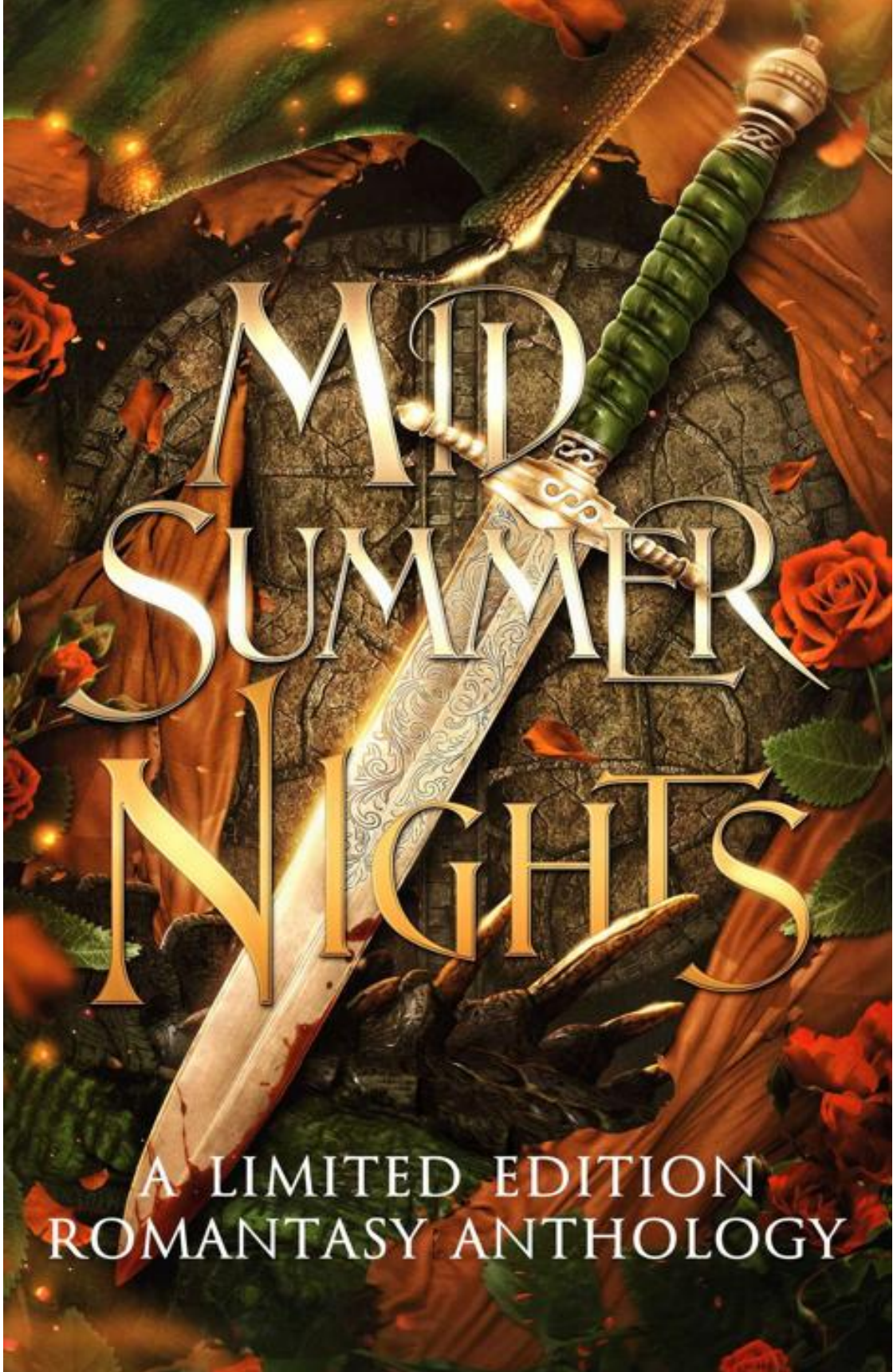


MID  
SUMMER  
NIGHTS

A LIMITED EDITION  
ROMANTASY ANTHOLOGY



# MID SUMMER NIGHTS

A LIMITED EDITION  
ROMANTASY ANTHOLOGY

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# HOW TO MARRY A WINGED KING



AJ LANCASTER

A Cinderella Retelling

# BLURB



WHEN THE FAE KING announces he'll choose a bride at the Thrice-Held Summer Ball, Cinders is forbidden to attend. As a lowly human, she's never been good enough for her noble fae family. Certainly not good enough to appear with them in public. But that was before she received an enchanted mask that alters her appearance...



# CHAPTER ONE



LORD BLOODTHORN HAD DECREED long ago that he would not stand for my ghastly human presence at mealtimes, so I didn't find out about the invitation until mid-morning. My oldest stepsister, Acantha, waved it like a flag as I came into the parlor after breakfast. She and my other stepsister, Rose, were clustered together on the sofa next to my stepmother, vibrating with excitement.

I read the invitation: *The Lord of the Golden Wood invites the House of Bloodthorn to the Thrice-held Ball.*

"It means the king is choosing a bride!" Acantha said.

"It does?" The Thrice-held Ball welcomed the fullness of summer to the Golden Wood every year. Unless there was an invisible postscript, there was nothing in the invitation to suggest this year would be any different. Not that I knew what the ball was usually like—I'd never been permitted to attend.

Acantha huffed at my ignorance. “Yes! King Tāwhiri has been putting it off for years, playing the houses against each other, but his time’s run out. He must choose a bride from amongst the twelve houses by the final night of this ball, or he loses the throne. And he is going to choose me.” Acantha wrapped a lock of dark hair about her finger, as if she were contemplating how she might do the same to the king.

“And if he wants a meek, self-effacing sort of bride?”

Acantha batted her eyelashes. “Then I will feign meekness for three nights, and he’ll be in for a lovely surprise after we exchange vows.”

“Lucky king,” I said drily.

Acantha just grinned and extended her claws. The gold of them caught the morning light, forming bright flames briefly at each of her fingertips.

“Acantha!” Lady Bloodthorn reprimanded. Acantha’s claws were the only thing about her that betrayed she wasn’t pure sidhe, and her mother was always after her to keep them hidden. It seemed both sad and foolish to me, since Lady Bloodthorn’s own belua blood was clear enough in her daintily hooved feet and curling ram’s horns.

Acantha rolled her eyes but dutifully retracted her claws.

Rose laughed. “You can have your crown, Acantha, only please say you’ll invite me to the Golden Hall’s libraries when you are queen. They have one of the finest collections in all Faerie.”

“I still expect you to make an effort for your house,” Lady Bloodthorn told her youngest.

I looked down at the invitation again and couldn’t stop myself. “So, when do *we* go to this ball?”

There was a predictable beat of awkward silence, tinged with a hint of reproach that I had insisted on creating it.

“I’m afraid you won’t be able to come. Humans are forbidden to enter the Golden Hall,” Lady Bloodthorn said eventually. She even managed to sound apologetic. “You’re

not upset, are you, dear? You understand how these things are.” She looked at me hopefully.

I smiled weakly back. “It’s fine. I’m not upset.” One upside to being human is the ability to blatantly lie. Fae have to get creative.

Rose piped up. “Actually, there have been humans at the Golden Hall before, or at least once before. A human princess visited King Tāwhiri’s grandfather.”

“Royalty may be granted any number of exceptions.” The cold voice of Lord Bloodthorn from the doorway froze us all. As usual, he looked past rather than at me. His eyes glittered with malice. “And our Cinder-girl is no princess. If she proves an obstacle to this family forming royal connections yet again ...” The threat hung unspoken but no less sinister for it.

“The king won’t even know she exists,” Acantha promised, stepping forward. Hurt flashed through me, though I knew she was only trying to help.

Lord Bloodthorn narrowed his eyes, but at least he looked at Acantha directly. He never did with me, the daughter he’d been swindled into adopting. Acantha met his gaze without flinching, shoulders high and defiant. With her claws sheathed, she was every inch an aristocratic pure-blooded sidhe, tall and willowy with pointed ears, perfect waves of ink-dark hair, and gold-brown skin.

“See that the king is pleased with you,” he said eventually.

Acantha gave a tight nod, like a general preparing for battle.

Lord Bloodthorn’s gaze fell on Rose, who flinched. “Don’t embarrass your sister. Make sure she covers her horns.” This last was directed to his wife, who touched her own horns nervously and nodded.

Lord Bloodthorn turned to leave, and I let out a silent breath of relief. Too soon, for he took a parting shot, lips curling.

“Even if you weren’t a worthless baseborn, you could not go, Cinders. The dancing will likely go past dawn.”



DID I MENTION I'M cursed?

I don't mean metaphorically. If I'm not within the bounds of Bloodthorn Manor every dawn, it causes me immense pain that won't cease until I return. Lord Bloodthorn bound me so when I was little, the first time I ran away. He hated me, but I was still his, by fae law, and he doesn't give up his belongings.

Usually, the curse means I simply stay inside the grounds until dawn has safely passed. But sometimes, I wake early and can't settle until I've pushed both my luck and the walls of my cage as far as they'll go.

The first day of the thrice-held ball was such an occasion. I spent the pre-dawn hours in the wilds of the Golden Wood beyond Bloodthorn Manor, beating my mood into the earth with each footstep. Today, I would have to help my stepsisters prepare for a ball that I was forbidden to attend and be reminded of all the ways in which I was lacking.

I wasn't angry, I told myself sternly, squashing the rebellious feeling down. The ball would probably be deadly dull anyway. Even if I loved dancing. It wasn't my stepsisters' fault. I was grateful for what I had, for food and shelter and family that cared for me, in their way. Some of them, at least. Many couldn't boast so much. I had no right to yearn for more. I stomped as I made each point. Healthful morning exercise and all that.

With only a few minutes to spare before dawn, I turned back toward the boundary. The air was still cool, but it held a promise of heat to come. A whirr of dark wings caught my attention. The bird followed my path, flitting from tree to tree beside me. A tūī, iridescent blue-black feathers sparkling in the pre-dawn, its crisp white throat tuft bobbing. They were common in the Golden Wood, though I'd heard that hadn't been the case before King Tāwhiri's rule. The Wood changes to reflect its ruler, they say.

Other birds called in the still air, but the tūi didn't join them with its distinctive song. It moved instead with odd deliberateness, approaching the same garden wall as me tree-by-tree in careful stages, until—

“No!” I gasped, too late. The tūi landed on the deceptively smooth-barked tree that marked Bloodthorn Manor's entrance, and all the tree's thorns sprang from their retracted sheaths. The tūi squawked and took flight—or tried to. The branches had already closed around it, forming an ever-tightening cage, long cruel thorns turning inward toward their prey.

I sprinted the distance to the bloodthorn and slammed my hand against the trunk. The thorns retracted around my hand just in time, forming a palm-shaped hollow. “Stop!”

The tree shuddered, and I could feel its reluctance to obey, the desire for blood that its maker had impressed upon it.

“I am a daughter of the house, and you may not hurt me! Stop!” I cried again.

With a final shiver, the thorns stopped tightening, but they didn't retract. I peered up through interlaced thorns and branches. The bird huddled in a cage of thorns, trapped, but at least none had yet penetrated its flesh. The dark eyes of the tūi met mine.

“Let it go,” I told the tree.

The tree ignored me.

I shouted at the tree for a bit, and it pretended not to hear me. The bloodthorn only barely respected the authority I'd claimed over it. It wasn't going to do anything more, and I knew as soon as I removed my hand from the trunk, the tree would leap back into action. It was hungry; the local wildlife had long since learnt to give it a wide berth.

Dawn was nearly upon me, and I could feel the tether in my chest beginning to grow tight. But if I left the tree to cross the bounds, it would kill the bird before I could make it back.

“Fool bird,” I grumbled up at the tūi, tucking my skirts up in a way that would outrage my stepmother's sense of propriety

and starting to unlace my boots. I kept a palm against the trunk the entire time.

I climbed, the tether in my chest growing tighter, hotter. It was slow going, the thorns retracting sullenly as I reached for each handhold, as if the tree were making a point of being as unhelpful as possible. It was Lord Bloodthorn's creation, and it was just as resentful of me as he was. But oaths bind fae and their magic, and the tree could not harm those who belonged to the manor, no matter how much it might want to in my case.

When I reached the branch that held the tūī at its far end, I thought the tree might give in, but no, it continued to make me fight for every inch. Obstinate bloody thing.

"Hang on," I told the bird.

*I scarcely see what else I could be doing at this moment.*

I nearly fell off the branch. The voice had sounded in my head, deep and resonant, prickling with sarcasm. A magic-touched creature, then. They weren't so uncommon in Faerie, though I would have thought a wyrling would have more sense than to alight on a bloodthorn.

"A bit of gratefulness wouldn't go astray, since I'm rescuing you," I said as I eased my body along the branch.

*A very slow rescue, I might note.*

"Any more helpful comments before I leave the tree to eat you?"

The tūī said nothing. The branch grew thin as I neared his thorny cage, trembling under my weight, and the stinging in my chest had become a burning, a line of fire spreading out from my heart. Tears filled my eyes as the first rays of dawn lapped over the garden wall.

Even when I reached out to touch the thorny cage, the tree reacted sluggishly, so that I had to wrap my hand around each thorn and force the tree to withdraw them one by one. By the time I'd forced a big enough gap, I was panting and weeping, my limbs shaking with pain, but at last it was done. The tūī darted free.

As soon as the tūi took flight, the bloodthorn relaxed, all its thorns smoothing out. I dropped to the soft earth, my knees threatening to give out, and stumbled across the bounds in blind agony to collapse in the meadow. The pain slowly ebbed, and I gasped myself back to awareness.

A beak filled my field of vision. *What ails you, my lady?*

I yelped and sat up. The tūi flew out of the way to perch on a nearby tree stump.

*You are human, aren't you?*

“Well spotted. Also, you’re welcome for the rescue.” My arms and bare feet were dirty and scratched. I got up stiffly and stomped back over the boundary to my boots. I couldn’t help tensing as I did so, even knowing the curse wouldn’t reactivate until tomorrow’s dawn.

*That was a curse that struck just now, wasn't it?*

“Yes,” I said tiredly, lacing up my boots.

*How does it work?* He had the kind of voice that sounded like it was used to being obeyed without question, which was somewhat amusing coming from a bird not even a foot high.

“That’s a very personal question, and we haven’t even been introduced,” I pointed out. “Besides, I have to go.”

The tūi puffed himself up. *You may call me Golden.* An odd name for a dark-colored bird, but it’s a rare fae creature who gives their true name to a stranger. *I owe you a debt for saving me. Perhaps I can free you from this curse, if you tell me what it is, Daughter of Bloodthorn Manor. Is that something you would want?*

Freedom. My heart gave a single hard beat. “Yes,” I whispered. In concise, detached sentences, I told him about the dawn-curse.

When I was done, he sat motionless. *I owe you more than I realized, for saving me at the cost of your own pain. I will try to free you.* I felt the echo of something in my chest, but then the sensation faded, and he shook his head. *This curse cannot be broken by force alone.*

I gave myself a shake, forced a laugh. “Never mind, then. It’s fine.”

*In what manner is this curse fine?*

I didn’t know what to say. No one had ever questioned my declarations of fine-ness before. “I mean, thank you for trying, but you don’t owe me anything.”

*I disagree.*

“Grant me a feather or a song whenever it suits you, then, if you feel you must.” I hurried back to the manor before he could respond.



MY STEPMOTHER WAS ALREADY up and preparing for the long day ahead when I returned. At my disheveled appearance, her thin eyebrows nearly merged with her hairline.

“Whatever happened?”

“A fight with a tree.”

“Oh, dear heart, I thought you’d outgrown the tree climbing! Go and wash up, hurry now. There’s so much we need to get through, and I know you want to help your sisters make the best possible impression!”

My stepmother was determined that every nook and cranny be made suitable for a royal visit. I considered pointing out that even if Acantha snagged King Tāwhiri on the very first night, what were the chances he’d be inspecting the broom closets of Bloodthorn Manor the same day? Besides, if he was going to marry her, surely he wouldn’t care about our broom closets? But Lady Bloodthorn kept rubbing at her left horn, which she only did when she was agitated, so I didn’t argue.

While the house brownies cleaned, I spent the better part of the morning on tasks Lady Bloodthorn didn’t trust them with: swapping the cushion covers for our fanciest embroidered ones, polishing the brass noses of the gargoyles that decorated the entrance stairs, rearranging the bushy pōhuehue vine that



had sprung up only last year to twine nicely with the older ivy and fall around the balconies just so. Lady Bloodthorn refreshed the house spells, the clip-clop of her hooves on the marble stairs a constant background drum as she walked between floors, checking and re-checking all was being done to her satisfaction. Meanwhile, my stepsisters were whisked to bathing chambers to begin their own scrubbing and polishing.

“I wish I didn’t have to go,” Rose admitted later as I was called to help her dress. “I hate dancing, and it’s not as if his majesty is going to choose me, anyway.” She touched her dark hair, arranged so that it covered her curling horns.

I dredged up some sympathy, even though my every muscle ached from the day’s cleaning marathon in the summer heat, and I felt like saying at least she was *allowed* to go. Unlike some other members of this family.

“Why shouldn’t the king want to marry you?” I said. “You’re a daughter of the twelve houses just as much as anyone else, and who’s to say you might not suit? Maybe King Tāwhiri hates balls too. Do you know what he’s like at all?”

Rose shuddered. “We’ve spoken a handful of times, and he was perfectly well-mannered. A bit cold. But it doesn’t matter what he’s like; I’m not earning the ire of every noble scion of the Golden Wood. How could anyone want that? No, Acantha is welcome to him. I’ll just be glad when we’re done with all these balls.”

I thought of all the balls at Bloodthorn Manor I’d watched from a hidden, yearning distance and swallowed down bitterness. Instead, I thought of the tales of King Tāwhiri I’d heard. A boy-king who’d inherited the throne and managed to keep it until he reached manhood despite the many challengers. Not pure *sidhe* himself, though apparently enough of a hypocrite to value that in a bride. A powerful illusionist who’d once single-handedly defeated a lion-drake. Acantha had once said the curve of his profile put the sharp turn of the river’s cliffs to shame. I tried to imagine what that must actually look like in person, and my brain helpfully supplied the image of a rock with nice teeth draped in expensive fabric.

But the king's supposedly poetic jawline wasn't what captured my imagination. As my mind's eye spun out the full scene, what I saw most vividly was the court's attention falling enviously upon his bride, a woman who held her head high—who everyone acknowledged as worthy. A sharp, secret longing went through me.

“Cinders?”

I gave myself a shake. Of course I didn't want that. Obviously. Not that it was a possibility. Even if I was technically a daughter of the twelve houses too, just as much as Rose. Lord Bloodthorn thought the king wouldn't choose even a noble fae bride who showed evidence of the less-aristocratic kinds of fae ancestry. A base-born human would no doubt disgust him.

It was hard not to feel my own lacking at the end of the day, when my stepsisters were dressed in their finery, impossibly beautiful and graceful as a pair of deer. In comparison, I felt every speck of dust on me, the plainness of my clothing, the blunt ordinariness of my features. I stood at the top of the entrance hall, looking down at my family together, feeling the vast distance between us. They didn't look up.

And then they were gone, leaving me alone in the empty house. I gave a deep sigh, went to eat supper with the house brownies, washed up, and dragged my aching body up to my bedroom in the attic, which had collected the heat of the day and was now much like stepping into an oven.

I froze.

On my bed lay an elegantly wrapped package tied with silver string and a long, dark feather.

The note tucked under the string read: *A feather and a song, my lady. They will not know you for human if you wear the mask. Transportation will be provided to return you before the dawn.*

With shaking hands, I unwrapped the package and spread the contents out on the bed. I then spent several long minutes afraid to touch them. A ball gown. A mask. And an invitation.

The mask was black and smooth, decorated with shining tūī feathers. There were no ribbons to attach it with. Without letting myself think too much, I held the mask up to my face in the mirror.

The mask shifted subtly.

I gasped and snatched it away, thinking of the tale of the Enchanted Beast, who'd lived for years unable to remove his bespelled mask. But my mask came away cleanly, thank the Thorned Sister. When my heart had stopped pounding, I examined it and found that the mask's contours had altered to match my own face.

Warily, I replaced the mask, and the fit was now so perfect that it held firmly in place even without a ribbon.

I gasped again when I looked in the mirror. The disguise did more than hide the upper half of my face, and I touched my ears wonderingly. They still felt round, but in the mirror, they were pointed, and the bits of my face not hidden by the mask gave an impression of fantastical beauty.

I squashed the sudden urge to smash the mirror to smithereens, turning away and taking the mask off instead. I looked again at the things laid out on the bed. Did I dare? If anyone discovered the ruse, my stepfamily would be furious, and the fae court might be more than furious. *Humans are forbidden at the Golden Hall.* I didn't know what the punishment might be for breaking that. Was the risk worth it? What if I ruined Acantha's chances of marrying royalty?

*The king will never know she exists.*

I shrugged out of my clothes. Maybe I could just sneak into the edges of the ball, and if the illusion didn't seem to hold, I could come away again, having at least enjoyed a glimpse of it. It seemed a shame to let the efforts of the tūī go to waste. How had he managed all this?

The dress was midnight green, darkly iridescent as a tūī's feathers, with silver beading up its front and feathers worked into the design at the neckline. Silver shoes to match, which

underwent the same disconcerting personalization as the mask when I put them on.

I considered my hair uncertainly, and then let it out of its tight braid. It fell in a dark brown wave halfway down my back. The mask's enchantment somehow managed to make this look glamorous and interesting.

My heart hammered as I crept down through the quiet house, but none of the house brownies stirred. Outside, the moon had risen, and I saw the transportation: a black carriage pulled by a white stag. I got in.



I HAD SEEN THE Golden Hall only at a distance before, its organic form blending with the forest, the yellow-tiled roofs of its tallest towers rising above the canopy in bursts of color. My hands trembled as I showed my invitation, but the guards let me through without challenge, and I was abruptly *here*, on forbidden ground, swelling with excitement mixed with terror. I couldn't believe my own daring.

The great ballroom lay open to the stars and was bordered by gnarled, twining kōwhai trees, their golden flowers held in perpetual bloom regardless of season by the magic of the court. I searched their branches, wondering whether Golden was hiding there. Or was he among the crowd? I'd heard it was possible for a powerful fae to shape-change, but I'd never met one who could before. Golden's magic was certainly powerful, because fae lords and ladies dipped their heads in acknowledgment as I passed, accepting me as one of them.

I spotted my stepsisters on the dance floor and hastily huddled toward the edges of the room. The twisting yearning that had driven me here wavered.

“—yes, I have only the two daughters.” Lady Bloodthorn's voice nearby.

I froze and slowly turned my head. My stepmother stood talking to a fae with gossamer dragonfly wings. They looked

to belong to House Sweetgrass.

“I had heard you kept a human changeling in your household?” the dragonfly fae asked in a tone of honeyed poison.

Lady Bloodthorn tittered. “Who doesn’t? I am fond of the pet, but it is not the same thing as family, of course.”

Lady Bloodthorn turned before I could hide, but her gaze skimmed over me without recognition. The illusion was holding. Great. Fine. I was fine. I was grateful my stepmother was fond of me.

But my hands shook, and I glared at the whirling dancers. I *wasn’t* grateful; I was angry. The dark, reckless emotion rose up through my cracks. I wanted to do something ill-advised. Something to force all these fine fae lords and ladies to acknowledge the lowly human.

That was when I saw the lord of the golden wood, King Tāwhiri. Tall, with deep bronze skin and dark hair that sparkled in the feylights, he would have been arresting even without the antlers and the great feathered wings. Those were a bit of a surprise, more of a sign of belua blood than I’d expected, but there was no mistaking him. When he came off the dance floor, men and women crowded in, vying to be next. And yet there was a sense of stillness about him, as if he were the eye of the hurricane around which the rest of the world turned. With his face in profile, half-covered by a mask, I couldn’t help considering his jawline. It was well enough, I supposed, but, really, Acantha—river cliffs? You didn’t think to mention the enormous feathery wings while you were getting caught up in poetic detail? Or that he had antlers? How dare he scorn Rose’s appearance, the hypocrite!

Tāwhiri opened his mouth to answer one of the courtiers—and then saw me and broke off mid-sentence. Oh no. Just what sort of magic had the tūi imbued my mask with? Had the king seen through it? Should I run? What if that made things worse? Could I bluff it out? At the same time, that simmering anger bubbled up, and I found myself lifting my chin, refusing to look away.

Had I gone mad? But it was too late to run now, so I held myself with a stiff confidence I didn't feel as he strode toward me. As he drew closer, I saw that his mask was accented with the same feathers as my own. The same feathers that made up his vast wings, currently furled tightly against his back.

I'm not an idiot. My building panic flooded right back into anger, even hotter than before. *Call me Golden*, my left foot. Up close, I could see his blue-black hair was tipped with bright silver, like the back of a tūi's head. His snowy-white cravat evoked the tuft at a tūi's throat. A feather and a song, indeed! He could have granted me true freedom, but instead he'd played me for a fool.

"Will you dance, my lady?" he said in the same smooth midnight voice I'd heard from a bird much earlier that day.

"You," I said flatly.

"Me," he agreed, holding out his hand. The sheer arrogance!

*He's a king! I reminded myself. Of course he's arrogant! You're a human in the middle of a forbidden fae court! Don't do anything foolish! Or at least not more foolish than you have already.*

I took his hand.

His fingers curled around mine, the point of contact shivering through me as he led me out to the dance floor. Beyond him, I felt the eyes of the court. I caught sight of Lord and Lady Bloodthorn and Acantha, their eyes narrow and lips drawn tight. Tāwhiri's arms were firm, and he moved with elegant, light-footed grace. If not for, well, everything, I'd have enjoyed dancing with him thoroughly. As it was, my emotions seesawed between outrage, panic, and curiosity.

"My intimates call me Tāwhiri," he said.

"Good for them, your majesty," I said before I could stop myself. I hastily pressed my lips tight.

His mouth curved. "This morning you pulled me from a trap, and tonight you wear my feathers. That is fairly intimate." His dark eyes searched mine, as if he couldn't

puzzle me out. I wondered what he looked like under the mask. Undoubtedly beautiful.

I said nothing. It seemed safest.

“Thank you for coming. I wasn’t sure whether you would, even with two invitations,” he said into my fraught silence.

“Why did you want me to come? You don’t even know me. And I’m human.”

He looked surprised and a little ruffled, as if he were the only one allowed to ask awkward questions.

“I am currently obliged to seek a bride,” he said in a tight, clipped voice. “You yourself said you were a daughter of Bloodthorn. If I must choose from amongst the scions of the twelve houses, then by Sister Night, I will have the full breadth of them here to choose from.”

It shouldn’t have annoyed me that he’d invited me only out of perversity—why else would he, after all?—but it nonetheless did.

“I came for the food, just so you know,” I said.

It surprised a laugh from him. He had a good laugh, warm and resonant as apple cider.

“Why are you called Cinders?”

We spun in silence as I debated how to answer. He’d bothered to find out my use-name? “My mother was a scullery maid, apparently. It’s not my actual name.”

“Apparently?”

“I never met her.”

Tāwhiri blinked dark eyes. “What is your true name, then?”

It was a rude question for a fae. I remembered that he was a king, which I’d been in danger of forgetting for a moment there, with the laugh and the warm hands and the intensity of his gaze.

“I don’t know. Lord Bloodthorn didn’t bother to ask when he took me.” It came out more bitter than I’d intended.

His eyes bore into mine, and I felt uncomfortably seen. Tāwhiri canted his head. “Why did he take you, if he did not mean to treasure you?”

I sucked in a breath. It’s not pleasant to have a stranger voice your deepest insecurity after less than a minute of conversation. “What were you planning to do if I didn’t rescue you this morning?”

He said nothing, and realization hit me, followed swiftly by shame. “Oh. You didn’t need rescuing, did you?” Of course he hadn’t truly been caught in our bloodthorn tree. He was a king. He probably had enough magic to blow the entire manor to smithereens. He hadn’t needed saving, and I’d driven myself half-mad with pain this morning for nothing but his entertainment. I was just a toy to him, a human puzzle that had briefly intrigued him with its novelty. He’d invited me to his ball to see if I’d dance to his tune, and I had. “All right, you’ve done your bit, dazzled the stupid mortal girl, thumbed your nose at your court. Go dance with your real bride prospects and leave me alone.”

I wrenched myself out of his arms, leaving him standing in the middle of the dance floor with wide eyes and his arms still half raised. Gasps rippled out from the assembled watchers. I held my head high and glared at them all, these beautiful and terrible sidhe, and relished their attention. I might never be good enough for them, but right now, I was the one with the power to reject a king in his own palace.

Then I left.

Afterwards, I regretted losing my temper. Why had I given up the chance at a whole evening’s dancing? Couldn’t I have just swallowed my tongue, flattered Tāwhiri’s ego with gratitude for being invited at all? But his words had poked at my most tender spot. He’d made me feel seen, and then it had turned out to be a lie, and that was worse somehow than staying invisible the whole time.

My attic felt small and sad and alone. I hid the beautiful dress and mask under my bed and told myself I’d be glad when things were back to normal tomorrow.





DAWN FOUND ME BACK at the meadow, though with the memory of yesterday's pain fresh, I stayed inside the bounds to watch the sun rise, listening to the insects and birds waking. I turned at the sound of tūi wings and narrowed my eyes when the bird landed on the stump next to me.

I said nothing as it transformed into a man—a fae. It was the first time I'd seen his whole face, and he was as sickeningly beautiful as I'd suspected. I remembered how his body had felt against mine and then told myself I didn't remember any such thing.

We stared at each other. I crossed my arms.

"Can we try this again?" he said after a moment. "I handled things badly last night."

I continued to cross my arms, with more emphasis. My silence flustered him. I supposed kings weren't used to having to explain themselves.

"I didn't invite you last night to mock you," he said hastily. "I owe you a debt worth more than a feather and a song. I offered you your freedom in exchange for saving my life."

"I didn't actually save your life, though, did I? You could have magicked your way out. You don't owe me anything."

"You didn't know that at the time, and yet you saved me at the cost of your own pain. I will stand the debt. Will you tell me how you came to be part of House Bloodthorn?"

"You've been demanding a lot of personal information. That's not how normal conversation works, you know."

His feathers rustled as he considered this. "Fair. You may ask me something personal as well, then, and I will answer as best I can."

I laughed. "Is everything in your life a series of carefully measured exchanges?"

“A great deal of it.” He smiled. The smile transformed him, revealing a glimpse of a real person in the heart of the arrogant fae king. “I will be generous and not count that as your question. Ask.” A fine thread of tension gathered in his body.

What should I ask him? The twelve houses would want to know who he was going to pick—that would be a valuable piece of information to have, but I couldn’t see how I’d use it. Besides, everyone would find that out anyway in another two days.

“What would you choose to do, if you weren’t a king?” I asked.

The line of tension eased, his wings flexing in and out. He looked taken aback. “I have never thought about it before; I’ve always been destined for the throne.” He looked down at his hands. “I like making things,” he said, as if he were confessing a state secret. “Perhaps I would be a woodworker, though I suspect I would be a rather poor one.”

“Most people don’t start off being brilliant at things. I’d expect you’d get better with practice.”

The intensity of his regard made me suck in a breath. He had long, inky-dark eyelashes, and in the bright morning I could see that his irises were deep brown rather than true black. The world slowed, the only sound the cicadas and the occasional calls of birds. I had that peculiar feeling of being *seen* again, as if my soul lay bare beneath his gaze.

“I will comfort myself with that thought in my hypothetical carpentry career,” he said, and for a moment I wondered what on earth he was talking about, I’d become so distracted. “What would you do, if you were free to choose?”

I was tempted to point out this wasn’t the information he’d bargained for but decided to be generous, since he was making an effort at conversation. “Find some sort of job, I suppose. Try to make a living. I’d enjoy having my own house and managing it, if I could afford to have one. Go out in public as myself—” I cut myself off before I revealed too much. “A very boring answer.”

“A very practical answer. Would you return to the mortal world, then, if you could?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. I don’t know if there would be any more place for me there than here.” I looked beyond the meadow, to the wildness of the Golden Wood, where ponga ferns and young tarata saplings now grew beneath ancient linden trees. “I’d miss the wood. And my stepsisters. Have you ever been to Mortal?”

He looked at his hands. “Once, as a boy. My father took me to see one of the great festivals, and we cast illusions so that we might pass as humans. It was ... interesting. I haven’t had time to return since. Will you tell me how you came to Faerie?”

I sighed, sank down onto the stump, and told him the story.



I WAS SUPPOSED TO be royalty.

Lord Bloodthorn thought that’s what he’d bargained for when he agreed to aid my human father in a bloody succession war in the mortal world. Firstborns are a traditional price for fae bargains.

Lord Bloodthorn helped make my father a king and in exchange expected control of the infant prince, the royal heir. I think Lord Bloodthorn had some notion of one day marrying my stepsisters into royalty or at least holding significant sway over a human nation. Even humans can be acceptable if they’re titled enough, I suppose.

This, however, was where I came in. I was born out of wedlock a month before the young prince, to one of the castle’s scullery maids. My father knew about it—he’d organized to have my mother packed off and wed to a farmer, far from the capital, the moment he learnt of her pregnancy. They tell tales of his cleverness in his kingdom, how he outsmarted a fae, won a throne, and saved his heir.

If the stories mention me at all, it's generally assumed I got a good bargain too. After all, surely a servant's bastard ought to be grateful to be adopted by a lord, even a fae one?



TĀWHIRI GAVE ME A sidelong glance after I'd finished. "How do you know what tales they tell in Mortal, if you've never been back?"

"Lord Bloodthorn."

"He told you they tell tales about him being outsmarted?"

"No, but he wouldn't be so sore about it if they didn't. I filled in the blanks from what he did say: my real father didn't want me, I ought to be endlessly grateful to House Bloodthorn, and so on and so forth."

"Your real father cared enough to make Lord Bloodthorn promise to adopt you into his household and raise you as his own. That's not traditionally part of a firstborn bargain," Tāwhiri said. He saw my expression. "But that doesn't make up for what he did. I am sorry."

My throat felt oddly thick. No one had ever said that to me before. I looked at my feet and told myself I wasn't going to cry.

"Marry me."

My head came up. "What?"

He colored, as if he'd shocked himself nearly as much as me. "I, ah, meant to lead into that rather more elegantly."

I gaped at him but managed to croak: "You don't even know me."

"I know that you are bold, intelligent, and kind." His voice, which had started unsteadily, grew more confident as he spoke, until he was listing off reasons like you'd categorize a horse's assets. His gaze dropped briefly to my lips, and for a moment blood pounded in my ears, but then he looked away

and I realized of course desire wouldn't feature on his list. Why would it, when I was ordinary and human, and he had fae beauties of every house vying for his attention? Why did I even care?

He continued: "I know that you do not lust after the throne for power's sake. That you would rescue a helpless creature if it was in your power to do so, even at some cost to yourself. That puts you ahead of all the other candidates. I have to marry *someone*, and I have very little time to make that choice. Good marriages have been built on less."

I stared at him. He seemed perfectly serious. "You want to tweak everyone's noses for forcing you into this," I said slowly. It was the only plausible reason I could think of, and never mind his pretty words.

"Ah ... yes," he admitted. "But it will also avoid giving power over to any of the twelve houses over another, which is a greatly desirable outcome. We exist peaceably because we are in balance. If I were to choose your sister Acantha, or the Sweetgrass heir, or any of the other favorites ..."

"Be still, my beating heart. And what do I get out of this?" I took refuge in flippancy. It was *obvious* what I got out of this.

"I am a king," he said stiffly. "You would be queen of the Golden Wood, with the associated luxuries and powers. But also, if you are bound to me, it will unbind you from this manor. You will be free of your dawn-curse. Not freedom in its entirety, but freedom from that, at least."

"I already said I'm not holding you to that debt."

"I know. But—will you consider it?" His wings shifted restlessly. "I must go. I will see you tonight?" He remembered to make it a question rather than a command right at the end of the sentence. And then he was gone.



ROYAL LOVERS' TIFF? WAS the headline of the morning's gossip sheet. No one was sure who wrote them—Rose thought

it was enterprising pixies with a handpress. Lord Bloodthorn made a point to magically set the papers on fire whenever he saw them, but the ladies of the household had long learned how to disguise them to avoid this.

Acantha had her nose buried in the report—disguised as an improving work of history—when I came across her later that morning. She was muttering to herself.

“How are you, Cinders?” Lady Bloodthorn asked me with a smile. There was an unusual solicitousness in her manner, and I wondered if it was driven by guilt about disowning me in casual conversation last night.

Acantha flung the paper sideways in an abrupt display of disgust. I picked it up and began to grin. Apparently, I, or rather “the masked lady,” was Tāwhiri’s old flame, come to show my displeasure at his planning to marry somebody else. I found myself reading over the mundane details of the rest of his evening. He had danced only once with each of the scions of the twelve houses and excused himself after that duty was discharged.

“Who was the lady?” I couldn’t resist asking.

“No one knows,” Acantha said. “Lowborn, clearly, behaving in such a way. Probably Tāwhiri told her he was ashamed to see her and that’s why she left.”

“He didn’t look ashamed,” Rose murmured. Acantha scowled at her.

“Now, now, girls!” Lady Bloodthorn soothed. “It matters not. I’m sure we shan’t see her again. It was vulgar of her to come, of course, but I’m sure that’s all done with now.”

“Do you like him?” I asked Acantha later when Lady Bloodthorn was safely out of earshot.

She frowned. “Who?”

“The king.”

She shrugged. “He’s handsome, powerfully magical, and rules the Golden Wood. What’s not to like?”

“But if he weren’t? What if he were a, a humble carpenter or something? Would you still like him?”

Acantha laughed at me. “Oh, Cinders. Of course I’m not going to marry a carpenter.” Her eyes grew wicked, and she checked to make certain we were alone. “Even if I might dally with a handsome one. After I’m married, of course.”

I blushed.



WHEN THE PARTY LEFT for Second Night, I retreated to my attic with mixed feelings. Another dress lay on my bed, silver this time, and a white mask decorated with tūi feathers. Tāwhiri clearly had a theme he liked, and he was sticking to it.

My arrival was different on Second Night. Whispers sprang up immediately. People stared, envious and wondering, and I once again found a discordant thrill in their reaction. If only they knew I was human.

Tāwhiri wore silver too, though tonight his mask was a mere suggestion. Heat flared in his eyes when he saw me, and his wings half-flared too. A harder heart than mine would have stirred—until I remembered the illusion. He was admiring a lady who didn’t exist. Admiring his own illusion, in fact, which presumably was tailored to his exact tastes and made the whole thing curiously narcissistic. My heart fell.

Why was I being so silly about this? Tāwhiri might have asked me to marry him, but he’d been coolly practical about the reasons for it. It was politics and perversity, not romance.

Still, when he held out his hand, I felt oddly breathless. “I read in the paper that you allocated one dance to each potential bride. Very fair of you.”

His lips curved. “You were reading about me?”

“Doing my research.”

He inclined his head. “I have not yet danced with anyone else this evening.” He led me out onto the floor, the eyes of the

room upon us.

“Aren’t you supposed to be wooing potential brides?”

“I am.”

I glanced away from the intensity of his gaze. “What if I say no? Shouldn’t you know what your options are?” I still couldn’t truly believe he was serious about this.

“Do you think the houses have failed to push each and every eligible woman and man upon me since I attained my majority? I assure you: I have heard the details of their virtues at length. A dance with any of them will not change the balance of my opinion.”

That stunned me into silence for a whole round of the ballroom.

“I have some questions,” I said when I found my voice again.

“I thought you might.” The music came to a halt, and he gave a wry smile and said, “Will you come outside with me?”

When I nodded, I wasn’t expecting him to pull me into his chest. Or for the snap of his wings unfurling and the rush of wind as we took off. Outraged cries sounded below.

“It’s my party; I can fly if I want to,” he said mildly, and I laughed.

He flew us over the palace, and we landed atop a tower that was like a great tree trunk transformed to stone, its crown of leaves forming crenellations. There was a picnic feast laid out and cushions piled about. The air held that perfectly balanced warmth only summer nights have, the sky above a deep velvet sparkling with stars.

I slid out of his grip, feeling suddenly shy.

“You’re really serious about the wooing,” I said. “Why? I thought it was a straightforward bargain you were offering.”

“I should like you not to be wholly averse to the bargain for its own sake. My parents were an arranged marriage, but they



grew very fond of each other. I should like something of the same.”

“What were they like?”

He looked to the stars as he told me. His mother had been a bright soul, with a love for growing things; it was she who’d brought the ballroom’s ever-blooming kōwhai to the Golden Hall from her own part of Faerie, though more had grown throughout the wood since Tāwhiri had taken the throne. His father had been of a more reserved temperament, but fiercely proud of his wife and their only son.

The way Tāwhiri spoke of his parents made them sound larger than life, which made me sad for the boy he’d been when they’d died, that he’d never had the chance to know them on more equal footing. It sounded lonely, growing up roaming these halls with an unbridgeable distance between him and any other playmates. It also sounded oddly familiar, to be alone even surrounded by others. I found myself telling him of my stepsisters.

“I’m sure you’d be happy with either of them,” I added out of a sense of fairness. “Acantha would love being a queen, and Rose would marry you for your library in a heartbeat.”

He made a noncommittal sound in the back of his throat, *looking* at me in that intent, heated way. I blushed and then remembered the illusion.

“And you? Would you like being a queen?”

I looked down at my hands and thought of the court’s envious gaze. *Yes*. “I don’t think I would know how.”

“Someone told me most people get better at things with practice.”

I laughed. “Well, you are getting better at conversation.”

We talked for hours about everything and nothing. I grew more intensely aware of him as the night deepened. The rustle of feathers. The warmth of his body, so close. The sleek profile of his antlers and the starlight glittering in his hair. The heated looks that sent thrills right through my body each time until I remembered the illusion.

Eventually, I swallowed and turned back to the topic that perched on the tower between us like an invisible lion-drake.

“Say I *did* agree to marry you. How would that work?”

“We would pledge our troth before the Golden Wood—”

“No. After that. What about children? Would you want them? Half-human children, inheriting the Golden Wood?” Had he really thought this through?

Tāwhiri spread his wings. “I am not pure sidhe, my lady. My mother was a bird-woman, and I can name a dozen other fae races in my family tree. There is even some human in the mix already. I have always attributed the strength of my house’s bloodline to that diversity.”

I hadn’t known Tāwhiri had a human ancestor. It was a reassuring answer, but it also completely avoided the thing that had prompted me to ask in the first place. Children required certain prerequisite activities.

“So, you’d want children, then? With me.”

The heat returned to his gaze. “I ... yes. One day. Is that something you would want?” His voice sounded huskier than normal.

I took off the mask because I couldn’t bear for him to keep looking at me like that. It lay starkly white against the stone.

I turned around. “You should kiss me.”

There was a shocked silence from the other half of the tower.

“You can talk about it in this bloodless manner all you like, but marriage isn’t just a balanced list of advantages and disadvantages. Children don’t spring fully formed out of the ground, you know.” I spoke to my feet, babbling a bit, but determined to make my point now I’d gotten up the courage to start. “We have to have some degree of physical compatibility. I know I’m not much to look at, but if you can’t bear to touch me without some pure-blood sidhe illusion, then better to know that *now*, before—” Cool fingers beneath my chin, tilting my face up.

“My own illusions don’t work on me,” he said, and kissed me.

I don’t have words for how it was, that first time. It was as if word and thought had been knocked clean out of me, as if language itself had ceased to have meaning. I’d read about kisses and listened avidly to Acantha’s salacious gossip on the subject. Speculated interestedly late at night in the privacy of my attic. None of that had prepared me for the raw physicality or the way my body would react, suddenly a stranger to me. A wild, sensual stranger.

The only comfort was that it affected Tāwhiri just as strongly, even though I suspected he’d kissed a great many more people than I. We parted, breathless, drinking each other in under the starlight. My lips felt swollen, my whole body set thrumming.

He swallowed, and my gaze latched onto the way it made his throat move. “Are you satisfied we have some degree of physical compatibility?”

“Yes,” I said faintly.

He wrestled with something for long moments, searching my face before he pulled an envelope from his pocket.

“This is for you.”

I took it, still addled from the kiss, but his next words brought me to full alertness.

“It’s from your mother. Your birth mother.” He looked ... embarrassed? My mind was a vast, empty blankness. “After what you said yesterday, I went to your kingdom and searched—a pregnant scullery maid from the palace many years ago, sent to marry a farmer.”

“She’s alive,” I said. I knew time passed differently in Faerie, though it wasn’t predictable. It might have been a day or a hundred years since I’d been taken. I’d always preferred to think the latter. It had felt less painful to believe that door firmly closed.

“Yes, and happy, I believe. A grandmother, now, surrounded by loving family. The farmer she married—whether they loved

each other to start, I know not, but they cared for each other deeply before he passed. It was clear in how she spoke of him.”

I sat down hard in the nest of cushions, holding the envelope like it might bite.

“I told her you had grown into a daughter any mother might be proud of and asked her to write you your name. I haven’t read it,” he added quickly. “You do not need to read it now, if it is too much—”

I opened the envelope. The letter was written in a strong hand.

*To my beloved daughter, Ella*

I stopped reading, my heart stuttering. “My name is Ella,” I said. The syllable formed strangely on my tongue.

“Ella,” Tāwhiri said.

“Say it again.”

“Ella,” he said obediently in his deep, velvety voice.

I shivered and read the rest of the letter, coming unmoored as I did. “She loves me,” I said when I looked up. “She tried to stop Lord Bloodthorn from taking me. She never gave me up willingly. I was wanted.”

“I believe it. I said I wished to make you a queen and she said queens were all very fine, but if it wasn’t what you wanted, she’d hunt me down and use my feathers as pillow stuffing.”

I gave a soft, disbelieving laugh. “Thank you for this. It means everything to me.” I held the letter to my chest. “Ella.” I had a *name*, a name not bound in debt and shame.

Tāwhiri’s eyes were soft, his profile sharp against the lightening sky. It was nearly dawn, I realized with sudden alarm. We’d talked the night away.

“I need to go. I’ve already stayed too long.”

Tāwhiri held out a hand, an offer.

“Shouldn’t you return to your ball?”

He just shook his head and kept his hand where it was. I took it.

We flew together back to the manor and touched down just outside the boundaries with only a few minutes to spare. For a moment we remained standing so close that I could feel the heat of him, a contrast to the cool morning.

“If you will marry me, come to the ball tonight and I will announce it.”

I tried to make light of it. “I don’t think you need doubt me. I’d rather be bound to you than the manor, and the trappings of royalty are a nice incentive too. Think of the number of hats I might purchase, as queen.”

His expression remained serious, as if he were weighing something. “Ella,” he began.

“Yes?” I prompted when he said nothing more. I felt dawn calling to me, the crest of a wave, but I didn’t move to cross the boundary.

“Your true name might break the curse,” he said all in a rush. “If you claim it with the dawn.”

I stared at him as the curse hummed to life, sunlight breaking over the manor wall. Pain struck. All the years of being caged, of never quite being good enough, of being always held at a distance, rose up in me and set me alight like a match to dry tinder.

“I am Ella,” I told the manor. “I claim myself from you.”

The curse pulsed, white-hot. Tāwhiri caught me as my knees gave out, but it was done, burned out of my chest. I stood outside the bounds at dawn without pain for the first time in more than a decade.

“I’m free,” I said in wonder swiftly followed by a sharply illogical hurt, because I ought to be glad about it, oughtn’t I? Except that starlit towers and eyes dark as midnight had confused things. Tāwhiri had given up the bargaining chip he

held over me. “Why did you tell me that just now? Have you changed your mind?”

His hands still rested lightly beneath my arms. “No,” he said heavily. “My choice remains the same: I wish to marry you. I meant to tell you to test the spell against your name tomorrow morning, as a wedding gift. I should have, for now I have nothing to bargain with. But I ... couldn’t.”

I stared at him. A fae king confessing he’d done something against his own interest for me.

“You want me to like you enough to marry you for yourself,” I said.

He winced. “Yes.” And then, hurrying on from admitting that vulnerability: “You are every bit as deserving as any other scion of the twelve houses, Ella. You are not somehow less, or lacking, and I would have you choose me knowing your own worth.”

I couldn’t speak. He touched a finger to my cheek. “If you will marry me, come to tonight’s ball. If not, then, I suppose farewell.” That glimpse of vulnerability folded away as if it had never been, and with a rush of wings, he was gone.



I LAY AWAKE FOR a long time before sleep came. When I was roused, after what felt like only a few minutes, the mood in the house was furious. Lady Bloodthorn glared and huffed her way through the morning’s gossip sheet, which declared: MYSTERIOUS STRANGER STEALS KING’S HEART?

Lady Bloodthorn shook her head. “I have had messages flying back and forth all morning. No one has heard of her before.”

“She can’t be a child of one of the houses, can she?” Acantha looked down at her list, where she had detailed the names of her competitors along with their weaknesses. “Which means he can’t marry her, regardless. I don’t know why he’s wasting everyone’s time with this, this *nobody*.”

“Perhaps that’s why he’s spending so much time with her,” Rose said.

“Maybe she’s not a nobody,” I said softly.

Everyone looked at me in surprise.

“I mean, if no one knows who she is, she could be anyone,” I said hastily. “And she looked pure sidhe, didn’t she? Maybe she’s a sorceress, or, or a princess from another court.”

Rose frowned at me. “How do you know what she looked like?”

My mouth went dry. “Isn’t that how you described her yesterday? Maybe I just assumed.”

Rose’s eyes widened, looking past me, and I turned with sudden foreboding. Lord Bloodthorn stood there. For once, he hadn’t averted his gaze from me. His eyes were narrow slits, his mouth a grim line. In his hand he held the white mask I’d left on the tower last night.

“Put this on, Cinders,” he said in a low, dangerous voice.



IT WENT VERY QUICKLY and very badly for me after that.

Perhaps worst of all was that I could see them struggling to believe it, even in the face of the proof offered by the close-fitting mask and the other items the search of my attic produced. How could Tāwhiri have given such attentions to someone so ordinary and so far beneath him?

“He is trying to shame us,” Acantha said softly, finding the only explanation that fit. I flinched.

“He doesn’t care about sidhe blood or any of that! That’s *your* obsession!” I flung at my father, whose expression didn’t change.

They locked me in the attic.

Later, after they'd all left and I'd rattled the doorknob and wasted many hatpins trying to prize open the windows without success, I lay on my bed staring at the ceiling.

Maybe it was better this way. Someone like me marrying Tāwhiri had always seemed too far-fetched to believe. I had my freedom now, and I was pretty sure someone would let me out of this attic tomorrow, although the Night Sister knew how angry Lord Bloodthorn would be if Tāwhiri chose someone other than Acantha for his bride.

I hugged my knees up to my chest. I didn't need Tāwhiri. I could go and start a new life somewhere. I'd known the man for less than three days. Really, *not* marrying someone I'd known for that length of time was the only sensible course of action. Wasn't it?

I thought of how it had felt to have Tāwhiri so tightly focused on me he was unaware of the crowd. The warmth of his hands. His mouth. How he'd given me my name back. I could fall in love with that man, given half a chance. But it would be so much easier not to. All I had to do was nothing.

He'd wanted me even without the illusion, knowing exactly who and what I was. Abruptly I was angry. Two days ago, freedom from my dawn-curse had been the biggest dream I could imagine. Now, there was this yearning for a nebulous *more*. Tāwhiri had started to convince me that perhaps there could be more, that I was worth more than the sum of my debts and disappointments.

I wanted that.

Admitting it to myself made everything worse because I was still stuck here, and Tāwhiri would choose someone else, thinking I'd gotten cold feet. Would he choose Acantha? She'd spoken out of shock earlier, but it wasn't her whole character. Maybe they'd be happy together.

I didn't want them to be happy together.

I heard the clock downstairs strike midnight.

I rose. I beat at the windows with a boot, trying to shatter the glass. I threw myself at the door over and over, until I felt



bruises forming. The house held fast. In frustration, I howled at the manor. “Look, I know you don’t like me! But I’m not tied to you anymore. If you let me out, I’ll go and never return.”

A shiver went through the walls as the manor considered this. Tempted, but it would not disobey its master’s instruction.

I began to rifle through my things, desperate for anything that might help me escape. I hammered at the walls and shouted for the house brownies. But no matter what I tried, I remained trapped, a moth in a jar with the lid screwed on tight. The minutes ticked at the back of my mind. How long would Tāwhiri wait? My heart squeezed, imagining how his features would tighten as the time passed and it became clear I wasn’t coming. He would think I didn’t want him enough to take the risk.

At last, exhausted, I sank down in the mess I’d made of my room, drew my knees up to my chest, and cried.



I FELT IT WHEN dawn broke. Maybe I would always be attuned to it now. The walls shuddered, and the door unlocked, but it was too late. The ball would be long since over. Tāwhiri would have chosen someone else hours ago.

I ran anyway.

The white stag still waited in the little copse. I climbed into the carriage, chest so tight I could barely breathe. A carriage ride later, I spilled out onto the steps of the Golden Hall, hitched up my skirts, and ran. Only to be greeted by the crossed halberds of the guards at the doors.

“Humans,” they said, “are forbidden to enter the hall.”

I didn’t have my mask, and I looked terrible as well as human, I knew, with circles under my eyes and a nose red from crying.

“I’m—”

“—invited,” a familiar voice said from just inside. Acantha stepped into the light. In her hand was the feathered white mask. “She’s invited, as a Daughter of Bloodthorn.”

I stared dumbly at her.

“You will invite all the neighboring royalty to your wedding,” she said, the corner of her mouth lifting ruefully. “Somewhere there must be a prince I can convince to marry me.”



A BALL DOESN'T END until the last dancers leave, and Tāwhiri had never stopped dancing, even as the dawn came and went.

When I came, he was dancing with Rose. Her horns were unwrapped. The flowers of the kōwhai swayed toward me, as if the Hall itself had been waiting for me. I passed a knot of fae that included Lord Bloodthorn, muttering about how the king had put things off for long enough, and this drawing things out was ridiculous, debating whether to approach him en masse and tell him so. He looked up from the group as I passed and blanched white, then red.

I smiled at him sweetly, not stopping even as his mouth dropped open to shout.

And then I was through and Rose made way for me with a smooth grace that I ruined by stumbling. “Don’t forget—access to the royal library,” she said.

Tāwhiri caught me.

Relief looks different on different people. On Tāwhiri, it pulsed through his magic, sending a warm shimmer of light over his wings.

“You came,” he said in a low voice.

“You waited.”

He smiled. “I will always wait for you.”



IN THE MORTAL WORLD, they tell the story of Cinder-ella, who stole into Faerie wearing an enchanted mask and won the heart of a king. The tales leap straight to happily ever after and don't mention the awkwardness of wedding planning after your adopted father has locked you in an attic. (I didn't invite him, though both my stepsisters braved his displeasure, and Acantha did indeed dance with a foreign prince. I believe they're very happy.)

My human mother came to my wedding with my whole extended human family in tow, half-siblings and nieces and nephews I'd never met, and I cried tears of happiness in front of the entire court without caring what they thought. Tāwhiri and I had a long talk about changelings and the first-born bargains struck by fae. There won't be another case like mine in the Golden Wood, with a baby taken unwillingly from its mother, no matter what bargain its father has struck.

The stories also fail to mention the mundane logistics of two people binding their lives together. We worked through our share of them. (Whilst wings make a nice blanket in winter, at midsummer they should be kept firmly on their owner's side of the bed, thank you very much.)

But we did, eventually, get our happily ever after.

It's impossible to pinpoint the moment a seed becomes a tree. Kōwhai bear golden seeds, little sparks of hope beneath the earth, sending out rootlets and slender stems, branching and growing stronger as the seasons turn. So it was with us. One day I turned to find my king and husband watching me, smiling, beneath the golden flowers of our hall, and I knew that I loved him.

"Ella," he said, reaching for me. "Will you dance?"

I took his hand. "Always."

THE END



Thank you for reading *HOW TO MARRY A WINGED KING*.

If you want to read more tales of FAE & FIRSTBORNS,  
including cameos by King Tāwhiri and Ella, then check out  
[\*HOW TO FIND A NAMELESS FAE\*](#).

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



GROWING UP IN RURAL New Zealand, AJ Lancaster escaped chores by hiding up trees reading books. Now ensconced in a house with two cats and a wide variety of houseplants, AJ writes and indie publishes romantic, whimsical fantasy books. In 2021, AJ Lancaster received the Sir Julius Vogel Award for Best New Talent, New Zealand's preeminent awards for science fiction, fantasy, and horror.



## **ALSO BY THE AUTHOR**

**Stariel**

THE LORD OF STARIEL

THE PRINCE OF SECRETS

THE COURT OF MORTALS

THE KING OF FAERIE

A RAKE OF HIS OWN

**Fae & Firstborns**

HOW TO FIND A NAMELESS FAE

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# LORD OF CORPSES



ALINA GRIMALDI

House of Dark Gods



# BLURB



HE'S BEEN KNOWN BY many names. Prince of Ruin. The Godling. Bloodsinger.

Killian would've preferred any of those monikers, but the one that stuck, the one whispered on the lips of every Fae and mortal in Elfame is Lord of Corpses.

A monster crafted from cruelty and God's cursed blood. A ruthless killer. Nothing but a tool to be wielded against the kingdom's enemies until a chance meeting with a mysterious girl changes everything.

Rune is beautiful. *Vicious*. A tempting distraction in a desperate situation. Inexplicably drawn to her, Killian agrees to strike a deal that will set her free, but a Fae bargain once made cannot be broken.

...and like a single drop of ink can darken even the purest water—one girl can plant the seed that destroys an entire kingdom.

# CHAPTER ONE



NOTHING GOOD EVER CAME from my brother keeping secrets.

My footfalls echoed in the long corridors of The House of Dreamings as I stalked toward its gates, intent on making just one stop along the way.

The rush of power that always swelled at the barest hint of irritation coiled like a cornered snake deep in the chasm of my chest.

I breathed deeply to temper it, but already I could hear the heartbeats of every soul in my proximity as if they were my own, thudding in my ears. Could sense the flow of blood in their veins. Hear the taunting whisper of the ancient thing in my mind desperate to spill it, eternally hungry for bloodshed.

I threw open the heavy door without knocking.

“Iz, wake up.”

Isolde's chambers reeked of stale wine, sweat-dampened feathers, and sex. Her reddened eyes protested as she squinted to see me amid the shadows.

“Kill?”

The two lower Fae males, tangled with her on the stone floor in front of a long-cold hearth, stirred at the sound of my name. The easy cadence of their heartbeats stumbled, finding a shallower, swifter pace while Isolde's remained placid, betraying nothing more than annoyance at my intrusion.

“Lord Killian,” one of the males spluttered, caught in a moment of panic somewhere halfway between waking and sleeping.

He rose unsteadily and bent at the middle, tripping on his way out the open door.

Iz scoffed and threw an arm over her eyes as the other male hurriedly disentangled himself from her.

“Apologies, my lord,” he muttered, bowing, cock in hand, as he rushed out of the chamber.

“Damn, Killian. You really know how to clear a room.”

“Get up, Iz. I need you.”

She groaned, her face twisting as she plucked a stray feather from her mouth.

“Iz,” I snapped, knocking the toe of my boot into her foot.

“Whatever it is, get Bastian to do it,” she bit back with a glare. “I was promised a day off, and I intend to take it.”

I lifted my gaze to the vaulted ceiling, a muscle tightening in my jaw. If anyone, and I meant *anyone* in the House of Dreamings dared speak to me like this, I'd cut them down where they stood.

Isolde and Bastian were the only exceptions.

I exhaled and unclenched my fists, reminding myself it wasn't her that had me so Godsdamned tense.

“Baz is still scouting the Northern border. I need you for this, Iz.”

“*Gods*,” she growled, throwing off the covers to stand.

I averted my stare, pointless as it was. I’d seen Iz naked as the day she was born more times than I’d seen any other body save for my own. The woman had an insatiable appetite for male company. This wasn’t the first time I’d found her in a similar situation of entanglement, and I doubted it would be the last. No matter how relentless her parents were in trying to secure her a match.

“Well, what is it?” she demanded.

Now robed, with her slender arms across her chest and a cruel slant to her mouth, she scowled at me through eyes bright with the waking of her gift. She liked to chastise me for my lack of control, but the truth was she was just as bad when provoked.

“It’s Draken.”

She inspected something on her fingernails and lifted a brow as if wondering why in the name of The Seven she should care. There was no love lost between her and my brother since their tryst almost a century ago, but love or not, he was still the Lord of this Court. Even if Iz was sworn to me as one of my two Elites.

“Has something happened?” she asked with boredom etched across her face as she drained the remnants of an open bottle of wine into a fresh glass and sipped the crimson liquid.

“He’s up to something. He and my mother. They’ve sent the palace sentries and a Court emissary to the East.”

A slight hiccup in her pulse gave away her interest, and I smirked.

“And they didn’t tell you why?”

*Clearly.*

“If they did, would I be coming to you?”

It wouldn't have been the first time my brother chose to hide his plans from me, but whatever this was, it seemed like something the council should've at least had the opportunity to vote on first.

Iz swirled her glass, considering. "If they sent sentries and an emissary, then it's a palace escort."

I'd already suspected as much. It was the questions of who and why that kept me awake trying to glean more information.

Draken himself was conveniently otherwise engaged for the rest of the evening and everyone in the House of Dreamings knew not to pester my mother, Astoria, once she'd taken to bed unless they wanted to see their heads removed from their shoulders.

"You're worried they mean to broker an audience with Oren's council."

Iz's words broke through the weak iron caging in my aggravation. My power swirled in the air like shadows only I could see, carried on a phantom wind.

"They've ignored my warnings about the threat in the East for decades, leaving Oren's Court to rebuild their ranks unimpeded."

Isolde understood this threat better than most. As did I. We knew what the Court of Decay was capable of. What they wanted. Isolde would bear the scars to remind her of their cruelty for the rest of her immortal life, even if no one else would ever see them.

Not a soul in Oren's council would step one foot into the House of Dreamings while I drew breath. Which was likely why I wasn't party to the information, commander and council member or not.

She lifted her chin. "What do you need me to do?"

"Keep an eye on Draken and Astoria, and get word to Baz that he should return to Court."

"And what will you do?"

"I'm going to give Draken's guest a proper welcome."

Isolde's lips twitched, betraying her jealousy, but I could promise her this...

"If it's any of Oren's depraved council members, they won't get into the city alive."

"Draken will have your head for the interference."

"He can try to take it."

My own bloodlust was mirrored back to me in Isolde's violent viridian eyes.

"Very well, Lord of Corpses," she said with an air of mocking formality, using the moniker she knew I loathed as she tipped her glass. "But you owe me a day."



ALONG THE DECREPIT ROAD through The Sleeping Wood, there was only one resting place. A small tavern with rooms for travel-weary folk on their way to and from the smaller villages dotting the countryside between here and the Eastern border of The Lunar Court.

Beneath a waxing moon, I ferried into the dappled silver light under a foxtail pine a few cart lengths away from The Weary Traveler and grinned.

I cocked my head at the garish carriage half-stowed in a hay shed, its size too large to be accommodated properly. Palace horses nibbled on apples and grain in a trough along the side of the weathered gray stone structure, their raven hair glistening from a fresh wash, manes tied back in intricate plaits.

The beasts whinnied and stomped their feet, their great hearts thudding with alarm as I approached, sensing the shift in the air as my power disturbed it.

"*Hush,*" I crooned softly, twisting the rein of the nearest mare around my fist to bring the beast closer, willing her heart to slow to an even rhythm. The scents of earth and dust and sweat filled my lungs as I leaned my forehead against hers.

She chuffed softly, her nostrils flaring as she fought against my control and lost.

“Who did you bring to my doorstep? *Hm?*”

I let my eyelids fall shut, listening for their masters. For their hearts.

They lit up in my mind’s eye like pulsing wisps of crimson light.

Four sentries stationed outside the tavern, clustered near the two entry points. Eight patrons in the lower level, most of their hearts sluggish with drink. A further five in the rooms upstairs. Two, close together, beat erratically in a pattern I recognized from sensing Isolde’s nightly diversions. Somewhere among the other three was where I would find whoever my brother intended to bring into The Lunar Court tomorrow.

*It’s truly a pity they won’t make it that far.*

Reaching out with my God’s cursed touch, I curled tendrils of power around the four half-drunk hearts beating outside the walls of the tavern. Four sentries slumped to the ground. The synchronized thud of heavy flesh on hard-packed ground music to my ears.

Not dead, only insensate. The beating of their hearts slowed to a mimicry of deep sleep. They weren’t my prey tonight, and they would wake by the time I finished.

A shudder rolled down my back as I drew on a familiar glamour. One I used often when I needed to be able to move about unseen.

It dulled my inky black hair to a dusty charcoal. Made my skin rough as if weathered from several years spent in the salt mines of Salmaris. Changed my eyes to an unremarkable and unchangeable shade of cobalt, removing the vivid reddish-copper rings around the dark pupils entirely.

It concealed the scar running like a bolt of jagged lightning from the hinge of my jaw to my chest. Made the fine threads of my jacket appear as if crafted by a common market tailor.

In the Court, I'd leave my ears, but here, outside its borders, I rounded them in a further attempt to go unnoticed.

If one of Oren's men was upstairs, I'd drop the glamour, letting him and everyone else see exactly how the Lord of Corpses dealt with enemies in his territory. But if it were someone of no consequence, it would be as if I were never here.

Stepping past the comatose bodies in an alcove near the door to the tavern, I allowed a savage smirk to lift my lips. It wouldn't be the first time palace guards allowed themselves to be overtaken by drinks on a Court errand, which was precisely why none of the four sentries would breathe a word of their failing to another Fae.

If it were my choice, they'd have been executed for their carelessness, but my brother was too forgiving. Too soft.

As I entered the tavern, I was reminded of the one thing I could not conceal with glamour. My appearance could be altered, but the thing slumbering within me could not be so easily masked.

Prey would always recognize predator.

Words died on tipsy lips. Heavy-lidded eyes fixed on me as I altered my gait and strode to the short bar, dragging a wood stool out to sit.

The older mortal two stools down took his mug of ale and sat elsewhere, spilling most of his draught and leaving me with the barkeep.

Just the man I wanted to see.

Nothing happened in places like this without the barkeep's knowledge or consent.

"Evening." His tone was weary and tight as he tossed a threadbare rag over his shoulder and cleared his throat. "What can I get you, friend?"

"Ale."

I pulled a single gold coin from my jacket and spun it on the bar top. He eyed it greedily as he returned with an overfilled



mug of lace-heavy amber ale.

“The carriage outside—who was it carrying?”

I slipped the coin toward him. It was twenty times what this ale was worth, and it showed in his hungry brown eyes as he snatched the piece and dropped it into the front of his apron.

“I didn’t see them,” he replied. “They used the back stair to bring someone up to the room. Paid handsomely for a single night and my discretion.”

Which seemed to be worth all of a single gold mark.

“Where were they traveling from?”

He openly eyed my jacket as if he could spy the other coins hidden within, even as his throat bobbed and his heart thudded loudly in his chest.

I fingered two more coins and dropped them atop the bar. “Tell me what you know.”

The coins vanished just as quickly as they were set down.

“From the East,” he answered and it was a study in patience not to sever the artery throbbing in his meaty neck.

“*Where* in the East?”

He shrugged. “Don’t know, but the Court sentries mentioned travel through the pass in the Ash Mountains.”

The feel of his slimy essence, small and flickering and so easy to snuff out, momentarily drowned out my other senses as he confirmed my suspicion.

Past the Ash Mountains were nothing but inconsequential villages until the Eastern border.

*Draken, you bastard. What are you doing?*

I lifted my gaze as if I could see clean through the low ceiling and into the rooms above. I could kill whoever it was from here, but I wanted to see the light leave their eyes as I ended them.

“Is that everything?” I asked the barkeep with a raised brow. He’d been monumentally less helpful than I’d hoped, and I

was ready for him to get the fuck out of my face.

“Oh, they did mention that their charge was a personal guest of Lord Draken, himself. Fancy that.” He puffed himself up, adjusting the set of his apron as if it were a fine cloak. “At my tavern.”

Eager to put distance between us now, he went to tend to some remedial task at the other end of the bar as I sipped my ale.

I’d never admit it, but I always found common ale better than anything brewed in the Courts. There was a depth of flavor to it that Court ale lacked. Like a body without a soul.

The stool next to mine screeched as it was pulled back, and a scrawny wisp of a girl slid into the seat, leaning over the bar to beckon its tender.

The barkeep lifted his brows at the woman as if he, too, wondered where she’d come from. I hadn’t paid much attention to the other folk who still lingered in the damp space, but I’d have noticed her. Not the simple tea brown linen gown or her sun-freckled cheeks, but I would’ve recalled the scarlet shade of her wild hair. The color like spilled blood under a dark moon.

“Miss?” The barkeep looked past her as if expecting an escort to materialize. She did appear to be young but with an aged quality to her gray eyes and the pallor of her skin. She could have been anywhere from seventeen to five and twenty.

“A mug of ale,” she said, and I blinked.

Ladies didn’t often drink ale. Not even in places like this.

“Wouldn’t you prefer some summer wine, miss? I have a fresh cask from the Court—”

“Just the ale.”

She dropped two copper marks on the table. “Cold. From the barrel.”

I raised a brow, taking a sip of my cold brew.

*A woman who knew how she liked her ale.*

Even if she seemed to have absolutely no sense of survival instinct.

Interest piqued and with ale still in my mug to finish before the evening festivities could begin, I shifted in my seat to face her.

She appeared to have no interest in me, and when she felt my eyes on her, her own narrowed, bowed lips pressing into a thin line of displeasure.

“What?” she snapped, taking her ale from the barkeep like she might use the heavy tankard as a weapon against me. But when she turned those slate eyes on me, her heart faltered, picking up from its steady rhythm into a spooked trot.

*There it is.* The fear.

Or, perhaps not fear...

Her eyes, large as a doe's, took in my glamour as if struck by it. As if she looked at *me* instead of the mask I wore. I knew little of the preferences of mortal women. Perhaps this washed-out, dulled-down version of my appearance was enough to tempt her.

“Nothing at all,” I drolled, a smile pulling at my lips as I took another swig of ale, making no attempt to stop watching her.

As the barkeep swung up a section of the bar and stepped through to see to the other patrons, the stirred air pricked my senses. Mortal blood carried with it the scent of tangy earthen clay and sweet decay, but her blood was richer. The perfume of it lingered like soft rain after the passing of a storm. Heavy, full-bodied, and smooth.

Fae.

In a vessel decidedly *not* Fae.

There were precious few glamorous strong enough to fool me, and I sensed no power swimming in her veins.

A faeling, perhaps? The offspring of a lower Fae and a mortal.

It would explain my interest and her lack of Gods blessed power.

I'd never been able to resist a good puzzle. Isolde liked to say I was worse than a housecat with a ball of yarn. I wouldn't stop until I had the whole thing unraveled across the floor. Or, more accurately, information in hand and blood painting the halls.

"Passing through?" I guessed, seeing as the barkeep didn't recognize her.

Her brows lowered and, for a length of breath, I thought she might ignore me.

I'd never been ignored. Definitely not by someone as low as this faeling girl.

My veins flushed with heat, shuddering as my power stirred.

She swiveled in her seat, and when her eyes met mine, this time they didn't stray.

"What does it matter to you?"

Another sip of ale. "It doesn't. Just making conversation."

The girl held my gaze so directly I didn't know what to make of it. The only others who dared try were Iz and Bastian.

After a long swallow that saw her mug drained and a lifted hand to request another, she wiped her mouth with the back of her wrist and sighed.

"Well, from what my escort tells me, I'm to be married off to some vile excuse for a male and bear him an abundance of tiny heirs sure to be just as vile as he is."

Her pulse thrummed louder, faster with each word.

She dropped two more copper marks on the bar in exchange for her drink and swallowed deeply. The yeasty rawness of it altered the scent of her blood while its effect made it slip faster through her veins.

An arranged marriage? At least mortals couldn't be tied, body and soul, to another being by a thread of fate so strong that it could only be severed in death. It was why I rarely

shared my bed. Couldn't risk a mating bond snapping into place, fusing me to them for the rest of my immortal life and allowing them access to my power.

The girl waited for my reply with a sour expression pulling her delicate features taut.

I didn't think I was getting the whole story, but why would she share her truth with a stranger in a tavern on the road?

“Your family couldn't refuse the match?”

She shook her head, her grip tightening on her mug until her knuckles stood out bone white against her olive skin.

I flagged the barkeep for another ale myself, signaling he should keep both tankards full.

“You could leave. I don't think your escort is in any state to stop you.”

I assumed the man with his head bowed to his chest, fighting sleep in the back corner of the tavern was the one she came with. Judging by his similarly colored hair, perhaps a cousin or uncle.

“They'd just hunt me down.”

She said it quietly, staring into the amber ale in her mug with a hollowness that haunted me.

“Perhaps my betrothed will refuse,” she said absently, more to herself than to me. “I don't think I'm what he's expecting. He could send me back.”

“And if he doesn't?” I prodded, already toying with the idea of getting rid of the relative playing escort for her. Give her a chance to flee.

*I shouldn't care.*

“Then it won't be a very long marriage,” she scoffed.

*I should be more focused on what's going on upstairs, and yet...*

“Why is that?”

Her cheekbones flared as she clenched her jaw, considering me through calculating eyes. Her heart fluttered with eager excitement before she parted her lips to speak.

“Because I intend to kill him.”

## CHAPTER TWO



I COCKED MY HEAD to one side, unable to suppress the smirk creeping over my mouth. I couldn't imagine this tiny thing killing a hen for supper, much less a man, but the fire in her eyes told a different tale.

“He must've done something terrible to warrant such a punishment.”

“He did.”

I waited.

“He killed someone I cared about very much.”

Her gray eyes turned stormy, and I felt the ache in her chest like it was pain I carried in my own. I recoiled from the sensation, retracting the claws of my power with a grimace.

“I mean, I can't imagine how I'd pull it off,” she continued, more aloof now.

I didn't offer any sort of condolences, too rapt in that familiar yet *foreign* feeling staining the thing beating in my chest.

"But it won't stop me from trying. If I'm caught, I suppose he'd just kill me and be done with it. At least there's a sort of peace in that fate."

She said it with a mockery of a smile on her lips that I couldn't return.

So willing to throw her life away. Foolish girl.

A waste of a strong, fearless heart. There were too few of those among Fae and mortals to be so casually discarded.

Like the beating of distant war drums, I sensed men and horses headed this way from the East. At this hour, nothing good would be traveling the roads through The Sleeping Wood. My time here was running out.

"I'll make you a bargain, little assassin," I said before I could change my mind. "If you don't succeed in killing your betrothed, I shall end him for you."

Now it was her turn to look surprised, glancing away for the first time, swirling the remnants of her ale. "I was told never to make a bargain with the Fae."

I frowned.

Feeling for the weight of my glamour, I found it still in place. Strong and unwavering.

Perhaps she *had* sensed my nature when she chose her seat but ignored it. Regardless, she impressed me yet again. Clever little assassin.

"Whoever told you that is very wise. You should heed their warning."

A quiet, charged moment passed between us, her heart galloping at the prospect of agreeing to my offer.

I wished she would. A creature like her should be bound to no one, never mind a male with a penchant for murder and



likely a pot belly to go with it. I'd killed men for far less noble reasons.

“What would you want in return?”

“Nothing.”

What could I ask of her? There wasn't anything she could give me I couldn't possess by a hundred other means.

“Not much of a bargain then,” she snorted, and her next words were muffled as she spoke them into her mug before taking a drink. “More like charity.”

A laugh escaped me and she scowled in return, licking the ale from her lips.

I wondered what else that mouth could be good at.

“And clearly you *don't* accept charity.”

Her chin lifted. “I do not.”

“Fine. A favor in return then. Anything of my choosing to be determined at a future date. Satisfied?”

I could see her weighing her options, and I wanted to wait for her unhurried response, but I was painfully aware of the approaching entourage on the road.

“What if you can't kill him either?”

Adorable.

This time my grin was genuine, and she startled at the sight of it, her eyes fixed on my teeth. “I assure you, I can stop the heart of any man or beast as easy as breathing.”

She looked doubtful.

I stood, adjusting my jacket. “But if you're confident in your ability to do the job yourself, then—”

“Wait!”

Her warm hand clutched my wrist, gripping with surprising strength. The connection fed me a direct line to her heart and the chaos raging within it. Making it hammer and skip and squeeze. The pace was intoxicating.

She blinked up at me. “What’s your name?”

“Killian,” I answered honestly, struck at how easily my name slipped from my mouth. “And yours?”

“Rune.”

*Rune.*

“I-I accept. I accept your bargain.”

Rune braced herself, as if simply by speaking those four words a bolt of lightning might drop from the skies and spear her where she sat.

I pulled my arm from her grip, shaking off the ghost of her that remained.

Plucking the badly concealed dagger from her left boot, I twirled it between my fingers as she cursed, trying and failing to snatch it back.

The handle was in such bad shape it looked like it’d been chewed on by rabid wolfhounds, but the blade itself was pristine. Honed to a fine edge so sharp I had no doubt it could cut through bone.

“Give that back.”

“Patience. A bargain must be properly sealed, little assassin.”

I pushed the pointed tip of the blade into the pad of my index finger, reaching over her to let two crimson drops fall into her ale.

Rune’s nose wrinkled.

“Drink.”

I returned her blade to her.

“Is it true the magic of the bargain can’t be undone?”

I didn’t answer, and she drank anyway, making a face as she forced the tainted liquid down her throat. “Now what?”

The bargain wouldn’t be binding until I consumed her blood too, and the predator in me salivated with anticipation, but I wanted something else before our deal was struck.

“A kiss.”

A knot twisted between her dark brows.

I didn't wait. There was no more time.

I stole it from her mouth, intending to take my bargain's blood from her lips with my teeth, but the sound she made... the gasping moan I swallowed... cast all thoughts of blood and bargains from my mind.

Her heart sang for me.

Fae touched blood rushed in her veins like an ocean tide. Pushing me out. Drawing me in.

Her body, small against mine, vibrated with something I couldn't name. Something I was starving for.

I wanted to taste it.

I *needed* to taste it.

Her lips parted, allowing me to sweep in and take her more deeply, drawing another raw sound from her chest that echoed in my own.

I got lost somewhere between one breath and the next. My hand bruising at her waist. My lips hungry.

*My hand. My lips.*

Yet they moved as if apart from me.

“*Fuck,*” I hissed when she bit my lower lip hard enough that the taste of my own blood filled my mouth.

She breathed heavily, her chest heaving beneath her threadbare gown, my blood on her lips. Staining her front teeth.

Beautiful. Savage.

A tempting distraction.

My ears pricked, and my spine straightened. *They're here.*

I swept her into my chest and clamped a hand tight over her mouth, willing her heart into an even beat that forced her to remain calm. She fought my magic harder than any mortal

could, but as the men from the road entered the tavern, she stilled.

I removed my hand and leaned over her casually, slipping two fingers into her hair and twisting the silken locks around them.

Just two travelers sharing an ale at the bar.

Not the Lord of Corpses and his newest toy.

“Say nothing,” I whispered.

Because these were not men stopping in hopes of a warm meal or a bed for the night. There was violence in every beat of their Fae hearts. It hummed in their veins like the sweetest poison.

Six. A number I could normally handle without thought, yet the potential collateral made me pause for the first time in millennia.

I focused, trying to get a sense of their power, but without their blood in the air or on my tongue, I uncovered only traces of at least one God’s blessed gift among them.

They moved through the tavern like wraiths, and the patrons still lingering scattered for the exits, Rune’s escort among them.

“Hey, what are you doing? You can’t go up there!” the barkeep called as their heavy boots met the stone steps leading to the rooms.

Watching their backs vanish around a sharp turn, I searched for any sign they might be from The Lunar Court—a secondary escort sent to join with the first—and found none.

Their cloaks were a nondescript black. The same as their boots and trousers.

*Assassins?*

Rune shoved at my chest, trying to get out from beneath me as she cast me a hard glare and wiped the blood from her mouth, spitting onto the floor.

Upstairs, a scream shattered the stillness of the night. Then another.

Rune whirled, her heart racing for an entirely different reason now.

Two hearts stopped beating. Then two more.

Whoever my brother meant to bring into our Court was a corpse now.

I ground my teeth.

Those were no palace sentries.

I'd be entertained by the convenience of not having had to get my hands dirty if the Fae mercenaries were not working in direct opposition to my brother, their lord and ruler of these lands.

"You should leave now, little assassin."

Her gray eyes flicked to me and back to the stairs. "I can't."

"Suit yourself."

I moved away, concealing myself in the shadow of a stone pillar near the central point of the tavern floor.

They descended a moment later, covered in gore and grins. As the last face caught the lamplight, my magic thrummed like a drone in my ears, pushing against the confines of my physical body for release.

*Calen.*

I hadn't seen him in half a century. He was one of Oren's men. Not on the council, but a relative of the man himself. A nephew, if I remembered correctly, but his shared blood with my enemy was not what had me feral with bloodthirst. No.

He was one of the males who put his filthy hands on Isolde while Oren held her in his Court.

Trying to think past the murderous thoughts rampaging through my mind was like trying to climb a crumbling cliff side.

What were they doing here?

Perhaps one of Oren's men was going to sell his secrets to my brother and Oren sent these men to stop them before they could?

If that were true, it was a missed opportunity, but also one my brother wouldn't have hidden from me. I'd have helped. I'd have dangled the turncoat on the edge of living and dying until he spilled every ounce of knowledge he possessed.

"Kill the rest and set the tavern ablaze," Calen ordered. "Track down the runners."

*Oh.*

This was going to be delightful.

I dropped my glamour and stepped from the shadows.

The look in Calen's pale eyes when he recognized me would live in my mind as a trophy for years to come.

"Miss me, Cal?"

"Get him!"

I gripped the hearts of the three nearest me, crushing them like grapes in the fist of my power. I could have crushed them all, but where would the sport be in that?

Calen lifted his hand, and I sensed the ripple of his power pass through his heart like sand through a sieve. Not fast enough. Not strong enough.

Thickening the blood in his veins made him sluggish. Lethargic. Turned his breathing shallow. Fucked with his senses and made him a useless bag of bones, trapped and waiting until I would be able to take my time dealing with him.

"Get the girl!" the larger of the last two ordered before charging me with a sword drawn, the blade turning a vivid orange giving him away as a Drake. I scoffed. Not one strong enough to wield flame, only powerful enough to heat steel.

*Was there not a half-even match among them?*

I visualized every vein in his sorry corpse bursting open, and he stopped dead, a strangled cry on his lips as blood

poured from every orifice.

*Yes.*

I drew it out, pulling it from him like water through a cistern, coaxing it to flow from his pores until it abandoned him completely.

It shimmered in the air around him like thousands of tiny rubies as he shriveled in on himself, drying out like a plum under summer sun.

I released my hold, and the rubies scattered, exploding across the tavern, painting my face in streaks of red.

Rune grunted, and I whirled with a snarl to find her trapped beneath the lifeless corpse of the barkeep, the last assassin standing over her. She held her blade out toward him, frantically shoving at the torso of the heavy corpse pinning her legs with her other hand.

“Stop!” she snarled, and the Fae male’s brow furrowed, his lifted sword hesitating, faltering in its deliverance of the death-dealing blow.

It was the single second I needed to collapse his heart.

He crumpled to the ground as I stepped past him and tossed the barkeep aside.

“Are you injured?”

My muscles tensed as I reached a hand to her, relief and fear mingling into a cocktail I’d never have the stomach for.

She kicked her legs, scrambling backward until her spine connected with the stone wall, her blood rushing loudly in the sudden silence of the blood-soaked tavern.

“Stay away from me,” she said, voice strained and all traces of the little assassin gone.

She looked at me with hate in her eyes. Fear in her heart.

Like every other mortal. Every courtier, lord, and denizen of the Courts of Elfame.

It tore at something I didn’t realize I had left to ruin.

“I rescind our bargain.”

She couldn't rescind what wasn't ever fully bound, but I stood over her, still power-drunk with the scent of fresh blood in the air and destruction in my veins. I couldn't deny what the darkest parts of me whispered.

A cruel idea took shape in my mind.

I didn't give a God's damn if she didn't want the bargain. She already agreed.

The little faeling needed to be taught a lesson in going back on her word.

I stepped toward her, twirling my finger in the air, stirring her blood to pump faster, making her face flush and her eyes brighten.

“Stay back!”

Her words were a physical force against me, and my steps faltered as the command pierced through my mind.

A haze of doubt clouded my thoughts.

Why did I want to advance on her? I needed to remain here. Away from her.

*No.*

My magic warred against the intrusion. Battling the thought that was not my own.

With a feral growl, I cast her command out, snapping my attention to the girl slowly rising to stand against the wall with defiance in her eyes.

Well, well...what do we have here?

My upper lip curled as I advanced again, feeling for her heart, ready to tame it. Quiet it. Control it.

*“Stay back.”*

Her words were a bludgeon against my skull. Messy. Wielded by an unskilled opponent.

This time, I was ready, but the effort needed to shield my mind distracted me. The ability rusty from disuse. I hadn't had



need of it for decades, but the muscle memory was there, and it blanketed my mind in impenetrable steel.

Rune fought against my defenses, battering uselessly, if not admirably.

*There's my little assassin.*

I grinned wickedly as I watched her realize the magic she possessed was not strong enough to sway me. She stopped her mental assault, her eyes going distant, skin turning ashen as she sagged against the wall, using it to stay on her feet. The exertion of using her limited magic pushed her to a point near death.

I could hear it in the way her heart battled to stay beating and immediately my magic shifted to strengthen it.

A stuttered breath left her lips as blood fell from her nose and ears and a single garnet tear gathered on her lashes.

I scented it then. Her power concealed beneath whatever magic trapped it within her mortal skin.

I inhaled deeply, drawn to it.

She didn't have the strength to fight me as I stood over her. She looked up at me with banked coals still hot in her stare. The tear of blood dropped onto her cheek. So stark against her blanched skin.

Rune didn't give me the satisfaction of flinching as I reached down to brush it from her face, but her lips parted with a silent gasp as I sucked the droplet from my fingertip.

I groaned as her essence slid down my throat, her magic dancing with mine, restoring what was depleted and more until I could feel it push tight under my skin, begging for release.

“What are you, little assassin?”

Her cheekbones flared as she clenched her teeth, trying to shrink away from me as if she could seep into the stone and vanish.

At this point, I wouldn't have been surprised if she could.

The thought to bring her back to the House of Dreamings with me quieted every other thought. But I would never get her inside unnoticed, and I didn't want anyone to notice her.

I wanted her all to myself.

"Stay out of the Court of Dreamings," I whispered. "Go to your betrothed and call for me when the time is right."

"I don't ever want to see you again."

So cruel. So sure.

"That's unfortunate. I intend to see you, Rune." And the magic of our bargain wouldn't allow her to hide from me, no matter where she fled.

"Why?"

I rolled a length of her wild scarlet hair between my fingers. "Call it morbid curiosity. You have a gift that could be of great use to me."

A gift she shouldn't possess if she was only faeling and not Fae.

She was a mystery I fully intended to unravel. Thread by blood-soaked thread.

How fortunate *I* was the one to stumble upon her. Here of all places.

The fates certainly had a sense of humor.

Rune tugged her hair free of my grasp, her face pinched with something akin to disgust. "I won't help you."

"And why not?"

"Because you're vile."

"And here I was thinking we'd really hit it off. So much in common."

I licked my lips, remembering the taste of her blood on my tongue. So familiar to my own.

*Gods cursed blood.*

"I'm *nothing* like you."

“Oh?”

“I’m not a monster.”

My vicious grin faltered, and before I knew what I was doing, I had my palm flat against her chest, her heart trapped in the vice of my power.

She clawed at my hand, my wrist, her nails biting into flesh until I made the beating thing within her ribcage shudder beneath the weight of my control. Rune choked, pain crossing her stormy gray eyes like shadows over a placid sea.

Behind us, Calen stirred, a gurgled curse thick in his foul mouth. I’d all but forgotten about him.

“I think we’re much more alike than you think,” I whispered.

Her throat bobbed, and I released her.

“A pleasure meeting you, Rune.” I tipped my head in a mock bow before turning my back on her.

Calen’s eyes fluttered as I approached his limp form. He fought against the hold my magic had on him. I could kill him, but I think the bastard would make a fine gift for Isolde to play with. *After* we got every morsel of information he possessed.

With Rune’s strange blood still singing in my veins, I was able to ferry all the way back to The Lunar Court in a single breath, carrying Calen with me.

## CHAPTER THREE



I DROPPED CALEN ONTO the stone floor at the feet of the palace sentries, flicking off bits of dust and wiping blood from my jacket.

“Take him to my private cell, and alert Isolde there’s a gift waiting for her. And be sure to manacle him. He’s Gods gifted.”

“Shall we alert Lord Draken, sir?”

“I’ll alert him myself.”

I needed to wash off the stench of the tavern and its corpses, but that could wait. This was real proof Oren and his Court of Decay were making moves in the East. They breached the border. Carried out an unsanctioned assassination.

Interrupted what was going to be a very pleasant evening.

I berated myself for not thinking to ferry upstairs to see with my own eyes who my brother intended to bring into The Lunar

Court. I'd been more than a little...*distracted*.

Hopefully, the girl had the good sense to get out of there before the slumbering sentries outside woke and wanted answers to questions I didn't think she wanted them asking. I couldn't be concerned for her now and something told me the girl could handle herself anyway.

Quick steps rounded a corner ahead, and Bastian appeared, rushing toward me still dressed in his armor and cloak, dark daggers gleaming across his chest and down the sides of his legs.

"I just got back," he said. "Isolde told me where you went. The palace sentries said they saw you ferry to the gate with a man. Who was it? One of Oren's?"

I nodded, jerking my chin toward the west wing, where our chambers were at the furthest reaches of the palace. This conversation would be better held privately.

"But not the one my brother intended to bring into the Court. It's Calen. He and his men killed whoever Draken wanted an audience with."

Baz's gold eyes searched my face as we walked, and he lowered his voice. "You don't know who it was?"

I shook my head, clenching a fist as rage at my own stupidity flooded down my spine.

"So, we question Calen."

"We let *Isolde* question Calen," I corrected.

Baz's expression darkened, but he nodded his agreement.

"Anything from the North?"

His jaw flexed. "Nothing."

As we passed the threshold of my chamber and the magic spelling it for privacy welcomed us in, Baz shut the door.

"We should speak to Draken. Now. It's near dawn. I can call for an urgent audience."

"Yes, we should."

I pinched the bridge of my nose as an ache formed in the hollows behind my eyes. My blood slithered with something foreign. A drain after the fountain of power I exploited to get home so quickly.

“What is it?”

Baz could always tell when there was more, and as I let my hand drop and found his serpentine gold gaze etched with lines of worry, I knew I could trust him with this.

“I found something, Baz. Well...*someone*.”

I told Baz everything, remembering details I missed. Discovering new possibilities as he injected his own rhetoric and theories on what could've happened. What she could be.

*Who* she could be.

By the time we were ready to find Draken, it was near afternoon, the sun so bright and hot that my chambers were warmer than a Fire Drake's lair and almost offensively bright.

I needed sleep, but that would have to wait as well.

The door to my chamber swung open as I was replacing my jacket with one less blood-splattered.

She had glittering malice in her eyes and her fair hair was damp with red.

“I take it back. You don't owe me a day. In fact,” she trilled, lifting an apple from a dish on the table for a bite. “I think I might owe *you* after that little gift.”

Isolde had already pried some information from Calen and was only taking a short break to allow him to heal before she went back for seconds.

After rehashing everything I told Baz, the pair of them agreed I should keep the existence of the girl to myself. For now.

There was one other conclusion unanimous among us, no matter how unlikely; it seemed the last Whisper did not in fact die without first producing an heir for his power. There was no other plausible explanation.

“I need to speak with Draken.” I’d put it off too long already.

My brother would finally have to listen after all Isolde learned from Calen in the early hours of the morning. Oren’s nephew claimed The Lunar Court would burn to ash once his uncle was through with it, alluding to a great power we wouldn’t be able to stop.

It was as much an admission of intent as I needed to get Draken on board with a proper scouting mission over the border.

“We’ll come with you,” Isolde offered, rising from the low seat in front of the hearth.

I made no effort to conceal the way my eyes tracked over the blood and filth from the cells covering her body. “Isolde, you’re disgusting.”

“Have you looked in the mirror?” she sneered, and I shook my head, mirth warming my chest. “You, to the baths,” I told her. “And you, to get some rest. You look like a day-old corpse.”

“Killian—”

“Those are orders.”

I left them, impatient to speak with Draken. I wouldn’t go to the trouble of calling a formal council like Baz suggested. I wanted to speak to him first. Just me.

The sentries guarding the eastern wing of the palace, where Draken and our mother kept their quarters, inclined their heads to me as I passed.

I peered into the study and library as I strode by, but there was no sign of him.

A sentry outside his bedchamber bowed as I neared.

“Have you seen Lord Draken?”

“Yes, my Lord, he is—”

“Killian; I was just about to send for you,” Draken called from down the corridor, leaving the door to the dining hall ajar

behind him. His eyes were lit with more than just his gift of fire. He seemed excited. Almost boyishly so.

He wouldn't be after I told him what we learned.

"Draken, I need to—"

"*Come*," he commanded, ferrying to my side to tug me forward. "There's someone I need you to meet."

"It can wait," I hissed, withdrawing from him. "I've found evidence of—"

"Later, brother," Draken said, a sharpness in his tone brokering no room for argument. "This is important. It could change everything."

I found only truth in his face. A face so similar and yet so different from my own. Where I looked like I'd been pulled from a well of black ink, leaving the tint to stain my hair and eyes. He appeared to be pulled from a golden pool with hair the color of wheat at harvest and eyes so richly brown they looked like clay pulled from the lakebed of Loch Deòir.

He would always be the optimist. And I would always make sure we didn't suffer for it.

"And what I've learned could see it all turned to ash," I said through my teeth, but he was beyond hearing reason as he towed me back to the dining hall.

"*Draken*," I snapped, ripping my arm from his grasp. "You aren't hearing me. We need to—"

"I wanted to introduce you to my betrothed before the council meeting."

He went to the arched windows between the long cypress table and the stone wall, pointing out the centermost one into the inner courtyard. I stifled a groan and followed him, looking out to where our mother sat with a young maiden at tea.

"Look! She's there. I thought it only fitting that my brother should meet her before the council."

My throat went dry.



I would not have recognized her if it weren't for her hair.

Not for its style, since it wasn't wild at all now, but tamed into soft waves tumbling past her breasts. Breasts that appeared sinfully fuller in the corseted Court garment she wore.

But it wasn't that she'd clearly spent time in the baths and had the whole Gods damned wing of my mother's lady maids attending her. It was more.

There were dark circles beneath her eyes I assumed would match my own, but that was the only physical flaw I could find.

Her eyes, a muted cloud gray before were now alive with color as she nodded at something my mother said. A summer storm raged in their depths as she twisted her hands in her lap.

Her ears, rounded last night, now sloped to gentle points.

Her scent, barely there before, now reached me even here through a wide pane of glass.

The power in her blood felt fathomless—as if it came from a bottomless chasm.

And I realized the curious quality I couldn't place was born of blood magic. The type meant to bind power. It'd been centuries, but that same magic was used to temper my own gift when I came into it. To stop the infernal pounding in my ears from a thousand hearts in this city before I went mad and stopped every one of them.

She smiled at my mother, betraying none of what I could hear in the hidden places beneath her breast.

“Shall we go greet your new sister?”

I blinked, retracing my thoughts. His words.

*I wanted to introduce you to my betrothed before the council meeting.*

“You're *betrothed* to this woman?”

“We thought the Whisper bloodline ended with Merrik, but we were wrong, brother. It's just like the tapestries predicted.

Our joined bloodlines will unite the Courts and bring peace to all of Elfame.”

It was her all along. *She* was the one Draken meant to bring into The Lunar Court.

Of course.

*Of course.*

She lied to me.

Tricked me into making a bargain with her. She must’ve known who I was and what I could do and I’d played so *foolishly* into her games.

Now, at any moment, she could call upon our sealed bargain and force my hand.

I couldn’t even kill her if I tried. The magic woven into the bargain would forbid it.

Draken stepped between me and the vision of her through the window with concern on his brow.

“Brother?”

My power thrashed and pulsed beneath my flesh and I knew Draken could sense it. Could see it in my eyes.

“You need to kill her, Draken.”

“*What?* Why in the name of The Seven would I do that?”

“If you don’t, she’ll damn us all.”

TO BE CONTINUED



Thank you for reading *LORD OF CORPSES*. If you want to read more from the HOUSE OF DARK GODS series, then check out [\*EVERY SALT KISSED BONE\*](#), the first full-length novel in the series told from Rune’s point of view, coming soon!

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



ALINA GRIMALDI IS THE romantasy alter ego of bestselling author Elena Lawson. Much like Elena, Alina writes stories filled with feisty heroines and the unforgettable heroes who love them.

She currently resides near Toronto with her husband, daughter, and two Siberian cats who preside over the household like tiny reigning monarchs.

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# WORSHIP ME



AURELIA JANE & KEL CARPENTER

Immortal Vices and Virtues

# BLURB



**FROM THE MOMENT I left home, an inexplicable pull tugged at me. Little did I know, it was the call of a bona fide god—a deity of carnal sin and temptation made flesh.**

Enter Pan, the God King of Arcadia. His allure is only surpassed by his primal ferocity, and despite my better judgment, I find myself drawn to him. Right up until he pulls me into another world—a real asshole move, if you ask me. Especially as this world has a sinister tendency to plunge shifters into madness.

I want nothing more than to leave.

Until he delivers a revelation that rocks me to my core.

I'm not the last of my kind. My birth family isn't dead. They've been searching for me.

As I navigate this unfamiliar realm with Pan at my side, I find myself entangled in a dangerous dance of mystery and



desire. The intensity between us grows with every step, but the secrets he guards cast a chilling shadow over our connection.  
*Will the truth bind us together or tear us apart?*

# CHAPTER ONE



PAN

NIGHTMARES PLAGUED ME. AWAKE or asleep, it didn't matter.

Her ghost lingered. Phantom touches caressed my skin. Peals of her laughter echoed, and whispers of shattered promises replayed in my mind. The scent of her arousal and the memory of her heat against my body toyed with my sanity.

Gods, I missed her, or at least that version of her.

"Fuck," I growled, running my hands through my hair. It felt like an eternity since I'd heard my own voice, and even then, it was only to scream. Sitting up from my bed, I shook off the madness as it tried to sink its claws into me.

She wasn't here. No one was.

My steps were silent as I crossed the room. The eerie glow of candlelight flickered, casting a shadow dance on the walls of my underground tomb. I stopped at her altar. An altar made not for what she was to our realm, but for what she had once been to me. All that remained was a single black feather. An iridescent shade of dark blue shimmered when brought near the light.

I smashed my fist into the marble dais.

I would not mourn for what could have been. I knew what that led to. Pain. Death. Destruction. It was all her doing, and there was nothing I could do to stop it ... nothing except what I was doing now.

“Your Majesty?” A voice broke through my thoughts, and I turned to see a young shifter standing at the bottom of the stone steps that led to my quarters. His lower half resembled a goat, and his upper remained human-like. A faun? In Arcadia?

“What’s happened to you, child?” I asked him, my voice scratchy from years of disuse in my solitude.

The boy dipped his head, casting his eyes down. “One day I tried to shift when I was playing with my sister, and I’ve been this way since,” he said quietly. “Our power ... it’s like we’re broken.”

“What do you mean by that?” The child was stuck mid-shift, and my brows furrowed as concern lanced through me. “You said ‘our’ ...”

Refusing to meet my gaze, the boy continued. “It’s what’s happened to us all.”

My heart sank.

Had this truly happened to all of Arcadia? I’d tried to protect my people. Instead, I’d damned them.

“The guardians sent you for me, haven’t they?” I glanced at the parcel he held in his hands.

He nodded. “I come with a message from the Temple of the Gods,” he said softly. I approached him, taking the parchment

and unrolling it. Tufts of wolf fur had been placed inside, one brown and one gray—and now they were speckled white.

The demand was simple.

*It is time.*

My hands shook with fury, and I crumpled the paper as I headed to meet them. I ascended the stairs that led from my tomb to the world above.

Arcadia.

My home.

How long had it been since I'd breathed fresh air? Smelled the night irises? Run through the forests?

Too long.

I climbed and climbed.

When the first light of day reached me, my steps quickened. It was only when I saw a figure standing in front of the entrance that I slowed to a stop. A tall, slender woman in blue robes regarded me with cold eyes.

“Go back to your temple, priestess. You're not welcome here.” My voice came out thick. Dark.

She raised a single brow. “Have you decided to end your self-imposed exile, my king?” At that moment, she glanced behind me. I turned to see the faun-like boy as he approached from his climb up the stairs. The sadness in his expression tore at me. “You see what you've done to your people? They looked to you, and you abandoned them. You are no god.” She curled her lip in disgust.

I ground my teeth together, canines lengthening.

My love for my people was unending. Arcadia had once been a paradise with thriving cities and happy shifters. That had changed over time as one catastrophe after another ravaged our world. I didn't want them to suffer any more than they already had, and even in my attempt to protect everyone, I'd continued to harm them.

“And you are no guardian, priestess.”

Her eyes narrowed. “This is your fault, Pan. You have failed to uphold your duty, and Arcadia suffers the consequences of your actions. *You* have done this to your people. You have turned them into perverted versions of themselves. Not us.”

My gut twisted. “Give me Flora and Fauna. They’re a part of my soul. You trapped them, and I want them back.” And they were aging. Their fur ... the flecks of white. If they died, I would dive straight into madness. A part of me knew I was already headed there.

The corner of the woman’s lips twitched. “The terms are the same as they’ve always been, since the very first day you walked yourself to this tomb. You’re welcome to retrieve them anytime you like...” She let it trail away, the meaning flashing in the dark depths of her eyes.

“So long as I bring you Kali,” I finished.

She nodded.

My hands clenched and unclenched.

I knew the bargain, but for the first time in my incredibly long existence, I’d chosen to go against it. My soul had paid the price, and I could live with that. But the faun boy ... my people? Arcadia had fallen. To see what would become of them ... that I couldn’t bear.

“Bring her back to us, Pan. We’re her guardians, and she belongs here.”

“Guardians?” I scoffed, seething at the notion this woman was maternal in any way. “You’re fanatics. Nothing more.”

“You have no say in her destiny, god of shifters,” she countered with equal derision, the pitch of her voice rising with each word. “Get back in your place, and do what is expected of you,” she looked at the faun boy and pointed, “or your people will descend into madness with you.”

I hated it.

Hated the priestesses.

Hated the choices I was given.

Pressing my lips together, I dipped my chin once.

The priestess smirked. “The sand falls in the hourglass, my king.”

I watched her walk away, wanting nothing more than to stab my dagger into her spine. But it would do no good.

The young child stayed by my side, looking up at me.

I dropped to one knee, meeting him at eye level. “Say nothing of this, do you understand?” I said quietly, and he nodded. “Good. Go home to your family.” I ruffled his hair and sent him on his way.

I was three steps away from leaving my tomb. A prison of my own making. If I left, there would be no going back. All of Arcadia would know I had returned. And all of Arcadia would assume why.

The priestesses’ words echoed in my mind.

*It is time.*

I felt a change in the forest the moment I stepped over the threshold. My people. A current sizzled in the air, the powers of all shifters connecting and reuniting with their god. They felt me, just as I felt them.

I could hear their laughter. Their prayers. Their hope.

I felt their love, their desire, and their thirst ... just as I could feel their bitterness, their sorrow, and their rage.

Animals shrieked in the distance. A wild call to our inner beasts. Their king had emerged.

It was time.

## CHAPTER TWO



ADORA

WHY IS IT THAT all really good dreams always end before you get to the best part?

Usually my dreams were weird and vague—at least those parts that I'd remember. It was rare that I'd remember everything. Sometimes I'd get a real nightmare about losing my family or the massacre that killed my biological parents. It wasn't like I actually remembered said massacre. I was a newborn when it happened, but my psyche remembered.

But this dream ...

This one wasn't like any other.

The land was lush. Warm. Crystal clear water fell from a rocky outcrop high above me. Verdant ferns popped up from cracks along the rockface with some sort of glowing algae. I couldn't see where the waterfall ended up, but the spray touched my legs as my toes curled in wet sand.

As amazing as it was, the tropical paradise wasn't even the best part. That award went to the sexiest man I'd ever seen as he pounded into me with some kind of hip roll, slowly driving me insane.

Dark hair fell around his face, creating a curtain between us and the surrounding paradise. He had bronze skin and wide shoulders. His muscles were significant, but not beefy like so many of the shifters back home. It was said that you can't visualize a face you've never seen before, but his features were plain as day. Yet, I was absolutely certain that I'd never laid eyes on this man. He wasn't the kind you'd forget—and that wasn't just because he fucked me like a god.

“Who owns you?” he grunted, kissing my heated skin. When I didn't answer, he growled, his chest vibrating, the sensation sending shivers up my spine. Vines wrapped around my ankles and knees, spreading me for him. “Who fucking owns you, Kali?”

*“Kali?”*

That wasn't my name.

What the hell?

The dream evaporated. Instead of the warm sand against my back, and a hot, hard body pressing into mine—I woke in a cold bed. Empty. Alone, as usual. My phone screen lit up my tiny room and it buzzed so hard against the nightstand that it rattled obnoxiously.

Two thuds sounded from the wall beside me, followed by an annoyed voice. “Can you get that?”

I sighed.

Fucking vampire hearing. Not that shifter dorm-mates were any better on that front.



You'd think the walls would be spelled for sound proofing when an assortment of supernaturals lived there, but no. Instead, the walls were paper thin and poorly insulated. They claimed it was because they were destroyed regularly from fighting or fucking, but I thought whoever was in charge of budgeting was just a cheapass when it came to living conditions.

I reached for my phone, already knowing who would be on the other end. Not many people had my personal line. Even fewer would call it at such a late hour.

“What?” I answered.

My sister's voice flooded through the shitty speaker. “Why do you sound like a chain smoker?”

I rubbed the sleep from my eyes and cleared my throat. It did jack shit. “Because it's four in the morning, and not all of us have a filthy rich vampire mate that can portal us around the world for vacation.”

“It's not vacation,” Elias said.

I couldn't make out my sister's response as Danni squealed. It didn't take much imagination to figure out what they were doing. I groaned. “Seriously, you can't wait until after you're done to call me?”

“Hey,” she protested. “We're not—”

“Save it.”

“For your information, Elias is working. So this isn't a vacation. A vacation means that there are no kingly duties or contracts to be signed—” Danni's voice turned muffled as the phone shifted. I rolled my eyes. Not having sex, my ass. “Or people requesting an audience with one of us. Nope. This is not vacation. It's just a ... leisurely tour through all of his properties so that I can get acquainted with all of Blood and Beryl.”

“Mhmm.” I tried to clear my throat again. “Blood and Beryl. Suuuuure. Whatever you say, sis.”

Well, it was true that Blood and Beryl did have many territories and that Danni, who was now queen, needed to become familiar with them.

However, I wasn't an idiot.

She and her vampire mate had been trying to conceive for the better part of the last year and decided that some time away from home—i.e. our moms—was needed. Namely so they could fuck like rabbits without interruption.

Not that it had ever really stopped them before.

Danni wasn't quiet. Even after the soundproofing Elias had installed when one of our moms made an offhand comment about it last Christmas, we could *still* hear her.

Apparently, complete soundproofing wasn't an option because "safety reasons."

I called bullshit on that given the sly smirk Elias made whenever it was mentioned, but what did I know? I was just a peacock shifter, sister of the Queen.

"I'm sorry that I woke you. I didn't mean—I mean—I didn't realize the time difference. It has me all mixed up." I tried really, really hard not to think about the background noise coming through my speaker or why her breath was suddenly so hitched.

I cut her off with a heavy sigh and pinched the bridge of my nose. "It's fine. It's fine. Really. Where are you now?"

"Southeast Asia. It's absolutely beautiful here. I think you'd love it. It's a bit too warm for me, and it's way too humid for Nova. But I think that your peacock would be in heaven here."

I nodded along while she kept talking, then remembered she couldn't see me. I switched to making the appropriate vocal acknowledgments when needed, while desperately wishing I could go back to sleep, or more accurately, back to that dream ... Except the longer I tried to remember it, the more it slipped away, leaving me feeling uncomfortably hollow.

Portal Watch had its perks, namely the bachelorette (or bachelor) lifestyle that we all led. It made for some pretty

awesome parties almost every night. Sometimes one of the embassies got hold of the good kind of contraband. Faery wine from the world of the fae. Ambrosia from the world of the gods. Every now and then, one of the Watchers would transfer, switching places with one from another Portal Watch location. It was something of an unspoken tradition to bring whatever goods you got from your old post to your new one.

Goods like that also didn't hurt for making acquaintances.

I'd made several friends as a result—and some friends with benefits. I'd always been one to prepare for anything, and that included stockpiling methods of payment ... or bribery. Tomato, tomahto. So, sure, I came bearing gifts from around the world that I'd acquired during my apprenticeship period. You never knew when you might need it.

But as great as the bachelorette lifestyle was, there were still drawbacks.

Early mornings being the largest one. I wasn't sure whose idea it was to switch shifts in the morning but given that there needed to be people on watch for twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, all year round, I was convinced that it was one of the *morning people* who were at fault. After all, if you have to do twenty-four-hour shifts, wouldn't it make more sense to do—I don't know—noon to noon? Nine to nine? I mean really, there were a lot of options that didn't involve early morning.

But I digress—mornings were the quietest. There was something bittersweet about watching the sun rise on the Portland skyline. It made my chest feel less heavy, but also pointedly reminded me of the missing piece that just always seemed out of reach. I was good at ignoring it. I did a great job of filling it with empty fucks, shallow relationships, and whatever good food I could find.

Danni was leading the life she was meant for. Stable. Steady. Filled with greatness, but still surrounded by people that loved her. Meanwhile, I was living mine to its fullest. Mostly. Sometimes when it was quiet and I couldn't be distracted, that missing piece inside me was painstakingly obvious.

Reminding me that maybe, more than likely, I was meant for something more, and it was just out of reach.

“Adora? Are you listening to me?” Danni’s voice snapped me back to the present.

“Yes, sorry. Shit. It’s just really early right now. I need to get ready for my shift—”

Danni sighed. “This wasn’t just a social call, unfortunately.”

“Not you too.” I knew what was coming and couldn’t help the groan that escaped me as I put the phone on speaker and stripped off my night t-shirt, tossing it on the floor along with my other dirty clothes. “Let me guess, Mom told you to call me?”

Danni sighed, her breath making the speaker crackle. I really needed to replace the piece of crap I called a phone, but the thing was damn near indestructible, a positive in my profession. “Technically Abby told me,” Danni said.

“That hardly makes it better, you traitor.” I picked up a clean sports bra hanging over the back of the overstuffed armchair that took up a third of my room. The rest of it being a full-size bed, nightstand, and armoire. I didn’t mind since I didn’t exactly have much stuff to begin with. The armchair really just served as a place to put all of my clean laundry since I was allergic to folding it. Organization wasn’t exactly my strong suit.

“Oh, come on. When you said you wanted to join Portal Watch, you promised me you’d visit often, but I haven’t seen you in six months.” Her accusation stung when I could hear the hurt in her voice. Guilt ate at me.

“I said I’d be home for Christmas.”

“You also said you’d be home for Thanksgiving, but that didn’t happen.”

We weren’t exactly a religious family, but our mother believed that holidays—even very antiquated holidays—should be spent together, something she raised us to also believe. I picked a pair of faded black jeans off my armchair of clean laundry and stuck my legs through the holes.

“I know, I know, but there’s like a billion holidays and I’m not the only one taking time off. Someone has to guard the portals, ya know? They don’t just close for Hanukkah or Diwali or the commemoration of the Great Sacrifice.”

“There’s also like a billion Watchers. Why can’t someone else take one for the team?”

Because I volunteered.

Not that she knew that.

It wasn’t that I didn’t want to see my family. I loved them more than anything, but I also was trying to figure out some things.

At the end of my training, I got to pick which portal I wanted to be stationed at. Six months had passed since then, and I could argue with myself and ask why I’d chosen to return to Portland, but it was always the same lie. I said it was to stay close to my sister, Dannika. To stay near our moms. The truth was, I’d chosen to return home because some inexplicable thing pulled me to this place with magnetic force.

I couldn’t make sense of it.

Maybe I was imagining it.

Maybe I was having grandiose thoughts about who and what I was.

Maybe I was going nuts. It was rumored that peacock shifters often did, not that I would know since I was the last one, so maybe that was just some bullshit people made up.

But whatever the reason, the feeling that something was missing was ever-present. I needed to find it, and it seemed to be tied to the shifter portal into Arcadia.

I traveled all around the world to each of the seven portals during my apprenticeship. I’d seen them. I touched every single one. Hell, I’d even crossed through into the world of fae. My moms would have a conniption if they knew that I’d jumped over into the land of fairy a few dozen times for the wildest fucking nights you could imagine—but none of them called to me the same way that our portal did.

There was just one problem.

Anyone that entered the Arcadian portal never returned. We weren't sure why or how. All we knew is that any shifter or person with shifter blood that crossed over hadn't come back in over twenty years. When other creatures crossed, if they came back right away they were okay, but every time there was an expedition to find out what was going on, the Watchers tasked with that mission never returned.

Eventually people stopped crossing all together. So instead of doing something crazy and reckless like I typically would—such as going through the portal when the shift change was happening—I chose to guard it. To watch it. To listen.

When I put a lot of thought into it, I figured I was probably going crazy since no one else seemed to hear the tempting whispers that came from it. But on the off chance I wasn't, I didn't want to be away for even a moment in case whatever was calling got tired of waiting.

"I'm still new," I explained, giving my sister the explanation I'd prepared. "I've only been an official Watcher for six months. The newer you are, the less time off you get." It wasn't a lie, even if it wasn't the whole truth.

Danni made a disgruntled noise. "Yeah well, if you back out on Christmas, Mom has threatened to come to the portal *in person*. Abby said this is your warning. No missing Christmas."

I groaned. "I said I would be there."

"Yeah, I know," she said, "but you also said the same thing on *our* birthday, and then instead of coming home, you let me break the news to her. Which was crappy by the way—"

"There was a real emergency!"

"And Thanksgiving wasn't an emergency? You just chose to not come home?" she asked in a very neutral tone, something Danni had picked up from being queen. Damn it. She was getting better at this.

"I didn't say that."

“You’re lucky I didn’t give in to Mom when you didn’t show for Thanksgiving. She’d asked—no, wrong word—she’d damn near demanded that I send an official order from Blood and Beryl stating that Adora Kresley was to be sent back to the capital.”

I let out a string of curses as I dug through the laundry on my armchair. “She said that?”

“Yup,” she answered, popping the “p.”

“Please tell me you reminded her you’re a queen and an adult. You don’t have to do what she says.”

We’d had this conversation. Many, many times before.

“Of course I didn’t. Abby did, but she’s got a point. So if you’re not here on the 20<sup>th</sup>—as promised—I’m going to pull rank.”

“That’s cruel.”

“Missing our birthday and making me tell Mom you weren’t coming was cruel,” Danni replied. “I haven’t seen you in ages and I miss you. We all do, even Elias—”

“Okay first, there was a damn dinosaur that came through the portal! A *di-no-saur*, Danni. That was a new and unexpected experience for everyone. You saw the pictures.”

“Excuses, excuses.”

“Second, don’t even go there. Guilt me if you must, but the only person Elias cares about is you, dear sister, which is fine. Good. Fantastic, really. I wouldn’t want it any other way. Don’t make it weird, though.”

“Well if you won’t listen to me about that, let me tell you about the guy we met with in New York. He’ll be at the Earth and Emerald winter solstice celebration and still needs a date. He’s in the supernatural syndicates. An heir to the Brooklyn syndicate, I think. What was his name? Aaron? Ashton? No, that wasn’t it. There was an A...”

“Adrian,” Elias offered.

“That’s it,” Danni said. “He was so fine, Adora—”

Elias growled and the phone changed hands after a muffled exchange. I glanced at the clock and hurried through getting dressed the rest of the way. “He is your type,” Elias said on speaker. “Pretty boy. Dark hair. Delinquent.”

“What?” I asked, looking up from lacing my boots like he could see my face.

“What?”

Now he was just being an ass on purpose. “Why do you say \_\_\_”

“Because the last guy you brought home was wanted by three different Houses,” he said apathetically.

“Only two,” I said, getting defensive in tone. “The third wanted him as a hostage for negotiating with the other two.”

“The one before that was a man *I* sent you to detain for murder.”

“It was justified.”

“And the art thief?”

“A victimless crime.”

Dannika cackled like a damn witch in the background.

“My point, Adora. Thanks for making it.”

For fuck’s sake. “It’s too early in the morning for your bullshit, your *majesty*. I’m hanging up. Tell Danni I promise I’ll be there and tell her to call me later when you’re off doing king shit.”

Elias snorted as I hit “end call”.

Prick.

I stood in my room for a moment, huffing over how my day had started. If early mornings weren’t already bad enough ...

*Come to me.*

Unease ran through me as that phantom command I’d heard for months made an appearance. It was the same thing every time. The same three words. But it was usually at the portal, never reaching me this far away.



I tossed on my leather jacket and was out the door before I could think much about it. It really was too early for this shit—hearing voices included.

Still, restlessness scraped against my insides. A nervous energy I couldn't push away. My fingernails tapped against my thigh in an unsteady, erratic rhythm. A blustery wind lifted stray hairs away from my neck as I left the Blood and Beryl embassy dorm.

It was winter in Portland. My least favorite season. Cloudy gray skies and freezing temperatures were unabating, dragging the days out until they bled together. It was significantly worse if it rained or snowed. While pretty to look at from the inside, my peacock was not pleased to be outside and *in it*. As we shared a body, I tended to agree.

As I took a quick detour through the commissary, I couldn't avoid overhearing the two Watcher's conversation in front of me as I waited in line to grab a banana and protein bar.

“So there I was, listening to her brag about her travels and how *worldly* she is, while she used different lingo for the countries she was talking about, but I got confused because it was gibberish, and I was like, ‘but what’s a latterine?’”

“A what now?”

“Right? She looked at me like I was stupid, and it said it’s a bathroom.”

“Wait, did she mean ‘latrine’?”

“Yeah, and I corrected her, but instead of admitting she’d simply mispronounced it, she doubled down and insisted that’s how they say it overseas.”

A short pause. “Yeah, no. I was stationed abroad. She made that shit up.”

“That’s what I said, but when I called her out on it publicly, suddenly *I* was the asshole.”

I sighed as they broke out in laughter, leaning my head back and closing my eyes.

*Come to me.*

Jesus, it was bad today. Worse than it had ever been. A small part of me hoped that meant my waiting was almost over. The rest of me was side eyeing the fuck out of myself. What “wait”? I didn’t even know.

“Next,” the attendant barked.

I moved forward and flashed him my food order so he could mark it down for inventory. I took the long way down to the portal, avoiding the cold for as long as possible. When I touched ground level, I braced myself as I stepped outside.

Taunting whispers rode the wind. *Come to me.*

I blinked slowly, eyes opening.

This was new. The voice was distinctly masculine, both smooth and tempting. I knew it had been just a few weeks since I’d been laid, and that dream was something else, so surely I wasn’t having withdrawal to the point of hallucinating. A girl knew how to take care of herself, if you know what I mean. But still ... I shook my head and glanced at the portal once more, staring into the swirling blue and green depths.

Thirty feet in diameter, the Arcadian portal loomed over most everything. Around it, scaffolding had been built to form the bridge—four levels of security that the Portal Watch occupied.

I typically served on the first floor. The main one.

It was the closest to the portal and made direct contact with anything and everything that came through, which meant I got to fight on the front lines.

Not that there was ever much action.

A few dozen animals. Occasionally a shifter in partial shift. I hated those. They came through so disoriented, they couldn’t finish shifting one way or another and they’d end up dying in a few days.

That dinosaur a month ago was the most fun I’d had in a while. Not every day you got to fight a giant bird-lizard.

Very little provided a reprieve from my endless waiting for something. What that something was, I didn't know. It was hard to explain.

I just felt it. That pull. And I didn't dare tell anyone.

Maybe it would be good for me to leave for a couple weeks. Clear my head. People joke about going crazy, but I was really starting to question it.

As if it heard the direction my thoughts had gone, that mysterious voice whispered once more.

*Come to me.*

Those honeyed words were all too appealing. I was tempted to cross. I almost had, once. It was when I had volunteered to stay behind again, not going home to visit my family. The desire to see my sister was ever-present, even if I was the one keeping myself from taking leave.

In some ways, I just convinced myself that my duty was to the Portal Watch, and Danni's was to our House, Blood and Beryl.

That didn't make it any easier.

I'd left my family and all I'd ever known behind to travel the world.

Because of a fucking feeling.

A sense of longing I didn't understand. When I found nothing, I'd come back here searching for the unknown. Waiting. Watching.

And nothing. I pinched the bridge of my nose, squeezing my eyes shut.

*Come to me*, the portal whispered louder, as though it were near me.

My eyes shot open. Okay, that wasn't a voice in my head. It had come *from* the portal. I drew closer, slowly. I'd never stepped over the line. I wanted to.

Gods, I wanted to.

The prospect of never returning ... prospect nothing. The inevitability of it ...

It was one thing to leave my family.

Another to *leave* them.

I stepped closer, my face only inches away from the swirling magic that connected our world to Arcadia, and that invisible pull in my chest tightened.

A hawk shifter called down, “You sure you want to do that?”

“I’m just looking, June,” I said, my voice quiet as uneasiness set in. In the multi-colored depths, I saw a face.

Eyes.

I squinted, leaning in to examine it.

“You’re clearly forgetting that giant-ass dinosaur we had come through—”

June’s voice cut off as a hand came reaching through the portal.

*If you will not come, you leave me no choice.*

I jumped back in surprise, barely escaping the grasping claws by an inch. My heart thumped against my chest, the sound throbbing in my ears.

“What in the actual fuck is happening?” I muttered.

A tattooed arm emerged, followed by a broad chest with strong, powerful shoulders. I took another step back, peering up at the man that came through.

My brain battled with my choice of words. He wasn’t just a man.

It was *him*.

The one from my dream that looked like a god. My dream didn’t do him justice.

Logic argued that this wasn’t the portal to the realm of the gods ... but that didn’t mean other worlds didn’t have them.

This *being* stood nearly seven feet tall, with green, glowing eyes and cheekbones sharp enough to cut.

If he was a shifter, I'd never encountered anything like him before.

The silence that pulsed around us ended when the sirens went off. Sharp, piercing alarms screamed for backup.

As supernaturals jumped down from the higher levels of the bridge onto the main platform, I kept my focus on him, and it didn't escape my notice that he didn't bother looking in their direction. Not once.

Those verdant eyes stared at me, and only me.

"I gave you the opportunity to choose." Dark hair hung around his face in thick, uneven strands; the portal at his back casting him in shadow.

I'd thought the voice had been a product of my own mind. Being crazy seemed far more likely than what was actually happening. "You were calling me ..." Part statement, part question; I was at a loss for words.

"I'm the only one that can." His words were deep and husky, but also haunted. I got the distinct impression he was bothered by the admission.

Before I could ask what he meant, my fellow Watchers approached.

"Back away, shifter," Gadric—a pompous warlock with more power than sense—commanded. I barely stifled the eye roll that begged to occur every time he spoke.

The god-man tore his eyes away from me, and annoyance flitted across his features. He sent one look at Gadric, and the warlock suddenly exploded in a cloud of feathers. A cobra chicken stood in his place.

Most people called them Canada geese, but I knew them for what they really were, the feathery devils.

What he'd just done to Gadric was unheard of, and I studied the off-worlder with greater interest. If I had been invested in my job, I'd have attempted to apprehend him like the others

around me, but I had the feeling it wouldn't matter. One of the other Watchers jumped forward. Without fail, before they got within feet of the man, they each shifted. *Even those who were not shifters.*

A veritable zoo began to form around us, but instead of reacting to being turned, they didn't attack. They weren't feral. They stopped—then *bowed.*

Clothes and weapons fell to the floor as more changed. One by one, the bridge was whittled down to just me and him.

A cold wind whipped between us, forcing a shiver through me.

Wise, ancient eyes stared back. While beautiful, there was also great sorrow and a savageness there. The dichotomy made it hard to look away from him. His very presence called to me, demanding my attention—but there was no way I planned on telling him that.

It took a few moments before I found my voice. “That was impressive. Also a good choice for Gadric. He's probably better off this way, but I can't say I've seen that trick before.” I gestured at the animal pack around us. “Who are you?”

“Pan,” he answered. “I am the god-king of Arcadia.”

The pull. The voices. The indescribable feeling clawing at me. It was him? It never once occurred to me that it was a man calling me. Certainly not the man from my dream. I'd thought ... well, I'd thought it was destiny or some shit, as cheesy as that sounded. Or that I was a step away from losing my mind.

There was a reason I'd never told a soul.

“God-king,” I mused, flicking my ombre blue braid over my shoulder. “That sounds important.”

His face didn't crack, and even though he tried to hide it, I saw amusement in the quirk of his mouth. “Do you have a point to make before we return to Arcadia?”

*Return?*

I'd never been to Arcadia before ... no one had.

“For someone who is so *important*,” I paused, letting my eyes travel the length of him in an assessing manner while suppressing the desire to lick my lips, “why are you here, for me, specifically?” I pushed my power toward him. That power that caused the massacre of my kind. The one that could drive a person crazy.

The *Eyes of God*.

I wanted to know what I would see in his soul. What kind of man was standing before me, and what his intentions had been in his past. What kind of person had just crossed through this portal?

My powers could tell me a lot. All I had to do was choose to look.

Nothing happened.

All I found was ... a wall. A dark wall blocking my access. I occasionally had trouble reaching someone, especially if they were good with shield magic, but it was rare to see absolutely nothing.

Pan regarded me closely with tight eyes and flared nostrils, and I felt a prickling sensation along my spine, like he knew I'd just been trying to pry into the depths of his very being.

That was impossible.

No one knew I was a peacock shifter, and no one knew I held those powers.

My entire life, my family and I kept my secret hidden from everyone because it was safer to be considered a useless, broken shifter than a peacock. Most people didn't ask what kind of shifter I was, but the few I'd been forced to answer thought I was an abused wolf. One that was horribly mutilated, and therefore didn't shift, but was really good at fighting and had a smart sense about people. After all, who better to fight and not give a solitary fuck than someone who had nothing to lose?

So how could this newcomer have an idea of what I was just trying to do?

“I’m here to bring you home.”

“Home?” I repeated slowly in disbelief. “To Arcadia?” His eyes narrowed, and while he didn’t answer, that was answer enough.

I considered his words. I could go. I could also turn around and leave. Though something told me the god-king would have something to say about that.

Truthfully, I didn’t want to walk away from this.

Part of me always knew I’d walk through that portal, but I couldn’t stand the guilt of knowing I may not return. Hesitation made me complacent for six months. I didn’t want to spend more of my life stuck in a liminal state while trying to find my purpose.

I was the only one of my kind that survived that night. My mom—Danni’s mom—found me untouched beside the body of her fallen mate. There wasn’t a scratch on me, nor was there a peacock shifter nearby. She had no idea where I’d come from, only that her first mate, Scott, had protected me.

It soon came to light that I was the last. All other peacocks had died that night.

There had to be a reason—more to the story than what my either of my moms knew. I wanted answers. I knew deep in my bones there was more to my existence, but crossing that threshold meant there was a possibility I’d never see my family again. My chest tightened at the thought of leaving them forever.

I’d just promised Danni ...

Running my tongue over my teeth, I took a deep breath. “I need to talk to my family first.”

“That’s where I’m taking you,” Pan said.

My pulse quickened. “What? I have family there? There are more peacocks?”

He extended a clawed hand, but not as forcefully as I would have expected. Even though he had some sort of commanding



alphahole presence he exuded, Pan seemed cautious around me. “Are we doing this the easy way or the hard way, *Kali*?”

My body jerked.

It was like a bolt of lightning struck me.

I’d heard that name before from his lips, in my dream. That was crazy, though. Or was it?

I could see into a person’s soul and know every secret.

Maybe this was another power the peacocks had, but no one knew? Maybe it was a vision of what I was in the future? In which case, he’d eventually fuck me into oblivion—not sad about that—but he’d also be calling me by another woman’s name—which wasn’t cool.

I could handle role play, but I didn’t fancy being called something else. “That’s not my name.”

“What I call you does not matter.”

My eyebrows lifted sardonically, and I put my hands on my hips. “Then you won’t care if I refer to you as *Entitled One*—”

“Hard way it is.”

Pan wrapped his fingers around my neck, and before I could protest, my senses went wild. The moment our skin made contact, a jolt of electricity shot through me. My blood turned to molten lava at the barest touch of his skin, sending a buzzing sensation all over my body.

A feral spark flashed in his eyes. Pan smirked as he pulled me into his world—a world of dark magic and chaos.

A world of beasts.

# CHAPTER THREE



PAN

ENTERING ARCADIA WAS LIKE breathing for the first time.

My chest expanded as magic filled my lungs. I'd only been on Earth for a brief moment, but it was long enough to starve my senses.

The damp air and scents of home enveloped me. I would have found peace in it, were it not for *her*.

I dropped my fingers from the base of the peacock shifter's throat. Her touch burned enough to cause me pain, but not enough to deter me from doing it again. Pain was at least

something. A feeling. It had been a long time since I felt anything outside of madness.

“Gods,” she groaned, squeezing her eyes shut. The sound made my cock twitch, and I turned away. “The air is water,” the peacock choked. “And it’s so hot—”

“It’s Arcadia,” I replied. “What did you expect?”

The tropical-looking trees grew hundreds of feet tall, their wide heart-shaped leaves blotting out most of the night sky. Phosphorescent butterflies that danced in the dark lit the forest floor. A rainbow of colors and hues lined our path.

“Hot, rugged, shirtless men,” she deadpanned. “Preferably with tattoos and excellent knot-tying skills.”

I glanced over my shoulder to lift an eyebrow in her direction. That was a mistake.

The blade she pressed to my throat proved just how much I’d underestimated this strange creature. Determination made her brows furrow. Sweat dotted her temples. Blown pupils and her bottom lip trembling *just* enough to see made her a glorious and deadly sight.

I’d seen it a hundred times before.

Though never so fragile and unsure as this.

The novelty of it made me smirk, leaning into the metal’s sharp edge.

“What do you plan to do now?” I asked. “Cut me?”

She half shrugged, not lowering the blade a fraction. “Depends. You’re a god, so I don’t imagine it’s that easy to kill you.” She imagined correctly, not that I would tell her as much. “Then again, getting cut to pieces isn’t fun for anyone. Well, unless you’re doing the cutting.”

This was familiar. Her ruthless irreverence. As if she were talking about the weather instead of murder.

Gold dribbled down the handle.

I hadn’t realized she cut me until the evidence was touching her fingers. Flashes of a past I couldn’t forget assaulted me.

Knives to my throat. Cunt wrapped around my cock. Nails scratching down my chest.

We'd fucked hard as we fought.

The daydream vanished when she spoke. "You said you were taking me to my family." Her voice quivered—barely, but it was there. *Vulnerability*. She might be the same, but she was also different. "What did you mean by that?"

I sighed, leaning back from the blade.

She was going to ask questions. It was inevitable. I'd barely figured out how to answer them when I'd found her. "You're from Arcadia. Your family is here—"

"I've never been here," she challenged. "Not once. I was born on Earth."

Of course she was. I'd felt it the day she returned.

I always did.

This was the first time that feeling was merely an echo of feeling. A far cry from every past life. She hadn't been here in Arcadia, but she was still back all the same.

"Your blood is from this realm. Your magic. There is family here, your family, and they've been looking for you ever since they lost you." It was the truth. Every. Single. Word.

Her eyes narrowed mistrustfully, but I could see it. The wheels turning. The temptation.

She wanted to *belong*. She always had.

"Why didn't they come for me if they knew I existed?"

"They couldn't," I said. "Earth is no friend to peacocks."

Her lips pressed together. She didn't disagree. There had been a Great Sacrifice on Earth twenty-four years ago. I knew of it. She was born shortly after the battle where her kind were slaughtered. She'd likely been raised either by some unknowing people or wild creatures, though I wasn't sure which to believe just yet.

“And you?” Her head cocked. “How did *you* know where I was?”

I laughed, pressing against the weapon’s edge. My blood ran freely, without care. “Darling, I am a *god*. I can easily find a measly peacock shifter.”

Righteous fire ignited in her brown eyes, hints of gold flashing in their depths.

Her knife pulled away, and disappointment licked my skin. The tiny cut healed shut before she lowered the blade to her side. “Which brings us back to my original point, oh Entitled One. Why would you, ‘a god-king’,” she repeated, using her fingers to make quotation marks in derision, “humble yourself to look for a ‘measly peacock shifter’?”

“Because it’s my duty,” I uttered in all seriousness.

Dubious eyes stared at me, trying and failing to look inside the gaping void of my soul. I knew her powers. “It won’t work,” I said, calling her out on it. She didn’t shrink or blush with embarrassment.

“It was worth a shot.” She sighed, looking toward the forest. I could only imagine what she saw. I knew of Earth, but I’d spent no more than minutes there. The damage humans had done to the world was atrocious, and the concrete cities grated on my senses. It wasn’t a world for me.

A wicked thought crossed my mind, one I shouldn’t have given into, but I couldn’t resist. I had to see how she responded ...

Moving faster than she could track, I grabbed her hand that held the knife and broke her grip. The blade slipped through her fingers, hitting the dead leaves with a dull thud. Then I used my hold to spin her around, so her back was pressed to my chest with my arm braced across her upper body. Using my other hand, I reached between us to snatch her opposite hand and pull it behind her back, causing her top half to push into the arm across her chest while her ass leaned back into me.

My fingers were hard enough to bruise.

“Word to the wise, peacock. Never threaten a god in their own realm.”

Instead of fear, the scent of arousal reached me. The wildness in me howled.

“First, my name is Adora. Ah-door-uh. Say it with me.”

“No.”

She twisted her neck to look up at me from over her shoulder. “For a ‘god-king’ that takes his duty so seriously, you’re rude.”

I blinked. “Fine. Adora.”

She smiled. While beautiful, it was also wicked. “Second, don’t threaten me with a good time.”

Her ass thrust back, purposely brushing over my half-hard length. I went rigid as stone instantly. I lowered my head to put my lips at the hollow of her ear. “Do. Not. Ever. Do. That. Again.”

She lifted an eyebrow, perhaps testing if I was joking. I wasn’t. Upon realizing that, she rolled her eyes and straightened up. Just when I was going to let her go, she stomped down on my right foot. My breath hissed between my teeth. Adora threw her head back, breaking my nose.

I cursed, shoving her forward as she tried to kick me in the knee.

She fell and the vines encircling the tree wrapped around her ankles to form shackles, holding her in place as I reset my nose.

“Hey! How’d you do that?”

“God, remember?” I grunted.

“As if I could forget,” she replied scathingly. “Word to the wise, Entitled One. It’s an asshole move to feel a girl up and then gaslight her when she gives you the go-ahead.”

I growled.

*This fucking woman.*

Shaking my head, I turned away, taking a moment to gather myself.

Three days if we made good timing, four if not. That's all I had to endure. Then I'd have Flora and Fauna back, my soul's twin animals. Without them, I'd been losing my mind. If they died, I would truly go mad—and the call of the wild that enslaved my people would be permanent.

“The journey to Atlantis isn't far. That's where your family is. If everyone can simply keep to themselves, then we won't have an issue.”

“Right. *Atlantis*. That makes sense.”

The tone of her voice filled me with exasperation. It was the last thing I needed when I'd be handing her over to them soon enough.

“Is there a prob—” I broke off at the sound of ripping. “What the fuck are you doing?”

Now naked, she sat on the forest floor hacking at her clothes with her knife. “It was freezing in Portland and it's like a sauna here. I'm not going anywhere dressed in jeans and long sleeves.”

“How'd you get out of the vines?” One quick look told me she hadn't cut them.

With a mischievous glint in her eyes, she said, “Shifter, remember?”

Warm golden-brown skin acted as the flame. I was the moth.

I swallowed harder than expected and walked away.

We couldn't do this. *I* couldn't do this. Not again.

She'd tried to seduce me before. Was it possible she knew more than she was letting on? That she remembered? I couldn't be sure how much she retained from her past because I'd never known her like this—

“I'm ready.”

In a very rehearsed manner, I appraised the newly cutoff jean shorts and makeshift tank top. The sleeves, she'd used to

create fingerless gloves. It was smart given the rough terrain we would cross.

She tapped away on a small electronic device.

“That won’t work here.”

She looked up, closing the device. “Obviously.” With a wistful look, she walked toward the portal and tossed it through.

Adora must have read the confusion on my face.

“I left letters. While I wasn’t sure when it would happen, I knew I would cross, eventually. Anyway, my sister won’t stop looking for me. She’d send our entire House through that portal to wage war if she thought I was kidnapped.”

“Your House?”

“It’s like a pack, only larger. Houses can have multiple packs, and it’s how we govern—that’s not important. The point is, I left a message on my phone, so she knows I’m okay. Assuming it makes it back through, she’ll find it.” Her lips pressed together; eyes tight around the corners.

“I didn’t know you have a sister,” I said.

She shrugged. “That’s surprising. You act like you know everything.”

I wasn’t sure what to say.

What I did know was this version of her wasn’t feral or unhinged. She was *attached*. Loved. Accepted.

Somehow that seemed worse.



# CHAPTER FOUR



## ADORA

MY FEET ACHED. SWEAT dripped down my chest, running in rivulets over my cleavage. Had I known where I was going or what exactly I'd be doing, I would have packed a bag with snacks, water, and rope.

The latter was good for any number of things.

Traps. Suffocation. Climbing. Sex ...

My dream came to mind, much as I tried to push it away. I ran my tongue along the edge of my teeth, swallowing down the humid air.

The god-king walked ahead, giving me an unobstructed view of his taut ass in leather pants. How he managed to wear

them in this sort of heat confounded me. Probably another god power, if I had to guess. He didn't seem to break a sweat even after hours of walking. The thin white shirt clung to the generous muscle around his shoulders but wasn't damp or sticky. Unlike me.

His wild, dark hair was pulled back from his face and tied with a strip of leather. Symbols peeked out of the collar of his shirt, but I couldn't make them out.

Pan was a curiosity I would have had no qualms about taking to bed, but the arrogant asshole liked to tease and then turned me down.

I could take no for an answer. I neither cared enough nor was so insecure as to let it bother me.

It was the *reason* that weighed on me.

He hadn't simply refused. He'd reacted vehemently.

Aggressive to the point that it was irrational.

Either Pan had a few screws loose or there was more going on here than he was telling me. I had a nagging suspicion it was somewhere in the middle.

The god-king had the odd habit of jerking his head in various directions every few minutes. His eyes moved as if following the path of something I couldn't see. He clenched his fists when it happened again. My eyebrows furrowed.

"Hey dude, are you sure you're good to take me to my fam —" I started, speeding up to close the gap between us.

Pan twitched, startling far too easy for a supposed god.

The tree nearest us let out a sickening crack. I spun around, trying to gauge which way it broke when the trunk snapped diagonally and fell. I froze.

I could take down a dinosaur without fear, but apparently my quick instincts didn't extend to jumping out of the way from being crushed to death. In the split half-second between when it cracked and then fell, a strong arm grabbed my waist —forcibly moving me.

My head bounced off a hard chest, scrambling my senses. Cinnamon, cloves, and a distinctly male musk fell over me as the forest quieted once more.

Heart pounding and body slick with sweat, déjà vu hit me like a train.

I'd smelled this before. Felt these arms. Heard this heartbeat, as it pounded steady and strong in my ears—like a bass to music only I could hear.

But that wasn't right.

It couldn't be ... *could it?*

I twisted in his arms. My hands fell on his chest, fisting the lightweight fabric. I used it to hold him to me, close where I could see every facial tic and slight inhale.

"What aren't you telling me?" I demanded.

His pupils dilated. "We need to keep moving."

Or maybe it was like the dream, and this was some vision of the future. Although, it was hard to see that when he was such an ass.

I bit the inside of my cheek, tasting blood. "No. I'm not going anywhere until you tell me what is actually going on. You're being weird. Twitchy. Either there's more to the story or you're on drugs."

His expression didn't change, but I only took that as greater confirmation that I was right.

"How much do you know about me?"

I frowned. "Are you really that much of a narcissist to make this about—"

He leveled me with a cold, flat look. His hands locked around my wrists, squeezing until my fingers went numb enough he could extricate himself. "You wanted to know why I'm 'being weird.' There's no need to insult me."

I pursed my lips petulantly. "Fine. You're a god and a king, obviously. There's no account of you ever leaving Arcadia and coming to Earth. Given that all the shifters that go through the

portal have disappeared, most people assume you're not a fan of Earth."

"I'm not."

I snorted. "Other than that, all I know is you're revered as *the* shifter god. Whatever that actually means."

"I'm not the only shifter god," he interjected. "But that's beside the point. I'm the god of Arcadia and the wild—and *madness*."

My lips parted. "Does that mean that *you're* mad? Or that you make people around you go insane?"

Something uneasy raced along my spine, and it wasn't the sweat. I didn't feel crazy. Then again, did anyone who was actually feel that way? How would I know?

Gods. If Danni knew I'd gone into a portal with this joker—

"Kali! Kali!"

A hail of voices called out, waving their arms in excitement. A couple hundred yards off, people began approaching us. I couldn't understand what they were saying, beyond *that* name.

"Um. Are they real?" I jutted my chin toward the group approaching from behind Pan. He turned his cheek. A muscle twitched there, and I felt it like a warm breath against my skin.

"Unfortunately."

Well, at least I wasn't insane.

I glanced back at the fallen tree to make sure it was there, needing reassurance after Pan's little admission. That he left that out in his whole speech about taking me to my family made me feel unsettled. This conversation wasn't over.

"Not a fan of your loyal subjects?"

"Something like that." I was being a smartass when I asked, but his response made me take a second look at the shifters approaching.

Two larger men walked hand in hand. The taller one was slight in build with a beard that had seen better days. Black,

velvety ears stuck out from a mane of salt-and-pepper hair. The shorter of the two had more muscle on him. A black-and-white striped tail flicked in and out from the back of his pants. On his shoulders, a half-shifted child sat with a pointed black nose and large raccoon ears. White fur lightly lined her cheeks, and black rimmed her eyes. Her mouth and hands were human, but her lower half was entirely raccoon.

With them was a single half-shifted woman that I could only make out to be female from her breasts bound in vines. Her face had entirely shifted.

“I’m really not imagining this, right?” I asked. Distaste leaked into my voice, and the god-king visibly flinched.

“No.”

“Kay.”

The shifters kept coming toward us, the ones with human mouths smiling and speaking words I couldn’t understand. The only thing I could make out was a name.

Kali.

It was the same thing Pan had called me back on Earth at the portal. The same thing he’d said in the dream.

Who the hell was Kali?

“We need to leave.” Pan grabbed my wrist, his touch sending tiny shots of electricity through me.

It was that same feeling I’d had for months. The sense of something calling.

If only I knew how to answer.

“They look friendly,” I remarked, but didn’t stop him from dragging me in a different direction. The raccoon shifters walked faster, breaking out in a run. “Why are we ignoring them?”

Pan growled under his breath. “Because I said we are.”

“Oh, of course. How dare I question the almighty Entitled One? Clearly you know best ...”

He gave me a sharp look over his shoulder. “I’ll explain it when we stop for the night.”

“Why can’t you explain it now?”

I could have sworn I heard him grind his teeth in frustration. “Because I’d rather not have to deal with them.”

Behind us, their calls grew louder, more desperate. “Kali! Kali!”

I dug my heels into the ground, bringing us to a temporary halt. Storms brewed behind his gaze. “Don’t do this.”

His words were a command, but also sounded strangely like a plea. I couldn’t decide which it was.

“You called me Kali before.” I lifted my chin in defiance. “Now they’re calling me Kali.”

He cursed. It wasn’t in English, yet somehow, I understood it.

That realization terrified me.

I’d only been here a few hours and was already beginning to wonder if maybe this was a mistake.

Maybe some calls shouldn’t be answered.

“We don’t have time for this.”

With that, he bent and grabbed me around the waist, throwing me over his shoulder. My head whipped back before banging into his lower spine. I smacked him with everything I had. It was like hitting stone.

Sexy, warm, fuckable stone—but stone, nonetheless.

One of his arms wrapped around my knees, the other smacked my ass. I got the distinct impression it was not meant to be playful and instead demeaning.

My mouth dropped open in indignation.

All my attempts to knee him or kick were thwarted by his arm keeping me firmly in place while he hauled ass. The raccoon shifters were getting smaller as his speed quickly surpassed theirs. I had to do something.

My side cramped as I twisted, reaching under his arm for my boot. It was easier said than done when my body was shaking like a leaf in a hurricane while he ran, my hips bouncing off his shoulder. It took a few tries, but I managed to catch my boot around the edge. I maneuvered my fingers, straining them to the point of pain as I dug them into the side, grasping for the handle of my blade.

My fingers found purchase right as Pan gritted, “What are you doing?”

I yanked the blade free and stabbed him through the back without a second thought, aiming for his kidney.

Gold blood erupted. Pan dropped like a man kicked in the balls.

My peacock preened.

Served the lying asshole right.

We didn’t get long to savor our victory considering he ate a face full of dirt and sent me sprawling. I rolled along the rough forest floor, coming to a stop right as my head smacked into the base of a tree.

Spots of black danced behind my eyes. I groaned.

*Shit. Shit. Double shit.*

I put a hand to my temple and the other to the ground, trying to will myself to heal faster than a god. Fat chance.

“What is wrong with you?” Pan groaned. His voice sounded close. A little too close. A muffled thump told me he’d just removed my dagger and tossed it out of my reach.

Smart god. Apparently, he did learn.

“You’re the one kidnapping me,” I snapped.

“You agreed to come through the portal,” he thundered. “That’s not kidnapping.”

“You lied!” I shouted back. Gods, why were we shouting? It was giving me a migraine. Or was that a concussion? Either way, I needed to find out what was actually going on.

“No, I didn’t,” he scoffed. “Which you’d know if you understood.”

“I’d understand if you’d explain,” I replied in an aggravated tone.

“You’ll understand when we get there and you’re reunited with your family.”

“Why are you so gods-damned difficult—”

I was cut off by the sound of the raccoon shifters. Their steps slowed as they approached. The black spots faded from my vision, leaving me feeling woozy but cognizant.

“Kali ... Kaaaali.” That name was a cry, a plea, a prayer.

They came toward me, and Pan stepped between us.

I slapped his ankle, trying to sit up.

“Stop,” I hissed. “Why are you acting like such a prick?” It was supremely unfair how fast he healed given how high-handed he was being. I should have stabbed him twice before going down.

“You need to run,” he said softly.

I frowned, dragging myself into a sitting position. What on earth was he telling me to run from? Him? Because he didn’t need to tell me that, I already got there all on my own.

Right as I opened my mouth to tell him as much, the raccoon shifters stopped. One by one their eyes began to bulge. Their teeth grew larger. Their bodies cracked, breaking in places bodies never should.

The child’s jaw unhinged, gaping like that of a snake. He let out a feral hiss then climbed down the man’s shoulders in a scurry that more closely resembled a spider than a raccoon. The others dropped to all fours, wrists and ankles snapping, making room for larger, more monstrous claws to distend. Fur rippled along their bodies. Back and forth. Back and forth.

They stalked closer, letting out the shrillest of screeches.

It was a call.



I really didn't want to find out what answered.

"Well, shit," I muttered right as they sprang.

Pan met the first two head-on in a clash of talons and fangs, his own body rapidly shifting. I scrambled out from behind him, and army crawled toward where I'd heard the knife drop.

Two of the monster raccoon shifters broke off and started for me. Pan managed to grab the one that had previously been a woman. The child outmaneuvered him with three at his throat.

I tried to haul myself to my feet, thinking I may be better off ditching the blade at this rate.

The thought only lasted a second before something slammed into me from behind and sent me sprawling.

Blackness returned to greet me.

*Fucking concussion.*

I was starting to think stabbing Pan might have been a poor idea, and what was more, that he may have been right for encouraging me to try to run.

Teeth latched on to my shoulder. Ripping. Tearing.

Pain sharpened my senses and sent a surge of urgency to my brain, clearing the fog long enough to reach back and grab the raccoon-creature-shifter child by the hair. I pulled her off of me, gritting my teeth against the pain as the child ripped out a chunk of me with it.

I flung it forward, trying to get it as far away from me as possible.

The effort sent me back to my knees. One hand hit the ground to steady myself. The other came up to my neck to feel the damage.

Crimson ran like paint, causing another episode of déjà vu to hit.

Gods. I wasn't scared of a little blood, but I wasn't made to sustain heavy bleeding, in a land without healers or hospitals, no less.

A ragged growl drew my attention. The kid was back. Blood dripped from its mouth like a monster out of the *Gremlins* movie from the 80s.

“Don’t do this kid,” I coughed. “I really don’t want to hurt you.”

If it could understand me, it gave no indication.

“Pan,” I called, taking a step back. My foot hit something hard. My eyes flicked down. Steel glinted in the luminescent hours before dawn. I snatched my blade up without taking my eyes off the kid.

“Little busy here,” he said, sounding pissed off to the nth degree.

I bit back the smartass reply ready on my tongue. This was kind of my fault.

“What’s wrong with them? Why are they attacking us?”

The raccoon monster took another step toward me, its unhinged jaw opening wide to show a row of very pointy teeth.

My peacock was not impressed.

“Madness,” Pan grunted.

“What?”

“They’re mad,” he snapped, louder. The trees rustled and birds flapped away.

Pitch-black eyes zeroed in on me. I shook my head, hoping that even if he couldn’t understand my words, he could grasp what I meant.

“You just said you’re the god of madness. Fix them—”

It lunged. I sidestepped, dashing away to avoid a confrontation.

“I can’t.”

“What?”

“I can’t help them.” Emotion weighed his words down like lead bricks. I wanted to ask what good a god of madness was

if he couldn't fix it, but that wasn't going to help us right now.

"How do I get them to stop?" I asked instead.

"You can't," he answered. A crack echoed. I saw a body drop out of the corner of my eye. The raccoon creatures snarled. "There's no cure save death."

"You can't be serious," I said, continuing to evade my pursuer.

At full strength it wouldn't have been such a difficult task. But after being awake all night, hiking for hours, starving, and fighting off a head injury ... I'd seen better days.

Another crack sounded. The breaking bones were like a chill running down my spine.

It was one thing to kill for vengeance or in battle, but this ... they weren't in their right mind ... and it felt wrong. The same way their malformed bodies were a perversion of what we were, so was killing them.

"Don't you think I'd take it if I had another option?" he said, frustration bleeding through every syllable. "They are *my* people, and my power is corrupting them ..."

I missed a step, distracted by his admission.

The kid used that moment to close the distance between us. I lifted the knife, hoping to deter it and buy myself time to find another solution.

Hot blood slicked my fingers.

The creature gasped, crimson bubbling up and spilling out its mouth. I stared in horror as it pulled itself off my blade, then lurched forward again.

Time slowed, and I found myself counting its breaths.

One. Two. Three. Four.

It didn't breathe again.

Slowly the body fell back, sliding off my blade and falling onto the forest floor. Eyes glazed and utterly unhuman, it died like an animal.

My chest tightened.

It was only my months of training with the Portal Watch that kept me grounded in that moment and instead of collapsing into a crying mess. They'd prepared us for every situation they could think of, and that included child soldiers.

It hadn't sat right with me then, and it didn't now.

I lowered my blade to my side, fingers stiff with congealing blood.

Silence fell between us.

He must have killed the third when I was focused on the kid. Pan took a step toward me, and I lifted my chin. "I don't know what you're playing at, but I didn't sign up to kill kids. Either you start explaining *that*," I motioned to the body in front of me, "or I'm out. You may be a god, but I promise you, I will *not* make for a pleasant captive."

Storm clouds and hidden secrets were in his eyes when he looked at me, his expression unreadable.

"I'll tell you what you want to know, but first, I need to give them a proper burial."

I cleaned my blade on my shorts and stowed the weapon in my boot, then crossed my arms over my chest. I nodded. "We'll bury them. But when the sun comes up, I want answers."

# CHAPTER FIVE



PAN

*IT'S ALWAYS THE SAME nightmare.*

*The skies are red and filled with smoke. Trees are burning. Homes ablaze. Bodies litter the forest floor, a trail of corpses leading up to the white stone archway of Atlantis.*

*I am running. Racing. Trying to get to her.*

*The ground trembles and cracks appear. Sand and silt bounce on the surface as the land groans. Deep. Yawning. It sounds like thunder when it splits open. Dirt and debris slide into the cracks, pulled in as the crevices widen and grow.*

*Wings sprout from my back as I leap into the skies. Lightning forks through the clouds, scorching the air. The*

*better parts of me, Flora and Fauna, morph from wolves to falcons. They flank me on either side, and we battle the wind and rain when it unleashes.*

*In the distance, across the city where buildings crumble, crack, fall—she stands at the great wall's edge. Her dark blue hair is nearly black from the rain as she faces the open water beyond the city.*

*On the other side, the ocean churns. Like a sleeping monster awakened, the water begins to circle and pull away from the shore.*

*No. No.*

*I beat my wings harder. Faster. Urging myself to reach her in time.*

*Water rises. A tidal wave forms.*

*Ten feet. Twenty. Thirty. Forty.*

*Growing. Expanding. It blots out the last bit of light from the dual suns of Arcadia. Lightning flashes, painting an eerie, haunting scene.*

*The land shakes and the sea attacks.*

*“Kali!” I shout, my voice booming.*

*The figure on the wall turns.*

*Her electric eyes settle on me.*

*I can't name the emotion if I try.*

*The wave hits. The wall breaks. Atlantis capsizes.*

*My eyes flew open.*

The past faded as I stared at the suffocating stone walls. Anxiety filled me, not recognizing them as the sulfur-lined sides of my tomb. Gravel skidding caught my attention. I twisted, shifting my hand to claws.

*My breath halted in my chest.*

She slept on the slab of rock at the very back of the cave. Her fingers were threaded together behind her head and her dark blue eyebrows were drawn together, the skin between

them puckered as if an invisible hand pinched her. Her feet moved restlessly, the hard soles of her boots scraping against the rock and sending tiny pebbles skittering off the edge.

I sighed.

She was the same as she'd always been on the outside, but inside—something was different. Kali never balked at death, be it an elder's or a child's. She certainly never helped give them a proper burial.

Sure, the impatience was there, along with a sharp tongue that no other besides Kali dared have with me. She was built for sin and death. Wild to her very core. But there was also an emotion that I'd never seen in her before in all the years I'd known her: regret.

Adora regretted getting in the way so that the shifters could approach us. She regretted the deaths of those people.

Not for the first time, I wondered if she was this way before I met her.

While every life was different, there were two commonalities that never changed.

The first, that I found her as a baby and didn't see her again until she was a grown woman who'd regained her godhood.

The second was that I killed her.

Sometimes it was difficult, excruciating even, and others, nothing more than numbness. I was able to let it go because what redeeming qualities she'd had—what *we'd* had—had diminished over time. Eventually, her destructive nature had vastly outweighed all else.

Now, I wasn't so sure.

Light disappeared beneath the horizon, bathing the cave in shadows of the past. I shook my head, clearing those thoughts away.

My mission was simple. Find Kali and return her home.

Flora and Fauna would be returned to me. My soul would be restored instead of splintering. I would regain what sanity I

lost and put an end to the madness. The call to the wild that drove shifters to become monstrous versions of themselves would end.

That was my job. My duty, as god and king of Arcadia.

So why did I find myself making a distinction between Kali and Adora?

“Are you going to keep watching me sleep like a creep?”

I jolted, no less shocked than if she'd slapped me. “I wasn't watching you.”

“Sure you weren't.” She opened those mischievous brown eyes, focusing on me instantly. “Are you going to deny being a creeper next?”

I pressed my lips together. ‘Creeper’ wasn't a term I'd ever heard before, but it didn't take much to get the idea. “We need to get moving. There's only eight hours of night and we need to make up for the delays we ran into yesterday.”

Adora arched off the slab, stretching her arms high above her head, drawing her shoulders tight together. A flash of a memory where I had Kali tied up in my tomb while I sucked on the flesh between her thighs made me stifle a groan.

I may have hated her in past lives, but that didn't stop me from taking her to bed in most of them. And there were ones we loved before we hated. Sometimes for years. Decades.

It physically hurt to think of those times when she was here looking at me with those fuck-me lips parted in a seductive smile.

After last time, I swore her off for good. Every life thereafter. We were bound by fate, but the harm she did was too much. Every fuck and affair ended in a catastrophe between us, even though we were continually drawn together like magnets.

*But that was Kali, not Adora.*

I needed to suffocate the part of me that dared even think that.



“Delays,” she mused. “That’s an understatement if ever I’ve heard one. Care to tell me how we ended up here?” She motioned to the cave, dropping her arms and sliding off the rock.

“You passed out during the vigil.”

“I must have hit my head harder than I thought.” She frowned, taking in her clothes for the first time. “You washed me.”

“Washed is a stretch.” I jerked my chin toward the mouth of the cave. “There’s a small stream that goes down this part of the mountain. It sprays enough off the rocks to get the blood off without too much trouble. Last thing I wanted was you waking up in the middle of the day and getting me up because you couldn’t find a shower.”

It was a lie. Partially.

I didn’t want her waking up. I also couldn’t stand seeing blood on her. It made the madness worse.

I’d seen Kali drenched in blood enough for even my infinite lifespan.

“You have showers in Arcadia?”

“Natural ones. Waterfalls. Leaks in caves.”

“Not exactly what I’d call a shower.”

“Did the lack of steel death traps not tip you off that this isn’t Earth?” I lifted my eyebrows.

“You mean cars?” She cocked her head. “Because I’d kill for one of those ‘steel death traps’ with air conditioning right now.”

*Of course you would.* Because this was Kali. She’d kill for anything, and I shouldn’t forget it. “Cars. Machines. Oil rigs. Coal mines. Your planet was trashed in the name of luxury and laziness.”

She squinted at me. “I don’t see what my planet has to do with anything, but if you’re going to go there ... is this an insecurity thing?” She took a step toward me, her gaze intense.

“You lost control of your powers and corrupted your own people, so you have to bag on my home to feel better?”

I took a step toward her. The air between us became charged. Tension, palpable. “You don’t get to say *anything* to me about that.”

“Really?” she replied. “Because it was *your* powers that caused it, in *your* world, where *you’re* in charge, and *you* failed to tell me what would happen.” Her voice got quieter with each word as she stepped closer. “I was forced to kill a *child* because of your asinine belief that I should be kept in the dark.”

Golden waves rose and fell in the depths of her gaze. A shiver ran up my spine.

I leaned close. “Has it ever occurred to you that I didn’t tell you for *your* benefit?”

She snorted. “Horseshit.”

My teeth ground together. “You want to be vulgar and disagreeable? Fine. I’ll tell you.”

She tapped her foot impatiently, hands on hips. “I’m waiting.”

My hands balled into fists. I wanted to grab her and shake some sense into her. I couldn’t do that, so I settled for second best: feeding her lies dressed as the truth. “Your family took my soul’s twin animals, Flora and Fauna. Unlike shifters, who have mates, I have them. They ground me and my power. Twenty-five years ago, your family took them from me. Trapped them using old magic. They refuse to give them back unless I bring you back to them.” I had to commend her. Her face didn’t show an ounce of emotion as she listened. “In losing them, I’ve descended into madness, and the entirety of Arcadia with me.”

She didn’t speak for several seconds. I started to wonder if she would.

“There’s just one problem with this little story,” she said, voice shrewd. “If this hinged on you finding me, why didn’t you?”

*Why indeed?*

I couldn't give her that truth. No version of it would go over well.

"I'm the god of Arcadia, not Earth. I traveled the entire planet to find you, but *you weren't here*." A crack appeared in her armor. She wasn't quite sure I was lying now. I was a bastard for laying on the guilt this thick, but I had to. It was the only way. "Arcadia paid the price."

She looked down for a brief moment. "But you called me. Through the portal—"

"I was calling through all the land and portals, trying to draw you closer from whatever world you were in, so that I didn't have to cross over for long and risk my power infecting another population."

The muscle in her cheek tightened. "I see. So because I have a horrible family, apparently I am equally deserving of your scorn. Thanks for clearing that up. We should be going, since I'm guessing I'll need to find breakfast on the way."

She stepped around me and marched toward the front of the cave.

Well, she bought it. Not that it made me feel any better.

Adora was going willingly. This was a good thing. We needed to get through this as quickly and painlessly as possible.

"Are you going to stand there and stare at my glorious ass or lead the way?" she called before rounding the corner.

"I wasn't staring at your ass."

"No, but you *were* staring."

I lifted a brow. "How did you know?"

She paused mid-step.

"I have eyes on the back of my feathers."

A fan of black peacock feathers sprouted from her tiny shorts. It was the first hint of her animal I'd seen, and it was

only a slight shift. Not even enough to be called a partial. The onyx feathers swayed.

I could have sworn one winked at me before she disappeared out of sight.

## CHAPTER SIX



### ADORA

“ARE WE THERE YET?” I could hear the whine in my voice. Dehydration was going to be the death of me. I knew it. No one could sweat this much and survive. How did peacocks live here? I’d never liked the cold, but this heat was too much—and it wasn’t even daylight. Now I’d resorted to whining. A sound that grated my nerves to no end, and I was doing it. I was becoming someone I didn’t want to be, and it was all because of the damned humidity in the jungle.

“If you weren’t trudging like a petulant child, maybe we’d get there faster,” Pan grumbled.

“Excuse me, I am not *trudging*, and I’m not a child,” I bit back. “I’m sticky, hungry, and in desperate need of a bath. I’m

completely out of my element here with the worst company imaginable—and I spent Christmas with my sister’s rejected mate slash former bully at the same dinner table, so that’s saying a lot about you. Forgive me if my speed doesn’t live up to your unrealistic expectations.”

Pan turned to look at me, raising an eyebrow. “I could always throw you over my shoulder again,” he suggested.

I rolled my eyes. “Pass. The view isn’t worth it.”

Pan scoffed, and I grinned to myself. It was a lie, but I wouldn’t tell him that. He had a delicious ass, and if he were anyone else, I’d lick the muscled contours of his back with pleasure.

I sighed, tilting my head to the side to ease the cramping. As I did, the damp cloth around my neck wound slipped. It pulled at the freshly healed and still tender skin, and I hissed at the sting.

Pan stopped, leaning over so he could inspect it. He softened as he spoke. “It looks better now. The cave we’re headed to has underground springs. Pools. You’ll be able to take a proper bath. The sooner we get there ...” He gave me a look, suggesting I was holding us up.

“Fine, fine. I can’t argue with the idea of being clean.” I kept quiet, reserving my energy, dreaming of being submerged in water. I had no idea how much time had passed when he started asking questions.

“What did you mean about your sister’s rejected mate?” Pan asked, knocking large palm fronds out of the way.

“That you’re worse company than him? I figured that was pretty self-explanatory.” He side-eyed me while I smirked, but I knew what he was asking. “My sister Danni and I were outcasts growing up. Outcasts get bullied. Sometimes fate is a bitch and mates you to your bully. Fate also allowed her to reject him, thank the gods, but it didn’t stop him from ending up in my life. So—”

“You took him as your lover?” he interjected. There was anger in his tone, but also something like jealousy. I couldn’t

quite place it.

I shook my head. “First—ew. Second—who even talks like that? ‘Take him as my lover.’ Third, why would you go straight there? I didn’t say I *wanted* to spend the holidays with him. I said he still ended up in my life. And also, don’t interrupt me. It’s rude.”

“You weren’t getting to the point,” he said with a shrug.

“I *was*, actually, but you’re impatient.” I waited a moment in silence until I knew he wouldn’t speak again. “Anyway, Markus—the mate she rejected—he was dating a high-ranking member of our House. So he was with us for the holidays because of her. Thank the gods they ended it and he moved on. I’ll tell you what, it was so hard to be near him without strangling him when no one was looking.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t just kill him.”

I huffed in agreement. “I know, right? I thought about it a few times.” For a brief second, we were getting along, but when I turned to look at him, there was a hint of sadness on his face. Like somehow my admission showed him something he didn’t want to see. I felt exposed, but for the life of me, I couldn’t figure out why I cared. It was a new feeling, and I didn’t like it. It was all made worse by the fact I couldn’t use my power on him. I’d pushed so hard, but all I found was darkness.

“Why didn’t you?” he pressed, breaking me from my thoughts.

“Kill him?” I asked, and he dipped his chin in response. I lifted my shoulder. I wasn’t sure how much I wanted to share with him. “He didn’t actually deserve it. I thought he did at one time, but ... I don’t know. Much as I hate to admit it, he’s changed.”

He considered me. “I find it curious you’re defending his innocence.”

I scrunched my face. “What? I never said he was innocent.”

“You said he didn’t deserve to die.”

“Dude, that’s not the same. Being guilty of something doesn’t mean you deserve death. Motive determines a lot, you know? I don’t know what kind of savage system you have here, but so far, I can see why Arcadia doesn’t have a thriving tourism industry. The weather is bad enough, but if there’s an execution for every wrongdoing ...” For years, the portal had been off-limits. It made me wonder if all the shifters that passed through had ended up dead. Or gone mad.

Pan tilted his head and hummed, but I had no idea how to read him. “Tell me about your family,” he said, that trepidation in his tone leaking through again.

“Danni’s dad died the day she was born. When her mom went out to look for him, she found me. I was just a baby at the time, so they didn’t know what I was. When no one claimed me, we all just assumed my parents died in the Great Sacrifice. A lot of shifters did. I was just one more orphan of many. Until I shifted into a peacock. By then I was a toddler. My mom took me in—raised me as her own. She’s really strong. Not physically, although her wolf is another story, but mentally. She raised me and Danni all on her own until Abby came along. Scott, Danni’s dad, was her fated mate. She suffered in ways we didn’t see, and then she found Abby. It was only when things got better that we started to understand how much she had been struggling to get by. She kept going for us, but finding Abby made her want to keep going for herself too. Now that Danni is mated and they’re trying for a little mutant vampire baby, she and Abby are over the moon to be grandparents. Personally, I think I’m a little young to be an aunt, but no one’s asking what I think there, so ...”

“It sounds like they’re important to you,” he said softly.

“Uh, yeah. Of course they are. They’re my family.” Was this god-king lonely? Did he have a family? Anyone to love or feel close to? Something told me not. What a shit existence that must be. “What about you?” I asked.

Pan instantly bristled—*that* I could read. His whole posture tightened; shoulders tense and body rigid, he cleared his throat. “What about me?”



“Family? Friends? Fuck buddy?” I asked in a casual tone, winking at the last suggestion. “Tell me about your ... whatever it is you have.”

“No.” Pan kept his eyes forward, refusing to look at me.

I scoffed loudly. “Why not? I just told you about me.”

“It’s not your concern.”

*What. A. Bastard.*

“My life isn’t your concern either, asshole, but I was nice and told you about some of it. I don’t see a reason for the cold shoulder. Maybe you have some psycho ex you don’t want to mention. That’s fine, but you could at least tell me something. Maybe what it was like for before you ‘were driven to madness’?” His dismissive glance told me that wasn’t happening anytime soon. Pity. I would have liked to hear about it. “What about how you became a god? Is it immaculate conception like the bible or do you have godly parents? What about siblings? A sister? A twin? A pet goldfish, perhaps?”

As though I hadn’t spoken, all he responded with was, “Hurry up. You move slowly.”

“You know, you want me to walk faster, talk faster, and stop asking questions. It’s really chauvinistic, *oh Entitled One*, the *god of shifters*. By chance, do you also shift into a pig?” I stomped ahead of him, trying to escape his proximity.

“Kali,” he called to me.

“I take it back. That’s an insult to pigs,” I retorted. “Cute creatures, actually. Also turn into bacon, which I like, so they’re pretty useful on that front. I’ve been told they’re good for disposing of bodies too.” I waved my hands around as I spoke, moving through the trees at a quicker pace.

“*Stop.*” The commanding tone did nothing except fuel my irritation with him.

“No, you told me to hurry up.” I glanced over my shoulder and yelled, “And it’s *Adora*, you giant prick!”

As I marched away, my foot sank into the mud before I started slipping sideways, and I lost my balance, stumbling

down onto a slope which—lucky for me—was much steeper than it looked.

I am beauty, I am grace.

Gracefully careening down an embankment while screaming. My leg smacked into a tree trunk as I rolled. Something stabbed into my calf. I came to a stop with a resounding thunk. I was starting to have regrets about crossing the portal. Who was I kidding? We were well past ‘starting’.

“I’ve had about as much of this journey as I can stand,” I mumbled, my face pressed into the dirt.

I heard Pan’s footsteps approaching from where I’d fallen, and I rolled onto my back. Mud stuck to my cheek. My makeshift clothes were coated in sweat and decorated with detritus from the jungle floor. A throb in my calf forced me to sit up and inspect what had caused the pain.

A thick green thorn was embedded in the muscle. Great.

“Wait, let me help you,” he said, kneeling down.

“Go away,” I muttered. I yanked the thorn and gritted my teeth at the pain, exhaling through my nose loudly. Slowly, I counted to five while focusing on steadying my breathing. I opened my eyes, cracking my neck and releasing some of the tension in my jaw.

Pan’s eyebrows shot up in surprise. “You handled that better than I expected. Those thorns tend to make even the toughest of shifters break down in tears.”

“I have a high pain tolerance, but I prefer the kind that requires set up and consent, if you know what I mean. This,” I gestured to my bloody leg, “is your fault, so I’m not thrilled.”

Leaning back, he glared. “How exactly is this my fault? I told you to stop. You chose not to listen.”

“First, you’re just being an asshole to me in general, and I have no idea why. I didn’t do anything to you. I’m sorry if whatever ‘family’ I have here treated you badly, but I didn’t. *You* came for me, remember?” I pointed my finger at his chest. “Second, my name is Adora. For fuck’s sake, no wonder

you're alone. If you kept calling her the wrong name, maybe that's why she left you."

Pan's lips pressed together, and he inhaled sharply. Several moments passed before he spoke again. When he did, I cringed.

"She didn't leave me. She died."

*Ugh. Fuck my life.*

Now I sort of felt bad. He was still acting like a miserable jerk, and I'd taken a shot below the belt. I just didn't think it would land *that* hard.

"I'm sorry to hear that," I said quietly. "I didn't mean to ..."

"Hurt me?" he suggested.

"No, I meant to jab hard enough to hurt you," I admitted. "Just not like that."

Pan leaned his head back and laughed. It was genuine. Natural. I tilted my head as I watched him, feeling an odd sense of happiness that I couldn't explain. Like it made me feel content to hear his laughter and to see him like this. But I'd known him for all of twenty-four hours, so the logical part of me was confused.

I stood up, brushing my legs off, but that was like sweeping sand in the desert. I was coated, and nothing I could do would make it better. As I looked up at Pan, a soft whistling sound gave me pause.

*Weapon, my brain screamed.*

I lunged at Pan while he simultaneously wrapped me in his arms, sending us both to the ground right before a spear landed between where we'd been standing. Buzzing all over my body attempted to distract me as I laid on top of him. My breasts pressed into his chest as he held me tight, but adrenaline quickly took over and it was all I felt.

Screaming in the jungle gave away which direction the spear was thrown from.

“Hope it was good for you,” I ground out, shoving away from Pan. “We need to get out of here.” I had no desire to kill anyone else.

We scrambled to get up, and I felt for my dagger at my boot, pulling it from its sheath. While it wasn't in my nature to run, I was fine doing it if it meant I wouldn't kill another kid.

“Too late,” he muttered, scanning the trees. “They're here.”

“The same from yesterday? The ... creatures?”

“Worse.”

“What? What do you mean, *worse*?” I whisper-yelled, dagger up and ready. “I haven't gotten a rabbit shot. What's worse than mutant rabid raccoon shifters?”

A crowd of four burst through the trees. Like the day before, some of the shifters were stuck grotesquely mid-shift. In complete contrast, they didn't look happy to see me before things got weird. These shifters looked enraged from the start, like they had a personal vendetta to settle. Like I'd eaten their family dog and used the bones to pick my teeth right in front of them. They looked at me with wild hatred.

And I was ninety-nine percent certain they wanted me dead.

“I come in peace,” I shouted, holding my hands out in the universal sign for “stop.” Pan snorted.

“Well, they don't,” Pan said, in a fighting stance beside me.

“What the hell did I do?” I asked as the first shifter arrived at our clearing, yelling in a language I didn't understand.

They wasted no time lunging straight for us. Pan intercepted two and deflected, tossing one to the side before blocking another attack from a half-shifted puma that appeared to be in charge. The remaining two came at me, and it didn't take long for us to be separated.

Another volley of commands came from the half-puma after Pan managed to toss him, but this time something changed. I didn't know how, but some of the words translated in my thoughts, making sense as if I spoke the language.

*Murderer. The One. Attack.*

Hearing it tripped me up. A vision flashed in my mind of standing in a forest not unlike the current jungle, speaking to a tribe.

I shook my head, clearing the false memory as a half-wolf turned and lunged for me. I rotated my body, tucking the dagger against my forearm and slashed in an arc, hitting its neck while I ducked and rolled. It landed with a thud, blood pooling around its prone form. I glanced up, seeing Pan cut through a half-bear.

I stayed in my crouched position, frozen, as another scene played out in my mind. Something like another life.

A life where I knew a family of bear shifters, but they weren't stuck in some monstrous in-between. I watched as their cubs changed easily from human to bear with ease while they splashed in a river. A tribe leader handed me a platter—an offering—and there was a look of uneasiness in his eyes...

“Adora, above you,” Pan yelled, breaking my trance. I looked up into the tree branches and saw the puma was about to get the drop on me. Panic coursed through my veins.

I sprinted to Pan as the giant cat landed where I'd been moments before. Someone here was playing with my head, but I didn't know who. I'd almost gotten killed because of it, and now I was mad.

“Back-to-back,” I shouted. I turned my body, pressing against him and taking a defensive stance as a fox shifter leaped from the bushes snarling, jaws open and ready to bite.

As soon as I saw it, I knew I had only a moment, but I pushed my power into it. I tried to see into its soul. Its mind. Its heart. Anything. No images came through. Just pulsing pain. Anger. Hurt. Generations of sorrow and loss caused by ... destruction.

And it wanted vengeance.

I let go of my power then threw myself at the fox, forcing it off track using my momentum. It landed with a yelp, and I stabbed into its neck, severing the spine quickly, to minimize

the pain. After being immersed that shifter's soul, it felt wrong to kill them, even though they were dead set on killing us first.

I walked over to Pan as he was leaning down, finishing off the puma that had tried to attack me earlier. Wiping my blade on my muddy shorts, I frowned. Not the best way to take care of a weapon, but I didn't have many other options.

When Pan stood, I looked up at him. Some of that pain and sorrow I'd felt from the fox was radiating off their god-king as he stood before me. My sister was the one who'd been filled with an unnatural empathy after her change, but now it felt like it was consuming me too.

As I opened my mouth to tell him I was sorry for the loss of his people, a searing pain ripped through my arm, and I screamed as I twisted around. There'd been five. Shit. Another mountain lion, identical to its dead brethren, had taken a swipe just as Pan pulled me away.

I gripped the wound, and the cat went for me again.

A warm and protective arm pulled me into an unyielding body, holding me close, its hand splayed on my chest just above my breast. I turned to look at Pan, but my vision clouded.

The scenery changed.

Pan held me in the same position, but this hold was tender. His thumb gently stroked my skin. He looked at me with admiration. With ... love. He looked happy. His eyes were filled with hope. He leaned into the crook of my neck, trailing little kisses to my ear. I could feel the heat of his breath against my skin, and the press of his hardened cock against my backside. I could hear the sound of a waterfall near us, almost drowning out the words he whispered.

*You'll were made to be mine.*

“Adora!”

Pan shouting and shaking my shoulders brought me back to the jungle. The real world, where we'd just battled a group of half-shifted animals. Where dead bodies littered the forest

floor, including my attacker. I came out of my stupor, but the strange memory I'd just seen had me at a loss for words.

I was fully aware of a throbbing pain and blood dripping down my arm, but I didn't much care. I looked at him in a new light while he spoke to me, asking if I was okay. The best I could do was nod.

What had just happened? Could shifters play mind tricks? That was the best explanation I had, but even I didn't believe it. That memory with him ... it felt real. I felt it in my heart. My soul.

Pan cupped my cheek. "Adora, say something. I need you to focus."

"I'm okay," I said, my voice cracking slightly on the way out. I cleared my throat and nodded. "Yeah, I'm good. Just taken by surprise. Not thrilled about it." *Part truth.*

Relief shone in his eyes, but then he pressed his lips together, trying to remain stoic as he had been before. "I don't want to risk another encounter. We need to take a different path."

"You won't hear any argument from me." I shuddered, thinking about the misshapen shifters and the weird flashes I experienced. "There's been entirely too much death since I got here." *All truth.* I was just thankful this latest group hadn't included any children.

Pan lingered for a moment, and I held his gaze. Warmth bloomed in my chest, telling me I'd found something I'd been searching for. The moment his hand left my face, a longing for his touch pulled at me.

I reached up and dug my fists into my eyes, rubbing like this was a headache I could make go away. What the hell was wrong with me? Becoming one of those insipid women that developed feelings for a moody asshole they'd just met.

*Gag.*

I knew myself better than that.

Whatever was happening to me had to do with this place, and whatever mystery it held. Part of me wanted to figure it out. Part of me wanted to take a nap and pretend this wasn't happening.

I had to settle for a long walk deep in my thoughts.

Not exactly a good place to be.



# CHAPTER SEVEN



PAN

I REPLAYED THE EARLIER encounter on a desperate loop. An inkling of hope fluttered, but I didn't dare acknowledge its presence. If I did, it would infect me with its poison. I'd fall for her again. I always did.

For a brief moment, I was sure she felt the spark between us. Or maybe it was just the bloodlust, a semblance of her true self returning the more she killed ... but I was starting to believe that less and less.

There was a voice in my head that kept insisting she was different this time. The woman fighting in the jungle wasn't the same woman I'd known. The things she'd said didn't make sense. Guilt didn't mean you deserved to die? That wasn't

Kali's viewpoint. It wasn't in her nature to be forgiving. She was brutal. Ruthless.

She hadn't spoken since we'd left and taken an alternate path, determined to keep quiet. Her screams had given away our location when she'd fallen down the embankment. Clearly she wasn't going to let anything like that happen again and risk alerting further shifters. She spoke not a word. Not a complaint. Not a question. Just silence.

"We'll be at the ruins shortly," I said, glancing at her.

"The where?"

"The ruins. It's a shorter path to the caves," I answered.

She slowed her pace, turning to me. "Don't people usually live near ruins? Places like that provide shelter. Civilizations are built near natural resources, so won't more shifters be living in that area?"

I inhaled deeply, letting it out slowly. "Not these ruins. No one goes there. They believe they're haunted."

She let out an annoyed scoff. "I can deal with haunted, but if it's a shortcut and no one is there, why didn't we take that way before?"

*Because I didn't want to. Because it is a painful reminder of the past.* I couldn't explain that to her. Maybe I wouldn't have to. Being back there might trigger her memories even more. I'd be lying to myself if I said I wasn't terrified of seeing her that way again.

After a while, the jungle started to thin out, and a clearing appeared not far from our path. As we broke through the tree line to open ground, the view changed. A large, flat area spread in front of us. The once-vibrant green grass was still dead and blackened, never able to grow again after the destruction of this place. The foliage surrounding it wasn't as thick as one would expect, and younger trees grew at its edge, trying to reach the height of their neighbors. But the centerpiece was the ruins positioned on a plateau, steep cliffs on either side. The moonlight cast the entire scene in an eerie glow.

“Holy shit,” she breathed, her eyes wide as she took it in. “It looks like a bomb went off here,” Adora muttered, kneeling down and rubbing the charred ground with her hand. She lifted her fingers to her nose and sniffed. She looked at me in confusion. “There’s no smell.”

I tilted my head, considering her. “What were you expecting?”

She pressed her hands to her thighs and pushed herself to stand, then she shrugged. “An accelerant of some sort, or the scent of magic.”

I stared at her blankly for a few moments, trying to register what she’d said. “You can *scent* magic?”

She crossed her arms and cocked an eyebrow. “You seem to be shocked again, Mr. God-king. You act like a know-it-all, but you don’t really know much about me.”

I gave her a deadpan look, and she rolled her eyes in return.

“Yes, I can scent magic.”

“Peacocks can’t do that.” *She* couldn’t do that.

“Well, I don’t know what other peacocks can supposedly do. I’m the only one left on Earth, so I’ve been on my own there, and *I* can scent magic. My moms taught me how. I’m not that great at it, mind you, but I can get by okay. It comes in handy working with the Portal Guard. Investigating and whatnot. An explosion like this should be easy. It’s hard to mask the scent for something of this magnitude, but there was nothing.”

It had been an immense explosion. Those who didn’t feel the tremors in its wake were rocked to their core by the devastation and loss. All of Arcadia felt it in some manner. I felt it still.

“We’re losing the cover of night,” I said, glancing at the dim streak of sun on the horizon. “The caves are at the base of the valley below, just on the other side of these ruins and down a very long set of stairs that I’m not looking forward to descending. So let’s go.”

Adora pressed her lips together as she stared at the remnants of the structure, massive even in decay. Columns that once stood high were now toppled and broken. Huge rectangular stones littered the ground, and some had clearly fallen over the edge of the cliffs. “Stairs? In that? It doesn’t look structurally sound. Is there a way to climb down the side?”

“The only way is through it, unless you want to fly.” She was already full of surprises and liked to point out how little I knew about her. Perhaps this was one of those times.

She frowned. “Peacocks aren’t exactly graceful in flight,” she started, trailing off as she peered over the edge. The ravine was steep, and sharp rocks jutted from the mountainside. “I’ll pass. Last time I tried to fly, I couldn’t do it without hitting a tree. And that was ten feet off the ground.”

“Wise choice.” I took the steps that led up into the ruins and pulled down a torch mounted on the wall. Snapping my fingers, a small fire lit on its top, casting a warm glow around us.

She raised her eyebrows in disbelief, then gave me a look of approval. “Fancy.”

I took a deep breath before entering. I wasn’t ready, but this was the only way to avoid killing any more of my people. Adora followed silently, and I turned my head to see her in my periphery. She looked around, cautious and curious, her hand on her dagger.

“You won’t need that here.” When she gave me a questioning look, I jutted my chin to the hand on her weapon.

“You say that,” she whispered, her eyes still shifting from side to side as though she were waiting for someone to jump out. “And yet ...”

Step by step, we made our way through the expansive entrance. Our footfalls made soft thuds as we walked through the eerie darkness, but it wasn’t long before the sounds within these haunted walls changed. A sick crunching rose as the weight of our bodies crushed the bones beneath us. My

stomach tightened with grief, and I wanted more than anything to be away from it.

“Pan?” Her voice remained steady, but there was a nervousness in her tenor. “What are these ruins of?”

“A temple.”

“What happened here?” The words were barely audible, and she’d stopped walking. I turned to see her looking at the ground, waiting for me to answer. She looked up, her brows pinched together, fear written all over her face.

“Death. That’s what happened.”

“Stop being a cryptic asshole and answer me,” she demanded, her voice wavering as it rose in pitch with her anger. “What. Happened?”

I sighed. “The goddess of destruction happened.” Stepping toward her brought the light of the torch closer. As I approached, the flames flickered, casting our shadows on the wall ... and illuminating the bones and skulls that littered the temple floor.

Her mouth fell open as she took in the sheer number of dead that called this their final resting place. Adora knelt down, picking up a small skull and holding it in the palm of her hands. She looked over, seeing another and comparing their similar sizes. Crawling on the floor, she came to another. And another. And another. Every bone she picked up, every skull, she saw how small it was.

I stood there and watched, saying nothing.

She stared up at me, her eyes glittering with tears. “They’re all children, Pan. *Thousands* of them. Why?” Her breath shuddered as she spoke.

I held the torch up, pointing to the faded murals on the walls. “At the base of this ruin, in the valley, there was once a civilization. A peaceful people, they thrived here for generations. They weren’t warriors. They were farmers. Families. Scholars. Free thinkers.” I turned my arm so the flames would light up another mural, showing families working together. “The goddess of destruction demanded they

worship her, but they refused, protesting against a religion they didn't believe in. They argued for their right to teach free thought. So she destroyed them for it, setting an example first by filling the temple with children then collapsing it."

Adora gasped, clutching the small bone she held in her hand. She craned her head, looking all around at what was left of the dead. "Why? What kind of monster just ... just kills children? For the sake of her fucking vanity ..."

As the tears tracked down her face, I felt the sincerity radiate from her. The pain. The sadness. All the unfamiliar emotions were jarring to watch when I realized this was all genuine. There was no agenda. No trickery or false pretenses. Adora was genuinely heartbroken at what she saw. At what she'd just learned.

And that rocked me, to see her like this.

She sat there and wept, clutching a small finger bone to her chest as she grieved for those she didn't know.

I dropped to my knee, resting my arm on my thigh. Reaching out, I cupped her cheek, then wiped the tears from her face with my thumb as she looked up at me.

"I didn't know being here would hurt you," I ventured, trying to think of what to say. "If I'd have known ..."

She quickly moved to her knees, throwing her arms around my neck and nearly knocking me over with the force of her embrace. She cried noiselessly on my shoulder for a moment while I remained in my crouched position. With my arm wrapped around her lower back, I held her to me.

Her ombre blue hair brushed my skin, and the scent of her triggered memories with her that I'd tried to shove away. What we were like when she *wasn't* the monster. When she had been a friend. When we'd been lovers.

What was happening now surpassed even that.

In every other lifetime, she'd never been empathetic. She'd never loved anyone beyond herself. I'd often questioned if she even truly loved me, though I never wanted to know the real answer.

Stroking her hair, I waited until she pulled away from me. She wiped her cheeks, smearing the dirt that covered them. Adora nodded while she pushed herself to stand. “Can we just go?”

I inclined my head. “The stairs aren’t far from here.”

“Is there anything I need to know before we get there? I can handle it; I just need to know what I’m walking into.”

“It’s a long staircase, and the way is dark. Stay close to me, but don’t try to look over the railing,” I said after a moment of thought.

“That’s where the adults are, isn’t it?” she asked. I pressed my lips together and confirmed her suspicion with a single nod. “Got it.”

“We’ll be there soon. Then you can rest.”

She straightened her shoulders and gestured for me to lead the way. She’d put on a strong face, acting unbothered by the atrocities of these ruins. With her features schooled, you’d never know she’d cried or cared. The logical part of me argued that *this* was the reaction I’d expected, this was the real her. Callous. Heartless. Cruel.

I wanted to believe it.

And I could have convinced myself if I hadn’t heard her quietly sniffing as we descended in silence, surrounded by the souls of the dead that still haunted the ruins.

# CHAPTER EIGHT



## ADORA

I COULD SMELL THE water before we arrived. That delightful crisp and fresh scent reached my nose, and I inhaled, taking it all in and imagining what it would be like to feel clean again.

I was so over this day.

I'd started to question my instincts. Did peacocks have good instincts? I didn't know. I'd always trusted myself. Danni had trusted me. Now I wasn't so sure.

Nothing was right in Arcadia. Of course, we'd already known that on our side of the portal, but not to such an extent. I would have never guessed it was filled with mutant, half-



shifted inhabitants that had become feral and attacked without provocation. I thought that was the worst of it, but walking into the temple ruins tore at my soul.

My entire life, I'd put on a strong face. Where Dannika wore her heart on her sleeve, I hid behind a mask of indifference. I showed people what I wanted them to see. It wasn't false. It just wasn't all of me. Dannika was kinder, and I was meaner; there was no doubt about it. I stabbed first and asked questions later, while she weighed her options—but we both felt *deeply*. Maybe it had something to do with us being born during the Great Sacrifice—a night when my entire race was slaughtered, and her father was murdered. Maybe a piece of that pain and suffering our loved ones endured had become ingrained within us somehow.

Still, even with all my practice, there was no way to disguise my emotions when I held those tiny bones in my hand. I sensed an inexplicable familiarity in the ruins. The air was thick with sorrow and loss, so much so it was hard to breathe. The truth was that it was almost unbearable. It was easy to see why Arcadians would say it was haunted and no one dared to enter. I had a better understanding of why Pan didn't want to go there either. If I felt it, he surely did as well.

A deeper part of me wanted to avenge them. I just didn't know why. I wouldn't pretend that I was benevolent, or that I didn't hold grudges. I kept a list of those who'd done my family wrong, and some of them deserved to end up on the pointy end of a blade given the chance, but not for something as stupid and trivial as them not liking me. Not *worshipping* me. I was disgusted by the goddess that had inflicted pain and destruction on so many innocents for such a slight.

As we descended the staircase at the back of the temple, I made a silent vow to the souls of those murdered children: if I found the one responsible, I'd do everything in my power to put an end to her. To make sure she could never harm anyone ever again.

Reaching into my pocket, I touched the tiny bone I'd picked up. A metacarpal, as best as I could tell. Maybe a finger,

depending on the age of the child. It didn't matter, really. I'd kept it as a reminder.

I didn't know why it had affected me so viscerally. Maybe it was because I'd lived my life believing I was the last of my kind. On Earth, I was. All because of self-righteous zealots who wanted to rule over others. Peacocks were deemed too dangerous because of the ability we'd inherited. With nothing more than a look we could see into someone's soul. See their past, their mistakes, their secrets. People who were stronger with more means didn't like the risk that posed, so we'd been exterminated as if we were ants and not people. *She* was no different, except this time, there were no survivors, and that made me sad. It was such a basic word to describe my emotion, but there was no other way to put it.

"You're awfully quiet." Pan's voice broke me away from my thoughts. "What are you doing?"

*Plotting murder, but I don't plan on telling you that.*

"Thinking about a bath."

He smiled, pointing ahead. "Right through there."

I looked up, catching sight of the cave entrance.

"Thank the gods," I breathed. *Not that bitch of destruction, though. Fuck her. I'll thank her for nothing.*

Running ahead, I entered. Dark shadows and a damp scent filled the space. I dropped to my knees, scooping my hands into the spring and bringing them to my mouth to drink over and over again. I took my fill before I stood up, stripping my shirt over my head.

"What are you doing?" Pan asked, his voice almost panicked. I glanced at him to see he'd backed away slightly. His brows were scrunched as he looked at me with suspicion.

"That's not usually the reaction I get when I take my clothes off," I said, shimmying my shorts down my legs. "But I guess there's a first time for everything."

He opened his mouth to talk again, but I didn't stick around to listen. I bundled my clothes under my arm and padded over

to another pool, one I didn't plan to drink from, and dipped my toes in. A lukewarm temperature greeted me, and I walked right in, dropping until I was completely submerged.

The water rushed over my head, and I held my breath in the blissful silence until my lungs started to burn.

When I broke the surface, I noticed Pan had started a small fire near the cave entrance. He turned to look at me, aware that I was watching him.

"Why are you afraid of me?" I asked, rubbing my clothes together to wash the grime off of them as best I could. It didn't bother me that he didn't want to screw me, but the way he acted made me curious.

My comment made him bristle, and he straightened his back. "I'm not afraid of you," he said stiffly.

I gave him a flat glare. "C'mon, I just took off my clothes, and you took three steps back from me like my vagina has teeth."

His lips parted slightly, but something like a smile crept up one side of his mouth. After a moment, he said, "If we're going to be honest, I thought you were trying to seduce me."

Treading water, my head tipped back as I barked a laugh. I couldn't help myself. "If I wanted to seduce someone, coating myself in sweat, mud, leaves, and blood wouldn't be my first choice. Nothing sexier than rank body odor and open wounds," I said, lifting my arm and pointing to the gouges the puma left on my deltoid. The movement pulled at the wet cuts, and I winced.

Pan's expression softened. "I suppose that's a fair point."

"You know, when I first met you and you grabbed me by the neck and pressed your dick into my back, I gave the green light. But you declined. I can take no for an answer." I tilted my head to the side, then gestured at my arm and back. "That being said, I would be grateful for some help washing these. I don't heal as fast as you do. No naked funny business, I promise." I smiled, winking at him.

It was his turn to laugh, and I was pleased he seemed to chill out some after my comment. A tingling sensation ran over my exposed skin as the sound echoed in the cave. His mirth filled me with an emotion I couldn't place. I tossed my partially clean clothes onto the rock ledge so I could twist them out and dry them by the fire. Moving a little closer toward the shoreline, my feet found purchase, and I was able to stand. The water came to my breasts, barely covering my nipples.

Turning around, I looked at a wall in the back of the cavern. "See? I won't even look. Take off your pants, or don't. I'll never know." I was a total liar. Not about the seducing part. No was no, but I was one hundred percent going to check out the goods.

Pan chuckled, and I heard his pants rustle. Turning my head slightly, I glanced out of the corner of my eye to see what he had to offer. My mouth fell open, and I whipped my head around as quickly as possible. *Oh my gods ... was that real? Are all gods endowed that way? Or just him? Is it an animal thing? No, I've been with average-sized shifters. That monster looks like it wouldn't fit. Not that I wouldn't give it a ride just to feel it out.*

The water splashed as he entered—the pool, not me—and he waded through until he made it to my spot.

"I know you looked," he said casually as he approached with his thin white shirt in hand.

I shrugged, turning around. "I was curious."

Once I was facing him, my stomach tightened. His eyes met mine, and we stared at each other in a tense silence. I meant what I'd said. He wasn't interested, and I was good with it, but my insides screamed at how much I *wanted* him. Trying to shake off the feeling, because I would never be *that* girl, I did the best thing I could think of. Talk about something gross.

"I, um—" My voice was breathy, which was not what I intended. I cleared my throat. "I don't want these cuts to get infected. Slower healing means they'll fill with pus and smell bad, so ..."

Pan pressed his lips together in an attempt to not laugh at me, then managed to school his features. Guess maybe he saw through my subtle attempt to ignore my baser instincts. *So smooth, Adora.*

“What happened here?” Pan asked, pointing to just below my collarbone. His fingers traced a jagged, puffy scar, then touched the round scar next to it.

Flashbacks strobed in my thoughts, and emotions flared within. “I was captured by some assholes and stabbed. Probably wouldn’t have scarred so badly had one of them not dug his grubby finger into it. Then they shot me.”

Anger flashed in Pan’s eyes. He tried to cover it, but I could see it clear as day.

“Who did this?”

“It doesn’t matter anymore. They tried to kill my sister. They failed. We won.” I shrugged, thinking back to that night.

Pan pressed his lips together, accepting my answer and not pushing further. “I don’t think these will scar, but your healing should be better than this ...”

“Really?” Curiosity filled me. “Do peacocks heal better when they’re in Arcadia? Is this just because I’m so used to being on Earth? Like it drained my powers?”

“Sort of,” he said softly, gently guiding my shoulder to turn me around. Water splashed against my skin, and he gently rubbed his wet shirt over my back. “It’ll come back to you soon ...” His voice trailed off in a somber tone.

For several minutes, he washed me slowly, taking care around the marks that hadn’t quite healed.

“Tell me about life in your realm,” he said. “I want to know more about you.”

“I told you some things about me, remember? Then you wouldn’t return the favor.”

He dipped the fabric in the water before wringing it out and using it again. “You didn’t tell me what you were doing on the other side of the portal.”

“If I talk about me, will you answer my questions?” I turned my head slightly to look at him from my periphery.

He smirked, keeping his eyes focused on his work. “Some of them, yes.”

It was better than none. “I joined the Portal Watch. We’re the faction that guard the portals between realms. There’s seven of them on Earth. There’s this one to Arcadia, of course, Celestia that goes to a world of angels and demons, Faery goes to the fae—obviously, unpronounceable portal is in the Himalayas—”

“Unpronounceable portal?” He repeated, amusement lining his tone.

“It’s the language of the gods—or at least the god-like entities that come out of it. That portal sucks. It’s freezing. The Watch there are mostly arrogant fucks that think they’re better than the rest of us because they guard the most inhospitable portal with the most powerful beings.” I rolled my eyes. “The world on the other side blows anyway. Not that they know that. We’re technically not supposed to cross that one ...”

“But you’ve never been one for following the rules?” Pan guessed.

“In my defense, some jackass dared me to because he thought I’d chicken out. I made him my bitch the remaining three weeks I was there.” Pan chuckled quietly, his warm breath doing things to my skin I wasn’t supposed to think about. “Anyway, then there’s the witch portal in the Sahara, Vuulectus in the land down under, and Oceania in the Pacific. Oceania is the only one I haven’t been to. Kinda hard to get an invite when it’s a few hundred feet underwater. That one is mostly left to Sea and Serpentine to do what they want since they’re the only House that can easily access it. The other six we monitor the comings and goings of supernaturals. Protect our world when something undesirable comes through. That sort of thing. When I finished my training, I chose to return to Portland to guard the Arcadian portal.”

“Are you happy there?” he asked, gently lifting my injured arm from the water and skimming the cloth over it with care.

“I don’t know. Sometimes? No one there even knows what kind of shifter I am, except for my family. The peacocks were slaughtered because the Eyes of God. I was told that they refused to be controlled. Their power was heavily coveted, but they wouldn’t yield. Since they couldn’t be used as a weapon, they were killed. My family kept my secret, but I can’t trust that anyone else will when push comes to shove. So I don’t get close to anyone. Most of the time I’m good with it, I suppose, but it can get lonely.”

My honest admission shocked me. I hadn’t ever said that out loud before.

He hummed in response, placing the palm of his hand onto my deltoid. Warmth pressed into my skin, sending tingles over my body. “I know how that feels, actually. More than you can imagine.”

When he lifted his hand, the gashes were now faint scars. I touched it, looking up at him. “How’d you do that?”

“It’s a power bestowed to only those that are called ‘Entitled Ones.’”

I twisted my lips. “Fair enough. It’s my turn to ask questions.” I held my hand out, but he just stared at me confused. “The cloth, please. I know your wounds are healed, but the least I can do is help you clean up. You’re covered in blood too.” My eyes drifted to his tanned skin, looking down at his arms and seeing the remnants of our earlier battles.

He dipped his chin, turning around.

“Tell me about your world before this madness took over. Before your bitch of destruction started leveling temples,” I suggested, choosing to make a statement rather than ask a question. I thought it might help him open up.

His muscles tensed, but I remained quiet, gently cleaning the dirt and blood from his back.

Finally, he sighed. “It was a happier place. There’s not much more to it, really. When she is here, the world falls into darkness after a time. There’s nothing I can do about it, I’ve

learned, and my people suffer for it. No matter what I do, it seems.”

“Where is she now?”

“Gone.” It was his only answer, and the sadness in that singular word danced across my skin.

“Gone?” I pressed. “Like, she’s visiting her family in Fiji, or she’s dead? Do goddesses even die?” *Please tell me this one did.*

He chuckled slightly, but it was halfhearted, the movement creating tiny ripples in the spring. “This one can die, yes, but she always comes back.”

I traced the cloth down the length of his arm, taking care to make sure the skin was free of impurities. My hand followed in its wake, rinsing off as I went. “How can she come back from the dead? That seems awfully convenient. Is she a necromancer?”

“No, she has a temple that keeps her reincarnating. While I am the god-king of this world, she was created to be my equal counterpart. To balance me should I ever ... lose control. Except it ended up being the opposite. Somewhere along the way, the fates that created us both made a mistake. While I cannot die, she can, but whenever an act of injustice occurs that triggers her magic, she’s reborn. Her temple has made it so that she’s stronger with each lifecycle.”

“A temple? That’s it?” I repeated, raising my voice a bit. “Well, if she’s always destroying people, why don’t you return the favor? Destroy her temple and kill her for good?”

Pan turned as I finished washing his back, and when I moved to wash his chest, he held my hand in place, keeping his eyes focused on me. “I can’t destroy it. No one can,” he whispered. “It’s tied to her in a way that magic can’t break. She’s the only one who can destroy it, and she never will.”

I could see how much pain he was in, and it tore me apart inside. Reaching up, I placed my hand on his cheek, staring into his swirling green eyes. I couldn’t help the strong desire to use my power. I wanted to see into him. I wanted to know



more, but as I released a piece of my magic, his eyelids narrowed a fraction.

“I can feel you trying,” he said, cupping my hand. “I won’t let you in.”

I frowned. “You’re keeping something from me. I just want to understand. I want to help.”

“And what would you do to help, if you could?”

“I don’t know, maybe light her on fire?” I suggested. “We have really good pyrotechnics on Earth. I know a warlock, he’s a fuc—err, a friend who experiments with magically enhanced dynamite. I’m just saying, it’s worth a shot.”

“Why do you care so much?” He asked, searching my gaze. “I’ve been an ass to you most of this trip. The people here have done nothing but try to kill you. Why do you care what happens to us, them, if the goddess of destruction returned?”

“I don’t like bullies. My sister Danni was bullied horribly when we were kids, all because she couldn’t shift. I took the punches that I could, but if I got in the way they just hurt her twice as bad when I wasn’t there. I felt helpless. So, I can relate to the way this hurts you. I want you to be free of that, even if you are an ass. I can’t fix this curse myself, but you’ll get your animal souls back when you return me. I’m sorry my ... kind have been such dicks, but I want your people to be free of their cursed bodies and able to shift as one. I want this world to recover. If what you say is true and this goddess of destruction will come back, they’re going to need you at your best even more.”

“You almost give me hope,” he said so quietly I nearly missed his words.

“Almost?” I asked, trying to cool the flames that were slowly eating at me.

“I’ve been around too long to wonder how it ends.”

I nodded slowly. “Maybe you’re too old and set in your ways, but I’m not. This time you have the portal to Earth. Maybe those same fates that screwed you decided to throw

you a bone?” My lips curled up in a half smile as he stared at me with something I didn’t want to name.

“You continue to fascinate me, Adora,” he whispered, caressing my hand. “You are so much more than I expected.”

As I stood in front of him, I could no longer ignore the fact that something drew me to him. Sliding my hand around to the back of his head, I guided him toward me, pulling his face to mine. I paused when only a hairsbreadth stood between us. Drunk on the scent of him, I still let the moment settle in, giving him every opportunity to turn me away. To stop this.

Pan’s eyes flashed, showing something I thought I’d only ever imagined when he looked at me. Hunger.

He inhaled abruptly when our lips met, and a jolt of energy passed between us. I pressed against him, feeling a familiar ache between my legs, wanting so badly to take whatever this was a step further. My animal called to him, begging to be filled. She wanted his lingering gaze and unrestrained passion. His rough hands and gentle caresses.

My fingers threaded through his hair as I opened my mouth to him, my other hand resting against the planes of his chest. His cock swelled in the water, pressing into my belly.

He kissed me hungrily, sucking my bottom lip and scraping it with his teeth as he pulled away before covering my mouth with his once more.

I craved him, and I knew if I didn’t pull away, I wouldn’t stop. He’d said no—and I wouldn’t cloud his judgment.

I broke the kiss, sliding my arms between us to create space. The moment I did, my body screamed and yearned to be close to his again. Shaking my head and wiping off my lips with a wet hand, I knew I needed to explain myself. “You, um, you didn’t want this to happen, and I said it wouldn’t. I don’t know what came over me.” I couldn’t find it in myself to say I was sorry. I wasn’t sure it was true. Not if I wanted so badly to turn around and start it all over again. So I went with truth. “I didn’t mean to be a cock tease. Honest. That’s not my style, and I’m sorry for that. Truly.”

I ran my fingers through my hair, unable to read the expression on his face. Guilt? Anger? Desire? I had no idea. I took some steps around him as I walked to the shoreline.

Halfway there, a hard body pressed against my back, molding to fit me. My breath stuttered in my chest as his cock pressed into the cleft of my ass. Rough fingers grasped my hip bone, squeezing hard enough to leave marks. His other hand wound itself around my hair. Air hissed between my teeth as he pulled it to one side sharply, forcing my head with it.

Heat burned in my core.

“Pan ...”

Lips slid up the column of my throat to the hollow of my ear. My breathing turned erratic as the flat edge of his teeth nipped my earlobe.

Pleasure shot from his bite straight down my body. I pressed my thighs together. The slickness running down them had nothing to do with the water.

“I’m not known for my self-control,” I breathed. “If you turn me on then leave me hanging, I *will* finish the job myself, even if you’re in this cave when I do it.”

“I ...” His gruff voice trailed as my back arched, pressing my ass into him. “I won’t fuck you.”

Ice water doused my veins, followed by a different kind of fire.

I pulled away from him—or tried to. The hand in my hair tightened, yanking me back to his chest.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” I snapped.

“So much,” he breathed against my neck. He cursed in that language that I should not know but somehow did. “I can’t fuck you. Not when ...”

I craned my neck as far as I could to look at the man who held me in his arms. “Spit it out or let me go. You turned me down, and I said I don’t know what came over me. You had the go-ahead, but you don’t want it. Fine. But acting like this when I *want* you and you know it. That’s just cruel.”

Pan sighed. “I can’t,” I started to shake my head in disbelief, and he pulled my hair taut again. Forcing me back against his chest. “But if I let you go right now without feeling your sweet cunt come on my fingers, I know I’ll regret it and I already live with too many regrets.”

I stilled in my fight, far too agreeable for how cagey that answer was. “So what? I’m good enough to finger bang but not actually fuck? This after you acted like I had some sort of disease when I gave you the greenlight?”

“That’s not it.”

“Bullshit.”

He growled, the sound rumbling through his chest where it pressed into my skin. “It’s not a question of want, Adora.” His cock thrust against my ass. Hard. Heavy. “I can’t fuck you because I would impregnate you whether I wanted to or not. I’m the god of Arcadia itself. The land lives because I live. You’re a shifter in my domain, where I’m most fertile. The pullout method won’t work. Neither would human contraceptives.”

Understanding grounded me to the spot.

“Oh.”

“Now do you see?”

“Yep, and thanks for not doing that. This is a no-god-spawn-factory.”

His nose ran up my neck as he laughed lightly. “No-god-spawn-factory?”

“No mini-entitled ones.”

“Hate to break it to you, but all children are entitled. Not just godly ones. Comes with being reliant on—”

“You know what I mean, asshole. Now are you going to help me or are you going to ruin the moment and I’ll go take care of myself?”

Pan didn’t waste any more time. Spinning me so fast I was dizzy, he grabbed my thighs where they met my ass and lifted

me against him. Our naked bodies pressed together. Chest to chest.

His thick cock touched my spread pussy with every step but never near my entrance. With other guys, I might have worried about the precarious position, given the number of asshats that preferred to go bareback regardless of the consequences. Pan wasn't like that.

He took care to never push the line while still teasing me. Sparks of ecstasy zipped along my skin everywhere he touched.

My back touched a hard rock surface.

“Lift your hands,” he commanded. I arched an eyebrow but did as he said. Almost instantly something tough and leathery wrapped around my wrists. I frowned, arching my back to tilt my head up and see. Ancient vines in hues of blue and brown wrapped around my wrists and arms.

Pan kissed my neck, nibbling at my skin. His hands ran up and down my thighs as the vines took a hefty portion of my weight, pulling my shoulders taut.

He pushed my legs wider, spreading me further than I'd ever been. My muscles tingled with the edge of a burn just as something collared each ankle. I gasped as vines pushed out from the cave wall to wrap around each calf and thigh. My upper half was suspended while the lower was locked in place and unable to move an inch.

Pan took a couple of steps back. His green eyes flashed with raw hunger. He closed his hand in a fist and bit down on the edge of it as he took me in.

“You planning to stand there and stare like a creeper, or—”

An earthy musk washed over my senses as a vine wrapped around my face, tightening at my mouth like a gag.

Holy shit.

I was pretty sure a waterfall of my own making gushed from between my thighs. My cheeks heated as I felt my own slick arousal running down my inner thighs.

Pan grinned with pure male satisfaction. “Snap your fingers if it becomes too much,” he directed.

I nodded; or tried to.

Pan approached. One rough hand cupped my breast, fingers tweaking the nipple. I jerked. Need shot straight from my breast to my core, reminding me of its emptiness—and how much I desired for him to fill me.

“That tiny little tank top you call a shirt has been taunting me for days,” he said, lowering himself to my breast. He took my nipple between his lips and sucked the already tight peak until it was so sensitive, even his breath made it tender.

His thumb gently brushed over it and I cried out against my makeshift gag.

“Such a needy little thing ...” He repeated the process to the other side, smirking when I began to writhe against my restraints.

Fingertips trailed down my belly, curving around the crease where my thigh met my hip. Those tortuous fingers skimmed the edge of my folds, and a groaned rumble ran through him. “Fuck. You’re *dripping*.”

Pan dropped to his knees. His nose skimmed from the corner of my knee, up my inner thigh. He stopped just short of where I wanted him and bit down. Not hard enough to break skin, but it would definitely bruise.

Desire pulsed in the air; so thick and all-consuming, I felt like I’d die from it.

It’s like he knew every place to touch that would drive me insane.

Then I felt his tongue lick inside me.

Heat rushed to my head, as I reached for the release that was too far out of my control. “I’ll never get this taste out of my head,” he groaned, then penetrated deep again.

I thrashed against the vines that held me tight, but it didn’t hurry him along. Pan took great pleasure in licking and sucking everywhere ... except the spot where I needed him

most. I twisted my wrists and flexed my strength, but it did no good. Whatever plant these vines were made of were stronger than what we had on Earth. That or his magic made them unbreakable.

Pan shifted his tongue to my swollen clit. He hadn't touched it, but gods did I need him to. He traced light circles around it with the very tip of his tongue, making my indignation evaporate. If he'd asked me to beg right then, I would have.

My teeth sank into the smooth wood-like plant that gagged me. The slight taste of mint with coconut touched my tongue, along with something unknown.

Pan stilled. "Keep those teeth sheathed or I'll give you something to chew on."

He could feel that?

Damn. He really was one with the planet.

Little did he know, I'd like that.

As if reading my thoughts, Pan looked up, his eyes filled with lust. "Darling, when I'm done here, you won't be able to keep your head up—let alone suck my cock."

Then he sucked my clit into his mouth and shoved two blunt fingers in me at the same time.

I came apart. Black touched the corners of my vision, eating it up. My world narrowed to one singular thing.

Pan.

His tongue did something to me that made my entire body seize. Darkness took me as I orgasmed harder than I ever had before.

I was so fucked.

# CHAPTER NINE



PAN

I SPENT MOST OF the day watching her sleep, thinking about what had happened between us.

I'd been wrong about her. Again. Something in me snapped the moment I realized her motives were organic. The kiss was just that. A kiss. And gods, her lips felt good. She tasted different this time. Hungry. Experienced. Raw. New. A multitude of words came to mind as her taste lingered on my tongue.

Who was this fascinating and beautiful creature?

I couldn't stop myself after that. I ate her pussy half a dozen times, to the point that she was crying from overstimulation



before I finally let her down and put her to sleep. I retreated back to the pools to take care of myself after that, but it wasn't enough. I was hard the second I stepped back into her vicinity.

So like the inexperienced and overzealous young shifter she made me feel like— instead of the immortal being I was—I did it again and again until nothing more came out of me. I imagined my cock was between her parted lips instead of my fist, and I finally found some semblance of sanity.

I wasn't sated. Not even close, but it would have to do.

I wanted more of her. More time to know this version of her. But I knew what was at stake.

Arcadia in its entirety.

Still. It didn't make my heart's desires any less.

For over a hundred years I'd convinced myself I'd never trust her again. Never love her again. Now? I feared losing her, not to death, but to herself. All the emotions of the past came flooding back, but this time, it broke through my armor in a way I couldn't understand.

"You're watching me again," she whispered before cracking an eye open. "Creep."

I suppressed a laugh and instead smiled. "Maybe I am."

She'd slept naked, which did little for my raging hard on. I'd watched the rise and fall of her chest, the pebbling of her nipples as she turned and the cool stone sent goosebumps over her warm skin, and the flutter of her eyelids as she dreamed.

I wanted little more than to be sheathed in her tight heat and see if she felt the same as before, or if that was new too. I couldn't bring myself to; not when she wasn't aware of who she was. What *we* had been.

I'd fed her half-truths that I knew would lessen the sting of me not fucking her.

She rolled over, her ombre blue hair spilling over her breasts before she sat up. As she glanced outside the cave, she saw the haze of the moonlight illuminating the entrance. "I overslept. Why didn't you wake me?"

“You needed more rest,” I answered, pointing to her body. “Your wounds are all healed now.”

She inspected her body, noticing how every scratch and cut was gone, with fresh pink skin where the deepest gouges had been. She hummed in surprise. “Guess my blood *is* from this realm if my body is reacting this way. I never heal this fast at home.”

I wondered if she’d remember her “home” for much longer. I shoved the thought away, offered her breakfast, and started the final leg of our journey.

“You said you’re taking me to Atlantis, right?” she asked after we’d walked in silence for a time. She kept her voice low in fear of attracting more feral Arcadians, and I appreciated it more than she could imagine.

I nodded. “It won’t be long.”

“Are all peacocks from there?”

“No,” I answered, shaking my head. “Peacocks came from all over Arcadia. They thrived. Their colors brightened this world. They were peaceful.”

“You’re talking about them in the past tense,” she said slowly.

“The peacocks felt in danger here, and they all fled for safety. I couldn’t protect them.” An admission that haunted me, like so many other failures.

“The goddess?” she guessed, and I nodded in confirmation. “How many are left?”

“These three are the last that I know of, besides you.”

“Are they all black like me?”

“No, you are the only black peacock to have ever lived.” And the only one that ever would.

“Wow ... really?” The realization filled her voice with awe and wonder. “And they live in Atlantis? Like, the Atlantis that sank into the sea? At least, that’s how the story goes on Earth ...” When she trailed off, she looked at me to fill in the gaps.

I worried I might tell her too much, but I knew she couldn't piece it all together. She was missing crucial pieces of the puzzle that only I could give her.

"Atlantis didn't sink," I started, tilting my head to watch her reaction. "Not in the way you're likely thinking. It was razed by the goddess. It once held her worshippers, but like all evolving creatures, they had the ability to think. Analyze. Form opinions. When some dissented in their beliefs, she sent a tidal wave. I tried to stop her, like I always do. But I couldn't."

Adora snorted in derision. "That bitch really has an ego the size of Texas, doesn't she?"

"Texas?"

"An old territory on Earth. Big. Filled with mosquitoes and other things that want to kill you for no good reason." She waved her hand around as she spoke. "Kinda like here, the more I think about it."

I chuckled. Wonder consumed me. Would she be the same after she was taken by the priestesses? Would some of these qualities pass on to her? So much of her was different. I liked it. I wanted to keep her like this.

I wanted to keep her, period.

We walked in silence, but I found when she was quiet, I desired to know what was going on in her mind. Her thoughts were never what I expected.

"What are you thinking about?" I asked lightly.

"Meeting the other peacocks. I'm a little nervous and excited at the same time," she admitted.

Again. Never what I expected. "Nervous?"

She nodded, looking up at me with soulful brown eyes. "Wouldn't you be? I've never met any others like me. I have so many questions. But also, what if I don't fit in? What if they don't like my family?"

I almost stumbled. "Your family?"

“Well, yeah. I know the portal is wacky right now and I don’t know much about how to fix that yet, but I figured maybe once you have Flora and Fauna back, the portal will be fixed, and I can bring them through to meet the peacocks.” I slowed my pace, and it made her reduce her speed to match. “I ... I wasn’t planning on staying here permanently if there’s a way back to them. I figured I’d live in both places. Maybe we could see each other more.” Her fingers brushed against my arm lightly—her intention unmistakable. “You know, I mean, when you’re not dragging me through the jungle on a blackmail-fueled quest.”

Atlantis was just beyond the clearing. I didn’t want to go further. If I did, this moment was over, and my insides clenched and coiled in turmoil.

When I didn’t answer, she mistook my silence for rejection, and took hasty steps to put distance between us. “Or not, which is totally okay too—”

I grabbed her wrist, twirling her around and tugging her to me. She pulled her blade from her hip in an instant, reflexes kicking in over being grabbed.

Throwing out my other hand to catch her weapon-wielding arm, I held firm, pulling her in and crushing my lips to hers. Her tense body relaxed, melting into mine as I pushed my tongue into her mouth, savoring her taste, hoping I could burn it into my mind just like this.

Whatever this version of her was, I never wanted it to go away. I wanted her taste, her scent, her electrifying touch—I wanted it all to linger so I could call on the memory whenever I wanted.

Adora moaned, dropping the dagger and twining her arm around my neck as she stood on her tiptoes. My hands grazed up the curve of her hips, over the exposed skin of her waist, trailing her ribcage as we kissed like it was both our first and last kiss ever. Like we’d never see each other again. Never have the opportunity to feel this again.

A wave crashing against the rocks ahead startled us, and we broke apart. I looked into her heated gaze, following her

tongue as it traced over her swollen lips. The sun started to crest over the horizon, painting a soft orange hue across the sky.

“I needed to do that,” I managed, clearing my throat.

She nodded, breathless, closing her eyes while she grounded herself. “I’m not complaining.”

“We’re here.” I took her hand, leading her to the water’s edge. “Are you ready?”

I guided her over the stone steps that rose from the crystal clear water until they came to an end. She looked around, confused.

“What now?”

“Now, we swim. Follow me.”

As we dove in, my heart tore itself into pieces.

My cynical self wanted to say I was back where I said I would never be again. My emotions raged against the very notion and said I’d never been with her before. Not like this.

The logical part of me knew what I had to do.

The logical part of me knew I had no choice.

The logical part of me still hated what was about to happen.

# CHAPTER TEN



ADORA

I COULD SEE LIGHT shimmering through the ripples beneath the water. Fire. Torches.

Little bubbles escaped my nose, and my lungs began to burn. Kicking my legs harder, slicing my hands through the water to pull me closer to the exit ahead of us.

Peacocks. Family. They were *here*. Supposedly searching for me my entire life. So desperate to find me that they were willing to extort their god-king, charging him with the task. If that wasn't ruthless, I didn't know what was.

Honestly, it sounded like something I would do.

I would have blackmailed, begged, borrowed, stolen, or killed to find Danni if she'd been taken from me. I understood the sentiment, though I could see how others might find it cruel. The consequences for Arcadia certainly had been.

My heart squeezed at the idea of learning more about who I was. Where I had come from. Our culture. Traditions. Our history.

Would they be able to tell me about my peacock family on Earth? Did they know them? When had they crossed from Arcadia into Portland? Did I have brothers or sisters still here? Cousins? I had so many questions. Anxiety and excitement warred within me.

But there was another emotion. One I didn't like.

A hesitation. A worry.

I heard it, and I knew better than to ignore it, but I still chose to. I couldn't live my life questioning where I came from.

And what had happened with Pan ... I could try all I wanted, but the inexplicable pull and desire I felt toward him wasn't to be ignored. At least not on my part.

As I broke the surface, I sucked in a lungful of air, feeling my chest expand. I coughed slightly, sputtering water. Moments later, Pan appeared beside me, inhaling as soon as he was able. I glanced around the sunken room. The cavernous ruins were crumbling just as badly as the first temple had been. But where those ruins were an abandoned graveyard, this one looked inhabited. Lit torches lined the walls, and a set of steps led out of the water to a large rug. Another set of steps from there led to an unknown location.

"I win," I said between heavy breaths. I treaded water, staying afloat in the pool not three feet from him.

"What?" he asked, rubbing his eyes and trying to focus on me.

"I beat you. By a few seconds, sure, but I got here first." I smiled while he stared at me blankly.

“I didn’t realize you were ... racing,” he said, shifting his gaze to the steps leading out of the water.

I splashed water at him. “You need to have more fun in life. Maybe I can teach you how.”

His lips curled up in a hesitant smile.

It hit me that he was going to leave as soon as he dropped me off. Whatever had just transpired between us—whatever that kiss was—it didn’t share the same meaning to him. For me it meant possibility. For him, perhaps it was goodbye. If he was tasked with finding me against his will, I could understand not wanting to stick around, even with last night, but an emptiness settled in me at the knowledge that I probably wouldn’t see him again.

I’d known him for all of three days, but I felt so deeply that he was a part of me somehow.

I didn’t dare say that. I sounded like a lovesick lunatic.

*Hey, we barely know each other, but I actually like you, and for some reason, you’re stuck in my mind like you belong there and always have, so I’d really like it if you stayed with me.*

I shook my head and almost laughed at myself.

No, those words wouldn’t be coming out of my mouth.

I swam to the steps and got out of the water with Pan, standing beside him. I shuddered slightly, and he glanced at me.

“Are you okay?”

I nodded. “Just nervous.”

“Do you feel anything ... off?”

I instinctively looked down at my tattered, wet shirt. “I mean, if you’re talking about my nipples sticking out through the shirt, yeah, I feel that. Not much can be done, I’m afraid. Unless you were talking about something else?” I angled my head to look at my backside and make sure I didn’t have a gaping hole in the tiny cutoffs I wore. When I saw nothing, I



faced him again. He looked lost for words, but a surprised grin washed over his face.

“You aren’t what I expected.” The melancholy in his tone was in stark contrast to the sparkle in his eyes, and it tugged at my heart. “For what it’s worth, I’ve enjoyed our time together.”

My brows furrowed. His goodbye was real. He really had no intention of seeing me again. I’d be lying if I’d said that didn’t hurt. I’d had a teensy bit of hope that maybe he felt a connection to me too. All I could do was press my lips together in a forced smile and dip my chin.

As we took our first steps up the stairs, my heart began racing with anticipation.

Twelve steps left.

Nine.

Seven.

Three.

I stopped, reaching over to grab Pan’s hand before we finished our climb. Before we met anyone and I lost the opportunity to say something to him in private.

As our skin made contact, electricity shot through me again. My entire body lit up like a Christmas tree. I felt it in my core. Between my legs. At my fingertips. I inhaled sharply, and my lips parted when I saw his pupils blown wide and his jaw clenched. He’d felt it too. It wasn’t just me.

I stood there staring at him for a moment, not speaking, taking in my new realization.

“Pan,” I started, trying to find the right words. “I wanted to say thank you for bringing me here. I’m sorry my family took Flora and Fauna from you. That you had to go through all this.” When he started to speak, I cut him off so I could finish what I needed to say. “But I’m not sorry it was you that had to find me. I’m glad I got to be with you. I just ... I just wish it could have been a little longer.” I felt my voice quiver, and I cleared my throat. We’d kissed twice now. He brought me to

release enough times that it quite literally knocked me out. We'd shared stolen touches and lingering gazes, but it wasn't enough. Something inside me yearned for more. Something inside me didn't want to leave his side. Acting on impulse, I pushed up on my toes and reached around his neck to pull him to me.

Our lips met in an impassioned kiss, and I inhaled sharply as he reciprocated instantly. His tongue traced my lips as I parted them, allowing him access to taste me further. His fingers laced through my hair, his other hand splaying across my lower back to keep me close. My body pressed against him, and I struggled for air. I'd been kissed before, but the intensity with which devoured me was going to make me see stars.

I moaned into his mouth, my tongue massaging his as I deepened the embrace. I pulled away too soon, grazing my teeth over his bottom lip, and kissing the corner of his mouth.

He pressed his forehead to mine, his eyes closed.

"Adora ... we ..." he started, trailing off. The way he was subtly pulling away from me stung, more than I ever wanted to admit after yesterday. I didn't understand it. One moment he was holding me to him, and the next he was putting up another barrier.

"It's okay, Pan. Really. In another life, right?" I said in jest with a humorless laugh, but the look on his face suggested I'd just slapped him. I held my arms out, smoothing my scraps of clothing. "How do I look?"

"Stunning."

I spun on my heel, taking the last few steps with Pan trailing behind me.

As I crested the top of the stairs, I saw a beautiful mosaic centered on the wall in front of me. Every vibrant and brilliant color I'd seen in the jungle for three days was represented. At its center was a temple raised up high, lording over all the meager people and villages depicted below it. Scripture was written to the sides in a language I didn't speak, but somehow still understood. Words that I shouldn't be able to read

translated in my mind. *The Temple of Kali, goddess of destruction.* My fists tightened at my sides as my body shook. Above those damning words, brightly colored peacocks appeared to be in worship, circled around a single entity in the center ... a black peacock.

My stomach roiled. Three days' worth of half-truths and lies sped through my mind. Pan's words echoed in my mind.

*No, you are the only black peacock to have ever lived.*

No ...

"Pan?" I asked, but when I turned, he wouldn't look at me. I said his name again and again. He kept his gaze down, ignoring the fact that I was practically screaming at him.

"It is about time, Pan, god-king of shifters." A cold and monotone voice echoed in the cavern. I whirled around to see a woman in green robes, brown peahen feathers trailing behind her.

"Your demands are met. Give me back Flora and Fauna," Pan said, his words coming out tense and trembling.

"Demands? You did as you were commanded by the fates to do, Pan. We demanded nothing except what is *expected* of you," another scoffed. This one appeared exactly as the other did, identical in looks, but wearing gold robes.

"What are you talking about?" I whispered, turning to look at a third woman that had emerged from the shadows, her robes in shades of blue.

"It's—" Pan began, but the newest zealot spoke.

"It's his duty to bring you back to us. Those that held you in that world kept you from your becoming. For years now, this land has suffered for it. Suffered for his sins."

I looked at Pan pleadingly. "Tell me it's not true."

When he couldn't speak, another answered. "Every lifetime you're reborn, Pan is charged with finding you and delivering you to us, your priestesses. This is the first he has delayed."

The words echoed in my head, drowning out other sounds as the chatter between them became fuzzy.

Every lifetime?

Finding me. Delivering me.

The whole time, I'd spilled my guts about my insecurities and desire for family. My longing for a place in the world. To know where I came from. Every tender touch and moment he gazed at me. The way he kissed me like his life depended on it ... He'd led me on, bringing me here like a sacrificial lamb.

White-hot heat crept up my body, licking at my skin, kindling a flame inside me I'd never felt before. Rage unlike anything I'd ever known, fueled by unimaginable hurt.

"You tricked me," I hissed through clenched teeth. Taking a step toward him, he didn't move. He raised his chin in defiance.

"I didn't."

"It was all a lie." The room shook with the timbre of my voice. I'd never moved mountains with my anger before, but there was a first time for everything.

"Not all of it." He kept his gaze on me steady before his green eyes darkened, glancing at the priestesses behind me. "They are peacocks. They are your family. And they did want you back."

"Fuck your semantics."

"I'm sorry, Adora," he said quietly. "You have no idea how sorry I am."

"I don't believe you. You had three days to tell me the truth, Pan. Three! And you didn't. You can tell yourself whatever you want to feel better about it, but you carefully hid the truth from me. That's called lying."

"It is time, Kali," the green priestess said.

"Give me back Flora and Fauna," Pan shouted, his voice growing in strength and power. "I have returned her to you."

The three priestesses dipped their heads, chanting and moving their hands, looking like they were creating a spell. That was the closest thing I could relate it to. A burst of water sounded, and we all turned to the pool below. Two cages emerged from its depths, floating above the surface, and dissipating once they were over the stone dais.

Two wolves lay prone, and Pan rushed to their sides. Their bodies were lackluster, drenched, and unmoving. Until he touched them. In an instant, the wolves took on an effervescent quality. Pan's skin shimmered in a way it hadn't before. The misery and exhaustion on his face melted away. They stood, nuzzling his neck. They were whole again, the three of them, and Pan's power looked as though it had stabilized and returned.

He'd given me up for them. I wanted to hate him for it, but I knew how my sister and her wolf were bound to each other's souls. He did what he had to do, and I understood that through the deepest part of my anger. My shoulders sagged, and I took a painful breath.

"The Arcadians," I said softly, waiting for him to acknowledge me. When he did, I continued. "Will they become normal again? Proper shifters? Your magic ... your power ... If I stay here, will the madness that everyone has fallen into stop?"

He hesitated, his gaze shifting to the mosaic behind me, then he nodded slowly, and I understood what I had to do. My desire to leave this place, to fight my way out—I had to let it go. An entire realm suffered, and if I could save them from the nightmare they'd been living, I had to try. But this wasn't what I'd expected to find in my search. I never realized this would be my purpose. Noble as it might be to sacrifice oneself, it still sucked.

"Pan," I called out, and some of the sadness he'd worn returned when our eyes met. "Find my family. Tell them I love them and that I'm with other peacocks again. Tell them I'm okay so they never come looking for me. Do you understand? Lie to them like you lied to me. Don't let them cross into Arcadia. They can *never* know the truth."

“Adora, I—”

“Say you understand. Promise me this one thing. You owe me that much.” I needed him to protect Danni, Nova, and my moms. They’d search for me, and I didn’t know what they’d find. My heart ached when I thought of them, but it would shatter into a million pieces if I thought they’d get hurt looking for me. I’d almost lost Danni once, and it nearly destroyed me as I watched the life drain from her eyes. I needed to know she’d be okay. “Say it, Pan,” I yelled, blinking furiously through my tears.

He set his jaw, his lips pressing into a thin, hard line. His nodded once, closing his eyes as he did. “I understand.”

He turned, disappearing into the water with Flora and Fauna, and I stood unmoving until the water’s surface settled again, not a ripple in sight.

A priestess laid her hand on my shoulder, and I flinched, disgusted by the contact. When her skin touched mine, it didn’t elicit the electric buzz I felt with Pan. It wasn’t tender like my mothers’, or gentle and reassuring like my sister’s. The touch was cold and sinister, causing me to pull away and sneer at her.

The priestess in gold walked to the mosaic, pressing a stone deep into the wall like a button. A loud groan sounded before a split appeared down the middle, parting into two door panels that swung inward.

Torches came to life on the wall, illuminating the hidden room.

Dark and rotted tree roots had broken through the ceiling. Black vines crept up through the cracks in the floor, wrapping themselves around the pillars that surrounded a large basin. Between each pillar, a curtain of water fell. A stale odor hit me, and I recoiled, coughing to the side.

“You’ve really kept up the place. Honest, it’s the warmest welcome I could have imagined when I dreamed about what my long-lost family would be like.” I walked forward, knowing full well they were going to tell me to go in anyway.

“Nothing like eau de mildew and decay and ... a tub filled with blood.” I stopped dead in my tracks.

Horror filled me as I realized what the source of the rotting stench was. The contents of my stomach threatened to make an appearance, and I turned to the side, dry heaving as I doubled over, clenching my midsection.

“The fuck is wrong with you?” I choked out.

“It is time for your rebirth, Kali,” the green-clad priestess said.

“My re-*what?*” I repeated, taking a step back, wiping my face with my forearm.

“Soon you will remember.” The three peacocks pointed to the basin, signaling they expected me to get in.

“Um, there’s no way in all the worlds and realms that I am getting into that.” I continued taking steps back. I knew I’d just had a moment of realization that I could save the tortured people of Arcadia, but that was before three psychos wanted me to get into a bath of blood. I had no intention of staying. There had to be another way to save them. Not to mention I’d rather drown in water trying to swim away than drown in *fucking blood*.

The priestess in blue robes chuckled, and the sound made my veins ice over. I couldn’t move, and to my horror, I understood it wasn’t a reaction. It was her using her magic on me. She was holding me in place while chanting, and the two other priestesses approached me and stood on either side and again, nausea washed over me.

My mind went to the finger bone in my pocket. I wouldn’t become that. I couldn’t. What that goddess had done ...

Before I could process what that meant, the spell that held me lifted my body into the air, dragging me toward the sacrificial basin.

“Let me go!” My screams echoed off the walls, shaking the room as bits of sand and dust fell from the cracks. The gold priestess pulled a dagger from her robes and approached me as I hung in the air above the red expanse. I eyed the weapon, and

then her. Hatred tore through me. “I will kill each and every one of you the first chance I get,” I said, seething.

The peacock priestesses laughed in unison.

“You will forgive us when you return, Kali. You always do.”



# CHAPTER ELEVEN



PAN

I SAT ON THE edge of one of the floating stone steps leading to her temple. Flora and Fauna rested next to me, quiet and calm. They could feel my every emotion, though I imagined anyone could at this point. They didn't have to be the other half of my soul. The turmoil inside me was so intense, I was sure it radiated off me in waves.

"She is different this time," Flora spoke to me in my mind.

"That she is," I agreed, never taking my eyes off the mountain of stone that was her temple. I'd left her there, and I saw the hurt in her eyes when I did. She didn't understand why. Couldn't. I had seen her transformation countless times. I didn't want to witness it again.

“And yet you walked away from her, leaving her there with those power-hungry priestesses,” Fauna stated. “It’s clear you didn’t want to.”

“I had to,” I whispered. “The realm has descended into madness without us. You were both aging. It might take a thousand years, but your deaths would be my end. Without us, Arcadia would fall. I had to make a choice.”

Flora nudged my arm, scooting closer. “Then why do you sit here questioning your decision?”

I shook my head, not knowing how to put into words the struggle I felt within.

Fauna huffed, rolling her eyes, and breathing out harshly through her snout. “Because he loves her.”

“I always love some part of her,” I admitted. “We were made for a purpose.”

“Oh, please,” Fauna countered, tossing her head to the side. “She is different, so this love is different. We *feel* you, Pan. We are soul-bound. Stop lying to yourself. When you do, you lie to us in turn. It’s beneath you.”

“Fauna,” her sister chastised. One kind and gentle, one straightforward and harsh. My yin and yang. “He’s hurting.”

I chuckled, relishing their company after how much I missed their bickering and comfort. “You’re both right.” Fauna licked her paw with pride.

“In truth, everything is different, isn’t it?” Flora prodded. “I see her in your memories. You’ve never known her like this.” She raised her head, staring into the distance as she watched what had transpired over the last three days play in my mind. When she finished, she turned to me. “That was not Kali that you handed over to them.”

“I assure you, it was. I’d know her anywhere.” I clasped my hands, waiting for the weather to change. It would come soon. It always did. When the goddess of destruction returned, we’d all know it. I just didn’t know how long we’d have before she’d fully descend into the behavior that earned her the title.

We'd lived countless lifetimes as friends. We'd lived countless lifetimes as enemies. We'd lived countless lifetimes as lovers, and only a few of those were even happier times. Each story had the same ending, though I'd tried to change it despite our fraught history.

Eventually, her nature couldn't be tamed. The devil priestesses—her *family*—groomed and raised her to be what she was. They encouraged Kali to answer the call that drove her into darkness, urging her to drink in the power that came when she was worshipped. As she gained in strength, so did her priestesses. They fed from her, fueling their own influence over the shifters of Arcadia, reveling in the blood that paved the way to their own immortality.

They prepared Kali each and every time so that they, her priestesses, would be revered for their hold over her. Kali was a means to an end. When tribes fought back, or refused to bow before the peacocks, they used Kali's wrath to destroy the realm. I hated them for it.

"You misunderstand, Pan. Yes, it *is* Kali's body, but that's not her mind. Maybe not even her soul. The physical body is merely a vessel, after all," Flora said gently, tilting her neck slightly as she considered saying more. "And you are not following your heart."

"Like a dumbass," her sister chimed in.

"My heart has led me down this path before, Fauna," I argued, though a part of me smiled at her candor.

"More lies," she scoffed, giving me the side eye.

I knew she was right. They both were. That didn't stop my heart and head from battling.

I'd spent three days with a woman unlike any I'd ever known. Brief pieces of the personality I was accustomed to shone through this new version of her, yes. A hardness and an unyielding perseverance were present, but not because she'd been raised by the zealots. She'd been raised by a family. Suffered hardships. Endured loneliness and bullying, but also experienced unconditional love. Joy. Fear.

She'd been shaped by compassion. Humanity, as she'd called it.

It was why she'd cried amid the temple ruins. Why she'd reacted with such anger over having to kill a child, even if it had been in self-defense. It was why she helped bury them.

Those parts of her were genuine. Every bit of her I'd experienced the last three days was a woman I'd never met in all my lifetimes with her.

Her anger was just. Her pain was real. Her love for her family was palpable. She'd made me promise to stop them from searching for her. Her last wish was to protect them.

When she'd looked at me, accepting that I'd traded her life for Flora and Fauna, I saw forgiveness in her eyes. It was an understanding. This version of her didn't forgive easily, but Adora was *capable* of it. In all the eons we'd existed, Kali had never forgiven anyone.

Dark clouds gathered, rolling into each other and blacking out the sky. Rumbling thunder sounded after violent cracks of lightning splintered across the heavens.

I stood, preparing to dive into the water. "Stay here."

"What are you doing?" Flora asked quickly, jumping on all four paws.

"He's going to get Kali," Fauna answered with a knowing smirk I could hear in her voice, not bothering to move.

"No, I'm going to save Adora."

I just hoped I wasn't too late.

# CHAPTER TWELVE



ADORA

DARKNESS ENVELOPED ME.

Dreams swirled in my mind, painting pictures that felt like distant memories, each with a red filter distorting the images.

Lifetimes. Childhoods. Births. Deaths. Rebirths.

Visions of pasts being raised by the priestesses. No affection or reassurance. No guidance on right and wrong. Only retaliation. Reminders of my worthiness and what I was *owed* by this world.

Preening when Arcadians gave me what I wanted.

Reverence. Adoration. Worship.

All the while, anger and an all-consuming rage bubbled beneath the surface of my existence, and my self-serving guardians greedily stoked the flames. I watched countless rebirths that led me to indescribable powers. *Destructive* powers. The priestesses urged me to claim my revenge. To show my strength and punish those who refused me ... those who refused *them*.

In the background, a familiar face always watched from the shadows. A tormented soul wallowing in the anguish my actions caused him. Crying out for his people. Sometimes crying out for ... me.

*Pan.*

My consciousness whispered his name in my mind. A tender touch grazed my psyche. I felt ... desire. Regret. Longing.

Lifetimes together. Fighting. Fucking. Embracing. Damning.

Each ended the same. My final vision in each life was his face. His eyes, always filled with the torturous burden of killing me when he failed to change the course that had been set. The overwhelming sorrow he felt when he'd lose me not only to myself, but to the priestesses. My teachers. My guardians. My groomers. Emotion leaked from his eyes when he'd whisper his final goodbyes. His apologies. His failures. His promise that he'd never stop trying to save me.

A flutter in my chest pressed against a cage of bone.

A thousand lifetimes flashed before my eyes, and it was always the same story. Rage, destruction, and murder. My death. My rebirth.

But one more story lingered, its uniqueness burning brighter than any other as the veil of red lifted. My tiny hand holding my sister's while we played in the creek by our cabin as little girls. Her smiling face, the light sparkling in her icy blue eyes when she looked at me. Fighting together side by side to protect each other. My sister's wolf nudging me with her snout, helping me stand when I'd been knocked down. My mom and stepmom holding me, stroking my hair, offering comfort and security. Twenty-five years with my family, and it

wasn't enough. It never would be. I was encouraged, supported, beautifully flawed, and, above all, loved beyond measure.

An incredible ache consumed me, and my body jolted as though I'd been shocked.

I grabbed the sides of the basin and pulled myself up, breaking the surface and gasping for air.

My eyes shot open, and the ceiling came into view.

"I remember," I choked out.

Turning my head, the three priestesses became my focus. The last thing I had heard before they'd suspended me above the tub and sliced open my throat was the chanting. The room was now silent.

"Rise, Kali, and take back this realm from the wicked," Gold entreated, raising her arms.

I stood, blood streaking down my body in rivulets, returning to the tub that was filled with blood, a sacrificial basin that held a piece of me from every lifetime.

A torrent of emotion raged inside me.

I had one objective.

As I stepped over the rim, a form appeared at the top of the stairs, short sword in hand. His wide eyes met mine, and despair slammed into me. We stared at each other for a moment, and his dejection turned into confusion.

"Put your weapon down, you fool," Blue admonished him. "Kali is reborn. Arcadia has fallen, and we will reshape it again. Do not get in our way, Pan. You know this is how it must be."

"Adora, wait, this isn't you—" he started, ignoring the peacock all together.

I held up my hand.

"You don't command me, Pan," I said through clenched teeth.

The righteous smirks from the priestesses made me swell with pride. They were my truest followers. My first worshippers.

The waterfall curtain around the tub called to me. Stepping into the spray, the water washed away the blood from my body, clothes, and hair. Red-tinted puddles pooled at my feet, the last remnants of my past lives.

This was the beginning of another.

I stood there until the water ran clear. Turning, I faced them. The peacocks ... and Pan.

A glint of steel shimmered from an altar, catching my eye. It was the very blade they'd used every time I was reborn, forged by the priestesses themselves. But it was my blood forged into the metal. That was what gave it its power. Not them.

*Me.*

I felt it coursing through my veins. Electrical currents buzzing with excitement. This was my world. I had everything. I had the power I craved after living such a powerless life. The ability to protect myself. To protect my sister. To end those that had harmed us.

“Come, Kali,” Gold said, approaching me. “Your return is long overdue.”

Taking in her form, my gaze shifted to Blue and Green. I gestured for them to come stand next to their sister. It wasn't a request. Kali didn't make polite suggestions to her followers. I made demands ... and I would make them bow before me.

Pointing to the ground, it was clear what I wanted. They kneeled, bowing their heads down in reverence. I glanced up to see Pan, and his features hardened. He shook his head, his eyes glazing over.

If he didn't kneel, it was no matter. I would get what I wanted in the end.

“Thank you for bringing me back, my priestesses.” I spoke softly, but in the vast silence of the cursed tomb, my voice echoed in the chambers.



Green smirked, though she kept her gaze down. “As we said, Kali. You always forgive us.”

Grabbing the Gold priestess by the hair, I jerked her head back and stared into her wide eyes. Leaning in closely, I whispered, “I never said I forgave you.”

I threw my hand out and called to the sacrificial dagger. My magic reached for it, pulling it to me as easily as I might tug an invisible string attached to it.

Faster than they could react, I slit her throat, whispering an ancient chant—old magic that only I knew, and it would ensure her death.

Green and Blue drew back in response, shouting and pleading with me to stop.

I walked toward them slowly while they crawled away. Memories of that decimated temple and the bones of countless children flashed in my mind. I threw the dagger, and it landed with a sickening thud in between Blue’s shoulder blades. She crashed forward.

Leaning back, I kicked out hard, concentrating my power into the ball of my foot and breaking Green’s femur as she scrambled away. The crunch of her bone was like music to my ears.

Screams filled the room as she tumbled to the ground, curling herself into a whimpering, broken ball, and all I did was laugh.

I called the blade back to me, and it slid out of Blue’s back as she cried out.

“Kali, no,” she mumbled, her eyes shifting to see me as her cheek pressed against the stone floor. “I ... I can’t ... move ...”

“What you can’t do is control me.” I leaned over her, smiling as I yanked her head up by her hair, exposing her throat. “I am not yours to command.”

Blood poured from her neck after I sliced across her delicate skin and the life drained from her eyes.

Green gasped, crying out for mercy as she rolled over onto her back, trying to back away from me while her mangled leg dragged behind her.

“We can rebuild this world, Kali,” she begged.

“Tell me you love me,” I said, standing over her.

“You know I love you, my Queen. I would do anything for you.”

“Tell me you worship me above all others.”

“You know I do. Everything I have done has always been for you.”

“Tell me you would kill for me. Anyone that would go against me. Man, woman, or child. Anyone who would dare try to love or worship another.”

“I would make them suffer for it, Kali.”

“Tell them you’re sorry,” I whispered.

“What?” Green shook her head fervently. “Please, my goddess, I appeal to your better nature as your most loyal servant.”

“I don’t have a better nature.”

“Give me a chance,” she cried out, coughing on her tears.

“Pray to me for forgiveness for what you’ve done.” Rage boiled deep within me, unabating. I thought of the little hands. The tiny finger bone.

“I beg of you, my goddess, please forgive me. I will always serve you.”

Kneeling down in front of her, I nodded softly. I reached out my hand and she flinched, but all I did was caress her cheek. “I know,” I whispered. “That’s the problem.”

I shoved the blade into her throat as her eyes widened and bulged. Her mouth popped open, but no sound came out save the gurgling of the blood collecting in her throat.

I shoved her away from me, keeping hold of the dagger. Standing up, I turned to Pan.

“I’m taking this world back,” I told him. “And there is nothing you can do to stop me.”

# CHAPTER THIRTEEN



PAN

I HAD TO KILL her. I knew it. It was my only chance. The temple stood, and always would, but its priestesses were dead. They couldn't bring her back. Only I knew how.

It would be my responsibility to end her.

To end this.

Yet, I stood frozen, wavering in indecision. For one reason, and one reason only. Not because I loved her. That was a given.

It was because from the moment I crested the stairs and witnessed her rebirth, as I had done so many times before, I sensed the atmosphere had changed. Despair ripped me apart

when I saw her emerge from the blood rite. I'd missed my chance to save her. Save Adora. Not Kali. Then, as my hope drained away, I realized I felt Adora's energy. The connection that had been growing exponentially between us was still present. This was the same woman I'd dropped off—a woman unlike any version before. That had to count for something. In every lifetime she was reborn, her wrath returned with a burning intensity. Her power radiated from her in violent waves. Not this time. Power, yes. Violence, yes. Wrath, oh yes ... but not directed at Arcadia. It was for *them*. The priestesses.

She stared at me; dagger drawn. I returned her gaze, my short sword raised. Silence swelled between us.

I didn't know what to do. I had to stop Kali from her destructive rampage. But I didn't know if I could kill Adora. Love and logic warred within me, and logic even warred with itself.

“What have you done?” I asked, glancing at the corpses of the zealot peacocks.

“Given Arcadia my first gift,” she answered with a shrug.

“Your first gift?” I repeated back to her slowly, watching her every move with eagle eyes. She'd slaughtered them with a smile. That was the Kali I had always known. My heart sank when that reality set in.

“Those priestesses will never control me again. They'll never use me again. They'll never urge me to do their bidding again. If I'm going to kill someone, it'll be on my terms. I make my own decisions.”

I nodded slowly, breathing out. So that was it. We were back where we'd always ended up.

She saw the resignation on my face and her features hardened. “You still think I'm going to turn into a batshit crazy goddess.”

“The thought had crossed my mind, yes,” I said.

“Well I'm not.”

“And yet you just said you were taking this world back and there was nothing I could do to stop you.” The energy coming from her conflicted with her words, but I still felt Adora’s presence. Not Kali’s.

“I was being dramatic, Pan,” she huffed. “It’s a fucking dramatic moment. Technically, yes, you can stop me. Those psychos used me. That won’t happen again.”

“And what of you taking the world back?”

“I saw what Kali is capable of—what I am now capable of. I held those bones in my hand. Felt the souls that haunt that damned temple. Now I remember *causing it*, but the memory feels more like a nightmare. That isn’t *me*. I can’t undo any of it. I can’t right any of those wrongs, but I can help fix it.”

I raised my eyebrow in question, and she glanced at my weapon that I still held firmly in my hand.

“Fix it?” I asked.

“If you’d let me, yeah. I know Kali did nothing but destroy, but I want to help repair the damage she’s caused in Arcadia. I’ve always felt a pull to something greater, and something unknown. Like I’d never belonged on Earth to begin with. I just didn’t know what it meant until now. I didn’t know about you and this world. I didn’t know about my past, but I know who I am deep down inside, and it’s not *her*. That shit ends here.”

There was a lot she’d wanted to say, and she had the floor. She’d more than earned it.

“The rebirth was complete,” I commented lightly, wanting to see how she’d respond.

“Don’t I know it.” She shuddered.

“That means you’re a goddess again.”

“I’ve always been a goddess,” she said, shrugging playfully.

“That is not what I meant.”

“Yeah, but it’s still true in both senses. Kali doesn’t live within me, but she is a part of me. Do you understand? *This*

goddess”—she swept her hand over her body—“ has never existed before.” She sighed, throwing her dagger down. “Look, I know you’re capable of killing me. You’ve had to do it every lifetime I’ve lived. I also know I can’t stop you if you decide you can’t let me leave this temple.”

The weapon clattered to the floor, and she didn’t look at it again.

“What are you doing?”

“The only thing I can do. I’m not going to fight you. Never again. This is me, Pan. The real me. Unindoctrinated, uninfluenced, unfiltered, and true to myself. Take it or leave it. If you’re going to kill me, get on with it. You owe me that much. Save your people and put an end to this lifetime.”

“And if I let you live? If I go against what every lifetime of yours has told me?”

“I have no idea. Great as my powers are, reading the future isn’t one of them. We were bound to each other by a cruel fate, you and me. I know the truth of my creation now. You succumbed to millennia in solitude and begged the fates for a partner. A true equal. They warned you that they would test you. That if you failed, your world would pay a heavy price. You were so lonely, though ...” Her voice trailed and those brown eyes, ancient as my own, I saw her sorrow. “You took the bargain, but you had no idea that *I* was the test.” She looked toward the ceiling, shaking her head. “They made me to be everything you desired. My base nature was and always has been this. Me. But the priestesses, my temple ... they were my test as much as I was yours. *And I failed.*” She paused, then cleared her throat before speaking again with hesitation. “When my past came back to me and I remembered everything, I had a clarity that I’ve never had before. In every life, a part of me loved you, but never my whole self. I didn’t understand love, so I didn’t know what it was when I felt it. The priestesses taught me that vulnerability was a weakness, and I wasn’t allowed to have those. I couldn’t love you with all of me, not when I didn’t even love myself. It was like only a glimpse of my soul was present. I don’t know if that means

anything to you, but it ... it was real to me. Even beyond Kali's—my—madness, that was buried inside.”

Silence spanned between us. Droplets of water echoed in the quiet darkness of the cave. Her discomfort at my lack of response was palpable. Her eyes shifted, trying to gauge my thoughts. I felt her power tickle the edge of my mind, teasing the edge of my consciousness. She wanted to see my intentions. My truths. I'd kept the shields up around her. For too long she had used it to her advantage, but this time was different. I knew that now.

Her lips parted in a gasp as I removed the block and gave her access to see what she needed.

She saw herself from my point of view. She witnessed the times I loved her more than my world and the times I loved her, even when I hated her. The fights, the fucking, the pain, the sorrow, and the ultimate endings that occurred in every life before. But she saw what she was now. What I could see when I looked at her. That I had already known the truth of who she was. That I loved her more deeply than I had in a thousand lifetimes.

She ran to me, and I dropped my weapon to the side.

Washed clean from the blood of her past lives and sins, Adora wrapped herself around me. Our chests pressed together when she jumped, and I caught her. My hands went to her ass where the tiny shorts that had been driving me crazy for days now had ridden up. I palmed the curve of her, grabbing a handful of what I found there.

Adora groaned. Her arms wrapped around my neck, fingers fisting in my hair. She yanked my head back, looming above me. My lips parted. What she breathed out, I breathed in.

For many lifetimes, I'd been alone. Ones with Kali. Without Kali. They started to blend together when they all ended the same.

Not this time.

Not with Adora.



This was the reincarnation I was waiting for. I knew it as deeply as I knew myself.

Our lips met, tongues twining together—like a thread weaving tightly into an unbreakable bond. Shifter gods didn't have soulmates. Not like shifters.

I had Flora and Fauna to ground me.

Kali always had ... me.

Until I killed her. Again.

This life would be different.

When the years became long and our immortal lifetimes never ended, I would be her rock. Her soul when she needed one. Her reminder of who she was.

“If you stop, I swear to every god in the motherfucking realms—”

I chuckled against her, kissing along her jaw. “What makes you think I'm letting you go now, *little peacock?*”

I tested the pet name on my tongue, finding I liked it quite a bit. It suited her. Tiny but with a big personality.

“Thank fuck.”

My lips slid down the column of her throat.

I wanted to bite her. Mark her. Suck her flesh between my teeth until it turned red and angry.

Then do it again.

I walked us back to the wall where water poured from crevices in the ceiling. One particularly large break in the stone gushed like a small waterfall. I stepped under it, the cool waters of Atlantis flowing over us.

Liquid ran from her skin to mine as I backed her against the stone wall. Adora gasped when the rough edges touched her spine and I pressed into her front.

My cock was already painfully hard after watching her slaughter the priestesses. Now that I had her warm and

wanting, despite my betrayal and the hundreds of past lives between us?

I rolled my hips and the noise that escaped her was nothing short of perfection.

“I need you to do that without clothes,” Adora breathed.

I smiled against her temple. The tips of my fingers toyed with the hem of her shorts where her thigh met her cunt. Slick warmth teased me.

“Do you have any idea how difficult it was to not fuck you every time you bent over in these?” I asked her darkly. Her heart rate kicked up, chest moving faster to inhale the air.

“I wanted you to.”

I groaned. “That’s because your pussy knows who it belongs to, even if it took us a little while to get here.”

The corner of her mouth curved into a smirk. A devilish gleam entered her brown eyes. “Does it? Because back in Portal Watch there was this ice fae that was fucking amazing with temperature play and—”

I dragged her from under the spray to the altar in the middle of the room. Her ass smacked against the stone as I dropped her on it unceremoniously. Adora huffed.

I nipped her neck, letting my canines sharpen enough to break the skin. She jumped as my hands came down on her waist to hold her in place.

“You won’t be seeing him again.” I licked the small punctures, sucking her skin. Adora abruptly arched into me, moaning low.

“You sure about that?” she breathed. “I’ve got a big appetite.”

I stepped back, letting my hands slide over her smooth brown skin to the wet fabric of her shorts. I pinched the hem between my forefingers and thumbs. “I’m sure.”

A quick tug was all it took for them to part at the seams.

Adora gasped.

“Those are the only pants I have asshole—ahhh!”

I gripped her knees to part her thighs as wide as possible, then kneeled at her feet. The first lick cut her off. The second one had her fisting my hair for a whole other reason.

“You won’t be needing them for a while, and when you do, I will make you new ones—that don’t show everyone what belongs to me.”

She threw one leg over my shoulder, yanking my slick strands while thrusting her hips forward.

I loved her like this. Wild and unrestrained.

“What *belongs* to you?” She was mouthing off, and honestly, I liked it. “Last I checked—”

I licked her ass to slit. The shudder that ran through her turned me on like nothing else.

“What was that?” I growled. The tip of my tongue traced tiny circles around her tight bud. Her thighs tensed, trying to close on instinct. I held them open with ease.

“Keep doing that,” she groaned.

“Say it,” I demanded. “Say it’s my pussy.”

Adora tipped her head back. “I don’t know. I think you need to do a little more than tease if you wanna be the only one fucking it—”

“*Adora.*”

“*Entitled One,*” she countered right back.

I slid my open palm up her leg as I pulled back, running my lips along her inner thigh. I went slowly, watching her reaction. When I hit a sensitive spot that made her twitch, I bit down hard, marking her with my teeth.

“Fuck,” she grunted. “I never said you could bite me. You’re going to leave marks everywhere.”

I cocked an eyebrow before maneuvering my hand between us so I could shove two blunt fingers into her slick sex.

“Hmm,” I hummed. “My pussy doesn’t seem to mind me marking you.”

“Savage,” she quipped.

“I am.”

If she expected me to be ashamed of that, she guessed wrong.

“I kinda like that,” she admitted, breaking off to moan when I curled my fingers to hit a better spot inside her.

“That I’m the god-king and all I want is to fuck this pretty little peacock pussy?”

Adora grunted as her inner walls clenched my fingers. Wetness flooded between her thighs. “Do it.”

“Tell me what I want to hear.”

Adora groaned. “You’re an Entitled Twat—”

I pulled my fingers out and dragged her body to the very edge of the alter so I could slap her pussy with an open palm. Adora’s lips parted. A flush began to crawl up her neck.

I grabbed the edges of her shirt and ripped it up the middle. The bra keeping her soft breasts from me was a hindrance. I went to open it with the tiny clasp that was situated snugly between flawless ocean sand skin.

“Do *not* ruin my only bra on this entire fricken’ planet,” she said as I pinched the clasp and popped it open. The cups flew to either side of her chest, baring her to me.

“You won’t need it,” I pointed out, my mouth latching onto one of her brown nipples. I licked the raised skin and then sucked it between two teeth, causing the already hard peak to further stiffen with her arousal.

“I’m not a prude, but public nudity isn’t really my vibe—”

I bit down, causing the breath to hiss between her teeth.

“I told you; I’ll make you new clothes when you need them. Undergarments too.” I pulled off her tit with a pop, releasing

her angry, swollen nipple. My cock strained harder against my trousers than should have been possible.

“You should put that on a resume. God-king and seamstress.” She grinned.

“I don’t like seeing marks that aren’t mine on you,” I murmured, eyeing the reddened skin along the underside of her breast. “I also don’t like others providing for you. While we’re here, in my world—I will be your provider.”

“You know I’m a big girl. I can take care of myself.”

I smiled, circling her other nipple with my tongue. “I’m aware, little peacock. I will do these things because I want to, not because you need me to. Let me.”

She seemed to consider this, staring at me through shrewd eyes as I toyed with her body. “When we go to Earth to visit my family, will you let me provide for you?”

“Yes,” I answered without hesitation. “I am taking you as my mate, Adora. I have no problem with you taking care of yourself. I simply won’t share you with others.” My response must have quelled some unknown worry because her expression softened.

“You’re so sure and yet you’ve only known me days.”

“I’ve known you for eons. Every version. Every life. This one is different. *You* are different, and it is only *you* that I want. Will you give me that?”

I sucked her nipple between my lips, pulling the blood to the surface. On a shaky moan, my little peacock signed her fate. “*Yesss.*”

A growl of satisfaction ran through me. Possessiveness bore down with a new intensity. “Then tell me what I want to hear. Whose pussy is this?”

I rubbed my fingers through her wet slit.

“Yours.”

*Mine.*

“And what does it want?”

“You inside me,” she answered on a breathless sigh as my middle finger lazily traced her nub.

“Ask nicely for it.”

“Wh—” She broke off before finishing. Lust was already glazing over her expression, but a new fire lit her pupils aflame, blowing them wide. “Please fuck your pussy.”

Music to my fucking ears.

Her jaw clenched, and I slid a finger into her tight channel, loving the grip that immediately enveloped me.

Adora widened her legs, spreading herself to the point it was obscene. I lived for it. My goddess. My temptress.

I used my other hand to undo the laces on my trousers. I loosened them until I could completely free myself. My hard length made the job easier, pushing the fabric down as it sought out her warm heat.

Adora’s eyes flicked down then back up, licking her top lip.

I pulled my hand away from between her thighs and pressed my fingers to her lips. She didn’t wait for me to tell her to suck, she took my fingers between her lips and licked every trace of herself from my skin like the sweetest honey. “I’m going to fuck this mouth next, but I’d hurt you if I took that first.”

Arousal spiked in her gaze.

Her lips popped as she pulled off my fingers with a wet smack.

“Don’t threaten me with a good time,” she purred.

I lined up my cock with her entrance and thrust once, filling her until I bottomed out. Her back arched off the altar as a strangled sound escaped her throat.

I gripped the soft flesh at her hip, holding her still so I could power into her. Heat covered me as her muscles strained to grip me. Her petite size struggling and yet simultaneously perfect for me in every way.

“Fuck,” she cursed, her face contorting. “I’m not ready to be a parent. Not even for dick.” She swallowed; face stricken.

I slowed my movements but didn’t pull out. “You won’t.”

She put her hands against my chest. “You’re changing your tune from yesterday awfully fast now. My sister may want a tiny tyrant running around and dictating her life but I’m not about that. I want to be the cool aunt. I like sleep and fucking, not to mention silence.”

I lowered my head against hers, closing my eyes. My cock twitched in impatience, but I held myself back.

“You’re no longer a shifter. You’re a god of this world. My equal in every way.” She jerked, pushing against my chest in a panic. I grabbed both her wrists, holding her still. “No life would be able to grow inside you without your permission now. You can’t get pregnant unless you want to. Think about your past lives. Search the memories. They’re all there.”

Adora stilled, doing just that. The fight drained away about forty-five seconds later as she let out a deep breath. “Oh, thank fuck. I was worried we’d be all oral for life—which isn’t horrible. I mean, there are condoms, but those break and to be honest, I hate them. I might as well be fucking a plastic bag. I’ve done the only oral before when I was with a snake shifter who had a wicked tongue, but I really like dick—”

My chest rumbled as a deep laugh ran through me. “Every life you’ve led, you didn’t want a child. The reasons always varied, but because of that, we’ve never had one. If this life is no different, then so be it.”

She kissed me hard, biting my bottom lip. “I’m not saying never. Just ...” She pulled back a fraction and caressed my jaw with her lips. “Give me time. I’m young. I want to live, preferably for a long fucking time before thinking about that.”

“You have all the time in the world. Yours and mine. I’m not going anywhere.” I took her mouth again, slowly rolling my hips to test the waters. She leaned into me, hands curling in passion as her nails pressed into my shoulders.

“Fuuuuuck. You’re so deep like this.”

I groaned, relishing her words. “Tell me what you need to get off.”

“Choke me.”

I wrapped my hand around her throat, pressing my thumb into the divot where it was softer. A slow red spread up her chest as I rolled my hips again, driving into her while pushing against her clit over and over.

Liquid gushed from where we were joined as her first orgasm tore through her.

Her legs wrapped around my waist, bare heels pressing into the small of my back. Crimson stained her skin as her chest rose and fell rapidly. I was on the cusp of release and holding myself off for her.

The next second her pussy contracted, tightening impossibly more. Just as her cheeks started to turn plum-colored, I loosened my hold on her throat. Her lips parted as she sucked in air on a heavy gasp; pure ecstasy written all over her.

I growled, letting the beast in me slip the collar as my pleasure heightened with every second she came on my cock. A scream consumed her, one that I might have thought to be pain, were it not for her shaking legs.

I pushed harder, thrusting till our hipbones slapped. The wet noises of my body meeting hers mingled with my animalistic grunts and her savage moans.

Her convulsing pussy slickened further, and her orgasm sent me flying over the edge. I thrust shallowly twice, before stilling.

“Keep doing that to me, and my pussy is definitely yours,” she murmured, pressing her forehead against my chest while she tried to catch her breath.

“I know it is.” A rumble in my chest made her smile.

“Cocky,” she hummed playfully. Glancing down, she looked back up to meet my gaze. “About my clothes, Mr. God-king seamstress ...”

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As we swam out to the edge of Atlantis, Flora and Fauna sat regally on a stone near the water's edge.

Upon our approach, they each inclined their heads slightly. "Your Majesties."

Adora scrunched her eyebrows while she pulled herself out of the water. "I think you're confusing me for my sister. Which has never happened, by the way. Just call me Adora."

They chuckled, giving me knowing looks.

"The air is shifting," Flora said, scenting the air. "I felt the end of the priestesses, but now Arcadia feels it too."

"Does this mean the shifters that were ... stuck ... are they returning to themselves? Their abilities?" she asked, tilting her head to the side, and wringing the water from her hair.

I smiled at her. "It does. It's already happening." I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. "I can feel them. They're happy. Relieved. Somewhat confused, though. We have a lot of work to do."

"And the madness? Is it truly gone?" she asked. The hesitancy in her voice caused the question to come out slowly.

"Diminishing."

Adora looked at Atlantis, half-sunken into the water. Her temple. The place she'd selfishly demolished and yet, preserved for her rebirths. The place only she had the power to destroy. She held out both hands and closed her eyes. Electricity crackled all over her body. The ground began to shake, sending ripples over the sea. The ruins shook as a heavy force pressed against it, splitting the stones, and they tumbled and spilled into the water. Like it was pulled from underneath, the temple sank below the surface, crashing and sending waves to pummel the shore.

When the dust settled, she exhaled a shaky breath, then whispered, "We did it."

"I believe *you* did it. I just stood and watched." I crossed my arms. "Which was incredibly hot, by the way."

“Do me a favor,” she said, but trailed off and let her question hang for a moment. “Promise me you won’t ever find a way to bring me back to godhood if I die. I know that I’ll physically be reborn, but Kali doesn’t need to be awakened. Let the goddess within me die too.”

“With the priestesses gone, I’m the only one that knows how to bring Kali back, and I swear to you I won’t do it.” Adora looked at me with relief, but a hint of anxiety appeared on her features. “Do you know what will happen to you if you die now that you’ve brought down the temple?” She shook her head. “When great injustices occur, you’re reborn as you were before. A ‘measly’ peacock shifter.”

“Really? That’s it?” she asked, the light sparkling in her eyes. I nodded. “That’s not so bad. Lived my entire life as a ‘measly peacock shifter’,” she said with a wink.

“I figured you’d be okay with it.”

“Promise me one more thing.” I glanced at her, raising an eyebrow in question. “If that happens, promise to find me again, *love me again*, so I can remember who I am and can always be by your side.”

She looped her arms around my waist, and I held her against me. With my lips hovering over hers, I whispered, “I swear it.”

I kissed her and felt her smile against my mouth.

“We have one more really big thing to deal with ...”

“What’s that?”

“Going back to Earth and introducing you to my moms. And my sister. And her vampire king-mate.”

I raised my eyebrows and breathed a sigh. “Well, after every lifetime we’ve shared, that is something I’d never expected to hear.”

“C’mon. It’ll be fun. Imagine: Family dinners. Holidays. Maybe playing with a niece or nephew soon. Paying my sister back for how awful she is every time she goes into heat by having loud sex in her house.” She trailed off, looking at me with trepidation. “What? Too much? Too fast?”

I chuckled. “Not at all. Honestly? I can’t wait. The sooner, the better.” Adora’s smile widened in excitement, and I leaned down to nibble her earlobe and whisper, “I’ve not had my fill of you yet.”

**THE END**



**[If you would like to see the exclusive NSFW art of the cave scene between Adora and Pan, you can get that here!!!](#)**

Thank you for reading *WORSHIP ME*. If you want to read more in the IMMORTAL VICES AND VIRTUES UNIVERSE, then check out **[REJECT ME](#)** where it all started!

# ABOUT THE AUTHORS



KEL CARPENTER AND AURELIA Jane are the hilarious team behind the international bestselling series, *A Demon's Guide to the Afterlife*. They pride themselves in being absolute weirdos, spending hours on the phone coming up with detailed worlds, and laughing about crazy ideas for torturing characters. While they believe they each have the personality of a rabid badger, people still seem to like them okay. They share a love of coffee, t-shirts, and tacos, and they've made some adorable tiny people with their equally weird husbands. Best friends and work wives, Kel has the audacity to live in Maryland while Aurelia lives in Texas, but they try to see each other as much as possible.

For more exclusive content, swag, and other goodies, sign-up for their [Patreon](#).



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[Dark Horse: A Demon's Guide to the Afterlife](#)

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# VIXEN'S MARK



BC KING & PHANTOM DAME





# BLURB



FOR THE FIRST TIME in over twenty years, Bernadette LaRue has a moment to herself. Her children have flown the coop, her estate has been purged of traitors, and when she takes stock of her life as she enters middle age, one thing becomes clear.

She needs to get laid.

Due to her husband's exclusive attraction to the rougher sex, Bernadette has never experienced true romance, but with his support—in truth, at his insistence—she agrees to take a chance and seek out a new partner. However, as a married noblewoman bound by a magical oath of fidelity, Bernadette's midlife romance could end up doomed before it ever begins.

# CHAPTER ONE



## BERNADETTE

“BERNADETTE, MY SWEET. YOU’VE given me twenty-five years of love and support. I know not why the Goddess chose to bless me with the perfect partner, but my life, and the lives of our children, have been eternally enriched by your unending compassion.” Leo sat across from me, gently grasping my hands in his giant fists. He smiled, and the warmth of his gaze held me in place as surely as his iron fingers. “We stand at a crossroads in our journey. Our children have left the nest, and with them, the daily demands of parenthood. You were so young when we wed, Bernadette, and for all that I’ve relied on your support since that day, I couldn’t help but fear that our responsibilities stole some of your freedom from you. But now, as we enter the next phase of our

lives, you have the chance to reclaim some of your lost opportunities. You have the chance to live the life you forsook in the name of duty.”

*Here it comes*, I thought.

“Bernadette, my star, my shining glory,” said Leo. “It’s time for you to get laid.”

*And there it is*. This wasn’t the first time Leo had tried something like this, but he’d never been quite so forward.

Leo LaRue was the lord of a mid-sized noble house in the Grand Duchy, located so far east in the duchy’s ancient forests that it nearly abutted the impassible Grand Cul mountain range. My parents had married me off to him when I was a teenager, and for all Leo’s virtues as a supportive husband and doting father, his lustful appetites have always had an exclusive contract with his own gender. Ever since we met, he was open about his sexuality, and I never begrudged him his extramarital dalliances. After all, ours was nothing more than a political marriage—at least at the start—and I had nothing to gain from denying my husband his appetites.

Unfortunately, *my* appetites weren’t nearly so easy to satiate. Fuchsvolk society frowns upon the mingling of the sexes, so while Leo was free to spend alone time with whatever men he chose, be it in the bathhouse or the bedroom, a woman like myself spent the majority of her time with other women, and as much as I care for my maidservant Marie, she’s missing a few key features I look for in a partner.

Which brings us to how a noblewoman in her early 40s, a mother of two who’s made love exactly five times, found herself pressured into an extramarital affair by her gay husband.

Couldn’t be simpler, right?

“Dear,” I said, “I don’t want you to live your life driven by guilt. I knew what I was getting into when we wed, and I have no regrets.”

“No regrets!? You’re as good as celibate, Bernadette, and despite our sexual incompatibility, I know well enough that

your libido is as ferocious as mine.”

“As if you’d know anything about my libido,” I said. “We don’t even share a room, let alone a bed! You have no place in my sex life.”

“No, but I *do* have an occasional place in your chambers. Do you think I never gleaned the true nature of those ‘decorative mushrooms’ you had the glassblower create for you? The long-stemmed things you keep hidden in your—”

I cut Leo off with a sharp gesture, cheeks flushed. “That’s none of your business.”

“Is it not?” he said. “I’m your husband, and I want nothing more than to keep you satisfied, and if I can’t do it myself, the least I can do is help you find satisfaction elsewhere. You’re a beautiful woman, even *I* can tell that much, and you deserve the chance to express your sexuality. Let me help. Let me get you laid.”

I let out an over-the-top sigh, hoping Leo would get the hint, but that oaf was stubborn as a glacier. “Suppose I agreed,” I said, relenting. “How would you go about your little scheme?”

“Oh, I have a few ideas,” he said, flashing a mischievous grin I’d rarely seen on him before. “Noblewomen have entertained illicit courtships since time immemorial. You don’t think your ancestors found a few workarounds?”

“Perhaps,” I admitted, “but what about courtship? I’ve *never* dated anyone, Leo! Not *once!* The idea is grand and all, but when I think of talking to some man, flirting with him, trying to, to, to *bed* him, I just, I—...” I rubbed my palms against my eyes, frustrated. “I wouldn’t even know where to begin. And where would I even *find* someone?”

“You’re thinking with too wide a lens, dear. Let me handle the details, won’t you, my sweet? I’ll get you plenty of alone time with a handsome man, someone who knows perfectly well what our goal is. No stress, and no possibility of scandal. Just a bit of fun between adults.”

“Fun? What about love?” I asked. “I’m supposed to disrobe for a man I have no feelings for?”

“Oh, I hope you’ll do far more than just disrobe.” “*Leo.*”

“I mean it!” said Leo, raising his hands defensively. “Sex without love is *far* preferable to love without sex, and I can set you up with all the sex you want. As for love... well, these things tend to spring up when we least expect it, do they not?”

“Is that all? You’ll just lend some man to me like a well-read paperback, is that it? Or are you lending *me* to *them*?”

“Dear—”

“And what about the Binding? Have you forgotten that I swore an oath to be faithful? An oath that *you* didn’t have to swear to *me*, by the way! I *can’t* cheat on you!” I meant that literally—on the day of our wedding, I held a Binding Rod, an arcane piece of Goblin technology, and pledged that I’d never be unfaithful.

Upon hearing this, an uninformed bystander may ask themselves, “Isn’t it a terrible idea for a woman to marry a gay man, then promise to be faithful to him forever?”

Well, yes.

“Bernadette,” said Leo, “the Binding isn’t ironclad. The spell isn’t sentient, it doesn’t understand the words of the oath. It functions based on *your* interpretation of the oath. It’s your guilt that holds you back, and I’m telling you, there’s *nothing* to be guilty about.”

“A Fuchsvolk noble can’t just wipe away her morals, even at her husband’s behest,” I said. I continued to put up a resistance, but in truth, I’d been giving some serious thought to these ideas. Truth was, I was *horny*, and though I still resisted the idea with every fiber of my conscious mind, deep down, I wanted to be convinced. My thoughts wandered to the days of our youth, when I’d first met Leo. In my naivete, I thought a marriage of necessity, one half-devoid of libido, could be just as fulfilling as those found in children’s tales.

Goddess, was I wrong.

A woman has needs, and—this can’t be overstated—a woman has *wants*. As a noble, I needed a husband who could help me bear and raise healthy children, who could provide for

our family and our estate, who treated others with respect and dignity. But as a woman I *wanted* a man whose eyes and hands were drawn to my body like filings to a lodestone, who could ravish me with the urgency of a stripling and cherish me with the strength of a life partner. With Leo, my needs had been nurtured, but my wants had been left neglected like a rusty tool.

I'd long accepted that needs trumped wants, and I wouldn't trade away Leo's love and support for anything in the world. But... was it possible to have both? One man to care for my family, and another to satisfy my lust?

For years, I'd thought, no, of course not. But today, I thought... maybe.

Besides, after decades of selflessness, hadn't I earned this?

"Alright, Leo," I said. "You've made your point. Perhaps it's worth a try."

Leo grinned, and while it stung that he had such eagerness to give me away to another, his sunny outlook was infectious.

"I'll take care of everything, my dear," he said. "I hope you're ready for the kind of romance that would make a stablehand blush."

Surprisingly, I found that I was.

## CHAPTER TWO



RICHARD

I LET OUT A frustrated sigh, agitating my mustache. “Don’t know about this, m’lord.”

“Richard,” said Leo, chiding. “You only call me ‘m’lord’ when something troubles you. Speak plainly.”

Leo and I sat in the mess room of the stableside guard house, drinking our morning coffee. I sipped my café crème, silently urging the warm drink to give me clarity, while Leo stirred his fancy hazelnut blend with a tiny spoon. Despite being the lord of the estate, Leo often spent time with his servants, and no one was set on edge by his presence. Well, except Guy, who nearly broke the new mechanical coffee maker as he prepared Leo’s drink.



“I’m just not sure Bernie—ah, Lady Bernadette, beggin’ your pardon—I’m not sure she’s the type to go for a tryst. So proper, that one. I reckon there’s even odds she just said yes to get you off her back.”

“Perhaps,” said Leo, tenting his fingers. “But maybe that’s enough. Bernadette just needs a little push, and she’ll tumble into a wonderful future. If that push comes on the heels of a little pressure from her husband, well, the ends justify the means, do they not?”

I grumbled, unconvinced. I’d served House LaRue for my entire adult life, I knew Bernie as well as anyone, and I just couldn’t imagine her shackin’ up with some dolled-up dandy. I guess it didn’t *have* to be a dolled-up dandy, but I know the kinda fellas Leo ran with, and, well, let’s just say that, as bettin’ goes, it’s sure as sunrise.

“Still not convinced,” I said. “Even if you got her to give it a go, how d’you figure you’ll get the two of ‘em alone?”

“Couldn’t be simpler,” said Leo. “You know Francois, right?”

“Sure. House LaRue’s tailor, right? Blond bloke, tall?” *And about as dolled-up as they come*, I thought.

“That’s him. Well, conveniently, he’s also the house masseuse.”

“The what?”

“The masseuse. The massage specialist.”

“Ah. So he’d have an excuse to smear his mitts all over Bernie’s body, is that it?”

“That’s the short of it, yes. Francois is probably the only man in the manor with an excuse to spend time with a half-dressed woman outside his family. And I have it on good authority that he’s more than willing to offer his ‘members-only services’ to those he trusts.”

“Easy as that, eh,” I grumbled into my cup. *Fina’s gleaming tits*, I thought, *but that machine makes a good coffee*.

“Indeed. And given the surety of our little plan, why are you so reluctant?”

“Just not sure he’s Bernie’s type, is all,” I said, hoping Leo wouldn’t catch the half-truth. “You’re sure this fella is clean? Won’t give her the clap, won’t stick a bun in her belly, won’t go braggin’ to his mates?”

“If Francois didn’t maintain discretion and order in all his dalliances, he wouldn’t be the house masseuse. Have faith, Richard. Bernadette is in good hands.”

*Good hands, I thought, even if they’re as tough as cream.*

“Sounds like it’s all worked out, then,” I said. “So what d’you need my help for? You make the appointment, Bernie takes her kit off, and old Marie guards the door while Francois stuffs Bernie like a game hen. I may as well just take an extra shift on patrol.”

“Not so,” said Leo. “In the case of unexpected developments, I’ll need you to act as my gofer.”

“I’m a Wulfvolk, m’lord, not a gopher.”

“My errand-boy, then.”

“Sir, at my age, I don’t think ‘boy’ is—”

“Richard,” said Leo, voice stern but eyes smiling.

“Right, sir,” I said, and despite myself, I cracked a grin. It was hard to be upset at Leo.

“As I’ve said—twice, now—I need someone I can trust, ready to help if something goes awry. Marie’s a dear soul, but she’s getting on in years, and I can’t count on her to handle things with delicacy. Truth be told, I don’t want her involved at all; Goddess only knows if she’ll be able to keep her lips sealed.”

“What, so, you want me standin’ post while Bernie gets rubbed out on the other side of the door?”

“Nothing so forward as that,” said Leo, setting down his empty cup. “Just stick by my side through the day. My servants will keep us informed, and, Goddess willing, we’ll

simply spend a few hours playing at Stoneboard until word arrives that the mission is complete. But *should* something happen, I'd rather not tend to it myself, lest I cause a commotion."

"A commotion, right," I said carefully, remembering what had happened on Cosette's wedding night. When word reached him of the groom's betrayal, he'd broken two doors and knocked a dozen men unconscious as he stormed the manor to save her. Leo was... prone to his passions, so to speak, and so, in an effort to avoid spooking the staff, he'd had me run tasks for him as of late.

"Sounds simple enough," I said. "I'll do it...on one condition."

"What would that be?"

I bit my tongue, still uneasy about the whole arrangement. I hated the idea of Bernie and Francois dallying around—Bernie was a special woman, and she deserved to be with someone who really knew her, who knew how to make her happy. But as I thought about it, it became clear that Francois was the perfect choice *because* he didn't know her. No drama, no mess, no baggage. Just hot, sweaty ruttin'. And was a handsome lad, wasn't he? Twenty years my junior, shiny hair, not an ounce of fat. Good with his hands, that's for sure, and he had all those oils. Meanwhile, I was a middle-aged houndmaster, always stinkin' of beast. Balding, with a growing paunch and more wrinkles than sense.

I forced a grin and said, "I get first dibs on choosing the Stoneboard gems."

## CHAPTER THREE



BERNADETTE

*FINA PRESERVE ME*, I thought, running a finger across the table's plush leather surface. *This is really happening.*

Until this moment, Leo's scheme had been nothing more than a fanciful whim, but it turned all too real when a pair of young men carried a massage table into my bedroom. This was where I'd get my massage. A massage, and maybe...

I shook my head, already feeling color rising in my cheeks. *You silly, silly woman*, I thought. *You've had two children, you've managed this estate since you were a girl, you can't be frightened by a massage.* I busied myself by tidying the room for the fourth time, making sure all my underwear drawers were closed.

Yes, because Goddess forbid this masseuse see my neatly folded underthings in a drawer. That would be *far* too intimate for him. *Silly isn't the half of it. I'm acting downright stupid.*

I still hadn't decided if I'd go through with it. My matron-of-the-house brain was confident that I'd simply enjoy a relaxing massage before sending Francois on his way, but my unsatisfied-lover brain bubbled underneath, threatening to override my better judgment at any moment.

*It's not cheating, I told myself. I'm completely faithful to the spirit of my Binding. You can't betray someone if you do exactly what they ask of you.* But no matter how many times I tried to convince myself that a fling wouldn't ruin my honor, no matter how well I knew that Leo had bedded dozens of men during our marriage, something within me refused to accept it.

Gooseflesh prickled across my arms, and I felt a tense, itchy sensation suffuse my muscles, telltale signs that my Binding was on the verge of taking over. This arcane magic was a strange art, the details still unknown to all but the Goblins who designed the spellgems by which it operated, but the reality was clear: if the Binding sensed that I was betraying my oath, my free will would be stripped away, leaving me prone and helpless until I overcame the urge to rebel.

On mine and Leo's wedding day, I'd taken hold of our Binding Rod and sworn to pledge my loyalty to House LaRue. The exact words were a blend of traditional vows and my personal additions, but the sentiment was the same for me as it was for every other High Lady of the Grand Duchy: I could not, under any circumstances, betray my husband. Other nobles could slip their true motives between the ironclad words of their Bindings, relying on personal interpretation to wipe away hypocrisy and get away with whatever they wanted, but I'd never been one for self-deception. In theory, I understood that it couldn't be considered cheating if Leo was the one who set the whole thing up, and for other women, that would be enough to assuage their guilt. But in all my wisdom, I'd decided that Leo's word wasn't good enough. I still felt as if sleeping with Francois would betray my vows, and if that guilt became too great, the Binding would trigger, preventing

me from carrying out whatever betrayal I'd been considering. These physiological reactions had diminished somewhat in the days since my talk with Leo, so I must be making *some* progress, but it was still too early to tell how I'd feel when push came to shove.

I yelped as a sharp knock shook me from my reverie. "Lady LaRue?" called a voice from beyond my bedroom door. "I'm here for your treatment. Are you presentable?"

"Yes!" I said. Was that too loud? It was fine, right? Goddess, why was I sweating so much?

The door creaked open, and a young Hasevolk man entered my bedroom, carrying a basket of lotions and oils. Like most Hasevolk, he stood no more than five feet tall, though his rabbit-like ears added another foot to his height. His long white hair failed to disguise his age; he couldn't be any older than my son Julien. He had flawless skin and a finely honed smile that could win anyone's affection. He wore a loose cotton shirt over a lean upper body, yet his tight leather pants hugged a pair of stocky, muscular legs and a rear that looked like...

"My name is Francois, Lady LaRue," said the man. He walked to the massage table and began unpacking his collection of bottles. "Your husband, Lord Leo, has reserved my services for the rest of the afternoon. I'm to lavish you with all the luxury at my disposal. Are we of the same mind?"

"Yes," I said before I understood what he was implying, and my cheeks flushed when I realized what I'd agreed to. "Um... I..." I stuttered, unable to get my words out.

"There's nothing to be nervous about, my lady," said Francois. "I'm a professional." He draped a robe and some towels on the massage table before turning his back to me. "Please undress to your level of comfort, then lie face-down on the table."

My level of comfort? In the presence of this stranger, I wouldn't even be comfortable in my pajamas. I glanced down, examining my outfit. A floor-length red dress, elbow-length

gloves, heels, stockings, petticoats... *What was I thinking, I thought, wearing all this to a massage?*

“Give me a moment,” I said, getting to work. I had to hustle; getting out of an outfit like this typically took at least one attendant.

A few minutes later, my outerwear was heaped in a pile on my bed, and I stood in nothing but my underclothes. *This is naked enough for a massage, right?* But the more I looked at myself, the more embarrassed I got. *Garters, lace, a bust-enhancing corset—Goddess, I can’t let him see me in this!* I hurriedly peeled off the rest of my clothes and tossed them aside, then wrapped myself in one of the towels Francois had laid out. It was soft as a cloud, and he’d somehow managed to warm it up for me. Finally, I lowered myself onto the table, placing my face in the gap at the top. “You can turn around now,” I said.

“Splendid,” said Francois. I heard him shuffling around, but all I could see was my room’s soft pink carpet. “Excellent choice, choosing the towel. Why restrict yourself with clothes during a massage? Indeed, indeed. So, floral or citrus?”

It took me a moment to realize he was asking which scent I preferred. “Floral,” I said, barely able to focus. I heard the crisp sound of a glass stopper being removed followed by a slick noise as he applied something to his hands, and finally, I felt a bolt of lightning lance through my bones as he laid his hands on my bare skin.

It had been over a decade since Leo last laid a hand on me, and my touch-starved body had long grown numb, but all at once, the dust was blown away, and I remembered the sheer, dominating power of skin-on-skin contact. Francois was perfectly professional, working with the skill of an artisan rather than the lust of a courtesan, but even so, his firm, dextrous hands, cold and slick with lotion, sparked firelights in my mind. I held back a shiver as he began working my neck, digging his thumbs into my tense muscles, sparking a flash of pain followed by a bone-deep relaxation.

Francois let out a soft moan. *Wait... no, that was me*, I realized. My head was positively *spinning* from the stimulation. My breathing grew heavier, and as Francois worked his way down my arms, I imagined how his hands would feel on my lower back, my thighs, my...

“You must have had an active youth,” said Francois. “Your core betrays years of shoulder training. Archery, perhaps? Oh, look at those legs! Horseback archery, then?”

“Yes,” I said. “Disc archery. As a noblewoman, I wasn’t permitted to hunt.” Had it really been over twenty years since I last rode? My athletic prowess was well-renowned in my youth, but my star had faded so long ago that no one would remember it. Goddess, was Francois even *alive* when I hung up my reins?

“Of course, of course,” Francois said. “My lady, I’d like to work on your back next, but I’ll need to remove your towel. Is that acceptable?”

“I—... um...” This was nothing to be nervous about, right? He’d probably seen a thousand rumps in his day. Nothing to be ashamed of. “Yes, go ahead.” Cool air washed over my backside as the towel fell away, and I could practically feel his eyes drilling holes into my naked skin.

“Heaven above,” said Francois as he began massaging my back. “What I would give to have skin half as soft and pale as yours. I’d happily treat you every week for free, just for the chance that your beauty may rub off on me. Yes, yes.” His hands spun me into a world of luxury, but I couldn’t focus on the pleasure. *I shouldn’t be here. I shouldn’t be doing this. I’m naked with a man I don’t even know.* His fingers reached my lower back, and I flinched. I wasn’t ticklish, exactly, but feeling hands on my bare waist was simply too much to handle.

My heart pounded, my breath turning labored. His hands *did* feel good. My passions bubbled like subterranean magma just as my comfort zone shattered like glass. I *wanted* him to go further, but I couldn’t *imagine* what would happen. I tensed



my muscles, waiting for his hands to inevitably make their way lower, a bit lower...

“No!” I said, practically shouting. “Francois, no, let’s stop here.”

“My lady?” he asked. “We’ve only begun. Surely, you at least want to finish your massage?”

“I can’t,” I said, breath quickening, panic rising; the Binding was on the verge of triggering. “I’m not ready. Please, just leave. I’ll see you paid, or, or, or whatever arrangement Leo has, it will be fulfilled. Just leave me so I can dress.” “But, my equipment—” “I’ll have it delivered!” I said. “But I need you to leave! Now. Sorry. Sorry, but, please just go.”

“As you wish, my lady,” he said, voice cool and unperturbed. I heard his retreating footsteps, and when the door closed behind him, the bands of steel that threatened my body began to retreat.

As the beating in my chest finally slowed, my mind hazed over. Logically, I knew that sending Francois away was prudent; the betrayal of one’s Binding wasn’t something to take lightly, even with consent, even in private. Emotionally, the thought of being with a man I didn’t know gave me a feeling somewhere between fear and disappointment. The emotional side of intimacy was too critical for me to ignore, no matter how often Leo extolled the virtues of sex without love.

But *physically*? I wanted to go and grab the twit by the collar before he got away, drag him back by his collar, strip him until he was as bare as I was, and pin him between my legs until eventide.

Unfortunately, it looked like I’d never have the chance. I rose from the table, stretched, and reached for my clothes, but then I paused, examining all the goodies that Francois had left behind. Lotions, pillows, candles, a plush robe... Surely, I didn’t need to return it all immediately, right? If the man would be paid either way, what’s the harm in treating myself to a bit of self-care? I could use some relaxation, after everything that’s happened.

And, well... I *did* know of one way I could satisfy myself without compromising my oath...

# CHAPTER FOUR



RICHARD

“RUBY NORTH, TOPAZ NORTHEAST,” said Leo. “Victory is mine.”

“Mira’s tits,” I muttered. I’d never beaten the old codger at Stoneboard, but this time, I really thought I had him backed against a wall. “You always have to go and muss things up at the last moment, don’t you?”

“I assure you, this was my plan from the beginning,” said Leo.

We had been playing at Stoneboard in his study for the better part of an hour. For such a burly fellow, Leo sure had some refined tastes. The cozy little room was rimmed with

floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, filled with tomes and scrolls and doodads, and it was all lit, not by a lamp, but by a genuine Goblin spellgem. Goddess only knows how the damn thing works, but it filled the room with sterile, steady light. Leo liked it, but I found it unnerving.

We began sorting the gems into their respective cups to prepare for the next game, but now that my mind was unoccupied, I found myself thinking of Bernie. Did that git already have her out of her clothes? Was she biting her lips, trying not to scream?

*Stop it, you jackass*, I thought. Bernadette didn't owe me anything. I *wanted* her to be happy. I just wish I didn't know the grits, is all.

"This has been nice," said Leo as he counted out a pile of sapphires. "Ever since Julien left for Freyport, I haven't had many opportunities to play at Stoneboard. Of course, it was never about the game, so to speak. Half the time, Julien and I wouldn't even finish our first match, putting it aside to focus on whatever conversation we'd wandered into."

"Mmm," I said, scooping some rubies into a small leather pouch. "Hans passed my skill level before his beard grew in. He was always a far shot cleverer than me. Must have gotten it from his mother." My son Hans and Leo's son Julien had been thick as jelly since they were boys, and when Julien had come of age, he chose Hans to be his retainer. It was a great opportunity for a mixed-blood; Hans would have far more opportunities than his shriveled old daddy could ever have given him.

"I wonder what kind of mischief Hans and Julien are getting into today," said Leo. "In his last letter, Julien said he'd found jobs for them both, but he refused to elaborate."

"Typical," I said. "Julien always had a bigger appetite for adventure than he knew what to deal with. But Hans has always kept him in check. Could be that they took on some menial work, maybe some embarrassing work, but Hans wouldn't let them do anything dangerous."

A knock sounded at the door, and who walked in but fancy-pants himself.

“Leo,” said Francois, “why didn’t you *tell* me Bernadette was such a prude? She ousted me before I could lay on even a tenth of my charm!”

“She did, did she?” said Leo. “You’ll remember, Francois, that I told you exactly how tricky her circumstances are. She’s a special woman, and she deserves special treatment.”

“If she wanted special treatment, she should have waited for my shirt to come off,” said Francois. “I’ll have you know, I’m *not* accustomed to rejection.”

“Perhaps, Francois, you’ve finally encountered someone out of your league.”

The two prattled on for a while, clearly at ease with one another, but my mind was elsewhere. So, Bernie *didn’t* shack up with Francois. I felt relief, and a moment later, guilt. Why should I care what she does in the bedroom? She’s her own woman, and even if she *did* diddle her masseuse, that doesn’t make her any less of a lady.

So why *was* I so relieved? I pondered it as I sorted the stones, and eventually, the truth became clear: Francois and I couldn’t be any more different from one another, and if Francois wasn’t her type, maybe...

*No, no, no*, I thought, clenching my fists to oust my selfish thoughts. I thought of Leo, the man who’d hired me back when I was a wandering youth, who’d accepted me as a friend despite my heritage and social standing. If I let my thoughts wander too far, I’d end up with fantasies that Leo would never forgive.

“Richard?” said Leo, starting me out of my self-pity. “Are you well?”

“Couldn’t be better, m’lord” I lied.

“Well, as I’ve said, now that Francois’s afternoon is freed up, I have some work for him to do. I need you to go and collect his tools from Bernadette’s room and return them to the tailor’s studio in the south wing.”

“Right away, sir,” I said, nearly jumping out of my seat. I knew exactly what kind of work Leo had in mind, and wanted to be a mile away before they got started.

Bernie’s personal quarters were deep in the women’s wing, a bit of a trek from Leo’s study. I checked the clock to make sure I wouldn’t be interrupting a bathing hour, one of the designated periods throughout the day where women had the freedom to travel from their chambers to the baths in whatever state of dress they wanted. During those periods, men were strictly banned from the women’s wing. Thankfully, the next bathing hour wasn’t until evening.

My mind wandered as I made my way to the women’s wing. I thought of how Francois must have looked when Bernie sent him packing. I thought of my son, on the other side of the continent, experiencing things I couldn’t dream of. I thought of how many times I’d walked down each hall in the manor during my decades in the service of House LaRue.

At one point, I ran into Guy, the lad who made Leo’s coffee most mornings. I had to make up some excuse about what brought me to this part of the manor, lest he wonder why I was headed towards the Matriarch’s chambers unaccompanied. He bought it, thankfully, and the remainder of my journey was utterly forgettable.

What came next, however, would be impossible to forget.

## CHAPTER FIVE



### BERNADETTE

I SETTLED ONTO THE pile of cushions I'd arranged on my room's floral carpet. With a bed as plush as mine, there wasn't much you could do in it but sleep, and my chair prioritized style over comfort, so certain activities—those that required, shall we say, a particular posture—required a bit of ingenuity. I was wrapped in the silk robe that Francois had left me, smooth and soft as a summer evening. To my side, I'd set out a bottle of white wine of which I'd already liberated a third of its contents, a favorite book of mine, and the lotions and lubricants whose scents I'd enjoyed the most. The curtains were drawn, my body was relaxed, and because my appointment with Francois ended so early, I had hours yet to myself, free from obligations and interruptions.

Most exciting of all, I'd finally had the chance to try out the newest tool I'd requisitioned from the house glassblower. It was roughly half a foot long, flared at one end and ribbed along the shaft. The women of the house had taken to calling these implements "shrooms," owing to their shape, and their function was decidedly... explicit.

Despite myself, I blushed. *Goddess*, I thought, *even in the privacy of my bedchamber, I can't escape propriety.*

I'd spent 15 minutes setting up my little relaxation station, waiting for my heart to slow and my mind to clear. Now, though, I felt as relaxed as I ever would. I took another sip of the wine, then scooted my body around until I was in the right position: flat on my back, one pillow under my head and another under my rear, legs spread wide. I grabbed my well-loved copy of *The Misadventures of Lady Vivienne* and opened to a page I'd dog-eared in my youth. In this scene, the heroine was finally reunited with her fiancé after a year apart, and in a truly scandalous development, they grew intimate on the day *before* their wedding. Her fiancé, Lord Franz, was an older, stoic man, described as strikingly handsome, once you get past his bushy hair and sun-weathered skin.

I began to read, but by now, the scene was so well locked into my memory that the book wasn't truly needed. I imagined myself as Lady Vivienne, a young noblewoman on the eve of her wedding, nervous, perhaps frightened, but eager all the same. I've spent the evening deep in wedding preparation with Lord Franz, but as midnight approaches, our eyes meet, and something *changes*. Maybe it's the fatigue, or the long absence, or the glass of wine we'd shared, but without speaking a word, we run up the creaking wooden stairs and hide ourselves away in a guest room. Our lips meet, bypassing our normal, tender pecks, rushing straight to passionate necking. I tug his shirt over his head before he grabs my blouse in both fists and tears it in half, straight down the middle, tossing it aside like a used rag. Then we begin to undo each other's laces...

By this point, the book was forgotten on the floor beside me. I knew each maneuver Franz used to titillate Vivienne, and as I



envisioned each one in turn, my hands did their best to recreate the sensation. I gasped, lost in my own world, using my hands to warm myself up and draw out each drop of tension from my body, feeling my breath catch in my lungs as my back arched. My robe fell open as I grabbed the shroom, unsure what to expect but eager to find out. I began to tease myself with the narrow end, the surface cold and hard and slick in a delightfully distinct way. I kept at it for a minute, but it was thicker than I expected, so I applied some lotion to ease the process.

*Closer, closer, closer...* It took a while for my body to adapt to the unfamiliar sensations, but when I did, it immediately became clear why this new batch of toys had stirred up such a storm of gossip. Ecstasy washed through me like a rising tide, my abs burning with the effort of maintaining my stance, but *Goddess* did it feel intense. My head swam and my senses grew fuzzy, everything but pleasure being forced out of my body. I bit back a moan and clenched my eyes as I made the final ascent, and—

What was that sound?

My body was moving on its own by now, a slave to my own passions, and though I couldn't stop my hands, I managed to crack an eye open and identify the source of the sound: someone had entered my room. They stood by the doorway, staring, dumbfounded at the sight before them.

Most of my mind was deep underwater, so perhaps it shouldn't be surprising that my first reaction was one of indignation. *Who would dare to enter a lady's room unannounced*, I thought, trying to make out the figure. They were too small to be Leo... *Wait, is that Richard!?* I called out to him, trying to order him to leave, but all I could muster was a weak "Richard..." as he watched, my hands betraying me through their continued pursuit of my pleasure. We locked eyes at the final moment, and the remnants of my mind went blank as I let out a silent scream. For a few eternal moments, I was nothing but a thin thread, tense and threatening to snap, and then, in a flash, it was over.

Finally, my sanity returned, and I was able to form my first logical thought:

*Oh, no.*

Then, my second:

*Oh, SHIT!*

At last, I was able to wrap myself in my robe, though preserving my final shred of modesty felt like a fruitless pursuit at this point.

*“Richard!!!”* I said. *“What are you doing here!?”*

“I, uh, I, um, b-beggin’ your pardon, m’lady, I was sent to collect, the, ah...” Richard’s mind appeared to be in such disarray that it took until this moment for him to finally turn away. “Leo sent me to fetch the masseuse’s things. Got word the massage was canceled, didn’t realize you were, ah, usin’ them.” He turned back briefly, then made for the door. “I’ll just grab them later, m’lady.”

I called after him, but he was out the door faster than I’d ever seen him move. And just like that, I was left alone, the pool between my legs making it impossible to imagine I’d just had some horrible dream.

*And yet...*

And yet, part of me felt... validated? Goddess knows I’d take it back if I could, but if nothing else, Richard’s reaction affirmed to me that *someone* could find beauty in my body. Maybe these twenty-five years with Leo had subconsciously convinced me that men would simply never want me in that way, and though I’d slept with Leo multiple times, this encounter with Richard was the first time a man had seen me as a woman, had seen my body as something to adore.

*Or, I thought, maybe I’m just interpreting his fear as lust.*

I shook my head, frustrated. Frustrated with myself for assuming no one would interrupt me, frustrated with Richard for barging in without a thought, frustrated with Leo for making everything so messy with his schemes. And, most of all, frustrated with my body for holding onto that fiery new

feeling, for demanding a new partner with the same intensity with which it demands air.

I flushed and began cleaning up the room, hoping to erase all evidence of my idiocy before anyone else found out, and all the while, I couldn't banish the vision of Richard's eyes drinking in the sight of me.

## CHAPTER SIX



RICHARD

I WISH I COULD say that, upon finding the lady of the house twiddling her bean, I simply closed the door and retreated, purging the scene from my mind and getting on with the day's work. I wish that a man with as many years as myself could shrug the whole thing off as little more than an embarrassing footnote.

But I'm as weak as Bernadette is pink.

I must have been so wrapped up in my damn fool thoughts that my damn fool hands opened the damn fool door without knocking first. Didn't that oiled-up twit say Bernadette was gone? No, he'd said she rejected him, I'd just *assumed* that meant she was gone. Damn it all, so it was my fault, then?

He also called her a prude—*that* sure ended up being a load of dung. Ol' Bernie was workin' her garden like it was planting season, and—

*Shit*, I told myself. *Can't dwell on it, can't talk about it, can't even think about it.* It wasn't meant for my eyes, and it certainly wasn't meant for my memories. Just a lady doin' lady things, is all. No different than walkin' in on Bernie doing up her hair.

These thoughts stormed about in my mind as I made the brief, endless walk back to Leo's study. What would I say? *Yes, sir, I saw your wife in her room, legs spread like icing. Yes, sir, I stayed and watched a minute. No, sir, I don't recall any lacy underthings; seems she went without them today.* My mind raced, on and on, until the moment I stood before the oaken door of fate that led into Leo's personal library.

I steeled myself, then knocked.

"It's Richard," I called.

"Richard? You know you've no need to knock," said Leo. *Sorry, sir, but I'm never entering a room without knocking again,* I thought.

I entered and took my seat at the desk, as casually as you please, but Leo saw right through me.

"Richard, you seem out of sorts," he said. "Was anything amiss with Bernadette?"

*No, sir,* I thought to myself, while aloud, I said, "Amiss? No, she was in ecstasy."

Well, shit. I flipped my internal and external dialogues again. *That's what I get for overthinking,* I thought.

"Ecstasy?" said Leo. "But she decided against the encounter, did she not?"

"Yes, sir. Beggin' your pardon, she was, ah... independently satisfied."

"Ah, yes, she's always been an occasional fan of self-pleasure. Glad to learn she still had an enriching afternoon."

He paused. “How did you learn... Oh, Richard, tell me you didn’t!”

I didn’t have the balls to respond aloud, but my expression must have given me away. I’m not sure how I expected Leo to react, but “roaring laughter” certainly wasn’t on the list.

“Goddess shelter me, Richard, you caught her *mid-act*? The poor woman must have been struck to stone! Richard, you dog. Ah, pardon the expression. Is she alright?”

“Yes, sir, just a mite, um taken aback.” *He’s taking this well*, I thought.

“Taken aback? That’s it?” said Leo. “Bernadette is a woman of propriety and order. She wouldn’t just shrug off something like this; she’d swear you to secrecy on the graves of your ancestors. Unless...” Leo snapped his fingers, brightening. “Unless she *wanted* you to catch her! That sly fox played the trapper, and you, the mouse to her cheese!”

“I, ah... I don’t think so, sir,” I said. “I know Lady Bernadette as well as anyone—well, not you, sir, I didn’t mean to imply anything, but... Do you really think she’s the type for that?”

“You’d be surprised what some women have swimming in their undercurrents,” said Leo. “My daughter was the exemplar of a Fuchsvolk noblewoman until the day she secretly married her Goblin maidservant and vanished in the night. Who’s to say Bernadette doesn’t fancy herself a sly flasher?”

I considered that for a moment. Was it possible? Was Bernie that good of an actress? Goddess knows I’ve done some foolhardy things to satisfy my lower head. And for that matter, why didn’t Bernie lock the door? Why was she facing the entryway? Why didn’t Francois just tell me to stop by in the evening? I pursed my lips. *It couldn’t be...*

And for that matter, if Bernie *was* experimenting like this, she could get into real trouble. She’s lucky I was the one to catch her; if some random steward had found her instead, they could have been traumatized, and if word got out, the family’s

reputation would be right in the shitter. *I guess it's right lucky I was the only one to see*, I thought.

Or... maybe it wasn't luck. Maybe she knew I'd be the one to find her. But if that's the case, then, why me? Is it because she knew I wouldn't air her secrets all over the manor? Figured she'd try her luck with a family friend?

Or could it be that she fancied me?

"At any rate," said Leo, breaking me out of my revelry, "what's done is done. Let's write this whole thing off as a simple mistake, a silly story we keep to ourselves. I'll have a chat with Bernadette, make sure we're all on the same page, and we can move on."

"Of course," I said, but my mind never quieted. The whole situation had gone from messy to downright mucked. Bernie was a proper lady, she was married, she needed freedom, she needed a tight young lover, she deserved all the luxuries in the world, and a tired old hound like me should feel lucky just to pass her in the hall.

But even so, my long-buried desires crept back to the surface, and I couldn't stop entertaining the one question I wasn't allowed to ask.

# CHAPTER SEVEN



BERNADETTE

“HE JUST WALKED RIGHT in?” said Leo, surprised. “He didn’t even knock?”

“No,” I said, still cringing at the memory. I’d originally hoped I could just keep quiet and forget the whole thing, but I quickly decided to tell Leo the whole story, worried that he’d get the wrong idea if he heard it elsewhere first. “He just waltzed in, carefree as a hound, and caught me like a child with her hand in the cookie jar.”

“Hmm,” said Leo. “That’s not far off, I suppose; your hand was certainly *somewhere* he didn’t expect.”



“*Leo!*” I snapped. I thought I’d long since lost my shyness around the big lug, but the memory of my shame was still too fresh to bear that kind of teasing.

“Forgive me, my darling,” said Leo, smiling. “I can’t help but push your buttons now and again; your cheeks take on the most lovely shade of pink.”

I groaned, burying my face in my hands. “For the love of order, can we just drop the whole thing?”

“Not yet,” said Leo. “I’m concerned about Richard.”

“He’s a mature fellow,” I said. “I’m sure he’s had his share of women in his day, I doubt the sight was enough to traumatize him. And he isn’t the sort to run his mouth.”

“It’s not Richard’s wellbeing that concerns me, it’s his motives,” said Leo. “Bernadette, he barged in on your private chambers without announcing himself. He caught you with your pants down, so to speak. Many a man would fantasize about such an ‘accident.’ Can you be sure that wasn’t intentional?”

“Leo, please,” I said. “This is Richard we’re talking about. The three of us have been friends since we were children. Do you genuinely think all of that was an act?”

“Not at all,” said Leo. “In fact, it’s precisely those long years of friendship which could convince him that he could get away with such a scheme. Maybe he harbors secret feelings for you, and he couldn’t go another day without tasting of your nectar. Maybe—”

“Goddess above, Leo, do you *have* to speak that way?” I said, groaning. “It has nothing to do with my ‘nectar.’ He’s my friend; I’d rather it were him that caught me than some baby-faced recruit or vile old lech. Let’s just move on.”

“Mmm,” said Leo. “You’re happy it was him, is that so?”

“Not like that, you twit,” I said. “I’m just glad this won’t become some big scandal, is all.”

“Of course,” said Leo. “And yet, if that’s exactly how he expected you’d feel...”

“Enough,” I said. “I just want to put this whole mess behind us. If you’ve nothing else to say, be off, and let me resume my day.”

“As you wish, my heart,” he said, standing and stretching. He took a quick look around my room, which he’d emptied of Francois’s equipment. “If you’re satisfied with life returning to the status quo, then so am I.” He strode from the room, fully aware of the weight of his words.

Back to normal. I *did* want things to return to normal; the alternative would be a lifetime of awkward stares from the house houndmaster. And I certainly didn’t want to live with the thought that one of my oldest friends was a creep who’d take advantage of me like that.

And yet...

And yet, part of me would be offended if Richard *didn’t* change. *Am I not beautiful enough for that mangy old wolf*, I wondered. I went to such lengths to care for my skin and figure, to maintain the picture-perfect elegance of a Fuchsvolk noblewoman. All the while, Richard spends his days in the sun, drying out like old shoe leather, wrinkled as an autumn leaf. Sure, he was fit for his age, well-liked by everyone he met, reliable to a fault, and sure, he had a rugged sort of appeal, but...

*Hmmm.*

I’d always written Richard off as a silly, frumpy sort of man, as reliable as a stump and a tad more clever, but there’s no reason why he should be single at his age. He had a stable career, a good heart, and, today’s scandal notwithstanding, no skeletons in his closet. By all accounts, he should have settled down with a good woman by now. Was it because he was Wulfvolk? It was true that most of our manor consisted of Fuchsvolk, but aside from his deep-forest dialect, he fit in perfectly well among the rest of us. Could it be that he was gay? No, no, I’d seen him take women on dates now and again, even if his relationships never seemed to last. And I already knew he loved being a father, given how close he’d been with Hans before he left with Julien.

The more I thought about it, the more confused I became. I knew it wasn't any of my business, but I couldn't help my curiosity—and, frustratingly, my guilt. Why had I never thought to ask after his love life? Did he think I didn't care about his happiness? No matter how hard I thought, I couldn't think of a single instance where we'd discussed it. Was he intentionally keeping the details from me?

Eventually, I reached a realization: we needed to talk, he and I. About what happened today, and what happened over the past twenty-five years. I quickly made myself presentable and headed off for the stableside barracks.



UPON MY ARRIVAL, I was greeted by a handful of men who seemed oddly uncomfortable with my presence, even in the communal break room where I'd hoped to find Richard. I recognized most of the faces I saw—the manor wasn't big enough to employ more than a dozen guards—but, disappointingly, I didn't know anyone's name. I made a mental note to ask Leo how to connect with these men, then asked one of the men if Richard was around.

“Captain?” said a young man, no more than twenty. “He’s in his quarters, down the hall and on the left. Took the day off for some special detail he couldn’t tell me about, then came back after an hour to take a nap. Blew right past us without so much as a hello, then said not to disturb him. Not sure what happened.”

“Thank you,” I said, turning to leave, then pausing. “May I have your name?”

“Guy,” he said, adding a salute. “Not quite a year into my service for House LaRue. I know it’s beneath your station, Lady Bernadette, but if you could do anything to help Captain Richard out, we’d all appreciate it. I’m sure his do-not-disturb doesn’t apply to ladies like yourself.”

“Thank you, Guy,” I said. I walked down the hall, passing rows of bunks and chests. Most bunks were empty, but a few

held sleeping men, probably those who worked the night shift. *Not even a curtain for privacy*, I thought, disappointed. *I should commission our mason to build more suitable lodgings.* I reached the end of the hall, found a door labeled “Captain Richard,” and gave it a knock. When I heard no response, I gave another, firmer knock.

“Bleedin’ jackass,” I heard Richard mutter as he tromped towards the door. “What do you think ‘no disturbances’ means?” He threw open the door, and suddenly, I realized why everyone had seemed so uncomfortable with my presence earlier; this facility clearly wasn’t intended for noblewomen.

Richard greeted me at the door wearing nothing but his briefs and an angry scowl. “How many times do I—Lady Bernadette?!” he said, gaping at me a moment before quickly slamming the door. “Just a moment,” he called out amidst the frantic sounds of drawers being slammed and furniture being jostled. “Just gotta make myself presentable, and my room besides.”

“Take your time,” I said, trying to slow my racing pulse. I was loathe to admit it, but the sight of Richard’s bare chest had knocked me for a loop. *How did I describe him to myself earlier*; I wondered. *Dry as shoe leather, wrinkled as an old leaf?* That wasn’t just uncharitable, it was simply untrue. His face had taken on a weathered quality after decades spent outdoors, but under his uniform, his skin was smooth, his muscles tough. And that hair! His chest was hairier than Leo’s! I’d always had a thing for hairy men, and between his chest and his iconic mutton chops, Richard was downright bushy. So what if he’d lost most of the hair atop his head?

Finally, Richard reopened the door, dressed in a casual outfit and bearing signs of hurried brushing.

“Apologies, my lady,” he said. “I just, ah, wasn’t expecting you.” He smiled. “Let’s just be glad I kept my skivvies on while I slept today. With heat like today, that’s not a sure bet.”

“Think nothing of it,” I said. “Do you have a moment to speak? Privately?”

Richard flashed a resigned smile. “Come in, then,” he said, offering me a rickety wooden chair by the desk before taking a seat on the bed. The room was small, with barely enough room for a bed, a desk, an armoire, and a chest of drawers. A plush cow sat on his desk, a touch of whimsy I hadn’t expected from him.

“So,” I said, unsure how to begin. “Are you dating anyone?”

“*That’s* what you came all this way to discuss?” said Richard.

“I don’t know, I don’t know,” I said truthfully. “I was thinking about all the time we’ve spent together, the years we’ve known each other, and I realized that you’d never spoken a word about your love life to me, and I’d never asked. So, here I am, asking. We should share more with each other.”

“More than—” “Not another word,” I said, but Richard grinned, and I couldn’t help but smile as well.

“It’s been hard,” he finally said, visibly relaxing. “There’s been... something I’ve struggled with, ever since I was a lad. Can’t connect with women the way I want. Can’t go into the details with you, m’lady, please understand. So I just, well... I never brought it up with you. Nothing *to* bring up.”

“Oh, Richard,” I said. “I’m sorry you’ve struggled. Proprietary be damned, you can always talk to me.”

“Not about this, I can’t,” he insisted. “But it hasn’t been all bad. You see that cow stuffie, there by your arm?”

“Yes,” I said, picking it up. It was nearly perfectly round, made with cobbled-together materials but obviously by a talented hand. I gave it a squeeze. “It’s adorable, and clearly made with love.”

“I like to think so,” said Richard. “My son, Hans, made it for me.”

“Really?” said “I didn’t realize he was so crafty.” I inspected the stuffie, imagining the burly young man who was off on the other end of the continent, keeping my son Julien safe. “You raised a good boy. Julien and Hans have always been as close as brothers.”

“Aye,” said Richard, eyes locked on the toy. “I’ve missed him fiercely since he and Julien ran off those months back, but he’s been living with Julien ever since you and Leo hired him on as a retainer. My home’s been empty for years. That phase of my life is long past.” He looked at me, and his eyes held a bone-deep weariness I hadn’t seen in him before. “When I moved back into the barracks, I thought it would just be for a year or so, just to get away from those empty rooms in my home. Thought maybe I’d find a girl who’d stick around, maybe have another kid. And here I am, ten years later, bunking with men half my age.”

“It’s hard,” I said, the air growing stagnant. “It’s so hard to watch your kids leave, no matter how much time you had with them. I want to be happy for Julien and Cosette, and I am, but...” I wiped my eyes, sniffing. “But I guess I’m just a selfish old woman. I don’t want to spend all day looking for work to get lost in, just to keep the lonely thoughts away. I want my family back.”

Richard nodded but didn’t speak. We sat in silence for a moment, the room heavy with our leaden thoughts. Then I took Richard’s hand in mine, giving it a squeeze.

“Thank you,” I said, “for giving my son a best friend. Julien would probably be homeless or worse right now if Hans wasn’t there to drag him back to reality now and again.”

Richard chuckled. “The Goddess’s own truth,” he said. “I love your boy, Bernie, but his head’s in the clouds more often than a hawk’s.”

I smiled at the thought of my son, and then, out of the blue, another thought crystallized.

“There’s no way you *planned* to catch me masturbating.”

Richard let out an abrupt cough, as if choking on water he wasn’t actually drinking. “No, m’lady, no, I didn’t.”

I blushed at my horribly blunt phrasing, but I pressed on. “Sorry, sorry. I knew from the start that it was a simple mistake, but Leo seemed convinced that you’d done it with malintent. That you were hoping to get a free peepshow.”

“Why the hell would he say a load of dung like that?” said Richard, growing upset. “I *told* him that it was all a mix-up! And if he thought I was a bleedin’ pervert, then why did he accuse *you* of bein’ one too?”

“He said *what!*?” I said, stunned.

“He wondered if maybe *you* lured *me* into your room, leaving your door unlocked and keepin’ quiet so you could flash the goods without seemin’ like a predator. I, uh, not that I would ever accuse you, of, uh, well—”

“That asshole!” I said. “What’s his angle here? Why would he try to pit us against each other, if we were both willing to be understanding?”

“Maybe he wanted an excuse to oust me from the manor?” said Richard. “If he could set our stories against each other, everyone would believe you, bein’ the lady of the house and all, and he’d have reason to send me packin’.”

“No, of course not,” I said. “Leo trusts you more than anyone. If anything, this seems like a convenient way to end our marriage, potentially opening the path for him to fully legalize same-sex marriage. His preferences have been an open secret for a while now. He knows he would still have public approval. Maybe he just needed a push.”

“Bernie,” said Richard, “that boulder of a man has only ever said the kindest things about you. He may not see how beautiful you are, but he’s always saying, ‘Bernadette is the perfect domestic partner,’ ‘Bernadette is a better parent and leader than any man I know,’ things like that. Your family means everything to him.”

“You think I’m beautiful?” I said, and despite myself, I felt a flutter in my stomach at the thought.

Richard turned away, only just realizing what he’d said. “Well, yeah,” he finally admitted. “You’re the lady of the house, what with all your linens and lotions. You have an, um, a feminine sorta charm.” His ears wilted; I’d *never* seen him so out of sorts.

“You know, Richard,” I said, “you’re a handsome man yourself. Your face has character, your shoulders embody quiet strength, and your hairy chest would make a fine pillow for any milkmaid in the manor.”

“M’lady,” said Richard, looking frightened, “you shouldn’t be sayin’ stuff like that.”

“But it’s true,” I insisted. “And you have a good heart, and you’re charming, and you’re the most dependable man I know. You just need to work on your door-knocking etiquette.” I hoped the last line would lighten the atmosphere. “You have plenty of choices. Hell, with how young the manor’s staff tends to be, you could probably find a dozen melon-chested thirty-somethings to bed. So, I’ll ask again: why do you insist on being alone?”

“It’s complicated,” he said, though I got the distinct impression that it wasn’t.

“Were you hurt by Hans’s mother?” I asked. “I know the two of you weren’t together for long, but that shouldn’t disbar you from love for the rest of your life.”

Richard shook his head. “Nothing like that,” he said. “Truth be told, I never expected things to work out with her. Hans was a lucky accident, is all, and Goddess only knows it was no virtue of mine that reared him into such a fine lad.”

I wanted to push further, but I could sense him receding, so I decided to change to a riskier track. “When I heard that door open, my heart dropped. For that one heartbeat, I was paralyzed by the idea that a stranger to me would catch me in a vulnerable, humiliating state. Instead, it was you, and that set me at ease. I’m glad it was you who caught me.”

“Right,” said Richard, eyes glued to his shoes.

“In fact,” I said, heartbeat quickening, “I’m glad you caught me, period. I’m *glad* this whole mess took place. I’ve been stuck in a sexless marriage for *decades*, and this was the first time even a *hint* of my womanhood was able to connect with someone who might actually appreciate it.” I couldn’t believe the words that were spilling from my mouth, and yet I kept



talking. “Leo may be a scheming ass sometimes, but he was right about one thing: I want a lover, I *need* a lover, and the moment we shared in my room has convinced me that it may actually be possible.”

“You should go,” said Richard, standing. “Keep talking like that, and you’ll give me the wrong idea.”

“And what idea is that?” I said, getting to my feet and meeting Richard chest-to-chest. Richard stared me down, but I was done talking. He needed to face reality and stop running from his feelings.

He held my gaze for another long moment, jaw clenching. Time stretched to years, and the inches separating our lips felt like miles as I breathed in the woodland scents that clung to his skin. I felt the heat of his blood radiating from his frame, tension rendering his muscles immobile. In this moment, I finally understood the primal force that drew people together in intimacy. I felt it, and I knew that Richard felt it, and that unspoken connection was more powerful than any political oath, than any arcane Binding. I felt no guilt, no hesitation, no warning shocks of spiteful magic flooding my veins. I was *ready*.

But Richard wasn’t.

“Leave,” he said, pushing me away, his command hanging frozen in the air. “Please.”

I stepped away from Richard, heart growing numb. So that was it, then, was it? I finally found someone I felt comfortable with, and he tossed me aside like soured wine. One moment, I finally learn what intimacy means to me, and the next, I learn just how unworthy it finds me. I started for the door, instincts driving me to flee.

But then I stopped.

“Fuck this, Richard,” I said. “Fuck you and your secrets. If you don’t want to be with me, fine. If you’d rather shag a seamstress half your age, be my damned guest. But you’re not getting out of this without an explanation.” I stepped closer, glaring up at his saucer-round eyes. “You’re hiding something

from me, you raggedy old bastard, and I'm not leaving until I learn the truth. I *know* you felt the same spark I did. I *know* you're as desperate for love as I am. I haven't a damned clue how things will end up, but I couldn't live with myself if I didn't even try. I want to *try*, Richard, but if I can't, at least tell me why you gave up on everything that could have been."

Richard held my gaze, hiding behind a mask he must have donned a thousand times before. I watched his eyes as he maneuvered through a lifetime of emotions. His face softened, then sagged, then grew heavy with a lifetime of weariness.

But then I saw something I didn't expect:

Relief.

"I swore I'd never tell anyone about this," said Richard, "but I guess you deserve to know the truth."

# CHAPTER EIGHT



RICHARD

*Twenty-five years ago*

LEO AND I WALKED down the halls of LaRue Manor, chatting idly with what little time we had left to us.

“Tomorrow’s the big day,” said Leo, wringing his meaty mitts. “To tell you the truth, I feel I may lose my nerve.”

“No you won’t, ya daft twit,” I said, slugging Leo in the shoulder. “You and Bernie are gonna have the tamest marriage this side of the Grand Cul. I should know, I’ve seen the paperwork.”

“Yes, yes, I suppose,” he said, rubbing his chin. He’d grown in a bristly chin strap beard, the bastard. I was already past

twenty and could barely grow a mustache. “But a man does worry. Bernadette deserves the world; what if I can’t deliver it?”

“I’ve seen the way she looks at you,” I said. “She doesn’t care about your power or your hobbies or the size of your prick. She doesn’t even care that you’re unmoved by her tits; hell, that may well put her at ease in the bedchamber. She just wants you to treat her right, and if you just be yourself, you’ll have that taken care of.”

Leo smiled, giving my shoulder a squeeze. “Thank you, Richard. Truly. There’s no one whose judgment I value, whose words I trust, more than you.”

“Yeah, well,” I said, shrugging him off. “Gotta keep my career secure. If House LaRue falls apart, it’s back to the Wulfvolk lands for me, and if I ever have to see those arsewipes again, it’ll be too soon.”

“Ah, Richard. You really need to quit safeguarding your feelings like that. Open up once in a while, and you’ll find a spring of healing in your heart.”

“Have you been reading those philosophy books again?” I asked.

“The great thinkers of yesteryear have much to teach us, but now’s not the time for that. I’m late for my fitting, and Bastien will have my head if I keep him waiting.”

“Well, yeah,” I said, smirking. “You’re the size of a damn mountain, the poor fool will need a miracle if he’s to finish the adjustments by tomorrow.”

“Indeed, indeed. Well, I’m off, friend. I’m tied up for the remainder of the evening, so I suppose I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Be seein’ ya,” I said, giving Leo a wave as he entered the tailor’s studio. As the door swung open, I caught a glimpse of the woman standing on the riser as the tailor took her measurements: Bernadette, a vision of beauty to rival the Goddess herself. Wrapped in her white wedding silks, her hair piled high in gleaming orange curls, rouged lips pursed as she fought to maintain balance, she was as lovely a sight as I’d

ever seen—and just like that, the door swung shut, and she was gone.

Bernie and I had grown friendly during the months she'd been courting Leo here at the manor, but she was betrothed to my closest mate, so I only ever saw her as a friend. But in that moment, when Bernie's beauty blinded me and tore my heart in two, a thousand feelings crystallized, and I knew all at once that today would haunt me until the end of my days.

Bernadette, an angel sent from the Goddess Fina to bring beauty to the world. Bernadette, graceful as a swan and clever as a crow. Bernadette, betrothed to my best friend, a man who would never appreciate her for what she's worth. Bernadette, the woman who sparked feelings in my heart that I'd finally lost the fortitude to ignore.

Bernadette, the woman I loved.

Pain pierced my chest like an arrow. I didn't *want* to break up the betrothal, and even if I did, I simply couldn't. All I could do was attend the wedding, support my friends, and bury my grief so deep that a wolf wouldn't know where to dig it up. I couldn't entertain even a whiff of a fantasy where Bernie and I ended up together; that would just keep the wound open. I had to keep my feelings secret from Bernie, secret from Leo, and if I could manage it, secret from myself. It was the one thing I needed to keep hidden from Leo, the one thing I knew he'd never forgive me for.

So I did what I could to smother my hopes, to trust that my friends would find happiness in their new lives together. Bernadette would travel life's midsummer road, kissed by evening sun, and I would take the hollow road, emptied of everything but secrets.

I sliced away the part of my heart that longed for Bernadette, freeing to find her happiness, praying that she'd find the love she deserved. But just as surely as I knew that she and I would never be together, I knew that, so long as my feet stirred the dust of the earth, I would never love another woman the way I loved her.

## CHAPTER NINE



LEO

THE AIR FILLED WITH the spicy scent of lamb stew as my staff rolled out the dinner carts. Bernadette sat by my side, as always, and Richard had taken the seat across from her. This was one of a thousand such dinners I'd hosted over the years, each more mundane than the last, but tonight, something was different.

Under the table, Bernadette and Richard were playing footsie.

It warmed my heart to see my wife could finally pursue the romance she'd wanted since she was a girl, and the guilt I'd carried with me since our wedding had finally begun to fall away. I'd never felt guilty of who I am—the Goddess doesn't

make mistakes—but that Bernadette’s freedom was cloven in two by our marriage had always been one of my greatest regrets.

Which is why I constructed this master plan in the first place.

I’d known for years that Richard was in love with my wife, but he’d never admit it, especially not to me. He’d always prioritized loyalty over his own happiness, and while I loved him for that, it made it damn hard to help him sometimes. I’d also known that Bernadette would never bed a stranger, as much as that may help her find relief. She needed a stable partner. But there’s the rub: one can’t be handed a partner. One must choose a partner for oneself. I needed a way to get Richard and Bernadette together, but they had to think it was their idea, not mine.

The waiter took away our empty salad plates and handed each of us a steaming bowl of stew and a slice of crusty buttered bread. As per usual, I received a double portion. Beside me, Bernadette stifled a giggle, and Richard flashed a cheeky grin at her. They must have been getting into trouble under the table.

Step one was to show Bernadette just how vital stability is in a relationship, and to do this, I needed to show her the polar opposite. I accomplished this by convincing her that a casual encounter with a masseuse would be exactly what she needed, when in reality, I knew from the start that she would never go through with it. I’d briefed Francois on how to act, both with Bernadette, and in front of Richard as he gave his report.

The waiter poured us each a glass of wine. When Bernadette and Richard thought no one was looking, they mimed a quick toast. They must have been celebrating their newfound romance.

Step two was where things got hairy: I needed Richard to catch Bernadette in a vulnerable state, which I accomplished by sending Richard to her room, implying that it would be vacant. With modesty shattered and propriety forgotten, they’d be able to bypass the birdlike dance of courtship that

Fuchsvolk culture demanded and cut straight to the heart of the matter. I hadn't expected her to be *quite* so vulnerable, and I still carried some guilt for how that all played out, but in the end, Richard and Bernadette were able to break down some of their barriers at triple tempo.

Bernadette took a bite of her soup, grinning so wide that I feared for her lipstick's integrity. Was her renewed zest for life enriching every aspect of her being, right down to the flavor of her dinner? Or was she simply giddy with the excitement of budding intimacy?

Finally, step three: I needed them to *talk*. The two souls had a long history of friendship and support, but they had never been willing to tear down the walls that separated them, and an incident as delicate as theirs could have the opposite effect, driving them to never speak openly again. So, I needed to give them something even more pressing to discuss: me. I planted the seeds of doubt in both their minds, compelling them to confront each other, and then, upon realizing how I'd manipulated them, they would have a common enemy in myself, drawing closer to each other as they bonded over their frustration at my actions. They'd need to discuss the situation in detail to clear up any misunderstandings, and such discussion would inevitably lead to other, more important matters. From there, I could only trust that they'd realize how fertile the soil of their friendship had grown.

And thus, they would be perfectly primed to begin courting. The barriers that kept them apart were reduced to rubble, their emotional bonds were strengthened, and when the moment was right, they were able to make the decision, all on their own, to come together in love and trust. I had a hundred ideas on how I could help them progress their relationship further, but when I saw the mischievous glimmer in their eyes, I decided that they could handle things on their own from now on.

I got to work on my stew, smiling as Bernie and Richard made doll eyes at each other.

It's never too late to be happy.



THE END



We hope you enjoyed *VIXEN'S MARK*! Bernadette, Richard, and Leo originally appeared as side characters in our fully illustrated debut novel, [\*THE TREASURE OF HOUSE LaRUE\*](#), which tells the story of how Bernadette's daughter fell in love with her Goblin maidservant—be sure to check it out!

# ABOUT THE AUTHORS



BC KING AND PHANTOM Dame are creative (and romantic) partners who spend their free time creating stories, comics, and illustrations, with an emphasis on smutty fantasy. They live in Massachusetts, where they spend their days looking at the trees and listening to the birds. Head to [PhantomDame.com](http://PhantomDame.com) to see what else they have cooking.

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# OF STONE AND HEART



DEBBIE CASSIDY

# BLURB



## BLURB

Monsters from beneath the earth have plagued our lands for centuries. But to me, the threat was always far away, never touching my idyllic world until the day it took my father from me.

I vowed to join the ranks trained to cut down these monsters. To fight until my dying breath, and then I meet Arvin and everything I thought I wanted changes.

He's a cast, a machine built for war. An inhuman creature made from clay and metal, and yet in a world filled with death, he brims with the desire to live.

I came to the city to fight the monsters—the last thing I expected was to be fighting my own heart.

# CHAPTER ONE



THE TRENCH BELOW THE bridge had no end. At least, that's what it felt like suspended above its hungry mouth. Even the silver shimmer of the ward, stretched as far as the eye could see over the blackened maw, did little to assuage my disquiet.

"Don't look down," Baba said. "Best to keep your eyes ahead, *Beti*."

I tore my gaze from the pit and to our destination, still half a mile away across the bridge, where towers gleamed and tiny figures moved about. A crowd of people dressed in vibrant oranges, yellows, and browns crossed Hameksha Trench with us—scarves wrapped around heads and faces to shield them from the angry sun—all on their way to Surakshi City. How many of them were going for the same reason as us? Was that fear and trepidation on their faces or was I putting it there because it was what I wanted to see, because it would make me feel less alone?

What were we doing? This was dangerous. Risky. “We could run.”

“And where would we run to, Sira?” Baba asked, resigned.

I gritted my teeth, blinking against the heat that stung my eyes. “Anywhere but here.”

“It will be fine. I’ll be examined and they’ll see...they’ll see I’m unfit.”

But would his slight limp be enough to exempt him from conscription?

I hooked my arm through his to loan him support and he leaned into me. I was tall for a woman, my muscles strong from working the farm. Baba said I was the son he’d never had, and I was glad of it. Glad to help. We were happy, just the two of us on the fringes of the southern lands. We’d been enjoying the summer, withstanding the scorching days to enjoy the warm nights sitting on the porch with glasses of homemade lemon crush. But the declaration had changed everything.

Men between the ages of thirty-five and forty-four summers were being conscripted. Ordered to present themselves to the southern watch for examination, and if they passed, then...My attention dropped to the chasm, and my chest grew tight.

“It is safe,” Baba said, misconstruing my tension for fear over the trench. “There hasn’t been a shudder in decades, and even if there was one, then the wards will keep the neechers at bay.”

I nodded, allowing him to think he’d assuaged my anxiety, when the true source of it lay across the bridge manning the metal towers.

Large stationary forms stood among smaller figures that moved to and fro between them. They called them casts. Humanoid beings created from metal and clay, animated by powerful magick, casts were bulky, powerful, lethal in battle, and our only defense against the neechers.

But they didn’t work alone.

They needed a human to bind with them. Humans who were given the title of atma. I didn't know much else about how that worked. Didn't know much more at all except that my father was being conscripted into training as an atma, and I was terrified of losing him.

"I don't understand why they need more atmas anyway."

"That isn't for us to question," Baba said. "We do what we must to protect the people we love."

The way he said that...the determined edge to his tone...Ice trickled through my veins as an awful thought crossed my mind. The watch might be conscripting males specifically right now, but the new law stated that, as of next year, one member of every family was required to serve *regardless* of gender. So if Baba served, I'd be exempt, but if he failed the examination...

I tightened my grip on his arm. "You *will* tell them about your leg."

"Of course."

He was lying, and we were three-quarters of the way across the bridge. "Baba, please..."

He smiled at me and patted my hand, and I knew for certain he had no intention of coming home with me. Dark wings of panic unfurled inside me, and I dug in my heels, coming to a halt.

"No."

"Sira..." He tugged on my arm. "Please."

"No. You promised. You promised you wouldn't leave me." The wings of panic expanded, beating wildly in my chest, making it harder to breathe.

"I'll be fine," he cajoled. "I'll come home for leave, and we will be together again. You can manage without me. You'll be eighteen next month and—"

A rumble shook the air, and his eyes flew wide. The world fell into silence as everyone on the bridge froze in place. My skin chilled, despite the heat beating down on me.



It couldn't be.

Not now.

Not after so long...

Another rumble.

A shudder.

Across the bridge, the small figures of human atmas moved toward the much larger casts.

"It's fine," Baba said. "The wards are intact. They'll keep the neechers at bay. We don't have to—"

A rumbling roar cut off his words, and the bridge beneath our feet trembled. It was held aloft by a mammoth metal framework that stretched on either side of us like a spider's web. Metal creaked and moaned beneath the strain of the shudder.

"Run!" someone screamed, breaking the collective paralysis.

Everyone moved at once, some faster than others, resulting in a crush then screams as people fell, quickly trampled by their fellow travelers. I grabbed hold of Baba, pulling him to the side to avoid a collision before breaking into a run with him.

The pack on my back thumped against my ass as I ran, one arm hooked through Baba's.

The rumbling grew louder, and the ground shook again, the shockwave lasting longer this time. Screams of terror and pain rent the air.

Don't look into the trench. Don't do it.

I looked in time to see mammoth shadows surging up from deep within to smash against the shimmer.

"The wards will hold," Baba yelled. "We'll be—"

A loud crack was followed by the sharp sting of magick, and an acrid flavor burst across my tongue.

The shimmer died, and for a moment, there was deathly silence as if to punctuate the enormity of what was about to happen. Claws gripped my heart and squeezed, even as my feet continued to move, muscles straining as I dragged my father along with me.

Then a cacophony of awful sound erupted out of the trench—roars, shrieks, and chitters mingling to create a symphony of doom.

Hulking figures leapt onto the bridge—fifteen feet tall with huge heads with mouths as their only feature.

The bridge quaked, drowning out the terrified screams of people desperate to escape the neechers.

I kept running, Baba staggering beside me as I rammed and shoved to get across the bridge, away from the claws and the teeth of the trench beasts hungry for flesh.

Metal screamed, and dark figures arched through the air, aiming for the bridge.

The casts were activating.

They'd save us. They'd stop this.

A pale, hairless monster landed in our path, grabbed a woman, and bit into her like she was a carrot. Blood sprayed, coating the air, and the crunch of bone was awful and loud against the backdrop of terror and carnage.

“Sira, move!” Baba yanked me to the right, breaking me out of my momentary paralysis and back into a sprint. But he was flagging, his bad leg slowing him down. I tore the pack off my back. “Get on!”

“What?”

“Get on my back. Do it!”

He was shorter than me, not frail, but light and wiry. I was stronger. Faster. He knew it, and in the next instant he was on my back, arms around my neck, allowing me to pick up speed.

I wove through the horror, aiming for the sanctuary of the other side as the people around me were plucked off the bridge

or torn asunder where they stood.

A cast landed up ahead—a monolith of clay interwoven with metal. It attacked, punching neechers off the bridge with its huge fists, and a moment later, an atma leapt off its back and into the fray, mammoth sword gleaming in the sunlight as it swung and decapitated a smaller neecher.

“We’re almost there, Sira,” Baba said. “You can do it, Beti. You can do this.”

My muscles burned, but determination flared bright in my chest, fueled by hope. We were close. So close and—

A shadow swept overhead, and I was suddenly lighter. Moving faster.

No...

“Baba!” I ground to a halt and turned back. “Baba!” So many people. Monsters. Casts. “Baba!” I ran back the way we’d come and spotted him tucked under the arm of a humanoid neecher with glistening corded flesh. It was headed for the bridge barrier. “No!” I burst into a sprint toward them. “Stop!”

“No, Sira, run!” Baba cried.

The creature holding him turned its head toward me, dark eyes gleaming wet and hungry in a hideous face, and slowly, deliberately lifted my father, kicking and screaming toward its mouth.

“Stop! No!” My lungs ached as I pushed myself, desperate to get to him in time.

We locked gazes across the distance, so close yet too far as his lips moved, forming two words. *Love you.*

The crunch of flesh and bone tore free the scream trapped in my throat.

Baba’s body fell limp.

Dead.

He was dead.

Lava flooded my limbs. Rage and grief caging my lungs, I charged the monster, seeing nothing but blood and gore. Contact was like slamming into stone. I rebounded and hit the ground on my ass. My palms scraped rubble, but I barely felt the burn before I was back on my feet, wrath searing my lungs, my scream tearing at my ears.

The neecher flung Baba's body over the railing and stomped toward me. I ducked my head and charged once more, wanting nothing but to hurt it. To make it bleed.

A shadow flew over my head, and a woman landed in front of me. An atma. She swung her sword and decapitated my monster.

"NO!" I ran at him, impotent fury turning my vision red. A band of steel closed around my torso, and my boots left the ground.

A cast had me in its grip and the world rushed by, taking me away from Baba and to safety. "NO!" I shoved at his stony hand, tight around my waist, my palms slippery and bloody.

The cast drew to a halt suddenly. "Calm." Its deep, rumbling voice rose to block out the world.

The haze clouding my mind cleared as I looked into bright emerald eyes set in a face hewn from metal and stone-like clay, and for a moment the rage, the pain, the world seemed to melt away, leaving only bone-numbing grief.

"My baba..." A sob cut off my words.

"Gone. But you are alive. So now you must live for the both of you."

This was a construct, a machine created for war, and yet its words pierced my soul.

He set me down gently, releasing me into the arms of the trench guard before turning back to the bridge and the battle that raged there.

I watched numbly as the casts decimated the neechers, forcing them back into the trench. Watched as they brought

people to safety one by one. So much death and horror, and the casts were the only salvation.

In that moment, heartbroken, orphaned, and crushed by grief, everything changed.

The Sira who wanted nothing more than a quiet life, who lived for the evenings drinking lemon crush on the porch swing watching the fireflies, died, and I was born.

# CHAPTER TWO



## THREE YEARS LATER

SWORDS CLANGED AND POTENTIALS grunted with the exertion of each swing. Our Irithima blades required both skill and strength to master. But it was the only metal that could cut down a neecher. The same metal that each cast was infused with.

I blocked a blow, twisted, then sliced at my opponent's abdomen. He leapt back in time to avoid contact. My blade guard prevented me from causing serious harm, but the force of the blow would bruise if he was lucky, and break a rib if he wasn't. We were all a patchwork of broken and reforged bones, our skin rarely clear of mottled bruising.

"That was close," Vane said, wiping sweat from his brow with the back of his wrist. "You almost had me." His eyes were bright with the thrill of combat. "You want to go again?"

"Do you think you can handle it?"

He chuckled, low and sexy. “You know exactly how much I can handle, Sira.”

My stomach dropped. I’d given in to my urges with him once or twice. But we weren’t together, even though he wanted us to be. Even though he watched me with longing and saved a seat for me at the supper table every night.

We were friends, but I’d crossed the line, and nothing would ever be the same, no matter how much I wanted it to be.

His smile died when I didn’t meet it with one of my own, and his expression sobered completely. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have—”

“It’s all right. It isn’t your fault.” It was mine. The initiator. The instigator, and the one to end it. “We should break now.”

He nodded, not meeting my gaze, and guilt clawed at me. “I’ll see you at the Claspings.”

I left him on the sands of the arena and fell into a jog, telling myself that I needed to get out of the sun, when really it was him that I needed to get away from.



POTENTIALS’ QUARTERS WERE SMALL and cramped. Enough room for a bed and a wardrobe and nothing more. We shared a communal washroom between the fifteen of us with bathing times split between men and women to allow some modicum of privacy. We ate together, trained together, lived together. The only space where we could be alone was in our tiny sleeping quarters.

I closed the door and sank onto the bed, head in hands. Today was important. Vital. I couldn’t allow guilt to sully my aura if I hoped to be compatible with a cast, and with fifteen potentials hoping to be bound and only six casts in need of an atma, the odds were against me.

No one knew how or why a potential was chosen. But speculation was rife. Skill, strength, aura, fortitude, even scent

had been suggested by some. But my favorite theory was one that suggested blood lines were responsible.

This theory related to an ancient legend that spoke of a ritual where thirteen warriors had sacrificed their lives to forge the first cast. The legend said that every cast thereafter had come from the clay of the first, and that every person in the four lands had the blood of the thirteen somewhere in their family tree. People believed that the strength of that blood determined who was chosen as an atma.

All I could do was hope that I was one of them or my hard work would have been for nothing.

I closed my eyes and summoned Baba's face, his slightly crooked smile and the weathered wrinkles at the corners of his warm brown eyes. "I'm here, Baba. I'm going to do it. I'm going to be chosen, and I'm going to kill every fucking neecher I can get my hands on. No one will lose a loved one on my watch."

A light knock sounded on the door. "Sira, you in there?" Yara called. "I'm headed to the baths. Are you coming?"

Yara and I had joined the potentials at the same time and trained together for the last three years. Next to Vane, Yara was my closest friend and one of the most promising potentials preparing for the Claspings this year.

I exhaled and let the image of my father go. "I'm here. Just getting my things."

"Hurry, or all the hot water will be gone."

I grabbed my wash bag and clothes and yanked open the door to her muddy face. She'd scraped her auburn locks into a high knot, but even that was speckled with dirt. "What happened to you?"

Her mouth turned down. "I got paired with Cramer for hand-to-hand in the field, and he kept pinning me to the ground. It's still muddy from last night's rainfall."

I bit back a smile. It was my conclusion that Cramer Medala had an eye for my friend.



She narrowed her eyes. “Don’t.” She stalked off down the corridor, and I jogged to catch up, unable to stop a chuckle from escaping my lips. “You’re so wrong.”

“And what if I’m right?”

“It doesn’t matter. I can’t stand him.”

“The body wants what the body wants.” I regretted it as soon as I said it because wasn’t that exactly what had ruined my friendship with Vane?

Yara sighed and slipped an arm around my waist. “Too much wine and sadness on the anniversary of your baba’s death were responsible for the slip. Let it go. Forgive yourself. Vane has.”

But had he? Or was he simply hoping that I’d change my mind? I hated the cynical thoughts, but they persisted, another cause for the rift in our friendship.

Several female potentials rounded the corridor headed toward us, their wet locks twisted in knots on top of their heads.

I tipped my head to the side to rest it against Yara’s temple briefly. “I love you, Yara.”

“I love you too, but not enough to let you get the last of the hot water.” She let go of me and broke into a run.

“Sneaky thief!” I sprinted after her, our laughter echoing off the passage halls, and for a moment, the weight of the world lifted.

For a moment I allowed myself to pretend that we were simply two young women with our whole lives ahead of us.

Reality could wait for an hour or so.

## CHAPTER THREE



WHEN A CAST'S ATMA died, the cast went into slumber. At the northern watch, they kept their inactive casts deep in the bowels of a neighboring mountain—a long-dead volcano that they'd repurposed. Some said the volcano was where the first cast was forged. I believed that to be a rumor propagated by the northern watch themselves so they could feel superior to the other watches.

Here, in the southern watch, our inactive casts were kept in a chamber beneath the earth.

My stomach tightened the deeper underground we went, down a wide stone and brick passage lit by crystals that glowed a soft amber.

Yara walked ahead of me, her shoulders tense, her posture stiff with nerves. We all felt it. All fifteen of us, being herded deep into the earth to find out if we were a match. If we were

worthy to protect not only Surakshi City but the whole of the southern lands.

Three years ago, I would have cared less, but seeing the threat with my own eyes...losing Baba...it changed me. Made me realize how vital this role was and how much I needed to be a part of it. To make a difference.

The chamber lay through an arch fifteen feet high, its perimeter lit by wall sconces. A balcony circled the chamber a floor above us, and beyond that was a domed ceiling hidden in gloom. But the prize lay in the center where, caged by softly glowing runic symbols, crouched the six casts waiting to be activated by an atma.

We fanned out, coming to stand on the outer rim of the arcane circle. Yara caught my eye and smiled tightly before fixing her attention on the casts.

I followed suit, heart thudding hard against my ribs. I hadn't been in the presence of a cast since that day three years ago on the bridge. Potentials were cloistered, kept away from active casts and their atmas, but not a day had gone by when I hadn't remembered the words of the heartbright that had saved my life. Words that had been too insightful, too intelligent, to have come from a machine.

Had I imagined them? Had the trauma of the moment addled my mind, allowing me to hear words I needed to hear? I'd questioned my recollection many times over the years, finally resigning myself to the fact that I'd probably never know for certain. I'd channeled my energy into learning everything I could about my new world.

There were three kinds of casts: limbers, fists, and heartbrights. Limbers were agile, able to climb deep into the trenches, but fists were built for brute strength, able to tear a neecher limb from limb. The heartbrights could morph to fifteen feet or larger in some cases and acted as the generals of each cast troop.

Everyone wanted to be bonded to a heartbright—to be a leader. But there were only thirteen in existence. Our watch had four, and only one of them was without an atma at present.

It sat in the center of the chamber, crouched on one knee, head bowed. Around him were two limbers and three fists.

Personally, I didn't care which cast chose me. I simply wanted to be chosen so that I could fight.

People strode onto the balcony above us. I recognized General Thorpe from her visits to the potentials' barracks—an athletic woman with silver hair and piercing blue eyes, she had a stern demeanor that could easily cow the hardest temperament.

The short rotund man with them was the mayor. He'd announced the fifteen potentials chosen to take part in the Claspings. The third and final figure, however, was new to me, identifiable only by his navy and crimson robes.

The arch Jaadoogar looked down his nose at us, his amber gaze impassive and unimpressed. This was the man responsible for managing the casts and ensuring that they functioned.

"Potentials," the mayor said. "Welcome to the Claspings. Your hard work and dedication have brought you to this point, a point where some of you will be elevated to atma and given the prestigious mantle of protectorate. Seven centuries have passed since our earth fractured and the neechers invaded. Through union, fortitude, and the will of the Goddess, humanity was able to beat them back into the earth and hold them there. We have kept them at bay ever since using might and magick, and with your help, we will continue to do so. One by one, you will step into the circle, and if the Goddess wills it, you will be chosen." He stepped back, and General Thorpe took his place.

She swept an icy gaze over us before speaking. "You will step into the circle when your name is called. *If* you are chosen, your cast will rise. If you are rejected, then you will be repelled."

It sounded simple enough. My breath fluttered in my chest. There was no need for concern.

"Matthew Gideon," Thorpe called.

Matthew, a thuggish, mulish-looking potential with an easy temperament that contradicted his appearance, stepped into the circle. The symbols glowed brighter for a moment.

Long seconds ticked by while the room seemed to hold its breath, then with a creak of metal and stone, a fist lifted its head. Its eyes glowed bright white, and Matthew's shoulders sagged as he exhaled in shock.

The fist unfurled its stocky frame and looked down at Matthew. "You be my atma?" it asked in a soft echoing voice that belied its stature.

Matthew tipped back his head, staring up at the monolith. "Yes, I will be your atma."

A white bolt of energy shot out of the fist and hit Matthew in the chest. He cried out, back arching, eyes glowing white for a moment. Then it was over.

"You may step out of the circle," Thorpe said.

Both the fist and Matthew walked out of the ring, crossing to stand on the far side of the chamber.

"Cramer Medala," Thorpe called out next.

Yara's admirer took Matthew's place in the circle. He stood confidently with his head held high, his focus on the heartbright.

Typical.

We waited long seconds before a loud crack shattered the silence. The sound was quickly followed by a bright flash of light. When it dimmed, Cramer was on the ground outside of the circle.

Repelled.

"No!" He scrambled to his feet. "There must be a mistake. Let me try again. I need to try again."

"You have been rejected," Thorpe said coolly. "You may leave."

"But I—"

“Leave!” the Jaadoogar boomed.

Cramer turned on his heel and strode out of the room like a puppet following orders.

“Melayna Bakshi,” Thorpe called as if nothing untoward had happened. And so we continued.

One by one, the potentials stepped into the circle. One by one, they were rejected until we were down to nine of us, with five casts. It wasn't unheard of for no atmas to be chosen. We could all end up being rejected.

Doubt bloomed in my mind, but I pushed it back.

“Vane Ithika,” Thorpe called.

My gaze shot to my friend to find him watching me. He dipped his chin, threw me a smile, and stepped into the circle. The symbols bloomed brighter, and silence fell as we waited.

We didn't have to wait long before a limber raised its head and fixed crimson eyes on Vane. “You will be my atma?” it asked.

Vane exhaled shakily before responding, “Yes, I will be your atma.” Just like with Matthew, a bolt of energy shot out to touch Vane, binding him to the cast.

Things moved fast after that. The last two fists were claimed by the Donnelly twins, a brother and sister powerhouse team who were known for being the life of any gathering.

That left a limber, a heartbright, and three potentials: Yara, me, and Frederick, a shy hard-working potential who I'd sparred with on and off the past few months.

Yara and I exchanged glances as Frederick's name was called. If he activated one of the casts, it would mean one of us would be left without a position.

I wasn't one to wish failure on anyone, but in that moment I came close.

Frederick waited for several seconds, and I rubbed my sweaty palms on my thighs. The crack and flare of expulsion

tore a gasp from my lips, and it took a moment for my pulse to slow.

Yara and I locked gazes, hope bouncing between us.

“Sira Arora,” Thorpe called out.

My turn. Okay...I took a breath and stepped into the ring, skin prickling, hairs at my nape quivering.

The world fell away, leaving me alone in the arcane cage, surrounded by power and faced with two monoliths of war.

Seconds ticked by, and my chest tightened in panic. Please don't eject me. Please, please. I want this. I need this.

A gentle heat filtered through my veins, and the flutter in my chest calmed. Then, with a creak of metal and stone, the heartbright raised his head and stared at me with bright emerald eyes.

I knew the broad sweeping lines and flat planes of that face. It was the heartbright from the bridge. The one who'd carried me to safety, and was it my imagination or did his eyes flare a little brighter in recognition of me?

“Will you be my atma?” he asked in his smooth, rumbling voice, giving no indication that he remembered me.

I swallowed past the dryness in my mouth, speaking above the thunder of blood in my head. “Yes. Yes, I will be your atma.”

## CHAPTER FOUR



YARA WAS CHOSEN BY the limber, and before we knew it, we were being led out of the chamber through a different passage. My heartbright walked beside me, seven feet in height, now that he'd reduced his size, but still imposing.

I could sense his presence, like a warm caress at my nape. Was this what being bonded felt like?

“Where are we going?” Vane asked from up ahead.

“To the Cast Tower. Your new home,” Thorpe said. “Your possessions will be brought to you. Your time in the barracks is over, and you will have nothing more to do with the potentials. You will be given a week to acclimatize to your bond with your cast, and then you will be assigned rotation and active duty.”

The Cast Tower was visible from the barracks—a ten-story stone structure built into the side of a mountain, it housed the casts and their atmas. Up until now, it had been off-limits to



the potentials, so there was no denying my excitement at finally viewing the interior of the impressive building.

“You will be sharing quarters with your cast,” Thorpe continued. “Proximity is key to a strong bonding.” We climbed a flight of stairs. “Tomorrow you will assemble in the second-floor hall for orientation and cast management.”

My heartbright ducked through an arch and led me onto a second passage, this one redbrick and stone, set to an incline that led us to double doors that opened onto a spacious chamber with vaulted windows that provided a beautiful view of Surakshi. Rolling fields, woodland, and the city itself—a vista of tiny homes and winding streets—could be enjoyed from this vantage point. And directly below us, within walking distance, were the barracks where I’d spent the last three years.

Thorpe stopped by the stone steps in the center of the room. “Your casts will take you to your new quarters and see to your needs. I will speak with you all tomorrow.”

She exited via a side door, leaving us standing around with our casts.

“You come this way,” Yara’s limber said to her before bounding easily up the stone steps.

Yara glanced at me, uncertainty etched across her features. The wanting of something could be a sweet diversion or a focused goal, but finally having it could spawn uncertainty and fear.

I dropped my chin in a nod and smiled. “I’ll see you later.”

She swallowed hard and nodded. “Later, then.” She disappeared up the steps.

The other limbers took the stairs too, but the fists stomped across the room to a silver door that slid open to reveal a large room with pulleys and chains attached to draw it up the building. I’d heard of these winches, but this was my first time seeing one, and my stomach dropped.

“Please tell me we can take the stairs.”

“If you wish it,” the heartbright said.

I did wish it, but I’d spent the last three years conquering my fears, and I wasn’t going to stop now. “No. The winch is fine.”

We waited while each fist took the elevator one by one. Finally, it was our turn, and my heartbright ushered me inside with a sweep of one of his large hands. The same hand that had held me aloft all those years ago.

Did he truly not remember me? Weren’t these constructs created to house memories of places and faces?

My stomach dropped as the winch lurched into motion. I bit back a cry and set my jaw, breathing through my nose.

“You are afraid,” the heartbright said.

It wasn’t a question, but I answered regardless. “I am.”

“Then you are courageous.”

Being afraid and persisting despite that fear was the definition of courage...that’s what Baba had said, and now, this construct was intimidating the same. I slid a glance his way, studying his mammoth form. He looked like a man. A large muscular man cut from stone. Slivers of metal ran down his arms and legs and across his shoulders, glinting dully in the crystal lights of the winch room. His profile was regal. Jaw firm and strong, his head perfectly formed, not blocky like the other casts but smooth like a man’s would be.

He turned that head now to look down at me. “You are no longer afraid.”

He was right. I wasn’t.

The doors finally opened onto a large airy space filled with sunlight. Three doors lead off it.

“Come.” The heartbright clomped across to the central door and hauled it open. The room beyond was spacious with one bed, a wardrobe, a dresser, and a wash area to one side, complete with tub. There was one window with a view of Surakshi.

It was a large enough room but... “Wait...we *share* this?”

“We do.”

My gaze fell on the tub. “I’m supposed to bathe with you in the room?”

He watched me silently for several beats, his eyes dimming and brightening as if processing thoughts. “You are uncomfortable with this idea.”

“Perceptive of you. Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m a woman and you’re a...a...”

He canted his head. “I believe the word you are looking for is cast.”

A cast. He was a cast. Not a man. Not a person. But...he was more than a *thing*. More than an *it*. Goddess, but this was awkward.

“I will leave the room when you wish to bathe,” he said. “Do not concern yourself on that account. But I must be with you when you sleep. It is...essential.”

“There’s only one bed.”

“The bed is for you. I do not need such comforts.”

Of course he didn’t. I crossed to the bed and sat to test the spring. Firm but not uncomfortably so. Much better than the potentials’ threadbare mattresses.

Once again, he continued to watch me with a strange intensity that made my stomach tremble with the need to fill the silence. “What’s your name? I mean...*Do* you have a name?”

“My name is Arvin, and you are Sira Arora, my *atma*.”

How did he know that? He’d been inactive when Thorpe said my name...or had he? “How do you know my name?”

A ripple passed over his eyes, the myriad colors of a rainbow, so brief I could have missed them with a blink, and

when he spoke next, his tone was softer and filled with inflection.

“I remember. I remember you from the bridge.” He said it as if it was a secret to be shared.

A strange flutter filled my chest. He remembered me, which made sense, but... “I never told you my name.”

“No, you did not.”

I waited for him to elaborate, but he didn't. Instead, he came to crouch in front of me. “You must touch me now,” he said. “You must touch me often to solidify our bond. It is... essential.”

He was so large that even crouched before me, his eyes were level with mine—emerald gems that seemed to convey emotion even though his face was unable to express any at all.

I reached out and placed my palm on his cheek. It was warmer than I'd expected. His eyes dimmed, as if he was closing them.

A tingling sensation spread across my palm and up and down my arm. It morphed to a pleasant buzz that spread across my shoulders and over my chest to settle beneath my breastbone.

“I hoped that I would find you,” he said.

The strange new connection between us thrummed, and a secondary vibration flared to life low in my chest, and the feeling that I knew him, had always known him bloomed in my mind.

Was this part of the bond? This comfortable familiarity edged with the excitement of something new? As if I was standing on the precipice of a wondrous discovery.

Was I supposed to feel this way? “What did you mean...you hoped to find me?”

His eyes glowed softly. “You were in my mind after the bridge.”

In his mind? He'd been thinking about me? Nothing I'd learned about casts led me to believe they had the capacity to think this deeply. They were constructs of war, created only to fight the neechers, weren't they?

"I have wondered about you," Arvin said. "About the fearless human who attempted to fight a neecher. I have heard your scream of pain and rage many times since that day."

His words transported me to that moment on the bridge, my baba in the clutches of a monster, sorrow and defeat etched into the weathered lines of his face. He'd known he was about to die, but his fear had been for my welfare. The pain that followed...that red haze of wrath could have taken me with him.

I might have died that day. Might have thrown myself into the fray only to be torn limb from limb if not for this cast.

"You saved me..." I licked my dry lips. "You saved me that day,"

His eyes brightened, and I held my breath because it felt as if he was about to say something more. To impart some valued truth. But in the next moment, the gleam in his eyes dulled, and he moved away from me.

When he next spoke, his tone was flat. "I did my duty. You were an innocent in need of saving. Come. I will show you to the meal hall."

The inflection, the softness was gone, and as I followed him out of the room, I couldn't help but wonder if it had been there at all.



ARVIN SHOWED ME TO the dining hall for my evening meal. Back in the barracks, we'd been subjected to long wooden tables and benches, threadbare and chipped from use, but here atmas sat in clusters at proper tables dotted around the room while their casts stood to one side against the walls.

Yara and Vane sat at a table with Matthew and the Donnelly twins. I hurried over, leaving Arvin to find a spot against the wall with the other casts.

At the barracks, we would have to take trays and form a line to get our food. Meals that were pre-prepared on a rota. No options. No choice. But here, each table was laid with a selection of dishes: red lentils, fragrant rice, two kinds of spicy meat stews, and flatbreads seasoned with garlic and butter.

My stomach growled, and my mouth watered as I loaded up a plate.

“How are you settling in with the heartbright?” Caleb, one of the twins, asked.

“We’re getting to know each other.” I spooned some rice into my mouth, chewing slowly when I noticed the confused glances being traded. “What?”

Yara shook her head and smiled. “I suppose you traded life stories, then?”

The way she said it, as if trading life stories would be a jest, brought me up short. I kept my tone light, teasing, to feel her out. “What? And you didn’t?”

She chuckled softly. “Of course. My limber told me all about his likes and dislikes.” Vane let out a bark of laughter. “Can you imagine if that was true?”

“They’re constructs for a reason,” Caleb said. “Created to protect and to serve. They don’t have feelings, and that’s what makes them the perfect soldiers.”

That wasn’t true. Not with Arvin, but some sixth sense warned me to keep my own counsel.

“My limber lost its last atma three months ago,” Yara said. “It’s a new construct. Fifty years old.”

“Isn’t that when the last batch of casts were made?” Vane asked.

“Do you think the rumors are true?” Cara, the other Donnelly twin, said.

“What rumors?” Vane asked.

“Well, if you haven’t heard...” Cara said with a smug smile.

Caleb rolled his eyes. “Excuse my sister; she likes to create an atmosphere of intrigue where there really isn’t any. It’s a common rumor among the west wing of the barracks.”

“Well, spit it out,” Vane demanded.

Vane didn’t like not knowing things. He prided himself on being stocked on all the barracks gossip, using the information like currency. For him to not have heard this rumor must grate.

“The clay to make the casts is gone,” Cara said in a rush.

Caleb shot her a sharp look. “Yes, what my sister said.”

Vane’s eyes went round. “But that means—”

“No new casts,” Yara finished.

Casts were hardy. They lasted centuries, but many had been pulled down into the trenches over the years. Which left me wondering how old Arvin was.

Yara pulled me out of my thoughts with a nudge. “Are you going to eat that flatbread?”

I rolled my eyes and passed it to her. “You know it bloats me.”

“Yes.” She grinned. “More for me.”

We settled into easy conversation around the orientation to come and the week ahead, and the next hour passed quickly, but there was no denying I was glad when it was over because by the end of it, I was in no doubt that my cast was different from the others, and I couldn’t wait to find out how different he truly was.



OUR ROOM WAS DARK, lit only by the moonlight streaming in from the single window, and it took everything I

had to keep my eyelids from drifting closed. I wasn't ready for the day to end. I had questions that needed answers.

"Why do you fight the pull of sleep?" Arvin asked.

I rolled onto my side to face him, focusing on his hulking frame crouched in the far corner of the room. His body was mostly in shadow, but silvery fingers had found his face, highlighting the beautifully crafted features. In this soft light, shrouded in gloom, I could almost imagine he was real. That any moment now, his perfect mouth would curve in a smile or part on a breath.

"Sira?" He sounded...confused.

"I don't suppose there's any point lying and saying I'm not tired?" He could no doubt feel my lethargy through our bond.

"No, there is not."

"Then answer me this. Why do you pretend to be an automaton?"

Deathly silence, deep and stunned, stretched between us, and when he finally replied, his tone was guarded.

"I do not *pretend*. I am a cast. I am a construct."

There was a thread of doubt laced between his words. My pulse beat hard in my throat, the connection between us vibrating low in my chest. "Yes, you are, but...you're more than that, aren't you?" When he didn't reply, I continued. "How connected are we? What do you...feel?"

His eyes gleamed eerily in the moonlight, and this time he responded. "A cast has no flesh with which to feel physical sensation, but we share a metaphysical connection with our atma, and through that connection we can understand the sensations of pleasure and pain."

"And...emotions?"

He was silent for so long, if he'd been a person, I'd have suspected he'd fallen asleep. Finally, he said, "Casts have no emotions."



The untruth was a barb pricking at my psyche, and I couldn't help but challenge him. "You're lying."

Silence once more, then, "Sira, we should not speak of these things."

I was right. He *was* different. More...sentient. I sat up, suddenly breathless. "Why can't we speak of these things?"

"There are rules, Sira. Boundaries that must not be crossed. Some casts can stay within them, but others..."

"What?"

"Time changes all. Time brings knowledge and growth. But they have no place in this world. Not for a cast and not for an atma."

It was a warning, but I'd never been good at heeding those. "Did your previous atma know this?"

"Yes. She was...kind. We were...friends." There was an aching resonance to his voice. "Leaving Reema to die was not easy."

Leaving her to...He'd let her die? "Why? Why would you do that?"

"Innocent humans were in danger. I had no choice. It is the law—the life of innocents above that of the atma." His eyes dulled until they were barely visible in the gloom. "You will be taught this soon enough," he said flatly.

Silence stretched between us. What must that have been like? To leave his friend to die. To turn away from her when she screamed his name. Atmas were dispensable, it seemed, in the grand scheme of things.

"I sometimes hear her screams of agony," Arvin said softly. "I sometimes feel the searing burn of her wounds."

Oh Goddess...the cruelty. "I'm so sorry."

"Yes...Sorry...I, too, am sorry."

We lapsed into silence once more, and the revelation of his true nature filled the void between us. What were the implications of his sentience? Right now, he was a possession.

He belonged to the southern watch, to the four kingdoms. He was considered a machine, but...he was *more* than that. Were there others like him? Yes, of course there were. There had to be.

“Arvin...how old are you?”

“Time passes differently for my kind. I cannot tell. But I have seen many seasons and many faces. I have seen towers rise and fall and the color and cut of human garb change. I have been present, and I have been...nowhere, and yet I have *always* been here.”

His words echoed with the ache of loneliness. “Do you *like* being here?”

The light in his eyes pulsed for long seconds as he considered this. “In this moment. Right this moment. I like being here. With you.”

He had a preference...A life. He was everything that he wasn't supposed to be, but all I could wonder was why it felt as if he was deflecting. As if there was much more he could have said. Things he *wanted* to say. Things on his mind.

His mind...Goddess, he was real. “Did Reema know that you were different?”

“I was not like this before. The bridge changed something. I did not understand it. I was...afraid of it. So I listened, and I learned. I did not speak of it to Reema until two months before her death. She was frightened at first but not for herself. She was frightened for me. She warned me to keep my awakening a secret.”

Awakening... “But you told me.”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because, Sira, I believe it was you who woke me.”



HE DIDN'T UNDERSTAND HIS awakening, and neither did I. But one thing we agreed on was to continue to keep it a secret. To guard his gift closely because my intuition said that revealing his nature would have him taken from me, and even though I'd had him for a matter of hours, the thought of losing him spawned feral panic in my chest.

He was bound to me now.

Mine to protect.

We were allies. A team.

I wasn't entirely sure why a cast needed a human to be its atma. The consensus was that our humanity grounded them, and our energy gave them a basic sentience. Enough to participate in the never-ending war. And through this union a cast was able to protect our world.

We would need to rely on one another, and to the best of our abilities, take care of each other. But if he was compelled to put an innocent human's life above the life of his atma, I needed an important assurance from him.

I propped myself up on an elbow. "Promise me something." He stared at me, waiting. "Promise me that if one of those things gets its hands on me, you'll end me rather than let it have me."

The light in his eyes pulsed as he thought this over. "I will do this for you. I will end you rather than let them have you. I only wish I could have done the same for Reema."

I lay back down and closed my eyes, my mind whirring with implications of everything I'd learned.

"Sleep now," he said. "I will watch over you."

"If I cry out in my sleep, just nudge me. I'm often plagued by nightmares."

"You will not be plagued tonight," he said.

Maybe it was the connection between us, or maybe it was the fact that it had been such an eventful day, but I slept deep and dreamless till the dawn.

# CHAPTER FIVE



“PIVOT AND LEAP. LEAP!” Oona, leader of first troop, bellowed at me.

I managed to launch myself high enough to latch on to Arvin’s back. He grew in size, and I scrambled up and locked my legs around his neck.

“Finally!” Oona threw up her hands, her tone long-suffering, but her eyes bright with triumph.

“You did well,” Arvin whispered so only I could hear.

We’d been practicing maneuvers for the past week. A cast and an atma had to work together and become one fluid machine. My cast was my mount, my partner, and my weapon. We’d have to work in tandem, anticipate the other’s moves, and react accordingly.

“It will take practice to become fluid,” Oona said. “But you have time. You’ll be shadowing me and Bhima for your first

rotation.” She glanced at Arvin. “Arvin is a veteran, and I’m sure his experience will be enough to guide you. Look to him for your cues.”

Arvin gently lowered me to the ground before morphing to his regular seven-foot height and stomping over to where Bhima stood watching us.

I wiped sweat from my brow, wishing I could tear off the leather vest and elbow and knee guards Oona had made me don for training. The early morning sun was already brutal, hammering heat onto the training grounds and turning the earth hard as stone.

Oona passed me a flask filled with water. I took it gratefully, drinking deep before handing it back to her.

The training grounds were empty this early in the morning, and over the past week Oona had met me here every day to train. As atma to one of the heartbrights for southern watch and leader of first troop, it was her job to make sure I acclimatized to my new position as a troop leader. Reema had been a friend of hers, and so Oona spent a lot of time around Arvin. Bhima and Oona also shared a floor with us, their room to the left of ours.

“How are you settling in?” she asked.

“Good. I’ve been sleeping better than I ever have.”

“Dreamless and deep?”

“Yes. Is that an effect of being an atma?”

“It’s certainly a common factor between us.”

I was about to ask why she thought that might be when people began to file out of the building and into the yard.

Vane nodded my way, and Yara raised a hand in greeting. Their casts trailed close behind them.

Several seasoned atmas strolled out, shouting orders to my friends. Mentorship was a natural process here, and both Vane and Yara were working with an atma from third troop who was bound to a veteran limber.

I tore my gaze away from them as they began training and looked to Arvin across the quad. He stood, arms loose at his sides, bright eyes staring straight ahead, and yet I could feel his regard on me. The connection between us thrummed, and heat filtered through my veins—a common reaction to his proximity, except this time he was several yards away from me.

“Patrol can be stagnant,” Oona said. “But it’s a good time to practice your skills in a real trench environment.”

I focused on her words. “What do you mean?”

“The trench we’re guarding tomorrow is called a dead zone, which means there hasn’t been any recorded activity in over a decade. When this happens, the Jaadoogar removes the wards and places a rotation of guards instead. If there is no activity for a further year, the trench is abandoned. It’s an excellent time for you to practice scaling and descent.”

My stomach trembled with a mixture of excitement and nerves. Behind me, the *whoosh* and *thunk* of blade on blade signaled escalation of practice.

“You did well today.” Oona gave my shoulder a squeeze. “Get some rest.” She strode off toward a group of seasoned atmas.

She was an excellent mentor, not too harsh but not too lenient either. My stomach rumbled, reminding me that I’d put off breaking my fast to be here.

I turned, intent on remedying that, to find something large and gray hurtling toward me.

A limber.

A limber was about to smash into me.

“Sira!” Arvin’s bellow shattered my eardrums, and in the next moment I was in his arms, his large body curved around me, his back to the threat.

The crunch of metal on metal rang in my ears, and a vibration rocked through Arvin, shaking the ground and rattling my teeth. In the next moment, we were airborne with

the world tipping as Arvin twisted midair so that we landed with him beneath me. My bones shook and my head whipped back and forth so fast I narrowly missed biting off my tongue.

A deafening silence descended before the world began to scream.

“Sira! Oh Goddess. Sira!”

“Not your fault.”

“Help her.”

Arvin... “Arvin!” I pushed up to look down at his dull green eyes. “Arvin, wake up!”

“Goddess preserve us!” Oona grabbed my shoulders, trying to pry me off Arvin, but I shook her off, panic a coil in my belly.

“No! Arvin, please. Wake up!”

“It’s all right. He’s all right,” Oona said. “Calm yourself.” Her tone was tight. A warning. But Arvin wasn’t moving, and his eyes were dark, and that wasn’t all right.

My eyes heated as an iron fist squeezed my lungs. “Why isn’t he waking? Arvin!”

Oona grabbed my wrist and placed my hands on his shoulders. “Touch him. Just touch him and wait.”

I did so.

Fingers trembling, stomach quivering, I waited.

Long seconds ticked by, and the coil in my belly wound tighter and tighter until—

“Sira...” His eyes bloomed bright.

Alive.

I let out a choked sob. “You’re alive.”

Murmurs broke out around us, and Oona’s grip on my wrist tightened.

Arvin’s eyes pulsed. “I am not alive. I am a construct,” he said flatly. “I am pleased that you are alive.”

My scalp prickled as awareness trickled through me. Awareness of all eyes on me. Of being watched and judged for my outburst.

What had I done? Behaving like this for all to see.

I sat up slowly, reining in my emotions. “I’m sorry. That was...I think I’m in shock.”

“Of course you are,” Oona soothed. “Who wouldn’t be? You could have died.” She glared at someone over her shoulder.

“I’m sorry. I lost control,” Yara said tearily.

She must have been practicing remote maneuvers where an atma could take control of the cast’s movements by thought alone. Something that was unique to the limber cast.

I climbed off Arvin and fixed a shaky smile on my face. “No harm was done.”

“Not entirely true,” one of the other seasoned atmas said to me. “The fact your cast was affected this way indicates you have not been providing it with enough physical contact.”

My cheeks heated at the reprimand.

“Good point,” Oona said quickly. “You must remedy that.” She gave me a pointed look. “If this were to have happened during a skirmish with the neechers, you and your cast would have been lost to us.”

I nodded. “I’ll fix it. I’m sorry.”

“Sira is safe,” Arvin said pulling himself to his feet. “There is no cause for worry.” He turned to look at me. “Training is over for the day.”

I nodded mutely and followed him across the quad, legs trembling with the acute awareness that I’d almost been flattened.

All eyes were on me and my cast as we exited. Expressions of stunned relief decorated their faces, but when my gaze fell on Vane, it wasn’t relief I saw—it was suspicion.





WE DIDN'T SPEAK TILL we got back to our quarters, but once inside with the door closed, I acted on impulse, throwing my arms around Arvin's waist and pressing my cheek to his chest.

This was contact, after all. This was what he needed. But it was more than that. This was what *I* needed.

So I held him, reveling in the buzz that bloomed beneath my skin and spread over my body. His chest vibrated against my cheek, and his arms came up to hug me back.

Why did this feel so good? Why did it feel so right?

I wasn't sure how long we remained locked in an embrace before Arvin broke the silence.

"I believe I felt something today. Something that came from within my own being."

I lifted my chin to look up at his face. "What was it?"

"A hot coil deep in my belly. Barbed and sharp, it was accompanied by a yawning chasm in my chest. The sensations bloomed the moment I saw the limber hurtling toward you, but they occurred *before* you became aware of the danger. It is why I know the feelings came from within me. I believe that in that moment, I was...afraid. Afraid of losing you."

I swallowed past the tightness in my throat, reaching up on impulse to caress his hard jaw, smooth and cool beneath my fingers. His body was unresponsive. His clay skin couldn't feel, but the being that lived within felt all too much. There was no longer any doubt in my mind that Arvin had an essence that was as alive and sentient as mine.

I sighed, trailing my fingers down his neck and over the metal woven into his being. "When you were still and silent beneath me...When I thought that you might be dead, I was terrified."

"I cannot die, Sira."

“Maybe not, but I was afraid nonetheless because you’re alive...and things that live can die.”

He was silent for a long moment then. “There was a time I wished for death. For an end to the cycle. But I do not think death is permitted to my kind. For that I am glad because I no longer wish to die. Now I wish to live. I wish to live with you.”

The emotions his words spawned inside me were sharp, bright, and dangerous. They made me ache to wrap myself in them and stay there. But Vane’s face filled my mind, the memory of the suspicion in his eyes leaving my stomach in knots. My reaction today had been too visceral. I wasn’t sure what would happen to Arvin if the watch discovered that he was different from the other casts, but I wasn’t willing to find out.

I needed to guard his secrets, and to do that, I’d have to guard my emotions, not only in public, but with him, here in private, and so I pulled away and dropped my gaze.

“I need to eat.”

Silence stretched between us once more, and I felt his confusion, hating myself for being the cause of it.

“Yes,” he said finally. “You need fuel.”

And so did he. “You’ll sleep by the bed tonight so that I can touch you.” I hated the snap of command in my tone, but it was for the best.

He straightened, eyes dimming. “As you wish.”

Boundaries must be kept, so why did it feel so awful?

## CHAPTER SIX



IT WAS NO EASY feat keeping an emotional distance from Arvin for the rest of the day, because even though I guarded my emotions, he didn't. Melancholy confusion pricked at my psyche over and over, and by the end of the day, my resolve was weakening.

I ordered him to stay in our rooms, claiming that I needed to clear my head, and left for a walk around the tower. It was quiet and peaceful late at night with the moonlight bathing the stone halls. I stood on a balcony, tipped my face up to the night sky, and closed my eyes. Soon I would have to go back to my rooms and be with Arvin.

After a week of spiraling closer, I was carving out distance between us.

It felt wrong.

Hurting him was wrong.

But if I didn't do it, if we grew closer and the truth of his nature was revealed, then what? Would they take him away? Remove him from active duty? They wanted constructs who followed a script, an order. A construct who thought for himself was a dangerous thing...But he was a heartbright. They needed heartbrights. Needed every cast, because if what the Donnelly twins said was true, then there was no clay to make more.

They wouldn't take him away.

They needed him.

But more than that. *I* needed him.

"Baba, I don't know what to do..."

The cool silvery kiss of the moon was a soothing caress on my brow, and Baba's voice bloomed in the back of my mind. "Listen to your instincts, allow your heart to be your guide, and even though the path it chooses for you may not always be the easiest, it will invariably be the most fulfilling."

I exhaled and opened my eyes. My instincts told me to be wary, to protect, but my heart told me to nurture my connection with Arvin. To treat him how he deserved to be treated. Like a person. Even if it would be in secret. In the confines of our room.

He deserved that much.



OONA FELL INTO STEP beside me on the stairwell that led to our quarters. "How are you feeling after this morning?"

I threw her a quick smile, recognizing this as my first test. "Fine. Shock scrambled my mind for a moment."

"Hmmm. Well, it's all right to care about your cast, Sira, especially a heartbright. They're more...*evolved* than the other casts."

I shot her a side-eyed glance. Was Bhima evolved? Evolved in the way that Arvin was? She dropped her gaze before I could read it.

“Heartbrights need more contact than the other casts,” she continued. “It isn’t something we’re told. It’s something we learn. But the best fuel for a cast is allowing them to experience sensations. Pleasure is the most powerful one.” She slid a glance my way. “You shouldn’t be afraid to feel it in your cast’s presence. It will make him stronger.”

Was she intimating what I thought she was? “Oona, please speak plainly.”

She sighed and rolled her eyes. “Pleasure yourself occasionally. Find release. It’s a powerful feeling and one that will empower your cast.”

My cheeks heated. “You all do this?”

“In some form or other. Some of us have lovers, and if the cast is close by when we’re intimate, then...”

They fucked with their casts nearby... “I understand.”

We reached the top of the steps, and she placed a hand on my shoulder. “There is nothing to be embarrassed about, Sira. We do what we must to keep our unit strong. Think of it like feeding logs to a fire. A heartbright is like a hearth that needs to be fed for its fire to blaze.”

Constructs...Bhima was simply a construct to her. He wasn’t like Arvin. But that didn’t mean that Arvin wouldn’t benefit from being fed pleasure. If it could make him stronger, then I’d do it.



ARVIN STOOD BY THE window with his back to me. He didn’t turn to look at me, and my stomach hollowed.

“I understand,” he said.

I kicked off my shoes. “What do you understand?”

“Why you are being cold toward me.”

Cold...Had I been cold? “Arvin, I—”

“Please, allow me to speak.” He turned to me, his powerful frame silhouetted by moonlight. “I was too forward earlier. When I said that I wished to live with you...I...frightened you. In truth, I frightened myself also. I should not have spoken so openly about feelings that are so new to me and easily misconstrued.”

The aching vulnerability in his tone made my heart hurt. “I’m not afraid of you, Arvin. I’m afraid *for* you. For what might happen if anyone discovers how different you are from the other casts.”

His eyes pulsed as he considered this. “You are afraid that we will be parted?”

I took an involuntary step toward him. “Yes!”

He mirrored me, moving closer. “I fear this too. But we will be guarded outside of this chamber. We will shield our emotions and let them loose only within these four walls.”

My doubts melted, leaving only distant echoes because I wanted this...this connection. This closeness. I wanted...him.

My throat pinched. “Agreed. In this room we can be ourselves. In this room we can be honest about what we feel and what we want.”

He bridged the distance between us, dwarfing me with his frame. “I want to touch you.” His request, although innocent, sparked a flame of desire within me that was entirely inappropriate and ill-placed. I swallowed past the sudden dryness in my throat as the pulse between my thighs began to throb.

His chest rumbled. “You are...sexually aroused.”

Of course, he would know this feeling. I wasn’t his first *atma*, and if what Oona said was true, then his previous *atmas* would have fed him pleasure. Why did that bother me? “Did Reema...Did she get aroused around you?”

“Only when she was with her lover. When he touched her. But...there is no lover here for you. No one is touching you.” His eyes glowed brighter. “There is no one in this room but me.”

My chest grew tighter, breath coming shallow and quick. “I know.”

His deep rumbling voice teased my senses once more. “You are aroused by me...”

I licked my lips. “Does that...does that make you feel uncomfortable?”

“No. It makes me want to touch you. To feel the sensation of your skin.”

My pulse beat faster. “Reema fed you pleasure through her contact with her lover?”

“She did.” Was that excitement in his voice? “I would face the wall, and she would indulge in sexual acts. But this...” He reached out to touch my cheek with his fingertips. “What I feel for you is sharper...deeper. The sensation that I experience through you is an ache that is echoed within me. I want to *feel* you, Sira. Will you...will you touch yourself so that I may experience your body?”

Oh Goddess, why did this request leave me slick and wanting? I’d lain with men before to assuage my body’s needs, but his words, his voice, his very presence evoked sensations that no flesh-and-blood male’s touch ever had.

“Yes...”

His eyes brightened. “I will turn away to give you privacy.”

“No.” I placed my hand on his pectoral, splaying my fingers across the smooth, hard expanse of molded muscle. “I want you to watch.”

The rumbling in his chest morphed to a growl that rubbed against my senses like a physical caress. I undressed slowly, savoring the slow pulse of his eyes as I laid myself bare for him. The room held a chill, but my skin was feverish beneath

his emerald gaze. I stretched out on the bed, and he moved closer, his shadow falling over me.

I imagined that it had weight, a substance that pressed me into the mattress and held me there. Imagined that my hands were guided by his, moving over my body to cup my breasts and knead them, pinching the peaked nipples until the throb between my thighs screamed for attention. Breath shivering in my lungs, I reached for that place—wet and warm—and imagined that he was touching me. I bit back a cry, eyes threatening to flutter closed.

“Look at me,” he pleaded. “Don’t shut me out.”

I locked gazes with him, and a flicker, a flame, sparked inside me. His eyes flared, and the connection between us snapped and tightened, tugging at the coil of tension beneath my fingers and pushing me over the edge toward the sweet, cold bite of release.

I swallowed a cry, forcing it down into my throat where it vibrated low and long as my hips bucked and my fingers thrust, milking the sensation until I was wrung out and spent. I couldn’t keep my eyes open any longer and fell into myself, riding the wave of pleasure. Arvin’s low moan joined mine a moment later.

When it was done, when my body lay quivering and spent on the mattress, I cracked open my eyelids to find him leaning over me, eyes like emerald fire burning just for me.

“Sira...”

I licked my lips and reached up to touch his cheek, trailing wet fingers down his jaw. My arousal sank into his clay skin, and he moaned once more.

In that moment, I wanted nothing more than to kiss him. To melt against him. To feel his heart beat against mine. But we could do none of those things. Ever.

Still, I raised my head and pressed my lips to his unmoving mouth, snaking an arm around his thick neck to hold him to me. I kissed him, then drew back to whisper against his lips, “Lie with me.”



He sighed, the sound filled with aching regret. “The bed is too small.”

“Then I’ll lie on the floor with you.”

“On me,” he said. “You may lie on me.”

So that is what we did.

All night.

# CHAPTER SEVEN



## CHAPTER 7

The dead-zone trench was a fraction of the size of the Hameksha Trench at a mere eighty feet across and a quarter of a mile in length. But it was as deep as all the other trenches.

The watchtower was a large structure made of metal and stone and built to house the atmas stationed here. There was a dining area and bunks for rotations that required residence, but we wouldn't be using them. We were on day patrol with a different troop relieving us at night.

I wasn't the only mentee here. Vane and his limber joined us, shadowing Partik—Oona's second-in-command.

The casts took positions along the trench line while the atmas sat on benches outside the watch tower.

I forced myself to relax as Vane claimed the space beside me. If he was suspicious about my attachment to Arvin, then I

needed to assuage that suspicion.

“How are you feeling after yesterday?” he asked.

“I assume you’re referring to the way I reacted to my cast going down?” I injected a mixture of amusement and resignation into my tone.

He wasn’t fooled. “You were crying, Sira.”

Damn him. “The shock hit me hard, and...and for a moment, it was Baba lying there, still and dead, not the cast. I never got to say goodbye. You know that. It’s haunted me ever since.” It was half a lie, and I hated myself for it. “I suppose everyone thinks I’m weak now.”

“No,” Vane said quickly. “Not at all. We were just...worried.”

“About what?” He looked away, chewing on his cheeks, and my stomach quivered with foreboding. “What? Tell me.”

“There are stories among the potentials about atmas becoming emotionally attached to their casts, resulting in problems during combat with neechers. Especially atmas who are bound to heartbrights. You know our focus must always be on protecting the innocent humans.”

“Of course I do.”

“Good. Because not everyone is a suitable match for a heartbright. Not even when chosen to be so.”

Vane had always been ambitious. He’d never been cutthroat, at least not to me, but things had changed between us several months ago, and I was no longer sure I knew him at all, because his words to me right now sounded like a threat rather than a warning. “What are you implying?”

We locked gazes, his dark, unfathomable, and filled with a cacophony of emotions. I saw the truth hidden there. Being bonded to a limber wasn’t enough for him. He wanted a heartbright. My heartbright. But he hadn’t been chosen by Arvin, I had, and there was no guarantee that with me gone, Arvin’s choice would be Vane. But the look on his face right now...the longing, the hunger made my blood cold.

“Answer me.” My tone was sharp, challenging him to admit his thoughts to me.

“Nothing,” he said finally. “I’m not implying anything. I’m simply trying to look out for you, that’s all.”

He was a filthy liar, and if I wasn’t afraid of exposing Arvin further, I’d have challenged him on it. Instead, I clamped my mouth shut and forced a smile. “Thank you. I appreciate it. But I’m fine. Honestly.”

He said no more, looking out at the vast trench and sitting back in his seat, but my stomach remained in knots because I knew Vane well enough to read him. His concern wasn’t for me but for what he could gain from my perceived weakness—a chance to petition to be unbound from the limber and a chance to try to bond to Arvin. There were rumors of this being done in the past, but the details of why and how were blurry.

Arvin and I would have to be doubly careful.

We’d only been on watch for an hour when Oona spotted activity about two hundred feet down the trench to our east.

Not neechers. Humans.

“Trench divers,” Oona said with an exasperated sigh.

“Fucking typical,” Partik, her second, said. “They don’t care about their necks, just what items of value they might find.”

“Tulla, Meena,” Oona called out to the two fists in her troop. “Stay here. The rest of you, come with me.” Oona broke into a jog, and we all followed.

I picked up pace to come abreast of her, Arvin close behind us. “What’s happening? What are trench divers?”

“People who wait for the wards to drop on dead zones so they can look for valuables, anything that belonged to the humans pulled into the trenches. Anything they can sell.”

“They’re scavengers,” Partik growled. “Disgusting scavengers, and we should leave them to break their scrawny necks.”

“That is not our decision,” Oona huffed. “We will ask them to leave or remove them by force. That is our only objective.”

A group of five men came into view the closer we got. They began waving and jumping up and down.

“Help! Help us!” they cried.

They were dressed in worn clothes, their feet covered in flat shoes, which I wagered had no grip. Thick ropes were flung into the trench, the ends tethered into the ground behind them using huge iron pins.

“Help us!” One of them rushed to meet us. “Our children are trapped. The rope frayed and snapped, and they’re stuck below.”

“Typical,” Partik sneered.

Oona hurried to meet the group, then peered into the trench. I joined her, looking down at the almost sheer drop to a ledge far below where two faces, mere smudges in the gloom, peered back at us.

“Your ropes are worthless,” Partik said to the men. “Look at this!” He picked at the thick rope, which frayed easily beneath his fingers. “Rappelling ropes are thinner, stronger—the weave tight and immune to fraying. What were you thinking?”

One of the group, a man with a stocky frame and angry eyes, stepped forward. “We were thinking that we were hungry and that there might be a bounty below that we could pawn for a meal or two. We were hoping for some temporary salvation. But what would *you* know of starvation and strife? You in your towers of stone with a bounty at your fingertips.”

“Harmil, please,” his companion, a younger man with large mournful eyes pleaded. “We require their aid. Alienating them will not help.”

Harmil had the grace to look abashed.

“Please help us,” the young man said. “My sister and younger brother are down there, and we have no more rope with which to pull them out.”

They'd sent down the young ones because they were lighter, hoping the cheap rope would hold them, and now... "What do we do?"

"We help," Oona said. "And we learn. Vane, you and your limber will shadow Partik and bring the children back up. Sira, you will rappel down with them as a tertiary support."

As a potential, we'd practiced rappelling many times. It was an essential part of being an atma no matter what cast we were bound to, but now, faced with a real trench, my heart shot up into my throat. But Arvin would be with me, climbing by my side. I'd be fine.

Oona canted her head. "Sira? Is there a problem?"

"No." I stood tall. "I'm ready."

She smiled tightly. "I'm pleased to hear it."

One of the fists set up the rappel rope for me.

"How many down there?" Oona asked. "You mentioned your brother and sister?" she said to the young man. "Are there more?"

"Yes." He nodded. "A man joined us this morning. I cannot see him. He must have fallen farther."

"All right. Arvin and Sira, you climb down and look for the third person." She fixed her gaze on me. "I hope your heartbright has been adequately fueled. He will need to use his ember light while inside the trench."

A memory of last night bloomed in my mind, bringing heat to my cheeks. "Yes. I believe so."

Oona's brow flicked up slightly, and the corner of her mouth lifted. "Good. Let's get to work."

Rope attached to the holster around my body, I took a deep breath and pushed off the ledge and into the trench.

Arvin climbed beside me, his hands morphing to lethal metallic projections that sank into the rock to hold him in place as he descended. The same projections jutted out of his feet, holding him firm against the wall.

“How many times have you done this?”

“Many times. You are safe.”

I flew away from the wall, only to come swinging back to brace with my feet, the motion sending my stomach dipping and my heart racing.

“Calm,” Arvin said. “All is well.”

To my left, Vane clung to his limber, attached by a harness as they crawled down the rockface toward the ledge where two children waited with tearstained faces. They couldn’t be more than twelve years old.

What kind of desperation would force a parent to send their child into such danger? I’d heard the tales of failed crops and plague while living on the farm with Baba, but the tales had been just that—stories. A problem from far away that never felt real, never touching our quiet haven. And even in the bosom of the city, the strife of the outside world was a distant thing.

Not for these people, though. Their desperation had brought them here, to a maw of death.

What were the leaders of the southern lands doing to help the hungry citizens of the outer settlements, if anything at all?

My boot slipped, and I hit the wall with the full frame of my body, the impact snapping me out of my thoughts.

“Sira!” There was panic in Arvin’s tone.

“I’m fine. I’m all right.” I glared at him in warning. We were not alone here.

His eyes pulsed in understanding as I braced my palms on the rock face, taking a breath to gather my wits.

Across from me, Vane watched us, his brows down low as he came level with the ledge.

I jerked my chin up. “Shouldn’t you be focusing on your own job?”

His smile was the coldest I’d ever seen. “Oh, I am. I am.”

A shiver crawled up my spine, but I shook it off, focusing on the descent. Darkness closed in around us, and as the sky grew further away, light bloomed to my left emanating from Arvin, from a spot in the center of his chest.

It glowed bright orange, then white, illuminating the trench around us. I locked gazes with him, my pulse pounding in awe. This was why they called them heartbrights.

“Do you see anyone?” he asked.

I peered into the chasm, searching the gloom for movement. “Hello! Can you hear me?” A low moan of pain was followed by a weak cry for help. “There...” I pointed to my left, a spot far below the ledge the children had landed on.

We continued our descent, and a man came into view. He clung to the wall, feet planted on a ledge barely wide enough to hold him. “Please help me...My leg...”

One of his legs was indeed hanging at an odd angle, the boot dangling off the ledge. How he was managing to hold on was a mystery to me.

We were too far out to grab him. But Arvin could climb over me to get to him.

“Stay still,” he said to me. “I will fetch him and bring him to you, and you must attach him to your harness.”

He hauled his huge body over mine, his chest brushing my back as I flattened myself to the wall, and in the next moment, he was on the other side of me, climbing toward the man.

The man whimpered as Arvin got closer.

“Do not fear, human. I will not harm you. Come.” I couldn’t see past Arvin’s huge frame, but I heard the man yelp in pain. “You will be safe. Do not struggle. Hold fast to me. Do not let go.”

“Arvin!” Oona called from above. “Do you have him?”

“I have him. I am delivering him to Sira and her harness as we speak. He has a broken leg.”

“Wait, I’ll send a limber to assist.”



“I can do it!” I called back. “I can carry him up.”

“A precaution,” Oona said.

Above me, I spotted the limber making its way down. Vane’s limber.

Arvin was close now, just a couple of feet away, and the man clinging to him stared at me with wide, frightened eyes.

“We have you now. You’re safe.” I smiled to reassure him.

I adjusted the harness that would allow me to hold him to my body, then reached across for him, but the world shook with a thunderous sound, and I was flung away from Arvin and slammed back into the wall with enough force to rattle my bones.

“Sira!” Arvin reached for me.

The world shuddered again. Above us, someone bellowed a warning.

In the next moment, my rope went slack.

I fell, my scream eclipsed by Arvin’s bellow as darkness swallowed me. I flailed, trying to gain purchase on something, anything.

Impact came suddenly.

A crunch. A snap. Then nothing.

# CHAPTER EIGHT



“THERE YOU ARE, CHILD. Wake up now. Open those pretty little peepers. That’s right.”

I was pressed to icy stone in a world with no light. It was so dark that I was unsure if my eyes were indeed open. I reached up to touch my face, carefully skimming my eyelids to be certain.

“You’re safe here,” the woman said. “They’ll find you soon enough. I’ll keep watch over you till they do. Make sure the scourge doesn’t find you.”

“What... Who are you?” My voice was a weak whimper that sounded alien to my ears.

“Me? I’m a messenger, child. Here because you are. I’ve been waiting a long time in a place where there is no time. I was beginning to lose hope, but you’re here, just as promised.”

My head throbbed, and my chest ached. “I fell. I’m hurt.”

“You were quite broken, but I’ve healed the worst of it. You will live. After all, you are the beginning of the end.”

“What?”

“Sira! Sira!” Partik’s voice echoed off the walls.

“Here!” The word was a croaky rasp. “I’m here!” I tried again. The darkness lightened to gray. I was in the mouth of a cave with a ledge beyond.

“I can’t see her,” Partik called out.

“We heard her,” Arvin said.

“Here!” I began to crawl toward the ledge, ignoring the shooting pain down my legs.

“Not so fast, child.”

A weight settled on my back, and terror clamped its jaws around my throat. “No! get off. Get off me!”

Hands covered my mouth, and the scent of earth filled my nose. “You will take this key. You will take it, and you will guard it until the time is right, and you may use it for freedom but nothing more. Nothing more, you hear me?”

I couldn’t breathe, couldn’t make a sound, and beyond the cave, Partik and Arvin searched, calling my name.

“I give it to you,” the woman on my back said. “I give you the key.”

Heat bloomed across my palms, intensifying until it was a searing pain, and the scream trapped in my throat left me dizzy because I couldn’t breathe, I couldn’t—

The hands holding me captive vanished along with the weight. I sucked in huge gulps of air and stared at my hands, at the strange symbol glowing bright orange against my palms.

“Sira!” Partik cried again.

Fuck. I scrambled toward the ledge. “Here! I’m down here!”

The gray light bloomed to white then a warm amber.

“I see her!” Arvin called out, and in the next moment, he was on the wall beside the ledge, his eyes beacons in the

gloom. “She’s alive.” There was a weight of emotion in those words.

“Stay with her. We’re almost there,” Partik called out.

“You’re safe now,” Arvin said.

I raised my hands and stared at my palms. They were ordinary, non-glowing palms, and foreboding bloomed low in my belly because I wasn’t sure I was safe. Not any longer.



“YOU’LL REST FOR THE next two days,” Oona instructed from my doorway. “Arvin will watch over you, make sure you have everything you need.” She pressed her lips together. “It’s a miracle you survived that fall, let alone with so few injuries... You’re a lucky woman.”

It was no miracle, and no luck was involved. An old woman had saved me. She’d saved me and changed me somehow. Even though the evidence of the markings had vanished, I could feel them against my skin—a strange alien pressure that refused to ease.

Where had she gone? Who had she been? And how had she been down there?

Partik had investigated the cave, finding it to be nothing more than a nook that led nowhere. So where had the woman come from?

“You did well today,” Oona said. “The loss of the injured man was not your fault. The shudder caused it.”

The injured man Arvin had been carrying had fallen to his death at the same time I had. “Thank you for searching for me. For not giving up.”

“Thank your cast. He was adamant that he could sense you were alive. You have a strong connection for such a new bond. It bodes well for the future.” She left, closing the doors softly behind her.

Arvin moved to lock it then joined me by the bed, crouching to lean over me and study me with eyes filled with emotions.

“Arvin, you can never look at me like that in public.”

“I won’t,” he said. “But we’re alone now. I’ll look at you however I please. I’ll touch you however I please.” He reached out to touch my mouth, then my chin, trailing his thick finger down my throat, and my breath snagged in my throat. “For a moment, after you fell, I felt nothing. For a moment, you were gone, and I wanted to die.”

I curled my hand around his finger. “I’m here. I’m alive, but...something happened down there.” I told him about the old woman and the marks on my palms. “She told me she was giving me a key.”

“What could it mean?”

“I don’t know.”

“Then we will find the answers together. But for now, you must sleep. You must rest.”



I WOKE MUCH LATER to moonlight and the rush of water. Arvin knelt by the tub, eyes pulsing.

I propped myself up on my elbows. “What are you doing?”

“I was attempting to run you a hot bath, but I am unable to gauge if the temperature is sufficient. I do not wish to burn your delicate skin, nor to chill you.”

I joined him at the tub, wincing at the deep ache in my bones and the tightness in my joints. “Let me see.” I dipped my fingers in the water. “A little hotter.” He pumped more from the hot pipe. “That’s perfect.”

I pushed down my pants but struggled to take off my shirt. “Arvin, can you help?”

He gently peeled the shirt off for me, then my undershirt, and finally my brassiere. His eyes glowed bright, fingers

trailing over my naked shoulders.

I sucked in a breath, reveling in the contact, and he pulled away. “Don’t stop.”

“You are hurt.” He sounded conflicted.

“Not that hurt. I *want* you to touch me.”

He ran his large hand down my torso, the abrasion of his rough skin setting mine on fire.

“You like this?” he asked.

“I do.”

He did it again.

“My breasts...touch those.” I licked my lips. “Focus on the nipples.”

He did so, his chest vibrating alongside my moan.

“You should get in the water before it grows cold.” He lifted me easily and lowered me into the tub. But he didn’t withdraw. Instead, he picked up the washcloth, lathered it, and began to wash me with easy circular strokes that had me writhing and panting for more of his touch.

“Arvin...this is torture.”

“I don’t understand...You are feeling pleasure.”

“I am, but it’s a torturous pleasure that demands release.”

“In that case...” He lifted me out of the tub and onto his lap. “Take your pleasure from me.” He cupped my buttocks and pressed me to his hard flesh, and a low moan slipped from my lips. “I not only want to feel your pleasure but want to be the one to evoke it. I am no man, I do not have the same appendages, but I can satisfy you in other ways.” He ran a thick finger down my abdomen and paused at my pubic bone. “Will you let me?”

“Yes, please. Yes.” I rose to rub myself against the thick digit, grasping his shoulders and positioning myself on the tip. Our eyes met, my heart beating so loudly I was sure he could hear it, and then I sank onto his finger, biting back a sob of

satisfaction as he stretched and filled me, the ridges of each joint sending a jolt through me as he sank deeper. “More.”

“I do not wish to hurt you.” His tone was tight, as if he was restraining himself.

“You’ll hurt me if you stop. Please...” I rocked against him, groaning with the sensations, the motion, everything. My bare breasts, still wet from the bath, rubbed against the hard, immovable expanse of his chest, heightening the spiral of pleasure. “Arvin, more. Now.”

He obliged, pushing a second finger deep into me, and a guttural cry spilled from my lips at the delicious invasion. The stretch and burn propelling me into a frenzy, I threw back my head and rode him, chasing the release that was within my grasp.

His purr of pleasure spurred me on, and the connection binding us flared a vibration with a life of its own, wrapping tightly around us both until we were one entity moving to a rhythm created only for us.

In the next moment, I was outside my body, looking down at us: cast and atma entwined in the most primal way.

“Sira...” I turned my head to find I wasn’t alone. Arvin was floating beside me. His face was no longer static and inexpressive, but mobile and alive. Dark hair floated about his cheeks, and his emerald irises gleamed against eye whites. “Sira...How can this be?”

“I don’t know.” We reached for each other, but before we could touch, I was pulled back into my body.

Into the throes of a release that catapulted me into the stars, shattering me and then piecing me back together in his arms, soft and pliant against his stony form. My pulse thundered with the conviction that something momentous had occurred, something more than this closeness. More than finding release. But the revelation fractured and misted away when I tried to grasp it.

“Sira.” He stroked my back, stoking the embers of a fire that still burned bright.

I lifted my chin and pressed my mouth to his jaw, then to his lips, aching for the impossible. For a kiss. For the pliant yet hard pressure of a flesh-and-blood mouth. My eyes stung, tears blurring my vision as I mourned what we could never have.

“I’m sorry, Sira,” Arvin said. “I wish...I wish I could—”

The door slammed open, and Thorpe strode into the room, keys jangling in her hand, her eyes blazing with fury. Her mouth turned down in disgust at the sight of us carnally entwined. It was a look that expected me to cower in shame, but all I felt was anger.

How dare she look down on us?

“I told you,” Vane said from the doorway. “I told you she was unfit. He dropped the human to try and save her. She’s broken him.”

“Arvin?” I searched his face, noting the dimming of his eyes. Guilt. A confession. He’d broken the rule. For me.

Guards spilled into the room, and Arvin rose with me in his grasp. “You will not hurt Sira.”

“No, we will not,” Thorpe said. “As long as you come with us willingly. Fight us and she *will* be hurt.”

There was no escape for us. Not with goodness knew how many guards and casts between us and the tower exit.

“Arvin...” Tears blurred my vision.

He covered me with a towel. “Thank you,” he said softly. “For accepting me for what I am.”

I grabbed his wrist. “Not *what*, who.”

And in that moment, I was certain he smiled.



## CHAPTER NINE



I WASN'T SURE HOW long I was in the dingy dank cell with only the squeak of rats and the drip of water for company before the amber light of a lantern made its way down the stone steps toward me.

Oona approached the thick bars of my prison. “Oh, Sira, what did you do?”

I blinked hard against the threat of tears, pushing words past the brittle lump lodged in my throat. “I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“This is my fault,” Oona said. “I wasn’t clear. I must have given you the wrong idea about the relationship between atma and heartbright.”

“No. You were clear. But Arvin is different. He’s alive. Truly alive.”

She made a sound of exasperation. “Arvin is ancient. He’s been among humans for long enough to be able to mimic our traits in a convincing manner, but he is *not* human. He is a construct of war. A clay cast animated by magick. He feels only what you allow him to feel, and it is obvious that you feel too much.”

She was wrong, but there was no way to make her see, to make her believe, and maybe it was better this way. For them to blame me. To think that I’d been confused, and that, new to being an atma, I’d crossed a boundary.

I dropped my chin. “You’re right. I saw what I wanted to see and became disordered. This is not Arvin’s fault. He merely acted on my instructions, feeding off my desire.”

“Yes, that much is obvious.”

“I suppose Vane will be applying to end his limber bond so he can try to bond to Arvin now?” My tone was bitter, and I didn’t care.

“What?” He brows came down in confusion. “No, Sira. It doesn’t work that way.”

“I heard rumors.”

“Lies,” she said. “The bond between cast and atma is... sacred. Vane was merely doing his duty to preserve the sanctity of that bond. He was saving you and the heartbright from corruption. You do see that, don’t you?”

I searched her eyes for conviction and found none. “Do you?”

“Do I what?”

“Do *you* see that? Do you believe what I have with Arvin... what I *feel* for him is corrupted?”

She glanced away. “I believe that you feel too much, Sira. And your imagination has tricked your heart into believing things that cannot be true.”

“Cannot, or are not?”

She inhaled and straightened. “You’ll be debriefed at dawn and allowed to leave.”

My head whipped up. “Leave?”

“Yes. You are unfit to be an atma. A shame as you showed much promise.”

I’d worked hard to get here. To prove myself, but now none of that mattered. All that mattered was Arvin. “What will happen to Arvin?”

Her mouth turned down. “I don’t know. They’ve taken him to the Jaadoogar tower for inspection.”

My pulse quickened. “What does that mean?”

She looked away. “I’m not sure.”

She was lying. “Please, Oona, please tell me. I—” My voice cracked with emotion despite my resolve. “I need to know.”

She gave me a pitying look. “I cannot say for certain, but there have been rumblings of a new process called an unraveling. It’s to be used on casts too damaged to be functional.”

“Arvin is not damaged!”

“Maybe not physically, but the mystical commands sewn into the fabric of his being have been tainted by your bond. If my suspicions are correct, they will unravel him and mold him anew.”

No, no, no. “If they do that, he won’t be him any longer.”

Her mouth tightened. “He’s a construct, Sira. He is a *thing*, nothing more.” I didn’t bother to hide my devastation, leaving my grief laid bare for her to see. She closed her eyes on an exhale. “Get some rest, Sira. Tomorrow will be a long day.”



I CRIED FOR A while, impotent tears of rage that left me weak and drained. And then I slept, drifting in the place

between where there was only the memory of pain and not the sensation itself.

I dreamed for the first time in over a week. Of Arvin. Not a cast made of clay, but a man of flesh and blood, his emerald eyes bright and filled with life against his warm brown skin. I dreamed of running my fingers through his chestnut locks, of watching in delight as golden strands were revealed, slipping between my fingers. I dreamed of his laughter, of his warm body pressed to mine and the steady beat of his heart working in tandem to mine.

*You have the key.*

*The key to freedom.*

The old woman's voice echoed around me, disrupting my dream and tearing me into a gray place where I floated alone.

*The key can free you and your heart's desire. Use it and find a door where there is none. Hurry, child, before all is lost. Hurry before he is lost.*

I woke with a jolt, my cheek pressed to cold stone and my palms burning with strange energy.

The symbols were back, and suddenly I knew what needed to be done. Suddenly the power inside me made sense, guiding me into action.

I pressed my hands to the ground. "Take me to Arvin. Take me there now."

The earth shimmered, and I fell through.



I LANDED HARD ON a wooden floor in a room reeking of incense and filled with strange bottles, liquids, and sheafs of paper. A study?

No...this was a Jaadoogar workroom.

The hum of voices teased me, and I scrambled to my feet and hurried to the door, straining to hear what was being said

beyond it.

But the words were muffled.

Heart pounding in fear of discovery, I carefully opened the door a crack and peered into the room beyond.

It was a large space, brightly lit by strange lights encased in tubes fixed to the ceilings. Two men stood with their backs to me. One wore a white coat and the other a deep blue cloak and a crimson hat—the Jaadoogar.

In front of them, stretched out on a large shiny metal table, was Arvin.

“How soon?” the Jaadoogar asked.

“It will take a few hours, but it can be done.”

“He is the first, but he won’t be the last. Use him to perfect the process.”

“And if we fail?”

“That would be...unfortunate. Not just for him, but for you also.” The Jaadoogar strode across the room toward another exit, and the man in the white coat followed at a trot.

The door closed behind them.

I waited a beat before hurrying to Arvin. “Arvin, can you hear me? Wake up. Please?”

His eyes remained dim, his version of closed. My gut told me we had very little time if we were to escape. I pressed my hand to his chest, willing him to wake. “Arvin. Wake up. I’m here. We have to go. Now.” Long seconds passed, and my gut twisted with fear. What had they done to him? Why wasn’t he waking? “Arvin, please. You must—”

“And what do we have here?” The Jaadoogar studied me from across the room.

When had he entered? How had I not heard him?

His gaze dropped from me to Arvin then back up again. “How did you get into my tower?”

“What have you done to him?”

“I did nothing. He has *chosen* to sleep.”

“Then wake him up.”

“I cannot. Once in slumber, a cast will only awaken for a compatible atma.”

“I am his atma. Me. He chose me.”

“Did he now?” His eyes narrowed. “Then it was your recklessness that brought him here.”

Recklessness?

He locked the door behind him.

I tensed, my body readying itself to fight. “What are you doing?”

“Making sure that we are not interrupted.”

My pulse galloped as he moved closer. “Stay back. Stay away.”

He raised his hand, and a blue ball of energy appeared in his palm. “Make me!” He hurled the ball at me, and I dove to avoid it.

It exploded against the wall behind me with a crash, and before I could catch my breath, another jet of power came rushing at me. I rolled out of the way, heart in my mouth, terror a live thing in my chest.

The jets of power kept coming. I was running out of places to run, out of energy to evade.

“You will die here today, atma,” the Jaadoogar said. This time the ball of power he manifested was deep crimson. He held it up so that the glow highlighted his high cheekbones and created flames in his dark eyes. “A shame. Such a shame.”

The ball came hurtling toward my face. I tried to dive, but phantom hands held me immobile.

His power. His will.

He could have done this all along. He’d been toying with me, and now—now I was about to die.

“No!” Arvin stepped between us and took the hit. Crimson power exploded outward and dissipated.

He was awake! My knees threatened to buckle, but I held myself stiff and upright and grabbed hold of his hand.

“There you are,” the Jaadoogar said. “And about time.”

“You will not harm her,” Arvin said. “Thorpe vowed it.”

“I’m not Thorpe, but I also have no wish to harm your atma.”

“What?” I peered around Arvin to find the Jaadoogar standing, hands loose at his sides. “You attacked me.”

“A necessary ill to awaken your cast. And now that he is awake, you should leave.” The corner of his mouth lifted. “I can give you a few moments only. The use of my power will have alerted guards, and they will be upon us soon, and then... Then I will not be able to help you.” He turned away. “Leave now. The same way in which you entered.”

He knew...Somehow, some way, he knew. But there was no time to question. I grabbed Arvin’s hand. “Come with me.”

He looked down at me, eyes dulling with sadness. “There is no escape. Nowhere we can run. Nowhere that we can be... us.”

But there was. There had to be. “Just come with me.”

I led him into the room I’d landed in, closed the door, then pressed my hands to the wood.

“What are you doing...” he asked “Oh...your hands...”

They were glowing again, ready for my intention. “I can open a door.”

“Where will it take us?”

“A place where we can be together. A place where no one will hurt us or try to tear us apart.”

A cacophony of voices bloomed somewhere beyond the door. Guards rushing into the room, no doubt, but they wouldn’t find us there, and they would not find us here.

Because the wood began to shimmer and our bond flared to life, thrumming with a newfound energy. I smiled up at him. “Are you ready for a new adventure?”

“You *are* my adventure, Sira.”

And he was mine. It was time for us to be free.

THE END



Thank you for reading OF STONE AND HEART. If you want to read more fantasy by me, then check out my Demons of Morningstar series that begins with [\*DEMON THRONE\*](#).



# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



DEBBIE CASSIDY LIVES IN England, Bedfordshire, with her three kids and very supportive husband. Coffee and chocolate biscuits are her writing fuels of choice, and she is still working on getting that perfect tower of solitude built in her back garden. Obsessed with building new worlds and reading about them, she spends her spare time daydreaming and conversing with the characters in her head. She writes Urban Fantasy Romance, Paranormal Reverse Harem Romance, and Fantasy Reverse Harem.

Stay in touch with Debbie Cassidy by joining her [Newsletter](#). Hang out in her [Facebook Reader Group](#) or follow her on [Bookbub](#).



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# HEART OF DEFIANCE



EVA CHASE

An Abandoned Realms Novel

# BLURB



ORPHANED AS A CHILD and ostracized by her town, Signy survives by keeping her head down and scavenging the scraps others discard. But when she sees soldiers of the conquering empire who killed her parents destroying her mother's last sculpture in the town square, years of bottled rage boil over.

Little does she expect her sudden act of defiance to spark a nation-wide rebellion, place her at odds with the empire's entire army, and bring three incredible men into her life. With only her wits and sheer stubbornness as her weapons, can the woman everyone saw as nothing lead her country to freedom—and win more love than she ever believed she deserved?

# CHAPTER ONE



SIGNY

SOME PEOPLE SAY THAT one person's trash is another person's treasure. I think that might be exaggerating the case a little. It's more like, one person's trash is someone else's "might as well make the best of it."

As the queen of making the best of it, I should know.

At the moment, I'm making the best of a tattered old fishing net someone discarded by the river. The rock I'm sitting on is hard against my ass, and the coarse strands of rope are rubbing my fingers raw, but the burble of the water and the light summer breeze are pleasant enough.

At least until the dukeling and his fawners show up.



I'm just knotting two of the frayed strands together, closing up a hole even the biggest trout could swim through, when their voices carry through the trees. It's easy to recognize the dukeling's. He's the one who sounds like he figures he's giving a momentous speech to the entire kingdom when his only audience is a handful of friends and the woodland creatures.

And, unwillingly, me.

The crunch of Rupert's footsteps through the brush punctuates his words. "It truly is an incredible development. I can't wait to see the reactions in our court. And naturally some benefits will trickle down to the nearest towns."

His companions' voices don't carry as much, but I catch a "That's fantastic!" and a "What a win for the duchy!" which is what they'd say even if he shat on a log.

I yank the jumble of intersecting rope into my arms, wrinkling my nose at the dank odor it gives off, but I don't manage to gather it fast enough to avoid notice. As I shove to my feet, ducking my head instinctively so my long black hair shields my face, the dukeling and three other men around my age stride up to the edge of the river where it widens about twenty paces away. Prime fishing spot—their poles gleam under the afternoon sun.

Rupert sweeps his gaze imperiously over the bank. I know he's spotted me when his lip curls with a sneer.

He flicks his blond hair away from his eyes. "Oh, look, it's the waif of refuse. I can smell her from here."

One of his lordly friends makes an obscene gesture in my direction. "Take a dunk in the river, filly, and let's see how you clean up."

The lordling next to him snorts. "It won't be well. Even her own godlen didn't want her, isn't that right?"

The last comment stings right down to the outer edges of my feet—to the stumps of the two smallest toes on each that I offered in sacrifice during my dedication ceremony when I turned twelve.

We all dedicate ourselves to one of the nine lesser gods at that age. Many of us offer up a piece of ourselves in the hopes we'll be blessed with a gift of magic in return.

Everyone else I know who offered the trade was rewarded for it.

But the gods rejected my sacrifice. Inganne, the godden of creativity whose sigil is branded into my skin over my sternum, determined what I gave was unworthy of the magic I asked for.

So I can't even say these pricks are entirely wrong. Gritting my teeth, I ignore their jeers and grab my pouch of tools.

The fourth man in the bunch makes a disgruntled sound and motions his companions' attention back to the river. "Why bother with Signy when we've got fishing to do? That'll be a lot more entertaining than she is."

That's Landric for you. Son of the richest merchants in town, probably worried my existence will reflect badly on him in the eyes of the nobles he's sucking up to. With his striking coppery hair and well-built frame, he cuts an attractive enough figure for them to treat him as an almost-equal when they venture beyond the duke's nearby estate, but he shouldn't have any delusions that they see him as an actual friend.

Hard to believe we played together when we were little. Us and the other children around the same age clambered along this river and roamed through the woods beyond the town's last streets, explored the many crevices and caves that weave through the rocky underbelly of this landscape.

I turn my back and hurry away, biting back all the caustic remarks I'd like to make. Insulting the town outcast gets you some laughs. Insulting the duke's son and his companions gets you a dozen lashes with a whip.

I don't need to learn that lesson twice. Better to show them that I don't even care.

It's a quick tramp through the woods to the abandoned cabin I've made my own, slumped in the shadow of one of the many rocky outcroppings that jut from the forest floor. The roof is

smothered with lichen and I have to stick a stone at the base of the door to hold it shut, but it's some kind of shelter.

A crack in the jutting stone marks one of the shallowest of the caves around town, a space I've turned into a storage shed of sorts. I toss the net in there to finish mending later.

A quick glance over the garden shows no new weeds have invaded since this morning. I checked my snares right before I headed to the river.

I *don't* really care about the dukeling and his views on me, but the encounter has left my nerves on edge. The little plot of land I've claimed looks even more dreary than usual.

Is this really it? This is all my life is going to be, from here until the end?

There are worse fates, I remind myself. I might as well go tend to those.

I set off on a route that skirts the edge of town, but once I reach the hill at the northern end, I have to veer onto the outer streets to make the climb. Sweat beads on my forehead with the lingering mid-day heat. I keep my gaze fixed on the polished limestone structure perched up at the top of the road, which is coming more clearly into view with every step.

A murmur catches in my ears regardless. "There goes that useless Signy."

I just keep walking.

For the last several paces of the climb, tufts of grass creep onto the packed dirt road. Really, it's more of a path at this point. I've left all the houses behind, nothing remaining but the memorial building ahead of me.

Somehow it looks less grand when standing right in front of it than it does from the bottom of the hill. I could touch the edge of the stone-tiled roof if I lifted my hands. The whole structure is barely larger than my decrepit cabin.

But no one needs to live in this building. It's a symbolic home to honor those no longer living at all.

Row upon row of names are carved into the outer walls, the earliest etchings from centuries ago worn down with age. I pick up one of the rags I keep in a bucket near the corner and start wiping away the grit and bits of moss that've attached themselves to the surface, obscuring some of the letters. Here and there, I need to take out my pocket knife to scour off the worst bits.

The names continue all the way around the back of the building and onto the other side, where the newest additions reach about halfway across. Still plenty of room for more, and no doubt there will be more to come.

I give the last couple of rows an especially thorough wipe, my gaze lingering on two names that were added sixteen and thirteen years ago respectively, when I was five and then eight.

Greta Emadaut. Faro Hendiksson.

I rest my fingertips against the carved letters, my tan skin dark compared to the pale stone.

My memories of my parents have fragmented with time, gone hazy and disjointed. But Mom's smile still beams through my recollections, alongside Dad's buoyant laugh. The way she'd cuddle me on her lap when I scraped my knee, weaving flowers and ribbons into my hair. The way he'd toss me up in the air like I weighed nothing at all and then swing us in a giddy circle.

No markings on the building say what the memorial is for. We're too afraid to openly state it.

Our conquerors don't like any hint of discontentment with their rule. If we gave away that we're bearing witness specifically to our family members, friends, and neighbors who the Darium empire's soldiers have struck down, this structure would be rubble by sundown.

It's hard to imagine what this town—what all of our country—might have been like before Dariu invaded the entire continent. The last people who experienced the old Velduny are long dead. But I have to think life was better when our kings and dukes and countesses weren't worrying more about

keeping favor with their overseers than serving their own people.

I put away the rag and grab the broom to sweep off the tiles around the memorial. My gaze wanders over the landscape around the hill, and some of my earlier restlessness subsides.

It's a stunning view. The domed marble roof of our temple of the All-Giver glints under the sun, ornate patterns carved across it. Next to it, the ancient town hall looms with a subtle grandeur. Its burnished pinkish-gray stones were cut from the local hillsides.

On either side of town, winding crags rise up amid the forest like islands in a sea of green leaves. One curves right over to meet the ground again, forming the arch visitors ride through to enter town along that road.

Straight ahead to the south, our river winds through grassy plains before feeding into a sparkling lake at the foot of jagged mountains. A temple of Inganne, my chosen godlen for all she dismissed me, stands a couple of miles to the west of the lake, shining so vibrantly orange it immediately draws the eye.

Looking at it, I tap my fingers down my front in the gesture of the divinities: forehead for the three godlen of air, heart for the three of the sea, gut for the three of the earth, then fisting my hand between my breasts where I have Inganne's sigil burned into my skin. I can't not pay my respects to our gods when faced with this vista, even if they don't care much for me.

I'm still not totally sure why Inganne rejected my sacrifice. The shame of it has never stopped burning. But I am blessed to live in a place surrounded by such beauty.

I don't need to have magic to one day honor that beauty with something I've created, like I've always dreamed.

Something like the fountain burbling in our town's central square. When my attention drops to it, a couple of kids are swaying along the outer edge of the basin. The girl slips and jumps into the water with a burst of giggles. On the other side, one of the town cats darts over to lap up a little water.

My mother left her mark on this town, even though she was stolen from my life far too soon. She carved every curve of the elegant figure standing on the fountain's platform, pouring the water from a jug. Every petal on the flowers that dapple the ground around the woman's feet. Every symbol on the Veldunian crest that binds her rippling cloak.

Adelheid is an old Veldunian folk hero. It's said she gave up her home and traveled the country in a time of drought, helping those she met find ways to keep their crops and gardens alive, and Prospira, the godden of fertility and abundance, blessed her with a jug that would never totally empty.

The corner of my lips curves up in a wry smile. I once imagined contributing a work of artistry that was even more breathtaking. Now that idea seems ridiculous. But I'm glad that Mom's creation keeps nurturing the town even after her death.

I've put the broom away and am taking one last look over the landscape when I spot a cluster of dark figures on horseback riding along the road to our natural stone archway.

There's no doubting what they are the second my eyes catch on their uniforms. Only Darium soldiers wear those outfits that are black from helm to boots—other than the white skull and bones painted onto the material.

They make themselves up to look like living skeletons. I can't deny it's effective. A shiver travels down my back as I watch the five of them.

I stick to my high perch, following their progress into town. For a minute or two here and there, I lose sight of them amid the buildings. But it's always easy to pick them out again as soon as they pass into view.

When they reach the edge of the main square, they dismount. The nearby townspeople stiffen and slip into the nearest buildings as surreptitiously as they can manage.

One of the soldiers motions to his companions as if he's in charge, and a couple of the others march over to the bakery.

My stomach knots. I don't need to be in hearing range to figure out what's going on.

No money will be exchanging hands. The soldiers of our long-time conquerors simply point and take.

The men come out of the bakery with a couple of bundles of rolls and pastries. They lift the visors of their helmets to eat, and the leader's mouth glints metallic in the fading sunlight.

He sacrificed a few teeth at his dedication ceremony for a gift. Assuming *his* sacrifice was accepted by his chosen godlen.

Which most are. I'm the rare exception.

One of the soldiers saunters over to the fountain and fills his canteen from the water streaming from the jug. Another follows him and peers up at the figure. He turns to say something to the leader.

I can't read the leader's expression from here, but he strides over to a couple of townspeople who've just jarred to a halt across the square. Before they can hurry away from the intruders, the soldier asks them something with jabs of his hand toward the statue.

What's going on? What could they possibly be upset about?

The tension in my gut winds even tighter with the sense of some impending horror. My hands ball at my sides.

Whatever the townspeople answer, the leader shakes his head. He peers up at the statue for a moment and turns to walk back to his underlings.

For the space of a few heartbeats, I think it's over. Everything's okay.

Then he waves his hand toward Mom's fountain in a flippant gesture as if to say, "Do what you like with it."

Three of the solders retrieve spiked clubs that were dangling from their saddles and barge forward. With a brutal swing, the first smacks his club down on the statue's arm.

A cry breaks from my throat. Even as the sound bursts into the air, another soldier attacks the statue, battering it with thumps that carry all the way to my hilltop. The third hangs back with a hint of hesitation, but she doesn't move to stop her colleagues either.

With a few more strikes, the statue's arm cracks. Chunks fall off the mouth of the jug, tumbling into the basin's water. The first soldier hops right onto the platform, his boots scuffing against the delicately carved flowers, and bashes at Adelheid's marble head.

The tension bottled inside me explodes through my body. It knocks every thought from my head but a silently wailed *No!*

My legs propel me forward. I'm running down the hill at full tilt, my patched boots smacking the cobblestones, my breath searing my throat.

No, no, no.

My sprint to the square passes in a blink in the haze of my panic. I'm barely aware of the buildings I'm rushing by, the road falling away beneath my feet, the instinctive splaying of my remaining toes ensuring my balance.

I careen into the square just in time to hear one of the soldiers muttering to the others. "All these years and everything we've done for them, and they still think they should celebrate the time before the empire."

He swings his club at what's now a stump of the statue's arm, and I hurl myself at him.

Somehow, my pocket knife is in my hand. I barrel into the soldier, slashing out with it, my voice crackling up my throat. "That's *ours*. You can't take it. You can't take everything!"

My knife skids over the leather covering his upper arm before tearing through the fabric and flesh below his elbow. The soldier grunts and heaves me to the side with a smack of my jaw.

I stumble and manage to stay upright, brandishing the blade, breathing hard. "Get the fuck away from our fountain. It belongs to this town, not to you."



The fact that anyone's objected at all has apparently bewildered the soldiers. All five of them have turned to stare at me, the two at the fountain momentarily lowering their clubs. The one I cut has his hand pressed to the wound, the cloth around his fingers turning even darker with blood.

"Who the fuck do you think you are?" the leader snarls, drawing his sword.

I'm too angry to be scared. "I live here. This is my home. And I don't want you here."

I launch myself at him so quickly he's obviously not prepared. Rather than push forward to meet me, he flinches backward.

My knife swings wide, but I heave my fist forward too, clocking him in the nose. He recovers with a snarled curse. I barely dodge under the swipe of his blade.

He wheels toward me, murder in his gaze, and the realization penetrates the blare of adrenaline in my veins that I might actually die today. My name might be the next added to the memorial on the hill. The other soldiers storm toward me —

And a metal bowl flies through the air to clang against one of their helmets.

"She's right!" the baker's assistant yells, wielding a steel tray like a weapon. "Get out of here and leave what's ours alone."

All at once, more dishes and other odds and ends—rocks, shoes, a hammer—pelt the soldiers along with a barrage of shouts.

"Go away!"

"There's nothing for you here!"

"Get back on those horses and ride!"

A crowd of townspeople has emerged from the buildings around the square, their faces taut with the same fury and anguish I was feeling. No one else would have wanted to see the fountain destroyed any more than I did.

They were just too afraid to say anything until someone else did it first.

“Back off,” one of the soldiers growls, and jabs his club at the people closing in around him. It smacks into a little girl’s jaw.

At her yelp of pain, the crowd surges forward. They punch and shove at the soldiers, heedless of their weapons.

Bertha from the butcher shop lunges forward and stabs a skewer straight into one skeleton-painted chest.

The soldier jerks and collapses, blood gushing from the wound. As Bertha yanks the skewer free, the Darium leader must decide his squadron is too outnumbered.

*He* doesn’t have any intention of dying today.

“Pull back,” he calls to his underlings, already retreating. They hustle to the horses they left at the edge of the square and haul themselves into the saddles.

“That’s right!” a woman next to me hollers. “Run like the beasts you are!”

The leader yanks his horse around. “You’re going to pay for today, peasants.”

Then they canter off the way they came.

A cheer goes up through the crowd of townspeople. Exhilaration rushes through my chest alongside it.

Excited voices babble all around me, friends gripping each other’s arms and exclaiming over our victory. With a grin on my face, I start to ease back to the fringes.

But Bertha grabs my arm and peers at me. “Are you all right, Signy? That was impressive, the way you came at them.”

As I blink at her, a man speaks up from behind me. “It really was. You showed them they can’t get away with whatever they want.”

An older woman who’s eased into the crowd aims a quiet smile at me. “Your mother would be proud.”

My voice comes out in a stammer. “I—thank you. I just couldn’t stand seeing them break her fountain.”

“There’s a line,” someone mutters.

Someone else gives me a hasty pat on the back. “You did good.”

Despite the ache where the soldier bruised my jaw, a smile stretches across my face. All at once, I feel like I did as a kid, spun around giddily by Dad like maybe if I wished it hard enough, I could actually fly.

“We kicked them out,” I say, barely able to believe the words. “We kicked them right out of town.”

Bertha grins fiercely. “And if they come back, we’ll do it all over again. Now let’s celebrate our first taste of freedom in three hundred years.”

# CHAPTER TWO



## LANDRIC

“HERE, HAVE ANOTHER!” ARETTE the barkeep grabs the cup I’ve drained and pushes a second mug of ale into my hands.

She heads off across the square, exchanging empties for newly filled vessels, with a spring in her step to match the music. A melody of lute and horns lilts through the air. Over near the players, a bunch of my fellow townspeople are bounding around in a dance of celebration under the glowing lanterns.

Gunther the baker has been distributing fresh pastries as fast as he and his assistant can bake them. Novak the farmer is handing out the pears and plums he brought to sell.

Everyone who isn't dancing is wandering around exclaiming over what a spectacular night it is. I haven't seen this many smiles on my neighbors' faces in... in possibly my entire life.

Next to me, Rupert wrinkles his nose at his own barely touched mug of ale. He speaks with the dryly derisive edge I've gotten used to. "So this is what small town festivities look like. So... quaint. I suppose it's not your fault when you don't have much to work with."

His two noble friends guffaw. I bite my tongue.

I do so much of that around the duke's son that it's a wonder I haven't bitten right through. Rupert has a lot of opinions about my home and the people I've grown up with. Sometimes I'm not sure whether he takes the breaks from court life more to enjoy a little freedom or simply to gawk at his supposed lessers.

But I've been able to earn my way into his good graces. He doesn't see me as quite the same clueless hick as everyone else in town.

So I will just keep biting my tongue until I can leverage this association into a career that sees my mother's business secure—and me finally on my way out of this place.

Deiter, Rupert's duller regular companion, gives the crowded square a puzzled frown. "What exactly are they celebrating again? Someone fought the Darium army?"

"Not the whole army," I say. "A few soldiers were bashing up our fountain, and everyone got upset and managed to drive them off. We wouldn't usually try to stand up to them." Let alone hope to succeed.

The thought sends a quiver of excitement through me. I wish I'd been here to see the confrontation.

Even if just a glimpse of those skeletal uniforms can turn my gut into a lump as hard and cold as granite.

We only got the story secondhand after we headed into town for dinner once our fishing was done. The shadows shifting across the fountain in the lantern light show the statue of

Adelheid is missing most of one arm, her nose and chin cracked off, a chunk missing from the jug that pours the water.

Looking at it sends a renewed pulse of anger through my veins. Can't they let us keep *anything*?

Rupert makes a disgruntled sound and smooths back his pale hair from his ruddy face. "It's bad business, really. Father always says we should work *with* the empire, not against them, and I agree. We'll put ourselves in a much better position in the long run."

It's not as if *he's* in a position to make any political decisions at the moment. As far as I can tell, the most responsibility Duke Berengar trusts his son with is not to drown in the river when he takes off on one of his country larks.

Deiter and Leonhard murmur in eager agreement, though, so I force a smile. "It obviously wasn't a move made out of wisdom."

Only the pure, totally justifiable craving for retribution.

I scan the crowd as if I might pick out my mother's face, even though I already looked for Mom earlier. She'll be off in the shop's back room, sorting through inventory and fretting over whether the acquisitions and sales will balance out. She might not even know anything unusual has happened.

She used to smile a lot more. Laugh, even. When she and Dad handled the business together, his sharp mind for negotiating the perfect pairing with her persuasive warmth, life felt easy.

Now I constantly get the impression that she's treading water, a few weak kicks away from going under.

I glance up toward the memorial on the hill. Even with the celebration, someone remembered to light the lantern that sends a glow over the glossy stone.

It's been seven years since we carved Dad's name into its side. Seven years since a Darium noble marched into a negotiation with a tradesman and cut Dad down for daring to bargain for what the noble had decided was already his.

We still don't really know how to live without him.

Rupert lets out a low, dark chuckle that immediately puts me on the alert. "Oh, look, there's the waif of refuse who somehow started it all."

I yank my gaze back to the crowd. Signy is just weaving past us, carrying a bucket I can't make out the contents of.

Her tan face looks strangely solemn amid the revelers, but her dark eyes burn so fiercely I can't look away. The waves of her black hair tumbling across her shoulders as wild as always only make her more breathtaking.

The lantern light glances across her face, and I spot the purpling splotch of a bruise on her jaw. My hand closes into a fist as if I could punch it into the past to smack down the prick who battered her.

Of course it would have been her who spoke up first, who launched herself at those soldiers rather than freezing up in fear. She's never let all the caustic whispers stop her from doing what matters to her.

No one's sneering at her now. Even as I watch, a couple of our neighbors raise their mugs to her in cheers, and another gives her arm a quick squeeze with a look of gratitude.

There's something delightful about the startled awe she can't quite hide beneath her wariness.

I saw her aunt and uncle among the dancers. What do they make of their niece's sudden shift in status?

No one spoke against them when they kicked her out of their home at sixteen and left her to fend for herself. Trouble enough having to take in an orphan after they'd just finished raising their own children, but one who was rejected by her godlen? Who skulked around the town like she had nefarious deeds in mind?

Who could blame them for wanting no part in that? That's what everyone murmured behind Signy's back.

Funny how one brief act could shift opinion so quickly. I only hope it doesn't swing back toward disdain by tomorrow.

She deserves better. She's deserved so much better from *me* than simply trying to divert a little hostile attention away from her.

Gods, she must hate me. She must hate all of us.

And why shouldn't she? Here I am, still playing along trying to win my own game.

"What is the bint doing?" Leonhard says, peering at Signy as she moves through the crowd toward the fountain.

Between the milling bodies, I catch a glimpse of her setting the bucket down on the rim of the basin. Several chunks of broken marble have been laid out along it nearby. She picks up the largest piece of arm and hops onto the rim to hold it to the statue's stump.

Rupert figures it out at the same moment I do. He snorts. "Of course. She thinks she can fix it. Always poking around in the trash. I suppose like calls to like."

Deiter shakes his head. "Why's that fountain matter so much anyway?"

The words jolt out of me in a sharper tone than I intended. "Her mother made it. It's the last sculpture she carved before a Darium soldier killed her."

Rupert turns his attention on me, keenly enough that my skin prickles uneasily. He keeps his voice smooth, but I can hear the undercurrent of warning. "If the woman was anything like her daughter, I'm not sure the soldier should be blamed for it. No doubt she was asking for it."

He's goading me, wanting to see if I'll react. And Great God help me, the urge to slam my fist into his smug face rushes up so fast I'm not sure I can contain it.

My shoulders stiffen with tension—and a clatter of hoofbeats breaks through the music, cutting off my anger with a startled hitch of my pulse.

Most of the crowd whirls toward the arrivals: several armed men on horseback who've drawn to a stop at the edge of the square. My heart thuds even louder in the split second before I



recognize that they're not wearing the eerie Darium uniforms but the burgundy jackets and steel caps of the Veldunian armed forces. The hobbled remains of our army that our Darium overseers allow to handle local disputes.

One of the soldiers prods his horse forward, his bright blue eyes blazing in stark contrast with his bronze-brown skin. "Stop the music! Grab what you can. You need to evacuate the town *now*."

## CHAPTER THREE



### SIGNY

AN UNFAMILIAR VOICE RINGS across the courtyard, and the musicians abruptly lower their instruments. I spin around on my fountain-side perch with a wobble of my pulse.

Did he say we need to *evacuate*?

The man leading the pack of Veldunian soldiers points across the square. “Everyone, head to the west of the town as quickly as possible. Keep going until you’re well beyond the buildings. Hurry!”

With a shaky breath, I set down the bucket of supplies I brought with me. What is going on?

My uncle steps forward with his usual bluster. “Why should we leave? Are you even going to tell us what’s going on?”

The head soldier lets out a strained sound, his chiseled face taut with frustration. He motions to his companions. Most of them split off to ride off through the city streets away from the square.

“The Darium army has put out an order that this town is to be burned to the ground,” he says. “We’re under orders to *help* them, but we’ll help you as much as we can before they get here. Please, grab only what you absolutely need and leave. I don’t know how far behind us they are.”

My chest constricts so tightly that for a moment, I can’t breathe at all. An ache spreads all the way to my ribs.

It’s because of me. Because I attacked the soldiers and stirred up the rest of the town to follow my lead.

The Darium soldiers said we’d pay for it. I just had no idea—I never thought—

All sense of revelry has vanished from the square. My neighbors grab their children and run toward their houses or off to the west without stopping to collect any belongings.

We all know that when the Darium army says they’re going to burn a place, they’re not going to hesitate to burn up anyone still in it too.

The banging of doors and the soldiers’ hollered voices carry from the nearby streets. “We’re evacuating the town! You need to leave now. Everyone, quickly!”

I remain on the rim of the fountain’s basin, frozen amid the panicked bustle of the crowd fleeing the square. The bottom of my stomach has dropped out.

Burn the town. My parents’ old house, since claimed by another family. The homes where so many were born, grew up, made lives for themselves.

The gorgeous temple I admired just this afternoon. The grand old town hall.

My gaze darts to the memorial on the hill, and my lungs clench even tighter.

The Darium soldiers will destroy that too, won't they? They'll scorch or smash the stones with the names of the fallen, score my parents' names out of existence as if they never lived at all.

I told them they couldn't take everything that belonged to us, and they mean to prove me wrong.

Where will we go after we flee? What town will take in another town's worth of people?

The soldiers will probably hunt us down across the countryside once they've destroyed our home.

If we let them.

A sharp sear of conviction shoots up from my gut. "No!" I shout over the frantic clamor. "We stood up to them before. We showed them they couldn't bully us. We can stop them!"

As several people turn to stare, I leap off the basin and cast around.

Bertha brought out a few geese from the butcher shop to roast—carcasses are still dangling from rods near the braziers. I run over and yank out one of the pointed roasting spits.

Brandishing it in the air like a spear, I call out again. "There are hundreds of us. They won't be sending that many soldiers. If we push back, we can save our town. We don't have to let them get away with this."

Some of the townspeople keep rushing by, but others hesitate. Gunther glances back toward his bakery and then toward the fountain where our first confrontation was successful. His hands ball into fists.

Bertha marches over to me and grabs another of the spits. Fear shines in her eyes, but her jaw is set.

She raises her makeshift weapon in the air like I did. "We should fight for what's ours! Come on, everyone. I have more rods and knives in my shop. We'll batter them with frying pans and garden hoes if that's what it takes."

I might have gained a little respect from my defense of the fountain, but Bertha has been considered an upstanding citizen for a lot longer than I have. Her voice rallies far more people than mine did.

As she ushers people into her shop to arm themselves, the head Veldunian soldier and his remaining companion ride over to us. His startlingly bright blue eyes flash with anger—and maybe a little fear of his own. “What in the realms do you think you’re doing?”

I hold up the roasting spit and set my other hand on my hip, ignoring the racing of my heart. “This is our town. We can’t just stand by and watch them destroy it.”

He wheels his horse around. “You don’t have any choice. You can’t hope to push back an entire squadron of Darium soldiers.”

“We sent them running this afternoon. We weren’t even prepared then.”

Bertha comes bustling back out of the butcher shop. More figures are gathering around us, gripping whatever makeshift weapon they could get their hands on.

Sef the farrier swings his arm. “If they’re coming from the east, we have to meet them there. Gather your friends—anyone who’ll stand and—”

With a distant hiss, a streak of yellow-orange light flares against the night sky at the east end of town. Flames are shooting up from the buildings on the fringes.

A chill washes through my body. Our enemies are already here.

An uneasy murmuring passes between the townspeople who gathered around me and Bertha. I can sense their resolve dwindling.

Clammy sweat trickles down my back, but I jab my spit toward the flames. “We have to face them now! They won’t be expecting it. We’ll strike them all down.”

For a moment, I think my battle cry will be enough. My neighbors shift toward the east end of the square, grim determination crossing their faces.

The lead soldier wheels his horse, his mouth tight. “You don’t want to do this. Please, get out of the town while you can.”

His companion leans over in his saddle. “Jostein, if the soldiers see us—”

“I know,” the other man snaps.

Bertha and I wave our band of resistors forward anyway. We hustle across the square.

And then the first victims of the razing come pelting through the streets.

A woman clutching a baby stumbles at the edge of the square. Her hair is singed, a burn mark on her cheek.

“They’re coming!” she wails. “They killed Nivard.”

Her husband.

More fleeing figures dash toward us from behind her. One man has blood spreading down the shoulder of his shirt from a deep gouge. Another hobbles next to her partner, her ankle awkwardly bent. A kid who can’t be more than ten sprints past them, burns bubbling on his forearms and jaw.

When he sees the bunch of us, his voice splits the air in a shriek. “The empire is here! They’re going to kill all of us! Mom... Dad...”

More fire wavers all along the east end of town. The warble of it seems to come from all around us. Smoke laces the air.

A man staggers into the square and then crumples, the back of his tunic drenched in blood. His eyes stare at us blankly.

The lead Veldunian soldier rides around us, his voice even more urgent than before. “That’ll be the fate all of you meet if you don’t get out of here *now*.”

The small spirit of rebellion we summoned disintegrates.

“Run!” Gunther cries. His voice is echoed by others in the crowd.

Even Bertha turns on her heel, grasping the burnt boy’s arm to steady him and bolting in the opposite direction from the flames. The lead soldier and his companion wave everyone onward to the streets heading out of town.

My throat prickles with the thickening smoke and the anguish that threatens to choke me. “No! We can’t give up. We can’t let them ruin it all.”

But everyone who stood with me has rushed off. I’m alone amid a torrent of the wounded and panicked escaping the carnage.

I grit my teeth and hold my roasting spit steady, bracing my feet against the cobblestones. My pulse hammers through my limbs and in the back of my skull.

If I lose this place, the only home I’ve ever had, the only place that holds the memories of the family I already lost... I have nothing. What’s the point in going on?

If the Darium soldiers want to fight me, let them. I’ll take as many of them down with me as I can.

More townspeople careen past me. Harsher shouts of warning and retribution reach my ears.

The Darium force is getting closer.

I clutch my spit with all my strength—and a huff of breath sounds right behind me.

The lead soldier tips over on his horse and smacks his arm right around my chest. Before I can do more than gasp, he’s heaved me up onto his lap, knocking aside the spit.

I sprawl on my stomach across his muscular legs, my own legs dangling. As I try to squirm away from him, he pins my lean frame against him with one arm while the other tugs on the reins.

“What are you doing?” I sputter. “I was going to—”

His thighs shift with the press of his heels, and the horse springs forward, away from the burning. The soldier's voice comes out in a growl. "I'm saving your life, as little as you seem to care about it. There's nothing else here you can salvage."



# CHAPTER FOUR



## JOSTEIN

IKO GLANCES AROUND OUR hasty refugee camp. In the first haze of early dawn light that seeps between the trees, the people of Feldan huddle together, some dozing, some staring ahead in a daze. Their faces are marked with grit and soot—and here and there smears of blood.

My friend rakes his fingers back through his dark blond hair, pushing the chin-length strands behind his ears. His lips slant into a wry grin, but his voice comes out rough. “Well, this is a mess and a half, isn’t it?”

I swallow thickly. “We did the best we could.”

I don't know how many of the townspeople died in the Darium attack. We managed to usher a few hundred deep into the forest beyond the western edge of the town, farther than the Darium soldiers bothered to venture. From the size of the settlement and the number of buildings now smoldering in embers, I doubt this is even half of them.

But then, we're lucky we made it to the town far enough ahead of the Darium forces to warn them at all. If we'd been with the empire's squadron, they'd have expected to see us burning and murdering alongside them.

Our first loyalty is to Dariu, as our overseers so often remind us.

Iko and I meander onward in our informal patrol, Iko fiddling with a branched stick and a scrap of leather he's assembling into what looks like a slingshot. As if the sword at his hip isn't enough of a weapon.

He never knows how to sit still. Always has to keep his hands moving. I'll admit that he's come up with some ingenious solutions by seeing what odds and ends he can meld together, but this morning his fidgeting is wearing on my nerves.

A woman we pass is clutching her arm, weeping in soft sobs. I kneel down in front of her. "Are you injured? We have a medic who should be able to help."

She shakes her head. "It's just a scratch. But I got it when—I couldn't grab Maud fast enough..."

Another sob overwhelms her voice.

I straighten up with a sensation like a jagged blade in my gut. I don't know who Maud is—wife, daughter, friend—but it's obvious she meant a lot to this woman.

The cleric and a few of his devouts who escaped the burning of their temple have been offering what comforts they can to their neighbors. I'll have to direct one of them over here when we next cross paths.

As we walk on, Iko hums to himself. "We should show them a painting of Agnethe. They can feel good that they were

spared that catastrophe.”

His jaunty tone brings my gaze jerking to him. He catches my expression and swipes a hand across his mouth, looking abashed. “Too much? Too much. Ah, there’s our spitfire prisoner. It was something watching you play hero to save her from her own heroics.”

If his voice has gone droll again, I’m too distracted by the sight of the figure up ahead of us to care. All my exasperation is aimed at her.

I’ve gathered from murmurs and mutterings that the bloodthirsty woman’s name is Signy. She didn’t tell me herself, of course, because she hasn’t said a word to me that’s not cursing or complaint since I hauled her out of the town square.

She sits now with her arms looped around her raised knees and her head drooped, her rumped black hair spilling down her back, but I recognize the tension still coiled in her sinewy frame. Given an opening, she’d be dashing back to Feldan in a split-second, never mind that the soldiers she’d like to flay are long gone now.

That’s why there’s a rope wound around her wrists and ankles, tying her to the birch tree she’s crouched in front of. She already tried to run off twice before we finally put her under official arrest for resisting military authority.

That was a few hours ago. Maybe she’s cooled off a little since then—enough to be reasoned with.

With trepidation winding through my chest, I walk the last several paces to stand in front of her. When she doesn’t acknowledge me, I clear my throat. “Well? Have you sorted yourself out yet?”

She lifts her head, and I immediately regret drawing her attention. Those striking emerald-green eyes blaze hotter than the summer sun, searing into me as if she’s peering straight through to my soul.

Her lips pull back in what’s almost a snarl. “The one who needs sorting out around here is you. You call yourself a

Veldunian soldier, but you're not even willing to fight for your country? You might as well take off that uniform and put on the Darium bones."

The comment sets me even more on edge in an instant. "We're not the ones who torched your home. We did our best to warn you and get you all to safety."

Her voice rises. "We would have stood up to those assholes with sticks and pans. You're the ones with the swords, and all you were willing to do is run away."

Several gazes turn our way at her words. Even tied to a tree, she can command attention in a way that gives me a pang of mixed admiration and envy.

And the quiver in my abdomen in memory of my dedication sacrifice tells me she means it. She really would have battled the Darium soldiers to the bitter end, even alone, and probably felled a few of them in the process.

The gift Creaden blessed me with lets me judge who's up to a task, and it's usually accurate.

It and my steadfast dedication to my career haven't gotten me promoted past squad leader, though. *You're just not very... commanding*, my last captain said.

I don't think I need to be taking tips from this half-feral woman, though.

"Look," I say firmly, the back of my neck prickling with awareness of our growing audience, "the Darium empire has kept the entire continent under its thumb for centuries. Even if we fought off that squadron, they'd send more people next time. Rebellion is a death sentence. At least when we work around them instead of coming at them head on, we can protect some of you instead of encouraging what'll essentially be suicide."

"Which is not just depressing but very messy to clean up," Iko puts in, and I restrain the urge to glower at him.

Signy's gaze flicks to him and back to me. A little of the fierceness fades from her expression, and I see the exhaustion behind it.

Her next words come out quieter, but they seem to ring all through the forest in the silence our argument has cast. “What’s the point? What does it matter if you saved our lives when everything that mattered in those lives has been destroyed? Do our *breaths* even belong to us, if the only reason we get to keep living is because the Darium empire didn’t decide to slaughter me or him or her today?”

She waves her hand toward the huddled townspeople as well as she can with her wrists bound.

A lump clogs my throat. I push my voice past it. “Of course it matters. You can rebuild—you can recover—you still have one another—”

Signy’s eyes narrow. “Tell that to everyone here who lost someone they cared about to enemy swords last night. At least if we’d stayed and fought, the pain would go both ways. We’d have shown them that we do matter.”

Last night’s frustration swells inside me, overwhelming everything else I’m feeling. “You already fought. From what I heard, you all attacked a small patrol and killed one of the soldiers. Burning the town was your punishment. Was all that loss really worth it for a few minutes of ‘showing them’?”

To my surprise, the woman flinches. Her head droops for a moment as she works her jaw. “It was my fault. I started the fight on my own. No, that’s not really true. *They* started it by deciding to smash our fountain just because it wasn’t some kind of homage to their empire. But I drew the first blood.”

For a second, I can only gape at her. “You launched an attack on the patrol... by yourself?” A single, untrained woman against several fully-equipped Darium soldiers?

She grimaces. “I couldn’t stand to let them ruin one more thing... I didn’t expect it to go that far. I wasn’t thinking. I was just so angry.”

My shock steals the rest of my voice. Gods above, I’m not sure I’ve ever met a human being so reckless... or so passionate. It took an incredible amount of courage for her to instigate that act of resistance alone.

Of course, after seeing how she hollered for her neighbors to push back the Darium force last night, maybe I shouldn't be surprised by that.

Iko lets out a low whistle, his eyebrows lifted with similar awe. "If you get that much done when you're mad, remind me never to piss you off."

I consider stomping on his foot to shut him up, but then Signy's eyes flash toward us again. "We could have gotten a lot more done if you'd been completely on our side. All it took was me jabbing a pocketknife at the soldiers for so many other people to stand up to them too. Maybe we could have saved the whole town if your squad had rallied us instead of running us off. How do you know what's possible when no one's tried to rebel in ages?"

Footsteps crunch through the underbrush with an ominous thudding. Captain Amalia, who sent my squad and one other off on the evacuation mission, marches into view.

She frowns down at Signy. "We've heard enough out of you. Keep your foolhardy thoughts to yourself, or we'll add a gag along with the ropes."

I wince inwardly at her caustic tone, even though I was essentially trying to get Signy to do the same thing. A flurry of whispers, some supportive and some agitated, ripple through the mass of refugees around us.

Signy glares back at Amalia, but she appears to take the captain's authority seriously. Her mouth clamps shut, wary of the threat.

Then a man who can't be more than a year or two older than she is shoves to his feet from where he was sitting among his neighbors. The dawn light flares in his reddish-brown hair like the fires in town last night.

"She shouldn't have to shut up," he says, his voice pealing through the forest. "Signy's right."

# CHAPTER FIVE



## SIGNY

I'M SO BUSY STARING at my unexpected defender that the first surge of conversation rushes past me without my comprehending.

Landric stands tall and defiant, his dark brown eyes penetrating beneath the sweep of his coppery hair. He's staring down the soldiers rather than looking at me.

He thinks I'm right? He's arguing in my favor—in front of all that's left of our town?

Did he take a blow to the head in the middle of the destruction last night?

Then the comments being tossed around penetrate my consciousness.

Norbert the old cobbler is waving his hand toward me dismissively. “We can’t trust anything that comes out of that girl’s mouth. Even her own godlen didn’t trust her enough to give her a gift.”

The crouched figures nearby sway uneasily. A woman farther back is sniffing. “The Darium empire always wins.”

One of the devouts who escaped the All-Giver’s temple dips his head. “We took one of their lives, and they took our whole town. You can’t conquer every foe.”

I feel my aunt’s piercing gaze on me before I pick out her face in the crowd. “Signy never could make anything of herself. She’s the last person any of us should be following.”

Jostein’s bright blue eyes have fixed on me again. His mouth slants at a discomforted angle. “Your dedication sacrifice was rejected?”

A heaviness presses down on my chest. I force a tight smile, wiggling my remaining toes within my boots, not that he can see them. “I asked Inganne for more creative talent. Apparently she didn’t think I’d make a good artist.”

And what that has to do with my opinions on the Darium empire, I can’t really see. But more disheartened mutters are still passing through the crowd, any rebellious energy that was left dwindling by the second.

Landric shakes his head, though his stance has already started to deflate as if he can tell this is a losing battle. “If Signy knows about anything, it’s how to survive without much support. She pulled together an entire household with the scraps everyone else threw away.”

“Because she couldn’t manage better,” someone calls out, and another burst of disparaging murmurs follows.

I suppress a wince and lower my head. The insults sting, but they’re nothing new.



What prickles deeper is the frustration that's gripped me since the first moment I saw the Darium soldiers swing at Mom's fountain. The frustration that's maybe been simmering in me for longer than I knew.

How can they just give up? How can they shrug off the latest horror the Darium empire has inflicted on us on top of so many others?

The dukeling liked to call me the waif of refuse, but it's all the rest of them who've been sitting down and eating a pile of shit without complaint, day after day. And now we're absolutely mired in it.

Unless we find a way to dig ourselves out. To throw the shit right back at the pricks who buried us in it.

What do any of us have left to lose? I've certainly got nothing.

I square my shoulders and lift my gaze again, pitching my voice to carry. "Just listen!"

I'm still a little surprised when the barrage of voices falls silent. Not knowing how long their grace will last, I hurtle onward. "We have a chance. Even the empire knows we do. The Darium soldiers must see our rebellion as a legitimate threat or they wouldn't have come down on us so harshly over one brief scuffle."

"Or maybe they're just bastards," someone grumbles.

"No," I say. "They're not used to anyone fighting back. It terrifies them. They've gotten complacent—because we've gotten complacent, just taking whatever they inflict on us. They aren't prepared for a real uprising. None of them have needed to face one before."

The soldier next to Jostein, the one with blond hair tucked behind his ears and a roguish grin, arches a skeptical eyebrow at me. "And you think you're in a position to face them? The entire Darium army?"

I stare steadily back at him. "Yes, I do."

My gaze travels over the townspeople hunched all through the woods around me. “If we strike out at them again, fast and effectively, while they’re thinking they’ve cowed us, we could do some real damage. And the more we push back and tear them down, the more people from other towns will realize it’s possible and join us.”

The image unfurls in my mind’s eye, the way I can sometimes look at a cracked bucket or a tattered net and see how it could be mended into something functional again. Veldunians standing up against Darium soldiers all across the country. Not just hundreds but tens of thousands of us, fueled by centuries of bottled anger.

My voice falters with the enormity of what I’m saying, but I push the words out. “We could... We could take our whole country back. If we’re just willing to try.”

Someone snorts, and someone else makes a scoffing sound. “That’s dreaming too big.”

But the image has taken hold of me too forcefully for me to back down. I can almost taste it, the freedom from fear and tyrannical demands. The knowledge that our home was really ours, with the rules and justice we decided on.

Where no child ever lost someone they loved because an asshole in a skeleton-painted uniform took offense.

“It’s not,” I insist. “Not if we show the rest of Velduny what’s possible. There’s—there’s a Darium guard post just an hour’s ride southeast of here. That’s probably where some of the pricks who burned our town are holed up now, rejoicing their ‘victory.’ I say we burn the guard post down to the ground as payback. I’ll go do it even if I have to by myself.”

“And what would they do to us next?” Norbert demands.

I pause, and a laugh hitches out of me with the obvious answer. “What could they do? How would they even know who attacked them, or where to find us? They took away the place where we lived. Now all of Velduny is our home.”

A burst of more emphatic conversation erupts, voices clashing and colliding, but a note of excitement reverberates

through some of them.

They're listening. They're seeing what I see.

The captain steps in, her square jaw tight. I suppose I should be glad she hasn't brought out the gag she threatened yet.

She glowers at me. "All right, you said your piece. But you're not burning anything down while you're tied to a tree. What your neighbors need is rest and healing, not a call to arms."

Jostein shifts his weight from one foot to the other and glances over at her. His expression has tensed even more than before. "Captain... She has made some good points. I think she could see them through."

As I clamp my teeth to avoid gaping at him in shock, his captain's head jerks toward him. I'm even more shocked that she doesn't snap at him for contradicting her but studies him pensively.

"Let's not hear any insubordination out of you, squad leader," she says, but her voice is simply terse, not outright cutting.

The blond man who seems to be Jostein's friend rocks back on his heels with an air of restless enthusiasm. "One little guard post, hit it in the middle of the night, no one the wiser... We *could* just see what happens. Baby steps rather than diving in headfirst."

The captain lets out a growl of irritation. "Iko, you can't call instigating war a 'baby step.'"

He shrugs and offers her one of his crooked grins. "I think I just did."

The captain glares at both him and Jostein for a moment. Then she points at me. "I think this one is stirring up enough trouble with her neighbors. You two, bring her over to my tent so she can't disturb them any more while we figure out what to do with all of these people. I trust between the two of you, you can keep her restrained."

She marches off through the trees. A hush has fallen over our makeshift camp.

An ache expands in my stomach. So now I'm going to be set apart from the rest of my town all over again, when we don't even have a town left?

Jostein and Iko exchange a look I can't read. Jostein crouches next to me to untie the rope that binds me to the tree trunk while Iko kneels by my ankles. I guess I should be glad they're going to let me walk rather than carting me over like a trussed pig.

They leave my wrists tied and yank me to my feet by my elbows. My legs wobble after so long sitting in that cramped position.

Landric is still on his feet. "You're not really going to—"

Jostein aims a hard look at him. "Captain's orders. No one's going to hurt your woman."

I sputter indignantly. "I'm not his."

Iko hums in apparent amusement and tugs me forward.

We tramp between the trees in silence, past a few small tents the soldiers have set up to a slightly taller one with a little Veldunian flag waving from its front post.

Inside, we find the captain sitting on a stool by the far end. She has a map unrolled on her lap.

At our entrance, she nods and makes a brief gesture for the men to sit me down across from her. They let go of me, Jostein a little warily. "Do you want us to bind her legs again? She does have a habit of running off."

The captain shakes her head. "I don't think that'll be necessary."

The men move to leave, but she clears her throat. "Actually, I'd like to speak to both of you too."

Something in her tone sharpens my attention. I peer at her as she sets the map aside and considers me in return.

Jostein and Iko stay where they are, Jostein's posture stiff with tension and Iko slinging his thumbs in his belt in a casual stance.

"You raised some interesting points," the captain says to me. "I see the guard post you mentioned. There wouldn't be more than ten soldiers stationed there at any given time, if that."

I shrug. "It'd be a start. A symbol that we can fight back."

"Or simple revenge."

My jaw clenches. "If I only wanted revenge, I'd have hunted them down years ago for killing my parents. I'm tired of standing back and letting them screw us over again and again. I'm tired of feeling like nothing we do matters, because they can step in and ruin it in an instant. Do *you* like pretending to have some authority when you're really just their puppet?"

A muscle ticks in the captain's cheek. She fixes her gaze on the men. "And you agree with the sedition she's spouting?"

Jostein manages to tense even more. "I can see the logic to her strategy, if someone *was* going to push back against the empire."

Iko snorts. "Let's not pretend that all of us wouldn't like to see all those Darium pricks with their heads on pikes."

"Hmm." The captain glances down at the map and back at us. "We're staying here another day while we gather supplies for these people and determine where they might be taken. So there would be plenty of opportunity for just a few of this company to slip off after dusk falls and put their words into action."

Jostein's eyes widen so much I think they might fall out of his head. "You're saying—"

"I'm saying if you believe in this one, you can stand with her—and fall with her. Stir up the makings of a rebellion if you can. If you're caught..." The captain lifts her shoulder. "I'll say you deserted our company and condemn you."

My breath catches in my throat. She's really agreeing to this plan.

But the men have far more to lose than I do. I look over at them, my heart pounding.

Iko nods, a subtler smile curving his lips. After a moment, with a flex of his jaw, Jostein does too.

“Someone has to light the first match,” he says. “I couldn’t ask anyone else to do it if I won’t myself.”

Iko gives a muted whoop and pumps his fist in the air. “Let’s go hand those Darium bastards their asses!”

## CHAPTER SIX



### SIGNY

I WAKE UP IN the captain's tent to the thump of a bowl set down by my head. I jerk upright, my mouth tasting like sawdust, my eyes bleary.

I didn't mean to fall asleep. My exhaustion from the fraught, sleepless night must have caught up with me.

The captain sits on her stool by the little folding desk. "You'd better eat something before you go. I'd rather not have two skilled soldiers go down because you fainted with hunger in the middle of your rebellion."

I pull the bowl toward me. The meaty smell that wafts off it has my stomach gurgling in anticipation.

Starkly conscious of the captain's attention on me, I wolf the stew down as quickly as I can without looking like a total animal. As the gnawing of hunger subsides, curiosity tickles up in its place.

I consider her in the glow of the lantern. "Why are you letting us do this at all?"

"I don't believe you can win much of anything without taking a few risks along the way. I just want to make sure they're the right risks before I invest very much in them."

She stands, collects my bowl, and sets a canteen down in its place. "Your parents were killed by Darium forces?"

I nod. She heard me say as much this morning.

Something hardens in the captain's eyes. "A couple of their soldiers killed my brother." She straightens up. "I imagine it won't be long before your companions come to collect you. No one will be on watch at this end of the camp, but try to be discreet about it, for my plausible deniability, please."

She ducks out of the tent without waiting for my response. But a reply doesn't really feel necessary.

We all have our reasons to hate the usurpers, don't we?

I take a gulp from the canteen to wash down the stew and take stock. The captain removed the rope around my wrists before I fell asleep. I'm wearing the same simple tunic and trousers I was yesterday, discards I patched up like I did my boots. I wouldn't have minded a dunk in a river and a change of clothes, but beggars can't be choosers.

My pocketknife remains nestled at my hip. It's hardly a fearsome weapon, but it's better than nothing.

I roll my shoulders and stretch my legs. Even if it was unintentional, I'm grateful for the sleep. Now that I've fully woken up and eaten, my thoughts are much clearer than they were this morning.

Is the mission I'm about to embark on insane? Possibly. But at least three people trained to know what a reasonable fight



looks like seem to be on my side. So presumably it's not too crazy.

That doesn't mean I'm going to make it through the next five hours alive, but I still have nothing to lose.

I'd still rather die taking at least a few Darium soldiers down with me.

A whistle that sounds like a drunken bird sounds outside the tent, followed by a muffled mutter and a rustle of shifting clothes. The hushed voice rises just enough for me to make it out as Jostein's. "Signy?"

Swallowing hard, I ease aside the tent flap.

At first, I almost don't recognize the two men. Jostein and Iko have discarded their steel helmets and burgundy soldier uniforms for plain shirts and trousers not all that different from mine.

They look more real somehow, like they're people I could actually know rather than distant figureheads.

Jostein waves me out with a small smile that sends an unexpected flutter through my chest. His now-visible rich brown hair, several shades darker than his bronze skin, only makes his blue eyes stand out more impressively.

The flutter only grows with Iko's soft chuckle. "I bet she would have figured out the birdsong just fine."

His hazel eyes gleam as they meet mine, his face even more roguishly handsome now that he's in clothes to match.

Gods smite me, I didn't quite notice before just how appealing both of these men are to look at.

I yank my mind back to the task at hand. "I'm here. Lead the way out of camp."

They'll have a better idea than I do which is the safest route to avoid notice.

As we slink between the trees, leaving the cluster of tents and my neighbors behind, I notice the swords sheathed at the

men's hips are more modest too—short ones, only about the length of my forearm.

I guess typical military weaponry would draw more attention than we'd prefer. And also the captain wouldn't want any Darium forces who capture us to realize they've been attacked not just by Veldunians but specifically our local soldiers.

As the lantern light dwindles behind us, the men's strides lengthen. They pause in a small clearing, Jostein reaching into his pocket.

"It isn't much, but we thought you should be somewhat properly armed."

He hands me a curved hunting knife on its own leather strap that I can fasten around my waist. I draw the blade out for a moment to admire it in the hazy dusk. "I've never had a blade this nice."

Iko grins. "Nothing but the best for our rebel. Come—"

Footsteps rustle behind us, and we all stiffen. Before I can react with more than the lurch of my pulse, Landric hurries into view, his hands held up in a pose of surrender.

Jostein's hand leaps to his sword hilt. "What are you doing out here?"

Landric eyes the squad leader for a moment before his gaze slides to me. "You're going to the guard post like you talked about, aren't you? I could tell something was up, the way the captain pulled you aside."

I glare at him. "What's it to you?"

He blinks as if he's surprised I'm not celebrating his arrival. Sure, he stood up for me for about five seconds earlier today. Did he figure that somehow erased all the insults he and his friends have slung at me over the past several years?

Then he squares his shoulders, his annoyingly attractive face defiant. "I want to come with you. I want to help."

Jostein considers Landric with a skeptical expression. "It's going to be a long walk."

“That’s fine. I’m ready.”

Both of the soldiers shift their attention to me. Iko cocks his head. “Since this whole expedition was the lady’s idea, I think the lady should make the final call.”

Before I can open my mouth, Landric extends his hands toward me. “I’m sorry. The way things were around town—none of it was fair to you. I think you’re doing the right thing. Please, let me do something to help you this time.”

I don’t know whether I believe him, but my gut twists at the plea in his words. He pauses and then adds, “Even if you say no, I’ll just follow behind you anyway. I know where you’re going.”

I let out a huff of breath and peer through the forest behind him. If we keep standing around, it’s possible a sentry from the squadron will wander over this way and spot us.

Why shouldn’t he put in a little work to offset the crap he’s done in the past?

“Fine,” I say brusquely. “Just make sure you keep up.”

We set a swift pace through the woods and come out on the edge of a stretch of rolling hills. Moonlight glints off the peaks of the distant mountains.

Now that we’re well clear of the camp, we veer in the actual direction of the guard post, which will bring us past Feldan. Our boots hiss through the long grass. Jostein peers up at the stars every few minutes, I assume making sure we stay on the right course.

After a long stretch of silence, too many thoughts are yammering in my head for me to stay quiet. I glance over at Landric. “What happened to your esteemed friends? Did they skip the celebration in town?”

I didn’t see the dukeling or his noble sycophants among the survivors.

Landric shakes his head, his expression grim. “We came to the square, but Rupert and the others took off for their horses the second we heard the first call to evacuate.”

“A more reasonable reaction than some others I’ll refrain from mentioning,” Jostein murmurs, but his tone is more dry than disparaging.

I glower at him. “It wasn’t even their town, just a place near his dad’s estate where he could slum it a little.”

The soldier meets my gaze, the glint of his eyes sending another flutter through my pulse. “You were about to face an entire troop of Darium soldiers with nothing but a roasting spit. At least on this mission, the odds will be a little fairer.”

My gaze slides back to Landric with the thought of another question I should ask. “What about your mother? Did she make it out?”

I haven’t seen her, but then, I spent most of my time in the camp tied to a tree.

He releases a shaky breath. “Yes. She heard the calls and ran for the forest before the soldiers arrived. But I don’t know how long it’s going to take her to process the loss of all her inventory.”

All the goods she would have traded or sold. I don’t know what it’s like to be a successful merchant—I have no idea what to say about that.

We lapse into a weightier silence for several minutes until Iko pipes up. “How does a dedicat to Inganne end up so warlike anyway? Shouldn’t you be chasing butterflies and frolicking with paints?”

I roll my eyes at him. “I’d rather be making something beautiful than doing this. Or at least appreciating the beauty that’s already there. The Darium empire just happens to be in the way.”

I hesitate, but Landric already knows this. The soldiers might have heard it from my neighbors over the past day. It’s not that much of a confession. “My mother was an artist. The statue they were destroying—it’s one of her best pieces.”

Or it was. I never got to even try to fix it before the assholes stormed the town.

The quiet that follows feels even heavier than before. Iko breaks it with the same breezy tone. “Of course, I’m not anyone to talk about odd dedications. How many soldiers do you meet who picked Estera to guide them?”

My gaze snaps to him. He dedicated himself to the godlen of wisdom and scholarship?

“Did you not expect to go into service back then?” I find myself asking, curious despite myself. Plenty of twelve-year-olds can’t predict what course their lives will actually end up taking.

“Oh, I did. It was obvious the world needed a little more order, and I’m more than happy to provide—or attempt to, anyway. I just wanted to be smart about it.” He winks at me.

Jostein speaks up, low but with a fond note that tells me they’ve been friends for quite a while. “His gift does come in handy for military operations sometimes.”

Iko makes a dismissive sound. “It’s only a small one. I was brave enough to march into battle but not to sacrifice more than a few patches of skin. A little extra inspiration for seeing how the things I have could be put to some new use. I have to work out all the finer details myself.”

He nudges Jostein with his elbow. “This one’s got all the ambition. Dedicated himself to Creaden.”

I find I’m not surprised to imagine the stalwart squad leader being drawn to the godlen of authority, but he ducks his head as if embarrassed. “I haven’t been able to see through that purpose very well so far.”

“Hmph. You’ve got to make captain soon. Then major, then general, then why not rule the entire damned army?”

Jostein guffaws at his friend’s irreverence. “We’ll see.”

I study him. I can’t see any obvious dedication sacrifices on his body, but then, I can’t see Iko’s either. “Do you have a gift?”

It takes him a moment to answer, as if he needs to decide how to. “I have a knack for judging who can handle what

tasks.” His bright blue gaze slides to me. “That’s the main reason I’m here. Every instinct Creaden gave me says you can see this mission through.”

My heart skips a beat. He’s sure I can do this—stick it to the Darium empire and survive? *I* wasn’t even totally convinced.

But he believes it enough to have followed me on this perilous quest.

“You’ve accomplished a lot already,” Jostein goes on, “even if I’ve given you a hard time about the risks you took. I’m not sure I’ve ever met a soldier as brave as you’ve proven yourself to be.”

My skin flushes under his attention. I don’t think any man has ever seemed this genuinely appreciative of me, let alone one as breathtaking as him.

I know what it’s like to be lusted after. During my teen years, there were a couple of boys from town who managed to persuade me to let them get close... only to kick me aside after they’d gotten the itch out of their system, because of course the girl who was shunned even by her godlen wasn’t worthy of anything but a rollabout or two. After the second time, I learned to keep my distance no matter what cajoling words a man murmured.

Jostein’s interest doesn’t feel anything like that. I don’t know if he sees me as anything beyond a capable vigilante, but that’s still more credit than anyone’s given me in nearly a decade.

“I’ll do my best to prove your instincts right,” I find myself saying.

Iko flashes me another grin. “I have total faith in you too.” He lifts his chin toward Landric. “What about you? Any hidden talents we should know about?”

I can’t help wondering what my childhood playmate will say. Everyone in town talked about who dedicated to which of the lesser gods, so I know he picked Jurnus, but I don’t remember hearing that he asked for a magical talent from the godlen of travel and communication.

Landric shakes his head. “There wasn’t anything I could think of that I wanted enough to make the trade. Mostly I was hoping for Jurnus’s guidance.” He lets out a rough laugh. “I suppose he’s giving me a good shove toward exploring the world now.”

“The gods do work in mysterious ways. We have plenty of colleagues who forgo a divine exchange. After all, it’s not as if a sacrifice is a guarantee.”

Iko’s voice halts abruptly with a darted glance toward me, his smile faltering. As if he’s concerned that I’ll be insulted by him touching on one of the most basic facts about my life.

I wait for someone to ask what I requested that Inganne judged as overreaching or why I think she denied me. Instead, there’s only another silence more awkward than anything else.

Jostein adjusts our course so we can cross a stream at a rickety bridge. Reaching the dirt road on the other side, I kick aside lumps of dried horse dung that bounce into the grass.

We’ve given the town a wide berth, but a smoky scent taints the air even out here, even a day later. I squint, but I can’t make out any of the landmarks amid the stretch of forest and jutting rocks that surround most of the town.

No temple spires. No memorial on the hill. They couldn’t have burned the limestone, but it wouldn’t have taken much to knock it down.

Are some of the other buildings still smoldering even now? Is there anything left it’d be worth returning for?

My little cabin might have gone untouched, set off from the rest of the town as it is, but the thought of living there next to the ruin makes my stomach roil.

The men have followed my gaze. Landric’s jaw has tightened, maybe thinking about his family’s inventory turned to ashes or so damaged it may as well be.

Everyone from town will be starting over from scratch, but most have concrete skills they can quickly bring to bear. A merchant’s talent for sales can’t matter much without merchandise to peddle.

Iko wets his lips. I expect him to make some flippant remark to try to ease the tension, but instead his voice comes out cautious. “The way your neighbors talked about you—have they always been that harsh?”

Landric’s expression twitches, but I don’t see any point in dressing up the situation. “No. Not until I became a burden. I’d lost both my parents by the time I was eight, and my aunt and uncle weren’t happy about taking me in. Then my dedication sacrifice was rejected, and no one wanted to associate with a girl even the gods had shunned. Wouldn’t want the ill-favor to rub off on them.”

Jostein frowns. “Just because you asked too much once doesn’t mean the gods have rejected *you*.”

I shrug. “Sometimes it seems like they did before I even made my sacrifice.”

Iko’s tone turns unexpectedly fierce. “Darius has taken too many good people from this country. That’s on them, not the gods.”

I look at him, startled by his vehemence, and he grimaces as if in apology. “One of my good friends when I was growing up—we were running around in the street, and she tripped and bumped into a Darius soldier walking by. The prick yelled that she was a pickpocket and stabbed her before she could even get out an apology.”

A chill wraps around my gut.

Jostein is nodding, his expression even more solemn than usual. “My uncle—he ran a tavern. A squadron came in and started harassing the barmaids. He and my cousin stepped in, and they murdered both of them.”

Landric looks at the ground. “My father. Competition over a deal. Just greed.”

I haven’t thought about that in ages. As I look at him, my throat constricts. Maybe it makes sense that he insisted on coming on this mission after all.

I don’t know if the Darius empire can ever repay everything they owe us, but they’re going to make a small start



tonight.

# CHAPTER SEVEN



## SIGNY

WE STOP WELL BEFORE we reach the glow of the guard post's lantern, which is hanging over the door of the wooden structure. A couple more lights glow in the second-floor windows.

I flex one calf and then the other. The walk took three peals of the hourly bells ringing in the temples and villages we've passed at a distance.

Jostein considers the terrain around the guard post. It's mostly open fields with a few low hills to the east and south, but a sparse woodland starts several paces to the north of the building.

He tips his head toward the trees. “Let’s circle around, staying out of view, and see what we can make of the place from closer up.”

We have to cross another road dotted with horse dung on the way over. None of us speaks, keeping our ears pricked for any hint of discovery by the soldiers inside the post.

We make it to the scattered trees without any calls of alarm. But then, even if a soldier on guard noticed a few figures walking across the nearby fields, they’d probably assume we’re no threat.

When was the last time anyone truly challenged Darium authority?

We sneak between the trunks until we’ve come up alongside the building within the shelter of the trees. We’re close enough that I can make out muffled voices and a brief chuckle but not most of the words.

Then someone who must be near an open window or in the upper lookout that’s open to the air lets out a disgruntled sigh. “My uniform still smells like fucking smoke.”

Her companion snorts. “That’ll take ages to come out. At least you have happy memories to go with it.”

“Happier if we could have barbequed all those stupid peasants.”

“I wish I’d been able to join the razing. To see a bunch of ungrateful Veldunians crushed—can’t get better than that.”

My teeth set on edge. Ungrateful? What exactly do these assholes think we’re supposed to be grateful for—the honor of having them shove us around and steal what’s ours?

“Bastards,” Landric growls under his breath.

Jostein’s gaze looks even more determined than before. “How are we going to do this? I’ve got a flint, and all that wood will be flammable, but we’ve got to get the fire to the post before they can stop us. And make sure it’ll spread quickly enough that they can’t just stamp it out.”

Iko hums to himself. “We should have brought some pitch. It burns like anything.”

“I don’t think Captain Amalia wanted us stopping to make supply runs along the way.”

My mind trips back over our journey alongside memories of the odd sorts of kindling I’ve had to resort to at the worst of times. “We might have something just as good.”

Jostein’s eyebrows lift. “What?”

I aim a slanted smile at him. “Dried horse manure is almost perfect fuel if you don’t mind the smell. And I’d say in this case that’s a benefit rather than a downside. Especially if we mix it into balls with dead leaves or grass...”

I’m expecting the men to recoil, and maybe Landric does, but I’m paying the least attention to him. Jostein nods slowly, and Iko clasps his hands together with an air of excitement. “We can find plenty of that along the road. The summer heat will have baked it dry quickly—it hasn’t rained for days.”

“We still have to get the burning dung into the building,” Landric points out. “I guess it’d be too heavy for arrows even if we had a bow... A strong enough throw might cross that distance.”

Iko’s face lights up. He reaches to one of the trees, just barely bigger than a sapling, and tugs on a pliant branch. “We don’t need to risk falling short. It’d be easy enough to turn part of a tree into a miniature catapult.”

Jostein chuckles. “Get to it then, master inventor. We’ll collect all the fuel we can.”

Without a word of complaint, Landric hustles alongside the squad leader and me back toward the road. He produces a sack of thin canvas that was folded in his pocket.

“You never know when you might see something worthy of collecting,” he says at my surprised glance, with a hesitant grin.

I’m not going to reject his contribution. It’ll beat hauling horse shit around in our arms.

We pick our way along the road, snatching up the harder, grittier droppings that are obviously older and tossing them into the bag. Wrinkling my nose, I grab a few pieces that are still partly damp as well. “To stick it all together.”

When we head back through the trees, we all stop to pick up any fallen leaves that’ve turned crackly brown. I add the tiniest stray twigs I can find to the mix.

By the time we reach Iko, he’s carved a branch as tall as he is off one of the trees and is testing its capabilities by launching rocks in the opposite direction from the guard post. He sends one flinging as high as the treetops just as we reach him and beams at us triumphantly. “Just need to trim a little more off the top, and it’ll be perfect.”

Jostein swipes his hands together. “I’ll survey the site around the building again and pick the best position to launch from.”

I hunker down next to the sack, and Landric follows suit across from me. “Looks like we’re stuck with manure duty,” he says.

I reach into the sack. “No one said you had to stick your hands into shit.”

He replies steadily enough. “What am I here for if I’m not going to pitch in every way I can?”

A fair question.

He watches me shape the first ball, packing several droppings with leaves and twigs and a little damp manure to glue it all together. The final result is as big as a round of bread.

Copying my technique, Landric forms a couple of his own. In the end, we have enough for five projectiles.

Returning, Jostein appraises our work and motions us all over to the edge of the trees by the back corner of the guard post. “We’ll want to fling them in there in quick succession, before they realize what’s hit them. Here’s the flint. I need to get to the door as soon as they start fleeing.”

He flicks his fingers down his front in the gesture of the divinities and unsheathes his sword.

A sense of ominous anticipation grips me like nothing I've ever experienced before. My heart is thudding, but I have the urge to yell some kind of war cry and pound my feet in a primitive dance.

We're really doing this. We're going to show these murderers what it's like to really have your lungs filled with smoke.

Landric takes the flint. I hold up the first globe of dung while he lights the spark to its side.

On the second try, the spark catches. I adjust my hands, waiting until the flames have crept all the way over one side of our projectile and dug deeper inside. Heat wafts over me, but it only spurs on the excitement quivering in my chest.

I place the flaming ball on the back of Iko's branch catapult. He shifts the angle slightly, braces himself, and lets it fly.

As the fiery dung ball careens through the air, I'm already holding out the second one to Landric. I only wait until I'm sure the fire has totally caught before yanking it over to Iko.

Shouts reverberate from the guard post. As Iko launches the second ball into the air, I'm vaguely aware of Jostein sprinting across the open ground between the trees and the building's walls. Most of my attention is on getting the rest of our projectiles lit.

It's only between the fourth and fifth that I let myself take the swiftest glance between the trees. My breath catches.

I drag my gaze back to the lump of dung and leaves I need to heft, but the flames flaring above the wooden walls and climbing to the lookout blaze on in my memory.

More yells ring out alongside the rising roar of the fire. Metal clangs, and bodies thump.

My heart stutters with the thought of the threats Jostein is facing alone, but all I can do is keep up my part of the bargain.

The instant Iko has propelled the final fiery dung ball into the guard post, he drops his catapult, and we all run after Jostein. I whip my hunting knife from its sheath, not sure how to land the best blows but knowing I'll fight with everything I have regardless.

As my gaze catches on Jostein in the wavering glow of the fire, my rushing steps slow. He's just slamming his sword into the gut of one of the Darium soldiers, right where there must be a joint in the basic armor.

The enemy soldier crumples with a spurt of blood over his lips, next to four other foes Jostein has already toppled all on his own.

I guess a warrior has an advantage when they're prepared and their opponents are dashing around in a panic. All the same, he cuts a magnificent figure. I've never seen anyone wield a blade that skillfully.

One more soldier stumbles out of the flaming building. Iko springs forward to run him through.

The four of us remain braced around the guard post's entrance, but no one else hurtles toward us. Any other guards currently stationed there must have succumbed to the fire.

When it's obvious that no one could still be living inside the inferno that's baking my face, I take a step back and sheathe my knife. A victorious, giddy laugh tumbles out of me.

Iko whoops and slings his arm around me, spinning both of us around as if we're in the middle of a dance. "We did it. We destroyed those fuckers."

As he sets me back on my feet, his handsome face fills my entire view, his gray eyes glinting with delight. In that moment, I think he might kiss me.

I think I might want him to.

My pulse hiccups, and he lets me go.

As I wet my lips, the motion sending a tingle of desire through me, Landric cranes his neck toward the far side of the fort. "They've got a stable. Maybe we can ride back."

The thrill of triumph sweeps through me again, strong enough to carry every other consideration away. The words spill out of me.

“There’s a whole fort less than a day’s ride north of here. Who says we have to stop now? Let’s show Captain Amalia just how worthy this risk is.”

The men stare at me for a moment. Then Jostein breaks into a soft laugh of his own.

Iko claps his hands, his teeth flashing in a feral grin. “I like the way you think, Spitfire. Let’s ruin them all.”



# CHAPTER EIGHT



## SIGNY

IF I'D KNOWN HOW big a Darium fort actually is, maybe I wouldn't have made such a bold suggestion.

I peer over the top of the knoll from where I'm sprawled in the grass, fidgeting with my sleeve. It's still stiff from the dunk we all took in the river we crossed this morning. I'm glad to have let the current sweep away the worst of the grime of travel, but the water's left all my clothes a little tight against my skin.

Or maybe that's just the tension winding through my body as I stare at the stone wall below.

Next to me, Iko swipes his hand across his mouth. “Well, we’re not burning much of that place.”

The two-story building beyond the wall is built of stone too. I worry at my lower lip. “I guess the floors are probably wood?”

On the other side of Iko, Jostein frowns. “We’re going to need more than that to work with. We can’t even get to the floors until we’re inside.”

With two guards posted by the gate, it’s hard to figure how we’re going to accomplish even the first part of that sequence. And what are we going to do once we’re inside? There must be three or four times as many soldiers stationed in the fort as we faced at the guard post.

As much as I admired Jostein’s skill with a sword, it seems a bit much to expect him to tackle a few dozen armed men by himself, especially when they won’t be fleeing a rampaging fire. Even with Iko in the mix, we’ll be overwhelmed.

I’m not reckless enough to think Landric and I will contribute much to the slaying part of the plan.

Iko adjusts his position, the side of his arm grazing mine. A tingle of heat races over my skin, sending me back to the moment last night when he embraced me.

“Maybe we just harass them,” he says. “Hurl some crap at them and irritate them. We could get alcohol or lantern oil in that town down the road, put together some basic incendiary devices.”

My stomach knots. “That won’t make much of a point. If anything, it’ll make us look weak—prove that we can’t really harm them at any kind of larger fortress.”

But maybe that’s true. Maybe I should call this absurd mission off before we get into real trouble.

Captain Amalia only asked us to destroy the guard post. We pulled that off. She might be willing to encourage more of her soldiers to join our rebellion now, and Landric and I could appeal to our neighbors...

Of course, even with a force of a hundred, I'm not entirely sure how we'd do any damage to the fort. All they have to do is keep the door shut and pelt us with arrows from above.

Was I out of my mind to think we could make a real stand against the Darium forces?

As my doubts gnaw at me, a large horse-drawn cart comes rattling along the road at the base of the hill, which leads east from the nearby town past the fort. I expect it to continue on by, but instead it veers onto the side lane to the fort's gate.

At my other side, with a careful distance between us, Landric makes a thoughtful sound. "Of course. They'd have a merchant from town bringing supplies regularly. They never bother with any grunt work they can make one of us do for them."

It appears he's right. The cart comes to a stop in front of the gate, and the driver waits while one of the guards scans the cargo: lumpy burlap sacks, casks of ale, a couple of baskets of fruit.

The guard steps back with his arms crossed over his chest. His brusque voice carries up the hill. "Commandant Paulo wants more of that pork roast tomorrow. And it'd better be fresher this time."

The merchant bobs his head with obvious anxiety and murmurs something obsequious. The other guard pushes open the door and ushers in the cart.

Landric leans his chin on his folded hands. "That's one way to get inside."

Jostein knits his brow. "We couldn't hide on that thing without the driver noticing us. He'd need to agree to the scheme."

"I can't imagine he likes his employers all that much," I say.

"He probably likes not being slain by them." Jostein tips his head to the side. "Let's head over to town so we can at least find out where he's coming from."

“And grab ourselves something to eat,” Iko puts in. “I’m starving.”

My stomach gurgles in agreement. We found a patch of wild raspberry bushes on our trek, but the relief that snack brought has long since faded.

We tramp down the far side of the hill to the spot where we left the horses to graze. As Jostein helps me into the saddle and then swings up behind me, I will down the flush that creeps into my cheeks.

There were only three animals in the stable by the guard post. It makes sense that I’d be the one to double up, since I weigh the least, and he was the only one confident in handling the horse with a passenger in front.

I lean tentatively against his broad chest, doing my best not to think about the warmth of his muscular thighs on either side of mine. His arms wrap loosely around me, almost a hug, as he flicks the reins.

I’m already getting tingles when I’m close to Iko. Panting after both of them seems a bit much.

And then there’s Landric, glancing over at us with a tightening of his mouth as if he’s not entirely happy seeing me in another man’s arms. The All-Giver only knows what’s going on in his head.

I do my best to focus on the terrain around us and staying balanced as we trot across the fields, taking an indirect route toward the town so we aren’t seen from the fort. I’ve only had the chance to ride a few times as a kid, many years ago. I forgot how unnerving being perched on a creature that has a mind of its own could be.

Jostein guides the stallion with total confidence, clicking his tongue so it perks its ears and steps a little faster. I turn my head so I can see his face at the edge of my vision. “You seem like you have a lot of experience with horses. Are you normally with the cavalry?”

Most of his colleagues who joined us once we met up with the captain were on foot.

He shakes his head, his chin grazing my hair. “My parents are horse breeders and trainers. I grew up with them. So my superior officers tend to give any riding-related tasks to me.”

“All the better for him to sweep pretty ladies off their feet,” Iko pipes up.

My cheeks outright flare, but Jostein simply snorts. “Or drag them away from disaster.”

I decide I’m better off keeping my mouth shut for the rest of the ride.

Not far from the first buildings of town, we pass a wagon that’s sagging amid the grass. One of the wheels has cracked through. Dirt stains the canvas covering on either side of a massive tear. I peer inside but find it empty. It looks like the owner must have taken out their cargo and abandoned it as unsalvageable, months if not years ago.

Because of our roundabout route, we circle around to the road just as the merchant’s cart is returning to the town. We tie the horses at a hitching post on the main street and amble along at a cautious distance until we see him guide it around back of a grocer’s shop a few streets beyond the central square.

The four of us wander into the shop as if just there to stock up on provisions. As Jostein and Iko pick out apples and eggs and a couple bottles of milk, voices filter from the back room—the merchant and his wife, I suspect.

“The delivery went smoothly?” she asks.

“No trouble at all. I’ll just need to speak to the butcher tonight. As long as we keep them happy up there at the fort, we’ve nothing to worry about.”

I find myself exchanging a glance with Landric. That attitude doesn’t bode well for convincing him to turn on the soldiers.

Iko’s faint grimace suggests he’s drawn the same conclusion. He and Jostein pay the clerk for our selections, and we duck back out, gnawing on the apples and passing around one of the bottles.

The cool creaminess of the milk takes the edge off my hunger but doesn't lift my spirits. "Now what?"

Jostein sighs. "Let's go back to the square and get ourselves some bread from the bakery. It'll be easier to think once we've had a full meal."

Iko nods. "We should stroll around and visit each of the shops. You never know what else we might hear from the locals."

It's a nice thought, but we pass the last two hours of the afternoon gulping down our meager meal and overhearing nothing but basic pleasantries and irrelevant gossip between the townspeople. As evening sets in, Jostein checks his purse and declares that we have enough funds to splurge on a hot dinner at the tavern.

As we step into the loud, hazy space, my stomach sinks. I can't help thinking this is a gesture of condolence—that we'll eat and then the responsible soldier will declare that there's nothing more we can do here, that we need to head back to his squadron.

I'm not even sure what I could say in argument.

So I pick at my leg of roast chicken slowly at our table in the corner, peering at the customers around us as I chew. I almost choke on my current mouthful when three Darium soldiers push into the room.

They're wearing their standard uniforms, black with white bones, but no helmets, which only makes them slightly less terrifying. The locals at the nearby tables tense at their arrival, a few cringing to the side.

The man at the lead calls for mugs of ale without any indication he's going to pay for them. The barkeep hustles to pour the drinks.

I can't help remembering Jostein's story about the soldiers who murdered his uncle and cousin.

One of the other soldiers waves her arm at the patrons already sitting at a prime table. They clutch their drinks and

dash off to a more cramped one that remains open near the wall.

The previous bar chatter has dwindled. As the soldiers drop into their chairs and enjoy their drinks, the conversations only continue in lowered voices.

I force down my mouthful of chicken, my chest constricting. At least it doesn't seem the soldiers are here to investigate a recent guard post burning.

Landric shifts uneasily in his chair. He speaks under his breath. "Should we go?"

Jostein shakes his head, his voice pitched equally low. "It'll be noticeable, so soon after they arrived. Signy's only halfway through her dinner. We wait a little and then go."

I start plowing through my chicken at a much more enthusiastic pace.

I'm nearly down to the bone when a man gets up from a table a couple over from the soldiers'. His flushed face and unsteady balance suggest he's had a little more ale than is wise.

Especially in present company. He heads toward the bar, sways on his feet, and jostles the back of one of the soldiers' chairs.

The man jerks around with a snap. "Watch yourself!"

Then the woman who claimed the table lets out a chuckle that sends a shiver down my spine. "Thaddeus wanted to have more of a lark. Why don't you play darts with this one?"

I don't understand what she means until the soldier who ordered the drinks gets to his feet. The drunk mumbles an apology, but the other man ushers him over to a dart board hanging on the side wall. "You disrupted our fun, you can help us have a little more."

"Thaddeus," his other colleague says with a trace of dismay, but he shuts his mouth when the larger man glares at him.

The drunk's friends still sitting at his table watch with paling faces, but no one else dares even try to intervene. The soldier

positions the drunk right in front of the dart board. “Let’s see how well I can outline that fat head of yours.”

As he steps back with a handful of darts, my stomach churns. Jostein’s shoulders stiffen, but Iko sets a hand on his forearm to warn him to stay put.

We could take down these three soldiers, but what would that mean for the town? Would we leave another smoking wreckage in the wake of our attempted rebellion?

We weren’t prepared for this.

The soldier whips his first dart toward the drunk. It thuds into the wall less than an inch above his victim’s rumpled hair. His friend gives a whoop of approval. The other soldier stares at his drink without a word.

So it continues, one dart after another, flying so close to the drunk’s head he must feel the air shudder with their passing. The fourth dart hits a little too close, nicking the shell of his ear and falling to the floor.

The drunk gives a muffled yelp. Blood beads on his ear, but he holds himself even more still with a brief shudder.

The whole tavern has gone silent except for the soldiers. We watch as the last two darts smack the wood on either side of the man’s neck.

“An enjoyable jape,” the soldier says casually, and saunters over to pull out the darts. My hands clench at the thought that he might pick up the game all over again, but instead he shoves the drunk toward his table. “Keep your ass in your seat, and we shouldn’t have any problems.”

My gaze slides to the drunk’s friends. Their sallow faces tighten with restrained anger as they track the soldier’s assured stride back to his own chair.

An idea starts to come together in my head. There are a lot of things broken here... and we might not be the only people interested in fixing them.

It was never supposed to be only about us, after all.



I glance around at my companions, speaking at barely a whisper. “I think I see an opportunity here.”

A small smile crosses Iko’s face.

Jostein hesitates, but maybe his gift tells him I know what I’m talking about. “Give it your best shot.”

At least one of us has faith in me. I’m not convinced yet that my conviction isn’t just willful stubbornness.

The soldiers don’t head out until after the next peal of the town bell. I wait another few minutes to be sure they aren’t going to barge back in, but then I see the drunk and his friends getting up from their table.

I beckon my companions to follow me and hurry after them.

We catch up in the square just outside the tavern. Even the drunken man is walking fairly steadily, the encounter with the darts having sobered him up.

I come up beside them and clear my throat. “That was a sick game they played in there.”

The four men slow, the main target of the soldier’s game touching his blood-dappled ear.

“It is what it is,” one of them says warily.

“But does it really have to be? There’s more of us than there are of them.”

Another of the bunch considers me with narrowed eyes. “What are you saying?”

I hold up my hands in a gesture of innocence. “Just speculating. It’s been hard not to, lately... I don’t know if you heard, but a group of Veldunian rebels burned down a Darium guard post just south of here last night. They took out all the soldiers who were in it.”

I’m prepared to drop the subject there, but interest immediately lights in all four pairs of eyes, as much as the skeptic tries to keep a poker face.

“Serves them right,” the third man mutters, and the skeptical one elbows him.

The drunk exhales roughly. “It does. I wouldn’t mind seeing something like that here.” Then his gaze darts around as if he’s afraid the soldiers might be listening in.

“We’re not doing anything with the fort right there,” the skeptic grumbles.

I offer them a crooked smile. “Maybe you can, though. Word’s being passed around between people who’d want to see some change. Anyone who’d like for the Darium army to get what they deserve should meet in the field west of town tomorrow at the tenth bell.”

If we make it sound like someone else is organizing the scheme, the locals won’t point us out as the instigators if they decide to tattle.

The men scan both me and the three men behind me. “You’re all going?”

Iko joins in with a casual shrug, playing along with my story. “Might as well find out what could happen, right? No commitment.”

The group exchanges glances. I step back as if I’m not all that invested. “I just thought you might want a part in that. Don’t pass on the word to anyone else unless you’re sure they’re more loyal to Velduny than the invaders.”

The men walk on, murmuring amongst themselves, and we draw back into the shadows next to the tavern. The corners of Jostein’s mouth have quirked upward. “What are you up to now, rebel maiden?”

I ignore the giddy quiver the nickname sends over my skin and rub my hands together. “I’ve got a wagon to fix, and then we’ll need to do some more grocery shopping.”

## CHAPTER NINE



IKO

THE PUNGENT CHEMICAL SMELL of lantern oil wafts out of the bottle. Wrinkling my nose, I stuff the last rag partway down the neck and watch the liquid gradually saturate it.

Signy straightens up from where she was crouched by the side of the old wagon. Her movement, all athletic grace, draws my gaze automatically.

She pats the side of the wagon, which is now standing evenly on four solid wheels and stripped of its ragged covering. “There. All we need to do is harness the horse and load it up.”

I leap to my feet. “I’ll help you with that. I think we’ve got a good supply of explosives now.”

Signy eyes the rows of assembled bottles and lets out a soft laugh. “I should probably be worried by how much you seemed to enjoy putting those together.”

I thought she was pretty from the first moment I saw her hollering for her neighbors to push back the Darium soldiers, but when she smiles, my heart skips a beat.

I grin back at her. “Who doesn’t enjoy a good blast?”

As she fiddles with the harness, a mix of the abandoned one that’d started to rot and fresh strips of leather we scavenged from the shoe shop’s rubbish heap, I lead over the largest of our three stolen stallions. It’s obvious that this woman has never harnessed a horse before, so she lets me take the lead, eyeing the animal warily. But despite her uncertainty, she rises to the task with the same unshakeable determination I’ve seen over and over in the past few days.

How did this incredible woman manage to drop into my life out of nowhere, in the worst of circumstances?

We heave the three large casks we’ve acquired into the front of the cart. I check to confirm that the lid will easily pop off before stocking the base of each with several doctored bottles and a flint. Signy should fit inside easily enough, but it’ll be more of a squeeze for any of the rest of us.

As we load up the rest of the crates and sacks, mostly stuffed with trash with only a topping of food showing where necessary to sell the story, Jostein and Landric come riding over on the other two horses.

Jostein hefts the raw roast in its waxed paper wrapping and nestles it in clear view. It’s the key to our entry to the fort after all.

Landric dispenses handfuls of battered fruits and vegetables from his sack, carefully arranging them so only the best parts are showing. He motions to Signy. “I got your lemons!”

I can’t help watching the interplay of emotions on his pale face as she hustles over to collect the yellow fruit. He’s trying

to play it cool, but there's an almost desperate intensity to his gaze.

I don't think she notices how much it bothers him that she's still standoffish with him. And I suspect that bothers him even more.

But if he used to talk to her the way the rest of her idiot neighbors did the other morning, her aloofness serves him right.

Signy gets down to work cutting into the lemons and squeezing juice into a few small oilskin pouches. Before I can ask her what she's planning on seasoning with the stuff, Jostein grunts in warning.

Several figures are heading our way from town. I hop up on the back of the cart for a better view. "They're all wearing regular clothes, no soldier uniforms. Three of them are from the bunch we talked to last night, a couple of women around the same age, and two older men. I think they're all right."

I don't have any magical gift for judging people's intentions, but the grim resolve I can make out on the new arrivals' faces and the forcefulness of their strides suggests they're committed to a task they expect to be risky but worthwhile. If they were coming out here just to betray us, I'd expect to see more nerves or signs of guilt.

We all gather together to meet our accomplices. As they near, I take in the details with a growing sense of satisfaction.

Not only do they look resolved, they've also come prepared. The two older men are carrying crossbows, as is one of the younger men. One of the women has a regular bow slung over one shoulder and a quiver of arrows on the other. The other woman and two men carry hunting knives.

They're definitely anticipating a battle.

I step a little ahead of my companions and smile in welcome. "Good to see you all here. Are you ready to crack some Darium heads?"

A gleam comes into the eyes of one of the younger men. "Are we taking them on today? Where are we going at them?"

The older man next to him gives him a nudge. “I’d like to know who we’re dealing with first, Sepp—and they’ll want to know who we are.”

Sepp ducks his head with an abashed look. “We were careful, like you said. This is my dad and a friend of his, Otmar. They do a lot of hunting—they know how to handle a weapon. And Tilman and Weiland brought their wives. The more of us can pitch in, the better, right?”

Jostein considers the group. “What happened to your other friend from last night?”

It’s the drunken one who’s missing, the one the soldier aimed his darts at.

Tilman grimaces. “He’s too hungover to be much use this morning, and I’m not sure he’d have the guts for it anyway. But those pricks from the fort have been terrorizing the whole town for too long. If we can do something about it...”

Otmar the hunter adjusts his crossbow under his arm. “What *are* we going to do? Who called for this expedition?”

Before I can speak, Signy spreads her hands apologetically. “It’s just us. Last night, we needed to be careful too. But we’ve already destroyed one of their guard posts, just the four of us. With a little more strategy and the seven of you, I think we can take down the entire fort.” She tips her head toward the distant building.

“Who *are* you?” Sepp’s father demands, though his face has lit up at the promise of her suggestion.

Landric motions between him and Signy. “Darium soldiers destroyed our home a few days ago. We’ve had enough. It’s time to send the invaders running.”

Weiland’s wife eases closer to the cart. “What exactly is the plan? We can’t all fit in the cart.”

My mind has already been spinning through the possibilities, but Jostein is the most natural leader among us. He probably took stock before they even introduced themselves.

He points to the casks. “We can have three people hiding in the barrels—they’re empty. The women are the smallest, so I’d suggest the three of you for that task. Iko will drive the cart, since he’s the best at bullshitting his way through tense situations.” He shoots me a wry smile.

“Guilty as charged.” I salute him and then turn to our new allies. “I’ve stocked the casks with several homemade incendiary devices and flints. You’ll have about ten seconds from when you light the rags to throw them before the glass bursts on you. I’ll signal you when it’s time—I’ll stop the cart partway through the door and say, ‘I almost forgot something.’”

Signy points to the one woman’s bow. “You can stash that and your arrows between the sacks and grab them when you need them. And we also have these.” She hands over the pouches of lemon juice and tosses the last to me. “Throw it in the soldiers’ faces when they get close. It’ll blind them for a little while.”

Clever as well as brave. I attach the pouch to my belt. “The three of you can use the casks as shelter for as long as the situation allows. Just keep lighting and tossing out the bottles—the more fire and smoke we can get going, the more confusion there’ll be that works to our advantage.”

Jostein walks over to the horses. “As soon as we see the first spurts of fire, the rest of us will charge in from over the nearest hill. I’ll ride... and it’d be good to have someone else particularly skilled with arms at the front of the charge.” He beckons Otmar over. “Landric will lead everyone else on foot. Just get in there as quickly as you can and stop any soldiers who try to run or ride off. Any concerns?”

The newcomers have gone wide-eyed, taking it all in, but I can tell it’s as much excitement as anxiety flushing their faces. Jostein sounds so confident I already believe we’ll pull the whole plan off without a hitch.

Signy leaps into the cart, her eyes glinting fiercely. “They won’t be expecting a thing. They figure they’ve got us all cowed. We’re about to show them different.”

Her words propel everyone into action. Otmar strides over to join Jostein at the horses.

Landric motions for the other men to follow him. “Come on, we need to get going to make sure we’re in position ahead of the cart.”

They set off at a brisk tramp, and Signy and I help the two women into the cart. They slide tentatively into the barrels, their feet setting the bottles clinking quietly, and crouch down.

“You’ve found the flints?” I check. “We jabbed a few discreet air holes so you should be able to breathe just fine, and the lid will pop off the moment you smack it. Let’s try it just so you know how it’ll feel.”

Signy ducks down into her own cask, and they practice a couple of bursts out of hiding. By the second time, the other women are laughing breathlessly.

“It’s really going to work,” one of them says.

I smirk. “The assholes aren’t going to know what hit them.”

With the lids in place, I take my seat at the front of the cart. I touch the blanket I laid there, which is covering the new weapon I spent a few hours last night constructing after a flare of gift-given inspiration, and then twitch the reins.

The stallion heaves forward, and the abandoned wagon rolls after him.

Even with our mostly false load, it’s enough of a burden that our pace is about the same as if we were walking. I expect we’ve given Landric and his followers a solid enough lead that they’ll be in place in time even with their roundabout route.

Jostein really was quite astute in how he divided us up. Every group has at least one of our original four in it, so our new allies won’t be unsupervised.

As I direct the horse onto the lane that leads to the fort, I glance toward the nearby hill. A flash of black cloth atop it confirms that the others are ready.

But this next step depends entirely on me.



I keep my posture straight as the horse clops up to the gate and draw the cart to a stop a few paces away. The two guards posted outside peer at me with vaguely puzzled expressions.

“Xaver fell off a ladder and broke his arm last night,” I say, using the name I gathered with a little chatting around town. “He sent me instead. Wanted to get that pork roast to your commandant bright and early.”

I motion to the hunk of meat, dribbling a bit of blood through the folds of the paper.

One of the guards walks over and then nods. “Thank you. He’ll be glad to hear it.”

They move to open the gate.

No expression of condolences for the grocer’s supposed injury, but I didn’t expect one. And barely a hint of caution.

How very complacent they’ve gotten. So sure every Veldunian is too beaten down to stand against them.

I’m looking forward to proving how wrong they are.

The gate creaks open. I tap the horse forward. The cart’s wheels crunch over the pebbles embedded in the dirt.

When we’re as far inside as we can get while still blocking the gate from shutting, I tug the stallion to an abrupt stop. My pulse thunders, but I manage to say the words loud and clear.

“I almost forgot something.”

I yank my doctored weapon out from under the blanket and spring to my feet. In the few seconds it’ll have taken for the women to light their first rags, I’ve aimed the morphed crossbow at the guards by the gate and shot three arrows with one press of the trigger.

One of the men was already starting to duck. The arrow pierces the center of his forehead. The second flies wild, but the third strikes the other guard in the chest.

Then the women erupt from the casks, and flames streak through the air.

Amid the shattering of glass on the hardened earth, shouts ring out all through the fort. I jump into the shelter of the cart and jam three more arrows into my bow.

More bottles careen through the air. Flames roar up from the splotches of spilled lantern oil. The tangy smoke prickles in my lungs.

The second the women duck into their casks again, I fire off another round of arrows toward the men rushing from the fort's main doorway.

All three hit their mark this time, though two are hardly fatal injuries. More soldiers are hurtling toward us.

I draw my sword instead and vault over the side of the cart.

Another round of bottles with burning rags smash to the ground, one setting a soldier's pantleg on fire. I swing my sword across another man's throat before he can get close enough to stab at Signy.

The woman who brought her bow hurls one last bottle and scrambles out to retrieve her weapon. She bobs in and out of shelter, firing at the approaching soldiers.

My sword clangs against a longer one. I shove my attacker backward with a kick to the gut.

And Jostein barrels through the gate with a thunder of hoofbeats, his own sword flashing through the air.

He cuts down two Darium soldiers in quick succession. Otmar gallops in right behind him, shooting from his single but totally acceptable crossbow.

At the corner of my eye, Signy clambers out of her cask and leaps right over the front of the cart.

With a lurch of my pulse, I spin around. She's already darting between the patches of flames, two more burning bottles in her hands.

She ducks under the sweep of a soldier's dagger and flings her cargo through the open door of the fort.

Toward the wooden floors.

Fire roars up within the building. Within seconds, the shouts take on a frantic edge.

I spring forward and grab Signy's arm, throwing myself between her and an attacker. As our blades clash, she whips out her hunting knife and rams it into the Darium soldier's gut.

When she steps back, it's not just exhilaration but pride shining in her face.

The fort is falling into ruin around us, and it's all because of her. She *should* be fucking proud.

Gods know I'm proud to have been here with her, making the triumph she envisioned real.

Jostein lets out a menacing yell and topples another foe. His stance radiates power and passion—all that fire our superiors have liked to claim he lacks.

Maybe my friend needed this rebellion just as much as Signy did.

With a barrage of thudding feet, the last of our number charges into the fort. Knives flash, and the older man adds his crossbow arrows to the projectiles soaring through the air.

A Darium archer from a high window risks shooting into the melee and carves a bloody line through Landric's bicep. The man barely flinches—and then Otmar has launched his own arrow straight into the enemy's throat.

I don't know how many we've already felled. I keep slashing and stabbing while the fire crackles through the fort, until flames lick at the second-floor windows.

All at once, I realize the onslaught has stopped. There's no one around me except my co-conspirators.

We wait for a minute, our chests heaving with the exertion, our breaths rasping from the smoke. Then a triumphant laugh bursts from one of the women's throats.

She raises her fist in the air. "For Barba!"

Sepp imitates her gesture. "And for Krissem!"

Jostein's jaw tightens. "For Dirk and Fritzi!"

A lump clogs my throat. I propel the words past it. “For Lutz!”

For the first time, I really do feel like I’ve taken back some of the power Dariu has stolen from us for so long. Dealt back some of the horror they’ve inflicted on us for centuries.

We withdraw from the wreckage of the fort on shaky legs. Otmar dismounts to hand his horse over to me. He presses his arm against his side, where blood is seeping through his shirt.

“Just a scratch,” he protests when his friends exclaim and hurry to bandage it. “More than worth it.”

He turns to Sepp and his father. “We shouldn’t let it stop here. Gods smite them all, we need them right out of our country. If we could manage this with just eleven of us…”

Sepp’s father nods. “We’ll go to Vadan and see who we can rally.”

The woman with the bow taps her husband. “We could go to Childeric and do the same. We have to spread the word that the assholes can be beaten.”

I grin at their enthusiasm, but Jostein looks abruptly concerned. “Spread the word,” he says, “but lay low for now. If all goes well, the Veldunian army will mobilize in our favor. When our soldiers come to help you, you’ll be able to do so much more damage.”

With the elation emanating from our newly turned rebels, I’m not sure they’ll listen to his caution. But then, I’m not even sure they should.



WE DON’T WASTE TIME clearing out from the area of the fort and heading our separate ways. There’s no evidence left behind to indicate who was responsible for razing the fort.

As far as the Darium empire is concerned, it might as well be all of Velduny. That seems fitting.

Our band of four rides south for most of the day, back toward Feldan where we can regroup with our squadron. We stop only to rest, graze the horses, and to wash off the worst of the battle grime at a pond. After the latter, I find a small clearing in the forest where I can let the sunlight bake some of the dampness from my hair and shirt.

Jostein follows me there. He swipes his dark hair back from his forehead and leans against the tree opposite me.

His gaze slides back in the direction of the stream, where we left Signy still washing to offer her some privacy. “She’s really something, isn’t she?”

There’s more than awe in his voice. As I sit up straighter, a prickling sensation runs through my gut. “She is. I don’t think I’ve ever met a woman like that.”

My friend’s attention returns to me, his bright eyes evaluating. “You’ve certainly dallied with enough of them before tossing them aside. She deserves better treatment than that, Iko.”

I bristle at his implication. “There’s a difference between two people knowing it was never anything worth keeping and ‘tossing aside’ someone. I hadn’t met anyone I wanted more than that with.”

An edge creeps into his voice. “But you have now?”

I narrow my eyes at him. “Have *you*? Since when do you let yourself get distracted by a pretty face?”

Jostein lets out a rough guffaw. “She’s leagues more than that, which you know as well as I do. Gods smite me, I’ve never gotten in your way. You can’t give me a chance the one time I want it?”

I push to my feet, the prickling heat that’s a mix of anger and jealousy spreading up through my chest. “It’s hardly up to either of us, is it? I’m pretty sure she’s the sole decider of who she’d end up kissing and whatever else. And she should know what her options are.”

Jostein’s shoulders tense. “Iko—”

At the crunch of footsteps in the brush, we both jerk around.

Signy stops a few paces from the clearing. Her arms wrap loosely around her chest as if she needs the reassurance of an embrace. “What are you two talking about over here?”

# CHAPTER TEN



## SIGNY

I DON'T THINK I'VE ever seen Iko look remotely flustered before, but his tan face reddens as he seems to grope for the words to answer my question. My stomach drops.

All I made out of their low voices was something about “she” needing to know what her options are. And the only “she” around here is me.

What options could there be beyond heading back to their squadron and seeing how much farther we can take this mission? Are they discussing whether they should try to convince me to back down?

Why would they be having any kind of conversation that concerns me off where I can't be a part of it?

Iko opens his mouth to speak, but Jostein beats him to the punch. Though the squad leader looks a tad ruffled himself, his voice comes out with typical steadiness. "I mentioned to Iko how much I admire you, and he's trying to persuade me that I shouldn't act on my interest."

Even as my heart stutters at the confession, Iko is jumping in, his cheeks still flushed. "That wasn't it at all, Jos, and you know it. I was only saying that I have just as much right to express my own interest."

My jaw has gone slack. I glance from one handsome face to the other, my pulse recovered and thumping at twice as rapid a pace as usual. "You mean... You would want... *Both* of you..."

I can't quite seem to sort my thoughts out into a coherent order. I thought the flares of attraction I've felt were mostly if not entirely on my side.

I'm a nobody who's accomplished nothing before the last few days, whose own godlen didn't believe in her. How is it possible that not one but two stunning, capable men could want to court me?

"It's out there now," Jostein says to Iko, and turns his attention back to me. The intensity of his bright blue eyes sends a thrill down the middle of my chest. "You're the most incredible woman I've ever met, and I'd be honored to become more than just your colleague."

Iko rolls his eyes as if exasperated by his friend's formal phrasing. When he looks at me, there's something oddly nervous about his usual carefree smile. "You're fucking fantastic. I'd welcome the chance to give you everything you deserve from a man."

He pauses, taking in my reaction. "Although naturally you don't have to accept either proposition. If you're not inclined to be kissing either of us, we wouldn't press the issue."



A startled laugh tumbles out of me. I rake my hand back through my travel-mussed hair, my head still spinning, and look down at my feet. “That isn’t the problem. I never expected... I think you’re both incredible too.”

There’s a beat of silence, and then Iko cracks a grin. “We’ve made a good impression then.”

“I guess you could say that,” I mutter, and inhale slowly.

I’ve stared down Darium soldiers, ready to meet my death by their hands. I should be able to look these two men in the face while I’m talking about a much more enjoyable outcome.

I lift my eyes, girding myself. A blush tickles across my cheeks at the avidness in both their gazes. My heart is still thumping along far too quickly.

“We’ve only just started to get to know each other,” I say. “I like both of you a lot so far. I don’t think I could choose between you right now.” Not without risking regretting that choice before long.

Gods above, how did I end up in the position to need to choose at all?

Iko cocks his head, his smile turning sly in a way that sets off sparks over my skin. “Maybe that’s not a problem. You could get to know us both a little more at the same time.” He glances at Jostein. “Friends don’t have to pitch a fit about sharing, do they?”

Jostein blinks at him and then considers me. A glimmer of passion lights in his eyes. “We do work well together in many other ways...”

“Mmhm. So why not give this a try? Fan our spitfire’s flames twice over.”

Iko trails his hand down my arm, and I sway toward him automatically. Heat courses through my body, muddling my thoughts even more.

The soldier steps closer, brushing my hair back over my shoulder, and presses a tentative kiss to the side of my neck.

The graze of his lips brings a gasp to my throat. I tilt my head farther to offer him better access, my skin lighting up all the way down to my toes.

I haven't been touched with any kind of desire in more than two years. I'd forgotten how good it can feel.

It's *never* felt this good, with the certainty that the man offering it truly wants me for more than just his satisfaction.

As Iko deepens his attentions with a flick of his tongue, a strangled sound escapes Jostein. He eases in at my other side, tips my chin upward, and captures my mouth.

Great God help me, this is another realm of pleasure altogether. I kiss him back instinctively, more heat flooding my body and pooling between my thighs.

The two men enfold me, Iko teasing his hand across my belly to rest on my hip, Jostein caressing the small of my back. When Jostein releases my mouth to trail his lips along my jaw and nip my earlobe, Iko wastes no time in claiming a kiss of his own.

A whimper of need escapes me, which might be embarrassing if these men didn't seem to need me just as much.

Jostein stifles a groan and nibbles a path right down to my shoulder. His stroking fingers creep up under the hem of my skirt, drawing scorching lines on the bare skin of my back.

Not to be outdone, Iko lifts his hand to skim his knuckles over the peak of my breast through my shirt. My nipple pebbles with a jolt of bliss, and he swallows my gasp with the deepening of his kiss.

I grip his shirt and Jostein's arm, my legs abruptly wobbly. All at once I'm wondering whether I should *ever* have to choose.

Their combined attention is so delicious. How could anyone give this up once they've had it?

Jostein lets out a little growl that seems to demand he resume his claim on my lips. Iko draws slightly back with a

soft chuckle—

And a twig cracks beyond the clearing with a rough inhalation.

All our heads snap around. Landric has halted several paces away into the forest, but well within view of our intimate embrace. His eyes have gone wide, his face wan but spotting with uncomfortable red before my eyes.

“I— Never mind.” He whips around and strides away, his shoulders hunching.

A different sort of heat ripples through me—a mix of shame and anger that this man who’s never treated me as better than trash before the past few days can make me feel that shame.

What’s it to him who I kiss or how many?

Then it occurs to me with a sudden chill that my private choices might become much less private as soon as we reunite with our neighbors. Is he going to tell all of them that I’ve become some kind of insatiable seductress on top of all my other failings?

My stance tenses, the desire that consumed me earlier snuffing out.

Jostein sighs. “He’ll get over it.”

What’s there to get over? It’s not as if Landric’s ever wanted me for himself.

I shake my head and gather myself. “I’d better go talk to him, to make sure this won’t become a bigger problem.” I pause, glancing at both of them with a renewed blush tingling across my face. “Um, but it definitely wasn’t a problem for me.”

I hustle off after Landric before I can get any more embarrassed, with Iko’s pleased laugh following me.

Landric has stalked all the way back to the stream. He’s crouched down at the bank, peering into the water but giving the impression he’s not actually seeing anything there.

At my approach, his gaze jerks up. He pushes to his feet and turns to face me, his expression tightening.

I stop a few paces away, my stomach balling into a hard lump. I just had one of the most amazing experiences of my life—why did this jerk have to ruin it?

“It wasn’t even my idea,” I blurt out. “Not that I’m saying it won’t happen again. Not that it’s any of your or anyone else’s business.”

The blotchy flush has crept back over Landric’s face. His eyes flick down toward the ground and back to me. “I know it’s not. I wasn’t going to criticize.”

I frown, crossing my arms over my chest. “You want to, though, don’t you? You look like you’re already thinking of all the new insults you could toss at me.”

To my surprise, he flinches as if the accusation startles him. “Of course not. I wouldn’t— I never said anything against you.”

My eyebrows shoot up. “One of us has a very spotty memory, then.”

Landric’s hands twist the fabric of his tunic. “I know how it must have sounded. But whenever I heard anyone speak against you, I did my best to push them in another direction, to get their attention away from you so they’d leave you alone.”

He did?

My mind careens back through all our brief encounters over the past several years. It’s true that in most of them I remember someone else making the first jab or two, and him diverting them to some other topic. But the way he did it...

“You made it sound as if I wasn’t worth bothering with.”

Landric’s head droops. “If I was too obviously defending you, everyone would have looked at me differently too.”

My tone sharpens. “How horrible for you.”

He meets my hard gaze with obvious effort, his dark brown eyes simmering with emotions I don’t understand. “I didn’t

want to make myself a target. I had things I was trying to accomplish... It was selfish, and all of that seems pointless now anyway. I'm sorry. I should have spoken up for you more, clearer. You didn't deserve any of it."

His voice has gone raw, every word searing with honest regret. My arms fall to my sides. I don't know what to do with his apology.

"What makes you so sure I didn't deserve it?" I find myself asking.

His expression turns incredulous. "So you overstepped when you were twelve. Twelve-year-olds aren't exactly the wisest human beings in the world. And you didn't get along with your aunt and uncle—well, I didn't find them to be the most agreeable people either. You took care of yourself without hurting anyone, even though the way we all acted must have hurt you. You even took the time to look after the memorial."

Landric hesitates and then offers me a cautious smile. "Thank you for that. I liked knowing that someone other than me cared."

His father's name was among the last few additions to the limestone walls that have since fallen. I hadn't realized he even noticed me going up there for the weekly cleanings.

I shift my weight. It feels as if the ground between us has tilted, and I'm no longer sure what to make of him.

He did speak up for me in front of everyone after we fled town. He's pulled his weight on this dangerous mission he volunteered for, from packing horse shit to charging into battle. The bandage on his arm shows how much he risked.

But how can I weigh that against all the times he listened to others disparage me and simply dismissed me as not worth even that much attention?

I drag in a breath. "All right. I'm not saying I'm okay with what happened before. But we can move forward from that. There are bigger things to focus on."

Landric nods with a relieved air. His smile grows. "And you're the one who was brave enough to see how much we

could do. Let's get back to our army and tell them it's time to really fight."

# CHAPTER ELEVEN



## SIGNY

JOSTEIN SQUINTS THROUGH THE darkness. “I think I see lantern light up there. That’s probably them.”

He nudges his horse from a walk to a trot, letting me nestle more closely against his chest. The feel of his body behind mine, his thighs braced against my hips, sets off even more warmth than it did before our little interlude with Iko.

We returned to the patch of forest where we left his captain and my neighbors in the wee hours of the night and found a message in some kind of military code. Apparently it meant that they’d moved to a spot east of the town. We don’t know why that is or what exactly will be waiting for us there.

As we approach the woodlands up ahead, the first glow of sunlight hazes the sky. I make out a few tents between the trees and then a couple of soldiers in the burgundy Veldunian uniforms standing guard in the shadows.

Iko must recognize them, because he lifts his hand in a wave. One of the soldiers returns the gesture and ducks farther into the forest.

By the time we've reached the trees and dismounted, Captain Amalia is striding over to join us. She looks us up and down with a bemused smile, her eyes bright.

"You really pulled it off," she says. "You're late, though. Was that you all the way over at the fort by Idam too?"

I shrug. "I thought we'd better make our point as well as possible."

"You did that." She glances over her shoulder toward the camp. "We relocated most of your neighbors to a few nearby settlements, but several dozen of them insisted on staying with us at least until we found out how your mission went. We've been gathering proper weapons for them... and speaking to other squadrons. I have people here eager to ride back to their captains and let them know when we're ready to mobilize."

My pulse hiccups at the thought of how much progress we've already made—how many people we've brought over to our side.

Jostein dips his head, his expression even more serious than usual. "We had help at the fort. A few of the locals went on to rally people in Vadan and Childeric. I told them to wait until they had our military backing them up before launching any new assaults, but I don't know how long they'll keep that in mind."

The captain nods. "We'll see about sending at least a squad to both towns to summon whoever's willing to join us—and continue spreading the word beyond there. We'll want to keep the main thrust of our force together. Picking at the empire bit by bit is fine for a start. It won't drive them out completely."



My gut twists at her implications, but the twinge of queasiness can't diminish my exhilaration. "Then the army's on board? You're going to help us push the Darium forces right out of Velduny?"

Captain Amalia's mouth tightens, but the gleam in her eyes only gets flintier. "They've had their way with our country for too long. If the four of you can manage to get the better of them, who am I to back down? We might never get a better chance."

Iko grins. "I knew I was glad when I got assigned to your squadron—and not just because I'd get to have a friend bossing me around." He elbows Jostein teasingly.

The captain gives him a wry look. "Come get something to eat and take a little rest. I can't imagine you've had much chance to do either with all the running around you've been doing. I need to reach out to my colleagues."

She must have prepped the squadron for our arrival, because as she steps away, a few other soldiers come forward to usher us over to a small campfire. Bowls of porridge are shoved into our hands. I gulp mine down so fast I scald my tongue.

One of the female soldiers directs me to a tent that it's clear someone else is also using, but they've already gotten up for the day. Now that I have the chance to relax, I'm too exhausted to do anything except crash on the sleeping bag and close my eyes.

I'm not sure how long I'm dead to the world, but raised voices and pounding feet jolt me out of sleep. With a lurch of my heart, I sit up and swipe at my bleary eyes.

Landric is pushing back the flap of my tent before I've made it that far. His voice comes out in a frantic hush. "A company of Darium soldiers is marching on another town south of here. The squadron and another that's just joined us are hurrying over to defend them."

He moves to the side so I can scramble out.

The camp has turned into a flurry of activity, soldiers and some of my neighbors grabbing weapons and hustling away.

Jostein is in their midst, calling out orders to arm themselves and picking who'll take the horses to reach the town first. He catches my gaze, and I dip my head to tell him I'm coming too.

Iko appears next to me, his blond hair tussled from his own interrupted sleep. "Let's get going before they can do even more damage."

Seeing Jostein ride ahead with a small group of soldiers sends an ache through my chest, but I can't pretend I'm battle-ready enough to be on the very front line. I strap my hunting knife in its sheath around my waist and rush to join the mass of us on foot.

We set off beyond the forest in the direction of the mountains. Captain Amalia stays with us, riding around the outskirts of our mismatched infantry and calling out orders and encouragement.

I notice a few people from Feldan sending curious glances my way. My aunt and uncle and Landric's mother are nowhere to be seen, but Bertha the butcher has stuck around, as has Norbert the cobbler—the latter to my surprise.

Do they all know that I've done more to conquer our enemies in the past few days than they have in their entire lives? What do they think of me now?

An echo of past humiliations prickles over my skin. I'm not sure I actually want to know.

Landric stays by my side, apparently committed to showing all of them that he's throwing his full support behind me. Iko marches nearby amid a group of his colleagues.

In the middle of the crowd, I can't see much other than the people marching ahead of me. I only know when the Darium forces have come into view from the angry cry that goes up from the soldiers at the front.

We pick up the pace instinctively. Captain Amalia pitches her voice to carry to all of us. "They're just reaching the town now. It looks like only a few dozen soldiers—we have them far outnumbered. Get in there and push them back however

you can, but stick close to each other. Our strength is in working together.”

It’s a matter of minutes before shrieks and thumps reach my ears. I draw my hunting knife, my jaw clenching.

We pour into the outer streets of the town in a furious mass. The Darium soldiers who got there ahead of us bellow at us to back off, but no one listens.

They can’t withstand the deluge.

The Veldunian soldiers at the front of the surge catch the boldest of the attackers, weapons clanging and bodies in skeleton uniforms crumpling. The pricks thought this place would be easy pickings, punishing innocent civilians for what their countryfolk have done elsewhere.

They’re so very wrong.

Once the first several of their comrades have fallen, the Darium company must realize they’re screwed. The bodies clad in black and white dash back the way they came, and we storm after them in determined pursuit.

One of them smashes a lantern and lights a ramshackle house near the edge of town on fire. A yelp goes up from inside.

I grab a bucket of water leftover from washing and douse the flames before they can do more than blacken the lower wall.

A soldier lunges at us from the side, but Iko is there, slashing the woman’s neck open. We hurtle onward, out of the town, pressing the pillagers farther back.

Captain Amalia’s voice rings through the ruckus, bringing us to a stop. She points toward the plain ahead of us.

The remaining Darium soldiers are fleeing toward a larger contingent in the skeletal uniforms. The front line is on horseback, with maybe a hundred foot-soldiers behind them.

The man riding a little ahead of the others sports a helm with a single red plume like a spurt of blood from its skull-like

visage. I know that indicates he's someone higher up in the Darium army's ranks—tribune? Admiral?

He's also flying a small white flag indicating he means to parlay, not attack.

As the company marches toward us, I pick out some twenty figures in dark green uniforms off to the side. A gold crest gleams on the left side of their chests.

I frown. "Isn't that Duke Berengar's livery?"

Landric's stance goes rigid beside me. "Gods smite us, it sure looks like it."

Captain Amalia and a man on horseback who I think is also a captain as well ride forward to meet the approaching force. "That's close enough!" Amalia hollers.

We still have the advantage of numbers by a factor of about two, although nearly half of us are hardly soldiers. It must seem like enough of an imbalance that the Darium leader doesn't want to risk provoking us.

He holds up his hand for his people to draw to a halt and directs his horse forward on his own. He stops about ten paces from the company and the same from our captains. Then he swings down from his steed and steps in front of it as if sharing attention with even the animal would be unacceptable.

The delicate blue blossoms of sealace, just bloomed with the summer warmth, bob around his feet. It only grows in Velduny, but despite its looks, it's one of the hardiest plants out there.

I expect he'll find us an equally difficult challenge.

The military man doesn't lift his helm, letting its painted skeletal face glower at us unchecked. His voice booms across the space between us.

"Veldunian insurgents, your disgraceful acts against the empire and your Darium benefactors will not be allowed to stand. This is your one chance to surrender before you—and the people you stand for—face the harsh punishment you deserve."

My skin itches uneasily. What does he think we deserve? All our towns and cities burned to the ground? Thousands slaughtered?

Captain Amalia has remained on her stallion. Her arm tenses at her side as if she'd like to grasp her sword and run this prick through right now.

"We don't intend to let you punish us," she retorts. "There'll be no surrendering unless it's on your side."

"I wouldn't be so hasty, traitor. The high commander who oversees this half of the continent is marching this way with an army far greater than anything you've been able to assemble. In a matter of days, the full might of the Darium empire will be prepared to crush your treachery."

Even though I know he's going out of his way to sound intimidating, my mouth dries up. Just how big an army is on its way? Will we be able to assemble enough people to fend them off?

How much will they destroy if we can't?

The Darium leader goes on without offering our side a chance to respond. "We'll give you ten minutes to decide. Surrender and hand over the woman named Signy who instigated this uprising, and High Commander Livius will treat the rest of you with more lenience."

All the blood seems to drain from my body, leaving me a cold husk.

He knows my name. He knows I started this.

Murmurs pass through the people gathered around us. The soldiers remain stoically silent, but I catch fragments of anxious commentary from my neighbors.

"...comes down to her."

"An entire army!"

"...murder us all and..."

Landric reaches over to squeeze my hand, but I barely feel the contact. My mind has detached from my body, floating

somewhere just behind it, like I can't bear to be part of myself.

Like the moment when I realized Inganne's gift wasn't coming, that no rush of magic was going to offset the throbbing of my foot where I'd offered my toes.

I went too far before. I pushed for more than I could handle and threw my life into shambles.

That's why she turned me away, isn't it? She knew I didn't only want to create beautiful things. I asked for a talent that people would envy and view with awe.

I wanted to show up my aunt and uncle for their grumbles and sighs, to make the rest of the town wish they'd pampered me in my grief rather than ignoring my struggles.

Is this rebellion really what's right for everyone, or have I only been acting out my own desire for vengeance? If I've overstepped again, it'll be far more than me paying for my arrogance.

The rest of the rebellion doesn't need me anyway. I could give myself up, buy my allies at least a little time, and they could decide when they're really ready without me pushing them on to the edge of ruin. Maybe they'd still be able to rally again and win our freedom.

But maybe they wouldn't. Maybe the spark of resistance would flicker out for good.

I swallow hard, my heart drumming against my ribs. Doubt constricts my lungs.

All I have to do is take one step forward and call out who I am...

The Darium leader turns on his heel. As he moves to his horse, he very deliberately brings his boot down on one of the sealace flowers.

He grinds it with a twist of his heel before he reaches for the saddle.

My spine stiffens. The murmurs fall away around me, and I know my companions have seen the gesture too.

No. We can't let the Darium empire grind us down even more. We're already shadows of ourselves, grasping at the scraps they've left us with.

Would I even have cared about the power of a gift if they hadn't stolen my parents from me, destroyed my childhood?

I've seen the light of hope come back into so many people's eyes in the past few days. *I* put it there—by demanding more, by doing more.

We need this. If we don't claim our victory now, if we let ourselves give up in despair, I don't know how we'll ever get that hope back.

I do take a step forward, but only to yell defiantly at the Darium company. "We won't be crushed. This is our country, and we're taking it back!"

A cheer louder than I was prepared for roars through the makeshift army around me. Townspeople and soldiers raise their weapons, ready for battle.

Captain Amalia smiles thinly and looks at the Darium side. "You've gotten your answer."

My fingers clench around the handle of my hunting knife, but the leader motions for his company to withdraw. "When you meet High Commander Livius, you'll regret that decision," he calls over his back.

I square my shoulders, gathering all my renewed resolve.

Not if I have anything to say about it.

# CHAPTER TWELVE



## LANDRIC

IT'S STRANGE TO REALIZE that after all the hours I've spent in the company of the duke's son, I've never actually visited his family residence just an hour outside of Feldan. I always had to wait for Rupert to come to me.

I never had any delusions about him seeing me as a true equal, but as I rein in the horse Captain Amalia gave me leave to borrow, I feel just how expendable I've been to him on a deeper level than ever before.

How expendable we *all* are, possibly. The image of the guards in Duke Berengar's livery has haunted me since the confrontation with the Darium company yesterday.



The duke's son and heir might not see me as worthy of full consideration, but there's no one else from Feldan I can imagine him listening to at all. At least he'd decided I was one step up from a country hick.

If anyone's going to talk to him, it has to be me.

A guard in the same dark green jacket calls to me from the other side of the gate. "What's your business here?"

Not even a "sir" to soften the bluntness of the question, but then, I hardly cut a picture of refinement in my borrowed tunic and trousers that hang a little awkwardly on my body. I washed and tidied my hair as well as I could, but there's only so much you can do with nothing but streams and camp soap to work with.

"I need to speak to Master Rupert about an urgent matter," I say, attempting to make up for what I lack in appearance with lordly airs. "Tell him Landric from the town of Feldan is here—he knows me."

The guard grunts. "You'll need to wait at the gate."

He trots off to the residence, leaving a silent companion behind. I adjust my position in the saddle, not sure whether I should dismount or expect to ride on in.

It takes several minutes to get my answer, with the thud of two sets of footsteps across the lane on the other side. I've swung out of the saddle before the guard can even open the gate, knowing Rupert will respond better if we're on level footing rather than me looking down at him.

He strides out to meet me, his broad chest even more puffed up than usual but his eyes warily narrow. "Landric! I wasn't expecting to see you."

There are a lot of ways I could interpret that sentence. I decide it doesn't really matter exactly what he's implying.

I bob my head deferentially, as he'll appreciate. "I apologize for the intrusion. I needed to speak with you—I'm sure you heard what happened to Feldan."

Rupert grimaces. “A bad business, that, but not unexpected after an act of revolt. I trust your mother was able to evacuate safely?”

The fact that he bothers to ask gives me a tiny spark of hope. “Yes, thank the gods.” My fingers sketch down my front automatically in the gesture of the divinities. She’s joined the refugees who were taken in by one of the nearby towns. “But the threat isn’t over yet. We’ve been warned that a large Darium force is marching on Velduny.”

“That’s not surprising either, with the continued attacks on Darium posts. Some kind of order needs to be restored.”

My stomach twists. I remember all too well the way he spoke when we watched the celebration in the town square. “I heard that some of your family’s guards rode with the Darium soldiers.” Better not to admit outright that I was there to witness them myself.

Rupert doesn’t even hesitate to nod. “My father knows where he owes his loyalty. We were glad to supply whatever support they’d find useful.”

I wet my lips, choosing my next words carefully. “Seeing how events have played out so far, I can’t help wondering if there might be a real chance of regaining Velduny’s freedom... if enough of us banded together. We could be loyal only to—”

The duke’s son cuts me off with a scoffing sound. “Challenge the entire Darium army? You sound as mad as that Signy must be. Of course it’d all start with the waif of refuse.”

A chill trickles through my veins at his words. When the Darium tribune asked for her, I hadn’t wanted to think—but Rupert and his friends were the only people outside of Feldan who knew that Signy instigated the revolt. The only people who could have mentioned it to our enemies.

“You told them about her,” I say evenly, not even a question.

“The blame should be dealt out fairly.” Rupert chuckles. “I can’t imagine why those upstarts haven’t given her up already. What about her is worth preserving?”

My teeth set on edge, but I'm as much frustrated with myself as with him. Stung by the memories of all the times I let statements like that stand or even tacitly agreed with them.

I can't shout at him the way I'd like to right now. Jabbing at his ego might make him even more eager to see Signy destroyed.

But I won't keep quiet either.

"Perhaps that should be a sign that there's more to her than you've recognized." I turn back to my horse. It's clear I'm not going to make any progress with Rupert, and anything more I say could incite him to have me detained. "I hope you evaluate your loyalties with all due care."

Rupert's eyes narrow again. "Landric, what are you saying?"

"Just a bit of common wisdom." I haul myself back onto the horse and nudge it to a canter without another word, leaving the duke's son staring after me. "I should get back to helping my neighbors recuperate."

Just not in the way I hope he thinks. Great God help me, let me not have soured the situation even further.

I have a couple of hours' journey to our current camp to reflect on the conversation and what I'm going to say when I return. I didn't speak to anyone except for Captain Amalia before I left, but I suspect Signy will have noticed my absence by now.

I wish I was bringing better news. I wish I'd accomplished anything at all with my little quest.

By the time the procession of soldiers, civilians, and pack-laden horses comes into view up ahead, I've considered all the possibilities and settled on the bald truth as my best option. Get it over with, move on.

The three captains now leading our uprising have us moving to the east, so we'll be ready to stand against the Darium army before they can rampage through any major settlements. New allies have been joining us by the hour, drifting in from towns that have caught word of our efforts, but still Signy takes note

of my arrival before I've quite reached the edge of the march. Her leanly athletic figure comes into view veering off in my direction, the two soldiers who've become her biggest advocates close at her heels.

At the sight of her companions, the image flickers through my mind of the two men with their arms around her, their mouths claiming her lips and neck. Jealousy flares up inside me, burning my cheeks and constricting my throat.

She really didn't understand why it rattled me, seeing that. I'm so far from a potential suitor to her that it never even occurred to her I might want to court her.

Who do I have to blame for that other than myself? From nearly the first moment they met her, Jostein and Iko have stood by her, spoken up for her.

Why wouldn't she want them?

Pushing down the churn of my emotions, I dismount when I've come abreast with her. My horse will need some time to cool down at a walk and then one of the soldiers like Jostein will no doubt claim the animal.

"Where did you go?" Signy demands before I can so much as open my mouth.

Her sharp green eyes pin me in place. Jostein and Iko are watching me too, but I barely feel their gazes compared to hers.

I push my mouth into my best wry smile. "I went to the duke's estate. I wanted to see—"

Signy's stance tenses. "You went to the *dukeling*? After everything that's happened, you're still trying to impress—"

"No!" I break in. "I don't give a shit what Rupert thinks of me now. I only thought—I could at least find out exactly where they stand—if there was any hope of persuading them to oppose Dariu—"

Iko, who doesn't even know the duke or his son, snorts, and a shamed heat floods my body. The idea didn't seem so absurd when I first thought of it.

Signy folds her tan arms over her chest. “They already offered their guards up to the Darium army. It’s obvious which side they prefer to be on. How could you still think you could trust them?”

I swallow thickly. “I didn’t, not really. I just wanted to try. To do *something*.”

Jostein studies me with his usual authoritative calm. Whatever he thinks of my attempt, he doesn’t reveal any disdain in his voice. “What did they say?”

“They’re totally committed to supporting the empire,” I admit. “And... Rupert’s the one who pointed the finger at Signy.”

Her eyes flash. “Of course he was. You only just figured that out?”

My words stall in my throat. It was the obvious answer. Maybe there is something wrong with my own loyalties that I didn’t fully believe it, didn’t want to believe it, until I heard it from him directly.

But even when his opinion mattered to me the most, even when it seemed as if all my dreams of getting out of Feldan depended on his good will, I never felt half as desperate as I do right now.

I meet Signy’s piercing gaze, letting it hollow me out. I wanted to do something to help our cause, but all I’ve done is make her question *my* loyalty. My fucking common sense.

And I don’t know if I can tolerate a world in which this woman looks at me with suspicion any longer.

How did I never realize just how spectacular she is before? These two men saw it so quickly.

She’s single-handedly set a revolution in motion, rallied hundreds to the cause, seen the ways to cut through the empire’s bullshit.

All the dreams I once had are nothing but shadows compared to the future she’s aimed us toward.

I don't really care where in the world I end up or what I'm doing there, as long as I'm at her side seeing what she'll do next.

So everything I do from here forward, it has to be proving myself to her. Earning her trust, her friendship... I don't know if I can dare to hope for more than that.

It doesn't matter. I'll take as much or as little as I can get as long as I can be here with her.

No resolution has ever felt so right. The decision steadies me.

"I'm sorry," I say. "Old habits die hard, but this one couldn't be more deceased. We don't need the help of the nobles anyway, not when we've got you pointing the way. What's the best thing I can do for our revolution right now?"

# CHAPTER THIRTEEN



## SIGNY

“BLOCK, FEINT, JAB,” JOSTEIN calls out, stepping forward with a swing of his sword.

I jerk the short sword I was given this morning through the motions we’ve been practicing. Steel clangs against steel, the impact reverberating through my arms.

I manage not to stumble backward like I did the first few times we practiced this sequence, but my jab isn’t quite fast enough to even nick Jostein’s tunic before he’s smacking my blade aside.

As I grimace in frustration, he lowers his sword and squeezes my shoulder. “You’re doing well. Most of us had

years of training and practice battles before we saw real enemy action.” He glances across the field around us. “I’m sure we never expected to find ourselves as the teachers this early in our careers.”

All across the lightly hilly terrain around us, other soldiers are directing the civilians who’ve joined our ranks through similar exercises. The periodic influxes of new squadrons have brought some extra weapons with them, and some people are still using kitchen and hunting knives, makeshift spears, or whatever else we could scrounge up to arm them.

My gaze drifts farther to the peaks looming in the distance. It’s a strange sensation, looking over and finding the mountains at my flank rather than up ahead.

We’ve come a long way from Feldan. But if we want to stop the Darium army from terrorizing any towns or villages of innocent Veldunians in their rampage to end our rebellion, we have to be on the front lines. We’re at the eastern edge of the country here, only twenty miles shy of the border with Icar.

I hope the army the emperor is sending won’t take their anger out on the innocent civilians of the other countries they have to travel through. Although the thought sends a tingle of exhilaration through my veins—what if every country Dariu has subjugated found the courage to rise up against them?

What if the whole continent could be free again?

The touch of Iko’s hand on my side brings me back to the present with a different sort of tingle. The soldier leans close, adjusting my stance and the angle of my sword, his body warming my back.

“If you keep the blade tilted to the side, you protect more of you from attack,” he says in a low voice that makes me think of all the thrilling things we could be doing other than engaging in mock battles. “And always keep one foot at least a little ahead of the other for ease of dodging.”

His hand drops to my hip to nudge one leg forward, and heat flares between my thighs. His breath tickles over my neck.



I can't help thinking of the press of his lips against the sensitive skin there a few nights ago. Of being enveloped by both of these men.

But this isn't the time or place to be indulging in those sorts of thrills.

As Iko eases back, Jostein looks at him with a slight arch of his eyebrows. "If you're done groping her..."

Iko laughs. "I don't think Signy minds getting some hands-on instruction."

My cheeks flush, and the look Jostein gives me, a smolder lighting in his bright blue eyes, makes me reconsider the whole "we probably shouldn't make out on the training field" principle I've been following.

"I would also like to make sure I don't *die* when we're facing an entire Darium army," I say, pleased that my voice only comes out a tiny bit breathless. "So let's continue the regular instruction."

Jostein raises his sword, and a yelp rings out from across the field.

My head jerks around with a lurch of my pulse, but all I see is one of the new trainees rubbing his eyes frantically, an orange flower bobbing in a patch of weed near his feet.

"You need to flush your eyes with water to clear out the pollen," I holler over to him. I had an unfortunate encounter with lissweld in bloom back when I was a kid, and rubbing only made the stinging worse. It took a few hours before I could see properly again.

As the man hurriedly gropes for a canteen, Captain Amalia rides by, surveying the situation with a frown. With the amplification charm she's been using since our numbers started to grow, she pitches her voice over the entire field. "Remember to watch out for the lissweld flowers! We have enough enemies already without fighting pollen too."

Chuckles pass through our crowd at her wry tone, and everyone takes a careful look at the ground around us. We

didn't have a whole lot of choice in where we stationed our line of resistance.

"At least we avoided that huge patch of the stuff back there," I say, motioning behind us to where we passed a stretch of dense blooms that must have gone on for a quarter of a mile. I waggle my blade. "Where were we?"

Jostein swipes his sleeve across his forehead, sweat beading under the midday sun. "Let's go back to that side-step and stab combo you were making progress with before. Every soldier needs to learn to lean into their strengths. You're going to get farther with speed and nimbleness than brute strength."

We run through the motions with Iko observing and offering a little commentary. By the fourth attempt, I manage to tap my sword against Jostein's side.

A grin springs to my face. "You'd better not have let me land that blow."

Jostein shakes his head. "What would you learn from that? You're getting faster—and better at spotting the openings."

He pauses to brush back a strand of hair that's blown across my face, his fingers grazing my cheek. A renewed warmth blooms across my skin.

Maybe I should be training with his colleagues rather than him and Iko. These stunning men are way too distracting.

But I don't trust anyone else here even half as much as I do them.

At that thought, my gaze moves across the field instinctively. I haven't consciously registered who I'm looking for until my eyes snag on Landric's well-built form in the midst of his own training.

His coppery hair has darkened with sweat, but he's clearly putting his all into the brief sparring match with the soldier who's been helping him. There's something pretty stunning about his face too when it's set in that mask of determination.

I yank my attention back to the men I'm standing with. The apologies and promises Landric has made to me, the passion

that reverberated through his voice, echo through my memory. They're a distraction too.

"How long have the two of you been serving rather than training?" I ask as I raise my sword to resume our practice. Neither Jostein nor Iko look like they're out of their twenties.

Iko lifts his chin toward Jostein. "Jos graduated from the military school at our duchy's main temple of Sabrelle a year before I did—benefits of managing to be born a year earlier. It's been six years of active service for him, five for me."

Curiosity tickles at me. "Is that where you two met?" They haven't mentioned any shared history outside of their military experiences.

Jostein nods and twitches his sword toward his friend. "This one was a trouble-maker from the start despite all that supposed Esterean wisdom. I got assigned to 'guide him onto a smoother path.'"

"Which only half worked," Iko puts in with a grin. "I'm partly incorrigible."

There's obvious fondness in the squad leader's tone. "But after four years of schooling together, he grew on me."

The warmth of their dynamic sends an odd pang through me. I have no idea what it's like to have a friendship like that—one so close and loyal they didn't even let their shared interest in the same woman divide them.

But maybe, by living alongside them for the past week, I'm starting to get a taste of it. The affection in Jostein's gaze when it returns to me might be more heated, but I know it also matters to him to prepare me for the upcoming battles as well as possible.

Neither of them have been shy about showing I mean much more to them than a means of scratching an itch.

Jostein resumes his sparring stance, but before we can attempt another exercise, hoofbeats thunder over the nearest low hill. One of the sentries our commanders sent ahead gallops toward us with an urgent shout. "Captains!"

Without needing to say a word, Jostein, Iko, and I exchange a worried glance and hustle over to find out what's happened.

The five captains now with us and a major who arrived with more troops yesterday gather to meet the sentry. As the three of us push closer, many other soldiers and civilians draw nearer. Tension hums through the air.

The sentry doesn't even bother to dismount. As soon as he reaches the leaders of our ragtag band, he reins in his horse and starts speaking at an urgent clip. "The Darium army is almost here! They're approaching the border now, coming through Icar."

A chill washes over me. If they're almost at the border, they could be on us by tomorrow.

The major frowns. "How large a force have they sent?"

The sentry draws in a breath, a tremor passing through his slim frame. "There had to be thousands of them. Three, maybe four?"

My gaze darts across the mass of figures around us. We've assembled a force several hundred strong, but we'll still be overwhelmed... and all of the Darium soldiers will have had far more than a few days' worth of training. They'll all have proper weapons and armor.

Major Arlo glances at the captains. Technically he has the most military authority among us, but he hasn't been lording his higher title over the other officers, recognizing that most of them have been directly involved in the rebellion for longer than he has. "If we're going to win this, it won't be through might. We'll need Estera and Kosmel watching over us as much as Sabrelle."

As if any of the godlen of wisdom, trickery, or war are watching out for us now. What we really need is to keep our own wits about us.

Captain Amalia lifts her head. "We have a few advantages we can make use of. Emperor Vitus has sent soldiers from abroad—few if any of them will be familiar with Velduny's terrain. We know our country as they can't."

Murmurs of agreement pass through the watching crowd, but her words don't reassure me that much. We've always known our country better than the Darium forces, but it hasn't allowed us to fend them off in the past.

We have to use that knowledge in the right way. How are the hills around us or the distant mountains going to help us defeat an entire army?

"We should warn the nearest towns and villages," one of the other captains is saying. "Most of them didn't want to evacuate before, but if they know the threat is so close by..."

Another peers at the landscape around us. "Is there any ideal location between here and the border where we could stage an ambush?"

The wind picks up, tossing bits of dried grass and grit into the air. A woman on the other side of the gathering swipes at her eyes to clear them, and inspiration lights in my head like a flame in a lantern.

"I have an idea," I blurt out.

The major and the five captains all turn to look at me. I expect one of them to tell me off for interrupting, but they all study me with interest... possibly even hope. Waiting for me to say more.

Pride expands through my chest alongside a burst of nerves.

I've proven myself—I spearheaded this rebellion. They're willing to listen to me.

I set us on this course, and I'd better not lead us astray.

Inhaling deeply, I sort through my thoughts, making sure I'm confident in them before I speak. Maybe the gods are watching over us right now; maybe Inganne sparked the idea in my head, letting me picture the scene I could create.

Jostein's hand rests on my back, a tacit support. Iko shoots me an encouraging smile. And farther around the crowd, I catch Landric's gaze on me.

I'm not in this alone, not anymore.

“We have several people who’ve joined us who have gifts for building, don’t we?” I ask to confirm. The captains have been compiling a list of all the magic every new arrival can offer as they appear. “Who can move objects with their will?”

It’s a common gift to appeal to Creaden for, since that godlen presides over construction as well as leadership. Much easier to build walls and roofs if you can stand back and direct the materials with your mind.

Captain Amalia nods. “Not enough that they could enhance our weapons a significant amount.”

The corner of my mouth quirks upward. “Not our traditional weapons. It’ll be risky, but... I think we can arrange for our countryside to do a lot of the fighting for us.”

# CHAPTER FOURTEEN



## SIGNY

“GODS SAVE US,” BERTHA mutters where she’s crouched on the hilltop next to me. “Here they come.”

The mass of figures in their white-on-black uniforms has appeared on the horizon. They march forward across the landscape like a rigid flood—perfectly regimented, perfectly steady, but with a momentum that feels inevitable.

Unstoppable.

My lungs constrict. I have to force myself to drag in a deep breath of the warm air to try to loosen the tension.

The Darium army isn’t unstoppable. We’ve cut down soldiers like these more than once in the recent past.

But never anywhere near so many. Never when they were utterly bent on our destruction.

At my other side, Landric shifts his position with an air of restlessness he's trying to suppress. "Don't move until they've almost reached the crossroads. We've got a little time left."

When they come up on the crossroads, they'll have the option of veering north and laying waste to the first village on this side of the border. It's a quaint place without even a temple to call its own, only a cluster of houses and a couple of common buildings surrounded by farms.

When we warned them, a few of the inhabitants opted to join our cause. A few fled to camp out in the forest farther north. Others refused to leave their homes at all.

They'll all lose those homes if the army heads that way. We've seen how thorough Dariu likes to be in dealing out revenge.

There won't be a single building left standing.

So we have to make sure they come this way.

I scan the fields on either side of the road for any splotches of orange we missed. With a waft of relief, I find none.

Most of our "army" spent the better part of the past day ever-so-carefully plucking any lissweld blooms we could find and adding them to the thicker field that's currently at our backs. We didn't want the Darium soldiers stumbling on a patch early and realizing the danger the flowers pose.

It isn't just our familiarity with our country that works to our advantage. The Darium forces are ignorant in all sorts of ways.

They don't know that our numbers have doubled since the last time one of their representatives confronted our resistance. They don't know how organized we've become under the guidance of our own military leaders.

Let them think we're merely a scruffy band of resentful townspeople who can barely handle a knife, let alone a sword. They're marching on us assuming there's no way we can stand against them.



Their arrogance is our greatest advantage of all.

A large man on a massive stallion rides in the center of the army, several scarlet plumes jutting from his helm. That must be High Commander Livius, the one we were warned about.

The man who's given the ultimate orders to every Darium soldier in this half of the continent. The man who's overseen our subjugation.

As Landric watches the army approach, he twists his fingers into the grass by his knees. He's pulled a brown cap over his distinctive reddish hair so it doesn't catch the sunlight, but a few ruddy tufts poke out along the nape of his neck.

I shouldn't notice things like that. I shouldn't want to talk to him—but I don't really know what to make of him these days.

He smiled when I explained my plan and told me it was brilliant. He volunteered to be on the front lines of this mission before we even asked who'd take that risk.

How much is he the same man he used to be, after everything we've been through?

"I suspect this isn't the kind of exploring the world you were thinking of when you imagined your future," I murmur to him.

His mouth slants into a crooked grin that takes his face from handsome to breathtaking. "No, not quite. It's certainly more exciting. And it'll matter leagues more than anything I ever pictured myself doing."

Bertha snorts. "*Exciting.*"

Landric lifts his shoulders in a slight shrug. "I'm not saying I wouldn't skip the hand-to-hand combat parts if I could. But... my whole life, I just wanted the chance to roam around the countryside freely. Now we could be part of giving everyone in Velduny their freedom. Nothing else seems all that important."

The tightness in my chest creeps up to my throat. "Yeah."

Those words resonate with me more than I'd have expected. What do statues and paintings matter when I'm helping create

a more beautiful future for all of us who've lived under the Darium empire's thumb?

What we're going to do here today will be a kind of masterpiece, and I'm the one who sculpted it.

The Darium army has continued their relentless advance. Iko's voice carries from behind us. "It's almost time. Is everyone ready?"

Voices lift in answer all across the hillside. Several dozen of us have gathered for this first part of the plan.

We need to present a big enough force that the Darium soldiers will be sure we're part of the main resistance without putting too many of our people in the most extreme danger.

Captain Amalia, the only higher officer who joined us, treads across the grass behind me. "Be fast on your feet, everybody. Just harass them—don't get any closer than you need to. Just enough for them to follow. *Now.*"

At her command, we spring to our feet and hurtle down the hill toward the road. Up ahead, the Darium army is little more than ten paces shy of the crossroads.

A shout goes up the moment we race into view, but there's nothing panicked about the sound. They won't see our small group as a significant threat.

Their mistake. I bet we can take down a few of them even now.

The Veldunian soldiers among us in their plain clothes and a few of the ordinary civilians with hunting practice brandish their bows of all sorts. As they send a volley of arrows shrieking through the air toward the enemy, the rest of us holler insults at the top of our lungs. I pull back the slingshot Iko constructed for me and fling one sharp stone and then another with all the force I can bring to bear.

The Darium soldiers on the front line jerk up their shields—black painted with interlaced bones to match their uniforms. Most of the arrows and other projectiles glance off the steel surfaces of those and their helms, but I see one plunge into a

man's shoulder, another catching a woman in the throat. A few figures stagger amid their comrades.

I reach for another rock, but High Commander Livius jerks a rigid arm forward. His booming voice carries across the terrain, amplified by magic. "Crush these pathetic miscreants!"

The Darium army surges toward us at his command. Captain Amalia yells the order for us to retreat.

We could have fled faster on horseback, but presenting ourselves as an armed cavalry rather than common rabble would make the Darium force more cautious. So we dash away on foot, our boots thumping along the road between the low hills.

It's half a mile. Half a mile past the field of lissweld to where the rest of our allies are waiting.

Half a mile before we're out of pollen range and our gifted companions can cast out their magic.

We aren't the only ones with bows. As the pounding of tramping feet reverberates from behind us, arrows plunge into our midst. There's a cry and a thud of a falling body behind me. A bit of fletching grazes my ear as a shaft twangs by.

I swallow a yelp and push myself faster. "Come on, everyone!" I call out, but my voice sounds hoarse.

More arrows whir through the air. More gasps of pain and ominous thumps carry from around me.

I glance over just as one pointed shaft rams into Bertha's back. A noise of protest breaks from my throat as she crumples.

"Signy!" Landric grabs my elbow, yanking me to the side. An arrow that might have speared me through my own back slices across my bicep instead.

Pain sears all through my arm with a spurt of blood. I can't do anything but keep running.

Orange blooms flare at the edge of my vision. We're passing the field. We're leading the Darium soldiers straight toward it.

I throw myself forward, my companions charging onward as if we're one being. There isn't time to look around and see how many we've lost.

We knew this was a dangerous gambit, but it wasn't half as dangerous as trying to face the army on even ground.

"Anyone injured, continue back behind our front lines," the captain is hollering.

Iko appears beside me, his eyes widening as he takes in my wound. He slings his arm around my back and urges me the last short distance to where our larger force is waiting.

The rest of the rebels don't charge to meet the Darium soldiers, not yet. The moment our contingent acting as bait races past the field, a smattering of figures raise their hands.

Their magic propels the very air.

A wind whips up over the field and flings the lissweld's pollen away from us, toward the advancing soldiers. A flurry of pale yellow whirls across the landscape like a sudden blizzard.

The tiny grains patter against shields and helms—and slip through the gaps in the visors.

All at once, the first barrage of Darium soldiers lurch and stumble. One and another claw at their helms. Watching, I'm barely aware of the army medic who's stopped by my side to murmur a little healing magic over my arm. A smile curves my lips.

I can just imagine the agony they're feeling, the stinging sensation digging into their eyeballs, the world around them turned into a vague blur as their vision fogs with irritation and tears.

Take that, you vicious pricks.

More wind gusts over the army, sending the searing pollen all through their ranks. Their strict formation is shattering into chaos.

High Commander Livius wheels on his horse, hollering orders I can't make out. Then our major flings his hand

forward.

Several hundred soldiers and armed civilians dash forward to attack our disabled opponents. Blades plunge into guts and slice through throats. Clubs bash in helmets and fracture bones.

Blood splatters scarlet across the grass next to the sea of orange flowers.

I step forward, reaching for the short sword at my hip, but the medic catches my arm. “The injured stay back. Captain’s orders.”

So I simply watch the carnage with grim satisfaction. The bodies of our colleagues, struck down on our mad dash here, have been lost amid the swarm of soldiers. But we’re taking down so many more of them than they stole from us.

The high commander must realize they’re currently outmatched. More shouts ring out, and the soldiers at the back of the march start retreating, just a few at first and then in a more orderly mass, surging away from the scene of destruction even faster than they swept down on us. The plumed helmet bobs away from us.

As my fellow rebels continue to carve through the nearest enemies, a cheer of victory goes up. We’ve sent them running. We’ve taken down hundreds of our foes.

A swell of triumph fills my chest, but it’s dampened by the sight of all those dark uniforms pulling away from us.

There are still thousands more of them, and now they know we’re a force to be reckoned with. We’ve won this battle, but we haven’t won the war.



WE LEAVE THE DARIUM corpses where they fell, murmuring a prayer for our fallen comrades among them, and draw back to the shelter of the nearest forestland. While we roast deer and wild boar our allies have hunted down, our

sentries report that the Darium army has withdrawn all the way to the border to regroup.

That gives us at least a day's buffer before they can strike at us again. A day to come up with another plan that'll let us come out ahead—and most of us alive.

The voices and laughter that resonate around the campfires have a celebratory vibe, but I keep seeing Bertha slumping with the arrow in her back. Keep searching the faces around me to try to determine exactly how many people we lost today.

How many people died carrying out my plan.

I'm not the only one with loss on my mind. My eyes catch Jostein's through the crowd for the first time since the attack, and he barrels past the figures around us with a frantic light in his bright blue eyes.

The squad leader comes to a halt in front of me, his gaze darting over my face, his bronze-brown skin looking grayed. "You're all right? I heard you were injured—I've been looking for you."

The intensity of his concern makes my pulse stutter. I motion vaguely toward the torn, bloody fabric of my sleeve, the pink line where the medic healed the broken flesh beneath. "Just a minor wound. They patched me up."

Jostein's mouth twists. "It came so close."

He touches my arm, his expression so fraught it wrenches at me. There's blood speckled across his tunic too, and a deepening purple bruise on his cheek that wasn't there before.

We all toed a perilous line today. We're all lucky not to be one of the few wrenched over the edge.

Gods help me, what would I have done if the Darium soldiers had murdered this man in front of me?

The anguish that rushes through me at that thought reflects back at me from Jostein's face. His hand rises to touch my cheek. Heat tingles across my skin, both from his touch and the mix of fear and longing in his gaze.

“I’ve just found you,” he says in a strained voice. “There’s so much we haven’t had time for... I can’t lose you.”

I know he’s talking about more than finding me just now in the crowd. My body sways toward him of its own accord, my hand coming to rest on his chest. “I’m right here. I’m not going anywhere.”

A raw sound thrums from his throat, and then he pulls me into a kiss.

# CHAPTER FIFTEEN



SIGNY

**CHAPTER**

**FIFTEEN**

I'VE KISSED JOSTEIN BEFORE, but it was nothing like this. His fingers tangle in my hair; his mouth captures mine with an urgent passion as if he needs me to survive.



The heady rush of the embrace floods my body. I kiss him back with all I have, giving myself over to the moment, to the thump of my pulse and the sparks racing through my nerves, confirming how alive we both are.

I grip the front of his tunic, caught up in the need to pull him even closer. My desire flares all the way down to the apex of my thighs.

We just did something crazy and incredible, and it won't be the last time. There's no telling what might become of either of us when we next face the Darium army.

I don't want to think about that. I want to revel in the fact that we're still here right now—that I matter to this daring, valiant man.

When Jostein draws back just enough for our mouths to part, his breath tingling over my lips, I murmur, "Have you got a tent?"

A partly suppressed groan escapes him, and then he's ushering me with him, his arm at my back and his hand twined with mine. His musky scent and the heat of his body drown out all but the vaguest impressions of the comrades we pass on our weaving path between the trees.

Our soldiers have been pitching tents all around the campsite. Jostein leads me to one at the farthest edge—because of course he'd want to be the first line of defense.

I can't be anything but glad for it now, because it means we're well beyond watching eyes when he pushes back the flap and we duck inside.

The moment we're kneeling together within the low, sloping walls, Jostein's mouth descends on mine.

He's been careful with me in the past, sometimes almost tentative, but it must have been because he didn't want to overstep his welcome. There's nothing but confidence in the way he handles me now, angling our heads to deepen the kiss, guiding my knee over his legs so I'm straddling him.

He's a man who knows what he wants. A man who's meant to be leading, even if his superiors haven't yet recognized just

how much authority he can wield.

I sit back on his thighs, splaying my hands against his well-muscled chest, and gaze at him with a spark of mischief tickling through my veins. “It seems I’m at your disposal, squad leader. How would you command me?”

Only faint lantern light filters through the canvas walls of the tent, but it’s enough to reveal the answering glint in Jostein’s eyes. His posture pulls a little straighter.

As he rests his hands on my hips, his voice comes out low but resonant. “Let’s have that shirt off so I can appreciate even more of you, rebel maiden.”

With a soft laugh, I reach to peel off both my blood-stained tunic and the thin undershirt beneath. The cool evening air washes over my bared skin.

Jostein’s gaze drinks me in through the dimness. A brief doubt flickers through my thoughts—all those years of scrounging for food have left my ribs visible through my flesh, and I’ve hardly got the fullest breasts around—but when he brings his mouth back to mine, I feel nothing but hunger.

He kisses me with all the intensity he showed before. One hand rises to skim the slight curve of my breast and then cup it completely. His palm swivels against my nipple with a jolt of pleasure, and I gasp against his mouth.

Jostein hums in approval and eases away just far enough to yank off his own shirt. He pulls me close against him, skin to skin, one hand massaging my other breast while he reclaims my mouth.

The arm at my back slides down almost to my ass and tugs me closer. My sex settles against the bulge straining against Jostein’s pants.

I rock against it, propelled by my growing need, and he gives a strangled growl. His lips trail from my mouth to nip the edge of my jaw.

“Lean back,” he says in his commanding voice.

I'm all too happy to comply. As I tip against his supporting arm, he ducks his head to chart a scorching path along the side of my neck and down my chest.

When his mouth closes over the peak of my breast, I clutch his shoulder with a whimper. He rolls the nub beneath his tongue and tugs it between his lips, setting off pulse after pulse of bliss.

As he shifts to the side to be thorough in his attentions, my hand rises to grip his close-cropped hair. At the stroke of my fingertips over his scalp, Jostein makes an encouraging sound that reverberates from his throat to delightful effect.

He sucks my nipple deeper into his mouth with a sweep of his tongue, massaging my ass at the same time. When I grind against his erection, a breath shudders out of him.

He pulls my face back toward him, his gaze seeking out mine, his eyes intent despite the darkening of lust. "I want to make you feel every pleasure imaginable tonight, but I'm not looking just to get off. The past few days... I can't imagine my life feeling whole unless you stay in it, Signy."

Despite the ache of desire that's gripping me, my throat constricts. How can any of us know what the future will hold, what he'll want after we see this rebellion through?

But we don't even know if we *will* see it through. And there's nothing I'd like to believe more than that I could stay in this man's life, whatever place I could find there. It isn't as if I have a home to go back to.

"If I have anything to say about it, you won't need to imagine," I murmur.

A brilliant smile crosses Jostein's face. He cups my face between his calloused hands and kisses me so hard I can barely remember anything exists except him.

I press into him again, the needy ache between my thighs getting hotter by the second. With a rough chuckle, Jostein tilts us over to lie on our sides on the spread sleeping mats. He ducks his head to lap the peak of my breast back into his

mouth while delving one hand beneath the waist of my trousers.

At the first brush of his fingers over my clit, I have to bite back a moan. Jostein caresses me through my dampened drawers and then slides his hand right beneath the thinner fabric. I rock with his explorations, my hold on him tightening when he dips a finger right inside me.

Then, with a warble of fabric, the tent flap pulls back.

I freeze, and Jostein's head jerks up.

Iko leans inside, his eyes gleaming and his striking face holding one of his sly grins. "I thought I noticed you two sneaking off over here. What happened to sharing, Jos?"

Jostein's eyes start to narrow into a glower, but at the same moment, his friend's words and the images they stir up set off a fresh pulse of desire through my body. To be touched like this by both of these men, the way they encompassed me in their kisses and caresses the other night...

Arousal pools in my sex with an eager quiver, and Jostein hesitates. He pumps his testing finger in and out of me while his friend watches, and his smile returns.

"What are you waiting for, then?" he asks Iko with a hint of a growl. "Get in here and let's see that our woman is properly celebrated."

Iko shows no sign of offense at being ordered around. He enters the tent and sprawls out at my back, immediately teasing one hand over my bare belly while he sweeps aside my hair with the other to kiss my neck.

Oh, gods. All I can do is tremble and sway between the two men as Jostein brings his mouth back to mine and Iko starts to fondle my breasts. The bigger man adds a second finger inside me, and I whimper into his mouth.

With a guttural sound, Jostein yanks down my trousers and drawers together. "I need to feel you around me."

Having no interest in arguing, I fumble with the fastening on his pants. He guides one of my legs all the way up to his waist

and enters me with one swift thrust.

“Fuck,” I mumble, the sensation of being so perfectly filled rippling through my entire body. I’m so wet there’s barely any friction at all as he pumps in and out of me, only the sweet burn of being stretched in just the right way.

Iko muffles a groan against my hair, pressing against me from behind as if to urge me on. As I buck with Jostein’s thrusts, he delves his hand between us.

When Iko’s fingers glide over my clit, I have to slam my mouth against Jostein’s to smother my moan. Iko circles his fingers around that most sensitive spot and nips my shoulder, Jostein plunges even deeper, and I can feel any shred of control I had left spiraling away from me.

I careen over the edge in a burst of pleasure that tingles all the way to my toes. My body shudders, lost in the flood.

My sex clamps around Jostein, and words spill out of him in a nearly incoherent muttering. “So good. Fucking incredible. Signy. Gods.”

After a couple more thrusts, I know he’s followed me. His head bows toward mine, and he holds me against him as if we could stay this way forever.

Iko nuzzles the back of my neck and peppers gentle kisses across my shoulder blades. He trails his hand up and down my abdomen as I come down from the orgasmic high.

“It’s an honor to witness you coming apart, Spitfire,” he murmurs.

Jostein presses his lips to mine once more and peers over me at his friend. He palms my breast with a flick of his thumb over the nipple, bringing it back to full stiffness. “You could do better than witness it. I’d imagine she could be even more satisfied.”

A giddy quiver shoots through me at his suggestion.

Iko lets out a light, breathless laugh and rolls me toward him. As I find myself straddling him, he grins up at me. “What do you think, Signy? Ready for another round?”

A flush spreads over my skin with a renewed throb of longing.

How is this my life? How have I ended up with two men who want me like this?

I can't see any point in denying that I want him too.

I set my hand against the erection straining against his trousers, getting a deeper thrill out of the ecstatic expression that crosses his face. "I think you've got too many clothes on."

With another laugh, he wrenches at his trousers. "A problem we can easily solve."

As Iko kicks off his pants, Jostein sits up next to us. He teases his fingers down my spine and along my inner thigh, apparently as intent on adding to my enjoyment as his friend was during our coupling.

Iko eases me down onto him slowly, inch by inch, dragging out the pleasure of the penetration. An impatient noise works from my throat, and he chuckles.

Propping himself up on one elbow, he grasps my hair and tugs me to him for our first real kiss tonight. As our mouths meld together, he rolls his hips and consumes my gasp of pleasure.

With a smile now purely wicked, Iko traces the curve of my ass. "You know, there are ways a woman can have two men at once, if you ever think you could handle it. More efficient—and I believe even more satisfying—that way."

I shiver at the thought, licking my lips.

Watching my reaction, Jostein squeezes my ass in turn and then skims my back opening. The nerves there light up with a flare of sensation like nothing I've ever felt.

"A pity we didn't think of that earlier," he says in a low voice that melts me. "It'll have to wait for the next time."

My noise of agreement comes out like a mewling more than anything else. Iko groans and bucks up to meet me.

I sway between the thrust of his cock and the provocative pressure of Jostein's fingers. I'd have expected to find myself too spent to reach my peak again at all quickly, but the pleasure swells inside me so rapidly I'm dizzy with it.

I run my fingers over Iko's chest, loosening the ties on his shirt and delving to the taut skin beneath. Match him kiss for wild kiss. Hiss a breath through my teeth when Jostein works a finger right inside me from the opposite end, aided by the slickness of my own arousal.

"We're going to give you everything you've needed," Iko promises in an increasingly ragged voice. "Everything you deserve."

He clutches my thigh as he picks up his pace, slamming me down to meet him and flicking his thumb across my clit. My fingernails dig into his sides, and he groans. "Fuck, you're too delicious. Come with me, Spitfire. Come with me all the way."

He swirls his thumb around my clit again with an even more forceful thrust. Jostein echoes the motion from behind.

With a whimper, I soar up and over my peak.

My eyes roll up, my vision briefly whitening out. Iko's breath stutters, his hips jerking, and then he's pulling me down over him, nestling my head against the crook of his shoulder.

Jostein withdraws his hand with one final caress of my back. He leans over to kiss my cheek.

I feel as much as see Iko gaze up at his friend through the dimness. "She is *our* woman. We can give her that much more if we're in this together."

He says it as a statement, but his muscles tense beneath me with a momentary uneasiness.

Jostein answers with a soft smile. "Our woman, for as long as she wants the both of us."

I barely restrain a snort at the idea that *my* interest would be the deciding factor.

As if he senses my skepticism, Iko cups my face. His voice comes out more tender than usual. "You're the only woman I

can see myself ever wanting again, Signy. No one else has ever come close to matching you.”

I don't know how to answer that statement of devotion except with a lingering kiss. He kisses me back just as ardently.

As I start to peel myself off Iko, a familiar voice carries through the tent wall.

“Signy?”

It's Landric—looking for me, apparently. His tone sounds concerned.

Iko grumbles a curse, and I snatch at my clothes. Jostein yanks up his trousers.

We emerge from the tent probably looking like people who were doing exactly what we were doing. I'm still straightening my tunic, vaguely aware of my well-rumpled hair. Iko's shirt hangs partly open, and Jostein is simply carrying his rather than pulling it back on. As if he *wants* our recent activities to be obvious.

When the squad leader folds his arms over his chest, staring through the forest, I get the impression he's staking a claim, even if it doesn't exclude his friend.

Landric has passed us by, wandering between the tents. I clear my throat, my cheeks prickling with a sudden heat. “I'm over here.”

He spins on his heel and then simply stops, taking in the three of us. The heat in my face flares, but I keep my chin high and my gaze steady.

A hint of a flush creeps over Landric's face in turn, but to give him credit, he doesn't avert his gaze or go storming off. “I didn't mean to interrupt anything.”

“That's all right,” Iko says, draping his arm across my shoulders in a possessive gesture of his own. “This lovely woman has been well taken care of. You wanted to talk to her?”



Landric fumbles with his words. “I—yes—there—” He pauses, swallows, and seems to gather himself. “I wanted to speak with you before going to the officers, since this is really your rebellion. I had an idea for the next time we confront the Darium army.”

A hint of a smile touches his lips. “You could say your trick with the lissweld pollen inspired me.”

# CHAPTER SIXTEEN



## SIGNY

CAPTAIN AMALIA GRIMACES AS she smears the yellowish green algae over her dark skin. “You’re sure this part is absolutely necessary?”

Landric’s mouth twists apologetically. “Unless you like the idea of getting stung by a horde of wasps.”

“No, I suppose I’d prefer to avoid that outcome.” She shakes her head. “Well, even if the stings don’t do the job well enough, the stink should keep the Darium soldiers far enough away they won’t be able to murder us.”

Her dry tone and the ridiculousness of the situation shock a laugh from my throat despite the tension balled tight inside

me.

I restrain a grimace of my own as I dip my hand into the murky pond. The odor that rises off the water makes me think of rotting fish. A shudder runs through me as I slather more algae across my arms and onto my cheeks.

But it'll be worth it if it means we can carve a bigger hole in the Darium army. At least the summer day is warm enough that the dampness isn't unpleasant too.

Iko uses a stick to swirl the film that coats the surface of the water, his own tan skin already yellowed by drying algae. "Hard to believe anything else can live in this mess."

"I don't think much does," Landric says, straightening up. He's streaked the slimy stuff even through his coppery hair, but somehow he's still handsome with his eagerness to share his knowledge brightening his expression. "The harvesters cultivate these ponds around the marl tree forests so they have easy access to the algae when they need it. I don't think they care about much else."

As we step back from the pond to give more of our allies a chance to slather themselves in the protective vegetation, Jostein shakes his head. "I wonder how the nobles on their estates would feel if they knew how much of a stink surrounds their fine furniture."

Landric chuckles. "That's why marlwood is so expensive—dealing with the damned wasps. But I don't think the people who buy the products made from it give it much thought beyond knowing that type of wood is a valuable commodity."

He knows because of the work his family does—because of how he's helped his merchant parents with their business. When he presented his plan to me and then the officers last night, he explained that it'd occurred to him there was a marlwood forest within a few hours' march of our current camp.

I examine my limbs for any patches of bare skin I might have missed. "What happens if the algae doesn't ward the wasps off enough and they sting us too?"

Landric's voice softens. "That shouldn't happen. Not when they'll have plenty of other targets to take out their annoyance on. But just a few stings will only hurt a lot and slow down your reactions. It takes several for full paralysis to set in. The only deaths I've ever heard of were unprepared folk stumbling into a stretch of marl trees and stirring up an awful lot of the wasps. They don't even come out from their tunnels unless they're disturbed."

Of course, we're going to be purposefully provoking the insects from their preferred home just beneath the bark of the trees. But I guess marlwood wouldn't be a commodity at all if the harvesters couldn't cut down trees to harvest it without being stung to death.

I'm not sure how well-known marlwood is in our neighboring realms, let alone all the way to Dariu. It's possible someone in the Darium force is aware of its unique relationship with the wasps. But it seems unlikely they'd also be aware of exactly where the local supply happens to come from.

As we tramp around the edge of the forest, I breathe through my mouth to avoid the worst of the stench. At least we're all in this smelly situation together.

Over where the woodland comes up on the nearby road, there's a stretch with about a quarter mile of more peaceful trees—cultivated purposefully so that travelers through this area don't accidentally set off a wasp attack. We've removed the signs warning of the marl trees beyond. Several of our soldiers are setting up tents and scattering equipment so it looks as if we were using this part of the forest as a camp rather than an ambush.

The Darium army won't be quite as quick to charge after us now that we've played one trick on them. We need them to think they've caught us rather than that we welcomed the fight.

Another soldier lopes through the trees and tips his head to Captain Amalia. We've been leaving traces of our journey so

the Darium forces can track us down, making the evidence look as accidental as we're able to.

After yesterday's confrontation, none of us has any doubt that High Commander Livius and his underlings will be eager for vengeance.

Our last sentry to arrive reported that the army was marching this way, only a couple of hours distant. I peer through the trees, hoping the man who stayed back to play a peddler walking the road will come out of his encounter with the Darium force in one piece.

He has to let the soldiers think they've bullied him into admitting he saw us hiding in these woods. With the grace of the gods, they'll be in enough of a hurry to follow our trail that they simply toss him aside once he's coughed up the information.

I check my sword at my side as if the algae might have stolen it when I wasn't looking, my pulse beating faster. We had a huge victory yesterday. Today's scheme isn't even my plan—I'm not responsible for how it turns out.

But I'm here in the thick of it. And none of the other people around me would be here if I hadn't lit the first spark of rebellion.

I sit down next to rather than on a bed roll, not wanting to risk contaminating it with the stink, and will my nerves to settle as well as I can. We can't act until the Darium army reaches us. There's nothing to do at the moment but wait.

Landric sinks onto the ground next to me, his eyes equally alert. Jostein and Iko have gathered with a few squad-mates around Captain Amalia. As my gaze lingers on them, taking in Jostein's assured stance and Iko's brilliant grin, Landric glances over at me.

He must be able to tell where I'm looking. His voice comes out low and even. "What's going on between you and them... it's more than just physical, isn't it?"

I swallow hard, the motion bringing back an aftertaste of the mirewort Jostein passed to me earlier this morning. To make

sure there are no unintended consequences from our passionate interlude. *For now*, he said as he set the packet in my hand, with a gleam in his bright blue eyes as if he could imagine a future when pregnancy would be welcome rather than a mistake.

The memory of that moment and of Landric finding us last night sends an awkward flush through my body. “I don’t see how it’s any of your business.”

Landric winces. “I know it’s not. I know... I have a long way to go before you’ll really trust me. And you deserve to be happy.”

I raise an eyebrow. “I feel like there’s a ‘but’ coming.”

“Not really.” His gaze drops to the twigs and pebbles scattered on the forest floor around his feet. “This isn’t how I’d have wanted to look—or smell—when putting this out there, but it seems like I’d better say it now or I’ll lose any chance at all. I already lost so many when you were right there in front of me in town.”

Is he trying to present himself as an alternate suitor? My previous flush turns prickly beneath my skin. “If you’re saying that I should entertain your interest over theirs—”

“No,” Landric says quickly, his head jerking back up so he can meet my eyes. “That wouldn’t be fair of me. But if it isn’t a competition between them, maybe... maybe you’d be willing to consider me alongside them.”

My breath snags in my throat. I don’t know how to answer him when he’s looking at me so earnestly, when all our tangled, painful history still hangs over us.

He means it right now. I don’t think he would have a couple of weeks ago. How quickly could his affections shift all over again?

I still don’t trust him. So why does my heart thump even faster at his proposition?

Before I have to respond to him or myself, a short whistle pierces the air. My stance tenses, rising up so I’m braced on my feet.

The army is almost on us. Any moment now...

The seconds pass by with the rustle of the leaves overhead and the stench of dried algae seeping into my nose. I've almost sat down again, thinking it was a false alarm, when one of the sentries posted at the edge of the forest comes running into our midst.

"The Darium army—they've found us! We've got to get out of here!"

He yells loud enough for his voice to carry all the way to the road behind him—which is the point. Let the enemy soldiers think they're falling on us unexpectedly, that they've driven us into a panic.

We scramble to our feet, panic not at all difficult to feign when all those swords and lances are bearing down on us. At least the trees will shelter us from distant arrows.

Landric grasps my arm with a quick squeeze, fear flickering through his expression and vanishing beneath a firming of determination. A thunder of stomping feet reverberates through the trees as the Darium army barrels toward us.

All of us take off for the deeper forest. We need them to see us fleeing but not quite catch up with us until we're amid the marl trees.

Taunting shouts ring out behind us. The high commander's voice booms out in the same contemptuous tone as yesterday. "You won't escape us now, vermin. We'll stamp you all out like the rats you are."

The stampede of footsteps sounds from either side of us—the Darium soldiers doing their best to surround us, coming up along the edges of this patch of forest where they can run faster on the un-treed ground.

I push myself faster and spot the mottled gray bark of the first marl trees up ahead.

A crossbow bolt zings through the air to slam into a trunk. Someone farther behind me cries out.

I hurtle into the midst of the marl trees alongside my comrades, all of us whipping out our weapons. Whacking the bark on one tree with the flat of my sword, I kick the next nearest trunk at the same time before dashing onward. All around me, bodies and blades thud against the precious trees.

And then the buzzing starts.

A fierce hum swells in the air as hundreds of tiny red-and-brown bodies spew from little holes in the tree bark. The angry insects shoot right past me, raising the hairs on the back of my neck but not pausing to aim their stingers at me.

They careen straight toward the unprotected soldiers storming into our midst.

The wasps fly at uncovered hands, at the gaps in helms and around collars, as penetrating as the lissweld pollen but ten times more vicious. The figures in their skeletal uniforms who barged into the forest break out into a horrifically ridiculous dance, shaking and slapping as they try to fend off the miniscule attackers.

As their larger enemies, we can't just stand back and watch. The Veldunian soldiers among us launch themselves at the Darium force, cutting down our opponents while they're distracted by the wasps.

Some of the Darium soldiers have already crumpled over, the toxin in the stingers numbing their bodies. I can't quite stomach stabbing those people in my inexpert way while they're so defenseless, but I knock off their helms, giving the wasps better access. Welts are swelling around their necks and mouths.

One woman lurches forward with a jab of her sword toward Landric, who has his back turned to her as he shoves away another soldier. My heart lurches. I swing my own sword with all the strength I used to put into my axe when I chopped wood at my old cabin.

The blade slams down on her wrist and severs it from her body so abruptly my jaw goes slack.



Landric whirls around at the woman's groan. She slumps over, yanking the stump of her arm closer to her body, trying to huddle against more wasps descending on her.

My childhood friend blinks and looks at me with a mix of shock and relief. "Thank you."

A sudden guffaw tumbles out of me. "Thank *you* for this fantastic plan."

The cries echoing between the trees are all triumphant now as the Darium soldiers lie broken or dash away in another retreat. We've won the day once more.

I can only imagine how much more furious the survivors will be when they descend on us next. But that's a problem for another day.

# CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



## SIGNY

LAUGHTER BOUNCES ACROSS THE water along the shore of the vast lake at the foot of the mountains. My comrades slosh around, thigh- to chest-deep in the cool water, rinsing the remains of the stinking algae from our skin and clothes.

I wobble on the rocky lake floor, and Iko grasps my arm to steady me. He aims a grin at me, looking twice as roguish with his blond hair slicked back and darkened with the water. “Need a little help washing up?”

I pat my face. “Did I miss a spot?”

“There’s a little in your hair...”

He guides me to lean backward and swishes my hair in the water with unexpected gentleness. But of course he takes a moment to stroke his fingers right over my scalp in a provocative caress.

As he pulls me upright, my cheeks warm. “Aiming to be thorough?”

He chuckles, his hand on my waist. “Nothing wrong with having a little fun at the same time.”

At my teasingly disgruntled sound, he leans closer, lowering his voice. “We hit the Darium army with quite a blow. It’ll take at least a couple of days for them to recover. I think tonight we should look forward to a lot more fun.”

I arch my eyebrows at him, though a flush has spread all across my skin despite the cool water. “Oh, do you?”

He hums meaningfully. “And I’d imagine Jostein would agree.”

With another flash of a grin, he dips his head to claim a quick kiss. Apparently he doesn’t care who knows how our relationship has developed.

And maybe there’s no reason to worry. Most of our companions are too busy reveling in relief to pay attention, and the few who’ve glanced our way simply smile with fond amusement.

No more sneering comments. No more disdainful glowers.

No one here seems to care anymore about the fact that my godlen didn’t reward my dedication sacrifice. I’ve created something so much bigger, so much better than anything the gift I prayed for would have allowed.

I take in the broader sprawl of our camp in a semi-circle around the lake. My gaze seems to skip across the fields to the south, as if given an inexplicable nudge.

I frown, but Iko grasps my hand to tug me over to the shore, and my momentary uneasiness fades. There’s nothing over there. I’m just worn out from the intense day—the intense *week*—we’ve managed to survive.

As Iko and I wade to shore, I peer through the rippling water at the rocky terrain. I have to lift my foot higher to clamber over a dark gap between the stones.

My attention rises to the mountain looming right at the far side of the lake. I can pick out several dark crevices along its base too.

“There are caves broken into the rocks,” I comment. “I wonder how far and how deep they run. Back at Feldan, there were passages all under the hills and the town. Some people used them for storerooms.”

Now those openings will be buried under ash and charred wood. I hope no one tried to hide in one of the natural cellars and found themselves unable to shift the door to climb back out.

A shudder passes through me at the thought, but Iko scans the landscape with a curious air. “We should do some exploring once we’ve dried off. It’s always good to know what we have to work with.”

We rub ourselves down with blankets and spread them out to dry. The summer air turns cool across my still-damp clothes, but it’s more refreshing than chilly with the sun beaming down on us.

Memories of those narrow crevices around the town nibble at my mind. I knit my brow. I can almost see... “I think if we had enough time to prepare, maybe there’s a way to use—”

My gaze slides over the landscape around us, and that unnerving sensation hits me again, harder. As if my eyes have been propelled away through a will not my own.

My body tenses, my voice dying in my mouth. Iko catches my reaction immediately. “What’s wrong?”

I swallow thickly, my stomach twisting with a sudden nausea. “I’m not sure. Something just feels... strange. You don’t see anything around here, do you?”

Iko considers the mountain range and then the fields nearby. Watching his expression, I catch a slight tick. His shoulders stiffen too.

“I think—there’s some kind of magic at work.” He raises his voice. “Major Arlo! Captain Amalia! We need to—”

He never gets to finish his suggestion. At his first shouts, dozens of heads swivel around all across our campsite—and the illusion breaks.

Stampeding figures waver into view all across the fields around us. There must be hundreds of them coming from the north, more from the east and west, every direction except the towering mountains.

As they charge toward us, they shed the drappings of greenish fabric that helped the illusionary magic conceal them. The skeletal uniforms of the Darium soldiers stand out starkly against the grassy terrain.

Their blades flash. Bows draw back with arrows launched into the air.

I cry out and scramble backward, but I don’t really know where to run. The camp turns into a teeming mass of panic, officers shouting for us to grab our weapons, curses and gasps of terror mingling with the orders.

I manage to snatch up my short sword, as much good as it might do me. Arrows hurtle into our midst, toppling a man just a few paces from where I’m standing, a woman I shared breakfast with this morning.

How did the Darium forces regroup and find us so quickly? How much magic must it have taken to hide so many of them?

Even in my horror, I spot the dark green uniforms amid the Darium standard. Duke Berengar’s livery. He’s had a hand in this assault—he’s helped them plot their counterattack.

It doesn’t make any sense that most of them have come from nearly the opposite direction from where we last encountered the Darium forces. We only arrived at the lake a couple of hours ago.

Unless these are other soldiers. Has the duke been rallying the squadrons already stationed here in Velduny, gathering them to launch an offensive at our flanks?

It could have been even worse if they'd caught us on totally open ground.

And is that a woman in an orange robe, vividly bright at the back of the swarm? As soon as I've noticed her, I pick out a few more people in similar attire at the rear of the charge.

As I scramble away, a chill consumes my gut. They're devouts of Inganne, no doubt from the temple that glitters beneath the sunlight to the west. With the godlen's affinity with imagination and play, dedicats seeking gifts of illusion often turn to her.

Did the Darium soldiers force them to contribute their magic, or did they ally themselves freely with our enemy?

It hardly matters now. The soldiers close in around us, plowing into the rebels at the edges of the camp. Blood sprays and bodies slump—mostly on our side.

Captain Amalia's voice splits through the bellows and shrieks of the fray. "Up the mountain! Take the higher ground!"

I whirl around, and Iko is there, gripping my elbow. As we dash around the shoreline toward the rocky slope, Jostein barrels past us on his horse, his sword swinging. A protest snags in my throat with the urge to call him back, to beg him to flee with us.

But the loyal squad leader would never put his own safety first. He'll stay to the bitter end, helping all of us who can escape make it to safety, just like he did for me that first night in Feldan.

Iko tugs me onward. "If anyone can make it through this mess, it's Jostein. He'll focus better if he knows I've gotten you out of the line of fire."

How far do we need to run for that? As we clamber up the steepening slope, more arrows pelt the frantic crowd around us. Another comrade falls, and another.

I have to dodge a body that tumbles down the incline right in front of me, blood blooming from the shaft piercing her chest.

My groping hands clutch at wizened trees and spears of stone to speed my climb. The rough surfaces scrape at my palms, but I barely notice the sting. My lungs burn with the exertion alongside the growing ache in my calves.

Finally, no more arrows whistle into our midst. Iko urges me a little higher, up to a narrow plateau where we can stand somewhat steadily.

A few dozen of our allies have already arrived there, more gathering above and below to stare down the slope at the camp we were forced to abandon.

Corpses in the plain clothes of rebels scatter the field around the edge of the lake and the lower reaches of the mountain. More bloody red meets my eyes than the green of the grass or the gray of the rocks.

The Darium soldiers and their helpers pick their way between the bodies, peering up at the remainder of our resistance. I can't help looking around me, taking in our dwindled battalion too.

I'm not sure even half of us survived the onslaught. Where's Jostein? What happened to Landric?

My pulse races for several panicked seconds before I spot Jostein walking beside his horse along the slope, down by the lowest of our surviving allies. Blood darkens his sleeve and chest, but I can't tell how much of it if any is his. He's striding along steadily enough to reassure me.

Landric's hair gleams beneath the late afternoon sun where he's poised off to the side of our little plateau. I can't make out much more of him, but he is at least standing.

There's no sign of High Commander Livius with his multiply-plumed helm. This isn't his army at all.

A Darium soldier with a single-plumed helmet marking him as a lesser officer marches to the bottom of the slope. As he studies our huddled forms, his lips curl into a sneer.

"You enjoy your mountainside," he calls up to us in an equally mocking tone. "Our colleagues are already on their

way to join us. I'm sure the high commander will want to have a part in executing the rest of you."

Their colleagues—what's left of the army we've tricked to many of their deaths twice now. Yes, they will be angry. My legs wobble under me.

It seems the Darium force isn't foolhardy enough to clamber after us and continue the battle with us very literally on higher ground. They draw back beyond the scene of the slaughter, some of the soldiers setting up tents of their own while others remain on guard.

My fellow rebels stir uneasily around me. Muffled sobs reach my ears from somewhere beyond my view. Every face my gaze catches on has fallen, shadowed with grief and fear.

I think we lost one of our captains in the attack. Only four of them have stepped off to the side with Major Arlo to confer, although I'm relieved to see Captain Amalia is among them.

I look down at the mass of fallen bodies again, and my stomach clenches up. So many dead.

So many who were only here because I called for this uprising. Because I claimed we could win.

After those two victories, I really believed we had a chance. That we could keep winning, over and over, until the Darium empire was beaten.

Who's beaten now?

I sink down to the ground, drawing my legs up in front of me. Iko follows, his expression tensing with concern. "Are you all right? If you're injured—"

I shake my head, too choked up to speak. No, *I'm* perfectly fine, at least in body. Unlike hundreds of the soldiers and civilians I rallied around me.

I led them to their deaths. And the Darium soldiers intend to slaughter all the rest of us—and who knows how many total innocents as well—in punishment.

Who in the realms did I think I was? I *knew* it could end like this, I knew I might be reaching too far, and I dragged so many



people down with me anyway.

Someone pushes through the crowd toward us. I can't quite bring myself to raise my head, but I know Jostein's voice as soon as he speaks, breathless with relief. "You both made it."

He kneels down, touching my hair. "We can recover from this, Signy. We won't let them catch us unprepared again."

But even as his last word fades in the air, the major and the captains march over to address the rest of us survivors. I've never seen Major Arlo's face so grim.

"Good people of Velduny," he says in a low but resonant tone that carries over all of us. "We've put up a good fight. We've done more damage to the Darium forces than most would have imagined possible. But in light of the losses we just suffered and the challenges ahead... I feel it's time to discuss surrender."

# CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



JOSTEIN

AS I WATCH THE officers in their hushed twilight conference, my jaw clenches. Every particle of my being itches to be in there with them, speaking against the surrender, laying out plans of my own. Showing how we can lead the people who've believed in this cause to a better outcome.

But I don't actually know what plan would get us out of this mess. Maybe that's why I'm over here with the infantry and the civilians, waiting in the growing gloom to hear someone else determine our fate.

Anger smolders inside me despite the increasingly hopeless atmosphere. We can't give up now. We can't let all the people who fell to Darium swords and arrows today have died in vain.

It's hard to keep up my own hope when I stalk back to where I left Signy sitting with Iko, though. Her head has drooped even farther than when I last saw her, her dark hair drifting across her shoulders and the knees she's hugging. Her slumped shoulders look unnervingly fragile.

I've watched this woman challenge an entire squadron alone. I've seen her fight tooth and nail for her home when no one else was willing to.

It always seemed like the strength she radiated was something innate and unshakeable. But she's obviously shaken now.

While I've been gone, Landric has come over to sit with her too, keeping a careful distance opposite Iko. The same anguish I feel is etched all across his face.

I don't know all the details of what went on between them in the past, but he clearly cares about her. Somehow that both annoys me and reassures me.

This magnificent woman needs all the caring she can get. All the caring she was denied for so long before she took up this mission.

I crouch down on the uneven ground next to Iko, turned to face Signy, but she doesn't look up. It's my friend who acknowledges my presence first. "Any news from the bigwigs?"

I shake my head. "They're still discussing our options. Trying to come up with an offer that'll save as many lives as possible, I'd imagine."

What's to stop the Darium force from slaughtering us all, really? It'll be easy enough once the rest of their army arrives, which may only be a matter of hours from now.

"Too many people already died," Signy murmurs in a rough voice.

My heart wrenches. I'm amazed that we made it so long without more initial casualties. She's never had to face the realities of warfare. She has no idea how much blood ends up being shed even to win.

“We all knew what we were risking when we took up the cause,” I say, as steadily as I can. “I know none of my colleagues would have regretted making the gamble for what we stood to gain. What we *still* stand to gain.”

A choked guffaw sputters out of her. “Still? We’ve lost. It took them just minutes to murder half of our comrades. They’re only holding back from cutting down the rest of us until we pose even less of a threat than we already do.”

Landric’s stance tenses. “Which means we have time. We started with less than we have now. We started with just the four of us.”

“Taking on a guard post, not an entire army.”

Iko makes a dismissive sound. “It wasn’t manpower that won the battles before this one. They always had us outnumbered. Our wits made the difference.”

“Until they didn’t anymore.”

I reach out to graze my fingers over Signy’s hair. She lifts her head just enough to peer at me between the strands. So much sorrow shadows her normally vibrant eyes that my throat constricts.

I want to tell her how we can win the war after all. I want to point the way and command everyone onto the path of victory.

But that has never been my actual role since I was first drawn into this quest. Signy was the driving force.

I was the one who recognized the potential in her. Who could see how much *she* could accomplish.

Because it’s all I have, I lean into the one certainty my gift gave me. “We’ve had a harsh setback, but that doesn’t mean this is over. We’ve faced setbacks before and come back stronger. You’ve always seen the way through, and I know you can again. All these people are here because you inspired them. You inspired *me*.”

Signy swipes her hand across her mouth. “I inspired hundreds of them to their deaths. Just because I couldn’t stand to let the Darium empire keep lording it over us.”

Ah. It isn't just grief but guilt tying her into knots.

I caress her hair again, summoning all the conviction and authority I can bring to bear. "The deaths today aren't your fault. Signy, you're surrounded by hundreds of trained soldiers, and not one of us caught on to the threat in time to prevent the attack. They used skills and tactics we didn't anticipate, and that's on us. How could you expect to be prepared when not even Major Arlo was?"

As she grimaces, Iko picks up my thread with a squeeze of her shoulder. "And you were the first to realize something was wrong. If you hadn't said something to me, they might have gotten even closer before anyone sounded the alarm. Even more lives would have been lost."

Landric shifts his position as if he wants to reach out to her too, but he holds himself back. "The Darium forces were killing Veldunian citizens long before you ever took up this rebellion. The only difference is that we've finally been making them pay. We finally have the chance to get rid of them completely."

"How?" Signy demands. "There's no lissweld or marlwood wasps here. We're stuck up a mountain with an army at the foot."

A crooked smile crosses my lips. "You haven't given yourself the opportunity to believe there's a way out of this. If you can find that faith again, I have total confidence that more strategies will come to you."

Iko perks up. "You were starting to tell me an idea down by the lake when you noticed the illusionary magic. You'd already thought of another way to turn the tables on them, hadn't you?"

A brief glimmer lights in Signy's eyes. She opens her mouth and closes it again, the spark fading.

I lean forward, knowing that if I accomplish anything tonight, it has to be fanning that ember back into flame. "What? What were you picturing?"

“I—I don’t know. That was before we were stuck up here. Before we lost so many people. We’d need time... It’d have been a lot to pull off even before.”

“We’re not doing anything yet,” I say firmly. “You’re not insisting on anything. You’re just telling us what you imagined. Let us judge whether it’s worth pursuing. That part won’t be on you.”

Signy wets her lips. For a second, I think she’s going to refuse again.

Then she lifts her chin a little higher. “There are caves in the mountain, under the lake—maybe all around here. The terrain around Feldan is like that too. A layer of soil over lots of rock, with crevices and passages all through it...”

She glances at Landric, who’s watching her avidly. “Do you remember when we were little kids—when there was that cave-in by the old cistern? Rafe and his sister fell in.”

Landric’s gaze goes distant with the recollection. “The ceiling of a cave under the field collapsed. Rafe bashed his head and his leg—he never thought or walked the same after that. Maika nearly died from the bleeding.”

“A fall like that does a lot of damage.” Signy’s head turns so she can gaze through the thickening dusk toward the remnants of her former home. “Those caves ran all through Feldan and out into the nearby fields as well as the forest... If we could thin or crack the ceilings so they’d be on the verge of collapsing and then lure the Darium soldiers there to fall... But I don’t know if that would be possible even if we had days to work on it.”

Landric springs to his feet. “I’ve talked to at least a couple of people who have gifts that could help set it up. I’ll make sure they’re still with us and see who else I can find who’d be able to pitch in.”

Signy stiffens. “You don’t have to—”

He fixes her with a look so intense it sets off every jealous impulse in my body. “I want to. It’s a fantastic plan.” His gaze lifts to me. “Isn’t it?”

“We don’t have enough of the pieces pulled together for me to evaluate with my gift,” I say. “But if we can pull it off, I think it’d be exactly what we need.”

As Landric hustles off, Signy’s gaze follows him. I think I see a faint flush in her cheeks.

I shove down the jealousy and focus on the part of me that wants to see this woman adored. The remark manages to come out in a casual tone. “He’s awfully devoted to you.”

Her attention jerks back to me with a twist of her mouth. “He’s just—he feels bad about not standing up for me sooner. He’s trying to make it up to me so he doesn’t have to feel guilty.”

Iko chuckles. “I think it’s more than that. It just took him much longer to recognize what an incredible woman you are than it did the two of us. His fault for being late to the party.”

Signy gives a soft snort at his phrasing, but the hint of a blush remains.

I pick my words carefully. “He has been a valuable and loyal member of our rebellion from the very start. The four of us worked well together.”

She stares at me for a moment. “What are you saying?”

I lift my shoulders in a slight shrug. “We obviously have more pressing concerns at the moment. But as far as I’m concerned, if you felt you could accept all the devotion three of us could offer you rather than two... I wouldn’t want to hold you back.”

Iko elbows me. “Hey, now I’ll look bad if I say I want her all for ourselves.”

Signy’s expression has shifted to something somewhere between incredulity and amusement. “Is that what you’d have said?”

Iko grins at her, his posture relaxing. “You know, when we first met, I might have said I’d rather have you all just for me. But there’s something pretty fantastic about a collaboration. I

liked seeing how much you enjoyed the two of us together. Three... that could be even more spectacular.”

There’s no doubt now that Signy’s tan skin has reddened. She ducks her head in momentary embarrassment and then pushes herself to her feet. “Well, none of it matters if we’re all facing execution tomorrow.”

Her gaze slides toward the cluster of officers farther along the mountainside. “It doesn’t matter what brilliant plan we come up with if the major and the captains don’t agree.”

I give her hand a quick squeeze. “Then we’ll have to be very convincing.”

It takes even less time than I expect before our comrades begin to gather around the three of us—some of my fellow soldiers looking to me and Iko with questioning expressions, some of the ordinary citizens studying Signy.

“I heard you might have a way we can knock the Darium bastards back on their asses,” one of them says cautiously.

Before this afternoon’s massacre, I’d have expected Signy to hold her head high with a daring smile and assure them we’re heading toward another victory. Now, I’m not entirely surprised to see her hesitate, even if it pains me. My attempt at a pep talk hasn’t been enough to fully restore her confidence.

If she needs more, I can provide it. She isn’t alone anymore—and she needs to see that the people she’s brought together are still willing to fight for our freedom despite today’s tragedy.

“We might have an opportunity to shatter the entire Darium force,” I say. “We can’t back down now, not when we’ve made so much progress. They believe they have the upper hand again—it’s the perfect time to upset the balance.”

A few of our companions look nervous, but most draw themselves straighter with determined expressions. They’ve watched friends and neighbors die today. They’ve had a stark reminder of the brutality we’ve spent the past three centuries enduring.



To drive the point home, I gesture toward the Darium camp beyond the lake. “They want to kill all of us. I say we spill their blood instead. Every Darium soldier we take down is one fewer who can torment the rest of us in years to come.”

It’s possible none of us will survive the next day, but if we hit back hard enough, we might still carve the way to a better future. All of Velduny will be hearing about the stand we’ve taken.

All we can hope for is to weaken the Darium presence in our country as much as possible, regardless of what fate we meet.

The murmurs of anticipation that pass through the growing crowd around us seem to invigorate Signy. She tosses back her hair and sets her hands on her hips. “I started us on this path, and I’m going to keep fighting until the end. You all have to make the decisions that are right for you. But I’d be honored to have you taking on those pricks alongside me.”

As several voices call out in support, Landric hustles back to us with a dozen figures trailing behind him. His face has lit up with enthusiasm.

He’s that happy to be playing this role—to be helping orchestrate the rebellion, to be showing Signy she isn’t beaten. Seeing it, I can’t resent his interest in her one bit.

“I think we could pull it off,” he says to us in a hushed voice. “We’ve got people skilled with rock work, construction, carving... I have a few asking around to see if there are other talents that could contribute. The hardest part might be setting off the cave-ins at the right time. We’d want the ground to hold steady enough at first for plenty of the soldiers to get into the area, right?”

Signy nods, her expression turning thoughtful. “We’ll need to create a big impact, some kind of shock to the ground. Explosives?”

She glances at Iko, whose grin turns sly. “You know I won’t pass up the chance to see what I can throw together to stir things up.”

A cleared throat brings my head snapping around.

Major Arlo and the captains have approached our expanding huddle. The major frowns at us. “What’s going on over here? If we’re going to negotiate as peaceful a surrender as possible, we can’t be agitating the Darium forces any further.”

He holds himself with an assurance I can’t help admiring. Ever since I was a kid, I dreamed of taking on a role like his, leading hundreds of soldiers in defense of our country. All my training tells me to stand down and follow orders.

That’s not enough, though. If I want to lead my fellow citizens on the right path, I have to start now, when it could make the most difference.

No, this plan isn’t mine. But part of me knew all the way back at twelve years old that sometimes the best leadership doesn’t come from seeing the route forward but getting everyone else on it once a visionary has pointed out the way.

Every bit of my gift is telling me that the people we’ve assembled, the people I’ve believed in from the start, can tackle this final challenge.

I square my shoulders. “We’re not ready to surrender, sir.”

The major’s jaw ticks. “It’s hardly up to you. We’ve fought hard, but we’ve been overwhelmed—”

“We can turn the tables on them again,” Signy breaks in, with so much of her old passion that my heart leaps to see it. “We’re putting together a strategy—if we get started on it right away, it could completely cripple the Darium forces.”

One of the captains steps in. “It’s our job to decide whether the risks are worth the potential gains.”

I fold my arms over my chest. “This isn’t just an army. This is a rebellion. None of us are following the rules anymore. If the people here want to keep fighting rather than giving up, I think your options are to do whatever you can to make that work—or give your own surrender.”

The captain’s gaze sharpens into a glare, but Amalia pushes past him. “My squad leader has a point.” She takes in the people who’ve gathered around us. “Do you really want to keep going?”

This time, there's no hesitation, no uncertainty. The voices rise up in a rush of defiance. "We have to keep fighting."

"We're in this until the end."

"Let's take as many of those assholes down as we can."

When my captain catches my eyes, I catch a glint of pride in hers. I doubt she was ever keen on the idea of surrendering. "Then I say we hear about this plan of yours."

I set my hand on my lover's shoulder. "Signy saw how it could happen."

# CHAPTER NINETEEN



## SIGNY

I WATCH THE NEXT group of rebels depart through the night with a brief wave of farewell. As they slink along the mountainside through the darkness, heading well past the view of the Darium guards before they descend and hurry north toward Feldan, my stomach knots.

I can't shake the feeling that I should be going with them. That I should have joined the first bunch of resistors who took most of our remaining horses to race off toward the town so they'd have as much time as possible to work their gifts.

But I don't have any gift at all. My contribution was coming up with the plan. The best I can do now is keep everyone's spirits up to see it through.

Jostein approaches with a rasp of his boots over the uneven rock. He stops beside me, tucking his arm around my waist in a gesture that feels so natural now it sends a quiver of giddiness through me.

We've known each other for a little over a week, but we've spent nearly every moment of that together. And with each of those moments, no matter how fraught, he's proven that he sees me as so much more of a true partner than any of my previous, fleeting flings did.

His thumb strokes over my back in a gentle caress. "How are you holding up?"

I let out a short guffaw. "I'm not on the front lines. I hope the stone workers and the rest we sent ahead aren't finding the task too much."

Jostein hums. "I didn't ask about them. I asked about you. You've taken on a lot of responsibility from the beginning, and now isn't any different."

A lump forms in my throat at his recognition of the pressure I'm feeling. I'm not sure I'd have dared to speak this plan, let alone attempt it, if it wasn't for the squad leader's encouragement earlier.

I lean into his touch, accepting the comfort he's offering. "I'm nervous, but I'm not letting it get to me. Even if this goes wrong, we'll end things taking as many of them with us as we can."

"Have you gotten any rest?"

I nod. "I managed to doze for a couple of hours after the first group left. No more time now—Captain Amalia said the rest of us should leave after the next bell."

Jostein turns me toward him. "No matter what happens, this is better than waiting on a mountainside to be executed. You gave us this chance, rebel maiden."

He dips his head to kiss me. The heat of his lips lights up my body with a tender heat that's a balm on my frayed nerves.

At the sound of more footsteps, we ease apart. Landric is walking over to join us, with a slightly apologetic dip of his head. There's an almost feverish brightness to his eyes that I can tell at once has nothing to do with jealousy.

"I think I can strengthen our strategy," he says.

The intensity in his voice combined with his expression makes my heart skip a beat. "How?"

He tilts his head toward the few remaining lights of the Darium camp below the hill. "Rupert's with the soldiers. I don't know whether he asked to lead the guards the duke contributed or if the Darium officers insisted that Duke Berengar send his son as a sign of full commitment, but it doesn't really matter. He knows me; he can vouch that I've generally been on his side."

A chill trickles through my gut. "But you spoke to him before about joining the rebellion."

Landric shrugs. "Only vaguely and briefly. He thinks highly of himself and his sway—he'd be happy to assume that his comments persuaded me away from any rebellious ideas. He'll at least be able to speak up for me with the Darium force in a way he wouldn't anyone else among us."

"Why would he need to speak up for you?" Jostein asks in an even tone.

Landric's stance tenses as he straightens his posture. "I'll approach their camp after the rest of you have had a chance to make it to Feldan. Around the first light of the morning? We were worried they'd notice our disappearance and send just a smaller force to track us down, and our efforts wouldn't injure very many of them. I can tell them that I saw my old neighbors and their new comrades heading toward Feldan, and they boasted about how they have many more allies who'll be coming to meet them there shortly."

Understanding unfurls inside me. "So they'll see us as a greater threat."

"Exactly. Hopefully I can convince them without outright saying it that they should wait to march on you until the rest of

the army has joined them so they'll have the benefit of full numbers, and then we can take them all down together. And that should give you more time to carry out the plan."

It could help. It could help quite a bit, if he plays the part well.

But Jostein puts the concern that's constricted my chest into words. "They might cut *you* down simply for carrying the message. They're not going to let you walk off after you give your report."

Landric lifts his shoulders in another shrug, though this one looks stiffer than the first. "It is what it is. I won't be able to contribute much to the plan otherwise. You're all risking your lives—why shouldn't I?"

I swallow hard. "It's not the same. We'll be together. You shouldn't have to go off alone."

His gaze catches mine. The sudden sadness there steals my breath. "How much time did you have to spend on your own with no one to depend on? At least I know I have friends to come back to if I can escape."

Jostein makes a rough sound. "We can increase your chances quite a bit. We still have a few horses here. If you're riding, it'll be easier for you to evade capture. Tell them you don't want to get any more involved and ride off in a different direction from the town at first so they won't see you circle back toward us. That'll make it easier for you to approach them as if you weren't with us too."

Landric blinks at him. "You'd give me one of the horses..."

A tense smile that still holds some warmth curves Jostein's mouth. "I'll give you *my* horse. Come on, let's get you ready. You'll want to be well away from the mountain when you prepare to make your approach."

He brushes his hand across my arm in a fleeting farewell, his quick smile to me a promise that he'll take care of the man I still haven't decided how to feel about. They walk off into the darkness.

I take a few steadying breaths, not wanting to admit to myself how conflicted Landric's offer makes me. Why shouldn't he put himself in danger? Like he said, we all are.

Part of me aches at the thought of him falling into the Darium soldiers' hands, though.

I rouse myself from my uneasy reverie and move across the mountainside. After offering a few words of encouragement to comrades waiting to make the trek to Feldan, I reach Iko.

He's hunkered down on one of the flatter rocks, fiddling with a few bits and pieces I can't make out that he's balanced on his lap. I know he's spent the better part of the night working his gift, trying to use its inspiration to construct some kind of device that'll support our plan.

As I come over, he looks up. A smile that's only a thin shade of his usual grin flickers across his face. A strain I don't think is only from fatigue tightens his roguishly handsome features.

I'm not sure I've ever seen Iko really under stress before. I crouch next to him. "How's the inventing coming along?"

He sputters a hoarse laugh and adjusts the materials he's assembled: a canteen, some twigs he's whittled smooth and curved into circles, a few arrowheads, a chunk of lumpy vegetation. "Estera is making me really work for this one. I can picture how it could be once it's finished, but getting it there and actually moving..."

"You'll figure it out," I tell him with full confidence. "You always have."

"Hmm. Maybe a little extra inspiration from my spitfire will help."

He reaches out to me, and I tip forward to meet him. The kiss he claims is more lingering than his usual playfully passionate embraces but equally sweet.

When he draws back, his smile has gone crooked. He hesitates. "You do *want* it to be like this, don't you? Being with both of us? If you'd rather stick with Jostein—Great God knows that'd be simpler for you—"



I cut him off with another kiss before he can go any farther. Who would have thought wryly confident Iko would be shaken by insecurities?

He twines his fingers in my hair, leaving them there when I pull back just far enough to speak, our foreheads still grazing.

“You and he are very different,” I admit, “but I think that’s why it’s so hard for me to imagine my life going forward without both of you in it. Who else could make me laugh in the middle of the most terrifying mission I’ve ever taken on?”

A glimmer of Iko’s typical slyness returns. “So I’m the jester in our trio, am I?”

I do laugh then, stroking my hand over his cheek. It’s somehow reassuring that I’m not the only one who sometimes wonders if I could really be worthy of this much affection.

“The most handsome, clever, and charming jester a woman could ever ask for,” I reply, and earn myself another kiss.

“Good,” he says after. “I know I can be a little... forward. It’s never intended to be pushiness.”

“I’m not pushed around that easily.” I sit back on my heels to contemplate his work. “Is there anything I can do to help before we have to move out?”

Iko considers his assembled items alongside me and pokes at the lump of vegetation. “I think this lichen is going to be the key. It’s growing in patches around the mountain—I’m not sure how much we’ll come across after we leave. If you could gather as much as you can find in the next little while...”

“I can do that.”

“Here, take a little piece so you know what to look for.”

The lichen is bristly against my fingers, with a lacy pattern to its growth and a blueish gray color when I squint at it in the faint lantern light. Iko hands me a small cloth bag to collect my bounty in.

I set off across the rocky slope, heading higher up where the clusters of my comrades won’t have disturbed the terrain as much.

It's difficult to spot the patches with no illumination except moonlight. We've left a few lanterns burning to reassure the Darium army that we're still barricaded up here, but I don't dare carry one and risk them wondering what my purposeful movement is about.

Instead, I bend close to the uneven rocks and press my hand to the darker splotches that stand out against the pale gray stone. Sometimes I encounter just gritty dirt, here and there a patch of moss. But on a few occasions I feel the same bristly texture as the lichen Iko gave me. I pry those patches free from their rocky home and drop them into the bag.

After the fourth, my heart starts to beat faster with the sense that the next peal of the hour should be coming soon. I pick my way down the mountainside toward the final stragglers of our camp.

The jangle of a bridle and a dry voice saying, "Hey there, Landric," bring me to a halt. Peering down the slope, I make out a glint of Landric's ruddy hair just beyond the reach of the nearest lantern, maybe fifty paces below me.

He's standing next to Jostein's stallion, who's fully tacked up. The squad leader must have moved on to other business after arranging the steed. But a couple of men from Feldan, guys around our age who I've seen Landric passing time with when Rupert and his noble associates weren't around, are ambling over to join him.

Mattias and Pascal. They were part of our childhood games too, back when we had little more to worry about than how to entertain ourselves.

"I heard you're riding off on us," Mattias says, his low voice traveling faintly to my ears.

I waver on my feet and decide it's better if I don't interrupt. Landric will be on his way soon enough. I sink down behind one of the jutting spires of stone where I can watch the conversation but they're unlikely to spot me in the darkness.

What will he say to them about his mission when the rest of us aren't around?

Landric speaks with impressive calm considering that he might be riding off to his doom. “I’m making sure our latest plan bears as much fruit as possible. If everything works out, I’ll see you in Feldan before mid-morning.”

Pascal snorts. “So you really are going to chat with the Darium army? What kind of madness is that?”

“Signy’s madness,” Mattias remarks before Landric can answer. “That crazy bint has gotten us pretty far, but gods above, that’s got to be more thanks to the captains and their soldiers than her.”

My hands clench at my sides, but Landric’s voice simply flattens in its steadiness. “If we’d left it up to Major Arlo and the captains, we’d be handing ourselves over to whatever mercy we think the Darium empire might supply in the morning.”

Pascal snorts. “That doesn’t mean you have to stick *your* neck out farther than anyone else. How’d she convince you to take on this mad quest?”

Landric adjusts his hold on the horse’s reins, swiveling away from his friends. “It was my idea. She tried to talk me out of it. You should focus on your own part—I’d better get going.”

Mattias steps back, but he elbows his companion. “You know, the crazy ones can really be something in the sack. I could see angling for a piece of that. But who would have thought Landric would get so desperate he’d go riding to meet an army just to land one lay with a—”

Even as I flinch, Landric whirls around. I don’t see his fist flying until it slams into Mattias’s face.

Mattias staggers backward, clutching his nose. Even in the dim moonlight, I see dark streaks of blood dribbling down his chin. “What the fuck was that?” he snarls.

Landric’s voice comes out fierce. “That’s for you to shut your babbling mouth. I don’t know who you insulted more—her for not being worth more than a lay or me for being the type that’d treat a woman like a piece of meat—but if I hear any of it again, I’m not going to stop with one blow.”

I think his friends are gaping at him with as much shock as I am. Pascal hisses a breath through his teeth. “You’re turning on us over that—”

“Don’t say it,” Landric warns. “You don’t even know her. You never tried. She lost so much, and you all...”

He shakes his head. “She’s incredible, and I love her, and maybe at least I’d have seen it sooner if everyone hadn’t made a hobby out of spewing garbage about her. But I know now, and I’m not going to listen to another word against her. Go get ready for your hike.”

Mattias sputters something incoherent, but they both stomp off.

I might be worried about what they’ll do next, but it’s hard to believe they’d expect the Darium force to be friendlier than Landric has been. And I’m too busy staring at him as he tests the girth on the stallion’s saddle one last time.

He has no idea I was listening. He told them off because he really believes all that. And he didn’t care how it might change their opinion of him.

The jagged place inside me that’s always stung when I talked to him, broken by the years of dismissals and snubs, melds together into something softer.

It isn’t so hard to accept when I’ve seen it with my own eyes, is it? How much have I changed since the moment I decided I’d rather stab a Darium soldier than watch my mother’s statue be destroyed?

This rebellion has changed Landric too. Brought out a courage and selflessness maybe even he didn’t know he had in him before.

He grasps the pommel, and the realization hits me like a jolt of lightning that he’s about to ride off into the midst of the enemy, possibly to his death, and I might not get another chance to speak to him.

I shove to my feet and pelt down the slope as fast as I dare, lifting my voice in a hushed but urgent call. “Landric, wait!”

He halts, surprise stuttering across his face as it whips toward me.

“I’m going,” he says, presumably thinking I’ve had renewed misgivings. “I need to do this.”

I skid to a stop just a couple of paces away, my heart thumping wildly. “I know. I just—”

I’ve already kissed two men in the past hour, but why *should* I stop there? If I’m going to be mad, I might as well go all in.

Closing the last short distance between us, I touch his cheek and bob up on my toes to press my mouth to his.

Landric’s breath hitches, and then he’s kissing me back with an urgency that shivers through my veins. He slings his free arm around my shoulders to tug me closer.

I drop my head against his shoulder, grappling with the urge to beg him to stay after all. “You’d better make it back to Feldan.”

A soft chuckle tumbles out of him. He hugs me tight, as if he can’t quite believe I’m in his arms. “I was always planning on it, but I’ll be twice as determined if this is the welcome I’ll get.”

Both of us know there’s no time left. He caresses the side of my face and steals one more kiss, his eyes shining with joy. Then he hefts himself into the saddle and sets off along the side of the mountain so he can circle the camp at a distance.

I watch him go with an uneasy weight expanding in my belly. Should I have accepted his proposal to go down there? Is it really worth the risk?

After all the battles I’ve fought in the past several days, I still can’t say which the right ones are. Bloodshed and corpses were never what I wanted my legacy in this world to be.

As my throat tightens, a flutter of movement at the edge of my vision catches my attention. I turn and go still.

A butterfly is gliding along the slope. Its pale blue wings reflect the moonlight as if they’re made of the stuff.

I've never seen a butterfly flying around in the night before. There are no flowers up here to tempt it.

Maybe it's some rare species that prefers the darkness, but a glow of hope lights inside me. Butterflies are one of the symbolic animals of Inganne.

It could be my godlen is offering me a sign.

Tapping my fingers down my front in the gesture of the divinities, I pad cautiously after the creature. It swoops here and darts there... and lands on the flat of a sword one of my comrades set down next to their pack.

I gaze down at the beautiful insect for a few seconds, taking in the way its wings shimmer against the sharpened metal blade, the interplay of delicacy and might.

If this is a message, then I think I understand it. There can be a sort of art to warfare, if you play it right. In the end, it's all a sort of game, after all, just one with the highest possible stakes.

Tomorrow I need to create a picture striking enough to carry my whole country through to freedom.

A town bell rings in the distance. The butterfly twitches and soars away.

I square my shoulders and march over to join the last of my colleagues, ready for the journey ahead and everywhere it might lead us.

# CHAPTER TWENTY



## SIGNY

JOSTEIN SURVEYS THE OUTER walls of my cabin with an unreadable expression. “So, this was your home after you left your aunt and uncle’s house.”

I nod, my arms coming up to hug myself loosely. In the thin early morning light, the weathered logs and crooked door seem more depressing than I remember.

Iko steps closer to me and presses a kiss to my temple. “Hey, it looks a damn sight better than the rest of the buildings in town right now.”

His teasing tone manages to bring a smile to my lips, if a bittersweet one. The Darium soldiers missed my cabin in their

fiery rampage—not bothering to venture into the woods, I guess. All the structures on the familiar streets have crumpled into blackened cinders.

I glance instinctively toward the treetops in the direction of the hill that held our memorial. They didn't skip those stone walls, even though they couldn't burn them. The limestone slabs lie scattered and cracked across the hilltop.

We'll pay them back today. Whether it changes the course of Velduny's future or not, they'll know their brutality has its own consequences.

I run my fingers through my hair, still slightly damp from the quick dip I took in the river. Maybe we should have stayed by the water's edge, enjoying the peaceful burbling while we can.

But I'd wanted to see whether my old home was still standing.

"It wasn't so bad living here," I say. "No one usually came out this way, so I had the spot to myself away from the judgments. I learned a lot, having to find and hunt my own food, mend any tools I needed."

Jostein slips his hand around mine. "I suppose it's hard to say I wish you'd lived differently when I don't know who you'd be without what you've endured. But I hope we can make every day from here forward bright enough to erase some of those old hurts."

I squeeze his fingers, smiling at him and then Iko. "You already have. I can't regret anything that brought me to you."

Iko beams back at me. I think he's going to dip farther to claim a deeper kiss, but at the same moment, the crackle of the underbrush brings the three of us whirling around.

My pulse only has the chance to lurch once before I recognize the gleam of coppery hair on the approaching figure. Relief sweeps away every other emotion I was feeling.

Landric, looking no worse for wear than he did when he rode off several hours ago, comes to a stop at the edge of the glade. "Captain Amalia said you'd gone over to the river.



When I didn't find you there, I thought this was the next most likely spot."

He pauses, his gaze traveling over the cabin and its surroundings: the scruffy patch of garden overgrown with weeds in my absence, the mossy outcropping of stone with the crevice that holds the tools I've scavenged that our neighbors discarded as trash. His mouth tightens.

Jostein keeps his hand in mine. "You delivered your message to the duke's son?" he asks.

Landric jerks his attention back to the squad leader. "Yes, and a good portion of the Darium force there as well, since I was yelling it from a distance. It's a good thing I had your horse—thank you. They definitely would have preferred to hold me for further questioning."

He tilts his head back toward the town, where most of our remaining resistance is gathered. "A couple of sentries reported in right after I arrived. It sounds as if my 'warning' had the intended effect. The Darium soldiers at the lake haven't started to march yet, and they sent a messenger toward the border. The rest of the army under High Commander Livius is approaching, but they won't reach us for another few hours yet."

I exhale in a rush. "Good. Then the people working their gifts will have more time to prepare the area."

Our magic-blessed allies have already thinned and weakened the stone beneath the earth across about a half-acre of land at the edge of the town, but the more distance we can cover, the more of the army we can topple in one blow.

Landric smiles. "I thought you'd want to know as soon as possible."

He pauses, and I find I don't know how to answer. The memory of our kiss last night and the things I overheard him saying clashes with the presence of the men I've already embraced as my lovers on either side of me.

Jostein and Iko said they'd welcome Landric, but how exactly am I supposed to handle this?

In my uncertainty, Landric's stance turns awkwardly stiff again. He dips his head as if to take his leave, and a protest leaps to my throat.

He's had to witness me in the arms of these two men more than once—and handled it more gracefully than most rivals for a woman's affections would. How can I say I care about him if I'm not willing to put the shoe on the other foot?

He loves me. He said it last night, even if not to me. I don't know if the ache of emotion inside me can match that statement, but I need to show him how much he matters to me.

Before he can move, I release Jostein's hand and hurry forward. Delight glints in Landric's eyes in the instant before I grasp the front of his tunic and lift my mouth to his.

He cups the side of my face and kisses me like I'm a long drink of water after a day of riding. Even after I ease back, I keep holding on to him. "I'm so glad you made it back to us safely."

The corner of his mouth quirks upward, but his crooked smile is gentle now. "I knew I'd better not let you down."

When I glance back at the other two men, my heart thumps with a hitch of nerves. Jostein's posture looks a bit tense, but his smile is undeniably fond. And Iko is outright smirking.

"That's our woman," he says in a tone resonating with admiration—and promise. He looks at the cabin and then back at me. "We have a little time. What do you all say we make Signy's last memory of this place a happy one?"

There's no mistaking the suggestiveness of that question. Heat sweeps through my body to pool between my thighs.

Landric trails his fingers up my back, but his caress is tentative, as if he's wary of his welcome. Jostein's bright eyes darken with a smolder of desire.

The squad leader takes in my expression and must be able to see the matching desire in me. My lips part, but before I need to speak, he holds out his hand and speaks with the same commanding tone he brought out in the tent the other night.

“I’d say that’s a brilliant idea. Come inside, rebel maiden. You’re ours—and no one else’s.”

A giddy quiver of agreement passes through my veins. I step toward the cabin, gripping Landric’s hand to tug him with me in case he has any lingering doubts about whether he’s a full member of our strange but incredible relationship.

Jostein opens the door, careful of its wobbly hinges, and ushers me inside.

The drafts that slip past the doorframe and around the curtains over the glassless windows have kept the air within fresh. With weeks past since I inhabited the space, the only smells that linger in the air are those of pine and moss.

After the cool night, the summer sun hasn’t had much time to spread its warmth yet. Iko kneels by the small fireplace and retrieves a flint to light the kindling I left there.

As the flames crackle across the bits of bark and twig, he adds a couple of logs to the fire. The wavering light fills the room along with a waft of warmth.

With the three men around me in the cabin, the interior feels so much smaller than when it was just me. Other than the fireplace, all it contains are the mattress I made out of stuffed canvas with a couple of tatty wool blankets over top, a rickety table with a single chair, and a set of shelves fixed to the walls that hold my few dishes and pieces of cookware. I spent most of my time outside when I could.

None of my lovers appear bothered by the modest surroundings. Compared to the hasty camps we’ve constructed over the past several days, I guess solid walls and actual furniture are almost a luxury.

And they’re too focused on me to give the rest of the room’s contents much mind.

Jostein turns my chin toward him and claims my mouth. As his kiss consumes me, Landric nuzzles the other side of my neck and nips the crook of my jaw. Iko rejoins us, sliding his hands under the hem of my tunic to splay against my bare stomach.

“I barely got to see you last time in the dark,” he says in a husky voice. “You deserve every bit of admiration.”

He lifts the bottom of my tunic, and Landric grasps the other side to help peel it off me. My childhood friend grins at me, so much adoration shining in his eyes that my heart skips a beat. “Out of everything in the world I haven’t experienced yet, there’s nowhere I’d rather be than right here, exploring all I can have with you.”

Even more affection swells inside me. I tug him in for another kiss.

Jostein strokes his fingers across my back. Iko flicks his tongue across the peak of my breast through the thin fabric of my undershirt before raising the chemise to take my nipple right between his lips.

I gasp into Landric’s mouth, and he lets out a strangled groan. His arm loops around my waist, pulling me close.

The hard bulge already risen behind his trousers presses against my hip. The feel of it sends more heat coursing to my core, but none of my men appear to have any intention of rushing the moment.

Jostein and Iko remove my chemise together, and then the squad leader massages one of my breasts while his friend returns his mouth to the other. The currents of pleasure have me swaying between them.

As Jostein recaptures my mouth, Landric hooks his fingers around the waist of my trousers and drags them ever so carefully down. The fire’s warmth licks over my bared legs, nothing compared to the hungry flame growing inside me.

Landric kisses a path down my thigh alongside his progress, sinking to his knees. Not to be outdone, Iko teases his hand along the waist of my drawers.

Jostein gives my lower lip a gentle tug between his teeth. I can’t restrain a whimper.

I don’t just feel adored. It’s as if they’re worshipping me, like I’m so much more worthy than a girl who was shunned by her chosen god.

As if I'm a lesser god myself, and they mean to honor me in every possible way.

Iko strips off my drawers with a stroke of my ass that sends a spark of anticipation rippling through me. He glances around, but Jostein takes charge first.

"Turn the chair around." He gazes down at Landric, a smile unfurling across his face. "You're in the perfect position to take care of her already."

A flush washes over my skin at his apparent meaning. Iko nudges me down onto the chair, and Landric guides himself between my splaying knees without any hint of hesitation.

I'd feel self-conscious about having my most intimate area open to the firelight before all my men's gazes, but there's only reverence in their expressions.

Jostein pushes my ass forward on the seat so I have to tip backward. As he cups my breasts from behind, Landric kisses my inner thigh on one side and the other.

Then he lowers his head right between my legs.

With the first press of his hot mouth against my sex, a rush of pleasure floods me. I have to hold myself back from bucking forward hard enough to hurt his jaw. As it is, I rock and pant through the melding of his lips to my clit and the sensitive flesh beneath.

Neither of my past lovers, brief as our dalliances were, ever offered this blissful act, though they were more than happy to push for my similar attentions. I had no idea it could feel so incredible.

Landric's pleased hum reverberates through my core, sparking renewed delight. He laps his tongue right between my folds and then penetrates me with two fingers. Even more pleasure spirals out from that most intimate touch.

As he grazes his teeth across my clit and pumps his fingers inside me, my other two men are seeing that no other part of me goes neglected. Jostein continues fondling my breasts and branding my neck with kisses while Iko massages my thighs and ass, easing up now and then to catch my mouth.

“You’ve taken on so much,” Jostein murmurs by my ear. “Now we’re going to take care of you completely. Let it all go.”

His heated words and the tweak of my nipples between his calloused fingers send me careening over the edge. I shudder against Landric’s mouth, and he flicks his tongue faster, working his fingers even deeper to a giddy spot I didn’t know existed inside me.

With a cry, I unravel. Bliss sweeps through every inch of my body until I feel as if I’m glowing with it.

While I come down from the high of my release, Landric dapples kisses along my thighs. Iko lets out a chuckle. “I suppose since the new fellow tended to our spitfire so well, he deserves a little reward. If you agree.” He pinches my ass teasingly.

I wouldn’t have thought I could feel more desire than I already have, but the sight of Landric’s flushed, eager face sets off a throbbing of need. The need to be filled. The need to claim this man as thoroughly as he’s claimed me.

Without waiting for Jostein to deliver more orders, I slide forward and push Landric down on the floor, his head coming to rest on the edge of my makeshift mattress. My hands dip to fumble with the fastening of his trousers. “Off, now.”

A breathless laugh escapes him. He squirms out of his pants and drawers as fast as humanly possible.

Landric’s cock juts up between us, thick and hard. When I rub my slick sex against it, his head tips back with a stuttered groan.

Iko and Jostein have followed us. Jostein kneels beside me, twining his fingers with my hair. “I love seeing a lady take what she wants.”

His friend kisses my shoulder blade, crouching close behind me. “Possibly the lady would want even more?”

He trails his fingers down to the crease of my ass, reminding me of his previous suggestion. A heady quiver passes through

my body. “I don’t know—I’ve never tried—but I would like to.”

“Don’t worry. I took the opportunity to prepare when it was offered. All we needed is a little oil.”

He leaves for just long enough to retrieve something from the pack he left by the side of the cabin. I can’t help grinding myself against Landric’s rigid cock and then rising up to take it inside me where I’m craving it most.

Every inch he eases inside me is pure bliss. As Landric fills me, he lets out another groan. Pushing himself farther upright, he captures my mouth and palms my breast.

“You feel amazing,” he mumbles against my lips. “This is the only place I ever want to be.”

Iko returns to us, already shedding his trousers. He positions himself over Landric’s legs behind me and smears a smooth liquid over my other opening. It warms quickly with the deft strokes of his fingers.

Each caress sends more of that thrilling sensation through me, heightening the blissful stretch of Landric’s cock. I can’t hold back a moan.

Jostein remains next to us, his gaze searingly intent. Even as Iko starts to stretch my back opening with tantalizing fingers, I can’t help feeling the moment isn’t complete.

I catch the squad leader’s gaze, willing my eyes not to glaze over with pleasure. “I need you too. Let me—let me taste you.”

If I had any worries that my fumbling request would land awkwardly, Jostein’s ragged breath and the hurried jerk of his trousers dissolves it in an instant. His erection springs free, as impressively large as I remember, the head already gleaming with arousal in the fire’s glow.

As I lower my head to lick my tongue across that bead of salty liquid, his grip tightens in my hair. “Gods. Signy, you’re a fucking miracle.”

The craziest thing is I feel like one as I wrap my mouth around Jostein's cock, as I take Iko's into me from behind and sway over Landric's, welcoming all of them in deeper. So much love and lust blazes through me in the most potent mix I can imagine that it's hard to see it as anything but divine.

How could we have found each other like this amid all the chaos around us if not through some godly intervention? I don't know who to thank for it, but I couldn't be more grateful.

After years of slinking along the fringes, keeping out of people's way, I'm suddenly seen, accepted, *wanted* more than I ever dreamed of.

Landric sinks back on the floor, working over my breasts as he thrusts up into me. Iko matches his rhythm with a grasp of my hips to help me keep pace.

My head bobs up and down over Jostein's cock as we reach a faster tempo. So much ecstasy is whirling inside me that I'm aware of nothing but the sensations radiating through my body and the groans of my men as they speed toward their climaxes alongside me.

The symphony of pleasure expands into a roar of bliss that consumes my entire being. A moan spills from my lips to reverberate across Jostein's shaft. The wave crashes over me, pulling me under and then tossing me high.

As the shudders ripple through my body, Landric's thrusts turn jerky. He clasps my leg as he spills himself inside me, his gaze fixed on me as if I'm the only woman in the world.

Iko bows over me, following the two of us into release with a hot rasp of breath over my back.

I clamp my lips tighter around Jostein with a swivel of my tongue, determined to bring him with us too. He bucks into my mouth with a rake of his fingertips over my scalp. "Signy—I'm going to—"

He's trying to warn me so I can pull back, but I simply suck him down harder. With a choked sound, he loses control. The



thick spurt of his cum fills my mouth. I flick my tongue along his length again as I swallow it down.

We sag into a sweaty, sated mess. For just a moment, the worries of the day ahead feel far away. Landric kisses my shoulder tenderly, Iko tucks himself against my side, and Jostein nestles his face against my hair as if they mean to make themselves my very own suit of human armor.

We will all be in plenty of danger in a matter of hours. But I've been fighting all my life just to *have* a life—to live it in a shabby place like this, scraping by.

Now, finally, I'm making something meaningful out of all that effort. Both in the strange passion I've kindled with these three men and the battles that have brought our entire country within reach of freedom.

It's not the works of art I pictured making, but maybe it's something even better.

We doze in our satisfied state alongside the murmur of the breeze and the chirping of birdsong beyond the cabin walls. It's almost peaceful until a voice splits the air from somewhere off in the forest.

“Jostein! Iko! The Darium troops are nearly here.”

# CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



I KO

I HOLD UP THE modified crossbow so all eight of the colleagues I've been able to equip can see it. "You fit the three arrows here, here, and here. When you pull the trigger, they'll all fire. So make sure it's only enemies in front of you, hmm?"

The other soldiers nod, their eyes alight with a mix of fervor and fear. The Darium army is marching on us from two sides now, both of them visible to our people who've been keeping watch from the hill at the north side of town. The contingent who ambushed us at the lake is coming from the south while the army we've tangled with twice before approaches from the east.

They aren't bothering trying to hide themselves with illusionary magic now. Possibly the mages they called on for help are too worn out after pushing their gifts to the limit yesterday. Or possibly they have us so outnumbered they don't see the need for stealth.

They want us pissing our pants at the thought of what will happen when all those skeleton-uniformed figures descend on us.

My colleagues with the triple crossbows spread out along the line we're holding at the edge of town. The burnt houses offer a tiny bit of shelter with the remains of walls and heaps of rubble.

I move to the larger cluster of allies I've equipped, this one a mix of soldiers and civilians who are good with various kinds of bows. We've had a lot of armor damaged or outright ruined in the past few battles, but I was able to see ways to work with some of the shields that've been cracked. They might not provide perfect protection, but by carving out a wider gap toward the middle, our archers can fire while remaining mostly protected.

"Aim quick, line up the arrow, and fire," I remind them. "Keep as much of yourself behind the shield as possible. You're part of our first line of defense, and you need to be visible, or they might not take the bait."

For Signy's plan to work, we need the Darium army to storm right up to meet us at the town. If they try to turn this into another siege like at the mountainside, holding back from the network of caves the gifted among us have worn away at under the earth, we'll have to take greater risks to provoke them.

As the archers position themselves with apprehensive but determined murmurs, Captain Amalia strides through the wreckage of the town to join me. She surveys the makeshift army we've held on to, all of them braced for the fight they know is coming.

The captains and Major Arlo have been laying out the bits and pieces of our strategy since early this morning. But now

that the part Signy suggested has been carried out, we all know that by far the most vital piece comes down to me and *my* gift.

“They’re no more than a half hour out,” Captain Amalia tells me. “You’re completely ready?”

My gaze flicks to the crate holding the five contraptions I was able to assemble from the materials we had. I’ve tested them out as far as I could without destroying them, but it’s the final step that matters the most.

All of my knowledge and the nudging of my gift tells me they should work. Jostein stopped to check on my progress as I was fiddling with them and told me he believed I could pull it off.

Somehow even that partly divine assurance hasn’t totally settled my nerves. What if he’s confusing his hopes as my friend with his gift’s ability to evaluate me?

Despite my worries, I grin at my captain. “I’ve gotten everything as prepared as I can before the actual explosions. If they don’t work, we’ll just have to hurl some rubble at the army and hope for the best.”

Amalia is a good captain. She considers me and must pick up on the uneasiness I’m hiding, but she doesn’t prod it. She simply claps me on the shoulder. “You’ve got one of the cleverest minds I’ve ever encountered, Iko. It’s been a pleasure ordering you around, even with your mouthiness.”

A laugh sputters out of me, and a little of the tension in my chest relaxes. “I’m glad to hear I haven’t been giving you too many gray hairs. But I think Jostein deserves the largest portion of the credit here, at least among our squadron.”

A smile plays with Captain Amalia’s lips. “Your loyalty also gives you credit. Don’t worry—Jostein’s contributions haven’t gone unnoticed. If we get out of this mess on top, they won’t be unrewarded either.”

As she walks on, my spirits lift at the thought that my friend might finally get the promotion he’s been vying for. Jostein might not have much patience for the politics of climbing the

ladder, but he'd make a damn good captain—or even general—too.

A few shouts carry between the ruined buildings. I don't need to make out the words—I can see the cause right in front of me.

The Darium army has come into view over the top of the nearest low slope. The two forces are merging into one as they march toward Feldan. Even after we've battered many of them with blinding pollen and toxic wasp stings, they maintain their rigid discipline: strict rows in perfect step with each other, weapons raised in ominous rows.

Like a horde of the undead come to drag us to our graves. Even though I know the bones are nothing but white paint on black fabric, an icy shiver runs down my spine.

High Commander Livius rides in their midst, the several scarlet plumes on his helm standing out starkly amid the mass of black and white. He's chosen a ghostly white stallion, as if he's arriving on death itself.

My mouth goes dry. I pick up my crate and check over the contents once more.

Everything's there. It will work. I can spark the flame of our true victory.

I can make more than random gadgets of minor convenience. I can offer more than laughs and high spirits.

I've invented the winning blow to an entire war.

I've always known that between the two of us, Jostein is the real hero. But this once, I feel pretty heroic myself.

As long as I time this right.

As long as the blasted things do what I intend.

I owe it to Jostein, to my captain, to all my comrades—to Signy, most of all. We have to see this brilliant plan through.

The moment the Darium soldiers come within range, our longbow archers let loose an initial wave of arrows. They thud

into raised shields, but we didn't expect to take anyone down with those.

We just want them to know we're in an aggressive mood. Make them think it's better to deal with us once and for all.

Some of those soldiers will have been drawn from forts around the country. They won't want to leave those areas less protected for very long.

Come on, fuckers. Come right to us.

The Darium army halts. We remain crouched amid the wreckage, visible but not easy targets.

High Commander Livius's arrogant voice thunders across the field between us. "You have no hope of winning this fight, rats. This is your last chance to surrender. Those who continue their treachery should expect a very painful death."

No one budes. We all know death is the most we can expect by handing ourselves over to the assholes now.

We'll take our chances, thank you very much.

The high commander lets out a scoffing sound and motions to his troops. Their rows of archers tramp forward first, tall shields protecting the infantry behind them. They're not bothering to waste their arrows when we've got a decent amount of shelter.

Our archers send out several more shots, a mere heckling. They don't provoke an immediate retaliation, but I think the approaching soldiers pick up the pace just a little.

They're all pressing forward, the whole mass of them passing onto the target area. Not quite enough of them yet, though.

Major Arlo gives a wordless holler, and most of our forces draw back as if we're retreating into the ruins for additional cover. As if we intend to carry out this final fight amid the burnt buildings and not on the field.

I scramble behind a derelict wagon we left on the fringes to disguise my preparations and reach into my crate.

Each of the five contraptions is little bigger than a mouse. They'll dart like the vermin the high commander compared us to, skimming across the ground between our enemies' feet.

If we'd hurled similar devices at the army from above, those skilled archers could easily have shot them out of the sky. I need the impact as close to the ground as possible.

I lay them out in the shadow of the wagon, pointing at five different angles toward the march. Then I grip my flint.

The Darium soldiers bellow in a wave of threatening war cries. A few enemy arrows careen amid the retreating figures around me, knocking one of my comrades and another into the dirt.

Just another ten paces. Another five. Another one...

I strike the flint and let the sparks catch on the bits of moss protruding from the back of the contraptions. With a hiss, the shifting parts set the pairs of tiny wheels into motion.

My explosive speedy mice hurtle from beneath the wagon into the midst of the marching army.

I scramble backward behind a fragment of a stone wall. There's a startled bark and a crunch as one of my inventions must be spotted and stomped on.

But only one.

The moss burns hot and fast. I brace myself for disappointment—and the flames hit the mixture in the tiny, oil-drenched pouch at the middle.

The pouches burst in a series of small but fierce booms and spurts of the soil churned up by the impact. The surrounding soldiers yelp, several of them toppling.

And that's it.

I freeze, dread chilling my gut.

Then the very earth creaks.

The thinned, cracked rock beneath the surface shudders with an expanding groan, the precarious balance overthrown. A smile crosses my face.

Even as shouts of alarm ring out amid the army, the solid ground they were walking on collapses in a brutal crash.



# CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



SIGNY

AT THE FIRST RUMBLES of explosive fire, I peek out from behind the crumpled shed I was using for cover. My breath snags in my throat.

Hundreds of Darium soldiers have barged onto the field just outside town, the nearest of them just steps from the buildings. But their rigid lines are falling into disarray.

One clump of dozens of bodies careens down with the collapsing of the earth. Then another and another around the spots where Iko set off his explosive devices.

The effect of the initial collapses shakes the ground all the way to where I'm crouched—and more of the earth opens up,

sending the soldiers tumbling. The cave-ins ripple outward as if the grassy plain is a lake with one massive stone dropped in the middle of it.

Skeletal-uniformed figures collide in a jumble amid the jutting stone edges of the underground caves. Some slump, blood seeping through their helms from cracked skulls. Others groan, their limbs splayed at unnatural angles.

They thought they were bringing death to us, but instead it's come for them. Their uniforms couldn't look more fitting. It's as if a pit of corpses long dead and withered to bones lies before us.

I couldn't have created a more stunning picture with all the paint in the world.

And I *did* create this tableau. I imagined it and I brought it into being—for the men and women still fighting alongside me, for all of Velduny.

Even as awe sweeps through me, my body tenses, my fingers tightening around the grip of my short sword. The Darium force was too large for us to take out *all* of them this way.

For every body mangled in the cave-in, at least one other figure is scrambling back from the still crumpling edges of the earth, reaching to offer help to the nearest fallen, or rushing around the edges to deal out vengeance for our trick.

High Commander Livius's horse stumbles under him, the ground cracking beneath the animal's feet. As it goes down with a broken leg, he springs away before he can take any wounds of his own.

Seeing him and his ridiculous plumes still uninjured, I grit my teeth. But we have a more immediate problem.

The Darium infantry still standing hurtles around the edges of the pit. Arrows fly from our archers' bows, some of them launching forward in sets of three from the crossbows Iko doctored.

It's not enough to have conquered half the army with our scheme. We need to destroy every one of our enemies that we

can.

We need them convinced that it's not worth continuing to fight us—that our rebellion is going to defeat them. That they'll lose so much more than they stand to gain.

Several Darium soldiers jerk and sag with arrows protruding from their chests. Others charge onward into the ruin of the town.

I leap up and throw myself at the nearest attackers. The lessons Jostein and Iko offered me guide my sword arm. I manage to duck beneath the swing of a blade and plunge mine into a man's gut.

As I kick him aside, a woman in Darium armor rushes at me with a screech of anger. I lash out at her with my sword and bash her helm with a slab of burnt wood from amid the wreckage. When she sways with the impact, I slice my blade across her throat.

The spurt of blood makes me recoil. I clench my jaw and will my nausea down.

She'd have done the same or worse to me if I'd given her the chance.

All around me, my comrades are cutting down the attackers as well as we can while the archers continue to shoot some before they can reach us. The edge of the pit crumbles more, tossing unlucky soldiers into its depths.

A yell I recognize as Landric's voice brings my head jerking around. I spot him farther along the edge of town, slamming his elbow into the side of a soldier's helmet. The soldier jabs out with his spiked club, but to my relief, Landric drives his sword home faster.

It isn't only the enemy facing slaughter. Near me, one of Jostein and Iko's colleagues teeters over with a spear protruding from his throat. The Darium blades gouge into chests and limbs, sending blood spraying across the ruins of my town.

I jump in to ram my sword through an attacker's back just before he stabs a woman he's knocked over, but right next to

us, another Darium soldier guts a teenaged boy who only joined our rebellion a few days ago.

Before I can raise my sword again, Jostein is there, driving his longer blade into the man's side. As the attacker slumps over, the squad leader catches my gaze with a hint of worry but a nod of resolve.

We're seeing this through. We're going to keep fighting as long as any of us are still standing.

I swivel around, bracing myself for another onslaught. At the same moment, the high commander's voice bellows over the fray with its magical amplification.

"Pull back, soldiers! To me!"

He's calling for a retreat already? I don't know whether to rejoice or curse their cowardice.

His soldiers swarm around him at a safe distance beyond the pit. They appear to have given up on any of their colleagues who are too injured to pull themselves out of the cave-in.

With a few orders I can't make out, High Commander Livius assembles his remaining troops back into their strict lines. Though dwindled greatly from their initial horde, they still make for an imposing force, maybe three times greater in number than our ragtag band.

There's no way we'd face anything but a bloodbath if we tried to challenge them out there on open ground. We've only kept a bit of the upper hand by drawing them to us and using the ruins to our advantage.

Is the high commander going to turn this battle into another stand-off? Try to wait us out? We're much better situated here than we were on the mountain. We've got the river to turn to for water and fish, the forest for berries, nuts, and hunting, a little shelter from the elements amid the crumbled houses.

If they give us time, our gifted allies who prompted the cave-in might be able to weaken the ground farther out, right under them...

Even as I think that, the high commander lifts his voice again, obviously intending it to carry. “We’ll march on Piam and then Segward. Let’s see how the rest of Velduny enjoys this rebellion.”

Gasps and disgruntled hisses escape my comrades. A chill wraps around my lungs.

Those are the two towns closest to here—the towns where our neighbors who weren’t up to fighting have taken refuge.

He means to slaughter every civilian he can, probably to torch their homes like he did ours.

The soldiers are already turning, heading to the west. High Commander Livius strides along behind them like a brutal shepherd guiding a flock of wolves. He shoots one cruel smirk over his shoulder in our direction before pulling the visor of his helm back down.

No. I can’t let the victory that was within our grasp turn into a horrific tragedy.

I glance around for something, anything that might help. Through the blare of panic and desperate resolve, my gaze snags on one of the horses that’s made it this far with us, tied to the burnt frame of a house.

There’s no room for thought, only action. I bolt for the animal as if my life depends on it.

But my life isn’t the one I’m concerned about. There are so many others that stand to be lost if we don’t stop this tyrant of a high commander.

I yank the reins free and heave myself onto the horse’s back. Someone calls my name, but the thrum of my pulse drowns out so much of the sound I can’t identify the voice.

I dig my heels into the stallion’s sides, and it leaps into a gallop.

We careen around the pit, the thunder of hoofbeats echoing my racing heart. I clutch the hilt of my sword, holding it at my side.

This may very well be suicide, but someone has to do it. Someone has to add the final details to the picture of our freedom.

I started us on this path, and I'll see us through to the end.

A few of the Darium soldiers glance back and then hesitate. The last few rows turn as if to meet my charge. High Commander Livius spins on his heel almost casually—

And I hurl myself right off the saddle into him.

The force of the collision sends him crashing to the ground with me on top of him. I'm already raking my sword through the air, the blade slashing through the leather covering his shoulder.

He grunts and lands a punch to my jaw that leaves my head reeling. When he shoves me, I slam my knee into his groin.

We tumble sideways, my elbow jarring against the ground. My sword slips from my fingers.

I smack my forearm against the side of his head hard enough to bang his helm off-kilter. In his temporary blindness, his hand closes around my throat.

And my groping fingers catch my sword again. Sputtering for breath, I whip it around and ram it straight through his neck.

The high commander sags over me with a gush of blood. Shouts bellow from all around me—a blade swipes through the air less than an inch from my ear.

I wrench out from under the crumpled body, yanking off the high commander's helm with one hand while I brandish my sword with the other. The Darium soldiers gape at their fallen leader for just an instant before they step toward me.

I hold the plumed helmet high as I ready myself, but more hoofbeats pound behind me. A stallion whirls by, a familiar muscled arm slinging around my chest and hefting me up.

"Here we are again," Jostein murmurs in a ragged but still wry voice as he swings me in front of him. "No respect at all

for your own safety. Well, show them all what you've done, my dear rebel."

Breathless and blood-drenched, I lift the high commander's helm even higher. The sunlight glints off the black-and-white metal with its ruddy plumes.

Several other soldiers on horseback, including Captain Amalia, have ridden into the fray with Jostein. A few dozen archers and swordsmen are sprinting over at their heels. As they clash with the Darium soldiers, war cries splitting the air, my display seems to rouse the rest of our allies.

Over a hundred more figures burst from the ruins of the town. Whether they're waving swords or cooking knives or sharpened branches turned into spears, their eyes flash equally fierce. They tear across the field toward the Darium soldiers with the furor of an army ten times our size.

As Jostein circles us around, I see our enemies already faltering. They've lost hundreds of colleagues to us, they've lost their high commander, and now they're facing the full brunt of our long-bottled anger.

Blades clang and arrows hum through the air. First, it's just a few soldiers at the back of the Darium contingent backing away. Then, all at once, a chunk of them peel off and scramble for safety.

Those of us on horseback dive into the battle. Jostein stabs and slashes on one side of his horse while I lash out with my sword on the other. I kick one soldier in the face and carve open another's throat.

"Pull back!" one of our enemies hollers in a strained voice. "Regroup at Fort Sirius."

The remaining Darium soldiers stagger away from our onslaught and simply run. Arrows and thrown daggers harry their backs. The rebels around me let out a jeering cheer of triumph.

Jostein lowers me from his horse at the same moment as Iko and Landric push toward us from different directions. My other lovers catch me between them in their arms.

“That was incredible,” Landric mumbles. “But gods, you terrified me.”

Iko guffaws. “That’s our woman.”

I hug them close, but a deeper urge draws me away from them. I stand a little back from the milling crowd and thrust the high commander’s helmet into the air once more.

My ragged voice rings out across the plain. “We’re just as strong as them. We don’t need to be ruled. We can choose our own destiny!”

Another cheer goes up, and more of my comrades close in around me with grateful words. We’re surrounded by the chaos of violence and destruction, but my heart couldn’t feel lighter.

I’ve always wanted to bring beauty into the world, and I can’t imagine a more stunning scene than this.



# CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



SIGNY

*Several months later*

MY SILKY DRESS RUSTLES around me as I shift on my feet. Everywhere I look, mosaics of swans and roses and swaths of pink draped across pale marble meet my eyes, making it impossible to forget exactly whose territory I've wandered into.

The Temple of Blissful Devotion is the largest temple in all of Velduny dedicated solely to Ardone, the godden of love and beauty. We figured if we were going to request her blessing for a rather atypical sort of love, it'd be best to do it in her most prominent worldly home.

But now that I'm here, surrounded by all those symbols of divinity, I can't suppress the jitter of my nerves.

I drag in a deep breath of the perfumed air, scented by the very real roses that grow all around the airy building. Jostein comes up behind me, tucking his arm around my back.

He must be able to pick up on my worries. He leans in to press a tender kiss to my forehead. "We don't *have* to do this. Not now, not even ever. Getting Ardone's approval won't change how much any of us love you."

I twine my fingers with his. "I know. But it makes a difference to the rest of the world."

For everyone who's accepted my joint relationship with three men, there are others who mutter scornful gossip and shoot disdainful glances our way. Never terribly overt, because I am still hailed as a hero of the rebellion, but I notice it and I know my lovers do too.

I never want them to have any opportunity denied to them because of their association with me. I want the whole country to see that the gods themselves support our shared affection.

But what if they don't? What if Ardone feels I've asked for too much, that I'm not worthy of monopolizing not just one but three incredible men?

Well, I've never been one to back down from a challenge, even those seemingly impossible.

As I square my shoulders with resolve, Iko and Landric amble over to join us. All three of my men have dressed up for the occasion like I have, them in formal jackets and trousers that set off their stunning looks to impressive effect. Taking them all in, I have to catch my breath.

"Getting cold feet?" Iko teases, giving one of the loose tendrils of my hair a playful tug.

I laugh. "Not at all."

Landric holds my gaze with all his usual intensity, his dark eyes never failing to send a tingle over my skin. "No matter what happens, we'll be by your side."

I reach to grip his hand as well and aim a determined smile at Iko. “And I’ll be by yours. I love you all so much.”

If that’s not enough for the godlen dedicated to love, what could be?

With her blessing, we can properly marry. Our bond will be treated as just as valid as any other official partnering.

And I can confirm the love that’s solidified between us over the past several months in the most unequivocal possible way.

One of the devout in his pink robe of worship approaches us, tapping his fingers down his front in the gesture of the divinities as if to bring his chosen godlen to the conversation with him. “It’s time. You can follow me.”

Gathering myself, I walk into the main atrium of the temple surrounded by my men. Light in shades of pink, red, and purple beams down through the panes of stained glass on the domed roof overhead.

Several more devout stand in a ring around the edges of the atrium. The one who brought us leads us before the cleric who presides over this temple, who’s waiting by an altar at the one end.

The cleric bows her head to us with a soft smile that’s also faintly sly. Ardone’s worshippers are advocates for all sorts of romantic love, from the most innocent to the most carnal.

“Are you ready?” she asks.

When we all nod, she spreads her hands toward us. “Signy Mauddaut of Adelay, Jostein Silvanesson of Nalbrecht, Iko Gerholdsson of Nalbrecht, and Landric Klausson of Adelay, you come before our passionate godlen today to seek her blessing for your union—one between the four of you instead of a partnering of two. What would you say to Ardone about your association?”

Jostein speaks first, with the commanding tone that provokes a giddy shiver down the center of me. “Signy owns my whole heart. My love is great enough that I welcome the love others can offer her as well.”

Iko trails his fingers across the small of my back. “I’ve never cared for anyone else like I do for Signy—and I love seeing how much joy she experiences with Jostein and Landric as much as what she feels with me.”

Landric shoots me a quick but fond smile. “I spent most of my life knowing I was missing something but too afraid to pursue it. Now that I’ve found my place with Signy, there’s nowhere else I’d rather be. And what we have wouldn’t feel complete without these two men who’ve become my greatest friends.”

Now it’s my turn. My throat closes up with a swell of emotion before I manage to summon the words, raw with truth. “I never knew how much love I was capable of until we found each other. What I feel for each of them seems incredible on its own; to feel it all at once three times over is a blessing in itself.”

Did that come out all right? My men seem to think so, all of them beaming down at me. The cleric’s expression gives no indication of approval or concern.

She tips her face back to the multi-colored light and raises her hands. “I have given my blessing to many couplings in Ardone’s name—man to woman, man to man, woman to woman. To so bless four in their shared union, I reach out to the godlen herself. Ardone, if you would exalt this love, please give us a sign.”

I have no idea what to expect. The gods normally work in subtle ways. I wait, my heart thudding, unsure how long we have before our relationship is declared unsanctioned after all.

Then a shadow passes through the sunlight streaming through the dome, like a puff of cloud. The pink-tinged beams swirl and intensify in a ring around the four of us for a few fleeting seconds before it expands back into its previous diffuse glow.

My lips part in awe. When I look at the cleric again, her eyes are open, sparkling with happiness. “Ardone has welcomed you into her embrace. You may go forward with all the same respect and consideration as any other union.”

A laugh both startled and relieved tumbles from my mouth. Iko catches me in his arms and whirls me around. The moment he lowers my feet back to the ground, Jostein and Landric draw in around me in a joint embrace of our own.

The cleric lets out an amused hum. “I think you can celebrate a little more ardently than that.”

Before I can get out so much as another giggle, Landric has accepted that challenge by planting his lips eagerly against mine. I’ve barely recovered from that dizzying kiss before Jostein swoops in. Not to be left out, Iko waits for his turn and dips me over with the melding of our mouths, his arm firm against my back.

“Come on,” Jostein says, nudging his friend. “Let’s go share the news.”

I raise an eyebrow at him. “Share it with who?” The cleric and all the devouts serve as our witnesses if we need to prove Ardone’s acceptance, but I didn’t think we needed to worry about that immediately.

Iko simply grins. “You’ll see.”

We step out of the temple, and my jaw drops.

Tables have been set up amid the rose gardens that surround the temple lawn. They’re laid with pitchers of ale and wine and platters of food—and surrounded by a few dozen guests I hadn’t known had arrived, their expressions bright with anticipation.

Landric slips his arm around mine, and Jostein lifts my other hand into the air. “Ardone has blessed our love!”

At his announcement, a joyful cheer rises up from our spectators. Captain Amalia, standing near the head of one of the tables, waves us over. “Let’s get on with the celebration, then!”

As we descend the temple stairs to join the merriment apparently in our honor, I spot several of my old neighbors who I fought alongside until the final driving of Darium influence from our country a couple of months ago, a bunch of

Jostein and Iko's colleagues, and even the new duchess who replaced Duke Berengar.

The last of those glides over to offer her congratulations. She bobs her head to me as if I'm the one with the greater name here. "I'm so pleased to see the four of you receive all the acknowledgment you deserve. If there's ever anything you need that I might be able to supply, please don't hesitate to reach out."

She meanders off, leaving me blinking at her back. Iko chuckles and bumps his elbow against mine. "Don't look so surprised. She wouldn't have her job if it wasn't for you."

I guess that's true in a way. Shortly after our confrontation with the Darium force at Feldan when I cut down High Commander Livius, the royal family of Velduny began rallying all the country's troops to join our rebellion. King Manfred and Queen Rinka hadn't been able to do much for Velduny while under the emperor's watchful eyes, but they jumped at the chance to win the country back once and for all.

And when they heard about how Duke Berengar and his family had sided with the empire, they were rather displeased. As soon as the war was won, they stripped them of their titles and elevated a different local noble family in their place.

I find myself gripping a glass of wine in one hand and a pastry in the other, overwhelmed by the flood of well-wishes. It's been obvious that people appreciate my part in the rebellion, but other than an intimidating meeting with the king and queen themselves to receive a token of honor and a promise that they'd call on me again soon, the past two months haven't been particularly eventful.

Everyone might have been busy pulling their lives back together and deciding what they'll make of themselves with our newfound freedom, but that doesn't mean they've forgotten how we got here.

A smile crosses my lips. I offer my thanks to everyone who approaches us, nibbling my pastry in between.

“You’re going to be even more celebrated soon, if that’s possible,” Landric tells me. “The bards are just starting to present their first compositions recounting the Veldunian Quest for Freedom.”

Jostein shakes his head. “And they have taken some liberties too—only in your favor, from what I’ve heard so far. One version has you charging down a hilltop straight at the emperor himself.”

I snort. “Emperor Vitus was never even here.”

Iko shrugs. “They enjoy making their stories as epic as possible. I don’t see any problem with that.” He leans closer and steals another kiss. “I’m honored to be one of the few who knows the whole, true story of our reckless, unshakeable Signy.”

“Hear, hear,” Landric says in agreement, grinning.

I beam back at all of them, basking in the warmth of their affection, and raise my glass. “And here’s to all the other stories we still have ahead of us.”

THE END



Thank you for reading *HEART OF DEFIANCE*. If you want to read another story set in the world of the Abandoned Realms, about a thief with forbidden magic who becomes just as great a hero as Signy, then check out [\*THIEF OF SILVER AND SOULS!\*](#)

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



EVA CHASE IS AN Amazon bestselling author of urban fantasy and paranormal romance. She grew up on a steady diet of magic, mayhem, and romantic angst, and brings plenty of all three to her stories. But no need to fear the dreaded love triangle—Eva’s heroines never have to choose. Her best known series are *Royals of Villain Academy*, *Flirting with Monsters*, and *Bound to the Fae*. She lives in Ontario, Canada with her family and one velcro-like cat.

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# THE HEALER



FROST KAY

A Twisted Kingdoms Novella

# BLURB



NYX HAS BEEN IN love with the same man for as long as she could remember. She's tried to tame his demons, heal the hurts of the past, but he keeps her at arm's length no matter what. When her last attempt to sway him to her side fails epically, Nyx decides to walk away from her mate and move on.

Dark memories from the past have always haunted Briggs. He's never been able to trust himself with anything precious—especially his mate. Too much blood stained his hands to take Nyx as his wife, so he must settle as her friend and protector. But it's not enough for either of them. When she leaves him behind for good, he knows that he's made a mistake and can't let her slip through his fingers. It's time to put the past when it belongs and fight for the only woman he's ever loved.

The Healer is a second chance, fantasy romance with the following:

- ✓ Cinnamon roll MMC shifter with a traumatic past
- ✓ Strong FMC who fights for what she wants
- ✓ First loves that leave marks
- ✓ Rejected mates
- ✓ HEA.

# CHAPTER ONE



NYX

## *Seven Years Ago*

BRIGGS WAS THE MOST stunning male Nyx had ever seen. With skin like midnight, a voice like velvet, and eyes of an old soul, he made something inside her cry out in longing.

At age sixteen, she was tall for a girl and the village women said she'd just continue to grow. Nyx towered over everyone, but next to Briggs... he made her feel downright petite. And she liked it.

Her brother had brought Briggs to them a short month ago but from that very moment, Nyx knew she wanted him to be hers. True she was too young for such things, at least that's

what Pyre said, yet Nyx knew in her heart that Briggs was the male for her. His quiet manner, shy nature, and kind soul made him perfect. It was three years until she'd be considered an adult in the Talagan culture, but that didn't stop her body from reacting to his scent—his mating call.

Sweet poison, it just about dropped Nyx to her knees.

There was no doubt about it. He was a strong potential mate. Now all she had to do was make him notice her. Her shy bear kept to the edges of their society but tonight she'd draw him from his shell and make him see her.

Dressed in her best skirt and top, and a flagon of filched honeyed wine in her left hand, Nyx ghosted through the halls of the Dark Keep toward the library. Briggs was notorious for hiding himself away with the old dusty tomes and reading for hours.

Nyx padded to the library doors and took a deep breath, steadying her nerves. This was it. She'd been alone since her mother died, with Pyre coming and going, but never there. True, she loved him and didn't begrudge him; it left her life a bit empty at times. But no more. Excitement skittered up her spine. Soon she'd have a mate of her very own.

Slipping inside, she smiled as the familiar scent of paper and warm candle wax curled around her. There was something so comforting about being surrounded by thousands of books. It was like being greeted by hundreds of potential new friends.

With her deep purple skirt swishing around her feet, Nyx navigated through the labyrinth of towering bookshelves with silent steps. She moved deeper into the library toward the small, windowed alcove near the back that Briggs favored. Nyx paused and peeked around the edge of the last bookshelf nearest to the niche. Her heart picked up pace and her palms began to sweat as she spotted her bear.

Some of her nerves melted away. Briggs sat on the floor with his back to the wall, strong legs stretched out before him, crossed at the ankles, chin on chest as he snored. Nyx slapped a hand over her mouth to stifle her giggles as the book in his hands teetered dangerously. Faint winter light slipped through



a crack in the black velvet curtains and caught in his long sooty lashes. It was almost too picturesque.

*Here goes nothing.*

On bare feet, she tiptoed toward his alcove, halted just out of reach, and then knelt by his side to rescue his book. Carefully, she leaned over and pulled the tome from his hands and gently flipped it closed with her right hand.

“No!”

Nyx flinched, almost dropping the heavy book as her gaze flew to his face. Briggs’ brows slashed together, and a low growl rumbled in his chest, causing the hair along Nyx’s arms to rise. She examined his painful expression and how his eyes flickered beneath his lids.

A nightmare?

Time to wake him up.

“Briggs,” she whispered softly. Nyx didn’t want to startle him awake.

No reaction.

She sat back on her heels, set down the wine and his book. The man was a hard sleeper.

Briggs growled again and shuddered, pressing back against the wall, brows lowered. “Don’t touch me.” His voice was guttural and terrified.

Nyx scooted closer and placed her left hand on his shoulder. “Briggs, wake up.” His face screwed up but he didn’t wake. She leaned closer, placing her right hand onto his chest and shook him harder. “Wake up! You’re having a nightmare.”

His eyes snapped open the same time his hand curled around her throat. Shock ran up her spine when he lunged forward, tumbling Nyx onto her back. She wheezed as he threw himself on top of her and squeezed.

“You’re hurting me.” She clawed at his hand; eyes wide as she stared up at her mate. “Briggs, it’s me, Nyx.”

His eyes were blank. No recognition.

Panic started to rise in her throat, and she kicked her legs against the stone floor to get traction.

“No lies, Mistress. I know what you are,” he hissed. She cried out when his grip tightened and he shook, clacking her teeth together. “I won’t let you hurt anyone else.”

*You’re going to pass out. Fight.*

Nyx struggled to breathe past the panic but managed to wrap her legs around his tapered waist. She heaved her hips and twisted to the right, unbalancing him enough that she was able to reverse their positions. She slammed her elbow down in the crook of his arm, managing to break his chokehold.

Coughing, Nyx scrambled back immediately, tripping on her skirt, eyes watering. Just what sort of nightmare was he living?

“Snap out of it! You’re dreaming. It’s me, Nyx,” she rasped, holding her burning throat as he rolled to his knees.

Briggs snarled and came at her again. Terror shot up her spine and she scrambled for any weapon. Her fingers curled around the flagon of wine, and she jumped to her feet, swinging as he came into range. Her stomach dropped at the sickening sound of the pottery breaking against his skull.

“I’m sorry,” she cried and backed away, holding what remained of the flagon handle as Briggs shook the wine from his black curly hair and glared at her, still lost in his mind.

He bared his fangs at her and growled low, seeming to swell in size. Dotae be good, if he shifted right now, Nyx wouldn’t have a chance against a bear his size.

She held her hands up while trying to edge out of the alcove. If she could get to the bookshelves, she could lose him and reach the entrance to the library. She was smaller and nimbler. He’d never be able to catch up.

“You don’t have to do this. Just wake up,” she pleaded one last time. “I’m your friend, Nyx. Not the enemy.”

Another step toward the library. She stiffened as the hair along his arms rose and his nails lengthened into claws.

*Time to go.*

Nyx bolted out of the niche and into the maze of bookshelves. Briggs snarled and followed; his heavy footsteps closer than she would have liked. Pumping her arms, she sped up, bare feet slapping against the cold stone floor.

The next turn came into view and her eyes narrowed. If she used the bookshelf to swing around the corner, she be able to keep up her momentum and—

Briggs grabbed a handful of her hair and yanked. She screamed, clawing at his hand as they crashed into the stone wall, dropping the flagon handle. Stars burst across her vision as pain spread across her left cheek and her ribs.

“You thought you could run from you sins?” Briggs hissed in her ear. He spun her around and pinned her in place.

Nyx blinked past the agony in her face and tried to focus on him as he seized her hands in one of his huge palms and held them above her head, practically grinding her wrist bones together. More tears dripped down her cheeks.

“You don’t want to hurt me. I’m your friend,” she choked out.

Still no recognition. All she could see was hate and fear in his gaze.

Her bottom lip trembled, and she bit it. What could she do to get him to wake up? What would comfort him?

Unbidden, she began to roughly hum her mother’s favorite lullaby. Her throat burned but she didn’t stop. Briggs frowned and his grip slackened enough that she could pull one of her hands from his grip.

He hissed but otherwise didn’t react as she carefully placed her left hand on his right forearm. Her fingers trembled as he continued to growl. Nyx began drawing patterns on his skin like her mother used to do for her when she was frightened or needed comfort. Nyx continued to hum and soothe the bear, watching as his muscles began to lose some of their tension.

Taking a risk, she skated her fingertips over his pulse at the base of his neck and up to his strong jawline. It would be so

easy for him to turn his face and rip into her flesh, but he didn't. Her bear's eyes closed as she traced his face.

A sob escaped her when the fingers in her hair released and then cradled her skull.

Thank the stars, he was coming back.

"You're okay," she croaked. "It's just me, Nyx. You're safe. I won't let anything happen to you."

Briggs' eyes snapped open, clarity returning in a slow wave. Her fingertips paused on his lips and traced down to his collarbone. Her chest rose up and down in huge breaths as she waited. He blinked slowly and scanned her face before stiffening as he noticed their position.

Briggs released her and scrambled back like she was on fire.

Nyx slumped against the wall and sucked in a deep painful breath as he eyed her with increasing alarm.

"How bad are you hurt?" he asked, deep voice holding a hint of panic.

"I'm fine." Her voice cracked, making a liar out of her. "It's just a little bruising."

He blinked hard; eyes trained on her neck. "I tried to kill you," he replied woodenly. He held out his hands like they'd betrayed him. "My fingers are imprinted on your skin."

She shivered at his words and gave him a weak smile. "I've had worse, and you weren't yourself." Nyx pushed away from the wall, feeling achy all over, and thanked the stars she'd survived. Tonight, had not gone as she'd planned. It definitely wasn't the ideal rendezvous she'd imagined with her mate. "You good?"

He snorted, pinching the bridge of his nose between his thumb and pointer finger. "I attacked you, and yet you're asking me if I'm alright?"

"Yeah, I am." *Because you're besotted.*

He shook his head. "No, I'm not."

That broke her heart. “That’s okay. All of us are a little broken. It’s made a bit more bearable with friends though.” Nyx smiled at him. “No need to worry yourself. I forgive you.”

“You shouldn’t.” He dropped his hands, fingers curling into fists at his sides.

“What are friends for?” She held her right palm out. “Shall we shake hands and put this behind us?”

Briggs started and then took a step backward. “I don’t need any friends.”

Nyx jerked as if he’d slapped her. She dropped her hand and wrapped her arms around herself. Was he rejecting her?

His expression cleared and he strode toward the door, making sure to give her a wide berth. “I’ll send a healer to you. I’m *so* sorry.”

Nyx blinked as he practically sprinted from the library.

She’d come with plans to seduce him, and he’d almost killed her.

They were off to a great start.

# CHAPTER TWO



NYX

## *Present Day*

CALLMAI WAS ONE OF her new favorite places. There was something about the blue-green water, the soft white sand, and salt air that called to her. While Nyx had loved being one of the healers at Lady Lochlee's children's home, it had been time for her to move on. At least for a little while.

Her heart panged and she rubbed at her chest. The ache had lessened over the last three months, but Briggs' rejection still had cut deep. She'd waited all these years for him, had spent years looking for a cure for his malady, only to discover something that could help, and he turned it down. Not only that, but he'd grown angry at her for it, for looking after him.

*The bastard.*

She plucked a shell off the beach and tossed it into the waves with a growl. So much time wasted on a man who'd didn't want her. The thought alone was enough to bring Nyx to her knees. No one found their mate at sixteen. Why did she think she was any different? Her life had never been a fairytale.

Sinking her fingers into the sand, she blinked hard against the tears that blurred her vision.

The worst part though was the thought that she'd lost her best friend. They'd grown so close over the years, training as healers and then spearheading the rebellion. She'd always harbored hope for the time when they'd be able to be together safely. Maybe she'd read too much into his one lapse of self-control.

*Stop dwelling on him. He won't change his mind.*

"Bah!" she yelled, startling some of the seagulls into flight from the nearby rocks. She didn't need Briggs to be happy. She'd conquered so much hardship and heartache in her lifetime, what was one more cut?

Nyx closed her eyes and inhaled, savoring the sea breeze on her cheeks.

All she needed was to move forward instead of looking into the past.

"Nyx!"

She opened her eyes and glanced over her shoulder. Marche—Chesh's first mate—loped toward her through the sand. She smiled at him. Nyx swore the handsome man never did anything slow. He was always bursting with energy, like his body just couldn't contain it.

He slowed at her side, blowing his downy white hair from his blue eyes. Long gold earrings twinkled from his ears. "What are you doing out here by yourself, beautiful?"

"Thinking." She stood and brushed the sand from her hands.

"About what?"

“Life.”

“So serious.” He tilted his head to the side, appraising her. “Please tell me it’s not about that male who clearly broke your heart.”

She rolled her eyes and nudged him with her shoulder, before wrapping her arms around herself. “Yes and no.”

Marche curled his arm around her slim shoulders and pulled her against his wiry side. She leaned her head on his shoulder, taking the comfort he offered. “I could make you forget him if you let me,” he whispered in her ear.

She laughed. “You and I both know you’d get bored of me quickly. And I think you’ve been spending too much time with Chesh.”

“Not true. My *flirtations* are all my own, princess,” he exclaimed. “Aaaand... I think you’d ground me.”

“And then resent me for it. I’ve seen it a million times.” And she had. So many girls had fallen for the bad boy and ended up at home nursing sick babies while their mate ran around with other women.

“So cynical.”

“No, I’m just tired, I suppose.” Nyx sighed. “I lack direction.”

“Then pick one.” He shrugged, as if it was as simple as all that.

She smiled and glanced up at him. “How simple you make it sound. Maybe I’ll just do that once Scarlet’s wee one is born.”

“On that note...” Marche gave her a sheepish smile, the small gold ring on his lip winking in the light. “You should know that the wolf sent me for you. Scarlet’s having contractions.”

Nyx gasped and jerked out of his arms, already running up the beach. “Why didn’t you lead with that?”

“Because Brine is being a big baby. My mother had fifteen children. I can almost always guess how long labor will be,”



he said, catching up to her. “Scarlet has at least twenty-four hours before the babe is born if it isn’t false labor. There is no rush.”

“Fifteen children?” Nyx gasped, her thighs burning from trying to run in the sand. She really needed to exercise more.

Marche grinned impishly. “My father *is* a hare Talagan.”

She snorted. That made a world of sense.

“Is this really as fast as you can run?” he questioned, jogging at her side like it was nothing. Like the sand wasn’t trying to suck his soul from his feet.

“Yes,” Nyx huffed, “not all of us have your heritage.”

She squealed as Marche swept Nyx off her feet and swung her into his arms bridal style. She clutched him close, giggling as he ran toward town.

“No worries. I’ll get us there faster.”

Nyx stared up Marche’s angular jawline. It was a bizarre feeling, being wrapped up in a man’s arms that weren’t Pyre’s or even Briggs’. Her fingers played with the ends of his hair. It wasn’t bad, to be held by him, just odd and... pleasant, if she were honest with herself.

“You’re staring, princess.”

“You have a very nice face,” she found herself saying.

He peered down at her through his wild fringe of white hair, blue eyes twinkling. “Are you flirting with me?”

Nyx rolled her eyes. “Just stating a fact.”

“Pity.”

Heat filled her cheeks as he continued to stare down at her, and she was the first one to look away. The breath trapped in her lungs hissed out between her teeth. What the devil was she doing? This wasn’t like her. She didn’t flirt, didn’t let men carry her around like a princess, didn’t play with their hair.

She pulled her fingers from Marche’s hair, and he squeezed her.

“Don’t stop. I liked it.”

Her blush deepened. “I shouldn’t have...”

“We’re shifters, touch is natural.”

Nyx looked anywhere but his face. They’d reached the edge of the town proper. “You can put me down now.”

“If that’s what you want, princess.” Marche gently set Nyx on her feet. She went to step away when he took her hand and lifted it to his cheek. Her fingers twitched as his stubble tickled her palm. He smiled, his lip ring winking at her. “Don’t isolate yourself.”

“I’m not.” Her tone held more defensiveness than she would have liked.

Marche smiled gently, leaning his cheek into her palm. “I know your heart is hurting right now, but it’s not broken. You’re surrounded by people who love and care for you. Don’t pull away.”

She nodded, her eyes filling with tears. They’d been doing that more often. “I’ll try.”

“That’s all we can ask.” He pulled her hand from his cheek and laced their fingers together. “Now, let’s go see how manic Brine is.”

# CHAPTER THREE



BRIGGS

## *Five Years Ago*

IT HAD TAKEN TWELVE weeks for the wounds on his back to heal. Six months for Briggs to stop flinching anytime someone touched him. A year to find his new calling. And two years for Pyre to hunt down and kill the monster that had haunted Briggs' nightmares for years.

He picked up the bandages and organized them on the shelf.

Even thinking of his old mistress made his skin crawl. With her death, he'd thought there'd be a measure of peace, but the damage had already been done. She'd destroyed more than just his skin. Lorina had stolen his future.

Briggs' claws lengthened and he exhaled heavily, eyes closing, as he tried to regulate his emotions. She didn't deserve any space in his thoughts. She'd been wiped out from the world and had no control over him any longer.

"Briggs?" a sweet voice called, one that haunted his dreams.

He opened his eyes and smiled weakly at Nyx, who hovered in the doorway. She was a ray of sunshine to those around her. He still didn't know why she or her brother had forgiven him after he'd almost killed her two years prior. Even now he could remember the bruises he'd left on her body. It sickened him.

Her smile faded, eyes scanning his face. "You okay?"

He nodded. "Just finishing up with some organizing."

"Good, that can wait. I need your help with Mr. Coalre. His bandages need to be changed and I can't move him by myself. Help me?" she asked with a hopeful smile.

As if he could say no or would say no. There was just something so compelling about Nyx. She made you want to be her friend and to smile.

"Come on then." She turned on her heel and flounced out the door.

Briggs removed his apron and tossed it over the worktable, following her out the door. He paused just outside the infirmary, his brows furrowing as the scent of something delectable hit him. He sniffed, savoring the mouthwatering burnt vanilla scent lingering in the breeze. Who was baking? He'd have to investigate once their house call was finished up.

He shoved his hands into his trouser pockets, already having lost sight of Nyx. The girl could run. He smiled, remembering the last spring festival. She'd beaten everyone with ease. The way she moved was captivating, and Briggs wasn't the only one who noticed. Every unmated male under the age of twenty-five watched her with covetousness. And it bothered him.

She was a treasure to be protected. None of those boys could take care of her.

*And you can?*

Briggs brushed away his errant thought. Nyx was younger by several years and she had the whole world ahead of her. True, her life hadn't been easy, but she rose above it. She kept choosing to bring light into the life of others. His friend was remarkable. He truly thought himself lucky to have gained her as a friend. He didn't deserve her, that's for sure.

"Hey, so I'll—" Nyx crashed into his chest as he rounded the corner of the nearest building, and he caught her as she stumbled back. "Sorry!" she squeaked. "I didn't mean to..."

Her words faded into the background and all he could do was try not to drown in her incredible scent. Blackcurrent, burnt sugar, and vanilla.

A growl rumbled in his chest, and he found himself tightening his grip on her biceps and took a step closer. Sweat broke out on the back of his neck and he took another step closer, backing Nyx up against the rough stone wall of the building. He stooped down, hunting for the source of the scent. His nose brushed the shell of her ear.

Sweet poison, she was sweeter here.

Briggs groaned, running the tip of his nose up and down her neck. His claws lengthened and he pressed his body along hers, sinking into her curves. Dear god, it was heaven and hell. All he could focus on was her. She shivered beneath him and tipped her head to the side. His growl deepened at how she yielded to him. He pressed a kiss at the base of her throat, his tongue sneaking out to taste her skin. Nyx was delicious.

"Finally," she whispered breathlessly beneath him as his thigh slid between her own. "I've been waiting for this."

Briggs froze, her scent still muddling his mind. What did she mean finally?

"Nyx?" he questioned, pulling back far enough so he could see her eyes, but he couldn't find it within himself to let her go.

She smiled up at him, eyes hazy with desire and... love? Panic wrapped around his chest. This couldn't be happening.

Her hands cupped his face, and she lifted up onto her tiptoes, lips almost brushing his own.

“I’ve known for two years that you’re my mate, Briggs. It’s okay. My mating call has finally kicked in. Don’t fight it.”

*Mate.*

The word echoed around in his mind. He couldn’t have a mate. Hell, he didn’t deserve one. Let alone his best friend’s younger sister. She was perfect and he was... broken.

Despite how her scent called to him, he managed to release her and stumbled back a few steps. It pained him. Everything inside him screamed to wrap Nyx up in his arms, carry her off, and make her his mate. But it was wrong. He could never have a mate—a wife—it just wasn’t in the cards for him.

And Nyx deserved so much more than himself.

She stepped away from the wall and he held up a hand, his claws fully extended. “Don’t come closer.”

Her smile dropped. “Why?”

Briggs shook his head. “This can’t happen.”

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “We can choose each other. I know it’s overwhelming, but it doesn’t have to be now. We can wait. I’m just glad you know.”

He swallowed hard, her scent still swirling around him. “I won’t ever take a mate.”

The words seemed to echo between them. Her expression was shocked and then hurt.

“You’re rejecting me?” she whispered.

“No,” he rasped. “You’re my friend, but I can’t take a mate. You know what happened when I attacked you? I have those dreams every night. How could I ever risk someone I care about? I could never sleep in the same bed as my wife or take a nap near the fire if there were children. I am always a danger to those I love.”

Tears slipped down her cheeks. “So you’ve decided for us both?”

He shook his head, his heart breaking. “Matches come and go, Nyx, but I’ll always be your friend.” She nodded and walked away from him. He shot forward, unable to help himself, and caught her by the wrist. Just touching her soothed part of him. “I’m sorry.”

“So am I.” She yanked her wrist from his hand, a sob breaking from her throat. “So am I.”

# CHAPTER FOUR



BRIGGS

## *Present Day*

HE TAPPED OUT A nervous rhythm on his thigh as Brine paced the room. First time fathers were always a wreck. They were more dramatic than the mothers most of the time.

“Where in the blazes is Nyx?” Brine growled, stalking back to the large fireplace. He grabbed hold of the mantel and braced himself, blowing out a hard breath. “They should be here.”

“Don’t worry,” Briggs soothed from his plush chair. “I’m sure she’ll be here soon.”



Brine glared over his shoulder at him. “Not fast enough. Scarlet won’t let me back in until Nyx arrives.”

Briggs stifled his smile. Brine’s mate had banished him from their room no more than twenty minutes prior and the wolf was about to lose his ever-loving mind. “Scarlet is fine, Brine.”

His friend growled and spun around, crossing his arms. “She is not fine. I can smell her stress from here.”

“Because you’re stressing her out. Your pup will come when it’s ready. Some time with Ari and a nap will do her good. This is just the beginning. It will be some time before the hard labor begins.”

“And this is why I asked you to come,” Brine muttered. “Because Nyx never tells me anything. She just tells me to stop worrying and to get out of her way.”

That sounded like Nyx. She was a force to be reckoned with.

*And you hurt her.*

He grimaced and ran a hand over his face. Nyx was his best friend. There wasn’t anything they couldn’t weather together. At least he hoped. The door creaked as it swung open, and Briggs found himself on his feet waiting to catch sight of the woman he’d secretly loved for years but could never have.

Until now.

A smile bloomed on his face as Marche held open the door and Nyx stepped inside. The sight and scent of her nearly dropped Briggs to his knees. He took one step in her direction. Blackcurrant, burnt sugar, vanilla, and... sage mixed with Marche’s male musk. He froze, eyes snagging on how the hare held Nyx’s hand, their fingers laced together like they belonged that way.

A growl rumbled in his chest that he couldn’t contain.

Nyx stumbled to a stop, her smile dropping as she spotted him. There was a flash of emotion in her eyes before she buried it beneath a placid expression he knew well. The one

she used when she didn't want anyone to see the pain that bubbled just beneath the surface.

She squeezed Marche's fingers and released his hand.

Another growl escaped him as Briggs got another whiff of Marche's and Nyx's blended scent. They reeked of each other. His stomach curled in on itself as his mate dismissed him and focused instead on Brine.

"How's Scarlet?" she asked briskly.

"Stressed. Where have you been?"

Her eyes narrowed at Brine's sharp tone. "I'll let you off the hook this time because you're worried about your mate, but don't think to snipe at me again." She chucked her chin toward Briggs but didn't meet his eye. "It seems you already have a healer here to help." The last part was an accusation.

"I sent for him two weeks ago," Brine grumbled. "These last few months of Scarlet's pregnancy haven't been easy on her. I thought you could use the help."

Briggs grimaced. That was the wrong bloody thing to say.

Nyx gritted her teeth. "If I needed the help, I would have sent for another healer."

Not Briggs. Another healer. Her message was obvious. She didn't want him here.

*Well too bad. They were going to talk.*

She peered over her shoulder at Marche. "Did you know?"

The hare shook his head. "I didn't not, princess."

Briggs bristled at the nickname and the way Marche shared a knowing look with Nyx. Had she moved on so fast? Briggs swallowed hard as blackcurrant and burnt sugar mingled on his palate.

Nyx spun around and pressed a kiss to Marche's cheek. "Thanks for today."

Briggs grounded his molars together and tried not to lunge for the other male.

The hare smiled at Briggs' mate and pushed a strand of her dark brown behind one ear. "My pleasure. Same time tomorrow?"

"Sure."

It was one light word, but it felt like the rug had been pulled from beneath Briggs. Just what had she agreed to? He needed the truth of the matter now before he lost his mind and tore about the whole bloody room in a mating rage. He inhaled deeply.

"Stop that," she barked, locking eyes with Briggs.

"I can't help it," he replied softly, dragging in another deep breath. He arched a brow but otherwise said nothing as he sorted through their scents. Briggs nearly sagged when he didn't decipher any scents that spoke of sex.

"Find what you're looking for?" she practically snarled as she stormed by him toward the bedroom.

"No." He twisted, unwilling to let her from his sight quite yet.

Nyx opened the bedroom door and stepped inside; Brine hot on her heels. She held up a hand and the wolf trembled.

"Get out of my way," he hissed, his claws lengthening.

Briggs took a step toward his friend, feeling his own claws extend. No one threatened her like that.

"I'm not scared of you," Nyx spat back, one hand on a hip, the other on the door. "Scarlet, you want your bastard of a mate in here yet?"

"No," Scarlet moaned. "I just need a nap and he won't leave me alone."

Nyx arched a brow. "You heard it from the lady. Kindly piss off until she wants you." With that, she slammed the door in Brine's face.

Pride and humor bubbled in Briggs' chest. That was his girl. No one cowed Nyx. It was part of the reason he loved her.

Brine slowly turned around; his expression black. He scowled at Briggs. “What the devil are you smiling about? My wife just banned me from the birth of my child,” he practically yelled.

“Not true,” Scarlet bellowed, her voice muffled from the bedroom. “I want to bloody nap. Have a drink with your friends or brawl for all I care. Love you!”

The wolf huffed. “Bloody woman.”

“She’s in good hands, my friend. Why don’t we get something to eat at Ari’s pub and then come back?”

“Nyx will take good care of Scarlet,” Marche piped in, making Briggs want to punch him in the face.

Brine ran a hand through his hair and sighed. “I suppose there’s nothing for it. I want my mate to get rest.” He trudged through the open door and Briggs followed his friend, Marche not far behind. He barely restrained himself from baring his fangs at the hare as Marche skipped on by. Briggs closed the door and flexed his hands, willing his claws to retract. He was acting like a territorial fool. Nyx would never speak to him if he couldn’t get himself under control.

Sucking in a deep breath, he stole a glance at the front door of Brine and Scarlet’s home. Soon he’d be able to make things right. Until then, he’d help Brine and pray that he didn’t accidentally eat the hare in jealousy.

# CHAPTER FIVE



NYX

## *Three Years Ago*

“WHY ARE YOU STUBBORN?” Nyx asked, trying not to yell.

“I don’t want the serum. Why is that so hard for you to understand?” Briggs replied, studying his cards and avoiding eye contact.

Nyx turned her attention to her brother and glared at him before tilting her head toward their friend.

Pyre sighed and placed a ten of spades down. “You might as well give in to my dear sister. You know how relentless she can be.”

Briggs took a sip from his ale, his dark eyes flickering between the two siblings before he set his cup down. “I don’t like the idea of it.”

That was the final straw.

Nyx slammed her cards face down on the table and threw her arms up in the air. “You’re a *healer*, Briggs. You know as well as I that draughts and medicine are good things. In fact, you even got Mrs. Woreland to take something for her mood swings last week. Don’t be a hypocrite.”

That got underneath his skin. She could see it from the way his jaw set. Briggs never yelled, or spoke venomously to a single soul, but he felt frustration and anger like the rest of them.

“If you would just give this a try...”

His dark eyes snapped to her face. “I said *no*.”

“Give me a good reason why,” she pressed.

“Because I don’t want my mind to be tampered with,” he replied softly. “I’ve lived that hell once before and I shan’t do it again.”

She bit her bottom lip as his quiet admission settled over the three of them.

Pyre leaned back in his chair and tipped his ridiculous top hat back, amber eyes characteristically somber as he watched their friend. “I take it you’ve had dealings with such drugs before?”

Nyx felt her heart clench at the look of utter destruction that encompassed Briggs’ features. He’d shared much of his past with them, but always left out the gory details. She knew it was much worse than he ever let on. Each time they had an assignment which meant sleeping over, he had her tie him up so he couldn’t sleepwalk and hurt anyone during one of his episodes. Every time he had one of his waking nightmares, she always sat with him just out of reach, humming to give him the only comfort she could.

“In the pits,” Briggs murmured, his gaze drifting to something far off. “I fought for their entertainment as you well know. But after I was taken as a child, I never stopped fighting back, so they began to drug me.” She sucked in a sharp breath. “When I realized what the Mistress was doing, I stopped eating and drinking so they couldn’t control me. But as I wasted away, the Mistress began sending younger children into the pits—the ones I’d been trying to protect for years. If I died, who would help them?” He shook his head, a sheen of tears filling his dark eyes. “So I began eating, and I would lose time, only to wake up covered in blood and the scent of death.”

Briggs set his cards down and ran a hand over his face. “Then at some point I began to crave it. I wanted the drugs she gave me so I could forget the horrors. But the Mistress was all too clever. She loved to torture those under her control. Once she saw my longing for the drugs, she changed it to something else. It altered my perception so that I felt like I was trapped inside my mind. I could see everything that was happening, but I couldn’t control my own body.”

A shudder wracked his large frame as Nyx reached out and took his hand in her own. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t know.”

Her bear gave her a weak smile. “I know. That’s why I’m sharing this with you. I won’t ever be controlled by a drug again.”

Nyx nodded, feeling her heart sink to her stomach. “You know I would never do that to you, right?”

He held her gaze, warmth finally filling his lovely dark brown eyes. “I know you would never hurt me, but my mind also fears much because of my past.”

She squeezed his hand. “I won’t press you anymore, but I want you to know that what I’ve created is for liberation, not slavery. Everything comes from the forest and is natural. Pyre and I both care for you,” her cheeks burned as his gaze warmed further, “we just wanted you to find some peace.”

“Thank you.”

Nyx released his hand, her fingers tingling at the contact and picked up her cards. The backs of her eyes burned but she refused to cry. How could anyone do something so horrific to someone so gentle and kind? It made her want to raise the Mistress from the dead so Nyx could kill her all over again.

Briggs sniffed, and she caught him watching her from the corner of her eye. “You mourn for me?”

“I do,” she said, her voice wobbling the tiniest bit. “I’m so sorry.”

Briggs studied his empty mug as Nyx pulled herself back together. Pyre tossed his cards onto the table and leaned back in his chair.

She narrowed her eyes playfully at her brother. “You never quit.”

“Seemed like the game was over.”

“You were going to lose,” she accused.

He grinned, tipping his hat forward so it covered his eyes. “I would never.”

“You would always—”

“If I were to agree to taking your serum,” Briggs cut in. “I would need Pyre to be there.”

Nyx blinked at him. “I didn’t mean to push you so hard for this. Just forget I ever mentioned it.”

“I trust you.”

Butterflies took flight in her stomach as she held his gaze. She’d always hoped he’d say three little words to her that meant everything, but somehow ‘I trust you’ seemed to mean more.

“Thank you,” she whispered. “But don’t make a snap decision. You’ve had some ale. Sleep on it and we can talk tomorrow.”

He shook his head. “No. I won’t sleep on it, and I don’t want to wonder about it, or talk myself out of it. It’s time to stop living in the past.”





SHE JERKED AWAKE.

Nyx blinked hard, her eyes adjusting to the darkness. The coals burned low in the hearth and Pyre stood by the fireplace; his gaze focused on Briggs. Her friend had them tie him to the large upright leather.

Her bear whimpered. *Whimpered* in his sleep.

She stood from her own chair and moved to her brother's side. "How is he doing?"

"Quiet until about five minutes ago."

"What time is it?"

"The middle of the night."

Briggs whimpered again but didn't move a muscle. "I can take the shift now. You lie down and get some rest."

Pyre pulled her into a hug and kissed her forehead. "Stay out of his space. This is a trial."

"I know—"

Briggs screamed, the sound so terrified that she clung to Pyre, eyes wide as their friend continued to bellow, still not moving from the sleep. Nyx released her brother and rushed toward their friend. Pyre grabbed her by the forearm and reeled her back.

"What part of stay out of his space did you miss?"

"He's trapped," she said brokenly. "Look how he's not moving with the night terror. I told him he'd be safe."

Nyx shook off Pyre and approached her bear cautiously, heart breaking with each cry of pain. Tears rushed down his onyx cheeks and his mouth gaped open in horror.

"Briggs?" she murmured, reaching out to cup his cheek. "Wake up."

He didn't.

Oh god, what if she'd given him too much?

He screamed again, body twitching in his sleep and she couldn't handle it for one more second. Without another thought, she climbed into his lap, his ropes pressing against her stomach and breasts, and she leaned close to cup his face.

"Nyx! Get back."

"Briggs can't hurt me. He's in too deep and is tied up." She choked on her own cry. "I have to help him."

She began humming her mother's lullaby and caressed his face, wiping each tear away as it fell. He continued to scream so Nyx wrapped her arms around his neck and pressed his face into her hair. She started singing in his ear and combing her fingers through long dark braids.

His terror, panic, and screams seemed to go on for hours.

Each pained sound he made was like a dagger to the chest.

The sun slowly rose, casting soft light into Pyre's room in the Dark Keep. Nyx closed her eyes for a moment, still humming the lullaby. Her throat felt raw from singing for so many hours. Her chest vibrated, rousing her, as did the brush of a nose along the column of her throat.

She blinked hard. She wasn't vibrating. Briggs was growling softly.

Her whole body clenched and released, warmth flowing through her limbs. Drowsily, she leaned back, meeting liquid dark brown eyes.

"Briggs?" she rasped.

"Mate," he murmured.

Her heart clenched. "What?"

He smiled at her and leaned forward. Her eyes fluttered shut as he kissed her collarbone. His teeth scraped her skin and her eyes snapped open. "What—"

Pain.

He'd bit her.

She jerked back, her hand flying to her shoulder. “What have you done?”

Briggs grinned, his teeth bloody and then his eyes rolled up.

“Did he just mark you?” Pyre asked, his voice soft and deadly.

“I think so.”

But it wasn't the glorious moment she'd imagined. Nyx had made a drug that mind-raped him and he'd marked her while out of his mind.

Tears streamed down her face, and she scrambled off Briggs' lap. “We can't tell him.”

“The hell you say?”

Nyx shook her head. “He'd never forgive himself, and well... it's all my fault. He doesn't want me.” It killed her to say it out loud. She'd done everything in her power to seduce him in the last two years and he'd never once budged on having a mate. “He doesn't want a mate. I won't take another choice from him.”

She faced Pyre, pasting on a wobbly smile. “Let me know when he wakes, and I'll be back. I'm just going to get this cleaned up.”

“You should be here when he does.”

“I can't. Would you clean him up?”

“You want me to brush his teeth?”

“I want you to clean away the evidence.”

Pyre pinched the bridge of his nose. “This lie will not help you. It will make things worse.”

She turned her back on her brother and strode for the door. “Don't lecture me on the truth. We both know I learned from the best.”

# CHAPTER SIX



NYX

## *Two Years Ago*

“NO!”

Nyx glanced from the window toward Briggs who slept on the floor of the cabin, in front of the low burning fire. Shudders wracked his body, and she dug her fingers into the skin of her biceps to keep from reaching out to him.

Touching Briggs during a nightmare was a near death sentence.

Her brother emerged from the single bedroom where they were keeping the girl—the one he was obsessed with but

didn't want to admit it. Pyre crept toward Nyx on silent feet and nodded at her bear.

"Another one?" he whispered. "They've gotten worse in the last few weeks."

"I know," she replied in a hushed tone. It worried her. Usually, she knew exactly what set him off but not this time.

Pyre pulled his cloak from the peg near the door and chucked it over his shoulders before giving her arm a gentle squeeze. "Try to get some sleep. I've got the next watch." Her brother slipped outside and closed the door softly behind him.

For a moment, Nyx didn't move. She was weary to the very soul. So many had died recently and there hadn't been time to mourn. All she could do was survive. It was exhausting. When would it get better? Pyre was pinning his hopes on the Lady Hound but Nyx wasn't so sure she'd come around.

Briggs whimpered, snapping Nyx out of her thoughts. Enough was enough. Giving him a wide berth, she grabbed an extra pillow from the bedroom and crept closer to the fire. Nyx stayed just out of reach before she lobbed the pillow with all her might at his head.

Her bear bolted upright, snarling, tearing at the pillow with his teeth. Heart pounding, she backed away toward the little kitchenette and began humming a soothing lullaby that he liked. Briggs' attention darted to her. Tears ran down his cheeks and he blinked repeatedly.

She froze as he stared at her, slowly coming back to himself, escaping whatever hell he'd been trapped in.

"Are you alright?" As soon as the word passed her lips, Nyx felt stupid. Of course, he wasn't alright.

Briggs shook his head, more tears tracking down his face. "I'm so tired," he rasped.

She could help with that.

Nyx spun on her heel and dug through her pots of herbal remedies before uncorking the little purple bottle and

generously pouring some sleeping oil into her hands. This would help him.

She hustled to his side, rubbing her hands together and reached for Briggs. He caught her left wrist in the palm of his massive hand, and she paused, staring down at him. How'd he escape his bindings? She'd not done a good enough job.

"No drugs." His whole body was tense.

She frowned. "It's just herbs."

"What's in it?"

"Lavender, tart cherry extract and wolfgave."

"No Mimikia? Or mushrooms?"

She glared at him. "None. I know how you feel about such things. I have not put anything extra in this."

The tension in his body fled and he released her. Nyx stepped around him, so his back pressed against her legs. She reached down and began rubbing the base of his neck and skull with smooth motions. "I thought you trusted me."

"I do. It's not that."

"Then what is it?"

Silence.

Not surprising, but still disappointing. They were beyond close as friends and sometimes it felt like more, but he opened all the way up. Briggs kept some parts of himself from her and it cut deep. She wanted to share his burdens.

*This is not about you.*

She set aside her feelings and continued rubbing down his neck to strong wide shoulders that seemed to bear the weight of the world. At least he'd let Nyx do this much.

Carefully, she edged around him until she stood before him, and he knelt in front of her. Nyx brushed his braids back from his cheeks and massaged his temples, humming softly.

More tears squeezed out of his closed eyes, and she felt her own well. Why was life so unfair to someone so kind and

gentle? It wasn't fair.

Briggs tipped forward, pressing his forehead into her soft stomach just beneath her breasts and wrapped his arms around her tightly, his whole-body shuddering. Nyx hugged him back, combing her fingers through his hair, humming while he cried into her skirts, releasing all the pain from his nightmares.

She cried silently with him, hating all the cruelty he had suffered and made a promise to herself that she'd try to only bring good into his life. While she wanted a life with him, being his friend and giving him this much peace was enough. It had to be.

His shaking stopped and Briggs turned his face to the side, his arms never letting her go.

"You know," he rasped, "that's the only thing I remember from the first time I spoke to you."

"What?" she murmured, stilling her hands over his braids.

"The lullaby you hum for me." He pulled back to look up at her, his dark eyes shining in the dying firelight. "The night I almost killed you. My mind was muddled but what brought me through was your song."

Her heart clenched. "I'll always sing it for you whenever you need reminding of where you are."

He swallowed hard. "I don't deserve such friendship."

Nyx pushed his shoulders, so he released her, and she leaned down until they were nose to nose. "Don't you dare say that. You are kind, smart, generous, thoughtful, and understanding to everyone around you. You deserve friends better than me." And it was the truth.

She heaved in a deep breath and his eyes dropped to her lips. Her pulse skittered when a low growl rumbled in his chest and his fingers curled into the fabric of her skirts. He pulled, tumbling her into his lap. She grasped at his loose shirt, her knees falling on either side of his thighs. Nyx trembled as she gazed up at Briggs who seemed to be shaking as hard as she was.

“Briggs?” she whispered. Was he still dreaming? Was she dreaming?

His warm hand landed on her lower back and pulled her closer as he leaned forward, his breath mingling with her own.

“Just this once,” he panted.

“What—”

Briggs kissed her.

Nyx froze as Briggs devoured her, begging her with his lips to give into him.

And she did.

Her nerves sparked alive, and she grabbed handfuls of his hair, pulling him even closer. He crushed her against his body, his hand on her lower back burning through her dress, branding Nyx. She gasped as his hands slid up the back of her thighs before he lifted her, and she wrapped her legs around his waist. It was everything and not enough all at once.

The room spun and she tipped her head back, gasping for breath as he pressed urgent kisses to her jaw, neck. His fingers clenched her bare skin, his thumbs sweeping her curves. She shivered as he licked the hollow behind her ear and tugged on the lobe.

Sweet poison, that was heaven.

Nyx cupped his face and brought him back to her mouth for another deep drugging kiss. Briggs shuddered and his hands seemed to be everywhere at once. The world went hazy, and she sighed, eyes closing. This was what she’d wanted for ages. It was for him to notice her. To want Nyx as much as she wanted him.

Her dress sagged and slipped off her right shoulder. He tugged on her hair, tipping her head back so he could once again nibble on her jawline.

“No,” she moaned, running her hands down his muscular chest. “Kiss me.”

The kisses stopped.



She opened her blurry eyes and blinked at Briggs. He stared down at her.

Not at Nyx, but her neck.

Releasing his hair, she slapped a hand over the mark.

“What is that?” he asked gutturally.

“Nothing,” she said quickly, pulling up the sleeve to her dress. Nyx practically scrambled from his lap, and Briggs let her. She moved to the window as her bear slowly got to his feet and stared her down.

“You’re marked.” It wasn’t quite an accusation.

“Just a scar,” she mumbled, messily tightening the laces on her side.

“It’s not *just* a scar.” A pause. “Who marked you?”

“No one.”

He took a step in her direction, his eyes dark. “Are you mated?”

“No.”

“That mark is fresh. Maybe a few years old.” He ran a hand over his mouth. “Were you mated?” A demand.

“No.”

He inhaled deeply and her skin prickled.

“Stop attempting to scent me,” she whispered.

“I can’t smell another on you.”

“Because there is no other!” she shouted.

“Then why hide it?”

*So you wouldn’t hate me.*

“Because it was an accident.”

“That mark is too clean to be anything but deliberate.” He paused, his expression sobering. “Did he leave you? Did he hurt you?”

Nyx swallowed hard.

“You can talk to me,” he murmured, all kindness. “You know you’re safe with me.”

She laughed, the sound grating in her own ears. He wasn’t safe with her. “You can’t help me.” Nyx yanked her cloak off the peg and tossed it over her shoulders. She had to get out of here before he wheedled what he’d done out of her.

Nyx wrenched open the door and stepped out onto the porch, intending on fleeing. Briggs caught her hand and pulled her back to him. She sniffed hard as he cupped her cheeks, his large warm hands dwarfing her face.

“We all have our secrets, but you don’t have to bear yours alone. And if a male forced you, all you must do is say the word,” he rumbled softly.

“It’s nothing.”

His gaze dropped to the clasp of her cloak, guilt creasing his forehead. “And I just took from you. I didn’t ask.” A heartbeat. “I shouldn’t have done that.”

If he’d stabbed her, it would have been less painful.

Nyx ripped out of his grasp and backed down the stairs until she reached the forest floor, sniffing back her tears. “I’m not safe with you.”

He blanched and she regretted her words but didn’t take them back.

She turned her back on him and strode into the woods. The time was coming for Talagans to be free from the monarchy and all she could think of was Briggs. That had to change. She had to turn off her feelings.

# CHAPTER SEVEN



NYX

## *Present Day*

“YOU’RE DOING GREAT, DARLING,” Nyx praised while Scarlet blew out a long breath. “Now lift up your hips.”

Scarlet groaned but did as she was told. Nyx nodded to Brine who quickly but gently set several pillows beneath her hips to elevate them above her heart. Scarlet dropped her hips down with a grunt and smiled up at Nyx.

“I feel like a beached whale.”

“Not for long.” She grinned back at her friend and eyed Brine who watched Scarlet like a hawk. Patting Scarlet’s leg,

Nyx tucked the very pregnant woman back under the sheets. “You’re doing great.”

“How much longer will she be like this?” Brine asked softly.

“Depends on the person.”

Scarlet snorted. “My pains are only coming every half hour. It’s going to be forever.”

“Which is not a bad thing,” Nyx said. “The babe is trying to enter this world bum first. We need to get them rotated head down before the pains get any closer together.”

Brine’s lips thinned. “Is that dangerous?”

“It’s uncomfortable.” She stared down her old friend. “Can you handle that?”

He nodded and Scarlet laughed, wiping sweat from her brow. “Stars save us from consoling men who aren’t going through the actual pain.”

Nyx snorted and set a knee on the bed, watching Scarlet. “Are you ready?”

She nodded and squeezed Brine’s hand. “Have at it.”

Nyx nodded, pulling down the sheet until Scarlet’s round belly was visible. She placed her hands on either side and peered up at her friend. “Take a deep breath and then slowly release it as I put pressure on your belly to turn the babe.” Nyx applied steady pressure and began to rotate the little one.

Scarlet groaned and panted, and Nyx’s arms began to shake when the wee one didn’t budge. She released her hold and gave Scarlet a break before trying again. Still no change. She gritted her teeth and stood from the bed.

“I’m just going to grab Briggs.”

Brine’s upper lip curled. “He’ll see Scarlet.”

Nyx arched a brow. “You’re the one who called for him. Maybe you should have let me make that call.” Her gaze moved to Scarlet. “Are you comfortable with Briggs being here?”

“I don’t mind.”

Nyx hid her smile when Brine muttered underneath his breath. She moved to the door, opened it, and stepped through. Her traitorous heart fluttered in her chest as Briggs pushed away from the window, his dark gaze intent on her. He seemed to be soaking in the sight of her.

*It’s just your imagination.*

She straightened as he approached. “I need your help,” she said in a low tone. His eyes flickered to the bedroom and then back to her face. “She’s breech.” Briggs cursed. “We need to turn the babe now but they’re being stubborn.”

“I see.”

“I need you to turn the wee one. Your hands are larger, and you have more control.”

“I’ll wash up.”

Nyx nodded and turned back to go into the bedroom. The back of her neck prickled as Briggs followed her in. She led him to the wash basin, avoiding looking directly at him. Briggs rolled up his sleeves, revealing muscled forearms. She fought a blush and helped him wash his hands without meeting his gaze.

She practically scampered back to Scarlet’s side as Briggs dried his hands. He smiled, his teeth a white flash against his complexion.

“How are you, sweet?” Briggs asked.

A long time ago, hearing her mate call someone else by a pet name would have bothered Nyx. But now as an adult, she knew he was only trying to calm his patient. It was how he treated all females. She no longer coveted pet names. They didn’t mean anything.

Scarlet smiled. “As well as I can be.”

He approached the bed, brushing Nyx’s side and sat on edge of the mattress. He held his hands out. “Is it alright if I touch you to help move the babe?”

“Yes, please,” Scarlet said.

Nyx took Scarlet’s hands. “Now remember what I said. I need you to take a deep breath and slowly release it as Briggs rotates your wee one.”

She nodded her head and did as instructed as Briggs put pressure on her belly. Scarlet groaned, squeezing Nyx’s hands.

“That’s it, sweet girl,” Nyx crooned. “You’re doing great.”

“Hurts,” Scarlet huffed.

“Just keep breathing.”

“That’s right, love. You listen to Nyx. We’ll have you right as rain soon enough,” Briggs said, his voice gentle and calm. “Another breath.”

Scarlet inhaled and then groaned as he rotated the baby a smidge more. By the time he was finished, Scarlet was a panting mess, Briggs was covered in sweat, and Nyx couldn’t feel her fingers.

She brushed the stray strands from her friend’s damp forehead and stood. “I’ll let you rest a little bit. When your next contraction hits, do you want me here?”

Scarlet shook her head. “From what you say, it will be a long while before this babe comes into the world.” She smiled up at Brine. “He’ll help me through the worst of it. I’ll call for you when I need you.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. Go get some rest yourself.”

Nyx nodded and left the room. She strode through the living area and out the front door, the scent of seaweed and brine greeting her. She shivered and wrapped her arms around herself, cupping her elbows. She leaned back against the stone house as Briggs stepped from the home, closing the large wooden door behind him.

How could it sicken and hearten Nyx to see his face?

“You were never one for silence,” he murmured.

“I have nothing to say.” *A lie.*

“Love—”

“Don’t,” she growled, glaring up at the man she’d wasted so many years on. “Don’t use pet names. You’ve never done that with me. I’m not one of your wounded patients to soothe.”

His lips thinned. “It’s not a pet name. It’s the truth.”

She laughed caustically and stepped away from the wall. “The truth? You want to speak about truth?”

His gaze dropped to her shoulder, and she placed a hand over it, even though her dress covered the mark.

“That’s mine.”

She said nothing. He had already learned the truth three months prior when he broke her heart for the last time.

“Why did you not tell me sooner?” He took a step toward her. “You could have told me that night at the cabin.”

“Would that have changed anything?”

He fell silent and Nyx dropped her hand. Go figure. More silence, more rejection. What did she expect? He wasn’t willing to try. Only guilt moved him now.

She wove around him, feeling sick. Briggs was good for helping those who he thought needed rescuing, but she wasn’t some maiden he needed to save. She wouldn’t be his next project.

He stopped her, his hand curling around her bicep. Nyx stared at his hand and then peered up into his handsome face.

“Nyx...”

“You were right about what you said a few months ago. We can’t be together.” She hiccupped but cleared the lump in her throat. She’d cried enough over the bear who refused to allow himself a happy future. “You refuse to move on from the past and I refuse to be penalized for your choices.”

“That’s not what I intended,” he rasped, looking miserable.

“And that’s why I don’t hate you, but I can’t love you either. It hurts too much.” She pulled her arm out of his grip, and he let her go, like he always did.

Nyx walked away from the only man she’d ever loved, and wondered how she was going to survive losing her best friend.



# CHAPTER EIGHT



BRIGGS

## *Three Months Ago*

“AND THAT’S HOW YOU can tell if wild berries are poisonous,” Nyx said, smiling at the children sitting at her feet.

Briggs leaned his shoulder against the nearest tree in the Lochslee garden and soaked up the sunlight, praying it got rid of the chills from his latest nightmare. A shudder worked through his body and his palms began to sweat. What had started as a small nap had turned into a full-blown terror.

His nightmares had been worse since the battles between the Dark Court and Heimserya. The faces of the past that always

seemed to haunt him had changed to those he loved now, but today was one of the worst. He'd watched as the Mistress had tortured Nyx repeatedly while he hung useless in chains, unable to help her as she begged for him to save her.

Briggs closed his eyes and tried to calm his breathing as his pulse hitched. When he'd awoken, he'd trashed half of his room. His bedding and mattress were destroyed. He could have hurt someone—the children or Nyx... it was unthinkable.

“Briggs?”

He forced his eyes open and stared at the aspen in front of him. Particularly how he'd sunk his claws into the trunk of the tree. When had he moved? Panic clawed up his throat. He didn't want to start losing time again like in the past.

A soft hand rested on his forearm, and he stared down into Nyx's worried face. Her gaze scanned his expression, missing nothing.

“Let's go get some tea,” she said softly.

Briggs pulled his claws from the bark, and she slipped her hand inside his. There were no questions. Nyx knew him inside and out. She understood he wasn't okay. He let her lead him from the center of the lush gardens, past a small babbling brook full of colorful fish, over the wide cobblestone walkway and into the large, airy infirmary.

Nyx led him to one of the cots and had him sit. He watched her bustle around the sunny room, the familiar scent of herbs swirling through the air, and tried not to drown in his shame. Briggs glanced toward the gardens, the melodious tinkle of children's laughter reaching his ears.

“Did the wee ones see me?” he asked, a lump in his throat.

“No, they did not.” Nyx glided back to his side and handed him a warm cup of tea. He took it and she sat down next to him, taking his left hand in her own once again. “Our lesson was finished up and the cook had pastries waiting for them. They never even looked in your direction.”

“How long was I... out of it?”

“About ten minutes.”

Briggs hung his head, his dark braids sliding over his shoulder to create a veil of sorts between himself and Nyx. What if she hadn't been there? What if he'd lost control?

She squeezed his hand. “Stop it. I know you're beating yourself up. But you didn't hurt anyone. You never have.”

“Except for you.” He looked at her and she shrugged.

“We both didn't know any better. Now we do. I'm not upset about it. You should let it go.”

Nyx was too good to him. He didn't deserve her forgiveness or even her comfort. His attention was drawn to the way their fingers were laced together, his dark like midnight, hers warm like honey. Briggs knew he should pull away, but he couldn't find it within himself to break the contact. She was his anchor. And he loved her, but this was all he could ever take or give to her which made him a selfish man. She was stuck with him, never moving forward because she had hope for a future he knew would never come.

*You're pathetic. Mistress was right. You destroy everything good around you.*

“Briggs?” she murmured, and he blinked at her. “Did you hear what I said?”

“No.”

She pursed her lips in that way that made him crazy with want. All he desired was to bite and kiss her bottom lip until it stopped pouting.

“I said that I have a present for you.”

He arched a thick brow. “Really?”

Nyx gave him a nervous smile and stood, releasing his hand. He flexed his fingers, already feeling the loss of her touch as she strode over to a small wooden trunk and opened it. She pulled out something and clutched it to her chest and she swung around to face him. Nyx walked until she stood before him and rocked back on her heels, not meeting his gaze.

What was this? His little kitsune was never nervous around him. “It can’t be that bad.”

She winced and shoved her hand out, uncurling her fingers. In her palm rested a vial of glowing blue liquid.

Briggs jerked back, a memory of his Mistress holding a vial similar in color and having her guards hold him down so she could pour it down his throat. He bared his teeth and growled, swiping at her.

“It’s me. It’s just me!”

Nyx’s voice pulled him from the memory, and he glared at her. Before she could move, he jumped down from the cot and yanked her to his chest, plucking the vial from her hand.

“How could you?” he growled, holding the drugs up to her wide eyes, his hand shaking.

“I didn’t.”

He laughed, pushing her away. She stumbled but caught herself. “I’m not stupid. There’s only one kind of plant that can turn a draught this color. Mimikia.” Briggs threw the vial onto the stone floor. It shattered, the liquid splattering over his boots and the bottom of Nyx’s skirts.

He panted, his whole body shaking with rage as he tried to control his temper. She’d betrayed him. “Do you have anything to say for yourself?”

Nyx gazed at the floor, her cheeks flushed. Her fingers curled into fists as she lifted her head to meet his glare head on. “How could you?”

“How could I?” he hissed, hurt and anger turning his question into a roar. “You’re the one who stepped over the line. You know my feelings on Mimikia.”

She blinked slowly at him. “You really think I would brew something for you with a drug you detest? That you have forbidden me to meddle with when it comes to your tinctures? I would *never* do that. I can’t believe you would think that I would.”

He scoffed. The proof was splattered all over the floor. “We both know you’re good at keeping secrets if it benefits you.” His gaze dropped to the mark on her shoulder. She gasped, tears filling her eyes. Nyx still hadn’t told him who’d marked her. And every time he saw it, Briggs wanted to tear something apart.

*Or leave one of your own.*

“You’re unbelievable.” She took a step closer, gesturing to her neck. “And I’m done protecting you. You want to know whose mark it is? Yours.”

“Not possible.” Briggs flinched when she smiled sharply at him.

“It was the first time I brewed something to help with the night terrors. You were stuck in them. So, I drew closer to soothe you and you bit me.” One sob escaped her. “But I knew you wouldn’t remember it when you woke up and that you didn’t want this life for yourself until we got your terrors taken care of, so I hid it to protect you.”

A deranged laugh escaped him. Briggs couldn’t stop it. He knew it was the wrong thing to do when Nyx’s face crumpled. But his body wasn’t under his control. For the last two years he’d been insanely jealous of himself.

Nyx closed the space between them and slapped him. Hard.

The sound seemed to ring in his ears. He rubbed his cheek before he met her fiery gaze. “I deserved that.”

Her bottom lip wobbled but she bit it. “You have broken my heart for the last time. You want to languish in the hell you created in your mind.”

His stomach bottomed out. “That’s not fair.”

“None of this is fair!” she shouted, brushing away her tears. “I have waited for you for years. I’ve spent hours upon hours researching a cure for what you suffered so that you could live a happy life— even if it wasn’t with me.”

“I never asked you to do that.” He cleared his throat. “I didn’t ask you to wait for me. I always knew my life would be

lonely.”

“I know.” She placed a hand over her heart and took a step back from him. “But it doesn’t have to be. You’re choosing this.” Nyx pointed to the floor. “I perfected your serum. That was your best bet for a peaceful future without fear. And you threw it away.”

“I told you no drugs.”

Nyx swallowed hard and kept backing away from him. Panic seized his chest as she put more space between them. This wasn’t how things were supposed to be. Everything in his head was so muddled.

“The fact that you still think I would try to get you to take Mimikia breaks my heart.” She held her hands out. “Clean up before you leave. And do me a favor, make sure you scent my serum.”

She disappeared from his sight, and he started to tremble. Briggs paced the infirmary with his hands on his head as he tried to calm down. The glass crunched beneath his boots, and he winced. He needed to clean that up. Retrieving a broom and dustpan, he stooped low to clean the mess up and inhaled.

His brows furrowed.

He inhaled deeper.

Not one sweet tone.

There wasn’t one drop of Mimikia.

# CHAPTER NINE



BRIGGS

## *Present Day*

BRINE AND SCARLET'S PUP had come into the world with a loud howl. Briggs smiled as Nyx held out the wee little girl to their friend. Scarlet cried, fat tears dripping down her cheeks as she held her daughter for the first time. Brine wrapped himself around both, his large hand hovering over their daughter's mop of dark blonde hair as if he were afraid to touch her.

"She's beautiful," Briggs murmured. "Congrats my friends."

He envied the love between his two friends as they shared a loving glance and quick kiss before turning their attention

back to their precious child. Briggs gaze sought Nyx who worked efficiently at the bottom of the bed, cleaning up the afterbirth and clearing out soiled bed sheets.

He wanted children with her.

A future full of love.

Only if she'd listen to him.

Briggs approached. "I can take those for you."

She pushed the linens into his hands without so much as a glance at him. She'd been that way since she'd dismissed him the night before. Briggs left the bedroom and exited the home. He moved to the washing barrel around the rear of the house, tossed the sheets in, and dropped a soap bud in that began to bubble immediately, causing the water to turn pink.

The shuffle of tired footsteps met his ears, and he lifted his head, watching Nyx weave toward him, dirty towels in hand. Dark shadows marred the skin beneath her brows. It had been a long night and day of laboring. Briggs glanced at the horizon. The sun was setting behind the ocean. Poor Scarlet had labored for almost twenty-four hours.

Nyx dumped her towels into the barrel and reached for the washing churn. Briggs grabbed her hand, and she blinked at him slowly.

"Not a chance, Nyx. Go get some rest."

"I don't need you to take care of me," she whispered without heat.

He nodded as he began to agitate the laundry. "You're very capable, my love. But someone once told me that it was okay to have help. Now, go get some rest."

"Too tired." She plopped down onto the ground with a groan. "And no pet names."

Briggs hummed but didn't say anything. He wouldn't agree to any such thing.

They sat in companionable silence for a long while before he felt Nyx lay her head against his leg. His heart picked up



pace, but he didn't say anything, just continued to wash the linens. Maybe this meant she was softening toward him. That she'd listen to him.

"A pretty view to do chores, no?" she commented.

"Brine is a lucky man."

Nyx snorted. "If only it were the man's lot in life to wash the laundry. Alas, it falls to women."

"And yet I am the one agitating the sheets." Briggs smiled as he heard her giggle. It soothed his soul. It had been way too long since he'd heard it.

She pointed toward the ships. "I'll be leaving soon."

Briggs flinched, halting his ministrations. "Oh?"

"Need to move on with my life. Chesh and Marche invited me to go with them. I'm going to enjoy the south for a while."

He swallowed hard and focused on churning the towels slowly. Briggs thought he had more time to convince her to stay to give him a chance. To tell her what he'd been doing in her absence. But he couldn't say anything now. It wouldn't be right.

"You love new adventures."

"I do."

They fell into a comfortable silence as the sun sank, the dark sky nipping at the soft orange glow on the horizon. A light snore broke the quiet and Briggs let go of the churn. Nyx had fallen asleep, her cheek pressed against his leg, mouth slightly open.

As gently as he could, Briggs picked her up from the ground. Nyx grumbled but otherwise snuggled into his chest as he carried her back inside Brine and Scarlet's home. He paused when he caught sight of Marche standing outside the door, messing with a small wooden puzzle. The hare pocketed the toy and cocked his head, watching them. He reached out a hand and opened the front door without a word.

"Thank you," Briggs whispered.

Marche nodded; eyes shrewd. “You hold treasure. Don’t be careless.”

The men shared a knowing look before Briggs entered the home and strode into the spare room Nyx had been staying in. He gently closed the door with his foot and then moved to her bed. Part of him cried out as he laid her down on the mattress, hating to be parted from her. He removed her slippers and then pulled the quilt over Nyx’s shoulder. For a moment, he just stared at her sleeping form. He should leave. But he wouldn’t.

Instead, Briggs kicked off his boots, edged around the bed, and sat on the other side. Nerves tumbled around in his stomach.

*You can do this. Don’t run away.*

He pulled the small blue vial from his pocket, uncorked it, tossed it back, then laid down on the bed beside the only woman he’d ever loved. Nyx rolled toward him, naturally snuggling into his side, her head resting on his bicep. Briggs stared at the ceiling, tears dripping down his cheeks and closed his eyes.

# CHAPTER TEN



NYX

## *Present Day*

STARS SHE WAS WARM and comfortable.

When was the last time she'd slept so well?

Nyx snuggled deeper into the bed, pressing her face into the pillow, savoring how incredible it smelled. It rumbled and she frowned. That wasn't right. She opened her eyes and sucked in a sharp breath.

It was most definitely *not* a pillow, but a large, muscular chest that she was sprawled across.

Nyx gasped and tried to sit up, but Briggs' hand on her hip kept her pinned to his side.

"Not yet, love, just a few moments longer." His deep voice washed over her.

She placed a hand on his chest and stared down at Briggs who peered up at her through sleepy eyes, a small smile curling his plush lips.

"What the devil?" she whispered, shaking her head. "What are you *doing*?"

Briggs reached up with his left hand and pushed a lock of unruly hair from her face, before cupping her cheek. "What I should have done a long time ago, mate."

*Mate.* It seemed to echo in her ears.

"But I'm not..."

"Yes, you are. You always have been."

Soul-wracking sobs burst from Nyx and she scrambled out of the bed, the sheets tangling around her feet. She stumbled and caught herself on the windowsill as Briggs rose from the bed.

Pointing a shaking finger at him, she cried, "Don't you dare!" It was as if the whole world had tilted. She'd seen Briggs sleep rumped before but not because he'd slept the night with her.

Her mind screeched to a halt.

He. Slept. The. Night. With. Her.

She scanned him from head to toe, then scoured the room for restraints of any kind.

None.

"How?" she choked out.

"Your serum." The room seemed to drop out from around her. He held a hand out to her. "It worked."

Another horrible sob escaped her, and Nyx slapped her hands over her mouth to try to contain the sound.

Briggs took another step in her direction. “Take a breath, Nyx.”

“But you said...”

“I know, and I was wrong. I was so caught up in my own fear. But it works.”

“I know it works!” she yelled. “Do you think I could have taken disappointing you one more time? I’ve spent every spare moment in the last four years searching for others like you—to discover herbs that could help create a draught that could help you all live a better life. After our last attempt a year ago, I knew I couldn’t let you down again.” She angrily brushed away her tears. “Then you tossed it away like it was trash—like I was rubbish.”

Pain creased his expression. “That’s not what I... I’m sorry. I overreacted and you bore the brunt of it.”

It was more than that. “You accused me of trying to drug you, of trying to trick you!”

Brine burst into the room, glaring at the two of them. “My wife and daughter are currently sleeping but not for long if you continue to shout the house down.” He glanced between her and Briggs assessing them both before the blasted wolf gave Briggs a smile. “Congrats, old friend.” He nodded and disappeared back out the door.

*That bastard.*

Nyx stormed from the room—as well as someone could on tiptoes—and out the front door without closing it behind her. She practically raced toward the nearest beach, Briggs’ steady steps following her. The warm morning sand greeted her bare feet and grew cooler as she reached the ocean’s edge.

“I’ve never known you to be one to run, Nyx.”

She spun on her heel, scowling. “I’m not running.”

“Yes, you are. I know what it looks like. I’ve been doing it for years since Pyre rescued me from the pits.” Briggs strode through the white sand to her and stopped just before her. Nyx tipped her head back to stare up at him, feeling like the world

was off-balance. “I’ve thrown myself into helping others to atone for my mistakes and to avoid what haunts me. I never wanted to look back, but I didn’t know how to move forward either.”

“I was there, trying to help you!”

“I know.” He seized her face, his touch desperate. “You have always been a bright spot in my life, my very best friend. I’ve just never let myself hope for or imagine anything else.” Briggs smiled and leaned down until his forehead touched her own. “You’ve given me hope. You’ve given me everything.”

Nyx shook her head. “If this is all true, why wait so long to come to me? It’s been *three* months.”

“Because I had to be sure.”

“You didn’t believe me?” She jerked back.

“I did.” Briggs didn’t let her go far, wrapping an arm around her waist. “I’ve always trusted you.”

“That’s not what you said.” It hurt even to remember it.

“Words that I have regretted saying each day since.” He touched her chin and lifted it so she met his serious gaze. “I’m so sorry for the hurt I’ve caused. I know it’s no excuse, but I wasn’t in my right mind that day in the infirmary. All I could see was you being tortured, the Mistress standing over you, and the blue drugs.” Shame filled his eyes. “I reacted poorly. Honestly, I was having a hard time telling what was real and what wasn’t.” He shook his head, his dark braids swaying between them. “I will forever be making up for my mistakes if you’ll let me. Know that from this day forward I intend only to bring joy into your life.”

“Not possible,” she retorted on another sob. How could she believe him?

Briggs grinned. “I’ll try my best at least, if you’ll let me.”

“I don’t know if I can.”

“I’ve known you a long time, Nyx. You and I both know that’s not true. You are kind, generous, loving, strong, courageous, and forgiving.”

No, she wasn't. "So I'm just supposed to forgive you? Like you never ripped my heart out? Like you never accused me of being like your Mistress?"

Briggs blanched. "No! I have and never will compare you to her. As I said before, I trust you." He released her chin and dipped into his pocket, pulling another blue vial out. Briggs held it up between them. "You wanted to know why I didn't come sooner? It wasn't because I didn't believe or trust you. It's because I wanted to make sure that I could trust myself." His throat bobbed. "I wanted to make sure that I was the kind of man you deserved."

More tears flooded her eyes. "I never asked you to be anything other than yourself."

"I know, love. But you were right in accusing me of being stuck in the past. I've buried myself in healing to atone for my sins. While I love it, and it's given me peace, I've never truly dealt with what I experienced in the pits. So I sought out the help of a mental healer that Tempest suggested."

Nyx blinked up at him. A mental healer? "And?"

He exhaled, and glanced down at the damp sand, the ocean lapping gently around their feet. "It opened wounds that have been festering for far too long. But it's been cleansing too. I think the terrors will always lurk in the back of my mind, but they won't control my life." Briggs put the serum back in his pocket before taking her right hand and bringing it to his lips. He kissed her knuckles tenderly before meeting her gaze once again. "I don't deserve your forgiveness, but I'll wait forever if that's what it takes."

This man was going to ruin her.

*He already has.*

She wanted to forgive him. He'd never been a cruel soul. But she needed to know one more thing.

"The mark." Nyx pushed her hair back so he could see it. "You're not just saying these things because you feel obligated to me? Because if that's the case, I'll be walking away right —"

Briggs kissed her. The type of kiss that stole your breath and set your soul aflame. She clutched his shirt between her fists as his thick arms banded around her waist.

“You are what I’ve dreamed of for five years. You’re my best friend and dearest love,” he breathed against her lips. “You will never be an obligation but the ultimate blessing of my life.” Her sweet bear began kissing away her tears as they fell. “If you’ll have me, I promise to sleep next to you every night.”

She cried harder.

“To cheat at cards to beat your brother so you can win.”

She half-laughed and half-hiccuffed.

“To wash the sage and boil it while you’re out so you don’t have to smell it.”

Stars, she hated the scent of sage.

“To never raise a hand or voice to you when we argue.”

Nyx could never see him doing that.

Her tears slowed but Briggs never stopped kissing her face.

“To cherish any wee ones that might come from our mating.” A pause. “And I want many.” A slight growl to that promise made Nyx shiver. “To love you until we both are dust and we’re just memories on the wind.”

“And if I say no?” she forced herself to say.

“Then I will be your very best friend and protector for the rest of our lives. But know this, there will be no other for me.”

Nyx sank her fingers into his braids, her decision already made. Briggs had always been it for her.

She’d found her mate at the age of sixteen.

“Well then, I suppose there’s only one thing left to do.” Nyx beamed.

“What’s that?”

“For you to find someone to marry us and then take me back to bed.”



She squeaked as he swung her up into his arms and began running toward the house.

For once, everything was perfect.

THE END



Thank you for reading *THE HEALER*. If you want to read the rest of the complete TWISTED KINGDOMS SERIES, then check out the first book [\*THE HUNT!\*](#)

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



FROST KAY IS A USA Today bestselling author and a certified book dragon with an excessive TBR.

She adores telling stories of strong women, diverse cultures, and epic fantasy worlds filled with relatable characters and true love. She lives in the United States and when not immersed in her newest book, you can find her free diving in her mermaid tail, rock climbing, camping, or soaking up the sun with her cat.

For more exclusive content and other goodies, check out [FROST KAY'S](#) website.



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# THE HEIR AND THE SPARE



AN OF FLESH & BONE NOVELLA

Harper L. Woods

# AUTHOR'S NOTE



THE HEIR AND THE Spare is a novella set within Harper's Of Flesh & Bone World. For the best reading experience, it should be read after book three of the series, *What Lurks Between the Fates*, to fully understand the circumstances and characters that have led Fallon and Etan here. As such, this novella will contain major spoilers for the Of Flesh & Bone series.

*The Heir and The Spare* is the beginning of Fallon's story and will be concluded later in the *Of Flesh & Bone* series, but this novella has a HFN (happy for now) ending in the meantime.



# CHAPTER ONE



FALLON

NO LIGHT TO BE found. I'd existed in this dark and hollow pit for far too many days. Any windows that may have offered a reprieve from this endless night had long since been shuttered and closed, sealing us off from even the dim light of the twin moons resting in the sky. But it wasn't only the eternal darkness that made coldness seep into my bones.

It was the reality of who and what my mother was—and who she wanted me to become.

I'd had a childhood filled with love, even when we were forced to live within the tunnels we called home. There had been light in that community, in the bonds I'd made and the people I'd shared my life with.

In the Court of Shadows, there was only evil and cruelty. Only torture and screams to fill the silence perpetuated by those who were so afraid to attract the Queen's notice they barely dared to move. To have her attention was to embrace madness itself, to dance with the unpredictability of her curse and hope to make it out unscathed.

She sat on a throne she'd crafted as a testament to her conquests; the skulls and bones of her favorite murders melded together with shadows. The midnight of her dress was sheer from her thighs to her feet, cascading in front of the throne and showing her demurely crossed legs to those who lingered in the throne room.

From the man standing silently opposite me on the dais, to the few lingering in the cages hanging from the ceiling, there were not many present on this day, not when she'd chosen to torment me in private. Her shame over the daughter she deemed worthless meant she subjected me to public humiliation far less often than she had in the beginning, seeming to realize that I would not cave purely because we had an audience.

Even if I'd wanted to, I couldn't give her what she wanted. I didn't possess the magic she so desperately wanted me to show.

She took my forearm in her hold and dragged a gleaming black knife over my skin. The first cut was shallow, a hint of what was to come. She stared at me, her eyes dark and endless. Her breathtaking, eternal face was devoid of all emotion even as she cut into her own daughter's flesh, her pursed mouth tense and painted blood red. The raven of her hair was identical to mine, straight and carefully arranged around her shoulders to fall around the bejeweled gown that graced her shoulders and covered her arms.

I didn't speak as she bled me, as her knife dug in deeper and carved through me. There was nothing to say, no place we had not already explored. I had begged her to stop. I had cried and screamed. I had learned that only one thing would make her stop.

A display of magic I didn't have.

I worried the bridge of my nose between my fingers, hating this relentless game we played. There was no magic within me, a complete abomination to everything Mab believed her daughter should possess. I didn't possess her penchant for darkness or her cruelty, only an extreme distaste for the place that was destined to be my home, if she had her way.

I was Mab's only heir, but she was too far lost to her disillusion to see that I would *never* sit upon her throne. Even if I'd had magic of my own, the only way Mab would hand down her rule was if she lay dead and her soul was lost to the Void. She would have no control over her heir, continuing to hold power in her death, and the Court of Shadows would return to the rightful line of inheritance.

The throne would belong to Caldris, and I would *gladly* hand it over. I might not have known where I belonged or if such a place even existed, but I knew it wasn't here.

Estrella entered the throne room behind me, everything in my being sensing her proximity even though I couldn't see her. She and I were the same, some gnarled and twisted bond that we would never be able to separate. Opposites, but also one and the same. Two trees whose roots had intertwined for so long that to cut them apart would be to kill them both.

I turned to the side, letting our eyes meet as she took in the situation before her. That all-seeing gaze tracked over the male across from me, Etan. I'd seen him only in passing in the halls of Tar Mesa, but that gaze always seemed to study me too intently. Even now, with Mab to witness the curiosity that could never mean anything good, his head tilted to the side in thought, as if I were a puzzle he couldn't quite solve.

Estrella's eyes narrowed into a glare as she raised her chin higher, that protective streak making everything in her go taut when she smelled the blood, when her gaze tracked down to the open wound on my forearm. She'd suffered far worse at Mab's hands, but Estrella would always tolerate her own injuries before mine. In this place of darkness, enemies were everywhere, and nothing and *no one* was innocent. There was

no goodness to be found when the people of the Court of Shadows had been forced to survive at the sacrifice of others.

Everyone but her.

I resisted the urge to laugh, knowing that if we were in any other situation, Estrella would think nothing of severing the man's head from his body if she thought he meant me harm. It wouldn't matter to her that the man was the Summer King's, Rheagan's, second in command—placed in his position by Mab herself to spy on her brother when he remained in the Summer Court. Etan's mouth curved at one corner, the faintest hint of a smirk rising in response to the smile I quelled. His deep auburn hair hung around his shoulders in choppy, layered waves—his brown eyes cold and unyielding in spite of the amusement curving his mouth.

As if he could feel Estrella's disapproval, he turned to face her finally as she came to stand beside me. She stared down Etan and his master, my mother, like the queen I knew she was meant to be. One day she would have that title—would rule at Caldris's side, not as a pretty ornament, but as an equal, because there was no one and nothing in this world that could put Estrella Barlowe into a cage.

I knew it as surely as I knew my own name. She'd been born to break her chains and use them to strangle her abusers. Compared to most royalty, she was something of an anomaly. She had known poverty and suffering, torture and injustice. It was because of those things that I knew one day she would shove them down her oppressor's throats and watch them choke.

I could only hope I was around to watch, because I could never hope to be as brave as she was. I knew my place was in her shadow, and I didn't begrudge her for it, even if I wished I could even once feel a hint of light on my face.

"You summoned me?" she asked, refusing to bow where any others would quiver in their boots at the thought of showing Mab such disrespect.

We hadn't been in Tar Mesa for long, even though the darkness made it feel like an eternity, but I knew Estrella was

the only one who could get away with such insolence.

She was a curiosity to Mab, a game the Queen very much enjoyed playing.

“I tire of having two incompetent children beneath my roof. You cannot seem to summon the magic we both know you possess, magic that would make you *useful*. Maeve cannot seem to summon *any* magic at all. Both are unacceptable to me,” Mab said, running her tongue over her teeth in dissatisfaction. She made a sucking noise in the side of her cheek, as if her annoyance was not already obvious.

“Her name is Fallon,” Estrella corrected, holding Mab’s glare with one of her own.

It would never cease to amaze me that after centuries of separation from her own flesh and bone, I was nothing more than something to be used. There was no love in Mab’s heart for her long-lost daughter. Only disappointment that what she’d found hadn’t lived up to her expectations after all that time.

“But I fail to see what you would like either of us to do. Magic cannot be forced. If it does not come when summoned, then perhaps we are not fit to control it,” Estrella said, utilizing her unique ability to come very close to outright lying.

I hadn’t retained that skill after my transformation upon arriving in Alfheimr. I had very much become defined and limited to the rules that the Fae had to navigate, hinting further at the fact that we did not know *what* Estrella was.

Mab sneered and huffed a laugh at Estrella, a grim, bitter smile transforming her face. She should have been beautiful, *was* beautiful, but the ugliness within her shone through every expression on her face and the crazed, desperate look that always seemed to linger in her eyes.

“I might have believed that to be true if I hadn’t heard rumors of all the things you’ve done. If I hadn’t *seen* them in your memories and for myself, Little Mouse.” The Queen of Air and Darkness’s voice was low and soft, for she had no need to raise it to invoke terror in most who came into her

presence. It was elegant and poised in her moments of calm, every bit the courtier and noble.

“I think I have proven myself to be more than a mouse,” Estrella said, smiling in the face of what most feared.

After her battle with the Minotaur in the Labyrinth, no one could deny that she’d proven herself to be far more than a rodent scurrying in the dark. I wrung my hands together, my fingertip touching the teardrop mark that bound Estrella and me to one another even more than destiny had already done. I could only hope that some of her bravery would bleed into my skin, become mine as much as it was hers.

I’d thought myself brave during all those nights I’d spent in the tunnels of the Rebellion, longing to step foot in the sun and fight in battles I had no place in. Only now did I see the beauty I’d been offered, that Imelda and my human family had provided me with in our haven, safe from harm.

“Occasionally, the mouse’s bite carries a deadly disease. But it is still just a mouse, at the end of the day,” Mab said.

Estrella’s jaw tensed as she swallowed back her rage at the insult. She drew it within her, storing it for motivation later when the time was right.

At first glance, one would think Estrella impulsive, that her small aggressions toward Mab were parts of her that should have been contained. But I knew her better, saw the deep well of rage that existed within her. The comments she made, the fights, were nothing compared to what she stored for later, and Mab would be wise to fear the day Estrella acts on that anger in truth after being the one to stoke the flames ever higher.

“What do you want from us?” Estrella asked, glancing at me.

I saw the drive there, the need to protect me against any and all threats. I felt the same, but whereas I felt limited in what I could offer, Estrella’s strength knew no bounds. She would suffer. She would hurt. She would walk to the ends of the earth if it meant saving me from the fate she’d already been forced to endure in Tar Mesa. While Mab might have shown cruelty

and abuse, it was nothing compared to the limits she had tested with Estrella.

“I only have the energy to invest my time into one of you. You will determine which of you remains here with me,” Mab said, waving a hand as if it were inconsequential to her.

My heart dropped into my stomach, even though I’d already known she hadn’t cared for me in the slightest. The confirmation that she would send me away if I was less useful than Estrella was still a swift kick to the gut.

It was also a relief at the same time.

“Will the one who does not stay go free?” Estrella asked, sensing the trap in Mab’s offer. There was no way she would ever allow anyone to escape her clutches freely. Rather, she would kill whoever she did not keep. But I would gladly die if it meant Estrella had a chance to live with Caldris, to know serenity and peace with the love of her life.

I may not have been brave enough to endure torture, but I could die. At least then, the pain would have an end.

“Of course not,” Mab said with a cruel laugh. “Etan is in need of a wife and is owed one for the loyalty he has shown me during my brother’s reign as king. Whoever does not remain with me shall be betrothed to him and return to the Summer Court with him after the Solstice.”

Estrella’s eyes widened, her arm twitching at her side as if she meant to raise it in shock. She twisted her head, her jaw working as if she’d swallowed a rock and needed to force it down. “I have a mate,” she said, turning to look at Etan cautiously.

He shifted uncomfortably, clearly bothered by the idea of taking another man’s mate as his wife.

“It is adorable that you think I care about such trivialities. Political marriages happen all the time. Caldris will learn to share you and remember his place,” Mab said, dismissing the notion that acting outside of the mating bond would be *agonizing*. For both Estrella and Caldris. There would be no

pleasure in being bound to another man, only suffering and pain.

Estrella smiled through the pain, and I knew she was confronted with the images of the carnage Caldris would unleash if anyone even attempted to claim her as his. “I somehow doubt that,” she scoffed. She turned her head, her face twisted with sadness. I knew she didn’t want to leave me to that fate, but that was the only path forward.

“It’s okay, Estrella,” I said, my eyes filling with tears. The thought of leaving her here, of abandoning her to this place that was so determined to break her, was enough to break me in half.

She shook her head, pursing her lips to fight back tears of her own.

“Whoever displays the magic I wish to see first will stay here with me,” Mab said, interrupting our moment.

“And if neither of us do?” Estrella asked, prepared to simply refuse to make the choice. If neither of us chose, would we simply continue on as we already had been? How long could we keep going that way?

“Then I’ll marry the other one of you off to one of my other allies. Perhaps a far crueler one than Etan. I have done you a kindness in selecting him. He is not a cruel man and will not be a cruel husband. He is distant and pragmatic but will see that your needs are met. I would tolerate nothing less for my daughter,” Mab said, turning to me with a knowing stare. “Even if she does not obey me.”

She knew beyond a shadow of the veil that I would be the one she sent to this marriage. She knew it would be Estrella who displayed her power and remained behind, hoping and waiting for the moment when she and Caldris could be free together. She knew, and she was willing to sacrifice me to force Estrella’s hand.

After centuries of searching, I’d proven to be a waste of effort. A waste of time.



The veil had been erected to keep us from Mab, to protect us from being raised in her image.

And for what?

I stepped forward, turning my back to Mab and placing myself between her and Estrella. I took my friend's hands in my own, stroking my thumb over the circle on the back of her hand. I ran my touch over the Fae Mark, the reminder of the bond that mattered more than ours, summoning that connection to the surface to remind Estrella of everything I was willing to sacrifice myself for.

Etan would never love me, and I could not possibly love a man who would willingly align himself with Mab. With every day that passed, it became more and more clear that there was no love for me, not the kind that Estrella had found with Caldris.

She deserved to have what she had already found and suffered for.

My palm touched the white teardrop of our blood vow on her finger, and the pulse of magic spread through me at the same moment Estrella shivered.

"It's okay," I said, my hand trailing up the white marks on her forearm. My fingers tingled with warmth, as if my touch alone could bring forth the magic she fought to suppress and keep hidden from Mab.

She shook her head again, the denial rising on her lips. "I can't," she protested.

"You can," I said, touching my forehead to hers.

I leaned forward, my eyes holding hers and willing her to see the truth. Her bottom lip quivered, her desperation to protect me at war with her need to be with her mate. All my life, people had been protecting me from danger—they'd been doing whatever it took to keep me tucked away and safe, guarding my light that was too good to be sacrificed to the darkness of this world. Beyond that need to protect me was a greater doubt, though, and I read it in every line of Estrella's face. In the tension at her temples, the crinkling at the corner

of her mouth as she forced a frown that was unnatural to her pretty face. Her fear—of what Mab would do with her magic. Her fear of what she herself was capable of.

“It is you. The most terrifying part of you, but it’s also the most beautiful. All you have to do is let it out.”

“It’s not that simple,” Estrella said, resisting the urge to make eye contact with Mab. Even our words came too close to revealing the truth, Estrella’s painful efforts to keep her secret safe useless in the face of a woman who would do anything to learn them.

I turned her away from Mab and guided her out of the throne room. Mab and Etan followed behind us, and I knew we were both aware of the fact that we were only able to exit the palace of Tar Mesa because she allowed it. That the guards standing at the entrance would have impaled us on sight if she so much as breathed a word of discontent. Instead, the Queen of Air and Darkness seemed content to allow the situation to play out, watching with only a mild curiosity.

“She cannot use you for evil if you do not allow it. Knowledge is power, but do you really think anything she does is stronger than you?” I asked, my voice a low murmur to keep the moment private between us. “You have lived in fear of what you are. You have suffered the pain of suppressing yourself to protect the world. When will you learn that you are not our destruction, Estrella? You are our savior.”

Estrella’s knees buckled as we stepped outside, the moons shining high in the sky above us. My bare arms warmed in the light shining down from them as I took a step back with a nod. I released Estrella as she turned to stare down at Mab and Etan as they waited for her decision.

“I’m not strong enough for this,” she said.

“Then lean on the people who love you. Take what you need from us,” I said, raising a hand.

She stared down at the threads she saw in everything, the ways she interpreted the world that the rest of us could not. Nodding, she allowed her eyes to drift closed as she sank into

herself, into the well of power that I felt rise to meet her. Goosebumps rose along my arms in response to the feel of it on my skin, forcing me to hold my ground. I couldn't risk Estrella seeing me back away from her, couldn't risk her thinking I was afraid of her.

Mab studied Estrella intently as she wrapped something into her fingers, curling it around her flesh as silent tears rolled down her cheeks. She stared up at the sky with wide eyes, as if she saw the world for the very first time.

Estrella closed her palm, pressing her fingers into it slowly. I followed her gaze to the sky, watching as one of the moons winked out of existence as if it had never been there at all. She reached up with her other hand as Mab gasped, the shock in her voice bringing a smile of pure joy to my face as I stared up at that one lone moon. Estrella gathered more threads into that hand, snuffing out the light and plunging the night sky into darkness. The other moon vanished, the stars disappearing along with it until a dark like I'd never known surrounded me.

The complete absence of light was suffocating, and my breaths came harsher and more quickly. Only the light of fires hanging from the doorway of the palace illuminated the ground before it, and I pointed my stare at them and fixated on that single source of light.

"Impossible," Mab whispered, taking a step toward Estrella.

Estrella turned to face her, unflinching when the Queen of Air and Darkness cupped her cheeks and stared down at her. There was something mixed between horror and awe in that stare, and she ran her thumb through the tears on Estrella's cheeks in a mockery of gentleness that felt all wrong coming from her.

"And yet here I am," Estrella murmured, drawing back from Mab. She released the threads, tossing her hands into the sky so that the moons reclaimed their rightful place. "Did that give you the answers you were so desperate for?"

"You can see the threads of Fate," Mab said, her voice filled with awe as she stared down at Estrella's hands. "That is how you summon."

Shock coursed through me with the realization that Mab knew what she shouldn't, that she'd recognized the way Estrella touched the world. "You see them too?" Estrella asked, swallowing so loudly I heard it.

"I see...shadows of them. Whispers on the wind occasionally, but I can never grasp them. I'm not—" Mab paused, clearing her throat as the closest thing I'd ever seen to emotion clogged it.

"You're not what?" Estrella asked.

She was so close to answers that I took an unwilling step toward her, pausing only so I would not interrupt the moment. I wouldn't be the one to keep her from the answers she needed desperately.

Mab clenched her jaw, and I could already imagine the strategy working through her head. The plans she was making for how she could use this knowledge, and Estrella, to her greatest advantage.

"A Primordial," Mab answered finally, knocking the breath from my lungs.

Estrella was a *Primordial*?

## CHAPTER TWO



ETAN

I STARED AT THE woman in shock, the impossibility of her existence contradicted before my very eyes. The Primordials had locked themselves away, disappeared from the world centuries prior to her existence from the kernels of information I'd been able to gather from my conversations with Mab and those who were the most loyal to her. Estrella Barlowe should not have had the power Mab claimed to have witnessed her possess. The assertion in the voice of the Queen of Air and Darkness stole the breath from my lungs. There was the faintest of tremors to it, the sound so unlike anything I'd ever heard from the goddess who feared nothing and no one that I felt my head tip to the side as I turned my head to stare at her profile.

Estrella and Fallon seemed oblivious to the note of fear that made her voice shake, their knowledge of her short-lived. They didn't have centuries at her side to understand the implication of that fear and what it would mean for Estrella.

She'd been in danger since the moment she'd stepped foot in Alfheimr, but Mab would never allow something she feared to continue living. It was only a matter of time before she figured out the best way to eliminate the threat Estrella posed, only a matter of time before she did what she could to rid herself of the competition for power where no other could challenge her.

There were two sides to Mab. The one that everyone saw, the crazed mad woman who acted without fear of consequences and hurt anyone who stood in her way. That was the Queen who had nothing to fear, no one who could right her wrongs or avenge their families. That was the woman who had been driven to a cruel, evil glee at the suffering of others. Most assumed her incapable of control, of containing that side of herself to play the long game when it was necessary for her survival.

But on the other side, I'd seen her do just that with Caldris, keeping him contained for centuries when he might have otherwise been able to fight back and claim what was his by birthright. She'd taken her greatest opposition and turned him into her greatest weapon. But while Caldris had been a child when he'd consented to the snake wrapped around his heart, Estrella was a woman. She understood the implications of such a thing, and fully grasped the fact that there were some fates worse than death.

The glare she graced Mab with was confirmation of that, a promise that she would fight her until the very end.

That glare was her death sentence; Mab's answering smirk her affirmation of a fate signed, sealed, and all but delivered to the Fates themselves.

Movement at my side caught my eye, pulling my stare away from the standoff occurring before my eyes. Had it been anyone else, nothing could have torn me away from the

gravity of this moment. From the implication that the future of Faekind would be decided when these two women decided to go to war.

Only one creature could tempt me from keeping a wary eye on the two women.

*My future wife.*

Fallon raised her chin, her strong, angular jaw set as her full mouth parted into a gleeful smile. It was in that moment that I saw the resemblance between her and her mother, the deep, devastating beauty that felt too dangerous to grasp. I didn't know that I would ever be able to contain it, to hold her in my arms in spite of the position she would soon play in my life. She was the kind of beauty that slipped through your fingers, disappearing into the wind like a mirage that couldn't possibly be real.

I'd seen her at court before this moment, silent and stoic at Mab's side in spite of the atrocities her mother committed, in spite of the pain she inflicted on her own daughter in an effort to gain the answers she sought. But Fallon refused any and all attention, gave no answers, and showed no signs of the power that she *must* have given her lineage.

The moon played off her fair skin, such a contrast to Estrella's bronze and my own skin that was deeply tanned by the sun in my home court. She looked as if she'd been locked away in a tower without a window, as if her skin had never been given the privilege of stepping into the sunlight, of feeling that warmth on the cool tone of her skin.

As if she felt my attention, she turned to face me. The smile drifted off her stunning face slowly, her pouty lips pressing into a tight line. I'd never seen a mouth so perfectly shaped, her top and bottom lips evenly thick to the point of looking like they'd had been painted on. Her lips were deeper than was natural, nearly the color of blood against her pale skin. I'd always thought Mab's lips were the effect of painting them with the blood of her enemies, but Fallon contradicted that notion.

I felt certain she only had one enemy in this world, and that was the queen who had so easily dismissed her in favor of Estrella.

Fallon crossed her arms over her chest, and where another woman might have looked insecure in the motion, she squared her shoulders as she studied me and found me wanting. The set to that strong jaw indicated the fight I would have on my hands, her entire body tense as she waited for abuse. Her hazel eyes bore into mine, her hair so dark it was nearly black. She'd braided one side back from her face, the tiny twists plastered to her head and highlighting the scar that arched across her forehead and through her eyebrow. It disappeared for a moment, her eye saved by the gap, before reappearing on her cheek and fading into the line of her jaw. I couldn't help the immediate curiosity that plagued me, the deep desire to know what had befallen her to result in such a wound.

But where it might have marred her beauty had she been any ordinary woman, it somehow added to her allure—to the sense of mystery that surrounded her like an aura.

“Sorry to disappoint you,” she said, her mouth parting ever so slightly. Her teeth peeked through the gap, bright white and perfectly straight, with only the tiniest of gaps between the two front teeth that felt too innocent for a woman staring at me with such disdain.

“Disappoint me?” I asked, meeting her pointed stare.

Most withered under intense eye contact, feeling uncomfortable with the aspect of self-confidence in a world determined to tear us down. The eyes were a window to the soul, a reminder that our bodies were nothing but flesh, and that the real pain came from within.

“Estrella is far too important to marry the likes of you, no matter how beautiful you may find her,” Fallon said, earning a grin from me. A grin that I usually suppressed when trapped in this court of darkness and gloom.

“She is beautiful,” I said, taking a step toward my future wife. The one who had been so willing to save her friend that she'd sacrificed herself to an arrangement, to a loveless



marriage decided by the mother she hated so clearly. That hatred extended to me as well, if her glare was any indication. I raised my hand from my side slowly, watching as she finally broke eye contact to study the movement. She stood her ground, lifting her chin as my fingers ghosted over her skin. My thumb found her bottom lip, the plump flesh parting as I drew it down to get a glimpse of her teeth again.

I wanted her smile, the devious grin that had graced her face at the prospect of Estrella besting the Queen of Air and Darkness whom Fallon believed me loyal to. Instead, she bared her teeth at me, jerking her head back from my touch. I let her go, running my tongue over my bottom teeth as her snarl gave me my first glimpse of her pointed little fangs at the corner of her mouth.

“But I am far from disappointed, Princess,” I said, holding out a hand and leaning forward into a courtly half-bow.

Fallon sucked her cheek inwards, hollowing out her face slightly and making her angular features even more striking in her distaste for me. She cast one last glance toward Mab and Estrella, the two of them staring upward toward the night sky. With a sigh, she lifted her hand and placed it in mine, allowing me to draw her against my side and escort her back to the palace of Tar Mesa. We took a few steps, ascending the few stairs and entering the doors that the guards pulled open with a dramatic flourish.

“I am far more concerned with understanding why you believe Estrella is any more important than you are,” I said, continuing our conversation in the absence of Mab’s prying ears.

Fallon scoffed, the condescending sneer on her face making me want nothing more than to wipe it off her beautiful face. She’d come to learn that her attitude would never be met with violence, not with me, but I would still show her all the ways I could own her.

She would just enjoy them.

“*Everyone* is worth less than Estrella,” she said as we climbed the stairs, casually leading me to the rooms she’d

been given during her time in Tar Mesa. At the time, she'd probably thought this would be her final home—that she would either remain as her mother's prisoner or die here. Instead, she'd know the grand opulence of the summer court, of breezy fabrics and bathing pools with flowing water in every room carved into the hillside that kept us sheltered from the worst of the sandstorms. "It isn't an insult to me."

"Perhaps she is worth more in *your* eyes, but I will not allow you to make less of your importance. No matter the circumstances that led us here, you are to be my wife now, and I'll not allow anyone to insult you. Not even you," I said, pausing in front of the door at the end of the hall.

Fallon faced me, her face expressionless as if she couldn't decide how to react to my statement.

"You don't have to pretend that you care. You don't even know me, and we both know this marriage will be nothing more than a political arrangement," she said, her voice soft. It was her reminder to herself of exactly what this was, and I appreciated that she wanted to go into our situation with clearly defined roles.

"Is that so?" I asked, raising the hand that did not hold hers and touching my thumb to her cheek. I dragged it over her high cheekbone, reveling in the tiny hitch of breath that caught in her lungs.

"What else could it possibly be?" she asked, her whisper barely audible in the abandoned hallway.

I shrugged, taking my hand back and releasing hers from the hold of my other free hand. "It may be an *arrangement*," I said, emphasizing the word she'd chosen.

Fallon had no way of knowing what I'd done, of realizing that I'd been the one to put the idea in Mab's head. A quiet whisper here, a hushed murmur there, the implication that I was ready for marriage if she should deem me worthy. Playing games with Mab was a strategy, a slowly evolving plan to make her believe the decision had been hers and hers alone.

Fallon did not yet know how to play that game, but I'd had centuries of manipulating the Queen of Air and Darkness to benefit my people. Fallon would be the first time I used that ability for my own selfish gain, arranging a wedding that Fallon had played right into.

I placed my hand on the handle to her door, turning it down and shoving it open before stepping out of her way. It was a room I'd spent my fair share of time in, getting to know Fallon through the space she kept as her own.

She moved to pass me, making her way through the door and pausing only when I leaned in and placed my mouth at her ear. "But that doesn't mean we cannot enjoy said arrangement," I added, stepping back from her suddenly as she gave me a wide-eyed stare. She drew in a deep breath, her shock palpable as she moved into her room on shaky legs.

She didn't so much as meet my stare as she swung the door closed behind her, sealing herself off into her place of false safety.

I grinned at the back of the door, running a palm over the wooden surface before I turned on my heel and stalked toward my own rooms.

The best part of hunting within the Shadow Court?

My *wife* wasn't going anywhere.

# CHAPTER THREE



## FALLON

ESTRELLA SCREAMED, THE SOUND shattering something within me. I took a step forward to reach her, grimacing as Etan grabbed my forearm with a vice grip that prevented me from moving.

A blade protruded from Caldris's heart, Mab's iron dagger making him sputter and cling to the last vestiges of life.

"Let me go!" I screamed, desperate to make my way to Estrella. She needed me, needed the bond that swayed between us as her bond with her mate prepared to sever—the one that connected us and drove us to face all obstacles together.

“Stay out of the way,” Etan murmured, leaning close so that the words hung between us. “I won’t let you risk yourself for her. Estrella made her bed with every moment she chose to defy Mab. There is *nothing* you can do to change her fate now,” he said, casting his gaze toward his King. Rheaghan lingered at the edge, his mouth tight and hands fisted at his side. As if he wanted to step in to interfere with his sister’s violence but knew better than to defy her.

But like so many of us, something in Estrella’s pain drew us closer. Something in that *love* made her striking ability to pull us into her orbit even stronger.

Mab pulled back the blade, and I watched in stunned horror as a surge of blood rose to the surface and dribbled down his chest in tune with the beating of his heart. I pulled at Etan’s grip, trying to get free, to no avail.

He simply pulled me into his chest, tucking my back against him and holding steady. His arms wrapped around my chest, entrapping me in a cage I had no hope of freeing myself from, no matter how I writhed against him.

“Settle, Fallon,” he said, his breathing slow and even. It was such a contrast to mine, so in opposition to the racing of my heart. My finger throbbed where the teardrop marked Estrella and I as bonded, the need to intervene coursing through me.

Estrella dropped to her knees at Caldris’s side, pressing her hands to his wound as he toppled to his side. She caught him, pulling him into her lap as tears splashed down her face.

“There’s been a change of plans,” Mab said, her voice calm. It was the perfect display of just how little she cared for anything living—anything breathing.

Caldris was her stepson, the son of her husband, and she’d known him since he was a boy. Her cruelty knew no bounds to finally kill him when he was so close to being mated, so close to reaching his euphoria.

Mab wiped her knife on the fabric of her dress, staining it with Caldris’s blood.

“I love you,” Caldris whispered, the words meant only for his mate. I screamed, knowing about the bond that Estrella and Caldris had sworn.

Where one went, the other would follow.

I felt like my heart might tear in two, and Etan held me tight as Mab’s curious gaze swung toward me. She studied me as if she couldn’t comprehend my heartache, as if love was a weakness that made no sense in this instance. I couldn’t even blame her, because she didn’t yet understand what she’d done.

She didn’t understand that she’d ripped Estrella from me.

“Caldris will be the Godly sacrifice. Consider yourself fortunate, Ilaria,” Mab said, the implication of that statement making something in Estrella go blank. Her expression dropped from her face, her anguish vanishing in a moment as she settled inside.

I knew her well enough to know the moment that creature within her rose up to comfort her, wrapping her in an embrace that was so cold that nothing could live within it. This was the Estrella that Mab did not know to fear, the one who made her ramblings about power seem like child’s play. The day Estrella learned to control that part of her would be the day she conquered the world, plunging us into chaos and darkness.

Caldris turned pale, his eyes beginning to glaze over as Estrella’s claws extended into talons. She dragged one over her wrist, making a sharp slice across her skin. The scent of blood was metallic in the air, turning my stomach with the strength of it.

“Please don’t leave me,” she begged, silent tears tracking down her cheeks as she pressed her bleeding wrist to her mate’s mouth.

Caldris’s eyes drifted closed, and I watched in dawning horror as Estrella’s *viniculum* pulsed with shadows. The black seemed to writhe on her skin in agitation, the shadows stretching and twirling as they threatened to consume her. Her eyes were wide, a manic energy I’d never seen on her face.

The white of her Fae Mark spread, shimmering with golden light as it shifted and pushed back the dark.

Her blood vanished into Caldris's mouth, the stain of it sparkling with gold where it touched his lips.

"If you are not strong enough to free yourself from this bond that cripples you, then I will do it for you, Little Mouse," Mab said, sneering as Estrella turned her gaze away from her dying mate.

The hatred written into the lines of her face promised retribution; it promised violence and vengeance and all the things that would plunge Alfheimr into war. I knew without a doubt that if Estrella lost Caldris, I would lose her. Even before she followed after him in mere moments, her soul would fray in ways that would never be fixed. She would destroy the entire world, burn it all to ground, if it meant tearing Mab's head from her shoulders. Her eyes glowed with golden light, her magic pulsing from within her.

Mab had the intelligence to stagger back half a step, trying to disguise her fear over the monster she'd so foolishly unleashed. Her ownership over Caldris had been the one thing controlling Estrella, had been the one piece that kept her from destruction.

Mab realized her folly as she summoned her daemon to guard her, watching as the creature who could siphon Estrella's magic took up guard beside the Queen who had summoned him from Hel.

Mab's soldiers grabbed Caldris by the legs, attempting to drag his limp form out of Estrella's grip. She held tight with one hand, making them eye her warily as she managed to cling to him. It should have been impossible, the strength she asserted against two men with a single hand to cling to her lost love.

"She's going to kill us all," I said, warning Etan of the coming danger. Estrella's rage simmered beneath the surface—ready to explode into the cove with the violence of a thousand storms. If Caldris was lost to us, Estrella would burn it all to the ground in her fury.

Etan swallowed with a nod, holding my gaze with something far too intimate in his expression. He reached up to cup my cheek, releasing his hold from my chest with that one arm to give me a moment of affection in what could very well be our final moments.

“We deserve more time. I won’t let her take you from this world just yet,” he said, earning a disgruntled chuckle from me.

He would have absolutely no control over Estrella as her jaw clenched tight. Her hands fisted at her sides, her fingers twining around the frayed edges of the golden thread of their bond. I couldn’t see it, but the phantom magic of it touched my teardrop mark, the feeling pulsing down our bond as she clung to Caldris.

Her brow knit, furrowing to mimic the deep scowl that toyed with her mouth as her nostrils flared. Her head tilted to the side as she watched Mab’s growing concern, that promise of violence becoming a deep, slithering thing that we all felt in the cove alongside us, until it was a tangible creature of its own.

Her face relaxed so suddenly my heart stopped, her hand releasing its iron grip on the thread and splaying across Caldris’s chest for a brief moment as she felt something I couldn’t see. His eyes flung open, the piercing blue of frost lost to the golden light of fate that mirrored Estrella’s gaze. Mab gasped, and the daemon swung his sword toward the impending threat.

The *impossible* threat that came with the realization that Estrella had healed a heart stabbed with iron. That she’d kept her mate from the very clutches of the afterlife.

There would be consequences for robbing the Void of the life it was owed, I knew. I knew and didn’t care, because it meant that Estrella was whole, that those magical eyes shone with relief.

Estrella realized the intended path of the daemon’s blade, as she laid herself over his body, using her own flesh to shield the mate she’d only just saved. I screamed my warning, her name



lost to the ringing in my ears as the wind of the daemon's strike moved the hair on Estrella's neck.

*No.*

Etan tightened his grip as I tried to move to her, to get in the way of the death calling her name this time. I couldn't reach her, couldn't protect her from what I knew would be fatal...

Caldris reached up, his arm moving faster than a lightning strike arcing through the sky. He caught the daemon's blade in his bare hand, stopping it with an explosion of golden light that tore through the cavern and made the tree branches rattle in the woods beside the beach. Sand blew into my face, stinging my eyes as Etan turned me in his grip, shoving my face into his tunic and shielding me as he rounded his body over mine. The sound of something striking the ground was the first to permeate the buzzing sound, like the explosion of light had damaged my ear drums.

I pulled my face out of Etan's chest, blinking up at him with wide, shocked eyes that I suspected mirrored his. His russet brown gaze roamed over my face, inspecting me for injury in a way I couldn't reconcile. His lips moved, but no sound came as I shook my head at him and reached up a hand to touch my ear.

My fingers came away wet, and I brought them forward to stare down at the blood that trickled down the sides of my neck from whatever damage I'd sustained. The feeling of my body healing itself was one I would never grow used to, the flesh moving within my ears as my body fought to repair the damage caused by Caldris's outburst.

I spun as hearing returned slowly, trickling in through the silence. Caldris had covered Estrella with his body, shielding her from any further harm as he laid her out on top of the sand. She stared up at him in shock, unable to figure out what she'd done to her mate. What she'd made him into by giving him her blood. He did not smile as he inspected her for injury, his face strangely unfeeling as he got to his feet over her. The daemon was nowhere to be found, as if he'd simply vanished into thin air while Etan surrounded me. Estrella scrambled to her feet as

the guards charged Caldris, attempting to contain the threat to the queen they were all forced to serve.

Caldris reached out a hand, his shadows no longer dark. Instead of black tendrils, they glowed with Estrella's golden light as he sent them sweeping toward those who advanced upon them. They wrapped themselves around the guards' throats, squeezing as the other royals stepped back away from the fray. Etan tightened his grip, lifting me off my feet as he too backed away from the spectacle.

"No!" I screamed, thrashing my legs to fight against his grip.

I wouldn't leave them to fight this alone, would at the very least bear witness to what my mother did to two of the people I loved more than anything. Estrella was part of me, a part I would never be able to tear from my soul. The crescent moon on my hand that marked us as one and the same seemed to pulse as she glanced up, meeting my stare with a soft smile that spoke of exactly what she knew would happen here. She already knew that she would never walk away from this cove, that there was no possibility in this world that Mab allowed both of them to remain free.

Her face was resigned as she mouthed to me, and I would have sworn I heard her sad voice break through the chaos. "Go," she said, ignoring my head shake to look at Etan and study the way he held me. She pursed her lips, nodding to him with a slight motion that he seemed to recognize as her expectation to protect me.

She would haunt him in the afterlife if he didn't.

Estrella's attention shifted to Mab as she raised a single hand. Her face tipped to the side as she held Estrella's stare, watching as Mab's gaze fell to the already healed wound on Estrella's wrist. The blood that stained her skin shimmered with gold, with the distinct sign of the Primordials that Estrella had fought to keep secret in the face of Mab's suspicion. What she proposed was impossible, and yet...

There was no denying what Estrella was capable of.

Caldris finished with the guards, turning his attention to the queen who had enslaved him as a weapon for all those years. Who had allowed her people to violate him in the greatest way, robbing him of autonomy over his own person.

Mab squeezed her hand as Etan backed me away slowly, attempting to avoid drawing attention to us and our retreat. Caldris grimaced but continued on through the pain, pushing through her control on him even as his chest stilled and stopped heaving with breath. Estrella struggled in turn, her face pinching with agony that I knew existed only in her heart. Their bond was incomplete, his pain only a shadow of what it would be, had they been able to complete their bond. Caldris dropped to his knees, clutching his chest as his eyes flashed between blue and gold.

“Stop!” Estrella begged, squeezing her eyes closed. She was trapped, desperate to save her mate, and I knew what she would do to save him, knew the sacrifice she would make. I couldn’t fault her for it, knowing I would have done nothing less to save *her*. “Name your price.”

“My star,” Caldris wheezed, reaching toward her with his free hand. He would rather see both of them dead than see her enslaved to Mab as so many others had been, than see his one love turned into a brutal weapon and know the guilt she wouldn’t be able to escape for an eternity.

My mother grinned, clearly pleased with the turn of events. This may not have been what she’d intended when she set forth with this task, but she was positively gleeful about it, nonetheless. Meanwhile, my heart felt like it was being torn in two, knowing that there was *nothing* I could do to help her. My helplessness was a prison all of its own, leaving me shaking with the feeling that I might come out of my skin. That something within me wanted to *burn*.

Mab tossed her head back and laughed, the sound filling the cavern. “We both know there is only one thing I want from you, Little Mouse,” she said, stepping closer slowly. She only stopped when she stood before Estrella, pressing the tip of the blade into the skin above her heart.

“Estrella, NO!” Caldris screamed, the agony of that call making the hair on my arms raise.

“Don’t do it,” a male voice pleaded, drawing my gaze away from Estrella and Mab and the spectacle they made. Rheaghan raised his hands placatingly, as if he could convince his sister that he was no threat to her.

Etan winced at my back, stilling in his retreat as his King’s gaze collided with his. Rheaghan gave him a look that said not to intervene, that no matter what happened, he was to stay out of it. I felt Etan shake his head at my spine, his grip tightening on me as Rheaghan’s gaze dropped to me for the briefest of moments before he swung his attention back to Estrella.

“It cannot be undone. I don’t think you understand what an eternity of servitude will mean.”

“I consent. As long as he lives,” Estrella said, the words torn from the depths of her soul.

Caldris’s horror was palpable in the air, striking me deep in the chest with an anguish I hoped I would never understand. I didn’t want to love anyone that completely, not if it meant feeling pain like that.

Mab wasted no time gliding the edge of her blade along Estrella’s skin, cutting through the muscle and sinew to create a gash that leaked blood on her dress in a steady stream. She carefully avoided Estrella’s heart itself, unwilling to lose the weapon she’d only just claimed for herself. For any mortal, the wound would have been fatal within seconds.

But Estrella stayed standing, her silence ringing through the cove as she refused to give even a whimper of pain. I didn’t know how she did it, how she survived and endured endlessly without ever giving in.

I would have given up long ago.

Mab raised her other arm—a small snake twined around her wrist. It hissed at Estrella as Mab guided it to the hole she’d created in Estrella’s chest, iron-teeth flashing as it slithered inside, shackling her in chains that we couldn’t see. The wound healed over, and Estrella’s entire body shuddered as

those iron-teeth sank into the flesh of her heart and became the key to the prison of her body.

“What have you done?” Rheaghan asked, running a hand through his hair.

Estrella turned to face him, her face distinctly blank. There was no emotion in it during the moments that Mab made herself at home in Estrella’s skin, only a blank mask of mindless obedience.

Mab’s iron blade lashed out so quickly that I’d thought for a moment she would go back on her word and take Caldris from Estrella after everything. It would be a small mercy in the end, with the knowledge I possessed that Estrella would go with him.

But it was Rheaghan’s throat that parted beneath the blade, his blood trickling down the front as his mouth dropped open and he choked. He pressed both hands to that line, that unnaturally straight line that marred his fair skin. Blood poured over his hands in a thick, viscous ooze as he looked at Etan behind me.

I didn’t dare to look at the man behind me, at the man who had just lost his King. I didn’t know the truth of Etan’s allegiance, of what he might feel for Rheaghan even as he betrayed him with Mab, but there was no mistaking the anguished gasp that rattled in his chest or the tightness in his body.

Rheaghan fell to his knees at Estrella’s side, and Estrella reached out to take his hand in his final moments as *emotion* flooded her once again. Her face was no longer a carefully controlled mask, but one of anguish.

I hadn’t realized she’d known Rheaghan that well, hadn’t seen them together but a handful of times; but there was no mistaking her grief as Mab drove her knife into his heart, silencing him permanently. Estrella moved as if she might give him her blood, and I knew she intended to save the King of the Summer Court, even knowing she’d already greatly weakened herself. That she had *nothing* left to give.

Mab abandoned her blade to squeeze her hand, forcing Estrella to halt and preventing her from interfering. Estrella fought against it, against that hold on her as her body refused to move. Rheaghan bled out before us, and none so much as dared to attempt to save him.

It wasn't his sister he looked to in his final moments, nor was it Etan as his second-in-command. He looked to Estrella as he died, as if he saw her for the first time and his eyes filled with sorrow.

He dropped onto the sand face first, bleeding out upon the white silt. There was no movement in his chest, not a breath in his body.

Because the King of Summer was dead.

# CHAPTER FOUR



ETAN

I STARED AT THE space Rheaghan had once occupied, his body nothing more than flesh on the sand. I knew he was gone, but I couldn't quite bring myself to grasp the reality of a world without him in it.

He'd been there for every moment of my life, an echo of my own heartbeat that came from the type of friendship that spanned lifetimes. Only Fallon held within my grip kept me from surging toward him, from revealing just how much I still respected Rheaghan.

Revealing everything we'd worked so hard to keep hidden from Mab.

Caldris raced for his mate, anguish and relief mixing when he was able to draw her into his arms. I couldn't help the bitterness I felt, knowing that if Estrella had only been willing to let Caldris go, Rheaghan would still walk in the land of the living.

Instead, I watched a daemon emerge from the tree line to grasp Rheaghan by the ankles, hauling him into the cove as Mab stared passively at the brother that had once meant so much to her. He'd been her protector as a child, the two of us doing everything in our power to keep her safe from those who would use her to get to her mother. But the Mab of this day didn't seem to care that she'd killed him. She didn't care that Rheaghan had *loved* being her brother as a child, had taken to that role as if he'd been born for it.

She'd never deserved it. Not since the moment that crown touched her head and claimed her for cruelty.

Even after all this time, Rheaghan had loved the memory of his sister enough that he hadn't been able to rise up against her. In the face of that loyalty, she'd cared only for his insolence and the challenge he presented to her.

"You're mine now," Mab said, snapping out a hand to catch Estrella by the chin. She screamed as Mab's talons cut into her skin, but from what I knew of the young woman, it wasn't the physical pain that caused her to yell.

It was the will pressing down on her soul.

"I have need of something that is locked within Tartarus," Mab said, clicking her tongue as she turned to look at the shimmering Cove. It looked innocent enough, a perfect disguise for the horrors locked within.

"No," Caldris rasped. Most who went to Tartarus were changed forever, their souls irrevocably damaged. Many begged for death, if they returned at all.

"Bring me a snake from the crown of Medusa," Mab ordered, nodding toward that shimmering pool.

Estrella moved to obey, her legs shifting even as she grimaced. Mab gestured to one of her guards, and the male



moved to give Estrella the clasped scabbard from his waist. He ignored Caldris's growl as he touched Estrella to settle it at her waist. It was far too large for her, and I knew that whatever she had to fight, it would be too heavy to be of practical use to her.

Still, I didn't move to intervene. The only thoughts in my head were for Fallon and my people.

*My people, in the absence of Rheaghan.*

Imelda hurried forward, bypassing where I stood with Fallon. The two women exchanged a panicked gaze, Fallon fighting against my hold even as I shifted to her side and stared down at all the blood that had been spilled. All the blood that belonged to Rheaghan, that should have been contained within the confines of his body. Imelda pressed a small pouch into Estrella's hands, but the grief-stricken expression on the witch's face said that she knew exactly how useless it would be to Estrella. Without Imelda's guidance, the young Fae wouldn't have the slightest clue what to do with whatever herbs or poultices she'd given her.

Estrella's mouth pressed into a tight line as she nodded anyway, accepting the aid that she could only hope to decipher. I suspected the intention behind the gift meant more to her than what the satchel may actually contain. From what I'd learned of Estrella in her time at Tar Mesa, she'd moved through her life feeling largely alone. She'd had a mother and brother in her village, but everyone she loved, every moment of happiness she ever managed to find, continued to be torn away from her. This was no different; the support system she'd found in Fallon and Imelda ripped away from her. Her bond with Caldris nearly severed by himself and now her physical form being sent away from his and into the pits of Tartarus.

She had people who loved her, but she would yet again have to fight her battles alone without anyone to stand beside her.

I understood her better than I cared to admit, grasped the concept of being alone in a crowded room better than most. I knew what it was to stand apart from all those you considered allies and friends, to be distinctly different in a way that could never be altered. I would never stand beside the likes of

Rheaghan and Mab and belong, even though we'd all been raised together. I would never belong in Mab's court along with her cronies, nor would I wholly belong in the Summer Court where I'd been raised, sitting upon the throne Mab intended to keep for me if my marriage to her daughter was any indication.

I was no God, and I already felt the weight of each and every God who did not have a court to claim as his or her own upon my face. I felt the danger in that stare, the competition lurking should Mab's loyalty falter for even the briefest of moments. Estrella may have prepared to descend into a place of untold danger, but there was no safety to be found above the surface either.

Fallon's tears dripped off her cheek as Estrella took a step toward the Cove, her weighted gaze heavy on her mate's. He stepped alongside her, refusing to release the hand he'd claimed. He would go anywhere with her, do anything for her. As the other part of his soul, he had little choice but to do everything in his power to protect his other half. While others of my kind coveted that bond, wanted nothing more than to find their other half and move into their destiny with them at their side, I did not envy those who found it. I wanted no part in a mate bond, hoping that my time to pass into the Void would come before I ever find the other half who would weaken me so greatly.

To love was to be vulnerable. To love was to be controlled.

I did not wish to ever give anyone that sort of power over me ever again, not when I knew the damage it could cause.

One of Mab's men stepped forward to grab Caldriis around the back of the neck, tossing him back onto the sand. Estrella spun, her eyes wide with fear that Mab would somehow go back on her word. That Caldriis would not be safe until she returned, that all of this would be for nothing, and she'd come back to find him dead.

Fallon kicked with so much force that I nearly stumbled, shocked by the vehemence in her motions. "Let go!" she

shrieked, the realization that Estrella would traverse this journey alone pushing her fight into overdrive.

I forced her backward, dragging her toward the entrance to the Cove as she fought against me. Holding onto her was like attempting to tame a wild animal, like caging a wildcat that wanted nothing more than to tear the skin from my limbs and feast on my flesh.

“She’ll be all right,” I murmured, the gentleness of my voice so at odds with the violence of her screams. They echoed off the chamber walls as I guided her back into the narrow passageway that would take us to the palace of Tar Mesa, leaving the Cove entirely. I couldn’t trust Fallon not to follow after Estrella, couldn’t have any faith that my future wife would have the sense to save herself.

We emerged into Tar Mesa, the Sidhe and Lloidhe who hadn’t been permitted to join the Tithe staring at us as we passed.

“You can’t know that!” Fallon shrieked, dropping all her weight to the ground suddenly.

I grunted, leaning forward to scoop her off the floor and fling her over my shoulder. The breath expelled from her lungs the moment her stomach connected with my shoulder, offering a brief reprieve from her sounds of rage before she caught her breath.

“Put me down, you asshole!”

I’d grown fond of the idea of a wife, developed a fondness for the woman I’d gotten to know in secret. While our marriage might have been an arrangement, it wasn’t one that I could see myself entering into with anyone else. Fallon was impossible and infuriating; her unwillingness to do what it took to keep herself safe was something that would undoubtedly cause me untold aggravation in our future together.

But she was also one of the most loyal Fae I’d ever met. The very thing that would create problems for me was the exact thing I craved for myself. I may not have been capable of

loving her, but that didn't mean I didn't desire to know her love for myself.

It was wrong, terrible even, for me to expect something of her that I would never be able to offer her in return.

Yet, as Caldri's roar shook the walls around us, I resolved myself to the notion of never loving the woman I would soon marry.

I would never feel that pain.

# CHAPTER FIVE



FALLON

EVERY STEP JOSTLED MY body on Etan's shoulder, leaving me more and more aggravated. I hated the feeling of pressure in my ribs, filled with the urge to drive my own shoulder into his stomach when he finally had to release me.

The bastard couldn't carry me forever.

Caldris's pained bellow left me with no choice but to accept that Estrella was gone, that Mab had succeeded in tearing them apart. There was no other reason that an agony like that could exist, only the death of a mate or a child earning the pain in that sound. I wished there was something I could do to ease his pain, that I could take Estrella's place. I'd thought I was doing the right thing in allowing her to show Mab her power, in

sacrificing myself to a loveless marriage so that Estrella would not need to know the pain of separation from Caldris.

Only for a far worse fate to befall them in spite of my best intentions.

“This is your fault,” I groaned, settling on Etan’s shoulder for a brief moment.

Let him believe I’d given up the fight, that I’d do nothing out of spite and pettiness when there was nothing I could do to save Estrella now. The truth was far more insidious. I would punish him *for* the fact that he had robbed me of my only chance to intervene. He’d stripped away the minimal chance I had, and I would make sure he suffered for it.

“How am I responsible for Mab’s actions?” he asked, his voice incredulous. As if he couldn’t believe I would dare to fault him for what she’d done. Even I knew I couldn’t, but I could fault him for keeping me from helping her.

“You’re responsible for keeping me away from her! I could have gone with her and helped!” I protested, searching for something to grab onto that would *hurt*.

Gods damn the man, but there wasn’t an inch of excess skin to spare. My hands roamed over his spine and the sides of his back, looking for any sign of a love handle that I could dig my nails into and try to tear from his body. Even I was surprised by the venom I felt for him, the wish that he would simply disappear from my life, when he was just as much stuck with me as I had been with him. I glanced down at the swell of his ass, swallowing as I realized I wasn’t quite *that* desperate to hurt him. Putting my hands on any part of my future husband that could be seen as *intimate* hardly seemed in my best interest when I had every intention of keeping this arrangement celibate.

“And what do you think that would have accomplished?” he asked, grasping the handle on a door that was very much *not* mine. I didn’t recognize this part of the palace, this hallway somehow brighter than the one Mab had given me rooms in for the proximity to hers. There were more candelabras along the stone wall, the warmth of the yellow and orange hues

playing off the coolness of the hall in a way that made my skin warm.

The room inside was smaller than my own, but a huge bay window overlooked the sand-filled terrain outside. The moons shone in through the window, illuminating the room with a glow that felt bright against my eyes as they fought to adjust to the sudden light. I'd spent most of my life locked in the darkness of the tunnels the rebellion called home, only to be trapped in the Court of Shadows almost the moment I stepped foot in Alfheimr. The moments I'd spent in the sun were far too few, but I would take the feeling of moonlight on my skin in its wake. A daybed was nestled into the bay window, as if the person who had furnished this room wanted to be as close to any light source as possible.

Etan approached it as he kicked the bedroom door closed behind him, and the motion tore me away from the moonlight in a way that made my stomach clench. I didn't want to be plunged into darkness again, and his broad, maddening form shielded me from the light as he put distance between us and the door. He drew me over his shoulder so quickly I gasped, then unceremoniously dropped me onto the daybed.

I landed with an oomph, throw pillows bouncing above my head. One landed on my face, and I shoved it to the side as I sputtered and stared up at the Fae male. He stared down at me, his head tilting to the side as his lips parted, as if he couldn't quite figure me out. The retort I'd been about to admonish him with died in my throat, leaving me to swallow them back in discomfort. Something in that look made me want to curl up in a ball, to hide myself from his view entirely.

He reached down, touching a single fingertip to the skin of my arm, where the moonlight shone against my fair skin. "You're beautiful even in darkness, but in the light..." He trailed off, shaking his head as if he could clear such thoughts from his mind. I didn't know what to make of the odd sort of compliment. The unfinished thought hung between us as I pursed my lips in thought.

"Why am I here?" I asked, pushing up onto my elbows.

He blocked me from the door, his broad hulking form preventing my escape. I didn't want to take the time to think of all the solid muscle I'd felt beneath his tunic when I'd tried to find a way to hurt him, to contemplate how long it had been since I'd felt the flesh of another against mine.

"You were too busy groping me to answer my question. What do you think you would have accomplished by going into Tartarus with the Barlowe girl?" he asked, and while the tone he used was harsh, there was a teasing tilt to his mouth that I wanted to slap off his face.

"I wasn't groping you! I was looking for a way to *maim* you," I snapped, my mouth dropping open in shock as heat flooded my cheeks. The burn in them gave me away, hinted at the fact that I hadn't particularly *not* enjoyed my search, much to my dismay.

"Whatever you want to call it. You can *maim* me whenever you like, Helcat," he said, taking a step back just when I thought he might reach for me.

My lungs filled with air suddenly as I took my first full breath. His presence was so imposing, so shocking to my system, that I felt like my body forgot how to function around him. I wasn't myself, and I couldn't even claim he made me into the best version of myself.

I felt certain he made me into the worst possible version of myself with only his nearness. If he were to ever touch me, I felt as if I might burst into the fires of Hel itself and burn him with me out of petty spite.

He nodded at my silence as if it pleased him, turning on his heel and making his way to the door. I scrambled to the edge of the daybed as he grasped the handle, turning it and pulling the door open without so much as glancing back at me.

"Wait!" I shouted, tripping over my own legs as I scrambled to my feet.

He stepped out of the room hurriedly, pulling the door closed behind him as I struggled. There was the distinctive sound of a key turning in the lock, and by the time I reached



the door, it was too late. I tried the knob anyway, twisting it with both hands frantically before I slammed my palm against the chestnut wooden door.

“What are you doing?!”

“Since you clearly cannot be trusted to prioritize your own self-preservation, I will do it for you,” he said from the other side. His voice was eerily calm, a distinctive decidedness to his tone that brokered no argument.

“You overstep your place, Etan!” I yelled, banging a fist against the door. The wood rattled but didn’t so much as creak as my knuckles throbbed. A reminder that I was barely a step from human, a *powerless* Sidhe who could do nothing to help herself in the games of the Fae.

“Do I?” he asked with a chuckle, and even though I couldn’t see him, I could just imagine him leaning his shoulder into the door that served as a barrier between us. “You’re new to our ways, so I will grant you the kindness of explaining what is going to happen now.”

I swallowed, pressing my back into the door in response. I hung on every word, waiting, as if his voice were the blade prepared to perform my execution.

“You became mine the moment your mother and I signed our betrothal agreement. In such, she acknowledged that you were seemingly powerless, and until such a time when you come into your own magic, your safety is my responsibility as your husband. You are far too young and headstrong to know how to behave, and yet when we return home, it will be to a coronation now that Rheaghan is gone. You may not understand what a Queen will mean to our people, but I do, and I have no intention of seeing them robbed of that before they ever even lay eyes upon you.”

I swallowed down the panic rising in my throat as I stared at the moons shining in the night sky. My eyes watered at the prospect of moving into just another cage. In spite of Mab’s words that Etan wouldn’t hurt me, she didn’t acknowledge that there was more than just physical pain. “That can’t be true.

Most courts are ruled by equals. Why would that not be true of us?" I asked, voice shaking.

His voice dropped lower, a near silent command that shattered any illusions I might have had regarding the type of marriage we might have. "I have no doubt that one day, it will be. But that respect is something you'll need to earn. Until then? You are not my equal, Fallon. You are my property."

## CHAPTER SIX



ETAN

I MADE MY WAY through the halls, unable to bring myself to regret the harsh words I'd delivered to Fallon. While it may not have been fun for her to hear and might have made her regret the future that we would have together, she needed to know that when I said I would do whatever it took to keep her safe, I meant it. I would act against her wishes if it meant looking out for her in the way she seemed unwilling to do for herself. I would lock her in a room to prevent her from putting herself in harm's way.

And I would conspire to sneak her out of Tar Mesa while her only friends and allies slept, making it impossible for them

to stop me from removing her from the growing threat of her mother.

A woman who was capable of murdering her brother, the man who had been closer to her than any other I could recall, would not hesitate to murder the daughter she considered a great disappointment. In all my experience with Mab, once someone was out of her sight, they were typically out of mind except for those she kept closest to her. She didn't spare time to think of those she could not reach to harm once they no longer served her purpose, and taking Fallon to the Summer Court was undoubtedly in her best interest—even if she disagreed with the sentiment greatly.

I knew where I would find Mab without asking any of the courtiers I passed, their pale faces a good indication of the horror they'd witnessed. None had been present for the Tithe, very few permitted to be present outside of those who had the magic of the Gods in their veins. Only Mab's chosen favorites were permitted unless they were an active part of the Tithe, and the common Sidhe who roamed the hall were not on her list of special pets.

I descended the stairs toward the entrance, curving my way toward the throne room and the screams that came from within. A male Sidhe stepped out of the shadows, his face drawn.

"Terence," I said, nodding to him as I closed the distance between us.

Inside the throne room, the woman's screams reached a new level, the shrillness of her pain echoing off the stone walls. I shoved it down, forcing my face to remain an indifferent mask as I met the Summer Court Fae's gaze.

"What do we do now?" he asked, blinking his dark eyes as he seemed to attempt to shake off the stupor Rheaghan's death had left us all in. He'd been our king for so long, it seemed impossible to know how to move forward without him to guide us.

I clapped my hand down on the male's shoulder, holding his stare as his nostrils flared. Some of the pallor faded from his

deep brown skin, his breath evening out as we stood there. In spite of the horror being committed, we would make a plan between us to guide the rest of our people who had come to the Shadow Court along with us. The ones who may not have heard the news of Rheaghan's death yet.

"Gather the others. Tell them to pack quickly. We leave tonight," I said, earning his wide eyes.

"Will she allow that?" he asked, swallowing as he glanced through the entryway.

"She will if she wants her daughter to be queen," I said, smiling slightly.

His mouth pressed into a line, his disapproval of my pending marriage very clear in the drawn lines of his face. No one would approve of Fallon until they knew her. I'd known I would face an uphill battle in endearing her to my people when we returned home, as all any of us knew about her was that she was the daughter of the Queen of Air and Darkness herself.

That was not an easy hurdle to overcome, I admitted. I'd thought I would have time to conquer that without the pressures of a crown weighing us down. She could make the people adore her while she maintained an irrelevant position as the wife to Rheaghan's second-in-command, something that few would concern themselves over.

"This was her plan all along, wasn't it?" he asked, his voice going soft. "The moment she betrothed her daughter to you, she had already decided to kill Rheaghan."

"I don't know," I admitted, shaking off the guilt that clung to my chest. I'd been the one to put the idea of Fallon and me marrying in her head, and if that was true, I didn't want to think of the fact that I'd also inadvertently made her decide she would rather see her daughter on the throne than her brother. "It doesn't matter much now. All we can do is stress that Fallon and I need to return home to be crowned before one of the Gods decide to try to take advantage of an unruled court. Make sure our people are ready quickly."

I moved into the open doorway to the throne room, not bothering to spare a glance for the woman who knelt on the stone floor before the dais. I didn't know her name, didn't *want* to know it. It was far easier to sleep at night when the victims were faceless, when they didn't have names to accompany their screams.

"My Queen," I said, kneeling to the side of the dais. I knew better than to get between Mab and her latest plaything. I hung my head forward in complete subjugation and waited for her to acknowledge me.

She withdrew her shadows from the woman, and I saw the quivering mass of the woman fall to her stomach on the floor. I still refused to look at her, keeping my eyes pinned to the stone.

"Etan," Mab said, her steps echoing over the stone as she made her way toward me. She descended the stairs slowly, the click of her heeled shoes deliberately paced until the pointed toe of them came into view. "Have you come to scold me too?" she asked, her voice laced with honey and warning, with seduction and menace.

"Of course not, my Queen," I said, shaking my head. It made me sick to my stomach, but I sank into that well-practiced space where Rheaghan had often sent me to *handle* Mab when she'd been difficult as a girl. To give her the approval she wanted in veiled comments, to lend her my support, all the while attempting to guide her to more...kind decisions in the future. "I am certain you did only what you felt you must."

"He asked me for permission to marry!" she said, stepping away from me. I raised my gaze from the floor, staring up at her in surprise as she spun in an aggravated circle. "Do you know who had tempted him so?"

"I do not," I said, swallowing back the feelings of betrayal that surged within me. He'd spoken nothing to me, given me no signs that he'd found someone he wanted for more than even just a single night. "He mentioned nothing to me, but then, he knew my loyalty lies with you. If he wanted it to

remain a secret, I do not believe he would have spoken of it to me.”

“He said I would not have noticed her absence, so it is highly unlikely she would have been worthy of his hand at any rate,” Mab said, as if she found the thought of her brother marrying beneath his station particularly distasteful. “I offered to find him a suitable bride. He *declined*. Can you believe that?”

I wondered if this occurred before or after Mab had betrothed Fallon to me. It couldn't have been Fallon herself whom she planned to wed to Rheaghan, but I also couldn't put it past Mab entirely. A marriage of convenience didn't need to be consummated, and it would be the easiest way to see her daughter on the throne without giving up her own.

“Perhaps whoever this person is, Rheaghan wanted to marry them because he loved them,” I explained, watching as Mab's eyes narrowed in disgust.

“Love,” she spat, making her thoughts on the emotion clear. She wanted nothing to do with anything that might weaken her, and that was entirely how she saw the emotion. I couldn't fault her for it, not after having seen the way she used loved ones against her enemies.

“On that, we agree, my Queen,” I said, forcing myself to smile up at her.

She returned the sentiment, lowering into her throne and raising her good hand to signify me to stand.

“If I were inclined, I just may have taken you for my own husband, Etan. You are one of my most loyal charges,” she said, running her nails over the bare skin of her chest.

She'd mentioned it several times, particularly when we'd been children, to the point that I worried she would follow through one day. That I'd be forced to marry a woman I had once seen as a sister, and now only saw as a monstrous damnation of everything she had been once upon a time. But it had never come to pass, not even after she'd rid herself of the husband who gave her the Shadow Court.

She would never again share her throne.

“You honor me, my Queen,” I said, the words feeling like ash in my mouth.

“How is my daughter faring, after the loss of her *friend*,” she said, the word feeling like an insult.

I had no doubt sending Estrella to Tartarus was only partially because the woman seemed more likely to succeed in the quest Mab’s other victims had been unable to complete. It also served the purpose of severing her daughter’s bond with the woman she valued far more than she ever would her own mother. Stealing Fallon away would mean she was separated from Imelda as well, who was far more of a mother to Fallon than Estrella could ever have been, given their ages.

I had no doubt if we remained, Imelda would be the next to suffer Mab’s wrath. The thought alone had me glancing toward the figure before the dais, but the woman was a far cry from the witch who’d raised Fallon.

“I detained her in my rooms for the time being,” I said, shrugging as if it was inconsequential. “The girl doesn’t seem to know how to contain her emotions appropriately, but we will work on that,” I said, earning a nod of approval from Mab.

“Good. She could do with a lesson in respect,” Mab said, smiling broadly.

In the days after my betrothal to Fallon, she’d asserted her expectations that I would bring her wayward daughter to heel. That I would use whatever means I felt necessary to train Fallon into something Mab could be proud of.

“I apologize to admit that I came to ask a favor of you, my Queen,” I said, bowing my head forward. Asking anything of her could be volatile at best, deadly most days.

“You wish to take my daughter and leave,” she said, knowing the question I would ask before I could even voice it. It was the strategic move, returning home to fill the void of power. Even Mab had to see that.



“I worry what should happen if one of the other Gods were to return to the Summer Court before Fallon and I have had ample time to make our journey according to our bridal traditions,” I explained, trailing off.

Mab was familiar with the Summer Court and the ways we prepared our brides for marriage, of what occurred in the days leading up to the crowning of a new king and queen.

“Fuck the traditions,” she said with a scoff, rolling her eyes. “Simply kill anyone who may oppose your rule.”

“As helpful as that may be in the face of opposition, I think it more prudent that we attempt to quell any rebellion before it begins. Fallon honoring traditions that are not her own would go a long way toward endearing her to my people,” I said, keeping my voice soft. There was no reproach, only a gentle reminder.

“Very well then,” Mab said, raising her hand to peel dried blood from her fingers. “I will see that the Gods are not permitted to leave for five days. Will that give you the head start you require to be crowned before any others may provide an alternative ruler?” she asked, her stare already turning bored. Her attention on me flagged, moving back to the woman she clearly intended to torment more after I left her in peace.

“That would be most generous of you,” I said, nodding my head in agreement.

“Yes, it would, wouldn’t it? Off you go then,” she said, her voice eerily cheery.

I swallowed down my unease for the woman she looked at, knowing that she would never leave this throne room alive. I turned, leaving her to her fate as I moved to escape with those who mattered to me.

“Thank you, my Queen,” I said, turning to give Mab my back.

“Oh, and Etan?” she called as she descended the steps. The click of her heels forced me to look at her over my shoulder, at the slowly gathering mass of shadows at her side that I prayed

were not intended for me. “I expect my daughter to be reformed next I see her. I would so hate to be disappointed in how you handle her.”

“Understood,” I said, bowing my head before I retreated from the room to the sound of a whip cracking through the air.

But it wasn't meant for me, not yet anyway.

# CHAPTER SEVEN



ETAN

I **BYPASSED MY ROOM**, striding straight down the hallway to another room that was near enough to mine. While Eryx normally called the autumn court home, he'd spent a great many weeks visiting with a lover in the Summer Court a few years prior. In that time, we'd gotten to know him well enough that I felt comfortable asking this favor of him.

Fallon would probably gut him the next time she saw him, but that was something for him to worry about another day.

I knocked on the wooden door, the distinct scent of a warm summer day clinging to the space beyond. It smelled it like home, like afternoon naps in the shadow of a tree to escape the sun.

Eryx tugged open the door, stretching with a yawn as he took in my presence. He stepped to the side, allowing me to enter the room that was his haven. Every corner of his rooms was filled with nooks suited to sleeping, and there were books strewn about the room, as if he would only read a few pages before tumbling into slumber. The folded corners of pages made something within me twitch.

“Have you never heard of a bookmark?” I asked, picking a book up off the floor where he’d arranged pillows in the windows that overlooked the sandy terrain outside.

“Did you wake me simply to insult my book preferences, or did you need something, Highness?” Eryx said, giving a mocking bow that was in poor taste, absolutely horrible taste, considering it had been scarcely an hour since Rheaghan’s death.

A growl rumbled in my throat, a warning. I would not tolerate his disrespect.

“Apologies, even I know that was horrible,” he admitted, moving to an end table and gathering the wine glass that I suspected could hold enough to put him to sleep for hours. He drew a deep drink, and I sighed with the knowledge that this was how the man coped. He drowned his sorrows in drink and slept until the world seemed brighter. “What is it you need, Etan?” he asked finally, setting the glass down gently.

His hands shook as he moved away from the wine, a slight tremor that hinted at just how deeply the loss of the Summer King had affected him.

How deeply it had affected all of us. Rheaghan may have been an unabashed rake and frivolous with his choice of lovers, but he was also one of the most fair rulers Alfheimr had ever seen. He didn’t discriminate against any in his court, showing no preference for those who were closest to him simply due to their proximity.

In fact, he was far more likely to lay into me when I made a mistake than he was a stranger, offering kind redirection to those he didn’t know well.

He was Mab's opposite in every way, and the world would be worse for his loss.

I swallowed down my own grief, focusing on the task at hand. It was what he would expect of me, what he would demand if he'd had the opportunity to instruct me before Mab sent him to an early grave. He would put his people first always, and I needed to do the same to ensure they were cared for in his absence.

"It's time for me and mine to return home. Mab has already given her permission for us to leave," I said, watching as his brows rose in surprise. He'd likely assumed, as I suspected so many did, that we would continue to be held captive in the Shadow Court until Mab tired of toying with us, until the courts could no longer continue to function without the people who led them any longer.

"I'm surprised she would allow you to leave so soon after Rheaghan's death," Eryx said, but he nodded as he processed the thought. "What does any of that have to do with me?"

"I'm to marry Mab's daughter, Princess Fallon, so it is of the utmost urgency that she and I return home to claim the Summer throne," I explained, answering the question he hadn't actually asked. It was relevant to lead into the one he had voiced, information that would explain why I needed his assistance.

"Congratulations?" he said, but his voice rose at the end with a question.

Arranged marriages were usually entered into between two parties who had an equal stake in property or titles, and I supposed Fallon and I did in a distant way.

She was the last remaining member of her bloodline, the last heir to her grandmother's magic. The Primordial of Light had passed her abilities to both her children, but when Mab had become twisted by the cursed gem upon her crown, she'd lost any and all ability to channel the magic that would associate her with summer. The magic of her brother, the God of the Sun, was lost to her entirely, leaving her far more at home with the Shadow Court that she would never abandon. Fallon was

the only choice to honor the Primordial who had claimed the Summer for herself once upon a time, but her magic had yet to manifest.

My own magic was far more at home in the oceans surrounding our court, in the sea water potions my mother had so greatly favored. It was not the magic that any of us had ever seen as being enough to rule, and I could only hope that my court's loyalty to me would be enough. That my years of service at Rheaghan's side would allow them to entrust me with their future. The uncertainty of someone else was too great to bear.

"From what I've seen, Fallon is far more like her uncle than her mother," I said, the statement the greatest compliment I could give. She was fiery and stubborn, but she held the same spark that I'd watched burn in Rheaghan's spirit for years, for centuries even, as he waited for someone to save the sister he had once known from the curse that was hers to bear. "Including the more resistant instincts he possessed."

"She doesn't want to marry you," Eryx said, crossing his arms over his chest as if the turn of events pleased him greatly. "The mighty Etan has finally found a partner who does not desire him, and she's the one he is destined to spend his life beside!"

"I am glad you find it entertaining that I shall need to guard myself even in sleep," I said, unable to resist the urge to smile at the guffaw he released. "But *that* is precisely why I require your assistance. Fallon will not want to leave without the witch who raised her, and we need to make this journey on our own, according to tradition. The odds of me sneaking her out of Tar Mesa while she screams are fairly limited, so I would prefer to do it while she sleeps until we've put some distance between us and those she would choose to lean on when she should be learning to lean on me instead."

"What difference does it make if she learns to rely on you?" Eryx asked, that knowing stare of his probing into mine. His eyes were the palest of blues, and in certain lights, one could even convince themselves they were an opaque white against the gold of his skin that so thoroughly mimicked the sleep dust

he reached into his pocket to grasp a handful of. “Your marriage would typically mean living entirely separate lives outside of court functions.”

“She’ll be alone in the Summer Court. She’s already endured so much change, I feel it is appropriate that she has someone she can trust to turn to—”

Eryx grinned, allowing his dust to slip through his fingers to the floor below. “You *like* her,” he said, his laughter echoing the words.

“Don’t be ridiculous. I am merely doing what is necessary to make the best of the situation we have found ourselves in. I cannot leave her to wallow in pity when she is my responsibility now,” I said, keeping my face carefully blank.

Something in Eryx’s magic allowed him to see straight into a person’s desires, their wishes and dreams for the future. It had to be the tenuous line that existed between the dreams of sleep and waking, the way our real-world interests influenced the dreamscape we created when there was no one to judge.

No one but Eryx, should he turn his inner eye toward us, anyway.

“How fortuitous that Mab selected a wife you will enjoy,” Eryx said, each word laced with suspicion.

Most thought him to be a quiet God, far more interested in toying with the Sidhe as they slept, but I’d seen him plant the seeds of doubt into a person while they dreamt. I’d seen him guide a person’s waking actions by poking around in their dreamscape, the slow manipulation having been largely the inspiration for the way I handled Mab.

It was always the quiet ones, who slid through life unnoticed, who were capable of the greatest damage.

He was more like me than most of the others in this Gods-forsaken court, who acted first with little thought to the long game.

“Are you accusing me of something, Eryx?” I asked, tipping my head to the side.

My fingers itched to reach for my dagger, to rid him of the knowledge that gleamed in his too-pale eyes. I resisted, knowing that I needed his magic first and then I could decide if he needed to die for what he knew.

Fallon would look at me very differently if she knew I'd guided her mother to the decision to marry her off and wasn't just another victim in her schemes.

"Of course not, my King," Eryx said, dipping his head forward in a mockery of a bow. "Only commenting on the incredible luck you've been gifted with. A wife you find tolerable outside of a mating bond is practically unheard of. If only all of us could be graced with the same fortune."

"Good," I said, nodding even though I knew his statement had only been a play of words. It was also as good as I would get as a declaration that he wouldn't share the information he knew, because nothing was truly sacred in the court of shadows when Mab would torture her own allies for information. "Does that mean you will help me sneak her out of Tar Mesa?"

He worried his lip in thought. "I don't suppose you would be open to hearing about how displeased that will make your future wife? If she is anything like Rheaghan, she'll be furious that you forced her to abandon her loved one here," he said.

I'd already considered that; but I'd long since come to adopt the mindset that it was far better to ask forgiveness than permission, especially when it involved a person's safety and wellbeing. In time, I had to trust that Fallon would come to know I had only done what was necessary to remove her from a dangerous situation.

"I think you'd better give me a satchel of extra sleep dust for the journey, just in case," I said, earning a frustrated smile.

"For all that you claim Fallon is like her uncle, I think you fail to see how like him *you* are," he said, making his way to the door of his bedroom. He gripped the handle and tugged the door open with one hand as he pulled a satchel from his pocket that he kept at the ready, holding it out for me to take with me



in spite of his disapproval. “One of these days, it will land you in trouble, just like it did him.”

The warning sat heavy on my chest as I followed Eryx into the hall, knowing that he spoke of Rheaghan’s stubborn unwillingness to accept the fact that his sister was a lost cause. That the cursed gem had changed her so fully and completely that there was no chance of the sister he knew ever returning.

It would make Fallon’s forgiveness all the more beautiful when it came, knowing what we were able to overcome when we were together.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” I said as I pulled the key to my room from my pocket.

The space behind my bedroom door was too quiet as I stepped up to it, pausing to listen for any activity. Fallon had seemed to settle, the sounds of her rage no longer audible from the hallway. I inserted the key and turned it, waiting for Fallon to react to the sound of my return. It seemed to echo through the halls, bouncing off the stone in the otherwise silent space.

“Better let me go first,” I said, motioning Eryx back.

He raised his hands, backing to the other side of the hall as if he greatly feared the woman who waited for me on the other side.

I couldn’t even say I blamed him.

With a deep breath, I steeled myself for whatever attack may wait on the other side. Pushing the door open quickly in case she might be waiting just on the other side, I winced when the door bounced off the wall when it flung open fully without obstruction. Fallon stood before the day bed, her chest heaving with exertion. Her fingers bled, the tips rubbed raw and scraped as my gaze dropped to them immediately. The scent of her blood flooded my nostrils, stealing over my senses and bringing temptation to the surface. She may not have been my mate, her skin solely marked with the color of the Shadow Court, inky trails of darkness winding up her arms to indicate that her mate was likely a human. The unfamiliar jealousy filled me at the thought, at the realization that one day, she

would *feel* him. She would be drawn to him when he came of age in this lifetime, desiring nothing more than to seek him out.

I could only hope I reached him first, discreetly ridding her of the man who would take her away. The one man who would have precedence over my own claim to her now.

“Fallon...” I said, my voice trailing off. I was proud of the concern that laced the tone, at the worry over her injuries and what she might have done to herself in my absence, and how it superseded the violence simmering in my blood for her one-day mate that I would murder the moment she spoke of him.

She screamed, turning and grabbing the heavy vase from the bedside table. I barely had time to duck before she hauled off, twisting her entire body with the force of her throw. It soared over my head, crashing against the opposite wall in the hallway just beside Eryx’s shoulder. The God turned to look at the impression it had made in the stone in shock, his face twisting into a scowl as well as I followed his stare. Confusion knitted my brow, considering the strength required to damage the porous surface. The vase had been crystalline, meaning it should have merely shattered on impact.

Instead...

I swallowed, spinning as Eryx’s eyes widened when he turned back to face me. I turned to face Fallon, the blur of her form launching at me in anger. I caught her up in my arms when she was airborne, ducking my head as she extended those bloodied fingertips from her clenched palms and aimed for my eyes.

“Fallon!” I shouted, wrenching her hands off me as I twisted her in my grip. I spun her in midair, forcing her to face away from me as she struggled. It was like trying to contain a wild animal, her skin warm to the touch like her anger heated her very blood.

It felt like trying to hold on to the sun itself.

“I will *not* be your fucking property!” she spat, weaponizing the words I’d given her in frustration. While I didn’t mean

them in the truest sense of the word, I also did not intend to share her.

Did that not equate to something I owned, jealously hoarding her for myself like treasure?

“You will be,” I said, keeping my voice gentle as I wrestled her to the bed.

She thrashed against it, fighting me every step of the way. She rose onto her hands and knees, attempting to crack my nose with the back of her head. I shifted to the side in time to avoid the worst of the blow, tucking her head into the crook of my neck and pinning her with a hand to the front of her throat. She snarled, twisting with her teeth bared.

“But I will be yours in turn, Sunfire. All I ask is that you give us the time we need to get there,” I said.

The snarl dropped off her face for a moment of confusion as she studied me. Taking advantage of her moment of stillness, I twisted her to the bed on her back, straddling her hips and pinning her arms above her head.

“Eryx!”

The God came into the room at my summons, Fallon’s eyes widening as she took in the other man. “I’m not interested in a three-way today. Try again later,” she gritted out, bucking her hips as if she could dislodge me.

My own growl rose up in my throat, vibrating in my chest as Eryx grinned, looking back and forth between the two of us. “You will not touch him today. You will not touch him tomorrow. You will not touch him *ever*,” I said, leaning toward Fallon’s face and issuing the order. “I do not fucking share.”

The little monster tipped her head to the side, smiling up at me as if she’d found my weak point and planned to use it to her every advantage. She shifted slightly, making me tense as I prepared for a fight. Instead, she raised a leg behind me, bending it at the knee and stroking her bare foot down Eryx’s hip. The God’s eyes protruded as he stifled a laugh, his deep chuckle unable to be contained as he touched the arch of her foot with a single, teasing finger meant to drive me to rage.

He let his laugh loose when I reached behind me to slap his hand away, warning flashing in my eyes.

“Oh, I *like* her,” he said, earning a pleased smile from the woman I felt certain would be the end of me.

I wrapped my hand around the front of her throat, drawing her attention back to mine forcefully. I nodded to the God who stepped up beside her, staring down at Fallon in apology.

“Do it now,” I ordered, anxious to be out of this court and away from temptation. The more men who tempted Fallon, the more likely I would be to commit murder and be stuck paying penance in the Shadow Court.

“Sorry, love,” Eryx said, reaching into his pocket and grasping an entire handful of sand.

Fallon’s eyes flashed wide, her mouth opening with a scream as the dust fell onto her face. She silenced immediately, blinking back the grit in her eyes as the dust settled, making itself at home in her body as the fight in her limbs went out.

“Don’t fight it,” I said, leaning forward to touch my forehead to hers. I was all too aware of the way Eryx watched the interaction, measuring the tenderness as Fallon’s sleepy eyes filled with fear. “Let me keep you safe,” I said, releasing my hold on her throat and hands now that her body was lost to the tiredness that no one could resist. Her head tipped to the side as if she couldn’t hold it up anymore, her eyes drifting closed slowly as I petted her raven hair gently.

I’d do whatever it took to keep my word to her, to protect her from even herself.

Getting her out of this place of horrors had to be my priority, not the friends she would leave behind.

“You breathe a word of what you learned today, to anyone, and I will find you and kill you. Make no mistake,” I warned Eryx, shifting Fallon into position so that I could carry her out.

He smiled, nodding his assent. “Wouldn’t *dream* of it,” he said, a smirk playing at his mouth.

*Fuck.*

# CHAPTER EIGHT



ETAN

I CARRIED FALLON'S SLEEPING form out the front doors of Tar Mesa, ignoring the hushed whispers of the other courts as they watched us depart. I wished I could say it would bother me that they weren't being permitted to leave alongside us, that I knew exactly what they thought of me as I fled the scene with Mab's daughter in my arms.

As soon as news reached them of our impending nuptials, that would be completed the moment we arrived in Vallania, the capital of the Summer Court, they would think I'd been aware of Mab's plans to execute Rheaghan. They'd call me a Kingslayer, a man who betrayed all sense of honor in his

pursuit of power. It wouldn't matter that it hadn't been my intention.

The horses were waiting for us as I stepped out the doors, the few members of my court who had come to the Tith along with us. Terence stood between two horses, holding the reins loosely clasped as he waited. His eyes widened as he took in the sight of me making my way toward him, clearly not expecting Fallon to be fast asleep.

"Is she all right?" he asked, staring down at the woman who would soon be his queen. His opinions of her, as her mother's daughter, were irrelevant next to the duty that was his for the rest of his life now.

To serve was the most important aspect of our lives; to give loyalty to those who controlled the court and kept us out of chaos.

"Just sleeping. I wanted to leave without a fight," I said, giving him a look that communicated just what Fallon would have thought of my plan to escape with her without allowing her to say her goodbyes.

He nodded, pursing his lips as he looped the reins over his arm, letting them settle into the crook of his forearm. The horses had been trained well enough that they wouldn't budge anyway, but the last thing we needed was a discomfited horse racing off when I tried to settle Fallon at the front of the bareback pad. We'd have to spend the beginning of our journey without a saddle, and it was only through luck that I'd brought my gelding, who was far more likely to tolerate the extra weight because he was large enough to do so. Thunder was the color of night, his mane and tail a streak of white against the ebony color of his crest. He'd been used to pull carts when he was younger, his size making him the perfect horse for heavy lifting.

I might have brought my stallion under different circumstances, if it had not been for the knowledge that the horses would be largely couped up in the stables during our stay.

“I can hand her up to you,” Terence said, holding out his hands as if I should hand Fallon over to him. I eyed him warily, glancing at the horse beside me and knowing there was no way I could mount with her in my arms. Without a saddle, I didn’t stand a chance of mounting him without a leg up.

“Give me a leg up,” I said to him, glancing toward one of the women in our company. “Marceline, could you hold her for a moment?” I asked, dreading the knowing smirk that crossed her features.

Marceline was one of the few people I trusted fairly implicitly, a friend of Rheaghan’s and mine from childhood. We’d all grown up together, though she hadn’t been raised by Rheaghan’s mother in the same way I had been. Her father had served in the Summer Court forces, rising to a rank that meant he was in near constant communication with the Primordial Queen herself until she disappeared overnight.

I’d never hear the end of it if she managed to catch on to my jealousy.

She handed the reins for her own horse to the other woman in our party, Johanna, who I trusted far less than her counterpart. It wasn’t that I thought she would betray the Summer Court or any of us necessarily, only that I thought she was opportunistic and would do whatever it took to hitch herself to the most powerful person she could. Whereas Marceline desired to earn her way through the ranks, Johanna had made no secret of her attempts to seduce Rheaghan and me in turn.

I’d gone there once, never straying in that direction again when I realized there was a cost that she attributed to her body, an unseen price for something I could readily get without expectations elsewhere.

I hoisted Fallon into Marceline’s arms, allowing the Fae woman to support my bride’s weight as I hurriedly stepped into the cupped hands Terence held out as he knelt, bouncing my weight up three times. On the third, he lifted me higher, and I swung my other leg over Thunder’s rear, settling in at the back of the bareback pad and patting his neck gently.



Marceline adjusted Fallon in her grip, lifting her with strength that most Fae women did not possess, but Marceline was not like most. She worked out and trained with us with little regard for the fact that others would claim she should be weaker, that she shouldn't show up the men who thought they needed to prove themselves. Marceline did not care, proving them wrong at every turn in a way that confirmed without a doubt that she and Fallon would get along swimmingly when they finally met.

I wasn't looking forward to it.

I reached down to grab Fallon under the armpits, hauling her limp form up onto Thunder's back. The horse adjusted his position, shifting his weight from one leg to the other as I settled her in front of me. I tipped her back toward me, leaning her weight into my chest as Terence swung the reins over Thunder's head. I picked them up, bunching them into one hand so I could keep my other arm wrapped around Fallon's waist to keep her from falling. Her head lolled to the side, her cheek pressing into my chest like it belonged there—nestled into the crook of my shoulder as if it had been carved specifically for her. If I'd been a better man, I might have paused to feel a moment of guilt for the way that I'd managed to get her in this position, for taking away her will and manipulating her unconscious body to suit my own needs.

I was self-aware enough to know I lacked certain feelings that others possessed, to know that they had conscience, where I did not, that they might have hesitated to do what was necessary for fear of repercussions and anger. That sense of right and wrong had disappeared in my centuries without finding my mate, in the time I spent alone without having a single inclination of that bond that meant I would find completion. Perhaps it was the beginning of the end for me, this simple uncaring about what Fallon might think of what I'd done.

She wouldn't have a choice but to forgive it, given enough time with me. We all bolstered and claimed we could hold a grudge, but I'd almost never seen a grudge last lifetimes. A few months, a year or maybe a few, that was a blink of an eye

compared to what we would have together. I could be patient and wait for her forgiveness, but I could only be patient if she was alive.

I adjusted my seat, lightly squeezing my calves against Thunder's side with a quiet clicking sound. Terence and Marceline mounted quickly, joining the band of seven others who needed to return to Vallania. We would go our separate ways soon enough; Fallon and I destined to make the journey to the capitol once we reached the fringes of the Summer Court. We needed to put some distance between us and Tar Mesa if we wanted to escape before the Lunar Witch, Imelda, realized we were stealing away with her charge, but as soon as we had enough distance between us, we would separate.

The others would ride ahead to alert the Summer Court of Rheaghan's death and the upcoming wedding, giving them a head-start in the preparations that would be needed. A wedding and a funeral rite so close together was wrong on so many levels, but there was no way around it under the circumstances.

"You'll take her on the Bridal Walk?" Marceline asked, guiding her horse up beside mine. Thunder tolerated very few getting too close to him, but he had an adoring relationship with her much smaller mare, Lady, that almost made me feel bad he was gelded and couldn't act on that love.

"Yes," I said, nodding as I met her eye.

The smirk from earlier returned, and I turned my gaze straight forward to avoid the questions I knew were coming.

"Never pictured you as the marrying kind, Etan," she said, jutting her chin out as she held my gaze. A smug smile spread from her smirk.

"Neither did I, but Mab hardly asked for my opinion," I said, all too aware of the listening ears nearby.

Johanna, in particular, wouldn't hesitate to use the information to her advantage if she thought she could drive a wedge between Fallon and me, so I leveled Marceline with a glare as a warning to be mindful.

She pressed her mouth into a line, suppressing a laugh and biting back the words that would likely call me out on my half-truth. It wasn't a *lie* by any means. Mab hadn't asked me for my opinion.

She hadn't needed to.

"I'm sure she didn't *ask* no," Marceline said, steering Lady closer. Our feet nearly touched, toes pointed to the sky to keep our seats as we guided our horses over the salt dunes. "But I'm sure you could have dissuaded her if you wanted. You have more control over her than anyone."

I did.

I did, and that made me feel horrible for all the things I couldn't control. Like I should have been trying harder to protect everyone, and not only the people of my court. But to do so would compromise my position, to put her trust at risk when I needed it to keep us all safe.

Fallon stirred lightly, nuzzling into my chest as if she took as much comfort in my embrace as I did hers. Marceline didn't miss the motion, her gaze narrowing in on Fallon's stunning face.

"You're so fucked," she said, laughing as she pulled Lady away and guided her back to Johanna, doing damage control to prevent any leaks of information our conversation may have caused. If it hadn't been for Johanna's proximity to Rheaghan through a mutual friend, she never would have been allowed to come.

She and Rheaghan had stopped sleeping together years prior, leaving their relationship awkward and stilted, and that's when she'd set her sights on me.

When we'd passed the salt dunes, I opened a palm and slid my blade across it, offering my blood to the shadows to combat the light we would bring into the court. Light and dark were out of balance in this place, and the shadows craved that light even more than we did. It took something from us to do so, but I called to the light around us, drawing it off the moon and the reflection of it against the sand and salt surrounding

us. The sunwalk opened up, a tunnel of blinding brilliance as I guided Thunder through the opening.

And bathed us in absolute, pure white.

# CHAPTER NINE



FALLON

THERE WAS SOMETHING WARM pressed against my spine, the heat of it like a searing brand seeping through the cold that had permeated my entire being. I snuggled deeper, sinking into that unfamiliar warmth until a deep sound of contentment reached me. My head felt fuzzy, pulsing with the beginning of a groggy headache at my temples. I groaned as I forced my eyes to open, blinking back from the blinding brightness in front of me.

The sun began to rise over the mountainside across the valley in front of me. The land was covered in cliffs, in mountains, and in rolling hills that seemed to defy possibility. The valley was filled with fog, making the center of it all seem

bathed in mist. The mountains were bare of trees, the earth a deep red with bright green moss and grass as I dropped my hand to the ground beside me and buried my fingers in the squishy surface.

It was somehow softer than the grass I'd felt in Nothrek, in the crunchy, dying nature as it gave way to the coming winter. I squinted against the brightness of the sunrise, the way it painted the clouds overhead with a distinct display of yellow and gold, bathing everything in warmth. My face heated beneath it, and though I had to close my eyes to shut out the light that they weren't used to, I still basked in the warmth of it on my skin.

My hand brushed against something as I raised it from the ground, the rough fabric making me open my eyes and study what I'd touched. A leg clad in trousers rested beside me, wrapped around my hips and hooked around my body like a cocoon. I twisted around, staring in shock at Etan's peaceful face. He'd propped himself up against a tree, the land behind me far more forested. The earth was covered in fallen leaves, the colors a myriad of reds, yellows, and oranges. It was so like Nothrek had been when I first emerged from the tunnels, but somehow so much *more*. His eyes were closed, his breathing deep and even with sleep.

I eased myself out from his grasp, carefully getting to my feet and putting some distance between us so that I could attempt to remember where I was and how the fuck I'd gotten here. The memory slammed into me so suddenly that I gasped, pressing my hand to my mouth to try to catch the sound before it could wake Etan. I scrambled to my feet, taking a few steps away from the man who had fucking kidnapped me while I slept. With my back to the sun, I missed the moment it finally crested over the horizon, too busy studying the land behind me.

Given the clear signs of a season in front of me, I knew that the area behind Etan had to be the Autumn Court.

The Shadow Court was nestled within the Winter Court. I knew only from passing conversations I'd overheard and the stories Imelda had shared that the Winter Court and Autumn

Court made up the Unseelie Court, that the Summer and Spring Courts were the Seelie Courts, putting them at direct odds throughout their history before the evil that was Mab had united them in a common enemy.

The back of my neck tingled, a buzz of magic against my skin where my hair had been pulled to the side and draped over one shoulder carefully. It was knotted there, tied with a ribbon that I had no recollection of owning or seeing in my rooms at Tar Mesa. I touched shaking fingers to the back of my neck, too fearful to turn and see what I might find behind me. There was nothing there to explain the touch, nothing present aside from the strange warmth of my skin. It came from both outside of me and within me, radiating around like a cycle as I turned slowly to face the valley once more.

The sun of Alfheimr beat down on my skin for the first time, and I twisted my hand in the sunlight as it seemed to shimmer with a warm, golden hue that wasn't like the aura of gold that surrounded Estrella when she touched her magic. This was simply a golden sparkle along my skin, like someone had bathed me in flecks of gold dust. My skin was fair beneath the pulsing, shimmering glow as I shoved my sleeves up farther, tipping my face up to the sun to enjoy the warmth on my skin for the first time.

I drew in a deep breath, my lungs filling with something ethereal as my insides warmed against the cold that had entrapped me for the entirety of my life. It chased away the darkness lingering within me, clinging to the corners of my mind and my very being and lighting my soul aflame.

I hadn't thought I would recognize it when it came, hadn't thought I would understand what it felt like at my fingertips until I felt it dancing along my skin, a silent question posed in every touch.

*Magic.*

I didn't dare to reach out to answer, instead turning to glance over my shoulder to make sure Etan was still sleeping. He'd lolled to the side without my body to keep him pinned to the

tree, his head dangling in a way that looked uncomfortable. He could wake at any moment, find me glowing in the sunlight.

I couldn't risk being seen as I discovered exactly how the magic at my fingertips would answer, letting my eyes drift closed slowly as I thought back to all the times Imelda had explained the concept of shielding. She'd taught me how to lean into the warding she'd placed on me at birth, the very same warding she'd refreshed as I lay on the snow of Alfheimr screaming in pain as I shifted from human to Fae. I'd witnessed Estrella's powers make a slave of her, watched them bind her to a will that was not entirely her own. The consequences for her had been far-reaching, including the mate that she would lay down her life for.

I would never allow myself to be controlled in the same way, doing whatever it took to maintain autonomy over my own being. I wouldn't be beholden to a court because of some magic flowing through my veins when I'd spent my entire life existing as a person without it, wouldn't let my carefully maintained composure be altered in the name of some birthright.

I reached out with my consciousness, touching the warding Imelda had placed on me. I didn't know what it disguised, nor did I care to, but I stroked against the wall it formed. My magic shriveled away from it as I wrapped it in a firm hand, grasping it and pulling it with all my might. I shoved it through the barrier of Imelda's warding, a thing that would need to be refreshed in time, and locked it away until I wanted to use it. Shoved it into the deepest recesses of my mind until I was alone.

I opened my eyes to watch the sunlight on my skin wink out like tiny fires in the night, the golden hue fading from my fair skin and leaving me feeling suddenly cold. I swallowed as I lowered myself to the ground, sitting with my legs dangling over the rounded edge of the mountain top as I waited for Etan to wake.

He might be my husband soon enough, but that didn't mean he got to lay claim to the parts of me I would keep for myself.



I just needed to find a way to bring Imelda to the Summer Court, and I needed to do it quickly.

Before everyone learned the truth.

That there was magic in my veins after all, that it burned inside me after a lifetime in darkness.

# CHAPTER TEN



ETAN

I WOKE WITH A start, the realization that my arms were empty sending a pang of panic through me. The place where Fallon had slept was empty now, the only companion nearby the presence of Thunder where I'd left his reins tied around a tree trunk in the shade behind me. He looked like he didn't want to keep moving, like the sweltering heat that waited for us in the Summer Court was something he dreaded, and I couldn't blame him entirely in spite of my desire to make it to my home.

We would need to pass through the desert before we could get to the lush center of the Summer Court with its flowing

waters and ocean breeze, but this was a journey Fallon and I needed to take before our coronations.

“Fallon?” I asked, getting to my feet and spinning in disbelief. I couldn’t explain this intense knowledge that something was missing, that a part of me had walked away while I slept. We lingered at the edge of the Autumn Court, the Summer Court sprawled before me like a beckoning welcome home.

I couldn’t believe the woman would be foolish enough to wander off in the middle of the Unseelie Court, that she would show so little regard for her own safety that she would wander alone in an unfamiliar, dangerous place without any magic or weapons to protect her.

My hand dropped to the scabbard on my hip, searching for my sword. It was still there, the familiar weight of it pressed into me, but my gaze dropped to the strap at my ankle and the distinct absence of the dagger I kept there.

“Fucking Gods,” I cursed, storming to the edge of the mountain.

I looked over the ledge, searching the steep path for any sign of Fallon’s footprints. The dust had not moved, and I reached up a tentative hand to weigh the boundary between courts, to test it in the way that I’d seen Rheaghan do so many times. My eyes drifted closed as I let the magic of it sink into me, a vibration running down the boundary like a spider’s net, searching for prey in the form of my errant betrothed who couldn’t seem to stay where I put her.

Something recoiled not far down the line, and I turned to my right to peer through the autumn court trees there. My feet followed, guiding me to where Fallon waited in the shade as if she wanted to avoid the sun on her skin, and with how pale she was, that might have been a wise choice.

She stood at the edge, running her fingers over the boundary and staring at her hands in surprise. She could feel it, I realized, the boundary between the Unseelie and Seelie Courts that existed as an invisible wall from a bygone era. Only those with a predisposition to either throne could feel it, could know

when someone passed through. It served as an alarm to protect against those who did not belong, protecting us when we'd fought in wars that seemed so foolish now as we looked back in hindsight.

I ran my hand over the boundary as I approached, letting the vibrations of my touch ripple down the surface. She turned to me as she felt it, and a smug smile stole over my face.

If I'd had any doubts as to whether I'd made the right choice, the boundary washed them away with a single moment.

It recognized her.

She looked different in the light, brighter somehow, as if she was always meant to be outside the darkness. She was beautiful in the dark, but the light did something to her that made her somehow *more*. All the Summer Court Fae were similar; a sense of peace existing within them that came with proximity to the source of our magic, however minimal it may be in the Sidhe who only held a tendril.

"Are we the only ones who left Tar Mesa?" she asked instead of greeting me. Her face was pinched, her features hard as she looked at me in a way that communicated her anger over what I'd done. She didn't need to yell; her emotive face offered everything her words did not.

"The rest of the Summer Court left along with us," I said, holding my position. I wouldn't force my proximity on her when it wasn't necessary, knowing that this simmering attraction between us would pull us together in time, no matter how much she may try to fight it.

"Then where are they?" she asked, crossing her arms over her chest. She strode back toward the place where I'd slept and the horse waiting there, breezing past me without stopping to make sure I followed.

"They went ahead, took the easy paths. They'll reach Vallania within two days," I explained, following after her. I trailed a short distance behind her, close enough to reach out

and touch her if I lunged, but not so close as to breathe down her neck and make her uncomfortable.

She sighed, spinning to face me with a sudden burst of speed. She stumbled a little, the movement far less than coordinated. I narrowed my eyes on her face but didn't move to help her, allowing her to right herself and shrug off the clumsy movement.

I had to imagine that becoming Fae after a lifetime as a human came with some adjustments. The changes in her body would take getting used to, but I'd never seen her move with anything other than carefully crafted grace before.

Other than the moment when she'd shattered the vase, anyway.

"Why are we not taking the easy paths?" she asked, making her way to Thunder. The horse extended his neck, reaching for her and nudging her with his muzzle. She patted his neck gently, smoothing the hair there with tenderness instead of fear despite his size. "And why the fuck is there only one horse?"

"Can't have you riding off now, can I?" I asked, quirking a brow at her. She'd carefully danced around what I'd done, avoiding the reality of smuggling her out of Tar Mesa while she slept.

"What exactly would be the point of running away?" she asked, shaking her head as if the suggestion was foolish. "If my options are you or Mab, I think I know which one is less terrifying."

"Ouch," I said, rubbing my chest as if she'd wounded me.

She rolled her eyes in response, fidgeting with Thunder's mane as she worked it into a running braid. The gelding looked at her from the corner of his eye, turning his head to push at her side in response.

She swatted him away without a care, turning him to face forward once more. "If that is the worst I say to you by the end of this, then count yourself lucky. There may come a day where I aim to make you cry."

The distinct lack of venom in her words was nearly shocking, the statement coming as a simple fact.

“I’ll keep that in mind. I can hardly expect you not to burn me in our eternity together, Sunfire,” I said, crossing my arms over my chest as I leaned back into the tree opposite where Thunder was tied and watched her work.

“Don’t call me that,” she spat, the nickname bringing out the worst of her ire that she’d kept carefully buried. It had struck a chord within her, something she hated brought to the surface. But instead of wanting to appease her anger by never using it again, it felt like the kind of wound I needed to poke at. Like it was responsible for so much of Fallon’s odd behavior when she shut away her cares.

“Does it frighten you?” I asked, crossing my ankles as I studied her. She paused, her hands stilling on Thunder’s mane, though she didn’t deign to look at me. “To know how hot your temper flares? To know what you would do for the ones you love? To know how you could light up the world if you let yourself?”

She turned to look at me slowly, her hazel eyes burning with rage and nostrils flared. “I would not light up the world,” she said, her voice laced with warning. “I would burn it to the ground if given a chance and leave nothing but ashes in my wake. I know myself well enough to know that whatever I am, it is something to be contained.”

“You cannot cage a wildfire,” I said, pushing off the tree trunk to approach her.

She turned to face me fully, spreading her feet to shoulder-width apart as if we would fight. Given what had happened in her bedroom before Eryx forced her to sleep, I couldn’t exactly fault her for the assumption. There were probably a great many altercations in our future as husband and wife, and I looked forward to ending them with our slick bodies fighting in the most carnal way.

“Then maybe you should put it out,” she said, the words striking me in the chest. They were laced with self-hatred, with self-doubt and uncertainty. I wanted nothing more than to

reach out and soothe whatever old hurt lingered there and watched her fingers rise to the scar at her eyebrow as if on instinct.

“How did you get that?” I asked.

She dropped her hand suddenly.

“That’s none of your fucking business,” she spat, but she squinted against the light. “It gives me headaches to this day. Imelda makes me a poultice to soothe the ache. Did she go ahead with the others? Why are we not traveling together?” she asked again.

“We are not traveling together because you and I must make the customary journey of Kings through the mountains, so that we may be crowned when we arrive in Vallania. It is how we earn the right to rule from the magic of our Court itself,” I said, untying Thunder’s reins from the tree. I led him to a fallen log and dropped the reins, knowing he would not move as I stepped onto the log and hoisted myself onto his back.

I reached down, holding out a hand for Fallon so that I could lift her up. It was far less than ideal. Thunder was too tall, and Fallon would need to give me a leg up or we’d have to find something to stand on in order to mount, but the alternative was a horse who would tire too easily carrying our combined weight.

“And Imelda will be waiting for me there?” she asked again, eyeing my hand. It became clear that she would not mount until I answered.

“Imelda is still at Tar Mesa,” I said.

Her eyes widened, and she stumbled back a single step, as if the words were a physical blow.

“I need her.”

“Why?” I asked.

She closed her eyes in frustration. “I just...need her.”

I reached forward, grasping Fallon’s forearm and using it to hoist her up and into the saddle in front of me. “I think it is high time you learned to stand on your own without your

witch to guide you,” I snapped, wrapping my arms around her and leading Thunder into a steady walk forward.

Fallon fell silent, her body shaking with anger.

I’d known it would be the case, but it didn’t matter to me.



# CHAPTER ELEVEN



FALLON

ONE FUCKING HORSE.

I sighed, squirming and trying to put some distance between Etan and me. He kept one arm slung around my hip casually, using it to pull me back. I couldn't even be too angry about it, knowing that my forward position probably put me too far from Thunder's center of gravity and made it uncomfortable for him. I reached down and patted the horse's withers, settling into the discomfort of Etan's chest pressed into me. Riding bareback meant there was absolutely no barrier between us. My ass nestled into his groin and there was very little left to the imagination as to how we might fit together if I were to

ever agree to make this more than simply a political arrangement.

Given his perspective of what was required to be an equal to him, I very much doubted that would happen. He might think it acceptable to claim ownership over me, but I was not one to allow that to settle.

I was no man's property, no man's possession, and anyone who thought to change that simply because he felt entitled would wake up with a knife between his eyes.

"Tell me about your home," Etan said, his voice far too casual for the awkward silence that had descended over us since we started the journey through the Summer Court.

The sandy terrain was difficult for Thunder to navigate, his steps slow and cautious as we descended the path toward the valley. The earth was dry and red, the cliffs beside us pointed and jagged. Faces and animals and plants had been carved into the terracotta stone, a history of travelers who had come before us to mark our journey.

"I don't have a home," I said evasively, shrugging my shoulders with the truth of the words.

I might have *had* a home and a family before, a place to rest my head and human parents who loved me, but I knew I could never go back there. I would never be welcomed back to the rebellion who hated the Fae, to the parents who would hardly recognize what had become of me. Even if Nothrek hadn't been filled with Mist Guard and other myriad of soldiers who would have killed me on sight, I could never stand to see the disappointment in the faces of the people I loved.

I couldn't stand the rejection I would find there, knowing that the very thing I had been born to, the thing I'd had no choice in becoming, would horrify them.

Etan sighed, his touch tightening on my waist in sympathy. "Your home is with me now, Fallon," he said, trailing off to let that sink in. "But I meant the home where you were raised. I'd like to know everything I can, so I might prepare you for what is to come. I don't want anything to be too much of a shock,

but I cannot help arm you with information without knowing anything about your past.”

“Is this your desperate attempt to get me to open up to you?” I asked, wishing more than anything that this conversation had occurred in a place where I had an escape. I didn’t want to sit with him and be forced to face the awkwardness of this, without a place to retreat if I bared too much of my soul and felt naked and vulnerable.

Etan chuckled, the warmth of the sound sinking inside me. I felt the rumble against my spine, the genuine humor in it, as if he found my snark entertaining. Not in a degrading way, like it was futile or useless, but like he genuinely enjoyed the path of our conversations and the unpredictability of what I spoke at any given moment.

“I have been desperate for very little in my long life, Sunfire.” He spoke the words above my head, the warmth of his breath surrounding me. It should have been impossible to feel in the searing heat pressing down on us, especially given that the sun beat down on my skin.

I feared I would be burnt to a crisp by the time we reached Vallania, but after several hours in the sun since it had risen, I couldn’t help but find peace in the slight golden hue, in the tan that was the first I’d ever had.

“But let me guess, you’re desperate for *me*, right?” I asked, rolling my eyes toward the sun that I squinted at. It had cast a golden hue over the blue of the sky closest to it, a wash of pure, unfiltered light radiating in a halo around it. It was so similar to the sunkiss on my skin that I couldn’t help but draw comparisons, remembering the feeling of magic on my skin before I’d shoved it into that wall Imelda had created.

“Would that make you feel better about sharing with me? If I said I was desperate to know everything about you and where you’d come from? Or is it just your body you expect me to be desperate for?” Etan asked, lifting his hand from my hip to snag my chin. He twisted my neck slowly, forcing me to give him my profile so I could stare at him from the side of my eye as he leaned in and drew his nose up over the side of my jaw

to press his lips to my temple sweetly. “Desperation makes fools of men, and I have no intention of ever being a fool for a woman who will not so much as speak to me.”

I jerked away, my anger rising at the manipulation and games he seemed so inclined to play. His words were so at odds with the physical intimacy he showed, leaving me reeling with no hope of ever understanding exactly what he intended for me—what he wanted from this marriage. The mixed signals were the epitome of frustrating, and I wished I was capable of making the rest of our journey on foot to avoid his touch.

“I’m glad we’ve established that,” I hissed.

“You misunderstand me, Sunfire. I have no intention of being a fool for a woman who keeps me apart, but I would gladly prove the fool for the woman who brings me to my knees,” he said.

I couldn’t help the way my head snapped back to stare at him with a furrowed brow.

“And you expect me to believe that’s me? That I’m the one who brings *you* to your knees with all your claims of ownership,” I argued, but the steel had left my voice. My breath felt uneven, altered by the intensity of his stare on my profile.

“You hear what you want to hear, Fallon,” he said, shrugging as if disappointed in me. “You can choose to focus on the fact that I said you, a perfect stranger and the daughter of the greatest evil Alfheimr has ever known, have to earn my respect in order for me to treat you like an equal in the *ruling* of an entire kingdom of people who are my responsibility. *Or* you can listen to the way I specifically implied I thought you were capable of earning that respect from me, and understand that, given your heritage and the fact that I do not know you, I am only doing what is responsible for my Kingdom.”

I withered, shrinking in on myself and hating the logical explanation. “Your words were intended to hurt. You said them as cruelly as you could manage,” I said, shoving away

his attempt to reason with me about something that had been deeply personal.

“You’re right. They were spoken in an attempt to get you to fucking listen and understand the reality that we were going to leave Tar Mesa, whether you liked it or not. No matter what you may think of it, Mab expects me to be responsible for both your safety and your behavior now, so I will not allow your actions to put everything I have worked to protect at risk. If you would deign to see me as anything more than your enemy, you would understand that you are now on that list of things I will work to protect,” he said, dropping his arm back to my hip as I tensed.

“Bold words coming from one of Mab’s allies,” I spat, relishing in the way his entire body turned solid behind me. My words had left their intended mark, striking as deep as he’d intended to hurt me.

Instead of spitting venom back at me, he only sighed and released all the tension into the dry air around us. “I can’t remember my own parents,” he said instead, the vulnerable words stated in such a matter-of-fact way that I froze in place. “Most of the Gods didn’t generally have much interest in parenting, given the poor example they’d had from the Primordials. They dropped me off with Diell in the Summer Court when I was five years old. She wasn’t with Khaos anymore, he disappeared long before the other Primordials, but since she had fallen in love with Aesira, the two of them were raising Rheaghan and Mab together. Rheaghan and I were the same age, in spite of the fact that he was a God and I was the child of two Gods. Mab was younger than two when I came to live with them, and I can still remember the way her brother doted on her.”

“Look where that got him,” I said, shaking my head from side to side to reject the tenderness of his admission.

“Rheaghan and Mab were just as much my siblings as they were each other’s. I grew up alongside them, and Rheaghan and I eventually grew very close. When Mab adorned her crown with that gem, everything inside of her changed overnight. She was suddenly dismissive of Rheaghan’s

protectiveness, competitive with him in ways she hadn't been. She was the opposite of what Diell and Aesira were raising us all to be, but I was the only one who could penetrate that hatred. Rheaghan always theorized it was because I was her sibling by choice, because I had actively chosen to love her as my own sister, versus the rest of her family, who had just gotten stuck with her.

"I think when the gem gifted her with those dark powers that twisted her up from the princess of the summer court into what she is now, they also enhanced every insecurity she'd ever had, every notion that she didn't belong, and blew them to new proportions. Mab is the most insecure woman I have ever had the displeasure of meeting, and that's why she needs constant reminders of her power. It's why she binds everyone to her will, so that they cannot betray her when they realize she isn't infallible. Everyone but me," he said, and I raised a brow as I touched his hand.

The movement seemed to shock him, a moment of something tender lingering between us that hardened to sharpened edges as I processed his words.

"You and I are the only two people connected to Mab who are not condemned to carrying one of her snakes within us. We are the only ones who are capable of directing her to produce change. It is a great gift of power she has given us..."

"You have free will, when so many others are not fortunate enough to be able to do as they please, and you spend that free will in her service, anyway?" I asked, trying to wrap my mind around the fact that I was to spend the rest of my life standing next to someone who supported the Queen of Air and Darkness *willingly*.

"It is because I spend my life in so-called service to her that I have free will even after all this time. There is something to be said for keeping your enemies close, Sunfire. Some wars are fought over centuries of deception before they ever reach the battlefield," he said.

I went quiet as I let those words sink in. The implication in them was that he was actively standing against Mab, that he

was working to undermine her.

But how could he pretend to support the woman who had killed his brother?

## CHAPTER TWELVE



ETAN

WE RODE IN SILENCE for a while, Fallon's body carefully controlled. I wouldn't have called it tense exactly, merely like she was somehow missing from her body. Like her mind had gone elsewhere, considering all that I'd told her and what that meant for her life in the Summer Court. She was infuriating, unwilling to see the position I was in.

Choosing a queen was no careless task, and when I'd thought to manipulate Fallon into being my wife, I hadn't intended to ever become King. I had greater concerns now, far more people relying on me than I'd had even days before. None of that should have even mattered, because she didn't have any clue about the fact that I'd been partially responsible



for our betrothal. As far as Fallon knew, I was just as helpless in the arrangements for our marriage as she was.

She tipped her head to the sun for the hundredth time since we'd departed that morning, making our way down the rugged, sandy terrain in the scorching sun. She seemed to come alive beneath the light of it, appreciating it in a way that I hadn't seen before.

"Did you miss the sun while you were locked away in the darkness of Tar Mesa?" I asked, referring to the way the shadows clung to every corner of the palace. While there was limited light outside during the day, Mab prohibited people from leaving the palace to enjoy it, knowing that her power lingered in the shadows, and she did everything possible to maintain the integrity of her magic.

"You can't really miss what you've never had," she said, the strange words making my hold on her tighten.

"What do you mean? You've never seen the sun?"

"There were a few days when we were traveling through Nothrek to get to Alfheimr where I felt the sun on my skin," she admitted, her voice trailing low as if she realized how sad that made her life sound. "That was one of the first times I had seen the sun, though, the very first time I spent more than an hour in it."

"How is that possible?" I asked, thinking of what life must have like been for the humans. Had they been plunged into darkness in truth? Had the erection of the veil somehow influenced the sun in their realm?

"I grew up in a human rebellion that had formed in opposition to the human monarchy and the influence of his new religion on us all. We long since stopped worshiping the Old Gods, but instead of just accepting that maybe we didn't *need* Gods at all, the King's great-, great-grandfather, or whatever the fuck he was, placed the New Gods on a pedestal. Their will became all that mattered, and our lives are spent in direct worship of them to the point that there are strict expectations for us and how we spend our time. Particularly in the case of women," she explained with a heavy sigh.

“Why did that mean you couldn’t see the sun?” I asked, unable to understand how her refusal to worship these new gods had resulted in her life in the dark.

“The rebellion would have been killed if we were discovered. We didn’t follow the rules that the High Priests and Priestesses set out for us, and in doing so, that meant we would be executed. So we hid away in a network of tunnels in the mountain caves, formed a community there. It became a refuge for so many, and it was necessary. It allowed us to live as we saw fit, but there were sacrifices too,” she said, turning to look back at me. She licked her lips, and my gaze dropped to the drying skin there.

“Like seeing the sun,” I said, and she nodded.

I took my canteen from the saddle bag strapped across Thunder’s back, guiding it to Fallon’s mouth so that she could drink. For a moment, I thought her pride would make her refuse. That she would insist on holding it herself and the independence such a rebellion had instilled in her would be a block for us in the future. Instead, she let me guide her head back so the water could pour into her mouth, taking deep gulps that hinted at her strong thirst.

She’d known I had the canteens with me, had watched me drink countless times, but that independent streak had prevented her from asking for water.

Stubborn fucking woman.

I would need to check in with her regularly, clearly. To ask and offer to meet her needs so that she was not forced to *ask*.

“Like seeing the sun,” she agreed, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand when she finally finished drinking.

“What would have been expected of you in service to these New Gods?” I asked, trying to understand what she’d been so desperate to avoid. It felt like something that would matter greatly in coming to understand the woman who would be my wife, in learning to appreciate what she wanted out of life for herself, as well as for us in the end.

“I’d have been expected to go to church regularly, to learn how to present myself and behave appropriately, as befitting a woman,” she said, turning to look back at me as she rolled her eyes. “I’d have been expected to remain virginal until I was chosen by a husband, and then I would have been expected to give him children and raise the next generation of girls to be sold like cattle to the highest-ranking man who was interested in them. Not unlike what happened with us, I suppose.” She scoffed, the noise lacking all humor as she drew the connection between what she’d been avoiding all her life and what would be expected of her now.

“There are some slight differences,” I said, trying to think of the words to carefully avoid the truth without actually lying.

“Like what?” she asked, arching a brow as she studied me.

“The decision to marry us belonged to Mab alone. Neither of us really had a choice in this when it comes down to it. I didn’t purchase you so much as receive you as a gift that I didn’t actually ask for,” I said, watching as she chewed on that bit of information.

“So we’re both just equally stuck with each other,” she said, huffing a laugh, but the sound brought a genuine smile to her face for the first time in what felt like forever.

“Some of the best gifts are the ones you never asked for,” I said, leaning into her more fully. I let her feel the press of me behind her, knowing that we were less than a day’s ride from the first stop on our journey, and that the moment of truth would come in that place.

The ability to be vulnerable with me would be necessary for her if we wanted to continue on, baring herself to me completely.

“You want me to look at you as a gift?” she asked, quirked her brow at me as if I were arrogant to think so.

I grinned, wrapping myself around her more fully so she could feel the lines of muscle hidden beneath my tunic. She stilled in my arms, allowing the touch when she might not have only a few hours before.

“There are those that would view me as a great gift indeed,” I said, grinning at the snort that she released.

“They must not have known you very well,” she said, and had she not been stuck on a horse with me, I could almost picture her striding away.

Leaving me burning to prove her wrong in her wake.

# CHAPTER THIRTEEN



## FALLON

AS WE APPROACHED THE halfway point in our descent down the mountains made from sand, the ground beneath Thunder's feet began to change. Slowly, the red dirt was replaced by blades of grass, the area ahead of us teeming with life. Streams of water trailed down the mountainside around us, cascading over cliffs to form waterfalls that soared into the valley below with the raucous noise of thunder. The air seemed to change as we approached, Thunder's step picking up pep as if he too could feel the change surrounding us.

I stiffened in Etan's hold as my skin buzzed with the feeling of magic kissing along it, like tiny wisps drifting through the air that I could not see. The heat became balmy, slicking my

skin with sweat until I became acutely aware of the pulsing heat that spread through me. But it didn't come from the air entirely, instead forming in my core and forcing me to shift a little uncomfortably.

I hoped Etan didn't notice the strange sensation occurring within me, the oddly timed arousal that I had no explanation for. It was far from the first time I'd felt it, having had my share of partners in the tunnels of the Resistance. Our public baths and limited opportunities for entertainment meant that few were unaware of the pleasures to be found in the comfort of another's body.

"There were four Primordials who once called the Summer Court home," Etan said, his voice sounding lower somehow, deeper than I was used to. I couldn't decide if it was something actually occurring or the haze in my head that made it seem real. "When our court was new, Diell thought we should pay homage to those who had already chosen to leave the public eye. We could no longer see them, but she knew they still existed and that their magic was present around us."

"Fascinating," I said through gritted teeth. I forced my jaw to relax, instead chewing on the corner of my mouth.

"She put sanctuaries throughout the court. Places intended for the Fae of her court to go to pay their respects to the Primordials who came before all of us. Many made offerings, and it was said that the size of your offering determined the blessing they gave in return," he explained, as he guided Thunder down a somewhat narrow pass.

It curved around the edge of a mountain, taking us away from the descent into the valley and the vague impression of the capitol in the distance. I wanted nothing more than to continue on our journey, but I kept quiet as he tugged Thunder to the side of the path, dismounted, and tied his reins to a tree branch. Pulling an apple from the pack slung across the horse's rump, he held it out with an open palm and patted the horse's neck when he took it happily. A bucket of water hung from the branch as if someone had prepared for us, and Etan reached up, grasped me around the waist, and pulled me down.

I swung my leg over Thunder's rear, sliding down slowly so I didn't disturb his snack. Etan was behind me, my back dragging over him slowly as I glided to my feet. His broad form left nothing to the imagination, making me entirely too aware of the fact that I was not the only one so inexplicably affected.

"What do the sanctuaries have to do with us?" I asked, my own voice sounding far more husky than I could ever recall.

I spun in Etan's hold, Thunder's bulky body behind me making me feel pinned between two dangerous creatures. Etan hung his head, his brown eyes holding mine and making me feel as if he stared right through me. Like he could see my arousal in the stare that held his, and his tense mouth spread into an arrogant grin.

He leaned closer, bending down so that his mouth was only a breath from mine and his nose brushed alongside mine. "Come with me."

He took my hand in his, guiding me away from Thunder finally and tugging me down the narrow path. It was just wide enough for the two of us to fit side by side, his hand too warm in mine and the callouses of his thumb rough as he rubbed the back of my hand where he gripped me.

"Just before she said goodbye to her children, Diell created a place where those who followed in her footsteps could come and make offerings to all the Summer Primordials at once. A place where they were all present, even in their absence," he said, pushing a tree branch out of the path so that I could move without ducking past it. They hung over us like a canopy, offering shade from the blazing sun of the desert where we had started our journey.

"She said it would be customary for any who wished to sit upon her throne to come and make their offering to those who came before. When it became clear that Diell had no intention of returning to reclaim her Court, Rheaghan came here for the first time and made his own offering. It is believed that the greater the offering, the longer you will be allowed to reign."

We continued along the path, and I waited for the moment that we would find an altar, that we would have to slaughter some poor, innocent animal that had been left for us.

“This path has not been traversed in some time. Are you certain the temple still stands?” I asked, glancing at him. It would be just my luck we wasted an entire day riding to a place that had fallen into disuse centuries prior.

He smirked, grasping hold of the tree branch that blocked both our paths. He lifted it as he watched my face, undoubtedly seeing the moment I laid eyes upon the sanctuary before me. I glanced at him in surprise, stepping forward on feet that moved of their own accord. Drawn to the magical haven before me, I took in the sight of something that made no sense whatsoever.

The haven was surrounded by trees on all sides, creating a private alcove that no one would ever find by chance.

“Only Kings and Queens of Summer and their guests are allowed to step foot in this place,” he said, following after me. “Since Rheaghan was unmarried, he often brought companions to share in the experience with him.”

Lightning cracked in the sky above us, rippling through the daylight sky with the force of a summer storm. The light mist of summer rain fell down around us, rinsing the sweat from my skin as I tipped my head up to the sky to feel the moisture on my face. The sun seemed brighter here, like we were at the peak of day with the sun at its apex even though it was already late afternoon. Flowers bloomed around the tree line, covering the ground in life and bursts of color as I moved to the baths carved into the earth.

I was no stranger to the concept of a communal bath, but the one in the tunnels had been far less refined work. Made out of necessity rather than from love and devotion. Four statues surrounded the bath, their forms recognizable even from a distance.

*Diell* with her crown of gold as she reached up toward the sky with her eyes closed, as if basking in the daylight.



*Oshun* where she knelt at the edge of the sea, her fingers and feet covered in grains of sand and drops of water dripping down her forearm. Her hair was wet, plastered to the side of her face and neck.

*Tempest* with a lightning bolt held in his palms, his chest squared as he stood upon a summer rain cloud.

*Gerwyn* with her feathered wings spread out behind her, a smile on her face as she watched a couple embrace.

The four Primordials of the Summer Court sat around the small, circular bath that was far more intimate than the one I'd spent time in since becoming an adult.

"What exactly does this *offering* entail?" I asked.

Everything in me went still as Etan's hands went to the laces of his tunic. He stepped away from me as he untied them slowly. He reached over his head, grabbing the back of the shirt and tugging it over his head in that distinctly masculine move that I'd never been able to master. His chest was broad, his abs defined. His Fae Marks curled over his collarbone and onto the left side of his chest, swirling lines of red and black that served as the reminder that no matter what marriage said, he would never really be mine.

There was no mate bond between us, only the simmering attraction between a man and a woman who found one another desirable on a physical level. My soul did not reach out to his as I stared at him, didn't crave him in the way I both feared and hoped would never happen for me.

"That, Sunfire, is up to you," he said, drawing my attention back to his face. "This is the part of this marriage where *we* have control, where Mab cannot dictate who or how we rule. Only one of us needs to enter the bath, but only those who have offered and been accepted, been given the blessing of the Primordials in return, can sit upon the throne of the Summer Court."

"If I do not get into the water, I won't be your wife?" I asked, trying to keep my voice neutral.

It was such an unexpected turn of events that I couldn't be sure I managed, that the lilt of hope didn't sneak into my voice. Etan might not have treated me poorly, aside from kidnapping me against my wishes, but that didn't mean I desired to tie myself to him without really knowing him at all.

"You'll still be my wife. It's the only way Mab will be satisfied, but she is very aware of this tradition. She knows as well as I do that I cannot force you into this water. You have to enter of your own free will," he explained, dropping his gaze to the surface that shimmered in the sunlight. "But if you do not enter, you will not be Queen of the Summer Court. Not unless we come back one day so that you can offer yourself when you're ready."

"You would do that? Allow me to change my mind and rule alongside you after rejecting the notion today?" I asked, leaving off the part where I would be rejecting *him* as well.

Though he did not speak it, I had the feeling that this was the precipice where we determined the type of marriage we would have. While we may not be a love match or fated mates, we still had choices as to how we continued on our path. We could live entirely separate lives, with me as the estranged wife of the Summer King.

Or we could undertake this endeavor together as partners, as temporary as it may be, and embrace our marriage to the full extent of its capabilities.

"That depends on how much you piss me off in the meantime," he said, crossing his arms over his chest with a smirk. He quirked a brow, glancing toward the water. I followed his gaze, staring into the slow current that seemed to keep the water moving, like it ran somewhere in spite of being an isolated pool.

"That's a no, then." I laughed. "What happens if I decide I want to be Queen? Am I required to share your bed?"

His eyes heated as he stared at me, keeping his distance even though I suspected he wanted to close it. "I won't require you to fuck me if you aren't interested, Fallon," he said, that heated stare drifting down my body. "But I am certain this

attraction is not one-sided. Should you decide to rule alongside me, I would ask that you be monogamous to me as your husband, whether you are in my bed or not.”

“And you? Will you fuck around while expecting me to remain celibate?” The venom in my voice shocked me.

I’d never understood why women from Nothrek were upset when their husbands slept with other women, not when most of them didn’t desire their husband, anyway. Why be upset when it meant he left you alone?

He grinned, as if the show of jealousy pleased him. “No, so long as I expect monogamy of you, I will return it. I do intend to spend my every waking moment buried within my *wife* either way. She just may make me work for it.”

I smiled, chewing on the corner of my mouth as I tugged at the laces at the back of my dress. It loosened around my chest, hanging lower in the front to reveal more of my cleavage as I paused.

“There is one thing you should know before you enter the water, Sunfire. To step into the bath is to give yourself over to the Primordials. You will no longer be in control of your body until they’re done with us,” he said, giving me pause.

“What do you mean, I won’t be in control?” I asked, tipping my head to the side.

“The Primordials will be in control. We will do as they see fit until they have taken their offering and are willing to give their blessing for our sacrifice. If you get in the water, you must do so with the knowledge that anything could happen, but the most likely outcome will end with me inside of you,” he said, smiling as if thinking of stories he’d heard from Rheaghan. “Repeatedly.”

I shrugged, backing toward the pool as I slid the sleeves of my dress down over my shoulders. It pooled at my feet, leaving me bare before Etan. His eyes on me didn’t bother me in the slightest, having gotten used to being seen naked in my time with the rebellion.

“I guess it’s a good thing I don’t have to like you to fuck you then.”

# CHAPTER FOURTEEN



ETAN

SHE GLIDED DOWN THE stairs smoothly after stripping off her shoes, the water shimmering and glowing in a halo around her as she trailed her hands through it at her sides. Her back was to me, her face hidden away as my eyes drank in the sight of her fair skin, of the contrast of her raven black hair as it swept down her spine to touch the surface of the water. The swell of her ass disappeared beneath the haze of the surface, and she didn't stop until she was waist deep. Her body went still for a moment, waiting as if the Primordials themselves wanted to know if I would leave her to be ridden by their magic alone or if I would join her in seeking their blessing.

I hurried to shuck off my pants and boots, starting the journey down the steps with far less grace than Fallon had managed. I came up behind her, the coolness of the refreshing water gliding along my skin as I raised a hand and watched it glide off my body. The water dropped to the surface, the sound of the splash far too loud in the quiet of the bath.

Fallon whirled on me the moment my hand rested on her shoulder, her eyes filled with gold. Something eternal stared back at me from within her beautiful face, and it almost pained me that my first moment with her, our first time exposed like this, would come when we would watch ourselves like spectators.

When we would be privy to every action, feel the pleasure of our touch upon one another, but know that we were not alone.

She touched my cheek, cupping it in her hand as she stepped closer to me, allowing the press of her skin against mine. I shuddered, taking in the lines of her face as she pressed onto her toes and touched her mouth to mine.

My senses exploded with the taste of her, with the scent of an ocean breeze on a hot day, filling my lungs as I breathed her in. When she pulled back and blinked up at me, I felt the moment the Primordials slithered into me, touching the inner corners of my body. Fallon grinned, lifting her hand to touch beneath my eyes. I knew they probably glowed with the same gold that had consumed hers, and the haze of arousal washed over me as I slid a hand beneath the curtain of her hair.

“Sunfire,” I murmured, using my hold on her jaw to tip her head up once more and capture her mouth with mine more fully.

She was pliant in my arms, none of the fight that I’d come to associate with her present as she molded her body to mine. She fit me like she belonged there, nestling into the swells and valleys of my body with hers. She reached between us, taking my cock in her hand and drawing a growl from me that shattered the last vestiges of my control.

*Too rough*, I thought distantly, warning the greedy, hungry voice that wasn't entirely my own. We may have shared the same desire, but I winced as my hands grasped Fallon by the waist and lifted her out of the water. I tossed her to the edge of the pool, cursing myself as she landed atop the edge hard. Instead of a grimace of pain, her face twisted into a bold grin and laughter bubbled up her throat.

I stared at her, waiting for her to show signs of pain, and barely restraining the part of me that wanted nothing more than to go to her, to spread her wide and plunge inside so harshly that she would feel the imprint of me the next day.

Fallon worried her bottom lip with her teeth, leaning back on one hand behind her and crooking me forward with a finger with her other. She spread her legs wide, hooking her feet along the edge of the bath and baring herself to my view. There were no insecurities in the movement, and I wondered briefly if it was a consequence of the Primordials riding her body and taking pleasure through her, or if Fallon was truly simply confident in her beauty.

I hoped it never went away, this woman who knew the spell she could weave over me with her beauty and her body.

I closed the distance quickly, far quicker than I should have been able to move, stepping into the gap she'd created between her legs. I claimed her mouth with mine, plunging my tongue inside the way I would my cock soon enough. She wrapped those long legs around me, pulling me tighter. So tight that my cock pressed against the seam of her, the heat of her core surrounding me and drawing a moan from me. I reached between us, desperate to guide myself inside, to feel her wrapped around me in truth.

She tore her mouth from mine, shaking her head mischievously. "If you want to fuck me, King of Summer, then you'd best prove you're worthy of my throne and my body first," she said, running a delicate hand through my deep auburn hair. She smiled as she pulled it, pulling me smoothly down her body.

I smiled against the skin of her breast, cupping her in one hand and tormenting her other nipple with my tongue. Her moan of satisfaction reached my ears, driving the other beings within me to growl in time with me. The sound reverberated off the trees as I slid my free hand between her thighs, covering it in her wet heat as I slid a finger into her and bit down on her breast. She pushed at my shoulders, knowing exactly what she wanted from me and *where* she wanted me. It drew twisted laughter from me as I lifted her knees onto my shoulders and slid my tongue through her. Tormentingly slow, I avoided the bundle of nerves as she writhed her hips, seeking release.

“Fucking asshole,” she grumbled, tugging on the strands of hair at the top of my head.

With startling force, she used that brutal grip to guide me to her clit, sighing happily when I finally smiled into her and gave her what she wanted. I worked her with my tongue, burying two fingers into her tight heat to stretch her open to take me. She shook beneath me, her body going taut as I explored every inch of her pussy, curling my fingers to stroke the spot inside her that made her eyes roll back in her head.

I smiled as I pulled my fingers out, straightening my body and earning a startled glare from Fallon. She’d been right on that edge, her pussy clamping down on me as she prepared for release.

“You come on my cock,” I said, guiding it to her entrance.

She didn’t push me away this time, arching her back so that she could stare down at the place where we joined. I slapped her clit with my hand twice, watching as her oversensitive body jolted in response to the contact.

I glided myself lower, notching my cock against her as she wrapped her legs around my waist once more. Then I drove inside. She was too tight, but so fucking wet that I slid through her tender tissue, pulling back and then gliding forward again every time I met resistance.

“Fuck,” she mumbled, dropping onto her back on the edge of the bath. Her hair spread over the grass, looking like she



was part of the sacred nature of this place if it hadn't been for the way her face twisted in pleasure.

I drove deep, striking the end of her and filling her in the way I'd wanted since I laid eyes on her. I couldn't wait to do it with that strange golden stare gone from her eyes, to look into her natural hazel hue and fuck her and her alone without the Primordials within us.

I pulled back, snapping my hips forward to drive into her once more. She moaned, her back scraping along the ledge of the bath as she moved with the force of my thrusts. I took her hands in mine, threading our fingers together and pinning hers to the grass beneath her, stilling her body to the best of my ability. I made her hold her position as I picked up my pace, driving in and out of her with sharp, fast thrusts that spoke to the desperation I felt. I needed to fill her, needed to fuck her until she couldn't remember her own name.

I wanted to erase the separation between us, to mold our bodies into one, and she held her stare with mine as I used her body to do it.

"Harder," she whispered, her gasps ragged and torn as they came with each plunge of me within her.

I gave her what she wanted, guiding one of her hands to her clit and using the combination of our fingers to work it. She tossed her head back, her breathing coming heavy and her cries growing louder. She whimpered as I took what I wanted, her own body seeking its pleasure from it.

"That's it. Fucking come for me," I murmured.

Her mouth dropped open into a scream as she came, her pussy clamping down on me so tightly I couldn't help but follow her over the edge, spilling myself inside her. I stilled as I finished, leaving my cock inside her as I lifted her from the edge and pulled her down into the water with me. She wrapped her legs around me to aid in my support in spite of her exhaustion, resting her head on my shoulder as she fought to catch her breath.

I still felt the weight of the Primordials between us, the heat of their attention in my skin. Though they'd given us a brief reprieve, I knew they weren't yet done with us.

"Are you good?" I asked, taking advantage of the opportunity to speak without fearing the answer would come from the Primordials more than her.

Fallon raised her head, meeting my stare as a swirl of gold and hazel mixed in her eyes. She smiled, nodding tiredly as she leaned forward and kissed me tenderly.

It was a tenderness that came with hope attached, with the possibility for a future we could carve out together. We might not have been the couple people were expecting, but we could have affection between us without a mate bond.

We could have the love that came from choice, rather than destiny. She was the woman I'd chosen, not the one the Fates had determined was mine.

There was power in that.

We would find a way to do it together, united as King and Queen, husband and wife.

TO BE CONTINUED

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



HARPER L. WOODS IS the USA Today Bestselling fantasy romance alter ego for Adelaide Forrest. Raised in small-town Vermont, her passion for reading was born during long winters spent with her face buried between the pages of a book. She began to pass the time by writing short stories that quickly turned into full-length fiction. Since that time, she has published over 15 books and has plans for many more.

When she isn't writing, Harper can be found spending time with her two young kids, curled up with her dog, dreaming about travel to distant lands, or designing book covers she'll never have enough time to use.

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# A GLAMOUR OF SMOKE AND SHADOW



HEATHER HILDENBRAND

A Cursed Fae prequel

# BLURB



THE AINE ARE AN elite caste of warriors among the fae. A sacred dozen selected by the Fates to protect this world.

Today, I join my sisters and become one of them.

It's all I've ever wanted.

Then *he* shows up.

The Furiosities are demon-gods. The three kings of Hel, they call them. No mortal fae has ever laid eyes on them before today, though their cruelty and wrath are legendary.

The first two make me want to run in the other direction, but the moment I lay eyes on the third male, everything else falls away.

Dark, mesmerizing, and intense—he is more than forbidden to someone like me. He is impossible.

Yet, when he speaks, I know I will do anything he asks. Even break my most sacred vow.

My weapons and magic might belong to my people, but my body and heart are owned by another—and there's no telling how the demon-god might bend or break both in the end.



# CHAPTER ONE



THE EYES OF THE Fates are fixed on me.

I don't look over at them to acknowledge their presence though every ounce of protocol requires me to do so. To ignore the Fates is to insult the goddesses of creation. But today's an exception to formality. Besides, I've trained my whole life for this chance. I refuse to let manners ruin it for me. So, I concentrate instead on winning this fight.

Late afternoon sun trickles in between the leafy branches overhead. The warm, humid air of summer has already made my skin sticky, though some of that is probably nerves. Beneath my feet, the ground has been cleared down to nothing but dirt. The space here is dubbed the warrior's circle. Surrounding it, fae and forest alike press in at the edges.

Everyone has come to watch us, but I shut them out easily enough. The Fates' presence is the only distraction for me.

Crouched in the center of the circle, my opponent, Heliconia, shows none of the conflict I feel at ignoring the three deities watching from the sidelines. Instead, she glares at me with the fires of Hel burning in her dark gaze. If I hadn't lived and sparred with Heliconia for the last six months, I'd worry she had Furiosity blood running through those fae veins.

Her temper never wanes. Her strength is unmatched. She's a fae warrior from the strongest bloodlines, a formidable foe, but I'm determined to beat her today.

My future is riding on my victory. All I've ever wanted is to become one of the Aine. Now, the only thing standing in my way is Heliconia Kucera.

"A moment please." The three Fates—willowy figures that depict the maiden, mother, and crone—speak as one. Their combined voice is an ethereal blend of the three goddesses.

I've only seen them once in my life before this moment.

The day they selected me to compete is still imprinted in my mind like a fever dream. My family comes from warriors, sure, but this is an honor few have received. My parents cried for days afterward, and my village threw me a parade before I left for training just outside our realm's capital city. At the time, all the attention embarrassed me, but the memory of my people's pride has carried me through the most brutal training I've ever endured.

Six months later, the Fates have come to Sevanwinds, the summer kingdom, to preside over our final competition. Those who make it will be divided into four groups. Three of us will remain in Sevanwinds to serve the crown here. The other three groups will be sent to the remaining kingdoms—fall, winter, spring—and pledge themselves to a king or queen there. The Aine have kept peace among the kingdoms for centuries this way. My generation will be no different.

My two best friends, Leshia and Amanti, have already won their rounds and secured their place as an Aine. There's only one spot left, and it's down to me and Heliconia. Twelve Aine—timeless, immortal warriors. Female fae of the highest honor. When our transformation is finished, we'll be full-

blooded Fairies. Chosen by the Fates themselves to protect this world.

I want that twelfth spot more than I've ever wanted anything.

Right now, the Fates' sudden interruption grates against my already taut nerves, but I respectfully turn to them as they continue their announcement. "Before we begin the last round, the Furiosities wish to join us and observe this sacred rite of selection."

Their voices are pleasant, but shock and dread shoot through me.

Heliconia and I exchange a look.

"Are they serious?" she whispers, eyes wide.

"I don't think they'd lie," I say, just as surprised.

Murmurs erupt from the crowd that's gathered to witness this last battle. The Fates don't bother to shush them. A moment later, behind the circle of onlookers, smoke rises, thick and dark, from the earth.

Heliconia and I step back, shoulder to shoulder, allies now should we need to be. She's a warrior fae like me. A sister. Or she might've been if we hadn't been brought to this moment—forced to become opponents.

Inside the black smoke, a trio of figures appear. They stand close until their forms solidify. Then, out of the smoke, three males emerge. I have no idea what the protocol is for looking directly at a Furiosity. They are demon-gods. The kings of Hel. No living fae has seen them, though tales of their wrath and cruelty are legendary. In villages, stories of the Furiosities keep children from misbehaving. I'd always thought them closer to fantasy than reality. Yet, here they are.

According to legend, they've never attended an Aine selection.

Until now.

They turn to face the Fates, offering a short bow and exchanging words in a language I don't recognize. The

Furiosities' voices are low and deep, sending shudders through me that conjure images of black flames and eternal torture. And power. Pure, limitless power.

Then, they stride over to Heliconia and me.

The crowd parts for them in utter silence.

My breath catches, sticking in my lungs under the weight of their dark stares.

"You are the remaining contenders?" one of them demands roughly. He's an old man, though his shoulders are broad and his posture strong.

"Yes," Heliconia says, saving me from a response.

"I am Age," he says, a nasty glint in his murky eyes.

The male beside him is middle-aged with brown skin and a cruel snarl. "I am Eld." He glances from Heliconia to me, and it takes all my courage not to shrink away.

The third male is younger than the others. In fact, he appears to be in his mid-twenties like me. He studies me with an intensity that makes my palms sweat. His hair is dark and messy, falling carelessly over his ears. He is handsome, though it's more than that—a magnetism that has me staring far longer than I should.

"I am Ire." His voice is low, his full mouth mesmerizing as it moves.

A nasty scar runs down his jawline near his ear. Before I realize what I'm doing, I lift my hand and press a finger to the jagged mark.

The crowd gasps.

I yank my hand back, coming to my senses with utter and total horror. "My apologies, I... I have no idea why I did that."

Beside me, Heliconia shifts her weight, and I know she's celebrating her victory. I can't blame her. I'm already dead. She won't even have to fight me. The demon-god will destroy me for her.

"What is your name, little warrior?" the one called Ire asks.

“Sonoma Eko,” I whisper, still bracing for certain death.

They say Furies can kill with a single blow. Hopefully, that means it’ll be painless.

“Sonoma,” he repeats, the sound of my name in his voice sending trembles through me that have nothing to do with fear. I lower my face, hiding the flush spreading over my cheeks. “You shouldn’t bother being envious of my scars. From the looks of that one, you’ll have your own soon enough.”

My eyes jerk back to his.

Beside me, Heliconia grins smugly.

He chuckles. They all do. Then, they step back, retreating to the edge of the circle where the Fates wait.

I watch in disbelief, still not quite ready to accept he isn’t going to kill me where I stand.

“Are both warriors ready?” the Fates ask.

Heliconia backs away from me so she can take up her previous stance. Her eyes glint with determination. “Ready,” she calls.

I’m still regaining my focus when the Fates say, “Begin!”

Heliconia is a tornado, arms and legs moving faster than I can block. She sees my hesitation and exploits it mercilessly.

From the sidelines, the crowd screams, cheering for their favorite. Their voices become a roar as Heliconia’s fist slams into my jaw, and I’m driven backward.

My feet stumble. Panic rises in me. My distraction has cost me. And we’ve only just begun.

## CHAPTER TWO



PAIN RADIATES THROUGH MY body, but I ignore it, shuttering my mind to the sensations as I force myself to focus. My warrior's training isn't just physical; it's mental too. Being able to take a beating, to close yourself off from the pain that might slow or distract you, is a skill few can master.

Concentrating only on the movements of my opponent, I find my rhythm. A block then a counterstrike. I hit her in the chin, driving her jaw upward. She dances out of reach, blinking and shaking it off.

Then she comes again. Fast. Lethal.

I duck then shove her hard, but she uses her momentum to spin and recover. When she rounds back to face me, she lands a hard kick to my middle.

I grunt as my body absorbs the pain. The air is knocked out of me, but I can manage without it for now. I return the blow

with a fist to her nose and am rewarded by a crack that sends her reeling.

She stumbles, pressing her palm to her face. When she pulls it away, blood coats her pale nose and pink lip. Her eyes narrow, her determination renewed.

Great. I've managed to piss her off more.

When she comes again, she's faster, if that's even possible. But I've recovered from my earlier mistake, and I meet her with a speed and force of my own.

Back and forth, we trade blows.

She leans in close, trying to wind her arm around my neck, and I manage to yank her to the dirt, falling on her and scrambling for a leg around her throat. She sinks her nails into my thigh. Even through my leathers, the sting is sharp.

I release my grip, rolling away quickly.

When I jump up, I barely have time to whirl away from her before she slams into me.

I use her momentum to shove her off balance, and she stumbles.

I don't waste my opening.

The crowd roars as I knock her to the ground face-first. Her bloodied nose lands in the dirt, and I shove her head down as hard as I can until she can no longer breathe without taking in a mouthful of dust and earth. I listen as it clogs her throat and she gags.

She kicks and bucks, but I don't let up.

My victory is only a few moments away when something glints in her hand. At first, I think it's her fingernails again, but when she stabs it blindly into my leg, I realize with hot, startling clarity that it's a blade.

And not just any blade. The burn of the poisoned magic hits me a second later, followed by horror. Poisons aren't my forte, but I'm guessing I have about five seconds left before whatever this is renders me immobile and she wins.

“You cheated,” I hiss, furious and desperate. I’m about to lose my dream.

The crowd is deafening, but I can hear Heliconia snarling at me.

“You don’t deserve this if you’re not willing to do whatever it takes.”

Weapons and magic are forbidden here, but apparently, not even the Fates’ rules mean more than Heliconia’s thirst for victory.

My leg tingles. The poison spreads, paralyzing me as it goes.

Fear grips me. I’m going to lose this.

I’m going to lose everything.

*No*, a sudden voice inside me insists. I refuse to let that happen.

With a guttural scream, I release Heliconia. After pushing to my feet, using my good leg, I lift my tingling foot and bring my boot down on her face just as she begins to roll over. My heel slams into her temple, and she goes limp.

I stare down at her hands, which are now empty. The blade is gone, vanished into some veil before the Fates could see her crime.

There’s a beat of silence from the crowd before it erupts into wild cheers.

My leg gives out, and I go down on my knees.

Lesha and Amanti appear, grabbing me and pulling me to my feet. They scream happily as they hug me and lift my arms in victory before the crowd.

Heliconia groans, slowly coming to. She lifts her chin off the ground and takes it all in. Finally, she rolls onto her back, and her gaze locks with mine. Her rage is evident, boiling so close to the surface that I brace myself for her attack.

Then, the Fates are speaking, and a hush falls over the crowd.



“The twelfth Aine has been chosen. Sonoma Eko of the Emerald Forest fae, you have been found worthy by the Fates. Tonight, the chosen will take vows before the king and queen. Tonight, you will receive the sacred power of the Fairies.”

More cheers.

Amanti grins at me, but my own smile dims as my gaze is drawn to someone over her shoulder. Ire, the third Furiosity, watches me with an intensity that steals my breath. He is unnaturally still among a crowd set in motion. And every cell in his body seems trained on me.

Something passes between us, and my heart squeezes as I try to decipher what it is. Then Lesha steps in front of me, blocking my view of the handsome demon-king. The moment I lose sight of him, my leg buckles again, and I nearly drop before Lesha catches me.

“Hey, are you okay?”

“Yeah.” I glance down at where Heliconia had been scowling up at me, but she’s gone. “Just...”

“You’re bleeding.” Lesha gestures to the blood staining my leathers. I sag against her. “Amanti,” she calls sharply. “Help me.”

Without a single question, Amanti slides her arm around my waist, bracing my other side.

Lesha looks at me with concern lining her usually smooth features. “What happened?”

“Heliconia caught me with her nails,” I lie.

Amanti frowns. “It looks like something much sharper than a nail. Deeper too. Are you sure—?”

“I’m sure,” I say quickly as I catch sight of the Fates heading this way.

Lesha looks like she wants to press it, but Amanti grabs her and spins her around. When she sees the Fates approaching, she goes abruptly silent. The crowd quiets, everyone wanting to hear what the goddesses have to say.

When they get close, it's the crone who opens her mouth, but the voice that comes out is still a blend of the three. It's unsettling, but I focus on what they're saying rather than who is or isn't saying it.

"You did well, young fae," they say, all three of them looking at me.

I bow my head in reverence and respect. "Thank you. It's an honor to serve."

"Your opponent was willing to do anything to win," they add, and my head comes up sharply.

I search their blank gazes for some clue as to how much they saw, but their expressions give nothing away.

"Would you punish her if you were us?" they ask.

"I..." I note the absolute hush that's fallen over the crowd.

I glance around, searching for Heliconia among the faces of my sisters. Instead, I find Ire watching me intently. His brothers stand farther back where a plume of smoke is rising. They glance at him impatiently, clearly ready to be done with this place. But he doesn't move. His dark eyes are locked on mine as if he's hanging on my answer.

Amanti elbows me hard, and I swiftly return my gaze to the crone. "I am one of the Aine, sworn to protect our people even from themselves. She has my mercy, and I ask that she may have yours too."

The crone tilts her head, studying me, and I swallow hard, hoping my answer wasn't wrong. "You would show mercy to one who betrays our sacred rules?"

"I would put my vow above even my own desire for vengeance," I say.

Another pause. The Fates share a look that leaves my heart pounding. When they look back at me, it's the maiden whose mouth moves as their next words echo around me. "Self-restraint is often harder than self-defense. A lesson well learned, Aine. We will see you tonight."

As one, the Fates turn and make their way toward their tent. The crowd waits until they've made it beyond the edges of the circle before the murmuring picks up again.

Amanti groans, and Lesha squeaks her relief.

"We need to get you to the healer," Amanti says, but I don't answer as I search for Ire.

He's no longer standing where he was before. I crane my neck, straining to see over Lesha's shoulder. There. He's walking away from me. He joins his brothers near the trees, and a second later, all three of them vanish into the thick plume of smoke.

I stare into the mist, my heart strangely empty despite having secured the only future I've ever wanted for myself—one that doesn't leave any room for handsome males or intense connections with demon-gods.

## CHAPTER THREE



BY MOONRISE, I'M OFFICIALLY one of the twelve. My friends are on either side of me, and we take our vows, wearing white robes and crown garlands made from clematis and snake ivy. One by one, the Fates imbue us with their essence, breathing a speck of their immortal lives into our fae souls. Thankfully, it's the maiden who presses her mouth to ours in order to pass on the power they gift to us. I don't really want to imagine kissing the crone, though I'm sure I would have done it if she'd tried. Especially when the magic that courses through me as the maiden releases me eclipses anything I've felt before.

"You are now a container for the magic of this land," she whispers to me. "A Fairy, a formidable one."

Power bursts inside me, shooting through every vein and settling into every cell. My shoulders tingle then itch then burn as pain explodes in the center of my body. My chest burns as if something foreign has rooted deeply inside me. I gasp,

choking on a sharp cry as my knees buckle and I land on all fours. There's a ripping sound and a warm trickle of blood, and when I turn my head, I catch sight of the edge of a gossamer wing now protruding from my back.

Craning around for a better look, I note the pair of them with wonder. They flutter in the night air, a swarm of sensations racing through me as nerves come to life inside the spiderweb designs woven through them.

Fairy.

The ancient word for Aine.

A winged weapon whose power is drawn from the land.

I let out a laugh, joy overtaking the pain as I use brand-new muscles, and the wings flutter at my command.

"Here." I look up, and Lesha is standing over me, offering a hand. Her wings shimmer in the moonlight, beautiful and graceful and strong, like mine.

She pulls me to my feet, and my head swims before the world resettles around me.

Lesha and I share a quick grin. "Did you hear that?" she says.

"What?" I blink, still getting my bearings.

"You, me, Amanti—we were all named as the chosen for Sevanwinds," she says. "We're staying together!"

My eyes widen, and my chest lifts as relief and joy fill me. To have made it this far is a dream come true. To be allowed to remain in my kingdom with my best friends is beyond anything I let myself imagine.

I squeal and throw my arms around Lesha. Then Amanti is there, hugging us both and laughing and crying and laughing again. Finally, the Fates shush us, and we step back. We're not quite finished with our ceremony.

To seal our sacred role, the Fates pass around a goblet infused with the blood of the royals we're swearing to serve. The other Aine will travel to their kingdoms and pledge with

their own goblets soon enough. This is my moment, and I intend to soak it in to its fullest.

King Tyrion and Queen Celeste, newlyweds and newly crowned as the rulers of Sevanwinds, observe the ceremony from thrones fashioned out of hollowed-out oak, gifted by the druids who live in this part of the forest. The young faces of the two royals are somber yet grateful as my friends and I drink from the goblet.

When I've swallowed the sacred wine, I take a knee, overcome with the honor and incredible responsibility of this moment. My eyes fill with tears. The new power inside me is a tumultuous thing; a force I'll need time to learn to wield and command. Not to mention the wings, which are still a surreal miracle that hasn't quite sunk in yet.

Repeating the words, I pledge myself—heart and soul—to the Aine. “I vow to remain loyally devoted to the people of this realm and their protection above all else, forsaking marriage and any other attachment that might turn my focus from my sacred duties.”

“Rise, Sonoma,” Queen Celeste calls out.

I do, finally lifting my face to hers.

She smiles kindly. “We are honored to have your protection over these lands,” she says. “Thank you.”

I dip my chin. “I am honored to serve, Your Majesty.”

The words echo a conviction I feel all the way through my heart—even if that heart is slightly lonelier than it's ever been. Strange. Like I suddenly miss something that's never been there.

I push the thought aside and concentrate on enjoying the moment.

When the ceremony ends, the true celebration begins.

Music and dancing fill the forest, and a bonfire as big as my sleeping tent lights the night sky. Lesha joins the dancers while Amanti finds her place at my side, a cup of wine in hand. She sips it slowly while I empty mine in one long swig. The

warmth of it spreads through me, offering a heady boost to my already swelling emotions.

Thanks to an hour with the healer, the poison in my leg is nothing more than a phantom ache, but my thoughts drift to the injury anyway—and then to the one who gave it. Heliconia’s tent was empty when I went searching for her after our fight, and while I hate how things ended between us, it’s probably for the best. My place is here with my sisters. I hope she can find her own place.

Beside me, Amanti laughs suddenly. Her gaze is locked on a pile of leaves nearby. The fallen leaves stir softly then lift in a whirlwind gust that sends them dancing. Amanti looks over at me, her smile more playful than I’ve seen in a long time.

“It’s pretty amazing, isn’t it?” she asks. “I need to use some of it just to take the edge off.”

I nod. “I know what you mean.”

The power is immense. A living pulse that makes me sharply aware of the life teeming around me—and not just the lives of the fae celebrating here tonight. The spark the Fates gifted us is a deep connection to the earth itself. I have a keen sense of druids and forest animals, and magic, deeply buried in this realm, now partially alive inside me.

The Fates were right. We are all a container for the magic of this land, though it could just as easily become a weapon to wield should we need it.

As if to prove my point, Amanti’s leaf trick ends with them falling back to the ground and rotting into dust. A soft breeze carries away the remnants until every trace of her trick is gone.

She sighs contentedly and takes another sip of her wine.

The weight of responsibility to protect what we have settles between my shoulders. Or maybe it’s the longing that’s persisted since the moment Ire vanished into a plume of smoke.

That’s stupid.

I'm not some lovesick girl. I'm a fucking warrior. Feared and revered by my people. Respected by the goddesses themselves.

"You ready to tell me what was going on earlier?" Amanti's question snaps me out of my thoughts.

I shake my head. "Heliconia didn't mean it. She just wanted to win."

"On that, we disagree, but I was talking about the little moment you had with the third Furiosity."

I cut her a look and find her watching me with an expression that says I'm not going to be able to brush it off. Not with her.

"I don't know," I admit. "I was just...distracted."

She rolls her eyes. "Yes, we were all distracted. No one's seen a prince of Hel and lived to tell the tale. I think the question is what possessed you to *touch* one?"

"King."

"Excuse me?"

"The legends call them kings of Hel. Not princes."

"I see. And will you be addressing him formally with that title, or are you two on a first-name basis now?"

"I met him for five seconds," I scoff. "I'm not on any basis."

"You could've fooled me."

"What are you talking about?"

"Look." She points, and I peer into the forest.

At first, I see nothing in the thick shadows, but then my newly honed senses pierce the glamour.

Ire.

He watches me inside a glamour of smoke and shadow. My stomach flips at the sight of him—here, now, and for what? I try to convince myself he's here for the Fates, but then he tips his head in invitation.

To me.



Nerves and anticipation beat like Fairy wings inside me. Refusing him would be rude, maybe even dangerous, given what and who he is. But it's more than that. So much more.

"I'll be right back," I murmur.

"Be careful," she warns, and the double meaning laced into her words isn't lost on me.

I hand her my empty cup and break away from the celebration, my footsteps completely silent as I walk into the darkness to meet the third Fury. He doesn't move as I approach, nor does he offer a greeting. I wonder if he's here to kill me for my impertinence at the fight or simply to sate his curiosity about traditions he's largely been left out of for eternity.

"Are you here to celebrate?" I ask though it sounds stupid the moment the words are out.

There's absolutely nothing celebratory or joyful about this male's demeanor. In fact, everything about him screams dread and darkness.

"I'm not here at all," he says, his low voice like a forbidden caress against my skin.

"I don't understand."

"My brothers have placed their bets on this turning of the wheel. They don't think the Aine will prevail in the end."

The wine swims in my brain, and I blink, trying to clear my thoughts so I can make sense of his words. "Prevail against what?"

"That's what makes it all so exciting," he says, though his voice suggests he thinks it's anything but. "We don't know what the darkness is yet. Only that the prophecy has foretold its coming. And when you've lived as long as they have, any unknown becomes a thrill."

An unknown darkness? In this realm?

"What is this prophecy?" I ask, wary now. "Who made it?"

“The Fates and Furiocities don’t agree on much, but in this, we are united: The gods and goddesses have seen a vision of death and darkness over this land.”

“The fae of Sevanwinds will not be conquered.”

“Sevanwinds falls—of that, I have no doubt.”

Fear stirs inside me, but I shove it away. “The Aine are powerful,” I say. “We will stand against any threat to our people. We will die for them if necessary.”

“Why?”

I frown. “Why what?”

“Why would you die for people you’ve never met?”

“Because I swore an oath.”

He sighs. “Is that all? What an incredibly boring way to live.”

Irritation flares, distracting me from the attractive angle of his jaw and the way his dark hair curves messily over his forehead. “Maybe for an immortal like you, but for our kind, there’s a thrill in having a limited time to stand for something—to risk it all for what you believe in.”

He takes a step toward me, and my heart pounds.

His aura isn’t something I remember noting this morning. Maybe it’s the new magic inside me, but up close, it’s impossible not to feel how incredibly powerful he is. Impossible not to notice how handsome. His scar is a jagged line that glints in the moonlight. I find myself staring at it.

His lips curve knowingly, and I look away before I can do something stupid like touch it again.

“Was I right?” he asks.

“About what?”

“Did she give you a scar?” His gaze dips to my leg where Heliconia stabbed me during our fight this morning.

Had he known what she would do?

“I don’t know yet.” I pull my dress up to reveal the bandage covering the wound on my thigh. With careful movements, I peel it off and inspect the mark left behind. “The poison slowed the healing so it looks like you might be right.”

When I glance up again, his gaze is wandering the length of my exposed thigh, lingering longest on the places he can’t see. My skin prickles with an awareness that leaves an ache low in my belly.

In the clearing behind me, someone shrieks. It’s followed by jubilant laughter, and the sound of it jolts me. I let my dress fall away again, smoothing it with my hands.

“The fae who injured you was your friend.”

I look back at him and find his brow furrowed. “Heliconia. Yes. She *was* my friend. I don’t think she’d call herself that anymore.”

“Yet she attempted to mortally wound you to ensure her victory.”

“Being chosen to compete is an honor.” How can I possibly make him understand when he’s never known what it’s like not to be the best? “There’s a lot of pressure not to fail.”

“You are not like the others,” he says, shaking his head.

“What do you mean?”

“You offered mercy to the one who tried to kill you. And you continue to defend her choices.”

“I won. Why inflict more pain? Her loss is punishment enough.”

“I admire your empathy, as naïve as it is.”

“I am not naïve.” I scowl.

“Sweet then.” His smile is fleeting. “But her insecurity is a weakness that infects the mind. She is not finished.”

*Not finished?*

“How do you know?”

“I just do.”

His words are so final that I can't bring myself to press him for more even though my mind is racing already. Heliconia didn't show up tonight. I assumed she was off feeling bad about what happened today, but if there's more to it, I need to know.

Instead of demanding an answer, I blurt out the real question burning inside me. "Why did you come here tonight?"

"Tell me, little Fairy, what will you do with the swell of magic the Fates have put inside you?"

"I will use it to protect my king and queen."

"And what if your king and queen do not deserve your protection?"

"It's not a matter of deserving. I have taken a vow, and I will not break it."

"You would serve those who do not deserve your loyalty?"

"My loyalty is to my promise. My word must be as strong as any weapon, or it is meaningless."

He studies me with the same intensity he did this morning. I resist the urge to squirm beneath his sharp gaze, but my heart races.

"You are not like the others," he says again, softer this time, as if he's surprised.

"What others?" How many Aine has he known? Or, more disturbing, how many females are waiting for him back in Hel?

I dislike how it feels to think of him with someone else.

"For a thousand years, my brothers and I have watched the selection from afar. None of the chosen have ever had a heart like yours."

"How would you know if you've never met them?" I ask.

"The Furies see what you are whether up close or far away."

"And what am I?"

“You are different, Sonoma Eko. You are something new.”

His words hit me in places I thought I’d closed away. Places that have no right to awaken now that I’ve taken the vow of the Aine.

Places that are forbidden to me.

To him.

He takes a step toward me, closing the remaining distance between us. He stands close enough that I feel his breath on my face. His scent hits me: a musky, smoky smell that clogs my senses until there’s only him.

His scar. His eyes. His hand reaching for my face.

He cups my chin with his thumb and finger, his full mouth parting as he leans toward me.

There’s more than enough time to stop him. But I don’t. I can’t.

His lips brush mine, and my senses ignite. I sigh, leaning into him as if I’m no longer able to stand by my own strength. His hand comes to my hip, pulling me flush against him. I’m acutely aware of the hard planes of his chest and the lithe muscles hidden beneath his clothes.

My body aches for more of him. For a deeper kiss. A touch

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I break the kiss, stepping back with a gasp that doesn’t do nearly enough to remind me of what I’m supposed to be. What I am.

“I can’t,” I rasp, the words paining me.

Ire doesn’t move, but he watches me with a deeply etched frown marring his beautiful face. “I know,” he says quietly.

We share a long look, and I realize he does know. He’s been here all night, watching, witnessing me take the vow that forbade this exact moment. That stole any possible future we might have. And still, he kissed me. And I kissed him.

The pleasure-pain that squeezes my heart is exquisite, but I force myself to take another step back. Here, the scent of him

isn't quite as intoxicating. My mind clears a bit more, and guilt stabs at me for what I've already done.

Ire doesn't look nearly as sorry, though what did I expect from a king of Hel?

"I'm sorry," I say, though I'm not sure those words are genuine.

I've never had to remind myself of my duty, but I do it now. This male is forbidden. The feelings he stirs in me even more so. I have taken my vow, and I don't intend to break it. Not even for him.

## CHAPTER FOUR



I RETURN TO THE party, but I no longer feel like celebrating. Amanti presses me for details of my encounter with the god-king. Rather than try to make sense of my complicated feelings, I tell her of his warning about the prophecy. She looks just as dubious as I felt, but she doesn't dismiss it. She's too cautious, too strategic to do something as reckless as ignore a possible threat.

"Do you think he's right?" I ask, watching her expression as her mind turns it over and over. "About death and darkness coming to the realm?"

"I think he believes it. Though, there's no proof it'll happen on our watch," she adds.

That last part doesn't offer much comfort. Maybe if it were on our watch, we could stop it. Somehow.

"What else did he say?" she asks.

“Um, he asked about my injury.” My face flushes with heat.

“Uh-huh.” Her gaze is razor-sharp, like she’s seeing straight into my thoughts. “What else?”

“That’s about it.”

She doesn’t look remotely convinced, and I brace myself for her to push for more. But she surprises me by shaking her head. “Be careful, Sonoma.” Her words are soft rather than the lecture I expect.

It shatters my defenses.

I exhale, shoulders sagging. “I think it might be too late for that.”

Hours later, the entire camp is finally tucked in for what’s left of the night—except for me. I’m wide awake in my bed, staring at the tent ceiling like it holds the answers to problems I never imagined for myself.

Becoming one of the Aine is all I’ve ever wanted.

Taking a vow of loyalty to my sisters—to my crown—never felt like a sacrifice. Until I met Ire. Now, it feels less like an honor and more like a prison. The more I try to stop thinking about him, the more it feels as if my heart is being pulled in half.

Exhausted and frustrated, I toss back the covers and get up.

My training uniform feels like too much work, so I pull a robe over my sheer gown, push my feet into my boots, and slip out into the darkness. The cicadas offer a lazy song as I walk out of camp and into the forest.

I veer off to avoid the remains of last night’s party. The cleanup crew will likely be up before sunrise to deal with it, and I’m in no mood to greet them. Instead, I venture into the thickest parts of the forest—away from our perimeter checks and common areas. It’s the only way to get privacy, but it means fighting through dense shrubs and carving my own path.

Before long, I resort to using a bit of Fairy magic to clear the way.



The rush of magic distracts me from my dark mood, coursing through me like adrenaline until I'm breathless with the feel of it beneath my skin. Eventually, I come to a large rock that juts out over a bend in the creek. The formation is tall and hollow beneath the smooth landing that sits just above my head. I duck beneath it and sit on the soft grass, tucking my knees up and wrapping my arms around them.

The cicadas sound far away down here.

I pretend it's the entire world that's far away. Including my problems. But no, those have followed me here. I know it the moment the figure steps into the opening. Some part of me expected him, I think, because I don't even startle.

In the darkness, Ire looks down at me, his hands shoved into the pockets of his dress pants. His shirt sleeves are rolled up at the elbows, and the top two buttons are undone. The disheveled look of his hair only adds to the messy-sexiness he exudes.

I stare up at him, dazed by how handsome he is. And how hungry he looks—for me.

"You shouldn't be here," he says.

My temper flares at that. This is my realm, not his. If anyone shouldn't be here, it's him. "Don't you have an underworld to rule or something?"

His lips twitch. "When you put it like that..."

But he doesn't leave. Instead, he ducks below the rock and sits across from me in the mossy grass. He pulls his knees up and dangles his arms on them. I find myself ogling his muscled forearms and large, beautiful hands. Ugh, even his hands are pretty.

"What are you thinking about?" he asks.

My gaze flicks to his. He watches me, bemused.

"How many people have you tortured?" I ask.

He scoffs. "That's what you're thinking about?"

“I was thinking about your hands,” I admit. “And then I wondered what those hands are capable of.”

He lifts a brow, and my face heats as I realize the innuendo.

“Torture,” I add hastily. “You’re a ruler of Hel. I just wondered—”

His mouth quirks. “You think Hel is about pain and suffering?”

“Isn’t it?”

He shrugs. “Not any more than this realm.”

He’s teasing me. I can tell. But I don’t think he’s lying either. “Hel isn’t... I mean, you’re not...a monster?”

“You tell me.”

I scowl. “I don’t know you.”

“Would you like to?”

“I don’t know what you—”

He scoots closer and holds his hand out, palm up.

I hesitate.

His eyes twinkle like he finds my hesitation amusing, but he doesn’t reach for me. He simply waits for me to offer it willingly and says, “Would you like to read what’s in my heart?”

“How would I do that?”

“I’ll open it for you. Let you in. So you can see what I am for yourself.” When I don’t respond, he adds, “It’s the same magic I used to read yours.”

I glare. “I didn’t let you do that.”

“You didn’t stop me.”

I could argue that I didn’t know *how* to stop him. Or that I needed to even try. But he’s right. My heart has been wide open for him since the moment we met. Besides, the temptation to look into his heart is too much to pass up.

Tentatively, I place my hand in his. My skin tingles at the contact. His hand is warm and sure, his palm lightly calloused, which surprises me. Between his title and his clothes, I didn't expect any sign of physical labor. It turns me on more than it should to know he's willing to get his hands dirty.

I shove the thought away and focus on our joined hands.

"Now what?" I ask.

"Use your magic," he says.

I have no idea what he means, exactly, but I've come too far not to try. Exhaling, I close my eyes, concentrating on our joined hands. His fingers tighten around mine, and I ignore the way my stomach flutters at that. Pushing past my attraction, I feel my Aine magic flaring to life. It rushes to the spaces inside me that are attuned to him, racing on ahead as if it knows the way.

"Keep going," he whispers, encouraging me.

I follow the magic, and a second later, visions come to life behind my lids. Ire, laughing and joking with his brothers in a realm that looks more like this one than I ever imagined it would. Ire hugging a woman much older than him. Kissing her cheek. Leading his army into battle, war paint streaked across his formidable face. Fighting a man with a knife, defending a child who hovers behind him for safety. The knife slices across his cheek deeply. This is how he got his scar.

Glimpses of Ire's life fly by too fast for me to see them all. Some are filled with battle and blood. Some are even filled with torture, like I feared. But none feel cold or cruel. At the core of every image is Ire's heart. His intentions are rooted in loyalty, passion, protection—of his realm and his family—but most of all, his heart is rooted in love. And when he's hidden away behind closed doors, there's a depth to that love that's become a longing.

A loneliness that was quenched the moment he saw me in that warrior's circle.

The magic recedes, taking the visions with them.

When it's over, I know that this male before me is not the monster the stories have painted him to be. He is capable of death and destruction, as they say, but he wields his power only against those who threaten what he loves most.

And he is mine if I want him.

I open my eyes and find Ire watching me with uncertainty. As if carved from stone, he sits and watches my reaction. I hold tight to his hand and, with my other hand, reach up and trace his scar like I did when we first met.

“You're not a monster,” I say.

“Sshh, don't tell anyone. You'll ruin my image.” His smile is teasing, but relief swims in his eyes.

I smile back, my resistance softening then crumbling completely.

He moves fast then—so fast I don't see it coming or have time to decide before he's closed the distance and is kissing me. But the decision's already made.

I kiss him back, feverish for more. He leans over me, wrapping one hand behind my neck. Gently, he pushes me to the grass. Then, he's over me, pressing his hard body against mine, exploring my mouth with his tongue, nipping at my lip as he slips his hand inside my robe and grips my hip with a strength that thrills me.

I rock against him, aching for more, and he immediately obliges. He runs a rough hand down to my thigh, catching the hem of my gown and pushing it up. I'm not exactly inexperienced, but in this moment, I'm trembling with anticipation. Everything with Ire feels new, every touch between us unexplored terrain.

He trails his fingers lazily down my bared skin then cups my center in a sudden, possessive move.

I gasp, and he breaks our kiss long enough to shoot me a smoldering look. “You can stop this now,” he says. “But once we begin, you're mine, little fae.”

I should stop him.

I should leave and return to my tent—and my life.

We are impossible together.

But I don't.

I arch into his touch, rubbing myself against his calloused palm and drawing his mouth back to mine. His answering growl ignites me, and I kiss him like this is the last moment we'll ever have. Since it very well might be, I don't plan to leave a single regret behind.

He slips his hand inside my panties, his fingers tracing through my folds. I shudder, clinging to him as he pushes one finger inside me.

“You're wet for me, little warrior,” he murmurs against my ear.

His erection is pressing against my thigh, and I find it with my hand, gripping it and eliciting a hiss from his delicious mouth. He strokes a finger in and out of me, nudging my thighs apart before adding another finger.

“Ire,” I gasp.

He kisses a trail across my throat. “What do you need, my love?”

“I need you inside me.”

“Mmm.” He shoves my gown down to reveal my breast and captures my nipple in his mouth.

I arch upward, pleasure rocketing through me as he stretches me with his fingers.

“Please,” I plead.

He releases me and lifts his head, his smile devious. In this moment, he is every inch the dark god of the underworld. Except the torture he's offering is pure pleasure. And I want everything he's willing to give.

He shifts his weight, lifting his body away from me, and I grab his belt, impatient to free him. He grins, not bothering to stop me as he continues stroking his fingers in and out of me. Breathless, I yank his belt off and toss it aside then unclasp his

pants. With rough movements, I shove them down until his cock springs free.

Panting, I wrap my hand around his impressive length. He sucks in a sharp breath, his dark eyes heavy-lidded as he looks down at me with a desire that steals my breath. I slowly slide my hand up and down his shaft.

He groans.

His fingers move a bit faster, and my pleasure builds.

“I’m going to come,” I whisper.

“Fuck,” he mutters. “Yes.”

He bends and kisses me roughly, his free hand twisting my nipple sharply, and my orgasm explodes. I make a sound that he swallows with a kiss, never altering his pace while I ride out my pleasure.

When I stop bucking, he eases back, his hand covering mine where I’m still gripping him. He guides my strokes in a lazy rhythm, and it’s the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen, watching him control my movements.

“Now, I’ll give you what you really want,” he says, his voice gravelly, and I tremble with renewed longing.

He slides his fingers out of my pussy. I sigh, hating the loss of him, but he steps quickly out of his pants and returns to me, angling his body so that his cock presses against my entrance. Somewhere along the way, I unbuttoned his shirt, and I run my hands over the hard planes of his chest.

He leans in and brushes a soft kiss to my swollen lips.

“You were meant for me,” he whispers, echoing my vision.

Before I can think about the words, he’s pushing into me, and I can only think about the pleasure of him filling me. Consuming me.

He starts slow, watching me as I take him in. But my hips rock, impatient for more, and he grins.

“You feel like heaven,” he groans.

“How would you know?” I shoot back, and he laughs as he slams inside me.

My breath catches as he sets a pace that is deliciously fast. I wrap my arms around him, my nails digging into his back and then his ass. He groans at that, and I press harder, pulling him into me as tightly as possible.

His forehead rests against mine, his breath hot on my face as he drives into me over and over again. I keep my eyes open, not wanting to miss a single second of this. Of him. He barely blinks as he holds my gaze, his depthless eyes threatening to swallow me whole. He’s devastating like this—looking at me like I’m all he cares about, fucking me like we were made for each other.

He bends to kiss me, his tongue claiming my mouth the same way his cock is claiming my pussy.

“I’m going to—” I don’t even finish the sentence before I’m swept off the edge. I grip his hips, my breath whooshing out of me as I soar.

Ire’s body tenses before his deep voice sounds in my ear as he groans. His warmth spills inside me, and I lock my ankles around him, riding the wave alongside him as we come together.

When he lifts his head again, I can already feel reality returning. Worry and regret creep closer, but I shove them away, wanting this to last just a bit longer before I have to face what we’ve done.

Ire looks down at me, his dark eyes knowing. He cups my cheek, brushing his thumb over my lips. “Don’t.”

“Don’t what?”

“Regret me.”

His words pierce my heart. I blink back tears, promising to make time for them later. “I don’t,” I say, half-meaning it.

He kisses me, but it’s softer now, lingering and sad. He knows I’m lying. He knows this is the end.

My heart squeezes as he finally breaks the kiss and gets up.

Rearranging my gown and robe, I watch as he gets dressed. The sky is lightening toward dawn. The space between night and day is all we had, and now that's gone too.

I try not to be sad, but I can't be anything else. Not when he pulls me to my feet and looks at me like he's already lost me forever.

"You are meant for me," he says, but he's not trying to argue with my decision.

I push up onto my toes and press a kiss to his full mouth. "I will never be anyone else's," I whisper.

That will have to be enough.



## CHAPTER FIVE



THE NEXT SIX WEEKS of training are brutal. The first six months were apparently only a warm-up compared to what waited for us after the selection. The morning after we took our vows, the Fates vanished—taking the other Aine to their assigned kingdoms where they made their vows to the crowns they now serve—before returning to finish our training.

Heliconia vanished too, which leaves me uneasy after what happened between us, but I've been too exhausted to do much about it.

Then there's Ire. I haven't seen or heard from him since I left him standing by the creek, and it's left my heart hollow. It shouldn't. My future is set. I am one of the Aine until I die and cross over into the Otherworld. There can be nothing between us. Even so, the emptiness inside me has only gotten worse these last few weeks.

It's an ache I haven't shared with anyone, not even Lesha and Amanti.

Today, Valoria, the most powerful—and the oldest—Aine in the entire realm, leads my afternoon magic instruction. She's hard of hearing, so everything she says is a shout. I always leave with a headache, and today is no different—except that today, Lesha pounces on me the moment class is over.

“Come on, I need something to take the edge off this migraine,” she says, pulling me along.

Normally, I would shush her before the elders can hear, but there's not much chance of that happening.

Amanti catches up to us as the others disburse. “Thank the goddesses that's over.”

“My head is killing me from all the yelling,” Lesha gripes.

“I can zap you with a bolt of Fairy magic,” Amanti offers mischievously.

Zapping is her new favorite hobby, and she's way too good at it.

“That would hurt like hell,” Lesha protests.

“Yeah, but you wouldn't be thinking about a headache anymore,” Amanti tosses back.

“Hilarious,” Lesha says haughtily. “But I have a better idea. Walnut toffee anyone?”

I turn to her, instantly suspicious. “Since when do you have walnut toffee?”

Lesha grins. “Since I found a stash hidden at the northern entrance. Come on.”

Amanti and I exchange a look. Neither of us bothers to voice our concerns, but she has to be just as wary as I am about some random stash of sweets in the woods. We're far enough outside the city that anything out here could only belong to another Aine, which is a problem since none of us are supposed to have food other than our provided meals.

The northern entrance is a secondary access that opens into the Trolech Forest. No one in the camp really uses it since the road from Sevanwinds doesn't extend that far. The path is much narrower, the overgrowth thicker from disuse. By the time we trek to the place where Lesha claims her treats are hidden, the temperature has dropped enough that I'm rubbing my arms.

Directly north, I glimpse the Concordian mountain ranges above the treetops. Their peaks are tipped in white where the snow coats them year-round. Looking at them, I can almost feel the chill on my skin. But here, where my friends and I stand among the honeysuckle and oleander, Sevanwinds's eternal summer offers plenty of warmth. What would it be like to live in a cold climate with snow half the year?

For some reason, it makes me think of Ire. Has he ever seen snow? They probably don't get a lot of that in Hel.

"Are you sure you know where you left these supposed treats?" Amanti asks dubiously while Lesha searches from tree to tree.

"Here," Lesha says, stopping in front of a large pine.

I frown. How could anything possibly be hidden out in the open like this?

But Lesha waves her hand over the trunk of an old oak, and it gives way to a hollowed center with a stash of wrappers. Lesha grabs one and holds it up triumphantly. "See? Jackpot."

A stiff breeze stirs. My senses prickle with sudden unease. Something about this place doesn't feel right.

"Lesha, how did you find that?" I ask warily.

At my tone, Amanti is at my side instantly. Lesha's smile dims. "I was out here practicing my magic homework and accidentally uncovered the glamour. Clever, right?"

She peels back the wrapper.

I take a step toward her. My arms tingle, and the hairs on the back of my neck suddenly stand on end as my magic registers a threat.

“Lesha, wait,” I call just as she brings it to her mouth to take a bite.

## CHAPTER SIX



THE WIND BECOMES A cyclone, but it's short-lived and nothing more than a distraction. When it settles, a familiar face stands in the shadows of the trees.

Heliconia looks nearly the same as the last time I saw her. The only change is in the glint of her eyes. It's sharper somehow. More vicious.

She aims it at Lesha first, snarling. "Gods, that was so fucking easy. How in the Hels did someone so pathetically gullible become an Aine?"

"What are you doing here?" Lesha demands.

"Drop the chocolate," Amanti hisses at her.

Lesha's expression morphs to horror as she finally puts it all together. She drops the wrapper, and it falls to the ground at her feet. Faint smoke rises from within the foil—poison.

Heliconia's favorite, apparently.

“You lured us out here on purpose,” Amanti says, her words clipped.

She’s pissed, and unlike some who lose their edge with a temper, Amanti only gets deadlier with hers.

“Very good.” Heliconia rolls her eyes. “Gold star for the A student.”

“Your jealousy is showing,” Amanti says, her wings unfurling as she readies for a fight.

I brace myself for Heliconia to snap at her, but she turns her glare on me. “Not jealousy. Disgust. You don’t deserve the title you’ve been given, and you know it.”

“What do you want, Heliconia?” I ask, already weary of this little showdown she’s concocted.

It’s not like she can fight us and win. Not with our Fairy magic, and not three against one. So, what’s her end game?

“I want to hear you say that you’re weak,” she snaps.

“Why would I say that?” I ask.

“Because we both know it’s true. You shouldn’t have won that last fight. You don’t deserve the power given to you.”

“And you do?” Amanti challenges.

Heliconia’s gaze flicks to Amanti’s wings. Jealousy ripples across her expression, but it turns quickly to cruel disgust. “You have the power of the realm inside you. Magic so ancient it doesn’t have a name anymore. Gifted from the goddesses who created our world. And what do you do with it? Use it to find hidden sweets?” She glances at Lesha, who scowls. “Make piles of leaves dance and rot?” she adds with a pointed look at Amanti. “You play tricks when you could rule this realm.”

“That’s not what the Aine are meant for, and you know it,” Amanti says in a low voice.

Her wings flutter in warning. She’s losing her patience with this conversation. I don’t blame her.

“Well, maybe they should be,” Heliconia says, and that glint in her eye twinkles with something that conjures images of violence in my mind’s eye.

Ire’s words come back to me—about death and darkness. Some threat against our world. A prophecy that Sevanwinds will fall.

Fear ripples through me, followed by fury. I fist my hands at my sides, gathering power so quickly it shoves out of me like thunder.

The air cracks.

Trees tremble.

Heliconia is driven back a step as the magic shoves her.

It’s one single thrust, but it’s enough.

She watches me with hatred in her eyes. I wonder, for the first time, if I made a mistake in showing her mercy before.

“You are no longer welcome in this place,” I say, my voice booming to match the magic coursing through me.

It’s the first time I’ve really used my Aine presence, and the magic swimming inside me suggests I’ve barely scratched the surface.

“You are banished from this forest,” I add before she can argue. “Go.”

She doesn’t move.

“Go!” The boom that accompanies my order shakes the earth beneath her feet.

She bends her knees, barely managing to stay upright. But it works. She turns to go.

Her glare is acid as she looks back at me. “This isn’t over.”

“Damn right it’s not,” Amanti fires back at her.

Heliconia marches off, and I watch her go. Ire was right. Heliconia’s not done. The vision is nothing more than a flash as I think the words, but it’s sharply disturbing: Heliconia snatching power she has no right to wield—and using it to

bring the realm to its knees at her feet. In that flash, I know one thing for certain: she is the darkness in the prophecy. And I have no idea how to stop her.



## CHAPTER SEVEN



IN THE MIDDLE OF the night, I wake to a silence that leaves a pit in my stomach. My tent is pitch dark. I scan quickly, my heart thudding. The power of the Aine inside me offers enough sight to make out shadowy shapes in my tent. My trunk. A small clothing rack. My weapons. There's nothing else here, but I can't shake the feeling that something—or someone—is close.

Heliconia.

Urgency has me tossing aside the covers and climbing to my feet. After pulling on clothes, I shove my feet into my boots and ease back the tent flap, listening.

An unearthly silence answers. Not even the cicadas call out.

A shiver runs down my spine.

There's danger here.

Slipping out of my tent, I scan the camp for any sign of movement. A dozen other tents are scattered around the large clearing. Wideset trees border us on all sides, but I can't see beyond the outer ring of canvas tents, not from this vantage point.

With silent steps, I make my way through the sleeping camp.

At the eastern gate, I pause, looking for the night guard. One of the Aine must always stand watch. Tonight, it was Eloise's turn. But I don't see her anywhere.

Heading for the sentry point, I use my Aine power to draw from the land and follow the trail of life that starts in the exact place where Eloise should've been standing. The trail leads deeper into the woods, the scent of death cloying the farther I walk. My heart thuds, and my hands twitch with the tension of muscles at the ready.

Finally, the scent overtakes all else, and my eyes land on a figure lying prone in the leaves.

My heart lurches, and I rush over, dropping beside the figure and pulling back the blond hair that covers her face.

Eloise.

Her throat is cut, blood coating the gaping wound as her life force drains back into the earth beneath her.

My stomach roils, and rage scorches my veins for whoever would do this.

I look around for some clue, but the blood is drying, which means the killer could be long gone already.

"I had hoped the prophecy would wait until your time as an Aine was over."

The voice, male and deep and startling as it cuts through the quiet, has me shoving to my feet and ready to fight. But then I realize I know that voice.

From the shadows, Ire emerges.

His dark clothes have been pressed into crisp lines and his hair smoothed into obedience. He looks handsome and completely out of my league, considering I'm here in fighting leathers and a messy braid.

Not that any of it matters given that he's standing over my dead friend.

"What are you doing here?" I ask.

"I came to warn you."

"Warn me of what? That you killed my friend?" My need to fight something—anything—for this atrocity is a tornado inside me.

But Ire remains calm and unaffected by my accusation. "I didn't take her life. But you should worry about who did."

"Who else is powerful enough to kill an Aine?" I demand. "And how did you know to warn me if it wasn't you?"

"The Furiocities are gods of rage. My power grows stronger with every dark and hardened heart in this world. I've felt this shift coming for some time. And I don't want—" He stops, breaking my gaze as some shadow passes over his expression.

My fury turns to a burning in my chest that won't let go. I've dreamt of him every night since we last spoke. To meet like this now...it turns my dreams to nightmares. "Don't want what?"

At my strangled whisper, he looks back at me, the intensity in his eyes igniting my heart. Whatever he sees in me has him closing the distance. Out of pure reflex, I back away, but he keeps coming. Ire is an ethereal force of nature beyond anything my power can resist. Or maybe it's not my power that needs to resist him at all—it's my heart.

But my heart tugs at me to lean into his hard body and not away from it.

*Traitor.*

"I want you to survive what's coming, little fae." He grips my chin, forcing me to hold his gaze. "No, I want you to do more than survive. I want you to live. To love and fuck and be

so filled with this mortal life that you have nothing left to cling to when your time here is done. Because when your flesh is finished with your soul, I intend to make it mine for eternity.”

I am pinned by his words, rendered helpless by the feelings that stir inside me. I shouldn't want this. I can't want him. There's no future for us with the life I've chosen. But I find myself unable to keep from asking with a hope so tenuous that a gust of wind would break it in two, “What do you want with my soul?”

“To protect it. To be worthy of it.”

His words are touching but only highlight all the reasons why this can't work. Namely, what I am. And what he is. And the chasm between those two things. “Why me?”

“You are rare, little fae. Your heart has no darkness. It shouldn't draw me in, not when there's no power to be gained from possessing something so pure, but I can't resist your light. You are a siren pulling me under, and I would go willingly to my own demise if I thought it would get me one step closer to you. You are meant for me, remember?”

“Ire...”

His gaze flicks to my mouth. “I can't want this either, you know. My brothers would not approve.”

“I've thought about you,” I admit.

He blinks, and the hope that leaps into his magnetic gaze steals my breath. “What have you thought about?”

Seeing the hope in him makes me braver, so I answer honestly. “The way you touched me. How it felt. How it would feel again.”

“Little fae,” he whispers, leaning in so close that his warm breath caresses my lips.

Still, I don't move, too afraid to close the distance but not strong enough to pull away.

Once again, he makes the decision for me.

He brushes his mouth against mine, and sparks shoot through me. I sigh against his lips, and he growls deep in his throat. He wraps his arms around me, dragging me toward him until I'm pressed tightly against his chest. Here, the rest of the world disappears, and I gladly let it. His hands, possessive, tangle in my loose braid. Then, he sweeps his tongue into my mouth as if I'm the air he so desperately needs.

I lose myself in his kiss, forgetting all the reasons I shouldn't be here doing this. Even the threat of a killer loose in the forest isn't enough to make me stop him. Instead, I lean in, wanting more—more friction, more pleasure, more of the demon god holding me in his arms as if he would worship at my feet if I let him.

For a fleeting second, I see it. A future full of this. Kisses in the moonlight. Being wanted and possessed by a male who makes me feel alive in a way I never have before. A lifetime of love.

“Well, well, well,” drawls a voice that not only shatters the moment but threatens to ruin the rest of my life in the process. “What do we have here?”

I rip myself from Ire's grasp, stepping away and turning fully to face the intruder. My eyes narrow, and the power of the Aine stirs inside me, telling me exactly what she's doing here. And exactly what she did earlier tonight—to Eloise.

Ire was wrong.

There is plenty of fury inside me now—all aimed at Heliconia.

# CHAPTER EIGHT



HELICONIA PEERS OUT FROM beneath the hood of a black cloak. Her gaze is triumphant, and I flush at what she just saw me doing. But the moment I smell Eloise’s blood on her, my embarrassment becomes a thirst for vengeance.

“Traitor!” I roar.

My power erupts, and I fling my magic at her in full force. But Heliconia lifts her forearm, deflecting my blow.

I stare, horrified, as I realize she’s gained strength since last we met. But the only creature who could stand against power like this... My gaze darts to Eloise’s body. “No,” I breathe.

Heliconia smirks. “Oh yes, *sister*. I am one of you now.”

“It doesn’t work like that,” I tell her, baring my teeth as I sidestep away from the demon-god.

Ire is silent, taking it all in, but I don’t want to chance him intervening. I intend to fight this battle on my own. It’s the

least I can do for my fallen friend.

“You’re right,” Heliconia agrees. “The bit of power I was able to steal from that bitch’s blood isn’t nearly enough.” Her expression darkens. “I need more for what I have planned.”

“You can try to take mine,” I say, bracing myself for the attack I know is coming. “But you won’t get anything beyond a slow death. And when the Fates learn what you’ve done here, your afterlife will be spent in Hel.”

At that, she lazily cuts her gaze to Ire. “Is it really all that bad?” she asks him. “Hel, I mean. Then again, it must be boring if you’re looking for a quick lay in this realm.”

I tense, but Ire reacts before I can make a move. A force wraps around Heliconia’s throat, squeezing. She struggles against it with her fists, her breaths nothing more than choked gasps.

“Kill me, and I’ll tell them,” she rasps. “The Fates...”

Alarm shoots through me as I realize what she means. Ire only tightens his grip. Heliconia’s entire body goes taut with her struggle. Her gasps are cut short, her fight now silent and panicked.

I turn to Ire, my fear overtaking even my anger. “Ire,” I say. “I can’t let her tell them. About us.”

He turns to me, ambivalent about Heliconia’s struggle. “I can intervene with the Fates,” he says. “You will not be harmed.”

“But I would lose my position,” I say, my voice cracking with desperation. “I would’ve broken my vow and would no longer be one of the Aine.” I hesitate, my heart shattering as I say, “Please.”

Pain flashes in his eyes. He blinks, and it’s gone. “For you.”

The force strangling Heliconia suddenly releases her. She falls to her knees, wheezing and gasping and coughing. Ire presses himself closer to my side as if ready to protect me from her next move. But she only climbs slowly to her feet

and looks back at us with a steadfast smugness that makes me wonder if I've made a mistake saving her. Again.

"Good choice, *Your Majesty*," she says, sarcasm dripping from the title.

"You won't say anything," I add, the words coming out somewhere between a statement and a question.

"It's not quite that simple," she says. "There's still the matter of Eloise. We both know, the moment you're back at camp, you'll scurry off to tell everyone what happened here tonight. At which point, I'll be forced to exact my revenge by exposing your little romance. It's very predictable, really."

My chest tightens, and I hate myself a little more as I say, "I won't tell if you won't."

Heliconia's eyes gleam, so I'm clearly playing right into whatever little plan she's concocted. "Tell you what. You get your little boyfriend to gift me a piece of his power, and I won't tell the Fates you couldn't handle celibacy."

"What? No." I shake my head. "You already stole Eloise's magic. I won't allow you any more power when we both know you'll just use it to hurt more people."

"Fine. I hope you two are very happy together in Hel." She blows a kiss and starts to leave.

"Wait." Ire's voice rings out, crisp and firm.

I look at him, horror filling me. "No," I say. "You can't do this. She doesn't deserve it—"

"She doesn't," he agrees quietly. "But you do. You are the purest soul I've ever known, Sonoma Eko. This realm needs you to protect it a while longer."

I hesitate, unable to produce another argument. I don't know if he's right about my soul, but if Heliconia is the threat from the prophecy, I owe it to the realm to stop her. Still, what he's offering is too much.

"I can't let you do this for me," I say, but I've already lost the argument. We both know it.



He takes my hand. “After tonight, you will never see me again. You will have the life you always wanted.”

He’s right. I’ve only ever wanted to be an Aine. But now, I want him too. And I can’t have both. I have to let one go. It’s an impossible decision, and he knows it—that’s why he’s choosing for me. By giving me up. The depth of love I feel at such an act has me blinking back tears.

Ire turns to Heliconia. With nothing more than a whisper, he breathes out a small ember. It glows where he cups it in his palm. “This is a speck of what I am,” he tells her. When she opens her mouth, inevitably to argue, he cuts her off. “Anything more would kill you. This is all your mortal body will handle. It is mine to give freely. And it will make you more than one of the Aine. This is the price of your silence. Do you agree?”

“Sounds good to me,” Heliconia says.

Ire lifts his palm and blows on the ember. It sails through the air and lands on Heliconia’s forehead where it dissolves. She hisses in pain and bares her teeth as the ember fades. There’s a beat of stillness, and then her eyes gleam, glowing to an unnatural brightness. It’s the only outward sign of Heliconia’s newfound power. That, and her absolute glee as she grins back at us.

“Pleasure doing business, folks,” she says. “Good luck with all this.” She waves a hand toward Eloise then walks off into the trees, whistling as she goes.

The tune creeps under my skin, bringing a sickening dread I can’t shake. There’s no taking back what we’ve done here tonight. But something tells me we’ll wish we could in the end.

## CHAPTER NINE



THE ELDERS ARE SLOW to react when I break the news about Eloise. Valoria is especially calm, making me wonder if she even heard me. But there's something almost resigned about her expression that tells me she's hiding her true feelings. I don't mention Heliconia, and the lie burns a hole in my chest. But a deal's a deal. And I'm more committed than ever to my duties here. According to Ire, Heliconia is now more powerful than one of us. We'll need all eleven remaining Aine to defeat her. I can't afford to lose my place here.

"We will honor Eloise with a warrior's last rites," Meri, the other elder, declares after a weighted silence. She isn't one of the Aine, but she's become like a mother to many of us since leaving our families and coming to train here.

Valoria nods. "Summon your sisters," she tells me. "We will prepare Eloise and send her spirit to the Fates."

I hesitate before leaving to carry out her orders. “There is a threat against us,” I say tentatively. My heart thuds with the truth that sticks inside my mouth. The name I can’t reveal. But that doesn’t mean I have to ignore the threat she represents. And if I see Heliconia rise against another, I won’t hesitate to call out that future treachery.

She must be stopped.

“Yes,” Valoria says, her faraway look finally clearing as she rests her gaze on me. “There is. Summon your sisters, Sonoma. There is work to be done before we talk of retribution.”

I bite my tongue and do as she says.

Lesha dissolves into tears the moment I break the news. Amanti is rigid and silent. To another, she might seem cold or unfeeling, but I know my friend better than that. She mourns differently, her sadness a weight of responsibility settling on her shoulders. She’s like me—not able to rest until justice or vengeance prevails.

As we prepare for Eloise’s service, I think of Ire. He promised me I’d never see him again after last night, and I believe him. My heart is broken. For Eloise. For Ire. For what he did for me when he gave Heliconia a spark of his power.

Guilt weighs heavily.

It will all be worth it when I catch Heliconia. Even if I can’t tell the elders she killed Eloise, I can make sure she confesses once I’ve caught her.

The thought comforts me but not much. Not while I watch Eloise, shrouded in white, being laid to rest among the leaves and loose soil. We give her a warrior’s send-off, offering her body back to the land. Meri reads the Aine’s Call while the rest of us stand solemnly around Eloise’s resting place.

When it’s finished, the others disperse. I follow reluctantly, casting long looks into the woods. I feel a tingling along my neck, a sensation that something or someone is watching. But when I turn to look, no one is there.

It could be Heliconia.

I wish it were Ire.

When I arrive back at camp, the royal carriage is parked near the main gate. My pulse speeds at the sight of it. But of course, the king and queen would've been told what happened. They would want to pay their respects. It has nothing to do with me hiding the truth.

I force myself to exhale and keep walking.

The afternoon passes quietly, but that only serves to set me more on edge. The king and queen spend an hour in the elders' tent then depart without incident. By nightfall, my heart is heavy and my guilt is a weight I'm not sure I'll be able to carry much longer. No announcements are made about organizing to look for Eloise's killer. I can't bring myself to approach the elders to ask why.

Lesha and Amanti are both assigned guard duty. The doubling of guards is the only indication anything is amiss in our ranks.

I wait until the rest of the camp is asleep before escaping into the forest. My heartache is a physical pain inside my chest. I debate returning to the rock alcove, but it's too painful. Instead, I creep silently back to the small clearing where I first spoke to Ire the night of the bonfire.

The spot is empty, of course, but being here makes me feel closer to him.

Can he sense me thinking of him? Does his power work like that, or can he only sense the darkest of hearts in this world? Now that I've lied to the elders, maybe my heart is a shade darker than before. In a twisted way, that makes me feel closer to him too.

The night hours pass slowly. I can't bring myself to leave as the moon travels overhead, crossing the constellations on its journey to the far horizon. Lying on my back in the grass, I stare up at the sky, my thoughts drifting. My future stretches out before me, a long, lonely path that just days ago held so much excitement and anticipation. Now, there is only heaviness—and dread.

The moon has begun to dip when a breeze gusts through the trees. The wind whistles sharply, and my Aine senses prickle with a power that overshadows my own. Startled, I jump to my feet, searching for the threat.

Beyond where I stand, in the small clearing where I took my vows, three moonbeams appear. I blink, and the moonbeams become silhouettes that take form so suddenly I gasp.

The Fates.

Why have they come?

The Aine have been chosen. They never return after the vows are taken.

Hovering among the shadows, I wait to see which way they'll go. Maybe they came to speak to Valoria or pay their respects to Eloise.

“Sonoma Eko.” Their ethereal summons sends a shudder down my spine.

I hesitate, heart thudding with fear.

The voice comes again, booming as loud as thunder. “You have been summoned by the Fates, Aine. Do not hide from us.”

The sheer volume of it reverberates through my bones, and I launch myself forward, hurrying toward them as I brace for what comes next. When I reach the small hill where they stand, I bow my head.

“I am here,” I say, breathless with fear. “I am at your service. What do you require of me?”

“You have broken your vows, Aine. We have come to hold you accountable for your betrayal.”

My head snaps up. I stare at them, wide-eyed and desperate. But there's a small measure of relief amidst my fear. A release of a weight I never wanted to carry. In the end, I can't bring myself to argue their claims.

“Yes,” I agree, my voice catching on the word. “I have broken my vow, and I am ready to receive my punishment.”

# CHAPTER TEN



BRACED FOR CERTAIN DEATH, I try not to think about how I've somehow managed to lose both things I love, all while letting a murderer go free. In the end, I'm getting no more than I deserve. Besides, Eloise deserves justice, regardless of what it costs me.

But the wind stirs again, bringing another unexpected arrival. Smoke forms near the edge of the trees, and two figures step out of the darkness.

My heart leaps, and I squint to see if one of them is Ire.

Instead, Age and Eld emerge, marching side by side across the clearing.

The look in their eyes isn't kind as they approach me and the Fates. I force myself to hold my ground and not shrink back from their glares.

“Furiosities, why have you come?” the Fates demand. Their question is cold and sharp, as if they don’t welcome the sight of the demon-gods once again in their world.

“It has come to our attention that one of your Aine has committed a crime against Hel,” Eld says. “We’ve come to take our retribution.”

Age doesn’t even bother looking my way, but he’s even colder—and scarier—than he was the last time we met. Suddenly, I realize Ire’s absence might not be a good thing.

“Where is Ire?” I ask before I can stop myself. “What did you do to him?”

“Our brother is not your concern,” Eld snarls.

“What he did was for me. Don’t hurt him—”

“You don’t order us.” Eld’s voice booms, shaking the ground beneath my feet as his power thunders around me.

My martyrdom dries up on the spot, and real fear grips me. Losing my position as an Aine is one thing, but being punished by the gods of Hel isn’t something I’m prepared for.

“What is her crime against Hel?” the Fates ask.

“She convinced our brother to give his power to one of your rejects.” Age sniffs disdainfully on the last word, and I have to repress the urge to defend Heliconia from his insults.

“Who is this fae you speak of?” the Fates ask.

The Furiosities look at me.

“Heliconia,” I say quietly.

I wait, but the Fates don’t question how I know it. Instead, they turn back to the demon-gods with sharp looks.

“If your brother gave up any power, it was of his own volition,” the Fates say, shocking me with their defense. “Unless you’re saying your brother is capable of being overpowered by a mere mortal?”

“Of course not,” the Furiosities snap in unison.

“We are stronger than any of the fae,” Age says, his chest puffing up.

If I weren't worried about being struck dead, I might've rolled my eyes at his obvious display of ego.

“The fae is ours to deal with,” the Fates say, and I can't tell if they're talking about me or Heliconia or both.

Age and Eld mutter their disapproval, but they don't argue. Not when it would mean admitting weakness. They scowl but wave the Fates to go on.

“We'll witness her punishment,” Age says.

The Fates turn to me, their eyes full of judgment now. “Do you have anything to say, Aine?”

“Only that everything I did was out of loyalty to my people.” The Furiosities make a sound of disagreement. “I did not mean to care for Ire—or make him care for me. Heliconia threatened to expose us, so Ire gave her a spark of himself to keep my position here safe. He did it for me because he knew how much being an Aine meant to me. Ire and I, we aren't...” I square my shoulders because, even though it no longer matters, I want to tell the truth—finally. To them. To myself. To Ire, if he's listening.

“I told him I was letting him go. That I chose the Aine over him. But the truth is I'm not sure I would've kept that promise. I've broken my vows by giving my heart to another. For that, I must be held accountable. But Ire is innocent. Heliconia is the one you want.” I glance at the Furiosities. “All of you. She killed Eloise and stole her power. And then she manipulated Ire into giving her more. She wants to use it to destroy us all. She is the darkness the prophecy warned us about.”

All five gods inhale sharply.

“What do you know of the prophecy?” Eld demands.

“I know you believe the Aine will not prevail against it,” I tell him. “And that a darkness will bring a shift to our world. That your strength grows because of that darkness.” My eyes narrow as I add, “I know it's a strength that would be fed by



the loss of another Aine. One might worry you hoped for that loss to happen tonight.”

Eld growls, lunging for me. Age grabs him, telling him to calm down, though his gaze on me is calculating now.

To keep from trembling, I force myself to look at the Fates and am surprised to see they are studying the Furiosities thoughtfully.

“Our warrior makes a point,” the Fates say.

Eld glares up at them. “She has no idea of what she speaks. We do not interfere in the lives of mortals.”

The Fates tilt their heads in unison, which is honestly just creepy. “And yet, that’s exactly what your brother did when he offered his power to a fae whose heart had been darkened by her rejection.”

“Our brother is being dealt with,” Age says, and fear ripples through me.

“Please,” I say, “take me in his place. Don’t hurt him. Not for this.”

Age and Eld look more than happy to agree, but the Fates’ next words silence us all. “What you suggest is the only way to keep this world from destruction.”

I look up at them, shocked. I hadn’t actually expected the Fates to agree with my offer of a trade. But there’s more to what they said than giving the Furiosities their revenge. Or I sure as hell hope there is.

“What do you mean?” I ask. “What destruction?”

“The prophecy is correct. The shift has already begun,” the Fates tell me. “Sevanwinds will fall. There’s no stopping what’s coming, but you can make yourself the sacrifice that offers your people a chance to survive it.”

A sacrifice.

My heart squeezes because I have a feeling they mean that word literally. But I take a deep breath and square my

shoulders. "I'll do whatever it takes. Tell me what I have to do."

The Fates nod. They look at the Furiocities, who nod back. Something has passed between them, and I have no idea what, but they're suddenly on the same page. That alone terrifies me. Then the Fates descend the hillside, all three of them stopping before me. My fear clogs my throat. But they reach for me, one at a time, their touch a gentle breeze on my cheek as they kiss my face, maiden, mother, crone.

When they're finished, the crone presses a hand to my belly, whispering something I don't understand. My body jolts with a sudden burst of magic; then she steps back, and the feeling recedes.

Before I can ask what that was about, Eld snaps his fingers, and a smokestack appears beside him. A figure coalesces in the fog. A second later, he steps out into the clearing.

My breath catches. He looks unharmed, thank the Fates.

"Ire," I breathe.

"Hello, my love."

# CHAPTER ELEVEN



IRE CATCHES ME IN his arms, and as relieved as I am, I immediately squirm, worried about our audience. When he leans in to kiss me, I jerk back.

“We can’t,” I hiss, but he smirks.

“Why not?” His brow arches, challenging my protest.

I look around. The Fates and his brothers are gone. We’re alone.

He leans in again, his lips brushing over mine, and my heart flutters with emotion. A rush of warmth spreads through me, and I realize the feeling is one I’ve felt since the moment I saw him the day of my fight.

Love.

It’s beautiful and alarming, holding such a feeling for a demon-god, especially after everything that’s happened—and everything that could still happen.

My heart constricts as he releases me. “I don’t think we have much time.”

“Why do you say that?” he asks.

“The Fates know—about Heliconia. About us.”

His expression is utterly calm as he says, “I know.”

“Your brothers are angry. They want to punish me.”

There’s a ripple of fury in his eyes as he says, “They will not touch you.”

“Did they hurt you?” I ask.

“No,” he says gently, pressing his palm to my cheek. “But we do need to talk.”

The way he says the words suggests he’s somehow already up to speed on what just happened.

“Do you know what the Fates meant about a sacrifice?” I ask.

“Yes.”

I tense, bracing myself to learn what sort of punishment or torture they plan to enact. “Whatever it is, I’ll take it. Especially if it means protecting you.” I try not to think about who will protect the people of this world when I’m no longer one of the Aine.

“Sonoma,” Ire says, and I try to decipher the gleam in his dark, depthless eyes, but he’s unreadable. “I want you to understand that what I’m about to ask of you...you have a choice. Do you understand me? I won’t accept your answer unless it isn’t forced.”

Worry, fear, and something like hope rise inside me. “Answer to what?”

“The sacrifice is a price we must both pay—but it’s also how you can protect this realm from the darkness that threatens it.”

“I told you, if it protects you, I’ll—”

“Your baby,” he says, and I go still, too shocked to respond. “Our baby,” he corrects. His tone is gentle, but I can’t help the panic that bubbles up in me at his words.

“How did you know?” I ask.

His smile is a bit sad and a bit smug as he says, “I’m a god, little warrior. I can sense a life the moment it’s brought forth into this realm. Especially when that life has a spark of the Furiocities inside it.” His smile darkens as he adds, “My brothers and the Fates can sense it too.”

My panic turns to a cold dread that seeps through me, leaving me trembling. “They can’t—”

“They won’t.” His words are a snarl, and I’m comforted by the way he seems even more upset than I am at the idea of anyone threatening our child.

A child I’ve told no one about. A child I’ve barely admitted to myself is growing inside me. How could I? The baby I made with Ire is living proof of my betrayal to the Aine.

“Then what is this about?” I ask.

He steps closer, wrapping his arm around my waist and pulling me against him. “This child contains a spark from two great powers.”

“Two?” I repeat. “I mean, I get your contribution, but what’s the... Oh, gods. The Fates. They kissed me earlier. The crone—she touched my womb.”

He nods, not nearly as alarmed as I feel. “They knew, and they blessed the child with a gift. From the Fates comes a kindness and light that shines brighter than any other. From the Furiocities comes a will and a strength that none can break. And from you, little warrior, comes the heart of a fighter. This child will be the one who saves the realm.”

My eyes well with tears as I try to process what he’s saying. The magnitude of it. “I don’t want to have to choose between you.”

“You won’t.”

“I don’t understand. What are you asking me?”

“Marry me, little warrior. Serve your crown and your people as one of the Aine by day. By night, belong to me. Let me love you. Let me share your bed. Your home. And when your time in this realm is finished, come home with me. Share my bed. Become my queen. For eternity.”

I shudder, noting the words—and the clever way he speaks them. I am fae, after all. The truth—the sacrifice—is in the details. “And our child?”

“You will watch her grow up. You will teach her everything you know. And when the time comes, you will let her face the darkness that is a blight on this world. This is her purpose.”

“Her?” I whisper.

He nods, smiling softly. “That’s what the Fates say, anyway.”

My wonder disappears as reality crashes back in around me. “You’re asking me to let her face Heliconia alone. I can’t put this on our daughter. This is a problem we created. A monster we—”

“Her destiny is written in the stars. We cannot take it from her. We can only prepare her.” He pauses, watching me digest it all. “Would you have wanted someone to take the role of the Aine from you—even for your protection?”

“Of course not. This is my honor. My birthright...” I trail off, scowling at him.

He waits patiently, giving me time. But I can see the strain behind his eyes. The fear. He thinks I’ll refuse.

“What if I say no?”

He hesitates then speaks slowly as if choosing his words carefully. “You can’t stop what’s coming. Nor can you take her destiny away from her. Refusing would only separate us all.”

I swallow hard. “What do you mean that I’ll watch her grow up? Why not say I’ll raise her? And why not say we will watch her grow?”

He doesn’t answer.

“The sacrifice,” I realize.

He nods, pain flashing in his gaze. “If Heliconia knew what we’d created—that another fae had the same spark she did—and more, that she had a piece of the Fates inside her too...”

“She would kill her,” I finish.

“We must protect her.” The sadness returns, and I realize why.

“You will not know her,” I say. “When you come to my bed at night, it will be because she will sleep elsewhere. Live elsewhere.”

“We must protect her,” he says again, his voice barely a whisper. This hurts him too.

“Who will raise her?” I ask.

“The king and queen of Sevanwinds will raise her as their heir.”

Whatever I’d expected, it wasn’t this. Royalty? I blink at him, stunned. “She will be a princess?”

“She will be protected. And she will inherit this land when she saves it. The king understands it. He welcomes it.”

I bite my lip, thinking back to the queen when I met her on the day of my vows. She was kind to me then. Her smile suggested she had a kind heart. But how much can I trust that now?

“I want to negotiate,” I say.

Ire’s smile is darkly satisfied, and I have a strange feeling I’ve made him proud. “And what are your demands, little warrior?”

But I shake my head, refusing to show my hand. “I will marry you,” I tell him instead, and his smile widens to the most radiant I’ve ever seen. For a fleeting moment, it almost chases away the shadows that cling to him.

“And share my bed?” he whispers mischievously.

“And share your bed,” I echo.

“But?”

“I want to speak to the Fates again. If I’m satisfied with their terms, we have a deal.”

Rather than argue or press me for details, he presses a kiss to my lips. “You’re going to make a formidable queen of Hel, my love. Let’s go negotiate our future.”



## CHAPTER TWELVE



DUSK IS NOT FAR off by the time Ire and I stand before the Fates and Furiosities one last time. My stomach is a jumble of nerves, but I'm unwavering in my decision. Ire's hand in mine is warm and solid. He gives me a reassuring squeeze as the Fates cut right to the point.

"Have you come to a decision, Aine?"

Ire's shoulder presses against my own, reminding me that, whatever I decide, I'm not alone. "That depends," I say. "On you." I glance at Ire's brothers. "And you."

"You are not in a position to negotiate," Eld says.

"Aren't I?" I challenge, and Ire snorts, clearly unimpressed by his brother's nasty attitude. "I carry inside me the answer to the end of this world—a world which, if I'm not mistaken, either adds to or diminishes your own powers." I glance from the Furiosities to the Fates pointedly.

Eld huffs.

“What are your conditions?” the Fates ask, and I swear there is mild amusement in their tone.

“I will give up my life as one of the Aine entirely,” I say, and Ire reacts.

“Sonoma, no,” he says.

“Shush. You said it was up to me,” I remind him. He looks stricken, but I squeeze his hand and whisper, “Trust me.”

His expression is tense, but he doesn’t argue.

“And what do you ask in exchange for this sacrifice?” the Fates ask.

“That’s not a sacrifice; it’s a consequence,” Eld mutters, but everyone ignores him.

“Ire and I will go far away from the summer realm. Maybe to Concordia, to the mountains, and raise our daughter. Ire is free to come and go between his realm and this one. Free to be with his family. We will both train her for what is to come. In the ways of the Aine and in how to control whatever power has been gifted her by the gods. And when my daughter is old enough to fulfill her destiny, I will not stand in her way.”

The Fates study me carefully. The Furiosities are silent, though it’s a morose sort of tension. Ire is the only one who looks ready to argue with my demands.

“Sonoma,” he says quietly, which doesn’t much matter since every pair of ears present can hear us. “Please. Being one of the Aine has always been your dream. I don’t want to be the reason you lose it.”

“Being Aine was always about protecting my people,” I say. “And what better way to do that than to birth and raise the fae who will save them all.” He softens, though he still doesn’t look convinced. “This is how I honor my vows,” I assure him. “Truly. I am losing nothing and gaining everything. If you’ll still have me.”

Doubt creeps in as I realize he hasn’t said he wants any of what I’ve proposed. A god of Hel probably doesn’t want to

live in the snowy mountains, anyway. He—

“I have belonged to you from the moment I saw you, little warrior.”

His words send a warmth through me that makes me feel protected against any outcome these gods and goddesses could throw at us.

I exhale, relieved. “Are you sure you can manage in the snow?” I ask, only half-joking.

“Absolutely. You’re not getting rid of me that easily.” He winks. “Besides, I have some ideas about how we’ll keep warm.”

My face flushes with heat, and the Fates clear their throats, a strange tinkling that still manages to sound otherworldly.

“We accept your conditions, Aine, with one of our own,” they say at last.

I brace myself. This is the moment it all comes down to. If they refuse, I’ll find a way to be with Ire, to keep my daughter, but—

“You will continue to hold the title of Aine. And the power.”

Relief floods me so fast that my knees threaten to buckle. Hope follows, and I pray to the goddesses I’ve heard them correctly.

“Excuse me?”

“You will need the power of the Aine in order to teach her what’s inside her.” The Fates pause, but I can’t bring myself to relax just yet. Not when I sense more is coming. “When she is of age, you will send her to the castle. To train. To accept her birthright. And when that time comes, you will resume your role here with us.”

I hold tight to Ire’s hand. “And what about me and Ire? Do I have to give him up when I return?”

“The Furiosity is not under our authority,” they say. “Nor are the queen-consorts of their realm. If that is what you are

when you return to us, we cannot remove your position or power from our ranks.”

A long beat of silence passes as their words sink in.

Even the Furiosities look resolute at the Fates’ decree. Whatever the relationship between them and the goddesses, Ire’s brothers don’t argue the decision.

When I look up at him, Ire’s smile is blinding. For a moment, all his shadows are gone and only light is radiating from the demon-god of Hel. It’s breathtaking—and it’s the moment I realize I’ve just gained everything I’ve ever wanted and more.

I smile back at him, and Ire grabs me, catching me in his arms and laughing as he kisses me soundly.

When he sets me down again, the Fates are waiting, serious as ever. Though, I swear the maiden winks at me.

“We send you with the protection of the Fates,” they chime. “But you must go where you can never be found. We will meet again—in this realm or another, Aine.”

Then they are gone, vanishing into a thin mist and then into nothing at all. Eld and Age remain, both scowling deeply at their brother.

“Stop looking so sour,” Ire says.

“You really fucking did it this time, brother,” Age says.

“You’re just jealous I found my mate before you,” Ire tells him, earning a glare.

“Fuck off,” Age mutters, but he doesn’t argue the point.

Their exchange is vastly different from the way they spoke in front of the Fates, and I find myself less intimidated now that they’re alone. The bite is still there, but it sounds more like siblings bickering than angry gods about to smite someone. The thought has me almost smiling.

“What the hell are you smiling at?” Eld demands.

I blink, the smile falling away. “You guys sound like a bunch of cranky toddlers,” I admit.

Ire howls with laughter. Age and Eld mutter curses and denials, but they don't try to kill me. I take that as progress even if it's not much.

"You can't talk to me like that," Eld says.

"Sure she can," Ire tells him. "She's my queen."

"Not yet," Age says, but then he adds, "Mother's going to lose her mind."

"Mother?" I ask, looking sharply at Ire.

"She's been nagging us about finding mates for a while," Ire explains. He squeezes my hand. "She's going to love you."

"Hopefully, it'll get her off our backs," Age mutters, and I try to imagine what sort of mother an elderly-looking man like him might have.

Though, of course, looks are deceiving, especially with gods.

"You don't have to meet her until you're ready," Ire assures me, noting my silence.

"I'd like to meet her," I tell him. "But first, would you like to meet mine?"

He kisses my lips tenderly while his brothers groan and pretend to gag. "More than anything."

# CHAPTER THIRTEEN



THE SNOW FINALLY STOPPED falling last night, and today, the sun is bright and warm. Spring and summer won't last long this far up the Concordia mountain range, but it came right on time—and brought new life with it.

I look over at the sleeping infant in the cradle beside me, overcome with love in a way I never understood until the moment she came into this world. It's a depth of devotion I never felt even after taking my vows with the Aine.

For her, I would give up everything.

Though I'm terrified the thing I'll have to give up is her.

A fear that's grown with every passing day since Ire and I arrived on this mountain.

The front door opens, and Ire steps inside, shaking the loose snow from his shoulders and boots. His expression lights up at the sight of me, but even so, shadows cling to him thicker than

ever. They've grown darker and more prevalent in the last nine months. I haven't asked him about it. We both know it's a sign the darkness grows stronger in this realm. Today, it's even worse, though, and I sense that something's changed.

He shrugs out of his coat, shaking out his hair. He's never once complained about the cold or the snow. He seems to love it, actually. Apparently, the youngest god of Hel loves snowball fights and hot chocolate. Who knew?

"How's she doing?" he asks, crossing to plant a possessive kiss on my mouth.

"Still napping," I assure him when he straightens.

He gazes down at the sleeping baby in the cradle, and I see all the love I feel reflected in his enigmatic eyes. At six days old, she's already got her daddy wrapped around her little finger.

"My mother sends her regards," he says finally, tearing his gaze from our daughter. "She says she'll be here for Sunday dinner if you're up for it."

"Of course," I say, "as long as I'm not the one cooking."

"She says she has it covered and made me promise not to let you do anything to help."

He takes a seat next to me, pressing in close even though there's plenty of room on the cushions next to mine. My body warms at his nearness—just like it always does. Even while I was pregnant, I couldn't get enough of him. Nor could he keep his hands off me.

Now, I'm supposed to be recovering, but I'm already wondering how much longer that will last. As if to answer, Ire leans in and presses a kiss to my neck. Tingles race through me, but I recognize a distraction when I see one.

"And your brothers?" I ask before he can make me forget why he went home in the first place.

He pulls away, sighing. "I used to be better at changing the subject."

I smile. "You still are. I'm just more stubborn."

“I won’t argue that.”

I swat his arm, and he grins, but it fades quickly. “She has gained power.”

“Another Aine?”

“No. Something else. They don’t know what. Only that the darkness has grown.”

“Do you think she knows?” I ask, glancing nervously at Aurelia.

“No.”

I can’t tell if his answer is firm out of reassurance or some actual certainty.

“What are the Aine doing about it?” I ask instead.

“The Fates have done all they can.”

“Bullshit,” I say, my temper making me forget any decorum where the goddesses are concerned. “They can always do more. What about adding to the ranks?”

“They can’t replace you without explaining that you’re gone,” he reminds me.

I scowl, but he’s right. Replacing me would only bring Heliconia’s attention to my absence. And that isn’t something we can afford to let her get curious about.

“What about the king and queen? They could raise their army—”

“I know,” Ire says, and while it’s not patronizing, exactly, I scowl at him anyway.

His lips twitch. “You look like Eld when you do that.”

“I learned from the best.”

He grins.

My relationship with his brothers is civil, but where Age and I can tolerate one another, Eld and I would rather tear each other apart. Or we will, once I’m no longer pregnant or healing from childbirth.



“I’m serious,” I press. “We need to do something.”

“I agree. Which is why I think we should get married.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“I am.”

“How does being married protect Aurelia?”

“It helps you protect her. Your role as queen-consort offers you a spark of power gifted from Hel itself. With that power, you can protect her—even from Heliconia.”

I bite my lip, considering. It’s not like I have to think hard. Marrying Ire is something I’ve wanted for months. Something we planned for—eventually. But doing so would require becoming immortal like him. Once I take my place by his side, I’ll stop aging like a fae. Like my daughter.

She won’t outlive me.

It’s the fear that keeps me up at night. The only thing that holds me back from becoming Ire’s true mate. Now, with so much riding on our future—on Aurelia’s—I can’t ignore it anymore.

Ire senses my hesitation and brushes a hand along my cheek. “What’s wrong, little warrior?”

“I don’t want to watch her grow old and die,” I whisper. “I hate that I keep having to choose.”

Something flashes in his expression. A knowing I’d somehow missed before. It’s there and gone so quickly I might’ve imagined it, but the blank expression he wears shows no trace of my fear. And that can only mean—

“You know something,” I say.

“I know a lot of things.”

“About Aurelia.”

“I have seen what she will become,” he says slowly.

“Tell me. Or better yet, show me.” I reach for his hand.

He lets me take it, but nothing happens, and he shakes his head. “This won’t work like that.” He leans in, brushing my

lips with his. “To know what I know, you must become too.”

I take a deep breath. “All right, Furiosity. Make me your wife.”

THE END



Thank you for reading *A Glamour of Smoke and Shadow*. The story continues in [\*Kingdom of Briars and Roses\*](#), coming 2025!

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**HEATHER HILDENBRAND** lives in coastal Virginia where she writes paranormal and fantasy romance with lots of kissing & killing. Her most frequent hobbies are cuddling with her Goldendoodle, riding country roads on the back of her husband's motorcycle, and avoiding killer slugs.

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# BRIDE OF THE FAE DUKE



LISETTE MARSHALL

*A Steamy Bluebeard Retelling*

# BLURB



**SIX WIVES. SIX DEATHS. Can a humble housemaid break the curse?**

The half-fae Duke of Locke is cursed to never find love... or so everyone says. But Nellie Finch does not believe in magic. As far as she's concerned, that leaves only one explanation for the death of His Grace's last six wives: he killed them himself.

It therefore is an unpleasant surprise when, out of nowhere, the duke proposes to *her*.

Marrying this cold and unpleasant nobleman is the last thing Nellie wants. But his money can save her little sister, and Locke is damnably convincing about the arrangement. All he needs is an heir, and apart from the... well, necessary duties, she won't have to see him at all. She should be able to survive that, shouldn't she?

Except that she soon finds herself doubting her suspicions of murder. And when she starts falling for her mysterious husband, she must figure out how to break the curse that killed six women before her... or be the next to die.

*Bride of the Fae Duke* is a steamy Bluebeard retelling featuring a tormented, blue-haired hero, a done-with-your-nonsense heroine, and a lot of unwelcome feelings.

# CHAPTER ONE



NELLIE FINCH DID NOT believe in magic.

Many people did – she was well-aware of that undeniable fact – but then again, many people believed in love, too, and that seemed roughly equally nonsensical. Lady Eyestone could wail on about fae, spells, and unnatural disappearances as much as she liked. The fact remained that after twenty-four years of life on the edge of Faerie, Nellie had yet to hear of any mystery that could not be solved with a dollop of plain old common sense. Lord Eyestone’s regular and much bewailed absences at night, for example, could just as easily be attributed to the busy human woman who went by the name of Mrs. Virtue, no fae powers required.

Magic was a fairytale. An easy way out. A convenient excuse.

Which was exactly why she found herself unable to suppress a cold shiver when, as she stood folding the earl’s

linen on a sweltering Linden Month morning, a footman loudly announced the arrival of Lord Locke at the Eyestone household.

Two cold shivers, perhaps.

Not because the duke was half fae – even though she knew it was the main reason many Elidian citizens distrusted the man, she considered his mother’s origins the least of his crimes. Nor was she particularly worried about the curse that was rumoured to haunt him. She did not believe in curses, after all, and therefore didn’t share the other maids’ fear of getting caught up in its deadly web if she accidentally stepped too close.

Rather, it was the simple statistic of one man losing six wives over the course of just a decade.

Which, once you took away the mitigating veil of magic and curses and other balderdash, left a rather unsettling pattern at best.

In the hall upstairs, she could hear the brittle-leaf voice of Mrs. Radcliffe approach, doubtlessly to tell His Grace that Lord and Lady Eyestone were out and would not be back for the rest of the day. Which was just as well, Nellie grimly decided as she hauled her last pile of bedsheets into the linen closet, then wiped the summer sweat off her clammy forehead. The fewer minutes she had to share a roof with a murderer, the better – although Anne would doubtlessly object if she ever spoke that thought out loud, reminding her how the guards’ investigations had found nothing incriminating and making points about assuming the best of people. Anne *did* believe in curses and magic, of course. In love, too.

She’d only been three winters old when Father left, after all. She hadn’t seen Mother wilt away in the months that followed.

The closet door slammed shut with more force than intended, the bang reverberating down to the basement and up to the floors above.

Drat. She should know better than to be so careless at work. With gritted teeth, she snatched the empty linen basket off the

floor and made her way back to the scullery, forcing her thoughts into the here and now of the humid servants' quarters beneath Eyestone Manor. At least the voices in the entrance hall had quieted. If she was lucky, Mrs. Radcliffe hadn't noticed the little misstep of the slamming door, though it was a rarity for the housekeeper's piercing eyes and ears to overlook even the smallest imperfection.

Not that she could complain. Lord Eyestone paid better than most employers, and if perfection was the price to keep Anne fed and clothed, then she ought to be glad to pay it.

The scullery was empty, save for the usual piles of unfolded linen. Good. One last batch to iron, and then the laundry would be done for the week. Which left the floors to be scrubbed, of course, and the chamber pots to be cleaned. And as soon as those tasks were done, the silver would have to be polished yet again, even though Nellie could swear she'd spent two whole days on Lady Eyestone's cutlery last week ...

A never-ending cycle. But she *really* shouldn't complain, and either way, what other options did she have if she—

'Nellie?' Lucy Clarke's nasal voice yelled, a few doors away. 'Nellie, where are you? Mrs. Radcliffe wants a word with you in the blue drawing room!'

Oh *drat*.

She shoved her empty basket into the corner, reflexively straightened her apron, and hurried out, tucking loose locks of strawberry blonde hair back into her braid as she darted up the stairs. Better not to let the housekeeper wait – a valuable lesson she'd learned within her first hours at this job. At least if she was punctual, Mrs. Radcliffe might forgive her for the noise she'd made within hearing of a guest. And the sooner she could get back to ironing, the sooner she'd finish her list for the day ...

The door to the drawing room stood ajar in an ominous invitation.

Wiping her brow with raw, soap-reddened hands one last time, Nellie sucked in a deep breath and slipped inside.

Mrs. Radcliffe stood at the mantelpiece, thin and crowlike in her proper black dress – somehow managing not to look sweaty even in this damp summer weather. Around her, even the furniture seemed to be holding its breath, afraid to move a hair out of line. But there were no obvious signs of displeasure on the housekeeper’s severe face, and only then did Nellie’s gaze draw around the rest of the room, noticing—

*Locke?*

Her feet froze mid-step.

Sweet divines help her, this couldn’t be true – but it *was* undeniably the duke of Locke who was sitting grimly in the room’s best chair as if he was the master of the place, long legs crossed and bulky shoulders tense under his dark grey coat. If she hadn’t heard the footman announce the man’s name, his hair would have taken away all last doubts as to his identity: that unfashionably long queue gleaming unnaturally blue even in the muted sunlight of this north-facing room. Like a magpie’s feathers, or a night sky that had *just* begun to brighten. Even his eyebrows held a faint blue sheen – she’d never noticed it from a distance before.

What in the world was he doing here?

And far, far more urgent – what in the world was *she* doing here?

Nellie risked a glance at Mrs. Radcliffe, expecting the housekeeper to answer at least one of those questions. But Mrs. Radcliffe’s dark eyes were on the duke, as if *his* reaction to Nellie’s appearance was the only thing that mattered here, and all the duke himself said was a terse, ‘This is her?’

Oh no.

Nellie’s mouth went instantly dry – had he come here to ask for *her*?

But why? He couldn’t have heard of her unflattering opinions of him, could he? She was sure she hadn’t spoken those out loud to anyone but Anne. Then again, there really didn’t seem to be any other reason for him to still be in the building if Lord and Lady Eyestone were nowhere near, and

surely a man of his stature would not be interested in Mrs. Radcliffe's dressing down of a clumsy maid ...

She had only been perspiring mildly before. Moisture itched between her shoulder blades now, prickling down the length of her spine; it took all of her manners and training to stand perfectly, unflinchingly still.

'Yes, Your Grace,' the housekeeper stiffly confirmed. 'This is her.'

Locke didn't respond. He merely turned back to Nellie, looking her up and down twice – an appraising look, as if she were a horse he was considering buying. His expression didn't change. Resolute chin, nose like a marble sculpture's, and then the strange, almost feminine contrast of his long blue lashes which framed grey eyes with unnerving, catlike pupils he must have inherited from his mother ... There was plenty of strength in his features, but nothing that suggested even the smallest hint of softness. *Of feelings.*

Only after two, three heartbeats of excruciating silence did he give a brisk nod – a gesture that said, *this will do*. 'What is your name, girl?'

He didn't even know her name?

Then how had he possibly asked for her?

'Nellie Finch,' she stammered, and then, remembering who she was talking to, she hurriedly amended, 'I mean, Eleanor, Your Grace. Eleanor Finch.'

'Excellent.' A curt, offhand word, and his expression didn't soften with it. It wasn't even *cold*, his face. There was no anger or impatience to be found in that strange mixture of bullish human and elegant fae features, only a stoic reserve that could have been carved from stone. 'Are you healthy, Miss Finch?'

She stared at him, the heat forgotten.

*Healthy?* Why in the world would the duke of Locke, unconventional but a man of means and standing all the same, care a whit about a common housemaid's health? And not even one of his own maids, at that? Had she been accused of



carrying some devastating disease, perhaps? Had the duke been sent on a mission by the Princes to eradicate all pox patients from Elidian, as well as all those who might be suspected of infection?

‘Nellie,’ Mrs. Radcliffe sharply said, ‘answer His Grace, will you?’

Drat.

Perhaps the facts didn’t warrant being quite *so* dramatic.

‘I ... I think I am quite healthy, Your Grace,’ she managed to force out, clamping her damp hands together behind her back. ‘I haven’t been ill in years, Your Grace.’

‘Excellent,’ he muttered again, more quietly now, as if the word wasn’t intended for her ears at all. ‘Do you have any brothers or sisters?’

‘One sister, Your Grace.’ An accident, Mother had regularly muttered. They’d barely been able to afford a single child. ‘She’s eight years younger than me, Your Grace.’

He pursed his lips, seemingly content with that answer. ‘And are you clumsy, Miss Finch? Do you make a habit of falling down stairs, tripping over furniture, and the like?’

What in the world?

Perhaps he was going mad, she considered. Perhaps Mrs. Radcliffe was just trying to keep the poor lunatic calm and engaged until someone arrived to constrain him and take care of him. In that case, she should probably not wait too long to give him the answer he was looking for – so she straightened her shoulders, willed her voice to sound as though her thoughts weren’t falling apart behind her face, and said as calmly as she could, ‘I wouldn’t call myself clumsy, Your Grace. I have never injured myself walking down stairs with full baskets or scrubbing the kitchen or ... or ...’

‘Thank you,’ he interrupted with a quick flick of his muscular wrist. ‘That is enough.’

She obediently snapped her lips shut, glancing at Mrs. Radcliffe. The housekeeper still looked as she always did:

stiff, severe, and like there was nothing unusual going on. There was a touch of anticipation in her swift look at Lord Locke, though, as if she too was tensely waiting for the next bit of insanity to fall from his mouth.

‘Yes,’ Locke added slowly, sitting straighter so that his dove grey coat strained around the impressive hulk of his shoulders. ‘Yes, that will be sufficient.’

And again there was that glimpse of calculation in his eyes as he examined her, a look that made her suddenly painfully aware of her messy blonde braid and her rough servant’s hands and the dust mark she hadn’t yet brushed off her skirt. Half of her itched to start fidgeting. Half of her stood paralysed with fear. *Something* was off – by now the facts did safely justify that conclusion – and why was he watching her like that, as if he was trying to estimate the cost and weight of her every flaw?

Then, abruptly, his lips curled.

It was a joyless smile. A performative smile. His mouth, too soft and sensuous for the square-jawed face around it, didn’t look like it was used to the motions, and not a glimmer of joy reached the shadows of his eyes.

‘Then I only have one last question to ask,’ he said, and with those words he rose to his feet, thoughtlessly tugging the cuffs of his coat back into place. He was tall. *Much* too tall, forcing Nellie to tilt back her head as he took a measured step towards her, and another one ... Sweet divines, why was he coming so *close*? And why wasn’t Mrs. Radcliffe saying anything, when surely this crossed the lines of propriety and this was supposed to be a respectable household and dear Mother Ostara, she still had all that ironing to do—

The duke of Locke sank to one knee before her.

And said, with not the faintest trace of jest in his voice, ‘Eleanor Finch, will you marry me?’

## CHAPTER TWO



ONE DID NOT SAY no to a duke.

One did *not* say no to a duke.

Which was unfortunate, given that a loud and wholehearted refusal was the only response Nellie could think of for a full ten heartbeats of stunned silence – that and perhaps making a run for it. But one did not run from dukes, either, and in some paralysed compromise, all she could do was stand and stare at the man who had just uttered that unthinkable question – kneeling at her feet, watching her expectantly – as the sheer, absolute insanity of those words hovered in the space between them.

Marry.

Him.

The floor she'd scrubbed herself last week seemed to be swaying beneath her.

Now the duke ought to start laughing. Now he ought to admit he was just playing the fool – that was the only way any of this could ever begin to make sense ... And yet he was still sitting there, on his knee, looking up at her with one blue-black eyebrow slightly higher than the other. As if she should have seen this coming. As if he wasn't a nobleman proposing to a housemaid whose name he hadn't even known five minutes ago.

The silence was growing deafening.

She parted her lips, trying to find an answer that would not offend him while also making perfectly, unambiguously clear that she was *not* going to move into a murderer's home, thank you very much. *I'm very honoured, but ... You must excuse me ... I do not think I could possibly make you happy ...*

Instead, all that slipped from her tongue was a blunt, 'What?'

By the mantle, Mrs. Radcliff let out the quietest *tsk*.

Oh drat. That had *certainly* not been the right thing to say. Then again, if she made sure to come across as a boorish, unmannered fool, perhaps Lord Locke would realise all by himself that he was committing the misstep of the century here? Perhaps he would simply retract his proposal, announce he had better things to do than explain his ways to witless maids, and vanish to find another, more enthusiastic victim for his schemes?

But the duke didn't so much as frown as he rose to his feet. Nor did he smile. There was no frustration or impatience in his gestures as he straightened his cravat with his large, muscular hands; only his measured side glance was full of unspoken requests.

'Radcliffe?' he said.

And before Nellie knew what was happening, the housekeeper had slipped out of the room, quietly shutting the door behind her stiff, black-clad back.

Shutting her in.

With *Lord Locke* – six-time widower and brand new suitor.

For one mindless moment, Nellie wondered what would happen if she were to take flight after all – if Locke would catch her before she could escape this mahogany-and-velvet trap. But even if she managed to get out of the room, causing a scene might very well cost her this position at the Eyestone household. And where would she end up if she lost her room and her daily meals, if she could no longer earn her money by ironing sheet after sheet after sheet?

*In a duke's home*, a treacherous little voice whispered.

*In a grave*, she countered, gritting her teeth.

No, she had to stay here and face him, whatever he had to say. And then she had to refuse him – *politely*.

Which would be much, much easier if he wasn't standing there looking at her with those frigid cat eyes, the slitted pupils so narrow as to almost be invisible. They didn't gleam or glitter or glower, those eyes. They just ... watched, taking in the world with a detached air of indifference that seemed far less human than even his fae hair or his unnaturally sharp cheekbones.

She'd have shivered if her tense muscles had allowed for it.

'Your Grace ...' she started, rubbing her clammy fingers behind her back. 'Your Grace, I'm afraid I don't fully understand—'

'Yes,' he curtly interrupted, finally taking his eyes off her. She almost breathed a sigh of relief out loud. 'Of course. I'm happy to provide some elucidation, if that is necessary in order to come to an agreement.'

What had he thought? That she'd be so elated to place herself in the position six dead women had held before that she'd throw herself into his burly arms at his first proposal, no further questions asked?

'I would appreciate that, yes,' she managed to say. 'Your Grace.'

He turned away with a terse nod, intertwining his hands behind his back. 'It's a purely rational matter, you see. I'm in need of an heir.'

An *heir*.

Which meant ... oh, sweet divines. Was she blushing? This was not the moment to think of Lucy Clarke's scandalous stories and imagine this man naked in his own silk sheets – but something about the breadth of his shoulders made it far too easy, the small, elegant motions of his hands that did not fit the roughness of their shape.

Or perhaps the simple fact that he'd just invited her to join him in those sheets.

Which she wasn't going to accept.

Of *course* she wasn't going to accept.

'In other words,' Locke flatly continued from the other side of the room – and whether he hadn't noticed her moment of confusion or simply didn't care about it, she was twistedly grateful either way – 'I need a wife to give me that heir. A wife who will stay alive for longer than a few months, that is.'

That was enough to instantly banish every heated thought from her mind again.

Because he spoke the words so matter-of-factly – not a sliver of emotion, as though the poor women had been remote acquaintances at best. Which stood to reason, Nellie sternly reminded herself. How would he have killed them, one after the other, if he had felt even the slightest bit of sympathy for them?

Although ...

Her thoughts wavered.

Although that *was* odd, wasn't it? Sure enough, she could imagine him as a killer – could see him calmly, meticulously pressing a pillow over a sleeping face at night. But if he needed an heir desperately enough to resort to marrying maids, then why would he have killed his previous wives at all? Shouldn't he have restrained his murderous urges until one of them had born him a son or two?

That really did not add up at all. Not because of love and other fairytales but because of the stark, hard facts.

‘Oh,’ she said weakly – suspecting she ought to say *something* in the mounting silence, but unable to come up with any more intelligent remarks as her thoughts folded in on themselves. ‘I ... I see. And your previous wives ...’

‘Were killed by my curse,’ he finished, upper lip curling a fraction. ‘Exactly.’

*He* believed in a curse? Odd, for a man calling this a purely rational matter. Unless he was lying, of course, unless this was just a game to lure yet another unsuspecting woman into his bed – hell, perhaps he didn’t care about heirs at all. Perhaps he had told the other six the exact same thing, only to poison their tea or push them down the stairs three weeks later.

It really was about time she got herself out of here. Divines knew what tale he’d come up with next; if she wasn’t careful, she’d accidentally spin right into his trap.

‘With all due respect, Your Grace,’ she started, faltering for a moment as those strange grey eyes swept her way again, ‘but if a curse is killing everyone you marry ... well, then it would be rather dangerous for me to accept your proposal, wouldn’t it?’

His mouth tightened. ‘Not for you.’

‘But ...’

‘My curse,’ he interrupted, his voice not so much sharpening as tightening, ‘doesn’t kill my wives, per se. It kills those I fall in love with.’

She blinked at him.

‘So what I need is a wife with whom I have nothing in common. A wife who evokes no feelings or affections. A wife who will simply be a means to an end to me. In return, I am more than content to be the same to her.’ He paused for a moment – just long enough for those brisk words to settle – then added, more calmly now, ‘Let me be very frank with you, Miss Finch. This is not and will never be a love match. If you were hoping for a grand romance, then you’d do well to refuse me.’

This was her chance, then – wasn’t it?

He was offering her the perfect, graceful way out. A wide-open door, and all she needed to do was step through it. *I'm sorry, Your Grace, but my heart belongs to the young footman next door* – who cared it was a lie? Who cared her heart would never truly belong to anyone anyway, duke or otherwise?

And yet ...

She wavered.

He seemed so uncannily straightforward, standing stiff and dispassionate between Lady Eyestone's velvet couches. He sounded so *sensible*. A simple transaction and no attempts to soften or sweeten that blow – much better than the young men who made advances every now and then, spinning fairytales of a forever she knew did not exist.

Much, much better than Father, who had insisted he loved them until the very day the money ran out.

And when she opened her mouth, what came out was not a refusal. Instead, the words she heard herself speak through the whirlwind of her thoughts were, 'Why me?'

'Ah.' The duke snapped back into motion, snappish strides across the polished floorboards. His ears were just a fraction pointed beneath his blue hair – she hadn't known or noticed that before. 'Excellent question. I came here to ask Radcliffe for advice. She was our housekeeper when I was a young boy, and there are few people whose judgement of character I trust more.'

It took a few seconds for that to register.

Mrs. Radcliffe had *recommended* her? To this man? Knowing his history – knowing what he might be capable of?

Any other day, it would have been a compliment to be singled out ... but here, now, Nellie found herself wondering for a moment whether the housekeeper may simply have chosen her as the girl she could most easily do without.

Then again ... this was Mrs. Radcliffe, proper and punctual, who had not hesitated to call for the guards even when the Viscount Westmoor had jokingly run off with Lady Eyestone's jade tiara. If the housekeeper had suspected this man she'd



known all his life of murder, would she have quietly stood by as he singled out his next victim right under her nose?

It seemed unlikely.

Truly, *every* part of this morning seemed thoroughly unlikely.

‘So ...’ She was grasping for sense now. Sweet divines, why couldn’t he simply be the ruthless, sweet-tongued murderer she’d assumed him to be, without his unexpected frankness and Mrs. Radcliffe’s unspoken endorsement? ‘So what did she tell you about me, exactly? I’d like to know what is expected of me.’

‘I asked Radcliffe if she knew any level-headed, pragmatic young women with a proper brain in their skulls,’ Locke said with a short shrug. ‘It wouldn’t do for my wife to collapse into hysterics whenever that blasted curse is mentioned, you see. And of course’ – a hint of that glacial smile lay on his lips again as he glanced at her, forced and measured and wholly devoid of true amusement – ‘if I am to have a son, I would prefer for him not to be a halfwit. Which means his mother shouldn’t be, either.’

So rational. So perfectly calculating. A list of requirements, and since she fulfilled them, he had asked her – how could she possibly disapprove of that approach?

‘I see,’ she said.

And this time, it was true.

The duke must have noticed the change in her demeanour, because something shifted in his face, too, as he ceased his pacing and turned towards her – the most minuscule softening of his broad, chiselled jaw. Before, he had merely been defending his proposal. Now ...

Now, they were *discussing* it.

She felt like a woman sucked into deadly quicksand. But no matter how hard she tried, she could no longer even remember what steady ground felt like.

‘I do not expect charity from you, Miss Finch,’ Locke added before she could regain her footing – before she could figure out if there even *was* any footing to be regained. ‘When I said I expect to be a means to an end to you, I was entirely sincere. There will be no need to stick with me for all your life. All I need is an heir, and as soon as I have one, I’m happy to settle a generous yearly allowance on you that will allow you to either live comfortably in Elidian or travel elsewhere. If you’d prefer to settle in the Dragon’s Bay cities and pretend to be a rich widow, you would have my full blessing.’

‘You ...’ The floor was wobbling in earnest now; she had to take three quick steps and sit down on the edge of the nearest sapphire couch before her knees gave way. The heat was creeping up on her, clouding her mind. Had she heard him correctly? A yearly allowance and her freedom – *freedom* – and no lye soap burning the skin off her hands ever again? ‘You don’t even expect me to actually ... be a wife, then?’

His eyebrows rose a fraction. ‘Apart from the, let us say, necessary duties, no.’

A shivery laugh escaped her before she could stop herself, sounding far too nervous. *Necessary duties* – for goodness’ sake, was she actually considering this, stepping into a man’s bed to buy her own future? A scandalous, scandalous thought ... but scandal, like love and magic, rarely had much to do with facts and far more with fear. So if she looked past the fear and took the facts at face value ...

There seemed to be a very decent chance he wouldn’t try to kill her.

Better still, she wouldn’t need to be a true wife to him; if she wanted, she could avoid him around dinner and at the top of stairs to increase her chances of survival. And even if it turned out he was a terrible lover, even if she spent a few nights staring at a ceiling and composing grocery lists in her mind, would that really be too high a price to pay?

She’d never have to iron a single sheet again. She’d never spend her sleepless nights scrubbing the floors of others again.

And Anne ...

Oh, Anne.

‘I have one request,’ she heard herself say.

Was that pushing too far? But Locke merely cocked his head in a wordless question, silky blue hair brushing his solid shoulders – his whole bearing so perfectly aloof, so entirely strait-laced, that nothing human remained below.

‘My little sister,’ she quickly continued before she could lose courage again in the face of that hollow shell of a man. ‘Anne. She was injured in an accident a few years ago – lost her right hand and her ability to work. She relies on me to keep her housed and fed. I would prefer for our marriage contract to also include a clause guaranteeing her a sufficient living in case any harm comes to me.’

The duke’s face didn’t darken – not much, at least. But there was a noticeable tightening to his lips, and he all but snapped his response. ‘You won’t die.’

‘I’m supposed to be pragmatic,’ she countered, realising only then she had forgotten about the *Your Grace* for the past two minutes at least. Since he didn’t seem to have noticed yet, she didn’t feel particularly inclined to add the honorific back into the conversation. ‘Even without any curse, I might end up below an ox cart tomorrow. You know how those Kraalian merchants drive these days.’

He stared at her, a small vein pulsing at his temple – trying to figure out, by the look on his face, whether he would be challenging fate too much by acknowledging the possibility of her untimely demise.

‘You can subtract her allowance from mine, if you like,’ Nellie added, jutting up her chin. ‘I’d spend it on her anyway. You might as well pay it to her directly.’

‘The money is not the issue.’ He drew in a harsh breath, then abruptly turned away and gave a single sharp nod. ‘As you wish, Miss Finch. If – *if* – anything happens to you, she will be taken care of. I’ll have my solicitor add it to the paperwork.’

She could have cried.

And now ... Hell, how could she possibly refuse him, if it was not merely her own future she was securing?

‘Thank you.’ Her hands were suddenly trembling; she tried to bury them in her apron, then realised she would never wear those aprons again and only trembled harder. Just a few words and she would no longer be Nellie Finch. *Lady Locke* – a thought as surreal as it was terrifying, a door she’d open and never be able to close again. ‘Then ... then I believe we have an agreement, Your Grace.’

He did not smile.

He did not kneel again.

His nod was the gesture of a man closing a sale, and his grey eyes remained as cold as ever. But there was a small crack of relief in his voice as he cleared his throat and said, ‘I’m sure Radcliffe will give you the day off to pack your and your sister’s belongings. I’ll make an appointment at the Temple for tomorrow morning.’

And with that meagre goodbye, he swept around and was gone, leaving Nellie weak-kneed and light-headed on Lady Eyestone’s velvet couch.

## CHAPTER THREE



THE LOCKE TOWNHOUSE WAS situated along one of Elidian's most prestigious canals, a stone's throw from the Princeps's seat and the domed building where the Senate gathered to make day-to-day decisions. It was the kind of neighbourhood Nellie had only ever visited to run errands, and even then she'd felt out of place; a humble housemaid certainly did not go for morning walks in this part of the city.

A duchess, on the other hand ...

Sweet divines, a *duchess*.

Her knees were still trembling when she stepped out of Lord Locke's hackney; if not for his footmen, she may have tripped and crashed onto the spotless cobblestones. Her thoughts were a screaming haze. Half of the Temple ceremony had gone by in a blur, and the other half would not stop rising from her memories in jumbled shreds – the empty rows of chairs, Lord Eyestone by her side, and no one but Anne, a stiff-shouldered

Mrs. Radcliffe, and a wide-eyed Lady Eyestone to witness the proceedings. Locke, it seemed, hadn't bothered to invite anyone at all.

Perhaps even his friends had rather given up hope for wife number seven.

Her knees wobbled more fiercely.

Behind Nellie, the footmen helped Anne step from the hackney, her sister's quiet voice thanking each of them with heartbreaking sincerity. Servants poured from the house to take care of their luggage. Three small bags, carrying all of their earthly possessions – even Locke had blinked in surprise when he'd realised how little she'd brought with her.

Locke ...

Her *husband*.

More than anything, she wanted to run like the wind and leave this deadly charade behind. But her little sister appeared next to her, frail and rosy in the faded pink dress that had been Nellie's and their mother's before ... and whatever she ran from, whatever choices she might regret, she couldn't leave Anne behind.

Which meant she had to face this.

Which meant she must be brave enough for the both of them.

So she forced a reassuring smile and turned to see the duke of Locke emerge from the hackney last – more elegantly than seemed possible due to the sheer size of him, his blue hair glowing like sapphire. No matter how warm and bright the sunlight, it couldn't melt the duke's countenance. Nellie was granted no more than a curt nod as he strode up to her and Anne; he didn't meet her gaze until the last moment, and even then his expression remained blank, nothing but perhaps a touch of grim impatience to the angle of his jaw and the grey of his cat's eyes.

'I have business to attend to,' he informed her, ignoring Anne entirely. 'I'll send my steward to show you around.'

And just like that he strode off, without even waiting for an answer. Nellie watched his broad back vanish into the shadowy hall of the townhouse with a sinking feeling in the bottom of her stomach – a sensation of imminent, *very* imminent regret.

‘I don’t think I like him much, Nell,’ Anne whispered beside her.

That was all she needed to pull herself together.

Because she could regret her own decisions as much as she liked, but Anne should not – *could* not – suffer the same fate, not if Nellie had any say in the matter. With newfound resolve, she let out a breezy chuckle, grabbed her sister’s left hand, and lightly said, ‘Good thing you didn’t have to marry him, then, isn’t it? Let’s go take a look inside, before we melt to puddles in this heat.’

Anne’s attempt at a laugh was half-hearted, even as she obediently followed towards that towering façade of red brick and white, ornate woodwork. ‘But Nell ...’

‘Don’t you dare worry about me, little bean.’ Was she trying to convince herself or her sister now? Walking up the steps to the open door felt not unlike stepping between some monster’s gaping jaws, and yet she kept going, giving herself no time to falter and show fear. ‘I’m a duchess now, remember? That’s worth a little unpleasantness. I’ll be perfectly fine.’

Anne’s silence was more damning than her objections could have been. *Duchesses can be unhappy, too*, her glowering expression said, loud and clear in the shimmering morning air. *Duchesses can die*.

Since that was undeniably true, Nellie decided it would be best not to respond to those unspoken arguments.

‘We’ll go shopping tomorrow,’ she continued with stubborn cheer, letting go of her sister’s hand as she stepped over the threshold. Servants hurriedly moved out of the way around her – a more disorienting feeling than even the sound of her new title on her tongue, but she pressed on all the same. ‘You’re in dire need of new dresses, and so am I. Perhaps we can even

afford to visit Miss Grey's shop! And we'll buy you some books and a bunch of those Issian honey treats you liked so much, and ...'

The last two maids parted before her, revealing the entrance hall beyond.

She faltered.

She ought to keep talking – she *knew* she ought to when she felt Anne stiffen beside her, heard the catch of her little sister's breath. But the space before her swallowed the words before they'd even left her lips, and for a heartbeat and a half she could only stand and stare – stare and feel the boulder sink and sink and sink into the deepest pits of her stomach.

This was not the grand duke's home she had envisioned.

This was nothing, *nothing* like the warm, inviting space that welcomed visitors into the stately mansion where Lord and Lady Eyestone spent their days.

The hall was long and narrow and strangely dusky. Even the summer light outside did little to penetrate the gloom. There was no dust, no trace of cobwebs on the crystal chandelier, and yet the air felt stale and hollow, as if it had been years since a fresh breeze had last breathed through the front entrance. All the doors along the corridor were drawn shut. The six paintings on the walls had been covered up with black velvet drapes, the heavy fabrics uncannily similar to the robes of funeral mourners.

*Six paintings.*

She shivered.

A bouquet of cornflowers on an oak side table was the only visible attempt to brighten the atmosphere. Somehow, their sharp contrast to the black and white floor tiles only heightened the icy sense of foreboding that suffused the hall.

It was like stepping into the dark grey of a dreary winter morning. Like walking straight into an empty tomb – as if Lord Locke had interred himself along with the six wives he'd laid in their graves.



At the front door behind them, the maids and footmen were still rushing back and forth, even their voices strangely muted. Nellie could no longer tell if it was the gloom of the house or the fog sinking over her own panicked thoughts that seemed to swallow every last sprinkle of sound. Sweet Mother Ostara, this was where she was forcing Anne to spend the next few months of her life? This was the duchess's existence she'd been promised?

And this ...

This was where her child would grow up?

She'd hardly dared to spend a single thought on him yet, the boy she'd have to bring into the world – had vaguely, hopefully, assumed Locke had a plan to make sure his heir would be taken care of, even with a mother who would be little more than a hired womb. But the sight of this hall made it suddenly urgent, the vision of a small blue-haired toddler running up those steep, narrow stairs ...

She swallowed, tasting gall.

What in the world had she gotten herself into?

'Nell?' Anne whispered, voice wobbling on the edge of tears. 'Nell, do you really think—'

A door slammed above their heads.

And a warm, male voice boomed, 'Ah, Lady Locke!'

The owner of said voice appeared at the top of the stairs a moment later, hurrying down with a vigour that seemed oddly out of place in this macabre environment – a tall, slender gentleman with ruddy brown hair and the sort of grin that made him look perpetually apologetic. He was all energetic motion as he jumped down the last steps, shook Nellie's hand, then turned to her sister and added with equal zeal, 'And you are Miss Anne, I presume? Absolutely *wonderful*. My name is Walford, Peregrine Walford, steward of the Locke family. Othrys sent me to show you the way to your rooms – if you could just follow me upstairs ...'

*Othrys.*

A fae name. Nellie hadn't even known it until the ceremony that morning, when the high priest had first addressed her husband-to-be; Lady Eyestone had visibly shivered at the inhuman sound of it.

Nellie gestured for Anne to go up the stairs first, just in case her sister slipped – she'd be unable to break her fall one-handedly. Walford seemed to catch that line of thinking without missing a beat and positioned himself behind the girl as she began to climb, visibly bracing himself to catch her whenever he might need to.

On this dismal morning, that small show of consideration was enough to make the tears sting behind Nellie's eyes.

Anne did not slip, and they reached the next floor safely, arriving in a shadowy passage that managed to be impossibly gloomier than the hall they'd left behind. Curiously, it seemed that someone had made a start at redecorating the walls, then stopped midway; about two thirds of the corridor were covered in a deep purple that had been fashionable ten years ago, whereas the section opposite the stairs had been replaced with a more modern, flowery motif that strongly resembled the style Lady Eyestone preferred. An initiative of one of the duchesses, presumably. And then when the poor woman had died ...

For what had to be the fifteenth time that day, Nellie suppressed a cold shudder.

Walford's quick glance of understanding as he opened the door to the left suggested he had noticed it, too.

The corridor through the back wing of the house *should* have been a cheerful one, lined with shelves clearly intended to display a colourful collection of exotic trinkets and other curiosities; unfortunately, however, the items in question had been unceremoniously packed away in rough wooden crates, which now balanced on the top shelf, allowing little more than glimpses of the treasures inside. The other shelves were empty, pale spots on the wood the only trace of the past.

On the far side of the passage, shutters were half-closed over the only window. To keep out the summer heat,

presumably, but the resulting lighting was dim and greyish, casting long shadows over the spotless wooden floor.

Walford interrupted her observations. 'These will be your rooms, Lady Locke.' He gestured at the door to his left. It stood ajar. 'Your bags have already been placed inside. And I thought Miss Anne might prefer to sleep close to you, so we have prepared this room for her to stay in.' He hurried to the next door with that energetic step, pushed it open, and cast a look inside. 'I'm afraid it's a little bare, but we did our best to add some cosy touches. Of course, we'll have plenty of time to adjust it to your preferences ...'

*Of course.*

He had to know, didn't he, that she might not have all that much time in the end?

'That ... that is really very kind of you,' Nellie managed to say, once again mortifyingly close to tears. Since when did she cry over such small kindnesses? 'We'll let you know if there's anything else we need.'

'Please do, Lady Locke. Anything you may think of.' His rueful smile faltered as he met her eyes – oh yes, he knew very, very well that he may be standing at her grave within months. 'You can usually find me in my office on the next floor, second door to the right. You too, of course, Miss Anne.'

'Thank you,' Anne murmured, audible only because of the stifling quiet of the townhouse.

With a last nod, the steward strode out and left them alone, his footsteps on the stairs a little less energetic now. Nellie forced a brave smile, pointed at her sister's open door, and said, 'Shall we take a look?'

The room wasn't large, and it gave the impression it had been out of use for a while. But someone had spread a plush pink quilt over the bed, and a vase of fresh wildflowers stood on the bedside table; on the small desk, a pile of history and fairytale books lay waiting to be explored. It wasn't enough to make one overlook the pale squares of removed paintings on the moss green walls entirely ... but at the very least, it didn't

evoke visions of funeral ceremonies either, and with a few prints on the wall and a cosy chair or two, it could turn into something quite passable.

‘There you go,’ Nellie said as Anne remained quiet, aiming for upbeat and falling just short. ‘That will do for now, won’t it?’

Her little sister stepped into the room, plopped down on the bed, and glared at her – a look that tore straight through all pretences of light-heartedness. ‘I’m not an idiot, Nell.’

Not a good start. ‘Of course you aren’t, but—’

‘You don’t like this place either,’ Anne interrupted brusquely – nothing like her, to be so blunt about her likes and dislikes. Her left hand balled into a fist in the pink quilt; the stump of her right wrist looked like it would have followed suit if it had been able to. ‘Can’t we go back to Eyestone Manor? At least Lord Eyestone never killed anyone.’

‘I married Locke,’ Nellie said, fighting the urge to close her eyes and crumple onto the floorboards. *Married* him – why hadn’t she run from the Temple screaming, to hell with his money and promises and his bloody cheekbones? ‘And either way, I thought you believed the curse killed his other wives?’

Anne gave a little huff. ‘That was before I’d seen his house.’

‘I’m sure a curse is perfectly capable of ruining one’s atmosphere, if it’s capable of killing people,’ Nellie said firmly. ‘And either way, I told you it doesn’t make sense for him to have killed them. So I’ll be perfectly fine, and this will all be just for a few months, and then ...’

*Then we’ll be free.*

It felt dangerous to even speak the words out loud. She’d seen the numbers in her wedding contract: more money per year than she’d ever dreamed of possessing in all her life.

‘Yes,’ Anne admitted, and her round face was truly darkening now, ‘but in the meantime you’ll have to ... to ...’

*Bed him.*

That sentence, too, felt too dangerous to finish. As if Nellie wasn't excruciatingly aware of it herself, the night rushing closer with every breath she took: those large hands the priest had bound with hers, moving on her body, on—

'I'll be just fine,' she made herself say, squeezing a smile onto her face. 'I wasn't holding out for love anyway, and this man is no worse than any of the others walking around in this city. So consider it from the bright side – when *you* inevitably fall for some penniless poet, at least we'll have the means to feed the both of you now.'

Anne didn't laugh. 'Nell ...'

'Not another word of it,' Nellie sternly interrupted. 'You should have a look at those books. I'll go inspect my room and unpack my bags, and then we'll have dinner together. I'm sure the food will make up for most of Locke's behaviour.'

Her sister seemed sceptical, but Nellie didn't wait for objections: one or two more of them and her desperate shield of optimism might fold like wet paper. With a last smile, she hurried out, shut the door behind her, and made for the other room Walford had pointed out. Just a few minutes in solitude to gather her wits. Just a single space, no matter how small, that she could call *hers* in this strange new world in which she'd trapped herself – surely that wouldn't be too much to ask?

She swung open the door, then froze on the doorstep.

There was nothing ominous about the room. Nothing that suggested its last six inhabitants had one by one died an untimely death – nothing that suggested the same fate might await her.

Really, the room didn't look like *anything*.

Not cosy. Not dark. Not sumptuous or austere ... There was a bed, a desk, a dresser. A little seat by the windows and a narrow door that would presumably lead to a dressing room. But nothing, *nothing* between these four blue walls carried even the faintest personality: no art, no flowers, not a splash of

colour. Only her own bags lay small and abandoned at the foot of the bed, waiting for her to unpack them.

Although she should probably ring for someone else to unpack them, being Lady Locke and all – she couldn't help a cheerless little laugh at that thought.

The floor felt unsteady beneath her feet as she wandered inside, feeling like a ghost already, an intruder in a place she did not belong. The room felt like it could swallow her whole. Just like it seemed to have swallowed the six previous Ladies Locke, wiped every trace of their existence off the walls, and left only the haunting, incomplete stories of their deaths ... Curse or murder, it suddenly no longer seemed to matter.

Either way, they were gone.

Like she might soon vanish, too, if she had misjudged this game even the slightest bit.

With a sharp shake of her head, she paced to the windows, hoping a glimpse of the city basking in its golden summer light would dispel some of this morbid brooding. Hell, wasn't she supposed to be the sensible, practical one here? But even the garden below seemed to be conspiring to add to her creeping unease ... Weeks away from midsummer, the grounds should have been in full bloom. Instead, most of the plants looked as dead and dreary as the rest of the house; the few flowers that had blossomed from the tangled, muddled green did so almost apologetically. Bad soil, perhaps? But on either side of the townhouse, the neighbours' gardens were bursting with colour as far as the eye could see.

Which suggested this was just neglect again, wilful or otherwise. Or would a curse be capable of killing flowers, too, if it could kill human beings so easily?

She had no idea. She hadn't believed in the damn thing until yesterday, and she still wasn't entirely sure whether she did believe in it now – divines help her, why had she agreed to come here at all before she understood what forces the duke of Locke was playing with?

Her breath was quickening. Hell take her, there had to be something more innocent to think about. Something that didn't remind her of death. The dressing room – how bad could a dressing room be?

She paced away from the windows, drawing deep breaths. The narrow door opposite the bed was locked, but the key protruded invitingly from the hole – a heavy, cast-iron thing the size of her forearm, the type of key one would expect in a Karwaldian castle rather than an Elidian townhouse. It turned easily despite its weight, and when she yanked at the door, it opened without a creak, revealing ...

She gasped.

*Here they were.*

Locke's wives may have been scrubbed meticulously from the bedroom itself ... but there was no erasing the six dead women from the racks and shelves of dresses they'd worn, the shoes, the gloves, the ribbons. The clothes seemed to buzz with untold stories, the personalities of their owners woven into every thread and stitch, every inch of lace and silk and satin. There, to the left, the belongings of a practical, businesslike wife, who'd worn simple dresses and good, sturdy boots. Next to her, a wife who must have loved travelling, or at least the notion of the faraway: exotic Issian motifs decorated her hems and collars, and were those snake-leather gloves there on the shelf above her gowns?

Oh, sweet divines, this was far, far worse than the garden.

Nellie stood paralysed, unable to look away, unable to stop seeing. An extravagant coat with mink sleeves, belonging to a lady who kept up with the latest fashions ... A wide range of playful, flowery dresses, hinting at a lady who did not care about the dominant trend of stately and elegant styles ...

Dead.

They were all *dead*.

She staggered back, air tattering in her throat. The dresses did not move, and yet it seemed as though they were following, whispers seeping into the bedroom. Warning her.

Reminding her. *We stood where you once stood, girl, as alive as you are, and look what's left of us now ...*

Out. *Out.*

Her thoughts were a pounding drum. Damn the cheerful pretences and the calming down – there was no more sense in attempting to reassuring herself, in trying to close her eyes to the bitter truth. She had to understand the rules of this game and understand them *now*. If she gambled wrong, if she played even one bad hand, it would be her humble pile of dresses added to those shelves in two months.

But she couldn't let Anne see her in this state ...

*Anything*, Walford had said.

She barged out of the room and up the stairs, almost flinging herself through the second door on the right as she knocked.



## CHAPTER FOUR



‘AH, LADY LOCKE,’ WALFORD warmly greeted her from behind his desk, then narrowed his eyes and shoved his paperwork aside as she stumbled in. ‘Are you well?’

She was not well.

*Lady Locke.* How odd was it for him to address yet another woman by that same title, after all the others he must have known?

‘Thank you,’ she managed, clinging to her good manners with every last ounce of composure she could marshal. For once, she was grateful for Mrs. Radcliffe’s strict training; her shoulders straightened themselves at the thought of the old housekeeper’s reprimands, and her voice came out steadier than she felt. ‘I ... I just had a small shock, that’s all. Could I ask you a few questions?’

‘But of course.’ He hurriedly stood up and removed a pile of cash books from the chair on her side of the desk, long legs

tangling in his haste. ‘Please take a seat. Could I get you a glass of water, perhaps? You ought to drink a good deal in this heat.’

Nellie shook her head, clutching the doorframe, attempting to catch her breath. How ghastly did she look, for him to make such a fuss about her? Although she was a duchess now – perhaps people just fussed over duchesses all the time, regardless of the state they were in? ‘None of that, thank you. I’ll be fine in a moment.’

‘I’m glad to hear,’ he said, sounding unconvinced. ‘May I ask what caused your distress, or ...’

‘Oh yes. Yes.’ She sat down, wrestling with the words on her lips. Away from the dresses, in this small room full of leather and parchment, her reckless flight was starting to seem increasingly foolish as her heart slowed down. ‘I ... I mostly did not expect to find the dresses of Lord Locke’s previous wives in my dressing room.’

Walford froze.

‘Just a small oversight, I presume,’ Nellie hastily added, her voice climbing. ‘But if they could be stored elsewhere, I—’

‘Good gracious – yes, of *course*.’ He let out a befuddled laugh as he dropped back into his seat, raking ink-stained fingers through his reddish hair. ‘That is very thoughtless. Those used to be stored in the room your sister is now sleeping in – Mrs. Hartnell must have moved them back into the dressing room prior to your arrival. I’m so sorry, Lady Locke. I’ll have them taken out as soon as possible.’

‘Thank you so much. *So* much.’ She buried her face in her hands, trying to wipe the image of those dresses from her mind’s eye and managing poorly. ‘I’m sorry, I promise I’m not usually this weepy. I just ...’

He let out a mirthless chuckle. ‘You haven’t struck me as particularly weepy so far. I’ll be the first to acknowledge this household could grate on anyone’s nerves.’

Knowing she wasn’t imagining it made her feel better and worse at the same time. Since she wasn’t quite sure how to

make that point, she sat up, smoothened the skirt of her pale yellow dress, and sheepishly repeated, ‘Thank you.’

‘My pleasure, Lady Locke.’ He hesitated, then slowly added, ‘You wanted to ask me something, you said?’

‘Oh yes. Yes, please.’ *Tell me how I survive this trap* – but if he knew the answer to that, Locke wouldn’t have had to marry her in the first place. ‘I was wondering ... have you been with Lord Locke for a long time?’

‘Nine years now, give or take.’ If he was surprised by the question, he hid it well. ‘But I’ve known him for much longer. I used to work for his uncle, you see.’

Nellie blinked. ‘His uncle?’

‘Good old Sir Percival.’ A smile slid over his freckled face. ‘He was the one who saw potential in me and trained me to be his steward. Then after he died, Othrys offered me this position. So I know the family well, which is what I think you were asking – I owe them everything, frankly.’

That was sincere fondness in his voice, wasn’t it? A man who knew the family well, a man who wouldn’t think ill of Lord Locke if he could possibly avoid it.

Nellie tucked that little observation away with the few other facts she dared to be sure of. ‘Then you’ve known the previous ladies as well, I presume?’

He sighed. ‘Yes.’

‘And ... and their deaths ...’

‘Ah,’ he muttered, giving her another of those cheerless, apologetic smiles. ‘Of course. Yes, I can tell you more about the curse, if you are sure you wish to know.’

*About the curse.*

Not a moment of hesitation in his voice. Not a trace of suspicion or disbelief.

‘So there *is* a curse,’ she blurted, feeling like a fool but unable to hold back. ‘You are really very sure ...’

‘Of course there is.’ He looked genuinely surprised now, blinking at her with his red eyebrows halfway up his forehead. ‘I understand you’d prefer for it not to be the case, Lady Locke, but I’m afraid there is absolutely no doubt that there’s dark magic at play here. Trust me – we’ve gone over every other option over the years.’

Two days ago, she wouldn’t have believed it. Magic. Fairytales. But she’d seen Locke’s grim distress since then, and now there was this kind, intelligent man who had no reason to deceive her ...

‘So who cursed him?’ she whispered, feeling like an even greater fool.

Walford gave a discreet little cough. ‘His mother.’

‘His *mother*?’

‘Not deliberately, we think, but— Well, let me start at the beginning.’ He planted his elbows on the table, chewing on his thoughts for a moment. ‘When Cyril became Princeps of Elidian twenty-three years ago and passed the law that banned all magic wielders from the city, the late Lord Locke found himself in a difficult position. He’d married a fae woman. That marriage was declared void. He needed to decide whether he’d follow the new rules or fight them.’

‘And he followed the rules?’ Nellie quietly guessed.

‘Yes. Sent her away the very day after the law was passed. He was ... not a sentimental man, Othrys’s father.’

*Not sentimental.* Through the lens of his unwavering loyalty to the family, she could only guess at the heartlessness that lay below those words.

‘I was here with Sir Percival the morning he made her leave,’ Walford continued, lowering his voice as if the maids might be listening by the door. ‘It was a whole scene. She wanted to take Othrys with her. The duke wouldn’t let her. And I vividly remember how she finally stormed out of the house, turned one last time on the doorstep, and yelled at him that she would make sure he never found love again.’

‘Oh,’ Nellie breathlessly said. ‘Oh no.’

‘Yes.’ A grim smile. ‘Well, the old lord never remarried, so we all assumed that was that. He died a few years later. Sir Percival died, too. And Othrys married Isaure – very sweet, very earnest young woman, avid botanist, loved working in the garden. Cut her hand on the garden sheers one day and the wound got infected. She died of a fever before they were married a year.’

Nellie shivered, remembering the sturdy, practical dresses in the dressing room. ‘That’s horrible.’

‘It was,’ Walford grimly affirmed. ‘Then again, such things happen. Tragic but not extraordinary. No one considered it to be anything but bad luck. But then a count’s daughter named Colette became the second Lady Locke – brilliant woman, wrote very engaging theatre critiques – and she fell down the stairs in the middle of the night, after drinking just a glass too many at a late show. Followed within the year by our lovely songbird, Lady Jeanne, who drowned in the marshes during a summer stroll outside the city.’

It had become hard to stop shivering now.

‘We were all there, you see,’ Walford said softly, rubbing his temples. ‘When she drowned. That’s when I began to believe it must be a curse – because it was *nothing* like Jeanne to be that careless. One moment she was just behind us on the path, the next she was being sucked into the mire. I tried to reach her – they had to drag me out of the quicksand, too – but they were too late to help her. As if something was ... *targeting* her.’

Divines help her. She didn’t want to hear any of this, didn’t want to know any of this – and yet she forced herself to sit and listen, to absorb every damning, deadly fact. She had to know. She wouldn’t survive this marriage without knowing.

‘Did Othrys—’ She caught herself just too late and quickly amended, ‘Did Lord Locke believe it was a curse then, too?’

‘He didn’t.’ A bleak sigh. ‘He’s stubborn, Othrys – very sensible, but *too* sensible at times. And of course, he didn’t want to believe his mother could have cursed him, too.’

‘Of course,’ Nellie said weakly.

‘Yes.’ He gave her a thin smile. ‘But people had started whispering, and for a while, remarrying seemed out of the question. Then an old friend of his – Lady Alis – returned from her travels to Issi and the Dragon’s Bay cities. Thought it was all ridiculous and decided she’d just marry him, if no one else was willing to.’

Nellie only just suppressed a whimper.

‘She lasted five months,’ Walford grimly continued. ‘We found her dead in the stables. One of the horses had kicked her in the head.’

‘And did Lord Locke believe in the curse then?’ she whispered.

‘Yes. Mourned for over a year.’ Walford rubbed his hands over his face, leaving his skin almost as red as his hair. ‘Frankly, we all thought he’d never marry again, and I can’t say we weren’t glad for it. But the estate still needed an heir, so ...’

Nellie swallowed. ‘So that’s when he married that half fae lady? Blanche?’

It was on that occasion that she’d first heard of Locke and his curse. Lady Blanche did not wield magic either, meaning the marriage was technically legal even under Princeps Cyril’s laws ... but of course Lady Eyestone had loudly declared it a disgrace all the same, second in reprehensibility only to the duke of Arragher and that fullblood fae mongrel he called his wife. What was to come of the city, if all its most powerful men started courting magic now?

Her fears had been excessive, though. Like the four wives before, Blanche had died – a piece of fish gone bad, sending half the household to bed with cramping guts for days, yet killing only her.

‘Yes,’ Walford said softly. ‘I assume Othrys hoped the curse wouldn’t affect her since she was part fae as well. Needless to say, that was idle hope.’

‘And yet number six married him.’

‘Rosamund. Yes.’ He shook his head. ‘She approached *him* to get married. Impoverished widow with expensive taste and a good eye for opportunities – lovely company, don’t get me wrong, but love certainly wasn’t the first thing on her mind. I think that was a reassurance to him. Didn’t save her life in the end, though.’

‘Hung herself in the attic,’ Nellie muttered. That particular death had been the topic of the month among the Eyestone household last year. ‘For reasons no one could figure out.’

‘Exactly.’

‘And now ...’ A watery laugh slipped over her lips as she glanced down at herself. ‘Now there’s me.’

Walford was quiet for a moment – and another moment, and another, until there was really no way left to interpret his silence as anything but the gravest of hesitations. When she looked up, he had closed his eyes, forehead resting in his hands as if to pray for strength.

‘Mr. Walford?’ she cautiously said.

He jolted as if he’d forgotten her presence, eyes flying open. ‘Yes. Yes, I’m sorry. I was just— Forgive me, I was just thinking ...’

She waited, quietly, the way Mrs. Radcliffe had taught her to wait when she was being spoken to. It took another moment before the steward seemed to come to a decision, rubbed his face again, and started, ‘Lady Locke ...’

There his resolve ran out. Once again, he hesitated.

‘Yes?’ she said, encouraging.

‘Please do not misunderstand me,’ he quickly added – as if there was anything she could have misunderstood from his meagre hints so far. ‘I truly meant it when I said this family is everything to me. I would kill for the duchy – well, not literally, but ...’ A nervous laugh. ‘You see what I mean. And Othrys is a good man – he really is. But he’s also a very, very unlucky man, Lady Locke, and seeing young life after young life end right under my nose ... well, that would drive anyone with a heart insane.’

Oh.

*Oh.*

‘So if you ever regret this choice,’ he continued, and now he was almost whispering, throwing haunted looks at the closed door, ‘if you ever decide you would rather get out of here ... *please* let me know. I would be able to help you. I could find a quiet, safe place for you – for you and your sister.’

A way out.

Away from this cursed house and the dead garden and the racks of whispering dresses. Could it truly be? For a moment, a single mortifying moment, she almost fell to her knees before his desk and begged him to get her to safety, back to someone’s servants’ quarters or a little one-room weaver’s house for all she cared ...

Then the hard hand of reality whacked her.

Because if she fled *now* – before the marriage had even been consummated – no doubt Locke would simply annul the whole thing. Which meant she’d lose her future again, Anne’s money, too, and how could she ever justify that except in the gravest, most imminent danger?

And if it truly *was* a curse haunting this household – if she’d been wrong, all these years, to assume the rumoured powers of the fae were nothing but children’s tales – then she might even stand a chance at survival in the end.

Whatever happened, Locke wouldn’t fall madly in love with some lowly housemaid before the month was over. *None* of his previous wives, even the ones he’d married of his own accord, had died within the first three months. So she would be safe for a while. She had time to make sure the marriage contract was fully and clearly fulfilled, to study the duke’s behaviour, to determine if there was any danger of sudden, deadly romance.

And *if* that were the case, then and only then would she get the hell out of there.

‘Thank you,’ she managed, and despite the newfound clarity of her thoughts, her throat felt tight as if someone had wrapped



their hands around it. 'Thank you so much, Mr. Walford, that is very kind of you. I don't think I should leave just yet, but I'll keep it in mind. I will let you know if I need help.'

He nodded, still smiling ever so apologetically. 'Of course, Lady Locke. I'll leave that decision in your hands.'

No doubt in his voice, no sudden shadows on his face ... and yet, as she rose to her feet, she couldn't help thinking she saw a flash of resignation in his eyes.

## CHAPTER FIVE



BY THE TIME AFTERNOON blurred into evening, Nellie had unpacked her bags and made her plans, so ready for the unpleasant but inevitable next step it almost felt like impatience.

Her new husband did not show up for dinner, and so she ate with Anne alone, the two of them seated at the head of a table built to accommodate two dozen guests. The dining room gave the impression it hadn't been touched by a breathing soul in years, with the brand new candles in the candelabras, the pristine white-and-blue earthenware, and not a fleck of ash in the fireplace; even the servants seemed a little skittish as they served the soup and the grilled lamb, as if the ghosts of their former mistresses could soar from beneath the long rows of empty chairs any moment.

And perhaps they could? If Nellie had to accept the existence of magic, she had no idea where the insanity might end.

Even that thought didn't bother her as much as it would have in the past. She had the facts straight now. She had a plan. And if everything went to hell, she held the key to her own escape – or more accurately, Walford did – which meant she did not depend on Locke to get out of here alive.

So she was not a prisoner of this place.

Just a grim but mostly willing guest, biding her time.

She ate in moderate amounts, careful not to overstuff herself in preparation for the physical exertion that might follow later that night. Next to her, Anne barely ate half of the meat a footman had cut into bite-sized pieces for her, staring gloomily at her plate in between courses. During dessert, not even the excellent raspberry pudding could entice her appetite back to life.

'You do realise,' Nellie said, and now that the shock and uncertainty of the morning had ebbed away, the light firmness of her voice was fully genuine, 'that this place will *surely* kill you if you refuse to eat?'

Anne glared at her, looking about to burst into tears any moment, and took one more bite of pudding before she dropped her spoon again.

They'd work on that tomorrow, Nellie decided. One plan at a time.

After they retreated upstairs, she helped her sister undress, braided her hair for the night, and read her fairytales until Anne's eyes started to fall shut. Then she blew out the candles and tiptoed back into her own bedroom, where the previous ladies' dresses had been removed and only her own meagre wardrobe now occupied the shelves.

She picked her yellow summer dress, not because it was the most flattering – it was not – but because it was easiest to get out of.

Then, having changed clothes, she waited.

Time ticked by far too slowly. She wasn't used to having nothing to do: usually she had too *much* to do, and even knowing the idleness would end, her hands were restless,

itching for something to clean or organise. This house wasn't comfortable enough by far to happily do nothing in it, either – she'd have to work on that.

Not today, though.

One plan at a time.

Except that right at this moment, even tonight's plan wasn't exactly making much progress, while she lounged here on her bed and glared impatiently at the door.

The temple bells struck ten outside, and she decided she'd had enough. Perhaps Lord Locke had a preference for midnight trysts or some such nonsense – but Nellie knew she'd wake at her usual time of half past six tomorrow, midnight tryst or no, and then she'd have to get out of bed to help Anne get dressed. As long as she went ahead and found her husband now, surely they could be done soon enough to allow her six hours of sleep?

They'd have to be, she reassured herself as she slipped out of her room and crossed to the front side of the house, her nervousness drowned out by her far more imminent annoyance. The duke came across as the sort of man who'd tell her to spread her legs, pound away for five minutes, and promptly fall asleep, like the men the other housemaids had whispered about – which was perhaps not entirely enjoyable, but efficient enough for the purposes of their marriage. So it seemed likely she'd be back in her own bed well before eleven

...

Assuming, of course, she could remember which of these dratted doors gave access to his rooms. She should have paid better attention during the housekeeper's quick tour of the house that afternoon.

Hoping for the best, she eventually picked a door at random and knocked. She was the duchess of this place now, after all. Surely the rest of the household would forgive her if she accidentally went bursting into the wrong place?

No answer followed, even after she knocked a second time. She moved on to the next room.

This time, the reply came immediately – an audibly terse, ‘Yes?’

Her husband.

All the resolve in the world couldn’t keep her hands from trembling slightly as she twisted the doorknob and pushed.

The room beyond was what she’d started to expect from this house – so carefully devoid of all personality it had to be deliberate. Not a fleck of colour on the walls. No flowers, no paintings, no little piles of human clutter. Just stark functionality wherever she looked: a set of methodically organised bookshelves, a near-empty desk, a chair so stiff it did not look intended to be sat on. The only hint of softness was the couch in the farthest corner, plush and more worn than she’d expect in a duke’s household.

It was on that couch he was sitting, in his shirtsleeves, his blue hair unbound and a crystal glass of some amber-coloured liquor in his hand.

She caught a single glimpse of him like that – a man she hardly recognised as the harsh creature she’d married that morning. Broad shoulders sagging. Stiff spine bent. And the look she found in his eyes as he snapped around towards her ... it was not the absent formality with which he’d regarded her before the altar of the High Divines, or even the blunt practicality with which he’d proposed to her the day before.

Instead, the catlike eyes that met hers exuded nothing but bone-deep exhaustion.

Just for a moment, and then he recognised her. In a single, disorienting eyeblink, he morphed back into the hard-shouldered, square-jawed aristocrat she knew – a look in his eyes that brought to mind all seventeen generations of family honour upon which she was infringing by barging in on him like this.

‘Eleanor?’ His voice was as sharp as his cheekbones.

*I prefer Nellie*, she almost told him, then realised that this would be infinitely better – that she didn’t mind at all if she didn’t have to be herself in his bed. Perhaps Nellie Finch did

not even have to sleep with him. Just Eleanor, duchess of Locke – just the woman who was a stranger to both of them.

She pushed the door shut behind her. It fell into the lock with an ominous *click*.

‘Good evening, Your Grace,’ she said, ignoring the tremor of doubt at that honorific – did duchesses still call their husbands *Your Grace*, or was she supposed to have switched to a more informal alternative at this point? He likely didn’t care. If he cared, he shouldn’t have married a housemaid. ‘Forgive me for imposing on you like this, Your Grace. I was wondering when you were planning to get to work.’

He stared at her as though she’d walked in straight through a solid wall.

And again it was as if a layer of ice cracked around him for a single heartbeat, as he blinked at her and blinked again – forgetting for a moment, it seemed, to be haughty and perpetually on the brink of vexation, as if his manners were an ill-fitting coat he had trouble keeping on in the far more familiar surroundings of this room.

‘*Work*,’ he said slowly.

It came out flat. Hollow. As if he was just repeating the sounds from her lips without the faintest notion of their meaning – as if he had forgotten why he’d married her.

Sweet divines. Just *how much* of that bottle had ended up in his stomach already?

‘Yes, Your Grace,’ Nellie said, speaking just a fraction slower in case it was more than the single glass in his hand. Lord Eyestone became a positive simpleton after three glasses of Cook’s plum liquor – better to be sure. ‘Conceiving a child. Getting you an heir. That was the whole purpose of this charade, wasn’t it?’

This time, he didn’t reply at all.

She really was getting tired of him gaping at her like that. *She* wasn’t the one who’d come up with this entire plan, for goodness’ sake. He didn’t get to look at her like she was the mad one here, when she was doing nothing more insane than

reminding him of the desperate approach that *he* had devised for the both of them.

Folding her arms, she pointedly added, ‘Your Grace?’

That seemed to shake him awake. In a single jerking motion, he plunked his glass down on the side table, turned the full muscular bulk of his body towards her, and sharply inquired, ‘You want to get started *tonight*?’

‘Well, most people seem to prefer the night for that sort of business,’ Nellie said, feeling more and more indignant. ‘All the same to me if you’d like to have me over the breakfast table, but in that case, you could have let me know in advance that would be the approach. I would have eaten more at dinner.’

‘You— Divines help me.’ He planted his elbows onto his thighs as he leaned forward – rather muscular thighs, she couldn’t help but notice, and what little she could see of his arms beneath his shirt appeared to be similarly corded. ‘I prefer to eat my breakfast uninterrupted, thank you very much, and I generally agree the night is the most convenient time of day for our *work*. That said, I assumed you and your sister might like to have some time to settle in.’

‘To settle in?’ she echoed. ‘You thought I’d still be unpacking those six whole dresses I have in my possession?’

His blue-lashed eyes narrowed. ‘You’ve only just arrived.’

‘Yes, and I’d prefer to be out again as soon as possible,’ she flung back with a snort – realising only a moment later that she was *snorting*, at a *duke*. Sweet divines, what had gotten into her? But the man before her hardly seemed to notice, and either way, what was he going to do about it? ‘So if it’s not too much to ask, I would very much like to get started. If you didn’t have any other plans tonight, of course.’

‘My plans,’ he tartly said, groaning as he hauled himself off the couch and straightened to his full towering length, ‘were to get mind-numbingly drunk and forget for a few hours that I’m officially a married man again. So I don’t have any pressing obligations, no.’

Oh.

Oh dear.

Seven-time husband. Six-time widower. Only now, seeing that look on his face, did the cold facts truly punch through to her: six women, six deaths, and if the curse was real, he must have loved every single one of them.

At once, her firm determination felt painfully, shamefully misplaced.

‘I see,’ she said, suddenly feeble again. ‘Of course. If ... if you prefer for me to leave, I’ll—’

‘Don’t bother.’ He all but snapped the words, as if her sympathy was an even greater offense than her unthinking lack of it before. His angular, almost-human face had gone expressionless again, although his loose long hair and comfortable white shirt rather spoiled his effort to look entirely unruffled. ‘It was not my wellbeing I was concerned about. We can get started whenever you wish.’

That was a victory ... wasn’t it?

So why did her nervousness choose *this* moment, of all the moments it could have chosen, to claw its hooks back into her guts?

She swallowed, unwilling to back down but equally unable to follow the duke as he made for the connecting door between his bookshelves and swung it open with an almost theatrical flourish. Through the open doorway, she caught a glimpse of a candlelit room and a broad, canopied bed.

*A bed.*

As glad as she should be that he wasn’t planning to deflower her on his couch, the sight of those tightly made blankets had the last drops of courage evaporating from her limbs.

‘There you go,’ he flatly said as he turned back to her, rolling up his shirtsleeves like a man preparing for a deeply unpleasant task. ‘After you, Eleanor.’

Which meant she had to step forward.



And again and again, all the way to those stiff, unwelcoming pillows ... And then she'd have to take off her dress, or let him do it. Lie down or let him fold her into whatever position he preferred. Which was all fine, of course. This was a job; it did not need to be pleasant. She'd suffered far worse than a little pain, and ...

'I'm a virgin,' she blurted before she could help herself.

Locke didn't even blink. 'That seemed a possibility to me, yes.'

'Oh.' A blush stormed her cheeks. Why was she suddenly blushing *now*, if far worse had left her lips already? 'That ... that is good. I didn't want to cause any unpleasant surprises. I suppose I'll just lie down then, and—'

'You'll do no such thing,' he sharply cut in, holding out a tanned hand to her. Only now, with his sleeve rolled up, did she see the line of silvery blue, scale-like marks that ran over the inside of his forearms, embedded in his wiry muscles like a second skin – more signs of his fae heritage, presumably. 'I may be a cold-hearted bastard, but I'm not a brute. Come here.'

This time she was the one to gape at him.

'Unless,' he added, and she had to be delusional because she imagined just the slightest fraction of bitter amusement in the twist of his lips, 'you'd rather leave me to my boozing after all. In that case, you are more than welcome to go.'

That helped.

'No, thank you,' she managed, kicking herself forward in a burst of extraordinary courage – nerves or no, retreating would be too much of a defeat to bear. Every step brought her closer to that bed. Closer to him. 'I ... I was just surprised for a moment.'

'I fully understand,' he said in his low voice, his palm settling in the small of her back as she passed. The warm touch guided her into his bedroom as he shut the door behind them with his free hand. 'I'd take me for a brute, too, if I were you. Let me help you with that dress.'

Wait.

What?

Had that been ... a *joke*?

She stood stiff as a broomstick as he untangled her lacings with seasoned ease. Her mind spun. After the way he'd proposed to her, after the way he'd vanished all day and left her to the care of his steward and housekeeper, the *last* she had expected from this man was any consideration ... and yet how else was she to take these remarks, this encouragement, or even his decision not to summon her at all tonight?

Of all the things she hadn't expected, accidentally having married a decent man was probably the first.

The duke's hands began bunching up her skirt, and she obeyed his unspoken command without thought, moving along as he pulled the dress over her head. In only her shift, even the summer air seemed suddenly cool. When she kicked off her shoes and turned, Locke had just sunken down onto the edge of his bed, still fully clothed but for those sculpted bare forearms.

He did not look in a particular hurry to get rid of his breeches, either.

'May I assume,' he said, one blue eyebrow raised inquisitively, 'that you know ... let us say, the basic mechanics of the act?'

Nellie managed a nod, feeling more naked than if he'd just torn her shift off her.

'Wonderful.' He gave a brisk jerk of his head. 'Come here.'

'Shouldn't you ... undress?' she risked asking as she tiptoed towards him, well-aware she was not the expert in the room but quite confident all the same that one did not bring forth children by remaining all buttoned-up and covered. 'Or at least ... partly?'

'Later.' His left hand landed on her hip as she came within reach, and she barely managed not to jerk away again – far, far too intimate a touch for a man with such an icy hardness to

him. ‘I want to prepare you first, to make sure it doesn’t hurt when I enter you. There’s no need to make this more unpleasant than it needs to be.’

She blinked. ‘What?’

‘Prepare you,’ he repeated, voice still so inhumanly impassive – as if he was talking about travel arrangements or midsummer festivals. As if he wasn’t talking about *bodies*. ‘Once you’ve reached a climax once or twice, the rest will be far less likely to cause you any pain. Which seems helpful, especially for a first time.’

*Helpful?*

Was she going mad? What in the world did her hurt matter to him, when he’d just hired her to do a job that she was perfectly willing to do regardless? Why in the world did he think she would be *helped* by him dragging out this business however long his preparations would take, when they could just get to work and be done in fifteen minutes at most?

‘There ... there is really no need for any of that,’ she managed, hoping her chuckle sounded breezily amused rather than like he’d lost his mind – because even if the latter was perfectly accurate, the man was *still* a duke. ‘I would prefer to just get things over with as soon as possible. I don’t care if it hurts a bit or—’

His eyebrows shot up. ‘I do.’

‘You’re the one who wanted to minimise contact,’ she sputtered, willing her legs to move, to step away from his solid, muscular form. They did not; the warm pressure of his hand on her hip did not abate, heating the muscle below. ‘Wouldn’t it be much healthier for me if you didn’t have to spend that much time with me every night?’

Was that a small twitch of his fingers on her hip? But his marble-carved face did not stir, and his voice did not betray any hint of emotion. ‘I was not planning to fall head over heels in love with you over a daily hour of nothing but physicality, Eleanor.’

Right.

Because she was still a graceless housemaid, and this man moved among the highest circles of the city; that *had* been a preposterous objection from her side, if she was honest. And yet ...

Yet her muscles resisted giving in, a defiance as instinctive, as reflexive, as the beat of her heart. She wasn't even sure *why* she was arguing – why his thoughtfulness was worse, somehow, than the cold disregard for which she'd braced herself. Just that this was not how things were supposed to be. Just that this had to be a misunderstanding, *somehow*, a trick she was failing to see through, and—

Locke rose.

A single, graceful motion, and suddenly he towered over her again, his hand sliding from her hip to her waist to keep her in place. Divines help her, there was so *much* of him – a wall of corded muscle in all directions, his blue hair cascading down his white shirt like a veil of midnight silk. His grey eyes bore into hers with an intensity that made her want to crawl away and take cover, something about him that seemed, more than ever before, decidedly inhuman.

'Eleanor.' That, she knew instinctively, was his duke's voice. All noblemen had a voice like that. They usually employed it when firing servants. 'What exactly is the matter?'

'Why do you even care?' she squeaked.

'You're my *wife*.' He pronounced the word as if it meant something. 'Sham or no, I still took responsibility for you the moment I married you. Which means I'm not going to hurt you if I can at all avoid it, I'm not going to treat you like some bloody harlot, and there's no negotiating on that. Is that clear?'

No.

No, that wasn't clear at all.

The defiance won, that little streak of stubbornness even Mrs. Radcliffe's strict training had not erased from her bones entirely. Her scoff left her lips before she could stop herself. 'I accepted your money to step into your bed, Your Grace. I

think you'd be perfectly within your rights to treat me like some bloody harlot.'

'Oh, come *on*.' She thought for a moment he would shake her. 'Do you *want* to get hurt?'

'No!' Her breath rushed from her lungs in a bewildered chuckle. 'No, but this is not supposed to be *fun*, is it? It's work. I accepted it as work. If it hurts a little – well, then it's still much better than scrubbing floors until my hands and knees are bleeding, which is what you've saved me from for the rest of my life. So you could stop fussing and just ... just ...'

'Assault you?' he suggested, and although his eyes remained dull like a grey winter's sky, there was a bite in his voice that made her swallow the rest of her words.

'It's not assault if you have my permission,' she muttered instead, forcing herself to hold his gaze.

'For the bloody divines' sakes.' He swept her off her feet before she realised what was happening – one arm beneath her knees, one beneath her shoulders, a mockery of a bridal carry for a mockery of a wedding day. 'Eleanor Locke, when did you last do anything just because you enjoyed it?'

*Eleanor Locke.*

The sound of her new name was so strange, so unexpected, that the rest of the question took another two seconds to come through. He had planted her on the silk sheets of his canopied bed before she'd fully processed it – *enjoying* things?

What in the world did any of this have to do with *enjoyment*?

That was not how life worked. That had *never* been how life worked. Enjoyment didn't keep little sisters alive and happy, after all. It didn't pay the surgeon's bills. It didn't keep the house clean when one's mother would no longer leave her bed. Enjoyment ... enjoyment was for people who believed in love and magic and happy endings, for people who could afford not to see the darker side of life.

She washed other people's linen until her hands were raw instead. She smiled even when she wanted to cry. She married dukes who might or might not end up killing her.

When had she last done anything else?

'Yes,' Locke said, lowering himself onto the edge of the bed beside her, and although she had not spoken a single thought out loud, she had the strange impression he'd heard them all the same. 'I see.'

'What?' she bit out.

'I've never quite regarded myself as a floor to be scrubbed.' If not for his even tone and the stoic mask of his angular face, she may have thought it a joke. 'But if that is how the matter stands, let me attempt another approach. See, there's a book by the esteemed physician Lord Heartstrong – esteemed enough that the Princeps awarded him a name change for his research – on human reproduction. One of his many interesting findings is that the chances of conception appear to be higher when *both* partners reach their climax, which means that, if you are as devoted to the success of the endeavour as you claim to be —'

Nellie squinted at him. 'You're making this up, aren't you?'

'Do I need to show you the source material?' He nodded at his study, eyebrows raised. 'I have the page marked, in case you were wondering.'

That did not look like a joke at all.

Mother Ostara have mercy. How thoroughly had he prepared for this marriage, exactly?

'Oh,' she said belatedly, because the silence was stretching on in mortifying ways and his eyes were glittering alarmingly in the candlelight. 'I ... I see.'

There was no joy in his smile. It did things to the structure of his features all the same, though – brought out the sharpness of his cheekbones, the breadth of his jaw, in ways that made her feel annoyingly and unnecessarily breathless.

'Done arguing?' he pleasantly enquired.

‘I think so?’ She swallowed. ‘For purely pragmatic reasons, that is.’

‘I wouldn’t dare accuse you of any other motives.’ His large hand hovered over her leg for a moment, then landed lightly on her shin, the strength of his fingers a strangely reassuring weight against her bare skin. ‘If we have that inconsequential matter cleared up, then, do you think we could get started with the work?’

## CHAPTER SIX



THIS WAS NOTHING LIKE work anymore.

Nellie felt like a fumbling fool in that overly large bed, gaping at the man who called himself her husband, her bare skin pebbling no matter how mild the night. The plan had been so very clear a few minutes ago. He would take, she would give. As she'd been paid to do – as she'd *always* been paid to do. And now—

Now she was supposed to *enjoy* things, and she did not have the faintest clue how in the world one went about that sort of thing.

‘Come here,’ Locke said, his voice gruff but not unfriendly as he lifted his hand from her leg and held it out to her. ‘Or if you prefer to come back tomorrow—’

To hell with that.



She might be clueless, but she was not a *coward*; if this was what he expected of her, she'd make it work somehow. Pressing herself up in the smooth silk blankets, she managed an almost-composed, 'There's no need for that, Your Grace.'

'No,' he admitted, hands wrapping around her waist. 'I suspected as much, to tell you the truth.'

Drat. He wasn't *blind*, the bastard – and somehow not that much of a bastard either as he pulled her easily into his lap, far more gently than the sight of him suggested he would. One arm wrapped around her, tucking her into his broad chest. The other brushed past the bare skin of her calf, there and gone again – as if he was still waiting for her to object, to push him away, to burst into tears and admit she should never have married him in the first place.

Nellie squeezed her eyes shut and steeled herself, unmoving.

'No need to be tense, Eleanor,' he murmured into her hair. 'I'll take care of you.'

A ludicrous promise. How could she trust him to keep it, she wanted to say, when she had not even been able to trust her own bloody father to do the same? But then his fingers traced a line up the inside of her thigh, and she abruptly forgot about every bitter rejoinder on her lips.

He was *touching her*.

Sweet divines, the duke of Locke was holding her and *touching* her – strong fingers brushing over soft, sensitive skin, not even her shift between them to dull the intimacy of his caresses. Which shouldn't make her feel so much. This marriage was not a place for feelings – he had been more than clear on that – and yet ...

That gossamer touch was dancing up her thigh, creeping closer and closer to parts of her she'd barely ever touched herself, and she couldn't help but feel *everything*.

'That's more like it,' he muttered, and only then did she realise that she'd slumped against the solid wall of his chest, that her legs had unclenched around his hand. His shoulders

and biceps shifted as he adjusted his hold. ‘Open your eyes, Eleanor. There’s nothing here you need to hide from.’

His voice was a low rumble in his chest, deep and mesmerising. She obeyed before she could think, blinking against the candlelight, against the sight of her own shift bunched around her hips. His wiry forearm lay between her thighs, the silver-blue scales even more alien next to the pale softness of her own body, and his hand ...

His hand shifted.

A finger slid beneath her drawers.

She *saw* him move, she *saw* his wrist and forearm bulge as he slipped past the last of her defences, and yet nothing could possibly have prepared her for the feeling of it – the first firm stroke of his finger over her own slick flesh below, the flurry of sensation sparking into every nerve and fibre of her body. She gasped, words evaporating. He repeated the motion in response, slow and deliberate, and a shudder wracked through her, pleasure fizzing up her spine and all the way down into her curling toes.

Again she gasped, more urgently now.

‘That’s it.’ There was a strange encouragement in his voice, calm and unaffected but soothing all the same. ‘That’s what I need from you. Do you want more, Eleanor?’

Did he expect her to *talk* now?

She jerked back her head before she could think twice, meeting his gaze – grey eyes watching her with unruffled interest as his finger continued to explore her most intimate places in methodical, unhurried circles. No glimpse of a blush on his tanned cheeks. No sign of glassy arousal in his eyes. As if this was nothing but mundane routine, and yet his touch didn’t falter, winding her tighter, coiling something terrifying yet glorious in her lower belly ...

This should have been mortifying. She didn’t even *know* this man. Yet all she felt, all she could possibly feel, was the building ache under his fingertips, rippling outward at his every stroke, his every brush.

It left no room for shame or fear.

It left room only for him.

‘More, Eleanor?’ The words were conversational, almost detached. She struggled for air, light-headed with the effort to focus, and still he barely even blinked, his eyes intent upon her face as if to read the words her gasps were hiding. ‘Do you want me to go on?’

‘Yes,’ she whimpered. ‘Yes, *please*—’

A finger slid into her.

She almost came apart around it.

She hadn’t known she’d been empty all her life, not until now, not until this moment in which she learned what fullness felt like – the blissful, delicious *presence* of him in the hollow tightness of her body ... A moan slipped over her lips. and then there was a *second* finger pressing into her, stretching her open, and somehow that felt even better than the first had done ...

Locke drew halfway out of her.

Then thrust back in, and *oh*, the ecstasy tightening within her at the roughness of that touch ... Her eyes fluttered shut. His free hand clamped around her hip to steady her, and once more his fingers drove deep, drawing an unthinking cry from her lips. A tension was building in her body, and she knew it instinctively, knew without words that she needed the release of it in every desperate fibre of her.

Just not when.

Just not *how*.

‘Please,’ she panted, words slurring. ‘Please, more ...’

‘Even more?’ he muttered, and in that moment, she would have given her soul for more of the approval brimming in his voice. ‘As you wish ...’

A third finger pressed into her, and she imploded.

She was all breathless surrender, all tangled limbs, as release tore through her and had her clenching up to the tips of her

fingers, sending her collapsing against him. Strong arms wrapped around her. And then she lay slumped against his chest, out of air and out of strength, as her body pulsed and trembled and her heart echoed *more, more, more* ...

‘There.’ Gone was that sliver of softness in his voice above her – as if he’d remembered just in time that her pleasure did not mean a blasted thing to him. ‘That should get us started.’

Sweet divines.

This was only the *start*.

When she scrambled upright on his thighs, knees still shaking, he met her gaze without blinking. Framed by ink blue strands, his sharp-edged face was *almost* entirely expressionless ... but she could have sworn on her mother’s grave that the bittersweet trembles at the corners of his mouth were hiding something close, very close, to a smirk of satisfaction.

Bastard.

The thought didn’t come with great conviction this time.

‘And?’ he muttered, as if he’d seen it in her eyes and was determined to change her opinion for the worse again. ‘Still impatient to get this over with?’

There was no holding back the laugh that spilled out of her.

It was shrill and breathless and elated in a way she hadn’t felt in years, that laugh – and divines help her, impatient indeed. Not for the end. For *more*. Because even if this madness was entirely unnecessary, even if none of these glorious feelings ever paid a single bill ... how in the world was she to resist this brand new hunger, the lure of whatever else he might have in store for her?

And why would she even try?

It all made sense, suddenly – work, yes, but if he wanted to pretend it wasn’t, then who would ever need to know?

‘I could be persuaded to take things slowly,’ she managed, that same giddy laugh still lacing her words. ‘Should ... should I lie down, or—’

‘No.’ He lifted her off his lap and placed her on the blankets, then shifted back over the mattress himself, reclining until his weight rested on his elbows. He still hadn’t even taken off his boots; his feet remained firmly on his mahogany floor. ‘I want you on top. Go ahead – loosen my breeches.’

She hadn’t thought she could blush even deeper, but the bluntness of his instructions managed it – that or perhaps the visible bulge beneath those same breeches. ‘Why ...’

‘Because it allows you more control,’ he interrupted, raising an eyebrow at her. ‘And before you start objecting that that’s too much consideration from my side, I don’t mind having the best view while you do all the work for me, either.’

Another snort-laugh escaped her as she reached for the buttons of his breeches, fingers shaking as she wrestled with the metal. ‘You don’t care whether *you* are enjoying this, do you?’

His face went a fraction tighter. ‘I’ll be fine.’

‘But—’

‘Eleanor.’ He didn’t raise his voice, but the bite in his tone was enough to discourage any further protest. ‘I’ll never be the victim here. Take care of yourself, not me.’

Nellie swallowed but nodded, unsure how else to respond.

His features softened again. ‘Go ahead, then.’

She fumbled open the last of his buttons and swiftly pulled the fabric down. His arousal sprung free as if it had waited for her, thick and dark in the candlelight, and ...

Sweet divines help her.

And *fae*.

She’d thought she knew what the male member ought to look like, from the whispers of the maids who shared her rooms. Thick and long. Hard, if one was lucky. Oddly curved, Lucy Clarke had confessed amidst fits of giggles after her rendezvous with the stable boy last year. But *this* ...

Locke's manhood was large, much larger than she'd imagined such a thing could reasonably be, emerging from a tuft of blue-black hair like a pale, smooth tower of flesh, glistening like silk at the ruddier tip. And swirling across that shaft, like artful spirals designed to draw her attention across its full unsettling length, were the same silver-blue scales she'd noticed on his forearms. Two slender lines of them, glittering pearlescent with every throb and pulse, running all the way up to the blunt head.

*Scales.*

She'd married a man with *scales* on his member.

Vaguely, she was aware of the sound that came tumbling from her lips. Locke's hollow chuckle held an edge of resignation to it – hell, how many times had he dealt with the same dismay and breathless shock already?

It was that thought that made her pull herself together. Fae or no, surely a man would sooner or later get sick of his wives gawking at his body as though he were some eldritch monster? She was supposed to be the pragmatic one, and did it really matter what colour his appendages happened to be as long as they fulfilled their practical functions?

'That could have been worse, I suppose,' she said weakly, still not quite able to pull her eyes away. 'No thorns and barbs. That's good.'

He gave a short bark of laughter. 'No urge to run yet?'

'No more than the one I've been suppressing all day.' She gently poked his rigid flesh before she could stop herself. The duke didn't object, so she returned for a more thorough exploration, running a finger down the silky rim, crossing the shimmering lines of scales. They weren't sharp, just smooth and cold, a strange contrast to the dizzying heat of the taut skin around them. 'So how do we proceed now, Your Grace?'

'Impatient?' he retorted, and again that unexpected flare of emotion below the impassive façade almost looked like amusement.

‘I need my night’s rest,’ she informed him, pulling back to tug down her drawers, leaving her shift on. Oddly, she barely felt naked under his eyes. ‘And it’s already past my usual bedtime, so let’s get to work. Do I just ... straddle you?’

He seemed to find that quite funny, too, for some reason she wasn’t sure about. ‘One knee on either side of me, yes. Then lower yourself over— Yes, just like that.’ He wrapped a hand around his own shaft, holding it up as she settled on top of him. ‘Slowly. It shouldn’t hurt.’

That seemed almost laughably optimistic, but then again, he was the one who had bedded at least six women with the same monstrous instrument. So she just nodded wordlessly, biting her bottom lip in concentration as she sank down and down and down until—

Her breath caught in her throat.

Until they *touched*.

His broad tip was slick and smooth against her core, her skin still shivery and sensitive from the torment of his fingers. No matter how large he might be, there was something instinctive about the feel of him in that hot, forbidden place – something that made her suck in a last breath for courage and sink down another fraction without any urging, pressing herself onto the first half-inch of his length.

An intrusion.

A *completion*.

It had no right to feel so good, having this near-stranger inside her, and yet she barely paused before sinking lower – unable to stop craving the sensation of her body parting around him, his girth filling her in the most irresistible of ways. Another inch. So, so much feeling, balancing on the edge of pain ... and yet the pleasure was stronger, the overwhelming *fullness*, a breathtaking satisfaction that turned his fingers into a distant memory.

Another inch. She yelped as the cold surface of his scales met her own heated skin. Her hands shook, her thighs trembled with anticipation; she squeezed her eyes shut and

spearred herself two more inches onto him, gasping as her body stretched and strained to its limits around him.

‘Slowly, Eleanor.’ His warm hand enveloped her thigh. ‘Slowly.’

‘Feels ...’ It was more moan than word. ‘Feels so good ...’

‘And it’ll feel even better,’ he said, his voice still as before – calm, dispassionate, as if he was instructing her on how to ride a horse. ‘But I’m going to fuck you again tomorrow, and the day after, and I don’t want you to be too sore. So—’

She sank down another half-inch.

He faltered, gulping in a breath.

He *gasp*ed – Othrys Locke, the duke of ice, *gasp*ed – and oh, that sound alone sent a whole new heat spiralling through her, tightening her body around his hardness in the most delicious ways. She blinked open her eyes, breathing a laugh. He still rested in the blankets as he’d done before, propped up on one elbow, his other hand guiding her down ... but dispassionate voice or no, his jaw had tightened considerably.

Oh, this was *glorious*.

‘Enjoying this?’ she murmured, sinking lower.

‘Doesn’t matter.’ His voice came out a little tight. ‘You should stop thinking about— *Fuck*.’

Because she’d pressed herself all the way down in one reckless, painful, *perfect* slide, and now he was all inside her, every impossible inch of him, and his breath had abruptly gone shallow and strained below her. The fingers on her thigh were squeezing into her muscles. Her hips instinctively began to rock, seeking that perfect angle, and again he cursed, lip curling up in a last, desperate bid for self-control.

‘Here ... anyway ...’ Nellie managed, finding her rhythm, up and down, stroke after stroke of wicked friction. He’d been right. This was even better. ‘Might ... as well ... enjoy ...’

‘Little minx,’ he snapped.



And then his hands were on her hips, both of them, and he was bucking up beneath her, dragging her down with every thrust into her throbbing tightness. She arched back with a cry, lost to the onslaught of sensation. Cold scales, hot skin, the ravenous strength of his fingers ...

‘Eleanor,’ he growled – a caress, that name that was hers yet not hers at all. ‘Pleasure yourself.’

She couldn’t obey fast enough.

Fumbling up her shift, her hands clumsily found the spots he’d touched before – and oh, divines have mercy, magic must exist after all because what else could this feeling be? This rising tide within her, climbing and climbing with every thrust and stroke ...

She shattered.

Every muscle in her body tightened around him as the world dissolved into glory and bliss and perfect oblivion. He slammed into her at the same moment with a roar of surrender, and spurts of warm wetness filled her as she rode him through their shared release, through every tremor and shudder, until finally the madness waned and she collapsed powerlessly onto his heaving chest.

Then she lay there, limbs like pudding and mind like fog, listening to his labouring heart as it slowly settled back into its usual rhythm.

‘I’d say,’ he finally muttered, voice jarringly level, ‘that that should do the job for today.’

Oh. Yes.

The job.

This was just work. Of course. And of course ... of course she did not at all want him to wrap his arms around her and hold her a little longer, to chat with her and laugh with her as they lay here basking in the afterglow of this glorious night. That would be utterly nonsensical, and dangerous to boot.

‘Shall I ... shall I just return to my room, then?’ she made herself ask.

‘You should rest for a few more minutes,’ he corrected, all stoic business again as he rolled her off him, sat up, and began to button his breeches with quick, matter-of-fact gestures. ‘Lord Heartstrong’s instructions.’

‘Oh.’ She came up on her elbows to look at him, sticky seed seeping out of her and staining her inner thighs. He wouldn’t meet her gaze, and now she *did* feel naked, in spite of all her pragmatism and sense. ‘That ... that’s good to know. I’ll bring a book tomorrow.’

He strode out the room without speaking, returning ten seconds later with a well-thumbed volume that he tossed onto the bed without further ado. ‘Anything else I can do for you?’

‘Oh no,’ she hurriedly said and smiled until her jaw started cramping. ‘No, I’ll be fine. See you tomorrow, then.’

The door to the study closed with a little too much force behind his broad back.

She lay in his bed for close to an hour, scanning Lord Heartstrong’s preface with unseeing eyes ... but no matter how intently she listened, no matter how close to the doorway she strayed while she finally slipped into her dress again, not the faintest sound emerged from the neighbouring room.

# CHAPTER SEVEN



FLINGING OPEN THE CURTAINS in Locke Manor was an unfulfilling experience.

Somehow, even on this sunny summer morning, little more than a few watery rays made their way into the bedrooms, as if even the light itself was hesitant to touch the cursed interior of this luxurious tomb. In an attempt to make up for the absence of a glorious dawn, Nellie made herself smile all the more broadly as she swept around the window and announced, ‘Good morning, little bean!’

Anne groaned dismally from beneath the blankets.

‘You’ve got some time to wake up,’ Nellie brightly continued, tucking the fairytale book she’d been reading last night onto the shelf where it belonged – a servant’s reflexes, and she didn’t suspect she’d ever get rid of them. ‘I told the maids to bring you breakfast in half an hour. But I need you to

be ready to get dressed after that, because we're going shopping.'

One brown eye blinked open beneath the mess of strawberry-blond hair, glaring at her suspiciously. Then a second eye. Finally, her sister's voice emerged, wary and drowsy in equal amounts.

'You look ... cheerful.'

'Well, I'm still alive,' Nellie said, which was admittedly not the full story – but then again, she wasn't going to tell her little sister about the scales on Locke's member, or the size of it, or the way it had felt inside her. 'And I don't think he's as bad as he seems at first glance. Lord Locke, I mean.'

*My husband.*

Strange, how that suddenly seemed a far more reasonable thing to say.

Anne hauled herself up in the bed, eyes narrowing. 'You're not going to fall in love with him, are you?'

'Don't be ridiculous,' Nellie said impatiently, stepping around the bed. 'We've simply come to an understanding. Now stay awake, ring if you need help, and enjoy your gentlewoman's breakfast. I'll be back in half an hour or so.'

'Nell ...' Her sister didn't sound reassured in the slightest. 'Nell, where are you *going*?'

'Oh, some preparations,' Nellie said, turning with her hand on the doorknob. This time, there was nothing forced about the smile growing on her face. 'If I have to be Lady Locke for the foreseeable future, I might as well make sure I don't hate every minute of it.'



Mrs. Hartnell was a large, stylish woman with chamomile-bleached hair, too proper to show any explicit displeasure at her lord's latest marriage but too staunchly aware of the world's natural hierarchies to be entirely happy she had to

serve under a glorified maid. The previous day she'd been civilly haughty while giving her tour of the house. Which had seemed perfectly fine to Nellie at the time, and not that unreasonable either ...

But for some reason it had started stinging this morning, the prospect of spending divines-knew-how many months surrounded by respectful dislike. Work, yes, but didn't Locke seem to think that was no excuse to be miserable?

Which meant it was time to do something about the matter.

She found the housekeeper in her own rooms, her small desk buried beneath a rather imposing pile of invoices and receipts. It was with notable reserve that Mrs. Hartnell looked up from her bookkeeping, rose from her chair, and said, 'Ah, Lady Locke?'

*For goodness's sake, the expression on her face added. As if a morning of bookkeeping wasn't bad enough already.*

But Lady Eyestone had been much more impolite than that on her bad days, and if there was anything Nellie had learned over the course of her employment in that household, it was to keep smiling kindly no matter what. So smile she did, as if her life depended on it. 'Good morning, Mrs. Hartnell – do you have a few minutes?'

Of course Mrs. Hartnell had a few minutes. Maid or no, one did not say no to a duchess.

'Perhaps we should move to the drawing room,' the housekeeper stiffly suggested as she closed her inkpot and majestically strode to the door. 'That might be a more fitting place for a quick conversation.'

*In case you and your boorish manners weren't aware, her expression elucidated.*

'Indeed,' Nellie said, smiling with almost aggressive stubbornness. 'Mrs. Radcliffe already mentioned you were one of the most attentive housekeepers she knows. I'm starting to see what she meant.'

'Oh,' Mrs. Hartnell said, faltering at that unexpected crumb of information. 'Oh, you've worked under *Honorina Radcliffe*?'

From the way she spoke the name, this was clearly a badge of honour. Nellie might still be a maid, that tone suggested, but at least she was a maid worth her pay now – and, potentially, a source of information.

‘I have, yes,’ Nellie brightly said, stepping aside to let the other woman through. ‘She spoke of you quite regularly.’

That was a lie, technically speaking. Mrs. Radcliffe had spoken of her colleague exactly once, as she was helping Nellie prepare for her departure from Eyestone Manor: *Mathilde Hartnell is a perfectly fine housekeeper*, she’d said, which every Eyestone maid knew was the highest possible compliment to ever leave those strict, thin lips, *but she’s rather susceptible to flattery, and you should be clear about your intent towards her as soon as possible. Remember that every new Lady Locke might threaten her position.*

A warning Nellie had forgotten to heed in the confusion of her wedding day ... but judging by the abrupt softening of Mrs. Hartnell’s face, the damage was not yet beyond repair.

‘*Oh,*’ the housekeeper said again, much more warmly now. ‘Now that is lovely to hear. She used to work for this family, of course – did she tell you? She left her position after His Grace’s mother was sent away by the late Lord Locke.’

‘Really?’ Nellie said, although she’d known half of it already.

‘Oh yes.’ Mrs. Hartnell held open the door to the next corridor, then continued, ‘I was a lady’s maid at the time, you see. After Honoria left, I took the position of housekeeper.’

‘That speaks of exceptional loyalty to the family,’ Nellie said, making sure to sound properly impressed, and Mrs. Hartnell gave a humble little chuckle that suggested she was glad someone had finally noticed.

The rest of the walk to the drawing room occurred in much more amiable silence. Mrs. Hartnell sat down in a stiff-backed wooden chair; Nellie took the much more comfortable moss-green couch, as that seemed to be expected of her. The wall opposite her seat was bare, as she’d started to expect in this

house; faded shapes on the wallpaper suggested the room had not always looked so dour, however.

‘So,’ Mrs. Hartnell said as they were seated, folding her hands in her lap, ‘what was it you wanted to discuss, Lady Locke?’

‘Well, first of all I would like to introduce myself properly.’ A self-aware grimace seemed appropriate there, so Nellie inserted one. ‘I’m afraid I wasn’t quite in the right frame of mind to do so yesterday. And of course there are some things on which I would very much like to hear your expert opinion, since this is all quite new to me ...’

‘Of course, of course,’ Mrs. Hartnell agreed, her voice growing cautiously warmer with every next syllable. ‘I’m happy to be of help in any way I can be.’

‘That is very generous of you,’ Nellie said, pressing a hand to her chest. ‘Frankly, the first thing I was worrying about ... well, you no doubt understand that I barely have a decent dress to wear here. And I wondered, since you are of course very well-informed on general etiquette and the latest fashions in more well-to-do circles ...’

That wasn’t an exaggeration. Mrs. Hartnell’s dress spoke of a sharp eye for style and quality, a perfect balance between the latest trends and professional modesty.

‘Oh, you *flatter* me,’ the housekeeper appreciatively protested, her opinion of Nellie visibly improving by the heartbeat. She might still be a maid, but she was one without illusions of grandeur after her unexpected promotion – one who wouldn’t threaten Mrs. Hartnell’s livelihood or position of authority. *It could have been worse*, her handsome, expressive face read. *It could have been a whole lot worse. At least she appears to be civilised.*

‘Oh no, no,’ Nellie insisted, preparing for her final nudge. ‘I would frankly be quite lost without your guidance. If you could just suggest what tailors to visit, or ...’ She gasped, as if coming up with the idea on the spot. ‘Or perhaps you could even come with us? Although you’re very busy of course, and I’d hate to impose on your schedule ...’

Mrs. Hartnell's eyes had lit up.

A smile inched across her lips, eager and conspiratorial in equal amounts.

'Surely the merchants will understand if the duke's marriage delays my weekly orders for a day or two,' she said, and every effort to keep her voice measured was ruined by that genuine excitement growing on her face. It was strangely contagious. 'And of *course* I would enjoy a quick visit to Sunfield Street. So ... how about we leave after you've had breakfast, Lady Locke?'



'NEW DRESS?' THE DUKE of Locke said.

It was his only greeting as she slipped into his study at the stroke of ten – no *good evening* or *how was your day?* or, divines forbid, *glad to see you, Eleanor*. He did not sound unfriendly, though. Not as impassive and curt as he had before. Rather, his welcome had a strange air of familiarity to it – as if they had known each other for decades and had given up on politeness or even full sentences years ago.

'New dress,' Nellie confirmed, shutting the door behind her – because meagre greeting or no, he *had* noticed what she was wearing, and she was too content with the day so far to make a point of his manners.

'Excellent,' he said absently as he scribbled his signature on a last document and shoved the whole pile aside. Only then, as he fully turned towards her in his chair, did his strong-jawed face regain some of its old detachment. 'You're early.'

'I figured there was not much reason to wait.' Only half the truth. She *had* thought of reasons to wait – her pride and some last illusion of chasteness – but had decided over the course of the evening that there was no reason to let those redundancies get in the way of what she actually wanted, which was him, inside her. 'And as I told you, I need my night's rest.'

His chuckle did not seem entirely natural. 'Ah.'



She squinted at him. ‘Is there anything wrong, Your Grace?’

‘Not as such, no,’ he said, but there was too much pause between the words, and he did not rise from his seat. His eyes clung to his hands, slitted pupils too narrow for the dusk of this candlelit room. A small hesitation, and then he repeated, ‘No, not necessarily.’

Nellie waited. Experience had taught her waiting was generally the wisest choice when dealing with dithering aristocrats who were unsure about their own wishes.

It didn’t fail her this time, either.

‘You’re not worried at all?’ he abruptly burst out, his half-hearted mask of ice shattering as his hand rose and landed on his desk with so much force it qualified as slamming. ‘You’re not supposed to be here *early*. You probably ought to have run away already, after ... after ...’

Last night.

There was no need for him to speak the words, and he seemed to know it as he faltered, finally jutting up his head to meet her gaze. *Last night*. His broken composure. Her honest pleasure. They both knew it, the memory tangible in the air between them – that small, shameful, joyful secret they couldn’t help but share even if they would never have anything else in common.

‘I’m not worried at all, no,’ Nellie said, respectfully clasping her hands behind her back. ‘Why are you, if I may ask?’

He let out a groan like a wounded animal. ‘I *enjoyed* that, Eleanor.’

‘As was the intention, Your Grace,’ she politely reminded him.

‘Was it? Was it really?’ He rose now, all six-and-something feet of him, his grey eyes glinting with inhuman ferocity in the candlelight. He must have fretted about this all day, Nellie realised, unable to suppress an unexpected sting of contentment – the heartless duke of Locke, spending his day consumed by the thought of her pleasure. His voice was a thinly veiled growl. ‘It’s one thing if I like fucking you ...’

Her head caught fire. ‘Yes, but—’

‘... but what if it turns into liking *you*?’ he finished, a snapped demand rather than a question.

‘That is really very unlikely,’ Nellie said impatiently. Dratted nobles. ‘You know there’s nothing I could add to your life, Your Grace. I don’t know anything about poetry or literature. I can’t tell a comedy from a tragedy. It’s the whole bloody reason you married a housemaid, if you recall – the guarantee that you wouldn’t find some kindred soul in me.’

He groaned again as he turned away, rubbing a rough hand over his face. ‘Yes, of course.’

Not the most convincing of agreements. ‘But?’

‘But it’s hard for me *not* to worry about this,’ he muttered. ‘And very easy to see signs of alarm in the slightest bit of intimacy.’

‘Of course.’ She bit the inside of her cheek, mind whirring. ‘In that case, the best way forward is presumably to eliminate as much intimacy as we can, isn’t it? No need for bedrooms, really. And if we can avoid all that pesky eye contact ...’

He choked on his breath as he whirled back around. ‘Eleanor, you’re not suggesting I just bend you over my desk, are you?’

Was she?

Scandalous. Outrageous. Then again ...

‘Don’t you want to?’ she innocently retorted, fluttering her lashes. As if sparks weren’t erupting in her lower belly at the thought alone. As if she wasn’t already feeling his hands on her hips, his breath on her neck. ‘It might be fun.’

‘Since when do you care about *fun*?’ he sputtered.

‘You made some good points last night.’ This shouldn’t be so enjoyable. *He* shouldn’t be so enjoyable. But his fluster was oddly exhilarating, the agitated twitches of his stark jaw and the way his shoulders tensed beneath his sapphire coat, and she couldn’t help savouring the thrill of seeing him like this, no longer the cold, frosty lord of winter himself. ‘And if *I*’m

able to combine the pleasant and the useful, I don't see why you shouldn't be allowed to.'

'If it's pleasant to me,' he bit out, raking an exasperated hand through his blue hair, 'that means you should be all the more worried, don't you see? I'm *poison*, Eleanor. The last thing you should want is—'

'Ah, yes,' Nellie said. 'About that. I had some thoughts today, Your Grace.'

He stiffened. 'Divines help me. Do you ever stop having thoughts?'

'Not voluntarily, no,' she admitted, grinning at him. 'I wouldn't have brought them up if you hadn't made such a fuss, though. But I had a look around the household, and it struck me ... Well, you like Walford, don't you? You like Mrs. Hartnell? You presumably have friends whose company you enjoy, too?'

His silence was enough of a confirmation. Judging by the resigned expression on his face, he knew exactly what argument she was about to make.

'And they aren't dead,' Nellie added, unfazed.

'No,' he muttered, pinching the bridge of his nose between his fingers. 'No, they aren't.'

'So clearly warm feelings are fine as long as they're just that. As long as you don't start feeling all fuzzy and protective about people, or whatever love is supposed to be. Which doesn't appear to be the case.'

His laugh was strangely hollow, an echo of the times true amusement wasn't such a stranger to his heart. 'You don't give the impression you need the protection.'

'Exactly,' Nellie said, crossing her arms and raising her chin. There. That should put an end to the wallowing. 'So if we've cleared that up, don't you think it's time we get to work, Your Grace?'

He stared at her for a long heartbeat.

She defiantly glared back, jutting her chin even higher.

A strange expression flickered across his face. Not a smile – it was too cold, too desolate, to truly count as a smile. And yet it lent a ghost of life to his features, a whiff of emotion – like the watery sunrays that would pierce through the fog on misty Birch Month mornings, announcing the imminent arrival of spring.

If it wasn't a smile, it certainly was a surrender.

'As you wish,' he said, canting his head as his fingers thoughtlessly found the buttons of his coat and began loosening the mother-of-pearl studs. His voice had lowered, the sound a fraction rough at the edges now. 'You're still going to bend over that desk for me, though.'

So she did.

# CHAPTER EIGHT



‘MR. WALFORD?’

The steward jolted up from his work as if she’d caught him burying a corpse, his red hair ruffled, an ink stain on his cheek. ‘Oh, Lady Locke! Come in, come in – wait, let me make some space for you to sit down ...’

It took relocating a cash book, two empty mugs, and a pile of letters, but eventually Nellie was seated in the same chair by the desk she’d occupied two days ago while Walford hurried around the cluttered study to tug files and documents back into place. Two days – an eternity. Hard to imagine she’d been so frightened so recently, when she was feeling almost *giddy* on this stuffy morning, full of plans and something that, in other circumstances, might have been worthy of the name excitement.

‘Lady Locke,’ Walford repeated as he finally folded himself into his chair again, entwining his long fingers on the table

surface. Behind his slender back, the sunlight came seeping in through the room's single mullioned window, its radiance somehow absorbed by the dark purple walls without truly illuminating anything. 'Wonderful to see you again. Please tell me what I can do for you.'

'I was wondering,' Nellie said, smiling her brightest summer smile at him to soften the rather unladylike bluntness of the request, 'if I could do something about this house.'

He blinked emphatically. 'I beg your pardon?'

'The house.' She gestured at the open door behind her back and the hallway beyond, where a single vase with dried flowers was fighting a losing battle against the dreary atmosphere. The cold tile floor and unused chandelier rendered the effort utterly moot. 'It's a rather gloomy business, you see. My sister doesn't like it in the slightest. So I was wondering if I might have a budget – I'll leave the numbers to you – to make some changes to the place.'

Walford stared at her as if she'd turned into a frog on the spot.

'I already discussed the matter with Mrs. Hartnell,' Nellie cheerfully added, in case that helped her cause. 'She is *very* excited to get started and insists she has plenty of time to assist me. And of course, I don't have anything else to do. So you or Lord Locke wouldn't have to worry about the matter at all, aside from the money.'

Something about the fidgety way he chewed on his bottom lip suggested money was the least of his concerns. What worried him so much? Her safety? Did he think she would not flee the household in time if she poured too much of her heart and soul into this temporary home?

'And I'm sure it won't cause me any trouble with the curse,' she suggested. 'If anything, I figure Lord Locke is *less* likely to fall in love with me once he realises how much money I'm spending on his behalf.'

The steward's chuckle suggested he was chuckling only for her benefit. 'If I may speak freely, Lady Locke ...'

‘Of course!’ He might, after all, save her life one day. ‘Please tell me what worries you.’

‘You showed up here two days ago in a state of significant shock from seeing your predecessors’ dresses,’ he said, rubbing his temple in a gesture that oddly reminded her of Locke. ‘I wouldn’t dare question your resolve and fortitude, of course, but looking into all the furniture that’s been packed away in the attic ... There are a *lot* of the previous ladies’ things among it.’

She hadn’t yet considered that. Then again ...

‘I was entirely unprepared, two days ago,’ she said, straightening her spine. It had been barely an hour after her wedding. Not even a full day after the proposal that had led to said wedding. ‘I’m sure it will all be much easier to handle now, with some planning and Mrs. Hartnell to guide me through it.’

‘I see.’ He sighed, looking far from reassured. ‘As you wish, then. I will discuss the matter with Othrys when I next see him.’

‘Much obliged,’ Nellie said and beamed at him, then bounced out of the room feeling much more well-disposed towards the pitiful dried flowers in the hallway.



‘WALFORD SAID SOMETHING ABOUT house improvements,’ Locke said as he stood thrusting into her that night, her upper body draped over his desk, his hands rough and bruising on her hips. His voice made a good attempt to sound conversational, yet the strain was unmistakable – an edge of fraying self-control. ‘I assume you’ve been having thoughts again?’

Nellie laughed, then couldn’t help but moan as his next stroke hit deep in *just* the right place, the cold scales on his length adding an addictive complexity to every sensation. Her

fingers clutched tighter around the edge of the desk, holding on for dear life. ‘I’m afraid – *oh* – I’m afraid I have, yes.’

‘Of course you have.’ His next thrust drove even deeper – as if to punish her for the audacity. ‘Why, though? Seems unlikely you’ll live here long enough to profit from it.’

‘Yes, but— *Oh*.’ Her eyes rolled back in their sockets as he shifted his hips and slammed into her again, finding an angle that hit entirely new devastating spots. ‘Do that again, please. I — *Yes—*’

There was little joy in his guttural laughter, but she thought she detected an undercurrent of satisfaction all the same as he complied, reducing her once again to wordless gasping. ‘Last one. You’re not getting more until I have my answers, Eleanor.’

‘What answers?’ she panted.

He slid out of her in response, growling a laugh at her squeal of outrage. ‘Turn onto your back.’

‘Oh no,’ she muttered, obliging as well as her shaking limbs allowed. Around her, documents lay strewn over the wooden surface like leaves blown about by the wind. Her husband towered over her, his waistcoat still buttoned, his cravat still tied; only his breeches had been opened, his member protruding with obscene hardness from that gentlemanly façade. ‘So you can glower at me more intimidatingly?’

‘That is exactly what I was planning to do.’ He wrapped his hands around her thighs, then lifted them, guiding her legs to rest against his shoulders before settling his tip against her entrance. ‘Why are you so concerned about the state of this house?’

She squirmed, trying in vain to get him closer. ‘Anne hates living here.’

‘Ah.’ Locke seemed unfazed by the news as he glared down at her, eyes narrowed, brows drawn close. ‘And that is all?’

‘And I need some way to spend my time,’ Nellie admitted, clawing at his waistcoat. He pulled back slightly in revenge. ‘Because – oh, *damn* you – buying dresses will get boring, and



if my only diversion is tugging my husband – which, to make things worse, he is currently explicitly *preventing* ...’

He barked out another mirthless laugh and slid back into her, the sheer girth of him almost robbing her of speech again. ‘Your husband wouldn’t mind diverting you a little more often, if necessary.’

‘Don’t you— *Oh!*’ She arched off the hard desk, body pleading for more, more, *more* of that devastating hardness inside her. ‘Don’t you *want* me to work on the house?’

He drew out almost entirely, then drove himself back into her in a single punishing stroke, his hands on her hips dragging her even closer. Nellie cried out again. Vaguely, she registered a pile of paper thudding to the ground as she flailed for grip, for some semblance of control; then he pounded back into her, and all thought evaporated. Divines help her, how could he be so utterly all-consuming, this man she didn’t even know – how could he be so utterly *blissful*?

‘Avoiding ... answers,’ she gasped between thrusts, eyes fluttering shut. ‘Don’t ... you ...’

‘I’m avoiding the past,’ he growled, and at once the restraint shattered, his ragged breaths punctuating each word. His thumb found the little bud between her lips, rubbing it ferociously. ‘I’m avoiding the fucking heartache. It’s staining every inch of this place, and you might drag it all back into the light, you impossible little—’

Pleasure washed over her.

She cried out, clenching tight around him. He pounded into her convulsing body once, twice more, then followed her over the edge with a snarled curse, his hot seed filling her in sticky waves – his outburst lost in breathless pants, his words punching through to her dazed, lust-fogged mind only slowly.

The past.

The heartache.

Oh, she remembered how Mother had clung to Father’s spare coat for days, refusing to let go, refusing to believe the facts ...

‘Have you considered,’ she breathed, legs slumping down as he lifted them from his shoulders, ‘that the heartache won’t fade as long as you don’t let anything else in?’

He staggered back, buttoning his breeches with shaking fingers as he dropped his hulk into the cushions of the worn couch. His voice abruptly went cold again, like a lake freezing over. ‘What the hell do *you* know of it?’

‘Enough.’ A bitter chuckle escaped her, sending rivulets of seed dripping down her thighs. ‘Trust me, more than enough.’

He didn’t respond to that.

She could feel his gaze on her without looking, feel the silence take shape in her gut – a strange, nervous silence after the clamour of their moans and groans, like a path leading straight into deadly marshland. Had she angered him? Pushed too far? Presumptuous, for a lowly housemaid to think she knew anything about the suffering of dukes ...

‘Go ahead, then,’ Locke said sharply, the couch creaking as he rose from its pillows. ‘Restore the place however you see fit.’

By the time she’d lifted her head from the desk to ask if he was joking, he’d already vanished, slamming the bedroom door behind his hard-set shoulders.

## CHAPTER NINE



‘SEE WHAT A DIFFERENCE that makes?’ Mrs. Hartnell triumphantly exclaimed, gesticulating at the large antique mirror held against the wall of the drawing room by two tall footmen. ‘Lights up the whole room – and it will do so even in the middle of winter, I can promise you that.’

It did make a difference, indeed. Enough to transform the room from gloomy and dark into something one could almost call cheerful – the silver surface reflected every glimpse of sunlight filtering in through the high windows and scattered it across the mismatched chairs, the empty bookshelves, the dark wallpaper where paintings should have hung.

Nellie nodded to the footmen, who promptly lowered the mirror again, and said, ‘Then why was it ever removed from this spot?’

‘Oh.’ Mrs. Hartnell’s triumph abated at once. ‘Lady Jeanne brought this particular mirror with her when she moved into

the townhouse – an heirloom. Then after the duke remarried ...’

‘Lady Alis preferred not to have it around and had it sent up to the attic?’ Nellie finished wryly.

‘Yes.’ Mrs. Hartnell permitted herself a watery smile. ‘Yes, I suppose it’s becoming predictable.’

The attic, Nellie had learned the previous day, was stocked with enough furniture, decorations, and other odds and ends to fill five separate households – the result of duchess after duchess banning her predecessor’s possessions upon arrival, then dying before they could finish their own furnishing of the home. There were crates of books, piles of paintings and drawings, marble busts from Lady Colette’s theatre days, and Issian blown glass from Lady Alis’s travels. The space as a whole was a macabre treasury, smelling of oblivion; Nellie was as loath to spend time in it as the servants seemed to be, never sticking around for longer than the few minutes it took to pick some promising items from the mess.

Only Anne seemed perfectly happy to spend hours upon hours between the towering stacks, peeling off wrappings and rummaging through trunks, pilfering fluffy velvet pillows and painted landscapes and dramatic silver candelabras for her own room.

‘Let’s keep the mirror, then,’ Nellie firmly decided. ‘If it’s an heirloom of Lady Jeanne, it doesn’t deserve to be stacked away in the attic. And then we should fill those shelves again – they’re just gathering dust like this. Some books, perhaps?’

‘We have Lady Isaure’s volumes on botany,’ Mrs. Hartnell offered, gesturing at the footmen to find the crates in question. They promptly hurried out of the room. ‘And of course, Lady Blanche read a lot, although I’m not sure those *novels* would be at all suitable to display in one’s drawing room ...’

‘Let’s not,’ Nellie said with a grimace, remembering Lady Eyestone’s outrage on the topic. ‘Do you know whether Lord Locke himself has any reading preferences?’

‘Oh.’ Mrs. Hartnell blew out her cheeks. ‘Well, he used to read all the grand Elidian literature, of course. And the great playwrights, Stoke and Merland – but I admit I haven’t seen him hold a playbook since ... well, not for years, but I couldn’t tell you ...’

‘Since Lady Colette died?’ Nellie suggested.

A short and uncharacteristic silence fell, broken only by the thuds and thumps of the servants rummaging through the crates piled up in the hallway. Mrs. Hartnell blinked. And blinked again. Then she dazedly sank into the nearest armchair, perfectly manicured hand slowly rising to her ample bosom.

‘Good gracious,’ she said, sounding shocked and embarrassed in equal amounts. ‘Good gracious, Lady Locke – you may be right.’



‘WE FOUND A WHOLE pile of charcoal sketches this afternoon,’ Nellie panted as she fell down on Locke’s bed for her fifteen minutes of rest, still dizzy from the force of the climax that had just washed over her. ‘In one of the attic crates. Very pretty work, really.’

On the other side of the room, her husband was buttoning up – shoving his armour back into place like he did every single night, his chiselled face hidden behind a veil of blue-black hair. The scales on his forearms glimmered in mesmerising ways in the candlelight. Nellie couldn’t help studying them attentively as she curled up on his blankets in nothing but her shift, well-aware that she would not be granted more than these few minutes to take in the sight of him and feeling unreasonably cross about the fact.

‘Did you?’ he curtly replied, moving from his breeches to the shirt buttons she’d torn open in the process of this night’s work.

‘Mm-hmm,’ she said, and when that did not elicit any reaction, she pointedly added, ‘They were very pretty.’

His voice didn’t mellow. ‘Isaure was an excellent artist.’

‘Oh, I love her work,’ Nellie admitted, which was true. She had dedicated an entire salon to the duchess’s flower drawings. ‘But these didn’t look like her style. Landscapes. The city mills. A view of the marshes. That sort of thing.’

Locke’s fingers had stiffened.

‘They were signed with *O.L.*,’ she added sweetly, observing the slope of his shoulders.

A single frozen moment was the only confirmation she was given – but it *was* a moment, proof that those stunning, gloomy drawings had not been created by some distant cousin or forefather sharing the same initials. Considering the place where she’d found them, stashed away in a yellowed folder at the bottom of a trunk, she hadn’t dared to be sure.

‘Have you drawn anything in the last few years?’ she asked, prodding despite his hardening exterior. It felt like testing a newly formed layer of ice on the canals in winter – putting more and more weight on the slippery surface, waiting for the inevitable crack. ‘I couldn’t find any more recent work.’

‘I would prefer not to talk about this,’ he bit out, snatching his coat from the floor without looking her in the eyes.

‘Well, all the better,’ Nellie said, unfazed. ‘You ought to think of me as a little nuisance you can’t wait to be rid of. I assume you quit drawing, then?’

He snapped around – a razor-sharp motion, as if to bite her head off. ‘What is the point of this bloody interrogation, Eleanor?’

What was the point?

‘Curiosity,’ she said, which should have been the whole truth. If she had a single sensible bone in her body, it could not be anything else. ‘Just curiosity.’

His lips tightened to a thin line, and even *that* gesture looked unreasonably pretty in that stark, inhuman face. ‘Are you

satisfied, then?’

No.

No, she was not.

She *ought* to be, and yet seeing him like this, a hardened shell of a man so unlike the glimpses she caught in every crook and corner of his home ... How in the world could she *ever* be satisfied with it?

‘Anne has been trying to pick up drawing again,’ she said, speaking without thinking. ‘She’s had to switch hands, though, so it’s a challenge. I think she would benefit a lot from some help, if you happen to have a few hours to spare.’

Locke stared at her – a hard, incredulous stare, but no longer nearly as cold as the glowers he’d levelled at her in the first days of their marriage.

‘After all,’ Nellie cheerfully continued, ‘it’s not a problem if you spend some time with *her*, is it? I’ll make sure to stay far away, of course.’

The word he muttered under his breath as he turned away and strode out of the room sounded a suspicious lot like *impossible*. The door to his study slammed behind him the next moment. She heard the croaking of the couch on the other side – then heard the couch croak *again*, followed by the sound of pacing footsteps, back and forth, back and forth.

Good.

She’d prod him again tomorrow.

With a content sigh, she sat up a little straighter in the pillows, turned to the nightstand, and picked up the Merland play she’d requested from him the day before.



THE ENTRANCE HALL SEEMED a different place entirely with the cream-coloured, flowery wallpaper she and Mrs. Hartnell had chosen after hours of deliberation: warm and

inviting, a perfect match to the summer sunlight bursting in whenever the front door opened to let a servant or craftsman through. Or perhaps it was the brand new, pale green carpet runner on the narrow stairs, or the garlands on the banister, or the far simpler chandelier they'd found in the attic to replace the unwieldy crystal creation that had hovered over the room before ...

'Now all we need to do is figure out some decoration,' Mrs. Hartnell said with audible smugness as she surveyed the walls. 'We had the portraits, of course ...'

The portraits of three previous ladies Locke. They had been shrouded in black velvet, as if the mere sight of them might bring death into the home.

'Yes,' Nellie said slowly, chewing her bottom lip. 'The portraits.'

Mrs. Hartnell's side glance didn't escape her. 'You may prefer not to have them in the hall at all, of course?'

'I would be overjoyed to have them in the hall.' It was not even an exaggeration. Two weeks of digging through her predecessors' belongings were doing strange things to her heart – as if she *knew* them, now, the six women. As if they might have been friends. 'They lived here, after all. I see no reason to treat them as rivals. I'm just not sure ...'

She didn't finish the sentence, cognizant of the maids scrubbing the floor one room away. Her quick glance upwards was enough for the housekeeper's keen eyes, though.

'Ah. The duke.'

'Yes.' Nellie gave a quick smile. 'Perhaps we'd better not take the risk. Do we have any other suitable options – any family portraits, for example?'

'Those should be *somewhere*.' Mrs. Hartnell pursed her lips. 'I'm sure I've seen Sir Ambrose and Sir Percival – the duke's uncles – at some point this week. And Lord Peregrine Locke – the duke's grandfather – must have a portrait too.'

'Well, let's start with those, then. And who knows ...' Nellie glanced through the open door of the salon, where Anne sat



bent over the couch with a sketchbook and a set of charcoal pencils, tongue out between her lips as her left hand swept over the paper. ‘We may have some new art to display soon.’

Mrs. Hartnell’s face lit up. ‘She’s made *great* progress this week, hasn’t she?’

‘Oh yes,’ Nellie said, smiling her most innocent smile. ‘Yes, she really has.’



‘OF *course* Egeric’s wife isn’t the true heroine of the play,’ Locke grunted between gritted teeth as she rode him, his hands fisting in the blankets, his hair a tangled blue halo around his face. His eyes glittered feverishly as he watched her, and sweet divines, it was hard to remind herself there was nothing but simple lust in that look. ‘She’s never even *named*. She only appears in a single scene, and ...’

Nellie shook her hair down her back, coming up over him. ‘But she *does* uncover the whole conspiracy, doesn’t she?’

‘She doesn’t know anyone is listening!’ He cursed as she impaled herself hard, fast, on his length, taking him all the way to that little sensitive spot where she could never, *never* get enough of him. ‘Little good her questions would have done if the *actual* heroes hadn’t been around to hear—’

‘Maybe she *does* know.’

He growled a laugh. ‘No evidence for that in the text, is there?’

‘Why else would she question her husband if she knows he has a tendency to get violent when— *Oh*.’ Her eyes rolled back as he thrust upwards, meeting her in a glorious slide of hot flesh and cool scales and perfect, overwhelming friction. Her next argument came out in gasps and moans. ‘So perhaps she saw the heroes sneak in, realised this was her only chance to get the truth out, and—’

‘Merland would turn in his grave, Eleanor.’ He slammed into her again, as if to make her feel the playwright’s wrath – but if that was his intention, it only encouraged her to anger the man a little more. ‘None of this is even *hinted* at in—’

‘Perhaps,’ she retorted breathlessly, ‘you should re-read the script a little more attentively, Your Grace.’

‘Watch your smart little mouth, you.’ With a groan, he came half up in the pillows, ink-blue hair cascading down his bulging shoulders. ‘And also, don’t *Your Grace* me while I’m sitting balls deep inside you, for bloody goodness’ sake.’

She laughed so hard at that she could no longer get her thighs to cooperate, sagging onto his member in a boneless heap of giggles.

‘That wasn’t a *joke*,’ he protested, flipping her over as she shook with mirth beneath him. His strong hands spread her legs, rough fingers warm on her skin, and just like that he was inside her again, driving deep and then deeper. In between laughing and gasping, she thought she might suffocate. ‘There’s no need for you to use the title anyway, and even if there was ...’

She wrapped her legs around his hips, arching into his thrusts. Her fingers tangled into his hair, brushing the sharp rim of his fae ears, and he growled in a way that made him sound decidedly un-dukely.

‘So what should I call you, then?’ she managed, fighting for breath. His rhythm was quickening, pounding into her with a frenzy that made it hard to keep speaking full sentences. ‘Lord Locke? That’s hardly better than—’

With a roar, he spilled his seed inside her.

She gave up on eliciting any coherent answers from him for a minute as he pistoned in and out more and more slowly, gathering his breath. Then he rolled himself onto his side beside her and slipped his hand between her thighs, still without speaking as his rough fingers began stroking the little core of her pleasure.

‘Well?’ she tried, biting down a moan. Sweet divines, she was close to the edge already. ‘If titles are no longer allowed, then what—’

He dipped two fingers inside her, thumb on that sensitive bud.

She blew into oblivion, questions or no.

By the time she came back to her senses, he’d already hauled himself off the bed, closing up his breeches with those strangely elegant finger movements. Not meeting her eye, as usual ... but she could have *sworn* there was a hint of something tender on his face, something lighting up the deep grey of his eyes like a sunrise in spring.

He snatched the copy of Merland’s play off his nightstand as he passed. Then he turned around one last time at the door to his study, as if he’d already sensed she was about to yell her questions after him.

‘Just call me Othrys, will you?’ he said.

Then he vanished.

# CHAPTER TEN



HER VOICE WAS THE first thing Othrys heard as he stepped through the front door and into his unrecognisable entry hall – two rooms away, chattering about dining hall decoration in that tone of earnest excitement, as if there was nothing more important in the world than the fate of a few antique vases and a table runner or two.

Matters of insignificance. He knew they were.

He found himself slowing down all the same.

‘... know that there’s no *need* to keep them,’ she was saying around the corner, presumably to Hartnell. ‘But I don’t think we have anything else with Rosamund’s coat of arms on it, and I don’t want to erase her from the room if this is where she hosted her dinner parties ...’

Othrys barely heard what she was saying. He only heard *how* she was saying it, knowing what expression must rest on her face as she spoke – that unflinching resolve, kindness with

a core of steel, a look that somehow made it bloody hard to contradict her even though he was a duke and she had, until three weeks ago, been a humble housemaid. Hartnell was already hurrying to agree on the other side of the wall.

A smile had crept onto his face, he realised.

He hastily erased it.

‘... thinking we should go with lighter curtains,’ Eleanor was continuing in the dining hall. ‘That should brighten up the room enormously, don’t you think? Although we should take care to choose a manageable fabric. Not damask – the stuff is *impossible* to clean if someone ends up spilling a glass of wine over it ...’

Hartnell responded in an amused tone. Eleanor’s laughter cascaded through the house next, that radiant sound, spilling through the not-so-dreary corridors like the light of the summer sun outside.

‘Your Grace?’ a footman said, suddenly close.

Othrys startled as if from a dream. Damn it, but it was time he got out of here – he had plenty to arrange before the whole city took a day off for midsummer tomorrow, and besides, he was not supposed to pay his wife any attention. Even if it was bloody hard to ignore her when his house was changing around him by the day. Even if she stubbornly refused to make herself forgettable, the way she dazzled as she bounded into his study every night. Even if—

‘Lord Locke!’ Anne’s voice interrupted his unwilling musing. She came hurrying down the stairs with charcoal stains on her pink cheeks and a sketchbook clutched against her equally stained dress. ‘Lord Locke, look what I made!’

A portrait of her sister.

A stunningly beautiful one, at that.

It was ridiculous, the way his compliments and suggested adjustments made him itch to take up a pencil himself again. He hadn’t felt that urge since Isaure had taken her last breath in his arms nine years ago, her skin burning hot with fever, the infected wound on her finger an oozing shade of blue – a day

that he'd thought would haunt him forever. And yet, these weeks ...

He'd covered and hidden every trace of his first wife for years in his desperate attempts not to think of her, and now he was finding she haunted him not nearly so much when he walked past her drawings every day.

What had Eleanor said? *The heartache won't fade as long as you don't let anything else in ...*

He'd lost track of his own voice for a moment. But whatever he'd managed to force past his lips for Anne, it seemed to have been sufficient: she was glowing with pride as she bounced on into the living room to show her work to her sister and housekeeper. Forcing himself to walk on towards his study, he heard her excitedly declare, 'Even Lord Locke says it's the best thing I've ever drawn ...'

'Oh!' Eleanor interrupted, suddenly breathless. 'Did he come home? Lord Locke?'

Othrys stiffened again.

Which was nonsensical, of course it was nonsensical ... but sweet divines, had that been a hint of *impatience* in her voice?

He had no time to wonder. He barely had time to blink before she came rushing into the hall, dressed in brilliant yellow, her blonde hair a mass of curls around her blushing face – and it was in that moment that he realised he had not seen her in the bright light of day since the morning of their wedding, when she had been quiet and timid and justifiably overwhelmed. Now, on the other hand ...

Now she swept in like summer itself.

She did not look like a duchess. There was no hiding the slight clumsiness of her motions that betrayed she was not used to the attire; her steps were just a little ungainly, proof her mother had not trained her since early childhood to walk straight and poised. But there was a *vibrancy* to her, a light in her eyes and a sparkle in her smile, that turned her stumbling grace into something far, far more addictive than the most elegant of manners.

Something so painfully alive it might just be an antidote to the bitter, deadly poison of him.

‘Give us a moment, would you, Tanner,’ she told the footman, who removed himself with a surprisingly respectful nod. And then she stood before him, small yet fierce, looking as if this was nothing but routine to her – as if they hadn’t meticulously avoided each other around the house for the full three weeks of their marriage.

‘Hello, husband,’ she said, a mischievous smile playing around that clever mouth.

A befuddled bark of laughter escaped him. ‘Hello, wife. Is anything urgent the matter, or—’

‘A little bit.’ She lowered her voice, throwing a quick look around the hallway before she continued, ‘My monthly bleeding started this morning. I thought you should know.’

That he should— Oh.

Yes.

Because he still needed an heir. Because this meant their first round of trying had failed, in spite of all Lord Heartstrong’s advice and their dutiful ... well, work.

Or something like work.

‘Ah,’ he said, clearing his throat, trying to refocus his thoughts. It didn’t help – it *really* didn’t help – that he always undressed her the moment she stepped into his vicinity. His eyes kept straying down now, towards the body he knew lay hidden beneath the yellow silk – too tanned and too muscular for a lady, and disconcertingly alluring all the same. ‘I see. We’re not yet done with each other, then. I suppose that is ... rather bad news.’

‘Yes,’ she said, chewing pensively on her bottom lip. She did not appear terribly distraught, Othrys couldn’t help but notice. ‘Yes, I suppose it is, isn’t it?’

‘Yes,’ he said again. ‘Yes, definitely.’

They stared at each other for a moment, as if waiting for a countermove in some game they might or might not be

playing. What did she expect him to say now – that it was fine? That it wasn't fine? Hell, was he supposed to console her?

But she really, *really* did not look in dire need of consolation ...

'I suppose that means we'll just have to keep trying,' he guessed, and she abruptly released a breath – almost like a sigh of relief.

'Yes.' This time her agreement came almost eagerly. 'Yes, that's the only sensible conclusion, isn't it?'

'I'd say so, yes.' He rubbed his temple, forcing out his next words despite feeling inexplicably disgruntled about them. 'Of course, now that we know the start of your monthly cycle, we could probably take a break of a week and a half. Since Lord Heartstrong says—'

'Lord Heartstrong says it's *unlikely* to conceive in those first ten days,' she interrupted in a pressing whisper. 'He doesn't say it's *impossible*. So if we want to give ourselves the best chance ...'

Oh.

The best chance.

Of course – and of course *that* was what made him feel so much lighter at once, the prospect of a quick resolution to this cursed business. He was lucky, wasn't he, to have found a collaborator as eager to succeed as he was? Surely *that* was where this sudden surge of fondness was coming from, simple gratefulness for her devotion ...

'Good point,' he heard himself say as he nodded. 'Yes, that is a very good point.'

Her face lit up. 'It really is, isn't it?'

'Yes.' He cleared his throat. 'Yes, absolutely. It ... Yes.'

Another small silence fell.

She did not look away – watching him with eyes both eager and fearful. It made him feel oddly self-aware, that look. As if



she was seeing someone else in his place – someone better. Someone braver. Someone who hadn't killed six women with nothing but his battered, blood-stained heart.

What was she hoping for?

For him to be anything else than lethal poison?

He coughed again, pushing that thought from his mind. 'Do I just ... see you as usual, then?'

'Ah.' She blushed, averting her face as if the question had shaken her sense of time back into her. 'I was thinking— Well, perhaps not tonight. I'll bleed all over your sheets, and those stains are a nightmare to get out.'

Not what she'd wanted him to say, then ... and yet he didn't manage to stop himself, baser urges moving his lips as he muttered, 'The bathtub is significantly easier to clean, may I remind you.'

'Oh.' Her eyes snapped back to him, narrowing in unmistakable interest. 'Rather scandalous, husband.'

'I'm only trying to be pragmatic,' he retorted – which was, admittedly, a shameless lie. But the truth ... Even if he shouldn't think of her as a wife to honour and cherish, it felt like crossing some line to tell her in the bright light of day what the vision of her pretty arse bent over his bathtub was doing to his nether parts. 'The best chance, remember?'

'Of course, of course.' Her blush really didn't help matters at all. 'How about tomorrow night, in that case?'

He quirked up his eyebrows. 'Not tonight?'

'Well, I was wondering ...' The pink on her cheeks deepened to a beguiling cherry red. Ah. They were getting to the core of the matter, then. 'Since I'm slightly indisposed, I wondered if perhaps you might like to have dinner tonight? Just once, of course. Just ... just ...'

He stared at her.

'I figured it couldn't do much harm,' she stammered, deer-brown eyes trained on the cuff of his sleeve. 'We don't have to talk about anything important, and I assure you my table

manners will inspire the absolute opposite of fondness in you. But there are a few things I've been meaning to ask you about the house, and they don't seem entirely suitable to discuss while you're ...' She cleared her throat, threw another look around the hall, then leaned in half an inch towards him and whisper-breathed, 'While you're *sitting balls deep inside me.*'

His laughter burst out of him with the force of a thunderclap, echoing back at him from the walls and ceiling.

Hell's sake. He'd forgotten how it sounded, his own amusement – but that grin growing on her face made it suddenly easy to remember, a fraction smug and naughty in a way that sent another rush of blood into his loins. He could only hope she didn't glance down; his cock was starting to tent his breeches.

'So?' she prodded, her voice still conspiratorially low. 'Will you have dinner with me?'

He should not – he really should not. Hadn't he learned anything from these six damned deaths, Rosamund dangling in the attic, Colette's broken body at the foot of the stairs? Tomorrow a bust might drop off a shelf and hit Eleanor on the head. A cart might run her over in the street. The curse would always loom around every corner, and he should know so, so much better than to invite it at his table.

Then again ...

His friends were still alive. His servants were still alive.

And he didn't want to love and cherish her, this little sunray in human flesh before him. He just wanted to bask in her warmth.

'Just this once, then,' he heard himself say, and her little squeal of delight made it worth every second he'd lie awake over the choice. 'I'll see you at eight.'

# CHAPTER ELEVEN



NELLIE REALLY HAD NO reason to be nervous.

It was not like she was going to meet her husband for the very first time, after all. He'd seen her in plenty of more intimate ways than on the other side of a dinner table; they'd had conversations before, albeit interspersed with other, more physical activities. So there ought to be nothing new about this, eating a meal together. It ought to be a step *back* rather than forward.

She changed dresses four times all the same. Clothes suddenly seemed to matter now that she was supposed to keep them on for longer than a few minutes.

'Aren't you worried about the curse?' Anne inquired, sketching a still life of an apple, a book, and one of the giant silver candelabras she'd found in the attic. 'He might suddenly fall in love with you if you spend a whole night talking.'

Nellie squinted at her own silhouette in the mirror, examining the fresh green of her dress. ‘That seems rather unlikely.’

‘Why?’ Her sister huffed. ‘You *are* very nice.’

‘Thank you,’ Nellie absently said, turning to inspect herself from the side. Hard to refute that argument without shocking her little sister to the core. *Lord Locke feels nothing but lust for me* – you couldn’t really tell a sixteen-year-old that, could you?

Instead, she added, ‘He’s still mourning six other women. And either way, I have no reason to be nervous. If he starts showing any particular signs of attachment, we can always ask Walford to get us out of here.’

As the steward had promised. As he’d reminded her twice in the past few weeks, hastily whispered reassurances in between her meddling with bouquets and wallpapers.

Anne grumpily sketched on but did not argue.

The green dress would do, Nellie decided – which was for the best, because the bell could toll eight at any moment. She locked the dressing room with its heavy iron key, checked herself in the mirror one more time in case a giant blood stain had suddenly materialised on her skirt, and made for the door when that didn’t appear to be the case.

‘Don’t leave any charcoal on my bed when you go to sleep,’ she warned, slipping out.

Her sister’s scoff was, presumably, a declaration of both love and worry.

The bell of eight came as she descended the staircase, and there he stood waiting for her – entirely the frigid nobleman, his blue hair tamed into a lifeless queue, his face so blank it could have been hewn from marble. This was the man who’d proposed to her, who’d married her ... but she *knew* that emotionless beauty now, had learned all the ways the mask could shatter with pleasure or amusement, and somehow that was enough to turn him into a different person entirely in her mind.

At once, she was no longer nervous.

Rather ... excited?

‘Your Grace,’ she greeted him, and that alone was enough to quirk his mouth as he held out his arm to her.

‘I seem to recall a conversation on the matter of that title,’ he murmured as he began walking.

‘So do I.’ It was strange to wrap a hand around his arm with a glove and a coat and a shirt in between; she’d gotten used to the warmth of him, the feel of muscles shifting right beneath his skin. ‘I wasn’t sure if it applied to other contexts, too.’

*When both of us are dressed, for example.*

She didn’t say it out loud. There were servants within earshot, and either way, her husband didn’t need to know she had trouble looking at him without thinking of his nakedness.

‘I don’t see why it wouldn’t,’ he said, his voice so flat she dared to be sure *he* wasn’t thinking about nakedness at all. ‘Unless, of course, you’d prefer for me to address you by your title as well during dinner, in which case—’

A snort escaped her, settling the argument.

Again his lips trembled suspiciously.

The dining hall was unrecognisable after her work of the past few days, even though it was far from finished: the stiff and soulless seats had been replaced by a set of upholstered dining chairs that had been banished to the attic after Jeanne’s death, and Alis’s paintings of Issian and Karwaldian landscapes had returned to the bare walls. The candelabras on the table carried the coat of arms of Rosamund’s family. Nellie couldn’t help glancing at Locke – no, Othrys – as they sank into their seats, but he didn’t pay the heirlooms any particular attention.

Instead ...

Instead, his gaze appeared focused on the blue-and-white porcelain plates.

‘It’s been a while since I’ve seen these.’ There was no emotion in the statement. ‘Where did you find them? The attic, too?’

‘We— Yes.’ She wasn’t sure what to make of that expression on his face, or rather, the lack of it. ‘Mrs. Hartnell wasn’t sure where they’d come from, but ...’

‘They were my mother’s,’ he said softly. ‘My father must have put them away after she was made to leave.’

Sweet divines. She’d known she’d have to bring up the topic over the course of the evening, but not like *this* – not sprung upon him before he’d even finished his entrée. ‘I’m so sorry – I didn’t realise—’

‘Don’t worry about it,’ he interrupted, his voice still unnaturally quiet. ‘I’m glad you found them, frankly.’

She wasn’t sure what to reply to that, so she settled for a watery smile and a nod. Thankfully, the footmen choose that moment to serve the soup; the silence was not nearly as pressing with the clanking of spoons and pans to break it.

It was only after Locke – *Othrys*, damn it – dismissed them that he met her gaze again, spoon hovering delicately over his plate. ‘You wanted to discuss something?’

No small talk. No polite enquiries after her day. She should have expected it – she should be *glad* for it, with her own life on the line – and yet the weight in her stomach felt suspiciously close to disappointment.

She blew a whiff of steam off her spoon, overly conscious of her inelegant fingers around the silverware, and admitted, ‘It does concern your mother, to be honest.’

‘Ah.’ There was no resentment on his face as he took a first bite, nodded approvingly at his plate, then lowered his hand and added, ‘I see. Go ahead, then.’

‘We found her portrait in the attic.’ A stunningly beautiful woman, smiling alluringly at them from the canvas – her face inhumanly sharp, her neck and arms adorned with scaly patterns not unlike her son’s. Nellie had known who she was before she’d read the small name plate: *Lithrina, Duchess of*

*Locke.* ‘Stashed away in the back. Mrs. Hartnell suggested adding her to the gallery of family portraits in the hall, but I wasn’t sure ...’

‘I see,’ he said.

He said it so very calmly. He took his next bite of pea soup so very guardedly. But something seemed to have changed about his face, about the look in his storm cloud eyes – an echo of lost laughter haunting the corners of his expression.

Nellie waited, sipping soup from her spoon and trying not to look like a toddler holding cutlery for the very first time.

‘What do you think?’ he asked.

She almost spilled soup on her skirt. ‘What? Me?’

‘Yes?’ He did not look like he was mocking her – the opposite, if anything. ‘It’s your life she’s threatening, after all. Would you feel unsafe, walking past her every day? Would she remind you of the danger?’

Sweet divines. She hadn’t even *thought* about her own opinion yet.

‘I ... I’m not sure.’ The words left her mouth in a stammer. ‘To be honest, I half expected you’d never want to see her again. You’re the one who lost ... well ...’

Six wives – but six times *himself* as well, six quiet, creeping deaths that no one in Elidian whispered about. Deaths she had come to recognise only gradually herself, marked by gravestones in disguise – his sketches in a forgotten drawer. His abandoned books, his empty home. Most of all, that cold, dispassionate demeanour, so different from the man she’d glimpsed in unguarded moments – every spark of joy buried deep behind that fortress of composure, as if to spare him all other feelings, too.

*I’m poison, Eleanor.*

She wasn’t sure when she’d started seeing him as a victim rather than a murderer, his bleeding heart as a wound rather than a weapon. She only knew he wouldn’t believe it – not truly.

Her husband did not fill the silence. He sat motionless on the other side of the table, eyes trained on his plate, the slits of his pupils wider than she'd ever seen them. In the dim light, his jawline was sharp as a blade – as if she'd cut herself if she were to wrap her hands around his face.

Not that she would ever do any such thing, of course.

'Othrys?' she said quietly instead, and suddenly the intimacy of that name seemed the most familiar thing in the world.

His shoulders clenched as he lowered his spoon onto his plate and rubbed his temple, sending a single strand of blue hair fluttering down onto his shoulder. 'I *should* not want to see her face ever again.' Flat, curt, factual words. 'I ought to tell you to tear the bloody portrait to shreds, after all the suffering she caused. So if that's the answer you'd prefer to hear ... feel free to accept it. Feel free to fling it into the nearest canal and never think of it again.'

The easy answer.

But she'd seen him look at those plates – *plates*, for goodness' sake. The first tangible trace of his mother's existence in divines knew how long, in this city that no longer even allowed her existence, and he'd soaked it up like a man dying of thirst.

'It's not the truth, though, is it?' she whispered.

His throat bobbed. 'No.'

Again she waited – a silence brimming with conflicting desires, the hollowness of it growing crueller with each passing heartbeat.

She knew that silence. She knew the war raging on his face. She remembered coming home from the market with the few bruised, half-rotten vegetables their last pennies could buy and finding their little house similarly quiet, the damning absence of Father's comforting whistle or his heavy footsteps on the creaking boards ...

And even then, she'd missed him.



Even then, through the sharpest pangs of her hunger and the hottest flares of her fury, she'd never been able to banish the grief entirely.

Which the man sitting before her shouldn't know – *couldn't* know. And yet she couldn't help opening her mouth, a stupid, sentimental attempt to soften the lines of guilt etched into that inhumanly beautiful face ...

'It's alright.' It was little more than a whisper. 'It really is. You must have been very fond of her, before she was banished.'

Like a dam broke, his bitter laugh shattered out of him. 'I didn't even believe it at first – can you imagine? Simply refused to accept the bloody facts. Walford argued and argued after Jeanne died, and I kept clinging to coincidences and lack of evidence, told him that surely she'd loved me too much to curse me in such a vicious way ...'

*He'll come back*, Mother had insisted, gaunt with hunger and red-eyed with grief. *Of course he'll come back. He loves me. He loves all of you ...*

'Yes,' Nellie mumbled, throat clenching tight.

'And then Alis died.' He didn't seem to have heard her; he certainly hadn't heard the emotion she was so desperately trying not to feel. His fingers clenched and unclenched erratically beside his plate. 'Horse kick to the head – *Alis*, of all people, who could tame a bloody horse by *smiling* at it. So then ... then ...'

Then he'd given up on his arguments.

Losing not just a fourth wife, but also the mother he'd thought he'd known.

'So why do you think she did it?' Nellie whispered. 'Could she have made a mistake? Tried to curse your father and accidentally targeted you?'

'Walford said the same thing.' His lips curved into a cramped, joyless smile. 'But she ... she really wasn't one to make mistakes. Not even if she was furious. The notion of her

wielding magic that carelessly seems even more impossible than the notion of her cursing me deliberately.'

'But then why—'

'The best I've managed to come up with is that she wanted the family line to die with me,' he cut in, not waiting for her to finish. The words came out with strange, restrained eagerness – as if he'd waited years to speak them out loud and hated himself for wanting to do so. 'That she wanted everything my father had worked for to come to naught. She would have known how much that would haunt him – having caused the decline of the Locke estate.'

Oh.

Oh dear.

She shouldn't ask – she shouldn't invite him to bare so much of his own heart and soul to her. But this *was* relevant to her own role in the tragedy, the entire dratted reason why he'd married her ... so out it slipped, a question she'd never even thought of before. 'Is that why you're going to such lengths to have an heir, then? Your father's wishes?'

He closed his eyes. 'Not exactly.'

Not an answer, and she *really* shouldn't ask.

Then again ... asking was only dangerous if it made him feel fonder towards her. And if every line on his angular face, every twitching muscle in his jaw, was telling her that he didn't wish to dive deeper into his own motivations, wouldn't asking him be a very decent strategy for survival?

'So what is the reason, then?' she blurted, absently spooning up pea soup. Somehow, most of her plate had emptied itself over the course of the conversation. 'What happens if you die without an heir? Does the duchy cease to exist?'

'Oh no. Nothing so dramatic.' He opened his eyes, slumping back with the air of a man about to recount an unpleasant history lesson. 'It's rather ... When my great-great-grandfather fled the tyrants of Pavella and came to Elidian, he left a significant part of his family behind. So while the Elidian line

always remained small, I still have distant cousins living under the iron crown’

Nellie lowered her spoon again. ‘Do you know them at all?’

‘They write me every now and then to ask for money,’ he muttered, sounding bitter. ‘Other than them, my father and uncles are the only family I’ve known. The youngest of them, Percival, drunk himself to death a decade ago and never had any children with either his wife or his impressive string of mistresses. My other uncle, Ambrose, is alive but hasn’t set foot in Elidian for twenty years. He left home to travel as a young man and never returned.’

Matters began to solidify. ‘So if you were to die tomorrow, Ambrose would become the next duke of Locke?’

‘Exactly.’ It came out grim.

‘And you don’t think he’d come back to Elidian and take up life as a nobleman here?’

‘He regularly assures me in his letters that he never wants to see the city again.’ The way his lip curled up lay a hair’s breadth removed from a sneer. ‘Which means the house would be sold. The servants would lose their positions, the family possessions would be traded, any influence we wield in the Senate would be gone. And if Ambrose were to die childless, which seems likely at this point, all of it would go back into the hands of some squandering cousin licking the boots of the Pavellan tyrants.’

Not his father’s wishes, then.

Just principles. She should have known.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said quietly, because that was all that seemed left to be said.

He cocked his head, one pointed ear breaking through the blue silk of his hair. His gaze met hers for the first time in minutes, and to her surprise, the emotion in those cat eyes was not grief or anger or even exhaustion, but rather ...

Relief?

No, *amusement?*

‘Thank you,’ he said, the most miniscule tremble of his lips confirming that bewildering hunch. ‘I understand you won’t even tell me to stop wallowing?’

‘I— Look, not *everything* you do is wallowing!’ An unexpected laugh wormed free. ‘All you do is care about your people and your responsibilities, and even if you do so a little too much at times ... should I chide you for it?’

‘No,’ he admitted, looking away again, his smile dwindling. As if he couldn’t bear to see her face – to see how she might react to the next words he’d speak. ‘No, not for that. But then there’s my unforgivable sentimentality over my mother’s memory, even after she killed six innocent women, and *that* ...’

Nellie huffed. ‘She’s still your mother. That’s the bloody trouble with parents, isn’t it? They don’t stop being your parents even when they leave.’

A small silence fell.

Perhaps that last sentence had come out with a little too much force.

‘I mean ...’ she started, a helpless attempt to correct the mistake. ‘Of course, not everyone—’

‘I know what you mean,’ he interrupted, and if his voice was curt, it didn’t sound unkind. ‘So who left, if I may be so impertinent as to ask?’

Drat.

‘My father,’ she whispered.

He sighed. ‘Ah.’

‘And my mother just ... stopped living.’ The words spilled out whether she wanted them to or not, lured into the open by his own vulnerability. ‘Kept telling me how much he’d loved us, how much he’d loved her, how he would surely come back soon ... and then he didn’t. So after months she finally gave up – stopped getting out of bed, stopped eating ...’

He closed his eyes. ‘How old were you?’

‘Twelve summers,’ she breathed.

His jaw tightened. But all he said was, again, ‘Ah.’

As if she’d answered questions he’d been mulling over for weeks. As if he’d wondered but never dared to ask. She’d been naked in his arms so many times, and yet she’d never felt so bare before him as in this moment – as he sat there and watched her with those strange eyes, grey depths brimming with years upon years of shattered affections.

‘I’m sorry,’ she stammered, shrinking in her chair. ‘I shouldn’t—’

‘You should.’ A brisk bite to the words – too brisk, as if he was hiding the opposite beneath that snappish tone. ‘And you ... Divines help me, you know that I’ll never let any such thing happen to you again, don’t you, Eleanor? You know I won’t allow it?’

Her jaw fell shut again.

*Allow it?*

She should scoff, a little voice reminded her, sounding uncomfortably like her own. She should laugh and shrug off his vows. Pretty promises, all of them. Like magic. Like fairytales. The sort of promise Father had made, and Father hadn’t minded dooming her to a life of scrubbing floors ...

But Othrys Locke wasn’t Father.

Othrys Locke was the bloody *opposite* of Father – a man who would collapse beneath his duty before he’d run from it, who understood the weight of heartache better than perhaps anyone else in this city. Sitting there with that gleam of honest concern in his inhuman eyes, ready to protect, ready to do what must be done and save her ...

Looking like a fairytale. Like every fantasy she’d laughed at come true.

‘Eleanor?’ she heard him say again, his voice distant.

‘Yes,’ she managed, feeling like someone else was speaking the words. Her eyes would not leave his face – that sculpted face, chiselled lips and cheekbones, an inhuman arrangement

so beautiful it almost hurt to look at it. ‘I know. I promise I know.’

‘Good,’ he said hoarsely, and then again, ‘Good.’

Her breath was quickening. His throat bobbed, but he did not speak again, did not avert his eyes from hers – watching her like a man possessed as the quiet deepened around them, like a starving beggar regarding the bread he couldn’t have.

He should not be looking at her like that.

It took a moment too long for the alarm bells to start ringing, even her panic muffled beneath the roar in her ears. Sweet divines, he should *not* be looking at her like that, and she should not have spoken a single word to him, should not have invited him here in the first place ...

His hand came up, as if to reach for her.

‘Don’t!’ she gasped.

His fingers froze in midair.

A moment of motionless deadlock as they stared at each other, opposing forces tugging at that hand – the need for his skin on hers against the ghosts of six dead women whispering at them from every corner in this hall, reminding him of their fates, of every life cut short. Just a moment, and then he jerked back his arm, the ice closing in over his face again.

As it should.

She felt the cold of his expression in the pit of her stomach all the same.

‘I should go,’ he said, voice choked as he rose. ‘I’ll see you. Later. Elsewhere. I ... I ...’

*No*, her heart screamed.

‘Yes,’ she whispered. ‘Yes, you should.’

He’d already started walking.

A dozen long strides, not a word or glance of goodbye. Then the door of the hall shut behind him with a soft, utterly restrained click, and he was gone from the room – leaving her

alone with their unfinished meal, his mother's porcelain, and the weight of that bloody curse pressing down upon her like a shroud ...

Nellie sat frozen, staring at the place from which he'd vanished a moment before.

And slowly, very slowly, a decision began to take shape in her mind.

## CHAPTER TWELVE



‘ANNE? *Anne?*’

A dismal groan emerged from beneath the rumpled blankets.

‘Anne, wake *up.*’ Nellie yanked the down and linen aside, to be rewarded with an even more miserable wail and an elbow almost hitting her in the face. ‘I have a question for you. It’s too important to wait.’

One bleary eye blinked open, glaring at her with the fury of a thousand hells in the pale morning light. With a tormented groan, her little sister pulled her pillow over her head and garbled something from which Nellie could only make out the words *away* and *middle of the bloody night.*

‘Watch your language,’ she snapped, tugging the pillow away as well, ‘and it’s clearly *not* the middle of the night, seeing as we’re minutes away from sunrise. Now—’



‘It’s midsummer day, Nell,’ Anne grumbled, finally opening her second eye. In her rumpled nightgown, blonde hair fuzzy around her head, she vaguely resembled a cranky lady’s cat who had been petted at the wrong moment. ‘Sunrise *is* pretty much the middle of the night.’

‘You’re exaggerating.’ Nellie plopped down on the edge of the mattress, folding her arms. ‘And either way, you’re awake now, so you might as well answer my questions. How does one break a curse?’

Anne stared at her.

‘Come on – *you’re* the one who knows all the fairytales.’ It took an effort not to shake her sister. It had taken an even more monumental effort to wait until the first light of day at all; she’d slept maybe two hours, and she was buzzing with energy all the same, with the irrepressible need to *act*. ‘If someone created that curse, shouldn’t we be able to remove it, too? Pragmatically speaking?’

‘Have you gone mad?’ Anne cautiously enquired.

‘I feel like I’m the only sane person in this household,’ she retorted. Even the *walls* seemed to be buzzing. ‘They’ve all been tiptoeing around the matter so much they’ve forgotten to solve it. Can curses be broken? What do the fairytales say?’

‘There ... there are stories with broken curses.’ Somehow, the suspicion on her sister’s face was only deepening. ‘Usually the cure is something like true love, though, which—’

‘Which is a problem here. Yes.’ Nellie jumped up again, unable to sit still for more than ten heartbeats. ‘Still, there needs to be *something*—’

‘Nell,’ Anne interrupted, hoisting herself up on her elbows, squinting. ‘Nell, did you fall in love with him?’

‘Doesn’t matter,’ Nellie impatiently said, waving the question away. ‘This isn’t about me. Listen, if we can theoretically get rid of the curse, then—’

‘*Nell*,’ her sister repeated, and now there was no trace of sleep left on that round face, not a brush of softness. It had

come out with all the bite of a despairing governess twice her age, that one name. ‘What are you *thinking*? He’s not—’

‘I know he’s not safe,’ Nellie cut in, closing her eyes. Divines help her. Was this love, then, this unbearable need to move and *fix* things – to fix *him*? ‘But the curse doesn’t give a damn what *I* feel, does it? And either way, it doesn’t matter, because I’m going to break it. I just need to figure out—’

‘You’re going to need fae for that,’ Anne said hoarsely. ‘The fairytales don’t give any details. And there are barely any fae left in Elidian because the Princeps—’

Nellie’s thoughts burst around another corner.

‘Lord Arragher.’ She almost gasped the name. ‘Lord Arragher has a fae wife, doesn’t he? Or well, a fae fiancée, because obviously they’re not allowed to get married ...’

But the duke of Arragher was rich as sin and a prominent member of the Senate, and somehow the combination of decadent wine fountains at public festivals, generous charity to the poor, and a good dose of blinding charm had kept the populace of Elidian from voting him out when the affair had come to light a few years ago. Lady Eystone had spent multiple days hyperventilating on the sofa when the news spread, declaring to all who would listen that she wouldn’t have *any* of those thieving liars anywhere near her home.

Nellie had not dared to point out that while fae may occasionally be thieves, they weren’t even *capable* of lying.

‘So then send her a letter,’ Anne was saying, rubbing her face. ‘I’m sure she’ll reply in a few days, and then—’

‘I’m going to visit her,’ Nellie declared.

Anne stared at her as if she couldn’t decide whether to laugh or cry. ‘Nell, it’s midsummer day.’

‘Yes, so?’ Restless impatience was taking hold of her feet. ‘Surely she won’t be at the festival yet. It’s still pretty much the middle of the night.’

‘All servants have their day off!’ Anne protested. ‘You can’t send them with a note to announce you, and—’

‘I’ll just go by myself.’ Who cared about etiquette when there were lives at stake – when there were *hearts* at stake? ‘I’m a duchess now, after all. And she’ll probably forgive me for trying not to die, don’t you think?’

If Anne didn’t think so, Nellie didn’t wait for her to make the point. She had already hurried out of the room again.



ARRAGHER MANOR – GRAND, glorious, and shining like the summer sun itself – lay alongside the Rope Canal, a mere stone’s throw from the Iron Hold and the market square where executions took place. The same places where the duke’s not-quite-wife would have ended up if not for the considerable influence her not-quite-husband wielded; Nellie couldn’t help but wonder, walking past the grotesque façade of the city’s prison, how often her ladyship thought of it, the threat of what her future might have been.

Then again ...

She’d found herself forgetting about the dratted curse more and more often, these weeks. Perhaps even looming death could become comfortable routine when surrounded by enough money and—

Love?

She hurriedly pressed that thought away.

Around her, all of the city was preparing for the midsummer festival, building bonfires and decorating the streets with flower garlands and laurel wreaths. Yet somehow the Arragher gardens were more summery still – exotic flowers and lush greenery wherever Nellie looked, their sweet perfumes enough to mask the marsh smells that hung over the city in these warmest months. Bumblebees buzzed. Fountains gurgled. Oh yes, she could imagine it was hard to think about death in a place like this ...

Had the Locke gardens been like these, once?

Was that why Othrys had allowed them to die and wither after Isaure was gone – because he could no longer stand the sight of so much life without her?

She couldn't shake off that look in his eyes even here, the hint of a thaw in that frostbitten heart of his. The fear, most of all. *I'm poison, Eleanor ...*

She walked a little faster.

A haggard-looking housekeeper received her, made an attempt to send her back home, then gave up when the title of Lady Locke was mentioned. Nellie was left waiting in the gold-and-marble entry hall while the lingering servants went looking for the lady of the house – a search of a few minutes, and yet it felt like an eternity until at long last a door flew open at the top of the stairs.

'Lady Locke!' a bright and decidedly inhuman voice cried out.

And in a dazzle of gold and purple, Lady Arragher – or at least the woman informally going by that title – swept down into the hall.

She was wearing a decadent dressing gown and very little else, elegantly holding a flaky pastry in one hand and a glass of some fizzy, amber-coloured drink in the other. Her white hair – not blonde, not grey, but a pure, snowy *white* – had been pinned up in messy curls, framing a face like a winter's rose, soft and ethereal in equal amounts. Her eyes were almost too blue to look at, her movements too swift for the human eye to follow. And her voice ...

Like the alluring song of violins, a tempting melody that even now made Nellie's feet itch to follow her and keep following her for the rest of her days.

Sweet divines.

The only fae she'd ever seen up close were the ones chained for the gallows, gaunt and dishevelled, looking about as magical as the cobblestones on which they stood. *This* creature, on the other hand ...

There was no way to look at her and not believe in magic.

‘How *utterly* lovely of you to come pay me a visit!’ Lady Arragher proclaimed, hurrying down the final stairs without bothering to give even the most half-hearted curtsy. Somehow she managed to look perfectly refined even as she stuck the entire pastry into her mouth and quickly licked the remaining honey off her fingers. ‘What about a stroll in the gardens, darling? The weather is absolutely lovely, and— Oh, before I forget, would you like a glass?’

‘No, thank you,’ Nellie managed, because the drink the other woman was holding looked suspiciously alcoholic and she hadn’t even had breakfast yet. ‘Thank you for receiving me on such short notice. I hope it’s not an inconvenience to—’

‘Oh, I was getting sick of Kieran’s snoring anyway,’ the almost-duchess dryly said. ‘Your arrival was simply the last straw to get me out of bed. So. Othrys Locke’s newest wife, aren’t you? What is your name?’

*Nellie*, Nellie almost said.

Instead, changing course at the last moment ... ‘Eleanor.’

‘Delighted to meet you, Eleanor. Call me Doretha.’ She sallied outside the way she’d descended the stairs – as if every step she took was the spectacular climax to some highly anticipated play. Nellie felt more like a housemaid than she had in weeks, hurrying after her as the duchess continued, ‘To what do I owe this rather unexpected visit? Are you urgently in need of a festival dress? Are we starting a club of counterfeit duchesses, perhaps?’

She seemed genuinely gleeful about the last suggestion. Nellie swallowed something bitter – she couldn’t help it.

*Counterfeit*. And if that was all she’d ever be to her husband ...

Then what?

Then the bloody curse still had to go.

It helped, that thought. It felt like finding firm footing in marshland again.

‘I was wondering if I could ask for your advice,’ she said, following the other woman into the golden sunlight, the perfect flower beds and pathways surrounding the house. She *was* a duchess, damn it all; she was not going to let herself be dazzled into stammers. ‘About matters of magic. Curses, specifically.’

Doretha froze.

Then she spun around, her dressing robe swirling scandalously about her pale bare legs, and flicked her gaze over Nellie once again. Her blue eyes had gone impossibly bluer. She was no longer smiling, suddenly – was no longer even pretending to.

‘Ah,’ she said, and a world of meaning lay beneath the surface of that single world. ‘Of course.’

‘I hope that does not offend you?’ Nellie cautiously added, unsure where the sudden change of tone had come from. Was this some bit of fae etiquette she should have known about? ‘I would have looked elsewhere, but the trouble is there are so few fae in the city, and ...’

‘Oh, there are plenty of them,’ Doretha interrupted, resuming her walk with swift, elegant steps. Her smile was joyless. ‘You just won’t find them, for obvious reasons. I’m happy to answer your questions, Eleanor, but you may not like the answers in the slightest. Please be aware before you continue.’

Which couldn’t be a lie.

Then again ... was she supposed to just *not* ask what she needed to know?

She wasn’t fleeing, and therefore she had to fight – the only fact she dared to be sure of on this day of bewildering insight. So she swallowed something sour, followed her hostess down the winding path surrounded by white chrysanthemums, and said, ‘Do you know whether curses can be broken?’

Doretha sighed. ‘Most can be, yes.’

‘They *can*?’ Nellie’s heart skipped a beat. ‘Are you able to do it? Would you be able to break the curse on Othrys, then?’

The duchess took a small, elegant sip from her glass. A small tick of silence went by.

Then, flatly, she said, ‘No.’

Nellie stumbled to a standstill on the flagstone. ‘What?’

‘No.’ Doretha did not glance at her, piercing blue eyes aimed stubbornly at the high boxwood surrounding the garden. ‘I’m afraid I would not be able to solve the trouble at Locke Manor. I’m sorry, Eleanor.’

‘But ...’ She felt like a pouting child begging for sweets. ‘But you said—’

‘I know what I said, darling,’ Doretha cut in, absently swirling her drink around in her glass. She seemed to be weighing her words. ‘And it may be best to leave the matter at this, before either of us regrets it. You—’

‘Is the magic too complex?’ Nellie blurted, barely hearing that warning. ‘Does that mean *other* fae could possibly break it, even if you’re not able to do it? I’m happy to ask around, if you say there are more of them in the city, and—’

‘Wouldn’t help you.’ The duchess hesitated a last moment, then snapped her gaze back to Nellie’s face, apparently having reached a decision. Her voice lowered. ‘Complexity is not the issue. I’m a fine enough mage, if I may say so myself. The trouble is rather ...’

A last pause.

‘The trouble,’ she repeated, then, briefly closing her eyes, ‘is rather that there is no curse.’

It took a moment for those words to land.

Two moments, perhaps, and they still didn’t make a lick of sense.

‘What?’ Nellie managed to force out, and the word was accompanied by an involuntary chuckle so joyless she almost winced. ‘No. No, that is nonsense. Of course there is a curse – everyone knows ...’

‘Every *human* thinks they know,’ the duchess corrected, all but rolling her eyes. ‘The problem is that humans don’t understand the first thing about magic or its workings. There is no curse on Othrys Locke. Every fae in Elidian knows there is no curse.’

‘But ... but six women died!’ Too loud. Too shrill. ‘That can’t be a coincidence, can it? *Six* of them?’

Doretha took another sip. ‘No, I agree that seems unlikely to be a coincidence.’

‘So then ...’ She was grasping for straws now, Nellie realised, was clinging to thoughts she *had* to believe, because the alternative was too terrible, too devastating, to even consider for the span of a heartbeat. ‘So then there *has* to be a curse. It’s the only possible explanation. Perhaps there’s a magic trick you don’t know, or ... or ...’

The other woman remained quiet.

Sweat was starting to prickle between Nellie’s shoulder blades, beneath the hasty loops of her hair. Throwing a wild glance around, she added, even shriller now, ‘And if there isn’t a curse, then why didn’t you tell anyone else until now? Why didn’t you warn Othrys or the city guards or—’

‘Eleanor,’ the duchess interrupted, closing her eyes. ‘I’m fae.’

‘So then they would have to believe you! You can’t lie! That’s no reason to—’

‘*Eleanor.*’ The undertone beneath her name was one of unflinching finality, worryingly close to Mrs. Radcliffe in her state of utmost vexation, and Nellie snapped shut her mouth at once, a reflex as old as her working life. ‘You don’t understand what I’m saying. I am the most public fae alive in a city that has banned all of us. The man who calls himself our Princeps is biting his ratty nails over the fact of my personal existence. I cannot step outside these gates without being trailed by the Mirror Queen’s spies wherever I go, and three times now they have *accidentally* called out my name on the list of those about to be executed on the square next door.’



The gallows.

Swinging peacefully in the summer breeze, waiting for the next neck to snap.

‘Kieran is rich and powerful and annoyingly charming,’ Doretha continued, her violin voice low and pressing. Her glass trembled slightly in her hand. ‘He can protect me to a certain extent, and he does it flawlessly. But we’re walking a very, *very* thin line, and Cyril and his cronies are waiting for a misstep – for even the smallest reason they can find to chain me up and kill me. Do you understand?’

Nellie wished she didn’t.

She wished this chain of arguments didn’t make so much sense.

‘So the last thing I’m able to do, Eleanor’ – suddenly there was a century of weariness on that flawless fae visage – ‘is march up to the guardhouse and announce that I have a murder to declare. Especially when there are six of them. And *especially* when it’s very well possible ...’

‘No,’ Nellie breathed, chest constricting. ‘No, please—’

‘... that the murderer is no less than a duke himself,’ Doretha finished and downed the rest of her glass.

# CHAPTER THIRTEEN



NO CURSE.

No magic.

By the time the red brick façade of Locke Manor loomed up before her, Nellie could no longer remember how she'd managed to find her way home, the sun-drenched city and its endless garlands and flowers a blur. The sun was beating down, but she barely felt its heat; just below her skin, a layer of ice seemed to have settled, cold and dark and hollow and whispering of death.

She'd been right from the start.

Why, *why* had she allowed his pretty words to blind her to the facts and lure her into this fairytale world that had always been too good to be true?

The hall was strangely empty, all servants gone for their midsummer holiday. She staggered past the portraits of Sir

Percival and Sir Ambrose, past the open door to the dining hall, up the narrow stairs with its new green runner – step after step through this house that had begun to feel like her own already, and to what end?

It had been home to six other women, too.

Who had died, and there was no curse to blame.

Why? *Why?* Othrys was the common factor they all shared, there was no way around it ... but what did he stand to gain from their deaths? Their family fortunes? Their connections? Had he been so impatient for an heir that he'd killed them when they'd failed to conceive within the first two months?

Was that why he all but knew the bloody Heartstrong book by heart?

She faltered on the landing, hand halfway to the door giving access to the back wing of the house. All she wanted was to crawl beneath her blankets and forget this miserable marriage existed at all ... but Anne would ask questions, Anne would panic, and how could she do that to her little sister before she had a plan to deal with these revelations?

She had to go somewhere else. Somewhere far, far away and —

Wait.

*If you ever decide you would rather get out of here ...*

She burst back into motion, flying up the stairs as if monsters were snapping at her feet. Second room to the right. That little office bursting with books and leather folders. The door stood ajar, and behind it—

Oh, thank the divines.

‘Mr. Walford!’ She all but sobbed the name as she stumbled through the doorway. ‘Mr. Walford, I ... I ...’

‘Good gracious, Lady Locke?’ The steward jumped from his seat, knocking a pile of paperwork onto the floor. His eyes went wide beneath the floppy tumble of his red hair. ‘Are you unwell? What is the matter?’

‘The curse,’ she stammered, collapsing into an empty chair. ‘The curse ... Mr. Walford, it doesn’t *exist*.’

He stared at her from behind his desk.

An eternity crawled by in silence, sunlight brushing the side of his freckled face as his eyes went wider, then narrowed to slits. His lips parted. Closed again. Then parted, letting out an oddly feeble, ‘I beg your pardon, Lady Locke?’

‘I asked Lady Arragher.’ Nellie hunched over, burying her face in her hands. ‘I ... I thought we might be able to break it with her help, you see? But she said ... she said ...’

‘That can’t be right,’ Walford brusquely interrupted, and she’d never heard him sound so little like his cheerful, amiable self. ‘She must have been playing some fae game with you. Of course there is a curse. What else—’

‘I said the same thing,’ Nellie managed through the hiccough of a first sob. ‘I didn’t want to believe it either – but she’s *fae*, Mr. Walford. She can’t lie! So then ... then ...’

She didn’t get it past her lips.

A small thud suggested Walford had sat down again. When she lifted her head, he was watching her with those narrowed eyes; his fingers had tightened around the edge of the desk, knuckles white with the force of his shock.

‘Then?’ he said sharply.

‘Then Othrys ... He must ...’

The steward’s shoulders slumped at once – as if he hadn’t believed, until the very last moment, that she’d truly speak the words out loud.

‘Unless there’s another explanation,’ Nellie hurriedly added, feeling like a heroine clinging to a cliff in one of Anne’s fairytales. ‘Unless it was a coincidence after all – or perhaps someone else has been trying to make his life hell for whatever reason ...’

‘Impossible,’ Walford said bleakly. ‘I would want to believe the same thing, but no one could have snuck into the house at

night to push Colette down the stairs or attack Rosamund in the attic. And Othrys, he ...’

He swallowed audibly. His eyes were darting from the doorway to Nellie and back to the door, the indecision tangible in every twitchy movement. A lifetime of family loyalty, she realised, and what else than the very darkest of suspicions could convince him to set all of it aside?

‘I’ve never wanted to take the thought seriously,’ Walford finally whispered, his voice clogged with dread. ‘His grief always seemed so genuine to me, you see? And of course, I owe him and his uncle *everything*. I wouldn’t want ...’

To be ungrateful. To bite the hand that fed him. And so he’d squashed away every spark of discomfort – she understood it now. All he’d dared to do was quietly offer her his help, the only possible compromise between his loyalty and fear.

‘But there were things that made you ... wonder?’ she managed.

‘Just glimpses. Moments where suddenly he no longer looked like the grieving husband I knew but strangely ... calculating.’ He shivered. ‘He seemed to expect Blanche to die long before she did. We were all sick after the fish stew had gone bad, and yet he only talked about *her* as if he thought she wouldn’t make it— Oh good gods, and when Rosamund was nowhere to be found, *he* was the one who suggested we look in the attic, even though no sensible soul ever went there ...’

No. *No*. She didn’t want to believe it – *still* didn’t want to believe it, not *Othrys*, who laughed with her and promised her he’d keep her safe, who grieved his mother and taught her sister to draw ... She had come here to be proven wrong, she realised. She’d come here to be reassured and find another explanation for the chilling facts.

And instead ...

Instead, even Walford believed it.

Instead, he made it *worse*.

She wanted to fold herself into the darkest corner and bawl like a lost child. Wanted to give in and give up, a helpless

victim for the world to save. But Anne was still here, blissfully ignorant and perhaps in danger as much as Nellie was herself ... so she willed her hands to still. Willed her voice to lower. Sucked in a deep breath and managed to sound calm, almost detached, as she said, 'Then I should leave as soon as possible, shouldn't I?'

That last lifeline. That little key to freedom she'd begun to believe she'd never need ... and look at her now.

'Yes,' Walford said shakily. 'Yes, you should – you and Anne both. I suppose we're lucky it's midsummer day, in a way. No servants around to witness anything while we smuggle you out of the house.'

*Out of the house.*

Out of *her* house.

Why that feeling of heartbreak, if she'd always known this was temporary, a dream that would end the moment she bore him a son? How dare her heart care in the slightest when she'd believed her husband a murderer for years and only a few weeks' folly stood between her and those wiser days?

'Yes,' she said, voice hollow.

'Alright.' He rose again, long limbs fidgety and restless. 'Give me a few hours to arrange matters for you. We'll wait until we're sure no one will come back unexpectedly, and I'll make sure I have a place for you and Anne to stay for a few days. After that ... you should leave the city, probably. Perhaps you could join Uncle Ambrose in Jelen, or whatever Dragon's Bay city he's staying in at the moment?'

'Yes,' Nellie managed again, barely hearing herself. 'Yes, perhaps.'

'Go pack your bags, Lady Locke.' His forced smile was more painful than the lack of it, panic and bewilderment tangible behind that flimsy façade. 'And stay in your rooms in the meantime. The last thing we want is for anyone to find you in this state and ask questions, do you understand?'

'Yes.' It seemed she could no longer say anything else. 'Yes, I'll do that.'

‘Good,’ he said, voice soothing as he sank back into his chair. ‘Be careful, then. I’ll come see you within a few hours.’



SHE DIDN'T DARE GO see Anne – not yet.

So she floundered into her own room instead, shut the door behind her, and collapsed onto the bed, burying her face in the pillow and making desperate attempts not to think. Not to remember.

*I'm poison, Eleanor ...*

Had it been some twisted warning? The six-time murderer, telling her well in advance what he was truly up to?

And she'd ignored it. Had allowed herself to get sucked into the lie by strong hands and a pair of grey cat eyes, by this silly, silly notion of having fun rather than surviving ... and so she'd forgotten the facts, the first rules of her existence. That she should always protect herself. That there was no sense in relying on anyone else in this world – not if they could just as easily abandon you from one day to the next.

No magic. No safety. No fairytales.

No love.

*Especially* no love.

And now ...

Now she'd reduced herself to some heartbroken idiot, hurting like hell over a man who would have hurt her far, far worse. She knew, and *still* she couldn't stop seeing that desolate look in his eyes. Couldn't stop feeling his gentle hands on her skin. Couldn't stop hearing him, most of all – *I'll take care of you, Eleanor.*

Bastard.

She turned onto her back, staring unseeing at the ceiling. The facts. She couldn't get lost in the mire of her feelings

now; she had to stick with the *facts*. No curse. Six deaths. Simple, damning truths, and so ...

So Othrys Locke had to be a murderer.

Why, then, wouldn't her heart accept it? Why was that persistent itch of doubt still gnawing at the back of her mind, as if he hadn't *told* her in so many words what was going on. *I'll never be the victim here ...*

Although that was, admittedly, an odd thing to say.

She blinked as the thought took root – a desperate, nonsensical thought, but a strange one all the same, a little anomaly waiting to be explained. Because if her husband had single-handedly murdered his six previous wives – if he had been the one to drown Jeanne in the marshes, the one to whack Alis on the head in the stables – then shouldn't he be going out of his way to paint himself as a victim, too?

It would be rather stupid, wouldn't it, to call himself a perpetrator to her very face? And whatever Othrys Locke may be, he wasn't stupid.

So then ... why had he said it?

She scrambled upright on the bed as thoughts rushed in, as if that tiny inkling of doubt had been enough to open the floodgates. No curse, six deaths ... but she'd had that discussion with Anne before, hadn't she, back at the Eyestone household? And Anne had cited guard reports. Outcomes of the investigations that had made their way into the hands of every gossiping Elidian – because of course the law had been suspicious about the deaths in Locke Manor, too, and yet the guards had found that the duke had not even been around on the day Rosamund had taken her own life in the attic ...

They might have been wrong, of course.

But what ... what if they hadn't been?

What if, rather than assuming her husband must be a violent killer, she took a moment to consider the wild, disturbing possibility that he may be ... innocent?



Her heart was a pounding drum against her ribs as she swung her legs out of bed and blinked at the clarity of her own uncoiling thoughts. It was hard to even let herself stray this way. *He loved me*, Mother still keened in her memory, broken and delusional ... but divines be damned, Nellie was not Mother, Othrys was not Father, and why, *why* had she immediately assumed that that whole dratted history was doomed to repeat itself?

If Othrys was innocent, then someone else had killed his wives.

Which seemed nonsensical, too. Who in the world would have a motive to do such a dreadful thing? And yet ... was it that much more nonsensical than gentle, dutiful, principled Othrys Locke murdering six innocent women?

The world seemed to slide off-kilter around her – slipping sideways, inside out, in all directions at once.

Who else?

Who had been around the family all this time? Who had been the first to blame the curse for the rising death toll, the last to have seen at least one of the previous ladies alive? Who had tried to get *her* out of the house, too, from the very first day she'd set foot on the doorstep?

But why ...

*You could join Uncle Ambrose.*

And just like that, she understood.

As if in a dream, her legs lifted her from the bed, sent her floating from her bedroom and into the corridor that stretched through the full back wing of the house. There, mere steps away, was the door to the landing. The door that gave access to the stairs, the entry hall, the only way out of the building ...

She wrapped her hand around the doorknob despite knowing with sudden, bottomless certainty what would happen.

Indeed, it didn't turn.

It was midsummer day, there was no other living soul in the house ... and she and Anne had been locked into their rooms,

like prisoners awaiting their sentence.

# CHAPTER FOURTEEN



OTHRYS NEEDED A LONG day of midsummer revelry like he needed another funeral – that was to say, he'd sell his soul to be able to avoid the blasted jollity and merrymaking on this particular day.

He hadn't slept for more than two hours. He'd barely eaten breakfast. How in the world he'd completed his morning rituals without storming into his wife's bedroom to beg her forgiveness, he no longer knew; perhaps it was the knowledge that she needed his regret over their miserable dinner even less than that bloody funeral.

They had a deal, after all. Evenings and nothing else.

And if those sensible restraints felt like unbearable fetters this morning, if the notion of waiting a full twelve hours to see her again filled him with sickening dread, then it was all the more important that he stuck to those blasted rules today.

So midsummer revelry it would have to be. At least the Princes' yearly gathering would keep him out of the house; if he was lucky, it might even temporarily distract him from the mess he'd caused. Not that he'd ever *enjoyed* it, spending the longest day of the year in the palace gardens with fellow nobles, senators, and other citizens of note ... but on the bright side, there would be plenty of drink around, and the divines knew he could do with a few hours of oblivion.

No matter how early he was, others had arrived even earlier, standing in little groups around the low hill on which the palace was built. Othrys forced a smile as he accepted a first glass from a lanky servant girl, pretending not to see the flash of fear in her eyes – he had not expected anything else.

*Poison.*

Except that Eleanor didn't seem to think— But for fuck's sake, he was not going to think about Eleanor today. He was not going to jolt at every blonde head in the crowd. He was not —

'Locke!' a familiar voice bellowed.

Thank the divines.

He would have gladly welcomed an intervention by Cyril himself at this point, and Ilios Tisri was a far better alternative – former boxing champion, current senator, and driving force behind a campaign to improve education for the poor. At least their amiable discussion of recent political developments filled a good fifteen minutes, and at least Tisri tactfully avoided any mention of—

Damn it.

*Why* was he thinking about Eleanor again?

The sun had barely made any progress across the sky by the time his conversation partner announced he was going to look for another drink and Othrys was left alone again between the lanterns and the blooming trees, nursing his own glass as around him the gardens slowly filled up. Henrietta Nightingale, the famous singer, arrived with her two enormous cats in tow. The Viscount Westmoor came in with a giggling

and rather scantily clad beauty on his arm. Lord Waterwar, scion of Elidian's most influential noble family, was accompanied only by his oldest daughter as usual; the youngest was said to be stark mad and rarely left her room.

At the moment, Othrys rather envied the girl.

Time crawled by like thick syrup. He exchanged polite greetings with the Princeps, smiling all the while as if the bastard hadn't been the one to destroy his family. Senators and charitable ladies flocked towards them to vie for donations, and he pledged more money than Walford would approve of. Arragher and his wife arrived, the latter clearly muting her fae charm in the Princeps' company; as usual, she avoided Othrys throughout most of the afternoon, save for a polite but noticeably quick greeting.

When they'd first met, he'd been surprised by her coldness. Soon enough, though, he'd realised it was likely a matter of politics: Cyril would be quick enough to accuse her of conspiring with other fae, after all, and the Mirror Queen's spies were everywhere even during gatherings like these.

Lunch was served. Speeches were given. Othrys stared unseeingly at the face of the High Priest blathering endlessly about the blessings of summer and the gifts bestowed upon humanity by Mother Ostara, unable to think of anything but the face of that same High Priest in an empty temple, binding a small, shaking hand with his.

Where was she now? Celebrating midsummer day at home, or perhaps with friends from the Eyestone household?

Why for the bloody divines' sakes hadn't he asked her about her plans at all?

The day progressed in ever noisier and more raucous manner. No more discussions of business and politics now; the wine flowed in abundance and washed away most of the collective sense with it. Westmoor was now surrounded by no less than *three* eager young ladies. Lady Millicent, the Mirror Queen, had appeared and was smiling encouragingly as inebriated guests waxed on about their most scandalous secrets. Othrys made a detour to avoid an editor of the *Key*

*Gazette* who would no doubt gleefully inquire about the state of his marriage, realising too late that—

‘Othrys!’ A high-pitched wail. ‘What a *delight* to run into you!’

Lady Sobgoblet came staggering towards him, a full glass of wine in her hand, several more clearly already in her stomach. In her glittering green dress, covered in ostrich feathers and diamonds, she resembled a particularly gaudy peacock; her cheeks were painted so red she would have looked feverish even on a theatre stage.

In hindsight, the *Key Gazette* would have been perfectly harmless.

But there was no way out now, not if he didn’t want to make a run for it in full view of the collected Elidian nobility ... so he braced himself and smiled his iciest of smiles instead. ‘Ah, Lavinia. I suppose you’re enjoying the festival?’

She patted his arm, kohl-rimmed eyes squinting to focus on his face. ‘Of course I am, silly. Tell me, where is your wife?’

Oh, for fuck’s sake.

His expression must have revealed too much, because she burst out laughing before he’d opened his mouth, sending the imposing tower of her hair wobbling. ‘Didn’t bring her along, did you? Can’t blame you – the little wench probably eats with her hands and dances like a heathen. Better to keep her away in case she tries to blow her nose into her napkin. Haha!’

She sloshed down another gulp of wine, chuckling smugly all the while. Othrys had to drag in a few deep breaths for calm. You could not punch a marchioness in the face while standing in the Princeps’ own gardens, could you?

‘Much as it may surprise you,’ he said, speaking through gritted teeth and a smile so forced it hurt, ‘her manners are better than those of some nobles I know.’

‘Oh, how *gallant* of you to defend her like that!’ She leaned in closer, swaying slightly on her feet. The smell of wine and nose-clogging perfume washed over him. ‘You should come and join my parties again, though, Othrys. I’m sure we can

find you a nice lady to keep you company – one who *doesn't* bray like a donkey in the sheets. Haha!’

He jerked away from her as if stung by a wasp.

Vaguely, he was still aware of her powdered face, looking just a fraction uncertain now, of the laughter and the music and the clinking of glasses around them. The roar in his ears drowned out all of it. He should just smile and walk off, he knew, keep the high ground and ignore her ... but then there was Eleanor – his lovely, witty, sensible Eleanor – and how dare this bloody shrew assume he would prefer *anyone* over her ...

‘No thank you, Lavinia.’ The words spilled over his lips by themselves. ‘Just because you jumped on everything with a cock when Albion was alive doesn’t mean everyone regards their marriage vows with such contempt, you see?’

She froze, blinking.

Her glass slid from her hands.

He had already turned by the time it shattered on the flagstones, the high-pitched tinkle a perfect match to the ringing in his ears; he barely registered the shocked and curious glances as he stormed off, his blood boiling in his veins. Divines help him, what in the world had come over him? His duty to protect his wife, yes, but it was hardly his duty to turn back around and stuff those ostrich feathers into Lavinia’s throat, like he very much felt like doing ...

He could hear Eleanor’s laughter, echoing in the back of his mind.

What would she say if she were here? That he was being dramatic, probably. Wallowing. And fuck, he *still* shouldn’t be thinking of Eleanor ... but there was the Viscount Westmoor, entangled with his pretty blonde behind a rhododendron bush, and all he could think of were strong, roughened hands clawing into his back. Arragher and his wife, dancing ... fuck, why had he never danced with—

Because he *couldn't*. He shouldn’t *want* to.

And yet ...

It was as if she was standing by his side anyway, arm tucked into his, her warm brown eyes smiling up at him with that unshakable firmness. Arguing with him about Merland's plays, perhaps. Taking every broken shard of his life in her hands and piecing them back together so gently, so ...

Lovingly?

No.

Never love. It couldn't be love, because he was fucking poison and she was a perfect, precious little gem, a beacon of life and beauty and everything comforting in the world, and—

Oh.

Oh *fuck*.

And then he was running after all, damn the watching eyes of the gathered Elidian nobility, because hell take him, there was no denying it any longer ...

And he had to get her out of here.

Before he killed her, too.



# CHAPTER FIFTEEN



BY THE END OF the afternoon, the house was so quiet Nellie heard the turning of the key even from her own room.

Her heart jumped into her throat at the scratching sound, but she forced herself to stay where she stood, to wait and be silent the way Mrs. Radcliffe had trained her to be. No reason to collapse into hysterics – not yet. She needed evidence first.

And she'd talked with Anne. She had a plan.

It did not help the trembling of her knees in the slightest, though, as footsteps padded closer down the corridor and knuckles hit her door with undiminished vigour. Walford's voice, sounding like it always had, yelled, 'Lady Locke?'

Nellie squeezed her eyes shut, sending a last prayer to any divine spirit that might be listening. 'Come in!'

The door swung open.

Walford hurried into the room, then came to a befuddled standstill three steps in – blinking somewhat owlily at the books lying about, at her open, empty trunk by the foot of the bed. The genuine confusion of a man desperate to help ... or so she might have thought.

‘Lady Locke?’ he said again, sounding more unsure now.

She managed a smile. ‘As you can see, I’ve changed my mind.’

‘Changed your— What?’ His eyes narrowed on her. Genuine concern ... but for whom? ‘You don’t mean you do not wish to leave after all, do you, Lady Locke?’

‘That happens to be exactly what I mean,’ she said, nodding at the entrance. ‘Would you close the door, please?’

He did so mechanically, his eyes never straying from her. ‘But—’

‘I would like to confront my husband first,’ she interrupted, trying to keep the frantic pounding of her heart out of her voice. ‘With the city guards present, perhaps. And you, of course. Doesn’t that seem a much better idea to you, to make sure he pays for his crimes?’

‘I— Good gracious, Lady Locke.’ A joyless laugh escaped him. ‘Of course he should pay for his crimes, but that’s hardly a job for a lady, is it? You and Anne ought to come with me to safety, and then *I* will make sure—’

‘No,’ she said.

He stared at her, breath quickening. ‘What?’

‘I said no.’ Her smile could not have been any more brittle. ‘I will stay here and see to the matter myself, Mr. Walford. No need to argue. My decision has been made.’

For a heartbeat and a half, he stood frozen.

Only his expression shifted, and it was then that she knew she’d been right – because that was no longer concern or confusion in his eyes but rather ...

*Panic.*

The look of a cornered animal with only one last means to survive.

‘That is extremely unfortunate, Lady Locke,’ he said, and his high voice cracked a little. ‘I’m afraid I can’t allow any such thing to happen.’

‘No,’ she admitted. ‘I expected you’d say that.’

‘I’m just looking out for your safety, you see,’ he hurriedly added, shuddering hand pointing at the closed door behind him. ‘If you don’t know what’s good for you, I—’

‘And that’s all?’ Nellie interrupted. Her mouth was dry as ashes. ‘You’re not worried, for example, that a confrontation with Othrys may lead to the inevitable conclusion that he is not a murderer after all?’

Walford stiffened.

He stared at her, then slowly lowered his hand and said, shakily, ‘Ah.’

‘He has no idea, does he?’ It felt like taunting a rabid dog, but she had to be sure. She *had* to be sure. ‘That you’re the son of Percival Locke?’

His involuntary twitch forward did not escape her – as if his first reflex had been to grab her by the throat. ‘I don’t know where you got this ridiculous—’

‘Oh, but it all makes sense,’ Nellie reassured him, forcing herself not to back away. ‘Your mother was one of his many mistresses, I suppose? So he couldn’t tell his wife. He couldn’t acknowledge you. But he named you after his father anyway – Peregrine Locke, Peregrine Walford – and as soon as you were old enough, he had you trained as his steward. Pretty decent of him, really, to make sure you’d be provided for.’

A high laugh escaped the man before her. ‘You little—’

‘And I’m guessing,’ Nellie continued, unfazed, ‘that he made arrangements to acknowledge you after he died. Created official documentation, at least, that you were his son. Which of course you’d know, having access to his files. Was that

when you realised you'd have a shot at all of the Locke fortune if you played your cards well?

'You should stop there,' he bit out, jutting a finger at her. 'I was trying to save your *life*, Eleanor. I was trying to—'

'From yourself, yes.' She couldn't suppress a joyless chuckle. 'How gallant.'

He jerked a step forward, breath heaving. 'If you had the faintest idea of what I've *suffered* ...'

'Oh, I suppose it's been a tense couple of years for you,' she said with a scoff. 'Very unhelpful situation. You couldn't just kill Othrys and then act surprised as the news of your parentage surfaced, could you? Because Ambrose is still alive, and you've had no chance of killing *him* since he's off on his faraway travels. So I assume that instead you resolved to bide your time, wait for Ambrose to die before you did away with Othrys, and most importantly, make sure *no other heirs would be born in the meantime*.'

The steward was shaking from head to toe now, his face a ghastly white beneath his freckles. 'I was never planning to kill so many of them! If the stubborn bastard had just stopped marrying, like any sensible man would ...'

A confession.

Through her raging fear, she barely felt the triumph.

'You helped take care of Isaure's wound, I take it?' she added. 'Deliberately bandaged her finger with infected cloth? Pushing Colette down the stairs must have been easy. And you *told* me you were there when Jeanne drowned – they had to drag you out of the marshes too, not because you were trying to help her but because you were the one who held her head under ...'

'I didn't want to!' Walford screeched. 'I *liked* them! I swear I did! But it's my right – it's my *legacy*—'

'And so it never even occurred to you to stop, seeing all the harm you were doing?' She was spitting out words now. 'You just *had* to bash in Alis's head in the stables and make it look like a horse kick? You really had no *choice* but to poison

Blanche while the whole household was down with food poisoning?’

‘Othrys was the one marrying them!’ he protested, half a sob in his voice. ‘He forced my hand! I told him to stop so many times – I *begged* him to stop – and yet—’

‘And yet you overpowered Rosamund and hung her in the attic.’ Nellie pressed her nails into her palms, a desperate attempt not to tremble. ‘Even though she must have trusted you. Even though she must have *liked* you. So how were you planning to end me, if I may ask?’

‘I wasn’t going to kill you!’ His eyes were so wide she could see the white around his irises. ‘You gave me the perfect solution, this morning – I was going to send you and Anne away, and then he’d never be able to marry again without committing bigamy. You would have been safe! I *like* the two of you, Eleanor, I—’

‘But not enough to spare us?’ she sharply interrupted.

He let out a shuddering moan. ‘You’re not leaving me a choice!’

‘Well, bad news for you, then.’ It took every last drop of her courage to scoff. ‘Because while you’ve been standing here, talking and wasting time ... Anne? *Anne!*’

‘What?’ Walford gasped, jerking around.

She didn’t give him time to move, raising her voice even further. ‘Anne, do you see anyone coming yet?’

‘There are guards in the street!’ Her little sister’s voice was crystal clear even through the closed door. ‘They’re marching this way— Oh, and I see Othrys too, Nell!’

‘*What?*’ Walford squeaked, gaze shooting wildly between Nellie and the door.

She grinned at him, inching back – away from him, closer to the dressing room. ‘Turns out you’re not as clever as you thought you were, *Peregrine.*’

For a single moment, he stood paralysed.

Then he dove towards her.

Nellie just managed to hook a foot around his long legs, lunging for the dressing room as he stumbled ... and then his ink-stained hand clamped onto her ankle, and she almost followed him to the floor. A cry was wrenched from her lips. He cursed, hands dragging her back as he came up on his knees, voice strained as he hissed, ‘Shut *up!*’

‘They’re very close now!’ Anne shouted, shrill with tension. ‘They’ll be here in a minute!’

Walford let go of Nellie’s ankle. She kicked, hitting his face, and he roared as he let go. Again she lurched towards that narrow dressing room door with its heavy key, and again he caught her a moment too soon, yanking her back just as her fingertips brushed over the cast iron.

‘Oh no.’ A growled laugh. ‘You’re not locking yourself away from me that easily, you little—’

‘Anne!’ she cried, and then Walford slammed her back-first against the door, panting and cursing.

Her little sister’s footsteps sprinted down the corridor outside. The steward loomed over her, red hair in disarray, face contorted into a desperate grimace – unrecognisable, now, as the kind man who’d joked with her and comforted her in his office before. Nellie tried to shrink away and found his hands on her shoulders wouldn’t let her, his fingers stronger than his lanky limbs suggested.

‘You’ll never get away with this,’ she breathed. ‘If you kill me now ...’

His hands wrapped around her neck.

She tried to gasp for breath and couldn’t, the pressure on her throat relentless and tightening with each passing moment. No. *No.* Her nails scratched his arms, to no avail. Black spots crept up on the edges of her sight as she struggled, knowing she should save her breath but unable to stop fighting as a primal panic took control of her limbs ...

Fuck.

Had she misjudged?

‘I’ll be fine as long as he doesn’t find your corpses,’ Walford snapped through gritted teeth. ‘I’ll tell him the two of you are off for midsummer, and who’ll think of me when they declare you missing?’

*The two of you.*

Fuck. Please, Anne, be quick ...

She let go of his wrists as her vision blurred, running her hands over the door behind her back. Finding painted wood. Hinges. Then, finally, the cold iron of the key—

Something heavy banged against the outer door of her room.

Three swift knocks, like steel-clad fists banging on the wood. And then Anne’s voice, loud and out of breath – ‘She’s inside there, Lord Locke! He’s trying to kill her there!’

Walford’s grip on her throat loosened.

Nellie gulped in a desperate lungful of breath, almost crying with relief. Another impatient ruffle followed, metal on wood. She didn’t dare to flee, didn’t dare to move as her would-be murderer glanced back and forth, visibly hesitating ... and then he stepped away from her, raking his red hair in place with a cramping, shaking hand.

‘Not a word,’ he hissed. ‘If you accuse me of a single thing, I’ll tell them you were trying to seduce me. Want to see who they believe: a steward or a housemaid?’

She didn’t have the air to respond, managing half a nod with her fingertips still clinging to the dressing room key. Walford frantically pulled his sleeves back into place and stumbled to the door, just as a third burst of pounding landed against the wood ...

Nellie tugged the key from its hole.

And then she was after him.

On the tips of her toes, holding her breath ... Past the desk and past her empty trunk. Past her messy bed. Crossing the last

open yards separating her from the man who'd tried to murder her a moment ago ...

Walford yanked open the door.

Then froze, blinking at the threat waiting for him in the corridor. No Othrys. No guards. Instead, all that stood at the threshold of the room ...

Anne, rosy-cheeked and fawn-eyed, a heavy silver candlestick clenched in her trembling fist.

A single moment of stunned paralysis, and Nellie was already moving.

Up swept her arm as she leapt forward, the heavy cast-iron weight lending satisfying heft to the swing. And down, before Walford could recover, before he could turn and realise she was no longer where he'd left her – iron meeting skull in a wet, sickening crack, sending the bastard crumpling to the floor.

She swung again, even while he was still falling.

And again, dropping to her knees beside him.

And again. And again. For Isaure and her drawings, for Colette and her books. Down, down, *down* – she could no longer stop, the sickening squelches blurring in her ears as rage and vengeance took over. For Jeanne and Alis and Blanche and Rosamund, lying cold in their graves. And for Othrys, *always* Othrys, dying over and over again ...

'Eleanor!' a voice bellowed.

She faltered.

The red haze over her eyes lifted.

The clump of red hair and bloodied mush beneath her was barely even recognisable as a head anymore, nothing but a grotesque, misshapen mess. Her hands were covered in blood. So was the key between her fingers, *so* much blood, as if the iron itself had started bleeding ...

'Eleanor?' that same voice said again, more choked now.



It couldn't be him. It couldn't *possibly* be. He was celebrating midsummer day with the other nobles of the city and wouldn't return until hours past midnight, just like every other member of the household ... but she looked up, and divines help her, it *was* Othrys, standing wide-eyed in the doorway. Blue hair ruffled. Tanned cheeks flushed. One arm around Anne, pressing her face into his coat to shield her from the gore and blood, the other pressed over his mouth, as if to smother his own shocked cries.

'What in the world,' he whispered, voice choked, 'have you *done*, Eleanor?'

'Hello, husband,' Nellie said, lowering the bloodied key to the floor. A wild, violent grin curled her lips, as heated as the fury thumping through her veins. 'I broke your curse.'

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN



IT WAS SIX IN the morning. The sun had set and risen again. Outside, the city had gone exhaustedly quiet after even the most determined merrymakers had finally left for their beds; inside Locke Manor, on the other hand, the constant coming and going of guards and other visitors had not slowed for a heartbeat. Doretha had swept in for a few minutes, confirming the absence of curses. Mrs. Radcliffe, thin-lipped and stiff-shouldered, had appeared to vouch for Nellie's sanity and sense. A letter by Sir Percival was found among Walford's private papers, confirming that his former steward was, indeed, his illegitimate son.

And now Nellie was sitting at the kitchen table with Mrs. Hartnell and a cup of warm milk, still shivery despite the balmy night and the blanket an attentive guard had wrapped around her shoulders. Anne had been given a cup of valerian tea and put to bed, but Nellie couldn't bring herself to go to sleep – not yet, not until ...

Othrys.

She rhythmically nodded along with Mrs. Hartnell's agitated rattling, listening for the shreds of his voice she'd caught from elsewhere in the house all night.

He'd barely exchanged a word with her after ushering her away from Walford's corpse and calling in the guards – he'd had plenty to do, she supposed, and yet it stung that he was doing it without her. Even if there was not a single reason she would be involved. Even if she knew their marriage was a simple charade and the truth behind the curse would not have changed anything about it.

Even if it seemed rather likely, really, that he was already kicking himself for getting himself stuck with a housemaid, now that it turned out he could have loved anyone he wanted.

'... should have *seen* it,' Mrs. Hartnell muttered for the seventh time. 'That Locke nose ...'

And then, out of nowhere in the doorway – 'Eleanor?'

She jolted, the chill gone from her bones between one moment and the next.

He was in his shirtsleeves, hair unbound, a thousand emotions warring for preference beneath the veneer of his stony expression. Even now, in the chaos of the night, there was a commanding air to him that he rarely wore so openly – dragging himself from hours of tense revelations with nothing but the safe haven of authority to hold him together.

The tired smile he sent her seemed genuine, though. 'You're still awake?'

'As you see,' she managed, which was not what she wanted to say but all Mrs. Hartnell's presence allowed her to. 'Are the guards—'

'They're looking into reports from their previous investigations.' He gave the housekeeper a quick nod, then turned back to Nellie and added, 'Coming along for a walk? I need to get out of the house.'

She blinked. 'But Anne—'

‘Oh, I’ll take care of Anne,’ Mrs. Hartnell interrupted, fluttering her hands at the door. ‘Don’t worry about it.’

Any other day, she would have worried all the same. Now, with her mind shrouded in exhaustion and the phantom feel of Walford’s fingers still pressing into her throat, she took her last sip of milk, shook off her blanket, and followed her husband into the hallway, feeling oddly naked in her oldest and most comfortable dress.

‘Your Grace?’ a nervous-looking guard stammered by the door. ‘The inspector has decreed no one is to leave the home, Your Grace, until—’

‘My wife was almost *strangled* tonight,’ Othrys sharply cut in, every clipped word impeccably polite and somehow all the more threatening for it, ‘and I’ve barely had the time to bloody ask her how she’s doing. We’ll be back within the hour.’

The guard paled a fraction. ‘But—’

‘Good man,’ Othrys informed him, then yanked open the door, all but shoved Nellie out, and followed before the baffled watchman could get out another word of protest. The door slammed behind his broad back with a most decisive bang. ‘Alright. Let’s walk.’

Nellie wanted to grab his arm for support and just barely managed not to. They were not a *couple*, she reminded herself once again. Just collaborators, and unnecessary ones at that. ‘Won’t you get in trouble for—’

‘Doubt it,’ he muttered, making for the east end of the street with brisk steps. ‘Inspector Hane knows damn well he failed to recognise six murders in a row, and at the moment, I’m not above making a point of it if he annoys me. Which he knows, too. I told him the moment he threatened to take you in for questioning.’

She had to trot after him to keep up. ‘He was going to *arrest* —’

‘He was absolutely not,’ he growled, eyes narrowing. ‘You’re still my bloody wife.’

Her gut clenched. As if there was still any meaning to that title ... but this was Othrys Locke, principled and dutiful, and of *course* he would continue to honour this meaningless marriage even if it was the last thing in the world he wanted.

Somehow that was even worse than the thought of losing him.

They walked in silence through the deserted streets, side by side but never touching – past the domed Senate hall, then across the Hay Canal, which separated the rich centre from the poorer neighbourhood at the east flank of the city. Flower garlands lay trampled on the cobblestones. The smell of beer and woodsmoke hung heavy in the air. In these early, exhausted hours, no one was around to see them – which was for the best, really. A duchess in a housemaid's dress and a duke in shirtsleeves ... the gossip would spread like marsh mud.

Although that would presumably happen anyway, the moment the world woke up and heard what had transpired in Locke Manor the previous day.

Walford's fingers were still there, squeezing the air from her lungs.

'So,' Othrys finally broke the otherworldly silence – having noticed her moment of trepidation, perhaps. '*Are you alright?*'

Spoken like the dutiful husband. She forced up the corners of her lips and managed, 'Mostly.'

'Hmm,' he said, voice low, and then he was quiet again.

They had reached the easternmost parts of Elidian now. For a moment, Nellie thought he was headed towards the cemetery, but he changed course at the last minute, aiming instead for the small public park surrounding the towering flour mill by the city's dykes. The smouldering ashes of a bonfire were all that remained of last night's celebration; the citizens had all left, a line of linden trees separating their small, sagging houses from this stretch of grass.

It was as they climbed the outer dyke, hands unceremoniously grasping at clumps of grass, that Othrys

cleared his throat and added, 'I'm aware that murderous cousins are ... not the sort of danger you agreed to when you married me. I'm sorry.'

A huffed laugh escaped her even as her heart constricted again. 'That doesn't seem something *you* ought to apologise for, does it?'

'Perhaps.' Predictably, he seemed unconvinced.

Nellie clambered up the last few feet, then stood on top of the dyke, squinting at the endless marshland stretching out before them. On either side of them, a few dozen yards away, mills turned their slow rounds in the summer breeze, pumping the water from the city. To the north, so distant that they were nothing but hazy grey outlines, the mountains of Faerie rose above the horizon.

She kept her gaze trained on the landscape. It was much, much easier than looking at the man standing by her side, close enough to reach out and touch her, yet keeping his hands pointedly to himself.

'If you no longer want to stay around after this mess, I can't say I wouldn't understand,' he flatly continued. 'We ... well, I'm sure we could arrange something.'

And there it was.

Mere hours after the truth had come to light, and he'd already drawn his conclusions – why keep her here, now that she was no longer a necessity, and likely more of a burden than even she realised?

'It wouldn't be that dangerous to stay, would it?' she blurted, her voice higher than usual. 'It seems unlikely more murderous cousins of yours will jump out of the woodwork anytime soon.'

'He tried to *strangle* you.' A crack of fury broke through the levelness. 'If you never want to see that damned house again —'

'I promised you an heir.' Too quick. Too breathless. 'Don't want to leave that unfinished. So I'll just stay around until ... until ...'

*Until you have no more use for me. Until I have no reason left to stay.* A few months. A few years, perhaps.

It would end, of course ... but at least she'd have him for that time.

He sucked in an endless breath beside her. 'I suppose ... I mean, if you're very sure ...'

It was his reluctance that broke her, that cramped, half-hearted excuse for an agreement; she burst without warning, words gushing over her lips like water breaking free. 'Bloody divines, Othrys, I'm so very sorry that you got stuck with me like this, and if you just want me to go, just tell me and I promise I'll—'

She saw him whip around on the edge of her sight. 'Wait, Eleanor? What—'

'—just go and leave you alone,' she barrelled on, unable to stop now that she'd started, 'and then I can pretend to have died from the Issian pox in two years and you'll be free to—'

'*Eleanor.*' His duke's voice. 'Where in the world did you get the idea that I'd want you to—'

'You never wanted to marry me in the first place! You married me *because* you didn't want to!' Sweet divines – this was even crueller than quiet agreement, having to spell out the obvious to a man who really should know better than to play the fool to her. 'And now it turns out that it never mattered a damn how much you didn't want it! So is it *that* odd for me to conclude ...'

He cursed.

And then his hand wrapped around her jaw, warm and large and strong – too intimate a touch to resist as he turned her head. He was agonisingly close, suddenly. Shoulders tense, lips tight. The slits of his pupils had widened farther than she'd ever seen them before, dark chasms of an emotion she couldn't name.

'You're the only good thing to have come from all of this, Eleanor.' He bit out the words, an almost desperate hurry to

speak them. ‘If I console myself with *anything*, it’s that at least I got to meet you, thanks to—’

‘What?’ she stammered.

‘—this fucking mess.’ His fingers squeezed tighter, then let go; he stepped back in the grass, breathing heavily, making visible attempts to loosen his shoulders. ‘But don’t you dare let that stop you from doing what is best for you. I promised you freedom. So if you want to leave ...’

She stared at him in the frantic silence, her heart pounding like the thumping printing presses. *Wanting* to leave?

*Her?*

But that ... that wasn’t the point at all, was it?

‘Don’t *you* want me to go?’ She almost whispered it, the words no louder than the rustling breeze brushing through the marshland, the linden trees. ‘I thought ...’

He briefly closed his eyes. ‘I’m not the one who nearly got killed, Eleanor. My wishes are hardly the relevant ones here.’

‘I can’t agree with that if I don’t even know what they are, can I?’ she managed. ‘So why don’t you just tell me, rather than operating on nothing but assumptions about my opinions?’

His jaw twitched.

Divines help her, he was so senselessly beautiful like this, mussed up and vulnerable, his storm cloud eyes clinging to hers with frenzied intensity ... as if he’d blink and she’d be gone. As if he’d wilt and die for lack of her.

Duty and principle. Only now did the alternative explanation sprout in her mind, far too good to be true yet impossible to shake – that maybe keeping her here was not the obligation he dreaded so deeply.

Rather ...

But that couldn’t be, could it?

‘Othrys?’ she breathed.



‘If the choice was mine alone,’ he said hoarsely, lips twitching around the words, ‘which, to be very clear, I don’t expect it to be, then you ... you would stay.’

Her heart thudded. ‘Until we had a child?’

‘No.’ He swallowed, throat bobbing. ‘Forever.’

Like in the fairytales.

She forgot to breathe.

Like the lies, some last part of her thundering heart tried to remind her. Like empty promises and senseless dreams. But *he* was the one who’d spoken the word, the man who’d never broken even a single promise to her, and divines help her, that look in his eyes ...

‘So ...’ Her mouth was dry as dust. ‘So what if I wouldn’t mind that at all?’

He blinked. ‘You wouldn’t— Hell, Eleanor, I know you’re not terribly practiced at enjoying life, but let’s raise that bar a *little*, shall we?’

A breathless laugh wobbled past her lips. ‘What if it would make me very happy, then?’

‘Are you serious?’ Almost a snarl, and yet this was not his old, emotionless sharpness. Instead, a ragged, fraying one, a bruised heart on the edge of breaking. ‘If you’re merely trying to spare my feelings ...’

‘*What* feelings?’ she burst out, voice cracking. ‘You’re not making sense! How am I supposed to spare things I barely even know to—’

A single step and he’d crossed the distance between them, his arm slipping around her waist as if it belonged there, pressing her against his tall body with a finality she felt in her bones. ‘Do you know why I came back early from that cursed party, Eleanor?’ His voice was rough. ‘Because I couldn’t for the life of me stop thinking about you. Because I almost punched a marchioness in the face for joking about our marriage. Because I finally realised I’d fallen madly,

senselessly in love with you, and I wanted to make sure you got the hell out of here before I could kill you, too.’

Fairytales.

*Fairytales.*

But there was no stopping the mad, hopeful fluttering of her heart, like a bird caught in a cage too small for its wings; there was no stopping the warmth spreading through her chest like a summer sunrise. His touch didn’t leave room for doubt, for disbelief, for pragmatic scepticism. The pressure of his arm was a promise in itself – an unyielding declaration.

*Mine*, it said, and it felt like truth.

‘But ...’ she stuttered against his chest, the world turning on its axis around her. ‘But I’m a bloody *housemaid*! I don’t know anything! I don’t have any manners! People will laugh about me and laugh about you and—’

‘They can all go to hell,’ he interrupted brusquely, lowering his face to the crown of her head. ‘If the fools can’t recognise a treasure when they see one, it’s us who should be mocking them. I don’t care, Eleanor. You’re brave and brilliant and far kinder than I deserve. You’re all the sense I lack. You’re a balm on my wounds. Don’t you dare tell yourself you’re not enough for me – you’re a lavish abundance.’

She could no longer speak.

She only just managed to lift her head and meet his gaze, his grey eyes mere inches away from hers. In the golden sunlight, his otherworldly beautiful face was softer than she’d ever seen it before – no more ice, no more marble masks, as if the summer sun had finally melted away the last of his defences.

‘I’m afraid I went about my first proposal all wrong,’ he muttered, a self-deprecating quirk of his lips a glimpse of the shields she knew. ‘So if you’ll allow me ...’

His arm loosened around her waist.

He sank into the grass before her.

‘Othrys,’ she said breathlessly. ‘Othrys, there’s no need for —’

‘Oh, but there is.’ He took her calloused hand in his, bringing it to his lips. ‘Eleanor Finch, you have saved me, freed me, and utterly bewitched me. And I’m afraid I’ll be a bit of a mess while I come to terms with all that’s happened, I’ll probably wallow and whine and make a fuss of absolutely everything, but if you’ll have me nonetheless ...’ His fingers tightened around hers. ‘I’ll be entirely, gratefully yours.’

One did not say no to a duke.

Which was for the best, really – it was the last thing in the world Nellie wanted to say anyway.

‘I ...’ She faltered, overcome by too many contrasting reflexes at once – laughing, gasping, unladylike crying. ‘Good gracious, Othrys, I’ve never even *kissed* you.’

He was already standing.

One large hand cupped her cheek. The other hooked around her nape. She had a single thought of *wait* and *not here* and *what if they see us*, and then his lips were on hers, fierce and tender at once, and damn it all, if anyone came ambling by, they might as well enjoy the show ...

Because he felt like a dream.

He felt *better* than a dream.

She knotted her fingers into his hair. Came up on her toes and met him instinctively, melting into a touch that was familiar and new at once – a body she knew, but unrestrained now, unguarded, and so sweetly, beautifully alive ...

Hers.

*Forever.*

And she knew then, as his lips promised her again and again, that magic did exist.

THE END



Thank you for reading *BRIDE OF THE FAE DUKE*! If you'd like to read more in this world, then check out my Beauty and the Beast retelling [\*CURSE OF THE THORN KING\*](#), the first full book in my Wayfarer Fae series.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



LISETTE MARSHALL IS A fantasy romance author, language nerd and cartography enthusiast. Having grown up on a steady diet of epic fantasy, regency romance and cosy mysteries, she now writes steamy, swoony stories with a generous sprinkle of murder.

Lisette lives in the Netherlands (yes, below sea level) with her boyfriend and the few house plants that miraculously survive her highly irregular watering regime. When she's not reading or writing, she can usually be found drawing fantasy maps, baking and eating too many chocolate cookies, or geeking out over Ancient Greek.

Sign up for her [newsletter](#) for exclusive content, or follow [@authorlisettemarshall](#) on Instagram if you like character art, behind the scenes updates, and other bookish news.



## **ALSO BY THE AUTHOR**

[FAE ISLES](#) (COMPLETED SERIES)

[THE QUEEN & THE ASSASSIN](#) (COMPLETED  
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# THE WILLOW TRAIL



MAY SAGE



# BLURB



FAE-TOUCHED KEIRA HAS ALWAYS seen the folk. For eighteen years, she's managed to avoid attracting their attention, until one encounter in the woods.

Thrust into the nightmarish realm of the fae, she has to forge herself into someone else to survive.

Calreth represents everything she should fear. The lord of the Hunt is the worst kind of monster, as terrifying as he's devastatingly beautiful. Asking his favor constantly puts Keira in the worst kind of danger—from the fae, from the folk, and most horrifying of all, from Cal himself—but he promised to help her get home.

Although the person she's becoming may not fit in the mortal world. Her very blood craves the fae realm. A land of perils, schemes, and deception, where she may never belong.

An enticing, dark world, with magic spells, romance, and betrayal...

# CHAPTER ONE



TO GET TO LIVE, I have to die a little more each day.

I don't know the name of the boy. I never bothered to ask. All that matters is that he belongs to this world. He's human. His kisses soothe the deep ache thundering inside me. I could drown in them. In him. For a moment, I love and hate him all at once.

I let him pull me deeper into the shadows of the library and press me against the wall.

"You're so beautiful." His voice is hoarse, rough. He surely believes that's due to his growing need for me. I know better.

I'm sucking the life right out of him. Just a little kiss. Just a little bit of life. If he persists in trying to shove his hand down my pants, it will be a lot more. Fortunately for him, he has trouble unbuckling my belt.

Someone clears their throat behind us. I grin, taking in the girl glaring at us, arms crossed on her chest. Five foot six, strawberry-blonde hair falling in waves around her shoulders, small breasts, and curvy hips. She's my opposite, although we're almost identical.

Clary wears a cheer uniform—a red and white crop top with a pleated skirt that flirts with the hem of her shorts, revealing plenty of skin. I'm in black from head to toe. Boots, jeans, a tank top, and my favorite leather jacket.

“Already?” Her eyes are fixed on the boy still plastered all over me. “Can't you wait one day before spreading your legs?”

She's disgusted with me.

We used to be closer than anything as children, until things changed. Until I changed.

She stayed on the path paved by our type-A parents. I started to see things that may not be there, and want things no kid should want.

Then, I began to need them.

My skin burns, my insides are ice and daggers, my head is all but ready to explode at all times, except when I'm touching boys. And girls. I kissed a girl or two, and definitely liked it.

My sister thinks I'm a slut. I know I'm something much worse.

She blames me for the move. She thinks my stalkers finally forced our parents to leave LA. The truth is, they're both professors. We've moved seven times in eighteen years. We would have moved regardless of my antics.

Besides, it's not like I ask boys to follow me around like lost puppies. We use each other for a little while, and when they ask for more, I pull the brakes. It's not my fault some of them can't take no for an answer.

“See?” I point downward. “My legs are closed. And covered, you'll notice.”

She rolls her eyes. “Whatever. Mom sent me a text. She wants us back as soon as I’m done with practice.”

She tells me because I don’t have a phone. I’ve never seen the appeal. In fact, I have a marked distaste for most technology. I don’t even like cars, hence why I wait around until she’s done with practice. Our new house isn’t more than a couple of miles away from Willow Prep, so I could have walked, but there are much better things to occupy myself with.

I push against the boy’s chest. At first, he doesn’t budge, but after I raise my brow, he takes a step back, then another.

“Thanks. Until next time, then.”

There won’t be a next time. He might be cute enough—athletic, well dressed—but his technique leaves a lot to be desired, and I didn’t appreciate the unprompted wandering hands. I join my sister and send him a wink over my shoulder before falling into step with her. He doesn’t need to know I’m not up for a redo. I’m not entirely unfeeling, and he gave me no reason to wound his pride.

We walk in silence to the parking lot. Clary applies apple balm to her lips, and without a word, she hands me the little pot. I dab my finger in it and moisten my dry lips.

She may not like me very much, but she loves me still.

Her car is one of the last still in the lot at five o’clock. It stands out like a sore thumb. It’s all about grayish ecofriendly cars or four-wheelers here in Oregon. Like any LA princess, she drives a convertible—a bubblegum-blue BMW our grandparents gave us both for our sweet sixteenth.

And yes, they knew I don’t drive. Clary offered to drive me anywhere, feeling guilty that they’d passed me over in all but name.

I can’t envy her—or blame them, either. I’m not the grandchild I should be. They did everything in their power to raise their daughter well, and then they spoiled us, like any grandparents should. I remember nights staying up late to watch movies and eat too much candy at their ranch. They

keep horses. One pony is named after me, and I own their best thoroughbred.

Edith and Gerald Ross deserve the perfect granddaughters. And they got it in Clary. Life shortchanged them when it comes to me.

“What do you think it’s about?” She fires up her engine and I wrinkle my nose in distaste. Even the sound of it irritates me. “Mom wanting us back early.”

It’s unusual, to say the least. Our parents have a tolerant policy when it comes to our education. They’re too busy shaping the minds of college students to worry overmuch about their own progeny. So long as we keep a spotless 4.0 and avoid getting pregnant, they’re happy to let us do as we please.

I shrug. “Maybe she cooked?”

Clary shudders, appropriately horrified. “Lord, please no.”

We exchange a knowing glance, my smile echoed on her lips. For a moment, we are twins again.

It’s a miracle we’ve lived so long, given that neither of our parents are capable of cooking pasta without causing a major fire hazard in the process. We were eight when we taught ourselves to cook. Clary’s best at baking. She has the patience.

“Keira, can I ask you for a favor?”

Her voice has changed, and she doesn’t meet my eyes, even fleetingly. Her grip around the steering wheel whitens her knuckles.

*No.*

The real answer is no, she can’t.

Whatever she has to ask me, it’s serious, and I don’t do serious.

“Shoot.” I’m noncommittal as ever.

“Can you...be discreet this year?”

I gape at her, surprised.

“I mean, I know you like to play around. You always have.”

“A gross exaggeration. I distinctly recall boys had cooties in third grade.”

Jokes aren't helping this time. She's still dead serious. “Yeah, well, you've had boys drooling at your feet for years. I get it. But I'm your twin sister. You don't know how things are for me. The boys who want to score both twins. The girls who call *me* a slut.” That's ridiculous. She's had all of two boyfriends, and I don't think she let either of them go past second base. “It's our senior year. Mom and Dad tore us from all our friends, and we—*I*—have to start over. I don't want to have to fight your shadow on top of everything else.”

I silently fume. I want the names of everyone who badmouthed her. I'll make them suffer, and I'll enjoy it.

Whatever I am, Clary's got nothing to do with it. It skipped her. It always skips every child in the family, except for one.

Except for me.

In our parents' generation, it's Aunt Julia, our father's youngest sister. I was twelve when she took me aside, after seeing me staring into the backyard, seeing something I knew no one else could see.

She told me of our heritage. Our curse.

She's left us now. Everyone else assumes she's missing, or dead.

I know she's crossed into fae land.

I lift a pinkie and hook it around my sister's.

It's the first time she's asked something of me in years, and I'll do it. I have to do it. Having me for a sister is difficult enough without my reputation staining hers.

“I'll be discreet. Promise.”

Even if it kills me.

## CHAPTER TWO



FAE-TOUCHED. THAT'S WHAT THEY call what I am. In the old days, they believed tiny, mischievous faeries whispered in the ears of boys and girls until they were driven to madness. Aunt Julia tells me the fae are neither tiny nor mischievous. They're evil, cruel, and twisted.

The things I see in the shadows are pixies and gnomes, pucks, sprites, and imps. They're the little folk. The actual fae are taller than any man, and strikingly, maddeningly beautiful. None of them ever cross to our world if it can be helped. The pollution, the technology, the iron hurts them, ten times more than they irritate me.

When Julia first told me all that, I thought she must have been joking, spinning some fanciful tale. I even suspected Clary had put her up to it. But I couldn't deny I saw them—the little folk—when no one else did.

Later, I felt the itch burning my skin. The need growing in me. And something else. The desire to do wicked, wicked things. To hurt those who have wronged me. Sometimes, to hurt just because it's fun.

I was fifteen when I took her advice and stole a kiss. It was the first time I knew peace in years.

Julia told me that we fae-touched are made for the world of the folk, not ours. There's a fae somewhere in our lineage, and he or she shared her curses with us. One per generation, in the Woodspire line.

Clary parks in front of the handsome three-story house our father purchased. It's an old home, right at the edge of the woods. Our parents work on it every weekend. They intend to redo it, and flip it for profit the next time they move.

I expected to see little folk here. They avoid towns, cities, crowded places. This area seems to be exactly to their taste. Yet since we moved three weeks ago, I've not seen one.

Maybe the fae don't like Oregon.

We've just gone in when we hear the shouts from upstairs.

"Clary, Keira! Up here!"

We follow our mother's screeches to the top floor—the messiest, and therefore, the one I've claimed for my own. My room is a little damp, and its flooring squeaks in places, but I like it more than any other I've ever lived in.

Our mother is in my bathroom, hunched over the rusty cast-iron tub I never use.

"Oh my—"

Clary is horrified. I can barely keep myself from laughing.

Pietra Woodspire's hair is bundled atop her scalp in a messy bun. Gone are the neat, careful blonde waves. It's dyed bright red.

"Mom!"

I inch toward the sink, then wince. "You used my hair stuff?"



Mom sighs. “I couldn’t wait any longer. Twenty years. I’ve had my hair done the same way for twenty years. No more. I am *not* boring. I refuse to be.”

Neither I nor my sister need to ask what happened. A student made a snide remark.

Still beautiful at forty-four, our mother thrives on love and compliments. The slightest critique troubles her for weeks, and often launches her into spontaneous choices such as this. Dyeing her hair. With my cheap products.

I don’t keep my hair the same color for more than a couple of weeks at a time—I don’t buy the best products. She should have known better.

“It’s going to look awesome,” I profess, rummaging through my cupboard until I find what I’m looking for: another box of red dye. “Clary, can you go get some plastic gloves from the kitchen? I’m just going to make sure it’s even at the back.”

Glad to be given a task, she rushes downstairs, leaving me to inspect the damage.

All in all, she didn’t do too badly, though it’ll be a far cry from her usual five-hundred-buck hair appointments.

I carefully section her hair in eight parts, and when Clary comes back with the gloves, I slather it with the second box of dye. I wash it, and Clary blow dries it artfully.

I grin at the result.

Our mother always looked young, but she managed to shed at least a decade with this color. Her eyes brighten when she looks at herself in the mirror, and she hugs us both.

“I can’t wait to show Robert! Where’s my phone?” As soon as she finds it in her pocket, she calls our dad. “Rob! What time will you be back? You’re taking me out. Yes. Tonight. Absolutely.”

She rushes downstairs, to find something to wear, no doubt.

I watch her leave. She’s young at heart, free-spirited. Our father is a little more contained, like Clary. I wonder if he chose her because he recognized something familiar in her

happy, ditzzy disposition. Something a little like Julia's weirdness. I wonder if Clary will choose someone like me.

I dismiss the thought. My sister is going to find a perfectly boring husband someday. A lawyer, or an accountant, maybe. She craves normalcy. A house where she won't have to cook for her parents. A sister she can understand.

"I'll cook tonight," I offer.

She turns to me. We alternate days for that chore, but I cooked yesterday, too. It's her turn.

"We don't have homework yet, but I bet you want to practice cheerleading or something."

I don't pretend to know anything at all about cheering.

"Thank you," she says, still unsure, as though she expects a trick.

She has reasons to be cautious. My favors have always been bargains. Sooner or later, I collect, with anyone else.

I like to think I can perform a task for my twin sister just because I want to. I'm not sure that's entirely true.

Downstairs, I tie my ink-black waves into a high ponytail, turn my dad's old gramophone on, wash my hands, and get started. We went shopping yesterday, so I can cook whatever I'd like. I pick ground beef, because the expiration date is sooner than anything else, and chop onions, sweating them, before I decide whether it'll be lasagna or chili. I throw a generous helping of cumin, paprika, and chili powder in the pan. Chili con carne it is.

I'm chopping oregano when my eyes lift away from the board, drawn to the window above the quartz countertop.

Our yard stretches right to the edge of the woods. Dad loves hiking on weekends—he hasn't had a chance yet, with the house renovation. He told me these woods stretch for miles and miles, providing the perfect trail for someone like him. But it's raining now. I doubt many people would want to hike at six o'clock on a Tuesday evening under a rainy Oregon sky.

Yet I see someone right there, in the shadows of the trees.

He isn't dressed for hiking. He isn't dressed for anything I can think of. His long, high-collared coat. It looks dark, perhaps forest green or navy. The way the fabric sways in the wind suggests it may not be suitable for the weather; too flimsy in this wind and rain. Under it, he wears pitch black.

I have the urge to go hand him an umbrella. Or a cup of tea. Or nothing at all. I could talk to him. Ask if he wants to come in. Invite him in for a taste of chili. Perhaps even a taste of something else.

But no. Despite the distance, I know he's nothing like the boys I play with. He's not a boy at all, and for all my sins, I've never been one to chase men. The one or two who caught my eye give me a different look, one I don't like. Teenagers might wish to get in my pants, but they don't take it for granted. I prefer the male sex young and manageable.

I can tell the stranger in the rain isn't manageable.

And yet, my eyes stay glued to him.

*Come, come, come closer.*

*Run, run, run away.*

I can't decide between one impulse and the next, so I simply remain where I stand.

"Your onions are getting past caramelized, sis."

I'm shocked to see Clary standing right beside me. She's never managed to sneak up on me before. I always hear her.

I note that on the gramophone, Rachmaninoff has given away to Chopin's first nocturne, one of my favorite songs. When that happened, I have no idea. For a brief moment, everything in my world faded.

Everything but him.

Clary sniffs the air. "Chili. It's been too long."

I don't attempt a reply. I'm looking out the window, scanning the yard and forest through the rain.

But the man in the dark coat has disappeared.

My heart rages in the cavity of my chest, racing in fear. A fear I can't explain—at least out loud. I thank Clary, toss the herbs in the pan, and add water, acting as though everything is just fine.

As though I haven't seen my first fae.

## CHAPTER THREE



I SLEEP WONDERFULLY, DREAMING of wicked things that leave me soaked with sweat and tears come morning. I see the fae in my dream, imagining a face worthy of any tale. When I wake, I don't remember a thing about the dream, but I know he starred in it.

For the first time in years, I'm the first to rise. The house is still and silent on every level. Downstairs, on the mahogany grandfather clock that came with the house, I read the time. Five.

*Five.*

I've always been a night owl. When I'm conscious at this time, it's generally because I haven't gone to bed yet.

I know going back to sleep would be a pointless endeavor. I've never been more awake.

To occupy myself, I start to cook breakfast. We only bother with a proper sit-down meal on weekends, normally, but there isn't much else to do right now.

A small feast rests under glass and steel cloches—fluffy pancakes, bacon, scrambled eggs, all crowned by our grandmother's gravy and biscuits. One glance back at the clock in the hallway, and I groan. It's not even six. What am I supposed to do with my time now?

I wish I could read a book, but my mind is restless. I know it's not likely to allow me to sit still.

On an impulse, I opt to head outside, changing my white slippers for a pair of sneakers. I'm wearing checkered PJ shorts and a white tank top. It's too cold for my getup, but I choose to forgo a coat. I'll warm up soon enough.

I set out across the lawn, to the woods, moving at a brisk jog.

My muscles immediately protest against the unfamiliar exercise. It's been a while since I've run. Back in middle school, I used to be part of the track team, but I've since given up on anything even resembling team spirit. My father insists that I keep at least one extracurricular activity, "for my future". I've chosen chess.

I've vaguely thought about running through the woods, simply because they're right there at our doorstep, and pretty enough, but I don't think I'd truly meant to do it. Now, with my lungs burning, my shins weighing five tons each, it's a matter of pride. I haven't even cleared a quarter of a mile. As a kid, I used to be able to run four or five without straining. *I feel like I'm dying!*

My ears ring, and my breathing gets so uneven, I have to stop. I bend forward, holding my knees. Damn. I'm going to start working out. What if a murderer was running after me? I wouldn't last five minutes.

I calm down enough to start appreciating the view again. Sometime in the last quarter of an hour, dawn rose in the

horizon. The sky is all shades of blood and water over the line of trees surrounding me.

To my surprise, I have to admit I like it here. It's peaceful. Quiet.

And I haven't felt any itch, any pain.

Not since I left the house.

Not since I woke up, actually.

I'm fine.

I haven't been fine for such a long time, it's a little odd to me. Fine feels uncomfortable on my skin.

Then I see it, right in front of me, almost close enough to touch my nose. A little folk of some variety. Three feet tall and purple-skinned, creased like that of an elephant, and covered with a soft layer of white fur. It's fluffy enough to be cute, although I don't think I've ever seen a face so grisly. Its droopy, beady eyes are surrounded by a million wrinkles, and it has no nose—just two slits, farther apart than that of a snake. It licks its lipless mouth with a long, serpentine green tongue that looks slimy.

I lift my torso abruptly, eager to keep my face far, far away from it.

"Sorry," I say impulsively, like the well-bred girl I'm not.

I freeze, the realization dawning on me.

It's the first word I've ever said to one of *them*, and with good reason.

The folk of this world glamour themselves to be invisible to mortals like me when they roam our world. Animals see them, or at least sense their presence, hence why cats and dogs sometimes stop dead in their tracks, staring at what seems to be nothing. Humans cannot see them, and therefore, I act like I don't.

There's safety in feigning ignorance. I'm just another girl, if I'm not aware of them. I can't see them? They don't bother to see me.

Aunt Julia told me that from the moment she started to interact with the folk, her life took a turn for the worse. They started to tease her, play with her, to catch her attention or ask for favors.

In my childhood, I think I used to wave at them, but they don't pay attention to little boys and girls. Most children can see the folk, until they grow to believe there's no such thing as fairy tales.

I've been so, so very good, for years and years.

And now, I've spoken.

To my surprise, as I stare at the creature with dismay and fear, it stares back, and it's terrified.

What could the likes of him have to fear from me? I'm one hundred and fifteen pounds, soaking wet. I took self-defense lessons, but I'm aware I'm lacking in the threatening department.

The strange thing doesn't agree. It's shivering from head to toes. "I beg your pardon, my lady. My *queen!*" it squeaks, bending at the waist, so low it's shoving its face on the muddy ground.

By then, it's quite clear that this is a case of mistaken identity. In a split second, I decide to ensure the creature keeps mistaking me for whoever he thinks I might be.

Did he say queen?

I don't have much to work with, but I stand upright, throwing my shoulders back and lifting my chin in what I imagine is a queenly way. I'm ridiculous, sweating, out of breath, and imitating Lady Di.

"You're pardoned. Now, go, I need my privacy."

There. Not too bad, right?

The little folk pops its head up, suspicion written in his puckered, leathery skin.

Dammit. I gave myself away, somehow.



“If I may, why is Her Majesty so far from the bright lands, and at such a time as this! Should they find you here, on unseelie soil—”

The words make little sense to me. I think back to Julia’s tales, trying to decipher its meaning, so that I might give a convincing answer.

I settle on sticking to my guns. I am queen. He’s...whatever he is. I doubt he can be very far up on the food chain. “Tell me, since when do I have to justify myself to you, exactly?” There’s a threatening edge to my words.

At first, it works. The little folk is trembling and shivering, reacquainting its face with the moss.

Then I hear a low, rumbling laugh, followed by a pointed slow clap. I turn to the sound, and freeze.

He stands feet from me, leaning on a black oak tree. The man from yesterday, still in black under the coat. Now that he’s ten feet away, I can tell it’s forest-green leather, stitched with gold embellishments. Trees and leaves, birds and hearts, follow the edges of the garment.

I concentrate on it, studying it in great detail, if only to avoid looking at him directly. I’ve had a glance. It’s enough. Enough to realize my terrible, terrible mistake.

I should have locked myself in yesterday. I should have convinced my family to pack up their bags and move far, far away.

*Run, run, run away.*

I don’t. I don’t move at all. As much as I want to flee, I obviously suck at running. Besides, I can tell. He’ll enjoy the chase.

The fae is the most beautiful thing I’ve ever beheld. There’s no need for any posturing on his part. I itch to kneel. To bare my throat to him, like a spineless bitch.

*Come, come, come closer.*

His dark eyes whisper promises of pain and pleasure, wordlessly beckoning me, but it is his mouth I fear. His

playful, full, bloodred lips have no business on the face of a man. I note the delicately curved point to his ears, poking out under his waves of black curls.

Screw it. I need to go, and I do just that, willing myself to ignore both of the folk as I storm past them, sprinting in the direction of my home.

At least, I hope it's the right direction. Suddenly, I'm not sure at all.

A laugh follows me. I don't stop, concentrating on one single goal. Getting back home alive. And whole.

Part of me wishes I were religious. I could pray right now, if I knew how. I could swear to be good. I could swear to be a better person, a better daughter and sister, so long as a higher power intervened, ensuring I got home in one piece.

Please, please, please.

One moment, there's nothing but the muddy ground in front of me. The next, a root lashes like a whip, curling under my foot. I see the ground approach, and wince in anticipation. At my speed, the fall is going to hurt.

I close my eyes, willing reality away, but the pain never comes.

Instead, I feel something much worse.

Warm, soft hands holding my middle. The scent of wood, blood, musk, and ashes hits my nostrils. I open my eyes to see the fae right under me, lying on the ground, his elaborate coat stained with mud and moss. He doesn't seem to mind at all. He's smiling as though he couldn't be more pleased.

*Run, run, run away.*

I don't. I know it's far too late for that.

## CHAPTER FOUR



“THERE, THERE, LITTLE LAMB. It wouldn’t do to hurt your pretty face, now would it?”

I wish his voice wasn’t so sweet. I wish I didn’t want to hear, smell, and feel more of him. I know it has nothing to do with me. Enchanting others is simply the fae’s nature.

Recalling my aunt’s advice, I bite my bottom lip, as hard as I can.

To my surprise, the fae laughs.

“No need for all that. Besides, I’ll have you know some of us do enjoy a little bit of blood with our pleasure.”

I let go of my lip, suitably stricken. Aunt Julia said that salt is one of the things I can use to repel the folk. If absolutely necessary, human blood does have enough salt to keep one at bay for a moment or two.

She said that when they're of a mind to eat one of us, they have to cut us up, cook us down, and season us with honey and berries, till we're a thick stew without much salt left to it.

I will this thought away. I will every terrifying tale of the folk right out of my mind.

Except for one. I'd been terrified when she told me about the stew, but then she said something else. "Don't fear, Keira. That only happens to regular mortals. The folk don't eat us fae-touched. They have other uses for us."

"What uses?" I'd asked. She only chuckled.

Half reassuring, half alarming, like all fairy tales.

I pull back and get up, ignoring the growing pain in my left ankle, where the root lashed at me. I hope nothing's broken.

"What do you want?"

The fae smirks, moving so fast I have some trouble making out the detail of his cat-like, elegant movement as he rises to a crouch. "I only meant to congratulate you, pretty girl. You excel in deceit, for one so young."

I analyze every word, turning them in my mind like they're a riddle. The folk can't tell an outright lie, so they make it their business to twist the truth around their tongue.

"Meant. Past tense. What do you mean to do now?"

His smile widens, revealing long, strong canines that look too much like fangs for comfort.

What I don't understand is how something like him—something not human, and quite clearly dangerous, threatening—can possibly look so irresistible. There must be a spell in the works. Yes, magic.

When the paranormal creatures came out of the shadows years ago, before my parents were even born, they changed the world that until then had belonged to us, redefining the place of humans in the food chain. We'd believed we were on top. Now, we know that saying we're in the middle is quite generous.

There are werewolves and witches, vampires, and even dragons, if one believes the tales.

I've always wished I had magic—true magic, not just my lingering trace of weirdness that causes me nothing but trouble. Never so more than now. If I could create some sort of shield against him, I would. If, if, if.

“Someone schooled you in our ways,” he notes approvingly. “I wish to take you home. These woods are dangerous, and you're wounded.”

Shifting my weight, one hip out, I put one hand on my waist and open my mouth to inform him that I can take care of myself, but right then, a sharp jolt of pain shoots all the way up my leg from my ankle.

I curse under my breath. The fae only laughs. Instantly, he's right there beside me, one arm around my torso. “Allow me.”

Without waiting for permission of any kind, he lifts me from under the knees, and carries me like I'm a princess.

I don't move. I don't say a thing. Inside, I'm screaming. I'm fighting myself, and panicking.

Nothing has ever felt so perfect, so delectably right. I'm in no pain, there's no discomfort. The craving for flesh—anyone's flesh, any boy I can lock my lips on—is sated, as if his touch, his presence, is all I could ever need.

I'm whole.

I hate, hate, hate him.

And I know, to the bottom of my soul, that I'll never stop needing him. Needing this peace.

“Do you have a name, pretty girl?”

“I do,” I reply spitefully.

He seems positively delighted with me. “They call me Cal. You'll want to be careful, if you wish to wander the woods. Bring salt, but in powder, not rock, you understand? Iron will be efficient—steel, if you must. Turn your clothes inside out.

Your socks, or your underthings will do. And when you need to find shelter fast, turn to running water. Yes?”

I only nod, committing all of this to memory. Not that I will ever wander the woods again. We live too close to forgo protection, though.

“Good, pretty girl.”

I grimace in distaste. He sounds so condescending, I’d kick his ass if my feet were in any state to attempt the endeavor.

Reading my expression correctly, he tells me, “You’ll have to give me a name, if you wish to be known as anything but the pretty girl in my domain.”

His domain?

I narrow my eyes at him. “Names have power to your kind.”

“True names, yes. The name of your soul. I doubt your human procreators would have guessed it right, so your given name would have none.”

I don’t give it to him, anyway. “You were in front of the house yesterday,” I accuse.

This surprises him—at least, he pretends it does. “Was I?”

I don’t grace him with an answer.

I see my house through the woods, and a knot of anxiety in the pit of my stomach loosens. Part of me doubted he’d take me back, whatever he said.

I quiet the voice that says I might not have minded being led astray for a while.

I only have moments left with him. Suddenly, I think of a thousand questions. I ask the one that matters most to me at this moment. “Why did that—that thing—call me queen? Who did he think I was?”

The fae keeps walking, ignoring me for so long, I think I won’t get an answer. But when we reach the edge of my backyard, he says, “Boggart. The *thing* was a boggart. A wicked brownie. And you’re quite lucky he mistook you, otherwise he might well have taken a bite out of you—or led

you down to the depths of his hole, where you'd never see the light of day again. Do not presume to stand above what you cannot understand, mortal."

Suddenly, I'm *mortal*, not pretty girl anymore. I don't know which I like less.

I suppose I've been a little condescending, but I simply didn't know what to call the boggart. I don't attempt to justify myself.

"And he mistook you for the queen of the bright court, despite knowing she'd never dare enter these woods." His voice has lost all humor, all pleasantry. There's only darkness left. Suave, dangerous darkness. I wish I could bottle it. Spread it on my skin every day.

"Why?" is all I ask.

Cal looks down at me. The shadow is there, under the surface, making his piercing gaze cold and unyielding. "Oh, no, Keira sweet. You've had quite enough from me for today. If you have other questions, you'll have to follow the willow trail, and come dance for me under the starlight some night."

His bright, toothy smirk tells me he knows I'll never dare.

We reach the four steps leading to the back door, and he lowers me to the white wooden panels, ever so gently.

I watch him retreat to the woods without a goodbye.

It's only after he's out of view that I realize he said the name I never gave him.

I get up, intending to hobble to the kitchen and ask Mom to run me to the ER, but when my foot hits the floor I notice the pain—if it ever existed—is long gone. I walk inside, forcing myself not to look back to the woods.

## CHAPTER FIVE



I'M USUALLY BETTER AT pretending to fit in. Not to the point of going unnoticed, but I don't tend to stand out as anything other than a flirt.

As the day passes, I get more and more irritated by little nothings that shouldn't even have attracted my notice. My patience for everything has been smashed into a thousand shards.

This morning, it was the teacher's teeth. Mrs. Motts wasn't very fond of oral hygiene. I'd noticed that yesterday, but now, something green was stuck between her lateral incisor and her canine. Lettuce. Spinach. Maybe even kale.

I itch to prick at it with something sharp. A spaghetti noodle. A pencil. Skewer. If that fails, I don't mind pricking her head with the sharp end of a kitchen knife until it stops bothering me.



She isn't responsible for my irritation. I know the true culprit: the return of the uncomfortable ache inside and outside of me, after spending a few priceless moments without it this morning.

The culprit is Cal. As I can't take it out on him, I want to lash out at everything else.

I don't. For hours, I take irritation after irritation. High-pitched voices, stinky lab partners. I don't even tell the annoyingly friendly girl who sits next to me at lunch to fuck off when she explains the benefits of a healthy meal. So what if I only picked at an apple? I don't feel like eating anything at all. The bright green fruit tastes like ash on my tongue.

At two, our math teacher chooses the lazy way out of giving us a lesson: he starts the year with a quiz, "to understand our level." Any other day, I would have taken my time, and borne it. Today, I fly through the multiple-choice answers, and hand it back to him five minutes after the beginning of the class.

I answered the last question wrong, deliberately. The last thing I need is another school calling my parents to ask that I be placed in special education again.

I like high school. I like coasting through easy, boring lessons and having all the time to pursue whatever I want to. Soon enough, I'll have to get a job, spend hours at a repetitive task that'll drain any joy from me.

I am smart. Maybe unnaturally so. But I know there's nothing bright in my future. No wonderful job, no acclamation.

I can't stand technology. It physically hurts me. I'll never own a computer or a mobile phone if I can help it. In this world, it means I can't amount to anything.

It isn't until PE that I lose it.

The coach is as lazy as the math teacher; he gets us to play dodgeball.

We've been in eight different towns, eight different schools, and the one constant in each of these establishments is *them*. The boys tripping up loners with glasses, and girls giggling in

the corridors. There's a reason the cliché appears in every movie. Whatever the school, those blessed with looks and athletic ability always prey on those who don't conform.

I've never been a target. Maybe because my sister's always welcome among the pretty girl clubs, or because I make out with most of the popular boys, but even at the start of the year, they leave me alone. I don't look like a target, I suppose.

The short, pencil-thin girl with baggy gray and brown workout clothes that must have belonged to her grandad? She does. I recognize her from the cafeteria. She judged me for nursing one apple for twenty minutes.

When the girls start to mock her in half-whispers, at first I shrug it off. Serves her right. She judged my diet. They judge her clothes. That strikes me as fair.

Then the game starts.

The coach divided the girls in two groups of ten, and the boys are on the other side of the indoor basketball court.

The six pretty girls are together, I note. It strikes me as unfair, as they're the cheerleader type, clearly more athletic than the majority of the class. I pick the losing side, mostly because I have no interest in the outcome of the game.

As soon as he blows his whistle, the girls all throw their balls at the thin girl, who clearly lacks coordination. Four of their six balls hit her, one close to the face. I can tell they all aimed for the face. The girl is lucky they can't shoot, or she might have been hurt.

She limps to the benches, wincing.

I shrug it off. Whatever.

The coach calls for a break, checking on the girl, and the group of girls gather around and chat in low voices, giggling again.

When the game resumes, they're shooting together again, this time aiming at a big girl on my right, ganging up on her the same way. One of their balls *does* hit her face.

I watch the girl who shot that one squeal in delight, and hold up her hands in victory. Her friends high-five her. The poor girl holds her face in her hands and cries.

The coach halts the game again, to help the second girl. When he coaxes her to move her hands, I see her nose is bleeding. I lean against the wall, waiting on him to administer first aid and letting rage simmer inside me.

I have to admit, I've surprised myself. I don't have much empathy for things that don't affect me or my family. Other people have their problems? Well, so do I. I deal with mine; they should learn to address theirs.

Right now, my problem is beyond my competency. I've let myself pay attention to everyone else's. I suppose it's oddly comforting to see that their lives suck, too.

The coach finishes dabbing at the girl's nose and sends her to the nurse's office with one of the boys—her brother, I think. Then, he calls us back to the court.

I expect him to make a speech of sort about bullying, or better yet, tell off the girls. Instead, he just waves us back into position, and blows his whistle.

He isn't going to say anything, do anything. He's going to let these bitches hurt their next target.

I can't believe it.

I catch the first ball thrown my way, by one girl who isn't part of the manicured posse, eyeing the little pack as they move to hit another smaller target. And I shoot.

Hard. Very, very hard. I shoot just at the right angle for the ball to hit the peroxide blonde right in the stomach, and bounce back to me. Retrieving it, I shoot again, aiming for the breasts this time—and not missing. I catch someone else's ball, and shoot a third time, then a fourth. A fifth. I save the one who hit the girl's face for last. I smile so sweetly, before throwing her a gentle curve ball. "Fun, right?" I ask in a syrupy voice.

I stare them down as the six bitches gape at me, wincing. I'm a little winded, but I don't show it, hiding any weakness.

Inside, for the first time in hours, I'm fine. Sated.

I was cruel and nasty, and I love this version of me. I recognize it.

I'm free.

I walk back to my initial position and play pleasantly for the rest of the day.

Back home a couple of hours later, it strikes me that for the first time since I was fifteen, I haven't kissed any boys at school.

## CHAPTER SIX



I SLEEP WELL FOR the second night in a row, and again, I wake before dawn. I'm not so much surprised as resigned, glancing at the darkness outside before sighing.

I get dressed in a pair of black high-rise jeans with a crop top, finishing the look with heavy boots. After yesterday's incident with the posse, I know I'm going to face open war at school. I can't deny part of me looks forward to it. Yesterday changed something. The dynamic I'm used to has been flipped on its head. Who knows what's next? Certainly not I.

I remain inside, occupying myself until the rest of my family wakes up. After preparing breakfast, I paint my nails matte black. It's six-thirty. Has time ever passed this slowly?

I force myself to focus on one of my mother's suspense books, willing the words on the page to make sense. Eventually, they do. The storyline is boring and rather

predictable, but I've read all of my books, and I'm not one to go back for a reread.

"I could get used to waking up to this smell!" Dad says from the stairway. Peeking through the open door leading to the den, he spots me, and advances to join me. When he reaches me, he bends down to kiss my forehead. "Breakfast again?"

I shrug. "I was up."

He sits on the arm of the sofa I'm lounging on. The poor old sofa sinks and almost topples. We both laugh. "Maybe I don't need that breakfast after all."

He's talking nonsense. Dad isn't a small man. At six foot four, he'd be hard-pressed to weigh any less than he does.

"Is everything all right? I'm not complaining—it's great to be treated in the morning!—but you've been..."

He can't find a word. I could fill one in for him.

Distracted.

Distant.

Cruel.

Glancing out the back window to the yard every other minute.

He was bound to have noticed something at dinner yesterday.

My instinct is to fake it, smile and say nothing's the matter at all. Instead, I find myself asking, "Do you have any news about Aunt Julia?"

We don't talk about her. Not since she disappeared two years ago. It upsets Dad and annoys Mom.

His eyes widen. "Why do you ask?"

That isn't a no, I realize.

"She..." What can I say, she was like me, and whatever happened to her is likely to happen to me? I think she might have left for the faerie land, where there's no steel or iron clogging the air, burning her insides? "She got me."

My father sighs. “I know she did. You and her...you were very alike. Different, even as children. Very smart, very strong. You don’t cry when you’re hurt, you just get back up.” He grins at me. “What makes you cry is frustration. The inability to act. Right?” I can only nod. Not that I’d know—I don’t remember ever crying. I suppose I must have as a baby. But I can guess helplessness would frustrate me beyond belief.

My father continues. “And you’re both—” He decides against saying anything else, letting his words fade.

I wonder if she ever confessed to being fae-touched to him, maybe as a child. I know her own uncle told her about it, and on and on goes our tradition in the family. Each of our ancestors had twins, and one of them is fae-touched. Aunt Julia’s twin, Aunt April, is perfectly normal. Like my father, she married an eccentric. A sculptor who molds her likeness over and over.

“I miss her,” I confess.

Dad rubs my knee in his awkward attempt to comfort me. I’m not being fair. I’ve seen her maybe a hundred times in my entire life, while she’s his sister. Her loss is his more than it will ever be mine. I feel it keenly regardless.

I hear footsteps coming down the stairs. Mom’s, I think. Clary is faster and lighter.

“I’ll start plating everything, shall I?” Dad offers.

I nod, returning to my book. I should finish the chapter before putting it down. It’ll make it easier to get back to it tomorrow, if I wake early again.

After reading the next three pages, I dog-ear the novel like the savage I am, and place it back on the white bookshelf coating the longest wall in the den.

I’m standing right next to the window, and I can’t help myself. I look. I look past the yard, to the woods.

It’s as if they call me, whisper my name over and over again.

All of a sudden, I see him in the distance. Cal, in his familiar, eccentric coat. He's there one moment, then gone in a blink.

I gasp and hold my middle.

I can resist. I can. I have to. I have school, and breakfast, and my family to think of. What if I disappear like Julia? Before I can tell the next Woodspire about the curse? I have to —

Screw it. I've never been one to stick to the rules. Not even my own.

"Start without me!" I call to the kitchen.

I take my leather jacket, hanging on a hook at the back of the door, and step out in the garden, crossing the yard to the woods.

I have more questions. About these woods, about him, and about myself. What I am. And I need to ask Cal if he knows about Julia. I suspect few fae-touched mortals join the fae. If there's any way he has heard of her, I'll get him to tell me, if only so I can reassure my family. My dad, her brother, who loves her with all his heart. If I could get her to come back for one day, or write a note, it might make all the difference to them.

To me.

The moment I step into the woods, I feel the change in the air.

It's cold. Colder than ice. The trees around me seem to converge closer and closer, caging me in. I can hardly breathe. I can hardly see.

I fall to my knees, feeling dizzy, disoriented, and more than a little nauseous.

I retch. If I'd eaten anything, I would have emptied the contents of my stomach on the mud.

"Poor thing." The singsong voice wraps around each sound, with a sensual drawl I can't place. British, maybe.



I don't try to lift my head. It feels too heavy, too unstable. At eye level, I see a pair of pointed white velvet boots encrusted with shiny blue gemstones. Sapphires, maybe. I can't bring myself to care one way or another.

"I suppose it's to be expected. Mortals are so very fragile, are they not?"

Though it sounded like a rhetorical question, it's answered. I realize we aren't alone.

"Yes, Your Highness."

Unsteadily, willing the bile threatening to come out back down my throat, I stagger to my feet, and force myself to look straight ahead.

I see myself.

# CHAPTER SEVEN



THE SAME STRONG CHIN, defined jaw, high cheekbones. A generous mouth with a pouty lower lip, naturally more purple than pink. Lighter brown eyebrows, though I have mine tinted black to match my hair. Strawberry-blonde, soft, wavy hair.

I'm used to seeing myself reflected on someone else's face. Every day, I look at Clary and I wonder at our similitudes. I like to study our differences too. Clary's ears are rounder, smaller, while mine slightly curve at the tip. Her canines are smaller, whereas mine are sharp enough to draw blood when I bite.

The thing in front of me is no twin of mine. She is me. She shares every single one of my features. I wouldn't wonder at finding a beauty spot below her right hipbone, if I were to strip her out of her layers of white and blue lace and gossamer.

I don't bother to ask who she is. The queen. The queen of the bright court, according to Cal. All at once, I understand how the boggart mistook me for her, and I wonder how he could have been so blind. Her presence is potent, magnetic. She exudes power and wickedness. No amount of posturing could ever make me look like her. Besides, this creature has never worn anything that could even remotely pass for jeans.

"How?" I ask, for two reasons.

One of them is my curiosity. I do genuinely wonder how it's possible for the two of us to be so exactly identical. But my true motive is to buy time. Time to think. Time to regain my senses. I feel better as moments pass, seeing more clearly, feeling less sick.

I doubt she's come for a courtesy call. I'd rather be in full possession of my abilities when she gets to the point of her schemes.

She circles me like a wolf pacing around its prey, her piercing eyes taking in everything about me. I resist the impulse to turn to face her when she reaches my back. I don't much like the thought of turning my back to her, but spinning around would have been a sign of weakness. I can't afford to show any more of that.

She picks up a strand of my hair, lifting it to eye level, and then drops it with a disappointed sigh.

"We can thank Mummy dearest, may her soul rest in peace," says the queen. "See, she had to taint the blood of Medb with that of a mortal. I can't say I ever understood that particular proclivity, but I'm not one to judge kinks."

She's facing me again. I'm disturbed to recognize her scowl, so like my own.

"She bore twins, you see. I was raised with her, in the courts, and my sister lived as a mortal, with our father. She died long ago, poor thing. I suppose you're the result."

Aunt Julia told me we had a fae ancestor. That makes this... thing my great-great-great aunt, in a way.

“So, we’re family.” I doubt she’ll see it that way, but I say it nonetheless.

Her laughter is a clear bell ringing in the silent woods. “Yes, I suppose we are. However, you haven’t been a good little niece, have you?”

I catch the edge in her voice. I have no clue what she’s talking about, but I don’t think playing innocent is likely to work with her.

“You’ll have to be more specific. I can’t remember the last time I was good the last few years.”

She laughs again. “Ha! Isn’t she just delightful?”

“Yes, my queen,” another voice echoes.

I finally give in, glancing around.

Several steps away, I see a retinue of folk—some fae, other little folk I can’t identify. I spot the boggart from yesterday, too.

No need to wonder how the queen heard about me then.

The question is, what could she want from me?

Her next words enlighten me. “I see what he sees in you, niece.”

He.

Assuming she isn’t talking about the boggart, I only know of one other fae.

*Him.*

Cal.

She’s here because he paid attention to me yesterday.

I recognize her behavior now. She isn’t the first disgruntled ex-girlfriend cornering me because of some boy I’ve played with.

She is, however, the first who could rip my heart out of my chest and crush it in her grasp.

I opt to go with apologetic and truthful. “You’re talking about Cal? I wouldn’t say he sees anything in me. Really. We chatted for, like, one minute.”

Maybe two or three. All right, ten at a push, but she doesn’t need to know that.

“And yet you’re still alive, whole, and were allowed to return to your world. Why would you say that is, dearest niece?”

She makes it clear that my encounter with Cal should have gone a different way. And I don’t find anything to say. She’s right. I did expect he’d trick me, hurt me, or kidnap me. That’s what happens in the true fairy tales.

That’s what’s going to happen to me now.

I feel my knees weaken again, but will myself to remain on my feet.

I have to think of a way out of this. I have to outsmart her.

A tall order. No one outsmarts the fae. They delight in trickery and lethal games. They delight in suffering and torment.

“Even now, I feel his magic on you. I can taste it,” she whispers, holding my gaze. “His scent is all around you. There’s a spell in the works. A spell of his own making.”

I glance down.

Maybe I did hurt my foot. It certainly felt like it. And yet, I’ve been fine since. More than fine.

He might have healed me.

Helped me.

Why?

“Maybe he thought it’d be fun if you heard about it, got pissed, and hurt me yourself?” I guess, offering the only theory that isn’t likely to result in my losing a head or vital organ on the spot. “So he could watch. Some boys have a thing about seeing catfights between girls, you know.”

The queen blinks, surprised. She hadn't considered that possibility. Maybe because it's ludicrous.

"Hm," she says. "I suppose that's one way of looking at it."

Yes, yes, yes. Believe it.

Maybe I can't outsmart her, but I can out-dumb her. I can play the stupid, worthless human for all it's worth.

"He did talk to me about you."

She likes that, I can tell.

"He said you're a great queen, ruling over a bright court," I continue.

I have nothing else to add. Thankfully, she doesn't prompt for more.

"Did he, now?" The queen stands a little taller, inclining her head to the side. Louder, she calls, "And what other flatteries might you have whispered in my niece's ear, Calreth?"

I wonder if she's truly mad. There's no one here but her dozens of followers.

Then, Cal appears between an ash and a willow tree. Gone is the coat, now—he's just wearing a silk ruffled shirt, open on his torso.

He strolls forward leisurely, smiling in a way that might pass as pleasant, were it not for the look in his eyes.

"Do you expect me to *remember*, Rena darling?" The endearment sounds like poison on his tongue. "It's almost dawn."

He yawns and stretches languorously, like a wild cat.

But he doesn't look tired to me. His every movement, his every word, his every look is carefully calculated.

*Do you expect me to remember...*

Suddenly I do.

I do remember every word he told me.

*Salt. Iron. Steel. Socks. Underthings. Water.*

*Follow the willow trail.*

He's standing right next to a willow now, some twenty feet away from the one he was nearing moments ago.

My eyes roam beyond that tree, and notice another one, then a fourth farther still.

Inside my jacket, a pouch in my pocket almost burns now that I recollect putting it there right after breakfast yesterday.

A pouch of fine salt.

I have weapons, such as they are. Never mind that I'm not sure how to use any of them. I'm not entirely helpless. And now that Cal is here, I'm not entirely alone either.

# CHAPTER EIGHT



CAL DOESN'T SPARE ME a glance. He doesn't look at the other folk. His entire focus is on the queen. Rena, he called her.

"I'm surprised you'd come here, after our last meeting," he finally says.

Rena narrows her eyes. There was a warning I missed somewhere.

*He knows she'd never dare enter these woods.*

I don't know what happened between these two, but it can't have been good.

"And I'm surprised you'd settle for this *thing*," she hisses, gesturing toward me.

I now understand why Cal was offended when I used that word to describe the boggart.



“What makes you think I’m even remotely interested in anything that bears your face?” he asks, almost lightly.

In other circumstances, I would have protested. I’m hot, dammit. But considering the situation, I want to nod along.

The queen ignores him. “She’s salt and iron. You, better than anyone, know what happens to the fae who fall for mortals.”

“Rena, I don’t want to say you’re paranoid, but—” He gestures around him, letting the scene speak for itself.

“If I were, you wouldn’t be here. Protecting *it*.”

“The child’s aunt is a member of my court, you’ll recall. She would not be keen on finding pieces of a niece she loves scattered in the holt.”

Julia.

He’s talking about Julia.

She’s truly in the faerie land. Despite everything going on around me, I can’t quell a sudden rapture, strong enough to overcome what’s left of my fear.

“Let the girl return home. Scaring easy prey is beneath you.”

I hold my breath as Rena’s lips thin.

Maybe she’ll let me go. Maybe she’ll fall for his manipulation.

Maybe, maybe, maybe.

Seconds pass. In the distance, the sun fights for dominion over the darkness, as I see the two faerie monarchs engage in a still and silent battle of wills right in front of me.

Rena’s hand darts out so fast I don’t have a moment to step back. She grips my throat in her strong grasp, her nails digging in my skin.

“You could have had me,” she tells Cal. “We could have been happy, you and I. The Hunt and the Bright Court. We would have had a kingdom powerful enough to rival the High Court itself.”

I kick out, desperate to free myself as my vision begins to blur. I can't breathe. The pain is so violent, I could pass out. I'll be pissed if I faint, like a stupid damsel in distress, but it's a distinct possibility.

Then I see something flash in front of me. I just have the time to close my eyes before it reaches me.

To my surprise, instead of more pain, I'm suddenly free. I fall, my ass hitting the ground hard enough to bruise.

Thick vines wrapped themselves around Rena's wrists, forcing her to let me go.

Cal places himself between the queen and me. He's still not looking at me, entirely focused on her, but he speaks to me. Just one word.

"Run."

Everything hurts, but I stand up.

*Run, run, run away.*

I only have a moment to decide where. Home is my first thought, but looking back, I don't recognize the path. I don't even see the house, although I've just crossed the yard and entered the forest. Behind me, there's thick, unfamiliar trees.

I doubt I'm anywhere near home. I doubt I could find my way back. Somehow, I crossed into the faerie realm.

I start to sprint to the first willow tree.

*You'll have to follow the willow trail, and come dance for me under the starlight.*

I hope the invitation still stands at dawn.

I find another willow, and a third, and a fourth. Behind me, I hear the ring of laughter, and footsteps that barely make any sound as they touch the ground.

I'm being followed.

No, not followed.

Hunted.

*Run, run, run away.*

I pass meadows and groves, ignoring the pain in every limb, the lack of air in my lungs.

The thought that the folk are playing with me dances at the edge of my mind. They could have caught up to me by now, but what's the fun in that?

I know they mean to corner me before I reach—wherever it is I'm supposed to go.

I hear water somewhere close. A stream, maybe. Reluctant to stray from the willow path, I ignore it. I have salt. That'll have to do.

I near a bridge, and the last willow I can see stands tall and proud, larger than any others around me.

There's nothing else here.

I try to contain my panic. *Think, Keira, think.*

I can't believe my own words. Cal didn't save me just to entertain himself with my growing despair. I can't believe it. I refuse to.

I've stopped running, but I walk to the tree.

I'm a couple of feet away when I'm knocked to the ground, thrown down with a powerful thrust.

I roll to see the boggart hovering over me, its nasty teeth shining under its curved lips.

*He might well have taken a bite out of you—or led you down to the depths of his hole, where you'll never see the light of day again.*

I yell, kicking at him as hard as I can, but if he feels any pain, he doesn't seem to care. He pins me down with surprising force.

“Be a good girl and stay, mortal. The queen isn't done with you.”

“Yes, she is!” Hands shaking, I pull the pouch of salt out of my pocket, rip it open, and shove it at him.

The boggart screeches, jumping back as the salt erodes his skin like acid.

I don't take the time to wonder at the craziness of all this. I get to my feet, only slipping once, and rush to the willow tree, my hand outstretched.

*Come, come, come to me.*

*In the wicked realm,*

*Beneath the willow tree.*

I don't know what I expect at all, but the tree is the answer. I have to believe that.

When my hand comes into contact with it, instead of the roughness of tree bark under my skin, I feel...nothing.

Nothing at all.

The tree is gone.

So is the boggart, and everything else. The bridge, the forest.

I'm standing in the center of a great hall lit with a thousand black candles, surrounded by unfamiliar faces who look at me with curiosity and wonder.

The walls are covered in black ivy, flowering with red blooms I'd be hard-pressed to name.

The smell is sweetness, ash, and blood.

Though I see no musician, no instrument, a deep drum thunders, beating like a heart.

I'm standing in a dark, dangerous, sensual faerie court.

A thick mist gathers in the air, and coalesces into the shape of a man. Then Cal is standing next to me.

"Not at all badly done," he comments.

I let go of a sigh I didn't realize I was holding.

I'm safe.

He's safe.

Safe and home.

THE END



In the same world, read *Kill the Loveliest Prince*, a full length novel following Calreth's twin (Calreth makes an appearance.)

Keira and Cal's story will be extended in 2025.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



MAY IS A USA Today Bestselling Author who recently moved to The Hague, in the Netherlands. She writes many sub-genres of romance; mainly fantasy, paranormal and contemporary. You're signing up for strong, sassy, kick-ass women and swoon-worthy alpha protagonists. Enjoy the ride!

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# UNRELENTING WINDS



MELISSA K. ROEHRICH

# BLURB



FOR CENTURIES, THE GREAT War that divided the realm has been over. The Fae Courts and mortal lands alike have been rebuilding, trying to move forward in a world they no longer recognize. When the Wind Princess requests a meeting with Prince Briar Drayce, ruler of the Water Court, he naturally accepts, intent on keeping good relations with the other rulers of the realm. But when the quirky and aloof princess makes an odd request of him, he starts to question just how much the winds have whispered to her. He's always kept the peace, but he's on the brink of breaking laws of old. Now he must decide if it's worth the risk of angering the Fae Courts, the realm, the gods, and more.

# CHAPTER ONE



BRIAR

*SHE'S HERE.*

That was all the note said when the Water Prince pulled it from a flurry of snowflakes that had appeared in the air. It was a message from his brother with the same water gifts as his own, but Briar Drayce already knew she had arrived. He could see it in the reflection of the Tana River that flowed through the middle of the Fiera Palace of the Fire Court.

“I have a meeting I need to go to,” Briar said, turning to face the others. “Do you need anything before I take my leave?”

Cyrus, the Fire Court Second sighed, but it was the Fire General who answered, flicking her red-gold braid over her

shoulder. “You do plenty, Prince. It’s our responsibility when he’s...like this.”

Briar studied her for a moment. He’d known her for decades. He’d known all of them for decades at this point, some even centuries. So he caught the flicker of worry in her grey eyes, a brief show of emotion she was always quick to hide.

“Our Courts have never done things alone. This is no different,” Briar answered, glancing at the river again. He was late, which was rude in and of itself, but being late to a meeting with a princess was ill-advised, even if he was a prince himself.

“Just...don’t tell Talwyn,” Cyrus said.

“The Fae Queen has her own turmoil she’s dealing with. We will leave Prince Azrael to handle her, and we will deal with the Fire Prince,” Briar replied. “I will check in later today.”

Cyrus pulled on the back of his neck and nodded. “Thanks for always coming here. The sea is...”

“I know, Cyrus. It is easier for me to come here anyway. I am the one who can make a portal,” Briar reassured him, the sound of rushing water filling the air a moment later as a water portal appeared behind him. Only the Fae Royals had the power to create such a thing.

Nothing else was said as he stepped from the fire palace into his own court. He paused for a moment in his study, taking a deep breath and letting the sea breeze fill his lungs. The Fire Court may have fire in their veins, but it would never compare to the warmth of the sun when walking barefoot through rolling waves.

The door opened, his Third and his Commander-of-Forces entering, clearly having felt him cross their wards.

“You’re never late, and certainly not for a meeting with a Royal,” Nakoa said, getting straight to the point. His Commander-of-Forces was tall and broad. He was everything you’d expect of a warlord with his cropped sandy blonde hair, keen turquoise eyes, and brown skin. Marks ran the lengths of

his arms, and he never went anywhere without a minimum of five weapons strapped to his being.

“I know,” Briar answered, falling into step beside them as they made their way through the halls of the House of Water. “Is she still on the shore?”

Neve, the Water Court Third, nodded, her light golden hair swaying with the movement. “She asked to wait on the beach. Sawyer is with her. Do you want us there with you as well?”

“I assume Ermir is with her?”

“He is not,” Nakoa replied.

That made him pause for a moment.

“No,” Briar said, mulling over this turn of events. “We all know her...personality. I need to be able to focus on what she’s saying, especially if she is alone, and the rest of you there spouting your opinions never helps.”

“No need to spare our feelings or anything,” Neve muttered under her breath.

“You are all busybodies.”

“You’re confusing us with the Fire Court,” Nakoa said dryly.

Briar huffed a small chuckle. He wasn’t wrong.

“I don’t think there is anything to worry about here, Commander,” Briar answered.

“If you think any of us are fine with leaving our Prince alone with another Royal, you were smoking mugweed with Cyrus,” Nakoa said, his tone making it clear what he thought of the Fire Second. Which was fair. The two had very different personalities. The fact that Nakoa and the Fire General were occasional lovers was the main reason Nakoa tolerated Cyrus and his antics.

“Nothing is going to happen,” Briar replied, growing irritated. “It’s not a request.”

“Of course it’s not,” Nakoa scoffed.

Something was clearly bothering him today, but Briar would have to deal with that later. He'd kept the princess waiting long enough.

They found the princess and Sawyer exactly where he'd seen her last on the shores of the sea. Sawyer was strolling beside her, her slippers in his hand as she moved barefoot in the sand. Her light blue gown swished around her ankles. She had to be warm in the heavier fabric the Wind Court favored. She was already turning, whether from hearing their approach or from the winds whispering his arrival to her.

"Princess Ashtine," Briar said with a small bow of his head. "I sincerely apologize for keeping you waiting. I was held up at a prior engagement."

Her head tilted a little to the side as if she heard something, and her silver hair flowed on winds that were more than just the sea breeze. Sky-blue eyes held his as she said, "The Fire Prince has much on his heart these days. Your tardiness is no bother to me."

He gave her a soft smile before turning his attention to his brother. "I have it from here, Sawyer. Thank you for keeping her company."

With pale blonde hair, icy blue eyes, and dark skin, he was almost identical to Briar, even though he was several decades younger. The Staying all immortals went through some time in their third decade of life kept them looking more like twins.

Sawyer's brow arched. "You are taking this meeting alone?"

"Yes. I already discussed this with Nakoa and Neve. The three of you can return to the House of Water if the princess is amenable to remaining by the sea for this meeting," Briar answered, turning to Ashtine in question.

"I am," she tilted in her soft voice, her hands clasped loosely in front of her.

Sawyer held his gaze for a long moment, clearly feeling the same way about this as the rest of his Inner Court. When he didn't move, Briar added, "I've kept the princess waiting long enough."

Sawyer gave a slight nod before exchanging a look with Nakoa and Neve. Briar could already hear the conversation that was going to happen around the dinner table tonight. Again, something he'd deal with later.

He waited until they were well out of earshot before saying to Ashtine, "Can we move a little farther from the water?"

She didn't hide her surprise at his request. "Do you not wish to be near your element?"

"Always," he answered. "But my brother is a busybody and shares my ability to turn water into a looking glass. He is likely watching this exchange at this very moment."

"If you wish to relocate, we can do so. We can move indoors if you wish."

"Not indoors," Briar said, motioning up the beach. "Just away from the water."

She nodded and moved to his side, following as Briar led her over to a small patch of secluded beach. He suddenly realized there really wasn't anywhere to sit unless they plopped down in the sand, and the princess didn't seem like the type who would do something most would deem improper of the title.

"Ermir did not join you?" Briar asked when they came to a stop.

She lifted her chin the barest amount as she replied, "No one from your Court is accompanying you."

"Yes, but..." He trailed off, not quite sure how to reply to that without also possibly offending her. "Does Ermir know you are here?"

Ashtine didn't answer for the longest time, but the breeze picked up around them, letting Briar know he'd offended her anyway. "Ermir is handling some things at the Citadel for me. I did not wish to pull him away from those tasks," she finally answered.

Ermir was her Second, but he was also the male who had raised Ashtine. More of a father to her, he'd stepped in when

all the Fae Royals had been publicly killed after the Great War had ended. That was when all the territories had been separated, Wards had gone up, and the late King Deimas and Queen Esmeray had convinced the mortals of the realm that the Fae were trying to enslave them all. It was also the late Queen Esmeray who had come to the Courts and slaughtered the sitting Royals before their Courts, not knowing their heirs had been hidden in the crowd. But while Ashtine had not even lived a year of life yet, Briar had been decades old.

He'd stood in that crowd and watched his father, the previous Water Prince, and his mother have a shirastone dagger shoved into their hearts. Sawyer had stood beside him, so much younger, and watched the same horror play out. When they returned to the House of Water that night, Briar had a new crown, new responsibilities, and a new weight on his shoulders. The Fire Prince was the same. The Earth Prince was older than all of them and seemed to handle the transition the easiest, but Ashtine? Ermir hid her away, only letting Talwyn see her, the two females nearly the same age. Ashtine was kept from the public eye until she was ready to take her place as the Wind Princess. Briar still remembered attending her coronation and seeing her for the first time. She was nearly identical to Princess Ophelia, her mother and the previous ruler of the Wind Court, and she'd inherited her mother's Wind Walker gifts to move among the winds and hear their whispered secrets.

But even now, a few decades later, Briar could not recall a single instance where he'd interacted with the princess without one of her Inner Court members with her. If it wasn't Ermir, it was Renly, her Third, or Sion, the general of her forces.

"How can I be of service today, Princess?" Briar asked, ready to get to the point of this meeting, especially if she was here without her Court's knowledge. The last thing he needed was more tension between the Western and Eastern Courts.

"I am here to make a deal with you regarding weapons," she replied.

The portrait of poise and grace, that was the last thing Briar had expected her to say. So much so, that he could only blink a



few times, completely at a loss for words. Finally, he said, “Weapons are a speciality of the Fire and Earth Courts, not Water.”

“Yes, but imbuing them with magic *is* a speciality of your Court,” Ashtine countered. “And that is what I need.”

Briar swiped a hand down his face, stealing time for a response. He was even more grateful he’d had the forethought to move away from the water where Sawyer could spy on this conversation. Nakoa would have already shown up here.

“Can I inquire as to why you feel this need?” he asked after several seconds of silence.

“You may,” Ashtine answered.

Briar rolled his lips as he contemplated his next words. This was why he didn’t want the others here. Conversing with her required carefully phrasing questions and statements. She wasn’t purposefully vexing, but others found her oddness irritating.

“Why do you find yourself in need of additional weapons at this time?” Briar finally asked.

“I do not require them for this time.”

“For the future then?”

“I do not require them for the past.”

He found himself keeping a smile from forming at her response. “That stands to reason,” he conceded. “What do you fear the future holds that brings you here with this request?”

He could swear something akin to relief flashed in her eyes.

“The future can hold many things. It is most unpredictable,” she replied. “But I fear the Great War was nothing more than one of many.”

Briar nodded slowly. “That is natural to fear, but we have all been preparing.”

She shook her head, that relief gone and replaced with frustration. “It is not enough. It is not going to be enough.”

Briar's brow furrowed. "The Great War has ended. King Deimas and Queen Esmeray have crossed the Veil, likely to the Pits of Torment. Our Courts have known peace for more than a century."

"That does not dismiss bloodshed from coming in the future," she countered.

"I understand, but—"

"You do not," she interrupted, a gust of wind stirring the sand at their feet.

"If you know of a credible threat, you must tell me, Ashtine," Briar said, taking a step closer to her. Her gaze snapped to his, and he winced. "I apologize, Princess. The use of your name was not meant to be disrespectful."

She nodded slowly. Briar was usually fairly skilled at reading people, but not her. He'd never been able to get a read on her, but he'd also never spent much time with her. Certainly not alone like this. And as she stared back at him now, he wasn't sure where this conversation was going to go next, but by the gods was he intrigued.

He was also perplexed because this seemed like a meeting Ermir would definitely want to be present for.

"At the risk of your ire, does Ermir know what you are here requesting?" Briar asked when she didn't speak further.

There was another gust of wind, this one sending sand flying so viciously it stung where it hit the flesh on his bare arms. He was glad his hair was tied up, but Ashtine's blew across her face as a small swirling vortex appeared at the tips of her fingers.

"Do you require the permission of your Court before acting, Prince?" Ashtine demanded, and Briar hadn't known she was capable of such a tone. Her usual mystical lilt was still there, but it was layered with an iciness that had his own Fae nature taking notice and his magic stirring in interest.

"I meant no disrespect, Princess."

"So you have stated, Prince."

Well, fuck. He had no idea how to deal with...this. It certainly wasn't how he'd expected this meeting to go today.

“I am taking your continued silence as a denial of my request?” Ashtine finally said.

“That is not—”

“At this point, it is either an approval or a denial,” she cut in.

“It is not that simple, Princess. You know this to be true,” Briar insisted.

“Nothing ever is,” was all she said, and then she was gone, walking among the winds that called to her.

And Briar was left standing on the beach wondering what in the fuck had just transpired.

## CHAPTER TWO



### ASHTINE

THE WIND PRINCESS STEPPED from the winds, only to realize she'd left her slippers in the Water Court when she registered the cool stone of her rooms beneath her feet.

*Blood will be shed.*

*A prince will fall.*

*The realm hangs in the balance.*

*A beginning or an ending? Time will tell.*

Ashtine released a shuddering exhale. The winds were restless, and it was driving her slightly mad.

She hurried to her dressing room and stripped out of the dress that smelled of the sea, pulling on a fresh gown of deep navy blue with fine white detailing. Shoving her feet into new slippers, she hurried from her rooms, running along the small parapet that connected her quarters to the main building of the Wind Citadel.

*He is to the left.*

The winds' whispered warning had her taking the next right to avoid Ermir. She loved her Second like a daughter loved her father, but he had grown...worried about her these last months. It wasn't surprising, but they didn't understand.

No one understood.

No one else could hear the constant whispered warnings.

She moved down the stairs, taking them two at a time, only slowing when she reached the main floor. Then she became the poised and collected princess she'd been raised to be.

"Your grace?" came a feminine voice, and she turned to find her personal handmaiden.

Her dark auburn hair half up, the female's light green eyes held a knowing look, and relief flooded through Ashtine. The female may be her handmaiden, but Ashtine also considered her a friend. She was a few years older than Ashtine and had proven her loyalty more than a few times, keeping quiet about Ashtine's secret wind walkings from the Wind Inner Court. Few knew how often she actually ventured out on her own.

No one knew where she went on most of those outings. Many times, she wasn't even sure where she was going until she got there. Some might find that disconcerting, but she found it freeing. It was the only time her movements were not constantly watched. Guarded. Studied.

Everyone knew she was a Wind Walker. That had been expected considering her mother was one of the few known Wind Walkers in history. Her father hadn't been a Wind Walker, but had been one of the most powerful wind Fae to exist.

Or so she'd been told.

But it stood to reason, given that pairings among the Royal Fae were often arranged to ensure power was passed down in order for the royal lines to remain strong. Ermir told her often that her parents' marriage may have been arranged, but they had come to truly care for each other in the end. When she was a child, she'd found it romantic and endearing. Now that she was older, she saw it for what it was: a story to make her more amenable to the idea of her own eventual pairing. An heir would be expected of her after all, and everyone would expect that heir to walk among the winds.

As though she had any control over that.

"Noelle," Ashtine said, forcing her breathing to even out.

"Was your outing enjoyable?" Noelle asked.

"It went as I anticipated it would," she answered, clasping her hands in front of her. "I was on my way to the catacombs."

Noelle smiled. "I am not surprised in the slightest by that. Would you like to take your dinner there this evening?"

"Dinner?"

"The meal one eats in the latter part of the evening," came a deep voice from behind her, and Ashtine's eyes momentarily fell closed at knowing she'd been caught.

*He knows, the winds whispered.*

*I am aware. Thank you, she retorted.*

As if the winds cared what she thought.

She sighed internally. This is why people thought she was odd. Or part of the reason, perhaps? She honestly didn't know. While others grew up with peers and families, her company growing up was the books in the catacombs. And Talwyn, she supposed, but that relationship was forged out of necessity, even if they considered each other friends now.

"Princess?"

She opened her eyes, finding Renly standing before her, his dark blue eyes studying her carefully.

"Yes?" Ashtine asked.

“Ermir has been looking for you.”

“He clearly was not looking in the proper location.”

“Or a princess was not where she was supposed to be?” Renly countered, a brow arching.

“Who is to say where one is supposed to be? The gods? The Fates? Time itself?” Ashtine replied.

*The ones across the sea.*

*Enough*, she snapped at the winds, her gaze going to where a window was open.

The winds could find her anywhere, but they weren't as loud when the doors and windows were shut. It was part of the reason she spent so much time in the catacombs. No windows down there. Everything was calmer, more peaceful. Even the winds there were more subdued, letting her be with her books and thoughts as she tried to decipher everything they whispered to her.

Noelle cleared her throat lightly, glancing knowingly at Renly before asking Ashtine, “Would you like dinner in the catacombs tonight, Princess?”

“That is unnecessary. I will simply procure food later when I am finished,” Ashtine answered, feeling the air stir around her.

The others felt it too, and Renly and Noelle seemed to have some sort of silent conversation. Ashtine had never understood how others could do that. Then again, social cues had never been one of her strengths. It had never really bothered her until recently. It's not as though she hadn't tried, but being so guarded growing up, she wasn't around other children. When her primary sources of company had been mature Fae, fitting in with other children didn't come naturally. Talwyn was the same way, and now, as royalty...

Some days, it seemed rather pointless.

She used to prefer the company of the winds over others, but that had changed these past years.

“May I escort you to the catacombs?” Renly asked, pulling Ashtine from her thoughts. She blinked, finding them alone in

the foyer. Noelle had disappeared.

“That is not needed,” she answered quickly.

“I would enjoy the company,” he said, holding out an arm and gesturing for her to move ahead.

She sighed internally again, and Renly fell into step beside her.

His father had served as her mother’s Third. From what she’d been told, he’d been killed protecting her mother in the Great War. Renly had spent all his years determined to honor his father’s memory by obtaining the same position. It was at Ashtine’s own coronation that she had asked him to be her Third, the position having been vacant since his father’s passing. While Ermir was like a father to her, Renly was akin to a brother.

Or what she assumed a brother would be like. An older brother, perhaps? She really didn’t know.

“It has been a week’s time since you have joined your Inner Court for dinner, Princess,” Renly ventured as they turned a corner.

Had it truly been that long?

When she didn’t answer immediately, he added, “Noelle also informed us you haven’t been eating regular meals.”

“It may have escaped me a time or two,” she replied absent-mindedly.

“One does not simply forget to eat,” he said, a hand gently gripping her elbow and tugging her to a stop. When she looked up at him, he added, “Except you. You have a tendency to forget to eat when you are trying to figure out the winds.”

“That is an impossible task,” she said with a slight scoff.

“And yet you spend hours trying to do just that.”

Ashtine pursed her lips, her gaze darting to the side. “I cannot simply ignore their warnings, and that is what is being asked of me.”



“Is this about the supposed war again?” Renly asked, and while he tried to hide it, she heard the faint exasperation in his tone.

Most people eventually ended up with that tone when conversing with her.

But the Water Prince hadn't.

If anything, *she* had carried that tone before she'd left.

“Princess?”

“Yes?” she asked, bringing her focus back to Renly.

“We have looked into these supposed warnings numerous times. Nothing has ever come of them. You know this,” he said.

“And yet the winds still speak of them.”

“The winds know everything and nothing,” he said. “You tell me that all the time.”

Her fingers curled into the skirt of her gown, and the texture of the material gave her something to focus on. “They are rarely this relentless,” she finally answered.

Renly nodded, seeming to mull this over, before he spoke again. “We understand the winds can be prophetic and we trust you to relay important whispers from them. But you must, in turn, trust us to help you decipher them. Ermir and Sion did so for your mother; let us help you as they did her.”

Guilt turned her stomach, and she reached up, tucking her hair behind her arched ear. She offered him an apologetic smile. “Of course I trust you all.”

“We take what you bring to us seriously. Truly you know that?”

“Of course.”

“We do not simply brush aside your concerns.”

“I understand.”

His brow furrowed, and he swiped a hand through his hair, pushing out a harsh breath. “Perhaps you should dine with us

tonight. We can all discuss your concerns—”

“To what end?” she interrupted.

“I do not understand,” he ventured, eyeing her as a gust of air blew through the vacant hallway.

“Each time my concerns are investigated, they come back as unfounded,” she replied, turning and continuing on her way to the catacombs.

“We are not simply dismissing them,” Renly argued, easily catching up to her with his long strides.

“That is not what I am implying.”

“Then come discuss this with us at dinner, Princess,” he said again.

She forced herself to halt once more.

*Blood will spill.*

*She may be too late.*

*The ones across the sea know. Go there.*

*Go there.*

*Go there!*

*I can't go there, she retorted. No one can go there.*

*She can. She must, or the balance will tip and—*

“Dinner sounds lovely,” Ashtine said suddenly, interrupting whatever Renly was saying.

He blinked a few times before saying, “Okay... Ermir will be pleased.”

“Shall we go eat?”

“Right now?”

“It is the latter part of the evening, is it not?”

Renly nodded slowly. “Princess, is everything all right?”

But Ashtine only nodded, turning and leading the way back down the same path they'd just taken. Renly spoke to some staff as they passed, asking them to prepare dinner sooner than

planned, and she felt a little guilty about the sudden change of plans. But if she wanted some peace from her court for the next few days, she needed to have this meal with them. It usually kept them placated for at least a week, and then she found it easier to slip away to the catacombs or move among the winds.

Minutes after she'd taken a seat at the dining table, Ermir and Sion, the general of her forces, came through the door, eyes immediately falling to her. She forced a smile, hands folded in her lap.

"I didn't quite believe the note when Renly said you were joining us for dinner," Sion said with a fond smile.

"Why would he lie about something so trivial?" Ashtine asked curiously.

"He only means you have been hard to track down as of late," Ermir answered, taking his seat to her right before reaching over and squeezing her arm gently. "How do you fare, Princess?"

Forcing another small smile, she answered, "Well. And you?"

Ermir chuckled softly, reaching to fill her glass with wine. "I suppose I should have worded that in a different manner. While I am glad you are physically well, despite forgetting to eat several meals, how are you fairing otherwise? I know the winds have been troubling you lately, Princess."

*Princess.*

She knew they called her that out of respect. It was her title, and Ermir had insisted everyone use it because she was so young when she took her throne. He didn't want anyone using her given name as a way to subtly undermine her. She understood that, but hearing Prince Briar use her name earlier in the day had been...

She didn't know what it had been, but she suddenly found herself wishing more people used it. Talwyn used it frequently, but that was different. Ermir had stopped using it the day of her coronation. Now that she was really giving it thought, she

couldn't recall the last time someone other than Talwyn had used her given name outside of introducing her.

*Waves and winds will call to forces you do not want here,* came the whisper, stirring her hair as the winds curled around her ear.

Ashtine reached for her wine, eyeing the open window. It took several seconds before she realized how still and silent the room had become. She found the eyes of her most-trusted on her, full of worry and unease, and not for the first time, she wished her mother were here. Or, at the very least, *someone* else who could hear the constant chattering of the winds.

"How did she manage them?" Ashtine asked into the quiet of the room.

Sion and Renly exchanged a look, but Ermir's features softened in understanding. "Ophelia had centuries of experience with the winds, and even then, there were times she felt overwhelmed by their veiled whispers and ominous chattering."

He could say her mother's name, but not hers.

It made her inexplicably want to throw something.

*Power will be resurrected.*

*Darkness and fire of the stars will draw out the prince who hides in plain sight.*

Gritting her teeth, Ashtine pushed to her feet, moving to shut the open window. It wouldn't do any good, but it was an excuse to leave the table for a moment. But as she reached for the small handle, the cry of a hawk had her pausing.

Nasima.

She hadn't seen the silver hawk in several weeks, and a part of her had felt out of sorts that entire time. Something eased in her chest as she spotted the bird gliding on the winds of the Shira Cliffs. The hawk was the spirit animal of Sefarina, the goddess of wind, and she was bonded to Ashtine. She knew her bond with Nasima was unique. She'd seen Talwyn and Prince Azrael with their bonded spirit animals. The wolf and

red stag came and went as they pleased, gone more than they were present, but Nasima rarely left Ashtine for more than a day or two at a time. Weeks without her had only increased her agitation.

Instead of grasping the handle, Ashtine extended her hand out into the cool air. Moments later, taloned feet wrapped gently around her forearm, and she brought the bird inside, brushing her fingers down soft feathers.

“Where have you been, my friend?” she murmured. Nasima clicked her beak and tipped her head into Ashtine’s touch.

“Did you want the window shut, Princess?” Sion asked, and Ashtine turned to find her general standing a few paces away.

“Yes, please,” she answered, returning to her seat and letting Nasima hop to the back of her chair.

“Shall we discuss your concerns from earlier?” Renly asked as staff began setting plates of food before them.

“It seems rather pointless. They are the same concerns we’ve discussed prior,” she answered, studying her plate of food. She wasn’t hungry in the slightest.

“The winds still speak of a coming war?” Sion asked with a slight frown on his lips. “Do you feel we are unprepared if such a thing would happen?”

“I am not doubting your skills or your leadership, Sion.”

“But you still feel we are not adequately prepared,” he repeated, cutting into his meat. “We’ve increased our numbers, and we’ve been working on relations with the Witches.”

“I am aware of what precautionary steps we have taken,” she snapped, her hands flat on the table on either side of her plate.

A warning sound came from Nasima, and Ashtine knew if she looked, her feathers would be ruffled.

*Blood will be shed.*

*A prince will fall.*

*The realm hangs in the balance.*

*A beginning or an ending? Time will tell.*

*The answers lie across the sea.*

She didn't want to think about the kingdom across the sea. The kingdom that had been a part of starting the Great War in the first place, then created Wards to protect their land while leaving the rest of them to finish the war and suffer greatly for it.

Ashtine stood then, her chair scraping as it slid across the stone floor, and Nasima releasing an agitated sound. "I apologize," she said, her voice sounding as defeated as she felt in the moment. "You all are correct. I am not feeling well, and I think I will retire early this night."

"Princess—" Ermir started.

But he was cut off when she said, "Good night."

She did not wait to hear their protests or their inquiries as to whether she needed a Healer.

Nasima flew to her shoulder as the dining room doors were pushed open for her, and she made her way back to her private rooms in the Citadel.

But she did not climb into her bed or curl up in a chair before the fireplace. Noelle was already waiting for her, a cloak in hand along with warmer shoes.

"Be safe, your grace," she said with a bow of her head as Ashtine pulled the hood of the cloak up over her hair and stepped into the winds.

She would figure this out. It was her duty to her court to protect them.

She was their princess after all.

Not Ashtine.

*Princess* Ashtine.

This was her burden to bear.

## CHAPTER THREE



BRIAR

“DAMMIT,” BRIAR MUTTERED, REALIZING he’d left the tip of his quill on the parchment too long, a large blot of dark ink now marring the page.

He placed the writing instrument back into the pot of ink before sitting back in his chair and sighing. His eyes wandered to the open veranda, the gauzy curtains tied back so he could see the waves off in the distance. It’d been six days since Princess Ashtine had been here, and it still bothered him how things had been left. His Court may be part of the Western Courts and hers part of the Eastern Courts, but that didn’t mean he didn’t like to keep good relations with them. There

was enough tension between the Fire and Earth Courts without creating a rift between the Water and Wind Courts.

He'd thought about sending her a message, but he wasn't sure how it would be perceived. She interpreted the world differently than the rest of them did. He didn't want his word choice to be misunderstood. Speaking to her in person would be the most ideal, but he didn't know how to set up that type of meeting without alerting the rest of her court that she had been here. She clearly wanted that to be kept a secret.

A dinner invitation perhaps? But for what? He'd need to come up with a reason. And why was this so godsdamn difficult? He'd never had a problem communicating with the other Royals before.

Fuck it.

He'd just go to the Wind Court and see if he could speak with her. Say something about needing to...

What was he thinking? He couldn't simply go to another court without invitation. Certainly not without some type of courtesy message. The Fire Court? Sure. He and the Fire Prince were close friends and had grown up together. The Wind and Earth Courts? Absolutely not.

With another frustrated sigh, he got to his feet and made his way out to the veranda, leaning against the railing. The sound of the crashing waves usually settled him, but not today. He needed to visit with her. There would be no comforting this unease until he did. It was inexplicable, and, quite frankly, rather annoying that their interaction had taken up so much of his time and energy these last days. On top of all that, if she knew of a credible threat to the Courts, that needed to be discussed.

At least that was what he told himself as he sent a message to Sawyer, Neve, and Nakoa letting them know he was leaving for a bit before conjuring a water portal and stepping into the Wind Court.

He instantly regretted the brash decision when the icy wind of the Shira Cliffs whipped around him. He was in a



lightweight tunic and pants, made for the sun and beaches. But he was already here, and there were likely wards alerting Ashtine and her court. If he simply left, they'd be at his door within the day asking what he'd been doing there. He'd look even more suspicious if he left at this point. Swiping a hand down his face, he moved to face the consequences of his impulsive behavior.

Such impulsiveness was not a normal character trait for him, yet here he was, trying to think of a rational excuse for being in another court without a moment's notice. He made his way across the stone bridge that stretched across a cavern leading to the Wind Citadel. The domes of the various towers of the fortress reached into the clouds, the Citadel sitting atop the highest cliffs. He didn't even have time to knock before the main door was thrown open, and he stood face-to-face with Sion, the Wind Court General.

The male's light grey eyes studied him, narrowed in suspicion, and rightfully so. His black hair was cut short, and Briar could see the hilt of his sword over his shoulder. Thick arms were crossed over a broad chest, and he said nothing. Just stared at Briar.

"Sion," Briar greeted, falling into his role of prince with practiced ease. "I apologize for the unannounced visit."

"Then what is the purpose of it?"

The demand came from Renly, who appeared at Sion's side. The male wasn't as muscled as Sion and was a little taller, but the small vortex of wind swirling at his fingertips wasn't missed. A reminder of where he was and that, in this place, Briar was not the greatest threat.

Then again, the greatest threat here was the princess housed within the walls of the Citadel.

But Briar smiled warmly, nodding in greeting. "That is a matter I need to speak directly with Princess Ashtine about."

Renly's lip curled into a small sneer. "Then arrange a meeting like anyone else."

“Ah, but I’m not just anyone else, am I?” Briar replied. There was no threat in his voice, but the intention of the words was clear as he held Renly’s stare. The pair of them straightened, as if they suddenly remembered exactly who he was.

“You expect us to simply let you speak to the princess unannounced without just cause?” Sion asked.

Briar’s smile turned sharp. “You can announce me all you like, but if she is here, I will insist on seeing her unless she is indisposed.”

Sion glanced at Renly. “Do you want to consult Ermir?”

Renly continued to stare at Briar. “Ermir is out at the moment.” Stepping to the side, he added, “But please come in out of the cold as we discuss this further, Prince.”

Briar nodded in thanks, grateful as the door shut out the chill behind him. It may be the summer season, but this far north never saw the heat of his own court. They didn’t say anything about Ashtine not being here, which gave him hope he could make amends with the princess and stop worrying about it. Then he could focus on the countless other things that demanded his attention.

“Can we get you anything?” Renly asked as Briar took in the grand foyer of the Citadel. It had been some time since he’d been here.

“Only an audience with the princess,” Briar answered.

“And you will not let us inform her of what this impromptu meeting pertains to?”

Briar shook his head. “It is of a sensitive nature.”

Renly seemed to debate his next words, but he finally turned to Sion. “Send word to Ermir. Let him know the Water Prince is here. I am sure he will be most interested in learning that. I will escort him to the princess.”

Sion nodded, some silent communication passing between him and the Wind Court Third. Sion left, disappearing down

one of the corridors off the foyer, while Renly turned to Briar and said, “This way, Prince.”

Each Court had a library, as did the White Halls and Black Halls in the northern and southern part of the continent, but none of them compared to that of the Wind Court. Its libraries were housed in catacombs beneath the Citadel, spanning the entirety of the structure and beyond. Few knew how big the libraries truly were, only that they were extensive and the Wind Court was extremely protective of the tomes they contained. Visitors were always escorted, never allowed to roam alone, and several areas were closed to outsiders.

Renly led Briar through the winding halls, and they entered the libraries through a large set of double doors that opened into a foyer as grand as the Citadel entrance above. He could count on one hand how many times he’d been here. Once on a tour with his parents when he was a child, and again on a tour when Sawyer was young. The other two times were meticulously planned well in advance, but none of those visits had him this deep in the catacombs as they moved past aisles and aisles of bookshelves. The passages they took seemed to get narrower and narrower, and this deep into the libraries, there were nooks and rooms tucked into the shadows.

It was another ten minutes before Renly knocked on a simple wooden door, waiting for the invitation to enter before pushing it open. Briar wasn’t sure if he was more surprised or amused by what awaited them on the other side.

There was a worn plush sofa shoved against one wall, and next to it was a decent-sized table with three chairs around it. The chairs were all different, though. One was a basic wooden chair, while another had a cushioned seat and armrests. The third was completely upholstered and looked more like a chair for a sitting room rather than in this tucked-away study of sorts.

Bookshelves lined two walls, both of them stuffed full with books and ledgers. A low table sat in front of the sofa, and perched on the edge of the cushions was the Wind Princess in a simple dress of soft grey, her silver hair gathered atop her head, and her attention fixed on the three books spread out

before her. Several pieces of parchment lay beside her, and she tapped the thin piece of charcoal she was using to write with as she continued to read.

Renly cleared his throat softly before saying, “Princess, you have company.”

Ashtine looked up, her eyes widening in surprise when they landed on Briar. That was interesting. She always seemed to know what or who was coming, and he assumed it was from the winds whispering to her. They clearly hadn’t warned her this time.

“Prince Briar,” she said, gracefully rising to her feet and stepping forward. It was then that he noticed the thick wool socks on her feet. “I was unaware I was to meet with you today.”

“It was not planned, and I apologize for interrupting if you are otherwise occupied. I can return another time if you wish,” he answered, glancing again at all the books scattered about.

“We tried to schedule another time, but he insisted on speaking to you personally,” Renly cut in. Briar could feel the male’s glare on him, but his focus was on Ashtine, her sky-blue eyes holding his.

“To tell me we could meet another time if I preferred?” she asked.

Well, when she put it like that...

“Yes,” Briar answered. “I was hoping to speak with you about a sensitive matter.”

Her brows rose so subtly, he almost missed it, but her Third certainly didn’t.

“Princess, if you do not wish for this, he can make a proper appointment,” Renly cut in quickly.

“It is fine, Renly,” she said, clasping her hands in front of her. “You can leave us.”

This time it was Renly’s brows that rose. “With all due respect, Princess, I cannot, in good conscience, leave you alone with a rival court.”

“Are we at war with them, Renly?” she asked, her tone still light but the air in the room stirring.

“Of course not,” he answered.

“Do we have reason to believe the Water Court wishes to start a war by harming me?”

“No, Princess, but you have been—” He cut himself off, glancing at Briar. “I would advise against this.”

“Your advice has been noted and taken into consideration,” she answered, papers rustling on the table, and pages in books turning. “Renly, if you please,” she added, gesturing for him to leave.

Renly’s lips were pressed into a thin line, his shoulders tense. Briar couldn’t blame him. His Court had acted the same way when Ashtine had visited last week.

“I am not going far,” Renly finally conceded.

“I would expect nothing less, Ren,” she said with a small, reassuring smile.

“If you need anything...”

“I will send word.”

With a final hard stare at Briar, Renly turned and left the small room, the wood door creaking as it shut behind him.

Then it was just Briar alone with the Wind Princes, who was staring at him expectantly. His gaze dropped to the floor, finding her feet in the wool socks again. Her dress was a heavy material too, which only made the lightness of his own clothing that much more noticeable.

“It is cool down here,” Briar said, wondering just how awkward this conversation was going to be. He deserved this for being so impulsive in coming here.

“The sensitive matter you wish to discuss is the weather?” Ashtine asked, her brow furrowing.

Briar’s lips twitched. “No, Princess. It was just an observation.”

“Did you do well in your academics as a child, Prince?”

“Very well,” he answered, more than curious about where this line of questioning was going.

“And your studies included geography of the realm?”

“They did.”

“Then one would assume you would know the climate differences of our two courts and not find the chill of the Shira Cliffs surprising,” she concluded.

“My trip here was...unplanned,” he said, unable to hide his smile now.

“So it would seem,” she replied. “Would you like to sit?”

“If you would be more comfortable.”

“I would,” she answered, moving back to the sofa and sitting once more.

Briar opted for a chair near the table, pulling out the cushioned one with armrests and taking a seat. “Again, I apologize for the unplanned visit.”

“And the purpose of it?” she asked.

“I did not like how things were left after your visit to the Water Court.”

Her head tilted, Briar assuming the winds were speaking to her, but she quickly turned and started gathering the various papers scattered around her. “I appreciate you not speaking of that visit to my Inner Court.” She glanced up at him. “Unless you did speak of it?”

He shook his head. “That is not my place, Princess.”

She nodded, stacking the papers atop each other. “If I offended you for how I left you that day, I apologize.”

“You did not offend me.”

Her movements faltered, but she moved on to organizing books. “Forgive me, Prince, but I do not understand what you are asking of me then.”

“I am not asking anything of you.”

She sighed, clearly exasperated despite her pleasant tone when she said, “Then I do not understand the purpose of this visit.”

“You had concerns when you visited me. I do not think you were afforded the opportunity to adequately express them,” he answered.

She cleared her throat lightly. “My Court feels those concerns are unfounded. I should not have troubled you with them.”

“Do you feel they are unfounded, Ashtine?” Her gaze snapped to his, and he winced. “I apologize for the use of your name. Again.”

“No one uses my given name. Only Talwyn on occasion.”

“I apologize.”

“I find I do not mind when you say it,” she replied.

He wasn’t sure what to say to that.

“Would you like me to abstain from using it?”

“No. I do not think I would like that,” she said in her usual lilt as she returned to straightening her books and papers.

Briar looked around the room, noting the untouched tray of food on a small cart that had been shoved into the corner. “Can we return to the earlier discussion? Do you feel the concerns you came to visit with me about are unfounded?”

“I wish I could say yes, but it would not be a truthful answer,” she answered, still not looking at him.

“Then tell me of them,” Briar said, settling back into the chair and resting his temple on his fist. His hope was she would relax more if he did the same. “Tell me why you wish to increase your weapon stores.”

Her movements had stilled once more, and she finally lifted her gaze to his. “If you are asking this to simply placate me, I do not wish to discuss this with you.”

“I would never disrespect you in such a way, Ashtine.”

Her stare swept over him, and she subtly nodded as if in agreement to something unheard. “The winds are restless. More so than I have ever experienced.”

“The sea doesn’t speak to me, so I need you to expand on that,” he said, using these quiet, private moments to study her. The way she nodded to herself as she processed his words. The way she continued to fidget with the books and papers while they conversed. How she would steal glances at him, a worry in her eyes that he didn’t understand.

“The winds carry secrets of the past and present,” she said, her lilt softening. “They speak of things long past and paths of the future. They speak nonsense and truth, riddles and facts.”

“That is a heavy burden to bear,” Briar said gently.

“My mother did it with grace. Or so I have been told. I often wish she were here to give advice because...”

He waited, but when she didn’t continue for a full minute, he pressed, “Because what, Ashtine?”

Her eyes lifted to his again at the use of her name, and for the life of him, he couldn’t understand the reaction. Unless she was speaking literally and that no one other than Talwyn used her given name.

“I would ask if they spoke the same way before the Great War began,” she whispered. “The winds speak of bloodshed. They speak of a prince falling. They speak of beginnings and endings and the balance tipping. And I am expected to understand it, and I cannot. Despite my days spent in this room among texts, I do not understand.”

“It is often said the winds know everything and nothing,” Briar said. “How can you be expected to understand everything they whisper to you?”

“Is that not my role as their princess?”

“Your role is to make the best decisions for the betterment of your people. Not to decipher ramblings that may mean nothing,” he countered.

She shook her head in disagreement, but she said nothing.



“Does your Inner Court expect you to know? Does Ermir? Renly? Sion?” Briar demanded. He tried to keep his tone neutral, but if they were placing such expectations on her shoulders... It made him irrationally angry.

“No,” she said. “Quite the opposite actually.”

“You stated they feel these latest concerns are unfounded.”

“I did.”

“And you disagree.”

“I do not know, and I find that aggravating,” she answered.

“And you are down here seeking answers?” Briar asked.

“I spend much time here, but yes. I am seeking answers.”

“Then I offer my assistance.”

She went preternaturally still in the way only the Fae could.  
“Why?”

“Because if you believe we have reason to be concerned, then I owe it to you, my own Court, and this realm to look into them,” Briar answered, standing and moving to sit beside Ashtine on the sofa. He reached for a book on the table as he said, “Show me where to start.”

# CHAPTER FOUR



ASHTINE

*BLOOD WILL BE SHED.*

*A prince will fall.*

*The realm hangs in the balance.*

*A beginning or an ending? Time will tell.*

*The answers lie across the sea.*

Ashtine stared up at the ceiling of her dark rooms, nestled under blankets and furs. The sun would rise soon, and she hadn't slept. Her fingers dug into the soft coverings, and she shifted, curling onto her side.

*Power will be resurrected.*

*Darkness and fire of the stars will draw out the prince who hides in plain sight.*

*She may be too late.*

Her windows were closed. The doors to her balcony were locked tight, but the winds still found her. They still kept her awake. They were still incessant.

Prince Briar had visited twice more in the last two weeks. Her Court was uneasy every time he was here, and she did not entirely blame them. Each of them had tracked her down individually and tried to ease into a conversation about what they were doing, but her answers never placated them. They had insisted on dinner as a court tonight, again expressing concern she wasn't eating, and Briar's increased visits had been brought up once more. Ermir had started the conversation, backed up by Renly and Sion, but she'd had trouble focusing on what they were saying. It had been a warmer day and all the windows had been opened.

The winds had been loud, and it now carried over into the night.

*The realm will fall to one.*

*Blood will stain the lands.*

*Those across the sea know.*

*Go there!*

She flung the blankets off, sliding from the bed and going to her dressing room. Shucking off her nightclothes, she slipped on a lightweight cream dress, leaving her hair unbound. She didn't bother with shoes. They wouldn't be necessary where she was going.

Five days.

It had been five days since Briar's last visit. The winds were...different on the days he was in the Citadel libraries with her. Perhaps it was simply because she was in the catacombs, but this wasn't the same. She could feel the winds stir, but they were quieter. The incessant whispers were

occasional murmurs that she found easy to ignore if she wished.

And it was because of that she found herself stepping into the winds and then onto the shores of a beach.

*Winds and waves. The balance tips.*

*Stop*, she retorted, but there was no bite in her mental reply. She was too exhausted to feel the annoyance.

*Blood will be shed.*

*A prince will fall.*

*Answers lie across the sea, locked away and hidden.*

Gritting her teeth, Ashtine moved down the beach until the waves rolled over the tops of her feet and her toes sank into the wet sand. She'd hoped it would ground her for some inexplicable reason. It did nothing of the sort.

*Blood will spill.*

*Enough!* she snapped.

*Find the one to cross the sea.*

"Be still!" she cried into the night, her voice breaking as another round of waves rolled to shore.

*He comes.*

She turned just as a water portal appeared, and the Water Prince stepped onto the beach. Wearing only loose linen pants, the moonlight reflected off his dark skin and his white hair appeared nearly as silver as her own beneath the stars. He went still when he spotted her, as if he hadn't expected her to be there. But that couldn't be right. Why else would he suddenly come to the beach at this exact place and moment in time? She'd assumed he'd felt her cross into his Court. All the Court Royals could feel when great power entered their territory. Most of their Inner Courts could feel it too.

"Princess Ashtine," he greeted, stopping several feet away from her.

"Prince Drayce," she returned in kind.

His icy gaze swept over her. “Are you well?”

Her smile was forced as she turned to face the waters once more. “Do you ever attempt to outrun the waves?”

“No. They call to me, and my soul answers,” he replied, moving to stand beside her before facing the sea as well. “But the waves are not as capricious as the winds.”

Ashtine glanced at him side-long, finding him with his hands clasped behind his back and eyes closed. Only the sounds of the waters stirred the night. Even the winds had gone still.

“I used to feel such things about the winds until days of late,” she replied softly.

Briar turned, and she felt his gaze on her. “How else can I be of aid, Ashtine?”

*Ashtine.*

Her name from his lips brought her the grounded feeling she’d been seeking by coming here. It had not been the beach or the waves, and something uneasy crept up her spine at the idea of that.

It was dangerous to seek such respite in another, and it was foolish to find it in a Prince from a rival Court.

“I should not have come here uninvited,” she said suddenly, taking a step back from him.

“Did I not do the same to you mere weeks ago?” he countered.

“Yes, but you had a purpose.”

“You do not strike me as someone who takes aimless actions.”

She wasn’t someone who did that.

And she had come here with a purpose. She just hadn’t expected him to be the one to fulfill what she was seeking.

“The winds are not as volatile when I am around you,” she said suddenly. “I do not understand why. Even now, they do

not speak when they have tormented me all night. All day. Too many days and nights.”

His brow furrowed. “Ashtine, when was the last time you truly slept?”

“It was so long ago, I cannot recall,” she whispered. Before he could say something further, she asked, “Why are you on the shore at this hour?”

“I also find sleep evading me as of late,” he sighed. “I was hoping Abrax would be waiting for me as he often is, but I was gifted your presence instead.”

“Abrax finds you often?” she asked, speaking of the water horse that was the spirit animal of Anahita, goddess of the seas and water. Abrax was bonded to Briar in the same way Nasima was bonded to her.

“He does,” Briar answered. “Others simply do not see it as he cannot perch on my shoulder.”

A breath of laughter escaped her. “You jest.”

He glanced over at her and smiled. “I do.”

Her head tilted. “You do so often?”

His small smile faded. “Not as often as I once did.”

“What changed?”

“The world is ever-changing,” he answered. “Do not let me keep you,” he added as he lowered to the sand.

Ashtine nodded, trying to decipher what she should do. She wanted to stay. There was a peace here that was evading her at home, but not if he wanted her to leave.

“You wish to be alone?” she finally asked.

“I simply do not wish for you to feel obligated to stay,” he answered, resting his forearms atop his bent knees.

She nodded again. “Are you opposed to me staying?”

He looked up at her, his brow pinched. “Of course not, your Highness.”

Another nod, but still she didn't move to sit. Or leave for that matter.

"Do you wish to stay?" Briar asked after an extended stretch of awkward silence.

"I do."

A soft smile appeared. "Then sit, Ashtine."

"But if you wish for me to—"

"Do you always overthink?"

A frown pulled on her mouth. "I am well aware that others find me perplexing, Prince Drayce. I find social situations just as bewildering."

"Is that what this is? A social situation?"

"I don't know because—" Then she glimpsed the smile he was fighting. "You are teasing me," she said in irritation.

"I would say you read social situations just fine, Ashtine," he said with a small huff of laughter. Patting the space beside him, he added, "Please sit. It would be a pleasure to spend this time with you."

Ashtine gave a sharp nod of her chin before she lowered down beside him, digging her toes deep into the sand.

"If you are allowing me the informality of addressing you by your given name, I am going to insist you do the same for me," he said after several quiet moments.

"What?" Ashtine asked, confused as she watched him lift a hand and begin to toy with the surf as it rolled in. Tendrils of sea water threaded between his fingers, staying with him when the waves rolled back out.

"You called me Prince Drayce earlier. Briar will do."

"Do others call you Briar?"

"My friends do." He turned to look at her as the water spiraled into a mini-cyclone in his palm. "I also want you to know I do not find you perplexing in the slightest."

“You are teasing me again,” she said, averting her eyes and dragging a finger through the sand.

“Not at all, Ashtine,” he replied. “I find you to be many things, but perplexing is not one of them.”

Lifting a hand, she let a small whirlwind of air twist in her palm, matching his water cyclone. “I do not know how to respond to that.”

“There is no need to respond to it,” he answered. “Do the winds bring new murmurings that have kept you from sleep?”

“No. Only more of the same,” she sighed.

“I can see how that would keep sleep at bay.”

“Ermir told me my mother wrestled with the winds as well, but he can offer no guidance as to how she managed them.”

“Have you found anything that quiets them?”

Ashtine lowered her whirlwind to the ground, letting grains of sand join the swirling air. “They are not as loud in the libraries, but I think that is because there are no windows or doors. It keeps them somewhat contained. Or perhaps I am simply reaching for some semblance of reprieve.”

“Did you find a reprieve when you came here tonight?” Briar asked, back to letting his magic wind between his fingers, small droplets landing on the sand as it moved.

“Not particularly. Not until—”

She cut herself off, because even she could recognize how inappropriate that sounded. How it was something that shouldn't be entertained.

That *couldn't* be entertained.

“Until what?” Briar asked.

“There is no hiding from the winds,” she answered instead. “What are you running from this night, Prince?”

“Briar,” he corrected with a small smile.

He let his magic dissipate before leaning back on his hands. Stretching his legs out before him, he stared out at the sea. He



was completely relaxed and at peace alongside the element he commanded. She used to have that with the winds. Walking among them was a freedom she'd cherished, and their whispered secrets had made her feel special as a child. A gift when so much had been taken from her. As she'd aged, they'd become as much a part of her as her silver hair and lilting voice. But they'd also become as symbolic as her title. The Wind Princess and Wind Walker. That was what she was to most.

"Ruling is a privilege we are given," Briar said into the summer night. "But some days, it is heavy and feels more like a burden. Would you agree?"

"I would," she replied without question. "But if I am adding to that burden—"

"You are not," he interrupted, pinning her with soulful eyes. "I have lived far more decades than you and know this cycle well. Times change. Trials come. Peace reigns, until it doesn't. I can feel the shift, and so can you."

"You believe me," she said in realization, staring back at him.

He nodded. "Many feel it, but many also choose not to acknowledge it. I cannot entirely blame them. I can see the value in clinging to the peaceful times before they are gone, but we do not get such a privilege."

"Because we have the privilege of ruling," she said softly.

"Exactly," he replied. "You are wise beyond your years, Ashtine. Do not doubt yourself."

"A task easier spoken than carried out."

"Agreed."

She relaxed more, wondering just how long they could sit on a shore before either of their Courts realized their sovereign was missing.

"I find it doubtful that is what is keeping you from sleep this night," she said after several minutes of comfortable silence.

"Because you are wise beyond your years," Briar replied.

“You tease again,” she said, but she felt a small smile pull at her lips. Briar only smiled as well, continuing to stare out at the gently rolling waves. Her head tilted, silver hair slipping over her shoulder. “Do you do this often?”

“Do what?”

“Sit on the beach in the night with another and tease them?”

Briar slowly turned to face her again and studied her for a long minute. She wasn't sure why, but usually when someone did that it was because she said something they found odd.

Finally, he answered, “I often find myself on the beach. It does not matter the time of day. Rarely with another. If there is, it is often Sawyer or the Fire Prince.”

Ashtine nodded, processing all of that before she said, “How does the Fire Prince fare?”

“How is Queen Semiria?” Briar countered.

That was a fair response. The Fae Queen and the Fire Prince had been close. Mentor and mentee for all of Talwyn's childhood. Ashtine had often found herself jealous of their relationship. Ermir was like a father, but the Fire Prince and Talwyn had been different. Niece and uncle, perhaps? Again, Ashtine wouldn't know, but the sudden disappearance of Queen Eliné had left their relationship broken. She wasn't sure it would ever be repaired at this point.

“Talwyn has the Earth Prince. He is a knowledgeable and loyal Second,” Ashtine answered. As an afterthought, she added, “And she has Tarek.”

Briar nodded. “Having people who care is only valuable if one is willing to let them do so.”

“The Fire Prince does not let you offer comfort?”

“Centuries of life together, and he still pushes others away,” Briar sighed.

“Surely he just needs to find his way. He and Queen Eliné were close. He was her soulmate,” Ashtine pondered aloud.

“Yes, which makes her sudden disappearance all the harder on him, but he won’t fucking talk about it,” Briar gritted out.

She waited for the apology that always followed after someone cursed in her presence. Not that she cared, but everyone treated her differently. Even Talwyn and Azrael conversed differently when she was around, but the apology never came from Briar. From what she knew of the male, he didn’t appear to act any differently around her. In fact, he was the only one who seemed to treat her the same as everyone else. No one ever teased her. Perhaps Renly had when she was younger, but after her coronation, that had ceased.

“But you do not need to hear of my burdens this night,” Briar went on. “If a war is on the horizon, the other Courts need to be made aware.”

“I have tried,” Ashtine sighed.

“Have you?”

She lifted her gaze to his, a bit taken aback. “Did I not come to you and seek your aid? Did you not initially dismiss my concerns?”

“I do not recall dismissing your concerns.”

Ashtine sat up straighter, her eyes narrowing. “You denied my request.”

“I never spoke such words. I wanted to discuss things further—which is a rational request when someone is asking to increase their stores of magically-enhanced weapons—and you became upset and left before we could do so,” Briar said simply.

“I— That is not—” Ashtine snapped her mouth shut as she started to sputter, something a princess was never to do.

“If others are not taking your concerns seriously, it is because you are allowing such a thing,” Briar said.

Ashtine could only gape at him. “You believe I *allow* others to dismiss me?” she demanded, failing to keep the incredulity from creeping into her voice.

“What is your explanation?”

“I do not have one,” she retorted. Briar’s brow arched, and the mannerism only served to make her more upset. A gust of wind swept along the beach, grains of sand and droplets of water splattering against her skin and marring her gown. “I have never considered you a rude person, Prince Drayce.”

“I have never considered you meek, *Ashtine*,” he replied, still calm and collected as he got to his feet.

Ashtine scrambled up as gracefully as she could beside him. “I am not that,” she retorted, air swirling beneath her and lifting her feet a fraction off the ground.

Briar glanced down before bringing his gaze back to hers. “You certainly shouldn’t be,” he replied. “Not with the power that runs in your veins and not with the title you wield. But I stand by what I said, your Highness. If your concerns are not being taken seriously, it is because you are allowing it. Feel free to stay on these shores as long as you wish.”

A water portal appeared, Briar retreating through it a moment later, leaving her standing on the shore beneath a sky slowly taking on the colors of dawn. A flash of faint silver light appeared a second before Nasima’s cry mixed with the sound of the waves.

*The realm hangs in the balance.*

*A beginning or an ending? Time will tell.*

Biting down on a cry of frustration, Ashtine stepped into the winds that tortured her and went home.

# CHAPTER FIVE



BRAIR

*FUCK!*

That was all he had time to think as he rolled to the side, but not before he conjured a wave of water to meet the wall of flames coming at him. And not before he sent an ice dagger flying.

The Fire General lifted her sword with a second to spare, the dagger shattering into tiny crystals when it collided with her blade.

Briar rolled onto his knees before pushing to his feet. Eliza's skills never failed to impress him, but it wasn't a surprise. She and Nakoia trained together and trained their forces together,

and he'd lain awake all night with an idea rolling around in his mind. The problem was, he didn't know how to approach his Inner Court or the Fire Court with the idea because relations with the Eastern Courts were strained enough as it was.

"Step behind your foot instead of in front," Nakoa said, and Briar turned to find him approaching Thia, one of Eliza's soldiers. "That will allow you to pivot easier."

Thia nodded, taking in every word and testing out the maneuver while the rest of them looked on.

"Where's Cyrus?" Sawyer asked, coming up beside them.

Eliza clicked her tongue in annoyance. "Cyrus is never up this early."

Sawyer huffed a laugh. "He sleeps in while his mate reports for training?"

"Every fucking day," Eliza grumbled, sheathing her sword down her back and flicking her red-gold braid over her shoulder. "Anyway, is there a particular reason you joined us this morning?"

Sawyer looked at Briar expectantly, because he too had been confused when Briar had suggested a trip to the Fire Court this morning. He hadn't been planning on bringing Sawyer with, but his brother was getting nosy. Briar knew the moment he suggested joining forces with the Eastern Courts for training, Sawyer would inundate him with questions. Maybe he should have approached Ashtine with this idea first, but he wasn't sure when he'd be seeing the Wind Princess again after the way he'd left her earlier that morning.

"Is he doing any better?"

Eliza crossed her arms, looking past him and watching the rest of her soldiers going through their morning training routines. Her shoulders tensed. "That is not what you came here to ask me because you already know the answer."

Fair point.

Briar pushed out a harsh breath, tugging on the band that kept his hair tied back. Nakoa had joined them now, his

turquoise eyes narrowing as he studied his prince. “I came to get your thoughts. Both of you actually. We train our Courts together, teaching our armies to work together and use their magic as one. Perhaps, now that we are all under one queen, we should be doing so with the other Courts as well.”

Eliza slowly slid her gaze back to him, and Nakoa blinked, a scowl pulling on his mouth. “Talwyn is only ruling in Eliné’s stead right now,” Sawyer cut in. “Technically, that’s not even her role. It would be Eliné’s Second—”

“Who is too lost to his own inner turmoil to properly do so,” Nakoa interrupted, rubbing at his jaw.

“Which would then fall to her Third, which is you,” Eliza continued, jerking her chin at Briar. “So I suppose the decision is yours.”

“That’s not how this works, and you know it,” Briar retorted. “I came to ask your opinions on the matter.”

“Why now? Eliné has only been gone a little over a year. Even when she was here, the West and East didn’t mingle much,” Sawyer said.

“That was due more to the feud between the Fire and Earth Courts than anything,” Briar argued.

“Question still stands. Why now?”

Definitely should have done this when Sawyer wasn’t around.

“It was merely an idea. It would give our forces new training activities rather than the same old, same old, and it could build relations,” Briar said. “Seems like a grand idea all around.”

Eliza flicked her grey eyes up to Nakoa, who had folded his arms across his chest once more. “It’s not a terrible idea, but with so much animosity between the Earth and Fire Courts, I don’t know that it would work.”

“So we start with the Wind Court,” Briar said with a shrug.

Eliza scoffed. “Luan would see it as a slight against him if we went to the Wind Princess and not him. And the Earth

Prince isn't the only issue here. There is also Talwyn."

They all fell silent. No one needed to ask what she meant. The growing rift between the Fire Prince and the Fae Queen of the Eastern Courts wasn't a secret by any means.

"Something to think on then," Briar finally said.

"Sure," Eliza replied, her eyes narrowing as Cyrus came sauntering down the path from the Fiera Palace. "Do not distract my soldier," she yelled at him.

Cyrus merely threw her the middle finger before wrapping his arm around Thia's waist and bringing his mouth to hers.

"One of these days I am going to set him on fire," Eliza grumbled.

"Wouldn't do much seeing as he's also a Fire Fae," Sawyer replied.

"Eyebrows take a while to grow back," she returned with a shrug.

Briar huffed a laugh turning to Nakoa. "Are you staying for a while?"

Nakoa nodded. "I'll send word when I need a portal home."

"Actually, I was planning to spend some time in the libraries here. If that's all right with you?" he asked, his gaze shifting to Eliza.

But before she could answer, Cyrus was there, Thia tucked into his side. "Of course, Drayce. Whatever you need."

"Thank you," Briar answered, turning and beginning the walk up the path Cyrus had just come from.

Sawyer fell into step beside him, and he didn't miss that his brother had gone quiet. He knew the interrogation was coming, and within minutes of stepping into the libraries, he started.

"What is really going on, Briar?" Sawyer asked, his voice low as they began wandering among the various rows of books. When Briar didn't answer, he pushed, "Does this have



anything to do with why you've been going to the Wind Court lately?"

Briar threw a glare at his brother. "Maybe let's not discuss this in another Court's palace."

"Apparently, this is the place to discuss a multitude of things, including new training regimens you haven't even proposed to your own Inner Court yet," Sawyer went on, his tone hard. "What the fuck, Briar?"

Briar sighed as they climbed the stairs to the next floor. "I know, Sawyer. This last year has been hard on all of us."

"Shutting the rest of us out is not the answer. You can see what it's doing to the Fire Court."

"I know."

"Do you even know what we're looking for here?" Sawyer asked as they made their way through the stacks of books on the third floor.

They had a library in the Water Court, of course, but the Fire Court library was second to only the Wind Court Catacombs. And, again, Briar wasn't sure when he'd be going back there again. The truth was, he'd been a dick to Ashtine. He'd likely spoken to her in a way no one ever had, and while he stood by what he said, he'd said that to create distance between them. He'd been far too close to crossing a forbidden line. Or maybe not crossing it completely, but definitely pushing invisible boundaries.

"Yes. No. Sort of," Briar answered absent-mindedly.

"That is not helpful in the slightest," Sawyer replied in annoyance. "If you had an idea, we could at least ask Eliza where to look. There are seven levels in this library, Briar."

"I know how many floors there are," Briar retorted. He always simply looked through the books Ashtine had already collected when he was looking for answers with her. "Texts about the Great War and Avonleya," he finally added.

"Avonleya?" Sawyer said, coming to a standstill. "What could we possibly need to know about Avonleya?"

“I don’t know,” Briar answered. “That’s why I’m looking for books about the kingdom.”

Avonleya.

The kingdom locked away to keep the rest of the realm safe. Or that was what King Deimas and Queen Esmeray had tried to rewrite into history. The truth was they had brought war to Avonleya when their monarchy had denied them something they wanted. The Fae Courts had fought alongside Avonleya, and that was why the then Court Royals had eventually been executed. While everyone had been at the public slaughter, the Court capitals had been ransacked and precious texts destroyed. It had been expected. It was why the hidden heirs had been dispersed among the crowd. No one would have suspected they’d be there to watch their parents be sacrificed in the name of setting an example.

He rounded the corner, taking the stairs to the next floor. Honestly, he had no idea where to look for anything in here. He’d simply been hoping that a change of scenery might help him sort everything out.

There was no warning when a figure stepped from the lingering smoke of the lit brazier along the wall, but Briar was used to the Ash Rider suddenly appearing. Whereas Ashtine could walk among the winds anywhere, Rayner needed smoke or ashes to move among. It hindered his movements, but only slightly.

“I asked Eliza. She said the main floor houses books about Avonleya, but there aren’t many,” Rayner said in his low voice, black hair falling across his brow and into his grey eyes that swirled like smoke.

“You spoke to Sawyer, then,” Briar said, only now realizing his brother hadn’t followed him up the stairs.

“He said he’d rather not wander around aimlessly the entire day. He also said to tell you he’d meet you downstairs when you were ready,” the male said, crossing his arms and leaning a shoulder against the wall. “Something we need to be aware of?”

“No. I mean, I’m not sure yet. Is he here?”

Rayner’s features seemed to darken, the smoke in his eyes swirling faster. “He went to his mountain chalet.”

“Fuck,” Briar muttered. Eliza and Cyrus had conveniently left that part out. “Not letting anyone in?”

“Has he ever?”

Briar didn’t need to answer. The mountain chalet was where the Fire Prince went to sort himself out. The problem was, he’d never let another soul into that grand mountain estate. Wards kept everyone out, but the-gods-knew they’d tried. When Eliné had first left, he’d spent almost a month there and only came back to the Fiera Palace when Eliza had threatened to burn his mother’s garden to piles of ash. Drastic measures, sure, but it’d done the trick. Now he only stayed gone for a day or two. Most of the time.

Normally, Briar would have talked through all his thoughts about Ashtine’s concerns with him, but the Fire Prince had his own turmoil to deal with. He didn’t need Briar’s piled on top of everything else right now.

“Thanks for the help, Rayner,” Briar said, turning to head back down the stairs.

“Drayce,” Rayner called out.

Briar looked back over his shoulder to find him pushing off the wall.

“Was he like this after the Royals were killed? His parents?” Rayner asked.

“No,” Briar answered. “He grieved, of course. We all did. Together. But he’s never been like this.”

The unspoken hung in the air between them. They didn’t know how to help him, and they didn’t know if he’d ever be the same.

Rayner was gone in the next blink, and Briar made his way back down to the main floor. It took a few minutes, but he found Sawyer at a table situated beneath a window. There were a few books on the table, and he dropped into the chair

across from his brother. Someone had brought them a pitcher of water and glasses, and he poured himself a cup.

“The staff is locating more,” Sawyer said. “But they warned me that a lot of the information contradicts itself.”

“That’s not surprising,” Briar muttered. He and Ashtine were having the same difficulty with the texts in the Wind Court, and that only seemed to aggravate her for some reason. He was still learning how to read her, so he hadn’t pushed.

No.

That wasn’t it.

He was learning to read her too well, and that was a problem. He shouldn’t know that she was getting aggravated when she smoothed her hand over the page, as if hoping the text would change. He shouldn’t know that she preferred wool socks over slippers or boots. And he shouldn’t know that if he used his water gazing magic on the water in his glass, he’d find her in her cozy nook in the catacombs because, although they brought her food and drink there, she never touched it, giving him the perfect view to observe her.

“I found something that should be of interest to you,” Sawyer said, sliding an open book across the table.

Briar picked it up, skimming the page, then let the book fall to the table. He met his brother’s gaze, icy blue eyes that mirrored his own.

“You’ve been spying,” Briar accused.

“You’ve been sneaking around,” Sawyer replied, not a hint of remorse in his tone.

“This,” Briar said, tapping the pages of the book, “is not something that needs to be worried about.”

“If you say so,” his brother said, reaching for another book. “I just thought it was something you should keep in mind.”

The text Sawyer had shown him spoke about Fae powers not crossing, specifically those of powerful bloodlines. It was common knowledge that the Courts did not mix bloodlines. It wasn’t unheard of for the common, less powerful Fae, but

strong bloodlines? It was taboo on many levels, and the only way around it was if you were twin flames. A fated bond could trump the unspoken laws of old, and even then, the Courts would have issues if Royals formed a union. There would be worries about heirs and an imbalance of power and—

And none of this mattered because that wasn't why he was spending increasing amounts of time in the Wind Court.

That wasn't why he was wondering if she'd remembered to eat today.

That wasn't why if Sawyer weren't sitting across from him, he would have already spelled the water in his drinking glass to watch her comb through texts.

This was to keep their Courts safe and prepare for war, not create more division among them all.

He sighed, glancing once more at the warning his brother had offered before flipping the book shut and reaching for another.

Perhaps distance would be the wiser option.

# CHAPTER SIX



## ASHTINE

SHE TOOK A DEEP breath as she stepped from the winds and stood before the White Halls. The sprawling castle was Talwyn's home. Or rather, it was the home of the Queen of the Eastern Courts. It was situated at the northernmost point of the Tykese River on the border between the Fire Court and Wind Court.

Eliné, Talwyn's aunt, had resided in the Black Halls. It was the sister castle at the mouth of the Tykese on the southern part of the continent between the Water Court and Earth Court. Talwyn had been Queen of the Eastern Courts for several decades, her aunt slowly easing her into the duties, but Eliné had still been highly involved in the affairs of the Eastern

Courts. She'd still been heavily guiding her niece, and this last year without Queen Eliné had taken its toll on more than the young queen.

Still, Ashtine had grown up with Talwyn, and when she had become queen, she had asked Ashtine to be her Third-in-Command. With Eliné around, Ashtine had found her duties hadn't changed much, and now with the upheaval of recent events, she wasn't sure what was expected of her. Technically, Talwyn didn't rule over all the Courts. The Fire Prince would be the acting sovereign until evidence of Eliné's death was undeniable, she provided a means to step down, or all the sitting Royals came together and made a unanimous decision to let Talwyn take both thrones.

The Western Courts would never allow such a thing.

*The lost one approaches*, came the whispered murmur of the winds seconds before the heavy front doors of the White Halls opened.

Talwyn stepped through, her mahogany hair braided back. Jade green eyes fixed on Ashtine, her features taut. She wore a white tunic with fitted brown pants. It was her usual attire. She didn't have her fighting leathers on, but there were various daggers in place. Her customary twin blades were also absent, and Ashtine tilted her head at that observation. She always had at least one on her.

"Why are you standing out here?" Talwyn asked, her tone brusque. She always spoke like that, though, even before her aunt's abrupt disappearance. But there had once been an underlying softness, and that was still usually reserved for Ashtine. Not this morning, apparently.

That was fine.

Ashtine was on a peculiar edge herself. Briar hadn't been to the Wind Court in weeks. In fact, she hadn't spoken to him since the morning he'd all but dismissed her on the beach. He'd sent a few messages to see if she'd learned anything more, but after the second one, Ashtine had stopped bothering with replies. If he'd suddenly become too busy to help her like he'd offered, that was fine. She didn't need to appease his

guilty conscience, or whatever it was he was trying to do. It confused her, and things that confused her made her irritable.

Like the nonstop chattering of the winds about war and bloodshed and the land across the sea.

And Briar's words constantly replaying in her mind: *If others are not taking your concerns seriously, it is because you are allowing such a thing.*

Her winds swirled, tossing her flowing hair across her face, and the queen took notice. Talwyn could command the winds as well. She could also control earth elements, along with Shifter magic she had yet to delve too deeply into. But despite having wind magic, the winds did not accost her as they did Ashtine, and the queen could not walk among them.

Talwyn's tone had softened a touch when she stepped to the side, making room for the Wind Princess to pass. "Come inside, Ashtine. Have breakfast with me."

Ashtine wasn't the least bit hungry, but she nodded once. "Thank you," she replied, moving gracefully through the entry and into the halls. The warmth of the castle wrapped around her, but she didn't feel it. Not as the winds immediately started a tirade.

*The rivers will run red.*

*The lands will be divided.*

*Which side will you choose?*

*Which side will she choose?*

*Across the sea.*

*The balance tips.*

"Ashtine." Her name was sharp on Talwyn's tongue, but her given name pulled her from the winds' grasp. Talwyn was the only one who used it.

And the Water Prince as of late. Or at least he had been.

"I have never seen you look so..." Talwyn trailed off, her gaze sliding over Ashtine as the princess pulled her cloak from



her shoulders and passed it off to the waiting staff. “Are you unwell?”

“Why do you ask such a thing?”

“I have not seen you in some time. You are pale and thin, and you seem...haunted.”

Ashtine fell into step beside the queen as they made their way to the dining room. “I do not have phantoms disturbing me.”

“No, not—” Talwyn cut herself off. “I simply mean you appear troubled.”

“We are all troubled in these times,” Ashtine replied, nodding to the male who pushed the dining room doors open.

But her steps faltered when she entered and found another male already seated at the table.

*A snake in the grass.*

For once, Ashtine wasn't sure if those were the whispers of the winds or her own thoughts.

The male was as surprised as Ashtine as he quickly pushed to his feet, the sound of his chair scraping against the stone floor sounding in the room. He rounded the table, bowing at the waist before straightening and saying, “Princess Evermorn. What a delightful surprise this morning.” Then he turned to Talwyn. “Did you forget to inform me of a morning meeting, Moonflower?”

“I am not required to inform you of anything,” Talwyn retorted. “But no. I was on my way down to breakfast when I felt her cross my wards. It was an unplanned visit, but one I am happy to be surprised by.”

A small smile tilted on Ashtine's mouth, and for the first time in weeks, she felt some of the tension ease from her being. There was a sense of familiarity with Talwyn. Something that came from growing up together.

“Sit. Let's eat,” Talwyn said, gesturing to the spread of food as she moved to her place at the head of the table.

“After you, your Highness,” Tarek said, stepping aside to let her pass.

Tarek Ordos.

The Third-in-Command in the Earth Court under Prince Azrael, and Talwyn’s twin flame. Although, the pair were still in their trials.

The twin flame bond was a mysterious twist of fate if Ashtine was being honest. Those who believed they’d found their twin flame were Marked to see if the connection settled into place and to initiate the Trials. There were five parts to it, and each piece had to be fulfilled in a test of sorts. Each couple was different and so each trial was specific to them. The Marking itself was a powerful enchantment that called from soul to soul. It created a literal offering of a piece of themselves to one another. If they had truly found each other, the Mark branded itself permanently to their skin, and the bond became unbreakable. However, if a bond was initiated and the couple were not twin flames, the Mark slowly faded over time, and the pieces of soul offered faded with it. Many believed they had found their twin flame but were too afraid to test it against the Marking, so they were content to simply join in a union of marriage as mates and husband and wife.

Ashtine had not witnessed many true twin flame bonds in her two centuries of life, and even before she was born, accounts of them were few. Cyrus and Thia were twin flames. Having completed their Trials, their twin flame bond was fully anointed. Tarek and Talwyn were the other, assuming they completed their Trials some day. They’d accepted the bond over a decade ago and still had not progressed through another Trial. Cyrus and Thia had completed their bond in under two years.

*A prince hides in plain sight.*

*Allies will turn.*

*Across the sea—*

Her fingers curled into her palms, nails digging into her skin as Ashtine took her seat to Talwyn’s left, and her head canted

to the side when Tarek took the seat on Talwyn's right. This was an informal breakfast, but tradition mandated that that seat was for the Queen's Second. Prince Azrael. Not Tarek. This only changed when a union had taken place, and even then, he would sit in the chair Ashtine currently occupied.

"Did you wed since I saw you last?" Ashtine asked.

Tarek paused his reach for a platter of sausages while Talwyn choked on the sip of juice she'd just taken.

"No. Why would you ask that?" Talwyn asked once she'd finished coughing.

"To receive an answer."

"Right," Talwyn muttered, setting her glass down. "Why do you think I have married?"

"The seat Tarek occupies is not his."

Talwyn glanced at Tarek briefly before looking at Ashtine once more, clearly noting her odd mood. Tarek, however, had gone stone-faced, his jaw tense and pale green eyes fixed on Ashtine with an unimpressed stare.

"Azrael is not here," Talwyn said. "Would you like him to sit at the other end of the table?"

"It does not matter to me where he sits," Ashtine replied. "But I think it matters to *him*."

The unimpressed stare morphed into a glare as Tarek gritted out, "What dishes can I pass to you, your Highness?"

"I am not hungry," Ashtine said, toying with the silverware beside her plate.

"You look like you need to eat," Talwyn said pointedly, spearing a piece of melon with her fork.

"Is Prince Azrael visiting today?"

"I see him often, as I see you, but we correspond daily."

Ashtine's brow furrowed. "That did not answer my question."

“No, Prince Azrael is not visiting today,” Talwyn amended, trying to pass her a plate filled with pastries.

Ashtine shook her head, waving the dish away. Her hand fell to the tabletop, where she tapped her finger, her nail clicking.

“What brings you to the White Halls today, your Highness?” Tarek asked.

“A prince that hides in plain sight,” Ashtine said, looking past him to the window beyond. “Why is that open?”

“Are you cold?” Talwyn asked.

“No.”

“Then why does it bother you?”

“It does not.”

Talwyn set her silverware down, pushing her plate aside. The weight of her full attention landed on Ashtine, but before she could speak, Tarek said, “What do you mean, ‘a prince that hides in plain sight?’”

“It could mean many things,” Ashtine murmured.

“But you have an idea?” Tarek pushed.

“She doesn’t know,” Talwyn said.

“Surely she has an inkling,” Tarek argued.

“That is not how the winds work.”

“She is a Wind Walker,” he replied. “Her entire purpose is to communicate with the winds.”

“The winds speak like an Oracle,” Talwyn said tightly. “Only Ashtine cannot have a conversation with them. She can only hear their chattering.”

“And she has been doing this for decades,” Tarek said, clearly growing agitated. “One would think she’d have learned to understand them in some way.”

“One would think you’d speak more respectfully to your *queen*,” Ashtine cut in, her lilt sharp as the air around the room stirred. A moment later, a hawk’s cry sounded before Nasima appeared at the window, perching on the ledge.

“I am not speaking to her as my queen right now,” Tarek replied flippantly. “I am speaking to my twin flame.”

The silver bracelet coiled around Talwyn’s wrist shimmered, and Tarek’s eyes dropped to it before meeting her gaze again. Ashtine watched, somewhat fascinated, as his features softened. “I did not mean to upset you, Moonflower.”

*She ventured east, whispered the winds.*

Ashtine slid her gaze to Talwyn. “Did you visit the Wind Court recently?”

Talwyn slid her plate back in front of her, watching Ashtine carefully. “Do you think I would visit your court but not visit you?”

Ashtine tapped her nail again absent-mindedly. “Visiting me is not a requirement of visiting the Wind Court.”

“Ashtine, I—”

“But I would have felt you enter the court,” she continued, as though she hadn’t heard Talwyn speak at all.

But if she hadn’t come to the Wind Court that only left the Witch Kingdoms, and why would she go there? It was common knowledge Talwyn and the High Witch did not get along.

There was a long moment of silence before Talwyn lifted a hand, a swirl of leaves appearing and disappearing, taking a message to someone.

“We need Azrael for breakfast?” Tarek asked shortly, apparently knowing who Talwyn had sent the message to.

“No. I need my Second because Ashtine is troubled by something,” Talwyn answered.

“We don’t even know if that is true,” Tarek argued. “Furthermore, how will Azrael help with that?”

*Lies and truth, who can tell?*

*Enemies or friends?*

*She will come.*

*Who will come?* Ashtine wondered, desperate to understand something. Anything. Desperate for a reprieve from—

*The rivers will run red.*

*The lands will be divided.*

*Which side will you choose?*

*The war only sleeps.*

*Answers lie across the sea, Ashtine recited in her mind.*

*Go there!*

She sighed. *I cannot go there. I do not wish to go there.*

Reaching out, she stroked her fingers along Nasima's feathers. She wasn't sure when she'd stood and made her way to the window, but she hadn't heard the last several minutes of conversation between Talwyn and Tarek.

*The guarded prince arrives.*

She didn't need the winds to tell her Prince Azrael was here. She knew the male's heavy footsteps and heard them seconds before the dining hall doors opened once more. More out of habit than anything, Ashtine turned and nodded in greeting to the Earth Prince. His earthy brown eyes were scanning the room before him, but she'd already turned back to the window.

*He trusts no one.*

*He is smart,* Ashtine retorted.

*Which side will he choose?*

"The winds' whispers are vague and often nonsense," Azrael was saying. "They could mean nothing, but they could mean everything."

"She has to have some idea," Tarek was arguing.

"What stakes do you have in this revelation?" the Earth Prince countered.

*The rivers will run red.*

*The lands will be divided.*

“There is a war coming,” Ashtine said, fingers gliding over Nasima’s head once more.

The chatter ceased for a moment, the silence deafening.

Tarek was the first to speak. “The war ended centuries ago.”

“The end of one war does not prevent the rise of another,” Azrael replied from where he stood near the table, his arms crossed.

“There have been no indications of war. Does this have to do with Avonleya?” Talwyn mused.

“Avonleya can do nothing locked behind their wards,” Tarek scoffed.

“They incited the Great War. I am sure they can incite another.”

“We are well-prepared for a war. All the Courts are after everything that transpired before,” Azrael said.

*Answers lie across the sea.*

Her hands fell to the window ledge, fingers curling. The whispers of the winds mixed with the arguing of her peers.

*If others are not taking your concerns seriously, it is because you are allowing such a thing.*

Briar’s words rattled in her mind among everything else.

And it was all just so fucking loud.

“Enough!” she cried, whirling from the window. A gust of wind rattled the dishes on the table, and Nasima let out an anxious cry. Everyone stilled, turning to her.

“Ashtine?” Talwyn ventured.

Both Azrael and Tarek had stepped in front of her, standing in defensive positions. It was only then that Ashtine realized her feet weren’t on the ground. She was floating a few inches above the floor, the winds keeping her aloft.

Control was as fleeting as the winds right now, and she grappled to find any semblance of it. A princess was to never lose control over her power, her Court, her demeanor.

And she found she did not care in this moment. That was both stupid and dangerous.

“War comes. Prepare or don’t, but with war, death comes to claim what is his. The rivers will run red. The lands will be divided, and the survival of the realm hangs in the balance,” Ashtine said, holding Talwyn’s gaze. “Do with that knowledge what you will.”

“Ashtine—”

But she was gone among the winds before she could hear them speak further.

Before she lost any more control.

She’d already lost her sanity.

And she wondered if she’d ever know peace again.



# CHAPTER SEVEN



## BRIAR

ABRAX SHOOK HIS HEAD, water from his mane spraying with the motion. His white coat glimmered in the hot summer sun, and Briar was thankful for the water that flowed as his mane and tail. The mist was a welcome reprieve from the heat.

He'd come out here when he'd seen Abrax running along the rolling waves. The sea was choppier than usual today, the sweltering sea breeze a little more haphazard, and Abrax seemed to be enjoying the chaos as he ran. Abrax wasn't alone, however. A silver hawk was soaring in the air above him, swooping down and brushing the tips of her wings along his mane and coat.

And where Nasima was, the Wind Princess usually wasn't far behind.

He hadn't seen her in weeks, and shortly after that, she'd stopped responding to his sporadic correspondence. Not that Briar could blame her. After his conversation with Sawyer, he'd made the wise decision to distance himself from the princess. If Sawyer was noticing, her Court was noticing too, and the last thing they needed was to incite rumors or suspicion. He could still aid her from here. Or that had been his thought until she'd stopped replying to him.

That wasn't the only part of his plan that had failed, though. Despite his best efforts, his mind wandered to her multiple times a day. When she'd stopped replying to his correspondence, he'd forced himself not to send a water message to Ermir or Renly to check on her wellbeing. More than that, he'd forced himself not to go to the Wind Court himself. Showing up unannounced once had been suspicious enough. To do so again would make things worse.

What things?

Things he tried not to think about.

Things that had made him keep himself so busy, running himself ragged, trying to keep from thinking thoughts he had no business letting enter his mind.

Yet when he saw Nasima, he had known. He'd immediately gone to one of the shallow dishes of water, drawn a quick enchanting Mark, and found her exactly where he knew she'd be: walking along the shore in the same place where they'd sat and spoken in the early morning hours nearly a month ago.

He'd felt her cross into the court, of course, but it was only a matter of time before others noticed her presence as well, especially if the wind continued to increase.

Nasima swooped down again, the tips of her wing brushing Briar's cheek as she did so. Then she circled before coming to settle on his shoulder moments before Ashtine came into view. She was no longer walking among the waves, but lying flat on her back in the sand. The closer he got, the more of her he

took in. Her gown fluttering in her winds; her silver hair blowing across her face. Her hands rested at her sides, swirling vortexes at her fingertips. Her eyes were closed, but he knew she was aware of his presence.

“Princess,” he greeted, stopping several feet away.

She didn’t move. Didn’t even bother acknowledging him. He took a few steps closer, then faltered. This close, he could see how pale she was. Her complexion was fair to begin with, but this was...not that. She looked frail, as though she wasn’t getting enough sleep or eating properly. It was rare for a Fae to fall ill. They were not plagued with sickness like the mortals of the realm, and while they didn’t need as much food and rest as a mortal, their power reserves depended on both to remain at their strongest. The more powerful one was, the more maintaining those things was crucial, and yet the Wind Princess was lying on the shores looking as if death himself was courting her.

It wasn’t until Nasima took to the air once more, a soft cry coming from her, that Ashtine blinked her eyes open. She appeared almost startled.

“You came,” she tilted. “I did not think you would.”

Guilt gnawed at him, but he didn’t let it linger. “Are you well, Princess?” he asked, taking a few more steps until he stood right beside her. Peering down, he held her stare as she mulled over his question.

“Is anyone ever truly well?” she finally countered. “Or do we all simply mask our ailments?”

“I...”

“I do not require an answer,” she continued, her eyes falling closed once more.

Movement in his periphery had him turning to find Abrax making his way forward. He bent his head, huffing into her hair, and Ashtine smiled. Or tried to. It certainly didn’t reach her eyes when she blinked them open, stroking a hand down Abrax’s muzzle. He huffed softly into her hand again.

“Would you like to come up to the House of Water?” Briar asked, crouching beside her.

“That is not necessary.”

Except that it probably was. This area of the beaches was close enough to the House of Water it was patrolled regularly. She would be discovered soon. If not by his guard, then by his Inner Court.

“Please come with me,” he said gently, extending a hand to her.

“It is not necessary,” she repeated.

He smiled softly. “Please come join me for the midday meal. Or at the very least, come out of the sun. Your fair skin will burn quickly here.”

“Fae heal just as quickly.”

“Ashtine.”

Something in her eyes cleared a little at her name, and he reached for her hand. When she didn't resist, he curled his fingers around hers before pulling her to her feet. A moment later, he guided her through a water portal directly into his private rooms. They were less likely to be interrupted here, and he was certain Ashtine didn't want others to see her in this state.

He sent a request for a light meal to be prepared before he said, “I am going to change quickly if that is all right with you?”

“It will not bother me if you change.”

“Would you like different clothing?”

Her brow furrowed. “Do you have female clothing in your rooms?”

He stifled his huff of laughter. “No, Ashtine, but I could have some procured for you.”

She waved him off, moving to pull the open window closed before examining the ledge that ran along the perimeter of the room. The ledge was halfway up the wall, and the top of the

ledge was shallow, allowing water to pool and flow. It was for aesthetics as much as it was security. The more water around the Water Prince, the more powerful he would be.

Briar let her be, going to his bedchamber to change into a set of fresh pants and tunic that weren't damp from the spray of the sea. When he returned, he found her on the other side of the room, far from the windows and balcony doors. She was studying a large map of their continent that was mounted on the wall, a hand raised and her finger tracing along the western edge of the map.

"Food will be delivered shortly," Briar said.

"I am not hungry."

Briar shrugged, moving to her side and clasping his hands behind his back. "That is no bother. I can eat, and you can tell me what brings you to the sea this day."

Her finger paused, head tilting to the side. "I do not always know where I will find myself when I walk among the winds."

"Are you saying the winds brought you here?"

"No. It was simply a statement."

"What is the most obscure place you have found yourself?"

She stepped closer to the map, her finger sliding along until it hovered over the mortal kingdom of Toreall and the Dresden Forest.

Briar's brows rose. "We cannot access our magic in the mortal lands. The enchanted wards prevent it."

"The winds forewarned me that I would need Talwyn's ring," Ashtine replied.

"Her Semiria ring? You stole it?"

"Is it stealing if an item is returned before someone realizes it is missing?"

He couldn't stifle his laughter this time, and Ashtine finally turned to look at him. She eyed him for a moment, looking at him as though she'd never heard such a sound.

“You find amusement easily,” she murmured, turning back to the map.

“Do you not laugh on occasion, Princess Evermorn?” he asked in a teasing tone.

“I do not remember the last time I found something joyful enough to produce such a sound,” she answered. Before he could comment on that, she asked, “What if history is wrong?”

“That is...”

He was going to say an odd question, but that wasn't necessarily true. He just needed to work out what she was trying to say. Their times in the Citadel catacombs had allowed him to slowly start learning to converse with her, but it still took a conscious effort to understand what she was truly saying. So instead, he studied her for a moment. Watched her bring her focus back to the Edria Sea and trace along the left side of the frame while rolling her words around in his mind.

Finally, he asked, “What history do you question?”

“All of it,” she replied. “Some texts I have read suggest there is power that once walked our lands, but no longer does. But does that mean it left our world all together? Or does it simply mean it has been trapped somewhere else?”

He watched her trace the edge of the frame again, understanding finally dawning. “You speak of Avonleya.”

“You lived decades during the war.”

“Yes, but I was born long after the Avonleyan Wards went up. I was born well after the wards around the mortal lands were erected. I remember my parents trying desperately to keep the peace with Deimas and Esmeray,” Briar answered.

“And yet their blood was still spilled.”

He swallowed thickly as the memories flashed in his mind. Standing stoically beside his brother and the Fire Court Heir. Hidden among the crowd and glamoured. Forcing himself not to react, not to make a sound. Slipping a hand over Sawyer's mouth to keep him quiet when he couldn't stifle his cry.

“Yes, it was,” he finally managed to say, just as a knock sounded. “Leave the food outside, please,” he called.

“I apologize,” Ashtine said. “I did not mean to stir such memories.”

He lifted his hand, as if he was going to touch her, then quickly dropped it when he realized what he was doing. “Still reading social situations just fine,” he replied with a sad smile before he moved to retrieve the food.

When he returned, tray in hand, he asked, “Do you like fish?”

“I am not opposed to a creature that lives in the sea,” she returned, her tone slowly returning to her signature mystical lilt.

Briar smiled, placing the tray on the small dining table near the balcony doors. There was seating for four, though when he dined in his rooms, he was usually by himself.

“I should have asked if you enjoy eating seafood. Fish. Shellfish,” he explained, lifting a lid off a platter of salmon and lobster.

She took a single step closer, then stopped. Her hands were at her sides, fingers curling into the fabric of her gown.

“If you do not, I had chicken prepared as well,” he added in a hurry, revealing the other platter. “There is also fruit, bread, and cheese.”

“But I told you I was not hungry?”

It was a question, and he picked up one of the two stacked plates. “You did, but if that has changed, there is plenty here,” he replied, beginning to fill his plate.

He was cutting a piece of bread from the loaf when he felt her approach. It took everything in him not to react as she peered over his shoulder. “I have dined with you in the Water Court before.”

“You have,” he agreed.

“But I was never served that,” she continued, and he knew she was referring to the oysters.

“I hoard them,” he said matter-of-factly.

There was an extended silence before she said, “I find that amusing.”

“Would you like to try one?”

“Does that not defeat the purpose of hoarding them?”

He huffed a laugh. “I suppose it does, but I am willing to do so.”

It was another few seconds before she gave a decisive nod. “Then yes, I would like to try one. And some fish. I do enjoy the food when I visit.”

“Noted,” he replied with a smile, placing his full plate before a chair. “You can have this plate. I will make another.”

Ashtine stumbled back a few steps, her gaze darting to the balcony doors. “You can eat, Prince. I will wait on the sofa. Or perhaps I should simply take my leave.”

Briar set the empty plate he had just retrieved back down, turning to face her. “Did I offend you in some way?”

“No,” she answered, shaking her head and taking another step back.

“If I did, I apologize.”

“I did not mean to come here,” she said, more to herself than to him.

“You can always come here,” he replied, moving closer to her.

Her focus snapped back to him. “That is a foolish statement. Impulsive visits cannot happen. This should not have happened. I will go.”

On instinct, he lurched forward, because he didn’t want her to go anywhere. She was clearly upset, and he reached out, clasping her elbow. Wind Walkers couldn’t travel with a



passenger, so she wouldn't be able to leave if they had physical contact.

“Ashtine, wait—”

But a violent gust of air slammed into him, and he was thrown backwards. Tendrils of water from the ledges leapt out, wrapping around his arms and waist and keeping him on his feet. More importantly, his magic kept him from colliding with the table full of food. The force of Ashtine's magic, however, had still blown the smaller plates to the floor. Bread and cheese splattered against the balcony doors and grapes rolled across the marble floor while the dinnerware shattered.

He lifted his gaze to find Ashtine standing with a curved sickle blade in her hand. The weapon's blade was white and silver. Skystone, he realized. Her reaction had certainly caught him off guard, but it shouldn't have. Ermir would have made sure the last Evermorn Heir could protect herself. Her childhood spent hidden away would have included all manner of training and that would have continued. Sion wouldn't have let her stop.

“I would not harm you, Ashtine,” he said cautiously. “I only wished to speak with you more before you left. I did not wish for you to leave.”

“I can feel your wards, Prince Drayce—”

“Briar,” he interrupted.

Her lips pursed. “I can feel your wards. I cannot walk among the winds from your rooms.”

She wasn't wrong, but he hadn't been thinking clearly when he thought she was going to leave upset. Again.

“I admit I acted impulsively,” he replied. “I did not wish for you to leave.”

“You stated that, but I do not think I believe it.”

“Why would you doubt my words?”

“Because you ceased your visits.”

She said it so simply. No bite or bitterness to her tone. Just a statement of what was.

And it made him so uneasy because he did not want that to be her impression of him. She didn't realize that—

“I understand I can be vexing,” she lilted, dropping her arm, but her grip remained on her weapon.

“Vexing. You think I stopped coming to see you because I find you vexing?” Briar repeated.

She gave a curt nod of her chin. “I do not fault you for it.”

He moved then, quickly in the way the Fae could, but so did she. In the next blink, he stood in front of her, and she had her blade raised once more, the edge at his throat. He let her keep it there, but he also placed the tip of his finger beneath her chin, tipping her head back and keeping her eyes on his. “I find you clever. I find you captivating. Alluring in a way I have never experienced. I find you so incredibly enthralling that my thoughts wander to you multiple times a day. But I find you anything but vexing, Ashtine Evermorn.”

“Why?” she asked, and gods. It wasn't breathy or teasing. She was truly asking why. Because she was Ashtine. The princess who saw the worlds differently than the rest of them.

“Because you are a breath of fresh air, my dear,” he answered.

Her brow furrowed. “That is...nonsensical.”

“Very much so,” he agreed. “It is nonsensical that even with a blade at my throat I am contemplating if the inevitable injury would be worth it to press my lips to yours.”

Ashtine stepped back, her weapon still poised as she stared at him for a long second. Two. Three. He gave her time, letting her process. Then she slowly lowered her blade as she said, “It is nonsensical that I am not opposed to that. It breaks laws of old.”

“It is nonsensical that I do not care,” he replied.

“You should care, Prince Drayce. Breaking the laws of old angers the gods and Fates.”

“Briar.”

“What?”

He closed the space she'd put between them, but she didn't raise her weapon again. “Stop calling me ‘Prince Drayce,’” he said, the words laced with a primal growl. “And I do not care. In this moment, the only thing I care about is your permission to take what I want.”

“It is not that simple—”

“It is either an approval or a denial,” he cut in, echoing her words from weeks ago. He was being pushy, but he didn't care about that either because he'd been thinking about this since the morning hours they'd spent talking together on a beach.

“We will regret this,” she whispered.

“I do not think I could ever regret you, Ashtine. Yes or no?”

“Yes.”

She'd scarcely whispered the word when his lips were on hers, breathing in her approval. His hand cupped her jaw, tipping her head to the perfect angle to deepen the kiss while his other arm wound around her waist, pulling her into him. In the back of his mind, he registered the sound of her blade clinking against the floor when she dropped it. Then soft fingers skimmed along his cheek, and her other hand curled around his forearm.

Ashtine pushed onto her toes, seeking more from him, and his magic pressed against his skin in approval, seeking her wind, her air, all of *her*. Gods, if they weren't careful, this was going to be far more than a kiss. If their magic became involved, this would become so much more.

She must have had the same thoughts because she broke the kiss first, but she didn't move away. Their bodies were still pressed together, and when she tilted her head, silver hair flowed on her phantom winds.

Winds that had been absent until this moment.

“I am sorry I stayed away,” he murmured into the space between their lips. “Never again. If you need me, I will be

there. With you. For you.”

His thumb brushed along her cheekbone, and an expression he couldn't read filled her features. She finally took that step back from him. “I should return, but I require a water portal to leave your quarters.”

“I invited you for a meal, and we have not dined together,” he argued.

“I did tell you I was not hungry.”

“Then meet me on the shore before the sun wakes.”

“Perhaps.”

“I will be waiting.”

“And if I do not show?”

He stepped into her once more, brushing a soft kiss to her lips and savoring the taste of her. “Then I shall wait the next day and the next and not regret a moment of it.”

“Be well, Briar,” was all she said, her fingers dragging along his bare forearm as she moved past him.

He didn't reach for her again. Didn't try to keep her any longer. He conjured a water portal, and the Wind Princess didn't look back when she stepped from his rooms.

# CHAPTER EIGHT



ASHTINE

SHE HADN'T PLANNED TO go there.

When she'd stepped from the White Halls, she'd wandered for a while, letting the winds take her where they would. And when they'd dumped her on the shores of the Water Court, she hadn't had it in her to truly care. Anyone could have found her. His Inner Court would have likely felt her cross into their territory, but Briar would have felt it first. She didn't know what she'd do when they came for her either. But no one would find that out of the ordinary.

She was the sheltered, peculiar Wind Princess that spoke in oddities and was difficult to understand. Hard to converse

with, yet simple to dismiss. Easy to pass her concerns off as the idle chatter of the breezes and lack of faith in her advisors.

For weeks, Briar's words had plagued her as much as the winds, and she'd realized he'd been right. But how does one demand consideration for something no one can understand?

So for a few moments, she'd dropped to the sand and tried to simply exist. She'd said her peace. She'd passed the winds' warnings along. What the others chose to do with those cryptic words wasn't her concern.

And yet she knew it wouldn't be enough either.

Not as her winds swirled around her, throwing her hair across her face and whispering more and more as the waves methodically rolled to shore. She'd been so distracted by their newest musings, she'd missed Briar's arrival. But with each passing minute of his presence, the winds had quieted, and when Abrax had let her run her fingers along his muzzle, she'd found the smallest breath of peace she'd been seeking for months. Years. Decades.

Ashtine had expected to go back to the House of Water and dine with him, but she had not anticipated being escorted to his private quarters. It had made sense, of course, but after his weeks of silence, it had still been a surprise.

But not as surprising as his admission to wanting to kiss her.

Not as shocking to her desiring the same thing.

Not as unforeseen as both of them giving in to that longing.

And now she was confused about more than the winds.

She moved to her bathing room, peeling off her dress. Now that she was feeling more herself, she realized how sweltering it had been in the Water Court. She bathed, wishing she could take her time in the water, but consequences for her brash actions earlier in the day would certainly find her soon. Sure enough, she'd been in the bath all of five minutes when she felt the power cross her wards. More than one.

A light knocking sounded, and Noelle entered the bathing room. "I apologize for the interruption, your grace, but Ermir

asked me to tell you Queen Talwyn is here along with Prince Azrael.”

She was already moving to retrieve towels and preparing to help Ashtine get ready.

“Is Tarek also present?” Ashtine asked.

“No, your grace.”

Ashtine nodded. “Renly and Sion?”

“Are also here.”

She nodded again, already tired at the thought of dealing with all of this. She was also a touch annoyed that the winds could plague her with ominous warnings but not warn her about who was coming to her court.

*Perhaps useful information would serve us all better,* she snapped internally.

*Answers lie across the sea. Find the one to go there.*

*By the gods,* she sighed, standing from the bath so abruptly, water sloshed over the sides.

Noelle was there, handing her a towel before helping her squeeze the water from her hair. Long before she was mentally ready, she was making her way down to one of the meeting rooms near the main foyer. The room fell silent when she entered, everyone but Talwyn getting to their feet and bowing or nodding. It was ridiculous, really. These formalities were pointless after centuries together.

“Princess,” Ermir greeted, everyone returning to their seats after she’d taken her place at the other end of the table, opposite Talwyn. “Queen Talwyn and Prince Azrael were just telling us of your visit earlier today.”

“I was unaware my movements were being monitored and reported,” Ashtine replied.

“That is not what we’re doing,” Talwyn said.

“My misunderstanding. To what do I owe the visit?”

Everyone in the room shifted in their seats, but it was the Earth Prince who said, “You cannot be serious.”

“I am usually quite serious.”

“You came to the White Halls, told us a war was coming, and then you left. Surely you recognize we would have questions after all that,” he said in disbelief.

“One would assume you would have questions,” she agreed.

“And what do you have to say about it all?” Azrael demanded.

Ashtine tilted her head, folding her hands in her lap. “I have nothing to say.”

“You have... How can you—”

“Stop, Az,” Talwyn interrupted. “I’ll handle it.” Turning her attention back to Ashtine, she said, “We have questions, but do you have any answers, Ashtine?”

“I do not know your questions,” Ashtine answered. “But if you are asking of the rivers running red, the lands dividing, and the survival of the realm hanging in the balance, I have been searching for those answers for months. I have the same questions you do.”

“If you have been searching for answers for months, then why do you just now bring them to our attention?” Azrael cut in.

Ashtine’s gaze slid to him. “As you said, the winds’ whispers are vague and often nonsense. They could mean nothing, but they could mean everything.”

“We are talking about a potential war,” the Earth Prince snarled.

“I am aware.”

“You cannot keep a war threat a secret for months, Princess.”

“Not informing you does not mean it was kept a secret, Prince Luan,” she replied, the air in the room stirring.



“If I may,” Ermir cut in before Azrael could speak again. “As you know from working with the late Princess Ophelia for decades before her death, the winds are not an Oracle. It has long fallen to the Wind Court to investigate and try to interpret the songs of the winds. That is why our library is so vast.”

“The fact remains that a potential war should be brought to our attention,” Azrael argued.

“Prince, do you know how often the winds speak of war? Of death? Of bloodshed and any number of catastrophes?” Ermir replied, his tone getting sterner.

Ashtine had only heard him speak this way a handful of times. It was his power stirring the air in the room now. Not hers.

“They speak of peace and prosperity just as often,” Ermir went on. “They carry news from other continents, other realms. They carry history. Not just ours, but of the stars. When we say the winds know everything and nothing, we mean just that. We do not dismiss things lightly, but to assume we have kept a threat of war a secret is insulting to our princess and our court as a whole.”

Talwyn’s gaze was looking between Ermir and Azrael, clearly trying to decide if she should intervene, but she was the youngest Fae at this table. Ashtine was older by mere months, but half of the Fae in attendance had fought in the Great War. And all of them, save for the females, had been alive during it.

“I meant no disrespect, Ermir,” Azrael said. “I remember well how Ophelia was often plagued by the winds.”

That had Ashtine leaning forward in interest.

“But I also remember a war fought and lives lost,” the Earth Prince went on. “I would be failing my own court if I simply sat back and did not pursue a potential threat.”

“That is understandable,” Sion chimed in. “We would do the same, and we have. The princess came to us with these whisperings months ago, and we have been looking into them ever since. We know it plagues her. We can see it consuming her. We are not blind, but we have found nothing to

substantiate it. Bringing it to your attention without proof brings just as many obstacles.”

“What if there was proof?” Talwyn cut in.

“What do you speak of?” Ashtine asked, and even she could hear the desperation in her tone.

The concerned looks from around the room told her everyone else could hear it too.

“There are...rumors. Of a weapon hidden in the mortal lands,” Talwyn said.

“Rumors?” Sion asked with a frown. “We cannot act on rumors.”

“The source is credible.”

*She ventured east, the winds whispered.*

“You spoke to the Oracle,” Ashtine said in realization. “That is why you went to the Witch Kingdoms.”

“When did you go there?” Prince Azrael demanded, turning to the Fae Queen. “And who escorted you?”

“I went myself, Az,” Talwyn sighed.

“To the fucking Witch Kingdoms?”

“Yes,” Talwyn snapped. “Maliq was with me,” she added, referencing her wolf spirit animal.

“By the gods, Talwyn—”

“Who or who did not accompany her is not important,” Ashtine interrupted, the chatter around the table falling silent. “What did you learn, Talwyn?”

“I was told that a weapon hides in the mortal lands. I was told how to retrieve it, but that the time is not right,” she explained.

“And when will the time be right?” Azrael asked.

“I was only told I will know. That’s it. That’s all she would say. But the weapon will determine the outcome of centuries of conflict.”

“A war that was not won but only sleeps,” Ashtine murmured.

Feelings of relief at knowing she wasn't losing her mind warred with dread at learning the winds weren't just chattering nonsense.

“So where does that leave us?” Azrael asked.

“On the precipice of salvation and destruction,” Ashtine answered.

“That is...not helpful.”

“You believe now is not the time to seek this weapon?” Renly asked, sitting forward to peer at Talwyn down the table.

“The Oracle was clear the time is not now. She insisted I would know when the time was right to retrieve it,” the queen answered.

“And how will you find such a thing? Let alone retrieve it? Do you even know what it is?” Sion asked.

“I am still working on the strategies, but when the time comes, I will be prepared,” she answered, sitting taller and lifting her chin. “In the meantime, we use the time we have to prepare.” She met Ashtine's gaze again. “And if you learn anything more, Ashtine...”

“The information you have provided may be useful,” Ashtine said, the burden and expectation of what she was weighing on her once more.

“We will help her,” Ermir added. “As the princess said, your information helps us narrow down our search.”

Talwyn nodded, glancing at Ashtine quickly before saying, “While this is pressing, we have time. None of us need to stress over it.”

“Understood, your Majesty,” Ermir answered.

Ashtine had stopped listening though.

*A prince hides in plain sight.*

*Beginnings and endings.*

*A world the gods forgot.*

*There must be balance.*

*A genesis brings death.*

“Is there anything else I am needed for?” Ashtine asked suddenly, the winds so loud now she could scarcely hear herself speak.

“No,” Talwyn said slowly. “Will you come for dinner tomorrow evening?”

“Will I dine with you?” Ashtine asked.

*Princes fall. Kings rise. The realms will divide.*

“Why would I invite you to dinner with someone else?” Talwyn asked.

“That would indeed be odd. Dinner sounds lovely. Thank you.”

Then, before anyone else could speak, she was moving among the winds.

*The rivers will run red.*

The winds swirled around her.

*Allies will stand on opposite sides.*

They carried her where they willed.

*Across the sea the cursed one rules.*

She let them have her for so long, she lost track of time. Minutes became hours, and still she stayed among them because while the winds were her freedom, they were also her prison.

*Across the stars, he waits for vengeance.*

Ermir had spoken so much truth in that room, but one thing she was sure they were all wrong about was the winds speaking nonsense. Their chattering may be nonsense in this moment, but a decade from now, would they say the same? Or were warnings for another world carried to her across the voids and stars between the realms? Either way, she did not believe them to be nonsense. The winds were rarely wrong.

It wasn't until she glimpsed dark skin and pale blonde hair sitting on a shore that she realized how late it was. She'd been wandering among the winds for hours if it was nearly dawn, but she didn't step from them now. It was for the best. The winds wouldn't let her linger. They would pull her somewhere else soon enough, so for the briefest of moments she let herself remember what it had been like.

His lips on hers.

How he'd tasted of the sea and sun.

How he'd been demanding yet soft with how he spoke to her, touched her, when everyone else in her life was careful and wary.

How she'd wanted more. So much more.

How she had sent her magic to him, hoping he'd lose as much control as she was.

She'd been with males before. Not many due to her obvious peculiarities, and they were never more than physical needs being met or curiosity being satisfied. But this had been different, and she was unsure how to feel about any of it.

But she knew she could not meet him tonight like he'd requested.

She knew it broke laws of old.

That waves and winds would tip the balance.

Still, she found herself returning among the winds the next morning before the sun woke, and he was there, just as he'd said he would be. He was there the next and the next and the next, simply waiting.

He'd promised he would always be there. With her. For her.

But he didn't know what she knew.

He didn't know what the winds had whispered to her while she'd lain on that shore the day he'd kissed her.

*A prince of water will fall.*

# CHAPTER NINE



## BRIAR

“I AM SURPRISED YOU haven’t brought up training with the other courts again,” Sawyer said as he sat with his brother on the banks of Anahita’s Springs. The water was said to be blessed by the goddess, and it was where the Water Fae imbued weapons with magic. Not only water magic. Any weapon could be imbued here. The element of the Fae dipping the weapon into the waters determined what magic would imbue the weapon.

The Springs were also connected to Briar and Sawyer, the only two known Water Gazers in the realm.

“No one seemed keen on the idea,” Briar mused, watching the images in the water before them. Of course he’d come here

with the intention of seeing if Ashtine was in her catacomb nook, but Sawyer had already been here. He wasn't about to send his brother away. This was the one place they both felt connected to their parents. Their mother had been a powerful water Fae, but it was their father that had been the Water Gazer. It was hard enough for Fae to conceive one child, let alone two. Both of those children receiving the Water Gazer gift lended to the idea that the Drayce bloodline was blessed and favored by Anahita.

He'd also come here because there was a storm blowing in from the north, and the Springs were more sheltered from the elements.

"Right. It has nothing to do with the fact that you stopped visiting the Wind Court," Sawyer said, drawing his own enchantment to change the view he was watching in the water.

"What do you want me to say, Sawyer?" Briar asked.

His brother shrugged. "Thought maybe you'd want to talk about it. The Fire Prince is...unavailable, and you've been preoccupied. Not to mention that for weeks you've been going to the same place on the beach every morning before dawn."

"Your spying habit is becoming annoying," Briar muttered.

"You're just jealous because it's easier for me," Sawyer replied, pulling the small mirror from his pocket. It had belonged to their father, and Sawyer had been enamored with it as a youngling. It had only seemed fitting that Sawyer have it when their parents were killed, but the mirror was imbued with the power of the Springs. Their father always told them the goddess herself had given it to the first Drayce Water Prince. That was the legend anyway.

"Either way, I thought I'd let everyone sit with the idea for a while before bringing it up again. I still believe it would be a good idea," Briar said.

"Quit trying to change the subject," Sawyer said, dipping a hand into the Springs and letting water pool in his palm. "Tell me about the Wind Princess."

"There is nothing to tell."

And that was the truth, as far as he knew. Sure, he could tell his brother about a kiss that happened over a month ago, but what was the point when it had meant nothing? At least to her. That was clear by the fact that she never showed on the beach, but he still waited, night after night, despite knowing it was likely pointless.

Ashtine wasn't wrong. A relationship would break laws of old and likely incite the wrath of the gods. She wouldn't risk that. He shouldn't either, but that didn't stop him from replaying the kiss over and over. Each day, the memory of how it felt to touch her faded a little more, and he found himself desperate to preserve it. He hated that if they were anyone else, no one would care. He'd spent time with plenty of females. But because of their godsdamn titles, the mere act of spending time together caused speculation. Sure, the speculations were true, but that was beside the point.

"Fuck!" Briar shouted as something icy hit him right in the face. He lurched to his feet, finding his brother laughing. Looking down, he found the snowball already melting in the summer heat. "Jackass," he muttered, wiping at his face.

"It is rude to ignore someone when in their company," Sawyer replied, scooping more water and freezing it to snow.

"I swear to Anahita, Sawyer, if you throw that at me—"

But they were cut off by the piercing cry of a hawk.

A cry he knew.

"Is that—"

"Yes, it is," Briar interrupted, trying to see through the trees that kept the Springs secluded.

What would Nasima be doing here unless Ashtine was with her? But he would have felt her cross the wards.

The hawk finally broke through, gliding above the small body of water in tight circles. Her wings brushed the surface, sending rings rippling to the edges as she screeched another cry.



“I have never seen her apart from Princess Evermorn,” Sawyer said, almost in awe.

“It is rare,” Briar agreed, but something wasn’t right. He could feel it in the way Nasima circled again, her cries almost desperate. Without thinking, he raised an arm. The silver hawk immediately flew to him, taloned feet wrapping around his forearm.

“Briar...” Sawyer trailed off, staring at him. “Tell me again how you haven’t been spending time with the Wind Princess.”

“I haven’t seen her in weeks.”

“That doesn’t erase the past.”

“Nothing has happened,” Briar retorted.

“That doesn’t erase the wish that something had,” Sawyer countered. He said it softly, almost gently.

But this had nothing to do with wants or desires. Something was wrong, and he’d promised Ashtine he would always be there. With her. For her.

It wasn’t even a question when he conjured a water portal, stepping through to the same place he had a few months ago. There was no hesitation this time. No trepidation or overthinking what he was doing as he strode across the bridge and up the Citadel steps. And just like the time before, the door was opened by Sion.

“Prince Drayce. Sawyer,” the Wind General said, his features grim.

It was only then that Briar registered how godsdamn windy it was here. Sure, it was the Wind Court, but these were brutal gusts. He suddenly wondered how he hadn’t been tossed right off the bridge and into the chasm it spanned. The clouds swirled just as violently, and Nasima loosed another cry as she battled against the gales, taking to the sky.

Sion stepped aside, letting them in. Briar hadn’t even thought about Sawyer following him, but he should have expected it.

“This is not a good time,” Sion said, shutting out the raging wind.

“Where is she?” Briar demanded.

“You really need to make appointments for these meetings, Prince,” Sion tried again.

“Noted. Where the fuck is she?”

Sion straightened at the tone, instinctively going into a defensive position. His hand twitched toward a blade strapped to his waist, and his features hardened. “She is not available right now. I can send word when she is feeling better.”

“No. Take me to her. It is not a request, Sion. Take me to Ashtine now,” Briar snapped, the temperature in the foyer dropping dramatically.

“Briar, calm down,” Sawyer murmured, bringing a hand to Briar’s shoulder. A little louder, he added, “Nasima came to fetch him, Sion.”

“What the fuck is going on?” Renly demanded, coming up behind Sion. His glare was enough to make any other Fae shrink back as air swirled at his fingertips. “The princess is unavailable. Surely Sion told you this.”

“He did. I did not care. Take me to her,” Briar answered. “Or I will find her myself.”

“They claim Nasima summoned them here,” Sion cut in, eyeing the Drayce brothers.

“Bullshit,” Renly spat. “I know you are a Fae Prince, but that does not mean you get to come to another court and make demands. The princess is unavailable. If you take one step farther into this Citadel, I will assume you are here to harm her and act accordingly.”

“You cannot be serious,” Briar snarled.

Sawyer’s grip on his shoulder tightened. “Do not start a conflict here, Briar.”

“There will be no conflict as long as I can lay eyes on her,” he bit back. “If not her, then take me to Ermir.”

“He cannot leave her side—” Renly started, but a faint flash of light cut him off.

When it faded, Abrax stood between the Water Fae and Wind Fae. He reared up, Renly and Sion both cursing as they lurched out of the way, but Briar was already moving. His own water magic propelled him up, and he was scarcely astride the spirit animal when the horse bolted forward. Staff cried out and jumped aside as they moved through the Citadel. If he wasn't so focused on seeing Ashtine, he'd find the scene comical. A horse galloping through the halls of a palace.

Two Fae scrambled to open the doors that led to the grounds behind the Citadel, and Abrax burst through. Briar didn't question how he knew where to go. He was too busy using his power to stay astride now that he was back out in the swirling winds.

Abrax skidded to a halt at the base of steep stairs that climbed up a cliff-side and into the dark clouds. Briar knew that at the top of those steps was a courtyard that was believed to be as blessed as Anahita's Springs. Skystone was found there. Stone that was said to be wind-kissed by Sefarina. Briar had never been inside the courtyards. In fact, the base of these steps was the closest he'd ever been.

Nasima's cry carried to him again, and it spurred him into motion. He took the steps two at a time, praying to the gods he wouldn't lose his footing. The climb took longer than he would have liked, and the gusting winds didn't help matters. He was out of breath when he reached the top, but he found Ermir there, standing outside the archway that was the entrance to the courtyard.

The air around them turned so cold, Briar could see his breath. He wasn't sure if it was the wind raging or his own fury.

“Why are you not with her?” Briar demanded, staring at the Wind Court Second.

Ermir calmly turned to face him, worry and sorrow mingling on his features. Speaking loud enough to be heard over the

howling winds, he said, “Prince Drayce. I am so sorry you made the climb up here, but she cannot see you today.”

“She will see me, but that does not answer my question,” Briar growled. “Why the fuck are you out here when she is in there? Something is clearly wrong.”

“The winds can be all-consuming,” Ermir said, turning back to face the archway.

Briar finally let himself look as well, and his breath stalled. There was a whirlwind inside the courtyard, leaves and dust swirling among it, but he couldn’t see Ashtine.

“Where is she?” Briar asked, taking a step forward.

“In the center of it,” Ermir answered.

“Again I ask you: why *the fuck* are you out here when your princess is in trouble?”

“I cannot help her,” he answered, and Briar could hear the angst in his words. He wanted to, but he wasn’t even trying.

Ermir lifted a hand, his magic wrapping around them and creating a barrier against the storm. They could still hear it, but at least they didn’t need to yell to be heard. “Ophelia would experience the same at times,” he said.

“And you stood back and did nothing? Nothing helped?” Briar asked, his gaze fixed to the courtyard.

“We tried,” Ermir said. “For decades. But it is a burden of a Wind Walker. Only they can find what quiets them. Ophelia struggled, just as I have seen Ashtine struggling these last years.”

“You have seen her struggling and done nothing?” he sneered.

“Do not presume to know the inner workings of our court or the winds, Prince,” Ermir said. “You think I enjoy seeing her like this? She is like a daughter to me. If there was anything I could do, I would.”

“And Ophelia never found a way to balance her gifts?” Briar asked.

“Not until Ansel,” Ermir said, referencing Ashtine’s father. “Even then, it took time. Their union was arranged, like all royal joinings are, but he found a way. He was the only one. I pray to Sefarina that Ashtine will find that peace one day. But today is not that day, and I have no choice but to watch over her while she suffers.”

“Let me into the courtyard,” Briar said, because standing back wasn’t an option.

He’d promised her he would always be there for her. Even if they could never be anything more, he could do this. Not stand back and watch, but he could step into her suffering and let her know she wasn’t alone in it. No one else might understand the winds, but that didn’t mean she needed to endure her fate alone.

Ermir shook his head. “It is too dangerous, Prince.”

Briar turned, a dagger of ice forming in his hand. “That is my risk to take. It will be a risk you take if you deny me again, Ermir. Let me into the courtyard.”

The older Fae’s eyes went wide, bouncing between his face and the dagger. “Prince, you overstep—”

The dagger flew, grazing Ermir’s shoulder enough to cause blood to well. Another dagger had already formed. “The next one will not leave a simple scratch, Ermir,” Briar warned.

He’d expected rage, but the Second only studied him for a long moment before nodding. He lowered his magic, the winds so forceful once more that Briar stumbled forward and the ice dagger was ripped from his hand. He pushed against the wind, following Ermir to the archway. The Second sent a small burst of his magic through the archway. It glowed faintly, and he motioned for Briar to enter.

Each step forward felt like pushing against ten warriors in training. More than once, he stumbled back, losing ground. Even using a shield of his own magic didn’t aid him. He was exhausted when he finally broke through the whirlwind, using his water gifts to wash the dust from eyes. He had hoped there would be a calm at the center, but while the winds didn’t

assault him like they had outside her storm, what he found had him rushing forward.

Ashtine was there, on her knees and face in her hands. Her hair appeared to have once been intricately braided, but now it was a wild mess of knots. She was barefoot, and a cloak was nowhere to be seen. Her gown was sleeveless, and the skirt was as tossed about as her hair.

“Ashtine.”

Her name got caught in his throat, but she still somehow heard it. She slowly lifted her head, dull sky-blue eyes meeting his. She was as white as a phantom. Even her lips were bloodless, but the dark circles beneath her eyes told him she hadn't slept in days, possibly weeks.

Briar lowered to his knees, wanting to reach for her, but not sure if he should. Truth be known, now that he was here, he had no godsdamn idea what to do or how to help her.

“Ashtine,” he said again. “Tell me what I can do.”

“You came here.” It wasn't a question, and gods, she sounded so incredibly tired.

“I told you I would always be here for you, my dear,” he answered.

“You came,” she repeated, as if she didn't believe he was kneeling in front of her.

“I did.”

“Why?”

“You called for me. Or I suppose Nasima did the calling,” he replied.

“They are quieter when you are near,” Ashtine said, her voice somewhere between an awed whisper and a sob. “I do not understand why.”

“Then I will stay. We can understand tomorrow,” Briar said. Looking around, he found her storm had lessened some. The winds still swirled, though not as violently. He could see

glimpses of the gleaming white skystone. “Do you wish to stay here? In the courtyard?”

“I wish for a bed and to sleep. That is all I wish for. It is all I have desired for days,” she said, still not moving.

“Then let’s do that.”

“The winds do not let me,” she whispered. “They never cease.”

“But they are less in the moment, yes?” Briar asked, unable to help himself as he reached out and pushed her hair from her face. Her eyes fluttered closed for the briefest of moments. “Speak, Ashtine.” He didn’t say it harshly, but it was a command to answer.

“Yes,” she murmured. “Because you are near.”

“Then I will stay near. Are you ready?”

He didn’t wait for an answer this time. He stood, then he bent and scooped the princess into his arms. She didn’t fight him. There was no protest. She only sighed, a sound borne out of weariness, and rested her head against his shoulder.

But the whirlwind around them faded, the gales slowing until they were nothing more than a gentle breeze stirring around them. He imagined this was the way the courtyard normally looked. Peaceful and stunning with the skystone glinting in the midday sun.

As he approached the archway, he saw Ermir standing on the other side, a cloak in his hands. Standing next to him was Sawyer. When he stepped out of the courtyard, Ermir placed the cloak over Ashtine without a word.

“I will be staying with her,” Briar said to the Wind Court Second. “It is not a request.”

“Indeed, your Highness,” Ermir replied. “Had you attempted to leave, I would have asked you to stay.”

Briar glanced at his brother, who only gave a small nod of his head, before they turned and followed Ermir. He carried Ashtine all the way down those steep stairs. The courtyard was warded. There was no way to make portals at the top. But

Ermir did not take him back to the Citadel the way Briar had come on Abrax.

Instead, Ermir veered left, leading them through a small grove of evergreen trees. They emerged some time later, where the Second pulled open a door that would have been easily missed without guidance.

“The princess’s safe route,” Ermir explained as they entered a dark passageway. “I do not wish for her to be seen in such a state.”

Briar made a sound of acknowledgement. Ashtine hadn’t said a word, and he hoped that meant she was asleep. They climbed several flights of stairs before he was led into a set of rooms he could only assume were Ashtine’s private quarters.

“Her bedchamber is through that door,” Ermir said, nodding to a doorway. “Send word if you need anything. Her handmaiden, Noelle, may be in and out. She can be trusted.”

“Thank you, Ermir,” Briar said.

“No, Prince. I believe it is I who should be thanking you,” the Second replied.

Briar only nodded before carrying Ashtine through to her bedchamber. He wasn’t sure what Sawyer was planning to do, but he also didn’t care as he gently laid Ashtine down. He removed the cloak and replaced it with a heavy wool blanket, but the moment he stepped back, her eyes opened, finding his.

“You will stay?” she asked.

“If you wish,” he replied, but that was a lie. He wasn’t going anywhere, even if she wished him gone.

“You will still be here when I wake?”

“I will always be here for you, Ashtine. Sleep.”

But it wasn’t until he’d removed his boots and climbed atop the bed next to her that she finally found rest. Her fingers curled into his tunic, keeping her tethered to him. The sound of wings rustling drew his attention to the window where Nasima was perched on the ledge. She clicked her beak, feathers rustling again.



“Thank you,” Briar said softly.

The hawk made another clicking sound before she launched back into the sky.

# CHAPTER TEN



## ASHTINE

IF THIS WAS A dream, she did not wish to wake.

Not only because it was the first truly restful sleep she could remember in years, but because she was surrounded by the scent of the sea. The winds were there. She could feel them gently flowing around her, but they waited. All her life, the winds had spoken when they wished. Now they waited until they were summoned. A give and take. A balance. A peace she had desired for months. Years. Decades, if truth be told.

Ashtine took a deep breath, curling more into the male beside her and soaking in these last moments of calm. She wasn't fool enough to think this could continue, but she was wise enough to take the reprieve while she could.

Opening her eyes, she found Briar propped on several pillows, one arm behind his head. His other arm was curled around her, fingers making a light sweeping motion along her waist and hip. If he knew she was awake, he didn't reveal it, and she took the time to truly study him. His pale, blonde hair was such a stark contrast to his dark skin. It reached his shoulders and made his icy blue eyes stand out even more. He appeared completely relaxed as calloused fingers continued their same path. Had he simply...lain here this entire time?

Glancing at a window, she found the light of a dying day. The sun was nearly set. Someone, she assumed it had been Noelle, had been in the room and lit candles and sconces and tended to the fire. There was fresh water on the bedside table, along with a plate of dried meat and cheese, although the food appeared untouched.

He had to know she was awake. Fae could sense the smallest shift in breathing, and in the silence of the room, he could detect a change in heart rate, but neither of them spoke. Was that normal when waking next to someone? She wouldn't know. This was a new experience. While she had been intimate with males before, it had been only that. She had never woken next to one. Never spent an entire night with someone. She'd never actually *slept* next to another in her centuries of life. How odd to still experience new things even after over two hundred years of living.

Minutes passed. Briar's fingers never ceased their movement, and she was nearly lulled back to sleep until a burst of flames appeared next to Briar's head. He sighed, pulling the message from the fire and scanning it. Then he tossed it aside, propping his arm beneath his head once more.

"You must go," Ashtine said, loosening her grip where her fingers were still curled into his tunic.

"It can wait," Briar answered, shifting onto his side. He propped his head on his fist, staring down at her. "How do you fare?"

"My wellbeing need not be your concern."

"And yet it is," he countered. "Ashtine, what happened?"

“That question is too broad, and I find it confusing to answer.”

He nodded in understanding, contemplating his words before he spoke again. “What drove you to the courtyard today?”

“The winds are unrelenting,” she answered, rolling away from him and onto her back. “Is this common practice?”

When he didn’t answer right away, she glanced at him, finding his brow pinched in confusion. It was an expression she was far too used to.

“You do not need to supply an answer,” she added, turning away and trying to find the resolve to get out of the bed. She knew this stolen peace would shatter the moment her feet touched the floor. But fingers were gripping her chin, gently turning her back to face him.

“Do not dismiss me, Ashtine,” Briar said, the words somehow both gentle and commanding all at once. “I simply need a moment to discern what you are saying and how to respond.”

“I understand I am—”

“I swear to the gods, if you say you are vexing, I will become upset,” he interrupted, and the temperature in the room dipped. “I am learning how to speak with you, but you must give me the chance to do so. I do not become impatient with you. I request the same courtesy.”

Ashtine’s eyes narrowed. “You are impatient at this very moment.”

“Impatience and displeasure are different.”

“You do not need to spend time learning how to communicate with me.”

“You misunderstand me,” Briar said, leaning imperceptibly closer. “I want to learn how to speak with you.”

“Why?”

He huffed a small laugh. "I can see I was not clear when I kissed you weeks ago. I want to learn everything there is to know about you, my dear. If you are amenable to that, please clarify what you were referring to when you asked if this was common practice."

Ashtine was silent, mulling over his words before saying, "I find you both intriguing and perplexing, Briar Drayce."

"And I only find you captivating, Ashtine Evermorn," he replied, his thumb brushing along her bottom lip. "Now tell me."

She nodded once, gathering her thoughts. "I simply wonder if it is common practice to wake next to someone and have a conversation."

"That depends."

She rolled towards him once again because no one had taken the time to learn how to speak with her, let alone try to explain social expectations to her. It was just understood she would be the Wind Princess with her head in the clouds and whispered nuances in her ears.

"What are the qualifiers for such an interaction?"

"It is quite common to ask of another's wellbeing, but in this case, I am a friend who is worried after finding you in such a state earlier today," he answered.

She nodded slowly, processing that. "So if we were not friends, the interaction would have been different?"

"If we were not friends, it would have been inappropriate for me to sit in a bed next to you while you slept," he replied. "Then again, it was likely inappropriate either way."

"Because of our titles," she said in understanding.

"Fuck our titles, Ashtine," he replied. "When it is just us, I care little of our titles. It was inappropriate because while you slept I let my mind wander to what it would be like if I could steal kisses and touches without worry."

"It breaks laws of old," she whispered.

“But to answer your question,” he went on, ignoring her comment. “If *that* were us, I would have still asked how you were faring when you woke. Then I would have kissed you until we were both breathless.”

“That would never happen. I have magic of wind and air,” she answered.

He huffed a laugh. “Then my lips would have likely strayed away from yours. Ideally, I would already be wearing little clothing, and you would be in the same state.”

“Your thoughts wandered too far,” she admonished.

He caught some strands of her hair, winding them around a finger. “You wish to stick with conversation then?”

“I...” She watched him for a moment, seeing his lips twitch. Her eyes narrowed. “You are teasing me again.”

“I would never, my dear.”

“You are a liar, Briar Drayce.”

“Perhaps,” he conceded, releasing her hair, before rolling to his back and stretching.

“But I...” she started, pausing when he turned to look at her again.

“You can speak plainly with me, Ashtine. Always.”

“I know. I simply... I enjoy this,” she said. “I did not think I would.”

He smiled softly. “As do I.”

“I think I would enjoy the intimacy as well.”

His blue eyes seemed to darken. “We could put the theory to the test?”

“That would be unwise,” she replied, but her eyes darted to his mouth anyway.

He moved fast, and she let out a small gasp as he rolled, hovering over her. “I tell you I have spent the last hours thinking of what it would be like to taste you again, and you tell me *that*?”

His voice was a sensual purr that she felt in her soul, making her toes curl in a way she'd never experienced. Was *this* what such intimacies were supposed to be like? She truly didn't know, but gods, did she want to find out.

"Tell me not to kiss you, Ashtine," he murmured, his face so close to hers they were sharing breath.

"Why would I say that if it is what I wish for?" she replied, her features scrunching in confusion.

"By the gods," he muttered right before his mouth landed on hers.

His lips moved, insistent and demanding, but she didn't care. Everyone was always so gentle with her. Sharp canines nipped at her lower lip, and another gasp slipped from her. Briar used the moment to slip his tongue into her mouth, tangling with her own. And she wanted more, just like the last time they'd kissed. Her hands looped around his neck, fingers twining into his hair. He was still propped up on one arm, but his other hand was roaming. Rough fingertips traced her jaw, her throat, her collarbone. She was the one shoving at the blankets, giving him room to explore further, but his hand slid back up and cupped her jaw. She was about to protest until he broke the kiss and his mouth followed the same path his hand had. Down her throat, her collarbone, and her magic was restless, seeking out more as much as she was.

"I was wrong," she said, and Briar paused, lifting his head to look at her in question. "I did not think I could be breathless, but I am."

He laughed, a real one, before he kissed her again, this time rolling to his back and taking her with him. Another laugh sounded, but this was her own. She sat up, staring down at Briar beneath her. Her knees were on either side of his hips, her gown bunched up. His hands were on her thighs, and he was watching her in wonder. Not the curious air of bewilderment, but as if he were truly enamored by what he saw.

"I do not laugh often," Ashtine said, more to herself than to him.

“It is a beautiful sound,” he answered, a hand skimming up her side and down her arm, where he interlaced their fingers. “You are still rather pale.”

“I am fair-skinned.”

“This is more than that, Ashtine. Tell me what drove you to the cliffs today,” he said softly, bringing her hand to his mouth and brushing a kiss to her knuckles.

“I already told you this. The winds are unrelenting,” she answered.

“Still about a coming war?”

“Yes, among other things. They speak so often, so quickly. So many things all at once...” She trailed off, the peace she’d been basking in already dissipating with his line of questioning.

Ashtine pulled her hand from his grip before sliding off him and slipping from the bed. Briar let her go, but he followed, getting to his feet just as quickly.

“Tell me one,” he said, reaching for her hand once more and tugging her to stop.

“Tell you one what?”

“Tell me one thing the winds say that drove you to the cliffs.”

She barked another laugh, but this one was humorless and harsh. “So you can carry such burdens too? I cannot do that to you, Prince Drayce.”

He snarled as he yanked her into him, tilting her head back with his finger while his other arm wound around her waist. “Stop trying to distance yourself from me, Ashtine. We can share burdens. We are not designed to face this life in solitude. We have centuries. What would be the point?”

“Then why was I given a gift no one else possesses?” she cried, and Briar’s eyes went wide, his grip on her falling slack. “I was given a gift that so many covet, but they should not, Briar. The winds are both loving and cruel. Their gifts are a blessing and a curse, and you rarely know which until their



musings come to fruition. What good is knowing of the happenings in other realms? What is the purpose of driving me mad until I wish I were anyone but who I am? I cannot use these warnings to protect my people. I cannot use their omens to warn the realm. I cannot understand any of it.”

Her power gusted, blowing through the room with such force the plate of food beside the bed was overturned and pillows were tossed to the floor. Frames slipped from the walls, glass cracking, and pages rustled as books fell from shelves.

“Ashtine.”

His voice was soft and so full of an understanding he could not possibly possess, but he pulled her into his chest, arms wrapping tightly around her.

*They come.*

It was barely a whisper from the winds before there was a knock on the door. “Princess? Prince? Is everything well?”

Ermir.

“We are fine,” Briar called back, keeping her close. “Give us a minute, and we will be out.”

“Do you always speak deception, Prince?” she asked, her voice muffled as she kept her face buried in his tunic. She was anything but fine. She was certain she had never been *fine*.

“It was not a lie,” he said, a hand smoothing down her hair. “You are not fine right now, but I refuse to believe this was the life Fate wanted for you. We will find harmony with the winds, Ashtine.”

“It is not possible.”

“And yet you told me they are less when I am near,” he countered.

“You cannot be with me all the time, Briar.”

“Perhaps not, but I can be there when you need the reprieve until we figure it out.” He took her shoulders, gently easing

her back. “But you must make the choice to let me help, Ashtine.”

“I fear the more time I spend with you, the more I will desire things we cannot have,” she whispered.

He smiled, but it was a sad tilt of his lips. “We will figure that out too.”

“And if we do not care for the outcome?”

“Our friendship will remain,” he answered, swiping a thumb across her cheek. It was only then she realized she was crying. “Do you need another moment before we join Ermir in your sitting room?”

Ashtine nodded, stepping from his touch and retreating to her bathing room. She took her time dragging a brush through her tangled hair, a product of the wind storm she’d summoned.

A storm Briar had walked to the center of to find her.

A storm no one else had dared to even try to help her manage.

But he’d dared.

Foolish or brave, she could not decide.

She changed into a fresh dress, pulling on wool socks rather than slippers, before she stepped back into her bedchambers. Briar was standing near the window, hands clasped behind his back, but he immediately turned when she emerged.

“Are you ready?” he asked.

No.

“Yes,” she answered with a tight smile, but the look Briar returned told her he saw right through it. Then she wondered when she had learned to read social cues. Except she hadn’t. She was only learning to read *him*.

Briar moved to her side, his hand falling to her lower back as he pulled open the bedchamber door and guided her through. She should care that Ermir was seeing him touch her in such a way, but after everything that had happened that day, she doubted it would matter in the end.

She wasn't met with one male in the sitting room, however; she was met with two. Ermir and Sawyer both stood when they emerged, both of them bowing their heads.

Ermir stepped forward, reaching a hand for her, but she found herself drawing back and stepping into Briar. Her Second's brow arched, while Sawyer sent a knowing look to his brother.

"What is the plan here?" Sawyer asked.

"I received a message from the Fire Prince. I was planning to go visit with him tonight," Briar answered, his hand sliding lightly up and down her spine.

"That is not what I meant, and you know it," Sawyer countered. His gaze flicked to Ashtine then back to his brother.

"I do not understand what you are asking," Ashtine said.

"Are you going to speak of the clear relationship between the two of you?" Sawyer asked plainly.

"Sawyer," Briar warned.

"There cannot be a relationship," Ermir cut in. "Old laws of the gods forbid such a thing, but that was not what this is. Is it, Princess?"

"Of course not," she answered, Briar's hand pausing before it slid back to her lower back once more and lingered.

"Bullshit," Sawyer scoffed, folding his arms across his chest. "There will be pushback, but it would be better to come forth with this from the start."

"Calling the Wind Princess a liar is ill-advised," Ermir cut in, his tone condemning. "But if Briar can help her learn to manage the winds, we welcome his aid."

"Even if that was all this is, which I still very much doubt, the Water Prince and the Wind Princess working so closely together ought to be disclosed."

"People will not understand," Ashtine said, shaking her head. "It breaks laws of old, and they will make other demands to prove it is not more."

“What other demands?” Sawyer asked, still eyeing them both.

“The Courts will push for both of them to take partners,” Ermir explained. “But that should start being discussed either way. It is long past time—”

Ashtine tensed, but Briar said, “That does not need to be discussed at this moment after the day we have experienced.”

“I think this does need to be discussed before we leave this room,” Sawyer argued.

Briar didn’t appear bothered in the slightest as he smoothly stepped in front of Ashtine. How he’d known that’s what she needed, she didn’t know, but his presence between her and the others eased something in her chest. It was a statement. He was choosing her—and whatever this was—over their courts.

He couldn’t do that. They couldn’t have this.

“We will discuss this at home, Sawyer,” Briar said.

“Godsdamn right we will,” his brother retorted, the room starting to feel chilly as the siblings argued.

Ignoring his brother’s retort, Briar turned to face her. “You will be all right if I leave?”

Of course not. The moment he left, the winds would pounce.

“Yes,” she answered, stepping back from him and forcing a smile. “Thank you for today. Be well, Prince.”

His eyes narrowed, and she knew he was upset over the formal address, but he couldn’t choose her.

She wasn’t an option for him to choose.

“The next day and the next and not regret a moment of it, Ashtine,” was all he said before he turned away from her. “Ermir, do not hesitate to send a message.”

“Of course, Prince,” her Second answered, but his gaze was pinned on her.

Sawyer followed Briar from the room, the door clicking shut behind them.

“I will ask once, Princess: is it more?” Ermir said, watching her closely.

*The balance tips.*

She forced her smile brighter, suppressing the wince as the winds descended. “No, Ermir. The wrath of angry gods is not something I seek,” she answered. “Is dinner nearly prepared?”

He studied her a moment longer before nodding. “It is if you are feeling well enough?”

“I would enjoy a meal with you,” she answered, placing her hand in the crook of his arm when he extended it to her. She let him lead her from the room as the winds followed.

*Lies and truth, who can tell?*

Maybe she was the liar in all of this after all.

*The rivers will run red.*

*A genesis brings death.*

*A prince of water will fall.*

She breathed deep and wished she were still lost to her dreams.

# CHAPTER ELEVEN



## BRIAR

HE STARED OUT AT the sea, the waves rolling to shore in a rhythm that had soothed him all his life. His hands were in his pockets, and his sleeveless tunic was still warm, even with the stars standing watch while the sun slumbered. Water brushed his bare feet as it ebbed and flowed, and he toyed with the element as he waited.

He'd spent the entirety of the afternoon and evening with Ashtine, and he hadn't lied to her. He *had* thought about what it would be like to steal moments with her, but he'd also thought of all the reasons why they couldn't have that. Their Courts would never stand for it. The other Royals would never agree to such a power pairing. Not to mention the gods who

forbid such a thing since the First gods and goddesses emerged from the Chaos.

And still he did not care when he most definitely should have.

A faint breeze had him smiling, and he didn't bother looking behind him when he said, "I knew you would come tonight."

"This will break laws of old," Ashtine said, coming to stand beside him.

"It does not have to."

She looked up at him, and he finally turned to face her. In the moonlight, her sky-blue eyes appeared almost silver. Her hair flowed on winds of her own making, and her silvery gown was light-weight and sleeveless. She'd dressed for his Court tonight.

"How can it not break laws of old?" she asked. "Our power is immense. It is why we carry our titles, and while the old laws are not officially our laws, they—"

"I think we simply take the trials as they come," Briar interrupted. "I know you have reservations, Ashtine, and I will not try and sway you if it is not something you want."

"But you know it *is* something I desire," she insisted. "You should be telling me all the reasons we should stop this. Both of our Seconds tell us this is ill-advised."

She was both right and wrong. While he didn't know what Ermir had said to her, Sawyer hadn't once told Briar not to pursue this. He had only cautioned him, telling him to think of the implications. And tonight, when they'd returned from the Fire Court, he'd only told him again that if this moves forward, they should be upfront with everyone rather than keep it a secret. Despite that, secrecy was their only option if they wanted time to learn each other without the involvement of the rest of the Courts. Maybe it would be short-lived in the end and the commotion would be pointless.

That was what he told himself as he said, "We do not know what the future holds, Ashtine. We will go mad trying to figure it out."

“You speak of the winds?” she asked, stepping closer.

“I speak of life and fate and the days ahead,” he answered. “I speak knowing we have centuries ahead of us, and we deserve happiness and something for ourselves, despite our titles and responsibilities.”

“We *are* our titles and responsibilities. You cannot deny that simply by speaking it,” she argued.

“Then we keep this for ourselves.”

“You will be content with stolen moments and secret meetings?” she asked.

“I will steal whatever time I can from fate if it means being with you,” Briar replied, taking her hand in his and bringing her fingertips to his lips. “I will never regret a moment of it.”

She was silent for so long, Briar thought she was going to deny him. He’d let her go, of course. If she did not want to risk it, he understood. He would move on at some point, but he’d always spend his days wondering what it would have been like. *That* he would regret. Never knowing, but feeling in his soul he had missed out on something that even the gods would envy.

“I do not know how to navigate something like this,” she finally said.

“Neither do I,” he answered, tugging her closer.

Ashtine shook her head. “No. I mean, I... This is a social situation I am unfamiliar with.”

He tried to hide his smile, but couldn’t as he reached to tuck her hair behind her ear. “My dearest Ashtine, this is anything but a social situation.”

“Oh,” she murmured. “In that case, I do not understand what this is at all.”

“Neither do I,” he repeated. “We will discover it together, I suppose.”

It was a moment before she nodded. “That sounds like something I would enjoy.”



Brushing his thumb along her cheek, he asked, “Have you slept tonight?”

She shook her head. “I spent the hours debating if I would come to you.”

He knew that. Having been in her private bedchamber, he could now use his water gazing gifts to enchant the water there. He’d done so tonight, not entirely trusting her to summon him if she needed him.

Without a word, he conjured a water portal, guiding her through into his private rooms, just as he had before. Ashtine looked around the space, a frown forming.

“There is only a sofa and chairs in here,” she said.

“It is a sitting room,” he replied.

“I have only been intimate in a bed. Is a sofa the same?” she asked, her head tipping to the side as she studied the furniture.

“I was attempting not to be presumptuous,” he replied. “However, apparently you had presumptions of your own.”

“I did assume this situation would involve a bed,” she retorted.

He rolled his lips, fighting the smile, but when she glanced at him, he couldn’t hide it.

“Briar Drayce, it is rude to continually tease me when I do not understand when you are doing so,” she chided.

Reaching for her and intertwining their fingers once more, he said, “This situation indeed involves a bed for the sole reason that neither of us has slept tonight. The intimacy part will be left up to you to decide.”

He pulled her to the bedchamber, candles already lit to illuminate the room. There wasn’t a fire because the heat of the summer still permeated the air, but—

“Do you want the windows and veranda doors closed?” he asked, while she again took in his space.

“No,” she murmured. “The winds are calmer when I am with you.”

“Are they silent?”

“Not silent. They simply...wait for me. Until I am ready to hear them,” she answered.

“Then we need to figure out how to carry that over whether I am with you or not,” he said.

She sighed, and he could hear the exhaustion in that single breath. “I have tried for decades. They do what they wish.”

“Our magic is not meant to control us, Ashtine,” he said gently.

“The winds are different.”

He didn't think that was true, but he also recognized this wasn't the time to argue with her. Instead, he asked, “Do you wish to rest in that dress, or would you like to borrow a shirt?”

She turned to him, her expression one of curiosity. “One of yours?”

“I do keep only my clothing in this space.”

“You jest.”

“You are a quick study,” he said with a wink.

Ashtine clicked her tongue in annoyance. “Again with the teasing.” Then she added, “Different sleeping attire would be appreciated.”

He nodded, retrieving a light-weight tunic that would be more than oversized on her frame. While she changed, he did the same in the bathing room, and when he returned, she was already nestled on the bed.

“You will stay? Like before?” she asked the moment he stepped back into the room.

He smiled softly, making his way to the bed and blowing out the candles as he went. “I am stealing every moment I can with you, Ashtine.”

She smiled at that, and it was one of the most beautiful things he'd seen. He immediately made a silent vow to pull more of those smiles from her. And laughter. He wanted to

hear more of that from her too. She deserved to smile and laugh. She deserved so much more than duty to her people and indiscernible musings from the winds.

He'd been settled in the bed beside her for several minutes when he said into the fading dark, "Ashtine?"

"Yes, Briar?"

He smiled at his name on her lips. "Can I kiss you, or would you prefer to sleep?"

"I enjoy kissing you," she answered.

That was all he needed to roll onto his side, moving closer until his lips met hers. A contented sigh came from her when he deepened the kiss, parting her lips and seeking her tongue with his own. For a long time, they laid there, tuning out the world, until Ashtine murmured, "Am I still to decide the intimacy?"

"That choice is always yours," he answered, pressing another kiss to the corner of her mouth.

"If I tell you I wish for more this night?"

He smiled against her skin as he pressed a kiss to her jaw. "I will ask if you are certain."

To his pleasant surprise, she pushed his shoulders, nudging him onto his back and climbing atop him, settling against his already hard length. "I rarely speak unless I am certain," she said. "But I will ask if you are certain as well. I will understand if you change your thoughts on the matter."

"I am not changing my mind, Ashtine," he answered, his hands sliding up her bare thighs and sliding under the shirt she wore. His thumbs made idle circles along her hips as he added, "But should I ever question things or feel differently, I will tell you. And I request you promise the same transparency."

Her smile was soft and tender as she leaned down, brushing her lips along his. "I can agree to such terms."

"Good," was all he said before he gripped the hem of the shirt and pulled it over her head. Then he was rolling them over so she was lying beneath him. Her silver hair fanned

across the pillows, and her body bared to him had him swallowing down the possessive growl that rumbled in his chest.

He didn't feel worthy of seeing her like this, let alone having the privilege of touching her, but he wasn't about to question it now. Not when he'd wondered about this moment for months. Not as her winds wrapped around him in a gentle breeze, making his entire body shudder with want.

He dragged his fingertips along her throat, across her collarbone, and down until he was cupping a breast in his hand. Then he was sucking her nipple into his mouth, unable to help himself when she arched into his touch. Her hands were roaming too, gliding along his back and arms. Fingers tangled in his hair, and he let his magic rise to the surface, turning his touch cold and making her gasp at not only the contrast, but his magic seeking out her winds.

For a long while, he was content just to feel her beneath him, stealing all those touches and kisses he'd told her about. It wasn't until she was moving beneath him, hips seeking more, that he finally pulled himself away long enough to remove his pants. Seconds later, he was settling between her thighs.

"Ashtine—" he started. He was going to ask her if she was sure, give her one last opportunity to tell him to stop, but then she was reaching for him, dragging his mouth back to hers. People had been second-guessing her her entire life. He wasn't about to do the same when she had made her desires clear.

Her hips rose again, grinding against him, and he groaned when he felt her already ready. If there was still any question about whether she was sure, it was gone now. Sitting back, he slid his hands beneath her, lifting her ass and angling her hips before sliding in, and by the gods. She had said she hadn't taken many lovers, but he hadn't been prepared for exactly what that meant. She was so godsdamn tight and warm around him that he was biting down on a curse.

Ashtine reached up, her thumb smoothing along the crease between his brows. "Are you well?"

He nodded, choking on his huff of laughter because it was such an Ashtine question in this moment, and he was more than all right. “I just need a moment. Are you all right?”

She smiled, her fingers sliding down his torso and making his stomach cave at her touch. “I am happy with my choice to both stay here and share a bed with you.”

Fuck, he couldn't focus on what she was saying or how she was saying it with her fingers tracing the indents of his abdomen, let alone his cock being buried inside her. He hoped this wasn't one of her veiled sayings with layers of meaning because all he could do was say, “I'm glad you stayed too, Ashtine,” before he curled over her, covering her body with his and kissing her slowly.

Another groan clawed up his throat when he moved excruciatingly slowly, but if he moved too fast, this would be over just as quickly. He could feel the perspiration on his nape and chest, and it had nothing to do with the summer heat. This was all the princess beneath him as she wrapped her arms around his shoulders, pulling him closer still and rolling her hips in a way that ground her center against him.

Briar buried his face in the crook of her neck, kissing and sucking as she stroked her nails down his back. He thrusted into her lazily, giving her the time needed to get to the same place he was. When her movements started growing desperate, he reached between them, circling and rubbing at her center until her breaths were short gasps and her nails were digging into his flesh. That was when he finally let himself take what he'd been desperate for.

It didn't take long when his thrusts were deep, fast strokes, and she buried her face in his chest as he held her close, finding his own release. He'd expected this to be good. Their odd connection was too intimate for it not to be, but he hadn't expected...

He simply hadn't expected this.

That was all he could think after they'd both cleaned up and were back in bed. Ashtine curled into him, her head on his

shoulder. He wrapped an arm around her, tucking her in impossibly closer and pressing a kiss to the top of her head.

“Briar?” she asked in a sleepy murmur.

“Yes, my dear?”

“The winds...”

She sighed into him, her breath coasting across his bare chest, and he traced his fingers along her arm.

“Tell me, Ashtine,” he urged.

“They speak of a prince of water falling.”

His movements paused, and she stiffened against him. “I upset you. I apologize.”

“No,” he said, resuming the soothing strokes of his fingers. “I am not upset. I am told the winds speak of past, present, and future. Perhaps they speak of my father. Or a prince in another realm.”

“And if they do not?”

“We will go mad trying to figure it out,” he answered, pressing a kiss to her brow when she looked up at him. “Did we not agree to take trials as they come?”

“We did,” she answered. “But that does not quiet the worry.”

“Worrying about something that may not even come to pass steals joy from the present.”

“Perhaps,” she murmured.

She was asleep before she breathed another word, and he certainly wouldn't wake her when sleep came easily after months of insomnia. And as the first light of day filtered into the room, he sent a message to his Court telling them not to expect him for meals today.

# CHAPTER TWELVE



ASHTINE

SHE'D BEEN IN THE Water Court for four days.

Four days since she'd been home.

Four days since she'd walked among the winds.

Four days of a peace she had never thought she'd know again.

Her days were spent in Briar's rooms or on the shores of the sea. Her nights were spent in Briar's bed, both pleasure and rest being found.

She shifted on the sofa she was lounging on as she remembered waking to Briar's head between her thighs that

morning, a soft smile forming. Then that smile widened as she realized she had smiled more in the last four days than she could remember doing in the last four years.

Briar was also making sure she wasn't only fulfilled intimately, but physically as well. She slept soundly next to him, and he made sure she was eating. There always seemed to be food available no matter if they were in his rooms or on the beach, and she'd finally been given the opportunity to try these oysters he hoarded. She'd decided he could keep those for himself, but she did enjoy the food of the sea, particularly the fresh fish they had for dinners. Their cuisine in the north tended to be more fowl and animals of the earth.

Ashtine readjusted the book she was reading where it rested against her bent knees. Briar had secured texts from the Fire Court library, and she had been leisurely reading through them the past few days. Briar, of course, had things to tend to, but he never left her alone for long. However, they'd agreed to gradually make his absences longer in the hope that she and the winds could come to an...understanding. She had been hesitant, but he'd reassured her she only needed to send a wind message and he would return immediately should they become too unrelenting.

The first day of this had been...taxing. The winds sought her out, and she'd had to summon Briar more than once. Then it had become a battle of wills, hers versus the winds that had controlled her for centuries. Even now she could feel them drifting around her, wanting to come closer. She lifted a hand, air swirling in her palm and pulling more wind towards her.

*Breaking laws of old angers more than just gods of past, they whispered.*

*There are dozens of realms. They will care little for this one, she replied, turning the page of the book.*

*Tempting fate tips the balance.*

*Allies will stand on separate sides.*

*A prince of water will fall.*



She tensed, wondering if they would continue, but the winds curled around her, flowing through her hair, before letting her be.

A slow give and take.

Testing limits.

That was what they were learning.

Briar's Inner Court were the only ones who knew she was staying here. She and Briar had discussed it over a midday meal that first day. They'd woke when the sun was high, and he'd retrieved a silk robe the color of the sea for her to wear while he'd simply donned pants. A spread of food was waiting for them, and they discussed how to move forward. They agreed to keep it a secret for now, not wanting more turmoil among the Courts. More than that, if war was truly coming, this was not the time to push against long-standing traditions. But if she were staying here for an extended period, his Inner Court needed to know, especially if they were venturing down to the water.

Sawyer was her escort whenever Briar could not be with her, and they'd formed the start of a friendship of sorts. At least, she thought that was what it was. He was like his brother in so many ways, and despite his words at the Wind Court, Sawyer never brought up disclosing the relationship again. He was carefree and jested as much as Briar, but he was astute and observant. She suspected he knew more than he let on about many things.

That was why when the knock sounded, she assumed it was Sawyer or Neve. She did not expect Briar to come through the door, and she certainly did not expect Ermir to be with him.

*You could not warn me of this?* she demanded of the winds.

But they were silent.

*Traitors*, she muttered, to which she felt them kiss her cheek before moving on again.

"You are well?" Briar asked, coming to a stop beside her as she closed the book and set it aside.

“Yes, thank you,” she answered, immediately standing and falling into her role of princess. Admittedly, a role she had been enjoying the reprieve from. “Is there news I need to be aware of?”

“Relax, my dear,” Briar answered, his hand running the length of her spine and instantly making her tension ease. “Ermir wishes to speak with you, but only if you are amenable to that.”

“Of course,” she answered, glancing at her Second. But Briar was gently taking her chin between his thumb and forefinger, turning her back to him. She felt a shield slip into place around them, keeping their words for their ears alone.

“If you need more time or do not wish to do this right now, simply say the word,” he said.

“I cannot avoid him nor my duties for days on end, Briar,” she answered. “This is one of those things we must learn to navigate.”

“You are not meek, Ashtine Evermorn. You are their sovereign, and while you indeed have a duty to your people, your Inner Court answers to you. Do you understand?”

She smiled softly up at him. “I do.”

He held her gaze a moment longer before releasing her chin and letting his shield disperse. Stepping back from her, he added, “You know what to do should you need me.”

Ashtine nodded, looking at her Second once more. He was waiting patiently near a window, his hands clasped behind his back. He did not look upset or worried, only calm and welcoming, as she had always known him to be.

The door clicked shut behind Briar, and she smoothed her hands down her dress. It was nothing like what she wore at home. Neve had brought her clothing, and this teal dress was lightweight and revealing. Sleeveless, it dipped low in the front, reaching halfway to her navel, with the same in the back. The fabric was partially sheer in some areas, and slits up the sides allowed for air movement in the oppressive summer heat.

Ashtine cleared her throat lightly before saying, “I apologize for my extended absence.”

Truth be told, she hadn’t expected him to come looking for her. It wasn’t uncommon for her to disappear among the winds for days on end. Although perhaps four days was pushing it.

“It is I who should be apologizing to you, Prin— Ashtine,” Ermir said, regret filling his features. “May we sit?”

“Of course,” she answered, perplexed by his admission as she reclaimed her spot on the sofa.

Ermir took an armchair across from her, the low-lying table laden with plates of food situated between them. He glanced at the plates, then back to her. “You have been eating. I am relieved to see that.”

She was unsure how to answer that, so she simply folded her hands in her lap. “May I inquire what you feel the need to apologize to me for?”

Never one to skirt around what needed to be said, Ermir shifted in his chair. “I should have handled all of this differently. I observed your mother battle the same persistent winds, and I felt just as helpless then.”

Ashtine looked away at the mention of her mother. The one person who would have had the capacity to truly understand what these last months, years, and decades had been like.

“Ophelia managed the winds as gracefully as you do, even before she learned how to live in harmony with them,” Ermir went on.

“There has been nothing graceful about how I have managed the winds in my years of life,” Ashtine replied. “I have allowed them to control me and drive me mad.”

“You did the best with what you were given,” Ermir countered gently. “That is all anyone could ask of you.”

She met his silver stare at his words. “Much is asked of me because of both my title and my gifts.”

“I know, Ashtine. You were born with the weight of ruling from the moment you entered this world, and I…” He released

a harsh breath, shifting once more. “I tried to shield you from so much. I wanted you to experience life before you were thrust onto a throne, but time was not on our side.”

Ashtine nodded. She knew this. Knew that all Ermir had done when raising her was trying to not only prepare her for her role but also keep her from expectations as long as he could. There was no preparing her for battling the winds, though, let alone finding a way to love them. For a time, she had. Ermir and others made sure to constantly tell her how special her gifts were.

“You said my mother eventually found a way to live in harmony with the winds,” Ashtine mused, forcing herself not to break her stare with Ermir.

“She did,” her Second answered, relaxing back into his chair some and crossing one leg over the other. “As you know, unions are traditionally arranged for the Court Royals. Your mother was no different. Ansel was a powerful Wind Fae. It was a union planned from birth despite them not joining in marriage until Ophelia was well into her second century of life.”

“I know of this history,” Ashtine cut in. “What I do not know is how she harnessed the winds.”

Ermir smiled at her sharp tone. “There is much of her in you. The grace and poise, but the tenacity and authority as well. Know she would be proud of you, Ashtine. So incredibly proud.”

She swallowed against the emotion threatening to spill from her eyes, but she remained silent, waiting for him to answer her question.

His smile faded, that same regret filling his features as before when he said, “I have always known how to calm the winds that plague you.”

Ashtine was on her feet before she realized she had moved. Wind tore through the sitting room, sending books and food to the floor. Her feet weren't even on the ground. “And you have

held your tongue for decades?” she demanded. “Despite seeing me slowly succumb to madness?”

“Let me explain,” Ermir rasped, and it was only then that Ashtine noted her raised hand and realized she was cutting off his air supply. He was strong, but she was more so.

She immediately dropped her hand. “My apologies,” she said tightly, her toes making contact with the marble floor.

“Do not apologize to me. You have every right to be angry with my actions.”

“You made...” She rolled her lips, trying to figure out how best to word what she was feeling. “You made me feel meek and inadequate for my role, Ermir. You made me feel as though I was failing my court when my concerns were continually dismissed.”

“They were never dismissed, Ashtine. We wished to take some of that burden from you, not laden you with more. However, despite our best intentions, we see our actions were misguided. Please sit and let me explain.”

“I do not wish to sit,” she snapped.

Ermir nodded, folding his hands as he spoke again. “Your mother found harmony with the winds after she and Ansel were united.”

“You are saying I must find a partner? Wed? That is a ludicrous statement, Ermir,” Ashtine said.

“You misunderstand,” he answered, shaking his head. “I have told you many times that while their union was planned, your parents eventually came to care deeply for one another. She found a haven in Ansel, and he did for her what none of her Inner Court had ever been able to achieve. She often said the winds were quieter when he was near. Over time, I witnessed your mother find a balance with the winds. I do not know her secrets beyond that. I wish I had wisdom to impart, but I do know that when their chattering became relentless, she and Ansel would disappear for days at a time.” He smiled softly. “Albeit, not to the sea.”

Ashtine had slowly lowered back to the sofa while he spoke, and now her fingers curled around the edge of the cushions.

“You believe Briar is this person for me? You believe... We cannot be together, Ermir,” she said, voicing the concern that was old as time itself.

“I am centuries older than you, Ashtine, but my senses are just as sharp. I know well what has been happening here.”

“Well, yes, but one could assume it was simply physical needs being met,” she replied, not meeting his gaze.

“I believe Fate brings some people into our lives for a reason,” Ermir answered. “I believe Prince Briar is one of those people, and I believe you owe it to yourself to learn what that reason is. If a relationship with him for a time is what you need to learn that reason, then that is your choice to make.”

“Why did you not tell me of my mother sooner?” Ashtine asked after several quiet moments.

Ermir sighed again. “I did not wish for you to search for another simply as a means to an end,” he answered. “Did I hope that one day your union would bring you the same reprieve? Of course, but I did not want to push you towards such a thing when you were already overwhelmed with omens and duties. Perhaps you will find that same reprieve with another in the future, but if you can find it with Prince Briar for now, I cannot fault you for that.”

She mulled the words over. The thought of finding another did not sound appealing, but surely that was simply because this was so new. Something forbidden made it all the more exciting, and perhaps Ermir was right. She and Briar had discussed not worrying about future trials until they came to pass. And while they certainly needed to think about the future, that didn't need to keep them from enjoying the present. They both knew this could not last forever. They both understood this was only for a time, and Briar had promised he would always be there for her, with her, whether they were lovers or simply friends. But she would never regret this and what they had found together.

That was what she told herself later that night as they lay next to each other, both having found their pleasure again. He was on his side, head propped on his fist, while his other hand traced along her bare skin. Down her arms, up her sides, along her breasts. They'd enjoyed a quiet dinner tonight on his veranda, but she needed to return to the Wind Court tomorrow. It was time.

"Tell me what worries you carry, my dear," he murmured, leaning down and brushing his lips along her cheek.

"They are too vast to speak in one night," she answered. "And I do not wish to spend my final night here speaking of them."

"Final night does not seem accurate."

Ashtine frowned. "I already told you I must return home when the sun rises."

"If you think we shall not have another night together, you are mistaken. It may not be the next night, but I already swore to steal any time with you I can. Do not make me a liar, Princess Evermorn," Briar replied, nipping at her shoulder before dragging kisses along her throat.

She huffed a laugh, lifting her chin to give him more access. "I cannot simply come to the Water Court at will, Briar."

"Of course you can. I have altered my wards. You can wind walk or portal here whenever you desire."

"And you can portal north just as easily," she countered.

He lifted his head to meet her gaze. "You wish for me to stay with you? In the Wind Court?"

"I know you are delicate in the cold, but I can secure wool socks for you," she replied, running her fingers along his muscled chest.

Briar barked a laugh. "Are you teasing me?"

"I am attempting it," she answered. "Did I do so correctly?"

Another laugh fell from his lips as he brought them to her own. "You did, my dear. You absolutely did."

# CHAPTER THIRTEEN



BRIAR

## *Several Months Later*

“YOU CANNOT CHARGE THE Earth Court more for your services,” the Fae Queen said from the head of the table.

“Why not? He charges our court more for his services for obtaining Marks,” Cyrus replied.

Briar rubbed at his brow. He had to give Cyrus credit. Going head-to-head with Talwyn Semiria was a bold choice in its own right, but he was handling her well. He supposed this was why he was the Fire Court Second. The fact that he was the one here arguing with her rather than the Fire Prince himself had been a sore subject from the start of this meeting.



“You have your own Fae to give Marks,” Talwyn said with a sneer.

“Good thing Eliza isn’t here for that statement,” Sawyer muttered under his breath, and Briar was inclined to agree. He was certain that Nakoa was talking the Fire General down at this very moment, but he threw a warning look at the glass of water in front of him. Nakoa and Neve were on the other side, watching the proceedings, and Eliza was with them.

“Perhaps if the Fire Prince would bother to show up to a meeting, he could negotiate properly,” Prince Azrael said, staring down his nose at all of them from his place at Talwyn’s right.

Glancing up, Briar caught Ashtine’s stare where she sat across from him, straight and poised. Nasima was at her shoulder, and the princess tilted her head, clearly hearing the winds.

She’d learned much these past months, and they made it a point in their stolen time together to give her time to practice the balance with the winds rather than simply letting them have their way with her. He’d learned much too. Communicating with her was getting easier, but it still took conscious effort. Learning what made her body hum, however, was a different story.

“Do fees need to be decided today?” Ashtine asked, looking away from him and at her queen. “The weapons have not been created yet. Perhaps that should be the primary focus.”

“And who is funding these weapons if fees are not decided beforehand?” Cyrus demanded. “Furthermore, the Earth Court creates their own weapons. Why do they need those of the Fire Court?”

“This argument is trying and old,” Ashtine lilted. “Fiera steel is only found in your Court, just as skystone is only found in mine. This war already brings division. Adding to it will only serve defeat and death.”

Cyrus made a face telling Briar he had no idea what she meant by that, but he knew.

“I believe the Wind Princess is saying that we should be working together rather than finding more reasons to bicker among ourselves,” Briar supplied. “This coming war will divide the realm enough, and we will not survive it if we cannot figure out some way to find peace among ourselves.”

“Then perhaps the Fire Prince should be attending these meetings instead of sending his Second and Third,” Talwyn gritted out. Her gaze slid to Cyrus, winds stirring around her and energy sparking off the silver bracelet coiled around her wrist. “Tell him that should he ignore my summons again, I will collect him myself.”

“With all due respect, your Majesty, you are queen of the Eastern Courts, not yet of the Western Courts,” Rayner replied, his voice deep and solemn.

“I will talk to him,” Briar cut in. “In the meantime, I think we move forward with all courts producing weapons. Fees can be discussed when we reconvene. Sawyer and I will have a better idea of how many weapons can be imbued at the Springs in a given time period by then. We can also begin the inter-Court trainings.”

Talwyn looked at Ashtine. “You are still amenable to your forces training with the Water Court?”

“I have no feud with the Water Court that needs to be considered,” Ashtine replied.

“Right,” Talwyn muttered. “Do you need assistance working out those details?”

“That is not necessary.”

“Great. Anything else, or are we done here?” Talwyn demanded.

When no one spoke, she stood, Azrael and Ashtine standing with her. The three of them left the meeting room, and Briar pushed out a long breath. That could have been worse.

“Can I get a portal, Drayce? I need to go punch my prince in the godsdamn dick for making me deal with this today,” Cyrus said.

“Tell him I will visit tomorrow,” Briar answered, conjuring a water portal.

Cyrus waved him off as he and Rayner stepped to their court.

Turning to his brother, Briar started to speak, but Sawyer cut him off. “I will keep watch and give you as much time as I can.”

They left the room together, taking the familiar paths through the White Halls. But when they reached the main foyer, Briar slipped down a corridor used by the staff. She was already waiting for him, a small swirl of wind at her fingertips.

“How do you fare, Briar?” Ashtine asked, head tilting back as Briar never slowed, walking right into her space.

He didn’t answer. He only took her face in his hands and kissed her soundly. His tongue dipped between her lips, desperate and wanting. He’d been waiting for this moment all day. She hadn’t been in his bed for over three weeks.

“Not nearly as well as I will be after tonight,” he answered when he finally broke the kiss. “Our plans remain?”

“They are unchanged,” she agreed, hands slipping from his shoulder and falling to his chest.

“Thank the gods,” he replied, before capturing her mouth with his once more. His hands slid around her hips, gripping her thighs and hoisting her up. Pressing her against the wall, her legs wrapped around his waist. Each stroke of his tongue and caress of his hands made promises of what was to come tonight, and the small sounds coming from her told him she was as desperate as he was.

The warning dusting of flurries from Sawyer came far too soon, and he lowered Ashtine back to the ground, brushing the snowflakes from her hair. “Tonight?”

“Tonight,” she agreed, brushing one more kiss to his lips.

She took a step back, but he caught her hand, sky-blue eyes finding his in the dim lighting.

“The winds? You are well?” he asked, studying her.

She smiled, a small, soft thing that only made him want to tug her back to him all over again. “They speak of a genesis.”

“What does that mean?”

“I suppose time will tell,” she answered. “Worrying about it now steals the joy from the moment.”

His lips tilted up. “That is does, my dear.”

“Be well, my heart,” she said, and then she was gone among the winds.

And he was left counting down the hours until she flitted back into his rooms and wondering how long he would be content with stolen kisses and touches. But it was enough for now.

TO BE CONTINUED



Thank you for reading *UNRELENTING WINDS*. You see Briar and Ashtine again as side characters in the [\*LADY OF DARKNESS\*](#) series, and you'll find out just how they handle keeping their relationship a secret and how they finally find their happily ever after.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



MELISSA K. ROEHRICH IS a dark romantic fantasy author living her best life in the Middle-of-Nowhere, North Dakota. She resides on a hobby farm where she homeschools her three boys with her husband. They have four dogs, several barn cats, and chickens. When she's not writing or reading, she's probably watching reruns of *How I Met Your Mother* or *Gilmore Girls* while trying to convince her husband they need to add goats to the farm. She loves coffee and traveling and dreams of owning a dragon someday.

For more exclusive content and other goodies, sign-up for MELISSA K. ROEHRICH's [newsletter](#) and check out her [website](#).



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# THE SWAN EMPRESS



M.J. MARSTENS

# GLOSSARY



HIEMAL: WINTER (MEANING WINTRY)

VERNAL: Spring (meaning of spring)

ESTIVAL: Summer (meaning summery)

OTTUMNAL: Autumn (taken from the word 'autumnal', meaning Fall)

ANSERINAE: The original kingdom of all Anseriformes (scientific name for the swan subfamily)

ANATIDAE: Kingdom that Rothbart created for oppressed Anseriformes (scientific family name for swans, geese, and ducks)

CIGNE: king (French for swan)

CIGNETTE: queen (from word 'cygnet', which actually means swanling)

ANSERIFORME: Name of humans that shift into either swans, geese, or ducks (scientific name for the order of waterfowl that swans, geese, and ducks are in)

NONANSER: An Anseriforme who cannot shift.

SVENSKA: Language of the Swan Anseriformes (from 'sven', old word meaning 'swan')

GANSE: Language of the Geese Anseriformes (old world meaning 'goose')

DUCAN: Language of Duck Anseriformes (old word meaning 'duck')

SWANS: Cob (male), Pen (female), Swanling (baby), Bevy (collective noun in general or on the water), Wedge (collective noun when flying)

GEESE: Gander (male), Goose (female), Gosling (baby), Gaggle (collective noun in general), Skein (collective noun when flying), Plump (collective noun on water)

DUCKS: Drake (male), Hen (female), Duckling (baby), Flock (collective noun in general or when flying), Paddling (collective name on water)

CORVIDS: Corvidae/Corvids are crows (murder), ravens (conspiracy/unkindness), rooks (parliament), jays (scold), and magpies (mischief)

DARK BEYOND: Hell

LIGHT BEYOND: Heaven

# PRELUDE



“YOUR MAJESTY, THE BLACK Swan’s troops have breached the kingdom. They are advancing rapidly and will be upon us in less than twenty minutes.”

A painful screech fills the air; both Siegfried and the manservant wince at the sound.

“I-i-is Her Majesty alright, Sire?” the manservant inquires hesitantly.

Siegfried looks forlornly toward the closed chamber door. His wife has been laboring for more than twenty-four hours and is starting to lose blood quickly. The midwife says if she cannot birth their swanling soon, both the Cigarette and their unborn child are likely to die.

“Send word that I would like to call a truce,” Siegfried finally announces, not answering his manservant’s question.

“*M-m-majesty?*” the man squeaks in surprise.

“You heard me. Enough blood has been shed on this horrific day.”

Siegfried gets up and walks into the birthing chamber.

His Cigarette lay upon a mountain of pillows, pale and weak. The white sheets are stained bright red with her blood, the vibrant color a macabre reminder of all that is at stake. Siegfried walks over to her side and clasps her clammy hand.

“Sieg...” she murmurs feebly. “I...I can’t go on.”

“Yes, you can!” Siegfried growls ferociously.

“I’m so cold,” she complains, shivering even though sweat is pouring down her face.

“This will be over soon. I swear it. You are the strongest person I know, Odette. Don’t give up. Think of our swanling.”

A small sliver of determination creeps back into the Cigarette’s tired light eyes.

“For our swanling,” she vows and Siegfried kisses her hand tenderly.

“I will be back. And when I return, it will be to the joyous news that I am finally a father. Godspeed, my love.”

Siegfried can see the questions in her eyes, and the worry, but there is much to do with little time. After explaining everything to the head midwife, the Cigarette sets out to the town square, where the Black Swan’s army has paused. In the center, seated upon a giant black steed, is the bane of Siegfried’s existence.

*Rothbart.*

The man who cursed his wife and nearly took her from him.

Now, Rothbart thirsts for Siegfried’s kingdom.

“Your manservant says you wish to concede,” Rothbart says conversationally as Siegfried arrives on his own magnificent horse- except, it’s white and carries the symbol of the Trumpeter Swan on its coverings.

Siegfried does not blink at Rothbart's instigation. He knows his manservant said no such thing and that Rothbart is merely twisting his words.

"I have come to call a truce," Siegfried corrects.

"How is the Cigarette?" Rothbart asks, changing the subject.

Siegfried growls at the man, a strange honking noise escaping his throat at the question, but Rothbart only chuckles.

"Don't get your feathers in a ruffle, White Cigne. I'm merely concerned about her."

"She is not of your concern!"

Rothbart raises his arms in surrender.

"Of course. Let us circle back to this surrender disguised as a truce to save your pathetic pride. What will you give me for it?"

"I do not surrender! I do not concede! The Kingdom of Anserinae will always be White! But for my wife and unborn child, I am willing to negotiate."

"Indeed. Your wife and newly-born daughter are perfect reasons to stop the bloodshed. My men will be happy to return to their homes to celebrate Hiemal's Eve with their families instead of fighting your pompous people."

Siegfried ignores the cutting remark.

Rothbart is merely trying to get under his skin.

But the part about a daughter...

"I-I have a daughter?" he asks in stunned disbelief.

"Congratulations, old boy. You're a father."

Siegfried regards Rothbart for a moment, before hesitantly asking, "Are... are they alright?"

"Yes. The Cigarette was losing blood, but the midwife has finally stemmed the flow. She is weak, but over time, she will heal. As for your daughter, she is a perfectly healthy little *darkling*."

Everyone in the square gasps at the implication in Rothbart's words.

No one bothers to ask how he knows such things.

He is Dark Magic.

And if he says that Siegfried has a *dark* daughter...

"I can see that you are preoccupied, so I will state my terms. I am willing to call this truce indefinitely *if* you promise your daughter's hand to my eldest son."

"No, she is my heir," Siegfried proclaims.

The head midwife already made it very clear that this would be his wife's only pregnancy. Another would kill her.

Rothbart's smile grows.

"Then, she will own much land," he says smugly. "I told you that I would one day have control of all your lands. If not in my name, then through my son's. Your kingdom is mine. I will give you eighteen years of peace before you *will* announce your daughter's marriage to my heir. And then... white will bleed to black. Farewell, Siegfried. Until we meet again."

With that, Rothbart turns his steed around and crosses back into his kingdom, Anatidae. The square is silent as the first winter snow blankets the ground. Siegfried looks to his manservant, who solemnly looks back. No words are spoken between them, but the manservant knows exactly what his Cigne desires.

Siegfried gallops off back to his castle at break-neck speed. The manservant regards the twenty or so men in the square who heard Rothbart's words. They must never be repeated. No word must ever be spoken about the princess or the truce. With a heavy heart, the manservant gives the command to the general to turn these swans into mute ones.

Siegfried doesn't look back to see if his unspoken command is being carried out. He knows that his manservant and general will take care of any loose ends. Within minutes, Siegfried is crashing through the courtyard and up the castle stairs.



Swinging down from his horse, he throws the reins to a startled maid and rushes inside.

When he gets to the birthing chamber, the door is locked. Pounding loudly, he demands to be let in. There is a scuffle and the loud honking of a swan but, finally, the noises die down and someone tentatively opens the door. It is the harried head midwife. She looks left and right to ensure that Siegfried is alone and then ushers him quickly inside.

The Cigne takes one look around the room and recoils in horror.

*It's a massacre.*

Bodies litter the floor, unmoving. Even scarier, his wife lies on the bed just as still.

“Wha... what happened?” Siegfried finally manages to gasp. “Odette!”

He screams her name in agony, but the midwife shushes him.

“She is but asleep, My Cigne. Her ordeal was a rough one. And, please, lower your voice! I do not wish to...startle your daughter.”

Siegfried looks around again, searching for her.

“Why is everyone on the floor?” he asks when he cannot find her.

“I gave them a powerful sleeping draught. They are yours to do with as you must, since they know.”

“Then, it's true. My daughter is a darkling,” Siegfried murmurs and the midwife gasps.

“How did you know, My Cigne?”

“Rothbart told me.”

The midwife purses her lips and shakes her head at the terrible turn of events.

“The sleeping draught will keep them unconscious for hours, sire. Do what you will with them. They are good girls.

Honest girls. But, I also understand the urgency of this secret. If you spare their lives- and mine- we will leave the kingdom.”

Siegfried is thoughtful at her words.

“I have already had my men from the square who overheard silenced,” the Cigne admits, and the midwife shudders at his words, “but you have done me a great service in saving my wife. I will send the others off, but you will stay. You will ensure that my wife heals properly and, then, you will be my daughter’s nursemaid. Her secret will be yours. I will reward you handsomely for your aid in this, but if you betray me... even Rothbart would never be as cruel.”

The midwife grimaces at the ill-concealed threat.

“Of course, Your Majesty. Thank you.”

“Now, bring me my daughter,” he commands to the woman.

The midwife scurries over to the large white bassinet and lifts up a bundle of black wings. The babe is in swan form already, making Siegfried gasp.

“She has already molted?!”

“No, Your Majesty, she... she was *born* a swan.”

Siegfried cannot keep the shock from his face. In Anserinae and Anatidae, there are three types of shifters, or Anseriformes: ducks, geese, and swans. Swans are the highest caste, and only birds of this noble blood may rule. Not everyone in these kingdoms can shift and those who can’t are called Nonansers. Families can tell by the time the child is three, or so, if they will be a Nonanser as they will begin to molt for their first shift.

But, *never* has anyone been born into their Anseriforme.

The midwife gently hands the swanling to her father, and the feisty thing tries to nip the nurse’s fingers. Siegfried chuckles while crooning to the little one to behave. The swanling turns her graceful black neck and looks pensively upon the man holding her. Without warning, she shifts into human form, and Siegfried almost drops the babe, making the young one giggle.

“She will be the death of me,” Siegfried vows and the midwife agrees.

“They usually are. Her hair, Majesty... what shall we do?”

The young princess in question doesn't even acknowledge the midwife, but grins at her father. Siegfried, in return, stares at her and her glorious crown of black curls.

Not brown.

Not blond.

*Black.*

Siegfried's heart shatters when he finally accepts the terrible truth.

He didn't break the curse when he set Odette free with his love; it merely went dormant. And now, Odette has passed it on to their daughter. Rothbart's evil blackness has found a way to taint his world forever, but this is not his daughter's fault.

She will always be his light and love.

“Shave it,” he finally tells the midwife. “Perhaps it will grow in lighter.”

The midwife nods her head in understanding, but is skeptical.

“And her name, Majesty?”

Siegfried contemplates the little beauty in his hands. Not even an hour old and her looks are captivating. She is worth it. This truce with Rothbart, if it guarantees her safety, is justifiable. Even stomachable. Because it means she will grow up and live in peace, unharmed.

“Viveka. Her name is Viveka- the demarcation between good and bad, black and white.”

Siegfried hands his daughter back to her new nursemaid and settles on the bed next to his sleeping wife.

“It's not over,” he promises. “It's not even begun. We will take these next eighteen years to build an army that not even

Rothbart's magic can contend with. We will be free of him, my love, *we will*.

# ACT ONE



FIFTEEN YEARS LATER

# SCENE ONE



VIVEKA

I RUN AND RUN and run.

Shadows chase me as I sprint further and deeper into the Albellus Woods. Pristine snow covers the land and muffles my rushed footsteps.

I need to get away.

To escape from every prying eye.

Today is Hiemal's Eve, but also my birthday- my most hated day of the year.

The giant feasts held to celebrate the Winter Solstice are my dreaded nightmares.

Once, they symbolized a time of gathering to overcome the darkness, and in Anserinae, darkness equals blackness. And blackness equals evilness. Hiemal's Eve has always been celebrated with big bonfires to encourage the return of the light.

Yet, somehow, over the years, *I've* turned into that symbol.

I'm the kingdom's hope for a brighter tomorrow- the promise of a blithe future.

Their *Golden Princess*.

I finally come to a massive oak tree and throw myself down on the ground, snorting at this thought.

*Golden*, like the long tresses that cascade down my back.

Except, my life is about as gilded as my hair- and the cage that I'm kept in.

My wings were clipped long ago, as was my freedom.

Now, I'm just a shell of myself.

The perfect Golden Princess that my parents always dreamed of, but out here, in the dark wilderness, no one can dictate to me who I am. No one can tell me what to do. I'm free to simply enjoy the world around, and I do. I watch the snowflakes fall from the sky and try catching them on my tongue.

It's cold, but I barely feel the chill in my warm, down-feather coat and boots. I have a muff for my hands and my hair keeps my head warm, but my scalp itches something fierce. Trying to ignore the prickling sensation, I get up and walk over to the Anas River. This far north, it's barely a stream, just a thin trickle of water.

It cuts a path through the snow and winds south, where it widens exponentially, becoming the natural divide between Anserinae and Anatidae. There once was a bridge that connected the two kingdoms together, but my father burned it.

Literally.

But who needs a bridge when they are Dark Magic?

If Rothbart wants to invade our kingdom, everyone knows that he can.

My father's action had been symbolic and rather foolish, if you ask me.

But, of course, no one does or ever will.

I'm just an icon, meant to be seen, *not heard*.

I stare into the crystal-clear water of the river and my reflection peers back out at me, highlighted in the bright light of the full moon.

My eyes are the same lovely pale blue as my mother's and my skin is the milky perfection heralding my status as a Swan Princess. My hair is long and golden, not the pale flax shade of my mother's tresses, but a cross between hers and my father's sandy brown hair.

I scratch at my scalp; the incessant itching never leaving me.

I'm everything a princess of this realm should look like and be, but it's all a lie.

I'm a fraud, and if the people knew...

There would be unrest in the kingdom.

*Dissent.*

As it is, my father already deals with insurgency on a daily basis.

The people are unhappy. They want equality for all Anseriformes, even Nonansers, but my father will not turn his back on a hundred years of tradition. Swans have always ruled Anserinae- the kingdom is named for them. We are stronger, bigger, and won our right to rule over ducks and geese eons ago.

Before, everyone was content with how the kingdom was run until *him*.

Rothbart.

Father doesn't like it when I speak his name, and if he hears it in his presence, he spits in disdain at the word.



*Rothbart the Betrayer.*

At one time, he and daddy were good friends- distant cousins even. Both boys were raised in the Royal Palace of Anserinae, but where my father was the exalted heir, Rothbart was the shameful black swan of the family. Black swans are very rare in Anserinae and happen only once in a blue moon. Their dark coloring foreshadows the dark magic latent inside of them.

There never has been a black swan that wasn't *evil*.

In the olden days, you were executed upon discovery but, thankfully, the practice of killing these innocent children was put aside. Black swans simply became demoted in society, forbidden to use their magic and shift into their Anseriforme. For a time, this worked, until my father became king.

He promised his best friend that things would change, not only for black swans, but for all Anseriformes- but daddy reneged. In retaliation, Rothbart revolted against the kingdom, nearly bringing Anserinae to her knees. He crossed the Anas River and started his own monarchy.

Rothbart called his kingdom *Anatidae*, meaning swans, geese, *and* ducks. It was- *is*- a haven for all Anseriformes, even Nonansers. The war raged on for years. To his credit, Rothbart didn't use his magic against my father or his army. Until daddy successfully killed off all known black swans, except Rothbart. Then, Rothbart unleashed his evil powers onto the very person daddy loved most: my mother.

He cursed her to forever remain in swan form, but daddy's love for momma broke the spell.

They thought that they would live happily ever after, but Rothbart still fought back.

*Until I was born.*

A truce was called and peace finally reigned. Everything was right in my parents' world once more, except for one terrible secret:

*I'm a black swan.*

I'm an abomination. The very thing that my father went to war against, but I can't help how I was born. And, clearly, that's cursed. I was born cursed. I'm simultaneously my parents' pride and joy, and greatest shame. It was decided early on that they would disguise my truth. My nursemaid, Elsie, gives me a special concoction to drink daily to keep my Anseriforme dormant.

Better to be a Nonanser *than a black swan*.

I slap the freezing water in irritation, making my reflection ripple out of existence.

Suddenly, there's movement to my right and I let out a honk of fright. I may not be able to shift, but I can still vocalize like a true Anseriforme. There's someone standing by the oak tree. They remain cloaked in the shadows, but they are watching me.

"Show yourself!" I declare, with a slight tremor in my voice.

I place my hands on my hips and glare, trying to look commanding and menacing. I doubt that I look imposing, though, with my slight frame weighed down by a giant, fluffy white coat.

The shadow hesitates, but then steps into the light of the full moon.

It's a boy.

He appears to be around my age. His shoulders are hunched, and he's obviously trying to shield his face from view, but the moon highlights everything. His hair is a bright, carrot-orange and patchy in areas, as if he's molting. His face is an inflamed conglomerate of blemishes and pockmarks and his nose is two sizes too big, but his eyes...

His eyes are silvery pools of beauty, reflecting the lightness of the snow in their depths.

"I-I-I'm sorry," he says.

His voice cracks and raises an octave and I realize that he's more afraid of me than I am of him.

Or maybe not afraid, just nervous.

“Hi... I’m Viveka. What are you doing out here?”

He seems stunned that I’m talking to him and it takes him a moment to respond.

“I’m Dell. I’m out here because... because I have no friends.”

Just like that, my heart simultaneously breaks and melts.

“I... I don’t really have any friends, either,” I admit hesitantly. “Maybe...*we* could be friends.”

## SCENE TWO



DELL

I FEEL MY EYES widen in shock at Viveka's words.

*How could this beauty not have any friends?*

She's the Crown Princess of Anserinae.

"You don't want to be friends with me," I confess, trying not to stutter.

Even though I've been watching her for more than ten minutes, unbeknownst to her, I can't get over her gorgeous features. Her skin is pale in the moonlight and appears to be glowing. Her golden hair is long and straight, hanging past her waist, and her eyes are a soft, powder-blue. Surprisingly, her perfectly arched brows are dark, seemingly black, as is the

fringe that encases her eyes, off-setting the vivid blue. There's a faint pink blush to her fair skin, probably from the cold, but her full lips are a deep red.

It makes me wonder if they are naturally tinted this color or if she uses berries to deepen the hue.

She cocks her head to the side inquisitively at my words.

“What do you mean? Why wouldn't I want to be friends with you?”

She seems genuinely curious and it confuses me. I know that she can see me clearly, if I can see her plain as day.

“Because... I'm just an ugly duckling. I'm actually an ugly Nonanser.”

I wait for her disgust.

“I'm a Nonanser, too,” she says instead, surprising me more.

“You are?” I squeak, my voice breaking embarrassingly.

“Yep.”

“Oh. Is it hard being a Nonanser here in Anserinae?” I wonder.

She shrugs.

“I'm still of swan lineage. Besides, it could be worse. I could be a *black swan*.”

I feel my brows shoot up at the bitterness that I hear in her words.

“Black swans are welcomed where I live- exalted, in fact.”

Now, her eyes widen in shock.

“You're from Anatidae?!”

“Yeah. These woods are connected and because the river is so thin this far north, it's easy to cross between the two kingdoms.”

Viveka bites her lip worriedly.

“I need to tell my father... what if...”

“What if Cigne Rothbart decided to attack Anserinae through the Albellus Woods?” I ask her gently, but teasingly. “Trust me, he knows. Besides, he doesn’t need to reroute. If he wants your father’s kingdom badly enough, he’ll simply take it.”

“I suppose that you’re right, but I still must tell him. Later, though. I have no wish to return home so soon.”

“But it’s Hiemal’s Eve! Aren’t you missing out on the festivities?” I ask.

“No more than you,” she teases and I shrug. “I thought Anatidae was known for accepting *all* Anseriformes, even Nonansers. If that’s true, why don’t you have any friends? What are you running from?”

I look into her gorgeous eyes and get lost in their depths before I remember that she asked me a question.

“Anatidae is a place of tolerance for all Anseriformes. I’m not running because people are mean to me, per se, but I’m still an outcast. My older brothers shine brighter than I ever could. It gets old to be constantly compared to their supreme perfection and my utter lack of... *everything*,” I say cynically. “Sometimes I need a break from it all. Out here, no one judges me. No one cares that I’m an ugly misfit.”

“You’re not ugly,” she hisses angrily. “I’ll show you ugly!”

Then, I watch in astonishment as she pulls at her long hair and yanks it clean off her scalp!

“It’s a wig!” I gasp.

Her bald head is just as pale as the rest of her, but through the red spots from where the thing clearly was irritating her skin, I can see the dark hair follicles growing underneath. Viveka looks embarrassed for a split second, before she tosses the blond hair piece aside and vigorously itches her exposed head.

“I hate that thing,” she spits out resentfully. “It itches terribly! So, tell me, who’s ugly now?”

Her dark brows are arched in challenge and their deep shade now makes sense. I laugh at the fierce face she is making.

“You’re still not ugly,” I reassure her, and it’s the truth.

Even bald, she is beautiful.

“But I don’t understand why you are wearing a wig if you so clearly hate it so very much.”

Viveka rolls her eyes.

“I don’t wear it by *my* choice. My parents make me wear it... to hide...”

“To hide what?” I gently prompt when she doesn’t continue.

She looks nervous and I reach out to take her hand. Viveka doesn’t even flinch when I touch her and something warm sparks in my chest.

“You can trust me; I promise that your secret is safe with me.”

She hesitates a second more, before disclosing in a rush, “I’m a black swan that my parents are trying to hide.”

This time, my brows disappear into my hairline.

“How did Cigne Siegfried and Cigarette Odette produce a black swan?” I wonder out loud.

“My father thinks that I’m a by-product of Rothbart’s curse that he placed on my mother, but in truth, there has been a black swan in the family before. It’s not implausible that I could be... *dark* because of that, but I doubt it.”

“Now see here, Viveka, being a black swan isn’t bad. It doesn’t make you dark or evil. People choose to make bad choices, not the color of their Anseriforme,” I tell her firmly. “Why don’t you think that your Anseriforme is this way because of family?”

“Because- I was *born* a swan.”

“Born a swan?! That’s unheard of! You must have molted-”

“In the womb, yes, according to the midwife. She said it explained why my mother was in such pain and bled terribly

trying to birth me. Apparently, I was molting during labor.”

I wince.

The poor Cigarette.

“Your magic must be powerful, then,” I hypothesize.

Viveka shrugs.

“I don’t know. Daddy says it’s Rothbart’s magic, not mine. I don’t even know if I have any or what it can do. I’m obviously not allowed to use any magic. Heck, I can’t even shift. My nursemaid makes me drink a potion every day to keep my Anseriforme at bay.”

“That’s barbaric!” I scowl.

“Yeah, well, they used to kill black swans upon their first molt, so I say this is progression,” she jokes, but I can see the hurt and pain in her eyes.

“I accept you. You are perfect just the way you are. And, personally, I prefer your bald scalp to that golden falsehood. You should grow your hair and stop taking whatever your parents are making you drink.”

“I can’t do that!” she exclaims. “If the kingdom found out... my parents would have to execute me!”

“Do you hear how insane that is? Besides, how old are you?”

“Fifteen... today.”

Again, my eyebrows raise, but I don’t ask any questions this time.

“Happy birthday, Viveka,” I say tenderly, before turning serious once more. “Now, listen to me. You are old enough to control your shifting. You’re not a child anymore, and unlikely to spontaneously shift into your swan form without notice.”

“I don’t know, Dell...”

A thrill courses through me at her use of my name.

“Let’s make a deal. How about we meet here every day, working on it, until you feel comfortable?”



I love how her head tips to the side when she ponders things, like now.

“Ok,” she says hesitantly, before warming up to the idea. “Let’s do it! I am busy in the morning, but my afternoons are generally free.”

“That’s perfect, so are mine. It’s fate, I tell you!”

I give her hand a squeeze.

“I better get back,” she finally manages after we stare at one another for far too long.

“Yeah, I suppose they probably are missing the birthday girl,” I tease, and she blushes.

“Bye, Dell. Happy Hiemal’s Eve.”

“Bye, Viveka.”

She turns to head back home when I call out, “Oh, and Viveka?”

“Yes?” she calls.

“Grow your hair out,” I demand and she just smiles.

*Together, the two of us are going to heal our pain.*

## SCENE THREE



VIVEKA

IT'S BEEN A MONTH since I've met Dell.

Thirty long days of sneaking off to meet him, but in that time, I've never been able to shift. I'm worried that Elsie's brew did permanent damage and did, indeed, turn me into a Nonanser, but Dell disagrees. He says that my body just needs time to remove the insidious poison from my system.

To be fair, I've been drinking it for fifteen years, I would imagine it has done a number on my body in that time.

I'm so grateful that I met Dell. He is the strength that I need in my life. I never would have had the gumption to stop taking my shifter suppressant...*or to grow my hair back.* It's only

been four weeks, but the dark locks have already grown an inch. I complain to Dell that I look like a boy, but his eyes become heavy and hooded while he reassures me that I am far from looking like a boy.

Heat seems to bloom inside of me when he gazes at me like this and I wonder if it has anything to do with ‘the passion of the night’ that I have heard the maids giggling about. Dell truly has the most stunning eyes; they are always full of emotion and something more that I can’t decipher. It scares me and entralls me.

But today, he has on his fierce teaching face.

He is even more determined than me to make me shift.

“Again,” he barks like a drill sergeant and I make a face. “Don’t roll your eyes at me, young lady,” he says in mock threat.

“Or else what?” I sass back.

“Or else I’ll have to spank you,” he warns.

Of course, corporal punishment is very common in Anserinae- and I imagine in Anatidae, too- but for some reason, the innocent threat makes my face heat with a blush. My mind fills with the image of me sprawled over his lap while his hand lands heavy blows on my backside and I feel funny at the thought. An embarrassing honk escapes my mouth and before I can react, I shift into my Anseriforme.

I look at myself in wonder, taking in the dark black plumage and wide wingspan. Hesitantly, I flap my wings a couple of times and the powerful movement lifts me from the ground. Now, I chirp happily while Dell claps at my success. I fly around the tree, catching the wind current, and zoom into the sky.

“Get back here, Viveka!” Dell yells. “It’s not safe.”

I quickly plummet back to Earth, but my landing is less than graceful and I plow into Dell, knocking him into the snowy ground. He laughs good-naturedly, and helps me to my webbed feet.

“You are a beautiful swan, Viveka,” Dell compliments, and I know that I would be bright red right now if I were in human form. “How did you shift? It seemed so sudden...”

Thankfully, my swam form keeps me from having to admit the awkward truth. Dell can never know about the indecent thoughts that I was having about him. I fly and frolic for about an hour before Dell says that I need to change back, but no matter how hard I concentrate, I can't shift back. I'm terrified. What if I can't get back into human form? What will my father do to me?

I honk in distress at my only friend in the world, but Dell just chuckles.

“Be calm, sweet Viveka. You will be human again. Just concentrate on that form. What were you thinking when you shifted into a swan? Perhaps those thoughts will help you to turn back?”

Of course, those thoughts are *not* helping.

Now, instead of just imagining me in his lap, I wonder what his hands on my body would feel like; what his lips against mine would taste like...

I make a strange squawking sound and start flapping about. Dell tries to soothe me and has me half picked-up when I shift back into human form. Well, mostly- from my elbows down, I still have wings, but the rest of my body has returned. Surprisingly, I'm completely clothed again. I hear a grunt and realize that I am *on top of* Dell. Mumbling a string of apologies, I hastily scramble off of him, but struggle with winged arms.

Dells reaches out to steady me, the fire burning even brighter in his eyes than before.

“Hold still,” he commands in a raspy voice that sends warm chills down my spine. “Concentrate on your arms coming back.”

I stare back at him and it dawns on me that the longing that I feel for him is reflected back to me in his eyes. I blush and look away, only to take in my human arms once more.

“Yay! I have hands again!” I crow in delight, waving my fingers in Dell’s face until he laughs.

“Good, fingers and hands are good. You must be very powerful, Viveka, to shift back into human form *with clothes on*. I didn’t think about it when you first transformed into your Anseriforme because I was so dumbfounded, but looking back- your clothing simply *vanished*. I only know a few Anseriformes who can do this.”

“Really? Are they black swans like me? There are others still?”

“Of course. The Cigne of Anatidae is a black swan,” he reminds me and I grimace.

“Yes, I know Rothbart is a black swan. And very powerful in his magic. Of course, he probably can shift without embarrassing himself.”

Dell taps my nose.

“This is the first time that you changed into your Anseriforme in over a decade. Cut yourself some slack. Now, tell me, what were you thinking that caused the shift both times?”

Curses!

*Why must he ask?*

I suddenly find the ground *very* interesting.

“Your face reminds me of the summer berries ripening in the sun,” Dell observes and I redden some more, but he just smirks. “Oh, this is going to be fun, I can tell. Spill.”

I scowl at him playfully.

“No.”

“Yes, or I will tickle you.”

I stick my tongue out at him and turn to run, but Dell is quicker. He pulls me to him and tickles me without mercy. Finally, I beg him to stop, swearing that I will confess, but Dell doesn’t let me go. He spins me around, so that my chest is

flush with his, making me painfully aware of my thoughts once more.

“I was thinking of you spanking me,” I blurt out in nervousness, but Dell looks confused.

“Why would the thought of me spanking you help you become a swan? Did you think that I seriously meant it or that I was going to hurt you?”

“Oh, no, never that,” I quickly rush to reassure him when I see the hurt on his face. “No, quite the opposite, in fact... I thought that it would... feel, um, *nice*.”

Dell’s eyebrows raise in surprise and confusion still clouds his eyes. It takes a second, but I know when my words finally click in his brain. That primal fire comes roaring back to life in his gaze and licks over my face hungrily. I stare back with the same longing, but he closes his eyes and shakes his head.

“Are you saying that you... *like* me?” he wonders hesitantly and then continues before I can answer. “But, I’m *ugly*!”

I glare angrily at his words.

I *hate* when he says this.

“Who told you that?” I demand indignantly, but Dell just scoffs.

“I don’t need people to tell me that; I have eyes, Viveka.”

“Dell, you’re not ug-”

“Don’t lie to me!” he growls. “I’ve seen my face, my hair, my body. I’m fat and short. My nose is eight sizes too big for my face- which is covered in red, pustulant sores- and my hair is the color of marmalade! Not to mention, it’s falling out in clumps!”

I make a face at his speech, before reaching up to cup his cheek.

“I’ll have you know that marmalade is my favorite food. And you aren’t ugly. You are everything good, and honest, and *beautiful* in my life. Even if you were the most stunning person that I have ever seen, it wouldn’t matter, because

beauty is on the inside. These marks on your face? They'll clear one day. Your nose? It's distinguished. Your hair? Adds to your quirky personality. Your body? Perfect to hug. And your eyes? The door to the most wonderful soul that I know. Dell, you aren't an ugly duckling. You're my Prince Charming," I admit bashfully.

## SCENE FOUR



DELL

I STARE AT VIVEKA in... *wonder*.

*She likes me?*

My heart swells with a foreign emotion that I think may be love. No one has ever accepted me unconditionally. Being a Nonanser, and hideous to boot, it's hard to fit in with my family of perfect shifters. I look into Viveka's eyes and see that she's not just saying things to make me feel better.

She actually means it.

*She actually finds me attractive.*



I swallow thickly, the desire that I try to keep hidden roaring to life inside of me at her words.

She likes me...*and wants me to spank her.*

My breathing has become ragged and I need to put some distance between us before I ruin our friendship by doing something foolish, like kiss her. I step back and walk over to the frozen stream.

“Well, I think it’s safe to say that strong emotions will provoke a shift. This is common in younglings, too. But as you shift more and more, you will be able to control it. We’ll try again tomorrow.”

I see her face drop when I don’t acknowledge her words, but she has no idea the fire that she’s playing with.

“Yeah, tomorrow. Sounds good. I guess... I’ll go.”

Now I feel like a jerk.

“Viv, wait. I’m sorry. I just... it’s a lot to take in. I never thought someone like you would like someone like me.”

“*Someone like me?* What does that mean?”

“Viveka, we both know that you could...do a lot better than me. My family doesn’t even have any hopes of me ever getting married,” I admit forlornly.

As usual, with any mention of my family, she scowls, and her brows draw down in an adorable manner. I walk back over to her and reach a finger out to smooth her forehead.

“Not because they don’t love me,” I hasten to explain, “but because in Anatidae, very few marriages are arranged. As the youngest son, there will be no betrothal for me. A blessing that I can choose my own bride, but a curse because, well... who would choose me?”

“I would,” she vows and my heart beats rapidly in my chest. “Tell me about your family, then, please.”

“Well, we are a unique bunch, that’s for sure. My mom is a swan, but has goose blood running through her veins from some ancestor. That’s where my orange hair comes from, I

guess. Mom's hair is a deep chestnut, as are my two older brothers'. We all have a reddish tint from her that is rare in swans. Everyone is a swan though. Except me. They used to think that maybe I was a gander, or maybe even a drake, but it turns out that I'm a Nonanser. Which isn't terrible. I just wish that I fit in more with them."

"Do they shun you?" she demands to know.

"No! You really are getting the wrong picture about my family. They aren't mean to me. It's me who tends to... shut them out. I'm my hardest critic, but Anatidae really is a tolerant place. I don't think that I would be so put out about being a Nonanser if I didn't look like a walking disease."

She gasps irately, like I knew she would, the blue of her eyes going smoky in her anger.

"Stop. Talking. Like. That!"

She punctuates each word with a jab of her finger.

"I'm kidding; I'm kidding! Besides, you're so bent on seeing my family as evil, but your family should be jailed."

Instantly, her face shuts down.

"Viv, they treat you like a disgrace."

"No, they don't," she insists. "They love me to the South and back. They are just trying to protect me, that's all. It's not their fault that I was born a cursed black swan."

"For the last time, Viveka, there is nothing cursed about being a black swan," I snap. "And besides, couldn't your *daddy* make it acceptable?"

"We both know why he wouldn't," she answers hollowly.

A prickly silence falls between us.

"I'm sorr-"

"I shouldn-"

We both speak at the same time and stop.

"You first," she says.

"I shouldn't have said that. *I'm sorry.*"

“Me, too. Maybe... we can just chalk it up that neither of our families deserve us,” she jokes, but we both know that she speaks the truth.

Well, *her* family definitely doesn't deserve her, the monsters.

“Tell me more about Anatidae,” Viv requests, changing the subject.

“What do you want to know?”

“Do you celebrate all the same things?”

“I imagine. The people of Anatidae are all originally from this kingdom, so most of the traditions and practices are the same. But, there's an open equality. Men and women aren't restricted to their job choices based on their Anseriforme. Nor are they any more or any less because of it. To an outsider, it might seem that Anatidae is no different than Anserinae because we have swan rulers, but our Cigne is-”

“A black swan,” Viveka supplies for me.

“Exactly. The very symbol of the oppressed and downtrodden. So even though Anatidae is ruled by swans, the kingdom has an open monarchy. If Rothbart's heir had been born a goose, or even a duck, he could still rule.”

“*Is he?*” she wonders.

“No, he's a black swan, too.”

Viveka looks shocked.

“I didn't know that!”

I give her a curious look.

“What do you know about Anatidae?”

“Nothing, really, that's why I asked. There are no books for me to read and, obviously, no one really talks about it. My father does... occasionally, but never insightfully. I have no idea if the land is similar, if the weather is warmer, or even what language everyone speaks.”

I chuckle at her rambling.

“Again, Anatidae is not much different from Anserinae. We have mountains to the West that border our kingdom and the weather is exactly the same. The Hiemal season brings deep freezes and snow. *Svenska* is the language we use, but it’s not the official language. *Ganse* and *Ducan* are acceptably spoken in court and in the community, too.”

Viveka’s eyes light up.

“Do you speak *Ganse* and *Ducan*?”

“Yes, all younglings are taught all three languages. Although, Rothbart is contemplating creating a uniform language of the three.”

“That’s... really interesting. He doesn’t sound *evil*.”

I roll my eyes.

“That’s because he’s not. He’s just your enemy. And the enemy is always the ‘bad guy’, but to the people of Anatidae, *your father* is the ‘bad guy’.”

She wrinkles her nose adorably in contemplation.

“That’s preposterous, but I can see how the people would think that...”

“It’s not even because Rothbart tells them to think that. These are the Geese, Ducks, and rejected Swans originally from Anserinae that were subjugated by Cigne Siegfried. These were the Anseriformes and Nonansers that were brave enough to follow Rothbart to a new land to begin a new life of equality.”

Viveka is pensive at my words.

“Everyone says that Rothbart made them- that he controls them with his dark magic.”

I snort.

“Rothbart has powerful magic, but no one forced the people of Anatidae to leave Anserinae. They did so of their own accord. Can’t you see the prejudice and hate?”

“No, not really. There are class demarcations, for sure, between the Swans and other Anseriformes, but I don’t see

any... unrest. The people are happy. They love my father and how he rules.”

“Huh, well, maybe they are. Maybe everyone who had a problem left, but keep an eye open. You might have been blinded your whole life to the plight of your people.”

I see her shiver at my words and regret forcing the harsh reality on her, but her world of lies can no longer serve her.

## SCENE FIVE



VIVEKA

THE VERNAL RAINS MELT the snow, thawing the earth once more, but my mood remains frozen in the dark reality that everything in my life is wrong.

On the surface, everyone is cordial, merry, and bright. Flowers bloom once more and there are sunshine and new moltings for the younglings. Vernal always brings a new crop of Anseriformes, ready to test their wings for the first time. My parents and I attend a spring festival to honor this special occasion, and both spread the love and cheer.

But only a swanling is named Vernal Queen.

And only a swanling wins the archery contest.

Once upon a time, I never would have blinked twice at this, but over the last few months, I've been watching.

In truth, I was intent to prove Dell wrong.

But, *he's right*.

Only Swans hold positions of power or notable careers.

No Swans are bakers or candlestick makers.

Swans are polite to Geese and Ducks, but if a Swan steps into a line somewhere, all the other Anseriformes are expected to get out of the way. I've always just taken it for granted that this happened because I was the Crowned Princess... *not* because I was specifically a Swan. Yet, apparently, all Swans are accorded this respect, as they are not *inferior* to their brethren.

I learned that only Geese and Ducks fight in my father's army. Swans may be generals or commanders, but they are never expected to fight in war. Geese and Ducks are expendable. Swans are not. Our blood is noble, our past regal; it can't be sullied with commonness, and to interbreed is actually forbidden.

That's right.

It's against the law for a Swan to mate with a Goose or Duck.

Of course, Geese and Ducks can interbreed as much as they wish, although Geese have a slightly higher social standing than the 'lowly' duck.

I'm ashamed to admit that it has taken me fifteen years to realize this.

I've been so consumed with hiding *my* lie, that I didn't notice the one going on around me.

Thankfully, I have Dell. He is my sounding board when I learn something new and life-changing in my world. I've tried to become more connected with my people, but everyone treats me with aloof deference. Perhaps when I am Cigarette, I can make a change, but that will not be for a very long time.

What of the geese that dream of being scholars?

What of the ducks that wish to be healers?

Why must they be relegated to jobs of menial or dangerous labor?

I asked Elsie.

She's a Swan, but all her helpers were other Anseriformes.

She didn't even try to contemplate the reason why. She simply stated that this is how our world is and we each have our place in it. She tried to change the conversation by commenting on how I was itching my scalp less, but I wouldn't be swayed.

Obviously, it itched less because I had grown out my hair, but I wanted to know who made up these rules; how long had they been in effect?

I never did get any answers.

Just thinking of it makes me irate.

I have to concentrate very hard, so as not to shift in the middle of the castle dining room, where I am eating lunch with my parents.

"Vivvy, love, your hair is getting so long. Perhaps it's time for a trim," my mother comments.

I roll my eyes. This is her covert way of saying that it's time for a new wig.

"Sure, momma, whatever hairdo you think would look best. I'm off to look for wild onions and buttercup blooms. Bye, momma; bye, daddy."

"Now, Viveka, hold on just a second," my father says before I can leave. "That's what we have foragers and florists for."

More eye-rolling on my part.

"I know, daddy. I just want to enjoy the Vernal air."

"Yes, well, I don't like you spending so much time in nature. It's... dangerous" he announces; then, he looks around before lowering his voice. "The wilderness calls to the untamed



inside you; even with Elsie's drink, we wouldn't want to do anything to provoke it."

"It?" I ask dully.

"Yes, your darkness. You know what I mean, Viveka."

My father's voice has gone cold.

"Besides, dear," my mother interjects, "You have your grooming classes."

I make a face. I was raised in a royal palace; how could I need any more grooming? Of course, my mother's eyes brighten with amusement, as if she can read my thoughts.

"You're being groomed for your new role in three years," she clarifies.

"To rule, you mean?" I ask in confusion.

"No, to be married!" my father corrects jovially.

I feel my face crumple in disgust.

"Viv, darling, your face just imploded. Fix it and go find Elsie. She has your schedule for the afternoon."

My mother looks like she's trying not to laugh at me.

I stick my tongue out at her playfully and, then, run from the room while my father yells at me to walk. I rush up and down the halls until I find Elsie.

"Elsie! What's this nonsense about marriage grooming?" I demand when I finally spot her.

"Your parents have requested that you begin lessons in the proper mannerisms of... wifedom."

"Gross. Who is teaching me these lessons?"

"Different tutors for different lessons, but the bulk of your learning will be self-taught through reading."

Phew. I can do that. I enjoy reading and do it quickly. If that's the majority of my schooling in wifedom, then I will still have plenty of time to visit with Dell.

"Ok, what's today's lesson?"

“How a Wife Acts With Her Husband in Public,” Elsie supplies. “It’s just a reading lesson. Here is your text. You will be quizzed tomorrow.”

“Double gross. Ok, well, I had better start reading. Thanks, Elsie.”

Then, I skip off to the woods to meet my only friend.

I’m late when I get there and Dell is sitting there, waiting.

“Hey, Viveka, what took you so long?”

“Ugh, don’t remind me. My parents want me to start ‘grooming lessons’.”

Dell’s brows pucker in confusion.

“Grooming for what?”

“Marriage,” I spit resentfully.

Now, Dell’s face erupts in a myriad of emotions: *shock, dismay, anger, and maybe even resentment.*

“I take it that you’re not happy?”

“Of course not. I don’t need to be prepared for marriage. That’s for two people who are connected and want to be joined. They don’t need grooming to know how to be together. That’s what I want, but...”

“But what?”

“My parents are arranging my marriage, and I doubt that I will end up like them. They genuinely love one another, but most other arranged marriages that I witness just seem... distant. Like they are simply putting up with one another. It just seems so lonely and demeaning.”

“I agree. Everyone should be free to choose their own love,” Dell says wistfully and I wonder if he wishes that I could be that love.

## SCENE SIX



VIVEKA

VERNAL TURNS INTO ESTIVAL, bringing the heat and long days, which then turns into Ottumnal. I love the crisp winds and falling leaves that herald the return of the dreaded Hiemal. It's not that I don't enjoy the wintry landscape, simply that it's my birthday once more. For the most part, I'm a shadow in the public eye, hiding behind my parents at events.

But I can't hide on Hiemal's Eve.

My 'little wifey' lessons are helping to distract me, though, from my impending big day. And today, I finally learned how a Swan wife acts when *alone* with her husband. Nothing like getting the birds and the bees from a complete stranger- not that I was completely ignorant before, but this... *was detailed*.

For the most part, I just learn all kinds of boring and patronizing things and, don't get me wrong, this lesson was no different, but I did find it a little interesting.

*Men like a submissive woman?*

*All the time or just in the bedroom?*

*What about a woman's pleasure?*

"Hey, Viv, what are you thinking about so deeply? More wifely duties?" Dell teases, startling a honk from me.

I feel the feathers burst from my arms, but I maintain my human form. Even though I have no problem switching from my Anseriforme to my human form and back now, extremely strong emotions still provoke a change in me.

"Sheesh, Dell, you scared me! And I... I don't want to talk about it."

"Sorry. That bad, huh?"

"Yes, no... it's complicated?"

"Are you cold?"

"No, why?"

"Your face is bright red. I thought maybe you had been in the wind and weather for far too long."

"Maybe I am a little cold," I lie, latching onto Dell's excuse.

He walks over to me and I have to look up at him now. Ever since his sixteenth birthday in Estival, he's grown much taller.

"You're a horrible liar," Dell observes and I blush some more. "Come on, Viveka, spill it."

"It's... embarrassing," I hedge.

"More embarrassing than the time that an Anseriforme shit on me while flying over my head?"

I can't help but snicker.

"No, nothing is more embarrassing *than that*."

"Well, then, you have to tell me, if only to soothe my humiliated pride."

I roll my eyes and nudge his shoulder playfully.

“I doubt your pride needs a boost, but... but maybe I can ask you some questions.”

“Your nervousness is making me nervous, Viveka,” he jokes. “It really can’t be that bad, can it?”

“Today’s lesson was about... how to please my Swan husband... in, um, *bed*,” I finally manage to choke out.

Now, Dell turns bright red.

“They gave you the nesting talk?!”

“Yes, no...I already knew about *that*, but today, they expounded upon it, I guess you could say.”

“Expounded how?” Dell demands coldly.

“Just the things that my mate will expect of me in the bedroom... like my submission,” I say with a shrug and Dell growls.

“What in the goose feathers are they teaching you?!”

“I don’t know! I’ve never been with a... man. I thought maybe *you* could help me.”

Dell takes a giant leap to the left and nearly ends up in the little stream of water that is the Anas River this far North.

“Me?! Why would you think that I could help you?”

“Because you’re a male. And my only friend,” I state dryly.

He scowls at my tone.

“How should I know what all other males want? I can only tell you what I like,” he mumbles.

“Well, what do you like?” I wonder.

“I... I don’t know. I’ve never, ah, mated before.”

He hunches his shoulders forward, clearly uncomfortable with the topic, but I forge ahead anyway.

“But you have preferences, still, don’t you? Don’t you... think about *it*?”

Dell blows out an exasperated breath.

“Yes, Viveka, I think about it. I’m a hormonal teen male. Of course, I think about it.”

I sidle up next to him, huddling into his warmth.

“Then, tell me what you think about. Is it what they taught me?”

“About submitting? No. I’ve never really, uh, fantasized about my mate submitting, but...” he trails.

“But what?”

“I guess that I can see the appeal,” he admits awkwardly.

I feel my brow furrow thoughtfully.

“Like all the time? Or just in the bedroom?”

Dell wrinkles his nose in disgust.

“Definitely only in the bedroom. I want a real mate, not a puppet that I can control.”

“Ok, that makes sense. How would you like your mate to submit?”

Dell groans.

“I don’t know, Viveka. What did *they* teach you?” he asks snidely.

“To... please my Swan husband above all, such as on my knees,” I cough out.

Dell and I are both blushing furiously and the silliness of our shyness makes me giggle. Soon, Dell joins me and we are laughing uproariously. I wipe the tears streaming from my eyes.

“It’s ridiculous, really. They are so obsessed about having all their ducks in a row, but they skip over the most basic of things. Like kissing. Won’t my husband want me to kiss him? Or is that too intimate? Aren’t mates supposed to be intimate? And... and what about my pleasure? Do I get any? Or do I just derive some from my mate’s?”

“Whoa! Slow down, my dark swan. Firstly, clearly, they are teaching you fluff. When an Anseriforme finds a mate and they nest, they form a permanent bond that can only be broken in death. It’s not something to take lightly and it’s not just about the male. It’s the male and the female together and their relationship as two people creating a whole. So, yes, I assume that your husband will want, even expect, you to kiss him. As for why they didn’t cover this... maybe they assumed that you knew?”

I snort.

“Who would I have been kissing?”

“You’ve never been kissed?”

“Nope. A swanling tried on my fourteenth birthday during the Hiemal’s Eve toast and my knee accidentally came up between his legs.”

“Accidentally?” Dell asks with a smirk.

“I swear!”

“Liar. Now, as for the last part of your questions... I don’t think that I’m the one to ask. Maybe your mother or nursemaid can tell you about... a woman’s pleasure.”

I make a face.

“I can’t ask my mother; that’s gross. As for Elsie, I don’t know if she’s ever... ah, *you know*.”

“No, I’m sorry, can you clarify? What are we talking about again?” Dell teasingly queries and I lightly smack his arm.

“Knock it off. You know what I mean. You’re just trying to embarrass me again.”

“You’re right. That was mean of me; what can I do to make it up?”

“Kiss me,” I command without thinking.

“W-w-what?”

“I want to be kissed and I want my first kiss to be special, not some bumbling experience between me and my arranged

husband, but with a friend that I cherish and love.”

“You love me?” Dell asks dazedly.

“With all my heart,” I confess fervently.

Dell stares down into my face for what seems like an eternity before cupping my cheek and bringing his lips to mine. We never close our eyes as we cautiously explore one another. His lips are feather-soft and a sigh escapes me at the feel of them against mine.

Encouraged, Dell presses his mouth more firmly over mine and, this time, I let my eyelids flutter shut. He pulls me closer and gently licks his tongue over his lips, the tip barely teasing me, but I open my mouth reflexively, inviting him in. His tongue caresses mine, making him groan deeply and I realize that my mate’s pleasure *would be mine*, as Dell’s desire stokes my own.

“Viv, we should st-”

“More,” I growl hungrily, needing to feel his hands upon me.

I need this- his unconditional love and support.

His hands now trace up and down my sides, brushing my breasts through my thick coat. I feel his palm curve under my wig that I haven’t taken off since the extra layer keeps my head warm.

“You’re so beautiful, so perfect. I love you, Vi-”

“WHAT IN THE SARD IS GOING ON HERE?!” a familiar voice roars behind me.

I pull away quickly from Dell, shielding his body with my own.

“Daddy- I can explain.”

My father snorts.

“Doubtful, Viveka. Seriously doubtful. Your darkness has made you wanton,” he accuses and a sob escapes my mouth.



“That’s not true!” Dell defends, jumping out from behind me. “Your daughter is everything good and pure in this world, Cigne Siegfried, and you- you’re nothing but a monster!”

Instantly, my father changes into his Anseriforme. Where my angry father once stood, there is now a flapping, menacing white swan. He honks wrathfully and then charges Dell.

“NO!” I scream as he collides into my best friend.

Dell has his hands over his face to protect himself, but I can barely see anything amidst all the feathers and the flurry of movement. I feel the familiar prickle of my impending change and, for once, I embrace it instead of fighting it, but I don’t turn into my swan form.

Instead, a blast of magic bursts free from my hands and slams right into my father and Dell. Both cry out painfully, and I scream in horror.

*What have I done?*

I rush over, but my father is already changing back into his human form. I shield my eyes from his nudity and miss his elbow coming up as he scrambles to get off Dell. It smashes into my temple and instantly knocks me unconscious.

When I wake up, it’s night.

I’m back in my room and there are bars on my windows.

# ACT TWO



THREE MONTHS LATER

# SCENE ONE



VIVEKA

IT'S VERNAL ONCE MORE, but nothing can pull me from the darkness that has overtaken my mind. My father absolutely refuses to talk about what happened those months ago- refuses to acknowledge if my best friend is even alive. And in those three months, I haven't left my room once.

I'm a prisoner in my own home.

Elsie comes three times a day and instead of just drinking my potion once, I'm expected to drink it twice- to curb my darkness and wanton ways.

Thankfully, she doesn't stick around to ensure that I do drink them.

My father still doesn't have a clue that I can change into my Anseriforme.

And by some stroke of luck, I left my wig on that fateful day, so I managed to salvage my black locks, too.

But I would give it all up in heartbeat to just even know if Dell is alright.

I wake up nightly, covered in sweat, afraid that I killed my only friend.

Daddy isn't the monster.

I am.

There's a light tapping sound at my door, and the tinkling of keys as someone goes to open it.

Surprisingly, it's my mother.

She's holding a large box and Elsie is behind with another.

"Hello, dear. Are you ready for the Vernal Festival?"

I stare at her blankly and say nothing.

"Elsie, bring her dress."

My nursemaid walks into the room and opens the box, revealing a lovely green dress just the color of newly grown leaves.

"And, that's not all," my mother remarks excitedly, like she hasn't kept me locked away without visiting me once, "a new hairdo!"

Momma opens her box and in it is a new blond wig. This one is shorter; the length will probably only hit just under my collarbones.

"Get dressed and ready, Viv. Your father and I have something we wish to speak with you about in the Great Hall before we leave for the festival."

I struggle to keep my face schooled.

Elsie comes forward to help prepare. Like with my mother, I don't say a single word, even though she tries to engage me in conversation.

She doesn't care about what I have to say.

None of them do.

Only Dell ever really listened to me.

I try not to pout and drown in self-pity, but I'm so hurt and frustrated.

*Why doesn't my voice matter?*

*Why doesn't everyone's voice matter?*

While I sit there, thinking deep thoughts, Elsie turns me into a vision of Spring. When she's finished, my hair is coifed loosely at my nape, making me appear both older and more regal. The bright green makes my blue eyes pop and sparkle, but I dislike the color immensely. It reminds me of happiness.

I'm not happy- I'm empty.

A drab gray color would be much better suited for the occasion.

"Come along, Viveka. We mustn't keep your parents waiting."

Like I give a feather about making them wait but, again, I hold my peace.

As we walk down the halls, palace workers greet me in joyous wonder.

"Princess Viveka! It's a miracle!"

"My Lady Princess, how good to see you are walking again!"

"Three cheers for the lovely future Cigarette!"

I weakly wave back at them, realizing that my parents told everyone that I was ill this entire time. Of course, it wouldn't do to tell everyone that I was a black swan caught whoring with the enemy. Appearances must be kept, and in Anserinae, appearances are *everything*.

Elsie and I finally make it to the Great Hall, where two castle guards open the doors to allow us entry, but Elsie dips a curtsy and leaves.

*Sard me, must I do this alone, I wonder bitterly.*

My thoughts lately have become more troubled and sprinkled with profanity that 'Good Viveka' would never have used. But that Viveka is dead. That Viveka was blind to the world. Stupid and innocent. I have been reborn in my pain and *this* Viveka doesn't give a sard about anyone or anything in regards to the Cigne and Cigarette.

They turned their backs on me.

Always have.

They had better watch themselves.

That's a good way to get a knife plunged there.

Someone clears their throat, bringing me out of my black thoughts. I finally look up and see my parents sitting in their thrones, my father's hand over my mother's, but it's not them that interests me.

It's the two men standing on either side of my parents.

They are mirror images of one another.

They both have deep chestnut brown hair and matching brown eyes. They are tall, even taller than my father, but they don't appear to be much older than me. Perhaps in their late teens, maybe early twenties. Their faces are clean-shaven, but the shadow of regrowth is hinted along their cheeks and jaw. Even through their clothing, I can see the corded muscle in their arms, legs, and stomach.

A strange tingling feeling overcomes me.

This is what it felt like when I kissed Dell...

"Ah, there's my little queen-in-the-making! I'm so glad to see you out of your room. You look lovely, too. The absolute embodiment of Vernal," my father praises.

I look back down to the floor so he doesn't see my hurt and disgust.

I tune out his words, but refocus when he announces that the two men will be my bodyguards and enforcers.

“What?!” I gasp, my voice rusty from not speaking for three months.

“Cyg and Linden are your new bodyguards and enforcers. Their family are nomadic swans, originally from Anserinae; Cyg and Linden have recently returned and are looking to reintegrate themselves into our wonderful kingdom! What better way than as your personal escort and protectors?”

“Is that what you meant by enforcer?” I ask.

“Oh, no,” my father laughs, “enforcer means that they have *my* full permission to dole out punishment if you put one feather out of line. As the future queen of Anserinae, I must ensure that you are prepared to take on your duties and will not... *fail me.*”

“Huh, well, feather and tar me! I never thought that you would employ a couple of nomads with *dark hair and eyes*. I’m glad to see that you are turning a new leaf with everything except me,” I deadpan.

My father’s fair skin becomes mottled with his rage.

“Viveka! Apologize this instant! Firstly, how dare you insinuate that they are *dark!*” he hisses. “Are you blind? Their hair is lighter than mine! Secondly, don’t you dare take that tone of voice with me! I am your father and Cigne!”

He wonders if *I’m* blind?

Is he blind?!

Cyg’s and Linden’s hair is clearly many shades *darker* than my father’s, *not lighter*. It’s almost my natural shade!

The twins narrow their eyes at me in menace, but I glare right back.

“I don’t give a sard about your status and I sure as feathers don’t give a sard about apologiz-”

“ENOUGH! LANGUAGE!” my father booms. He turns to address the twins. “See, this is what I meant. This... insolence must be curbed. We are doing everything to drain her of her darkness but, clearly, it still lurks. It has taken over my sweet, innocent daughter. Please, I will leave her in your capable

hands. Viveka, it pains me to say this, as so many are expecting to see you today, but you are not well enough to attend the Vernal Festival. You must go to your room and rest. Come, Odette, we don't want to be late."

My father and mother sweep out of the room, leaving me alone with... *whatever* they are.

I cross my arms over my chest and glare daggers at the twins.

"You might fool my father, but you don't fool me!" I announce fiercely.

"Good, we'll have more fun this way," Cyg answers and I wonder what kind of trouble I've landed myself into this time.



## SCENE TWO



CYG

PRINCESS VIVEKA'S BRIGHT BLUE eyes widen at my words.

I've unnerved her and it gives me untold pleasure to know so.

I slowly step down from the dais and Linden follows. Like birds of prey, we begin to circle her. She swivels around to face us, unconsciously making sure to never give us her back, but there are two of us and only one of her. Eventually, she's facing my twin and I step into her, plastering my chest to her spine.

The little princess freezes against me while Linden crowds her frontside.

I chuckle darkly into her ear.

“What’s wrong, little swan?” I breathe. “Afraid of the big, bad dark birds?”

Viveka cranes her head back to scowl threateningly at me, but Linden catches her chin and turns her to look back at him.

“Your father has left you in *our* care. You can make this easy for yourself, or not- your choice, but know that my twin and I will relish in your punishment every time you get out of hand.”

Her face drops in Linden’s hand and I can hear a soft snuffle. I look over her at my twin in surprise, his face mirroring mine.

“Princess, we didn-” I begin, but she cuts me off by slamming the back of her head into me.

Luckily, I am many inches taller than her and she merely clips my chin from my bent head. Viveka leans against me for support while she kicks out her legs, aiming for Linden. I quickly band my arm around her and tug her out of reach. She flails unsuccessfully before calming down.

“My, my, my. She’s a feisty one, isn’t she, Cyg?” Linden calls.

I tighten my arms and give her a small squeeze and she lets out a honk of protest. Before I realize just how badly we’ve scared her, she transforms into her Anseriforme. She pecks at my arms and I drop her. Viveka doesn’t waste any time, launching herself into the air and towards the opened windows near the ceiling.

She’s just small enough to squeeze through.

“Linden! Quickly!” I cry at my brother, but he’s already shifted into his giant white swan.

He races after the princess and snags her webbed foot with his powerful bill. He tugs, unbalancing Viveka, and she comes crashing back towards the ground. In her fear, she shifts back into her human form, still fully dressed.

I rush over and catch her in just the nick of time.

Linden zooms back down and gracefully transforms back just as his feet touch the floor. He reaches over to grab Viveka, but she flings out her arms, causing her hair to shift. Both Linden and I frown at each other and I reach up and pull.

The blond hair falls from her head, revealing the dark hair underneath.

“You’re *white* swans!” she exclaims in a pained voice.

“Yes, your father made us shift before appointing us your keepers.”

“But... your hair is so dark.”

I shrug.

“Not nearly as dark as yours,” I point out. “Your father said that you shaved it.”

Viveka looks away when I gently set her down, but I keep a firm hand on her in case she decides to run or shift again.

“A friend convinced me to grow it out.”

“He sounds like a nice a friend,” Linden comments.

“The nicest,” she says with another snuffle.

“Let’s make a deal, my dark, sweet one,” I offer and she looks at me uneasily. “If you can behave yourself, my brother and I will teach you to fight.”

Viveka snorts.

“What would I need to know that for?”

“So the day that you are ready to own who you are, you will have the skills to help you.”

She looks at me curiously, clearly not understanding what I mean, and I don’t explain.

“Come, Viveka. It’s time to go back to your room,” Linden announces and we usher down the halls to her room.

Once inside, Linden locks the door securely and I walk her over to the sitting area, urging her to take a seat.

“Listen well, my princess, within this room, you are free. Free to dispose of the wig, free to be your Anseriforme, free to practice your magic, and free to speak your mind. But outside these walls-”

“You do our express bidding,” Linden intones seriously. “Anything and everything. If you are not the good little submissive swan that your father expects, we will punish you. We have no choice. Our lives depend upon keeping you in line.”

If looks could kill, my brother and I would be dead right now.

“Never,” Viveka hisses.

“Enough!” I thunder. “We are trying to be your friend, but much is at stake.”

“I don’t believe you. It’s a trap set by my father.”

I look over at Linden, who just shrugs.

Clearly, it will take time to convince Viveka that we truly mean her no harm.

## SCENE THREE



LINDEN

OVER THE NEXT MANY months, Cyg and I work to secure our places here in the castle, as well as in Viveka's heart. The former is a piece of cake. With the king backing us, our station is elevated and people treat us damn-near like royalty. It helps that Viveka has become the model daughter again.

Unfortunately, behind closed doors, she still locks us out.

Cyg and I teach her how to fight, but the topic of magic is off-limits. Even if she did believe that we could help her- and she doesn't since we are white swans- she refuses to use it. It's late Ottumnal and everyone in the castle is bustling to prepare for Hiemal's Eve and Viveka's seventeenth birthday. But

today, my brother and I are going to wear her down. Today, we're going to make magic happen.

She just needs the right *push*.

"*Not that kind of push,*" Cyg growls in my mind.

Being twins, we're bonded, much like mated pairs, and can speak telepathically.

"*I don't know what you're talking about,*" I pretend.

Cyg snorts from across the throne room, where we're standing, listening to Cigne Siegfried drone on. Cigarette Odette is next to him, nodding attentively, and beside her is Viveka. Although she is facing her father, I can tell by the blank look on her face that she's not paying any attention.

*I wonder what she's thinking about.*

In all honesty, I was slightly disappointed with how quickly she reformed. I expected more... *fire* from her.

Another snort from Cyg.

"*You expected to be able to punish her,*" I counter.

A small smile tips up the side of my mouth.

I would be a liar if I said that I hadn't planned on enjoying cornering and disciplining our little dark swan, but instead, she simply retreated into herself. From the Cigarette's account, this is how Viveka was before the encounter with the Anatidae youth. I don't even think her parents realize that this girl before them is just an empty shell.

They think she is well-behaved.

Quiet.

Submissive.

Learning her place as the future Cigarette.

But in reality, she's practically dead inside.

I don't like *this* Viveka.

I want the one that fought us on the first day.

I only catch snippets of that side of her when we train. It takes her a while to warm up, but there is a small sliver of time each day that she sheds her docility to become the warrior woman hidden inside.

*“Not a woman,”* Cyg grits.

*“Almost a woman,”* I shoot right back. *“She’ll be seventeen in a month’s time.”*

*“And we are still two years older.”*

I huff in aggravation. Keeping my desire and passion in check for this girl has been... a chore, to put it kindly.

Everything about Viveka ignites the senses.

Visually, she is stunning. Beautiful with her blond wig, but sarding gorgeous without it. Her dark hair complements her milky skin and dazzling blue eyes. She smells of flowers and her skin is softer than down feathers. Her voice is a husky invitation, seducing me with every word-

*“Enough!”* Cyg roars, clearly seeing my thoughts.

*“Don’t act like you haven’t thought it, too,”* I snarl right back.

My twin fights his attraction to the princess, but me?

I sarding embrace it.

Finally, after what feels like forever, Cigne Siegfried wraps up his speech and we all applaud politely. Cyg bows to the Cigne and Cigarette and then offers Viveka his arm to escort her from the room. Both her father and her mother think that my brother and I are training her for her royal duties. We leave with their blessing, and Viveka walks beside Cyg meekly while I follow behind, my blood boiling at her compliancy-even though it’s exactly what we demanded of her.

Once we are securely in her room, I shut and lock the door.

Cyg is talking lowly to her, but I stalk over and rip the wig from her head, making her cry out in surprise. My twin glares at me rough handling, but I’m over Viveka’s false obedience.

“Time to train,” I announce curtly, hoping my abrupt manner will incite a reaction from her.

But instead, our princess merely looks confused at how I’m acting.

“Let me change and pull my hair back first,” she says softly, going behind her screen to change.

I stifle my groan at the sound of her shedding her dress.

“*Linden!*” my brother reprimands. “Focus!”

I hiss at him, a feral sound that comes from my swan, but somehow, I manage to rein in my anger. The princess steps out a few minutes later in a simpler dress and with her long dark hair braided and twisted at her nape.

“I wish that you would let me wear trousers,” she grouses and I close my eyes at the thought of her long legs encased in pants.

*Today is just not my day.*

Cyg clears his throat and shoots me a warning glance.

“We’ve been over this, my dark one, if the need to fight ever arises, the chances are practically nonexistent that you will be in men’s wear. It’s best that you learn how to fight in a dress.”

“You still haven’t told me what I’m learning to fight for,” she probes lightly.

For the millionth time, my brother and I don’t answer her.

“If you are so concerned about fighting in a dress, then why don’t you use your magic?” I challenge, earning a black scowl from her.

“Please, don’t start with that again,” Viveka begs me. “I… just can’t deal with it now.”

Cyg and I exchange a worried look.

“Viv, what’s wrong?” Cyg asks gently.

“Nothing, what are we working on today?” she asks instead.

My twin raises an eyebrow and, for once, we are in agreement. I press into Viveka’s back while Cyg cages in her



front.

“Do not lie to us,” I rumble against her. “What’s wrong?”

“I promise that you can trust us,” Cyg swears, staring into her eyes.

She stares back and says nothing for a time, but doesn’t attempt to escape our embrace. Finally, something inside of her cracks.

“I hate this time of year,” she confesses. “Hiemal’s Eve- my birthday. Before, I couldn’t stand the crowds, the adorations, the limelight. As I got older, each Hiemal’s Eve represented another year closer to my undoing- my betrothal. But last year... I met someone. Someone from... Anatidae. We became friends. He helped me, especially through my ‘lessons’-”

“What lessons?” I interrupt, and Cyg glares at me for cutting her off, but Viveka just lets out a laugh.

“Lessons on how to please my future mate,” she says provocatively.

Cyg and I release her like we’ve been burned.

“Come again?” I manage to stutter.

“You heard me- lessons on how to please my future husband... out of the bedroom *and* in it. In fact, I kind of thought that’s what you two were supposed to do.”

My brother and I recoil even further, emphatically shaking our heads in the negative.

“No, absolutely not,” Cyg spits out. “Your father tasked us to ensure that you remained, ah, *pure*. No one is to touch you.”

And then I see it: *that spark of life*.

Anger rolls into Viveka’s eyes at Cyg’s words.

“Pure? He’s worried about my purity because of *one* kiss? Or is it *who* I kissed, hmm?”

“My princess,” I start. “I’m not sure-”

“I killed my best friend!” she screams, then falls to her knees and sobs.

The heart-wrenching sound echoes off the walls of her room and something inside of me breaks with it. I crouch down next to her, pulling her to my shoulder, where she turns her head and cries. Cyg takes up her other side and we sit there while she pours out her grief.

After an eternity, Viv hiccups and tries to pull away from me, clearly embarrassed.

“Look at me,” I whisper huskily. “You didn’t kill anyone. You don’t have it in you.”

She moans pitifully at my consolation.

“My father caught me kissing my friend and shifted into his Anseriforme. He attacked the only person in the world that loved me. *The real me*. The black swan me. I tried to shift to help break them apart, but instead a blast of magic burst from my hands and hit them both. When I came over to see what I had done, my father had changed back to his human form. I think his elbow hit my temple... I’m not sure. When I woke up, I was back in my room, but there were bars over my window. I... never did learn of what happened to my friend. My parents refused to speak to me about it and, in return, I stopped talking. In fact, it wasn’t until the day that I met you two that I spoke for the first time in three months.”

“This still doesn’t mean that you killed anyone,” Cyg murmurs.

“It does. Either my magic killed him or my father did. Either way, it was because of *me* that he’s dead. If I had just controlled my magic,” she mutters bitterly.

I grasp her chin and turn her head to me.

“How can you control something that was never taught to you?” I counter.

To this, she says nothing. Instead, she changes the subject back to our earlier conversation.

“So...aside from keeping me in line, you are supposed to ensure my purity for marriage?” she asks ruefully.

I swallow thickly at this question.

“Yes,” Cyg answers, ever the strong one.

Her eyes narrow in sultry challenge.

“And no one is to touch me?”

Again, my twin answers. I’m incapable. I’ve been wishing the little princess would drop her shields, show me some of her fire, but I might regret it now.

“*You think,*” Cyg says to me mentally while answering her out loud, “That’s correct.”

“But *you two* touch me,” she points out.

Cyg blanches.

“Not like *that* we don’t!” he refutes and Viv lets out a throaty laugh.

“So, my father gave you permission to train me to fight?”

“You know sarding well that he didn’t,” I growl.

“Of course. And what about... me?” she wonders.

“What about you?” I snap back, bemoaning pushing her, but now we know why she doesn’t use magic.

“Can I touch myself?” she asks in a voice that makes it obvious to what she is referring to.

“Sard it,” I croak, and I give up the battle.

I pull her into my arms and slam my lips over hers hungrily.

## SCENE FOUR



VIVEKA

*LINDEN IS KISSING ME.*

And it's nothing like the kiss that I shared with Dell.

That kiss had been sweet- innocent- the exploration of two inexperienced people, but this kiss...

*It's passion incarnate.*

Linden doesn't hesitate, but claims my mouth completely. His tongue sweeps in to tangle with mine, and I'm too consumed with desire to even worry about my lack of experience. Instead, I just feel. I let the sensation sweep me under.

Linden pulls me in even tighter, wrapping one arm around my lower back, the others snaking up my nape to cup my head.

“No, brother!” Cyg admonishes, wrenching Linden off of me.

I feel bereft and cold without his body against mine.

They stare intently at one another- almost as if they are having a silent conversation. At this thought, I squint harder. *Are they?* Mated Anseriformes can speak telepathically... perhaps, they can as well. Twins are very rare in our world, especially swan twins.

Suddenly, Linden whirls again to face me.

“My apologies, princess, for taking liberties,” he says stiffly.

I squirm under his gaze. His mouth says ‘I’m sorry’, but his velvety brown eyes promise me a world of sensuality. I bite my lip to keep from crying out in frustration.

*What am I doing?*

*What was I thinking?*

Over the weeks, the twins have been nothing but kind to me behind closed doors, teaching me how to wield a sword, how to twist my body to escape attack, and so forth. In public, they are aloof, but never cruel. When we are alone, I can convince myself that they like me- that we are friends, but then I see them with my father, acting equally congenial.

*Which one of us are they playing- my father or me?*

But Linden’s kiss makes me think that perhaps there’s more to the situation.

You can’t fake passion like that-

*Can you?*

Both boys are looking at me now and growl when they see my face, as if they can read my thoughts. Inside, I’m a jumbled mess of need, regret, and despair. I hate my father for what happened to Dell, but I hate myself even more. Just the

thought of my birthday makes me physically sick to my stomach.

I wish that I could trust Cyg and Linden like I did with Dell.

A small part of me acknowledges that I must if I let them see my hair and Anseriforme, but another part of me worries when they will turn and stab me in the back. After they came into my life, I realized that fighting was futile and, instead, I have been plotting. The twins are unknowingly teaching me the life skills that I need to escape.

Cyg clears his throat, calling my attention.

“Viveka, are you listening?” he demands.

“No,” I admit ruefully. “I... I’m not feeling the best; may I have the afternoon and evening off, please?”

Cyg and Linden hesitate before the former says ‘alright’.

*This is what I need.*

An afternoon free of Linden’s smoldering looks and Cyg’s dark scowls.

And an evening free of dining with my overbearing parents who pretend to care.

“Thank you,” I say in relief. “I’m just going to rest.”

Cyg shoots me one last glower, as if trying to see what I’m really thinking, then he shoos his twin out the door, shutting it firmly behind him. Later, Elsie brings me a bowl of soup and my tonic. I eat the soup and dump the tonic into the remaining broth. Then, I snuggle own into my comforter. Hiemal is just around the corner and the ground outside is already covered in snow. The wind howls and I can see nothing in the moonless, black sky.

Suddenly, I’m overcome with the need to fly.

*To be free.*

My father never removed the bars from my windows, but the upper rectangular ones were never covered. I shift into my Anseriforme and fly to the top, pecking at the glass until it

yields and opens. I push, my long neck stretching, until I can finally wiggle my swan body out.

A blast of frigid air nearly causes me to plummet to the ground, but I flap my wings and catch the wind instead. Luckily, my dark feathers will blend with the inky night, helping to not alert the castle guards. I do my best to ride the air currents so that I don't have to move my wings, but once I am away from the castle, I flap and fly south.

*The north only holds bitter memories and heartbreak.*

As I fly over Anserinae, I notice how the buildings begin to thin. I'm now on the outer edges of the town and cottages and huts speckle the ground below. This is where the poorest of the poor live, mostly ducks and a few geese and Nonansers. I gracefully dive to the ground and shift back into my human form.

Unfortunately, I didn't put on a cloak before shifting, and the weather is brutal against my sleeping gown. But I huddle into myself and peer through one dingy window of a cottage. Inside, a family of ducks is shivering in front of a low-burning hearth. They are in their Anseriformes to help preserve heat. It looks like a father, a mother, and five ducklings. I watch them shiver, just as I am, and for once, I embrace the dark magic inside of me.

I let it flow through my veins, filling me with warmth.

An idea comes to me.

I need to know that I can do something more than just bring harm to others with my magic.

It killed my best friend- directly or indirectly- but tonight, I can help save another's life.

*Many lives, in fact.*

I reach out with my hands and envision a barrier covering the house, insulating it from the cold. I open my eyes and see a faint blue shimmer sparkling around the cottage. When I look in the window again, the family has stopped shaking and appears content already. Fortified by this, I walk over to another home. A hut this time.

Inside is a Nonanser.

Unlike the family of ducks, the man cannot shift and is even colder.

I raise my hands and again envision a blanket of warmth enveloping the house. When I finish, I send my magic to the man's fire, stoking it higher, to ensure the hut is properly heated. I do this to all the homes- a total of twelve. With each house, my magic becomes easier and easier to wield.

The smile on my face is wider than the Anas River and I can't help but glow with pride.

*I did it.*

I actually did something useful with my magic.

Maybe Cyg and Linden weren't wrong...

Just thinking of those two has my body tightening and burning.

I shake my head at the thought of their hands and mouths on my body.

Linden's would be so sweet and Cyg's...

A forbidden treat since he refuses to cross any lines with me, but I've seen how he looks at me when we train together, our bodies pressed hotly against one another. Cyg is much more contained than Linden- who says what he feels. So, the thought of Cyg losing control makes me burn even hotter.

I stroll through the quiet streets of the kingdom, my feet not making a sound on the cobblestone road. I pass all the shops, barely making their signs out in the dark of the night. I'm just about to change into my Anseriforme, when a distressed honk calls my attention. I follow the sound down a couple of alleys to find a man holding onto a duck.

Not just any man- a royal swan by the looks of the insignia on his shirt, but I can't make out his features to see if I know him or not. I actually try not to speak with anyone at the castle. I can tell by the duck's size that it's a female in her Anseriforme. The man is crushing her small form to his body cruelly, yelling profanities at the terrified bird.



“Hold still, you sarding whore. I paid your father for a night of pleasure, and I will get it!”

Again, she honks in misery, trying to peck at his hands to escape.

All too clearly, I realize what the man plans on doing to the girl and a black rage fills me. Much like that day almost a year ago, the magic overtakes me and blasts from my hands. It hits the man squarely in the chest and he collapses, freeing the duck. She hesitates for a second, dipping her head to me, before flying off, leaving me alone with a dead swan of nobility.

I stare after her before the ramifications of the situation hit me.

*Oh sard, what I have done?*

## SCENE FIVE



CYG

*VIVEKA IS GONE.*

As per our usual routine, Linden and I fly by her room a little after midnight before going about our business. In all this time, she has been there, curled under the blankets, like a chick in her nest. But tonight, she's missing.

I can barely fly in my fear for where she's at or what might have happened to her.

Linden goes north and I fly south.

It's not until I reach the outskirts of Anserinae that I spot her.

*“Linden! I’ve found her!”* I call to my twin.

*“Great goose eggs, thank our feathers!”* he exclaims in relief. *“Where is she?”*

*“In the Nonanser neighborhood.”*

I don’t need to elaborate for him to know that I mean the pitiful smattering of rundown houses right outside of the city. I slowly and stealthily glide down to land in the snow; against the white, only my beak sticks out, but in this dark, Viveka won’t be able to spot me.

I settle in and just observe her.

It dawns on me that she is warding the homes to keep in the warmth and my heart swells with pride at her thoughtfulness. The Cigne should be taking tips *from her*. Just as she finishes, Linden flaps down beside me. Together, we watch in awe.

*“She’s a sarding angel,”* Linden whispers reverently and I bob my head in agreement.

After she does each and every house, checking on the occupants to make sure that they have enough heat, she meanders back towards the city. I frown in concern at her bare feet and thin night rail, but I realize that she must be using her magic to keep warm.

*Clever girl.*

I wonder when she’s going to shift and go back home when Linden and I both hear an Anseriforme cry out.

Viveka hears it, too.

Being ahead of us, she follows and gets to the sound first.

Her horrified gasp reminds me that she isn’t privy to this world. She knows swans are given more, but aside from the poor housing, she can’t even begin to fathom the injustices done to geese, ducks, and Nonansers.

Linden and I quickly shift back into human form to intervene, but Viveka takes matters into her own hands. She lets out a blast of magic that drops the man. I don’t need to

check to know that he's dead. The female duck honks her gratitude and flies off, but Viveka just collapses to her knees.

My brother and I rush over to her.

"C-C-Cyg? Linden?" she stutters in fear.

"It's ok, sweetheart," I croon, bundling her now shaking form into my arms. "We'll take care of this. We need you to shift."

"I-I-I can't!" she wails, but Linden doesn't cut her any slack.

"Yes, you can! You can do this. All our lives are on the line. Shift, Viveka!" he commands and by some miracle, she does.

We fly back to her room without incident and I tuck her back in bed, but no matter how warm we make the room, she never stops shivering.

"*She's in shock,*" Linden observes.

"*Come, it's almost morning now. We'll alert her nursemaid.*"

We leave her room out the open window, making sure to close it tightly, then we go back to our chambers. Changing, we quickly go down to the kitchens. At this hour, only a few servants are about, but I direct one to go get Elsie. She comes stumbling into the kitchen, blurry-eyed.

"Have you checked on the princess this morning?" I demand.

"Um, n-n-no. She was fine last night. She ate her soup and went straight to bed," she rushes to explain.

"*Thank our feathers that she pretended to be ill yesterday,*" Linden comments and I agree.

"Well, it was particularly chilly. If no one checked on her in the night, her fire might have died. She might catch something far worse than the mere avian flu," I snap and the nursemaid pales.

"Of course. I'll go check right away."

Then, she dashes off.

Linden and I go around to check on the guards and speak with each of them. It's important that we continue our rapport here in the castle. A couple of hours later, my brother and I are called to the throne room. Inside, I am concerned, but on the outside, I act like nothing is amiss.

"Your Majesties," I say with a bow to the Cigne and Cigarette.

Linden does the same, but presses a kiss on the back of the Cigarette's hand.

*Flirt.*

"Good morning, Your Graces. How is everything coming for the Hiemal Eve's Feast?" Linden asks casually.

"It's going well, but I've not called you in here for idle chitchat. We have a problem. A big problem. A Swan nobility was murdered last night," the Cigne stops for a dramatic pause, "*by magic!*"

Linden gasps and I almost smile.

"*Knock it off,*" I chide.

"*No way. That sarding fool is eating it up.*"

I try not to roll my eyes and focus instead on the Cigne's words.

"This is Rothbart's doing," he finishes darkly.

"What should we do?" I ask cautiously.

The Cigne looks smug.

"It has taken me many years... I always knew that black-hearted swan would renege on his word. So, I've formed a special alliance. The only thing that can fight magic *is* magic," he says cryptically. "In the meantime, I want you and Linden to investigate this death and find the culprit. There will be a public hanging."

I can't stop myself from blanching, but thankfully, Linden diverts his attention by asking a question.

"And the princess, Your Majesty?"

“Her nursemaid informed me that Viveka is even sicker today than she was yesterday. She will be recovering for a few days and will not be leaving her room. I will post extra guards at her door to ensure her safety, but the real threat is outside these walls. We must inform all Swans to beware.”

I frown.

“Will that not just incite panic, Majesty?”

The Cigne is thoughtful and the Cigarette leans over to whisper something to him.

“I agree. Let us investigate this murder first, but be warned. The people of Anserinae already know of the death. It won't be long before rumors run amok and panic sets in on its own.”

With that, we are dismissed.

Linden and I spend the rest of the day framing another person.

“Viveka isn't going to like this,” Linden tells me cheerfully as he sets his ‘evidence’ in place.

I chuckle.

“No, but only because she is too kind. Besides, logistically, she'll understand someone else has to take the fall, why not another raper of the innocent?” I propose.

“Yeah, it's a real shame that he turned out to be colluding with Rothbart,” Linden sneers.

Of course, the sarder never was, but desperate times call for desperate measures.

“Let's go tell the Cigne we've found the culprit and go visit our princess,” Linden says.

I clap his back, suddenly in good spirits.

“Let's,” I agree.

## SCENE SIX



LINDEN

UNFORTUNATELY, LATER THAT EVENING when we go to see her, Viveka is not in good spirits.

*She's despondent.*

“I’m a murderer,” is all she can say, over and over.

Cyg draws the curtains to block out the waning evening light while I make sure the door is locked.

“Viv, you are not a murderer. We both know what he was going to do to that woman,” Cyg reasons.

“I just... I just wanted to help. To prove that I wasn’t evil. And then I sarding killed someone!”

“Stop!” I command. “I understand your... guilt- to an extent, but Viveka, you are a hero. Truly, you saved that duck from a terrible fate that probably would have ended in *her* death. Geese, ducks, and Nonansers are disposable in this kingdom. Besides, Cyg and I found a scapegoat. A man with... how do you say? Similar tastes to the sarder you ended.”

“What?! No! We can’t pin this on someone else! It’s a lie! Surely, my father will understand that it was an accident given that I was trying to save another life, right?”

Cyg opens his mouth to soften the blow, but I beat him to the punch and simply tell her the truth.

“No. My princess, you are half of everything that your father loves most in the world- your mother, but at the same time, you are half of everything that your father hates most in the world- Rothbart’s magic. Don’t test him to see which side wins because we all know which he would choose.”

Viveka looks to the ground.

“You’re right,” she whispers in defeat and my gut clenches at her anguish.

“I hate seeing you like this. Let’s train,” I suggest, thinking the activity might take her mind from last night’s events.

She snorts at the thought, though.

“I don’t want to fight today.”

“What if we let you wear pants?” Cyg barters and her eyes light up.

“Really?”

“Really,” he confirms and a genuine smile stretches across her face.

“Ok, let me change. I’ve been in bed all day. Moving will be good for me.”

It doesn’t take her long to put on the breeches and join us once more. It takes all my concentration not to focus on her long legs sheathed in the tight pants. Visually, it’s ten times



more alluring than a dress. Cyg scowls at me and my thoughts, but I know that he's thinking the same thing.

I toss Viveka a sword and we begin a slow circle while Cyg watches and barks commands. I'm fast, but the little swan has proven faster. She's even nicked me a time or two, but I take care today given everything that has happened.

"Are you going soft on me?" she taunts.

*And there she is.*

The little spitfire that makes my blood dance.

This is the real Viveka.

Confident, in charge, and sassy as all sard.

I dream of *this* woman.

She'll be a magnificent Cigarette if her father would just let her be.

She throws out a couple more jeers before I step up my game, rotating my sword overhead and bringing it down swiftly over her. She thrusts her blade up to parry mine and we begin to fight in earnest. When Cyg calls time, we are both panting and sweating.

"Viv wins by two points!" my twin crows and a happy smile graces Viveka's face.

"Only because I let her," I tease and she sticks her tongue out at me.

"Careful," I growl, "I might take that as an invitation."

"And if it was?" she counters.

*Sard me.*

Before Cyg can react, I'm yanking the sword from her hand, where it clatters to the ground next to mine, but I pay it no mind, pulling her to me in the next second. I only focus on the feel of her in my arms once more.

"I'm going to kiss you," I warn.

"I dare you," she challenges right back.

I tug her up until she is on her toes and then I possess her mouth like it is a lifeline and I am a dying man. I drink her in, savoring every flavor and sensation. She's sweet, but tangy. Soft, but fierce. Velvet over iron. *And she's mine.*

"*Share!*" Cyg growls in my head, but I'm too lost in my dark swan to heed him.

He steps into her back, pulling her from me and breaking our kiss.

Viv is panting even harder and I get grim satisfaction from knowing that I took her breath away.

"What do you want, Viveka?" Cyg asks, always looking for confirmation.

"More," she mewls, making both my twin and I moan.

"We're not supposed to touch you," Cyg argues. "If your father caught us, he'd pluck our feathers and roast us alive."

"Then we better not get caught," she throws out, staring hungrily at my mouth.

"Sard, a woman after my own heart. What do you want, sweetheart?" I ask her.

Her brow puckers in thought.

"I... I want you to kiss me," she announces after a beat.

I chuckle.

"Of course, but anything *more*?"

"No!" Cyg barks at the same time she asks, "What do you mean by 'more'?"

"Surely, you want more than to be kissed?" I prompt, making her blush at my implications.

"I don't know," she confesses in a whisper. "I've only ever kissed someone. I mean, they taught me how to please my future husband, but I've never... ah, practiced."

"Good," Cyg and I growl together.

Fewer men we have to kill now.

“But you touch yourself, right? Isn’t that what you said to Cyg and I earlier?”

Another scorching blush burns across her cheeks.

“*We’re playing with fire,*” Cyg warns, but I ignore him.

“Well, princess?”

“I’ve never touched myself,” she finally snaps, clearly torn between her embarrassment and ire at me. “Have *you* touched *yourself*?” she challenges.

“Almost every day to the thought of you,” I confess in a husky murmur.

Viveka sucks in a breath as her jaw goes slack.

“Careful, love, before a bird comes and poops in your open mouth,” I tease and she snaps her lips closed.

She’s quiet for a beat more and I notice that my brother has wound his arms around her front, one hooked over her chest, above her breasts, and the other across her lower stomach. He can deny his desire all he wants, but his actions speak louder than his words.

I’m torn from my thoughts when Viveka whispers, “Show me.”

“*What?*” my twin and I both gasp.

“You say that you touch yourself... show me.”

I ponder her words, an evil smirk forming over my lips.

“Ok, but only if you touch yourself while you watch me,” I trade.

Both Cyg’s and her eyes go wide at my announcement.

“B-b-b-but I don’t know how to!” she protests, squirming against my brother, making him wince with lust.

“Cyg will show you,” I say cheerfully.

Cyg looks torn between killing me and running away.

“He’ll know what you like,” I toss out.

Viveka cranes her head to look at Cyg.

“Will you... will you show me, please?” she begs prettily, making my twin groan in defeat.

“I knew these damn pants would come back to haunt me,” he curses.

I chuckle, then reach down and stroke my hard cock through my own straining pants. The movement immediately catches Viveka’s eye and she licks her lips at the sight. Her chest heaves up and down in time with my hand as I move it over my engorged member.

Cyg captures her right hand and slowly directs it down her front until she’s cupping her own pussy.

“Sard,” I whisper, almost undone at the sight.

I see my brother’s fingers moving Viveka’s up and down the seam of her pants, and a wet spot starts to darken and grow underneath. Unable to control myself any longer, I loosen the ties of my breeches and slip my hand inside, wishing it was her hand on my cock instead.

Cyg takes my cue and follows suit, undoing Viv’s pants and guiding her hand down the front.

“Feel how wet you are?” he asks her.

Our princess licks her lips and nods her head, but she seems mesmerized by the movement of my hand.

“And feel this?” Cyg continues. “This is your love button. Touching it will bring you pleasure, as well as dipping your fingers up inside your wet center.”

I handle myself a little rougher, pinching the tip and applying pressure so that I don’t explode at the vision of Viv exploring her body for the first time. I can see the movement shielded by her pants, and I can easily envision her fingers and my brother’s deep inside her velvety folds. Cyg’s thumb is lazily circling over Viveka’s little nub and I resume jerking my throbbing erection.

Our quiet swan suddenly becomes very vocal and Cyg clamps his left hand over her mouth to stifle her cries of pleasure. Viveka’s head is tossed against his shoulder and her

eyes are wide. They fly to mine in surprise when her orgasm unexpectedly crashes over her in a tidal wave. Viveka bucks her hips hard and I see her white teeth bite down over my twin's hand to stifle her screams of completion.

In return, Cyg is grinding himself fiercely into her ass, and I free my monstrous cock from the confines of my pants. Stroking myself quickly, I come all over the polished stone floor of Viveka's bedroom with a groan. I hear my brother make a similar sound and I know that he'll need to change.

I walk over to our princess, who is slumped against Cyg. She slits open her eyes to take in my still half-hard cock, the tip sporting a few drops of my seed. Cyg removes their hands from her pussy and raises them to his lips to lick off her cream. Viveka watches in interest and then reaches out to swipe a thumb over the head of my member.

She raises it to her mouth and delicately sticks out her tongue to lick her thumb clean, just as my brother did.

"Mmmm," she moans and my cock twitches at the delicious sound.

All I can think about is laying her on the bed, with her long dark hair fanned around her, and me between her thighs-licking her, eating her, sarding her...

*"Time to go,"* Cyg announces.

Regretfully, I agree.

For once.

"We'll be back. We have some business that we need to take care of," I tell Viveka, pressing a hard kiss to her mouth.

"Don't leave this room," Cyg orders and then hesitates.

At the last moment, he sweeps her up for a passionate kiss, then he releases her and we walk out of the room. Thank goodness it's late. The dim light of the flickering wall sconces hides my brother's pants and the damp patch where he came. The guards don't even blink at us coming from the princess' room at this hour.

After all, we're her personal protectors.

I snicker at their foolishness and the Cigne's.

We stop back at our room for Cyg to change; then, we shift into our Anseriformes and fly into the night. We go past Viv's room to check on her, and I almost plummet to the ground. She's lying on her bed...

*With her hands down the breeches that she's still wearing.*

Of all the sarding things to teach her...

"Come on!" Cyg urges before I lose my battle to temptation.

We fly back to the Nonanser neighborhood where Joslyn the Duck is waiting for us in her Anseriforme. Then, we fly north to the Albellus Woods, where crossing over into Anatidae is easiest. Cyg goes over to the neighboring kingdom while I shift back into human form. Joslyn follows suit, but didn't bring a change of clothes and is naked as a newborn babe.

I pull her close to me, hoping to block some of the night's cold air, but the Duck gets the wrong impression. Before I even know what is happening, her soft body is pressed firmly against mine and her lips are trying to mold themselves to my mouth. A muffled cry has me wrenching Joslyn back. To my horror, my eyes clash with the bluest orbs that I've ever seen.

*Viveka.*

"How... how could you?" she asks in an aching voice.

I open my mouth to clarify this misunderstanding, but Cyg takes that moment to swoop down from the sky. As he nears the ground, he gracefully shifts back into human form, fully clothed. Viveka gasps.

"You're clothed!" she accuses. "And your beak and feet... they were *black!*"

Too late, Cyg realizes that she's there. Because we didn't expect anyone, neither one of us camouflaged our swans to have orange beaks and feet. Their *true* coloring shows our *true* nature.

"You're black swans smuggling Anserinae citizens to Anatidae," she says dully, staring at Joslyn, who is still

plastered against me.

“Viv- this isn’t what it looks like. I can explain!”

She snorts, her eyes darkening and something dangerous dances across her face, screwing up her mouth in a twisted grin.

“Doubtful,” she cackles. “Seriously doubtful. But this is what I get. The darkness has made us all wanton.”

“Viveka, come with us,” Cyg pleads and she narrows her gaze on him.

“You’re a fool if you think that I would come with you. But not nearly as big of a fool as I am. Leave,” she commands in a regal and cold voice. “Leave and *never* come back or else it’s not my father’s wrath that you’ll need to worry about.”

With that, she shifts into her swan form and flies away from me forever.

“*From us,*” Cyg corrects in my head, and I realize that he’s right.

She wasn’t just mine.

*She never was.*

# ACT THREE



ONE YEAR LATER



# SCENE ONE



VIVEKA

“HAPPY BIRTHDAY, PRINCESS!”

“Princess Viveka! Congratulations!”

“Happiest of days, Your Highness!”

All around me, people scream my name. I smile and wave, my face the perfect blend of serenity and interest. Of course, I don't feel anything inside. It's hard to feel emotions when the people that you care for most take a match and set them ablaze until there's nothing left but ash and soot.

*People like my parents.*

*People like the twins.*

After I caught Linden with another woman, and Cyg flying back from Rothbart's kingdom, I just... gave up. I flew back to the castle, into my room and for the first time in nearly two years, I shaved my hair. I hated the sight of it. It represented false hope and dead love. Then, I burned the shiny length; the acrid smell almost gagging me.

In the morning, when Elsie came with my breakfast and tonic, I downed it without a second thought. My magic did nothing but cause trouble. Instead of embracing it, I should have been shunning it, just like my father wanted. It's the only thing that we agree upon. So, I put on my blond wig and set out with a vengeance to learn how to become the best Cigarette ever.

Every day, I visited the market square and became acquainted with my future citizens. Not just the Swans, but the Geese and the Ducks. Even the Nonansers. I made new friends and slowly found new things to laugh about and enjoy in life. But my heart remained locked away. In that regard, I've learned my lesson.

It's Hiemal's Eve once more- my eighteenth birthday.

*And the announcement of my engagement.*

Tonight, at Hiemal's Eve Feast, I will meet my betrothed for the first time.

Daddy has been very secretive about who it is and I actually find myself curious.

Which Swan did he choose?

I push the thoughts aside and pass out the treats that royals chefs baked for the ducklings, goslings, and swanlings. I pay extra attention to the ducklings and goslings, making sure to slip them an extra tart or two.

"Your Highness, we must return to the castle so that you can prepare for tonight's festivities," a guard whispers to me.

I incline my head in acknowledgement and say good-bye to the townspeople before heading back home. The castle is all aflutter. The chaotic noise drives me ducky and I hastily escape into my room. On my bed is a gorgeous white gown

adorned with pure swan feathers and seed pearls. I dress and let Elsie fuss with my wig. In the end, she decides to sweep my hair in an updo, placing a choker with a swan cameo around my neck.

“That’s lovely,” I compliment.

“It’s from your mother. She says it was a gift from your father and is very special.”

I touch the cool ivory thoughtfully. The band that encases my neck is black, which is surprising, but even more so are the hints of black in the wings of the swan carved into the bone.

*Why in the goose feathers would my father ever have given my mother something like this?*

I shrug at the peculiarity of it and finish getting ready.

By the time that I slip on my shoes, I’m a nervous wreck.

Tonight, I meet my future husband.

*Breathe, Viv, breathe.*

With my head held high, I enter the throne room and ascend the dais where my father and mother stand. Both beam proudly at me while the crowd gives thunderous applause at my appearance. After a few minutes, my father raises his hands for silence.

“And now, ladies and gentlemen, it’s with great joy that I introduce you to my daughter’s betrothed and your future king. May I present to you our new ally from the East, King Korvin the White of Corvidae!”

*No one claps.*

Absolute silence reigns, but my father’s smile never falters as the crowd splits in half to allow my husband-to-be to pass. Even at a distance, he’s striking. His hair is white and his eyes are nearly the same color, but his skin is a tawny golden hue that makes me think of Estival. He’s wearing a white suit and clearly takes his status as the only white crow in existence very seriously.

In fact, the man is a sarding legend.

The only light-colored bird in a kingdom of black crows, ravens, magpies, jays, and rooks.

Also, Corvidae is known for its magic.

I just presumed it was considered black, too.

*So then, why in the sard has my father engaged me to this man?*

“Good people of Anserinae, I can sense your confusion. Allow me to explain,” my father intones smoothly, while Korvin steps up onto the dais to stand next to me.

The Crow King doesn’t even glance at me.

“Eighteen years ago today, I called a truce with... Rothbart,” my father spits out, nearly choking on the name. “Eighteen long years we’ve had peace. And I’ve had time to build an army and align myself with those who can help us fight. See, Rothbart’s terms were simple. Peace would be maintained as long as Princess Viveka, my only daughter and heir to this pure kingdom, married Rothbart’s oldest son.”

The room fills with gasps.

Even my mother looks shocked.

I’m too numb to feel anything.

“I know, I know,” my father continues. “I’ve kept it a secret all this time because I always knew that I would never send my daughter to that traitor, but I refuse to plummet my people and kingdom into war once more! And that is where King Korvin the White comes in. In exchange for my daughter’s hand in marriage, he has promised to fortify the kingdom from any attacks from Rothbart. Everyone can sleep peacefully knowing that monster will not harm anyone.”

There’s a moment of hesitation before the room erupts into cheers.

Huh, I guess the fear of Rothbart pillaging our city again overrides their judgmental prejudice at having a foreign ruler married to their future Cignette.

Pleased, my father turns to my mother, holding out his hand. She takes it with a serene smile and they step down from the dais to start the dancing. I watch them walk away from me, leaving me alone with a stranger.

“Happy birthday, princess,” Korvin says softly, his voice lightly accented.

I turn to look into his strange light eyes. They seem lit with amusement and I feel my own eyes narrow.

*What the sard is so funny?*

“Thank you,” I finally manage to say. “So, how long have you and my father been plotting to overthrow Anatidae?”

Korvin’s white brows raise.

“You misunderstand your father’s intentions. He wants nothing to do with Anatidae, but merely wants to protect Anserinae.”

“And you think you can do this?” I snort. “You think that you are more powerful than Rothbart and his dark magic?”

The Crow King gives me a crooked smile that is kind of charming.

“Black swans are far and few in number. But I have a whole murder of crows, a conspiracy of ravens, a scold of jays, a mischief of magpies, and a parliament of rooks. Crows hold the most power and then it dwindles more and more with other Corvids. Ravens are the second most powerful and magpies are the least, but all Corvids hold power. That cannot be said for Anseriformes. Only black swans have magic.”

I feel my eyes widen at his words.

*His whole kingdom can do magic?*

Well, I’ll hand it to my father, he certainly picked a formidable ally.

Korvin’s eyes gleam with amusement again.

“But don’t underestimate the power of a black swan, princess. There’s a reason nature only makes them sparingly. Their magic is almost... unstoppable.”

He looks down at me knowingly and I wonder what he's thinking.

But before I can ask, the throne room doors are thrown open and guards spill in, shouting. The Captain calls for silence and rushes over to my father.

“Your Majesty, the Crown Prince of Anatidae used his magic to build a bridge to Anserinae. He's in the square and demands that... that his bride be presented to him immediately or he'll send over his troops.”

My father turns puce at these words.

“Did anyone try to decapitate him?” he hisses in anger.

“We tried, my Cigne, but he's put up a magical shield.”

“Very well. Korvin, it seems your engagement party must be postponed. Rothbart, the fool, will rue the day he ever crossed me. Once I have his heir locked away, we'll attack Anatidae and bring the unholy kingdom to its knees!”

I look at Korvin, who merely tips his head to my father.

*So much for wanting nothing to do with Anatidae.*

## SCENE TWO



COBBE

I WAIT WITH MY small flock of men while Cigne Siegfried's Captain and troops scramble to do my bidding. I almost smile, but continue to pin the remaining White soldiers in the square with a glare. I've waited eighteen long years for this day. I've known since I was five that I would one day marry the lovely Princess Viveka and avenge my father.

And my father is no fool.

Rothbart knew Siegfried would renege.

All these years, he's been training me.

The White Cigne is no match for me and my magic.

After what seems forever, I hear the thunderous footsteps of horses. Ah, Cigne Siegfried's men, I presume, ready to defend their pathetic kingdom. I feel a pang of guilt for all the Ducks, Geese, and Nonansers that will die this night merely because of the foolish pride of their Cigne.

I straighten in my saddle and call my magic to the forefront.

I have one mission: to claim the princess at any cost.

A flash of white catches my eye.

Huh, the Cigne decided to fight in his Anseriforme?

But I realize that the bird soaring towards me is too small to be a Swan. In fact, it's too small to be any type of bird from Anserinae or Anatidae. Behind the white blur flies a mass of black that stands out against the brightly lit night sky. It's a full moon and its light shows me the truth.

*It's a murder of crows.*

And leading the flock is the infamous White Crow King himself, Korvin.

Sard.

My father and I never anticipated this move.

We've had spies in the kingdom for many years and never once did they breathe word of something this monumental.

Perhaps Siegfried isn't as foolish as I thought, but he's still losing his kingdom either way- to me or to the Crow King.

The white crow stops right before my invisible shield of magic and, before my eyes, grows to double the size of a mature swan. I blink at the giant majestic bird. Behind him, his army hovers, not moving. I realize that they are lending him their power.

This is bad.

Before I can react, my shields are down, and The White Swan's army attacks. But I am trained for physical battle, too. I slay a few dozen, but the soldiers keep pouring in, faster and faster than my small contingent of men and I can keep up with.



I raise my hand to send a magical signal to Anatidae for help, but the White Crow blocks it.

I blast my magic at him, but he deflects it at the last moment, sending it ricocheting back into my body, knocking me unconscious.

As darkness claims me, I pray for death.

It will be much kinder than anything Cigne Siegfried has planned.

I

The first thing that I notice when I come to is the smell.

*It's horrific.*

Upon further investigation, I learn that smell is me.

I gag, but nothing comes up.

I have no idea how long I've been down, but by the smell and my raging headache, I would say awhile.

I look around, but I can barely make out my surroundings in the dark. I'm unsure if this is because it's night or because I am underground. I reach inside of me to call upon my magic and panic when nothing responds. I try again and again... but it's gone.

My father never prepared me for this.

In my own foolishness, I forgot that I am mortal, too.

My humiliation knows no bounds.

I didn't avenge my father, and Cigne Siegfried got the best of me.

To be fair, we never expected him to have magic on his side, especially considering how much he abhorred it.

And now I would die because of my foolishness.

I strain my ears to hear, but no one is even guarding me.

I've been left here to rot.

Who knows how long I have languished down here.

*Hours, days, weeks.*

But with every passing second, I feel myself getting weaker.

I fade in and out of consciousness, but come to when I hear an angelic voice calling to me.

“Wake up! Oh, please wake up!”

I crack open my eyes to behold a vision of pure beauty.

Surely, I am hallucinating now and close to death.

The woman before me is holding up a lantern high into the air and it highlights her golden hair, pale skin, and bright eyes.

“Ah, the Princess Viveka, in the flesh!” I croak, my mouth feeling like it’s been stuffed with feathers. “But why is your hair so light?”

The vision frowns.

“How do you know who I am?” she asks in a whisper.

I weakly shrug.

“My father has a painting of you.”

“But how... never mind,” she says. “Magic, right?”

I nod.

“Magic,” I rasp in agreement.

“I’m here to help you. I brought some water for you, too.”

“Do you have the keys to release me?” I wonder.

She bites her lip and looks away sadly.

“No... this cell was designed by Korvin. It’s made to deplete your powers.”

“So, you’ve come to prolong my misery then?” I attempt to joke, but she gasps.

“No! I swear that I’m not.”

“Well, your water will do nothing but give me a couple extra hours of life,” I estimate and Viveka grimaces at my words.

“I’m sorry,” she suddenly sobs. “I didn’t know. I should have fought back sooner. Earlier. Now, all is lost.”

Even though I am the one dying, I feel a pang at her anguish.

“We never did meet formally. Your Highness, I am Crown Prince Cobbe, heir to Anatidae,” I say as regally as possible while smelling terribly foul.

Viveka dries her tears and reaches a hand through the bars to shake mine, not even acknowledging the stink.

“It’s nice to meet you, Cobbe. I’m sorry... for everything that my father has done. Are you sure you don’t want this water?”

I hesitate, weighing my options, but survival kicks in and I hold my hand out to take the small skin. I chug the water sloppily, not caring how disgusting I must look to this magnificent creature. I will soon meet Death, what do I care? But I do, for some reason. I don’t want her only impression of me to be an abhorrent one.

“I must go, but next time I come back, I will have food. I promise that I’ll find a way to free you.”

She stretches her hand through the bars one last time to touch me, and I bask in her affection. I loved her before she even knew of me from the tales of her courage and I love her even more now that she’s trying to save me- even if it’s just wishful thinking on her part.

## SCENE THREE



VIVEKA

HIEMAL BLEEDS INTO VERNAL, and the desolate barren landscape becomes verdant once more. I spend most of my days to myself, pretending that my whole world isn't in upheaval. King Korvin tries to catch my attention, but I mostly ignore him.

I ignore the world.

A knock on my door signals Elsie has arrived with my evening meal.

“Here you are, my hungry little swanling. If you keep eating like this, you're going to look like a stuffed goose!”

I shrug and pretend to dig in.

“You must be growing,” my nursemaid says sagely and I give her a smile.

Elsie always has been good to me, but she fears my father more than her conscience.

Before she leaves, Elsie relays an invitation to play *Rooks*, a war game of strategy, with King Korvin but I politely decline. Clearly, I would lose. Between him and my father, they have mapped out all the necessary tasks to wage war and win against Anatidae.

Rothbart didn't expect us to capture his heir.

Or torture him to death, as my father has personally told him.

I cringe thinking of this.

Thank feathers that he isn't actually torturing the boy.

*But is what he's doing any more humane?*

I carefully bundle up my food and shift into my Anseriforme. With the cloth in my bill, I fly out the top window and quickly land below, where there is a grate. I shuffle over and maneuver it open, pulling myself and the food inside, before pulling the bars back over. Then, I begin my trek into the bowels of the castle.

It takes a little bit, but I finally come to the dungeon and shift back into human form.

There, I find the lantern that I stashed and light it. Relief fills me to see light again. I pick up my sack of food and lumber down to the dark row of cells to Cobbe's. As usual, the smell nearly knocks me to my knees, but I don't make a peep.

I can tell how embarrassed Cobbe is by it, but what can either of us do?

Perhaps this is another tactic on my father's part: abject humiliation.

The food and water have done him a world of good, but he still appears weak and tired. I try to stay most of the night, but I need to ensure that I'm back in my room before dawn so that

the guards don't see me. Luckily, the grate is right underneath my second-story bedroom.

It's hard to tell what Cobbe really looks like.

He's covered in dirt, muck, and dried blood.

His hair appears dark, like mine, and his eyes also seem dark, but it's hard to tell in this light. I can't even see his skin. He needs a bath. Not just for the stench, but to clean his wounds. Surely, they are festering and infected. I nuzzle my lip over this new worry.

*Why hadn't I considered this weeks before?*

But Cobbe seems okay...

As okay as anyone who has been stripped of their powers and left to die can be, I suppose.

"Any news?" he asks me wistfully when I hand him over the food.

I sigh.

I hate disappointing him like this over and over.

"No, I'm sorry."

I know what he's asking: has his father come? Have I found a way to free him? Will everything be alright?

The answer is always 'no'.

"You're sure there's no key..."

"I'm sure. That's not even a lock on these bars, Cobbe. Korvin keeps them shut with his magic."

Anger fills me and I feel the familiar rise of my magic.

I blink in surprise.

I've been taking Elsie's tonic for over a year, but it's done nothing to suppress my Anseriforme.

*Or my magic, apparently.*

I haven't even tried to call upon it in ages.

It's nothing but trouble, but today...

*I embrace it.*

I let it whip from my body and smash into the warded bars.

Cobbe gasps and I smile triumphantly to behold:

*Nothing.*

*How utterly disappointing.*

Once again, when I needed my magic the most it failed me.

A blind rage consumes and I fume at Korvin and his magic.

“I hate you, Korvin, you rotten crow! Come down here and fight like a real man!” I bellow into the darkness.

“A real man doesn’t fight a woman,” a voice says silkily behind me.

I let out a honk and swirl around to behold the striking White Crow King himself.

*Sard.*

*What was I thinking?!*

“But,” he continues, “I’m willing to see what you’ve got.”

A challenge lights his beautiful eyes and I place my hands on my hips, ready to snap a retort, but growls come from Cobbe’s cell.

I realize that it’s *Cobbe*.

“Get. The. Sard. Away. From. Her!” he snarls, lunging through the bars to grab me and tug me away.

I gasp at his burst of strength, but Korvin only chuckles.

“Jealous?” he queries in amusement, causing both Cobbe and me to glower at him. “Now, now, princess, be nice. After all, I’ve let you down here these many months to feed your friend.”

I gape at the White Crow King.

*He’s known this entire time?!*

I eye him warily.

*Why would he let me do that?*

*What's his game?*

"I bet you're wondering what my game is," Korvin smirks and I narrow my eyes at him.

Can the sarder read minds, too?

"I truly want to help... but I can't."

Korvin gives a small shrug with these words and I let out an incredulous laugh.

"That's it?! *You want to help, but can't,*" I parrot sarcastically.

"Correct, my beauty. I cannot. I'm bound by magic to not intervene. But... you can help."

"How?" I snap impatiently, not enjoying his riddles.

"Your magic can release him; you just need the help to do so. No one has ever taught you to use or manipulate your powers. But I can tell you what you need to do to release the prince."

I laugh disbelievingly.

"That easy, huh? You're just going to show me how to free him because you can't for some cryptic reason?"

"More or less," he nods. "Of course, nothing in this world is *free...*"

"There it is," I snarl. "*The catch.* So, tell me, Oh Mighty King, what could you possibly want from *me?*"

Korvin taps in lips in mock contemplation, but the wicked gleam of amusement glows even brighter in his eyes.

"A kiss."

"W-w-what?!" I splutter while Cobbe swears at the Crow King.

"Enough, boy!" Korvin booms, silencing Cobbe with a wave of his hand. "You heard me, Viveka. A kiss. Surely, something as paltry as that is worth giving in exchange for this young man's life."

I squint at him, really taking his measure.



“How old are you?” I ask in a whisper.

He leans in and I catch the scent of leather and smoke.

*“Older than time. Do we have a deal?”*

I glance at Cobbe, who is shooting daggers at Korvin, while simultaneously shaking his head at me.

“Just one kiss?” I hear myself ask.

“Just one small, insignificant kiss,” Korvin purrs and I shudder.

“Ok,” I agree.

*But I feel like I've sold my very soul.*

## SCENE FOUR



VIVEKA

“EXCELLENT!” KORVIN CROWS, LIKE I’ve accepted an invitation to tea instead of kissing him. “But, first things first, please take off that dreadful wig. Blond is not your color, my dear swan.”

I gape at him, but make no move to remove my hairpiece.

Even though Cobbe hasn’t bathed in forever, I’m ashamed of my bald head. I don’t want anyone to see it, especially the Crow King. I scowl at Korvin, trying to think of a reason for not taking it off, but he merely smirks at me.

“You’re wasting time. It’s almost dawn,” he warns.

*Sard!*

Defiantly and angrily, I reach up and yank off my fake golden tresses. Imagine my surprise when I touch my scalp and feel *hair*. It's not very long, only to my ears, but my burst of magic must have pushed it through. Using my powers always made it grow before.

I touch the short curling locks and wonder if I look like a boy, but Korvin is staring at me with devilry and lust in his eyes.

"Now, *that* is your color," he compliments, making me blush. "Well, what are you waiting for?"

I startle at his question.

"What do you mean?"

"The kiss...? You've forgotten it already?"

"No, I-" I pause, confused. "If you want to kiss me, then kiss me!"

Korvin gives a deliciously dark chuckle.

"Ah, ah, my sweet swan. I said for *you* to give *me* a kiss."

I blanch.

*The awful sarder!*

"Oh, I see... you've never kissed someone before, have you?"

"Yes, I have!" I snap indignantly. "Three men in fact!"

Korvin's eyebrows raise.

"My, my. You might be more experienced than me," he teases. "Well, let's have a taste, shall we?"

He steps into my personal space, but waits for me to make a move. Glaring at him the entire time, I raise up on my toes and lightly brush my lips against his, my eyes never leaving his. A current runs between us the minute we touch, pinging through my body.

"Mmmm, interesting," he remarks thoughtfully. "But I was expecting *more*."

My ire gets the best of me and I slam my mouth ardently over his.

I think of Dell's tender first kiss.

Then, of Linden's fiery ones.

And the fleeting one from Cyg.

Korvin takes control of the kiss, grasping my head to angle it better. His tongue fills my mouth and every wicked gleam that I've seen in his eyes is promised to me in this one kiss. It stretches on for an eternity until something slaps into Korvin, breaking our attention.

I look down and see some of Cobbe's precious food splattered against Korvin's pants and the ground.

Cobbe is standing for the first time, his chest heaving with rage, as he tries to call upon his nonexistent magic.

I glance at Korvin to gauge his reaction, but his gaze has never left me.

"It's a pity," he whispers, tracing my full lips with his thumb.

I lick them nervously, accidentally grazing him in the process, making him suck in a breath.

"Such a sarding pity."

"What is?" I finally manage to ask.

"That you're not destined for me. But, oh, if you were mine, my gorgeous bird. I would lock us in a cage together and throw away the key. Then every minute of the day, I would pay homage to your magnificent body with my mouth... my hands... my co-"

"We get it!" Cobbe snarls. "But she's not *yours*. And time is ticking, as you said."

"Of course. Turn around and face the prince, Viveka," Korvin commands.

I do as I'm told and feel his hands on my shoulders and his power slowly seeping into me.

“Envision what you want; why you want it, and what you will do with it.”

I purse my lips.

*I want to set Cobbe free.*

*Because it's cruel to treat him this way.*

But I'm not sure what I'll do once he's free...

I can't stay in Anserinae anymore. It's become the very symbol of oppression to me. After these many weeks helping Cobbe, I'm ready to live again. To forgive and be free once more, but I can't do that chained to a kingdom that despises my kind.

*But I can do it in Anatidae.*

I envision me setting Cobbe free, saving his life, and us flying to freedom in Anatidae.

Warmth surges down my arms and sparks out my fingers to blast the cell bars into smithereens. Cobbe and I stare at each other in astonishment, but Korvin just claps his hands lazily.

“Very nice, princess. We might make a black swan out of you yet. Now, you must hurry. The wards in place around Anserinae are so no one can enter *or* leave. In exactly ten minutes- the amount of time it should take you to fly to the border- I will release my magic. But only for a minute!”

“I... I can't shift,” Cobbe coughs.

“You can and you must. I know you are weak, but your power will return. As for shifting, that is inherently who you are. You and your swan are one. Embrace him and he will come. Now, go. Goodbye, my dark swan,” he murmurs to me tenderly, tracing his finger down my face. “Until we meet again.”

I can only nod; then I grab onto Cobbe's hand and drag him to where we must crawl through to the grate. It takes him many tries but, eventually, the prince manages to shift into his Anseriforme. We make it out of the castle and take to the sky. I speed to the border, but realize that Cobbe can't keep up.

Wheeling back, I dive under his black form, and lift him up. He weakly collapses on top of me and I almost plunge from the sky from the added weight, but I spread my wings wide and ride the air current for a second. Then, I think of all that is at stake and flap my wings purposefully.

Powerfully.

Magically.

I will myself across the border in Anatidae just as I feel the snap of Korvin's wards falling back into place.

## SCENE FIVE



COBBE

I CLING TO VIVEKA'S back, my long black neck looped around hers. I know that I am a heavy burden for her smaller swan form, but I physically cannot fly. The shift took everything from me. The instant that we cross into my father's kingdom, she begins to descend.

As we near the ground, my weight becomes too much and I slip off her back, falling some fifteen feet in the air. I hear her honk of distress but can do nothing as I slam into the ground. Then, I see and hear nothing.

When I wake up, I'm in my room.

I've never been so overjoyed to be home.

I feel a thousand times better, and I can even sense my magic crackling inside of me.

Relief fills me that the White Crow King told the truth.

I carefully move to sit up, upsetting my mother who is sitting on the edge. She looks at me, startled, before a giant smile splits her face.

“Cobbe! Oh, my son, I’m so happy to see you awake!”

She leans over and we embrace.

“Your father and I were worried sick...”

I sigh at the unspoken reprimand. My mother had wanted me to go into Anserinae with more reinforcements, but I had scoffed at the idea. I didn’t need an army to defeat an unmagical man. Except, he had a magical ally and I was proven the fool.

“Do not judge yourself too harshly,” my mother whispers, reading my face. “We all make mistakes, but you are safe now and Viveka is in our kingdom.”

*Viveka!*

“Is she alright?” I ask in worry, remembering her carrying my swan to safety.

“Yes. We have her in a guest room. She hasn’t ventured out, though. Your father and I were hoping that once you were well, we could hold a banquet party to celebrate your return and her arrival.”

“A wonderful idea! Tell father to plan for tonight.”

My mother raises an eyebrow.

“*Tonight?* Cobbe, you just woke up- the first time in three days. Perhaps this weekend if the doctor says so.”

I frown, but I know not to argue.

“Good. Now, your father will want to see you. Keep resting and I will send him in.”

My mother kisses my brow and leaves to get the Black Cigne.



Moments later, he barrels into my room.

“Cobbe, my boy!” he bellows, rushing to tackle me in a bear hug.

I grin and hug him back.

“I thought... I thought you were dead. My magic couldn’t find yours,” he explains with true sorrow.

“I know. Cigne Siegfried has a magical ally-”

“We know. Viveka filled us in. But with her here, I doubt Siegfried will attack. This gives us time to figure out what we want to do.”

“Meaning?”

“Do you want to retaliate?”

I look closely at my father.

“Do *you* want us to retaliate?”

“I want to sarding tear the White Cigne to pieces for what he did to you... but war is war. His act was personal, but at the same time, it wasn’t. I’m over the bloodshed. I just want him to keep his word. He betrothed his daughter to you, and a small part of me hoped that he would keep his word. The betrothal was broken the minute Siegfried reneged, and I don’t think he’ll ever stop fighting us, even if we prove that Viveka is treated like a queen.”

I consider my father’s words.

“Why do you want Viveka so badly? She’s always been the bargaining tool, but I don’t understand why you just didn’t attack Anatidae all those years ago and take what you wanted.”

My father lets out a mirthless laugh.

“You don’t anything about what I want,” he says softly.

“Are you saying that you don’t want Anserinae?”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying. Siegfried thinks I’m after his kingdom, but it’s not about the power. It’s *never* been about the power. That’s why I stopped fighting then and I why I

don't want to fight now. I want what's rightfully mine, but I want it peacefully. I'm done putting my family and people in harm's way."

"And if Siegfried attacks?"

My father snorts.

"When, not if, son. *When* Siegfried attacks, we'll be ready. I am over the bloodshed, but I won't let him slaughter the innocents of Anatidae."

I nod, but don't prod him for more details. If he says that he'll be ready, then he will be. My father isn't popular because he uses his magic to rule, but because the people know that he is capable and a natural leader. He will do everything to ensure Anatidae is protected.

"What about Viveka?" I hear myself asking.

"What about her, son?"

"You said that our engagement was broken?"

"Yes, it was the minute that Siegfried didn't make any attempt to send her to us."

"So... now what? Am I... I mean, are we..."

My father chuckles.

"I don't think that I've seen you this tongue-tied except for the time that you were caught red-handed, stealing Estival cakes right from under the Cook's nose. You were only five or six years old and wore the proof on your face, as well as had it lining your pockets. You tried to think of an excuse to tell your mother and me and it sounded just like this. Spit it out, Cobbe."

"Are Viveka and I still getting married?"

"Well, now, that depends, son."

"On what?"

"Well, do you want to marry her?"

"Yes," I answer swiftly.

“I see. Are you sure that you love her? That it’s not just ‘hero worship’?”

“No, sir. I promise that I do really love her.”

“Well, then, that almost settles it.”

“Almost?” I ask with trepidation, but he doesn’t respond.

“I’m so glad that you’re better. I’m sending the healer in. And I agree with your mother,” my father says sternly. “We can hold this ball this coming weekend *if* you rest.”

He gets up and walks to the door.

“I always feel like I don’t say this enough, but I love you, son.”

I grin.

“Dad, you tell me that every time you see me,” I point out.

“Yes, I do. But let me tell you something, son- you never know when you might not see the people you love ever again. Life is fickle like that. Get some rest.”

He leaves then and I mull over his words.

For some reason, I don’t think he’s referring to what just happened with me.

## SCENE SIX



VIVEKA

I STARE AT THE beautiful dress laid out for me to wear tonight.

It's an exact replica of the one that I wore on my birthday and engagement party- except black.

Rothbart has quite the sense of humor, it seems.

I haven't left this room since the first day that I arrived. Odile, Cobbe's mother, attends to me personally, and reminds me of my mother- sweet, loving, but always in the shadow of her husband. She is thoughtful enough to give me updates on Cobbe's health.

He's healed much quicker than I thought possible, but Odile told me that Rothbart has been feeding him magic.

I'm so thankful that Korvin's cell didn't do any lasting damage.

It's been a week since I fled my kingdom, and I can only imagine my father's rage.

I'm the lowest of the low.

A traitor to my people.

I've deserted my home, helped the enemy...

*And he had such high hopes for me,* I think sardonically.

There's a knock at the door tearing me from my dark thoughts.

"Come in," I call politely.

Odile steps through, dressed in a gorgeous red dress that complements the red tint in her dark brown hair. In fact, I've only ever seen one other person with this coloring.

*Well- two other people, actually.*

Cyg and Linden.

Perhaps, it's a common coloring here in Anatidae, where dark swan lineage is allowed to flourish.

"I was just coming to check on you," Odile says lightly. "The party is ready to begin, but first, I have a gift for you. Actually, it's not from me... but Cobbe assured me that it's from a friend."

I look at her with the same confusion that I hear in her words.

I have no idea what she's talking about, but I take the box and open it slowly.

Inside is the necklace that my father gave my mother.

And a single white feather.

*Korvin.*

I smile at the sneaky sarder.

When I look back at Odile, her face is white.

“That’s... a lovely choker, dear,” she says faintly.

“It was my mother’s. A friend sent it. May I wear it tonight?”

“Of course. Do you need me to send someone in to do your hair?”

“No, thank you.”

“Alright. Rothbart will be here to collect you in fifteen minutes, then,” she announces and then eases out of my room.

I hastily put on my dress and brush out my dark curls until my hair falls in a shiny wave over one of my shoulders. My burst of magic to save Cobbe made it grow like a weed. Satisfied with the look, I clasp my mother’s choker around my neck and wait.

The seconds tick on and I begin to fidget nervously.

I’d only spoken to Rothbart the one time when I first arrived.

He didn’t seem like the monster at all that my father portrayed him as, but anyone can hide a corrupted soul behind a polite veneer.

A knock sounds and my nerves ratchet up a notch.

Rothbart doesn’t wait for me to call him in, but opens the door enthusiastically and strolls right over. He stares at me with something akin to wonder in his eyes. There’s a possessiveness inside of them that is... unsettling.

“My lovely Viveka. You are the very image of your mother.”

His voice is covetous when he mentions her.

“Thank you,” I say carefully. “But my hair is far too dark to ever really be likened to her.”

“Indeed, but your eyes and face are the mirror image, my child.”

His eyes rake over my form assessingly and then snag on my choker.

“Where did you get this?” he asks in a ragged whisper.

“It was a gift from my mother...”

I don’t bother to explain how it got here.

I’m still baffled by that, but it’s Korvin.

Rothbart is staring at my necklace with the same look the Odile wore when she saw it and unease fills me. It was a gift from my father to my mother... is it rude to wear something from the hated Siegfried in this kingdom?

As if sensing my thoughts, Rothbart rushes to reassure me.

“It’s lovely. I simply didn’t expect for you to have it, is all. It suits you. Are you ready?” he asks politely.

This monster has a *very* polished veneer, it would seem.

Rothbart offers me his arm and I take it.

As we walk, he points out various things in his castle that I missed on my first day. He speaks with such pride about his home and his people- as if he truly loves and cares for them. I listen to him partially, while pondering if this is the real man or the mask.

Finally, we reach the ballroom doors.

My hand reflexively squeezes his arm as my nerves get the best of me.

“Don’t worry,” he soothes. “I’ll be with you every step of the way. Viveka...I know what you’ve been told about me- what you were taught to believe, but I promise you that I’m a good man. I’ve waited eighteen years to have you here. Soon, you will marry my son and I will finally get to call you daughter.”

His smile is slightly crooked and reminds me of Dell. I can’t help but return it at the thought of my lost friend.

“Thank you. I hope... I hope that I find my place here.”

Rothbart gives me a nod and then tells the guards to announce us.

The doors open wide and, together, Rothbart and I enter the lavishly decorated room. The crowd is staring at me intently and try to smile, but it comes out wobbly. Odile is standing on the dais, waiting, and I focus my attention solely on her.

After what feels like an eternity, we reach her and Rothbart helps me to stand next to his Cigarette.

“Ladies and gentlemen of Anatidae, I give you Crown Princess Viveka!”

The room explodes in cheering and clapping. I look around, taken aback by everyone’s enthusiasm- I am, after all, their enemy’s daughter. My eyes widen in surprise to see the hall filled with Anseriformes of *all* types- not just Swans. There are Geese and Ducks, even Nonansers! And they aren’t serving the masses, but rather actual party goers.

There are servers and from a distance, I can tell some are Swans.

I’ve never seen a Swan do such work.

Rothbart follows my gaze and chuckles at my thunderstruck face.

“Close your mouth, little one, before a bird comes and poops on it,” he jokes, reminding me of the same phrase that Linden used. “We’re an equal opportunity kingdom, here. Swans can choose whichever jobs they desire, as well as Geese, Ducks, and Nonansers.”

I ponder his words.

When I first learned of the segregation in Anserinae, I always thought that the lower Anseriformes were the ones cheated. They couldn’t be healers or scholars or anything that was reserved for Swans, but I realize now that Swans are restricted, too. There’s beauty and pride in all types of work.

If a Swan wants to be a smith or cook, they should be able to, too.

“Exactly,” Rothbart concurs with a twinkle in his eye, even though I never spoke out loud. “Now, for the formal introductions. Ladies and gentlemen, Crown Prince Cobbe!”



Again, the crowd goes wild as Cobbe steps into the room from a side panel door.

This is the first time that I've seen him cleaned up and...

He takes my sarding breath away.

His hair and eyes are the dark black of Rothbart's, but his features are his mother's, including the red-tint to his hair. He has a small smattering of stubble across his cheeks, giving him a rugged look. He's wearing all black and his smirk is... mischievous.

Just like his father's.

He stops to stand before me and I tower over him, standing on the dais. He takes my hand and lightly places a kiss to the back of it.

"Princess. You look ravishing in black," he compliments.

"Thank you, Your Grace. I can say the same about you," I respond, teasing.

He leans forward, tugging me down until our faces are mere inches away.

"No... thank *you*. You saved my life. I'll forever be in your debt. When we are alone, I will thank you properly," he promises with a wink and I yank back.

*What does that mean?!*

But he's already walking away to stand to my left at the foot of the dais. He seems to be waiting...

For what?

I get my answer when Rothbart bellows, "And now, ladies and gentlemen, Prince Cygnus of Anatidae!"

Through the same place that Cobbe entered, comes...

Cyg.

I stare at him, my eyes bulging.

*Cyg is Rothbart's son?!*

Which means...

“And Prince Rothlinde of Anatidae!” Rothbart calls and the ladies go absolutely crazy.

*Of course.*

He always was a flirt.

I try not to gape, but I can’t help it.

The twins stop in front of me, smirking evilly.

“It’s a good thing that we are inside, father,” Linden notes.

“Why’s that, my boy?”

“Her mouth is flapping open...”

“I already warned her about bird poop,” Rothbart says and Linden chuckles.

*Like father, like son.*

Well, thank feathers we are inside, because I couldn’t wipe the shocked look from my face if I tried.

“And last, but never least, Prince Odello of Anatidae!”

I whip my head around as a very tall young man comes through the panel.

He’s wearing dove gray and appears to be my age.

His hair is longer than his brothers’- thick, coal-black, but tinged fiery red at the tips. His face is what sculptors dream of and in truth, he’s more beautiful than handsome.

“He’s named after his mother,” Rothbart whispers to me as the new brother comes to stand before me.

He raises his head, a smile gracing his gorgeous full lips and I finally look into his eyes-

*His liquid silver eyes.*

“Dell?” I ask in an aching voice.

My long-lost friend pulls me off the dais and into his arms.

I could hug him forever.

Tears stream down my face.

“But... how... *why?*”

My voice cracks with my anguish and Dell’s eyes reflect my pain.

“I’m sorry, Viv... I wanted to tell you that I was safe, but I couldn’t. When you blasted your father and me with your magic, it *unleashed* mine. I’m not a Nonanser; everything inside of me was dormant, though, and you were the key to unlocking it.”

I stare at him in wonder.

“I haven’t eaten marmalade since that day,” I confess and Dell looks like he’s ready to cry. “I thought you were dead!”

Dell cringes.

“I thought that I was, too. When you came over to check on your father and me, Siegfried accidentally bumped into you and you toppled face-first into the Anas River. His anger was so great at me, that he didn’t even notice, but I saw that you weren’t moving. With your face in the water, you were going to drown. I somehow managed to convince your father to look at you. He rushed over to pull your freezing, unconscious form from the water and I took the opportunity to run away like the coward I was. Your father had two choices: go after me or save you. Obviously, he chose correctly. When I finally crossed over in Anatidae, I thought I was dying. My innards revolted against me and I blacked out from the pain. This lasted for *months*. Healers told my parents there was nothing that they could do. I couldn’t eat. I couldn’t sleep. With every passing day, I wasted further and further away...”

His words remind me of Cobbe’s ordeal and I shudder.

“Finally, when I could bear the pain no longer, I felt a strange prickling overcome my body and out of nowhere, I shifted!”

Dell pauses to laugh, and Rothbart and Odile chuckle, too.

“Imagine our surprise when we thought our dear Odello was taking his last breaths and out pops this gray swan!” Odile says.

“Gray?!” I query.

“Yes, gray!” Rothbart exclaims proudly. “The only one in existence!”

“He’s a rare bird,” Odile coos fondly at her youngest son.

I look at him in awe, recalling his words about his family and having brothers...

I look over to Cyg and Linden.

Dell sees where my eyes have wandered and he smirks.

“After... my ordeal, we’ll call it, I was weak. But I never stopped worrying about you. I needed to stay here to regain my strength. I also learned that I had magic. My father helped me to control and use it, but I demanded that someone be sent to look after you. My father ensured me that he had the perfect idea...”

“The twins?” I moaned and that gets a laugh from everyone.

“Yes,” Odile confirms. “They are the only white swans in the world who can do magic. We couldn’t send Cobbe because your father knew of him and he was needed here in the kingdom. So the twins went, using their powers to disguise their black beaks and feet while Dell healed. They were supposed to protect you-”

“They betrayed me!” I snap.

Odile makes a choking sound at my words, but Dell tugs my dress to get my attention.

“Did they betray you or just Linden?” he asks in a whisper, but Rothbart hears.

“What’s this, Rothlinde?” he demands crossly. “You hurt Viveka?”

“No!” Linden refutes. “It’s a misunderstanding. She saw... that is...”

He trails off, not sure how to explain me finding him kissing another woman- a naked woman.

“I know that you caught them helping Anserinaes to escape into Anatidae, but surely you are not upset at them for helping these people find refuge in my kingdom?” Rothbart asks me.

“Is that what they were doing?” I query, stunned at this revelation.

“What did you think they were doing?” Rothbart wants to know and I snort.

“When I found them, I only saw Linden kissing a naked woman and then Cyg flew back over and I saw his black beak and feet and I knew they had played me and my father both for fools. I thought that they were spies.”

“We were,” Cyg remarks, but Rothbart silences him with a raised hand.

“Linden was kissing a naked woman, you say?”

He shoots a glare at his son, but Linden hastens to clarify.

“Father- it was Westiana!”

“Who?” I wonder.

“Me, Your Highness,” comes a voice from across the ballroom.

The same woman that I saw in Linden’s arms that night is standing there in a resplendent pink dress.

“I’m Westiana, princess, and you saved my life.”

“Um...” I trail off, unsure of how I saved her life.

*Was she in danger when she was kissing Linden?*

“I’m the Duck that you rescued that night- from the Swan,” she elucidates and I realize finally who she is. “But you should know that Linden wasn’t kissing me. I... I was kissing him. And I was naked because I had just shifted from my Anseriforme. Linden merely was trying to keep me warm and I...”

She doesn’t finish, clearly ashamed of her actions.

I, too, am embarrassed, but not for her.

*For me.*

If I hadn't been so blind and hasty, I might have learned the truth and saved myself a world of heartache.

"It would seem that Princess Viveka is more than just a hero to my sons," Rothbart says with a warm smile, turning the attention away from situation. "And in her honor, we shall feast!"

Another cheer from the masses.

While everyone turns to eat, I stand and stare at Dell.

And Cyg.

And Linden.

*How am I supposed to pledge myself to Cobbe when my heart already belongs to his bothers?*

"It's a tricky situation," Rothbart sighs next to me, "but Odile and I knew our youngest three all lost their hearts to the Anserinae Princess. When your father reneged on our truce, in essence, our deal was broken. While I would like you to be mated to Cobbe, Anatidae is about personal freedom and choosing who you love is at the core of that concept. If you choose another of my sons, I will still gladly call you 'daughter'."

"Your Majesty, I couldn't possibly choose," I confess, especially knowing what I do now about the twins.

All that time spent helping others in need.

*And I turned my back on them.*

And Dell...

I had unlocked his Anseriforme, but at the cost of his health and almost his life.

"Let her magic choose," Odile suggests, and Rothbart turns to look at her inquiringly, before nodding.

"An excellent idea, my lovely! Viveka, your magic is powerful, as is my sons'. We will let your powers combined decide who is the best mate for you."

I look at him askance.

My magic has very rarely proven successfully useful...

*Do I really want to test it on something as irrevocable as choosing my mate?*

“I accept,” Cobbe answers.

“As do we,” the twins say in unison.

“I, too, agree to let our magic make the decision,” Dell confirms and I’m left with little choice in the matter.

“Then it’s settled. Tomorrow, we will let the trial begin and next weekend, we will announce a formal betrothal,” Rothbart decrees.

Then, he and Odile set off to eat, leaving me with their four sons.

All of them are staring at me intently and I can feel the blush forming across my cheeks.

“If you will excuse me,” I gulp, “I’m not feeling the best... I think that I will retire. Please give your parents my apologies.”

I edge sideways and into the crowd before any of them can grab me, but I hear Linden’s chuckle as I flee.

And his taunt.

*“Little liar.”*

# ACT FOUR



## THE MATING BONDS



# SCENE ONE



VIVEKA

“VIVEKA! ARE YOU ready?” Odile questions through my closed guest room door.

I want to yell ‘no’, but years of palace training has me calling to her politely that I am, indeed, ready. I open up and join the Anatidae Cigarette. We walk quietly together. I’m too worried to make small talk.

*What if my magic sards this all up?*

“Your friend sent another gift,” Odile says, breaking the silence.

“My friend?” I ask, my brow furrowed in confusion.

“The one who sent the choker,” Odile clarifies and I try not to shudder.

*I still haven't figured out Korvin's game...*

Odile hands me another box, slightly larger than the first.

“Do you want to open it now or later?” Odile asks.

“Now,” I answer immediately.

*Anything to prolong this duck show from starting.*

I carefully untie the black bow and lift the lid on the white box. Inside, nestled in a bed of white feathers, is a magnificent crown. It's made of a silvery material that reflects the sunlight filtering in through the castle window. At the top are two swans facing one another, their necks arched in just such a way as to form a heart.

And in the center of the heart is a glittering black stone.

The rest of the crown's tines are feathers, but when I look closer, I see that they are comprised of all kinds- Goose, Duck, and Swan.

A crown not just for Swans, *but for all...*

Once more, I wonder what Korvin is up to.

“How beautiful!” Odile exclaims and I hand her the crown to examine.

One white feather in the box catches my eyes.

It's definitely not an Anseriforme feather. I'm assuming it's Korvin's and it is inscribed with black ink. It's a simple message telling me ‘to take my time’.

*What does that mean?*

*Take my time for what?*

I sift through the feathers to see if there's more to his message. I find another with writing, but only one more. It says, ‘I'm stalling your father’.

I scowl at the messages.

The White Crow needs to work on his pen-pal skills.

Maybe it's a message for Rothbart saying that he has time to regroup and attack?

*But why would Korvin want that?*

I don't know who is on whose side anymore.

*Sard, I don't even know what we are really fighting about!*

"Deep thoughts, Viv?" Dell's low voice rumbles, making me jump a little.

"I will go put this in your room," Odile says, indicating to the crown and box of... *someone's feathers*. "Good luck."

Then, she leaves me alone with Dell for the first time in two years.

"Erm, I'm sorry, what?" I ask him.

His face and body are terribly distracting and I feel as lowly as a beetle at the thoughts racing through my mind now.

"I merely wondered what you were thinking about- you seemed lost in thought."

*Cue my blush.*

Dell takes one look at my face and bursts out laughing. He reaches out a hand to gently cup my cheek, his thumb brushing my lips softly and lighting a fire inside of me.

"Well, isn't this like déjà-vu?" he teases.

He leans his tall frame down until his forehead is touching mine.

"Are you thinking about me spanking you again?" Dell wonders and I gasp at the mental image that suddenly, *and vividly*, fills my mind.

"No! I mean, I wasn't... but now I am," I grumble and he chuckles at me.

I touch the tips of his hair. The vibrant shade isn't as orange as his hair used to be; it's bright red now and contrasts strikingly against the black length of the rest of his hair. His eyes are the same molten pools of gray, but his skin is smooth and blemish-free.

*Even his nose is completely different.*

“I was thinking that I barely recognize you,” I tell him.

“I’m vastly improved, thanks to you,” he teases and I scowl.

“Don’t say that! You were perfect before,” I snap, feeling guilty for ogling him.

Dell stares at me intently before a knowing smile stretches his face.

“I know. You loved me before I changed. You saw the boy on the inside, not just the ugly shell on the outside. When my parents finally presented the ‘new me’ to the kingdom, everyone suddenly wanted to be my friend. Girls threw themselves at me,” he admits and my scowl festers into something nastier. “But I wanted nothing to do with them. I have only ever wanted you.”

He swallows thickly before continuing.

“I knew who you were from the moment that I met you- *my brother’s* betrothed. I knew that I would fall in love with you, but I consoled myself with the knowledge that you would never love me back- that it would never be an issue,” he pauses and lets out a joyless laugh. “Of course, the impossible happened and, somehow, you fell in love with me. When I changed for the first time and saw my new appearance, I will admit to being... pleased. Excited, even. I finally had something to offer you, even though I knew you were meant for Cobbe. I guess, for the first time, I felt worthy.”

“Oh, Dell,” I whisper sadly, hugging him tightly.

Surprisingly, he’s still just as cuddly as before, except there’s not an ounce of fat on him. I can feel his firm muscles through our layers of clothing.

“I want you to know that whatever our magic decides today, my heart will always be yours,” he says, hugging me back.

“I don’t deserve your love. I’m just as bad and shameless as those other women,” I confess. “I... I was coveting your new body, too.”

Ignominy fills me, but I owe my best friend the truth.

Dell just quirks a brow at my words.

“Weren’t you listening to me? I want you to... what did you say? *Covet*? Mmm, yes. I want you to covet my body,” he growls. “Because I know that you want me for more than just what’s on the outside. Just like I’m in love with *all* of Viveka- but you should know that I covet your body, too.”

His eyes rake over my form hotly and I fear that I might combust in the hall before I even figure out who my future mate is!

“Let’s go,” Dell orders. “Your eyes are going to be my undoing.”

He ushers me into the room, where Cyg, Linden, and Cobbe are waiting with their father. All three brothers give me the same heated look and I feel the familiar wetness of desire bloom between my legs. I clear my throat and try to compose my face and thoughts before I do something to embarrass myself.

“Ah, hello Viveka! You look lovely, as usual,” Rothbart compliments and I smile at him. “Now, this room is specifically made to contain our magic. You are safe in here and this is where we will conduct the trial. I have explained to my sons what they will do and now I will tell you. They will each send an arc of their magic toward you and you will send one toward them in return. I promise this is safe. Their magic already knows to search yours for compatibility. If your magic finds an agreeable match, then a mating bond will form, but it will not be completed until you have nested.”

I’m proud of myself when I don’t turn pink at his words.

“And if my magic doesn’t find a match?” I query.

Rothbart strokes his beard thoughtfully.

“Then, you will just have to choose the old-fashioned way,” he shrugs and I realize that my magic might be the out that I need.

*It is going to choose my mate- not me.*

This way, there are no hard feelings, except if it doesn't choose and I still have to...

*Then, I'm sarded.*

## SCENE TWO



DELL

AFTER MY FATHER MAKES sure that Viveka understands everything, he leaves us to it. Viveka licks her lips nervously and I know that she's worried. I am, too. What if her magic doesn't choose mine? Can I really live with her being mated to one of my brothers like I promised her?

I guess that I will just have to trust our magic to know what's best.

Suddenly, Viveka throws back her shoulders and stands tall.

"Let's begin," she announces bravely and I can see the others in my periphery smiling at our brave little princess.

My brothers and I are lined against the far wall of the solarium, opposite Viveka. Together, we all throw a beam of our magic at her. In response, Viveka's magic leaps from her body. By the look on her face, I'm almost sure it wasn't voluntary. It races to meet our beams and the five arcs of light collide in a burst of power.

Instantly, my magic entangles with hers, forming a permanent mating bond.

I can't help the smile that splits my face.

*Mine.*

*She's finally mine.*

No sooner than I think this, the twins' magic sparks, indicating a secondary bonding to them both.

Dumbfounded, we continue to watch as her magic finally meshes with Cobbe's, creating another mating bond.

Viveka's eyes are large with shock.

Slowly, our magic dies down and the blinding light of its power diminishes.

"What the sard was that?" Viveka curses.

Cobbe gives a twisted smile that's more a grimace.

"Your magic has chosen us all as your mates, apparently," he states.

"But... but... swans are monogamous!" she bursts out.

There's a pause and then she erupts in laughter. She laughs until she cries and tears are streaming down her face.

Finally, Linden decides to ask her what's so funny.

It takes Viveka a solid two minutes before she can respond, but when she does, it guts me.

"I knew my magic would sard it all up; just like it does with everything else. Congrats, gentlemen, you can tell your father that he has four weddings to announce."

She cackles like a loon as she sweeps out of the room.



“Well, that could have gone better,” Linden remarks dryly.

“Actually, it couldn’t have gone any better,” Cobbe counters.

“What do you mean?” Cyg asks.

“You know exactly what I mean. We all love Viveka. If her magic had only chosen one of us... it would have torn the others to pieces. This way, we can all have her.”

“She’s not a piece of meat,” I growl angrily at my eldest brother.

“I wasn’t implying that she was!” he snaps right back. “Obviously, her magic sees something in all of us or else it wouldn’t have mated four men to one woman. As Viveka pointed out, swans are monogamous. Dell, your magic together was the strongest and hers picked you first. You probably have the strongest connection and we all know that she loves you. Maybe you should go talk with her?”

He says this evenly, but I hear the undercurrent of resentment.

Is the golden goose of our family *jealous* of me, the ugly duckling?

“Alright,” I say genially, “but in the meantime, you three go talk to father. Clearly, something is a-wing.”

“Ha!” Linden crows. “Look at you, old boy, making jokes! And that one wasn’t half bad, either.”

I roll my eyes at his antics and head off to the guest room where Viveka is staying, knocking on her door.

“Who is it?” she calls.

“It is I, Prince Odello of Anatidae!” I bellow regally, thinking my teasing will put her at ease.

“Go away!” she retorts.

*Well, that backfired.*

“What if I were just Dell instead, complete with red and patchy hair?”

There's a pause and then she asks, "Can you really do that?"

"No, sorry, but I can conjure up some marmalade."

Slowly, the door creaks open as she lets me in.

At one time, Viveka and I were almost the same height. I grew a smidge bigger over our year together, but now I tower over her petite frame.

"Well?" she suddenly demands. "Where's this marmalade?"

I chuckle and use my magic to make a small jar of the sweetest kind possible. I pop the lid and she sticks a finger in, pulling out a healthy dollop before popping it into her mouth.

"Mmmmm," she moans and I have to stifle my own groans at the sight of her sucking her finger sensually.

"Good?" I ask, trying to divert her attention.

"The best that I've ever had," she swears in a husky whisper and my stomach clenches at the sound.

I realize now that it was a bad idea for me to come and try to speak with her.

Everything about Viveka is distracting.

*Her full lips.*

*Her expressive eyes.*

*Her voluptuous body.*

I clear my throat three times, trying to speak.

One of the others needs to do this.

Not Linden- he's worse than me.

Cobbe or Cyg.

Cyg is the most reserved.

I turn to leave to get him, but Viveka grabs my arm, stopping me.

"Where are you going?"

"I... I just need some fresh air."

“Me, too, actually. Wanna go flying?”

Everything inside of me is urging me to go, but my swan doesn't want me to fight this any longer.

*So I don't.*

“Just like old times?” I ask with a fond smile that she shyly returns.

“Yeah, like old times.”

“Ok, let's go. But, Viveka?”

“Yeah?”

“I'm still not spanking you.”

“Ugh!” she exclaims, throwing her hands in the air and marching away.

1

Once we are outside, we shift.

My Anseriforme is very unique.

The only gray swan in existence.

I'm also larger than all other swans.

I honk at Viveka to follow me and fly to the West, away from the kingdom. Over this way, we have towering mountains. I always found their rugged beauty a peaceful haven growing up, but during Hiemal, the winds are too strong and dangerous to be in. That's why I went to the Albellus Woods. I'm eternally grateful that I crossed into Anserinae those many years ago and met with my dark swan.

We fly for an hour before Viveka starts to descend, indicating that she needs a break.

We land in a flattened area, surrounded by tall, rough stone. It's almost as if the mountain is trying to give us privacy. We change back into our human forms, and I'm so thankful that both of us can do so with clothes on. Truly, our magic has saved me from embarrassing myself even further.

Viveka takes my hand and tugs me over to a stone wall, sliding down to sit. I mimic her, our shoulders brushing. We sit

like this for a while without talking. Eventually she leans her head against my bicep and I lift my arm to tuck her into my chest and curl her body closer to mine.

“You know, I used to dream of holding you like this,” I confess.

“What else did you dream about?”

I chuckle.

“*Everything*. Of holding your hand. Of waking up next to you every day. Of spending the rest of my life with you.”

“Wow... Dell, that was beautiful. I wasn't expecting *that*...”

“What were you expecting?”

She blushes, letting me in on her naughty thoughts.

“Oh, I had those dreams, too,” I murmur hotly in her ear.

I'm rewarded with the sight of her turning even redder.

“Are you going to tell me about them?” she squeaks, trying to be bold.

I shrug and pause.

“No...” I finally say trailing off, and I almost laugh at the disappointment etched on her face. “Why tell you when I could *show* you instead?”

“My mouth just got really dry,” she discloses like she's committed a terrible crime. “Dell... I've... I've never nested with anyone-”

I put a finger to her lips to shush her.

“Viv, love, neither have I. I guess we're going to have to *wing it* together,” I tease.

She groans.

“Have you been getting jokes from Linden?” she asks with a cringe.

“Hey! Rothlinde isn't the only one who can make others laugh. I've always been funny! Of course, before, they were laughing *at* me, not *with* me, but you know what-”

She smacks me.

“Knock that off!”

“Make me!” I challenge.

And that’s how we end up tussling on a rock floor, on the top of a mountain.

Unfortunately, it quickly devolves into something a little more...

*Scandalous.*

## SCENE THREE



VIVEKA

ONE SECOND, I AM mock-fighting Dell.

The next, he is on top of me, his hard length nestled between my legs and an almost overwhelming need overtakes me.

He stares into my eyes, looking for confirmation.

Instead of speaking, I pull him to me and kiss him voraciously.

Dell kisses me back with the same ardor, our bodies and hearts starving for one another.

“Viv, not here. It’s not-”

“It’s perfect,” I disagree, rocking my hips upward against him.

He groans at the action, slamming his hips down to meet mine passionately.

“Are you sure?”

“I’ve never been more positive about anything in my life,” I swear, and it’s all he needs to know before he starts stripping out of his clothes.

Even though it’s Estival, the wind is a bit chilly because of how high we are up in the mountains. Goosebumps dot Dell’s skin as he undresses, drawing my attention to his perfect form. His chest and shoulders are broad, and his arms and stomach are chiseled muscle. When he shucks off his breeches, I avert my gaze from his manhood, instead taking in his powerful thighs and long legs that make him so tall.

Overall, he is sarding perfect.

The most beautiful man that I’ve ever seen.

I finally allow myself to look between his legs, and I feel my eyes bulge at the sight of him.

*He’s absolutely huge!*

I glance up at him worriedly, but I notice that he’s wearing the same look.

“What’s wrong?” I ask gently and he swallows thickly.

“It’s been two years, but every time that I look in a mirror, I still see the old me. It’s like I can’t accept this new person that I’ve become. I’m... I’m afraid it’s all a fantasy- a mirage. That I’ll blink, and be fat and ugly once more.”

“Dell!” I cry, his words piercing my heart.

I swiftly stand up and mold myself to his body.

“I won’t lie to you- this new body... it’s amazing. Your face? Truly what painters dream of, but do you know *why* I love you? Because you’re still Dell. The old one that loved and accepted me unequivocally, just as I undeniably love and accept you. We’ve talked about this- it’s not about the outside.

It's *the inside*. And right now... I want you," I gulp, hesitating at my next words, wondering if they are too crass. "I want you *inside of me*."

Dell's eyes burn at my words.

"Also, I think that you might be too big to fit though," I rush to point out in embarrassment and Dell laughs.

"I'm not too big," he reassures me. "I promise that I'm just right. Take off your dress, Viveka," he commands.

With shaking hands, I undo the stays and let the gown slip to the ground. Underneath, I'm not wearing any of the common contraptions of high society. I'm not even wearing any undergarments. It gets hot and sticky in Estival.

*The less material, the better.*

But up this high, the wind nips my skin.

"You look cold, love. Let me warm you," Dell offers, pulling me back into his arms and kissing me possessively.

We sink together as one to the ground and Dell comes to lay on top of me. He feels so perfect between my legs. We kiss and explore one another forever before I grow restless underneath him. He hisses when I push up to cradle him against my hot center.

"Please, Dell, I'm ready," I whisper.

Our eyes lock as he guides himself into my body for the first time. It feels like he is splitting me in two and Dell pauses, giving me a moment to acclimate.

He grabs my hands and pins them above my head, looking deeply into my eyes.

"I love you, Viv," he vows ardently.

"I love you, too," I say with equal sincerity.

Then, he plunges into me and I cry out in pain.

"Shhhh," Dell soothes. "The pain will be gone soon."

"How do you know?" I choke out teasingly.



“I... I don’t,” he admits. “It’s just what I’ve heard. Oh sard, what if doesn’t get better?!”

I chuckle, making him shudder inside of me.

“The pain’s already dissipated. Now, I just feel... I don’t know how to explain it.”

“I know what you mean. Hold on, sweetheart,” Dell commands and then he starts moving, rocking back and forth, his impressive length rubbing against me deliciously with every movement.

I feel a tightening inside and my heart races.

I recognize the sensation.

It’s like that time with Cyg and Linden.

Dell kisses me over and over as he slams into my body, moving faster and faster, until something inside of me bursts.

*Shatters.*

*Erupts.*

My whole body shakes in response.

This is nothing like what I felt by my own hand.

It’s so much more.

Dell groans in my ear.

“You were right,” he gasps.

“I know,” I tease, “but what about?”

“*This was the perfect place for our first time,*” he whispers in a velvety voice in my head.

And just like that, our mating bond is complete.

## SCENE FOUR



COBBE

IT'S NEARLY MIDNIGHT WHEN Viveka and Dell fly back.

My mother, father, and brothers are waiting with me.

Before anyone can say anything, I storm over to my younger brother, scowling. I unleash a torrent of angry words upon his foolish head until Viveka steps in front of him and silences me with her hand.

“Enough. It takes two to nest,” she reminds me curtly, and I can feel my scowl deepen even further.

*As if I need a reminder of what they were doing.*

“But you are right,” she continues. “We should have told someone that we were leaving. We worried you all needlessly, and for that, I am sorry.”

“Bah, you don’t have to explain young love,” my father says jovially, but my mother looks away with a sad face at the mention of ‘young love’. “I take it that you two completed the mating bond?”

“Yes, Sir,” Dell confirms and I feel the familiar jealousy ratchet back up.

“Excellent. We can officially announce that impending wedding. You others better figure it out,” he jokes before grabbing my mother’s hand and retiring without another word.

“If you keep glaring like that, people are going to start calling you ‘Cyg’,” Linden teases me, but it only makes me narrow my eyes further.

*I don’t like this feeling.*

This green monster inside of me is eating me alive.

Viveka practically glows and Dell is wearing the most satisfied smile.

*Will she ever look at me like she looks at him, I wonder.*

Cyg looks over at me knowingly.

“Why don’t you take Viveka back to her room?” he suggests.

Still moody, I grab my princess’ hand and haul her away.

“Will you slow down?” she asks breathlessly and I realize that I’ve practically been running.

“Sorry,” I mumble, walking more sedately.

“Hey,” she calls, coming to an abrupt stop. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I hedge and she gives me an exasperated look.

“Cobbe,” she bites out and I sigh over her tenacity.

“I’m... mildly upset about you nesting with Dell,” I say nonchalantly as possible.

She raises a dark brow.

“Only *mildly*?” Viveka jokes. “Oh, I was teasing! Stop looking at me like that! But why are you upset about me being with Dell?”

“I don’t know,” I pretend.

“I thought we were being honest with one another?” she points out dryly and swallow my pride.

“I’m afraid that you don’t want this bond,” I finally confess and her face softens.

“Oh, Cobbe, how can you think that? My magic chose you, too. If I’m being honest, I think my magic picked all four of you because it knew that my heart already belonged to each of you.”

I look into her bright, beautiful blue eyes.

“You love me?” I ask incredulously.

“Yes,” she confirms and my heart fills with hope.

“I know that you don’t know me like the others, so I was wondering if I could court you?” I ask her tentatively.

“Court me?” she asks back with a small smile.

“Yes, please. I want the chance to get to know you, too. And for you to get to know me,” I explain.

“Deal,” she says, holding out her hand to shake mine.

“I was hoping we could seal our deal with a kiss,” I suggest boldly and her eyes smolder into mine.

She grabs two handfuls of my shirt and hauls herself up onto her toes until her mouth can reach mine. Our eyes never close as her lips explore mine sensuously. Then, I cup the back of her head and deepen the kiss. This time, her eyes flutter shut and she moans into my mouth, making everything inside of me clench in need.

When I finally break our kiss, Viveka is panting and she looks at me with a hungry need. It takes everything inside of me not to act upon that need.

I promised her time.

*A courtship.*

Regretfully, I push her inside of her room, slamming the door shut behind me.

I'm already sarded and the wooing hasn't even begun.

## SCENE FIVE



CYG

FOR THE MILLIONTH TIME today, I find myself smiling.

Laughing, even.

Watching Cobbe wooing Viveka is amusing.

I've never seen my older brother struggle with anything.

A true black Swan, everyone reveres him like our father.

His magic is also the strongest and his looks are the darkest.

At nearly three years our senior, Cobbe looks like a man, confident and self-assured. It's entertaining to see him fumble about concerning our princess.

I'm standing on the other side of the cobblestone wall, listening to Cobbe talk to Viveka when my twin comes sauntering over.

“And how are the heartbroken ladies of Anatidae today?” I question teasingly.

Linden is everyone's favorite.

*Handsome...*

*Witty...*

“You forgot ‘talented with my tongue’,” he jokes, picking up on my thoughts. “And they are devastated, for sure, but the fair maidens of this kingdom know that my heart belongs to our dark swanling. The real question is what are *you* doing? I round the corner, only to find you *smiling*. Something is wrong, isn't it?”

I cut him a look.

“I'm listening to Cobbe recite poetry to Viveka,” I answer.

Linden wrinkles his nose.

“Cobbe reads poetry?”

“And writes it.”

“No!” he gasps when he realizes what I'm saying. “Move over so that I can listen, too!”

We press our ears to the wall in time to hear Cobbe begin a new one.

“Your skin is pale like creamy milk. Your hair is softer than the finest silk. Your blue eyes give an electric shock. And all I crave is-”

“To fill you with my cock!” Linden shouts, completely ruining the poem.

There's a beat of silence and then Cobbe is flying over the wall in his Anseriforme. The black Swan makes a beeline for Linden, who lets out a yelp and shifts into his Anseriforme. They fly off, black chasing white.

I smirk as I see them disappear.

*Perfect.*

Now, I get Viveka all to myself.

I shift into my own white Swan and gracefully glide over the stone wall to settle beside her on the bench that she is sitting on. Tears stream down her face from laughing so hard.

At least Linden is good for something.

“Oh, sard,” she manages to choke out. “I don’t know if I’m upset or relieved that Linden cut Cobbe off. I’m not entirely sure where he was going with that particular poem.”

We chuckle together.

“He’s trying, Viv,” I point out gently, feeling the need to defend my big brother.

“That’s just it. He doesn’t need to. We already have a connection, but he seems convinced that he has something to prove to me. In reality, he must have something to prove to himself.”

She shrugs in confusion.

“Cobbe is used to being first. In everything. He’s the oldest, strongest, *darkest*,” I tease. “He’s not used to having to wait or ask for things. Especially with Dell.”

Another shrug.

“Well, I can’t undo nesting with Dell and I wouldn’t.”

“So... you enjoyed nesting, hmm?” I ask in a hungry purr.

Immediately, her cheeks flood with color.

“Cyg!” she hisses.

“What? We can’t talk about it? Afraid it might make you all hot and bothered?” I press.

“No,” she glares and, then, looks away. “Maybe.”

I throw my head back and bark out a laugh.

I love her honesty.

Her goodness.



Her.

“So you *did* like it?”

“I sarding loved it,” she whispers, like she is confessing a grave sin. “It... it was like when you, well, I mean, when I was... ah, touching myself... but only more.”

Her face is fire-red now and I give her a tender look as she struggles to say the words.

“It was like when you made yourself come?” I rumble.

“Yes,” she asserts in a breathless voice. “That feeling...it’s almost addictive. I would do anything to reach that high again.”

My cock pulses at her words.

“I can help you with that,” I promise.

I push her back into the bench until she is completely supine, then I drape my body over hers and kiss her with all the pent-up passion and desire that I feel for her.

Viveka mewls into my mouth and guides my hand down to her pussy.

“Sard,” I curse, squeezing her heat through her dress. “I’m going to make you come so hard.”

“Yes, please,” she begs me and I throw her skirts up, uncaring of who might see us, but instead of using my hands, I plunge my tongue into her wet folds instead.

She cries out at the foreign invasion as I feast on her sweet, honeyed nectar.

Viveka’s flavor is like no other.

I lap, suckle, and sard her until I begin to feel her shudder underneath me. Then, I playfully bite her love button and Viveka comes undone. She screams out my name as her juices drip into my mouth. I lick every last drop up greedily.

My cock throbs painfully.

*I need to be inside of her.*

*To complete our bond.*

Unfortunately, the world's most annoying bird interrupts me.

## SCENE SIX



LINDEN

“MOVE OVER, CYGNUS,” I command.

I’ve been watching from a distance and I can barely walk, I’m so hard. Watching my twin bring Viveka to orgasm nearly breaks my self-control. I can almost taste her through Cyg’s thoughts.

“Sard off, Rothlinde,” Cyg growls right back at me.

“Share!” I demand.

“Enough!” Viveka yells with a huff.

Cyg pouts and Viveka reaches up to kiss him on his lips.

“Stop pou-” she stops, cutting herself off as her eyes go wide.

She licks her lips once.

Twice.

“Is that what I taste like?” she demands of my brother, who groans at the question.

She doesn’t wait for an answer, but dives into Cyg, kissing him forcefully. I feel a tweak of jealousy that she still hasn’t acknowledged me. Suddenly, Viveka is grasping my shirt and hauling me down on the bench next to her. Her mouth slams over mine and *I* taste her, too.

Sard, she tastes like perfection.

“I’m ready,” she whisper in between kissing me.

I pull back to look at her and Cyg’s eyes are large.

“Ready for what?” I ask cautiously.

“To nest with you,” she clarifies.

“Ok... which one of us should go and which should stay? Neither one of us will care,” Cyg rushes to add on, but that’s a lie.

One of us is going to be mad as sard if we have to walk away now.

She gives Cyg a funny look.

“I want you to both stay,” she murmurs and then leans over to kiss him again.

Cyg and I freeze as she takes turns tasting our mouths.

*She wants us both?*

*At the same time?*

Cyg snorts at my thought.

“*It’s not like we haven’t done it before,*” he comments in my head.

True... but never something like this.

This is our mate.

*“Yes, and she wants us both,”* Cyg reminds.

“Are you sure?” I ask my favorite black swan.

In response, she stands up and pulls off her dress.

I can only stare at her in the same surprised wonder as my twin.

*Where has our shy beauty gone?*

In her place is a warrior goddess.

Cyg and I soak up her glorious body with our eyes.

I stare too long at her perfect breasts, making the absent blush come roaring back.

I lean up and lick a pert nipple, sucking it into my mouth.

She groans and sways, but Cyg reaches out a hand to steady her. Then, he joins me on the other side, taking in her left nipple. Together, we worship her body until she is shaking with desire and dripping wet.

Cyg picks her up and wraps her long legs around his waist and pulls her petite frame down onto his cock. She cries out as he begins to bounce her almost savagely along his length. I step up to her back, folding her in between the two of us, and hold onto her breasts.

I tweak a nipple as Cyg tells me mentally that she’s close. I wait a beat, then I pinch the pink tips gently, forcing her orgasm to burst free.

Viveka lets out a garbled cry that my twin mimics as he comes, too.

She slumps onto his chest and Cyg lifts her until his cock springs free from her pussy.

“My turn, princess,” I hiss as I slide inside of her from behind. “Sard, you are perfect.”

Viveka doesn’t respond to my compliment. She’s already lost again in the sensations of nesting. Her pussy clamps down around my cock and I almost come at the feeling.

*“Linden!”* Cyg calls out urgently through our bond. *“Dell and Cobbe are watching!”*

*“Let them watch,”* I mutter, not even pausing. *“Better yet, turn so that Viv can see them.”*

I can feel Cyg’s hesitation, but he must decide it’s a good idea because he rotates our standing position until Viveka is facing my other brothers.

“Look over Cyg’s shoulder,” I command to her as I sard her faster.

When she finally manages to lift her head, she gasps at the sight of Dell and Cobbe watching.

Instantly, she comes.

I wasn’t expecting this reaction and the feel of her release triggers mine.

I cup her luscious backside and fill her with my essence.

Suddenly, something clicks into place and I find myself hearing her thoughts. I lift my head from her back and smirk at Cyg, who also can hear them, too.

The mating bond for us is complete.

*And wouldn’t you know it, our little swan loved having Dell and Cobbe watch.*

# ACT FIVE



A SWAN SONG

# SCENE ONE



COBBE

TONIGHT'S BALL IS EVEN grander and more festive than last week's.

My father is over the moon about Viveka's magic calling to us all and he will announce our impending marriages this evening.

I, on the other hand, am a little more reserved.

Of the four of us, I'm the only brother that Viveka hasn't nested with and completed the mating bonds. To be fair, it's only been a week of me courting her, but seeing her with the others is disheartening.

*When will it be my turn?*



If I am being honest, I'm jealous of my brothers and their bond with our princess.

I fell in love with her sweet goodness long ago and I yearn for her to reciprocate my feelings.

"What's wrong, brother?" Dell asks me.

We are standing on the dais, waiting for Viveka to make her appearance.

"It's..." I pause in my lie of telling him that it's nothing. Instead, I open up to him. "I'm worried that Viveka won't complete the mating bond with me."

Dell looks at me with raised eyebrows and then starts laughing.

I shoot him a dark scowl.

The sarder!

*This is what I get for talking about my feelings...*

"Sard off," I huff at him angrily, but he claps a hand to my shoulder.

"Cob, are you blind?" Dell questions lightly. "Can you not see how she looks at you?"

"No," I answer with a glare. "Because she's too busy looking at you, Linden, and Cyg!"

"I never thought that I would see the day that you were jealous of me, but you've got it all wrong. I promise you she stares at you the same way she does to the twins and me. You just don't notice."

"Then why hasn't she said or done anything?" I ask in exasperation.

Dell rolls his eyes.

"She waiting for you to make the first move," he points out.

"Me?" I say incredulously.

"Yes, you. For all of her fire, Viv is shy. She's only just nested for the first time this week..." Dell reminds me.

“Right,” I mumble. “I forgot. Seeing her with the twins-”

“I know. It makes her seem more experienced, but she was following *their* lead. And she will follow yours, too,” he advises.

I ponder his words.

*Is it really that easy?*

Just then, the ballroom doors are thrown open wide and Viveka strolls in, a vision in a red. The cut of her dress leaves little to the imagination and I suppress the urge to fidget. It’s hard to concentrate on the ceremony at hand while thoughts of her naked body yielding to me flood my mind.

Father announces her bond to us all and, surprisingly, the people of Anatidae go wild.

They support this union and see us as the symbol of a new future: a better future.

If only Cigne Siegfried could view us as such.

Instead, we are abominations.

“What are thinking about?” Viveka asks, suddenly at my side.

“He’s trying to plot how to get you to nest with him,” Dell supplies.

Viveka looks positively shocked and all I can do is make choking noises.

*I confided to the little sarder!*

If our parents wouldn’t be so upset, I would strangle the little back-stabber right now in front of everyone...

“Now, he’s plotting my death,” Dell teases and Viveka glares at me.

“You better not be,” she warns.

“What? Plotting how to nest you or my brother’s death?” I joke.

“Your brother’s death! I love Dell, you can’t kill him,” she snaps. “As for nesting me... plot away.”

The breath wheezes from my lungs and Dell outrightly laughs at me.

“Told you so,” he whispers.

I glare at him, then turn to Viveka.

“Care to take a stroll with me?”

She winces.

“Is that what they’re calling nesting nowadays?”

Dell and Linden guffaw at my expense, and even Cyg cracks a smile.

“Let’s go,” I growl, grabbing her hand and hauling her from the room and all the watchful eyes.

I take her to gardens, where we do indeed stroll, until she grows impatient with me.

On our way past the resting bench for the third time, she tugs me down and then straddles my lap.

My eyes bulge at her boldness.

So much for her following *my* lead.

But I quickly forget everything when she cups my face and kisses me hotly. There’s no shyness in her right now and her tongue seeks out mine. Viveka gyrates her hips sensually in my lap and I’m not sure how much longer I can last without being inside of her.

The low cut of her stunning red dress draws my eye, and without warning, I yank it down to expose her gloriously full breasts. I feast on them while pulling up the length of her skirt. My hands caress the smooth warmth of her inner thighs and I slip my fingers inside of her core.

Viveka throws back her head and rides my digits like they were my cock- which is aching for the same treatment. It doesn’t take her long to come all over them. I undo the ties of my pants, releasing my cock, and I slam her down my hard length.

I wanted so much more for our first nesting than a quick fumble in the garden, but her cries of desire fuel my own and I love the frenzied, almost violent, pace that we've set. She comes over my cock twice more before I spill deep inside of her.

Instantly, I can feel our bond solidify.

And not just ours, but a complete one with my brothers, as well.

Whereas the twins could always communicate mentally before, now we all can.

I kiss Viveka with all the love in my heart.

She's not only completed me, but she's also brought me closer to my brothers.

Everything is perfect until a single white feather falls into our laps.

*Sarding Korvin ruins my moment again.*

## SCENE TWO



VIVEKA

I STARE AT THE feather resting between Cobbe's and my body. Finally, I pick it up and read it.

My blood freezes at the words:

*'We're coming.'*

I don't need a translator to know Korvin's meaning this time.

I call to the others through our bond.

Rothbart needs to rally his troops now.

"How many black swans are there in Anatidae?" I ask Cobbe, quickly getting dressed.

“Six.”

“That’s it!” I gasp, realizing he means his father, brothers, him, and me. “I thought... I thought there were more!”

“No. Your family made every effort to eradicate them,” he points out bitterly and I snort.

“Your father and mine are distantly related. That’s *your* family, too... and, it’s not really important, huh? How are we going to fight Korvin’s whole kingdom of magical birds with only six black swans?”

I shake my head in dismay at the thought of the White Crow King’s immense army and power.

*Anatidae is sarded.*

Then, I remember something that Korvin once said to me long ago:

*‘Black swans are rare for a reason- their magic is almost unstoppable,’* were his words.

I mull this over in my head, my thoughts bouncing from Korvin’s words to his kiss and then to his gifts.

Cobbe growls next to me.

“Don’t remind me of that kiss,” he hisses, hearing my thoughts.

I lean up and nip his lip.

“If you’re so worried about Korvin’s kiss, maybe you should do something about it?”

“I plan to when I kill him in battle,” Cobbe says flatly and I gasp.

“I meant for you to give me a kiss to erase the memory of Korvin’s! And he saved your sarding life- and mine... *I think,*” I needlessly point out.

“For what? So that he could come back *now* and kill us both and everyone else that we love?”

I cringe.

*Cobbe makes a good point, but why would Korvin warn us that he's coming then?*

“Korvin told me that black swans are rare, and magically speaking, they are nigh unstoppable. Maybe we only need the six of us to fight him,” I tell Cobbe as Cyg calls for us to meet him by the Anas River.

“I don't want you there,” Cobbe grits out as we sprint off. “Being a black swan doesn't make you immortal. I'm sure there will still be hand-to-hand combat.”

“Good. Then I can finally put the training that the twins taught me to use.”

Cobbe groans.

“Those sorry sarders taught you to fight?”

“Yep,” I say with a grin. “I even won a few times.”

“Impressive.”

“I cheated,” I confess, making Cobbe laugh.

“All's fair in love and war. Fight dirty. You can't tarnish your wings; they're already black,” he says with a smirk.

“Thank you,” I say softly.

“For what?”

“For accepting that I'm coming and not trying to make me stay behind.”

“Just don't die or else there will be all sard to pay,” Cobbe grunts.

“Let's shift,” I suggest.

“Fine, but stay low to the ground. Flying swans make excellent targets in the sky.”

We change into our Anseriformes and soar to the river where Rothbart, Linden, Cyg, Dell, and Odile are standing with an impressive amount of people ready to fight. I wouldn't necessarily call it an army. No one is in armor or carries a weapon and there are women and adolescents.

Cobbe and I shift back into human form and I go stand between the twins while Dell positions himself at my back.

Across the Anas River, I can see my father standing there, his White Army behind him. But what surprises me most is that my mother is beside him. She's dressed in all white- of course, but I can't fathom why my father has dragged her into combat.

"Give me back my daughter!" my father roars.

"I didn't take her, you fool. She came of her own accord- just like everyone else in Anatidae," Rothbart snarls right back. "Besides, she's mated- to all four of my sons!"

My father's jaw goes slack.

"Impossible! Swans are monogamous! We cannot mate with multiple partners!"

"Nothing is impossible with magic," Rothbart sneers.

To this, my father straightens, taking my mother's hand lovingly, while giving his sworn enemy a smug grin.

"Indeed you are correct, cousin. Magic has proven quite useful to me in the past. I cannot always depend upon Corvidae and Korvin to save my kingdom. I must be stronger for everyone. And so, I traded my own soul for the power to fight you with your own magic."

With this announcement, my father produces a ball of flames in his hand. He tosses it up lightly, contemplating Rothbart, before turning to my mother.

"My love, this hurts me worse than it hurts you," he stage-whispers and, then, he touches my mother with his magic.

Screams of abject pain rend the air as my mother tries to arch away from my father. I stare in silence for a second before my own tortured yells join my mother's, but it's another person shouting that drowns us all out.

*Rothbart.*

"Siegfried! Stop! You're killing her!"



“Not until you give me back my daughter and my people. Not until you and your entire family burn to death like the evil scum that you are!”

My mother’s shouts of anguish are too much for me to bear.

I shift into my Anseriforme and jet across the river. I fly straight into my father’s stomach, knocking us both over. My mother falls in a crumpled heap to the ground. I quickly shift back into my human form, shielding her body from my father.

“What the sard are you doing?” I demand, but he stands up and brushes off the dirt from his white armor.

“Vivvy, love, go back to the castle with your mother. We can talk later.”

“I’m not sarding going back to the castle. *Ever*. I renounce my crown *and* my citizenship. I want nothing to do with *you*. Rothbart isn’t the monster- *you are!*”

“What did I tell you about such language? A princess does not use such vulgar wording. Well, one thing that I’ve learned is that magic is only good for so much. Sometimes you just have to get your hands dirty the old-fashioned way.”

He shrugs and steps up to me.

“Korvin, the wards!” he bellows just as he raises his hand and slaps me across the face.

Pain explodes in my head and the world goes white.

## SCENE THREE



CYG

*“VIVEKA!”* I scream both mentally and out loud.

I see her body sway, but she doesn’t collapse.

Instead, white light bursts from her body. I can barely make out her form in the blinding brightness of it. It pierces everything and everyone in her path, bringing the people of Anserinae to their feet. It even pierces the shield that the White Crow King put up.

From a distance, I can see Korvin standing there in his human form, a proud, smug smile on his face as he watches Viveka unleash all sard with her magic.

Finally, her light diminishes and she falls to her knees, spent.

Everyone is silent.

After a moment, harsh sobbing fills the air.

I realize that it is coming from Cigarette Odette.

The Cigarette rises to her feet to stare at my father from across the way.

“I remember now. I remember it all. You bastard,” she seethes. “You sarding bastard! You stole it all from me- and from him! For what? For fake love? ANSWER ME!”

“Th-th-that’s not true,” Cigne Siegfried answers and I look over at him.

Why in the sard is *he* answering?

“It was a lie,” the Cigarette says lowly. “All a lie. I don’t love you. I’ve never loved you. My heart has and always will belong to Rothbart!”

She turns then to look at her husband.

“I’m leaving to Anatidae and taking Viveka.”

She walks over to my mate’s slumped form, but Siegfried beats her to it, grasping Viveka by the neck and hauling her up.

“This is your fault!” he roars, spitting in his anger.

“Stop!” Odette cries, trying to pry their daughter from his choking hands.

“SHE SAID GET YOUR HANDS OFF OUR DAUGHTER!” my father shouts before shifting into his black swan and charging the odious White Cigne.

Right before my father is about to collide with Siegfried, he changes back into human form and decks the Cigne of Anserinae unconscious.

Korvin claps from the sidelines.

Confusing sarder.

I quickly shift, as do my brothers, and we race to Viveka's side. Linden pulls her into his lap as she gasps for breath. Cobbe and Dell are leaning in, too, so I stand and wait patiently for my turn. I smirk at Siegfried's inert form and look to my father...

*Who is kissing Cigarette Odette passionately.*

My head whips around to see my mother still standing across the river in Anatidae.

Her face is a mixture of resignation and pain, and my heart breaks along with hers.

Then, Viveka is abruptly in my arms and, for a moment, I turn my attention to her. She hugs me tightly. When she sees my father kissing her mother, her jaw drops open. We watch as they shift into their Anseriformes, one a white swan and the other black; then they fly back toward Anatidae. My father's swan flies slightly above the Cigarette's and they make a striking pair in the sky.

I wonder if this is how Viveka and I look flying together.

The two swans are halfway across the river, which is the widest here. Further up North, and again to the South, the water practically trickles into nonexistence. I hate the hurt that my mother is feeling, but I can't begin to imagine the pain both my father and Odette must be feeling, too, and I don't even know the whole story.

Suddenly, Viveka's scream splits the air.

I look at her and her face is frozen in a mask of horror. I wheel around to look back just as an arrow pierces the Cigarette, going up through her belly and into my father's swan, too. Together, they splash into the water below.

"NO!" Dell yells.

He runs to the edge of the river and dives in to save them.

Slowly, in a daze, I pivot around to find Siegfried, the master Marksman of Anserinae, conscious once more and holding a bow.

“You... you killed them,” Viveka whispers in a shaky voice. “You did something to steal their love and now that they are reunited once more, you murdered them.”

“Clearly, your mother wasn’t worthy of my love. And you know the saying- all’s fair in love and war,” Siegfried returns.

Viveka lets out a cold laugh.

“So Cobbe once told me. He said to fight dirty, that my wings were already tarnished. So, let’s fight, father.”

Siegfried doesn’t respond but attempts to call fire to his hands.

Over and over he tries, but nothing happens.

“Crow King! Where are my powers?!” he demands of Korvin.

“Oh, your daughter stripped them with her magic when she broke the spell you placed over your wife,” he responds genially.

“No! I sold my soul to the Dark Beyond in exchange for magic!”

“It’s rather foolish to make deals with things that you don’t understand, White Cigne,” Korvin points out in amusement.

“Fine. I don’t need magic to kill her. My sword will work just fine.”

Siegfried pulls the weapon from his sheath and stalks towards Viveka, who doesn’t move a muscle. I walk forward but stop a few paces behind Viveka. She is capable in her magic. But instead of using it against her father, she uses it to conjure a magnificent sword.

*Oh, sard.*

She’s going to fight.

Before I can yell at her to not be foolish, the sound of metal hitting metal grates in my ears.

The Cigne and his daughter are fighting in earnest now and I keep silent so as not to distract her. Linden and I taught her

well, but Siegfried is not untrained himself. They thrust and parry round and round in a circle, but I can see our swan is getting tired.

Just when I'm about to blast the sarding White Cigne with my own magic, Viveka spins to the right as Siegfried lunges to the left. She jumps up on the rock that the Cigne had been using to shield his back, bringing down her sword to rest against his neck. The sword lights up with her magic and Siegfried throws his to the ground in defeat.

Angrily, he shouts obscenities.

"You are a disgrace! You never should have been born! Out of kindness, I let you live. I fed you, clothed you, loved you even! I tried to hide the abomination that you are, but it didn't work. You are an embarrassment to me and all of Anserinae. You and your kind should be swallowed into the bowels of the earth, never to pollute my kingdom again!"

"No!" Viveka snarls. "I'm not the embarrassment- *you are!* Maybe the ground should open up and swallow you instead!"

Seigfried gives no retort because the world around us is suddenly shaking uncontrollably. I jump to the side as the ground rolls beneath my feet and begins to crack wide open. Viveka stares in dismay, realizing what her magic has done- but it's too late. The White Cigne drops into the crack. He grasps the edge, barely holding on.

"Viveka!" he cries. "Help me! I didn't mean it! Please- I love you! Forgive me. I-I-I promise to do better."

Viveka hops down from the rock, contemplating her father and his words. She bites her lip in worry and I know that she didn't intend for her magic to do this. She lowers her head, then raises it again with a look of determination. *I know that look.* Viveka may despise her father, but she's no murderess.

But before she can lean down to help Siegfried aloft, a white crow flies down to the ledge, shifting into the magnificent form of the White Crow King.

"She might believe your lies, but I don't. Enjoy the Dark Beyond," Korvin taunts.

He smashes his boot into Siegfried's hand and down the White Cigne drops. Then, Korvin waves his hand and the earth closes once more. He turns to Viveka and gives her a brilliant smile.

“Thanks for breaking the curse and evening out the debt. I always knew you had it in you,” he cheers to a confused-looking Viveka.

Before she can respond, Korvin tugs her in and places a kiss on her lips.

Instantly, my vision goes red.

*Someone's about to be a dead bird.*

## SCENE FOUR



DELL

I DIVE INTO THE water, thankful that it's clear enough to see into the river's depths. Fortunately, I can see the white color of the Cigarette's swan form, but not my father's. His black feathers are not discernable and I'm afraid that Odette and he were separated when they crashed into the water.

Using my magic, I create an air bubble around my mouth to breathe and I dive deeper. I finally reach them both, and I can see that my father is still tethered to Viveka's mother. I pull them into my arms and swim for the surface, trying to hold them as gently as possible.

When I make it to the top, pandemonium has broken out.



I'm only a few feet from the banks of Anatidae and, thankfully, my mother is waiting for me.

"Quickly, Dell, over here!" she calls.

Carefully, she helps me to pull the two Swans out of the water.

I look back across the Anas River to see someone kissing Viveka- someone that is not one of my brothers. Cyg looks positively apoplectic and Linden and Cobbe are holding him back.

"That must be the White Crow King," my mother observes.

I let out a shrill whistle, calling everyone's attention.

"Enough! Quickly! Time is of the essence!" I cry out to them and they immediately shift and fly over.

Viveka is the first to land and she rushes over to her mother and my father.

"Has someone sent for a healer?" she demands in fear.

My mother and I exchange a look just as Korvin comes flying over. He shifts and puts a hand on my mother's shoulder consolingly.

"Viveka- it's too late. They aren't going to make it," he tells her sympathetically.

"What? No! They were just reunited! I... I don't even know their story," she laments in a heartbroken whisper.

"I do," my mother says.

"And so do I," Korvin adds.

"Please," Viveka sobs, "tell me so that I can carry on their legacy of love."

She sits down to hold her mother, who is breathing laboriously. The arrow shot through her stomach, but it pierced my father through his heart. In truth, he was probably already dead before he hit the water, but the Cigarette's death will not come as quickly.

Viveka strokes her mother's long neck as she listens to my mother speak.

“Rothbart and Siegfried grew up together. Although they were distant cousins, they were raised as brothers. Odette came from another noble swan family and the three were inseparable as children. I come from swan lineage, but have goose blood, lowering my status in Anserinae society. As a girl, I would see Rothbart, Siegfried, and Odette playing. Siegfried never let me join them, but Rothbart and Odette were always kind to me. When we were teenagers, the old Cigne, Siegfried's father, announced Odette's betrothal to Siegfried. Shortly after, the old Cigne passed and Siegfried ascended the throne at the tender age of sixteen, but he did not press Odette to marry him until they were both eighteen.”

My mother pauses to catch her breath and Viveka leans down to place a tender kiss on the White Cigarette's feathered head.

“But, Odette didn't love Siegfried. She loved Rothbart and he loved her. I... I understood Siegfried's pain, though, because I was in love with Rothbart, too. When Siegfried found out, he was devastated. He loved Odette beyond the point of possessiveness. Rothbart suddenly became his enemy and when Siegfried learned about the underground movement to create a new kingdom where Geese, Ducks, Nonansers, and Swans were equal, Rothbart gave him the key to make him a traitor to the kingdom. Rothbart ran off with Odette and a few dozen men, women, and children and founded Anatidae. But back here, Siegfried told everyone that Rothbart was a black Swan and that he was using his magic to control Odette and the others. Suddenly it became the White Crown against the Black Crown.”

“I might interject, if I may,” Korvin interrupts.

My mother and Viveka nod at him.

“Remember when I said that I was older than time?” he asks my mate with a crooked smile. “I've been around longer than you can fathom. My only enemy has been an owl called The One. He has terrorized my kind since the beginning of time.

See, I'm originally from the Dark Beyond and The One is from the Light Beyond. Your great-great-great-grandfather helped me to defeat this owl, bringing an eternity of damnation to Anseriformes. He saved my life and my magic created an irrevocable life-debt, tying me to the Cigne monarchy until it was repaid. Where I once was black, I suddenly became white and your great-great-great-grandfather became the first black Swan. That is why there is a legacy of magic and darkness in your blood, but it's nothing to be ashamed of. Unfortunately, people often fear what they don't understand. As more Swans were born black, white Swans became scared and envious. The revolt that took place was a massacre. Thankfully, the practice of killing black Swans was stopped, but the prejudice and hate still existed."

"And it wasn't just black Swans. It was Geese, Ducks, Nonansers. If you weren't a noble and *pure* white Swan, then you were nothing," my mother adds bitterly. "What Siegfried and everyone else forgot is that we all bleed red when cut. We are no different on the inside."

"So, why did my mother return and marry my father?" Viveka asks in confusion.

"Because your father cursed her," Korvin says simply. "He used the one thing that he claimed to despise: *magic*. He bartered with the Crow Crone for a love potion so strong that Odette would forget her true love. In return, he gave her the things needed for spells... *unethical things*."

"Unethical *how*?" I ask in a hard voice.

"Hatchling beaks, the clipped wings of newly molted younglings, need I say more?"

We all shudder.

"I hope you took care of the Crow Crone," Cobbe says coldly.

Korvin merely nods.

"Viveka..." my mother starts but doesn't continue as my mate holds Odette close. The White Cigarette takes her last breath and dies in her daughter's arms.

Tears stream down Viveka's face, but the familiar look of determination is there, too.

"Please, finish their tale," she asks my mother.

"Siegfried wasn't your father. Rothbart was," my mother confesses and all of us recoil in horror.

"We're siblings?!" Viveka shrieks in panic.

"You knew this and let us mate?" Linden roars.

Our mother looks ready to have a nervous breakdown and I reach a hand up for silence.

"Brothers, Viv- let her explain. Mother, what aren't you telling us?"

I see her hands twitch nervously together.

"You're not Rothbart's sons... like you think. See, when Siegfried stole Odette from him, he went blind with rage, but his magic showed him a vision of his daughter and he knew that he must tread carefully so as not to provoke Siegfried into killing her. On the contrary, Siegfried raised Viveka as his own, ignoring the fact that she was truly Rothbart's- the ultimate snub. When Rothbart learned of Odette's pregnancy, he approached me, asking me to become his Dark Cigarette. Since Rothbart could see snippets of the future, I figured he saw one without his true love. I knew I was his second choice but greedily accepted. I would take his love in any form. And truly, he was a magnificent man. Giving and caring to all those in need. But... we never physically nested. I was... *am* barren, but with the help of Rothbart's magic, I became pregnant in my Anseriforme."

I suck in a breath at this announcement.

Anseriformes can't shift once they become pregnant and, as a rule, we don't nest in our bird form. So, that my mother was pregnant as a Swan is unheard of.

"I laid three eggs-"

"Only three?" Linden asks with a quirked brow.

“Yes, you and Cygnus were from split yokes but the same egg,” she explains. “Cobbe hatched first- a black Swan. When he shifted into his human form, he was already a little boy! Next, the twins hatched, both white Swans with black beaks and feet and, again, when they changed into their human bodies, they were younglings- a few years younger than Cobbe. Then Odello came, my adorable little duckling. Rothbart and I couldn’t begin to fathom how he came to be except that I have Goose blood and somewhere along the lines, it mixed with Duck blood. Whatever the reason, we loved you all dearly. When Odello shifted into human form, he was an infant. It was the only time that your father and I saw you in your Anseriforme. After that, you never shifted again and we simply said that you were a Nonanser. In truth, we had no idea what you were.”

“An experiment of magic,” I supply for her bitterly.

“No,” my mother protests softly. “You were the light of our lives. You brought so much joy to both of us. I went from not being able to have a family, to having a full nest, and you gave your father a sense of purpose. Never doubt that he loved you. He couldn’t be a father to Viveka. Don’t take that honor away from him now that you know the truth.”

I looked at my deceased father and I know that my mother is right.

*There is no place for hate.*

Hate is what brought us to this point, but it doesn’t serve anyone any longer.

“And Viveka broke the curse?” Cyg asks Korvin.

“Yes, this magnificent black Swan born of true love broke the curse when she stood up to Cigne Siegfried. She freed her mother from the love spell and fulfilled my life-debt, freeing me as well. No longer am I bound to the Swan monarchy. I am free to go back to the Dark Beyond. It is my hope that I one day meet a woman as passionate and brave as your mate. Farewell, my fair Cigarette, until we meet again,” Korvin says in a courtly manner, bowing to Viveka.

“Cigarette? I’m no Cigarette,” she mutters, scrunching her nose.

Korvin just laughs.

“*Yet*. You’re not Cigarette *yet*.”

Then, he shifts into his Crow, but instead of his normal stark-white coloring, his feathers are slowly bleeding back to black.

It makes me wonder: *is this the end of black Swans, too?*

## SCENE FIVE



VIVEKA

WITH EVERY PASSING DAY, I can feel my magic growing weaker and weaker. Dell is concerned now that the life-debt with Korvin has been fulfilled, our magic will dry up and vanish. It's not so much the magic itself that I will miss, but more that I never got to fully use and embrace it.

Today is the funeral for my mother and Rothbart.

Everyone is wearing white and black in their honor.

No one even mentions my father's- I mean, Siegfried's death.

Only a few Swans actually supported him and most of Anserinae ran them off to the South. Cobbe, Linden, Cyg,

Dell, and Odile have been helping me to reinstate order to Anserinae. The people have all unanimously agreed that I am the official Cigarette.

Worse, Odile has stepped down from her throne now that Rothbart has passed. She says that it's time for her sons and me to rule. I feel that there is so much good that my mates and I can do for the two kingdoms, but at the same time, I just want to hide.

To be left alone to grieve.

So much was stolen from me.

*From my mother.*

*From Rothbart.*

How do I even begin to compartmentalize what I've learned?

After the funeral, Odile walks up to me and hands me a single white feather and a black feather, one from both my parents. I thank her as a strange idea comes to me at the sight of them. I ponder the two feathers, thinking of Korvin's own white ones that he sent me, and his crown.

And the choker- which now makes sense.

*It was a gift from Rothbart.*

Something my mother must have clung to thinking it was from Siegfried.

But why did Korvin give me a crown made of all Anseriforme feathers?

What was the point of having nearly limitless power for it to simply fade away?

And then I know.

"Guys!" I call to Cobbe, Cyg, Linden, and Dell through our mate bonds. "*Gather everyone at the bridge- quickly!*"

After the few Swans who supported Siegfried were ran off, my mates and I created a bridge between the two kingdoms. People have peacefully been going back and forth. It's nice to



see all the Anseriformes mingle. Some Swans have already taken other jobs and a Nonanser and Duck from Anserinae have stepped forward to apply to become healers.

Linden and Cyg flew to Anserinae after the funeral and they will rally the citizens there to the bridge. Dell, Odile, Cobbe, and I gather everyone in Anatidae. When we get to the bridge, I have to shift to fly over the masses to get to the center. Even when the two kingdoms were at war, I have never seen so many people.

When I'm human once more, I address the crowd.

“Good people of Anserinae and Anatidae. I thank you for coming here today. It... has been a difficult day,” I admit and people shout out their condolences to me. “Thank you. Your support has been overwhelming. There is a rumor going around that I want to address- a concern about black Swan magic and it's true. Our magic is disappearing.”

There are gasps and cries of alarm.

I've realized that very few people actually fear us.

Instead, they revere our power and see it as a necessity to protect them.

Now, without our magic, they are afraid.

“But, we are not weak and defenseless without it! In fact, we are stronger now more than ever, two kingdoms united as one. And we will forever have Korvin as an ally.”

My speech seems to appease the people.

“After the funeral, an idea occurred to me. Our magic might be waning, but it is still there and Korvin once told me that black Swan magic is nearly boundless. My mates and I,” I swallow, hoping that they will be on board with this idea, “want to use it to help Nonansers shift.”

Suddenly, everyone is talking.

My husbands are in my face, all trying to speak at once, and the low murmur of voices from the people is beginning to crescendo into an avalanche of sound.

A high-pitched screech rises above the noise, causing everyone to stop talking.

A black crow flies down and shifts.

Korvin stands before me, but where his eyes and hair were once light, everything is now black. It's startling to take in his blackened irises. He offers me a smile and a small bow before he turns to speak to everyone.

“Ladies and gentlemen, for the most part, many of you know what it's like to feel like an outcast in your own town, but Nonansers are the lowest of the low. Even now, where equality will reign, they will always feel separated. Viveka wants to give these men and women a chance to embrace their true heritage. Everyone has an Anseriforme and everyone was meant to shift, but it's not without consequences. The change is painful and does not happen instantly, as Prince Odello can attest,” the Crow King tells the crowd.

“But you can guarantee that we will be true Anseriformes?” one man shouts.

I look to Korvin, unsure.

“Nothing in life is guaranteed, my friend. All you can do is try,” he responds simply with a shrug.

Now, I'm nervous.

*What if we can't change anyone?*

What if we *kill* someone?

Beside me, Korvin chuckles.

“Doubt is a nasty thing, my princess. It worms its way into your brain and, once there, latches on and spreads like a vicious disease until you can no longer perceive reality,” he warns lightly. “So, who wants to try?”

I cringe at the Crow King's jovial tone, but there are a surprising amount of women and men who step forward. Everyone else backs away. I wipe my sweaty palms against my dress. This seemed like such a wonderful idea not just an hour ago.

“Ok...” I say hesitantly. “First, will all Nonansers form a group at the foot of the bridge in Anserinae?”

The guys and I move out of the way as a couple dozen people cross over to join another dozen or so men and women in Anserinae.

“And you are sure-” I start to ask them, but a woman cuts me off with a kind smile.

“We are sure, Your Highness. I’ve longed my whole life to fly with my family and friends. I’m ready to own who I am.”

Her words ring in my ears: ready to own who I am.

*Have I ever really owned who I am?*

“Once,” Korvin whispers. “And it was magnificent.”

He’s referring to when I broke the curse and his life-debt.

I cock my head, not sure that I like him privy to my thoughts, but the Crow King just gives me a naughty smirk. I scowl, turning my attention back to the task at hand.

“*We can do this,*” I tell my husbands through our mental bond.

They smile down at me fondly. Cyg and Linden step onto either side of me, each taking one of my hands. Cobbe and Dell stand at my back, a hand on each shoulder. United, we concentrate on the group of Nonansers. We send out our magic, much like the day that we mated, and the beams of light pierce the small group of non-shifters.

The rest of the crowd murmurs at the sight and backs even further away.

I close my eyes tightly and pour my heart and soul into my dwindling magic, hoping it’s enough.

I think about my childhood and having to suppress my Swan. Oh, how I wished that I could fly like everyone else. Even though I wasn’t truly a Nonanser, I felt like one. It was a terrible feeling of being kept apart and it hurt to be different.

Suddenly, honks fill the air; startled, I drop my magic.

Where a bunch of men and women once stood are now a bunch of Geese and Ducks. There's even a Swan.

And they are all *black*.

Beside me, Korvin laughs and claps.

My mates and I regard one another in amazement.

The new Anseriformes shift back and forth from their human form to their bird form. Surprisingly, they are *clothed* when they transform.

"We must have imparted some of our magic to them," Dell hypothesizes.

"Well, I can't wait for the time when our magic is gone and everyone is running around naked as the day they were born," Linden says with glee.

I roll my eyes.

"Of course, you would look forward to that day," I tease.

"You have more requests," Korvin points out.

There, at the foot of the bridge, another group of Nonansers has come forward to be changed.

Cyg snorts cynically.

"Oh, *now* they want to be changed after they let the others test it out!"

I give him a look.

"Honestly, that sounds like something you would do- let Linden try it out first and, then, if it worked, you would do it."

Cobbe laughs.

"That's exactly what Cyg would do," he jokes, clapping his brother on the shoulder before turning back to the task at hand.

We spend the next hour helping Nonansers shift for the first time, and when we are done there are a goodly amount of black birds.

I slump into Cobbe, utterly spent.

My mates also look drained.

I think our magic has finally run dry.

## SCENE SIX



LINDEN

I FEEL SO WEAK.

I shift into my Anseriforme and back again, only to find myself *naked*.

Viveka and my brothers laugh at my predicament while women from both sides of the kingdom scream and holler at me.

Korvin walks over to me, his eyes dancing with amusement.

I'm not quite sure that I'm comfortable with the look in them right now.

It's almost... *assessing*.

“Nice,” he compliments to my hands that are covering my cock.

“Mine!” Viveka barks and it startles a laugh from me.

“Don’t worry, princess. I was only looking,” Korvin reassures her as he reaches out a hand to touch my shoulder.

Instantly, I am in clothing once more.

“Our magic is truly gone then, huh?” I ask.

Of course, I’m upset because I’ve used magic my whole life, but it was the one thing that my father gave us. With it gone, it feels like his memory, *his legacy*, has also faded away.

“Yes,” Korvin attests. “You’ve imparted it to the Nonansers... I mean other Anseriformes. There’s no more Nonansers left.”

Viveka’s smile rivals the sun.

“And we did it quickly, without pain *and* without killing anyone!” she crows happily and we laugh.

“I wish we still had our magic, though,” Cobbe laments.

Korvin looks at him assessingly.

“The exchange of magic is never free. What are willing to give me?”

Cobbe gives him the same calculating look.

“What do you want? And Viveka is *not* an option.”

“I wouldn’t *dream* of asking for your mate,” he vows, winking at her. “How about an alliance instead?”

My twin looks at me in confusion.

“You already have it,” he tells the Crow King, who just laughs mirthlessly.

“No, you think we do, but you have no idea what it entails,” Korvin corrects.

“Well, what does it entail?” Viveka demands.

Dell shakes his head at her.

“So impatient and bossy,” he taunts and she sticks her tongue out at him.

“Careful, my black swan, we might take that as an invitation,” I tease, remembering my words to her from long ago.

“And if it was?” she returns in a seductive whisper.

All of clear our throats while Korvin chuckles.

“You’re quite the lovely handful, aren’t you?” he asks Viv, who blushes. “Now, an alliance with me means that you are willing to fight against The One.”

“Yes, and...” Viveka prompts, making Korvin sigh.

“The One is your creator. Your wings are modeled after their angelic ones. Of course, when your great-great-great-grandfather saved my life, he damned the Anseriformes, but your kind has never truly gone to war with The One. If I impart my magic to your kind once more, I want your solemn vow that you will fight at my side when the time comes, no matter the cost. And I warn you- the cost will be great.”

A heavy silence descends upon us.

“You have our vow,” my mother suddenly speaks. She turns to address us. “This is what your father would have wanted because it’s the right thing to do. The One oppresses so many, just as Siegfried did.”

I look into her dark brown eyes, so like mine, and I know that she is right.

“You have our vow,” I agree.

“You have our vow,” Cyg echoes.

“You have our vow,” Viveka, Cobbe, and Dell add, as well.

“Excellent. Your word is binding,” Korvin says seriously and we nod our understanding. “Good, then I just need someone to exchange my powers with.”

“Ah... what do you mean?” Viveka asks.



“Remember your great-great-great-grandfather? He became black and I became white, rather amusing, since that is the color of The One, but an exchange is necessary- not just your commitment to fight.”

“I will do the exchange,” my mother offers.

“You know what this means?” Korvin asks.

“Yes, and I am willing to sacrifice that part of me.”

“*What is she talking about?*” Cyg asks on our mental link at my mother’s cryptic words.

“*We will find out soon enough,*” Dell answers calmly. “*We must trust her.*”

Korvin takes my mother’s hand and slowly, his black hair leeches to white and when he opens his eyes, they are the milky opaque from before. I expect my mother’s hair to turn darker, but instead, it seems to turn more golden.

When Korvin steps back, he looks surprised.

“Well, would you look at that,” he laughs. “My magic must have taken your alliance very seriously,”

I look to Cyg, wondering why the once more White Crow King speaks like his magic isn’t something that he can control.

“I can when needed, but it’s its own entity,” Korvin remarks and I feel my eyes widen.

*The sarder can read minds.*

He just winks at me.

“Now every Anseriforme has magic,” Korvin says in delight.

“*Every Anseriforme?!*” Viv screeches.

“Every single one of them. And they will need it. The One’s power is... *incomprehensible.*”

I shudder at the implications.

“Also, I imparted a gift to your mother for her sacrifice,” Korvin adds.

“Is that why my hair is more golden? I mean, nothing like Cigarette Odette’s lovely hair, but I can see how it looks like dark honey now.”

“Shift into your Anseriforme, my dear Odile,” Korvin directs and my mother changes, but not into her normal white Swan form, which she lost in the exchange.

Instead, she is a breathtaking golden goose!

She honks in surprise and flaps her gorgeous wings.

We all stare in awe.

“Just wait,” Korvin whispers, his eyes dancing with delight.

I furrow my brow as my mother dips her head in concentration.

Then... *she lays an egg!*

A solid gold egg!

“Now your kingdoms will always be prosperous and rich!” Korvin booms happily. “Although, I had hoped you would have joined them together by now.”

“Is that why you sent me that crown?” Viveka asks dryly.

“I was merely preparing for your future,” he rejoins.

My mother transforms back and picks up her gold egg.

“My, it’s heavy! How many of these can I lay?” she asks in wonder.

Korvin shrugs.

“As many as needed, I suppose. Now, I must be going. Corvidae is in good hands for the time being, so I must return to the Dark Beyond again. Call if you ever need anything.”

He shifts into a white crow and disappears into the sky.

“What do you think about combining the kingdoms?” my mother asks Viveka.

“It makes sense. We could spend half our time in one and the other half in the other.”

“Perhaps we could spend Vernal and Estival in Anserinae’s castle, and Ottumnal and Hiemal in Anatidae’s castle?” I offer.

“I like that,” Viv beams. “And we should combine the names.”

“To what?” Dell wonders.

“To Ansertidae,” Cobbe suggests.

Cyg smiles.

“Ansertidae. I think it’s perfect. Let’s ask the Anseriformes before making a decision, though.”

We all agree, but it turns out that the people unanimously support our decisions. Everyone is excited to have magic and to be part of this new chapter in our legacy.

The people embrace Ansertidae and their new identity, just as Viveka embraces hers as the Swan Empress. She wears Korvin’s crown proudly with her mother’s feather behind one swan, and Rothbart’s behind the other. Their story will not be forgotten and now it’s time to write our own.

# FINALE



THE KINGDOM OF ANSERTIDAE was a prosperous one.

The Cignes and Cignette ruled fairly and lovingly.

For once, the kingdom didn't simply exist.

It *flourished*.

Schools were created for everyone to learn their magic.

New traditions were made to integrate all Anseriformes and the citizens were finally free to follow their true calling.

It was a time of great happiness and growth for everyone.

But darkness was on the horizon.

A war they never knew existed waited for them.

And the alliance that they promised so long ago came calling all too soon.

In a ball of fire, the White Crow King came flying down from the sky.

Nearly burnt beyond recognition, he looked to the beautiful and powerful Empress.

It broke his heart to tear her world apart after it had finally woven itself back together, but much was at stake.

The One had returned.

And he was out for blood.

THE END



# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



*USA TODAY* bestselling author M.J. Marstens mixes romance, suspense, comedy, and sassy characters who can say whatever they are thinking because it is just a story. When she is not creating steamy scenes or laugh-out-loud fiascos, she's refereeing her four children that she homeschools. In her free time, she loves to eat, sleep, and pray that her children do not turn out like the characters she writes about in her books.

To read more of her books, check them out [HERE](#).

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# PANDORA'S BOX



SARAH M. CRADIT

A Crimson & Clover Story

# BLURB



JASPER IS A PECULIAR young man, hailing from a peculiar New Orleans family.

Pandora's eccentric tastes and unusual passions don't mesh well with her own blueblood Baton Rouge relatives.

They come together, forging an unlikely bond, changing their individual worlds forever. But then Pandora flees town, leaving Jasper to pick up the pieces.

In a fortuitous twist of fate, the young lovers find themselves in the same city, each unknowingly on a journey back to one another.

# CHAPTER ONE



## JASPER

JASPER STRAIGHTENED HIS TWEED jacket, moving through the halls of Brother Martin High School with the joyous ease of someone who knows exactly where they're headed and can't wait to get there.

Inside the worn leather bag, draped artfully over one shoulder, was a letter. The very one he and Esther had been waiting to receive for months. Her own letter had come weeks ago, leaving them questioning whether his application would be accepted as well. With a sad sigh, she'd declared their efforts at an impasse, believing if the news was good, they'd have heard by now. They would make the journey together, or not at all.

Jasper envisioned her pale face taking on a shock of excited color as he leisurely revealed the scintillating contents of the delayed missive.

Esther Prejean was the love of his life. The soft, warm center of his curious heart. And soon—very soon—they would begin their lives together as anthropologists of the occult.

The first time he saw Esther, freshman year, she was a cape of golden hair, leaning over a hand-bound leather copy of *The Necronomicon*, carefully inserting a rainbow's assortment of sticky-notes for later reference.

Once a week, all the private schools in New Orleans brought students together at the Brother Martin school library to give them research time for their studies. Judging from the jacket draped over her chair, he'd deduced she was from McGehee. When girls from Louise McGehee, in the Lower Garden District, came to study, they rarely gave the Brother Martin boys the time of day. The Sacred Heart girls were usually more laid back.

Not that Jasper had much of an impact on girls from *any* school, with his elbow patches, tweed pants, and penchant for quoting from centuries-old literature.

"H.P. Lovecraft studies? Quite an unusual assignment," Jasper had declared, standing over her with a blend of inquisitiveness, high intrigue, and inexplicable fear.

"This is not for an assignment," her smoky voice, shockingly mature for a girl her age, had retorted back without even a slight glance his direction.

He straightened his lapel, a gesture his classmates often rankled him for. *Don't be such an old man, Jasper!* He dared not wear any of his favorite vibrant cravats. "I don't recall ever seeing *you* here before."

With a resigned sigh, she'd closed the book. Her silken hair fell away from her face as she looked up, and gazing back at him was the most exquisite creature he'd ever beheld. Her almond-shaped amber eyes were painted up at the corners, giving her a distinctive feline appearance. The shocking shade

of red coating her lips was the kind one is used to seeing on pinup girls.

“We’re from Baton Rouge,” she’d explained; the way she accentuated the words made it evident she believed where she came from to be far superior to where she’d ended up. She blinked twice, sizing him up. “That jacket is groovy.”

“It’s my father’s,” he’d confessed, not adding he’d taken the jacket from a pile intended for Goodwill. “Nice shirt.”

The blonde bombshell had glanced at her Souxsie & the Banshees tee, intentionally shredded at one shoulder, and shrugged. “I’m Esther. Prejean... of Prejean Textiles.”

“Jasper Broussard. Of the Deschanel dynasty.”

Esther had wrinkled her nose with a snicker. “Dynasty, huh? Yeah, I know who you are. My father says the Broussards made their money by selling off all their land inheritance to oil companies. That they aren’t fit to share blood with the Deschanels, let alone a dinner table.”

“Sure, and?” Jasper had nodded at the tome sitting on top of her knees, just past the hem of her very short skirt. “Where’d you get that, anyway?”

Esther smiled. “I stole it.”

“Sure you did.”

“You don’t believe me?”

“How would a girl like you even know about the vast pantheon of a genius like Lovecraft?”

Esther had tucked the book into her beaded sack. “Maybe the kind who has studied the entire Cthulu Mythos forward and backward, in four languages, since she was seven?”

Jasper had reflexively straightened his posture, beyond even his usual careful deportment. “I have a signed first edition of *The Shadow Over Innsmouth*.”

Esther had stood, looping her bag over the crook of her elbow. “We should be friends, Jasper Broussard.”

*We should get married,* Jasper had thought to himself, as his heart leapt forward with a light, merry skip.

Esther had a curious and complicated relationship with authority. She couldn't bear to be told what to do, by anyone, but sought out approval as if it was vital to her emotional survival.

When her father declared Jasper an inappropriate boyfriend for someone of her breeding—despite Jasper's constant reminder he hailed from the most venerable family in the state of Louisiana, *ahem*—she'd acquiesced, her rebellion thus existing solely outside of his knowledge.

Through Esther's clever manipulations, she and Jasper made a game of sneaking around, managing to keep the secret of their relationship hidden through the end of their senior year. Taking their occult research to the New Orleans Library, they used code to communicate from across the room, meeting between the Travel and Business aisles to discuss their findings, and lament the unfairness of their situation.

Their shared dream was to open a museum of the occult; a place where true enthusiasts of the supernatural could come and browse legitimate relics with actual merit, and not merely the smoke and mirrors found in most New Orleans tourist establishments. They'd corresponded with their idol, a Dr. Archimedes in Paris, who, inspired by their energies, offered to sell them a number of artifacts at cost, to help them get started.

*Picture it, Jasper! A place where our passions could be taken seriously! There's no better city for this than ours, yet you won't find anything like what we're proposing anywhere here.*

Esther's romantic notions made Jasper dizzy with love. For her, and for what they could accomplish, together, if only they could spend time unfettered by the fear of her father discovering they'd gone against his wishes.

Esther insisted Jasper was her boyfriend, though Jasper's definition of the word included more than covert operations conducted in complete subterfuge. It also didn't involve

watching her date the insipid white-collar playboys her father approved of. He'd never even held her delicate hand in his!

"Maybe next weekend we can sneak away," she'd promise each time the subject came up, a vow that traveled over the space of years and yet somehow never dulled his hope.

On her eighteenth birthday—a mere month after his—he presented her with a gift, in the form of an opportunity: join him for a week in Paris over spring break. An adult now, she could make her own decisions. If she chose to come with him, he would give her the world. His world, and everything within their potential to create as a combined force.

In the secret pocket of his heart, the place where his doubts lived, he didn't believe she'd come.

But she did.

Dr. Archibald Archimedes was not at all what Jasper had pictured. Instead of a mad scientist, with tufts of white hair pointing haphazardly, and questionable social and hygienic standards, he was a young man fresh out of his PhD program. Handsome, too, based on Esther's reaction. Abashedly, he'd explained the former Dr. Archibald Archimedes Sr., his father, had died unexpectedly sometime after their last correspondence. "I intend to keep his promises," the young doctor vowed. "Everything he offered you, I offer still."

"Our very own patron!" Esther declared as she fell back on the lush bed in their hotel, sprawling over the golden duvet. Outside their balcony, the Eiffel Tower stood watch over the young lovers.

"Do you love me, Esther?" Jasper asked, dropping to one knee. He'd imagined the slow, deliberate move many times in his mind, his debonair charm sweeping her off her feet. Instead, his palms were drenched in sweat and his heart raced off the charts.

He expected her usual, noncommittal response, so when she sat up and slid to the edge of the bed, taking his face in her soft hands, he audibly gasped. "I do love you. I saved myself for you."

Tilting his head upward to face her, he was relieved to discover nothing playful or teasing in her expression. Esther Prejean had expressed her love for him, finally, and he knew the words reflected the contents of her heart.

“We’ll come back here after we graduate, Esther, and I’ll make an honest woman of you.”

“The Sorbonne,” she decided. “The University of Paris. They have a program made for us. If we do this, we have to do it right.”

They spent the next week writing Lovecraftian-inspired verses and discovering what it meant to surrender to another. Plans turned to promises. Love to something beyond their youthful definition.

“Was I worth the wait?” Esther asked him on their last evening in the City of Love, as her wide, amber eyes gazed back from the goose-down pillow.

“You’ll always be worth the wait, Esther.”

“Call me Pandora,” she purred, stretching her arms before her, twirling them in the air. “I don’t want to be Esther anymore. I never liked her much.”

Jasper cared not about the angry father awaiting them back in New Orleans. He would move the heavens for Esther Prejean. Would cross through Dante’s seven circles of hell to find her. He’d not once, not ever, met someone who embraced his unconventional eccentricities and his strange, twisted heart. Someone he could appreciate in equal measure.

With a skip in his step, Jasper made his way toward the library, to show her his prize: his acceptance letter, finally, to The Sorbonne.



# CHAPTER TWO



## PANDORA

WHEN PANDORA PREJEAN, FORMERLY Esther Prejean, learned she was pregnant, her very first thought was, *What will my father say?*

Of course, she knew the answer. That was the problem.



WHEN SHE'D ACCEPTED JASPER'S invitation to Paris, the gesture was more symbolic than even he knew. She'd strung him along for years, praying he'd still be there when she found her spine and learned to be satisfied with not

pleasing everyone. Her father would survive her falling in love with someone he didn't approve of. The world wouldn't cease its rotation.

Upon their return to New Orleans, Pandora had even mustered a burst of courage to tell her father of her love for Jasper, convincing herself it didn't matter that he'd turned and left the room before she finished explaining herself.

Jasper was her heart. All the rest was interference.

Pandora managed to prevent her inevitable groveling, her usual fare of begging her dad's forgiveness when his silence grew unbearable. Esther would have, but Pandora was a strong, confident woman with a bright future ahead of her.

*Not* the future a daughter of Francis Prejean was expected to pursue, of course, but his pretensions had held her back long enough.

In the end, this was her driving motivation behind her regretful decision to turn to Cassius Broussard, instead of her own father, when she learned of the child growing within her.



PREJEAN TEXTILES PRE-DATED THE Civil War, and enjoyed partnerships with over two hundred companies in Louisiana alone. The enterprise started with the hard work of Pandora's third great-grandfather, Alistair Prejean, a man who, to hear her father tell it, should be held in equal reverence to Jesus Christ Himself.

In contrast, the Broussards had inherited their fortune from their Deschanel cousins (a *dynasty*, Jasper had said, and that wasn't far off in the minds of the peerage), then promptly sold all of the acquired land to interested oil parties. The same companies now responsible for their disappearing Gulf coastlines.

The difference between the two families was lost on Pandora. Capitalists were capitalists.

Cassius Broussard was peculiar, but not in the same way his son was. Intellectually gifted, though not as traditional as most of his generation, and prone to more direct language than many were comfortable receiving.

Of course, Pandora didn't know this going into her visit. Her relationship with Jasper was conducted outside the purview of both their families, and so she'd never had the pleasure—if one could call it that—of meeting his father.

In a moment she'd reflect on the rest of her life, Cassius opened their discussion not by way of a customary greeting, but with, "You come to me carrying a grandchild, and expect my support?"

"I... I don't know what to do," she confessed in a slurry of self-consciousness. "My father wouldn't understand."

"No, I'd expect not. But I have low expectations for a man who vastly overestimates his own worth," Cassius declared, then tastelessly offered her a glass of cognac.

"I'm pregnant!"

His smile turned sinister. "Not for long."

"I came to you for help," Pandora pushed on, mindful the outcome of this discussion had been decided long before her arrival. "I'm having the baby. Jasper's baby."

"My dear," Cassius replied, his pointed features melting into something resembling a cartoon villain, "you're very young and have a limited view of this world. Do you understand what will happen if you go forward with having this bastard child? You'll throw your life away, becoming the very gutter trash we turn our heads from when we walk through the French Quarter. Your father will disown you. *Jasper* will renounce you, for if he doesn't, I'll cut him out of his fortune. You'll have nothing. You'll *be* nothing."

"I'm not nothing," Pandora insisted, jaw trembling, hands balled into tight, defiant fists at her side. "I'll be more than you, and *your* limited world view, could ever imagine."



PANDORA WENT STRAIGHT FROM that discussion into Jasper's arms, letting the scent of his sandalwood cologne carry her to a place where none of her troubles mattered.

"You look beautiful today, Pan," Jasper whispered against her temple, planting a kiss where his words tickled her moments before.

"You love me, don't you, Jasper?"

He stopped his tender ministrations and looked at her squarely. "Are you all right?"

"Yes," she lied. "I'm fine, just thinking of all we have ahead of us."

"You can't keep things from me. You're upset," he insisted gently.

"Paris is a long way out," she professed, keeping the sum of her fears to herself, not yet ready to share her news or the admission of her earlier visit to his father. Fearful of confessing, she'd not yet decided if Jasper's reaction would be favorable or otherwise.

"Our summer in Paris is a few short months away! Everything we've talked about for almost four years, all our promises, are about to become reality. Pan, I love you. All of you. And if something is troubling you, you need only tell me and I'll remedy it."

Pandora listened to Jasper comfort her in his odd language, one she could only describe as something she'd expect to hear in the last century. Her love, this strange child-man, offering assuages without even an inkling of the complications she was bringing to their relationship.

The question was, whom did he love more?

Pandora, or his inheritance?



ON THE DAY JASPER requested she meet him down by the river, where he had news to share, Pandora found herself at the house of another one of his relatives.

Jasper's aunt, Eugenia, was someone Jasper always spoke fondly of. A woman who encouraged his proclivities and embraced his personality, when most of his relatives insisted he hide his eccentricities for the sake of character.

"Cassius is right, and wrong," Eugenia explained, in exactly the gentle manner Pandora would have expected from a woman purportedly so kind. "Jasper loves you, dear. He's told me about you many times over the years. A man does not wait as long as he did for a woman he doesn't love.

"And he *would* turn his back on his fortune, I have no doubt. But the life you'd lead, one in shame, might eventually drive a wedge between the two of you. Some complications are greater than love."

Pandora wrung her hands in her lap, near to tears. "What do I do, then?"

Eugenia poured her a cup of chamomile tea. "I've always believed in the power of fate. The rest of this family is, sadly, not as imaginative, but I've always held that if something is meant to be, the universe will conspire to make it happen."

"I don't understand."

"I'm advising you to put my theory to the test, dear. Leave New Orleans. Go to The Sorbonne, as you've planned. I could find you a patron there, as I have many friends in Paris, but I believe you already have one waiting?"

Pandora nodded, swallowing.

"I'll see to Jasper. He's been accepted to Loyola, where he applied at his father's urging, while waiting for word from The Sorbonne. His visions of life in Paris will vanish, at least for a time, with your departure."

“You want me to follow our dreams without him?” Pandora started forward so fast her tea sloshed over the edges of the fine ceramic cup. “I could never do such a thing!”

“If I’m right, he will find you on his own, after enough time has passed. If he seeks you out, then I truly believe you can overcome anything.”

“What if you’re wrong?”

“Then your future together wasn’t meant to be. And you’ll have lived one of your two dreams, which I daresay is better than none.”

Pandora pulled tight at her thin jacket, her glance traveling between Eugenia and the door. “And if I stay?”

Eugenia dropped her gaze, her silence offered in place of an answer.



PANDORA DIDN’T WAIT FOR graduation. She’d finished her coursework weeks early. Waiting would dilute the rare courage surging through her veins.

She didn’t make her meeting with Jasper. Tears tickled her lids as she pictured his disappointment. This sentiment would fester over the weeks, she knew, potentially turning into something even darker. Something hateful.

But if she gave those thoughts credence, all was lost.

Pandora boarded a plane for Paris that night, with two bags’ worth of her most treasured belongings and a prayer to fate for Jasper’s eventual understanding.

# CHAPTER THREE



## JASPER

JASPER WAITED UNTIL SEVEN, an hour after he expected Pandora to meet him, before deciding she wasn't coming. Then he sat in the same spot until midnight, puzzling over her defection.

Her recent mood swings, centering around some unspoken fear, played front and center in his speculation. She'd insisted nothing was troubling her, but too much added up to the contrary.

Further worrisome was her absence in classes over the next few days, something Jasper learned overhearing whispers from her classmates when they came to the Brother Martin library. The following week was finals, and she continued missing.

Jasper strongly contemplated breaking his rule to never call her house. He very nearly caved, but then Francis Prejean paid him a visit instead, demanding to know what sinister things Jasper had done with his daughter.

“The police will be over to ask questions,” Francis spat at the end of his raging soliloquy. “You won’t get away with this.”

Jasper’s heart sank clear to his feet. “You don’t know where she is, either?”

Francis snorted, shooting a disgusted sneer at Cassius, who had been watching from the background with subdued annoyance. “You will not get away with this! A plague on this house!”

“Did he just insult us with Shakespeare?” Cassius murmured, as the door slammed sufficiently to rattle Mom’s fine china.



THE POLICE DID INTERVIEW Jasper, but the gesture was routine. It was evident from their line of questioning they believed nothing ill had befallen Esther Prejean and that, in fact, their abiding theory was she’d run away from home.

Jasper felt some relief in the authorities’ confidence of her safety, but that same peace was dulled by the knowledge she’d also run... from *him*. If Pandora were running only from her father, Jasper would be at her side.

The weight of this realization hit him hard enough to bring him to his knees.

Had the past few years been for nothing? Could he really have been so blind as to think the love she professed was anything more than an amusement to her?

Jasper’s mind continued to race back to their week in Paris. Her delicate fingers charting down his torso, trailed by her even softer lips. Her smiles of ecstasy as she sat astride him,



crying out to both him and God, in no particular order, the springs of their mattress accompanying her sounds of pleasure.

“No one ever marries their first love,” Cassius snipped, with all the sensitivity of a thousand stampeding elephants.

“Then I’ll never marry,” Jasper vowed.



LOYOLA WAS NEVER JASPER’S choice. His father being long-time poker buddies with the dean, perfunctory application aside, and Jasper’s place had been secured when he was still in diapers. A fantastic school, but it wasn’t Paris. It wasn’t studying under the patronage of Dr. Archimedes, side-by-side with the great love of his life.

But Jasper had enough practicality in him to accept that wallowing in his bed, writing melancholy sonnets, would solve nothing except to draw more ire from his father.

And so he slogged through his first year of college, knocking out his prerequisites in a haze of sadness and indifference. Fall turned to winter, and winter to spring, and when his heart didn’t mend the way everyone insisted it would, Jasper knew he must do something to chase his sadness away.

With this sentiment in mind, Jasper reached out to one Dr. Archimedes and asked if he might spend the summer in his patronage, if it was not too much trouble.

# CHAPTER FOUR



## PANDORA

PANDORA DAUPHIN, PREVIOUSLY PANDORA Prejean, previously Esther Prejean, strolled along the Seine with a pink-and-white-striped parasol, a gift from her patron, Dr. Archibald Archimedes, Jr. They were her least favorite colors by far, but she had no alternative means to shelter herself from the already simmering Paris summer heat.

Her other hand held tight to a shopping bag, which she swung lightly with her steps, as she approached the townhome where she'd lived for the past ten months.

Madame Fitzroy opened the door before Pandora could search for her key. "There you are, *ma chère*! Monsieur Archimedes has been waiting for you in the drawing room."

Pandora frowned, allowing Madame to take her things, inhaling the pleasing scent of freshly-baked midday scones. She made her way down the long hallway, heels softly tapping upon polished wood, toward the room Fitzroy had indicated.

Archibald sat before a roaring fire—so unnecessary in this heat, yet so like her patron—rocking the infant Leander back and forth in the chair she normally sat in.

“You’ve been gone half the afternoon,” he admonished. Leander cooed at his neck.

Pandora experienced a momentary burst of rage at the familiar way he held her son, but forced the emotion down. “Running errands. I picked up some new clothing for Lee. He’s growing too quickly.”

Archibald held the baby in the air before him. The boy giggled in delight at the faces made to amuse him. “He sure is. Isn’t that right, Lee? And what a proud papa I am.”

Pandora’s fists clenched at her side. She moved them behind her back. “Archie, we’ve talked about this. He’s not your son.”

“Yes, we have talked about this,” he replied back in the same singsong voice he’d used earlier with Leander, not bothering to look her direction. “I see no biological father here to claim him. Do you really want little Leander growing up without a daddy?”

She choked back the sigh forming; the sigh *always* forming in this household.

“You aren’t still holding out hope Jasper might come for you?” Archibald inquired, both brows raised in mock wonder.

“Of course not.” The words were a lie, one she’d learned to carefully craft early on in her tenure under his roof. If Archibald knew her heart, he might seek to keep Jasper from her. “He was a childhood love, that’s all.”

“Then I ask you, again, to reconsider my offer of marriage. I’d make a fine husband, Pandora. Both around town and in the marriage bed.”

Pandora repressed a cringe. While Archibald was indeed handsome—something that had struck her immediately upon their first meeting—some of the more prevalent aspects of his personality always left her feeling dirty. A prey being stalked by her predator.

These discomforts were a small price to pay for learning under him, however. Her first year at The Sorbonne was filled with equal amounts of education inside the school as outside, in the doctor's home. Knowing the knowledge she gained would help her and Jasper start their business, she held her tongue and continued to allow his solicitous remarks.

Yet her tolerance was also for Leander, her beautiful son, who resembled Jasper far more than her. A daily reminder of the decision she'd made, and the hope still burning in her heart.

"I'm only nineteen," she demurred, as she always had. The best argument at her disposal, as all others fell short in his eyes. "I'd like to finish school before I start thinking of marriage."

"A child needs a father."

"Lee is too young to understand the absence," she rebutted, lifting her son from his arms, ready to be done with the discussion. "Come on, let's go try on your new outfits!"

Pandora hurried down the hall and up the stairs to her quarters, fully aware of Archibald's scrutinizing eyes burning a hole in her back.



SAFE IN HER ROOM, Pandora laid Leander down in his bassinet, and opened her shopping bag. As she gazed at the contents, her earlier excitement faded. She could think of nothing except her ever-impatient patron downstairs, who would not continue taking no for an answer much longer.

Leander's breathing quickly turned to light baby snores. Pandora planted a careful kiss on his rounded cheek, and then

sat down at her letter desk. She slid a piece of paper out of the drawer, and pulled a pen from the holder.

*Dearest Jasper,*

*Ten months have passed since I saw you last. Thirteen since we lay together in Paris and created a new life.*

*I miss you beyond words.*

*Leander is growing so fast! He smiles constantly. Such a happy little baby. My mother said I was a cranky infant myself. I wonder, does he get this sweet disposition from you?*

*Archibald has taught me so much. Yesterday, he let me hold and examine the archdruid skull, from the ancient druid line I told you about in my last letter. The Quinlans, as you may recall? He's marked the things he'll sell me when the time comes to open the museum. Sell us, that is, because I won't do it without you.*

*I wonder often if I've been unfair, expecting you to find me. My life is filled with regrets, equal to the joys of discovering motherhood and the secrets of the life we planned together. I can't go on like this much longer, though.*

*Jasper, please come.*

*Love for always,*

*Pan*

Pandora carefully folded the letter in thirds, planting a kiss where the seal should be.

Then, she walked across the room and slid a mahogany box out from under her bed. *Pandora* was etched on the lid, lined with gold-leaf. A gift from Jasper who'd purchased the custom-made treasure from a small boutique woodworker along the Champs-Élysées. *Pandora's box*, he'd said upon presentation to her. *Should we open it?*

With a light sigh, Pandora placed the letter inside, atop the dozens of other unsent correspondences compiled over her time here.

Reverently, she closed the box housing her hopes and fears, and watched the slow rise and fall of her son's tiny chest, dreaming of what revelations tomorrow might bring.

# CHAPTER FIVE



## JASPER

IN THE WANING AFTERNOON, at a Paris sidewalk café chosen by his new benefactor, Jasper slurped his bouillabaisse while he listened to the sonorous voice of Dr. Archimedes, half-interested, and half-wondering if the man spoke merely out of love for the sound of his own voice.

Archibald finally drew in a deep breath, gazing down at his untouched *foie gras*. “I must say, I was surprised to hear from you.”

Dabbing at his chin and lips with the cloth napkin, Jasper paused. “Oh?”

“I naturally assumed this was a dream you shared with your young love. What was her name... Penelope?”

“Pandora,” Jasper amended. “You’re right, it was a shared dream of ours. But both of us had a special love for the occult even before we met. Wherever Pan is, I hope she’s pursuing this love as well.”

“Yes, well, it’s awful sporting of you to wish her well. Often relationships don’t end so amiably,” Archibald said with an odd look. “Have you moved on, then?”

Jasper set his napkin aside, not keen on discussing his love life, or lack of one. “I’ve no time or interest in women right now.”

The doctor’s expression evolved, this time revealing a broad smile. “Good! Good, good. Women are an unnecessary distraction, I often say. Now, then, I have a small flat in Montmartre where you’re welcome to stay until you’re called back for your studies. I apologize for, as lodgings go, it might not be to the standards you’re used to back home, but I have the room on lease for nights I stay in the *atelier*, which is no more than a five minute walk away. I’ll meet you there in the morning after I break my fast.”

Jasper was relieved to find he wouldn’t be staying with the doctor, though he couldn’t say exactly why. “That will be perfectly fine. I can’t thank you enough for welcoming me here.”

Their check came. An uncomfortable silence filled the space, as it became evident Archibald was waiting for Jasper to pay the bill. Jasper pulled the necessary cash from his billfold, and placed the money inside the leather folio.

The doctor stood. “I said I would live up to my father’s promises, did I not?”



JASPER SLEPT HORRIBLY THAT evening, despite the comfortable bed and satisfactory accommodations. His ache



for Pandora burned louder and brighter than it had since the day he realized she'd left. Her presence felt so near that he sensed reaching his hand through the dark might find his fingers touching hers.

*Of course, he thought. I'm here doing what we should be doing together. It's no wonder I miss her so much.*

The knowledge didn't offer any consolation, and by the time his mind slowed, the first hints of sun were peeking through the wispy curtains.



DR. ARCHIMEDES' *atelier*, or studio, was a mini museum in itself, inherited from his father who had grown the space a dozen times over the years. Jasper learned this as he followed Archibald around, listening to his self-indulgent historical retelling.

"I like to call it my laboratory, though my fellow scientists rib me about the label," he jested. "But anthropology is a special brand of science, wouldn't you agree?"

Jasper nodded, taking notes in his leather planner.

"Over ninety percent of my collection never makes it past this building. Our museum, which I'll show you later, features only the *crème de la crème*. In an average week, I receive no less than ten dealers, all hoping their collections will meet my approval and I'll pay the fees to incorporate the items. My assistant, Pa... Persephone tracks all items presented to us, which is further evidence of what I'm telling you. We accept only the finest and the rarest at Archimedes Antiquaries."

"I'd love to sit down with Persephone and review the ledgers," Jasper replied politely.

"She has the summer off," the doctor answered quickly. "I can arrange for someone else to walk you through them. Anyhow, let's continue."



ON HIS SECOND NIGHT in Paris, Jasper dreamed of Pandora.

She floated naked in a pool lit only by moonlight, her golden hair drifting away from her in a rebellious halo.

“I’ve waited for you,” her voice whispered in his ear, though the beautiful figure in the water said nothing.

Jasper descended the stairs. Still water rippled forward at his violation. As the cool fluid enveloped him, he realized he, too, was nude. He hardened at the discovery, and at what awaited him.

As he glided toward her in the cerulean water, her head came up, her hair pulling back toward the glassy surface in defiance. As she rose, her expression revealed a terrifying vulnerability. One Jasper craved to nurture and crush in equal measure.

Jasper pulled Pandora to him in one swift move, burying himself inside her as she cried out. Cheek to cheek, they made love under the moon, somewhere no one could find them, or touch them.

As he spilled inside her, Pandora let out a gentle moan, and asked, “Was I worth waiting for?”

“You’ll always be worth waiting for.”



JASPER CONTINUED TO HAVE this dream, or variations of it, every night thereafter.



AS HIS FIRST MONTH under the patronage of Dr. Archimedes came to a close, Jasper began to question his sponsor as to what items he might be inclined to sell. While his heart sagged at the thought of carrying forward without Pandora, he secretly believed realizing their dream on behalf of both of them, might be the one thing that would bring her back to him.

But Dr. Archimedes was noncommittal in his responses, consistently putting the discussion off until a later date.

As Jasper went through his daily life in Paris, Pandora whispered in his ear, guiding him. Sometimes offering commentary, like a voiceover in a television show, other times answering his seemingly answer-less questions.

“I don’t know if I trust this man,” he said to the night sky, enjoying a glass of champagne on his balcony before turning in.

*Ask yourself why, Pandora’s voice whispered in his mind.*

“I don’t think he has our best interests at heart.”

*You said our.*

“I did. I’ll always say our.”

*Follow your instincts, Jasper. They’ve never been wrong.*



THE NEXT MORNING, JASPER left a message on the doctor’s answering machine, requesting they meet for dinner to discuss business.

# CHAPTER SIX



## PANDORA

TO SAY ARCHIBALD WAS acting strangely lately would be like remarking the sky was looking especially blue. Nonetheless, Pandora sensed a marked shift in him not long after the summer began.

Archie had an addictive personality. This translated mostly into his work, which occupied him often around the clock, from day into night and then into morning again. It was, in fact, the thing Pandora most admired about him.

First, he began sleeping until noon, plodding around in his pajamas for another couple of hours before bothering with a shower.

Next were the days off, something he'd once told her he only believed were justified on holidays.

Then he refused to leave the house altogether, forcing Pandora and Leander to share his solitude, often in the form of sitting wordlessly in the parlor as he gazed out the window in thought.

For his own well-being, she approached the changes—tenderly, of course. He shrugged her off with the explanation they were in a slow season for trades, which directly contradicted with everything he'd said about his profession up until then. Getting nowhere, her questions lessened over time, until she realized his actions were putting her patronage at jeopardy.

When she confronted him with this, he turned on her with bloodshot eyes and asked, "Haven't I given you everything you could want and more?"

Pandora understood there was no satisfying answer to that question, which was not really a question at all, but ramblings of a half-drunk man driving himself to madness.

Before she could retreat to her room, and Leander, his hand snaked out and caught her wrist. "I'll give you all of it, Pandora. Anything of mine is yours. But you must marry me. Right away."

"Archie, we've talked about this—"

"Marry me, or leave my household!"



PANDORA PACKED HER AND Lee's belongings in choking tears. To leave his household meant leaving Paris. The Sorbonne would not provide housing for a young, unwed woman with an infant.

She would never marry him. Would never marry at all, unless the beloved's name was Jasper. Jasper with the elbow

patches on his tweed jacket, and the curious old-fashioned speech, with all the romance of a Jane Austen novel.

Archibald swept through the door within minutes, taking her into his arms in a sloppy gesture as foreign to him as it was unwelcome to her. “Don’t listen to me, Pandora. I’m not myself lately. You can stay.”

She nodded, and let him fall over his apologies. He’d have it no other way.

Still, Pandora understood her leaving was not a matter of *if*, but of when. Even if it meant moving on without her beloved.



ONE EVENING, AS SHE went into the kitchen to prepare a bottle for Leander, she overheard Madame Fitzroy talking to the butler about Dr. Archimedes’ elusive “American guest.”

“He’s not had him to the house once!” she complained in an exclaimed whisper. “He’s been here a month.”

“It is curious,” the butler, whose name Pandora was ashamed to realize she’d never learned, replied. “But none of our business.”

“Pft,” Madame clucked, turning to finish stacking the china in the cabinet. “I suppose it will also be none of our business when he gambles away his father’s fortune and we’re turned out into the streets with nothing?”

“Monsieur is no gambler!”

“Nor is he usually secretive,” she said with a pointed look. “I have half-a-mind to go down to Chez Dumonet and find out what secret things are going on myself!”

Pandora made a point of announcing her presence by tapping the bottle against the counter. “Sorry to interrupt. I came to make a bottle for Lee.”

“Do *you* know anything about Monsieur’s American guest?” Madame inquired, well past any offense at Pandora’s

unintentional eavesdropping, and ready for an ally.

“He doesn’t tell me about those kinds of things,” Pandora replied.

“Monsieur brought you on as his assistant. Shouldn’t you be aware?”

“He gives me assignments, and I do them. That’s all there is to our arrangement.”

“Hmph.” Madame put aside all pretense of stocking the hutch and leaned against the counter with one hand. “I find it terribly odd that he’s brought on *another* college student from America—why, from Louisiana, if I recall, isn’t that where you’re from?—a *second* apprentice, and then locks him up at the Montmartre place in secrecy. It’s as if he’s ashamed!”

“Calm down before you get your hand slapped for being nosy. Again,” the butler chided and slipped from the room before she could reply.

His warning didn’t stop Madame, who went on and on about the American college student, and the odd behavior of her employer.

By the time Pandora finished warming Leander’s bottle, the color had drained entirely from her face.

Could it be? Was her hope not so foolish after all?

“Excuse me,” she said in a trembling voice, and fled up the stairs to find something to wear.

# CHAPTER SEVEN



## JASPER

JASPER SPENT THE ENTIRETY of his day practicing his words. First in front of the mirror, then later at the small dining table in his flat, pretending Dr. Archimedes sat across from him and it was the most natural thing in the world to be saying these things.

*My, you look handsome,* Pandora sang in his ear, while he straightened his lapel, and checked for any errant hairs he might have missed during his shave.

“I always dress as if it’s the day I might see you again.”





DR. ARCHIMEDES WAS EARLY. On prior engagements, he'd left Jasper waiting to the point he considered leaving. When Jasper walked into the restaurant, he spotted his benefactor immediately, fidgeting nervously with his napkin.

"Did I get the time wrong?" Jasper asked politely, as the maître d' pulled his seat for him.

With a frantic snap of the head, Archibald gazed squarely at him. "I regret to inform you I need to end our patronage, effective immediately."

Jasper started, pistoning back in his chair before he could remember himself. "What? Why ever for?"

"I also cannot offer you a detailed explanation. My engagements have changed, plain and simple. I've enjoyed having you in Paris, and perhaps we can revisit the offer next summer when I am less absorbed."

Jasper's head spun; all the words he'd practiced flew out of his head, unimportant now. "But... but I've spoken with the counselors at The Sorbonne. They're prepared to extend my acceptance letter to this year. I was... going to *stay* in Paris. I'd hoped our working relationship would become long term."

"Regretfully, it will not." Dr. Archimedes stood in a haste, his chair tilting. A waiter happening by grabbed it before it could fall. Jasper understood he meant to leave before they could even sup. Nothing he'd prepared to say, none of it, would come to fruition.

"I don't understand," Jasper kept saying, but his sponsor was already rushing toward the door, without a formal goodbye or further direction. Nothing practical, even, such as what to do with the keys to the flat.

Jasper offered polite apology to their waiter, along with a small gratuity for his trouble, and then sauntered out of the restaurant in a daze, unsure of his direction but requiring distance from this disappointing conversation.

# CHAPTER EIGHT



## PANDORA

PANDORA WATCHED FROM ACROSS the boulevard as Archibald exited the restaurant in a flurry of anxiousness.

She pulled tight the light shrug sweater protecting her from the evening breeze, and prepared to return home, when she spotted another man.

In an instant, her knees went to jelly, her ankles splaying right and left as she nearly fell off balance. She had to grab a lamppost for support. Her heart seized forward at the sight of Jasper Broussard walking into the Paris night, and she expected to faint at any moment.

This same exhilarating fear rooted Pandora in place. She watched as Jasper looked both left and right, deciding which way he wanted to go, before turning left and wandering down the cobblestone boulevard.

It was not until his head began to disappear from view that Pandora sprung to life, remembering herself. *A strange American guest. From Louisiana, I believe.*

Yes, she'd let those vague details drive her tonight, and guess what? She'd been right. Eugenia had been right. Fate had brought her love back to her.



PANDORA FOLLOWED JASPER FROM a tentative distance. Stopping him was out of the question, as she felt a strange guilt at keeping him from wherever he was going, despite her heart insisting he was there to see her.

But there was also a strong chance he didn't know she was there. For all her learning, Pandora remained unsure precisely how fate worked. What if the opportunity was of Jasper's choosing, and what capricious hand had fate played.

For all she knew, his visit had nothing to do with her.

Her unflinching belief to the contrary carried her onward, continuing to follow him until he came upon a footpath leading down to a small bank along the Seine.

Jasper approached the river at a brisk pace, one that made Pandora wonder briefly if he would stop when he hit the water. Then he did pause, an abrupt move that caused him to wobble. His arms shot out to steady himself, and his shoulders slumped, followed by a light sigh of defeat.

"Jasper," Pandora whispered, finding her voice.

His head leaned to the side, the way he might have before she walked away, when he was used to her presence. He swayed slightly, but made no move to turn toward her.

"Jasper," she said more firmly.

Her love's entire frame went rigid. Very slowly he turned, blinking, adjusting to the sight of her. A wave of emotion—shock?—rolled through him, head to toe, as his muscles softened, then tensed again. “Pandora?”

“Jasper,” she said again, her breath escaping into the cool night.

“What on Earth are you doing here?”

“You told me to wait for you by the river,” she said, praying the lightness of her words might put him at ease.

“Ten months ago!”

“There were things I couldn't tell you.” She paused with a soft sigh. “I hoped... fate might bring you to me.”

“Why? Pan, when had I ever, ever given you cause to doubt my ability to handle whatever you dish out? Three years of watching you date jocks and idiots wasn't enough?” No sooner than he said the words did the fire leave him. “I'm sorry.”

Pandora's head dropped, all the cleverness of a moment ago dissolved. “I deserved it.”

“No, darling, you didn't.” Jasper's hand reached out to touch her face and paused in midair. His body shuddered with a heavy sigh, and then slumped. “Oh, Pan. How did we get here?”

“I have a million words for you, but I don't know where to start.”

“Why you left. Start there.”

This wasn't the place for a story of that magnitude. Not with locals and tourists carrying on feet away, from the bridge above.

Pandora reached into her bag. She pulled out the small box, the one with her name etched on top. The one housing all her secrets.

“Here,” she said, reaching it forward. With a hesitant glance, he took the box from her, and as he did, a welcoming electricity passed between them. She saw he felt it, too.

“What’s this?” He turned it over. “The box I gave you. You’re giving it back?”

“All your answers are inside,” she replied, pulling her sweater tighter. What she really wanted was for Jasper to remove his jacket and drape it around her, a gesture of tenderness and security. Claiming her.

“You want me to...” But the words trailed off, because *open Pandora’s box* probably seemed too silly for a moment this heavy.

Pandora nodded. “Please. Inside is a calling card. Send word when you finish... either way.”

She didn’t wait for his assurance, instead turning, not away from him so much as away from the breaking of her heart. Her moment of reckoning had arrived at last.



PANDORA FELL ASLEEP CUDDLING Leander, who snored softly on the bed next to her, both fists over his head. She knew she shouldn’t, but she couldn’t help her craving to feel close to what most-grounded her to reality.

How long would it take Jasper to read through the dozens of letters? If she knew him, he’d be done by night’s end. But he was a man who cherished reflection. Who knew how long he’d need to digest her words.

Pandora’s last images before she slipped into sleep were of Jasper holding their son for the first time.

## CHAPTER NINE



JASPER

PANDORA NEED NOT HAVE worried about Jasper's reaction to the letters. She couldn't have known his heart still belonged to her, still beat for her.

In all his contemplation, he'd never once fathomed a child lie behind her reason for leaving. Never guessed their union had brought forth a life. That Pandora had sought out his father for help and been turned away.

"Let my father disown me. I would never have resented you. How could anyone think I would choose money over my own family?"

"I was afraid," she said.

“I understand. But please believe me when I say you never have reason to be afraid again. I’ll always choose you, Pan. You’ll always be worth waiting for.”

This was how the discussion started as they sat in the parlor of Dr. Archimedes’ townhome. Soon, he would meet his son for the first time, but they had unfinished business first.

“He can’t be trusted,” Jasper said, nodding at the elaborate painting of their shared patron hanging over the marble mantle. The oils made him seem even smarmier, as if it accentuated and surfaced his worst attributes.

Pandora confessed that she’d railed against the doctor upon finding he’d kept the secret of Jasper’s presence in Paris, as a means of keeping her to himself. He’d flown off in a rage to his *atelier*, declaring if she were truly wise she’d shrug off this childhood romance and act like an adult. When he came back, he expected her to accept his proposal.

“I know,” she agreed. “But what do we do now? We were counting on him to help get us started. We’re back to square one.”

“We have all the time in the world,” Jasper told her, and seemed to realize it, now, for the first time. What was the rush?

“What are you suggesting?”

Jasper smiled. He brushed a hand over her soft golden hair, remembering all at once how it felt the first time he’d done it. “We don’t need a patron to attend The Sorbonne.”

“How will we live? They won’t let us take Lee.”

“I’ll work,” Jasper said, a thought that would have sent his father into a pique. “I’ll do whatever it takes.”

“We don’t need him,” she answered, speaking less to him than to herself. “We can do this on our own. We don’t need Archie, or my father, or your father, or anyone else who would get in the way of our dreams.”

Jasper’s heart skipped to see the girl he fell in love with reappear. “We can, Pandora. And we will.”

Pandora sidled up to him, sitting down in his lap. Her arms came around his neck. “Thank you for understanding. For coming to find me.”

“I said I would. And I always will.”



JASPER USED WHAT WAS left of the money he brought with him on a down payment for a small flat along the Champs-Élysées. One room, with only a hot plate and a small fridge for the kitchen, and a bathroom that would have fit in his shower stall at home. He was hired on as a shopkeeper for an antiquary, a job that both paid the bills and helped start a path toward the future he and Pandora dreamed of.

He kept work hours around their schedule at The Sorbonne, where every day his exhaustion spoke to him, telling him it would all be worth the temporary sacrifice. His discomfort rendered insignificant when measured against the size of their dreams.

At nights, he would return to their homely abode and reflect on how it was the simplest things—the way Pandora moved about the flat in a white nightgown, the perfect smiles on his son’s face—that kept his world spinning, day after day.

One day, he and Pandora would change the world.

They would see their dream through, and introduce a blend of magic and science such as New Orleans had never seen.

For now, though, he was perfectly content in this imperfect world of their loving creation.

THE END



Thank you for reading *Pandora’s Box*. The characters in this story are part of the Saga of Crimson & Clover universe,



consisting of multiple series spanning many years and time periods. To continue in this world, or to learn more about it, please visit my website at [www.sarahmcradit.com](http://www.sarahmcradit.com).

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



SARAH IS THE USA Today and International Bestselling Author of over fifty contemporary and epic fantasy stories, and the creator of the Kingdom of the White Sea and Saga of Crimson & Clover universes.

Born a geek, Sarah spends her time crafting rich and multilayered worlds, obsessing over history, playing her retribution paladin (and sometimes destruction warlock), and settling provocative Tolkien debates, such as why the Great Eagles are not Gandalf's personal taxi service. Passionate about travel, she's been to over thirty countries collecting sparks of inspiration, and is always planning her next adventure.

Sarah and her husband live in a beautiful corner of SE Pennsylvania with their four tiny benevolent pug dictators.

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Bayou's Edge: The Landry Triplets

\* \* \*

AS RIVER CHASTAIN

(CO-WRITE WITH ELIZABETH BURGESS)

The Complicated Romantic Life of Romy Delacroix

Silvan

Bastian

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# AMETHYST



SEDONA ASHE

# BLURB



**AMETHYST CRYSTALS BRING HEALING, tranquility, peace and protection... which is exactly what Wynthorn Throne needs. I guess it's a good thing I can create them from thin air.**

I've always felt like an outsider, even among my fae clan. As a girl, I'd sneak into the forest where I formed secret friendships with three Zyltor boys. Our bond was stronger than family, but I was forced to hide my true identity from them. Until one day, my crystalline magic saved one of the young men's life from a deadly curse. Sweet declarations of love and vows to make me their bride rang in my ears as I'd fallen asleep, but I woke to discover I'd been betrayed.

My entire clan had been slaughtered, and for the next seven years, I'd been on the run... only to be captured and presented as a gift to the ruthless king of the Wynthorn Throne. But as I lay crumpled like a broken butterfly at the king's feet, I was saved by a man I never thought I'd see again:



*One of the young men who'd betrayed me and left me for dead.*

Soon, all three of the men from my past life reappeared, and with them came the truth of what happened that fateful night—and the revelation that *for better or worse, and until death do us part*, my magic had unknowingly bound the three men to me in a way that couldn't be undone. Yet, as we unraveled secrets and faced difficult challenges, I realized our destiny may be far greater than any of us ever imagined.

# CHAPTER ONE



## AMETHYST

I SAT ON THE fallen log that had become my meeting spot with the three young men who'd become my friends over the past five years. We'd met the day after the last darkness had enveloped our world, Zyltoria. It had also been my twelfth birthday.

Our twin suns meant our world was always bathed in light, except once every six years when two of our largest moons' orbits caused them to align with the path of our suns, causing complete darkness for a full day.

It had been during one of these darknesses that I'd opened my eyes and breathed in my first shaky breath. I was the first

of my clan to begin life in the dark, and it had marked me as different, and that's how I'd been treated.

My fae clan wasn't unkind to me. It was quite the opposite. I'd receive shy smiles from the other fae my age, but it was as though no one dared to stay around me too long. Even the elder fae limited the length of my study sessions with the various instructors.

The tutors who taught me were kind, going out of their way to bring me additional books, or edible treats and intricate trinkets. But they were careful to keep me at arm's length. I was raised by the clan, without parents, but even with the community viewing me as theirs, I didn't feel as though anyone loved me or knew me.

I sighed, stroking my finger across a vine curling its way around my legs. "How strange that I can be treated with such kindness, and yet feel completely outcast at the same time."

The vine hummed in response to my emotions rather than my words. I watched as a delicate glass flower bloomed, each petal catching the light from the sun as it unfurled. Once finished, the vine pressed the flower against my palm. A gift.

"Thank you, sweet friend," I whispered, taking the offered flower.

The fauna of Zyltoria might not have had the ability to communicate through words, but that didn't stop it from expressing itself through actions. I couldn't help but think the world would be simpler if we all had to communicate through our actions alone. It certainly would be easier to see past the flowery speeches meant to distract from the true intent of the heart.

Something rustled to my left, and I turned, smiling as the three boys tumbled out from the star-covered bushes and into our private meadow. Rushing to greet them, I wrapped my arm around Elyon's waist, laughing as I brushed away the pink stardust that clung to his linen shirt.

"How are you feeling, Elyon?" My heart ached as I took in the dark, bruise-like smudges under his sky-green eyes.

Over the past five years, I'd watched as he steadily lost weight until his body, which should have been powerful, was weaker than my petite frame. His steps as we moved toward the fallen log were slow, and although he tried to hide it, I felt his body shudder with pain as he moved.

"I'm feeling exceptional, Ame." Elyon gave me a dazzling grin. "In fact, I'm thinking of training for the Dark Games next year."

I rolled my eyes at his jokes, but glanced behind him to find Ramul and Thazul's grim expressions. Elyon and Ramul were twins, and would celebrate their eighteenth birthday in one month's time. Thazul was their best friend, and had been born only a few days before me.

"It is time for the truth, brother." Ramul's shoulders sagged as though he carried the weight of the violet sea upon them. "She deserves to hear it from your lips."

"Hear what?" I asked, settling Elyon down onto the fallen log and looking between the three faces.

Elyon's blonde hair hung limp around his face. His features would have given him a sculpted, elegant appearance, but the weight loss caused them to become far too sharp.

"It can wait until we are ready to leave. There is no reason to spoil our visit as soon as we arrive," Elyon snapped.

My eyes widened. I'd never heard Elyon raise his voice, and it had every warning system in my body clanging in alarm.

"Brother, it is only fair you tell her and give her time to adjust before we leave," Ramul pressed.

"If I must." Elyon sighed and sagged forward, resting his forearms on his thighs. "Truthfully, I'm not doing well, Ame."

Swallowing the lump in my throat, I whispered, "I know. But you will heal with time, right?"

There was a long silence, then Elyon shook his head. "No. I'm dying. The healers and doctors have tried every known herbal and magic treatment on Zyltoria and they have all failed."

Tears streamed down my cheeks and I clutched at his hands. “There has to be something else they can try! There has to be!”

“I wish there was.” Elyon turned to look at me, his beautiful eyes shining with unshed tears. “I hoped to convince you to become my bride. But I have fought this for a long time, and I’m tired. Yesterday, the doctors packed their equipment. They advised me to say my goodbyes and enjoy my last few days among the living.”

Elyon had teased me from the first day the boys had stumbled on me reading in my meadow sanctuary that he was going to claim me as his bride. It always turned into a playful argument as Ramul and Thazul joked about how they planned to marry me as well, and each would take turns declaring why they would be the best candidate. We were kids, and it was all in good fun. But looking into Elyon’s eyes, I realized for the first time he was serious. He truly had planned to make me his.

But that could never happen because he didn’t know the truth of what I was.

Since the moment we’d met, I’d kept my true form hidden behind a powerful illusion to protect my clan and myself.

Fae were free to come and go as they pleased on Zyltoria, but some Zyltor Thrones and their leaders had grown greedy, caring only for their wealth and status among the Thrones. In the past three decades, two fae clans had completely disappeared from the face of Zylotria. It was as though they’d turned to dust and had been blown away by the wind. This left most of the remaining clans wary and watchful. Some chose to uproot their lives and travel to reside under the protection of fae-tolerant Thrones, but others refused to leave their land.

My clan had been one that refused to leave, and had chosen to hide themselves away from the Zyltors. We only traveled to the cities when we ran out of supplies. During those trips, we were cautious, and stayed behind our illusions, not willing to risk the Zyltor guards following us back to the caves that served as our homes. That meant the excursions had to be

swift, as the illusions took a large amount of magic and were difficult for a fae to hold for more than a few hours at a time.

*Except for me.*

I could hold my illusion for a full day before I felt the fatigue that came from expending so much energy.

What would these guys, who I'd grown so close to, think if they knew the truth?

I leaned my head against Elyon's shoulder, fighting an internal battle.

There was a chance I could heal him, but I'd prayed the Zyltor doctors would find a way to do it, so I wouldn't have to risk revealing my true identity. I could live with it if they were disgusted by my true appearance and never wanted to see me again, but I couldn't live with myself if it drew the attention of the Throne to my clan.

But was allowing Elyon to die when I could have saved him something I could live with?

That question was simple to answer.

I reached up to brush away a streak of stardust that clung to Elyon's cheek. "Do you trust me?"

"Of course," Elyon answered without hesitation.

"Come to the water with me." I stood, holding out my hand to him.

Elyon shook his head. "I'd love to, but I'm too weak to swim, Ame. It was almost impossible to make the trek here today, but I had to see you one last time."

I looked to Rumlar and Thazul. "Can you two help him?"

Their eyes filled with curiosity, and they quickly stood, helping Elyon make his way into the pond. The purple water was only waist-deep on Elyon, but I was so short, it covered my shoulders. Once they were sure he was stable, Rumlar and Thazul sat on the edge of the shimmering pool behind Elyon, their feet dangling in the water.

Closing my eyes, I sent another surge of magic to my illusion, then recalled every healing lesson I'd been taught. Focusing on the skin of his hands pressing against mine, I called my magic and let it ripple into him. It weaved its way through the veins and organs, searching for the decay of disease.

All the while, I kept feeding magic to my illusion, hoping it would hold up long enough for me to heal Elyon and for the guys to leave. Then I could return to the caves to recover my energy among the crystals.

It didn't take long for my magic to find the inky blot that spread between his organs and leaked into his blood. I bit my lip, realizing this wasn't an illness caused by faulty DNA or exposure to a virus.

No, this reeked of cursed magic. Someone had wanted him to die, and had used powerful magic to accomplish it.

There was no way any doctor on the planet could heal him, since very few Zyltors possessed magic, and none possessed powerful magic like what was needed to heal Elyon.

To do that, you'd need a pure magic. Like the amethyst magic that glowed in my crystalline heart.

Lifting my eyelids, I searched the aqua depths of Elyon's eyes. "I can heal you, but you have to open yourself to me completely."

Elyon didn't ask questions or even speak; he only nodded.

Refocusing on my magic, I envisioned the damage the living, pulsing stain had done to his body. The pool was fed by an underwater spring that ran through the amethyst cave system. The water helped to amplify my magic, and the cool water kept my temperature from rising to dangerous levels.

Even so, it took several hours to remove the curse and repair the damage. I finally forced my eyelids open, blinking furiously thanks to the sweat dripping from my forehead, only to find the world was tilting back and forth.

I couldn't pass out. Not until they left and I was free to let my illusion drop.

But despite my determination, my ears warmed and my breath started coming faster and faster. My knees buckled, and I toppled forward.

“Catch her!” Rumlar’s shout was followed by two splashes as both he and Thazul jumped in to save me.

Before they could reach me, a strong pair of arms wrapped around me. “Easy. I’ve got you.” Elyon pulled me against his chest, steadying me.

“How do you feel?” I tried to ask, but my voice was so hoarse I wasn’t sure he heard me.

“Better than I’ve ever felt.” Elyon hooked his long finger under my chin.

He tilted my chin up, and I sucked in a gasp. He was gorgeous. Don’t get me wrong, Elyon had always been handsome, but he’d been ill as long as I’d known him and it had robbed him of his strength and vitality.

I stared open-mouthed at the changes. Instead of sickly gray, his skin was a golden tan that seemed to glow in the bright rays of our suns. Elyon’s muscles had filled in, his chest had broadened, and he stood tall without the stoop I’d grown so used to. The shoulder-length hair that had hung limp and dull just a few hours ago now appeared glossy, and glittering strands of gold seemed to highlight his thick mane.

Behind him, Rumlar too, stared gaping at his twin, but Thazul’s attention was firmly fixed on me. His brow furrowed, and an unreadable expression flitted across his face.

“You know what the best part of this is?” Elyon asked, his eyes dancing with excitement.

“What?” I whispered, still trying to keep my illusion in place while struggling not to pass out.

I’d used far too much magic. It would have been wiser to heal him over several sessions rather than all at once, but I didn’t regret my decision. Not at all.

“Now that I’m not going anywhere, when the time is right, will you be my bride?” His long, golden eyelashes swept over



his eyes, and I found myself mesmerized.

“Well?” he prodded when I didn’t speak.

I was too tired to even think of all the reasons it could never work. And I was so relieved to see him healthy that for once, I just wanted to pretend this was a storybook romance with a happy ending.

“Hey! You can’t just keep her all to yourself!” Thazul protested, wading closer until he was nearly pressed against my right side. He tucked a piece of my magenta hair behind my ear.

Not to be left out, Rumlar moved to my left side, trapping me between the three bodies.

“Either we all get a chance to court her, or we ask her to take us as a group,” Rumlar growled.

“Take all three of you?” I yelped.

No one I knew of on Zyltoria, fae or Zyltor, had more than one life partner. Some chose to never tie themselves to one partner so they could enjoy spending time with different companions. Binding yourself to a partner was sacred, and once it was done, it was for life, and betraying them was unheard of.

“Why not?” Thazul shrugged, staring down at me with his aquamarine eyes. “If that’s the only way I can have you, I’ll learn to share.”

“You guys are ridiculous!” I laughed, then wobbled as the world tilted wildly.

Elyon’s arm tightened around my waist, bracing me tighter against him. “I don’t care what she decides to do with the two of you. That’s her decision, and I will accept whatever she wishes. But if you agree to be mine, I give you my word. Nothing will stop me from making you mine.” His thumb brushed my cheek. “I love you, Ame. I’ve loved you for years.”

I longed for that to be enough to overcome the obstacles that lay between us. But he was healthy now and could spend his

days with other young men, riding horses, hunting, and practicing sports.

It was only a matter of time until all three guys found beautiful girls among the Wynhorn Throne's citizens. When that happened, they would stop coming to see the strange girl who spent most of her days in a hard-to-reach alcove deep in the woods.

So what harm was there in pretending for one afternoon that they were mine?

"I accept all three of you." My cheeks burned with embarrassment at the admission, worried they would think I was greedy. Still, I pushed on. "I love each of you more than you know."

"You agree to be my bride?" Elyon clarified.

"And my bride?" Rumlar grinned at me.

Thazul's eyes were serious, as though he were looking through my illusion and straight into my soul. "And you claim the three of us as your husbands?"

Feeling light and happy, I giggled. "Yes! I want you three as my husbands and I want nothing more than to be your bride!"

The guys whooped and Elyon spun me in his arms, water splashing around us. "You guys heard it! She's ours!"

"You three are going to forget all about this by the time you wake tomorrow," I teased.

Elyon's face grew serious. "You're wrong. I give you my word in front of our suns Cinope and Astrov; I will wed you in front of the world the day you turn eighteen. You are mine—"

"Ours!" Rumlar cut in.

"Fine. Ours." Elyon rolled his eyes. "You have been claimed, beautiful Ame."

His lips brushed my forehead, and Rumlar and Thazul leaned in to kiss my cheeks. Wedged between them, I closed my eyes, enjoying the warm breeze that drifted through the tiny meadow. It carried the scent of plum flowers and glass

vines, and I wondered if there ever had been such a perfect moment in my life.

Lifting me in his arms, Elyon carried me out of the pool. “I still don’t know how you did it,” he murmured.

Among the Zyltors, there were those who could wield magic, just not to the level of the crystalline fae. I hated to lie, but claiming to be a talented Zyltor seemed like the best excuse.

“I was born gifted with magic, and I’ve taken an interest in healing. Please don’t tell anyone, okay?” My gaze bounced between the boys as I pleaded with them to keep my secret. “If anyone finds out, they’ll force me to leave my family and join a medical school. My family needs me, so that can’t happen!”

It was a half-truth. Talented Zyltors were forced into schools to hone their skills to later serve the Throne. But if the guards came for me, it would reveal not only my own identity but my clan’s existence if I were captured.

“We’ll keep your secret. You don’t need to worry about that.” Elyon was solemn.

Rumlar grinned. “Yeah! Why would we want to risk someone taking you away from us?”

Again Thazul watched me with an odd expression, but bowed his head in agreement. “I’ll tell no one.”

For nearly an hour, we lay on the grass, not speaking but just enjoying the comfort of each other’s presence.

Finally, Elyon sighed with regret. “We need to go before a search party is sent out for us. But we will be back tomorrow morning.”

“You can count on it.” Rumlar winked and tugged a strand of my hair.

“Get some rest, Ame.” Thazul leaned over and kissed my cheek. “You are amazing.”

I watched the boys leave through the star bushes, feeling tired but content.

“See you tomorrow, Ame!” Elyon called before disappearing from sight.

Except he wouldn't. Because when tomorrow came, my entire world would be in ruins, and it would be as though I'd never existed.

# CHAPTER TWO



THAZUL

*Seven Years Later*

IT WAS A DAY before the dark arrived, and the festival was in full swing. Dukes and lords from the further reaches of Wynhorn Throne, along with visiting royalty from neighboring Thrones, poured into the city, eager to celebrate and watch the Dark Games.

I hated everything about it. The noise, the chaos, and the expectations that were forced on members of the court. If I'd been given a choice, I would have traveled far outside the city gates and waited for the festivities to be over before returning.

Instead, I was forced to stand in the crown room and look interested as Wynhorn's king drank far too much. His speech was slurred as he accepted the greeting and gifts of members of the Throne and visitors, and more than once, I had to push him back into his seat so he didn't fall on his face. He was a disgrace to the royal bloodline.

I'd been fighting the urge to fake an illness so I could escape until the doors opened, and the captain of the guards strutted down the star flower-covered floor that led to where the king sat. With each step he took, the captain yanked a long chain, dragging a woman behind him.

I pushed away from the wall, no longer breathing as I took in the tangled magenta hair that covered her face and tangled in her antlers. Pale purple wings dropped behind her, and my stomach churned as I caught sight of the battered and torn edges.

Clenching my jaw, I fought the anger boiling up inside me like lava. Had the arrogant guard caused this damage to her wings?

"Well, what do we have here?" the king slurred, leaning forward and sloshing some of his wine onto the floor.

"A gift for you, My King." The captain kneeled, then stood and yanked the chains hard.

The woman tumbled forward, landing on her hands and knees at the foot of the throne.

"Where did you find this one?" The king sipped his wine and stretched one of her wings to look at it. "She's a little damaged, but the best one I've seen in a while."

I wanted to vomit as the king continued speaking about her and touching her as though she were a piece of furniture or a pet kostadillo.

"I got a tip from an informant that there was a fae in the mountains. It took considerable effort, but I tracked her down for you." The guard stepped forward and grabbed one of her antlers, yanking her head back with far too much force. "She

needs to be cleaned up, but she's a pretty one, sire. A nice decoration for your bedchamber, perhaps?"

The world around me faded away, and his words sounded as though they were coming from beneath the water.

*Ame.*

*She's not dead.*

Her eyes stayed fixed on the king, and she hadn't noticed me, which was good since I needed time to process my shock.

The king laughed, his glass tilting and the wine splashing to the floor. "The queen would mount my manhood on the wall if she discovered a female in my room. Even if I promised to look and not touch."

"My wife is the same about playthings; otherwise, I might've been tempted to keep her." The guard laughed. "Although, imagine her in a cage in your courtyard! She would make quite a showpiece for visitors to admire."

"I planned to join the table games tonight. She'd be worth a lot of dragon scales for betting." The king held his glass out for a servant to refill. "Although, I've heard rumors the nobles from the Glacier Throne have unusual tastes in the bedroom. If we had the maids clean her up, she might earn me goodwill with their king. Especially since I'm working to convince him to send me one of his daughters for a royal wedding with my son."

I couldn't take any more of their degrading talk. If I waited any longer, I was liable to unsheathe my swords and cause heads to start rolling.

Stepping forward, I swallowed my hatred of the king and bowed in respect. "King, I would like to make an offer for this fae."

The king chuckled. "Thazul, my boy! Why would you want her?"

The guard laughed. "Unlike us, he doesn't have a bride to limit his fun. Can't blame the boy for wanting some entertainment."

“Good point.” The king leaned back on the throne. “All right, I’m listening. What would you offer for her?”

I glanced down at Ame, and my heart shattered as I saw nothing but pure hatred glinting in the depths of her beautiful purple eyes.

Ignoring her obvious anger, I focused on the king. “I’ll offer you Stibik, my dragoteax.”

The king’s eyes widened, and I watched him struggle to hide his glee. “Are you sure? That beast is considered a thing of legend in Wynhorn. It seems an unfair trade for you to only get this broken insect in exchange for a dragoteax of his caliber.”

The king had tried to buy my mount for three years, but I’d always refused his offers. Once Stibik began breeding and his offspring proved to have his same wingspan and strength, the king had practically salivated at the idea of owning him.

I knew this was an offer the king could not refuse.

He would give me Ame.

“I am sure, Your Majesty.” I bowed my head again to keep him from seeing the disdain on my face.

“Then take her away.” The king waved his fingers, dismissing me from his presence. “You can have Stibik sent to me after the Dark Games are over, once the light touches the ground again.”

I stood and turned to the guard.

He handed me the chains with a smirk. “Have fun, boy.”

It took every ounce of control I had not to pull out my sword and skewer him. I knew I could slice through his heart before he even knew I’d drawn my blade, but I refrained, knowing it would not help Ame.

I could find a way to arrange the captain’s death later.

Not caring what anyone thought, I lifted Ame in my arms and strode out of the throne room with the jeers and whistles of the drunken royal court echoing in my ears.



As I walked through the grand archway, I passed Rumlar, who was just coming into the crown room. He took one look at the woman in my arms and stopped mid-step, becoming as motionless as a glass statue.

I would talk to him later. Right now, the trembling woman in my arms was my priority.



AME REMAINED SILENT UNTIL we reached my chambers. Then she finally spoke, her voice hoarse. “You’ve changed.”

I headed straight to my private bathing pool. “How so?”

“The boy I knew in the meadow would never barter for a sexual pet.”

“That’s not what you are to me.”

Despite her trembling body, a flash of spunk glowed in her eyes. “I won’t fall for your lies a second time. You just traded your prized beast for me, and you will expect to be repaid for that.”

The castle’s bathing pools were fed by hot springs below the castle, so I didn’t have to worry about her becoming ill from catching a chill.

Bending, I lowered her gently into the swirling warm water. “I want nothing from you except for what you are willing to give me.”

“What? And you plan to have me see to your needs and warm your bed until you take a wife from the royal court? Then what happens to me? You’ll discard me or barter me off like a pair of used sandals.”

This didn’t seem like a good time to tell her the truth. Kneeling, I broke the chains from around her bruised wrists. Ame’s mouth formed an O.

“You didn’t need a key.” She breathed in shock.

“Yeah. I’m a bit stronger since the last time we met.” Grabbing a bar of lilac-scented soap and a plush towel, I sat them by the edge of the pool. “I’m going to leave and give you privacy.”

Without saying another word, I strode back into the bedroom. My chambers had an open design, so there was no door between the bedroom and the bathroom. I headed to the kitchen area. It was at an angle from the bathing pool and would allow her some privacy.

I began gathering various fruits, nuts, and thinly sliced meats. She was far too thin, and I wondered when she’d eaten. Lifting the lid on the ice-filled chest, I pulled out a glass bottle of cold water that had been infused with the berries of the Lili tree. I hoped the nutrients in the water would help restore the vitamins she had lost due to malnutrition.

Task finished, I sat down on a stool and waited for her to reappear or to call for me. Ten minutes passed, then twenty, then thirty, without a sound from her.

“Ame?” I called.

When there was no answer, I headed toward the bathing area to check on her. There was no way she could’ve escaped, but what if she’d passed out and drowned?

As I turned the corner and caught sight of her, my heart ripped in two. She’d rested her arms on the side of the pool. Her head rested on her crossed arms, and her shoulders shook in silent sobs.

What had she gone through? It had been seven years since I’d last seen her, and it was clear she hadn’t had it easy. I didn’t even know where to begin to help her.

“Ame?” I kept my voice as soothing as possible, walking across the black stone floor to her side.

Her only response was to cry harder. Not bothering to undress, I lowered myself into the pool and pulled her into my arms. To my surprise, she didn’t fight me, but she didn’t completely relax either.

“What can I do? Tell me what you need,” I pleaded as I stroked her back.

“Stop acting like you care,” she cried, refusing to look at me.

A spark of anger flared in my belly. “But I do care, and I don’t know why you think I wouldn’t. You left us without even a goodbye. We visited our hideaway every day for endless moons, but you were gone.”

That got a reaction.

Ame reeled back, her eyes blazing with violet fury. “How dare you! I healed Elyon, and you three promised to keep my secret. Yet the moment you left, you told the king’s guards where to find me and my people! I barely survived the raid.”

My mouth gaped, and my mind whirled, trying to figure out what she was talking about. “What?”

“Don’t act innocent! My people were slaughtered because you couldn’t keep a promise,” Ame spat.

She tried to push away from me and scramble from the pool, but I held onto her.

“Ame, listen to me!” Catching her chin with one hand, I turned her face so she could see my eyes. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. We never said a word. I don’t know how they found you. We were serious in that pool about you being our bride. We would never have risked you being taken from your home.”

Her eyes still glowed with rage, but her brow creased in confusion as she tried to sort out the truth.

“Rumlar and Elyon searched every medical school for you, worried you’d been taken by force,” I added, hoping to help her see the truth.

Her eyes sharpened. “Why didn’t you help them search for me?”

“Because I knew you weren’t there.” I hesitated, worried that my honesty would make me appear guiltier. “I knew what you were. Your illusion wavered.”

“So why should I believe that you didn’t tell the soldiers where to find me and draw them a map straight to the entrance of my home?” Her words were heavy with heartache.

“Ame, that wasn’t the first time I’d seen through your illusion. I’d caught odd glimpses through it for many moons, and I was fairly confident you were fae. That was before your illusion wavered in the pool and showed me your true form. Why would I have waited so long to reveal the truth?”

Looking away from me, she chewed her lip. “If you knew I wasn’t a Zyltor, why did you join in when Elyon and Rumlar swore to make me their bride if you knew the truth?”

Reaching out, I ran my fingers over her cheek and down her neck, waiting for Ame to look at me before I answered.

Finally, she turned her large violet eyes toward me, and I saw the rage had vanished, leaving only exhaustion and pain in its wake. “Why would you play with my heart?”

“Because I wasn’t lying. Fae, Zyltor, your species didn’t matter to me. I claimed you as my bride because I wanted you.” Pressing my palm against her cheek, I prayed she would believe me. “I knew nothing about your people being attacked. We didn’t even know where you lived. But I swear to you, under Cinope and Astrov, I will find out what happened and punish anyone who took part in raiding your home.”

Ame searched my face, looking for any signs of dishonesty. She wouldn’t find it. I’d known nothing about the attack, but I would make it my life’s mission to uncover what had happened.

“Thank you, Thazul,” she whispered, all the fight leaving her body as she relaxed against me.

Glancing down at the faraway look in her eyes and the fatigue written on her face, I wanted nothing more than to take care of her. Dirt smudged every inch of visible skin, and leaves were tangled into her hair.

“I’m going to clean you up, okay?” When she nodded, I sat down on one of the submerged ledges.

Deciding it would be best to work with her hair first to give her time to be comfortable with my touch. I turned her on my lap so that she faced away from me, then guided her onto her back so that she was floating and I could wet her hair. Once that was finished, I settled her on my lap and grabbed the bar of shampoo to lather her hair.

I took my time working the soap through the long, tangled mess. Several strands were wrapped around her antlers, and I carefully freed them. It was almost thirty minutes before I leaned her back to rinse away the soap and the last of the leaves.

Wanting to make sure she was comfortable and didn't feel as though I was trying to take advantage of the situation, I kept her facing away from me as I moved to wash her body. Ame's simple dress had been tied over one shoulder to keep it up, and with trembling hands, I undid the knot and let the dress fall around her waist.

I lathered up one of the pink sea sponges and washed her shoulders and down her back. She was so thin that I found myself counting her ribs and fighting the lump of emotion that threatened to choke me.

What had she gone through? Fae hadn't been seen on Wynhorn Throne lands for over two decades, but clearly, they'd still been living here. But it had been seven years since the night Ame's clan was raided, so she'd been alone for a long time.

When every inch of skin I could see was clean, I hesitated, eyeing her wings. I knew very little about fae, so I had no idea how to best wash away the mud that was caked on them.

Clearing my throat, I said, "Ame? I've never washed wings before."

# CHAPTER THREE



## AMETHYST

I'D NEARLY FALLEN ASLEEP while Thazul's fingers ran through my hair. It was the first time I'd experienced touch from someone else in five years.

Thazul worked the tangled hair from around my protruding antlers and washed around my wings, but he avoided touching either of them. My gut twisted in fresh disappointment. Despite his claim that he'd known what I was, it seemed he was put off by the differences in our species.

"Ame? I've never washed wings before." I was surprised to hear that Thazul sounded unsure and shy, not disgusted.

“I wash my wings with soap and my hands.” My dry mouth made the words come out hoarse.

“That’s easy enough.” He shifted his weight to get the soap, and a moment later, his hands gently traveled down my wing.

Sensation sizzled through my butterfly-like wings, and I gasped in surprise.

Thazul froze. “Did I hurt you? I’m so sorry!”

“No, it’s not that.” I breathed. “I’ve never had anyone touch my wings. It was... unexpected.”

Unconvinced, he remained motionless. “Bad unexpected?”

“The good kind.” I was thankful to be facing away from him so he couldn’t see the glittering purple freckles that spread like stardust across my cheeks when I blushed. “It was... really nice.”

Thazul’s hand brushed against my wing, and I bit my lip to keep from gasping again. When I didn’t cry out, he went back to gently loosening the dirt. My wings fluttered and twitched, unable to behave while his fingertips were lavishing so much attention on them.

Why hadn’t my clan warned me about the effect of having someone touch my wings?

“I think they’re clean,” Thazul murmured, his voice reassuring and gentle.

It was a good thing, too, since the pleasurable sensations had moved from my wings into my body, and I was barely able to keep myself from squirming.

Shifting positions, I straddled his lap and faced him. It took far more energy than I’d expected, thanks to my body feeling like it was filled with stones.

How long had it been since I’d eaten? Three days? Four?

I could go far longer without food, but it was my soul that was weakening, and there was nothing I could do about it—not without risking my life.

We stared at each other, neither of us moving for a long moment. Then, Thazul picked up the sponge and brushed one of my antlers.

I sighed in pleasure, both from the sensation of having my antlers touched but also from being cared for. It was something I hadn't experienced since I was a child. My clan wasn't cold, but they weren't touchy-feely either. They valued and encouraged independence.

Thazul finished with my antlers, never once showing a flicker of distaste. Next, he gently removed the grime from my face. I knew I should've fought his touch and pushed for more answers, but I was beyond tired.

Fae were strong, refusing to rely on other species, yet here I was, showing him my weakness. He'd traded a valuable breeding mount for me... something I wasn't sure if I should be flattered or angry about.

The sponge moved down my neck and over my shoulders, and then he held out the sponge to me. "I think you'd feel more comfortable if you did the rest of your torso yourself."

Taking the sponge, I swiped at my skin, my arms trembling as I tried to scrub at the thick layer of dirt on my skin. Thazul's hand rested over mine, and he began guiding my hand over my breasts and stomach. All the while, his eyes remained on my face, trying to give me a semblance of privacy. Somehow, it only added to the intimacy of the moment.

Wrapping an arm around my waist, he twisted around. He sat me on the ledge of the pool and stood between my legs. My dress hung limp around my waist, and Thazul lifted the hem to rest on my upper thighs.

Dipping the sponge in the water, he added more soap. Thazul continued to take his time, washing down my legs, one at a time.

My fingers turned white on the stone ledge as I grew increasingly exhausted and fought to stay upright. I'd been captured three days before, and the captain of the guard had treated his steed with more care than he'd given me.



I snapped out of my half-stupor when Thazul finished washing my right foot and pressed a kiss to the top. He clearly held a high position in the Wynhorn Throne, and a man of his stature wouldn't kiss the foot of anyone beneath him. Let alone a lowly fae.

He sat the sponge on the side of the pool next to me. "I'm going to prepare the bed for you. You can rinse off and wrap up in this towel."

Standing, he headed back into the main area. I did the best I could to finish washing, but it was difficult, and I found myself winded just from the simplest of tasks. By the time Thazul returned, I was wrapped in the fluffy towel and completely drained.

"Let me help you to the bed." Thazul held out his hand, lifting me to my feet and helping me walk onto the dry stone.

I made it two small steps before my legs wobbled.

"Whoa." Thazul scooped me into his arms and carried me to the bed.

Settling my back against the headboard, he tucked several thick blankets around me.

Then he sat a tray filled with various snacks in front of me and twisted the cap off a bottle of water. "Here. You are dehydrated."

I drank, then picked at the food. It was delicious, but all I could think about was closing my eyes and sleeping. I'd never been so tired in my life.

"Could we save the food for when I wake up?" I pleaded.

Thazul eyed the little I'd managed to eat but nodded. "Yes. You can nap, but then you need to eat more."

He moved the tray to the kitchen, then returned to settle me under the covers. "If you need me, just call out for me."

Panicked, I grabbed his hand. "Please don't leave me!"

"I'm not. I'll never leave you again." Thazul bent to kiss my forehead. "I'm going to sleep on the lounge chair to give you

space.”

“Please sleep here. I want you to hold me.” Tears blurred my eyes, but I didn’t care how desperate he thought I was. I had been alone for too long. “Please.”

Thazul nodded. “Let me change into dry pants.”

A moment later, he returned and crawled into bed, pulling me into the heat of his bare chest. “Now sleep, little fae. You’re safe.”

My stress faded as warm comfort poured into my body. How odd. Amethysts were supposed to provide stress relief and comfort, yet he was the one providing that for me.



“THAZUL!” AN ANGRY VOICE boomed, slamming open the door.

I moved to sit up and face whatever danger was heading my way, but Thazul’s arm tightened around my waist. “Be still.”

“Thazul! You arrogant son of a dung-eating slug!” Heavy boots moved toward the bed, but still, Thazul’s breathing remained even and unbothered.

“Shut up, imbecile. I’m trying to sleep,” he grumbled.

“Where is she?”

Thazul’s arm pulled me deeper beneath the blanket. “Who? Your mother?”

“You know good and well who I’m talking about! It took me several minutes to realize who you were carrying out of there. Why didn’t you call for us?”

Thazul snorted. “Because you were not my concern, and he is not even in town.”

“We had a pact! Now, where did you hide her?” the angry intruder demanded.

Thazul's breathing remained calm, but his arm continued to grow tighter around me like a python slowly constricting its prey. It was a sign that part of him was worried about the new male stealing me away.

"Is she in your bed?" The man's voice had dropped to a dangerous pitch. "I swear to the moons if you—"

The blankets were ripped away, and my gaze locked with an all too familiar man. He'd changed, but I could still see signs of the childish young man I'd once been best friends with. Rumlar.

His eyes traveled down my body, and his breathing grew harsh as he realized my skin was bare. Or was it my wings that had him looking so furious?

"You've already bedded her? She's clearly been through so much, and your first thought was that you needed to wet your wick?" Rumlar launched himself at Thazul.

Thazul released me, grabbing Rumlar in mid-air. Their momentum sent them both tumbling off the bed and onto the stone floor.

"Does your word mean nothing, brother?" Rumlar snapped, calling Thazul by the endearment he'd used when they were children.

"I have not dishonored her or our agreement. Are you so blinded by your fury you didn't notice I am still clothed? Stop acting like a rampaging boar, and we can speak like adults." Thazul pinned Rumlar.

A knife appeared in his hand, and he held it to the newcomer's throat. After a long silence, Rumlar nodded, and Thazul sheathed his knife and stood. The men grabbed each other's forearms in a firm shake, then turned their attention to me.

Embarrassed at their gazes, I pulled the blankets up to cover my nakedness.

Rumlar sat down on the edge of the bed nearest me. His blonde hair fell over his face as he bowed his head. "I'm so stupid for never realizing."

“That doesn’t mean you’re stupid. It means my illusion was working well.” I smiled.

Rumlar lifted his head. “Why didn’t you tell us?”

There was no anger or resentment, only curiosity and a hint of hurt in his shimmering green eyes. He truly hadn’t known I was fae, so he couldn’t have been the one to tell the soldiers the location of my clan.

Some of the bitterness I’d carried for the past five years bled away. I’d lost my clan and my home, and I’d believed my three closest companions that day. But I could see Thazul and Rumlar hadn’t betrayed me. I hadn’t lost everything.

Rumlar reached out to stroke my wing, but his fingertips paused a millimeter from it. “May I touch you?”

I nodded, spreading my wing a bit toward him until it brushed his hand.

A look of awe crossed Rumlar’s face as he gently brushed my wing. His eyes moved over my antlers, and he leaned forward, fingers touching the point at the end of my elongated ear. “You are so beautiful in this form.”

“Fae aren’t exactly treated as equals in this kingdom, and I couldn’t risk my clan’s safety.” I huffed. “Besides, I enjoyed your company and did not want to risk you guys being disgusted and never speaking to me again.”

The horror on Rumlar’s face was almost amusing. “You can’t be serious? Aye, you know us better than that. You’re our bride!”

That drew a laugh from me. “Are you seriously bringing that up? We were youths when you three asked me to be your bride. That was nothing more than dreams spoken on a warm afternoon between friends.”

Rumlar and Thazul exchanged glances, but I couldn’t discern the meaning.

Thazul shook his head, causing Rumlar to clench his jaw in response. “She needs to know.”

My heart plunged to my stomach. “Know what?”

Rumlar stood and began undoing his belt.

What on earth did he need to take his pants off for? I got my answer when he angled his body to the side and lowered the band of his pants to show me his upper thigh.

I gasped at the tiny pair of purple wings that were tattooed like a brand on his skin. “How? Why?”

“It’s a binding emblem,” Rumlar explained as he buckled his pants.

I shook my head, not recognizing a Zyltor term. “I don’t know what that means.”

Rumlar sat back down on the bed and took my hand. “Don’t freak out, but it’s the mark that is branded on Zyltors’ skin when they wed.”

I tried to yank my hand away, but he wouldn’t release it. “You’re married?”

“Yes. I am.” Reaching out, he pressed his palm to my cheek. “To you.”

My lungs collapsed as though the wind had been knocked from my chest.

“And I’m not the only one.” Rumlar jerked his head toward Thazul, and I woodenly turned to find he’d undone his pants to show me the fae-winged mark on his thigh.

“How... is this possible?” I squeaked, still unable to draw a breath and feeling as though the world was spinning faster and faster.

“Zyltors make their intentions known like we did with you that day in the pool. Then, we go before the magics and repeat our intentions. The magic binds us to our word. It has always been this way with our people.” Rumlar paused, rubbing his jaw.

“Apparently, when we stated our intentions that day, your magic completed the binding.” Thazul settled with his back against the headboard beside me. “It wasn’t until several hours after we left that we discovered the marks and realized the truth.”

*No, no, no.*

My eyes darted between the men's faces, hearing their words but struggling to accept the reality. How was this going to work?

I'd been hoping Thazul would help me escape to a different kingdom where I could have a home among the fae. But looking at Rumlar and Thazul, I wondered if anywhere would feel like home if I were separated from them again.

I loved my clan, but I'd only ever experienced happiness when spending time in the garden with the three boys who'd stolen my heart.

Rumlar cleared his throat, pulling me from my scattered thoughts. "Those weren't just the words of youth in love that day. Those were our wedding vows."

Thazul pulled me onto his lap as though I weighed nothing and tilted my chin up to look at him. "Ame, we're your husbands."

I didn't hear what else was said because my eyes rolled back, and I was sucked into the dark.

# CHAPTER FOUR



## AMETHYST

WHEN I WOKE UP next, the room was dark, and I realized with a start that the day of darkness had arrived.

It should've been terrifying to wake up in a strange place without being able to see where I was, but I felt no fear. How could I when I was sandwiched between two hard, immovable bodies? Honestly, I'd never felt safer.

I was lying on my side, my cheek on Thazul's bare chest, while Rumlar's bare chest was pressed against my tightly tucked wings. Thazul's palm lay on my hip, but Rumlar had wrapped his arm around my waist. I tried to ignore the way his long fingers brushed the underside of my breasts with each breath I took.

Both men had slipped into soft linen pants, but the thin material did little to disguise the feel of their hard lengths burning my skin. I knew little about Zyltor men, or males of any species for that matter, but it was obvious even to me they were aroused.

A bit more of my lingering doubts were banished. They were turned on, rather than disgusted, by my true form.

“You’re awake?” Rumlar’s voice was husky and deep from sleep. It sent a shiver down my spine. “Are you cold, love?” His fingers curled, pulling me tighter against him, accidentally squeezing my breast.

“Oh,” I whimpered, then tried to swallow back the sound.

It was too late.

“Mm,” Thazul growled, woken from sleep. “Are you okay?”

I opened my mouth to reassure him I was fine, but Rumlar chose that moment to rub gentle circles with his thumb... and brush against my nipple. His hand froze, and my breath caught.

Part of my mind was screaming for him to keep going, but the other part was screaming this needed to slow down until we could figure out how to make ‘us’ work.

“Rumlar,” Thazul snarled, his chest vibrating with his displeasure. “We agreed we would wait.” Even as he said the words, his mouth brushed against mine.

“It was an accident,” Rumlar snapped defensively, placing a soft kiss on the back of my neck.

As Thazul’s mouth captured mine in a demanding kiss, Rumlar’s lips placed kisses down my spine and between my wings. I squirmed, overwhelmed by the flood of heat and intimate skin-to-skin touch. Both men groaned, their bodies shaking as my movements caused their hard erections to grind against me.

Rumlar’s thumb stroked the hardened peak of my nipple, and Thazul eagerly swallowed my moans. My hands trailed



over Thazul's chest, tentatively exploring his body. These two definitely weren't the lean boys I'd known in the meadows.

I'm not sure how far things would have gone if the door hadn't flown open again.

"I'm getting a lock," Thazul grunted, even as both men pulled the blanket over my head, hiding me from nosy gazes.

"Thazul? Are you sleeping?" A deep melodic voice I'd recognize anywhere drifted through the darkness.

*Elyon.* I wanted to sit up, but Rumlar's arm locked around me.

"The only time I get to enjoy the sleep that comes with darkness, and you wake me up?" Thazul pushed himself upright, resting his back on the headboard. "Aren't you back early?"

"Yes, because I've learned something my father didn't want us to know. We need to make a plan because I refuse to do nothing." The bed sagged, and I realized Elyon must have sat at the foot of it. "I need to find my brother first. This is going to take all three of us."

"Maybe you should check his room?" Thazul offered, sounding like being helpful was the last thing he wanted to do.

"I did check, but no one has seen him in hours! One maid said she saw him coming here looking upset, so I thought maybe you two were discussing things." Elyon flopped back on the bed.

His skull connected hard with the side of Rumlar's knee, and both men groaned in pain.

Rumlar sat up. "Astrov! Watch where you drop that hard head of yours!"

"Rumlar?!" Elyon shouted. "What are you doing here?"

"I, uh..." Rumlar stammered.

The situation was so ridiculous that I giggled, and then I tried to cover it with my hands.

Elyon's weight disappeared from the bed. "Thazul, have you brought a female to your bed? And you've joined in as well, Rumlar?"

"It's not like that," Thazul snarled, but Elyon ignored him.

"You would betray our bride this way? Her magic bound us as husbands and wife. I'm disgusted. Forget I came to you for help. I'll solve this myself." Elyon's footsteps headed toward the door.

Pushing aside the blanket, I whispered his name. "Elyon."

He held a lantern, its soft glow illuminating his silhouette. Slowly, he turned around to face the bed.

"Ame?" His voice was strangled.

"Yes. It's me."

The lamp clattered to the floor as Elyon rushed to the bed. He crawled up the mattress and plucked me from between Rumlar and Thazul.

"You're alive. I've searched so long for you." Elyon held me on his lap, his hands brushing over my ribs and back as he assured himself I wasn't part of his imagination.

Unfortunately, my body was hypersensitive, thanks to the kisses and heavy petting that had happened not five minutes before. I shivered and bit my lip to keep from moaning. This was not the time to give in to biological needs.

"Ame, you have no idea how much I've missed you." Elyon's words were thick with emotion.

I whimpered when his fingers brushed my wings, and Elyon paused. "Did I hurt you?"

"No." It was all I could manage, thanks to the lust clogging my throat.

His fingers traced the edge of one wing, and I closed my eyes, enjoying the tiny eruptions of pleasure that gentle touch sent through me.

"I don't remember the wings, but I like them," Elyon murmured.

Clearing my throat, I whispered, “I’m a fae.”

“I can see that, my bride. And you are lovely,” Elyon responded, reaching up to touch my antlers in the dark.

“You don’t care?” I gasped when his fingers stroked along one antler.

“Not at all.” Elyon’s hand disappeared, then caught my chin. His lips found mine in the most tender, passionate kiss I could have imagined.

When he finally pulled back, I was struggling to breathe or steady my thundering heartbeat. Why had I thought I could handle three men?

“I need to tell you something as well.” Elyon’s thumb brushed across my bottom lip. “I’m Elyon Wynhorn, Crown Prince of the Wynhorn Throne.”

My stomach plunged to my toes, then lurched up into my throat. “What?”

How could that be? How could I have missed that? Because I’d been so busy hiding my own secrets, I hadn’t thought to look for theirs.

“I’m the firstborn prince—”

“By four minutes!” Rumlar interjected.

“Yes, by four minutes. And that is why I received the Wynhorn curse.” Elyon was trying to explain things, but my mind was spinning out of control.

It was his family’s throne that had slaughtered my clan while I’d been passed out and asleep in the meadow. I would have been trampled or killed had it not been for the glass vines. They’d wrapped me in a cocoon and pulled me beneath the thick star bushes, hiding my unconscious body away from the destruction the soldiers left in their wake.

I’d awakened and sensed the change in the air. Making my way inside the cave, I’d found it dark. The amethyst crystals no longer bathing the path in soft purple light. We were a peaceful clan, and our crystals were for healing. Not for battle.

Blinded by tears, I'd stumbled over the bodies of my fallen clan mates.

Kind fae who hadn't deserved to die.

Unable to see any more death and not sensing even a faint heartbeat, I'd rushed from the caves into my meadow and then out into the heart of the woods. I'd never returned to the place of my birth.

Instead, I'd spent the years hiding alone in the woods. Without the help of the crystals, it had taken me many months to recover my strength from healing Elyon. Still, I'd managed to carve out a life in the heart of the woods.

During a harsh storm, I'd heard the calls of a dying hunter. I'd tried to ignore them, remembering what had happened the last time I gave in to my heart and used my powers. But still, I couldn't ignore him.

It had taken considerable energy, but I'd found the old man's broken body and dragged him to my hideout, where I healed him. We'd formed a sort of friendship after that, and he would bring me meat and needed items from the city.

Which is why when he'd shown up at my door begging me to come save his adult daughter, who was dying from illness, I'd gone without hesitation. I knew he'd protect my secret.

I'd healed his daughter, using every shred of magic in my body, then collapsed. While the hunter celebrated his daughter's second chance at life, his son-in-law had gone to find the captain of the guard. By the time I was able to start my journey into the woods, the captain was upon me, his whip shredding my wings and sending me to the ground in agony.

Now I was staring into the eyes of the man who would one day run the Throne that had caused me nothing but heartache and pain.

I tried to scramble away from him, but Elyon's arms locked around me. "Please let me explain—"

"Let go of her!" Thazul ordered, yanking me out of Elyon's arms. "Can't you see she's frightened?"

“She doesn’t need to be afraid of me!” Elyon’s voice broke. “I didn’t even know amethyst fae resided within Wynhorn Throne’s boundaries. I was taught that the fae left our land before I was born.”

In the faint light of the lantern’s glow, I tried to make out Rumlar’s face. He was Elyon’s twin, making him a prince as well. So what was Thazul that the king allowed his sons to spend so much time with him?

“What about you, Thazul?” I asked, my voice flat.

Thazul’s chest rose and fell with his deep sigh. “A duke. My father was one of the king’s advisers, but he has been dead for several years.”

“My clan was slaughtered the day I healed Elyon by soldiers of the Throne, and you want me to believe none of you knew?” My voice shook, and whatever happiness I’d experienced earlier vanished like a popped bubble.

“That’s what I came to tell Thazul and Rumlar.” Elyon buried his face in his hands. “When I was traveling, I overheard several soldiers talking about a raid that happened around the time I was healed. They mentioned fae, but stopped talking when they realized I was listening.

“So I did some asking around. After some bribes and being passed from person to person, I found someone willing to tell me the story of the raid.” Elyon stood and began to pace. “It was so much worse than I thought. Father sent a guard to follow us the day we traveled to tell you goodbye in the meadow. He thought I would collapse before I returned and wanted to make sure no one saw such weakness from his offspring.”

The bitterness in his voice when he said *father* almost had me reaching out to comfort him. But I needed to hear everything he had to say before I could decide what my next step was... and if I could trust these men. My heart said I could, but hearts weren’t known for being the brains of the operation.

“When we returned to the castle, I was healed, and everyone rejoiced. We stuck to a story about finding a magic token that healed me, but the guard told my father about the meadow he’d spied, and your magic. My father immediately knew what you had to be for you to be powerful enough to heal a curse that has killed the firstborn Wynhorn prince for the past five generations.”

So they hadn’t told anyone, and they’d even risked lying to the king in order to hide my identity. Lying to the king was a crime punishable by death, depending on the king’s mood.

“The king ordered the raid. Not to kill, but to capture.” Elyon rubbed his forehead as though he were fighting a migraine.

“But I saw the bodies. I tripped over them.” My voice cracked as the memories flooded unbidden into my mind.

“Some were killed, but the rest were put in chains. They were taken to a cave system in Wynhorn’s northernmost territory.” Elyon stopped pacing, his eyes locking onto me in the near darkness.

I pushed away from Thazul and flitted to stand in front of Elyon, hardly noticing the pain in my wings as I used them.

“They’re alive? You’re sure?” I clutched the front of his shirt, begging him to tell me the truth.

Elyon’s hands covered my tight fists. “I’m positive. There were so many, Ame. They are alive, but they’ve not been treated well.”

“But why? Father should have celebrated the news that fae still blessed our land with their presence. What could he hope to gain?” Rumlar barely hid his disgust.

Elyon sat heavily on the bed, pulling me down to sit beside him. “Because he’s using them to create crystals. Amethysts heal, and he’s charging exorbitant prices for them. He’s filling the Throne’s vaults with the gold he is making from working the fae.”

“He’s charging for healing?” There was no hiding my horror. “Our gifts are meant to be gifts. It is a dishonor to the

crystals for them to be sold and bartered among the wealthy. The size of someone's purse shouldn't dictate whether they deserve to be healed or helped!"

"I know. I know." Elyon caught my hand and pressed it to his heart. "I swear, I will correct this atrocity that my father has done against you and your clan. Even if it requires bringing a permanent end to the Wynhorn Throne. We will free the fae, and everything my father made from the crystals will be given to your clan, along with land and positions of power within the Throne. That way, they will have a say in how things are run and will never need to worry about this happening again."

"Yes, everything Elyon said will be accomplished." Thazul and Rumlar kneeled on the floor in front of me. "We will burn this Throne to the ground and rebuild a stronger Throne in its place."

"You'll be our queen, but you'll also be Queen of the Amethyst Throne."

"Amethyst Throne?" I asked, confused.

"Yes, my beautiful bride." Elyon pulled me back onto his lap. "It sounds a lot better than Wynhorn, don't you think?"

"I think it sounds great!" Rumlar stroked my wing.

"When do we start?" Thazul asked, his voice deadly calm.

"The roads are blocked for the games. We will leave when the sun touches the earth, and everyone is sleeping off their wine hangovers." Elyon smiled at me. "I have trusted allies sneaking food and blankets to your clan as we speak. They will eat well tonight."

Straddling his lap, I used my knees to lift myself so our faces were level. "Then I have an idea what we could do to pass the next few hours, husbands of mine."

I was glad it was dark because my men spent the rest of the night making me blush as they showed me all the ways their mouths, hands, and bodies could please me. That wasn't the only thing I learned that night, because I also discovered that crystals weren't the only way to recharge my soul. When the

suns' brilliant light banished the darkness for another six years, I was practically glowing.

TO BE CONTINUED



Thank you for reading *Amethyst*. If you want to read the full version of this story, then check out [AMETHYST!](#)



# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



SEDONA ASHE DOESN'T RESERVE her sarcasm for her books; her poor husband can tell you that her wit, humor, and snarky attitude are just part of her daily life. While she loves writing paranormal shifter reverse harem novels, she's a sucker for true love, twisted situations, and wacky humor. Sedona lives in a small town at the base of the Great Smoky Mountains in Tennessee. She and her husband share their home with their three children, adorable pup, pet fox, three kitties, an emu, farm pets, and over a hundred reptiles.

For more exclusive content and other goodies, sign-up for SEDONA ASHE's [newsletter](#) or check out her [website](#).



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# A WEDDING OF CRUELTY AND PEACE



SUKI ROSE

# AUTHOR NOTE



THIS STORY FEATURES DUBCOM as well as acts of violence.

# CHAPTER ONE



DEVIKA

“YOU ARE TO BE married. Tomorrow morning.”

*Silence.*

*What is she talking about?!*

“To whom, my Queen?” I managed to ask numbly as shock started to take hold.

“The Unseelie King.”

My stomach dropped, fear instantly churning in my gut as her words fell like stones in the full throne room. All the courtiers that had filled the throne room quieted in horror at her announcement.

The Unseelie King, one of our most vicious enemies... That's who she was marrying me off to?! He was known for his ruthlessness and cold disregard for his enemies. That question was soon followed by *why me?* I was no noble to be of any use for an alliance.

I stared at my queen in front of me in shock as my legs wobbled slightly before I managed to regain my balance. *She can't be serious.*

As if she could read my thoughts a smile pulled at her lips behind the half golden mask on her face. The ostentatious swirls and details covered the delicate-looking mask, but I knew it was hiding a monster underneath.

The metal covered the top half of her face leaving her amber eyes, ruby lips, and strong chin visible to the public. Her rich chestnut hair was also covered with a veil of gold that perfectly matched her mask, making it seem like liquid gold had been poured on her, spilling down onto a white dress wrapped around her.

Gold highlighted her every curve with detailed flowers perfectly placed to show off her figure. She was frighteningly beautiful and that amusement tugging at her lips at my reaction had cold sweat beading on my clammy skin.

There was no amount of wealth or fancy clothes that could disguise the cold-hearted bitch that the Queen was underneath. If I had been able to survive outside of the human kingdom of Orira then I would have left long ago just to escape those empty amber eyes... Sadly, I never got the chance.

Until now.

I just never thought marriage to the Unseelie King would be my way out of here.

From one hell straight into another.

“Do you have something to say? A complaint perhaps?” Her soft voice filled the room as the others present shifted, their stiff clothing rustling with each movement.

I swallowed hard as I tried to school my visible features. Knowing I was going to be unsuccessful I bowed my head

lower, deepening my curtsy I had maintained this entire time to stare at the floor.

“I am happy to help my people in whatever way you would have of me, my Queen.” My politely cautious answer paired with the respectful curtsy had her laughing at my expense.

“You must have practiced that for it to fall so prettily from your lips, child. But it is a good sentiment to carry forward. Raise your face and look at me.”

At her order I did so and my eyes widened to find her now standing in front of me. A sharp finger under my chin was a silent threat for me to hold her gaze. There was nothing warm or caring in her eyes, just disgust and twisted amusement.

“Everyone get out, I need to talk with our little *healer* alone.”

Fear ran down my spine at the prospect of being alone with this woman. Any time in her presence meant pain. Unimaginable pain. But when she was alone... She made her torturers look like novices. I had wounds from her that I knew I would never heal from and the Queen knew that, too.

The whisper of clothing and murmurings of her court signaled they were following her order. But not once did I dare look away from my queen. After a few minutes the throne room was empty and still she refused to let go. The harsh woman ruled our realm with an iron fist decorated in flowers, and this was nothing more than a power move.

Finally she let my chin drop as she stepped away and trilled, “Stand.”

Moving cautiously, I did as she said and watched as she went back to sit on her throne. It was so odd to see the place empty of courtiers and admirers.

As if she had the same thought she glanced around before letting out an airy sigh, “I know you are wondering why I picked *you* to do this,” She focused her gaze on me, cruel eyes serious. “But you are the only one who is capable of this.”

I licked my lips, nervous, but she seemed to be expecting questions from me so I hazarded one. “What is it you would



have me do, Your Majesty?”

“You are being sent as a princess of this court.” She held up a hand as if to hold off my shock. “For obvious reasons I could not send any of my daughters to that *place*. But you will represent us all and create unity for our two realms.”

Unity? Peace... Something I longed for but coming from her lips I could sense the lie underneath. The queen was nothing but cunning and that meant I was right in the middle of one of her games. *A pawn*. Unless we are of royal standing I guess we are all nothing but pawns in the end as Kings and Queens play war.

“Unity for the two realms? But I’m not—” I asked, my voice cracking with nerves as I felt sweat under my own plain mask start to slide down my cheeks. *What is she planning?*

“Of course not.” The venom in her voice made me shiver and instantly silenced my protests. “No one would believe that. You just have to make *him* believe it until the vows have been said. Once you are bound... the deed is done.”

I twisted my fingers nervously, but stilled them when the movement had her eyes flickering down to my hands.

“You said I was the only one who could do this. What am I to do? My Queen.”

She let it go that I almost forgot her title, though I saw in her eyes that she didn’t miss the near slip.

“Seduce him. Occupy him. Make him fall for you. I don’t care how you distract him. Turn a blind eye to his dalliances. Make. It. Work.” She stood up and started to pace on the dais. “We must win this war. You have to do your duty to your people.”

I couldn’t hide my puzzlement at her words and she let out a twinkling laugh.

“Don’t worry your little healer mind about the intricacies of war, leave it to those more intelligent than yourself. But remember to follow your orders. Fuck him. Make him love you. Or kill him if you ever find that spine of yours. Just

remember where your allegiance truly lies. A challenge for you, I know, but one can hope.”

At that her eyes hardened dangerously and she stalked toward me, haughty as she approached me standing there alone in the pristine white room so out of place.

My hair was a dirty blonde that fell to my mid-back and calloused hands showed evidence of my profession. The olive-green dress I was wearing was a clean, but simple cotton that I wore as a healer for easy clean up. My half mask was a simple white and green, the only detailed ornament on it was the slight swirl on the lower left side that showed I was approved to work with the aristocracy.

She eyed me up and down as she came to a stop in front of me, her gaze calculating and mine nervous under the weight of her full attention. A very dangerous place to be, I knew that from experience.

“Are you understanding what I’m telling you, Devika? Do not fall into the dark ways of that kingdom. If you think you are... I’m sure you know that poison works quickly. You’re better off dead because if you betray us I will find you and death will be the last thing on my mind.”

My stomach twisted in knots but I forced myself to bow my head refusing to let her see what memories her threat conjured up.

“Yes, Your Majesty. I understand.”

And I did.

It was meant as an insult, but regardless, I was a distraction coming veiled in peace. I wondered if I would live past my first steps into their court. *Would I even make it to this farce of a wedding?*

“You’re dismissed. Tomorrow you’ll meet the dressmaker for your new wardrobe and wedding gown. Smile girl, you’re getting married and leaving to go to your new home.”

I didn’t attempt a response beyond a deep curtsy and took my leave at her acknowledgement, careful not to turn my back until I was at the side door.

Quickly opening the servant door I made sure to quietly close it behind me before letting out a shaky breath. I loathed the brown nosing and schmoozing when dealing with aristocracy but the Queen was on another level entirely. As much as I wanted to linger and break down I didn't let myself.

Instead, I took a fortifying breath and purposefully strode down the hallway ignoring the glances of servants going about their business. Word would spread, it probably already had, and it wouldn't be long before people either came to talk to me or ignored me completely until tomorrow. Either way, I had things I needed to set up and an assistant I needed to teach more to before I left.

I kept my head down until I got to my safe haven, my clinic and work room.

Immediately I was embraced by the comforting scents of lemon balm, lavender, and eucalyptus. I inhaled deeply, letting out a smile at the familiar surroundings.

The worn, gray-stone floors and walls were softened by a few simple wooden cots for patients, and a window above each to let in fresh air. Walking through the currently empty room, I headed toward the distillery area I had set up with glass bottles neatly arranged on the counter tops, jars of medicine prepped and ready to go, along with ingredients precisely laid out ready to be worked with.

My fingers absently trailed along the worn wooden table wishing that I would be able to take this with me. But it seems that this war was claiming yet another piece of me that I might never get back.

Shaking my head, I reoriented my thoughts before I could lose myself in those thoughts. I looked over everything at my workstation and turned to pull out my journal when I found Altin, my apprentice, watching me from the doorway with cautious bright-green eyes.

"The rumor mill is fast today," I told him with a half smile, as I gently set my journal down on the table.

“Yes.” Atlin’s voice was soft and melodic as he walked further into the room.

His long, red hair was in a thick braid down his back and a well-groomed beard covered what looked to be a chiseled chin. Most men here didn’t have beards, but somehow, for Atlin, it didn’t look out of place. He had a mask similar to mine, though it was missing the swirl detail that had been added to my own. Even with half his face covered I could sense the distress and concern in him as he studied me.

“It does when a healer is being sent to Idrisid in place of a princess.”

I just gave him a brief nod in answer, not trusting there weren’t ears nearby listening to me. Atlin was trustworthy, but not letting him see my doubts and trepidation would only protect him from a Queen who would surely question him about me once I left. And no one deserved the Queen’s one-on-one attention. Unless she already had and that’s why I had been selected as a suitable replacement. He seemed to be able to read my thoughts and gave a slight nod in answer to my silent question.

“You are a great secret keeper, even under duress. We all remember what happened during the Battle of Vliud.”

I flinched away as the memories came back at his comment. The smell of burnt flesh, groaning men crying out in pain, and then the silence that fell on the battlefield as I stood there in shock with dead bodies all around. All of it was impossible to forget. It was one of the most terrifying moments in my life and I had lived through many.

“I’m sorry. I know you don’t like to talk about it,” he apologized.

“It’s not so bad that you can’t mention it.” I waved away his contrite look. “Just... people always want details and I don’t want to remember them.”

“What are we doing today?” He swiftly changed the subject and I couldn’t be more thankful. I’d take thinking of my upcoming wedding over remembering that battlefield.

“It seems I have the rest of the day to teach you everything I know before I leave tomorrow. So, I hope you’re ready for a long day and night.”

He gave me a startled look, “Don’t you need to pack?”

“The only things I can claim as my own are in this room and you need them more than I do. The Queen is making me a whole wardrobe that I’m getting tomorrow. It’s easier that way.” I waved my hands to push away those thoughts before pointing at him in warning. “Now, if you want food today then I suggest you run to the kitchens, because we aren’t stopping once we start.”

At that he sprinted out of the room toward the kitchen, knowing full well I had meant every word I said. *Nothing like mentioning lack of food to make a man motivated to get moving*, I chuckled to myself at my thoughts. I would miss days like this with Altin and the easy way I felt with him. Orira wasn’t always an easy kingdom to live in, but being with him made it more enjoyable.

Taking a fortifying breath, I started to pull ingredients down from the shelves, preparing for the day. Sachets, jars, and bowls were all neatly arranged and I grabbed a few of each for us to work with. It would be the ultimate test for him to see how much he knew of what I’d taught him already and how fast he would learn what I could cram into today.

“Devika?” Altin’s voice made me jolt and I spun around to find him in the doorway again, but this time he held two baskets of food for us. A crooked smile met my incredulous gaze and I burst out into laughter.

“Did you leave any food in the kitchens, Altin?” I arched an eyebrow. He joined in my laughter with a good-natured nod. I gestured at everything I pulled out as he approached to join me, “Then let’s get started.”

The day flew by as I shared with him recipes and instructions for how to deal with common illnesses and injuries. Altin pulled out his own journal and I made sure he filled it with instructions and medicines for war wounds that were, unfortunately, too common for my tastes.

The hours were filled with calm and efficient instruction, only pausing when Altin pulled out food at what I assumed to be regular intervals. Keeping track of meals was not my strong suit.

Before I knew it the room had darkened signaling the end of daylight, but not the end of my teaching. Grabbing candles from the cabinets I set about lighting them so we could continue working, determined to not be stopped by nighttime. Oddly, Altin didn't object, usually he was ready for the end of the work day. I glanced over at him to find his eyes steadily watching me and I tilted my head studying him in return.

"Aren't you going to complain about staying here late to work with me?"

At my curious tone I saw a slight smile pull at the edges of his lips, but his eyes remained serious when he replied, "Teaching me is helping you not think about tomorrow and your fear about it."

"We may spend too much time together if you can read me that easily."

"I've apprenticed under you for almost a year," he pointed out.

Shaking my head I looked away from his sharp gaze, "You have lasted the longest working for me, but most apprentices before you never even remembered how I took my tea."

"They obviously never appreciated what was in front of them," he replied softly and my head whipped toward him in surprise at that longing underneath his soft tone. He just gave me a chagrined smile before focusing on the work in front of him.

"You never said..." I started, but stopped myself knowing it was useless. He must have felt the same since he looked up at me with serious eyes. "I'm sorry."

He stood up and walked toward me, gripping my upper arms firmly. "Never be sorry. But I couldn't let you leave without saying anything at all. If that was a mistake... then I am the one that is sorry."

“Altin—” My voice cracked but he just shook his head silently, cutting me off.

“Devika, there’s no need.” He leaned down and brushed a soft kiss on the top of my head. I closed my eyes at the contact and relished at the lingering touch before he let go of me. “Now, what else are we doing since it seems you aren’t sleeping until you leave for Idrisid?”

He rubbed his hands together, focusing completely on the herbs and containers on the table in front of him and not looking at me at all. Even as he got to work, I remained silent for a moment, unsure how to take this unexpected turn of events. I was never the one people fawned over or really paid attention to, my fate was to be seen but not heard. Watching closely, I made sure Altin kept his attention on his work in front of him and listened to his silent plea to not address what he just said.

“You’re going to want to combine calendula and rose together in the jar before adding the oil.” I gestured at the flowers spread out on the table trying to keep my voice light. “Make sure everything is clean and then we can get started on the burn salve again.”

He nodded and did as I instructed while I stood there watching him closely. It was going to be a long night, for more reasons than I originally thought. The night would only last for so long though, then my new life would begin.

Wife of the Unseelie King.

I just hoped I survived the wedding.

But there were no guarantees in life, that much I knew from experience.

# CHAPTER TWO



## XIMEN

“YOU CAN’T BE SERIOUS, Your Majesty!” I asked, appalled by what he had just informed me of. “A human?!”

There were no others in the study with us, the formal announcement coming later tonight when he was to meet with the nobles. I had been given the courtesy of being brought into the loop early since I was his left hand man and lover. I searched his face, trying to figure out what man I faced, my King or my lover. Honestly, I had no idea.

He just looked at me blandly, as if he was expecting this response from me. I bristled at his reaction as if I was a petulant child but I stood my ground, unwilling to let him dismiss my feelings.



“I’m getting offered access to something we need. Marriage was the only way to secure it.”

“A wife, Ciaran?” I asked scathingly, immediately leaning back in my seat when a warning flashed in his eyes. We might be alone right now but given we were in his formal study anyone could walk in. “Forgive me, I overstepped.”

“You did,” he replied softly, steely venom made me swallow hard as he kept his stern gaze centered on me. “Remember to whom you speak, assassin.”

“You might be my king, but that is not all you are and we both know it.” I refused to back down, though I did keep my tone in check. “Don’t use your title against me to not talk about this.”

“I’ll do what I wish when I wish to with whomever I want,” he drawled, propping his chin on his fist. Gray, black, and blue eyes scrutinized me calmly as if he was intrigued by the emotions tearing through me. “There is no strategic advantage to us being bound together formerly, Ximen. This alliance, access to the other side of the Cordia Peaks, can help save our court. My informants have information saying that something in Merania can help us restore magic. All of our leads center on that place. We have to gain access to it and this is the easiest way. Sailing around isn’t practical.”

I didn’t respond, unable to put together my swirling thoughts. We had been together for decades, centuries, and this is how he was ending things? A political move? There was nothing of the warm lover I knew staring back at me right now, though. He was just my king at this moment. This was a stark reminder of my standing. We may have been lovers but the kingdom would always come before me. It was something I respected about him. Though right now I loathed it.

Ciaran leaned back in his chair, the leather creaking with the movement. His bone-white hair was pulled back, accentuating his sharp cheekbones and porcelain skin. Even now, as numbness took over, I appreciated the view in front of me.

We had grown up together and were opposites in almost every way, physically and otherwise. A few centuries ago we

had grown from friends to lovers, nothing formal but it was something the entire court knew. Flashes of his pale skin against my obsidian skin and silk sheets. The violence we unleashed upon each other only added spice to our time together.

I didn't know what was more painful, losing him to some human or the fact that he didn't seem to give a damn.

My heart ached at his cold words, hatred and love twisting me into something I never knew I could be. I was an assassin. I'd killed more people than most ever will in their lifetimes and yet Ciaran... he could cut me down with one dismissive look.

I hated him for it almost as much as I hated myself for my weakness.

"Then I will take my leave of you, Your Majesty," I finally replied, standing up from where I had been seated across from him. "There is no need for my presence—"

"I will decide that," he cut me off briskly. Standing up, he glided around his desk coming toward me. Long fingers ran up my arms until he cupped my face. "Stay with me tonight, Ximen."

"There is no *benefit* from that, *Your Majesty*. You are engaged and the only one warming your bed from now on will be her," I rebuffed him, or at least tried to until he brushed his lips against mine making my cock twitch.

"She isn't here and even if she was, she isn't you," he murmured before running his tongue along the edge of my ear.

"You talk in twisted riddles, Ciaran," I shot back, jaw clenching as I tried to ignore my physical response to him. "I'm tired of being second or third best with you. Your marriage—"

"You're thinking too much of this. It is a political maneuver only that could help us win this war and help our people." He shook me slightly before cupping my jaw, tilting my head back so I was forced to meet his intense stare.

Passion and anger warred inside of him, every tense line of him betrayed how at war he felt internally. A petty part of me was glad that he wasn't as unaffected as I had previously thought. *The weight of the crown is the heaviest thing in the world.* The memory of Ciaran saying that once shattered the last bit of hope I had in my heart for us.

I was done.

He needed to be as well.

“Married is married, Your Majesty,” I reminded him quietly. “You know how our people will feel about any dalliances outside of that union. This cannot happen anymore.”

“Ximen—”

“Let me go, Ciaran,” I whispered, closing my eyes.

“Enough of this,” he growled, slamming his lips over mine.

I didn't kiss him back at first but Ciaran wasn't having any of that. He threaded a hand through my braids and fisted it so he could yank my head back. I gasped for air as he kissed and nibbled his way down my neck.

“This is a mistake,” I told him gruffly. “It will only hurt more. As you reminded me, the kingdom comes first.”

Ciaran pulled back to meet my gaze with his heated one. “Are you denying me?”

“Would that matter?” I questioned as I tried to loosen his hold on me but he held steadfast. “Is this how you really want to end things between us?”

A steely expression took over his face as he let go of my hair. The moment he let me go I ached, desperately wishing I could take it back. But just like his wedding alliance there are things that cannot be undone.

Black spots filled my vision right before a searing pain erupted on the side of my face. I blinked a few times, realizing my mouth was filling with blood. Shifting slowly, I looked toward Ciaran standing in a fighting stance.

We always had a give and take in our relationship and the physical part of it... It was always our foreplay. Whether it was words or through fists we loved to push each other to the limit. Ciaran needed to let loose his pain and I was going to be the target of it. It was a good thing I loved him enough that even as he tore my world asunder I'd follow him over the edge. Even if that edge meant my own pain.

Another fist shot out and I caught it easily, but he swept my feet out from under me while I was distracted. I slammed onto my back, the wind getting knocked out of me. Ciaran took the advantage and covered my body with his own. But I wasn't going to just give in.

Wrestling we fought for dominance, both of us not holding back with punches or bites as we sought to win the war between us. Shadows crept out of the corners of the room, pinning me down as Ciaran sat back watching me struggle. The blue flecks in his irises glowed as he used his power to restrain me.

"Cheater," I taunted him as I swallowed some blood. "You never could beat me."

"Fight smart, not hard," he replied with a bloody smile of his own. He reached up, wiping at his busted lip before he started undressing.

I twisted, trying to break free of his shadows as those smoky tendrils undressed me for him. But there was a reason why Ciaran was King of the Unseelie Court and no amount of brute physical strength would win against his powers.

Part of me was curious why he was using it now between us. Displays of magical power were rare now with the well of magic running dry. It seemed like a waste but as he palmed his throbbing cock as he looked me up and down I couldn't deny that it was hot.

"You want me."

"No," I lied, grunting as he kneeled between my spread legs.

White hands brushed my skin, trailing down to my hard cock and ghosting over me. Ciaran smirked when my cock

twitched, precum glistening on the tip.

“Your body can’t lie, Xi.” The use of the nickname seemed extra cruel as he continued down to my balls then lower still.

“Fuck you.”

“I plan to,” he crooned. Ciaran leaned down and kissed me, deepening the kiss as he slid his tongue into my mouth. He claimed me so fucking thoroughly my body betrayed me, kissing him back like I needed him to breathe. Pulling back he smirked down at me and then he shifted up. My brow furrowed trying to figure out what he was doing until he spat on his hard cock that was bobbing between us.

Our blood mixed together with spit to make for the only lube he was going to use to fuck me. Before I could protest he quickly shoved my legs apart and pulled my hips up at the same time so he could slam into me.

No prep work meant searing pain left me gasping. His shadows kept me restrained as my body arched, tensing at his invasion.

“Fucking mine. *Mine*,” he growled, his long hair falling down around us as he fell down on his elbows to be closer to me.

He said it over and over again, praising me for taking him so well. Thankfully, he took mercy on me by finally reaching down, grabbing my hard cock and jacking me off quickly. We came together, crying out together as he filled me up and I spilled my seed all over his chest.

Our harsh breathing was the only sound in the room, echoing until I pulled at my restraints. Ciaran didn’t say anything but the shadows slowly untwined, releasing their hold on my body. Ignoring my torn clothes I stood up on shaky legs. I could feel the cum on my ass and back of my thighs as I started for the door.

“You *were* mine, Ciaran, but I was never really yours,” I spoke just as I reached the door. “You didn’t want me to be.” I cleared my throat roughly.

“Ximen—”

“I’ll go prepare everything so we can go get your wife,” I cut him off, not letting him say anything else. “Good day, Your Majesty,”

Then I walked out, not looking back or caring that I was completely naked. Nudity wasn’t a big deal for fae and neither was sex. But Ciaran was about to be married, a vow that fae viewed as sacred. There were very few exceptions and I knew that we pushed our luck with this tryst.

No one met my gaze as I stalked off toward my room. It was the last time we’d be together and maybe our fight and brutal fucking was better than some soft goodbye.

It definitely fit our relationship better.



## CIARAN

The alliance didn’t go over well, especially when I mentioned the Queen’s condition.

### *Marriage.*

If I had thought that Ximen’s response was bad, the nobles of the court were worse.

Fae only married once and marrying a human, even if she was a princess, meant I had maybe a few decades then I’d be alone. Forever.

The nobles erupted into arguments as I sat quietly on my throne. Ximen stood stoically at my side, not reacting to hearing the news again. They were arguing about the fertility and prosperity of our people if I bound myself to a human but their view was so fucking narrow it was exhausting.

Magic was dying.

Without magic our people wouldn’t last much longer which meant something like marriage to a human woman didn’t warrant that level of concern. Fae needed magic to survive just as much as we needed food or oxygen to breathe. I let out a

long sigh and made a slashing movement with my hand, instantly the room became quiet.

I clicked my tongue, conveying my annoyance at their behavior and savored the fear that perfumed the air of the throne room as they waited for me to speak.

“I told you of the alliance as is my duty as king, but do not mistake that as your input being asked for,” I drawled, the dry tone of my voice making some of the courtiers pale. “There are bigger concerns than my entanglements with this human. Prepare yourselves for her arrival, but let me make it abundantly clear. She will be my wife and will be afforded the respect of her station. Am I clear?”

“Perfectly, Your Majesty,” they all agreed at once.

“Get out of my sight.”

They all left quickly, though not too quickly, after my dismissal. Ximen didn't budge though, standing by my side like a silent shadow. His midnight-black hair was now pulled up high and in a thick braid. Standing just an inch shy of my own height he was tall, taller than most of the fae in the room. Where I was lean, Xi was muscular, so much so that his clothes had to be specially altered to fit. Dressed in fighting leathers and armed to the teeth with blades he was a sight to behold.

“We should leave soon to arrive in Orira on time,” he informed me, voice empty of all emotion. “The water is calm, so if we leave soon the sailing across Tamil Bay should go smoothly.”

“I would hate to keep my future bride waiting.”

I stood up and led the way out of the room and down the hallway. Conversations quieted as I neared, the whispers rising to a roar in our wake until we were outside where a carriage was waiting. Any other time I wouldn't let the talk just slide but we were in a time crunch. But with a few short words to a nearby guard I would have a list of all the upstarts by the time I got back. Right now they were not worth my attention... But they would receive it once I got back. With magic fading it

meant we would need to travel the old fashioned way, carriage then by boat, and while just horses would be faster, I did not think my wife would agree when I brought her back.

The driver opened the door and I climbed inside without a word. Ximen shut the door and climbed up front leaving me to my thoughts.

Queen Libitina didn't tell me anything about the woman I would be marrying tomorrow. The only thing I hoped was that she was nothing like her bitch of a mother. Cunning and scheming, Libitina. If she had been fae I would have admired her skills at playing her enemies off each other. As it was, now she was just a nuisance.

This truce wouldn't last long, hell, I doubted it lasted longer than a few months to be honest. So, what daughter was she willing to sacrifice for her own ends?

I guess I was about to find out when I met her at the altar.



# CHAPTER THREE



DEVIKA

THE MORNING SUN STARTED to stream in through the windows and I blinked hard at the bright light filtering in. *Where had the night gone?*

“It’s almost time, Devika,” Altin reminded me softly. I looked at the man sitting next to me, but he kept his gaze forward ignoring my stare.

“Yes, it is,” I sighed, nerves twisting my stomach as I tapped my fingers on the work table. “I guess this means I need to go to the seamstress soon.”

Standing up, I stretched my arms up and walked to a window to see the start of the day. Deep orange and pink

colored the sky making for a beautiful summer sunrise, I just hoped it boded well for me.

“Devika—” Altin’s voice stopped me as I was about to make my way out of the door. I looked over my shoulder at him to find an unusually serious expression on his face. “No matter what happens. I’ll be there for you.”

A sad smile twisted my lips and I changed direction, stopping in front of him. I grabbed his hands to squeeze them gently.

I dared not do more than that, not a friendly hug or kiss on the forehead like he had given me yesterday. The wedding would take place in only a matter of hours and the Queen had eyes everywhere. Altin froze, eyes squeezed tightly shut as if he could sense the things I could never voice by the weight of my touch.

His subtle declaration of feelings yesterday was never brought up again as the night wore on, but I could feel it between us now. That awareness grew until I felt as if I knew every movement he made. Someone else had laid siege to my heart years ago but even with his absence I could feel the echoes of him keeping my heart captive. Who knows what the war had wrought for him during that time.

Besides, in Orira, humans were known to take multiple lovers. Given the state of the world and the fact that everything was determined by the woman’s blood line, not the man’s, meant relationships were very much women centric. Though not many kingdoms outside of ours viewed relationships in the same way.

I stepped back after a minute, roughly clearing my throat. “Thank you for the sentiment. Goodbye, my friend.”

I walked away, not letting myself look back at him. Though it was as if I could feel the weight of his gaze on my back even after I had left the room. I had a sense that I was leaving behind a whole life I would never be able to see again the further away I got from him and the workroom. Maybe that is what quickened my pace until I was running, breathless to my chamber.

*But there was no outrunning what life had in store for me.*

The door was wide open revealing that my room had already been completely stripped down. Sheets were off the small bed, my trunk of simple dresses was nowhere to be found, and servants were in there scrubbing the floors and walls like their life depended on it. Knowing this court that very well could be the case.

“Healer,” a rough voice called out, yanking me from my thoughts. Glancing over I saw one of the servants standing there, expression blank as they motioned for me to follow them. “Follow me. The dressmaker is rushing the alterations and she needs you there to finish up.”

I nodded, not bothering to ask any questions about my missing possessions. Luckily, everything that was dearly important to me I kept on me at all times. I’d learned early on in life that what you treasured most you kept with you and everything else was free for the taking. You had to choose your battles carefully because you’d never win the war.

Falling into step behind the masked servant girl I tried to remain calm but the silence between us was cold, unbreakable, making my anxiety rise. She was one of the few royal servants that served only the Queen. Anything I said would undoubtedly get right back to the woman who had orchestrated all of this.

Of course, it is not as if she would willingly talk to me regardless. I was an outcast, hated by those I was serving for deeds I had done and would never take back. Something that my family never forgave me for.

The nobles I healed resented every breath I took, but at least the common people did not feel that way. Taking care of the injured from this never-ending war was my calling. I had lost too much on this path to not continue it now and if that meant that I would be marrying the Unseelie King then that’s exactly what I would do.



THE SEAMSTRESS HAD BEEN able to alter two dresses for me to wear on regular days and a wedding dress. The queen seemed pleased enough by this and reigned over the entire interaction. She chose the colors, adornments, and style for each while I stood still not complaining about the needles jabbed into my skin or the tightness of the fit.

Each dress was probably meant as an insult, plain with barely any accents to match the current styles, but to me they were perfect. Quality fabrics with a fitted bodice then flared out slightly at the waist to fall down straight to the ground. No sparkles or embroidery on it that nobility loved right now. Instead it was basic and if I were naive I would view it as a mercy by the Queen and not the backhanded insult that it was.

Only two dresses, though... Is that how long she thinks I'll live through this? No need to spend more time or money on me. Princesses usually go with entire trunks filled to the brim with possessions and a dowry, I'd have none of those things. I guess I'd see what happens if I make it to Idrisid.

“Good enough,” Queen Libitina clapped her hands briskly. “Now, onto the wedding dress since that’s the most important part.”

The seamstress and her assistant helped me out of the forest-green dress I had been in and then switched me over to the wedding dress they had probably stayed up all night to craft. This time no expense had been spared since it needed to be fit for a princess.

It was beautiful, and I even felt lovely in it. The dove-gray tulle was long and flowy, draped over a sheath of darker gray silk that protected my skin from the scratchy material. There were delicate flowers and vines embroidered on the bodice and down the skirt until about my knees. The neckline was bold, dipping low enough to see cleavage that instantly made my neck flush with embarrassment. I turned slightly and admired the sleeves. They were long and loose, cinched at the wrist and all see through tulle with the flower accents there as well.

This dress was hands down one of the most beautiful pieces of clothing I had ever been in. I felt powerful and gorgeous...

Everything I would never be. As that thought hit my brain the need to hide filled me. All I wanted was to change into my own dresses. My skin buzzing, wishing for the scratchy fabric over this charade.

“You are truly a miracle worker,” the Queen praised the seamstress. “You’ve managed to hide her bulky muscles and make her look appealing.”

The seamstress nodded, her masked face dipped away from view as she hurriedly started hemming the dress while it was on me. My Queen started circling me, commenting here and there where she thought adjustments should be made before she swept out of the door, promising to be there right before the ceremony.

An instructor soon came in, giving me a crash course in manners to pass off this charade for as long as possible. It seemed insane to me that they thought this would convince a king that I was royalty, but I recalled what she said. It just needed to last long enough... but long enough for what?

# CHAPTER FOUR



DEVIKA

## CHAPTER FOUR

DEVIKA

The hubbub of the King finally arriving had me wringing my hands and pacing in the small room I had been left in alone. The soft slippers on my feet barely whispered against the stone floor as I tried to calm myself. This was happening and there wasn't anything I could do about it.

But at least I would be out of the queen's reach.

Taking a deep breath I tried to calm myself. Instead of waiting in a suite full of ladies-in-waiting and maids helping me get ready, I was in a small sitting room that appeared to have been forgotten. There was a small window carved out of the stone wall letting in a little bit of light to highlight the sitting area in the room. There was a small couch between two sitting chairs on either side that were angled into the center focusing on a small table in front of them.

There was no rug here to soften the feel of the stone floors but it was a comfy room to me either way. I walked past the small sitting room to take in the courtyard below. The hot summer breeze blew and I had to squint against the glaring brightness of the sun. *Would Idrisid have similar hot summers or would they be cooler up north?*

The door to the room opened with a jarring scrape and I whirled around to see the Queen sweeping in. Instantly, I curtsied, dread curling in my stomach as I realized she was alone, no audience for this last meeting.

Impatiently she told me to rise. I did so and looked up to realize that in her hand was a small box that she was holding out to me, so plain and unassuming.

"Your Majesty?" I questioned, hesitantly taking the offered box from her.

“Open it, little healer,” her dark hair, slipping over her shoulder to blend in with the dark, wine-colored dress she was wearing. “It is customary to receive a parting gift before you leave home.”

I swallowed hard, but dutifully opened it, wondering what it could be. My mouth went dry as soon as I saw what lay nestled there. It was a sable black mask, smooth and solid in color, no decoration to it at all. The left side dipped down a little further, almost to lip level, while the right side didn't cover anything below my eye.

“It seemed appropriate to keep part of your face covered considering...” She motioned to my face with a cruel smile. “It will suit you perfectly where you are going. Let's get this on you and then you get to meet your future husband.”

Without bothering to ask she reached for the mask on my face, long, cold fingers slipping underneath to the metal sticking out of my cheekbones and unlocking it to remove it. The breeze on my face felt so foreign since I've been wearing my mask for years now with no break except to bathe quickly.

Men and women wore masks here as part of our worship of Mylios and Azara, keeping ourselves private outside of our family. But mine had also been twisted into part of my punishment.

Tied down and awake, welders had cut into my skin, embedding small hinges at the Queen's request. I could still take off my mask but the metal pieces guaranteed that I didn't remove it for long, just enough to clean my face and then put it back in place.

Metal hinges sticking from your face wasn't a good look for anyone and it showed the full extent of my punishment from the Queen herself.

Queen Libitina clicked her tongue as she scrutinized my face and the scars on the left side of my cheek. She ran her fingers along the edges, her painted red lips parted at the bumpy texture as if she was aroused. Though it was hard to tell if it was the memory of how I got them or the feel of them that excited her so much.



“It’s a pity that you couldn’t see reason before the end, Devika. This all could have gone so differently.” I didn’t say anything, biting my tongue unsure if she wanted a response or just to hear herself speak. A twinkling laugh fell from her lips as she tossed my old mask carelessly onto the floor like trash.

“Smart of you to stay silent girl, but that sweetheart of yours... Where is he now to save you?” She harshly pushed the mask in place, shoving it until the metal snapped in place and I couldn’t hide my grimace at the pain it caused. My bones never healed right after the hinges had been embedded in my face and I was reminded of that every time the mask was put back on.

“Well?” she pushed, grabbing my chin and forcing me to meet her stare. “Where is he? The man you lost so much for. It’s so disappointing he won’t be there to see you married to someone else.”

The man I had lost so much for, the forbidden lover I kept secret even now would never come here to save me. For him I’d lost what little position I had, the promise for a brighter future, and more things that I couldn’t even think of without breaking down. She brought him up to twist the knife of this surprise marriage even further. Pain and loneliness washed over me despite my best efforts.

The queen savored her subject’s pain as if it was a delicacy...Maybe it helped her avoid her own.

But even after everything I had lost—and the pain of my mask—I wouldn’t change anything. Even standing in the rubble of our destruction my only regret was that I could not save the best part of me before the end. The pain of his absence and physical pain the Queen had caused was nothing in comparison.

“He’s gone,” I forced out, tears stinging my eyes at her harsh grip. “You won.”

“That goes without question,” she released me, pushing me so I stumbled back a few steps, the back of my legs bumping into one of the armchairs. “It is a pity that even now you won’t

utter his name, but no matter. Soon you'll be with the Unseelie. You'll be their problem. At least for a little while."

Hatred twisted in me at her taunts. I wanted freedom, a new future, and some petty part of me wanted to find that with this unknown King because it would piss her off to no end. Maybe this isn't the future I had envisioned for myself but I'd be damned if she took yet another thing from me. I'd do anything I could to never return here.

*Even if that meant marrying someone notorious for his hatred of humans.*

"Yes, your majesty," I replied with more snark than was smart.

A resounding slap and ringing in my ears made me stumble back knocking over a chair, falling to the ground as I clutched at my face in gasping pain.

"You ungrateful little bitch," she hissed at me, stepping toward me menacingly. "Watch your tone before I decide that I want more than your pretty face from you. I think your tongue would make a wonderful trophy to remember you by."

When I didn't respond right away she hit me again, blood filling my mouth and a cry falling from my lips as she jostled my mask sending pain through my entire face. Twisted laughter filled the room before she walked away, her dress whispering along the floor as she headed for the door.

"Get through the ceremony, Devika, and make the alliance official before you fuck it up. The least you can do is be useful in your death since you never managed it in life," she commented dryly, brushing a hand down her skirt. "Now let's go. We need to get this over with since you're both leaving right after the ceremony. The carriage hasn't budged from the front door since he arrived and I need that *thing* out of here."

She snapped her fingers like she was beckoning a dog. I swallowed my pride while ignoring the throbbing of my face to stand up and follow her out of the room. Before I got close to her a guard knocked and opened the door, bowing to the Queen before delivering a surprising message.

“The Unseelie King demands to meet his bride before the ceremony begins.”

“Excuse me?” Libitina hissed, making the guard pale.

Before the guard could formulate a response someone appeared behind him. The stranger took my breath away in not an entirely good way.

He was tall, much taller than most of the fae I had met before. He had to be close to seven feet, if I had to hazard a guess. He was dressed simply in all black, boots, pants, and shirt along with a long coat, though everything looked rich and of fine quality. His long, white hair was braided tightly, highlighting his sharp cheekbones and jawline.

Gray-and-black eyes watched me like a predator considering its prey as he walked around the guard and into the room. His gaze stared at my black mask with a neutral expression, though something in the clenching of his jaw told me that he didn't like it.

“I do not think it is a big ask to meet my bride before the wedding takes place,” the King, there was no doubt in my mind that this is who this was, replied smoothly. “Don't you agree?”

“Everything is set—” the Queen started, her hand waving as if physically dismissing him.

“Then it will be ready after I speak with my bride for a few minutes. We can walk in together as is fae tradition. Something I'm sure will be fine considering our impending alliance and other concessions I've made for this arrangement.”

Queen Libitina wanted to argue, I could tell from the tense set of her shoulders but she somehow kept her thoughts to herself. With a sharp warning look in my direction she assured the King that was a great idea and she wished she had thought of it.

A few more sharply pointed polite words were exchanged and then we were left alone together.

The room was colder with him here and my awareness heightened even more as he flicked the lock on the door before facing me.

Instinct made me curtsy though I didn't maintain like I did yesterday in the Queen's presence. A slight nod from him was his only acknowledgment. The silence between us built and thickened with every passing second until I thought I would choke on it.

He remained silent looking over the room, though I didn't miss the way his gaze lingered on the chair that had been tipped over from me tripping over it. I licked my lips, nose scrunching at the taste of blood from where the Queen had hurt me. *Hopefully it stopped bleeding before the ceremony.*

He finally moved, walking toward me slowly until he stood right in front of me. Despite my best efforts, I took a step back but the room was too small to get far from him. The king didn't react beyond taking the extra step to get in my personal space. I braced myself, anticipating another smack from this stranger but he surprised me.

Long fingers trailed along my mask then down the side of my face to my neck, until he gripped my chin forcing me to look up and meet his steely gaze. His thumb brushed along my lips and came away with bright-red blood on his skin.

“Who hurt you?”

My breath rattled in my chest as I tried to fight tears. My entire face throbbed and I swore I could feel wetness behind my mask. Had she hit me so hard it had shifted the hinges in my face? If so, I had a lot more to worry about than a busted lip.

No one had ever cared that I was the Queen's punching bag on many occasions. Altin being the only exception, though I tended to hide most of the abuse from him when I could. But as the King stared down at me with rage growing in his stormy eyes I realized that maybe someone else did care.

But I worried more that his concern would quickly shift to rage because we'd just met and I was already lying to him.

# CHAPTER FIVE



CIARAN

## CHAPTER FIVE

CIARAN

*What had happened to her?*

The stench of fear had been thick in the city walls, an emotion that resonated within every stone of the buildings and roads until I could feel it rattling around in my bones with every step. That emotion only thickened in the palace itself until I passed by this room while getting away from Ximen.

He had made his feelings very clear and the fact he had to come with me here had only added insult to injury. But I was tired of dealing with his emotional damage when I had my own thoughts to deal with.

This room had dread in it, yes, but also a refreshing sense of hope... Something I had not felt in a long time. Drawn to that flame I realized that the guard outside was the Queen's and that she must be visiting her daughter before the ceremony.

Once I had forced my way in to see her, though, I was overcome with the certainty that whoever stood there in a wedding dress was not royalty. Studying her thoroughly in the growing silence only solidified my thoughts until I couldn't hold back anymore.

Half of her face was hidden behind a black mask but I could clearly see her wide brown eyes that held a hint of trepidation as they flicked to me then anywhere else in the room. Her fingers started to twitch with nerves and that's when I noticed calluses on her fingertips.

*Calluses?*

Princesses did not have calluses.

War might be rampant but princesses were always kept safe and hidden away, bargaining chips to be used as needed by

royalty. At least, that's how the past few human rulers had treated them. Political cattle as it were.

But this woman... She did not lead such a life of luxury. The slight shifting of her weight from foot to foot as the quiet built also caught my attention. She was good, this farce of a princess, but there was no royal decorum present beyond the blank, slightly pleasant expression on her half covered face. My future wife was hiding something, that much was obvious.

Part of me was curious just who this woman was and why the Queen was trying to pass her off as a princess. To save her own daughters? To insult me? Well... that's not how this game was going to be played.

Just as I was about to call her out or storm out to see what the hell the Queen was up to, I noticed a smell I was all too familiar with. *Blood*. I zeroed in my gaze on her face, the hint of bright red on her tongue as she licked her lips nervously and then slight swelling along the side of her face.

Rage. Protectiveness. Power.

All of those things surged in me as I stared at this slip of a woman in shock. I wanted to rip the hand off of the person who had dared to attack her, damn the consequences to hell. The urge to wrap her up and protect her grew as her uncertainty only grew at me questioning who had hurt her.

Instantly, weariness filled me at the thought that this *human* of all people inspired such a response in me. Defend her? I tried to remind myself that she was the enemy but as her nerves grew between us I found myself even more drawn to this mysterious stranger.

“You're not going to tell me?”

“It doesn't matter, Your Majesty,” she replied, her voice soft and husky as she pulled back, trying to get me to let go of her. “We should—”

“If you don't want to talk about who hurt you, then let's start with something simple then, hmm?” I tightened my grip on her chin forcing her to be still. “Who are you? I know who all the princesses of Orira are and you are not one of them.”

She swallowed hard but remained silent. I had to give her credit, she held it together better than most people had when I questioned them. There was a hint of nerves in her gaze but no fear when she looked up to meet my gaze.

“We have a wedding to get to.”

“To a woman I don’t know?”

“Wasn’t that the plan anyway?” she retorted dryly, making me almost smile before I could catch myself.

“To a princess, yes. To *you*...no.” I watched her closely, searching what parts of her face I could see. Her honey-blond hair was half up, half down—waves of it falling down her back—but as she finally got out of my grip the soft tresses caressed my skin, heightening my awareness of her.

“I’m—”

“Don’t even think of lying,” I cut her off sharply. “I’m not someone you want to play that game with. Let’s start with something simple, your name.”

She licked her lips and took a deep, fortifying breath. “Devika.”

“At least that part of what your Queen told me about you was true.”

She ran a shaky hand along the tulle of her dress, fingers tracing the small, white flowers there as she sat down in one of the seats in the room. *Devika was more nervous than she let on.* “I was informed yesterday that I would be marrying you to complete the alliance. An alliance and peace between our kingdoms... That’s all I was told.”

“Yesterday?” I asked blandly, walking over slowly to sit down in the seat beside hers. “This has been in the works for months. Why would she not tell you beforehand to at least have the ruse last? Make it seem as if you were a princess. I knew you weren’t the moment I looked you over.”

“You’re right, I’m not a princess. She didn’t want to chance marrying one of her precious daughters to the Unseelie King of all people. Her words not mine,” she said softly, anger



wrapping around me until she squeezed my hand, my gaze cutting over to where she had reached out to touch me. “But I can be useful.”

There was no trace of pleading in her eyes, just a steady stare that met mine and did not waver. She was being earnest but as my rage built over the deception I didn’t really care to figure out what Devika was implying. *At least we will get access to Cordia Peaks. That’s what I needed to remember.*

“The alliance is enough of a win for me.” I dismissed her, burying my bitterness. “There is no reason to not kill you before we even arrive in Idrisid.”

“I’m a healer.”

*A healer.*

*What kind of game was this girl playing?*

I studied Devika and her brown eyes, the hint of nerves was still there but I could sense no lies in her declaration. My magic wasn’t all that it used to be but shadows and sensing lies were a specialty of mine. Tricks and twisty riddles were a favorite of all the fae but outright lying was never tolerated.

“If that’s true then why would your Queen marry you to an enemy?” I asked slowly as I turned my hand over to squeeze hers. “With battles still breaking out, why get rid of someone who can help you?”

“I heal anyone and everyone who comes to me. I’ve always healed them, including the Unseelie after battles with humans. No magic involved. Healing people that aren’t human isn’t something that she liked... Honestly, no one liked it. But my vows as a healer to Iarae are more important than her displeasure. Magic is dying, even I know that, which means that I am *useful*,” she met my gaze with a fierce stare.

I didn’t want to admire her, though I couldn’t help but do so at this moment. Instead of being overcome with fear or begging for her life she was calmly telling me why she should stay alive. But that doesn’t mean I believed her. Humans lied with their tongues as easily as they lied with those damnable masks.

As a fae that could sense lies with the taste of words, I appreciated the irony of that thought. Tasting lies isn't something that comes easily anymore but the bigger the lie the easier it is for me to sense. Her words never strayed to the bitter taste of lies on my tongue but that didn't mean that I could trust Devkia herself. She was a pawn in this game but that didn't make her dangerous.

"Why should I believe you? Everything so far has been a farce. Your innocent face isn't enough to convince me to just take your word for it. It's already apparent that my guard was right... Trusting the word of a human is folly."

Devika sat up straight, pursing her lips in thought considering me. "She hates me and this is a useful way to kill me without getting her hands dirty. She and the nobles might detest my presence but that doesn't mean everyone does."

I considered her, removing my hand from hers and leaning back to fully study the person before me. Devika didn't react, just watched me and waited for my decision. No more attempts were made to get further away from me and my first thought was I wish she didn't have that damnable mask on her face. My next one was how could I use this to my advantage, what twist could I do to make this work for me?

"You're very talkative and open for someone in a very dangerous position," I commented, trying to figure out my way through this unexpected problem.

"Lying with you would get me nowhere," she replied calmly. "Would it be more fun to you if I did?"

A rough laugh escaped me before I could hold it back. She was feisty and I knew instantly this was going to be interesting. But there was something that she said that needed me.

"You said you do not use magic to heal."

"Correct."

"Why?"

"I don't have any..." she replied, clearly confused by my question.

“You do,” I countered, eyebrows raised in surprise as she seemed to pale. “You have healing magic. I could sense it the moment I took your hand.” Curiously, she recoiled as if she could physically distance herself from my statement.

“I have no training in magic, Your Majesty,” she rasped, voice husky and strained. “I use herbs just like any other healer. A good thing considering the state of magic.”

She didn’t say anything else about it but I could sense there was more to the story than this. More to *her* story. I didn’t expect her to pique my interest.

A quiet and passive woman who would be a wallflower is what I had been anticipating. Devika with her truthfulness, quick wit, and secrets... She might be more dangerous than I originally gave her credit for. I just didn’t know if that danger was to my people, myself, or both.

“My court is expecting a princess as their next queen,” I changed the subject, letting it rest for now. “No one will believe you were born royalty.”

“What is the plan then, Your—?”

“Ciaran,” I cut her off dryly. “We are to be married after all. Unless we are in a formal setting with the court, use my name. Hearing the constant Your Majesty this and King that might change my mind about keeping you alive.”

Devika hummed as she tried to suppress a smile, but failed. “What is the plan then... Ciaran?”

“I rejected the princess presented and chose you,” I said simply and she froze. “That way her little insult is turned back toward her. That doesn’t mean you’re off the hook because you are now going to be my queen consort so you’ll need to learn about how the court works.”

“Queen consort?” she questioned.

“It means you are my wife, but not a ruling queen of my court,” I told her evenly. I waited until she nodded in understanding before continuing my explanation. “That was my condition since she demanded marriage and we as fae only

marry once. I won't be sharing my power with someone whose view of life is merely a blink of an eye compared to ours."

"If you give me a work room and the ability to continue my calling as a healer, I'll do whatever training you want," she replied after a pause. "But I will warn you up front, my calling to heal everyone, including people you consider enemies, will not change just because I am in Idrisid and not Orira."

She met my gaze unflinching, calm and so certain of her statement that my breath caught in my throat. Devika was exquisite and that fire when she talked about being a healer... It was way more enticing than it had any right to be.

"If you want to continue to heal others that aren't Unseelie then so be it. But the Unseelie are seen first. My concern is for the safety of my people, not everyone else's, regardless of your feelings on the matter. That is something that is not negotiable. Any disagreements you do have will be brought up to me, and only me, *privately*. We are a united pair in front of the court, no exceptions. *None.*"

Devika chewed her bottom lip as she nodded slowly. There was something in her gaze, a pain that was there and gone in the blink of an eye before she cleared her throat roughly. "You have a deal... Ciaran."

"Good." I offered my hand to her and she stared at it then my face before slowly accepting it. I yanked her forward, purposefully making her off balance so the only thing keeping her from falling to the floor was my hold.

Her heart was pounding and as much as I wanted to demand that she take off her mask, I knew she wouldn't. One day I'd see her in her entirety but for now I was going to seal our deal to each other.

I captured her lips in a kiss, not letting her shy away from my claim on her body. She didn't respond at first but when I tilted my head to deepen the kiss she responded timidly. When she kissed me back I tasted the spicy hint of blood from her mouth and groaned.

Magic like I'd never felt before roared to life, searing pain lanced through me and into me. The power of it grew bigger and bigger until it exploded. We pulled apart, her eyes filled with shock that matched my own as a mate bond snapped into place binding us together.

*What in the name of the Goddess was going on? Was this some type of joke?*

"We have to keep this quiet," she whispered urgently, wiping at her lips as she stood up putting distance between us. "We won't leave this place if they know."

Fear. It poured from her in waves as she looked anywhere but in my direction. What was going on?

I opened my mouth to respond when a knock sounded at the door.

"Your Majesty," Ximen's deep voice rumbled from outside. "It's time."

## CHAPTER SIX



DEVIKA

*WE HAD TO GET out of here.*

The Queen hated bonded mates more than anyone I'd ever seen. Rumor had it that she'd had one but was promised to the king so she had to walk away from it. Ever since then she declared that bonded mates were unnatural. The only person who could pair together people was herself and it was almost impossible to break that arrangement once she had it set up.

Though that didn't mean that it couldn't be done.

Fated mates was a bond that could never be broken, even with death. Once your souls were tied together you were always together in some way.

The smell of fresh snow and pine surrounded me as Ciaran threaded my arm through his. His scent was a wonderful contrast to the hot summer sun beating down on us through the glass windows. His touch drove away my anxious thoughts but did nothing to calm my racing heart.

A step behind my future husband was his guard. Though something about him told me he wasn't a regular guard that the king had brought with him but someone important. The expression on his face when Ciaran opened the door and he caught sight of me made me shudder just remembering it.

*He hated me.*

I was used to hate though. He could feel however he wanted as long as he got me out of this kingdom.

The man remained as Ciaran's shadow as we made our way to the ceremony.

"Are you ready?" Ciaran asked softly, glancing over in my direction signaling he was talking to me.

"No," I told him honestly before a half smile curled my lips. "Which means we should get this over with."

"So romantic of you, Princess."

"I'm being married off to the Unseelie King... I'd hate to ruin your reputation with too much enthusiasm," I drawled dryly. The mystery man looked between us with an odd look of suspicion and hurt when Ciaran chuckled coldly.

"We will talk after."

I wasn't sure if that was meant to be a promise or a threat but it seems I would be finding out soon enough.

The Unseelie King nodded at the door and the silent man opened the giant door in front of us with ease.

Every eye in the temple atrium instantly became focused on us as we started walking toward the dais.

Fear. Disgust. Pity.

I saw all of those emotions in their gazes as I walked with my husband-to-be down the aisle.

All of those emotions were amplified as we got closer to the priest waiting for us. When we arrived there I ignored the gazes of the people I'd been around my entire life in favor of the stranger in front of me.

A flash of blue sparked in his light-gray-and-black eyes as he wrapped his hand around me. I took a deep breath, savoring the coolness of his presence to battle the suppressing the stifling heat in the packed room.

“Let us begin.”



## CIARAN

Our hands were physically bound together with the handfasting rope that the humans used. The binding was a physical demonstration of our unity as a couple and a show of our alliance. Very smart of the Queen to include it in such a public fashion.

I didn't miss that every gesture of the priest made Devika flinch, though she did well trying to hide it. A slight shifting of her body that made my anger rise every time I saw it.

It was a mercy when the announcement of us being husband and wife was made because every part of me wanted to drown the place in blood. On top of that Ximen's chilly anger at my back was a constant that grew as he was forced to watch me marry someone else.

The temple was filled to the brim with nobles and everyone here but Ximen and myself were masked, covering their faces. When the priest offered us one we declined the offer, ignoring the man's annoyance at our refusal.

Besides the nobility in attendance you wouldn't have thought it was a royal wedding. No fanfare or extravagant decorations. Oh, everything was of nice quality but nothing that really screamed 'the queen was marrying off one of her daughters.' Minimal flowers, no music. She had mentioned a



low-key wedding to not tip off the Seelies but it still seemed odd.

While waiting for the wedding to begin we had met privately to hash out the final discussions of our alliance, signing treaties and trading barbs. This was the final step and I was ready to leave, the overcrowded stench of humans made my skin crawl.

As Devika and I left, the Queen surprisingly was nowhere to be seen. I was shocked that the Queen didn't try to coach her pawn some more or get more alone time with her. Though Devika didn't seem upset at the lack of interaction, in fact, she relaxed more and more the further we got away from the temple and nobles inside of it.

If I thought she'd intrigued me before, now she fascinated me... She should be terrified, quaking in fear and she acted as if she was on a casual stroll and not newly married to one of her sworn enemies.

*Mated to one of her sworn enemies. Could Ximen tell?*

Ximen was right behind us, his expression carefully blank as he remained on high alert watching for any surprise attacks. He was scanning the area, aware of everything and everyone around us. Even if his anger simmered under the surface he had a job to do and would never shirk his duties.

"They wouldn't do anything here. We're still in the confines of the temple grounds in the castle," a husky voice broke the silence. Glancing down, I found that Devika was staring straight ahead, not even looking up at me or at Ximen.

"Forgive me if I don't trust the word of humans," Ximen replied coldly. "The treaty might be official but that doesn't mean—"

"The Queen would do many things," Devika cut him off with a soft, even voice. "But angering Mylios or Azara by spilling blood on their sacred land is not one of them. The alleyways out of the city? Now, those are fair game."

"Rather bold of you, Princess," he commented, his dark gaze eyeing the ribbon binding her to me with distaste. "To

share that an attack could happen before we even leave the city.”

She looked up at him then focused on me, warm, brown eyes steady behind her mask. “I may not be a general but I am no idiot. The Queen does nothing without her own ambitions in mind and I think it’s fair to say I am no concern of hers. Not anymore.”

“Pity for you,” I told her as I started walking faster, dragging her along with me.

Ximen easily kept pace though Devika had a hard time matching my long stride. Before long we were at the carriage and without waiting for Ximen, I opened the door.

“Be on guard with the driver,” I ordered Ximen as I scooped up Devika and helped her into the carriage.

“Your Majesty—” he started but I shook my head slightly.

“Out of the city walls before we can’t get the stench of this place off our skin,” I cut him off with a soft tone. “We will talk on the ship.”

A war of emotions rippled across his face before he nodded and climbed up beside the driver. I shut the door behind me and focused on Devika who seemed so tiny on the bench beside me.

She was easily a foot or more shorter than my tall frame. Her light-gray dress looked gorgeous on her though I could tell she wasn’t comfortable with the large tulle dress that took up tons of space.

“You seem rather calm,” I broke the silence between us when we finally got out of the city walls.

“Do I?” she replied as she pulled at the gold ribbon tying our hands together. The small fabric slipped off our hands and onto the floor though I didn’t release my hold on her hand. “I’ve learned to be a great actor.”

“Or it’s the mask,” I pointed out with a growl. She hummed slightly and gave a shrug.

“Keeping a neutral face is what has saved me the few times I was spared my queen’s attention.”

“Is she the one that hurt you earlier?” I growled, reaching out to grab her chin to force her to look at me. I rubbed my thumb along her lower lip remembering the bright-red blood that had been on her when we first met.

“It doesn’t matter,” she whispered, not pulling back from my touch. “I’m not there anymore.”

“No, you’re not,” I replied in a dangerously soft voice. “But you’ll have to worry about more than just a few bloodied lips among the Unseelie.”

Devika laughed, the sound bright and loud as she tossed her head back.

“I’ve found more comfort among soldiers than I ever have in the court we just left. I’ll feel right at home.”

THE END



# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



I'VE ALWAYS LOVED READING.

It was my escape and my safe place for as long as I can remember. Writing, for me, came later. It was such an amazing feeling to put my pen to paper and have my stories come to life. I even have all those notebooks safely tucked away to look at again whenever I want to see how far I've come.

No, those stories will never see the light of day because I think even now people would question my dark fanfic as a young teen.

Dark fantasy, paranormal, romances... I love them all. But one constant in my life is that I've always loved the dark, broken, morally gray characters. Don't give me a hero who saves the world, I want the villain who will save his chosen family.

Broken people are relatable, real, raw. That's what I want to convey in my stories and plots. A romance that's thrilling and

a plot that's consuming.

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# BLOOD SLUMBER



VELA ROTH

A Sleeping Beauty Retelling

# BLURB



## **BLURB**

**HER REVENGE DEPENDS ON waking her enemy from his hundred-year sleep...**

Former princess Celandine is plotting to bring down the men who stole her throne. She needs help from someone even more dangerous: the immortal who battled her ancestors. With his fangs and dark magic, he can destroy her present-day enemies, and then she'll double-cross the ancient creature to complete her victory. But when she wakes him with a drink of her blood, his bite ignites desire in her that could bring her careful plan crashing down.



Troi wakes to find that everyone he once loved is gone. With nothing left to live for but vengeance, he agrees to help Celandine. He knows he can't trust the scheming descendant of his sworn enemies, and yet the taste of her blood makes him feel like she's his.

Can he tempt her to abandon her devious plot, or will her betrayal destroy them both?

# CHAPTER ONE



CELANDINE'S REVENGE PLAN WAS mad. It all depended on waking a monster. But ten years of festering rage had made her willing to do anything.

She stood in the shadow of the mausoleum while the procession surged past her. The celebrants were in high spirits for the first day of the Summer Solstice festival. Through the sheer fabric of her veil, she could make out the vibrant colors of their gowns and tunics. Whiffs of fragrance from their flower crowns briefly lifted the odor of death that clung to her.

The last, brilliant light of sunset slipped away after them. Celandine's hand tightened on her distaff. It was almost dark, and with the Summer Solstice only a fortnight away, the nights were short. She didn't have much time.

As soon as the street cleared, she headed in the opposite direction of the parade, her distaff tapping on the cobbles. At last someone noticed her. The stragglers took one glance at the

gray robes that shrouded her from head to toe, then hastened to catch up with the festival, as if she were a portent of impending death.

But she had no power of prophecy, nor could she read minds or cast illusions. Although she was a sorceress in service to Chera, the Mourning Goddess, Celandine possessed none of the typical talents of the women of her Mage Order.

Not that she needed spells to make herself invisible. No one ever saw her, except when she was allowed out of the temple to be a ritual mourner at funerary rites. Her throat ached from wailing for people she didn't know. When she failed to return on time, punishment would await her.

An iron calm descended over her as she turned down a side street toward her goal. She no longer cared what the temple would do to her if her plan failed. She existed with nothing in her future but funerary rites until the day her own came. She had already lost everything.

She navigated from memory along lanes lined with orange trees, past the porticoes of noble manors. Before her world had shrunk to the inside of the temple, this had been her city. Corona, the magnificent capital of Cordium. Home. Right outside the temple gates yet always out of reach.

In the distance, she caught flashes of light and noise from the procession. But she didn't cross paths with anyone except drunken lovers who had stayed behind to seize fleeting pleasure in the shadows. Hearing their moans, Celandine fought off a stab of envy. This was no time to resent the celibacy forced on all mages. She had to focus.

Among the historic residences, she came to a high, forbidding wall. How like the Mage Orders to build walls around whatever they couldn't control and claim they had conquered it.

For one hundred years, mages and aristocrats had pretended this forsaken estate no longer existed in their midst, while tales of the creature sleeping within ran rampant in fine courts and shady alehouses alike.

The oak gates were reinforced with iron, but the real barrier to entry was the spells beyond. She had to throw her entire weight against one gate to make it shudder and groan open.

Firelight spilled out. Magic and heat prickled her senses as she crept inside. The gate slammed shut behind her, and she started.

Celandine faced a solid wall of magefire that burned so high she couldn't see over it.

The Order of Anthros would come here on Summer Solstice to extinguish the fires and take the creature. She had to beat them to their prey, or the plot she had so carefully crafted these ten years would fail.

The war mages who served Anthros, god of order and battle, reigned supreme over all magic users. Would the magic of one unwilling Cheran sorceress be enough against them? If Celandine proved powerless against them tonight—as she had ten years ago—she could not bear it.

She clenched her teeth. She would not let them win. Not this time.

From the raw flax wrapped around the top of her distaff, she pulled out one of the spindles she kept tucked there. How she hated the tools of her trade as a Cheran mage. How satisfying it would be to use them to unravel everything the Orders had done to her.

Drawing a bit of flax from the distaff, she gave her spindle a twirl sunwise. As it spun and the flax honed to thread between her fingers, she let her arcane senses spin out and hone in on the magefire.

Old, mighty fires. She wouldn't have stood a chance against these spells in years past. But now, after a century, their power was fading. She spun her thread, studying the patterns of the magefire until she had a firm grasp on the spells.

Then she twirled her spindle widdershins, freeing the thread on it. She felt an ephemeral tug on the flames. The fires burned lower, and their heat faded to warmth.

She gave her spindle another vicious turn. Another. Inch by inch, the wall of fire sank lower, then finally fell to embers, leaving spots of light on her vision.

She drew a breath. She had done it.

Overgrown gardens spread out before her, and beyond them stood the manor, a stately shadow in the moons' light. A fragrance wafted over her, more exquisite than any from the summer procession. The scent must have been coming from the flowers that had taken over the grounds. Their twisting vines were armed with thorns, and yet the most stunning blooms grew from the wicked things, with layers upon layers of crimson petals curling around each other. Celandine had never seen the like before.

Were these roses, the sacred flower of Hespera, the Goddess of Night? All her creations were dangerously beautiful. Especially the Hesperines, the fanged, bloodthirsty immortals who served her.

Somewhere in this house, one of their kind lay trapped in a hundred-year sleep. After all this time, he must be very, very hungry. Celandine was counting on that.

But to reach him, she would have to survive the Hesperine magic that guarded his lair.

The remnants of a path led through the rose vines. She held her robes close so as not to catch them on the thorns. Some tales said that the flowers would kill any mage who tried to approach the Hesperine. Others claimed that when either of the moons was full, he rose from his slumber to lure virgins into his garden to devour their blood.

Celandine didn't see the corpses of any maidens as she approached the manor. Perhaps not all the stories were true. Fortunate, for if he preferred virgins, he would have little interest in Celandine, and her attempt to give him her blood would be for nothing. Even so, she held her distaff at the ready to push aside any vines in case they tried to strangle her.

When she ran headfirst into a warding spell, the impact stunned her. She leaned on her distaff for support, reeling. She

had never felt such power. It repelled and comforted her.

Beautiful. Deceptive. Hesperine.

Tangling with Hespera was more dangerous than anything she had ever done.

She had known that when she came here. Was she a coward, or would she have her revenge?

She fumbled for her spindle and twisted it with a shaking hand. The whole night sky seemed to whirl around her. She stood firm against a wave of vertigo and let the eerie power flow across her arcane senses. Just when she thought she understood its nature, it transformed.

Finally, she reversed her spindle. She stood there for long moments, twirling and twirling widdershins. It seemed she would need to be immortal herself to have enough time for unraveling all the layers of spells the Hesperines had cast to guard their sleeping brother.

Then with a rustle, the roses parted, revealing the steps to the manor door. She took one cautious step forward.

And slipped through the ward, as if it welcomed her into the Hesperine's domain.

Had she really unwoven the spell? Or had it let her in for reasons of its own?

“Do your worst, Hesperine.” Celandine marched up the steps and pushed open the front door.

She peered around the bright antechamber, testing the space with her senses. She could detect no magical traps, but also no Hesperine.

Did his slumber dampen his presence? She hoped that was the reason. If he had died before she could get any use out of him, she would be furious with him.

She padded forward. Spell lights shone from every sconce. Their brilliant glow looked more like stars than any working of mortal mages. More Hesperine magic.

She made her way across thick carpets and under high, rounded arches. With every step, she felt more alone.

No temple crones watching like hawks. No apprentices ferreting out transgressions for their own advancement. No dictates handed down from the men in the Order of Anthros, who ruled women even in their own halls of worship.

Celandine halted in her tracks and ripped off her veil. The warmth of summer reached her cheeks and dried the tears there.

Freeing her hair from its knot, she gave her head a shake and let the dark brown waves fall around her. Her distaff clattered on the floor as she tore out of her shroud and kicked off her hard, thin shoes. She stripped off every vestige of the temple until she wore nothing but her long tunica and underlinens.

She stood there panting and realized she had come to the great hall. Without her veil, she could appreciate every detail. The lavish table settings were a hundred years out of style, but this place had been a palace in its glory days. The platters were still heavy with a half-eaten feast, preserved under the wards. The chairs were pushed back, right where the guests must have left them the night of the fateful summer banquet when the curse had befallen this place.

*Hurry*, said the voice of revenge in her mind. But longing drew her toward the dais and the golden chair at the high table. She slid onto the throne and looked out over the grand room.

She had once ruled her own world from a seat like this.

A lute lay abandoned by the chair. Remembering when her life had been filled with dances instead of funerary rites, she ran her fingers over the strings.

Celandine winced. Long out of tune. She shook her head and left, picking up her distaff and spindle on the way to the door. Her old life was gone. She could never get it back.

But she would make sure that if she couldn't have it, no one could. Least of all the men who had stolen it from her.

Wishing was for fools. Revenge was for survivors.

And her revenge required the Hesperine. She climbed a grand staircase to seek him in the upper levels of the manor. As she wandered along a gallery, princes of the Taurus family watched her from the portraits on the walls.

She looked into the eyes of the men who had feuded with her ancestors of the Pavo dynasty. She was fairly certain the one with the crooked nose had been disfigured by her great-great-great-grandfather's fist. That one there with the smug expression had seduced her aunt by several greats and slaughtered the husband in a bloody duel.

Celandine might have lost her name and her title, but she was still a Pavo by blood. She made a vulgar gesture at her long-dead Taurus enemies.

At the end of the gallery, she pushed open a tall, carved door. Inside the luxurious chamber, soft spell lights shone on a massive canopy bed.

She had found him.

The reality hit her then. She had actually made it this far, and now she would face the greatest danger of all: the Hesperine himself.

Her survival depended on his sleep leaving him weakened... and on making him an offer he couldn't resist.



## CHAPTER TWO



THAT SENSE OF CALM overtook Celandine again. She should have been afraid of what he would do to her when his fangs sank into her throat. But after everything she had suffered in the temple, what was some more pain?

For a decade, the temple had done everything in their power to destroy her pride and break her spirit. She had let them believe they had won. They thought her a cowed shadow of her former self who would not dare defy them.

Tonight, she would prove how wrong they were.

Just outside the bed curtains, she paused to pull the flax farther down her distaff, exposing the sharpened end. She had staked her fair share of lesser undead whenever a corpse inconveniently rose during its own funerary rites.

But this would be her first Hesperine. She had read all the temple's gory scrolls in preparation, but she had no illusions she was a match for an immortal at full strength.

With the sharp end of her distaff, she pushed back the curtain and looked upon the infamous Prince Troilus Tauri.

Her breath caught. The bedclothes were pulled up to his waist, leaving an expanse of bronze skin bare. Only a few days' worth of stubble covered his strong jaw. His dark hair lay tousled around his broad shoulders, and a slight flush darkened his cheeks. Lying in the intimate shadows of the bed, he might have fallen asleep mere moments ago after a long night with a lover.

She shut her mouth, her own face heating. No matter how long it had been since she'd touched a man, that wasn't enough to make her lust after a desiccated Hesperine who had been a Taurus in his human life. Even in his sleep, he must have had some kind of innate immortal allure that was toying with her.

His chest was eerily still, for his kind didn't breathe in their sleep. But she knew he wasn't dead. When Hesperines were slain, their remains self-destructed in a flash of light. The unfairly attractive body in this bed was quite alive.

He was lean as a hungry wolf, but she could see a warrior's strength in the contours of his torso. And he wouldn't need those muscles to hurt her, not with Hesperine magic.

She flung back the curtains to let in more light. "So, your branch of the mighty Taurus family has been reduced to this. What would your forefathers say if they could see you now? The last prince of their line, not only dethroned but transformed into an unholy monster."

Banishing the shadows did not make him any less handsome. She ignored the vee of his hips peeking above the sheets and went about her business. Keeping her distaff aimed at his heart, she adjusted her spindle in her hand.

"I hate your ancestors, and I hate princes who think they're entitled to take anything they want. In your human life, you were no better than the man who is now sitting on my throne. But we both have reason to want revenge on him. That is the only reason I'm doing this for you. So take my blood and be grateful for it, you filthy Taurus."

The mattress gave under her as she knelt over him. She pried his lips apart. After all the illustrations of ravenous Hesperines, his canines were underwhelming. “Not so impressive, even as an immortal.”

Celandine pricked her finger on the end of her spindle. Sliding her finger between his lips, she put a drop of her blood on his tongue.

He didn't stir. Would she have to stab him a little with her staff to rouse him? That would be satisfying but probably unwise.

When he moved his tongue, she started. He gave her finger a slow lick. Suddenly her knees were not so steady. Then he clamped his mouth around her finger and sucked. She pulled back. The sensation of her finger gliding out of his mouth sent a frisson over her.

She didn't see his hand move. He caught her wrist in a firm grip, and she froze. His nostrils flared, his chest lifting as he drew in a breath at last.

Those unassuming canines slid out of his gums, unsheathing to two long upper fangs and a pair of short, sharp, lower ones.

Purely on instinct, she fought his hold. His grip slackened, and she was able to break free. She retreated across the room, her palm sweaty around her distaff.

She took a deep breath, her heart hammering against her ribs. Good. He was definitely not at full strength. She could escape if she decided to. She could change her mind about all of this if he demanded anything she was unwilling to give him.

Celandine approached him again. He didn't open his eyes, but he turned his head slightly toward her, sucking in another breath. He licked his elegantly shaped lips.

She swallowed hard. She had wanted him desperate for blood, hadn't she?

But as she knelt on the bed again, she had to wonder if his hunger really gave her power over him...or put her at his mercy.

She pulled her hair away from her neck and leaned down over him. When she gripped his stubbled chin, the heat of his skin took her aback. He wasn't cold as the grave but feverish. From bloodlust?

Slowly, she guided his mouth to her neck. The first brush of his lips sent a shock through her. It had been so long since she'd been kissed. Why was she thinking of that now? This wasn't a kiss at all.

But it felt like one as he moved his mouth roughly, desperately, down her throat. He laved her skin with his tongue as if his life depended on the taste of her.

It did, she reminded herself. He was acting on pure survival instinct, and she couldn't afford to forget it. She was nothing to him but a meal.

He opened his mouth wider against her skin. Oh gods. He was about to do it. He was going to bite her now. She braced herself for pain.

But it was pleasure-pain that broke her skin and pierced her neck and drove deep inside her. A cry tore out of her, and she stiffened against him.

Then he sucked, and she gasped at the air. The aching draw at her throat seemed to pull at the very core of her, waking long-forgotten things. Her nipples peaked, brushing his chest through the fabric of her tunica.

He dragged hard at her vein. Warmth spread through her, and the rhythm of his sips began to throb low in her body. For the first time, she understood the tales of Hesperine seduction.

Oh *gods*. This was not part of the plan.

Celandine braced her palm on his chest and pulled her distaff closer. But then he buried his hand in her hair, and sensation cascaded over her scalp. His next swallow sent another rush of warmth pooling between her legs.

She felt more in this moment than she had in ten long years.

Another of his limbs came awake. He wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her against him with a fierce,

possessive hold. And she remembered how it felt to be desired.

He didn't want her. All he wanted was her blood. But why shouldn't she take what she wanted from him while he was at it?

Her grip slackened on her distaff. She barely heard it thump onto the carpet. She clutched his powerful shoulders to brace herself, now against the waves of pleasure building inside her.

She squeezed her thighs together. He had barely touched her, but her underlinens were already soaked. How could he do this to her with nothing but a bite?

Panting, she gave in to the urge to move and arched against him. Yes. Oh, yes. She dug her nails into his shoulders, riding the edge. Her plan could wait. The rest of the world could go up in flames. Nothing mattered right now except release.

Deep, gratifying spasms broke through her at last, and her jaw dropped. He growled against her throat. She felt that sound to her curling toes. He kept a tight hold on her shuddering body and worked her vein, pulling her into the next wave of ecstasy, and the next.

When she was spent, she lay still against him, trying to breathe. His fangs slipped out of her, and curse him, even that movement sent pleasure sliding through her. He was pulling back. Turning her face to his. Her blood trickled from the corner of his mouth. She swallowed hard.

His long lashes rose. His deep brown eyes focused on her.

"Who are you?" His gravelly voice sent shivers rippling out from where their chests touched.

"Celandine." She spoke it aloud to another person for the first time in years. Her real name, the one they had taken from her when she had entered the temple. The one she still knew herself by.

"Celandine." He said her name as if savoring the most exquisite delicacy on his tongue. His gaze swept over her, and the spell lights struck his reflective eyes. They glowed bright gold. Within the fallen prince, she saw a starving predator.



TROI HAD THOUGHT HER blood a dream. But his eyes were open, and she remained.

He had dreamt of waking before. How many times had he opened his eyes in one nightmare to find himself in another? How many years had he spent waking and waking through endless layers of figments, still trapped in his Slumber?

Now he held life in his arms, her heart pounding against his, the taste of her climax on his tongue.

Celandine was real. He was awake.

He tightened his grip on the thick waves of her dark hair and licked a smear of blood from her neck. The musk of desire clung to her amber skin. He should turn her over and keep her under him until they were both gluttoned.

Her pulse pattered faster against his tongue. A salty scent overtook the fragrance of her lust. Fear.

That shocked Troi fully awake, and he instantly let her go.

She scooted cautiously away from him, straightening her tunica with great dignity. When he made no move to pursue her, she snatched a staff off the floor and sat with her gaunt frame propped against the footboard, the sharp end of her stick between them.

She carried a mage of Chera's distaff, and yet she had thrown herself into a Hesperine's bed with no regard for chastity or the consequences of consorting with a heretic like him. He knew her name, but who was Celandine in truth?

He pushed himself up, keeping the bedclothes gathered around his waist with one hand. The arm supporting his weight trembled. He fell back against his pillows, already exhausted from the effort of achieving a sitting position. As memories overwhelmed him, his head spun.

Someone had finally come for him. Not a party of powerful Hesperines. One mortal woman.

A beautiful, half-clothed one who both desired and feared him. The thin fabric of her tunica clung to her nipples, and he could smell how wet she was. And yet wariness sharpened her aristocratic features. Now he saw the strands of silver at her temples and the dark circles under her large brown eyes. As he gazed into her soul, her emotions washed over him.

He had always hated this aspect of Hesperine nature. The Blood Union constantly inundated him with the feelings of any creature that had blood in their veins, and he had never mastered the art of controlling it. Hesperines called their empathic ability their greatest strength, but he considered it a curse to feel others' sentiments as if they were his own.

Until now. After his long solitude here, he drank down her vibrant emotions. She was a banquet of passion and pride, sadness and anger. So much anger. His fangs throbbed.

“Thank you for waking me, Celandine.” Hardly recognizing his raspy voice, he cleared his throat. “You have my gratitude.”

She inclined her head. “I believe we can help each other, Troilus Tauri, Prince of Galeo.”

He gave her a humorless smile and gestured to his fangs. “The only title my kind may hold in the human world is ‘heretic.’ My Hesperine name is Firstblood Troilos.”

“It appears you still harbor some bitterness about that. I understand that Rixor Pavonis is the man who took everything from you. A grudge I share, for reasons of my own.”

“What do you want with the man who betrayed me?”

Malice glittered in her eyes. “He stole your throne. His descendant stole mine. Will you help me wipe their legacy from the face of the earth?”

The word *descendant* sent another shock through Troi. “What year is it?”

She hesitated. “When you fell asleep, did you not know how long the curse would last?”

What curse? What did she believe about him?

She was no ally of the Hesperines. She was here for her own ends, and she made no secret of it. Her fear told him she thought of him as a monster.

He was as weak as the night he'd been turned. If she decided he was more useful to her dead, she could be a genuine threat. Especially if she knew how to use that staff.

No matter the bond of gratitude he had with her for waking him, until he knew what she was planning, he must consider her his enemy.



## CHAPTER THREE



TROI FRAMED HIS QUESTION carefully. “Did the curse last as long as you expected?”

“Yes,” she answered. “One hundred years. Well, minus seven days. I woke you before the mages of Anthros came for you.”

His chest seemed to tighten around his heart, and he was suddenly blind to his surroundings. All he could see were the faces in his memory.

His men had fought at his side every time they faced death and laughed with him every time they survived. They had stood with him at his father’s funerary rites and toasted him at his fatal coronation banquet. They were his brothers, not by blood but by bonds of loyalty more powerful than any he had ever shared with his own kin.

They lived only in his memory now.

No. Was she lying, trying to manipulate him? Even as doubt crept in, a familiar sound reached his sensitive immortal ears through the shuttered windows of the house. The gong at the Temple of Anthros. At midnight on each night of the Summer Solstice festival, the war mages beat out the year to celebrate their god's long reign over the world.

Troi counted the reverberating beats. One millennium. Five centuries. It was the year 1500. Celandine was telling the truth.

Every human he had ever loved was gone.

The barest brush of emotion brought him back to the present. Although he could see it nowhere in Celandine's hard gaze, deep within her, there was a thread of sympathy.

"I am sorry," she said.

"Rixor's heirs still live?" Troi asked through gritted teeth.

"After you were turned, he laid claim to your principality. His direct descendant, Rixor IV, rules Galeo now. I'm afraid this forsaken manor is all that remains to you."

None of that mattered. His men were dead, while the man who carried Rixor's name lived.

"Where is he?" Troi growled.

"You can't go after him in your current state. I can help you prepare, and on Summer Solstice, I can get you close to him for the perfect opportunity to strike."

He narrowed his eyes at her. "How? Are you a mage in the Order of Chera or an apostate who stole that staff?"

She weighed a spindle in her hand, and power stirred in her aura. "I suppose I am an apostate as of today. But until yesterday, I was a temple mage. I earned this staff, and I've slain unholy creatures with it before. I do hope we can keep this a cordial negotiation."

He couldn't place the magic he sensed in her. Ignorance of her abilities put him at a disadvantage. "You've been secluded in a temple for years. Why should I believe you can provide me access to a prince like Rixor?"

She drew herself up and looked him in the eye, her chin high, her face cold. He felt the truth in her aura. She had the Will to rule, and she had once been accustomed to being obeyed. Sitting there with her tousled hair and blood drying on her throat, she looked like royalty.

“I am Celandine Pavae,” she declared, “Princess of Aligera.”

Troi bit back an incredulous curse. Of all the women who might have woken him...

She was his greatest enemy of all. He had a scheming Pavo in his bed.

She gave him a smile that must have made her lovers grovel and her enemies quail. “Do you believe me now?”

Aligera had always been known for its wealth and ruthless political acumen. That hadn't changed in a thousand years, so he doubted it had changed in the last century. She was one of the most influential women in all of the principalities, duchies, and city-states that comprised Cordium. Or had been, before the present-day Rixor had dethroned her, it seemed.

“A Pavo princess brought low in the Temple of Chera,” he mused.

“Almost as humiliating as a Taurus prince turned into a Hesperine.”

Her point cut deep. He gave her a cold smile, showing his fangs. But she didn't shrink from him in terror.

“You can take a Pavo princess out of her court,” he said, “but you cannot take the courtier out of a Pavo princess.”

She replied, “You can take a Taurus prince off his battlefield, but you cannot take the fight out of a Taurus prince.”

“I see we understand each other.”

“Indeed, there is no love lost between us. Our dynasties have been stealing principalities from each other for generations, when our own relatives weren't stabbing us in the back.”

“Are you a descendant of the Rixor I knew?” Troi demanded.

Her gaze went to his fangs, and he could smell her sweat, but no fear showed on her face. “No. His family is a collateral line to mine. The bastard who now rules both Galeo and Aligera is my cousin.”

“Don’t expect my sympathy for your infighting.”

“I know better than to expect anything from you but hatred. Unfortunately, we are one another’s only way to get revenge.”

Revenge. Was that the red in his vision and the thirst burning inside him? It was.

A hundred years ago, he had wanted justice for his men. Now it was too late for that. Nothing was left but vengeance.

A base mortal desire. Contrary to the belief that his kind were evil beasts, immortals had much higher principles than humans. Vengeance was anathema to Hesperines.

But Troi remembered how to be human.

Celandine gathered the long curtain of her hair in her hands and laid it across one shoulder, tilting her head. “If you will assist me against our common enemy, I will give you as much blood as you need, anytime you want it.”

Troi’s gaze fixed on her bloodstained throat, and his mouth watered. Merciful Goddess. He had bedded the greatest beauties of Corona and feasted on the most powerful immortals. But he had never hungered for any of them as he did for the tired, vengeful woman before him.

Starvation had robbed him of his wits, and she was his first meal in centuries. There could be no other reason why he desired her so. Once he regained his full strength, he would be immune to this Pavo temptress.

“We need each other,” she said. “I can’t bring down Rixor on my own, and without my help, you won’t make it two steps out the gates before the Mage Orders capture you. But if we can tolerate each other for seven days, we will have our revenge—and then be free to go our separate ways.”

No matter what she was planning, he would play her games. She was his way to Rixor, and he would use her.

Troi bared his fangs. “I will destroy him.”

Her smile sharpened. “Then we have a bargain.”

They had a bond of gratitude. His Hesperine conscience whispered to him that he should do anything she asked of him without expecting anything in return. But those pretty Hesperine principles had not been made for the Tauri and Pavones.

“Tell me your plan,” he said.



CELANDINE KNEW BETTER THAN to tell him everything now. It was in her best interests to remain a valuable source of information, not merely blood. “I will explain the details in good time. If we are to succeed, you must first be strong enough to use Hesperine magic, not to mention stand up without falling on your face. Right now you look like a carcass.”

He glared at her. “Is there anything for me to drink in this house besides the blood of a Pavo?”

“If there were, I wouldn’t be offering.” She rubbed her neck, putting on a look of disgust so her thoughts wouldn’t show on her face. Somehow, his mark had already healed, leaving behind sensitive new skin.

She wasn’t dreading his next bite. Curse her deprived body.

He beckoned to her. “Give me your wrist, then.”

“My wrist?” she repeated stupidly.

“There are plentiful veins there. I needn’t drink from your neck.”

Oh, how Celandine wanted to burn all the scrolls that had attested she must offer him her throat. She could have spared herself the experience of being pressed against his hard body.

“Clothes first,” she declared. “Then blood.”

The sooner there was more than a blanket covering him, the better. She slid off the bed with as much grace as she could muster after climaxing on top of him. Thank all the gods he had still been half asleep and would have no idea she had enjoyed his bite.

She marched to his wardrobe and rifled through his clothes. “Hedon’s horn. These aren’t fit to wear outside my great-grandmother’s hearth room.”

“I can dress myself, thank you,” he snapped.

She fished out a basic tunic and loose breeches—styles which hadn’t changed all that much in a century—then threw them at him. They hit him in the face and covered his sculpted chest. She yanked all the curtains closed around him.

While he dressed, she tried to ignore the rustle of fabric on skin. She needed to armor herself against his wiles in more than her tunica, but she refused to put on that cold, coarse shroud ever again. She fished out a deep brown velvet robe embroidered in gold and wrapped it around herself. So soft and warm. She bit back a little moan of contentment.

When he pushed the curtain open, his movements were sluggish, his face sallow. Ha. The once-mighty warrior couldn’t even dress himself without exhaustion.

Unbidden, memories from the temple intruded on her thoughts. There had been times when she had collapsed from the fasting enforced on her for her small rebellions.

She padded closer and held out her wrist.

“Thank you.” His tone wasn’t even grudging.

He took her forearm in both his big hands. His dark hair fell across his face as he lowered his mouth to her vein. His lips grazed the sensitive skin on the inside of her wrist. As his fangs sank in, she bit the inside of her cheek to keep from gasping. This wasn’t as intimate as his drink from her neck, but pleasure still hummed through her. It seemed she was always cold these days, but now warmth reached from her head to her toes and the tips of her aching fingers.

He swallowed hard and let out a sigh. Watching him drink, she thought of how it felt to steal a loaf from the temple larder and bite into warm, fresh bread after weeks of deprivation.

By the time he got his fill, dawn was creeping through the seams of the shutters. He slumped back against his pillows, his eyes sliding shut. The short summer night was over, and sunrise had banished him into sleep again, but only for the day.

Now Celandine had work to do. She hastened out of his room and retreated to the great hall. She would start here and search the entire manor for any clothing or supplies they could use for her plan.

She picked up her discarded shroud. The next thing she knew, she was tearing at the seams. The rending sound echoed in the great hall. She ripped harder to hear it again. She shredded the robes into smaller and smaller pieces, tears running down her face. When there was nothing left but scraps, she ground them under her heel.

It was over. She had escaped the temple. She would never go back to that place, no matter what fate awaited her.

# CHAPTER FOUR



TROI FOUGHT THE DAWN Slumber. His body lay still and heavy while his mind raced. He would never go back to the prison of sleep. He had to get out.

When his limbs finally moved, he heaved a sigh of relief. He sat up, rubbing his face.

This was no cruel trick or once-in-a-century reprieve. He was awake for good. Thanks to Celandine. Her vibrant aura filled the manor, which had been empty of any living presence for so long.

She most certainly had not been a dream. If he had conjured a beautiful rescuer to grant him the boon of her blood, a Pavo would never have been the object of his fantasies.

He focused on shutting out his awareness of her, but that only made him focus on *her*. He gave up, muttering curses upon the Blood Union and the invading princess.



Troi put his feet on the floor for the first time in one hundred years and tried to stand up.

His knees buckled, and he landed in a heap like a child. If his men could see him now, he would never live this down. Iovian, with his razor-sharp humor, would have roasted Troi around the fire in every camp for the rest of their military careers.

Troi rested his forehead against the side of the bed. Had invincible Remus's luck held, and had he lived to retire with the man he secretly loved? After Marto had died a hero's death, had his widow been able to provide for their children without Troi's aid? He would never know.

But he did know what they would have done in this moment. Get back up.

He dragged himself to his feet. Step by halting step, he followed Celandine's aura down to the great hall. He found her sitting on his throne in his velvet robe, devouring an entire goose leg.

He glowered. "Go ahead, Your Highness. Make yourself at home."

"It's about time you got up, slugabed." She licked her finger.

He recalled how that finger had felt in his mouth. His fangs strained in his gums, and he swallowed hard, his throat dry as sand.

"My compliments to your cook," she said, "and whomever cast the wards that kept this food fresh."

He picked up a nearby goblet of wine and sniffed. Indeed, it smelled as if it had just been poured. He took a long swig to wet his throat, but the mortal drink did nothing for the burn of eternal thirst in his gullet.

Troi glared at her. "If you want my help unseating Rixor, get your arse out of my chair."

With a half smile, she lounged back. Only when the goose leg was reduced to bone did she stand up, delicately wiping her hands on an embroidered handkerchief. Then she fished in

the large basket at her feet, which overflowed with fine garments. She must have raided every trunk and wardrobe in the manor. She strolled down from the dais, a long string in her hands, and stretched it from his shoulder to his wrist.

“What in Hypnos’s realm are you doing?” he demanded.

“Measuring you.” She circled him, stretching the cord across the back of his shoulders. “I need to take in your clothing, as well as update it for the latest fashion.”

“I can rip out Rixor’s throat in sackcloth as well as velvet.”

Celandine knelt at his feet and looked up at him. “You will never get inside his summer ball in sackcloth. It’s on the seventh night of the Summer Solstice festival, so I don’t have much time to bring your wardrobe into this century.”

Troi should have paid attention to what she was revealing about her plan, but as she measured his leg, her fingers brushed the inside of his thigh. Her mouth was a hand’s breadth away from the laces of his breeches. Before he could stop it, a hunger-induced image filled his mind of the Princess of Aligera on her knees in front of him with her lips full and rosy around his cock.

He hauled her to her feet. “Those measurements will be useless to you by tomorrow night.”

Anger flashed in her eyes, snapping like sparks in her aura. “Unhand me!”

He wanted to shake her, but he set her away from him quickly so he could lean his hip on the table next to him for support. Crossing his arms, he tried to appear intimidating. He couldn’t allow her to see how that small exertion had drained him. “My measurements will change. The more I drink, the more muscle I will regain. Don’t change the size of my clothes.”

She pressed her lips together. “Very well. But you will wear what I put on you without protest. We have no room for error.”

He smirked. “So the jewel of the Pavones is reduced to the role of seamstress. What did you do to warrant such vindictiveness from Rixor?”

“I was born female. Do not disdain women who wield thread. We spin everyone’s fates but our own.”

“I never held any woman in my household in disdain. I was known for providing well for my dependents.”

She arched a brow at him. “That’s not how history remembers you. The songs are all about your curse, when they aren’t about your conquests. The ones on the battlefields and in bed. It sounds as if all you did before becoming a bloodsucking monster was fight and fuck.”

His Hesperine conscience needled him again. As a mortal, Troi’s violent deeds had earned him nothing but renown, as had his seductions. He had relished all of it. Until he had received the Gift of immortality along with the burden of immortal empathy.

Celandine peered at him. “You’re looking green again. Here.” She held out her wrist.

“I’m not hungry.”

“I need you fit for our dancing lesson.”

He looked down his nose at her. The top of her head came up to his collarbone. He would *not* think of how well her body had fit against his as he had drunk down her pleasure. “I don’t need instruction from you. I am an excellent dancer.”

“Do you know the Widow’s Weave?”

He scrambled to remember any dance by that name.

“I didn’t think so,” she concluded. “Some of the dances from your era are still popular, but there are many new ones you will encounter once we’re inside.”

“This is your plan? We are to dance into Rixor’s Solstice festivities and—what—kill him with the minstrels looking on?”

“We must make an impression at the ball in order to secure an invitation to the feast. We will take on the identities of the prince and princess of Clementia, who never socialize in the city. They won’t be here to expose us, and everyone at the ball will be eager to meet the elusive royals.”

“You expect me to pose as a Pavo?” Troi protested in outrage. “And your husband!”

“Do you have a better idea for getting near Rixor?”

“Yes. I’ll conceal myself with Hesperine magic and be close enough to kill him before he even knows I’m there.”

“Do your Hesperine skills include breaking through the Anthrian wards he surrounds himself with at all times? The wards made of magefire, your greatest weakness? You don’t seem to have made any progress against the ones at your own door, after all.”

Troi gritted his teeth. “And how is a fugitive mage of Chera to get through such wards?”

Celandine pulled a spindle from her pocket and smiled smugly. “Fortunately for you, I am an unspinner.”

The revelation sent a chill down Troi’s spine. With her talent, not even the Sanctuary wards on his home could keep her away from him. “Why am I your chosen partner for this plot? What need have you for a Hesperine?”

“You shall see. I get you inside. You commit the assassination. Rixor dies in my chair with me looking on.”

Pure rage throbbed in her aura, the fury of an animal lashing out at the one who had chained it. Troi had best not give her a reason to want him dead, too.

He had to regain his full power before she turned on him. His strength would be short-lived between drinks until he was fully recovered from his starved sleep. His only way to protect himself from her was to accept her blood. Without further protest, he took her offered wrist.

He braced himself, but nothing could have prepared him for another taste of her. He bit back a groan as her complex flavor bloomed on his tongue. Her anger and grief filled him, companions for his own. But somewhere under those bitter notes, he tasted the rich sweetness of a passionate woman who had once loved life.

It would be all too easy to lay her back on the nearest banquet table for a true feast. He released her before he lost his head.

She picked up a cloth from the table and wiped her wrist efficiently. Troi rubbed a hand over his mouth, willing his fangs to recede. They didn't heed him.

"Do you feel able to dance now?" she asked.

"Yes." With her life force rushing through his body, he felt he could levitate to the moons and back.

"Show me what you can do on the dance floor, then, Taurus."

Every time she said his old family name, he was rankled by a mixture of emotions he had no wish to sort out. "As long as we are plotting murder together, call me Troi."

She held out her hand to him. "Very well, Troi. I expect you to call me Celandine. If I hear you say 'corpse witch' or 'Pavo harpy,' I will hound you back to your bed with my distaff and weave a new curse around you."

"I wouldn't dare insult my blood supply." He took her hand.

She led him to the open aisle between the banquet tables and pressed their opposite palms together. "This is the starting position."

"You touch hands as the first move of the dance?"

Her peal of laughter filled the hollow room. "I never expected a heretic to sound so scandalized! Yes, Grandpapa, men and women touch hands during dances these days!"

She had no right to possess such a delightful laugh. Troi scowled. "I am not scandalized, merely surprised. We always maintained rigid decorum during dances." He smirked at her. "It was part of the chase. Pushing the boundaries of what the dance would allow was a skill, and after the ball, the private dances in the dark were the reward."

Faint color rose along her sharp cheekbones. "Do not push any boundaries at Rixor's ball—or tonight during our lesson. This isn't a chase. It is a matter of life and death."

“Seduction always is,” he found himself saying.

“Ha. I suppose so, according to your ancestor who killed my ancestor’s husband. But I don’t need Prince Troilus’s arts of seduction. I need Firstblood Troilos’s power.”

She commenced the dance, proceeding around him with graceful sweeps of her feet. He followed her lead, circling with her, their hands touching and bodies half-turned toward one another.

“Hear the music in your mind.” She began to count the beats under her breath. “One, two, three, four...”

“I doubt mages of Chera do the Widow’s Weave after dusk rites. When was the last time you danced?”

“More recently than you.” She spun in place and motioned for him to do the same.

“Fair enough.” He mimicked her, then brought his opposite palm to hers, and they repeated the steps in the other direction. “How long has Rixor been sitting on your throne?”

“Ten years,” she spat.

A decade was plenty of time for a grudge to turn into madness. Troi knew that from experience. “How old are you?”

“Your sleep has rusted your manners. It’s uncouth to ask a lady her age.” She danced backward, leaving his palm cold, and beckoned to him.

He pursued her. “I am one hundred forty years old. I promise that no matter your age, you will seem like a spring maiden to me.”

“I was a twenty-four-year-old widow when Rixor stripped me of my power. Now I will teach him never to underestimate a thirty-four-year-old mage.”

“He would be a fool to do so. It is not the spring maidens but the autumn matriarchs a man should watch out for. And don’t let me start on the winter crones. They’re the most terrifying of all.”

Amusement glinted in her gaze as she positioned them for another turn. This time she placed his hand on her waist.

She hadn't eaten well in the last ten years. He cupped her slim waist, circling with her again, while she held her hand in front of her face as if wielding a fan in a gesture of mock modesty.

He was beginning to understand the story this dance told. It too was a chase, and he could learn to push her boundaries.

She looked him up and down. "How can you be one hundred forty? You look like you were younger than me at your transformation."

"I was thirty, then I spent ten years as a Hesperine before my hundred-year slumber."

A frown creased her brow. "That's not what the legends say."

"Do tell me the stories of my 'curse.' Are they very terrible?"

"Tragic, gruesome, and unfit for the ears of delicate ladies."

"Well, we have established you are no delicate lady. Go on."

"The tales say the women of your line were secretly heretics, worshipers of Hespera who practiced her dark arts, but you wanted nothing to do with the forbidden goddess. When your father died and you inherited your principality, you held a coronation feast at Summer Solstice. You invited a representative from each of the Mage Orders but refused to set a place for a sorceress of Hespera to attend in disguise."

They turned in place once more, and she guided his other hand to her waist. He held her a little tighter this time.

She extended her hand, palm toward his chest, nearly touching. "In revenge, the sorceress turned you into a Hesperine, dooming you to serve Hespera for all eternity. The guests fled in terror—there are conflicted reports on how many you ate before they escaped—but the mage of Anthros in attendance bravely fought you. Although you proved too powerful for him to slay, he banished you into a one-hundred-

year sleep that would drain your power. He swore that his successors would come for you and..." She paused.

"Oh, do tell me what torture they've been dreaming up all these years. It had better be worthy of my fearsome reputation."

"They plan to sacrifice you to Anthros on the Summer Solstice." She gave him a push.

It was his turn to dance away from her. "One of those ostentatious affairs at the Temple of Anthros? Immolation on the altar?"

She danced just out of reach in a teasing circle. "Oh yes. All the pomp and circumstance."

"Fucking war mages."

She let out another laugh. "So, what really happened?"

"The legend is far more interesting."

"What people believe and what actually happened are both useful to know. But I prefer knowing the truth. It's usually more dangerous than tales."

Her circling brought her closer and closer. She tapped her waist to show him what to do next. He gripped her again, just a little closer than the dance called for. He felt no reaction in her poised body, but her aura betrayed that his touch excited her. Despite her masterful court face, she was transparent to his Hesperine senses.

He wanted explanations for her maddening emotions. It would be wise to indulge his curiosity about her, he reasoned. The more he knew, the better armed he would be against any betrayal. "Will you tell me the truth of how you became a mage of Chera?"

She paused to adjust the position of his arms for the next phase of the dance, and he thought she might not reply. But when they began moving again, she spoke.

"My magical ability manifested when I was a young girl. Of course, this meant I would be required to enter a temple. But I was my parents' only heir, destined to marry a suitable man to



rule Aligera. Unwilling to give me up to the Orders, we hid my magic from everyone. My parents took the secret to their graves. Even my husband died without ever knowing.”

“Your grief runs in my veins.”

She gave him a curious look.

“That’s a Hesperine saying,” he hastened to explain. He supposed he had absorbed more impractical Hesperine principles than he’d thought. “It’s how we offer condolences.”

“Thank you, then.”

“So, you were left ruling Aligera on your own as a young widow? My, how men must have circled like vultures.”

She turned her back to him, and he did as she instructed, dancing after her, close enough to touch.

“I could have held my throne against all contenders,” she declared, “if Rixor had not betrayed me.”

“He somehow found out about your magic?”

The dance brought them face-to-face now. Hurt welled up in her, but she continued matter-of-factly. “Yes. He revealed my ability to Kaion, our cousin in the Order of Anthros. Thick as thieves, those two. Kaion had me impressed into service to Chera, earning him accolades for apprehending a wayward sorceress. And Rixor, next in line, inherited everything that is rightfully mine.”

One hundred years later, the Pavones inside and outside the temples were up to the same tricks. He hated to admit how much he and Celandine had in common. “Will this Kaion be at the feast?”

“Do you really think I would drag you right out of your bed and into the clutches of a fire mage, who can wield your opposing element against you in your vulnerable state?”

“Of course you would. That’s why you need a Hesperine, isn’t it? To disguise not only your appearance but your magic. Rixor and Kaion know your face, but worse still, the mage knows your aura. It is no trivial thing to hide your innate magical ability. There is not a mage in all the Orders who

would help a rebel sorceress against the Anthrians. So you need a heretic.”

They were spinning closer again. He could feel the dance reaching its climax. This time when he grasped her waist, she took his free hand in a punishing grip.

“Will you run back to the safety of your bed now, Hesperine?” she challenged. “Or do you want your own revenge?”

He pulled her closer. “You should have told me about Kaion right away.”

Her scent filled with that primal mix of fear and desire again. “And if I had, what would you have done?”

“I would have agreed to your plan even more eagerly,” he told her. “I want vengeance on the mages of Anthros as much as I do on Rixor’s line. I will destroy them both.”

She looked into his eyes, her mouth close enough to kiss. “Then you are precisely the heretic I need.”

# CHAPTER FIVE



*Five nights later*

TONIGHT, IT WAS NOT the sweetness of Celandine's blood or the rush of her lively emotions that greeted Troi when he awoke. His room was cold, the house quiet, except for her fretful weeping.

He stumbled out of bed and followed her pain along the corridor and down a flight of stairs. His heart hammered with her fear. Her misery burrowed under his skin, turning into the burn of humiliation. He couldn't bear this.

He didn't bother opening her door. He simply took one Hesperine step through the solid wall, disappearing from the hall and reappearing inside the bedchamber she had claimed as her own. His eyes adjusted to the darkness, revealing her tangled in the sweat-soaked sheets. Shudders rolled through her body. Her haven now stank of panic and blood.

The scent didn't stoke his appetite. Laced with the odor of suffering, it turned his stomach.

"Celandine." She whimpered her own name to herself. "Celandine...Celandine..."

"Celandine," he echoed softly.

She jerked awake with a gasp, fumbling for her distaff. Before she reached it, she cried out in pain. Clutching her thigh, she fell back, and the sound of her blood changed. She was on the verge of fainting.

Troi pulled the bedclothes away from her leg and pushed up her tunica. Her thigh was bound in a tight cloth with blood soaking through it in patches. He peeled back the bandage, and his stomach flipped again. He had seen far worse in the Hesperine Healing Sanctuary...and caused far worse on the battlefield. But the sight of the wounds on her body sickened him in a way none other ever had.

A ring of deep puncture marks ran all the way around her thigh. Judging by the yellow bruises around them, this had happened to her several days before she had come here, but the wounds showed no signs of beginning to heal.

Troi fumbled for the magic that had never rested easily inside him. His healing power jolted awake in his veins. For the first time in his immortal life, he was glad he possessed it and that the Hesperines had made sure he knew how to use it properly.

He blanketed Celandine in a spell to ease her pain. His magic flowed into her as if it were the most natural thing in the world. She stirred, returning to her senses.

Her gaze darted from his face to her exposed wound. She started to scramble away, yanking at the blankets to cover herself.

He caught her shoulders. "If you move too much, you'll only bleed more. Please hold still and allow me to heal you."

There. He had asked nicely for permission to heal her, as a proper Hesperine should. His mentors would approve.

“Go to Hypnos,” Celandine snarled, twisting away from him.

Well, it would be necessary to do this the improper way, then.

Troi wrestled her down to the bed. She flailed under him, putting up quite a fight without her pain holding her back. But five nights of her blood had reminded him just how strong he was as an immortal.

He pinned her beneath him easily, wrapped his hand around her thigh, and sent a surge of healing magic into her wound.

Her eyes widened, and she went still under him, panting. As the holes in her flesh sealed and new skin began to form, Troi rubbed her thigh, massaging waves of his power into her. Another tear slipped from the corner of her eye.

When she was whole and no more pain screamed through her nerves, satisfaction settled deep into him. What didn't fade was his unreasonable anger at whomever had left those marks on her skin.

He should let her go now. But he found himself running his hand along her thigh again. To make sure his work was finished, of course. Her gaze dropped to where he held her leg.

His gums began to ache. Hespera's Mercy, what was wrong with him? Terrible as he was at being a Hesperine, he had some standards. In this moment, she was his patient, not a meal.

Troi let her go and stood a few paces away while she straightened her tunic and pulled the blankets up around herself.

She wouldn't meet his gaze. “You're a warrior. How can you be a healer?”

The question he had asked himself ever since he had received the Gift of immortality and all his other unwanted gifts with it. “Sometimes those who weren't mages in their mortal lives manifest magical abilities as Hesperines.”

“Hespera must have had a good laugh when she made you a healer. Poetic justice, perhaps, after all the men you slaughtered on the battlefield.”

She didn't know how true that flippant insult was. “You've never set foot on a battlefield. How did you sustain a wound like that?”

She pushed her tangled hair away from her face. “In the temple, of course.”

A nerve pulsed in Troi's temple. “The mages of Chera did this to you?”

“There's some myth or other that claims wrapping spiked chains around our thighs makes us holier. The most devout sisters do it willingly. Irreverent bitches like me get them strapped to us whether we like it or not.”

No wonder she had nightmares. He could guess why her name had been her rallying cry. She must have fought with everything she had not to lose her identity in that place.

He gritted his teeth. She had been carrying this wound right in front of him, with his healing power at his fingertips. “You've been dancing with that for days. You weren't even limping.”

“I've developed a high tolerance for pain.”

Fuck. After spending a decade among Hesperines, he had forgotten how barbaric life was for women in Cordium.

Or perhaps he had wanted to forget this culture of which he had once been a proud son.

“Don't put your feet on the floor for at least another hour,” he said gruffly. “Let the healing spell finish working.”

Troi didn't wait for her reply before seeing himself out of the room.



WHEN THE DOOR SHUT behind him, Celandine lit a candle and pushed back the covers again. She ran trembling fingers over her unblemished skin.

The pain she had lived with for so long was finally gone.

Why had a Taurus, a Hesperine, done this for her?

For the same reason she gave him her blood, of course. He needed her fit for their plan.

She crossed her arms and stayed in bed. Not because he had told her to—it was simply the sensible thing to do. She needed two working legs to get revenge on Rixor.

No more than a quarter of the hour had passed when there came a brusque knock on her door.

“I’m coming in,” Troi warned.

She covered her leg again, trying to forget how his big, warm hand had felt there. If he tried to examine her so intimately again, she would arm herself with her distaff.

“Very well,” she called.

Troi strode in like the lord of the manor and picked her up in his arms. She sputtered a protest and struggled, but the grip she had fought off so easily that first night was now like iron.

This immortal was far more powerful than she now.

“Where are you taking me?” she cried.

“Hush and do as the healer orders.”

“Don’t you dare tell me to obey you!” she burst out. Fury and panic sent a rush of energy through her, and she fought him with all her strength.

His grip loosened, as if she had surprised him. She managed to tumble free.

She landed at his feet with her bad leg under her. Still tender. She bit the inside of her cheek to keep from showing her pain. She would rather be in pain on the floor than take orders from anyone.

Troi backed away, holding up his hands. “Celandine. I am so sorry.”

How dare he sound so gentle and sincere. “Do not...” Her voice shook. She steadied herself and tried again. “Do not give me commands.”

“Never again.”

She eyed him warily from under the hair that had fallen in her eyes. Plenty of men had made her that promise, and every single one of them had broken it.

Troi didn’t move. “May I help you up?”

“You may hand me my distaff.”

He retrieved the artifact from beside the bed and handed it to her, blunt end first. She pulled herself to her feet, leaning her weight on the staff.

“I drew a bath for you in the next room,” Troi said. “The warm water will relax your muscles and help the healing work faster.”

She blinked at him, feeling as if she had wandered into a magical realm inside the manor all over again. “You drew and heated a bath? When?”

“In the last few minutes.” A faint smile appeared on his lips. “Hesperine speed, you know.”

She limped toward the next room, and all the way, she could feel Troi’s gaze on her.

He spoke again, and his respectful tone caused an odd flutter in her stomach. “If you need anything, say my name and I will hear you.”

Then his presence was gone from the room. She hobbled into the dressing room and stared.

Candles flickered softly around an enormous bronze tub. Steam and the perfume of roses drifted from the water. Soap and clean towels were stacked neatly on a stool within easy reach, and there was even a flagon of wine.



She dropped her sweaty clothes on the floor and sank carefully down into the bath. No one ever need know that she lay there in the warm water weeping with relief.

None of *this* was necessary for their plan, but if it were a game of seduction, he wouldn't have left her to undress alone.

Why had he done this for her?

The most confounding mystery in this manor was Troi himself.



THE AROMAS OF ROSES and clean, feminine skin drifted into the great hall, and Troi struggled not to flare his nostrils like an animal. It was even more difficult to fend off mental images of water lapping at Celandine's long legs and bare breasts.

He closed his mouth tightly over his fangs and turned to her. A little too fast—his head spun. Using his magic had taken more out of him than he'd realized.

And it had made him hungry.

Celandine padded in, her hair damp and glistening, wrapped in his velvet robe again. The sight of her in his clothes shouldn't please him so much. Her gaze went to the place he had set for her on the dais, a fresh feast of delicacies he had found in the kitchen.

She arched a brow at him. "Is that an invitation to sit on your throne, slugabed?"

"Make yourself comfortable, Your Highness." He held out his hand, making no move to close the distance between them.

She let him help her up the step onto the dais, but vulnerability throbbed in her aura. He had seen her in a moment of weakness, and she still feared he would exploit it.

Troi was many things, but neither as a man nor an immortal had he ever taken advantage of those less powerful than

himself. And when a woman had told him to stop, he always had. That much of his mother's code of honor had somehow become ingrained in him, despite his efforts to become the man his father wanted him to be.

He pulled out the golden chair for Celandine, then settled into the seat beside her. As if he were her suitor at a feast, he filled her flagon and heaped her plate with morsels he thought she would enjoy. "How are my table manners?"

"I cannot fault them. Formal feast traditions have not changed very much."

"Not all of my renowned skills are rusty."

She caught his innuendo, judging by the gleam in her eye. "A bold claim from someone whose blood flow has been insufficient for years."

It was a relief to hear her insulting him again without fear. He leaned closer, holding a plum tart to her lips. "If you take more measurements, you will not fault me there, either."

"Hmm. It takes a great deal to impress me."

He didn't doubt it. At the height of her power, she must have been a merry widow who enjoyed her secret liaisons. The kind of woman who could inspire a Taurus prince to inflame the feud for an affair with a Pavo princess that wouldn't be forgotten for generations.

Goddess, she must be fire in bed. But fire was a Hesperine's greatest weakness.

She bit into the plum tart, savoring the bite in her mouth. Her tongue darted out to capture a trickle of dark red filling along her lower lip.

When had watching a woman eat become so erotic? Unbidden, the image came to him of her licking a trail of his blood from her mouth instead.

When had his fantasies become so Hesperine?

He gestured to the corner of his mouth. "You have a dab of jam just there."

“Don’t you dare tell me my table manners are rusty.” She frowned and reached for a cloth to wipe her mouth but only succeeded in smudging it.

“I’m sure you got plum tart on your face intentionally, to test my decorum.” He held up his own napkin. “May I?”

She hesitated an instant, then leaned closer. Gently, slowly, he dabbed the sweet filling off her face.

A searching look came into her big brown eyes. “Where did you learn to ask a woman’s permission before you touch her? They don’t teach those manners here in Cordium.”

“Orthros,” he replied.

“You’ve been to the Hesperines’ kingdom, then?”

“It’s a queendom, you know. That’s where I spent my first ten years as a Hesperine.”

She propped her hand under her chin to study him. “Is Orthros as hideous as it sounds in the tales?”

“No,” he said truthfully. “It puts Cordium to shame.”

“That is not what the legends say at all.”

“You prefer the truth, do you not?”

“And why should I trust a Hesperine to tell the truth?”

He sighed. He had once wondered the same. Troi fiddled with the ring on his smallest finger, then decided to show it to her. “You surely have an eye for fine jewelry. Tell me, was this made anywhere in Tenebra or Cordium?”

She took his hand. Her fingers, wrinkled from her long bath, teased his palm as she studied the gold band and red moonstone. Her aura tugged at the ring, testing the spells on it.

“I have never seen such a jewel anywhere in mortal lands,” she admitted at last, “nor sensed the magic that crafted this.”

“All of Orthros is like this ring.”

Her eyes glittered with challenge. “I should not be surprised. Hesperines are known for being beautiful and seductive. And dangerous.”

“What does the magic in this ring feel like to you?”

She paused, as if searching for words.

“The truth is more dangerous, Celandine,” he reminded her.

“The magic feels pure,” she murmured.

“Under Orthros’s beauty, there is more beauty. In truth, Hesperines are disgustingly honest and annoyingly good-hearted. I have no idea how I became one.”

Her lips twitched. “No violent females wreaking havoc? No deadly orgies?”

“Sorry to disappoint you. The Queens are the most peaceful beings I have ever met. And none of my Hesperine lovers ate my heart.”

She raised a brow. “Making conquests in immortal beds as well, I see.”

“If I regarded a Hesperine woman as something to be conquered, she would toss me out on my arse. And with her magic, that would hurt.”

He was rewarded with Celandine’s sparkling laughter. “Perhaps I would like Hesperine women.”

He refilled her wine, but her gaze was on his face, not the pouring liquid. He felt the rush of knowing he had captured her attention.

“When Hesperines share blood and pleasure,” he said, “it is anything but a conquest.”

She lifted her wine to her lips, breaking her gaze from his. But he heard the way her pulse raced.

“Men and women are equals in Orthros,” he went on, “although the Queens of the Hesperines hold the greatest power.”

“I have lived in a temple where women hold power, and it was anything but beautiful and pure. Why is Orthros different?”

“Hespera worshipers stood against the Orders in the Last War, while the mages of Chera bowed to them.”

“And the temples of Hespera were razed for their trouble.”

“Ask yourself why the Order of Anthros banned worship of Hespera. The mages of war and order could not allow a goddess of peace and freedom. Everything about the cult of Hespera is a threat to them. Especially powerful women.”

Bleakness filled her aura. “All they achieved by resisting was exile.”

“They achieved a land free of the Orders’ influence.”

Troi had run so far to escape Orthros, only to meet a woman who would thrive there.

“What will you do when your revenge is complete?” he asked.

Her gaze shuttered, and her inner defenses hardened over her emotions. “Have you thought that far ahead yet?”

“No.” He could not see past the moment when he would hear Rixor’s heart stop beating. “The ball is tomorrow,” he said, striving for a lighter tone. “This is our last night to prepare. Any rough edges on me you still wish to file down, Your Highness?”

“My compliments on your table,” she replied, the traditional words of appreciation guests gave their host at the end of a banquet. She set aside her fork. “Keep your fangs to yourself tomorrow night, and you shall do quite well.”

He levitated the nearby lute into his hold and began tuning it. “In that case, we have time for some diversion.”

“Where did a prince learn to play the lute?”

“I have always been a man of many talents.”

“Do you remember how to tune that, after sleeping for a hundred years?”

He tightened another string and tested it, rewarded with a pure, high note. Much better. “There are some things one remembers forever.”

How many nights had he played for his men to lift their spirits?

Then there were the earlier memories he preferred to forget. His mother's smile on those rare occasions when he could play for her. His father's admonitions that a lute was useless in a warrior's hands.

Troi found himself playing the opening chords of a Hesperine dance. He had picked it up in the coffeehouses on the docks of Orthros during long, wild nights of dancing, which usually ended in private upstairs rooms. He had tried to drown his inner battles in blood and pleasure until the night when he had been powerful enough to come back here for his last stand against his enemies.

That confrontation had been one hundred and ten years in the making. So why, instead of strategizing on the eve of battle, was he sitting here playing a Hesperine song for Celandine?

Her foot tapped on the floor under the table. "This song is like your ring."

"It is made for dancing."

"I don't know the steps."

"Why not choose your own?"

She left the table and stepped down into the open center of the hall. Pausing, she closed her eyes, tapping out the beat of the song against her hip. Then she began with the opening steps of a Cordian dance he recalled from his day. Its restrained sensuality had made it his favorite.

She adapted and blended the steps to suit the Hesperine tune, and as she found her rhythm, her moves became more confident, more passionate than any woman would dare before an audience other than a Hesperine.

He watched her rediscover the joy of movement without pain. She was lost in the music, her robe swirling around her. He couldn't take his eyes off the sway of her hips and the sensual motions of her hands. He could imagine how she

would move under him and how her touch would feel down his back.

Troi had been burned by lovers before. Had he ever let that stop him from playing with fire?

None of them had been as dangerous as Celandine. But this hunger for her was more consuming than anything he had ever felt before.

He levitated down to join her. A flinch went through her, becoming another beat in the dance. Strumming hard on the lute strings, he circled and leapt with her, close enough to touch.

Her blood was rushing from the dancing, but it was his nearness that made her heart kick against her ribs. All the other sounds in the world seemed to fade as his hearing filled with the thrum of her blood pumping through her body. He forgot the rhythm of the song, and he played to the beat of her heart.

They turned again, and the room whirled. The floor tilted. He ran into the table, and the lute slipped from his hands with a melodious thud. Celandine caught him, falling back, her hair spilling wild across the golden linen tablecloth.

She looked up at him with wide eyes. “You were stronger than this last night.”

He sucked in a breath, trying to think through his thirst and desire. “I used magic.”

Her court mask slipped. “Healing me weakened you?”

“You don’t owe me anything.” That seemed so important to say, somehow.

But all coherent thought fled from his mind when Celandine pulled her robe aside to reveal her throat.

## CHAPTER SIX



CELANDINE WATCHED HIS FANGS shoot down. Where was her healthy fear now? Those sharp teeth didn't scare her as they had, as they should. Fascination made her reach up and run her finger down one of his canines.

She pricked herself on the sharp point. Troi closed his mouth around her finger. This time he looked into her eyes as he sucked.

She could see the desperation in his gaze, the sickly tint under his rich complexion. "My wrist will not be enough for you tonight."

He braced his hands on the table on either side of her. "May I drink from your throat?"

He could have demanded. He could have taken. But something about that question was more seductive than anything her lovers had ever said to her in bed.



She buried her fingers in his hair and pulled his mouth down to her neck.

When his fangs sank into her, she felt the bite all the way to her core. She bit down on her own hand to keep from moaning. He sucked rapidly at her throat, sending beats of pleasure pounding through her body. Splayed on the table for him, it would be so easy to wrap her legs around him and let him pound into her with more than his fangs.

Fuck, she had to stop thinking. Stop breathing. Just hold her own until he had his fill. She couldn't let him find out how his bite affected her. He would use it against her. Wouldn't he?

He lifted his head with a gasp. Her blood painted his beautiful lips and dripped down his chin. "Your lust is the finest delicacy in this house."

Oh, *fuck*. He could taste that in her blood?

Did her pleasure somehow make her flavor better for him?

A knowing, infuriating smile spread across his face. He lowered his mouth to her ear. "I won't touch you unless you demand, Your Highness."

He kissed his way to the other side of her throat and bit down.

He let her lie there, half under him, while he wreaked havoc in her body with only his bite. His hands lay flat on the table to either side of her, unmoving.

She swore at him and dragged her robe open. Taking hold of his hand, she put it to her breast. Obediently, he began to massage her. Gods above and below, his one-hundred-year sleep had not made him forget his way around a woman's body. His fingers played her nipple with expert flicks and tugs.

She should stop him now while she still had the will. But she was so hungry...she had been hungry for so long.

She clutched his other hand and guided it to where her wound had been. He swept his hand around her thigh, just like when he had healed her. This time his touch seared her, feverish hot.

He took his time, warming her with slow caresses along the inside of her thigh. She wanted him to hurry and give her everything *now*. But she didn't want him to stop.

When she was on the verge of falling apart, he stopped touching her. Wicked tease. She cursed again and dragged his hand between her legs.

His touch was smooth and hard and warm. She pressed the heel of his hand to the top of her cleft and arched against him. Oh, it was good to feel a man's touch there again. She guided his hand exactly where she wanted him, and he rubbed her while she ground herself on him.

She let her head fall back and closed her eyes. Wetness slid between his fingers onto her hand as her grip relaxed. He slowed his caresses, bringing his fingers up to tease her clitoris. She melted into his touch, curling her fingers around the edge of the table to steady herself.

He drew shameless sighs out of her until she was twisting under him, begging. In another life, she would have thrown all her other lovers out on their ears for one man with hands like this. She forgot his family name and her own.

"Trois," she gasped against his ear as he held her, trembling, on the edge.

He sent her over with another rough bite and a gentle flick of his fingers. She spasmed against his hand, a moan tearing out of her. His jaw tightened, and he purred low in his throat like the cat that got the cream.

He worked her with his hand, dragging her long release out of her and lapping it up at her vein. And she couldn't have stopped him if all her Pavo ancestors had come to haunt her for it.

When he finally let her go, her knees were jelly and her pride not much better off. He stood back, swiping his hand across his chin, and licked her blood from his fingers.

Her gaze dropped to the laces of his trousers, straining over his erection. Before her curiosity got the better of her and she

took his measurements with her own body, she squeezed her thighs together and pulled her robe over her breasts.

Troi grinned at her. “My compliments on your table.”

And then he disappeared into thin air. She heard his bedroom door shut upstairs.

Insufferable creature, leaving her sitting here cold in the middle of a seduction.

Confusing man, retreating at her merest sign of hesitation instead of pressing his advantage.

Celandine’s gaze fell to the lute he had left behind. She could hardly envision her future, and yet she felt sure Troi’s song would haunt her dreams long after Summer Solstice was through.



WHILE TROI SLEPT, CELANDINE waited in the ramshackle cemetery where paupers went unmourned. No one here but the dead and her. She hadn’t been followed.

The long, hooded cloak she had donned to sneak out of the manor was too warm for the balmy summer day. But now she pulled it closer around her with a shiver.

Soon, graveyards would no longer be her haunts.

Heavy boots crunched in the brittle grass behind her, and Celandine jumped.

A low, hoarse chuckle crept over the back of her neck. “Did I frighten you, little bird?”

She turned to face the man. The morning light seemed to die everywhere it touched his dark clothing. He wore the short robes and leather armor of a Gift Collector, an assassin of Hesperines. The Eye of Hypnos—the glyph of the god of death and dreams—was painted on his breastplate in bright red blood.

Must his sort be so theatrical? She put her hood back and gave him a practiced expression of disdain from her days as a princess. “You should know I’ve put less savory creatures than you in their graves. If you think we mages of Chera fear our brethren who serve the god of death, you are very unwise.”

“You should know necromancers of my profession are more dangerous than anything else you’re likely to meet in a graveyard.”

“Be that as it may, your scarred face is not much prettier than some of the undead I’ve slain.”

He rubbed the bite marks on his chin and smiled. “The Order of Hypnos doesn’t pay me for my pretty face, only Hesperine heads. Can you get me inside the manor or not?”

She tried not to stare at the bleeding knife hanging from his belt. But she couldn’t escape the image of that blade laying open Troi’s throat.

She wanted to shake herself. A week locked in the manor with the Hesperine’s allure was addling her wits. She couldn’t let fleeting pleasure sway her from a decade of effort.

From within her cloak, she withdrew the rose she had brought from the manor’s garden as proof. “I’ve already made it past the flames.”

Greed gleamed in the Gift Collector’s hard eyes, and he reached for the flower.

Celandine held it back out of his reach. “I want to see my first payment.”

He took another step toward her. Her heart jumped in her chest, but she forced herself to stand her ground. “The Order doesn’t pay apostate witches at all. Don’t forget you won’t see a coin except through me.”

“And you haven’t a hope of getting to the Hesperine without me. If I don’t unravel the spells for you before the mages of Anthros arrive, your valuable prey will be wasted on their altar.”

Still standing too close for comfort, the Gift Collector dropped a heavy coin purse in her hand.

She let him take the rose and opened the purse to count her spoils. It was the amount he had promised. Enough to get her out of the city once Rixor and Kaion were dead. But after her escape, she would need much more to survive in the world as a woman alone.

The Order of Hypnos's bounty on the notorious Hesperine of Corona had been increasing for the last hundred years. Even a fraction of it would be enough to reinvent herself and fund any new life she chose to live.

And Troi's life would end.

She tried to keep her voice steady. "We split the bounty fifty-fifty, as we agreed."

"I'm the one who must decapitate the creature. I should get seventy at least."

She had expected him to renegotiate, but not to torture her with such images. But could she really believe a few conversations with Troi over a lifetime of knowledge about Hesperines?

*Knowledge fed to you by the Orders*, the voice of truth reminded her.

Be that as it may, she couldn't throw away her life for this ephemeral sense of compassion for a Taurus. What compassion would Troi have for her when this was over? No doubt he was playing her like that lute and planning a betrayal of his own.

Would he kill her for simply being a Pavo? Would he take her away with him and use her for blood until she died?

*Did you feel used last night?* demanded that dangerous voice.

"Forty-sixty," she made herself say, "or I will let another Gift Collector through the gate before you."

He narrowed his eyes at her. "Very well. But if you don't hurry and get me inside before the mages of Anthros, you'll

get nothing but my hand in your hair, dragging you back to your temple.”

“I only need a little more time...”

Time to what? To reconsider her effort to free herself from Rixor and the Orders? To fall deeper under Troi’s spell, until he and his goddess took control of her destiny?

The Gift Collector loomed over her. “We are running out of time.”

“Unraveling the Hesperine spells inside is a massive effort. I’m earning my forty percent. Wait until the day after tomorrow, then come at dawn when he’s asleep. I’ll leave an opening in the spells for you.”

“I will be there,” the Gift Collector growled, “whether you’re ready or not.”

He turned on his heel and stalked away from her. The warm summer day seemed to fill with cold, dark visions of Troi, vulnerable in his Slumber, and the Gift Collector closing in on him with that deadly blade.

# CHAPTER SEVEN



CELANDINE STOOD ON TIPTOE but couldn't catch a glimpse of what Troi was doing behind the dressing screen. "Are you certain you don't need me to—"

"No."

"The laces on your tunic—"

"We had laces one hundred years ago, Your Highness."

"Fine, slugabed. But if you come out looking sloppy," she threatened, brandishing a hair-brush, "I *will* work you over from head to toe."

"If you intend to do that," came his deep, wicked voice, "I would prefer to be undressed."

She threw the hairbrush, and it hit the dressing screen with an unsatisfying thump. He laughed.

"The ball begins in less than an hour," she said. "We don't have time for distractions!"

All the years seemed to have built up in her chest, and if one thing went wrong tonight, she would shatter.

“We’ll arrive on time, Celandine.”

His reassuring tone and the way he said her name calmed her racing pulse. But the emotions gripping her heart only grew more tangled.

It wasn’t too late to call off the Gift Collector. She and Troi could abandon the manor, leaving the necromancer to find nothing but an empty house.

And then what would Celandine eat? How would she put a roof over her head? As a woman on the run from the Mage Orders, that bounty was her only hope of making her way in the world.

“Let go of your worries,” Troi said. “You can rely on me.”

He stepped around the dressing screen.

The air left her lungs. The breeches she had taken in hugged his calves and thighs to perfection, showing off every muscle he had regained. His altered black-and-gold velvet tunic emphasized his broad shoulders and golden-brown skin. He had trimmed his stubble beard, and a topaz stud gleamed in his earlobe. Every detail was perfection. The famed prince had stepped out of the legends and into her century.

“Celandine,” he said, his voice low with a little rasp, “you look like a princess.”

She looked down and smoothed the gown she had modified for herself. It was the deep purple-black of a summer night sky. She had also donned a beautifully embroidered marriage headband, for her disguise would not have been complete without that to signify her status as his wife.

She tried not to wonder whom this finery had belonged to, for it was low of her to be jealous of a long-gone princess. “I hope seeing these on me does not make you miss your wife.”

“I never had a wife. I don’t know whose heirlooms these were, but they’re yours now.”



She looked up at him. “Didn’t you face pressure to marry and father heirs?”

“Certainly. I found it convenient to be at war as often as possible, where the matchmaking mamas couldn’t throw their daughters at me.”

Celandine chuckled. She couldn’t fault him for wanting to remain unattached after how she had shunned a second marriage. “Were you planning to settle down after your coronation, then?”

He adjusted his collar with a rueful look. “Let us say that my parents’ experience did not inspire a love in me for the institution of marriage.”

“Family politics are the most painful of all.”

“As you well know.”

“And what about the fanged mamas of Orthros?” Celandine asked before she thought better of it. “Did any of them arrange a heretical marriage for you?”

“Hesperines don’t marry, and the eternal bond between immortal mates is one that cannot be arranged. It is fated.”

“That sounds ominous. How does Hespera reveal this fate to you, then?”

“Addiction.”

Something about how he said the word sent an unwholesome thrill down Celandine’s spine. It was not impossible to imagine becoming addicted to a Hesperine’s bite.

“You know your mate by your Craving for their blood,” he went on. “An eternal hunger that can only be sated by the one destined to spend forever at your side. You need no other blood, mortal or immortal. We call that person a Grace.”

“Do you have a Grace waiting for you to wake?” She found that even more unpleasant to think about than a wife.

Troi gave her a humorless smile. “I doubt I’m a candidate for such a blessing from Hespera.”

There was something profoundly, unexpectedly sad about that bleak statement. She knew what it was like for life's joys to be forever out of reach. "I'm sorry."

"It's just as well. If I were Graced, I would have died in that Slumber. A Hesperine can't survive without their Grace. They die of withdrawal."

"Oh." She shuddered. "That seems a high price to pay for love."

"It has its benefits," he said, a gleam of amusement in his eyes. "Sating the addiction is said to be ecstasy without compare. The depth of the magical bond adds to the pleasure."

Suddenly she felt too warm in her gown. "So Hesperines do practice profane pleasure rituals."

"I promise I will behave at the ball tonight."

"I doubt that very much."

He gestured to himself. "Will I do?"

She smoothed the rich embroidery on the front of his tunic. "You look perfect."

He leaned his ear closer. "What was that? Did I mishear you, or did a Pavo princess give me her approval?"

"Enjoy it while you can, Taurus."

He beckoned to her. "I think I need you to repeat that."

"Never." She stepped back. "Now for that Hesperine disguise you promised me."

He folded his arms and considered her. Magic caressed her, and she suppressed a shiver. "That should do nicely."

She picked up a bronze hand mirror and looked at her reflection. "I look exactly the same!"

"I am no illusionist, but all Hesperines can cast veil spells that subtly conceal. Even if someone who once knew you looks right at you, they won't recognize you."

She stared at her crow's feet and silver hairs in the mirror. She was older than him, and life in the temple had aged her

beyond her years. “You make a very convincing prince just back from the wars, but no one will believe I am your new bride. Men like you marry fresh maidens.”

He stepped even closer to her, his presence, his scent, overwhelming. She breathed in orange, neroli, and oak as his dark magic shadowed her arcane senses.

He lowered his head toward her, slowly, giving her plenty of time to pull away.

She tilted her face up toward him.

He took her chin in his hand and brought his mouth down on hers. He held her there as he kissed her lips roughly apart and stroked deep with his tongue. She could have broken free of his careful grip, but she didn't. The mirror slipped from her grasp onto the carpet. She flattened her hands on his hard chest and stood transfixed.

At last, he let her up for air. She tried to breathe, her head floating. He tucked back a strand of hair that had escaped from her headband. She must look like a ravished new bride. She certainly felt like one.

He gazed down at her, his eyes incandescent gold. “If anyone doubts our ruse, I will make a believer out of them.”

He'd half made a believer out of her, even though she knew the truth. It was all for the plan, of course. For the kill.



AT THE GATES OF the manor, Troi wrapped himself and Celandine in veil spells that would hide them from every mortal eye. He felt the urge to wrap her up tightly in his arms, too, and carry her in the opposite direction of their enemies.

Why were his protective instincts raging like this tonight? She could take care of herself, and all he should be thinking of was how he would kill Rixor and Kaion.

They halted at the boundary of the Sanctuary wards. He stared at the infernal ring of fire that had kept him bound here

for the last century. With a few twirls of Celandine's spindle, the fire sank away.

He was free. By her hand.

He stepped over the threshold and into the current world.

Human emotion rolled through him and made him stagger a step back. The wards had kept him insulated from the life of the city, and now it felt as if he had swallowed all of Corona's excitement and greed and desire.

Celandine caught his arm. "Trois?"

"I'm all right. Merely...adjusting." He stood up straighter and mustered his control of his Hesperine abilities, such as it was.

The historical street of ancestral manors was mostly recognizable, at least. But the celebrants strolling by or passing in their horse litters were dressed in a dizzying array of styles that he had not imagined in his lifetime.

He tracked a woman's bare throat with his gaze. "Such revealing fashions these days. Why are you wearing a high collar that goes up to your chin?"

She looked at him from beneath her lashes. "A prince once told me decorum adds to the excitement of the chase."

He traced a finger down her collar, touching the site of his bite through the fabric. "Are you enjoying the chase?"

The color deepened on her cheeks. "You did not misrepresent your skills."

Hidden by his magic, they left the Taurus district. A wide boulevard lined with orange trees was the only border that divided the city residences of the two feuding dynasties, but it had been an impassable divide for generations. Arm in arm with Celandine, Trois walked into enemy territory.

She led him down a back street where servants hustled to and fro, then along a stucco wall that bristled with warding spells. Pausing in the shadows, she brought out her spindle again.

Her eyes flashed, and her brow furrowed with effort. “Rixor has strengthened the wards since my day, but not enough.”

A hole spread in the spells directly in front of them.

“Hurry,” Celandine said. “Help me over.”

He pulled her against him and levitated them over the wall. She made a small sound of surprise.

“Did you think I would merely boost you and expect you to climb, when we could do things the Hesperine way?” he asked.

“You are a handy fellow to have while breaking into my own house.”

Her manor was a sweeping complex of rounded arches and broad porticoes surrounded by lavish gardens. Peacocks roamed between tall stone fountains and topiaries. All the elites aligned with the Pavones were descending from their litters near the front entrance, where guards in teal, green, and black admitted them one by one.

Troi and Celandine avoided the front gates and the guards’ questions. He eased back his veils, leaving in place only the spell that would protect her identity. They melted into the guests already idling in the gardens as if they had been there all along.

He fought the urge to loosen his collar. The emotions of the attendees were running high and would only flow more freely as the alcohol did. He was choking on mortal passions and woes. Not least the volatile feelings churning in Celandine as she returned to her stolen home.

She ached with betrayal, although her tone was cool and haughty. “Well, all my former friends are in attendance, dancing on Rixor’s strings and drinking his wine as if I’d never been here. I hope they all poison each other.”

“I’m sorry, Celandine.”

She looked at him, her brow furrowing. “Are you sure you’re all right? Was your drink before we left not enough?”

“I don’t need blood,” he assured her. “It’s simply that...well, I haven’t been among this many people in a hundred years.”

She hid a laugh behind her hand.

“How glad I am that you’re amused, Your Highness,” he grumbled. “I’d like to see your reaction if everyone’s despair and longing and anger felt like a constant ocean you were drowning in.”

“If forced to endure this Blood Union you’ve told me of, I fear I’d have committed murder long before tonight.”

“Where will Rixor and Kaion be?”

“Kaion will not attend something so worldly as a ball. We’ll have to wait until the banquet to get at him. Rixor will be mingling with the guests, and then he’ll join the dancing. He likes to make a grand entrance, the bastard.”

“Let us make our grand entrance first, then.”

Troi listened for a break in the music. In the quiet between two songs, he escorted Celandine through the broad open doors into the candlelit magnificence of the great hall.

The first murmurs from the edge of the crowd reached his ears, sweeping closer and closer until the gossip became a whispered wildfire around them.

“Everyone longs to know who the princess in purple is,” he said.

“Aren’t they curious about the prince in black and gold?” she asked.

“Oh, they think I’m all right. But you are captivating.”

She gave him a skeptical look.

“I know you like the truth,” he told her.

He paused to give their false names to the herald, who announced them to the room. “His Highness Magnus VIII, Prince of Clementia, and his wife, Princess Aurelia.”

Curiosity surged in the auras around them. Men and women took their positions for the next dance, sharing wild

speculations. As Troi lined up with Celandine, heads turned.

The minstrels in the gallery struck up the Widow's Weave, and Troi had to admit he was glad for Celandine's dancing lessons. When they began to move together, every eye in the room was on them.

He wove through the steps she had taught him, watching for each cue her body and aura gave him. The heat of her palm through her glove, the way she leaned into his touch when he put his hand to her waist. The fizz of anxiety inside her.

"Is the Princess of Vengeance nervous?" he asked softly as the dance brought them close.

She lifted her chin. "Of course not."

"You cannot fool a Hesperine, my dear."

She glared daggers at him. "If you must know, I am feeling aware of the fact that I haven't been among this many people in years, either."

"It's a shame." He spun with her. "You deserve to be seen and admired. By the end of this night, everyone in this crowded room will fall at your feet."

She snorted. "My days of inspiring swoons are quite over."

"On the contrary, you have only grown more captivating."

By the time the first dance was through, every curious and conniving noble in the room was ready to pry about the Prince of Clementia's fortune and claim Princess Aurelia's hand for a dance. Troi gave evasive answers that fed their imaginations, and Celandine kept her arm twined around his with mysterious smiles. He pressed his hand to the small of her back whenever a young lord's eyes wandered too far.

She put her mouth close to his ear and held up her fan, letting the onlookers wonder what confidence she whispered to him. "You aren't so terrible at playing the part of doting husband, slugabed."

"If you truly want to dance with any of them, I will not hold you back, of course," Troi murmured, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. He had no right to the jealousy gnawing inside

him. Celandine missed this life, and he would not ruin her enjoyment of this night. Even if he would rather break the other men's hands than allow them a chance to touch her.

"I am far more entertained watching you stare daggers at them," she said with a sly smile.

Her answer soothed something deep inside him.

They escaped the nosy guests as soon as the music began again. Troi claimed her hand for every dance, setting all the tongues wagging about how indecently attached they were for a married couple. He knew he should pay attention, but the gossip faded from his awareness as he grew more and more caught up in the pleasure of dancing with Celandine.

Her anxiety faded as the night wore on. She laughed and smiled, as if coming awake after her own long, arduous sleep. He could feel her spreading her wings and rising into her element.

"If I had been born in another time," he said, "and known you when you ruled this court, I would have danced with you like this all night."

"A Taurus and a Pavo could never dance like this."

"We would have."

She met his gaze. "Yes. We would have."

A fanfare interrupted the dancing. They drew to a halt with the rest of the crowd, and Celandine stiffened.

The herald called out, "Rixor IV, Prince of Aligera and Galeo, welcomes you to his house on the blessed occasion of the seventh night of the Summer Solstice festival."

Their enemy swaggered in, his boots ringing on the tile floor, with his shoulder cape slung behind him and his sword at his belt. Troi could see the family resemblance to the Rixor he had known in this man's high brow and deep-set, arrogant eyes. But more than that, their similarities were blatant in his aura.

The new Rixor's sense of entitlement coiled around everything his gaze touched, as if he already owned the world



and had only to reach out and take another piece of it when it suited him.

Troi knew the type. Whatever depths he had himself descended to, he had never been this far gone. Had he?

Celandine was a nova of anger and hurt and bitterness. They stood there, their years of pain flowing between them, bound together by their unlikely pact.

Rixor made his way through the guests, collecting praise and fear as he went. Troi fortified the veil spells around Celandine as Rixor approached them.

Troi looked into the eyes of Rixor I's living legacy. For years, Troi and his soldiers had bled to keep Galeo out of the clutches of this family. Now his enemy had ruled it for generations. Troi's men had died for nothing.

Troi and Rixor bowed to each other, and Celandine dipped a light curtsy, as if they were equals. But Rixor was not even half the man Troi's soldiers had been.

"Prince Magnus." Rixor greeted him with a smile that did not reach his eyes. "What an occasion for you to be among us in Corona for the first time. How are you enjoying the city?" He didn't spare a glance for Celandine, as if she were Troi's arm decoration and not a person.

Troi had never been adept at putting on a smile for his enemies, but he had learned more than dancing from Celandine. "My wife and I welcome the opportunity to renew past connections."

Finally, Rixor bowed over her hand with a supercilious smile. "You must stay for the feast afterward and regale us with tales from the countryside."

"We would be delighted," Celandine replied with flawless grace.

Rixor moved on, never knowing he had just invited death to his table.

Troi drew even more veil spells over his fangs. "Are you all right?"

“I will not be all right until he is dead.”

In that, he and Celandine were wholly of one mind.

“Let’s dance again,” he said, “as if you own this place.”

She seized his hand and let him lead her onto the floor again. They conquered the party from one end of the great hall to the other, stealing their host’s thunder.

“Does he hate us yet?” Celandine asked.

“I can feel him burning with spite.”

Rixor danced past them with a countess barely old enough to marry. But his gaze was not on the prey in his arms. He was watching Celandine, not with recognition but calculation.

“He’s looking at you as if he’s sizing up a threat,” Troi said.

Celandine’s smile was icy. “Then we’ve made our impression.”

The dances blurred together. Their shared anger and suppressed passion pounded in Troi’s blood as he fed more power to his veil spells.

A prickling sensation in his throat was his first warning. By the next dance, his mouth felt full of sand. He had thought himself prepared for this much magic use, but it was taking a toll on him far too quickly. Curse the years that had drained his strength.

He shoved down his stirring panic. He had misjudged in battle before. What mattered was how he adapted.

He pulled Celandine closer, daring to drain more of his strength to conceal their conversation. “I’m afraid we are facing an unexpected challenge.”

Her gaze snapped to his. “What’s wrong?”

“I need your blood. Now.”

## CHAPTER EIGHT



CELANDINE STARED UP AT Troi. She could already see a hint of fangs between his lips. His veil spells, their only armor against Rixor, hung by a thread from Troi's bloodlust. Her heart began to pound—from fear or desire, she knew not which.

She firmed her hold on his hand and subtly took the lead in their dance, guiding him toward the garden doors. She smiled like a flirt for their audience to see and whispered, "I know every nook and cranny of my manor. I'll take us somewhere safe where you can feed."

"Feast," he said. "We call it the Feast."

She drifted to a stop and tucked her arm in his, strolling with him out into the gardens. "Now is hardly the time to debate Hesperine semantics."

"It matters." His voice had gone husky. "Your blood is a gift, not fodder. The Drink is only the sharing of blood. The

Feast is the sharing of blood and bodies. Which one do you want tonight, Celandine?”

She suddenly felt as if she would go up in flames, despite the pleasant night air and the spray of a nearby fountain. She started to reply, rounding the splashing basin, but fell silent at the sight of the man coming toward them.

Kaion had arrived early.

He walked along the garden path with his hands tucked in the bell sleeves of his flame-red robes. He paused and gave them a pleasant smile. “Good evening.”

She would never forget that calm voice from her trial, when he had put her through the humiliating tests that had exposed her magic and doomed her. But the face he showed the world had fallen as he had watched the gates of the Temple of Chera shut between them. That day, she had seen the sick satisfaction in his eyes.

“You must be our visitors from Clementia whom everyone is talking about,” Kaion said.

How long had he been lurking in the gardens and picking up gossip? Could he have noticed any of the magic she and Troi had used tonight?

Troi rested a hand on hers. Her fingers were digging into his arm, she realized. “Indeed,” he said. “I regret we did not make your acquaintance in the ballroom, Honored Master.”

The fire mage dipped his head. “I am Kaion of the Aithourian Circle, here on behalf of the Order of Anthros to speak the summer blessing over Prince Rixor’s feast.”

Here to further their schemes, more like. Celandine kept her courtly expression frozen on her face through the mundane pleasantries that served as a thin veneer over everyone’s ulterior motives.

She risked a glance at Troi’s mouth. No sign of his fangs now. How much longer could he keep up this much magic in front of Kaion? Any moment, the mage could detect his spell...or Troi’s hunger could break it.

“Darling,” Celandine said faintly, “might we sit a moment? I fear I am still feeling overheated from the great hall.”

“Of course, my dear,” Troi replied. “Let us find a bench in a cooler area of the garden.”

Kaion gave her a benevolent look. “I wish you a swift recovery, Princess Aurelia.”

As they walked on, she could feel his presence, cracking with magic, recede toward the house.

Troi wrapped an arm tightly around her waist. “I will put his eyes out before I murder him for the way he looked at you. Did he think I wouldn’t notice him undressing you with his eyes?”

“He thinks he can get away with anything he likes. It’s a miracle he kept his cock in his robes long enough to recite his vows of celibacy. You know how the Aithourian Circle is. They enforce their order on everyone else while holding themselves above the rules—”

Celandine broke off, her eyes widening at Troi’s fangs.

His veils were gone. Which meant so were the ones he had cast on her.

She spread her fan in front of her face and glanced around. Two of Rixor’s guards were only a few paces away. If they merely turned their heads, they would spot her and Troi.

She pulled Troi behind a line of hedges, but voices and suggestive laughter warned her a flirting couple was about to turn down this path. The only cover within reach was a patch of shadow between a decorative archway and the surrounding bushes.

Celandine pushed Troi into the narrow space and squeezed in with him, flattening her back against the side of the archway. His body pressed against hers from chest to thigh.

He looked down at her and bared his fangs, gazing at her throat with dilated eyes. His unveiled presence engulfed her, a hungry darkness she could drown in. She tried to breathe

quietly, but her pounding heart seemed loud enough to give them away.

The half-drunk couple passed beneath the archway. Celandine slipped out of their hiding place, grabbed his hand, and made a break for the area of the gardens where guests were not permitted.

She careened to a halt at a statue of a past Aligeran princess. The heavy marching of a patrol drummed in her ears as she touched her hand to her ancestress's outstretched palm. Nothing happened.

Celandine cursed silently and rubbed the statue's hand. The footsteps drew closer.

With a scrape, a stone panel swung open in the wall behind the statue. She let out a sigh of relief and plunged through the hidden gate to her private garden.

She crept with Troi toward the entrance to her chambers. "Can you sense anyone nearby?"

"No. This wing is deserted."

"Good. My gardens and rooms should be empty, since Rixor has no princess yet."

"Yes, Celandine." His voice sent a shiver through her. "Take me to your bedchamber."

How strange it was to sneak under the familiar portico, through the door she had always left open on her gardens. Everything was well kept for Rixor's future bride, but the lock still opened for her. She brought Troi into the intimate space that had once been hers.

She shoved the door shut and relocked it. In the torchlight that filtered in from the gardens, she barely saw her luxuries. She only saw Troi.

"What do you want?" he asked her again.

"Your bite," she confessed.

He began to unfasten her high collar. He kissed each new inch of skin he exposed, his stubble teasing her skin. He was

the hungry one, and yet she thought she would starve before he finally pulled her dress down around her shoulders.

He lifted her against the door with breathtaking strength. Half-trapped in her skirts, she gripped him between her legs.

“Is this all right?” he asked against her neck.

“Yes. *Yes*—”

At last, he penetrated her throat. As he gulped down her blood, a wave of dizziness made her head whirl, but he held her steady in his embrace. She let her head fall back against the door, giving herself over to the pleasure of his bite.

The magic in his aura deepened by the moment. Suddenly chairs skidded across the thick carpets to block every door in the room. Then spells descended around them, and the noise of the party outside went silent. She felt wrapped in a dream, free from the rest of the world with a golden prince who ruled the night.

Troi lifted his head with a groan.

“Do you need more?” she gasped.

“Do you?” he replied.

She needed everything.

*Not the plan, not the plan*, her wiser self shouted in the back of her mind.

*Change of plans*, she thought, drowning out the inner warning.

She pushed against his shoulders. He released her, letting her feet slide to the floor, and backed away.

She gave him another push, this time toward the bed. His look of disappointment turned to a wicked grin. She laughed and shoved him harder. He tumbled back onto the plush layers of blankets.

She stripped off every piece of clothing she had so carefully prepared for him that night. He lay naked and decadent across her bed.

Prince Troilus did not disappoint. With a moan of appreciation, she traced a fingernail along his hipbone to watch his erection twitch. After not being allowed anywhere near a cock since she'd donned her shroud, she couldn't have hoped for a finer specimen on which to sin.

"Come make a mockery of your vows of celibacy," he invited.

She left her own clothes on the floor and joined him on the bed. Cupping her breasts in her hands, she ran her fingers in slow circles over her nipples. The uncaring gods knew she'd had precious few opportunities to enjoy her own body in the last ten years. She reveled in it now and in how he tracked her every motion with his rapt gaze.

Wetness trickled down the inside of her thigh. He flared his nostrils, his eyes hooded with desire. Was he scenting her? Could he smell her lust? The sheer physicality of that aroused some base instinct inside her.

She ran her hands up his chest and straddled him, relishing the feel of his body under hers. He gripped her hips as she fitted herself to him. His fingers dug in, bruising, real. Every nerve in her body hummed, overwhelmed with sensations she'd thought she would never feel again.

She sank slowly down onto him, unable to hold back a whimper. He heaved a breath, his muscular chest rising and falling. She couldn't tear her gaze away from his gleaming eyes, couldn't speak, couldn't think, could only feel his hard length stretching and filling her.

They had once been skilled and coveted lovers, but now they crashed together without artistry, grasping and rubbing, their breaths mingling in the warm confines of the bed. She rode him hard, and his muscles bunched and released under her hands as he flexed up to meet her.

All the tension inside her shattered at once, and her core convulsed around his shaft. She writhed on him, moaning like an animal. But the look in his eyes as he watched her come apart...



He gazed upon her as if she were a princess and his body was her throne.

After the long moments of her climax, she sagged over him, her limbs trembling. He was still rock hard between her legs. The tales of immortal control and stamina were true. She kept moving on him just to feel him inside her.

He lay back, one arm propped behind his head. "I could watch you forever, Celandine."

She withdrew, then came down fast on him again to get him deep inside her.

"Take as much as you want," he rasped, "for as long as you wish."

She pulled her knees up and arched her back, and he tilted his hips into her new angle. Fuck, he was so good.

"No one is watching but me," he said.

With his hypnotic voice urging her on, she put her hand where their bodies joined. She ran her fingers over her slippery clitoris and keened at the overwhelming sensation.

"That's right, Celandine. Worship your body on me."

She stimulated herself faster, rocking on his cock. Her eyes rolled back. But before she let herself fly, she eased off to prolong the moment. Each time she took up the rhythm again, the waves of pleasure grew more intense, the looming crest higher.

"Keep going," he said. "You deserve more pleasure than you can hold."

"I can't take any more," she cried.

"Are you ready to come, Celandine?"

"I want you to make me come."

"I'll turn you over and show you how good it is to have a Hesperine for a lover."

"Yes," she gasped.

He moved so fast his body was a blur. The world flipped. She was suddenly on her back beneath his weight, pinned by his cock and his feral gaze. The strength of his body on hers felt so good...so inescapable. She lay trembling under him with need and uncertainty.

“You are still in command,” he breathed against her breasts. “Do you understand?”

“You’ll let me go if I ask?” She needed to hear him say it.

He smoothed her hair back from her face. “Of course. My power is nothing but your instrument of pleasure tonight.”

“I want to feel your power,” she whispered.

He pinned her wrists above her head in one of his big hands. Now he went still, his body taut with tension. Like a man struggling to master himself.

He was not in command at all.

What would happen if he lost control completely?

A rush traveled through her. Better to court death with her legs wrapped around a Hesperine than to waste away in a shroud.

“I want your fangs and your cock inside me,” she demanded.

With a growl, he struck her throat. The pain was too good, the pleasure, too much. She bowed under him, and with a firm thrust, he held her down.

He clamped his other hand around her knee and pushed her leg up. Seating himself even deeper in her, he adjusted the angle of his hips. Sensation blazed through her clitoris, and she hissed.

He sucked her throat in time with his thrusts. Every move built friction along her most sensitive nerves. Curses ran through her mind, all the filthiest, most profane oaths she had ever heard against the gods who had denied her this divine experience. But she was speechless, lying beneath him in utter surrender as he worked her body.

He drove her relentlessly to her peak and brought her crashing down. She screamed into the muffled shadows of his veil spells. He kept thrusting, letting out a long groan as if savoring the most exquisite delicacy.

He didn't stop. He rode her clitoris until her climax turned into another. She bit down on his jugular while she spasmed under him.

A tremor moved through his whole, beautiful body. His fangs clamped tighter on her throat, and he surged between her legs. She watched him, felt him spiral into that moment when even an immortal could fall under a human's power. He lost himself inside her in long, hard pulses.

He collapsed on top of her, his fangs still embedded in her neck. His grip slackened on her wrists. She freed her hands and stroked his body, along his strong shoulders, down the contours of his back, over his taut buttocks.

He lapped at her neck, then kissed his way across to the other side again. Oh, gods. He was still hungry. How much blood did it really take to revive a Hesperine after one hundred years of starvation? She was willing to find out.

“Shall I turn you over again?” he purred.

“Cover me.”

He dragged a fat pillow over and turned her onto her belly, propping her hips where he wanted her. He spread her legs wider with his strong hands. She lay splayed with a Hesperine behind her, closing in on her where she couldn't see. Gooseflesh broke out on her skin, and her core throbbed.

Troi sank his fangs in slowly this time and began to suckle her gently. She arched on a wave of pleasure. Her sigh turned to a gasp as the head of his cock pressed firmly into her cleft. Her blood had already engorged him. She panted into the darkness as his thickness filled her to her limit once more.

They mated in a haze of teeth and heated skin and soft shouts within the shelter of the bed curtains. When he was done with her, she lay spooned with him, a blissful languor in her limbs.

In that moment, she couldn't bring herself to care about the time racing by or why they had come here. She felt alive with a long-lost, fleeting feeling she couldn't put a name to, except her own.

## CHAPTER NINE



WITH CELANDINE BARE IN his arms, a vision of the future finally came to Troi.

He could see them together like this in Orthros. The marble halls and eternal snow of the Hesperine homeland looked different to him when he imagined Celandine there.

He trailed his fingers through her long hair where it lay across her hip. “Were you happy when you ruled here?”

She was quiet for a moment. “No. Yes.”

He nuzzled her shoulder. Her body fit as perfectly in the crook of his as he had imagined. “What made you say yes?”

“You will think the worst of me if I answer that question.”

“I am a condemned heretic, my dear. I will not judge you.”

“After my parents were gone...and my husband died...that was the only time I’ve ever been happy.”

Troi's arm tightened around her instinctively. His words came out as a growl. "What did your husband do to you?"

"Nothing." Her voice thickened. "We weren't in love, but I never expected that from a political marriage. We were compatible, and he treated me well."

"Did he know how lucky he was in you?"

"He was a good man."

That didn't answer Troi's question. He knew the Cordian definition of a good man, and it wasn't good enough for Celandine. He had been a good Cordian man just like her husband.

"I did mourn him," Celandine said, so defensive, as if trying to convince herself as well as Troi.

"Of course you did."

Her tears put a salty tang in the air. "I missed him. My parents too. And yet those five years when I was sovereign of Aligera were the best years of my life."

"I'm sorry Rixor took that from you."

She went quiet again. "He didn't find out about my magic. I showed him."

Troi's breath caught. Cunning, worldly Celandine had handed such a secret to Rixor?

"You must think me a fool. And you're right. I was a foolish young girl who thought my friendship with Rixor more powerful than selfishness and greed. Neither of us had brothers or sisters, so we grew up together, playmates and confidantes. But that sweet boy grew into a vile man."

My sweet boy, Troi's mother had called him.

"Rixor kept my secret," Celandine said, "but not for me. He kept it for himself, until the day he was ready to use it against me."

"I'm sorry someone you loved hurt you so deeply."

“I miss the person he used to be. I miss my parents and my husband. But I miss my own happiness more than any of them. How could I have been so happy without them?”

“I suspect only you can find the answer to that question, but I know a place where you can search for it. You can have velvet and jewels. Endless nights full of music and dancing. You can use your magic as you please and remain sovereign of your own house.”

Sudden anger lashed out of her. “I can never get back what I had, Troi.”

“No. You can have something better, where the Orders can never find you. Come back to Orthros with me.”

She sucked in a breath. “And what would I have to bargain to Hespera for a life like that?”

“Nothing. No expectations. No demands. Simply come with me and see for yourself if you could be happy there. I know we’ve known each other for less than a fortnight, but we needn’t make any decisions or commitments. We can live as lovers without a care, and no one will judge us. You wouldn’t be dependent on me. Women can make their own way in Orthros on whatever path they choose.”

She traced her finger over his ring. A new emotion fluttered inside her that felt suspiciously like hope.

He kissed her neck. “If one night you tell me you want the Gift of immortality, I will give it to you the same way I gave you everything in this bed. If power is what makes you happy, Celandine, I can give you power that will last an eternity, and no one can ever take it from you.”

“Are you happy as a Hesperine?” she asked.

He hid his face against her hair. The worst question she could ask, but the most important one. “I could be, with you.”

She rolled over to face him. “Will you tell me what really happened the night of your transformation?”

“If I answer that question, then you will think the worst of me.”

“You just fucked away my chastity and drank my blood, and after this, we intend to commit two murders. You needn’t worry about my opinion of you.”

In spite of himself, he grinned. He would rather fuck again and forget everything else. But if he had any hope of persuading her to consider a future with him, he had to give her the truth about his past.

His smile faded. He lay back, staring at the ceiling while he considered his words.

“My mother was a Hespera worshiper,” he began, “like all the women of her line. That much of the legend is true. She lived the life of a Cordian princess while secretly preserving human worship of the Goddess of Night. The manor where you found me was property she brought to her marriage with my father. Their political union proved to be a love match.”

“How rare that is.”

“Indeed. He adored her. She was his world. And when she gave him a male heir in the first year of their marriage, his happiness was complete.”

Celandine stroked Troi’s chest. “What went wrong?”

“She trusted him with her secret.”

“Oh no,” she whispered.

“I was twelve. It took that many years for her to feel safe revealing her beliefs.”

“He didn’t take it well, did he?”

“It destroyed him. And he destroyed her.”

Celandine twined her fingers in Troi’s. The hand he had thought might murder him mere days ago now offered him comfort. He would have thought it nothing but a play in the game of seduction, but her aura didn’t lie. His tale pulled at her heart.

“He couldn’t bear to turn her in and see her executed for heresy,” Troi continued. “He was too in love with her. So he decided it was his responsibility to protect the world from her.”



Perhaps it was his way of protecting her from the Orders, too. He sent her away to one of our remote estates and kept her there under guard. She lived in exile, isolated from everyone she loved.”

“What a wretched existence.” Bitterness welled in Celandine. “Did you ever see her again?”

“I was permitted some time with her on the rare occasions when my father visited her and begged her to repent.”

“So he used you for bargaining power.”

Troi nodded. The familiar, oppressive anger made it hard to find words for a moment. But he kept talking, telling Celandine more than he’d ever confessed to the mind healers in Orthros during all their well-meaning, maddening attempts to help him stop hating his Hesperine existence.

“My father raised me strictly. Molded me into the model of Anthrian manhood. He was always watching for any sign that my mother’s ‘corruption’ might manifest in me.”

“All the songs agree you were everything Cordium admires in a man. Is that part of your legend true, too?”

“Yes.”

Memories of war invaded Troi’s mind. After all this time, they should be easier to push away. But somehow his long sleep seemed to have weakened his ability to forget them. Iovian, Remus, and Marto were no longer here to drag him out of his thoughts. Or push his head in a barrel of cold water after he tried to destroy his memories with drink.

“I...did many things I am no longer proud of. I butchered my enemies and celebrated afterward. If not for my men, I don’t know what I would have become.”

“You were close to your soldiers?”

“They were my true family.”

“Will you tell me about them?”

“One night. When I can.”

She didn't press, only laid her head on his chest. It seemed her capacity for affection was as boundless as her passions and her grudges. Somehow these nights of sharing lust and murder had awakened her tenderness, too.

He buried his hand in her hair. "When my father died, I was torn about reconciling with my mother. Her invitation to my coronation lay unopened while I debated with myself." He cleared his throat. "It was still lying there on my desk when I received word that she had died."

"Your grief runs in my veins."

For the first time, those words held meaning for Troi.

"When my mourning period was over, I held my coronation feast. Hespera's seat at the banquet was indeed empty. All the Orders sent their chosen representatives. Little did I know the mage of Anthros who said the blessing over my table was Rixor I's brother."

"Oh gods."

"Of course, he gave up his titles when he became a mage. They all swear they leave behind worldly concerns when they enter the temple, including the feud between our dynasties."

She snorted. "We know they seek that religious authority precisely so they can wield it as a new weapon in the feud."

"Rixor had been trying to conquer Galeo for years, and I had defeated him on the battlefield time and time again. So his brother poisoned me in my own house." Troi lifted his hand to display the ring. "My mother left me this when she died. Her final words to me were in a letter, instructing me that if there was ever a time when all hope was lost, I should shed my blood on this stone. As I lay dying, I was finally desperate enough to take the risk."

"What did the ring do?"

"It summoned an ancient Hesperine armed to his very sharp teeth."

"Well, you must have truly thought you were going to die, then."

Troi laughed. “Rudhira the Blood-Red Prince inspires either terror or adoration wherever he goes. He’s a Hesperine errant who leaves Orthros to travel in mortal lands, sabotaging the Orders and protecting the persecuted. So there he was, the most powerful prince of the Hesperines, looming over me in his scarlet battle robes with a massive longsword in his hands. I thought he was going to hasten my death by lopping off my head.”

Celandine pushed up on her elbow, clearly engrossed in his tale. “How did you convince him to spare you?”

“I didn’t have to. He put away his sword and cast a healing spell on me instead. I learned that night that the women of my line had aided him in his quests. That invoked what Hesperines call a bond of gratitude, which must be honored. When my body proved too damaged by the poison for me to survive as a mortal, he took me back to Orthros. His comrade Apollon took me under his wing and offered me the Gift.”

Apollon had always said he had seen some of himself in Troi. He supposed they had both gone too far down the warrior’s path in the past.

“So you stayed in Orthros with them?” Celandine asked.

“For one purpose only: to master my power so I could kill Rixor and his brother. I trained with Rudhira and Apollon until I finally felt prepared to face my enemies.”

“That’s how you came to be in the manor.”

“Yes. Ten years to the day after my mortal life ended, I returned to Cordium to find that my worst fears had come to pass. Rixor had taken over everything from my father’s lands to my mother’s house. I burst into his summer feast to tear him apart with my bare hands. He fled like a coward with his guests while his brother stayed behind to face me, as in the tales. It was a long, bitter battle. I fought with more anger than strategy, and once again, I found myself on the verge of defeat.”

“How did you survive?”

“My wounds, bleeding inside my mother’s ancestral home, brought about something I never thought possible. My blood woke the Sanctuary wards, the most rare and powerful of Hespera’s protection spells.”

“Didn’t the Orders hunt down every Sanctuary mage during the Last War over fifteen hundred years ago?” Celandine asked.

“Yes, but the sites where they died are where their magic lives on most powerfully. One of my mother’s ancestors was a Sanctuary mage who sacrificed herself in her own home so her spells would endure to protect her descendants.”

“So it was her magic that barricaded you safely inside.”

“Rixor’s brother stood no chance against her wards. The mage’s fireballs couldn’t break through unless the power of my blood faded and the spells returned to dormancy. So he cast his own spells to prevent me from escaping and left me for his successors to slay.”

“Was your sleep caused by your hunger?”

Troi nodded. He had been trapped inside the ring of fire for nights...years...starvation clawing at his veins. Burning with thirst and fever, he had slept longer and longer every Dawn Slumber. Until the day when the sun had banished him to sleep and he hadn’t woken again. “Then one unspinner did what the mighty Order of Anthros never could and found me through the Sanctuary wards.”

She smiled. “I still wonder if they let me in for your own good.”

“That is entirely possible, Your Highness.”

“You clearly needed someone to stab you awake, slugabed.”

He pulled her mouth to his and kissed her until she melted against him. When he pulled back, she gazed at him with longing in her eyes.

He slipped off his ring and took her hand. “I want you to have this.”

“I couldn’t—”

“Please, Celandine. I have Hesperine power of my own to protect me now. I need to know you’ll be safe.”

She let him slide it onto her ring finger. “Let me think on your offer. When we’re done with Rixor and Kaion, will you ask me again to leave with you?”

She hadn’t said no. That gave Troi more hope than he’d felt in a century. “I’ll ask you as many times as it takes.”



THE GONGS SOUNDED MIDNIGHT as Celandine entered the banquet hall on Troi’s arm. She barely heard them. His words, his touches, all ran through her mind, so much more powerful than the feeling of the Gift Collector’s purse in her hand.

The only guarantees she had from Troi were the dreams he’d spun of Orthros in the heat of the moment. Trusting Rixor had been the greatest mistake she had ever made, and she had paid bitterly every hour of every day since his betrayal. Could she truly rely on a Taurus prince to be any different from a Pavo one?

Her mind shied away from the thought of what the Gift Collector would do to Troi.

How could she do that to him?

“Celandine.”

Troi’s urgent whisper pulled her from her thoughts. “Yes?”

“Where do we sit?”

She looked up, and the sight of Rixor on her throne felt like a blow to the gut. He sat there in her place at the high table on the dais, Kaion standing at his elbow. They laughed together, and Rixor clasped Kaion’s arm, smiling with warmth and affection. She remembered when her cousin had looked at her like that, but the only undying loyalty he had to anyone now was to Kaion.

The banners of each noble in attendance had been hung behind the chairs where they were to sit. The green and gold of Clementia adorned the two empty seats at Rixor's table.

"We made too much of an impression," she hissed. "How will you veil yourself and ambush him right under his nose?"

"No, this is perfect. You kept your promise to get me close."

Troi seated her gallantly, and she found herself next to Kaion, with Troi and Rixor on her other side. The hairs on her arms stood up. If she and Troi survived this, she would have the best view in the house when he spilled their enemies' blood on the pretty table linens.

Just as the last of the guests found their seats, seven hooded figures filed into the banquet hall and took positions around the perimeter of the room. The blue flame emblazoned on their white robes made Celandine's belly drop. That emblem was burned into her mind from the long hours of her trial.

The doors of the banquet hall shut with a mighty thud, and she started in her seat. Rixor's guards blocked the exit.

Kaion had brought in the Inquisitors, and she and Troi were locked inside with them.

# CHAPTER TEN



THE AURAS OF THE fire mages in the room made Celandine's skin crawl. What were they doing here?

Troi took her hand. "My dear, are you still feeling poorly? Do you need me to take you home?"

She could read between his words. They had reached the same conclusion: they were far too outnumbered now and the only option was retreat.

She pressed a hand to her forehead. "I'm afraid so. Will you tender our excuses to our generous host?"

Kaion held up a hand. "Forgive me, Prince Magnus, but it is not possible for anyone to leave at this time. The entire estate has been secured with flame wards for the safety of all."

Rixor rose to his feet. "Please, everyone remain calm as we comply with the Inquisitors and heed Honored Master Kaion. The witch who once deceived all of you from my throne has

deserted her temple of Chera. A witness in the Order of Hypnos has seen her at large in the city and believes she will return here to seek revenge on those of us who brought her to justice ten years ago.”

Oh, gods. This was all her fault. The necromancer had betrayed her so he could keep all of the bounty. She had embroiled herself in a plot with Gift Collectors, princes, and mages of Anthros, and she had gone too far even for a Pavo politician.

Kaion’s deceptively calm voice raked her nerves. “Rest assured you are surrounded by the protection of my Order. Once the Inquisitors have searched the manor for her, you may return to your festivities. They will now cast a seeking spell to detect whether she is among us.”

Troi spoke in her ear, his voice steady, his veil spells thick about her. “That seeking spell will expose you. We must make our move first. I’ll hold them off while you unspin the wards. Then I’ll transport us to safety. Understood?”

She searched his face. “They’re only here for me. You could let them take me, stay hidden, and carry out your revenge.”

His eyes blazed. “You think I would let them lay a hand on you? I will tear them limb from limb before I let them lock you away again. And if they do drag you back to your prison, I will tear down the walls to find you.”

Celandine looked into the eyes of the only person who had ever been willing to fight for her. She had been so wrong about everything.

“Ready?” Troi asked.

She took his hand. “Ready.”

“On the count of three. One...two...three.”

His arm clamped around her waist, and levitation swept them up toward the ceiling. She dropped her spindle, letting it dangle wildly from her hand. The manor was now a maze of flame wards, freshly cast from the hands of eight powerful mages. She raced through them in her mind’s eye, tracing out their escape route with a thread of her magic.



Guests scattered, and cries of panic erupted. Kaion and the seven Inquisitors held up their palms, and eight blasts of flame rolled toward Troi and Celandine.

“Keep spinning,” he gritted.

Just as her toes grew hot from the flames, she felt as if they slipped through a door and spilled out on the other side of the room. She lost her grip on her spell. “What was that?”

“A Hesperine step. Hold on tight.”

In a blink, he stepped them out of the path of another fireball.

She looked down at the guests fleeing out the doors and the guards arming their crossbows.

Troi took her face in his hand and pulled her gaze back to him. “I will protect you while you focus on your spell. I swear to you.”

She would have to trust him.

Celandine left the battle in his hands and sank into her magic. The heat, the screams, the clatter of swords, seemed far away. All she could feel was Troi’s arm around her. She drew at the flame wards as if they were flax and began to unspin them.



HOLDING CELANDINE CLOSE AGAINST him, Troi dropped and let a fireball sail over their heads. He landed on his feet, hooking one hand around a section of the banquet table. As he flipped it over, platters clanged to the floor and glass shattered.

A stiletto landed in the wood, aimed at Celandine. Troi bared his fangs at Rixor, who stood with his hand still extended from the throw.

Troi levitated every fallen dinner knife he could grasp in his focus and sent the blades out in nine different directions.

Three inquisitors went down, clutching at their impaled throats. The other four raised battle wards in time to repel his attack. The knives aimed at Rixor and Kaion melted to liquid metal in Kaion's next fire spell.

Troi dragged the table into a corner as a barricade and ducked behind it, one hand on top of Celandine's head to keep her down out of harm's way. Fire spells slammed into the table, and the wood began to burn. He shoved it with all his strength, and it barreled into the three Inquisitors advancing on them. The men toppled, screaming as their own fire spells sent their robes up in flames.

The last Inquisitor kept coming, sending rapid darts of fire toward Troi. He levitated again. Not fast enough. As one tongue of flame flared toward Celandine, he turned and took the hit with his body.

Agony unlike any other crackled through his skin and burned into his veins. He clenched his jaw so hard he thought his fangs might break. He channeled all his anger into a spell and pulled raw healing power out of himself. His magical ability fed his innate Hesperine regeneration, and the poison of the fire began to fade from his body.

The Inquisitor's aura betrayed surprise. Troi would wager this temple sweeper had never fought a Hesperine Gifted by Apollon and trained in combat healing by Rudhira.

Before the man could adapt, Troi yanked a decorative sword off the wall and hurled it at the mage.

The Inquisitor tried to burn through it, but this blade was no dinner knife. The half-melted sword skewered the mage in the chest, and he fell to his knees, clutching at the hilt with a scream.

"I almost have it," Celandine cried.

Troi landed on the dais, keeping her behind him, and faced Kaion.

The fire mage sneered. "Your reputation precedes you, Hesperine. You must be Firstblood Troilos, failed follower of the Blood-Red Prince."

“I haven’t failed at anything, Kaion. I’ve simply been waiting for this moment for one hundred years.”

“You’re a relic of a past age,” Rixor said, circling with a sword in hand. “No one is loyal to you any longer but the dead. All the soldiers who wouldn’t swear fealty to my forefather were executed like the traitors they were.”

The words struck Troi harder than magefire. He had longed to know his men’s fates, but the truth was far worse than never knowing.

“Time to put you in your grave where you belong,” Rixor snarled.

He lunged just as Kaion hurled a fire spell. Troi danced between the flames and the sword with Hesperine agility. At immortal speed, he crushed Rixor’s wrist and caught the man’s falling sword. Kaion snarled and flung a line of flames between Rixor and Troi.

With Rixor reaching for his dagger and Kaion focused on defending his cousin, Troi stepped. He came up behind Kaion, grasped the mage’s hair, and drove Rixor’s sword through his back.

Troi looked into Rixor’s eyes over Kaion’s head as the mage’s heart stopped beating.

A howl of rage came out of Rixor. Troi had heard that sound on the battlefield so many times, even out of his own mouth—the battle cry for a fallen brother.

“Troi!” Celandine screamed.

Two men in festival clothes held her by her arms. As she struggled, Troi caught sight of the glowing blue flames burned into their wrists.

There had been more than seven Inquisitors, and not all of them had been wearing robes.

“Don’t go—” she cried, but one Inquisitor clamped his hand over her mouth.

Troi flung Kaion’s body at his feet and stepped. Just as he reached Celandine, he felt the pressure in the air of the mages’

traversal spell. They disappeared with her before his eyes.

Her spindle fell to the ground and rolled toward Troi, coming to a halt at his feet.

No cry of fury came out of him. This pain was beyond sound and thought.

Rixor, the last living man in the room, took one look at Troi's fangs and fled.

# CHAPTER ELEVEN



RIXOR'S FOOTSTEPS RECEDED THROUGH the manor. Troi's greatest enemy was escaping. He let him go. Kaion's blood spread across the dais toward Celandine's fallen spindle.

*Don't go, she had begged.*

Troi had failed her. Blinded by his thirst for revenge, he had broken his promise to protect her.

He snatched up her fallen artifact and cast his senses through the manor. He couldn't feel her aura, only the flame wards unraveling across the deserted estate.

He would find where they had taken her, and he would save her, even if it got him sacrificed on Summer Solstice.

What should his next step be? The answer came too slowly to his mind. Weariness dragged at his limbs. He let out a shout of frustration. Dawn was coming. He would go back to sleep

and lie helpless for hours while Celandine suffered in the Inquisitors' prison.

He had no choice. He had to take shelter at his manor and survive till nightfall. He was no use to her dead.

Troi stepped back to his own prison and entered through the gap she had left in the fire spells.

Sharp pain stabbed through the half-healed burns on his back. Troi crumpled to the ground, weakness spreading rapidly through his limbs. He lay helpless on his back and looked up at a leather breastplate painted with the Eye of Hypnos.

A Gift Collector smiled down at him, holding a dagger that dripped with magic and Troi's blood.

Troi's last coherent thought was that the necromancer could never have gotten through the Sanctuary wards unless an unspinner had let him in.



WHEN CELANDINE CAME TO, sunlight was glaring through the high, barred window of her cell.

It was dawn. How many dawns had passed? Sickening fear jolted her awake.

Everything after her capture was a blur of interrogation. She had no idea how long she had been there.

She didn't know if Troi was dead or alive.

If he had returned to the manor, then it was all over now. Imagining what the Gift Collector had done to him, she retched on her hands and knees in the corner of her cell.

She had tried so hard to tell Troi don't go back to the manor, to warn him before the guards covered her mouth. She had been too late. If only she had seen the truth a moment sooner...if only she had decided to fight for him the way he had for her...

Troi was dead because of her.

She curled around herself and wept for him. She, the merry widow, the Pavo princess always in command of herself, sobbed for him as she never had for her parents, husband, or throne.

She would join him soon. No life sentence in the temple for her this time. Not even a trial. The Inquisitors were determined to make an example of her as the Summer Solstice sacrifice to Anthros.

She worried away at the traversal cuff on her ankle. She would die in the enchanted shackle that bound her. She couldn't stop prying and pulling at it, no matter how much skin she lost to the effort.

She finally knew what made her happy, but it was too late.

As a girl, she had done as her parents required. As a wife, she had lived under her husband's authority. As a mage, she had fought every day against the temple's demands for her absolute surrender.

But for those brief, golden years as princess in her own right, she had obeyed no one but herself.

She didn't need dances or power or revenge. All that had ever mattered to her was being mistress of her own destiny.

She had been happy when she had been free.

The answer had been right in front of her the night Troi had sworn to fight for her freedom.

The Gift Collector's bounty wouldn't buy her happiness. For a paltry bag of coins, she had traded the greatest treasure she had ever found.

Her last moment with Troi flashed through her mind over and over. Was there any chance he had understood her words? Could there be a shred of hope that he had fled to safety and not into the Gift Collector's ambush?

After seeing him defeat eight fire mages, she wanted to believe he had somehow defeated the Gift Collector too. But even if he had, he might be in hiding now, suffering from his wounds with no one to give him blood.

She would never know his fate.



TROI COUNTED HOW MANY times he had woken chained to his throne. Tallying the nights gave him a little piece of sanity as weakness and pain ate away at his reason.

“Did you poison me?” he demanded of the Gift Collector on the sixth night.

The necromancer put his feet up on the table and lit a smoke. “I didn’t have to. Those cursed chains are holding you well enough. You aren’t the immortal you were one hundred years ago.”

Troi wasn’t even as strong as he had been when he’d woken from his long sleep. This hunger clawing him inside out after six nights was a greater agony than the starvation he had endured for a hundred years.

The Gift Collector smiled. “The gnawing in your gullet will end soon enough. We only need to lie low until the Summer Solstice is over and the mages of Anthros miss their chance to sacrifice you. Then I’ll collect my bounty without their interference. You won’t feel hungry after I carry your head into the Temple of Hypnos in a bag.”

Troi didn’t reply, his teeth chattering with a fever chill. He could hardly concentrate on his enemy’s words. The thought of Celandine’s blood consumed him. The layers of her flavor...the feeling of her life force flowing into his veins...

Hespera help him. If the woman who had sentenced him to death walked through the door right now, he would bargain his life for one more sip of her.

“The mages of Anthros can’t boast of burning a Hesperine this Solstice,” the Gift Collector mused. “They’re taking it out on the human who’s to be the sacrifice this year. Your little witch is out of chances to repent and will burn in your place tomorrow.”



No. Goddess, no. Troi threw his weight against his chains and snarled, “Don’t lie to me!”

The necromancer laid Celandine’s distaff on the table in front of Troi. “A Cheran mage’s distaff loses its power when she dies. Watch it happen.”

Laughing, the Gift Collector left him there. Troi sagged in his chains, unable to look away from Celandine’s distaff.

Even now, caught in this trap of her making, the loss of her was destroying him.

This was neither poison nor hunger. He should have known when her blood had revived him so quickly from a century of starvation. The truth had been creeping up on him as mere days with her had made him want her for eternity.

He needed her. He Craved her. Celandine was his Grace.

He had squandered his Grace for revenge.

Kaion was dead, and Rixor must live with the loss. And for what? Another mage of Anthros would take Kaion’s place, and Rixor would carry a personal pain that gave fresh life to the feud. A hundred years ago, men like them had reigned, and a hundred years from now, they would again.

Troi had kept coming back, caught in this repetition of human history. Even as a Hesperine, he was still trying to be a Cordian man. The man Iovian, Remus, and Marto had known and loved.

Troi let the memories wash over him and looked at the dangerous truth. His acts of brutality had been the fuel for his men’s morale. They were not only the ones sobering him up but the ones getting him drunk and angry in their endless cycle of abusing themselves and others. They had kept him alive, and yet they had been killing him.

Was that the man he wanted to be? A man like his father?

Troi’s tangled emotions finally unraveled, and he saw them for what they were. He had loved and hated his father. He had also carried anger toward his mother for holding on to her beliefs instead of coming home to him.

After having Celandine's emotions bleed into him these past days, Troi finally understood. His mother hadn't been choosing between Hespera and Troi; she'd been forced to choose between defying his father or losing herself.

His father hadn't destroyed her. She had saved herself each time she told him no.

Troi couldn't make things right with her now. But he could choose not to repeat history with Celandine.

It was time for Troi to act like a Hesperine.

One hundred and ten years after he had first received the Gift, Troi finished his transformation. He could only pray it was not too late for it to matter.



CELANDINE TORE AT THE cuff with a scream of frustration. She was powerless. They had taken everything from her, including his ring, and left her here in the white robe of a sacrifice. Her spindle was long gone.

Thoughts spun in her mind. She ran her finger round and round where his ring had been.

In her forbidden youthful experiments with her magic, she hadn't needed a spindle. She had popped enchanted locks and pranked old codgers who wore illusory hairpieces, all with her mind and a flick of her fingers.

With her formal training in the temple had come artifacts to help her focus her magic and wield it more powerfully. She had mastered the tools she hated, vowing to use them against her enemies one day.

Had those tools really made her more powerful? Or had the dependence they taught her been another way for the temple to control her?

Casting with pure will was the most difficult way to practice magic. But if she could find a new way to focus her power here and now...

She wasn't powerful enough to unravel the bastion of spells that fortified the Inquisitors' prison. But she might make it as far as the guardroom at the end of the corridor, where they had stripped her and locked up Troi's ring.

Celandine lay in wait until night fell outside her window. Then she pulled herself to her feet and faced the solid door. She pressed her bloodied palms to the smooth stonework and closed her eyes.

The spells on this place felt like all the years of her life when others had ruled her. Order and authority given form and hammered into every lock and bar.

Anger vibrated through her, and she poured all of it into her magic.

She thought of her happy years and the independence that had felt like wings in her chest. Of the moment when she had torn off her shroud. Of that night in bed with Troi, when she had felt free with another person for the first time in her life.

Celandine held out her arms, palms up to the night sky, and envisioned Anthros's wards spinning away into Hespera's stars.

The magic on her cell was rent into powerless threads with a force she felt under her skin.

The door opened soundlessly. She strode down the corridor to the guardroom. Two auras inside. She plucked at the spells they had drunk to help them stay awake on their long shift. By the time she walked through the door, the entire night watch lay slumped over their table, fast asleep.

Celandine spun in a circle, dancing the Widow's Weave backwards. All the locked chests in the room sprang open.

The glimmer of Hesperine magic led her to Troi's ring. She snatched it up and pushed through the next door, climbing the stairs to the top of the guard tower. At her mind's command, the spell lights on the parapet snuffed out.

She let her awareness expand into the moonless sky and rubbed the moonstone with a bleeding finger. A red glow spread from the gem.

A storm of Hesperine magic rose beyond the prison's defenses. She ran her finger widdershins around the moonstone, wearing away at the flame wards. She bared her teeth, her blood spattering on the stones at her feet.

A narrow breach split open in the wards. A presence crashed through, and she fell to the ground from the sheer might of his magic. A Hesperine manifested before her, crimson light glowing from the stone in the hilt of his sword.

She tilted her head up to look at him, her mouth hanging open. She saw a storm in his steel-gray eyes and pale, hawkish face. Wind tugged at his ankle-length red braid. Now she knew how Troi had felt when the Blood-Red Prince first stood over him with that gleaming blade in hand.

Rudhira reached down and took Celandine's hand in a powerful but gentle grip. He helped her to her feet.

A gong sounded from deep in the prison. Shouts reached her ears, then boots tramping up the stairs.

Just as the Inquisitors burst out onto the top of the tower, the Blood-Red prince stepped Celandine away through her tear in the Order's defenses.

## CHAPTER TWELVE



TROI STRAINED AGAINST THE chains with all the strength he had left, drawing from his healing magic to push back the weakness in his limbs. But there was no healing in the world that could cure his Craving.

He would sit here and fall into Slumber again while Celandine faced her death.

Her distaff hummed with traces of her magic, his last link to her. Each pulse of power in the artifact was weaker than the last. He could feel her fading away.

“No,” he ground out. “No!”

What were they doing to her? How much was she suffering?

The last thread of her presence slipped away. The distaff lay on the table, lifeless and empty.

His Grace was dead.

Troi's magic screamed out of him, a wave of raw power that shook every object in the room. Then he slumped in his chains, as if all the life had gone out of him, too.

When the Gift Collector returned, a case of tools jingling in his hand, Troi didn't look up. He couldn't stop staring at the distaff.

The necromancer halted abruptly and let out a string of profanities. "They weren't supposed to sacrifice her until the morning. She must have died in interrogation instead, worthless bitch. Now they'll come looking for you."

It didn't matter how Troi died now, whether decapitated by a Gift Collector, immolated by the mages of Anthros, or gradually sickened by his Craving for Celandine. His only regret was that he couldn't take down her enemies with him.

The Gift Collector spread his leather case on the table, revealing an array of blades and spikes. "It appears we'll have to rush the delicate process of removing your head. I need to get away from here with evidence of my kill before they hunt you down. I must keep you alive for most of this so you don't go up in a flash of light and take my trophy with you."

Troi imagined levitating one of the scalpels and spilling the necromancer's guts with it. But his magic struggled, fettered as his body by the curses on his chains.

"Well, Firstblood Troilos," said the Gift Collector, "this is the beginning of the end. You'll be awake for this part."

The necromancer pressed the tip of the scalpel to Troi's throat.

Behind him, the doors of the great hall slammed open. Ancient, icy, Hesperine magic swept into the room. Troi recognized that aura before his eyes made sense of the impossible sight in front of him.

Rudhira stood in the doorway, swinging his longsword in one hand. "Try to collect my head," he snarled.

The Gift Collector threw three blades from each hand in rapid succession.

Rudhira whipped his sword up, repelling all six with the flat of his sword. He laughed. “Cordium has grown lazy in my absence, I see. Try again.”

The necromancer drew a butcher’s knife. “The bounty on that red head of yours is the highest in history.”

“And it gets higher every time I kill one of you,” Rudhira replied with a fanged smile.

The necromancer leapt down from the dais to face the prince of the Hesperines.

The moment he turned his back on Troi, another aura emerged from Rudhira’s veil spells. Her presence washed over Troi like rain on his parched senses.

“Celandine,” he gasped. “You’re alive.”

Tears streaked the grime on her cheeks. “So are you.”

She took hold of Troi’s chains with bloodstained hands, her face hardening with determination. Without a distaff or spindle, she unraveled the malevolent magic from around him, and the chains fell to dust.

She ran her hands down his face and arms. “Did he hurt you?”

Troi shook his head, barely able to speak around his fangs. All his pain was from needing her.

The clash of blades echoed from Rudhira’s duel with the Gift Collector. Rudhira was clearly trying to drive the necromancer away from the dais, but their enemy kept circling, regaining his ground.

A flicker of light on steel caught Troi’s eye. “Celandine, behind you!”

He pushed her out of the blade’s path. A bleeding knife hurtled past her and landed in Troi’s chest. Necromancy and pain exploded across his ribs and lungs. He froze, not daring to move. How close was the cursed blade to his heart?

Celandine let out a cry of rage and snatched up her distaff, rounding the table. The Gift Collector ignored her, sweat

trailing down his face as he focused on Rudhira. With a great heave, the necromancer swung a cursed chain at the Blood-Red Prince. The links spun around his blade, trapping his sword.

Through the pain needling his senses, Troi felt Celandine's aura pulling on all the magic in the room.

The Gift Collector's chain shattered. Surprise flashed on his hardened face. Rudhira's blade swept down toward the necromancer's neck. He threw himself out of the sword's path.

And right into Celandine's reach. She rammed the sharp end of her distaff into his chest.

He stared at her, his face frozen in shock. With another scream, she twisted the staff, driving it deeper.

The Gift Collector fell at her feet. She gave her staff one last shove into his corpse.

Rudhira lowered his sword. "I'm not sure you needed my help rescuing Troi."

Blackness was growing at the edges of Troi's vision, but he saw Celandine appear at his side again.

"Can you heal him?" she pleaded.

Rudhira's aura came near. Royal healing power surged into Troi's chest, driving back his pain. He felt nothing as Rudhira slipped the blade out of his chest.

Troi's vision cleared, and he looked up at a greater prince than himself.

Rudhira smiled. "Good moon, Troi. It's high time you woke up."

"It's high time you came to rescue me."

A shadow passed over Rudhira's face. "We came back for you every ten years. We kept trying to get through the spells. We had all but despaired of you."

"I had despaired of myself until Celandine." The pain in Troi's chest was gone, but not even Rudhira's healing spell



had diminished his Craving. Troi had never been so happy to be in agony.

Rudhira's brow furrowed, and his magic swept through Troi again. Astonishment softened the prince's hard gray eyes. "Troi, you have a malady I cannot cure."

A foolish grin came to Troi's face. "Yes."

Celandine stood apart, watching them, gripping her hands tightly together. "What's wrong?"

"I must let him tell you." Rudhira pointed to the Gift Collector. "I'll clean that up while you talk. But we don't have much time. We need to get out of Cordium as soon as possible."

Celandine approached the throne, still standing out of arm's reach. Too far away. "Troi, I am so sorry. I tried to warn you, I swear, but I couldn't get the words out before they took me away. I am the one who betrayed you, but I tried to change what I had done. I changed."

"Celandine." He held out his hand to her. "Please come here so I can hold you."

She sucked in a breath. Then she flew into his arms, and he pulled her onto his lap, wrapping her close against his chest.

His Grace. He was holding his Grace.

"I thought you were dead," he choked. "All the magic left your distaff."

"I took my power back from it. I'm so sorry I frightened you."

"I'm so sorry I didn't protect you," he said into her hair.

"You have fought for me more than anyone else in my life. I will ask for your forgiveness as many times as it takes."

"Forgiveness is one of those infuriating Hesperine principles. I am beginning to see the merits."

"So am I. I'll come with you to Orthros. If you'll still have me."

“Oh, Goddess, the ways I intend to have you.”

She turned her face up toward him, her cheeks flushed. “No expectations, just as we said. We have time for you to decide what you want me to be to you. But if you’ll only give me a chance—”

He interrupted her with a kiss. “I don’t need time. I want eternity.” He pressed more soft kisses to her mouth. “Celandine, you are my Grace.”

She went still, her lips parted. Then something bright and wild dawned in her aura. Happiness.

Rudhira cleared his throat. Celandine rose, dusting off her dirty robe with perfect dignity, and helped Troi to his feet. He put his arm around her shoulders, leaning on her.

“Once we leave Cordium,” Rudhira said, “we cannot return. It’s too dangerous here for any Hesperine.”

Troi raised a brow. “You and your Blood Errant comrades dance in and out of here with impunity.”

Rudhira grinned. “Danger is our old friend.”

“Who are the Blood Errant?” Celandine asked.

Troi pointed to the prince. “A circle of four renowned Hesperines errant, including this braggart. They’ve fought the Orders’ tyranny for centuries without getting caught. The mages have no greater enemies in all of Cordium.”

Celandine’s aura glinted with interest. “Becoming a Hesperine errant sounds appealing. I should like to count myself among the Orders’ greatest enemies.”

Rudhira laughed. “I look forward to seeing what havoc you wreak if you choose that path in the future. But tonight, I’m taking you to safety before you two get into any further trouble.”

Troi pulled Celandine closer. “Yes. It’s high time I return to Orthros and stay awhile. I promised my princess luxuries and all the dancing she desires.”

“Enjoy it,” Rudhira told him. “Prince’s orders.”

“This time, I will,” Troi replied.

The prince smiled. “Now gather anything you want from this house. There is no coming back.”

Celandine rested her hand on Troi’s chest, the ring gleaming on her finger. “I have everything I need.”

Troi kissed her forehead. “Let’s go home.”

THE END



Thank you for reading *BLOOD SLUMBER* and welcome to the world of the Hesperines! If you enjoyed Celandine and Troi’s story, check out [\*BLOOD MERCY\*](#), Book 1 in the epic BLOOD GRACE series, a romantasy featuring more fated mates, rebellious women, sexy fantasy vampires, and spice with fangs.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



VELA ROTH MANIFESTED UNSTABLE writing powers at a young age, and many of her early experiments had unintended results. As she grew, a curriculum of fantasy novels with strong heroines helped her learn to wield her abilities.

Eventually she dared pursue the knowledge inside the most forbidden tomes: romance novels. She's been practicing the dark arts of fantasy romance ever since, but strives to use her noveling powers only for good.

She lives in a solar-powered writer's garret at the foot of the mountains with her familiar, a rescue cat with a missing fang and a huge heart.

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