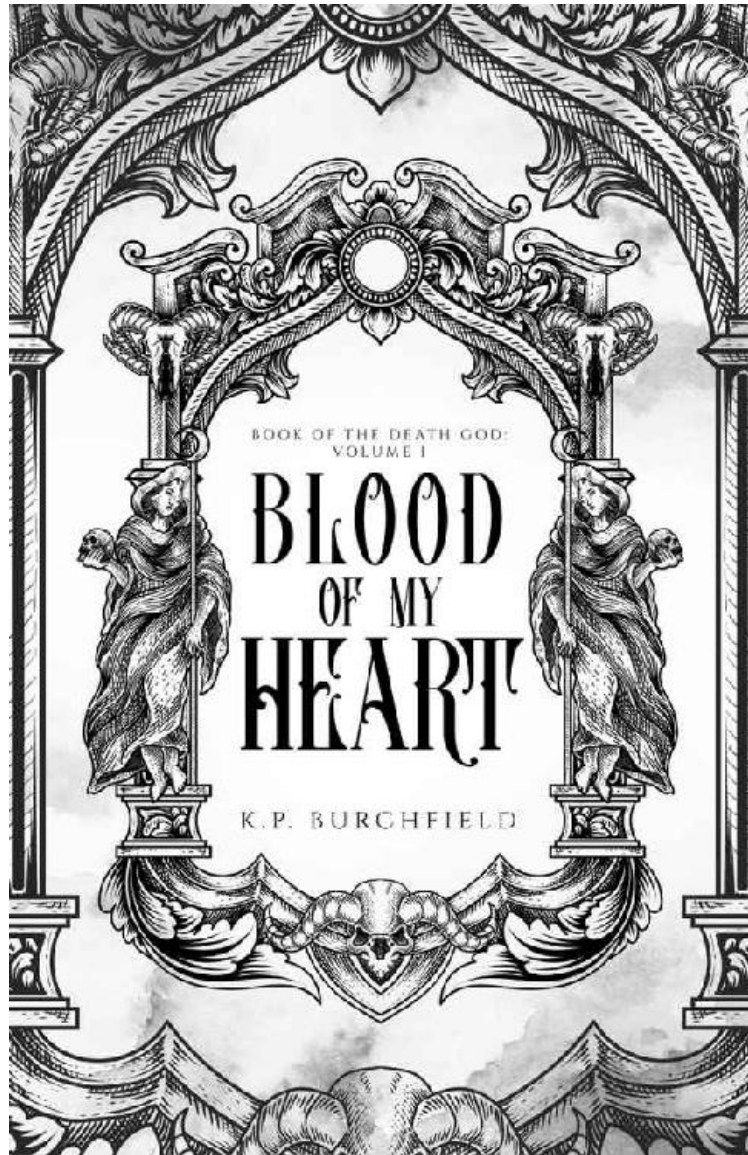




BLOOD  
OF MY  
HEART

K. P. BURCHFIELD



BOOK OF THE DEATH GOD:  
VOLUME I

# BLOOD OF MY HEART

K.P. BURCHFIELD

*Blood of My Heart*

Volume One of the Book of the Death God Series

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*To every heartbeat still drumming wildly in the chest  
of every person who once wished it would just stop.*

;



This is an adult book, with dark and grim themes that deal with death. Trigger warning for death, loss, blood, gore, cussing, mention of child abuse, self-harm, masochism, mental health issues such as depression and anxiety, and graphic sex scenes.

Typos and mistakes happen. If you spot anything you have a concern about, please feel free to reach out to me at [k.p.burchfield@outlook.com](mailto:k.p.burchfield@outlook.com)

Thank you for giving my book a chance and I hope you enjoy it!

—k.p.

“Deep into that darkness peering,  
long I stood there wondering, fearing,  
Doubting, dreaming dreams no mortal  
ever dared to dream before.”

—Edgar Allan Poe





## CHAPTER ONE

“TAKE IT OFF, or I’ll burn it off.”

The words rolled like smoke off the firerender’s tongue, the sound cutting through the night, flame igniting with his touch against the collar of her shirt. Fire danced in the woman’s vision, taunting her but never hurting.

Not that she would have minded the pain.

With her dark hair spilling over the surface of the desk, she knew what the man saw in her. She was nothing more than a girl willing to play in the heat that burned between them, a game of hot wax and hissing flames against cool skin.

He didn’t see her true intent, that the things she needed had nothing to do with his body, but rather his mind. She was there to play a different game, and if she played it right, they would leave the lavish inn and go their separate ways without him ever knowing that it was he who had been played.

He stole the flame from the candle, and watched as it chased its way up his finger like a curious bug. The heat taunted the hem of her favorite shirt. Crimson moonlight cast the man’s silhouette in a red glow. His calloused fingers were rough against her exposed skin, tracing the path of dagger-shaped buttons that parted the fabric down her chest.

“Last warning,” he said. “Take. It. Off.”

Some girls liked playing with fire, that was true, but Mora was not one of them.

It wasn't the flame that she hated. She could see the beauty as well as anyone. For her, it was the heat, and the chaos, and the gods-damned smell.

She drew in a silent breath, keeping her facade intact and her temper buried deep.

“I don't know,” she said, keeping her voice low. “I think it looks rather nice on, don't you?”

A ringlet of blazing red hair fell into his chiseled face as he smiled down at her. “Too much fabric for my taste.”

His finger slid down the hardened wax on her skin, the heat of him fighting against the cold of her, wax melting beneath his touch and solidifying in its trail.

Mora slid herself off the desk until her toes touched the floor. She sauntered across the room, teasing the shirt down one tanned shoulder, then the other, as he followed close behind. The flame absorbed into his palm while he admired her.

“Tell me, firerender, do you always surround yourself with danger?”

“What makes you think that?” He laughed and reached for the hem of her shirt. She twisted out of his way.

“I heard a rumor is all. That you sailed your ship with a certain type of cargo.”

He closed the distance between them. “And if it's true, does bravery turn you on?”

“No.” She slid her hands down his bare chest. “But danger would.”

She pushed away. Their merged shadows separated into two, chasing each other across the paintings and wall sconces that decorated the rented room, dancing in and out of the moonlight streaming in through the window.

She would let him almost catch her. That was her favorite part—the almos.

It had been far too long since Mora had been touched by another, and as much as she desperately wanted to let someone’s hands roam her body, that’s not what she was supposed to do this night. That’s not who she was supposed to be.

Her body was not a playground, but a weapon, diverting his attention with her soft edges and wicked tongue. Coaxing his lips to speak the words she needed to hear.

She leaped onto the bed when he grabbed for her. “Take me somewhere dangerous. Have me there.”

The silken duvet tickled her ankles, and she stretched her arms above her head to steady herself on the canopy frame. Her shirt lifted with the movement, and the firerender’s eyes caught on her black lace underwear peeking out from beneath the hem.

“I’m a firerender, little bird. I can make anything dangerous.”

A wave of magic enveloped the room as he commanded every candle to burn brighter—hotter. Not what she had intended.

Mora's stomach churned with the heat.

Strong fingers dug into the backs of her thighs as he yanked her closer. His hot breath pounded against her chest, and the air around her chilled. Their two hearts beat in unison, wild with hunger for two completely different reasons. One for pleasure, the other for pain.

“Enough of the games,” he growled. “No more talking.”

Ahmya's voice was in the back of Mora's memories, warning her to cower to his demands, to give in to his desires, to be the good person she knew she could be. The job didn't require violence, after all—Mora just craved it.

She forced a submissive whimper from her lips. Flame rose from his fingertips as she obeyed. It was desperate, trying to break from his hold like a rabid mutt on a chain. It lunged for her shirt, her bare thighs, anything it thought it could reach. The colors changed from shades of orange to green with every flicker.

She watched as it ate away at her shirt and lapped at her skin with a sweet kiss of pain.

Only when she heard the ping of metal bouncing across the floor—and she saw the first of the tiny dagger buttons settle in a dusty corner—was she jolted from her trance.

Patting at the scorched shirt, she extinguished the fire until she knew the only flames left would be the molten silver of her eyes, fixated on him.

Her heart thundered in her ears as she fell to her knees on the mattress. The echo of Ahmya's warning grew faint beneath the whispers of darker thoughts.

She let the firerender pull her in tighter. As long as she appeared obedient, he kept his flames extinguished, but something deep inside her sparked awake. Something much colder than a flame, and far from giving light.

Her head tipped back with a satisfied groan. She focused on the pleasure of his teeth scraping against her flesh and the sting of smoke in her nostrils, anything to get her mind to stop wondering about the color of his blood. It could glisten the same as hers. Most people's did. But she had never met a firerender. He could bleed bright with the light of his magic, or perhaps he bled in shades of orange.

His hands traveled lower down her stomach, tracing idle circles around her belly button and migrating to her hips. She almost forgot why she was there when she felt a finger stroking over the thin barrier of her underwear. His touch was warm, growing warmer.

"You're freezing," he whispered into the crook of her neck. "I can fix that."

More of his colorful flames lapped around his hands and bit into her. The only noise that escaped was a soft moan she tried to keep hidden behind the mask of pain, but the hurt was too sweet.

"Yes. Sing for me, little bird," he demanded, pressing the flame harder against her. "Sing for me."

Anger bubbled its way up her throat, fighting against her pleasure and feeding her dark urges. One wrong word and the man's temper would be set off, resulting in a black ash of unrecognizable flesh wherever he ventured to touch her.

But one wrong word from him—one more wrong word—and she was sure to find out what color a firerender bled.

She made a choice to focus on her pleasure instead. Wrapping her arms around his neck, she fell back onto the bed, feeding one of her demons before the other took over.

He rocked against her, responding to her every moan as she pushed against the headboard for leverage. The bedsheet melted beneath the man's hands. The hardest part of him was grinding against the softest part of her. The friction of the thin fabric between them threatened her mind with oblivion.

But that name, it would not leave her alone. *Little bird.* Those words darkened her desires with a deeper shade of malice.

Since the day her magic was imprisoned inside her, Mora's essyn had been fighting to break its power free from the iron cuff that coiled around her bicep. That ball of light that kept her alive and gave her strength, festered beside her soul and fought for control. It fed sinful thoughts into her mind, angered it could no longer use what little magic she had. She had learned how to push her essyn down deep and lock it away, a prison inside a prison, but its whispers spilled through the cracks when she faltered.

When it slipped out, she did her best to pretend it didn't exist, even when its voice spoke softly, sounding just like her own. *How easy it would be, to make him hurt.*

As the firerender explored her body, ready to take what she so badly wanted to give, a dark tendril of her essyn tried to escape. But it would only snake its way into her veins, staining her heart and darkening her intentions. It would never get what it really wanted: freedom.

It ate away her fears and fed her reckless mind with his words, repeating them endlessly. *Little bird. Little bird. Little bird.*

“Call me that name again,” she said with heavy breath, “and I’ll cut your tongue out.”

“Careful, *little bird*. We don’t want word of your disobedience getting back to your master, now do we?” A mocking crown of flame twirled above his head with his threatening laugh.

The sloppy wetness of his kiss pressed against her lips, demanding more from her. She parted her lips, inviting him deeper.

Then she bit down.

A metallic taste invaded her mouth as he yanked free. Drops of deep red bubbled along his lips.

“Bitch!” He pinned her beneath him. The thought of him tearing the remaining fabric away from her body was just as enticing to her as the thought of his rough hands squeezing her neck with rage.

White hot pain lanced through her arms and then cooled as his fire morphed from orange to green. It snapped back to orange, back to heat, grabbing at her with a hunger he fought to match. Mora knew too well the signs of his struggle; she had seen it happen before. The firerender’s essyn was fighting for control, his magic flickering between compliance and chaos.

The look in his eye was all Mora needed to see his truth. He had tasted his essyn’s wrath, and he wanted more just as

badly as it did. Sparks rained down on them as his temper grew.

Whips of fire erupted from his hands, chasing through the air with a resounding crack. Her breath was stolen when the flame tied itself around her wrists and yanked her arms up to the bedposts. It burned orange at first, eating at the wood and blistering her skin. It faded to cooler flames before the pain knocked her out. The green burned not with melting heat, but with fumes and an acrid smell that made her dizzy.

“I’ll make you regret every moment of this,” he said. “I don’t care who you belong to. Tonight, you’re mine.”

She thrashed and bucked her hips, trying to knock him off of her. One of her wrists broke free when the force of her movements snapped the charred wood it was tied to. At last, the firerender lost his balance, but when he tumbled off the side of the bed, he yanked her down with him. A pop echoed through her body. A jolt of pain stole her breath. Her still-tied arm dislocated from its socket before her bonds dissolved into sparks.

Landing on top of him on the floor, Mora reached out her good arm and grabbed a faelight lantern from the bedside table. She smashed it against his skull, listening as he cried out in pain. The light seared into the side of his face and diminished.

Cradling her limp arm, Mora scooted herself away from him with a laugh. She used the window sill to pull herself up, almost falling when her hand slipped in her own blood. She hadn’t felt the glass slicing into her palm.

She pulled the shard out and looked for the man’s reflection in the pane of glass, expecting him to try catching



her off guard. Her focus slipped beyond the surface images to what perched on the other side. A coil of smoke wrapped its way into the shape of a raven. It pecked against the glass. The only witness to her sins, it grew frantic, as if the mirage needed her to get out of the situation just as badly as she did.

*You're losing your mind.*

She spun to find the man glaring at her while he pulled slivers of glass from the blistering side of his face. Her gaze darted around the room. If she couldn't coax the information out of him, she'd have to find it herself. She hoped he was stupid enough to have written it down in that damned ledger he had been scribbling in when she had first tried to catch his attention.

The cloak he had worn was lying among the scattered clothes on the far side of the room. She spotted it at the same time the firerender started toward her. "I had thought you were a gift from Oryn, a sign he'd finally agreed to uphold the terms we'd set."

Her laugh was choked from her as he wrapped fingers and green flames around her throat and pulled her face close enough to kiss her again.

She scoffed. "And now?"

"And now," he snapped, his grip on her loosening, "he's not getting a thing from me without the payment I'm owed. As good as you'd be, I still want my coin. And when I'm through with you, you'll be delivering that message for me."

He shoved her, hard enough that her feet left the floor, sending her in a spiral across the room. She landed with a thud

against the wall, and slid down with an agonizing cry that quickly morphed to laughter.

Her arm was limp, her skin was melting away from her wrists, and her shirt was in charred tatters.

Mora had rarely felt more alive.

A hiss echoed as the firerender worked to absorb the faelight from another lantern. It seemed he could steal fire just as he could make it, and faelight would hurt far worse than any ordinary flame.

She calmed herself, wrapped her hands around her knee and leaned back, pulling her arm out until it snapped back into place. A blinding bolt of pain shot through her before relief took over with a final tired laugh.

“I will have it known you were the one who decided on this fight, and not I.” Despite the apathy in her voice, something inside Mora was giddy with relief that he had taken the choice away from her.

Testing the movement of her shoulder, she reached for the sheath of daggers she had tucked under the bed before their night had started, and pulled out the two smallest ones. The ache in her joint was just the right amount of pain to keep her going.

The faelight flame shot toward her, missing as she got back on unsteady feet. The flame turned green then, like his normal flames, but stronger, brighter.

She couldn't trust what she was seeing as she tried to focus on the man, a difficult task now that there were two of him. No matter how many times she blinked, the two firerenders

never merged back into one. They moved independently of each other, stalking across the room.

“Amazing, isn’t it?” The further of the two twirled his hand in the air through a cloud of green flames.

“The fumes,” the other added. “They cause a sort of hallucination, playing games with your mind.”

“The faelight only makes it stronger, if absorbed properly.” He stepped closer.

“I wondered what effect it would have on a measly human.”

If there was one thing Mora did not need, it was something malicious getting inside her mind and manifesting her already twisted thoughts into corporeal nightmares.

“Such a beautiful weapon, isn’t it?” They both spoke. When Mora didn’t answer, they breathed in deeply, inhaling the flame like it was fresh air. “The things that fire can do.”

“Fire,” Mora spat the word like it burned, “is chaos.”

She stepped sideways, distancing herself from the one getting too close. The tapping rhythm of the bird got louder with each of the firerender’s steps. She needed to distract him long enough to determine which of him was real.

“Fire is unpredictable. It eats anything it can get its hands on and answers to no one but itself. But a dagger?” Her body disconnected from the voice that rolled off her tongue as she tried to focus on the cold steel she had in her hand. “A dagger of mine never hits a target it was not meant for.” She slid her finger through the loop-ended hilt and spun the weapon

around three times before catching it with a white-knuckled grip.

Orange flames flew through the room. Mora ducked, and the ball of flame erupted on the desk.

She darted toward the one who had incited the attack. He threw a punch, but she avoided it, ducking low enough to drag her dagger across the back of his knees as his momentum spun his body away from her.

He lurched for her, uninjured. His fist went through her like air. The other him—the real one—laughed. Every flame in the room jumped toward her with a simple motion of his hands.

She dodged his attack, but a stray flame grabbed at her arm. Her mind was too heavy with the effects of the fumes to register her skin sloughing away, but the smell of burning flesh stung her nostrils.

“Tell me again how much better your pathetic blade is?” He laughed.

Mora raised her dagger in defense, smiling at its beauty, too happy to comply. “Fire seeks attention like a priest chanting gospel,” she said for no other reason than the fun that was to be had by taunting him. That, and she was certain she had been drugged. She had a tendency to be dramatic when she wasn’t in her right mind. “But a blade can go unnoticed until it’s too late.”

The second dagger, hidden in her off hand, flew straight and true with a flick of her wrist. It sank deep between his ribs, forcing the firerender into the wall.

“But the real reason a blade is better? Fire chars and melts, while a dagger will make you bleed.” Grabbing the hilt embedded in his chest, she held the other to his face and yanked the dagger free. “And blood is my favorite color.”

He slammed a hand over the puncture, his palm blooming red with heat as he bent over. Fire broke from his pores. If that was even possible. She didn't know what was possible anymore. He was a blur of orange heat that roughly resembled a man.

She focused on his swaying movements, but the room had started to tilt. Side to side it went, like she was on a boat being rocked to sleep by angry waves. Shapes of charred furniture blurred into abstract forms, and framed paintings dulled into hues of gray before her vision righted and bile rose in her throat.

Knocks sounded on the door, fire crackled loudly, and the lone raven tapped viciously at the window, smoke pooling at its feet as it threatened to unravel into nothing. It was coming apart the same way Mora was.

Still, it kept tap, tap, tapping.

She needed to get out of there before the fire drew too much attention, before she was killed, and most importantly, before she was seen.

Someone was knocking on the door again. The sound pounded against her skull.

“We're just having a bit of fun!” the man said, eyes glaring at Mora and a wicked grin spreading across his face.

“You'll pay for whatever you break,” a voice said through the door. The firerender ignored it, only caring about one

thing: hurting her.

There would be little time left before she was lost to her injuries and he was free to take her as he pleased. So, Mora did what Mora always did best: She took things too far.

With foggy thoughts and icy rage, she ran into the face of the fire.

The fight was quick, her body moving along mindlessly as the poison devoured her. She hit and hit until her arms grew weak. Her jaw ached with the memory of his fist slamming into her. She didn't give up. She gripped her dagger tighter and hit harder. When she could once again comprehend where she was, she found her hands warm with slick blood.

Red flowed down the firerender's chest like rivers cutting through a valley of muscle as he slid down the wall with a broken cough. She saddled herself into his lap, his blood smearing on her legs and soaking into her once-white shirt. The flames around them started to grow.

"You can call me little bird if you wish." She yanked her dagger from his chest. "You can enjoy the sound of my song. Some men go as far as to think I fly only because they let me."

His blood sprayed her face as he tried to catch his breath, but one of the wounds had punctured a lung, and he was slowly, painfully, drowning in his own blood. Alive for now, but not for long. One more thrust and she would lose him. One more penetrating stab and he'd be gone.

She wiped away the glistening red droplets that had landed on her lips. The color disappeared in the dark ink staining the tips of her fingers as if the tattoo drank it in with a desperate thirst.

“But I am no songbird, you see. I am a raven. And do you know what it means when you are visited by a raven?”

Not even the bird at the window made a noise in response.

“It means that Death is coming.”



## CHAPTER TWO

FIVE.

That's how many lives Mora had gifted Death in her twenty-three short years of living. To anyone outside the Kingdom of Vale, that number may have seemed small and insignificant, but to someone who had been born with a darkmark inked on her skin, five was four too many.

There would always be the one whom she could never regret.

Now, with a bloodied man between her legs and a haze covering her mind, her number was dangerously close to being six.

She rolled off the man's lap and lay on the floor beside him. She listened to his wheezing breath grow shallower.

He would be gone before the rolling clouds of smoke swallowed his body. Mora was tempted to stay with him, staring at the plumes forming on the ceiling and learning what it would feel like to suffocate in ashes.

"Can I tell you a secret, firerender?" She took a shallow breath.



He made no noise aside from a hollow rattle. His eyes struggled to stay open while he searched for a way out, ignoring her words. But the raven was listening. Its tendrils of smoke had slipped through cracks in the glass and reformed into the raven when it reached her.

Despite its light form, it landed heavily on her chest like the weight of what she felt. It wasn't guilt that haunted her, as it should have been. No. When she saw what she had done, she felt not a sliver of remorse.

At that moment, more than any before, Mora feared herself.

"I don't want to feel pain. I just want to feel," she whispered, no longer sure who the words were meant for. "Pain is the only thing that can take me there."

The raven cocked its head, but it dissipated the moment the fire's smoke touched its own, leaving her alone with her words. But Mora was never alone for long.

A figure stepped out of the shadows. Mora only knew she was real by the look of fear on the man's face as he too watched her sway through the flames untouched. Her features were a blur, as if she was forged of a thick fog with cold beady eyes that saw too much and cared too little.

Every part of her, from her vague curves to her flowing hair, was made from the kind of darkness only found in empty spaces and broken hearts. The kind of darkness that drew you in.

This wasn't the first time she and Mora had met.

"*You reek of fear, my darling.*" Death's hissing voice snaked through Mora's mind. "*It's intoxicating.*"

Death admired the dying man and his blood-slicked hands that reached toward her, shaking with prayer. He struggled to find his voice, to offer any final words to the figure darkening the space before him. Any sound came only as gargled moans.

It made no difference. Mora knew what he would have said without so much as reading his expression. It's what all dying men said: promises he would never be able to uphold, desperate deals he had no right to offer, and cries that would erase every brave moment from his pathetic life.

Not a single one of them spent the last of their dying breaths on words of love.

But she shouldn't care. He had chosen death.

*"And you delivered it beautifully."* Death's presence slithered through every one of Mora's deepest secrets and darkest thoughts, breaking through the walls she had built around herself. There was no hiding from Death, no matter how hard Mora tried or how fast she pushed the thoughts away. Death knew Mora's soul, her essyn, and her heart. She knew every one of Mora's horrible thoughts.

Shadowy fingertips traced the dying man's jaw, but his eyes darted back and forth between Death and Mora.

"It's you," he croaked out through a fit of coughs. "The prophecy...it's you."

Talons plunged into his chest before his words had registered in Mora's mind. She wasn't sure she had heard him right. Perhaps she had made it all up and he had only been groaning broken sounds that her mind had twisted into words for her own fears.

Death thrust her claws into the light that fused alongside his soul like the steel of a pattern-welded blade. She stole his essyn, extinguishing it as easily as blowing out a candle flame. The embers in his eyes dimmed to a cold brown and Mora could have sworn she heard a disappointed sigh from Death, her games coming to an end too soon.

*I am not her,* Mora repeated to herself. *I am not her.*

And she wasn't. She was not Death, only one of her playthings.

A small piece of Mora felt at home watching blood seep from a wound and feeling the power that pulsed through her body when a man realized that she had bested him. But that piece of her was no more than her essyn's rage-filled thoughts. She did not desire to be feared. She did not want to become a monster.

*I am not like her.*

*"But you could be,"* Death answered.

With her parting words nothing more than a faint imprint on Mora's mind, Death vanished, taking with her the chill from the air and leaving Mora staring with the same blank-eyed look of the deceased. Both of their gazes were stuck on the place where Death had last stood.

"We smell smoke. Is everything alright?" Someone shouted from the other side of the door that separated her from the never-ending perfection of Vale. "I've called for the city guard!"

She swallowed the thick taste of panic, her tongue bone dry as she choked on smoke and anxiety.

Mora stumbled to a pile of discarded clothes. She rifled through the heaps of fabrics and buckles until she found a pocket sewn into a cloak. Inside, she finally found what she had come for.

The information she needed was written in hurried scribbles on the third page. She tore it free and scrambled for her sheath still tucked under the bed.

The familiar weight of her daggers returned with the leather straps wrapped around her waist and bare thighs. She tried not to go anywhere without a few hidden within reach.

That was, perhaps, part of her problem. Without them, she may not have been so tempted to draw blood, creating “incidents,” as Oryn called them. More likely, it didn’t matter. The weapon wasn’t the real problem: Her *essyn* was. The only way to fix her would be to give it what it wanted: to free her magic of the iron cuff hidden beneath her sleeve.

She filled a vial from her sheath with the dead man’s blood before retreating out the window. The room was on the second floor, just above the tavern that had already closed down for the night. More importantly, it was above a back exit, providing a small roof just below.

She lowered herself down, gripping the ledge with aching fingers, and let herself fall to the rooftop. In her stupor, she misjudged the landing and her knee caught on a finial. The sudden jolt of pain stole her balance and sent her sliding off the sloped roof. She swallowed a scream and grabbed for something, anything, to stop her from falling. She found nothing.

The landing stole the breath from her lungs, making her fight for air. When she finally won, she was rewarded with a

breeze that chilled the sweat on her skin and inflated her burning lungs.

Her victory was short-lived; the smoke billowed out the window in alarm. She ducked into an alley and hid in the shadows, waiting for the city guards to pass.

Very few inside the Kingdom of Vale broke the law, especially not in Harlen, the island that was home to the Castle of Pearls. Nobody ventured through town without crisp collars and fashionable cloaks, and certainly nobody within the kingdom's magical walls hurt like Mora did.

In her state, she would stand out in the streets like a dark cloud in a blue sky.

The raven of smoke reformed in the billow of its likeness, the air breathing life into its form once more.

When three city guards rushed past her, she made herself leave her resting place. Her limbs were heavy, and she was seeing things far before her mind could interpret them, but step after step, she made her way deeper into the heart of Harlen. The raven flew down from the sky and guided her through the alleys.

On a normal night, she could have navigated the city blindfolded. Now, she found herself thankful for the bird and its trail of black. It kept her in the darkest shadows, hidden from the sleepless eyes that watched the streets.

She stuck to the path it had chosen, dodging faces of stone and marble that extended from the buildings, reaching for her. They were the faces of humans and fae and animals that belonged in the Deadwood Forest. Sharp teeth snapped at her heels and claws reached for her hair as she limped past.

*They're not real*, she kept telling herself. The poison had only convinced her mind to conjure them, taunting her. But real or not, she needed to get back to Ahmya before she was caught by the city guard or slipped into unconsciousness. She couldn't afford either.

Hurling herself around a corner, Mora was startled by the sudden absence of her smokey guide. She tried to recognize the buildings and lamplights to find her bearings, but all the buildings on the island looked the same. Glistening white stones, sharply pointed roofs, and matching arched windows. If it weren't for the few wooden signs signifying business names, she'd never have known she was in a market quarter.

One of the buildings started to rumble before the front came crashing down and spilled into the street before her.

The pile of rubble morphed from broken stones—piece by piece—to form four legs and a body, then a head and the vague form of ears. The jagged figure smoothed out into polished stone and in its place stood a cat-like creature, almost as big as she was, shaking the dust from its carved fur.

It spotted Mora. Its hackles rose and it hissed. The creature crouched into the perfect image of a statue posed to attack its prey.

Adrenaline drowned her pains and she sprinted down the street.

Lamplights extinguished with a whisper in her trail. She turned left, then right, trying to lose the creature but only succeeding in confusing herself further.

It ran close behind her, close enough to latch onto her leg with a searing bite. She tumbled to the ground with her eyes

squeezed shut and a scream ripping through her. Her sinew snapped audibly as the creature separated muscle from bone with a vicious shake. It was going to tear her to shreds.

She expected her neck to be next, but the only thing she felt was her racing heart beating like thunder behind her ribs. Even some of the pain had gone. Her leg felt fully intact, and the only injuries that throbbed were her burns.

When she opened her eyes, she was staring into those of liquid gold, spilling gilded tears to the grass beside her head.

It was a wolf standing above her now. This creature was not made of stone or protruding from any building.

His black fur was matted and mangy, and patches of bloodied muscle and broken bone showed through like splintered wood beneath chipped paint. Scarred ears stood thin and tall, nothing like the drawings she had seen in books. This beast was partially decayed by the ticking clock of death.

She couldn't see the entirety of the animal with her blurred vision as it blended into the dark of the night, but she knew what she would see if she could: long feathered wings stretching from his shoulders and dragging uselessly on the ground beside his too-long tail.

More than once, a less dead version of the same wolf had curled up in her dreams and kept her nightmares at bay. That her mind had conjured it was a welcome relief, like a lifeboat as she was drowning at sea, telling her it was alright to let go now. That it was safe. He would keep her afloat.

There was a moment of clarity before the poison took her, and in that moment, she knew not to fear what wasn't real.

The monsters catching up to her faded back into the buildings, and the grass beneath her hardened into cobblestones.

She reached her hand out to touch the wolf before he disappeared back into her dreams, but when her fingers touched bone, he growled. Hot breath blew into her face. She didn't pull her hand away; she didn't move at all.

As she drifted off, the last thing she saw was the beast tilt his head, concern creeping across his features.

Mora's mind could conjure a world of dark and twisted things: anger, terror, hate. But never, no matter her state, could she have created such a docile thing as concern.





## CHAPTER THREE

THE WEEPING WOLF did not exist outside the castle dungeons, or so Mora had thought; for it was only when she was there that he had ever visited her in sleep. It had been three seasons since she had last dreamed of him, but there he was, and so there she must have returned.

Fur warmed her chilled bones as he leaned into her. She sat with him in silence, always in silence, watching over her mind as her body rested. He never made a sound; he never snarled or showed his sharp teeth. He never did anything aside from sit there, in the dark, and make her feel less alone. And with heavy drops of liquid gold streaming from his eyes, she would not weep alone either.

This time, tears had not yet escaped when chains wrapped around her ankles and ripped her from his side, back into the waking world. She startled awake with the sound of metal clanging against metal. Panic filled her chest with her first inhale of rust and dirt.

She found herself where she had assumed she would, buried four floors deep in iron and muck, exactly where Oryn had promised she would land if she screwed up again. Of course he picked that promise, of all the broken ones, to be the one he kept.

“And here I was, beginning to think you finally went and realized your greater purpose.” The familiar masculine voice filled the stale air with the sense of safety she so often craved.

“Me?” she groaned. The unwelcome smell of rot and body waste invaded her nostrils. “Never.”

“Oh, I have hope for you yet.”

There was no telling how long she had been lying like the dead, tossed in a heap on the hard ground. Every one of her muscles screamed at the mere thought of moving, and her burns ached clear to the bone. Regardless, she pulled herself up until she could see through the cold bars to the other side.

His cell was in the shadows beyond the reach of the dim lights, but there he was, looking half beaten and bored out of his mind. Picking at his nails with a twig.

Emrhyn Flynn.

“Your hair’s longer,” Mora said, noticing his white locks, matted with blood, went just past his broad shoulders. A thick strand fell into his face as he turned to look at her.

“You’re hurt,” he said.

She wiped the blood trickling down her temple from a cut that had reopened on her eyebrow. She couldn’t recall the exact moment she had gotten it. Everything after the taste of the firerender’s blood on her lips was a blur of memories that didn’t sit right in her gut.

“Just a scratch,” she lied.

“Let me see.”

He walked to her side of his cell and squatted down to her level, hanging a bruised and dirt-coated arm through the metal

bars. He used his finger to turn her face into the light.

She rolled her eyes, painfully, at the thought of anyone pitying her. Not when she deserved every scrape and bruise that painted her skin. She was art of her own making, decorated by the consequences of her mistakes. Mistakes that had other, far worse consequences than a bit of pain. Ones she now needed to talk her way out of. Her stomach tightened at the mere thought of it.

Talking was never her strong suit, and begging—well, begging was a foreign language she had never cared to learn. The only words she was ever good at forming were the ones she turned into weapons. Her *essyn* had taught her well, crafting serrated thoughts to wound her with.

“He must have really scrambled your brain this time, if you think you can coddle me, Rhyn.”

She pulled away from his touch. He shook his head with the hint of a smile on his lips. His sharp canine peeking through on one side caught her attention.

It was easy for her to forget that Rhyn was an old-blood fae, but she could clearly see it from the points of his ears to the striking symmetry in his facial features.

His pale skin and crystal blue eyes accentuated his dark bruises. He looked as young as she in his softened state, but Mora could only guess how old he really was, and he had been in that cell far longer than she cared to know.

“You know Burik,” he said. “His methods lack the creativity it’d take.”

“You almost had me worried I’d been missing out.” Her laugh ached in her chest. “I could give him a few pointers if

you're getting bored."

He returned her amused expression, but his halfhearted smile fell when his eyes wandered over her. Even in the state she had been left in, she knew that his look had little to do with her exposed body and everything to do with her injuries.

"Can I take a guess that you've brought me something?" he asked.

"Has he been down to visit yet?"

"Not yet. I'm sure he'll be informed you've awoken, but we have time."

Failing in her attempt to change the subject, Mora dug her fingers into the smallest pocket on her newly empty sheath to find the vial of blood still there. She clenched it in her hand. It was a small mercy that she had been allowed to keep it.

Rhyn walked over to a loose brick in the back wall of his cell and returned to her side with a bundled cloth. Unrolling it, he removed a leather pouch and two matching vials, smaller than the one she handed him. He placed them neatly in his lap.

"I thought you promised 'never again.'"

Mora leaned against the cold bars and sighed. "I did, and yet here I am, again, with you beneath the castle."

"No need for shame until the fourth time." He smirked. "But we both know that is not what I refer to."

"He would have killed me if I hadn't..." her voice trailed off, unable to give the words life.

“I’m not the one who cares, nor the one that needs to be convinced, Mor.”

He emptied the blood into the leather pouch and tipped in a few drops of clear liquid from one vial and black powder from the other. After mixing it, he picked up a broken feather quill that tapered into an iron needle and dipped it into the mixture.

“Hand,” he said. Mora obeyed, sticking her hand through the bars and resting her wrist on his knee to stop herself from shaking. She wasn’t afraid so much as she was anxious. She needed to craft her words for Oryn perfectly if she wanted to regain her chance at a promising future. It was all she could think about as Rhyn sunk the needle into her skin.

She bit back a hiss as he repeated the action, continuing the line where her black ink faded on her finger. After a number of sharp jabs, she was well used to and rather enjoying the pain.

It went on for what seemed like half a day, staining the bloodink into each of her fingers and bringing the tattoo halfway past the first knuckle as she rehearsed her argument in her head. Neither one of them said a word aside from “turn” and “other hand.”

She appreciated the ability to just *be* around this man whom she considered as close to a friend as she’d let anyone be. There was never forced small talk or pressure to fill the silence. They had seen each other through far too much to stoop down to the idle chatter of strangers. And yet, Mora knew little of the man, and he knew even less of her.

When he was done with her last finger, he washed the quill in a bucket of water and rolled everything back up to

return it to its hiding spot. Still, Oryn had not come to visit.

“A healer should check the ink for infection when they take care of your other wounds.”

“How could I forget?” Mora scoffed.

“After that first time, I hope you never would. But I remind you regardless.”

He had done her nail beds that time, which required that the nail itself be removed so he could ink the skin beneath.

The infection almost killed her, but she had been so distraught over her mistake of taking a life that she had thought it was what she deserved. She had learned since then that living was a much harsher punishment than letting Death win.

After watching Rhyn settle back into the far corner and close his eyes in an attempt at sleep, Mora decided to do the same. She had likely been passed out for a day, if not longer, but she was more tired than she wanted to admit.

Her throbbing fingers took the edge of pain away from her headache and the burns and bruises that Rhyn had thankfully not mentioned. But the memory of her blade sinking into a thick chest plagued her thoughts, and the idea of losing everything she had left because of it kept her from finding sleep.

Rhyn’s chains shuffled together, clanking loudly. The sound echoed down the dark corridor, and just as it did with torchlight and false hope, the dungeons consumed it.

“Have you ever tried to escape from this place?” She grimaced at the scratch in her voice. Even with a soft whisper,

she had swallowed too much smoke to sound like herself.

He stilled, the chains going silent.

She had always wondered about him. What he did to get locked up, if he'd ever regretted it. But those kinds of questions always came with strings attached. Normally, in the form of questions volleyed back at her. Mora hadn't been prepared to pay that price. She still wasn't.

"If I didn't want to be here, I wouldn't have turned myself in."

"What? Why? For what?"

He laughed as she stumbled over her words. "Crimes against the One Faith."

Along with taking a life, it was one of the worst crimes one could commit in Vale, deserving of a prison as low as the one they found themselves in. Nobody in their right mind would turn themselves in for such a crime. Unless, of course, it was only Mora whose guilt would not be strong enough to make such a moral decision.

"Leave it to you to wait until the last moment to start asking important questions." Rhyn sighed. "I did it because this is where my queen needed me to be."

Confusion knitted her brow as she let his words sink in. She had always loved learning about the outside world, and she racked her brain trying to remember readings of every kingdom that lasted through the God War. There was only Vale, the lands outside of Vale that they called the Shadow, and the deadly Fallen Kingdoms that sat empty on the other side of the world.

But the King of Vale was not yet wed, although that was soon to change.

“I didn’t know the Shadow had a new queen,” Mora cried.

“It doesn’t. Is there anything else you would like to know?”

Mora scoffed. “You *want* me to ask you questions?”

“Yes,” he said. “I can’t answer what’s not asked, and it’s about time you learn how to ask.”

Mora straightened her posture and looked into the dark where she swore she saw his blue eyes glow before he blinked it away. She tightened her jaw, recalling every question she had ever wanted to ask, but never did.

He stood and began pacing in the shadows while she thought.

“Do you have a family?”

Sorrow flashed across his face like he was witnessing the life he had lost playing out in dull colors and fading images before him. His fingers wrapped tightly around his arm before he realized what he was doing and let go of his grip. Just as he always did after his visits with Burik.

She would have regretted asking had he not finally replied, “Yes.”

She bit at her lip. “And?”

“And? You need to start asking real questions, Mor. You never know what they might one day cost you. It would be smart to be careful with what you ask and how you ask it.” His words were matter-of-fact, without any trace of malice or



irritation, but he had to stop his fingers from drifting to his arm again.

When Mora didn't respond, not knowing what to say, he continued. "The world is full of deceit. The clearer you are with what you want, the less chance it will have to make a fool of you. Especially in the Shadow. I just need you to remember that."

Chills cut down her spine; his warning heightened her anxieties.

The wall around the kingdom was a bubble of swirling colors that trapped her, and everyone else, inside Vale like weak tissue stuck under a blister. It was made to keep out the bad and the evil, to keep out everything that made life real and worthy of existing. Things like monsters and the bloodblight, like the rain and the cold, pain and sorrow. Things like Mora.

But she needn't worry about that. Oryn would much rather keep her on a leash than let the One Faith force her through the wall. He had already proven so by keeping her indiscretions secret. The only way she would see the Shadow was if she ran.

"Even if I escape this cage, I would never make it through the wall alive. I don't need to know how life works out there."

Rhyn flicked something from his hand that pinged against an iron bar. "I have heard rumors that there are weaknesses in the wall. Tears that are spreading wider by the day. You may not have to go to the Shadow if the Shadow one day comes to you."

The answer was typical of Rhyn. He had always spoken of the future in a way that gave her an eerie feeling he knew

something she didn't. Something bad hiding between the lines of words that didn't quite make sense.

They had an unspoken agreement that she would never ask about his vague warnings. The one time she had, he hadn't spoken to her for days after.

"What family do you have?" she asked.

"Only a sister of the blood. You would probably hate her, you're too much alike." Mora's smile matched his as he continued, "And a few who are family by choice."

"That's the best kind of family in my experience."

"It can be if you let it. What else do you want to know?"

Even with his limited knowledge of her life, Rhyn knew that Mora's sister was not of the blood. It was one of the few things that became obvious the moment you saw her. Mora looked nothing like Ahmya.

Where her sister was bright and full of life, Mora was faded and dull. Her tan skin looked like it had started to turn with decay, her almost black hair was washed to charcoal gray, even her silver eyes were a faded shade of green.

"I just want to hear more about them, what they are like."

Before he could respond, they were interrupted by heavy footsteps echoing down the corridor. There were multiple pairs, three at least, from what Mora could discern. A chill crept across her skin and her stomach dropped.

Rhyn disappeared into the shadows, doing his best to remain unnoticed.

She kept her eyes on the corridor as the sound grew louder, until a castle guard stepped into the torchlight. He was

followed by a beautiful red-haired woman in a gown too pretty to be worn to the dungeons, and a man none other than the King of Vale himself: Oryn Zarric. He was dressed in white and neatly groomed from sandy brown hair to shiny black boots.

Another figure loomed behind them, hard to miss in his brash golden cloak: the ever-present Gilded Guard that followed the king.

“Get her out.” Oryn spoke to the guard who had escorted them, who proceeded to fumble through his cloak until he found a ring with a single key hanging on it. He hesitated at her cell door, looking through the bars at her as if she’d have the energy to kill him with her bare hands if he got any closer.

Mora stood up, using the wall to keep her balance. “I won’t bite,” she joked. The look in her eyes said otherwise.

His attention landed on the chain that she’d unlocked from her ankles with a pin she kept hidden in her hair. When her teeth snapped at the air in front of her, he dropped the key.

There were few people outside of the king and his Gilded Guards who knew the deal Mora had made with Oryn; this man was clearly one of them. He had guarded the lower dungeon during the two years she had previously been locked away. She had been known to attack her escorts from time to time when she was brought from her cell to Burik, although she never had the strength to fight them on her way back.

It seemed her old friend hadn’t forgotten her in the time she’d lived free.

The king excused the poor guard with an eye roll that rivaled her own. In his stead, Riggs stepped from his spot

lurking behind them and approached her cell.

As a part of the guard personally responsible for the safety of the royal family, Riggs was one of the best the army had to offer. He was always straight faced and stone lipped, like the rest of the Gilded Guard, never showing any hint of emotion and only speaking when it was demanded of them.

They reminded Mora more of statues than of people. Riggs especially. In all her attempts at breaking any of the six Gilded Guards, making them smile or wink or anything to prove they were alive, he was the only one she had yet to see a crack in his stone. He was her favorite.

He opened her cell and yanked her out. It hurt every part of her body, but she kept the feeling from showing. No fear, no pain, no surprise, only a nefarious grin that hid every swear word and ill thought that crossed her screaming mind.

Oryn crossed his arms. “Did you at least find the bones?”

“Where are my blades?” she asked.

He nodded once to Riggs who, to no one’s surprise, obeyed the silent order and handed Mora a small throwing blade from his belt, then two more, followed by a bigger, sharper dagger he had stored in his boot.

“Maybe if you stopped carrying so many weapons, incidents like this would stop happening.”

Mora accepted the blades and hoped that it meant she wasn’t being locked back up after his visit. Ignoring his comment, she inspected them thoroughly to find no new nicks or scratches. Two of the smaller ones still had blood caked on them where the blade met the hilt.

She thought about taking a job at the king's obsessive need for everything in the Castle of Pearls to be pristine and perfect but swallowed the joke with a dry mouth. It was not the time.

The end of the bigger dagger unscrewed with a gentle twist. Tipping the blade upward, a rolled-up paper with bloody fingerprints slid from the hilt and landed in her palm.

Oryn took the paper, opened it—seemed pleased enough—and then folded his arms back across his chest.

“You have done an evil, unforgivable thing taking another's life. Yet again.”

Although Mora had practiced what to say to those words, she found herself not ready to give her speech a voice. She was overcome by the desire to talk about something else, equally important, that gnawed at her insides.

“He knew of the prophecy.”

Oryn's jaw tightened as his gaze snapped to her. The future queen consort followed, red-brown eyebrows raised high.

He turned to Riggs. “Find out how he learned of this, immediately.”

The moment Riggs was gone, Oryn's posture relaxed just enough for Mora to notice. He sighed. “What exactly do you remember of the prophecy?”

“Not much,” she lied. “Something about a great evil coming, one that will bring fear upon the gods.” Her lungs tightened, waiting for Oryn to say something, anything, that might prove he knew her lie.

It had been a fortnight since she'd stumbled upon the journal the Lightmarked Prince had had delivered to the church from his travels.

She'd had only a brief moment with the worn pages before it was ripped away from her. Still, she remembered every word of that prophecy, every single feeling that had crept from the pit of her stomach to her throat when she read it, and every shaky stroke of ink that formed each letter.

Most of all, she remembered the exact shape of the darkmark inked above it. The smudge of ink and sharp symbols ran down the page in a color so dark it reminded her of Death.

The people of Vale had been praying for a prophecy, for their light and savior. They should have known; sometimes when you pray for a hero, a villain answers the call.

And it was Mora who was written to be the villain of their story. Her hidden darkmark that spilled across that page. Her fate that she swore she would stop from coming true if it was the last thing she ever did.

“Let me out and I'll help you find whoever the darkmark belongs to. I will do it the right way and prove that I'm not a liability to your cause.” The white lies slipped out before she could catch them. It wasn't at all what she had prepared and it was dangerously close to begging.

She righted her posture, trying not to so much as breathe until he replied. Oryn didn't know it was her. He couldn't have known. Ahmya had kept Mora's mark hidden beneath a glamour. Not even the census had record of it. They couldn't make a match to what they had never seen.

Oryn sighed. “Lucky for you, your sister here—” he placed his hand on the future queen consort’s shoulder “—is better at convincing me of your worth than you are.” Ahmya smiled sweetly as he placed a kiss—that was barely a kiss—softly on her cheek.

He turned back to Mora one more time. “Do not think you are getting off free. I merely don’t have enough time or patience to deal with you right now.”

The feigned smile on her sister’s lips fell, and she wouldn’t look directly at Mora when the king left them.

“Ahmya.” Mora bit her lip. “I didn’t plan for anyone to get hurt. I swear to Aemon.”

“Not here.” Her sister smoothed the green fabric on the front of her dress before looping her arm in Mora’s and leading her down the corridor. “Let’s get you to a healer. You are going to need to be at your best for what’s to come.”



## CHAPTER FOUR

THERE WERE WORSE situations that Mora could have gotten her sister into, but the only thing that mattered was that there were also better ones. Much better ones. And Ahmya deserved better.

As close as she and the king had grown since her freedom was traded for Mora's, their affection toward one another always seemed forced. Like two magnets of the same pole repelling when they got close yet oddly at ease with distance between them.

They were far too alike and much too different. And it was Mora's fault that they were to be wed. Stuck together until Death ripped them apart, as she no doubt would one day do.

"Do you love him?" Mora asked, sinking further into the copper tub in the center of her bathing room.

Her wounds had all been healed, but the heat of the water reminded her of fire, and fire reminded her of what she'd done. It felt wrong not to have any new scars or lasting bruises to prove it had been real.

She attempted to distract herself from the knot in her stomach by wiggling her fingers and watching as the



candlelight absorbed into her new bloodink. At least they couldn't take that from her.

Ahmya paused her pacing, glancing toward the door as if she could see her betrothed through the many walls that separated them from him. After a moment of pause, she continued to wear a path into the marble floor, letting the clicking of her heels reply for her.

In Mora's years of causing trouble, Ahmya had always been there, steady and calm, with a plan and a kind word to make it right again. This time felt different. This time was different.

*We'll figure it out. We always do,* Mora thought, but she couldn't put an answer to why the words wouldn't leave her tongue.

*Because you're wrong.* Her essyn woke.

"It took a while to convince him to let you out," Ahmya finally said. "We had guests too, when you were brought in, so there was no way to let you out even if he had agreed earlier. It would have caused rumors if they had known you were down there. We couldn't risk them seeing you dragged through the castle, so what was I meant to do but leave you there? I suppose if you hadn't—"

"Ahmya." Mora interrupted, adding every bit of light-hearted ease into her tone as she could afford. "I was fine. I had Rhyn to keep me company, and besides, I was unconscious the majority of the time. It wouldn't have made a difference to me where I slept."

Ahmya grimaced. The hint of guilt in her tone left in the blink of an eye. Or rather, the sound of a name. "Right,

Emrhyn Flynn.”

She perched on the edge of the tub, flattening out the skirts of her dress and looking exactly like the queenly figure she was meant to be: poised and determined. She smoothed out each wrinkle with irate purpose, like she was made of hot iron and billowing steam.

Unease dug into Mora’s skin. She knew a lecture was coming, but she resolved to listen without complaint as Ahmya continued.

“I know to pick my battles with you, so I’ll refrain from commenting on that particular friendship. Besides, there are important matters you should be concerned with right now. For example, someone went to the church yesterday claiming to have information about a mysterious raven-hooded figure lurking around the island. The people are starting to take notice of you.

“The rumor is, you’re an emissary of the Shadow. To them, this is proof that the wall is failing and letting ill intentions into Vale, and the last thing this kingdom needs is a reason to think that our blessed light is failing us.”

“Well—” The soapy water receded from Mora’s chest when she shifted her position in the tub, knowing that her sister’s deepening glare would peel away from her the moment she was indecent. Ahmya had always been far more modest than she. “The people noticing the Raven’s faceless shadow is the least of the things I’m worrying about right now.”

“This kingdom relies on our people’s faith in Aemon. You know that. You can’t give them any reason to question that faith.”

“If you ask me, they could use a little questioning in their faith. Imagine if they knew that their mysterious emissary was sent, by the very church they worship, to spy on them?”

“I’ve warned you before about such talk in this castle. You are not the only one who hears things.” She released her grip on the fabric of her skirt and went back to smoothing it flat along her legs. “And you know the church gives no such orders. Oryn alone is responsible for everything you do, and he is only trying to protect our kingdom.”

“Right.” Mora scoffed. “And yet, we both know it’s greed and the One Faith who puppets Oryn’s strings.”

“Enough, Mora. When are you going to start taking this seriously? Was finding that prophecy not enough of a warning for you to stop this? We know that it is *you* who is fated for great evil, and instead of stopping it from unfolding you’re speaking ill of our faith. Instead of helping me ensure nobody finds out about this, you are defaming our king, stealing, and lying. And you have taken a life, again. Stop saying you’re trying to be good, and just do it.”

Mora’s elbow slipped off the rounded edge of the tub, splashing suds onto her lip and giving her an excuse to turn her attention anywhere other than her sister’s accusing eyes. She wiped the soap off on her arm.

She wanted to defend herself, to yell *can’t you see I’m trying?* To tell Ahmya that she didn’t need to be told to be better when her mind already punished her for that exact reason every day. She had beaten herself inside and out for the past two weeks to *just be better*.

“That was harsh of me.” Her sister moved to the counter where a smaller washbasin and a pile of clean towels sat. Her

fingers drifted across the thick fabric of a towel and settled on the seam as she looked back at Mora. “I shouldn’t have said that. I’m—” a loud *thunk* startled her as a book fell from the towel she’d grabbed and landed heavily on the floor—a book that would now need a new place to hide.

Picking it up, Ahmya inspected the title with a raised brow. *Kezebel and the Sea of Silver*. “What is this?”

“It’s for the kids,” Mora said.

“It’s a bit grim to teach children to read with a tale about luring men to their deaths, don’t you think?”

“Or, maybe if they learn early how vicious women can be, they’ll grow up to treat them better.”

Ahmya set the book back on the counter like it would combust into flames or give her a bad rash if she tilted it wrong. “You’re still doing that, then?”

After stepping out of the tub, Mora grabbed the towel from Ahmya’s outstretched hand and began patting herself dry. Her sodden hair dripped water to the floor to form a small puddle at her feet.

She didn’t bother to answer the question aloud; of course she was still doing it, she would never stop, but saying so would only further their bickering. The One Faith held knowledge over their heads like a pearled crown gilded with the light of Aemon himself. That was to say, nobody else got to touch it.

Reading was against the law. Writing was too. She assumed it was because they feared what the people might learn if they read a book or two. That or, equally as likely, they

merely craved the power it gave them to behold such an untouched thing.

So far, Mora had read plenty of books and not one of them felt threatening in her hands. Perhaps that was what made them so dangerous, that one wouldn't realize the ideas forming in their mind until they had morphed into something unstoppable. Like a ripple in the sea that could grow to swallow an island—an entire kingdom if they gave it enough time.

Once she was wrapped in the towel, Mora relaxed into a chair with an exhausted huff. Ahmya smiled softly, silently agreeing to put aside their worries. She picked up a comb and started working the knots out of Mora's hair. One at a time, as gentle as she could.

“Tell me the dream again,” Mora said.

Through the mirror, she watched the smile grow wider on Ahmya's pink lips, then closed her eyes, ready to listen to every word her sister was about to say.

“The house is beautiful. Every window is made of stained-glass mosaics, all the colors of the rainbow interlocking into artful paintings of flora and fauna. When the sun shines through, the colors dance across the floorboards.” Mora could almost see it, this life Ahmya had planned for them. “Except for your bedchamber windows, of course. Those are made up of deep reds, so it always looks like night, no matter the time of day.

“There's a dog and a garden of vegetables. Oryn is there, he's found peace in our home on the hill. You've found love too—a ruggedly handsome man, a fighter like yourself. The two

of you spar in the front yard, and when the house is empty and you're alone, you have sex on all the furniture.”

“Even the dining table?” Mora interrupted.

“*All* of the furniture.” Ahmya laughed. “There are children too, mine, not yours. You are the adored aunt who teaches them how to be brave and where to kick a man to make it hurt.”

Her voice trailed off as she worked out the last knot from Mora's hair and let the dream of what could be drift through the room like a blanket of petals floating through the air.

Ahmya's comb traced down Mora's spine as it slid through the ends of her hair, brushing across the darkmark only they could see. Reality disintegrated the dream before a single proverbial petal could touch them.

When Mora opened her eyes, Ahmya let her hands fall to her sides. The smile on her face was laced in a bitter sorrow that she couldn't bring herself to look at for long. Their moment had passed and all that it left was the deafening fear of her future that lingered between them. And it tasted like blood.

“Oryn was supposed to join us to talk of his plans for you, but it seems he's been held up.” Ahmya's voice snapped with the lasting tension. “He will come around, likely in the morning. I don't mean for you to worry yourself, but what he needs you to do, it's important. Don't do anything to make him regret giving you this chance. It really is your last one this time.”

“I can't see why I would be worried then,” Mora said, but it was just another lie. They both knew any chance she got to

test herself was a chance she would make another mistake. If she was to be a great evil, it was only a matter of time before the bodies pushed her over a line she couldn't return from. Like flipping a hidden switch to stain her soul and flood her mind with the same ill intent her *essyn* had. If it wasn't already too late.

Maybe she could make up for what she had done, balance the scales away from a fate she wanted no part of. But there were six people now, weighing down her heart and haunting her sleep. She could do all the good in the world, and there still wouldn't be room for a single person more on her list. If there were to be a number seven, she would be sure it was her own life that Death was gifted.

She had to fight for her future. To prove she was worthy of their dream.

Ahmya paused at the door. "I do love him, you know. We are not soul-bonded by any means, but it's amazing the way a person can feel more like a home than any four walls ever have. He's warm and sturdy, and being with him just feels—I don't know. It's hard to explain to someone who's never experienced it."

The echo of the door closing behind Ahmya left a nauseous feeling in Mora's throat.

"But I have, dear sister," she murmured too late and too quietly to be heard.

She replaced the towel with a short nightdress and a pair of lace underwear—when one was posed as a king's courtesan, all her underwear were lace and all her nightdresses were short—and uncorked a bottle of brandy she'd dug out of her bedside table. As she poured a glass, the strong scent wafted through

the air, just like the poisonous fumes had. She swallowed it down and then poured another, chasing her thoughts with the sting of alcohol.

In Ahmya's eyes, home was a man with coin in his pocket and a crown on his head, but to Mora, home was Ahmya.

And she could not let her down again.





## CHAPTER FIVE

THE BOTTLE WAS one glass shy of empty by the time the rest of the kingdom was asleep, and Mora's chalice had plenty of room for more drink.

She tipped her head back and poured what was left down her throat; the liquid did wonders to drown any thought of her future. Already she had forgotten about whatever mysterious new job the king wanted her to do, about stabbing a man to death—and, frankly, liking it—and about what evil things the future had in store for her.

Fine, so she didn't completely forget. But the memories were clouded behind a haze of delirium and whatever weight had been sinking her further into the ground was now as light as a feather.

*Prophecy-shmophecy.*

Without looking, she sent a dagger flying from her spot on the edge of the too-soft bed to a target painted on the back of a garish chair. The piece of furniture was bright and colorful and horrendous, like the sun had vomited happiness in the form of four wooden legs and floral fabric. Her dagger landed in the center beside two more just like it.

If anyone from her nonexistent audience were to have asked, she would have happily agreed that it was quite the improvement to the chair, to the entire room, for that matter. She should have gotten the rest of her weapons and redecorated all the furniture.

The walls were too white and the fabrics too gold for her taste. The only things she did like were the large framed windows that overlooked the courtyard garden. The windowsill was wide enough she could balance on it with a blanket wrapped around her and watch the stars chase the moon across the sky, or the colors dance across the Levana tree below. All the things she did to avoid finding sleep.

She missed her old home, the small bed tucked away in a corner and all her failed attempts at owning plants lining her shelves. It was a comfortable place, one where she could be herself without fear of eyes lurking behind curtains or ears listening from cracks in the walls. The castle was too big for one to feel truly alone.

A knock rattled the door on its hinges. She hadn't realized she had been staring at it until it rattled a second time. It wasn't a knock she recognized, but not one that sounded particularly threatening either, despite the dramatic overreaction from the wooden door. *Besides, if it was a threat, her mind finally caught up, they likely wouldn't bother with knocking.*

On the third knock, she stormed to the door with her teeth bared and a pulsing in her ears. Whoever it was, was lucky she had already thrown the last sharp object within her reach.

“Who in this gods-fucked golden kingdom is banging on my door in the pitch *fucking* dark like an impatient, uncultured, ass—” She swung her door open with every bit of ill intent she had mustered, but that intent froze on her lips when she was met by two bright-blue eyes and a crooked smile that could stop a heart.

There was a man leaning against the frame of her door as if it were a perfectly acceptable time for a visit. She hardly minded after she saw him. He was rather enticing with his undone collar and darkening stare. For a brief moment—that she would never in her life admit to—she had no words.

A rush of heat rose to her face, and her anger flooded with the confusing mixture of both embarrassment and something much lower, deeper, and far more inappropriate.

The stranger raised a perfectly shaped eyebrow. “Please, do go on.”

It was darker in the corridor than it was in her moonlit room, but she could see well enough to make out neatly groomed blond hair, pointed ears, and the impossible-to-miss brash golden cloak he held by the hook of his finger, throwing it over his shoulder.

If the cloak was truly his, he was a Gilded Guard, and not one she had ever seen before, which was strange. To make it odder, he wasn’t statuesque in the way that made her want to try and break him. He was...bendy. Graceful. And he talked.

“Asshole of a Gilded Guard,” she finished. Normally, she wouldn’t have gone for a blond man, but the way this one was looking at her, he might as well have been tossing kerosene on fire. Mix that with the alcohol, and blond was looking rather dark and tempting.

“Ah.” He stepped, uninvited, through the threshold, never taking his piercing eyes off her much duller ones. “It is what I do, not who I am.”

“Uncultured assholes?” Mora widened her eyes in amusement and the stranger deepened his smirk. She raised her hands to show she meant no harm. “Everyone has their own taste, no judgment here.”

“The Gilded Guard,” he corrected. He tossed the silk cloak onto her bed while taking in the state of her room from the messy desk to the scattered array of pillows and clothes on her floor.

“So, you are the king’s newest toy I have heard so much about?”

“I’m no toy,” she bit back.

He pulled the three daggers from the ugly floral chair and flopped into a relaxed position like the spot had been his favorite place to nap for years. Inspecting one of the blades, he ran his finger across a sharp edge and let the point prick through his skin. A bead of red appeared.

“No.” He looked at her. “I have a feeling you most certainly are not.”

Tension grew with every sauntering step she took, watching as he fought to stop his gaze from trailing down the length of her bare legs. She closed the distance between them with her eyes on his, refusing to so much as blink before he did. Even when she took the blades from his hands, her eyes were locked on cobalt blue.

“If you’re here for a lap dance, I’m afraid you won’t be able to afford the likes of me.”

“And what, might I ask, would a man have to give for such a dance?”

“Oh, it’s not what you would give that should worry you, but what I’d take. Your safety. Your coin.” She traced the undone tie at his collar with one of her blades. “Likely your heart too.”

He rose, choosing to ignore the blade, and pushed a step toward her. She matched his movements with a step back.

He was almost a head taller than Mora, and she had to crane her neck to stay with him. They glided across the room, moving as one. His foot forward. Hers sliding back. Never altering the small distance between their bodies. It was as if they were hearing the same sensual beat counting off their steps. One. Two. One. Two.

They stopped when her back found the wall, her blade still on him, his eyes only breaking away from her when he leaned close enough to brush his lips against the rounded shell of her ear.

“I don’t bite,” he said.

“That’s a shame,” she drawled, pushing him back with the pressure of the blade until she could look him in the eyes again. There was something addicting about that shade of blue. “The best of times often involves a little biting.”

He chuckled, a smirk finding his lips once more. “Oh, you are going to be trouble.”

“Trouble can be fun.”

“It always is.”

She had the faint feeling that crooked smile was indeed going to cause her trouble. The feeling you get when your soul just knows things your mind hasn't figured out yet. She only hoped it was the fun kind because he was wrong; it wasn't always fun. Trouble could be dangerous if she wasn't careful. She knew that too well.

His fingers brushed against her jaw. His attention focused solely on her mouth. He leaned in, but pulled away before her lips met his. "No," his eyes trailed around her face. "A first kiss with trouble should never be so modest. When my tongue first meets yours, it will be with the taste of your come between our lips."

Someone cleared their throat from the open door.

The Gilded Guard pulled back as one would yank their finger away from a candle flame when finding out how long they could stand the heat. His shoulders went rigid and his jaw flexed as he snapped his attention to his king. He transformed into a soldier before Mora could blink.

"I see you two have already met," Oryn said, standing in her open doorway with a scowl and looking sorely out of place among her things. His light brown hair was pulled back, untarnished by the day. His neatly trimmed beard was a few shades darker but equally well kept. Not a thread on him was out of place.

The Gilded Guard's eyes went wide as he looked back at her, then to his king, seeing something Mora couldn't. Whether that was because the room was starting to spin for her, or because she didn't speak the silent language the guards seemed to adopt with Oryn, she didn't care.

“Apologies, Your Majesty. I seem to have been led to the wrong room. I had thought—”

“Hold your tongue, Kallan,” he snapped. “Since you are here, you might as well stay. I see no problem in having you take on your responsibilities early.”

Oryn’s eyes narrowed, darting between them as if he too could feel the abrupt absence where a warm body had been. As though he could smell the scent lingering in the space before her. Vanilla and something metallic, like pastries and swords; sweet and strong.

Or maybe that was the alcohol talking.

*Shit. The alcohol.* Before the multiple interruptions, she had been bottle-deep in drowning herself. She looked around, spotting the empty bottle on the floor beside her bed, near where the guard—Kallan—stood.

She couldn’t afford to let either of them see how well she had succeeded in racing herself into a drunken stupor. Especially if this were to be the most important discussion of her life. The one that everything hinged on.

“MORA.” Her attention snapped to the king when his voice boomed through the room. It was the tone he used when his patience was wearing thin, one she often found herself on the receiving end of.

A knowing glint shone in Kallan’s eyes when he trailed the path her focus had been stuck on and saw the one thing she’d wished he wouldn’t.

“Mora, my little Raven, I am assigning Kallan as your personal guard to assure that you have all the help you might

need with this coming task. Not to mention, a sword to watch your back.”

In her peripheral vision, she saw Kallan take a step toward Oryn, toward the bottle, and let his boot nudge it further beneath the bed while he coughed to cover the sound. Mora refused to look at him.

“I have never needed a sword to get a job done,” she argued, “nor any man to watch my back.”

“You will, and you will accept it,” Oryn demanded.

“You expect me to believe that being babysat by the Golden Boy is for my own good and not some punishment for —” She stopped short, unsure if the obviously amused Kallan was privy to certain information. “For a completely understandable accident?”

“Can it not be both? Until I make up my mind about what to do with you, the two of you are going to be working rather closely. In fact, he is not to step more than an arm’s length away from you from now until this job is successfully completed.”

“Wonderful.” Mora couldn’t help but laugh at the idea. “I’ve always wanted someone to watch me pee. Call it a new kink.”

Oryn pressed his thumb and forefinger to his temples, an act he always did when he was attempting to forget that her vile words existed in the same room as him. At least, that’s what Mora liked to pretend he was thinking. She could never be sure with him.

“He can close his eyes.” He crossed his arms. “While Kallan is arguably the best soldier I have and will be acting as



the Gilded Guard's second in command—" he gave a pointed glare at Kallan "—he is just back home from the border disputes and will be doing his best to remain professional as he transitions back to civilization." He brought his attention back to Mora. "It is of the utmost importance that the two of you do not fail."

She flinched at the word *fail*, hearing the unspoken accusations. That he no longer had faith in her. No longer trusted her. Would no longer offer mercy, should she mess this up.

Mora had taken things too far, she had carried out the wrong decisions with far too much confidence, and she had made messes too big to clean up on her own. But in the end, she always managed to take what she was sent for, be it secrets or desired items. No matter the path, she never failed. She wasn't about to start.

There was only one difference now: There was no longer room for mistakes. And sticking Kallan with her was a mistake.

"I'd like to continue this conversation with you fully dressed," Oryn said, looking around her room. "And not in here."



## CHAPTER SIX

ORYN FORCED A pillow of air past Mora to stop the door from slamming shut as she joined him in the corridor. It pleased her to no end to see the holier-than-all, perfect, law-abiding king break a simple law; more so when it was because of her that he'd been forced to do it.

It was too easy to push him so far.

In the absence of the lost gods, and everything they had taken with them, *essyn* had started to diminish from generation to generation. In turn, so had *fae* magic, and it had not taken long for the godless world to learn the terrifying consequences of one reaching their newly diminished limits.

To avoid the risk of turning into an *askian* and wreaking havoc in the kingdom, the *fae* in *Vale* were not to use magic unless for protection. Not even the old-blooded king was allowed to break those laws.

Still, the heavy door swung shut without a sound. His glare traveled up and down her newly clothed body, hesitating on the daggers strapped at her thighs and the corset-like sheath around her ribs. “The weapons are entirely unnecessary, as usual.”

“I prefer to be ready should the need arise to defend myself, as it sometimes does.” She blamed the words on the brandy as they slipped out before she could catch them.

“It would present itself less if you did not seek it out so often.”

“See, that’s where you’re wrong, Your Majesty,” Mora said in the kindest voice she could muster. “It always has a way of finding me.”

Kallan looked as if he were trying to unravel what gave her the right to talk to the king in such a manner. The answer was that Oryn had already done everything he could to force her obedience. All that came of it was the unpleasant discovery that a stubborn attitude was her greatest power, and it was one that no amount of brutal torture or iron cuff could subdue.

The more he pushed her, the more she pushed back, until their relationship landed, balancing on a fragile truce that had formed when he saved her life and was given repayment in the form of Ahmya.

That, and alcohol tended to blur the line between bravery and stupidity.

“Let’s go,” Oryn finally said, ignoring her quip and motioning for the two Gilded Guards—who had all but become part of the wall outside her rooms—to peel away from their station and join them. One moved ahead as they walked, the other behind.

Kallan stayed with her and Oryn, surprising her yet again as he broke the mold of what she knew a Gilded Guard to be. Maybe he wasn’t one, but posing as one as she posed as a courtesan. Maybe he was like her.

The further they walked, the more she could feel the alcohol in her blood moving from her brain to her feet, lining her sinew with steel and making her limbs too heavy for muscles to lift.

They made their way down the long white corridors and descending staircases, Mora's hands gripping the gold filigree railing as if it were the only thing keeping her from sinking through the floors to the dungeons below ground. Only once did her steps falter, and Kallan had been there to catch her, winking as if he found amusement in sharing her secret.

They rounded a corner to see the grand arched opening at the end of the corridor perfectly framing the white tree Mora often stared at from her window.

One of their guards stopped at the arch. The other continued on to the opposite entrance as the group approached the Levana tree.

"I know the moon is high, but this information needs to be relayed before my home is overrun with prying ears, and guests arrive at sunset. None of what I am about to say gets repeated, or I will chop tongues out of heads. Understand?"

"And you suspect prying ears in my rooms already?" Mora asked. She had always suspected he had people listening in on her, but this was all the confirmation she needed.

"This is the only place in the castle that prying ears can't reach, but as you can see, it's rather public, and therefore hard to gain privacy when the castle is full."

All around the courtyard were towering walls, each filled with large windows much like the one that peered into her own room—three floors high, second window on the left. The

courtyard was meant to be observed by all and, even late at night, there was likely someone watching them.

Kallan set the cloak he had opted to carry instead of wear on the bench, folded neatly with a small red sword pinned to the top of the fabric. The pendant was as close to the natural color of blood as Mora had ever seen an unnatural thing get. “Why here?” he asked.

There was a pregnant pause as Oryn gave him one of his “stop talking” glares. Mora knew that one as well. Kallan replied with the stiffening of his jaw.

Satisfied, Oryn went on. “The air pressure has been altered in a perimeter around the stone patio. Nobody outside this square can hear anything inside it.” He was admiring the tree as he talked. The shimmering white bark glowed in the crimson moonlight. It reflected all the colors of the sky the same way the castle did, changing its tint from yellows, pinks, and blues in the daylight and shades of red in the night.

Pale strands of pearls hung from the branches, draping like necklaces that enhanced the tree’s delicate charm. When the moon rose, the pearl strands curled up like they were going to sleep. Like they were now.

“The Shadow is coming,” he said in a tone far too casual. “Their princess will be here by First-day evening, likely accompanied by the Blade and his two lackeys. The princess is harmless, but you’ll need to keep an eye on the other three.”

The importance of his words staggered in her mind, tripping over fallen thoughts and landing with an urgency that sobered her blood. No one from the Shadow had ever, in any history she had read, been able to pass through the wall. Even

if they weren't too ruined to walk under Vale's light, the church would never have granted them entry. Until now, apparently.

"This is such a bad idea," Kallan said with a casualty that hinted this wasn't the first time he had expressed the opinion.

"It is already done. They have accepted our invitation to the wedding and will be arriving in a few days' time. While here, we will convince them to give us Vesnia," the king explained. "Our kingdom has grown stagnant. The Shadow has learned to push back, and I will not keep sacrificing my armies for nothing. If we cannot push further east, we will expand north instead, much further north. If we have Vesnia, we can avoid the danger of sailing through the Graves. In order to get the town, we need to offer a peaceful negotiation, and this is how we do it."

"Why north? The Fallen is barren, toxic, there's no way we can live there," Mora argued.

He scoffed, making his way in a circle around the tree. "This is the place I feel at my strongest, closest to the power of the gods. Do you know why that is, why the Levana tree is so important?"

With the sudden change in direction, it took her a moment, probably too long, to catch up. She racked her brain, recalling all she knew of the tree. Mothers named their daughters after the God of Love. Children named their pets after her, and the first of the Hallowed Kings had named the beautiful tree in the courtyard after her. The Levana tree. But if she had been doing as the faithful were supposed to and attended church, she may have known more than its namesake.

If she wanted to avoid trouble, she would have to tread carefully. It was high treason to speak ill of their god, and even worse to admit to not believing in him. It was the king's only rule when Vale took in a new village. He would offer them the protection of his kingdom's wall if they proclaimed the One Faith and worshiped at his altar.

"The God of Love was said to be a kind god," Oryn said. "Gentle, yet fierce. Kind and overprotective, especially toward her two brothers." He fell silent, staring idly at the pearl strand curled in his palm as if he had memorized Levana's story so well, he could feel the pain it spoke of.

Mora continued the story to prove she knew it, careful to leave any hint of resentment out of her tone. "The brothers started a war, and she was killed. So was the youngest of the siblings. It's why the gods left. Only the older brother stayed behind, our beloved light, Aemon. But I fail to see the connection."

"You're getting ahead of yourself, little Raven." The king tore his attention back to her, all hint of sympathy faded. "Levana died because she got in the middle of a fight she had no business being in. She had picked a side, and she had picked wrong. The Father buried their daughter and our godly Mother wept over her grave. From the body grew the Levana tree, and from her magic came the wall that protects our righteous kingdom.

"But when a god dies, so too does the ethereal that had named the god. In this case, it was Love, and the magic she had given the born god who had died. When the echo of that magic faded, the wall would have deteriorated. That is when Aemon stepped in. They call him the light of Vale, not because

of his selfless act to choose the people when the other gods abandoned them, but because he sacrificed his magic to the tree in order to save the wall. He gave us the light that protects Vale. And every sacrifice we make in thanks to his helps keep our wall strong. Our blood and our essyn help Vale grow.”

Even if she took the tale with a grain of salt, it still made her skin crawl to think she had spent so many lonely nights staring at what might be a dead god’s grave.

“The god who became the tree, and the one whose magic lives within it, are the reasons our kingdom can prevail in such a treacherous world. As long as our people continue to have faith in Aemon and make sacrifices in his name, the wall will be fed. It will reach out with gracious hands and follow us across the seas to the Fallen Kingdoms. It will help us heal the land and make our kingdom one worthy of the gods’ return.” He locked his eyes back on Mora, then on Kallan. “But we must first claim control of Vesnia.”

For the first time since she had met him, Kallan’s face gave up no hint of what he was thinking. Young as he looked, she could now, easily, see him in the position of authority the Gilded Guard required.

He might not have had questions, but there were a million swimming in Mora’s mind. “And what are you offering the Shadow in exchange for the port town? You can’t expect them to hand it over when you’ve been fighting them for the border villages for years.”

“Freedom,” Oryn said, as if it were as simple as that. “They want us to stop our attacks on those bordering villages. I offer them a choice to give us Vesnia and get just that, or to deny my generous offer and watch us take it instead.”



“And what is the real scheme behind all of this?” Mora accused.

“I will do whatever it takes to get Vesnia. As far as their ulterior motives, well, you are a smart girl, that is what I need you to figure out. Starting with which of my castle staff has been spying for them, and ending with why it was that they accepted our invitation so readily. They could be here to kill us, or they could have come to steal any one of the Castle’s ancient war relics. We have quite the collection, and many of the items were taken from the Shadow at one point or another. The two of you will figure it out, together. And stop it from happening.”

Oryn tore his attention away from the tree to look at Kallan. “Leave us a moment.”

Kallan looked warily between them before stepping outside of the sound barrier.

Oryn smiled when he was satisfied his guard could no longer hear them. “What I am about to ask does not get repeated to anyone, not even Ahmya. Do you understand?”

“My sister and I keep no secrets, Oryn.”

“Are you sure about that?” He laughed. “There are things about her even you don’t know, and this will be kept from her no matter how tempted you are to talk about it. If word of what you are to do gets out, we just might start a war we can’t win.”

It was her turn to glare, trying her best to ignore his claim about Ahmya. “There’s already a war, and Vale is winning it.”

“No,” he said, “There are disagreements along our borders. Do not mistake these small battles for a full-scale war. If

Garren sends the entirety of his kingdom to us before we are ready, there is the risk of failing. I will not take that risk. The first step in preparing is to find out what the Blade plans to do, and stop him.”

“So, you want me to spy on—and what, capture?—the best assassin this world has seen since before the gods left? And in exchange for what, a longer leash?”

“No.” Oryn smiled. “You are going to kill him.”



## CHAPTER SEVEN

MORA'S CORE TURNED to ice, weighing her down and chilling the blood that crept through her veins. She was sinking through the stone, through the ground, through the world, convinced she would shatter when she finally hit the bottom. She looked to Oryn for reassurance that it was all a sick joke or ill-humored test.

He showed no sign of emotion. "Should you succeed, I will have your iron cuff removed. According to Ahmya, that is your greatest desire, is it not?"

*No*, she wanted to say. But also *Yes, gods yes*.

She had gotten the cuff when she was barely fourteen. Since then, she had tried, and failed, to get it off. Eventually she had given up hope it even could be removed, but the need had returned with vengeance the moment she had stumbled upon that prophecy. If she could get it off, she might stand a chance at breaking free of her fate.

Now her freedom was dangling like a poisoned carrot on a string to taunt a starving horse. All she needed to do to get it was the one thing she had promised Ahmya, and herself, she would never do again.

“I do not require an answer. You already know the choice you have.” Oryn nodded at his guards and started to walk away, leaving Mora to stew with her thoughts. “I want his head on my desk before the wedding vows are spoken.”



Mora woke up sometime in the middle of the day, settled in a comfortable position and tired enough to wish she'd slip into a coma and never have to move again.

She had no recollection of how or when she had fallen asleep, and her brain was trying its best to break out of the skull-shaped cage it was furious to be trapped inside. This always seemed to happen when she drank too much and slept too little.

To make matters worse, she had to pee.

She groaned and rolled further into the bed, surprised to find herself bumping into a warm body.

“By the light,” the body mocked. “You sleep like the dead.”

She pried her eyes open to find the Golden Boy relaxed against her headboard, flipping to a new page in the leather-bound book that he'd stolen from under her bed. She really needed a better place to hide it.

Mora was immediately disappointed to see that his presence in her room hadn't been the half-asleep-and-still-a-bit-drunk dream she was hoping it had been the night before. She pulled a pillow over her face and let out a frustrated grunt before forcing herself off the bed, flailing like a fish out of water as she tried to bring the blankets with her.

Kallan didn't budge, and neither did the bedding he was sitting on. He didn't look away from the book. Mora stared him down as if her eyes could inflict as much damage as her daggers could.

The first thing she noticed about him was his armor. It wasn't the usual white and gold armor of a Gilded Guard; this was less bulky and less garish. His muscles looked sculpted into the thin gray leather.

He still wore the king's insignia like a brand over his heart. The sewn threads made two halves of one blade, split down the middle and tilted to cross over one another. The Twinblade, a relic of a time long gone, was the mark that all of Vale's army bore in one way or another. He was dressed like a common soldier.

Mora picked up the closest thing she could find, a pillow that had never met the bed it belonged to, and threw it at him. "Why are you in my bed? Shouldn't you be off guarding the door from being kicked too hard or something?"

"No more than an arm's length, remember?" He closed the book with a thump and smirked.

She was too tired to deal with that smirk, so she dropped the blanket and made straight for her bathing chamber. Kallan jumped up and followed as if a rope pulled tight between them and he had no other choice but to be dragged along.

She slammed the door in his face.

Luckily, the lock had been recently fixed and he wasn't able to force himself through it, although he tried. Right then and there, she decided that murdering him wouldn't count as

another number added to her list. It would be like killing a fly that buzzed one too many times past her ear.

She cleaned up, washing her face and smoothing the knots from her hair before almost running into Kallan on her way back out. The man seemed to be taking his orders far too seriously. If she wanted to learn anything about the Blade or the castle's apparent spy, she would first have to lose her new shadow.

"You can at least let me check the room before you lock me out of it," he said.

She made her way into the dark wardrobe and ignored his lack of confidence in her ability to protect herself from monsters lurking in the wash bowl or behind the mirror.

The only monster she'd ever seen reflected on either surface was herself. And now she had to pick, become that monster she saw or spend her life rotting in the dungeons. For that was the choice Oryn had been referring to, kill or be killed.

Perhaps it would be better for it to end before it began. After all, it was hard to fulfill a prophecy from a grave. And that's exactly what that dungeon would be for her, a place for her restless bones to fall to pieces.

"What happened last night, that was real, right?"

"That depends on which part you're referring to," Kallan replied, following her into the dark. "The dagger to my chest, the king's little chitchat, and the talk about a beautiful princess was all very real, but I am fairly certain the other stuff was a dream I had when you started grinding your butt against my —"

“Stop.” Mora put her hands against what she had, without being able to see, foolishly hoped was his back, but what felt more like a muscled chest. Ahmya liked to joke that between the lack of windows and the broken faelight in her wardrobe, the dark fabrics sucked all the light from the room, and if she would only dress in brighter colors, she might be able to see what she was looking for. “Why are you even talking? Aren’t Gilded Guards supposed to be silent and statuesque?”

She pushed Kallan further away from her and started brushing her fingers along the fabrics hung around them, searching for a particular shirt whose ties ended in tiny red beads—the only splash of color she owned.

“My orders are to blend in, to appear as your friend and not as the jailer I really am. Therefore, I speak.”

When the man had entered her rooms the night before, thinking she was a courtesan ripe for his taking, she hadn’t seen the harm in playing along with his flirtatious games. Now that they were stuck together, he was a thorn under her skin that wiggled deeper with his every word.

She hoped she wouldn’t be forced to tag along on his personal escapades too. The last thing she needed was to watch him sleep his way through the castle staff. “I don’t need another friend, especially not a manwhore.”

“Can men even be whores?” he asked, the question sounding like it was for himself and not her.

“The average man is an even bigger whore than any courtesan I’ve met. And I get the feeling that you, Golden Boy, are far worse than the average man.”

A laugh shot from his mouth, making Mora wince. It was too early in her day for loud noises.

“Would that not make me better, if I had all that practice? Does that not make me more enticing?”

“When your partners are paid to moan in your ear and tell you how good you are, the only thing getting better with all that practice is their acting. I’m willing to bet you’ve never even been told what you’re doing wrong, and how else could you improve if you’re not informed you need to?”

He was silent for a brief, peaceful moment. “On behalf of all men, that hurt a little, not going to lie. But I’ve never had to pay for sex, so I suppose that makes your argument invalid.”

“So, knocking on my door in the middle of the night to personally introduce yourself to the newest courtesan was for what? To get to know me?”

“I never said I did not sleep with them, just that I have never had to pay for it.”

That didn’t surprise her in the least. He had the arrogance of a Casanova and the looks to back it up. Little did he know, that made her want to see him begging on his knees for release. She wanted to make him lust for her just so she could get the satisfaction of being the first woman to turn him down. The man deserved to hear the word “no.”

She was just about to give up her search and grab whatever shirt was closest to her when a blue glow caught her attention.

She spun toward Kallan to find the source of the glow. Emitting from what looked like tiny threads on his hand was the brightest light she had ever seen. It burned her eyes and



blinded her worse than the time she had decided to see how long she could stare at the sun. Her hands flew to cover her eyes and she jerked her head away.

Kallan laughed. "Next time, I will warn you not to look directly at it."

"Next time give me a fucking blindfold," Mora barked.

"If that is what you are into, I will see what I can do."

A crackle of static followed his words, and behind closed eyes she saw the glow flash brighter and then dim away. It was a disturbing amount of time before she could see without splotches clouding her vision, but when she opened her eyes, the faelight was glowing again.

"What did you do?" she asked.

"Sometimes these things just need a spark to get them going again."

"And faelight answers to you?"

"No," he smiled. "I have the spark." The blue light skirted across his fingers with the same crackling noise as before, but far less bright.

She grabbed the shirt hanging beside his head, having easily located it in the new light. "Turn around so I can get dressed, or better yet, leave."

"If I can't watch, how am I to know if you need help?"

"Should I get stuck, I would shred the fabric long before I'd ever let you help me dress."

When his back was to her, a smirk no doubt curving his lips, she quickly changed.

“And what about undressing? Do you harbor the same feelings about help there too?”

She rolled her eyes. “From you, yes.” A hidden door opened without a sound as she slipped behind it. She made her way down the dark and dingy tunnels before he could notice she had gone.

As she maneuvered her way through the maze, alone with her thoughts in the dark, she came to two conclusions. The first, that regardless of whether or not she was going to kill the Blade, she would still need to capture him. And second, if she were to make room for another person’s blood on her hands and life on her conscience—just in case—she was going to have to do something drastically good to attempt to balance the scales, which meant she was going to have to attend church.



## CHAPTER EIGHT

FOR EVERY BLINDING *light, there too must be a deafening darkness.*

The symbols, carved into the grand entrance of the Temple of the One Faith, hung above them. An artful depiction of a language lost to time and buried by history, they were words that few could read but all knew by heart.

The people of Vale heard those words, and all they could see was the promise of their Lightmarked Prince, their blinding light. They never stopped to notice what the other half meant. It was as clear as the night was red, taunting her with her fate.

She swore she heard the fates laugh as she walked beneath the looming symbols and into the mob-like congregation. She had to fight the urge to push through the crowd, brandishing her bony elbows like weapons while parishioners stopped to gawk at their future queen consort. As they had the previous three days.

Like the king's, Ahmya's lessons and prayers were most often held in private, should she require them. But with her upcoming ascent to the king's side, no matter the lack of

power the position held, Ahmya needed to win over the hearts of her people.

If Mora was going to attend service, she was glad to do it at her sister's side. Even if it meant being witness to the exchange of flattering words and offered prayers that both women would be rolling their eyes at if not for the masks of grace plastered on their features.

It didn't escape Mora's notice that although Ahmya radiated attention, stares always lingered on the Gilded Guard hovering close behind. In the past couple of days, her shadow had managed to keep up with all her attempts at losing him.

With all the attention Kallan and Ahmya's presence demanded, Mora felt like they had swapped places. Like she was the one in his shadow, seen only by the few knowing eyes who recognized her for her apparent role in the king's flock of courtesans.

Kallan leaned into Mora's ear, paying no mind to a woman whose long lashes batted his way. "Do you ever wonder what it is like to be worshiped?"

"Do you ever wonder what it's like to not have an ego the size of a religion?"

His brow shot up and he fought back a smile. "I was not speaking of myself," he said, gesturing to where Ahmya accepted a child's offering of daisies. "But if you say the crown fits, I will gladly wear it."

"And put a crease in your perfectly styled hair? I can't imagine it."

He raised an involuntary hand to smooth over his golden hair as Mora shook her head.

Ahmya cut her way between them, her smile never faltering as she spoke in harsh whispers and wrapped her arm around Mora's. "You only have a few more days with him, and if you can make it through without driving me mad, I will personally ensure that the pairing never happens again."

Kallan winked at her, the light catching in the deep blue of his eyes. The color didn't remind her of the sky or the sea or the delicate flowers that Ahmya had put in her hair when they were children. His eyes weren't soft or beautiful like the blue of sorrow. They were blue like a gleaming gem, blue like his magic. Dark and vibrant and full of hidden mysteries.

She put the thought out of her mind as they made their way to cushioned pews where they found their seats.

Two priests marched to the front of the temple, synchronized soldiers ready to address an army hungry for self-sacrifice. Their stark white robes were decorated with pearls and sharp golden motifs. The garments were of the quality of kings, and the priest might as well have been called such; the One Faith was the law in Vale, and they were its sovereign.

They stood proudly on the dais before a statue of an armed god: Aemon, if she had to guess by his wrinkled brow and the braids in his beard.

A blanket of silence settled onto the temple, and the practiced chimes of towering bells rang throughout the kingdom. With each chime, bruised knees fell to hard stone floors and the people began to pray.

Despite the eerie feeling of mass obedience that crawled through Mora's nerves at the sight, there was something to be said about the unwavering faith that lived in a world on the

brink of death. They sent prayers to gods that no longer listened, and they gifted their essyn with undying hope. All of it built on a foundation of fairytales and propaganda.

Mora knew better than to put faith in any god. She didn't care whether or not they truly existed. If they were real, they owed her nothing. And if they did, why would she accept a thing from someone who so easily abandoned her?

"Rise." One of the priests spoke loudly enough that the whole kingdom might have heard his booming voice. The people in the temple obeyed, rising as one.

Kallan managed to get nearer to Mora when they stood, erasing the space she had purposely placed between them.

He paid little attention to the sermon, more interested in having a conversation with her. It seemed the guard had just as much on his mind as she did, only he was more than happy to voice his thoughts aloud.

She, on the other hand, figured walking into the church wasn't enough repentance on its own. She would have to actually pay attention and force herself to participate. She wasn't delusional enough to think this would make everything better, but it was a start.

"This morning, when you slipped away as I was in prayer, did you at least manage to find out anything about this spy? Or perhaps the Blade?"

"Shh," Mora whispered, trying to pay attention to the priest. In truth, she didn't want to answer his question. It had been days, and she had managed to learn not a single thing about either subject. She was reluctant to admit it to even herself.

The priest began to talk. “We have been made a promise that one day our great and terrible shadow will be illuminated and our world will once again be united by our one faith.”

“Nobody is going to hear,” Kallan said, dragging her back to the conversation he was trying to have. “They’re all too focused to listen to us.”

“I am trying to focus too. Besides, I haven’t yet decided if I’m going to...you know,” *kill him*, Mora admitted, if only to avoid his original question. She had already regretted telling him of her mission in the first place, but he had insisted on knowing and demanded she accept his help. It had been easier to give in than to listen to his nagging.

She glanced at Ahmya, whose impatient expression urged Mora to pay attention.

“I am here today to share the news. Our faith has rewarded us greatly. The time for our light is near!” The words had hardly left the priest’s tongue before cheers and murmurs of disbelief filled the temple.

“He actually gave you a choice?” This, again, coming from Kallan.

“He always gives me a choice,” Mora said. “Do the thing, or die. I’m currently debating which of the two would be better, and only one of them gets me away from you.”

Mora had no sooner leaned into her sister’s ear to ask what the priest had meant, when Kallan pulled her back toward him.

She eyed Kallan’s hand wrapped around her arm, and he was quick to let his grip fall back to the seat of the pew. Luckily, it had not been the arm adorned with her glamour

cuff, or else he would have felt the cold metal through the fabric of her sleeve and immediately known what it was.

“Would it sway you away from the noose if I told you that my fate is now tied to yours?”

Mora turned away from him and sighed under her breath, but he continued. “I would very much like to live. I want to fall in love, get married, have two kids—Rose and Kallan Jr.—get a dog, and live in a castle in the mountains overlooking a lake.”

The priests silenced the congregation, forcing Mora to cover her mouth and hold in an inappropriate giggle. She tried to turn her focus to the sermon.

“For hundreds of years, our kings have scoured the lands looking for a gate to reach the gods. Our Lightmarked Prince has finally found that gate, and now we seek only the key to open it.”

She wanted to care about what that meant, but all that consumed her attention was “Rose and Kallan Jr.” She bit her lip to stifle a threatening laugh. “You do know what it means to be a Gilded Guard—that you can’t wed or sire children—don’t you? And good thing too, because you should *not* be allowed to name children, or even pets for that matter.”

“Ah, but remember, when I am with you, I am not a Gilded Guard, I am simply Kallan the friend. And Kallan the friend is free to dream,” he said. “And there is nothing wrong with those names.”

A broken cry rang out from the back of the room and drew everyone’s attention. “No, please,” the voice added as a man pried his hand away from a teary-eyed woman and



limped into the aisle. He straightened the sleeves of his costly jacket and cleared his throat to speak.

“I have accepted the gift of my essyn and worn it proudly, but it is time I return it to the world from which it came.” He glanced apologetically at the woman, the only one who dared not to face him as he spoke. “I give my essyn in the name of Aemon.”

His words blew through the air like the fall of an axe.

“As do I,” the woman from the pew said, almost too quietly to hear.

His attention fixated on her, and the pair exchanged hushed words that didn't reach Mora's ears. She was side by side with the anxious congregation, holding their breath in wait.

Not even Kallan dared to speak.

Finally, the woman stood, reuniting her fingers with the man's, laced together like the ribbons of a lover's eternal vow. Her soft voice rang out like the echo of an axe drawing back for another swing. “I give my essyn in the name of Aemon.”

“What joy this brings our people!” the priest said as he joined the other in uncovering an altar that sat in the middle of the dais. “The first sacrifice of a joyous era indeed.”

Two soldiers ushered the couple up the aisle. Mora wanted to scream at them for being so compliant. She wanted to grab them by the shoulders and shake them until they opened their blind eyes to what she saw.

She clenched her hands in her lap to stop them from trembling, surprised that Ahmya hadn't already prompted her

with a complaint, something along the lines of “Stop that. You’re making me nervous.” Her sister just stared in frozen awe at what played out in front of them.

This was not what Mora had come for.

The temple was quiet as they prepared for the sacrifice, undressing the couple and drawing symbols on their arms and foreheads in their own blood. The man laid on top of the altar, a long dagger poised at his chest and the required words waiting to be spoken out loud.

Mora could feel the anticipation of a miracle spreading, more contagious than the bloodblight, and Kallan sat eagerly infected at her side. Her focus darted around the room, trying to find something, anything, to distract her from what was about to happen.

And then she saw it. Something darkened the priest’s shadow, absorbing all the light.

Death rose at his side as the congregation spoke. “*Aes ti’val, evi ten’yk.*”

*From this blood, I give to thee.*



## CHAPTER NINE

MORA COULDN'T HAVE escaped quickly enough.

She hadn't realized how unbreathable the air had become until she stepped outside the temple and took her first deep breath.

Every inhale calmed her mind, and every step led her further from the encroaching memory of what it felt like to be the one taking the life. She kept walking, counting step after step until she lost track of how many she had taken down the cobbled roads.

She passed building after building of white stone and only stopped when she arrived at one that looked much like the temple, only this one hadn't been polished and shined in years.

Kallan moved quietly, following close behind like a mouse scurrying across a stone floor. Hard to hear, but not so quiet that she hadn't known he was there.

"Not that I'm against the view, following you, but we should go back," Kallan said timidly, trying not to startle her. As if he could. "It will be over soon and Ahmya—"

"You're right, you should go back, but I'm not going with you. As for Ahmya, she will be fine on her own." The last part was for her own reassurance as much as it was for his.

His smirk faltered. “What happened back there?”

“Is it such a bad thing to not want innocent people to lead themselves to slaughter?”

“Slaughter?” His brow creased. “You were listening to Oryn the other night, you know what their essyn can do. Is their sacrifice not a gift to all of us? How can you speak of what they are doing as if they are animals not even deserving the respect of your attention as they pay the ultimate price for your safety?” He checked his rising voice, seemingly brushing off his lost temper. “You didn’t look like you wanted to run, Mora, you looked like you wanted to march to that altar and kill them yourself. Do you really care that little?”

Mora looked back to the building.

“I really do care that little,” she said, the lie rolling much more easily off her tongue than the truth, that she cared too much. “Now, are you breaking into the library with me, or going back to church?”

He ran a hand through his hair and looked at the building with a raised brow. “This is the library?” he asked, squinting his eyes. Mora realized he wasn’t seeing the same thing she was. All he could see was a little shop with a “closed” sign on the door, a glamour he would have to break through.

“You’re looking too hard. Stop looking for it, and just see it.”

“Thank you, that is incredibly helpful, it clears everything right up.”

Mora sighed. “You’re trying to force your brain to see something your eyes aren’t seeing. That’s not going to work. You have to—here.” She moved him so his body lined up with

the front door, in the center of the towering library. “Close your eyes.”

“You aren’t going to push me into a passing carriage, are you?”

“I wasn’t, but now that you’ve given me the idea, it’s rather tempting.”

Kallan laughed. Reaching his hand out to find Mora’s, he closed his eyes. “Don’t let go.”

She stepped close enough to whisper in his ear. “Are you afraid of the dark, Golden Boy?”

“More like being left alone.”

She didn’t know how to reply to that. He could have been taking a jab at her for having left him three times already, but he sounded far too serious to mean it as a joke.

On the off chance he had meant it, she squeezed his hand in reply. She feared being left alone too. “I’m going to describe it to you, and you’re going to picture it in your mind.”

“Easy enough,” he said.

She bit her lip, taking in the sight of him standing there, unaware that her attention was on him and not the building. A tendril of his hair was out of place from running his hand through it one too many times. She wanted to reach out and fix it, but she knew better.

Standing there, he looked different, like the flirtatious gilded wall he built around himself had started to flicker without his ability to see it in place. He wet his lips while he was waiting for her.

“The building is symmetrical,” she started, not taking her gaze away from the hint of sorrow that seeped through his cracks. “Two halves of a perfect whole. Tall spires that twist into the sky, almost too high to see the tops. Like they disappear in the clouds. The front door is made of stones, the same white as all of Harlen, the same white as the rest of the building. The door is buried in chains and locks, and the window panes are a mosaic of broken pieces, stained in a whitewash and soldered back together. The biggest of the windows, the one above the door, that one depicts a set of beautiful feathered wings.”

She walked around him, dropping his hand but making sure her touch never left his body. She stopped at his side. “There are four steps leading up to the front door, riddled with cracks and missing pieces. But carved into the steps are symbols of the old language. *Aer lythym, a’val ae’levyn.*” Mora let her gaze fall to her feet. “Can you see it?”

“Yes.”

“Open your eyes.”

He did. His lips parted, eyes widened. Then he started to laugh. “How did you learn to do that?”

“I’m just relieved it worked, although it would have been entertaining to watch you try to climb something you couldn’t see.”



Her calloused fingers had had no trouble with the climb in the past, but since being healed her skin was soft and her fingers peeled like grapes against the abrasive stone. Even so, it didn’t take long for them to make their way inside.

Kallan was taken aback by the sight, and no matter how many times she had seen it, so was Mora. Four stories of shelves stacked against the walls, adorned with intricately carved marble railings, walkways, and towering opalescent columns. A pearl-encrusted chandelier hung in the center, and high on one wall was a large window, the glass forming a mosaic of two outstretched white wings.

Mora found that when the sun or moon was at its highest, the wings cast a shadow that perfectly aligned with a statue of Levana in the middle of the room, giving the fallen god's shadow a pair of beautiful shimmering wings.

Radiating from the center of the room, around the stately statue, were rows and rows of bookshelves. Not a single one of the shelves had space for another book.

It was a place of broken quills and empty inkwells, a boneyard for the abandoned. Only here, in this world, people were stories. And the only parts of them that remained were pages of faded writing bound between worn covers that smelled like leather and rotting wood and forgotten memories.

“How much trouble will we be in if we get caught in here?” Kallan said in a stunned whisper.

“The last time I got caught in here, I spent two years in a dungeon cell getting sliced and diced from toe to hairline until my sister agreed to marry the king in exchange for my cage becoming a leash that extends directly from his hand to my throat.” She looked at Kallan, whose wide-eyed stare had turned to her. “I can't imagine he could do worse than that if he caught us now.”

They had just disappeared into the rows of books when they heard a door swing open on creaky hinges and multiple

pairs of footsteps enter the library.

Mora had never seen the door open before.

“It’s here. It just arrived back from the castle,” a scratchy young voice said.

The steps had gotten closer and stopped at one of the tables near where they had entered. Mora breathed a sigh of relief and peeked over the top of a row of books that left barely enough space to see through.

Two black cloaks stood over the table, one shorter and appearing to drown the person wearing it. The other was tailored to fit the form it covered and stood about the same height as Kallan, if not a little taller.

The taller of the two brushed his cloak away from his side and pushed his sleeve up, exposing his muscular forearm. The sight would have set Mora’s core on fire if it hadn’t been a highly inappropriate time for such thoughts.

A quiet *smack* came from beside her, startling her. Kallan had seemingly caught a falling book a feather’s width from hitting the floor.

The man darted his eyes over to the shelf they hid behind, and Mora’s lungs froze in place. He looked right at her. Through the shadow of his hood, she could make out a few curls of dark hair falling into his face and a short beard lining his jaw.

“It’s just the rats,” the smaller of the men said. “They treat this place like a breeding ground. I keep saying I can’t take care of it all by myself, but nobody cares about books. If it were up to the king, they would all burn.”



The man seemed wary of the explanation, but turned his attention back to the table nonetheless. Mora was sure he had seen her. His eyes had locked right on hers. Why hadn't he said anything?

"Did you find it?" he asked. He had a hint of an accent she couldn't place, but his voice was low and smooth and laced with the same dangerous edge that she heard in her own every time she let the dark thoughts of her *essyn* slip into the daylight.

"I—I'm not sure." The boy shuffled nervously through the pages of a thick book. "They are all inked in black, so I cannot tell whether they are darkmarks or lightmarks." He flipped a page and turned the book to face the man. "Are any of these it?"

The air grew colder in the library, and the only hint that it wasn't Mora's imagination was the slight shiver from the librarian. He kept flipping the pages as the man scanned them.

"No," he said. "Is there another census book? Or any way it could have gone undetected?"

Mora's heart was racing. He was looking for a darkmark. He must have been the informant Oryn was worried about, the one leaking information to the Shadow. By his stature, Mora had to guess he was a castle guard.

"I suppose if it were glamoured, but the ability is rare. It took two seasons to find someone to glamour this place."

Mora crouched down to the floor. Her face was flushed with heat, and her pulse was ringing in her ears. She didn't trust herself to stay standing. Her chest grew tight and she

struggled to take silent, deep breaths as the world felt like it was coming down around her.

“Rare is not impossible.”

“Will you kill her?” the librarian asked, almost hesitantly.

*Her.* There was only a slight difference in the symbols of *him* and *her*, one that Mora would have missed if she had not known the prophecy was about herself. She had been hoping against all odds that Oryn wouldn't notice it. She still didn't know if he had or not, but this man had. Which meant the Shadow knew.

The man didn't reply to the other's question. He didn't need to, not when there was only one logical answer.

*And here you are, dragging poor innocent Kallan into this mess. Foolish girl.* Her *essyn* fluttered in her chest. *It's only a matter of time before his blood is on your hands too.*

She focused on the stinging of her scraped fingertips as she rubbed them together. She bit her tongue hard enough to taste the sweet metallic taste of her blood and did every counting and focusing trick she could think of to will her heart to beat slower.

She focused on her senses, finding something in the room she could smell, see, feel. She counted down, and then started over again and again.

Mora hadn't been born in a ceremony of life and love; she hadn't been born at all. She was cut—ripped—from the womb of a woman long dead. She didn't cry then, and she wouldn't cry now.

After what felt like an eternity of trying to convince herself she wasn't going to die right there and then, her heart calmed to a reasonable beat and her mind returned from the dark.

She felt like a child every time the panic settled in, like someone who needed coddling or else they might shatter. The attacks hadn't happened in so long that she had hoped they had gone completely, but when she heard that man, what he was looking for—she steeled her expression and took the hand that Kallan offered to help her up. They stood there a moment, too close together, eyes locked on each other.

“They left?” Mora whispered.

“We're alone, once again.” He lost the flirtatious glint from his eyes. “Are you alright?”

*Yes—no.*

Leaving him alone between the shelves, she walked further into the library and let the silence answer for her. Yes or no, she didn't care how he interpreted it, as long as he didn't ask again.



Oryn had narrowed it down to two widely generic reasons why the Shadow would want to get into Harlen. Steal or kill. Mora had added a third she didn't tell Kallan about: to find her.

They had no idea what object, if any, needed protecting. They spent the remainder of the day reading the worn texts about the Shadow, rumors heard of the Blade, and everything of interest Vale had acquired over the years. As it turned out, the Shadow was a well-documented subject. Still, they were finding little of actual use to them.

“Maybe what we are looking for is kept in a different library.” Kallan broke the comfortable silence.

“There’s another library?”

He tipped his chin back and plopped into a chair. “Oh, yes. Much bigger than this one, but it is dark as night and full of terrors. I only got a glimpse of it before one of my men was eaten and we all ran like children.”

Mora kept skimming through the most recent book she had opened, feigning disinterest in his revelation. The book in hand was called *Tales of the God War: The Origins of Vale*.

The book was written in the old language, so it took Mora more than double the time to make out what it said. She wasn’t fluent, but she picked up on enough words to get the main idea.

“This library, where is it?” she asked, trying to remember what a specific group of symbols meant. They were all sharp angled lines and dots that made archaic shapes and looked too alike to tell some of the words apart.

“That, I cannot say. The king has sworn me to secrecy,” he said with a touch too much pride in his voice.

Weapon, it had to say weapon—or dagger, maybe? And then something about being broken in three pieces and rendered useless. She flipped the page and there, staring back at her, was a rough sketch of a winged wolf. For the third time that day, she couldn’t breathe.

It was *the* winged wolf—the one she called weeping—exactly as he had been in her dreams. Not decayed as she had seen on the roads of Harlen.

“I think I found something,” Kallan said and slid the book he had been reading over to Mora. “It’s talking here about the most noteworthy accomplishments of King Jarren. This one mentions the Shadow.” He skimmed his finger over the page, trying to find where he had left off. “Here, *‘on the seventh summer of his reign the Hallowed King, Jarren Zarric, third of his title, killed the last remaining divineblood, cleansing the world of the god’s descendants they had deemed unworthy and ending the Great Hunt.’* It goes on to say that the celebration was the largest sacrificial event in history. An entire village offered their essyn to Aemon.”

“I can’t imagine that much death. I’m willing to bet that behind all that bullshit about heroes and helping his people, even Aemon has a hidden agenda.”

“You think Aemon, who saved his people and this world from being completely destroyed, has ulterior motives?”

“He’s a god, isn’t he?”

Kallan shook his head. “You remind me of people in the Shadow. They don’t believe the lost gods were forced to leave, but that they were selfish beings. That they left because they wanted to start over, and took all the good with them.” He laughed. “Please tell me that is not what you believe.”

“No.” Mora smirked. “I don’t believe anything.”

Kallan fell back into his chair and tugged at his sleeve. “Back to the issue at hand. If this mystery man, or woman I suppose, was divineblood, how did Jarren kill him? Even an old-blood fae couldn’t kill a divine, not since the Twinblade disappeared.”

“Unless he found it.”

“He didn’t.”

“How do you know?”

“As a member of the court, I grew up in this castle,” he said matter-of-factly. “If it was in the possession of the king, I would have known, and even if I had not, Oryn would have inherited it from Jarren and there is no way he could have kept that to himself. He likes to show off his shiny things. If the blade exists—which, by the way, there has never been proof it was more than a myth—Jarren never had it.”

Of course Kallan had grown up in the court. He had the same self-important arrogance that came with being close to the royal family. It also meant he had known Oryn most of his life, which explained why he was the one Gilded Guard who dared to keep his voice around him.

“If he could not kill them,” Kallan said, “maybe he locked them up somewhere they would never be found. Some sort of prison for a divineblood. Maybe it’s not an *it*, but a *whom*, that we should be looking for.”

It was so obvious once she thought about it; a prisoner locked away for more years than she dared imagine. Hidden in the lowest dungeon where not even the guards dared to ask questions or get too close.

The Shadow was coming to steal something, but not any weapon or archaic relic like they had so wrongly assumed.

*They are coming for Rhyn.*



## CHAPTER TEN

**I**F THEY WERE coming for Rhyn, she didn't know what to do. How could she stop his chance at freedom, just to save herself?

*How could you let him leave you?* Her essyn whispered.

But if the Blade had come to hunt her, Mora would have no choice but to fight him. And when he died by her hand it might push her over the edge, into the evil dark, but at least she would still have her friend and her sister to try to bring her back.

The thoughts swirled in her mind, chased by the worry of yet another person's blood slick between her fingers, an innocent caught in the crossfire of her life. She sighed.

"One more move and I'll paralyze you." The wretched monster everyone called Mags pressed the cold, sharp metal into Mora's back. "Don't think I won't do it, girl."

"Ow!" A sharp prick jabbed into Mora's bare spine in the exact spot needed to send a jolt of pain to her toes. "I'm not moving."

"Your chest. It rises, it falls, and you sway." Mags's warm hands gripped her waist and held her in place like a vice. "Stay."

“Would you like me to stop breathing now, too?”

The old woman held a threaded needle between her teeth. A murmured string of untranslatable words slipped through as she folded a pleat into the sheer fabric hanging from Mora’s shoulder.

The woman’s growling and prodding had Mora’s fingers itching for the only dagger she was allowed to keep under the costume. She wasn’t going to hurt the old hag; she only wanted the reassurance that she could defend herself should Mags attack her for breathing too violently.

There were only three things Mora truly feared, and the dressmaker was one of them.

She released a breath slowly from her nose, careful not to sway her chest, when the door pushed open and in traipsed Ahmya, a bottle of wine in one hand and two glass chalices in the other. The building tension was instantly relieved at the sight of her sister.

“Oh good, we’re drinking,” Mora said. Mags glared at her.

Ahmya, with her golden dress, neatly done up hair, and eyelids rimmed in charcoal, slumped into a settee that had been moved to the foot of Mora’s bed and released the most unladylike sigh she had ever heard. The golden fabric sparkled in the light and even in a slump on worn down furniture, she looked as elegant as a queen on a throne.

With an audible gasp, Ahmya shot upright and corrected her posture like she had been hit with a bolt of lightning. “Gods,” she shrieked. “Why is he hiding in the corner like that? Did you know he was even there?”



“Did you forget that your betrothed ordered him to be my jailer? He’s always there. Never leaves.” Mora hadn’t noticed herself turning to catch Kallan’s reaction until she was yanked back to stone straight and upright with nails biting into her arms. “The only reason he’s not at my side is that I offered him a bet, and it turns out the Golden Boy likes to gamble.”

Kallan hadn’t cracked a smile or moved a muscle when Ahmya looked at him. If he broke from the strict rules a Gilded Guards was to adhere to, Mora would get to complete the remainder of their task—and the days of celebration leading up to the wedding—solo. It was her last-ditch effort at losing him.

But if Mora first broke the rules she was supposed to follow as the king’s personal criminal—Kallan’s words, not hers—then he got to spend the remainder of their nights sleeping on her bed instead of the settee.

Unfortunately, he proved to be rather serious about winning the bed.

“I don’t even want to know,” Ahmya said. The two chalices clinked together as she set them on a small table and filled them to the brim with the dark purple-red liquid. “I just want to drink and forget about all the people arriving and the remaining preparations. Do you know how many people will be attending my wedding? This celebratory feast will look like an intimate gathering compared to the ceremony. And don’t even get me started on the seating arrangements. One of Oryn’s closest friends is coming. He says he’s a guest of honor, so he will be sat at our table.”

Ahmya paused for a drink of wine, taking a large gulp. Another sharp pinprick to the back had Mora sucking in a

breath and clenching every one of her muscles.

“I can’t stand the man. He’s always smoking rolled baneroot. The stuff smells vile.” Ahmya laughed. “Frankly, Dromose can’t stand me either, though I have no idea why. But never mind him. It’s the Blade that worries me. He’s an old-blood, did you know that?”

If the Blade was there for Ahmya, as only Ahmya was convinced he was, he wouldn’t be given a chance to get near to her, regardless of how powerful of a fae he was. They had servants testing her food and wine for poison, and there would be two Gilded Guards by her side at all times.

“You will be safe,” Mora said, forcing a soft smile. “Plus, I will be there to keep an eye on him and make sure nothing happens.” Words she couldn’t say almost followed off her tongue.

It was selfish, but even though she was instructed not to say anything, she wanted Ahmya to find out about the deal she and Oryn had made. If only so she knew what he was doing with the poisoned carrot she had so recklessly allowed him to taunt her with.

She and Kallan had already decided that their best option would be to catch the Blade releasing Rhyn and lock the intruder in Mora’s old cell.

It sounded too easy, but if they succeeded it would allow her a chance to convince Oryn that it was enough to have captured him to earn freedom from her cuff. If the Blade didn’t try to kill her first, she didn’t see why she had to be the one to hold the dagger that ended his life.

“It’s crucial that nothing goes wrong,” Ahmya said. “I don’t need to remind you of that. It’s just that everyone of importance is going to be there and it needs to be perfect.”

“What about the Lightmarked Prince?” Mora asked, if for nothing else, to change the subject to something that wouldn’t build on her anxiety.

All three heads in the room turned toward her. The prince was rarely spoken of in the castle. Oryn’s younger brother wore the title in secret and lived somewhere far away from the island where he was safe and protected from any threat on his life. Oryn may have been crowned king, but his secret brother was the noble Vale really worshiped. He was meant to save the world, after all.

And now, with rumors circulating of him having sent a mysterious package to the One Faith, he was the center of the castle’s gossip. Everyone wanted a glimpse at their hero.

“Well, not him I suppose.” Mora watched from the corner of her eye as Ahmya poured the last of her wine down her throat. She stood and replaced the empty chalice with the full one. “Why, dear sister,” she teased, offering the wine to Mora. “Why do you ask?”

When Mags swatted Ahmya’s hand away, she resolved to take a sip for herself instead.

“Did you have plans for our hero prince?” Ahmya smiled. “Were you looking to dance between the sheets with our beloved kingdom’s heir? Take him somewhere quiet and teach him what *in danger* really means? I can hear the king’s wrath already, what great entertainment that would have been.”

Mags sewed one last stitch into Mora's ensemble and then took several small steps back. Mora watched her intently, ignoring Ahmya's comments and waiting with bated breath for a sign of satisfaction that would mean she was finally done.

Mags was short and older than anyone could imagine, and although there were rumors the woman was an old-blood fae, Mora sensed something almost animalistic in her—like she was more creature than woman. Her hunched-over posture only added to her “probably eats children and spins her own silk threads” demeanor, but when she was admiring her handiwork, she looked as tall and regal as a god.

“I still don't get why you couldn't add laces like the other courtesans got. Wouldn't that have been easier than sewing me into it?”

“Easier?” she spat. “Uglier. No, this is not meant for laces or ribbon. *You* are not meant for laces or ribbon.”

That had to have been the closest thing to a compliment anyone had ever received from her. Mags crossed her wrinkled arms over her chest and huffed. “It will do. You best not ruin this one, girl. I saw that shirt.”

She gathered her things without another word, shaking her head the entire time like she was imagining the state of the gown after Mora had the privilege of wearing it for a night. Mags had once told her if it were up to her, Mora wouldn't even be allowed in the same room as one of her beautiful garments, for fear that it would be ruined from a single look.

Mora didn't dare to breathe normally until Mags had retreated out of her bedchamber and they could no longer hear her footfalls shuffling down the corridor.

“So?” Ahmya handed Mora the wine and waggled her brows. “You did want to tangle with the prince, didn’t you?”

Mora rolled her eyes. “I don’t even know what he looks like. I was simply curious if he was coming.” And if he had read the prophecy he had sent. Presumably he had, but there was always the chance he couldn’t read the old language, and that was one less person on her list of those who would be hunting her.

“I bet he’s cute, don’t you?” Ahmya sipped from the bottle.

“He’s Oryn’s brother, I bet he’s hideous. He probably suffers from horrible acne and has a third eye hidden under greasy hair.”

Kallan strolled from the corner with a smirk and tossed his longsword onto the bed. “Looks like I get the bed.”

“What? No.” Mora marched over to him, shoving his sword back into his hands and almost spilling wine onto her white barely-there dress.

She set the chalice down and backed far away from it. She would have rather condemned herself to a night in the Deadwood Forest than have to face Mags to have her fix a stain.

“You called the king hideous, insulting him. Per our conditions, that counts as breaking from the proper etiquette of your title.”

*Shit.* He wasn’t wrong. Although it was the prince she was talking about, a royal was still a royal, and insulting one would have gotten any staff member fired. “The prince shouldn’t count, he’s practically a myth.”

“No need to argue, I am happy to share.”

“And be woken by your morning wood jabbing into my back? Not going to happen. I’ll up the bet. If I slip up again, you get the bed for the rest of our time together.”

He laughed and tossed something into the air, catching it in his hand. He made a show of peeking at the object and then smiled. “No deal, the bed’s mine tonight.”

Mora clenched her jaw as Ahmya dragged her to the floor-length mirror to fix the dark gray strands of her hair that had fallen loose from the braids. She would have to figure out her Kallan situation later. Ahmya was smiling sweetly at her reflection and fanning a tear away from her eye.

“Look at you,” her sister said.

There were several glamours on Mora, covering her iron cuff and any other identifying markers. She was missing the ink on her fingers and the darkmark on her back, the mess of scars that covered her tan skin and the constellation of freckles on her face. Where there should have been five imperfect dots, there was now only one; just below her eye.

With her hair curled and braided and gold lining her eyes, she looked every bit the courtesan she was supposed to play. Poised and submissive and nothing like herself. If she looked hard enough, she could see past the glamour. The scar on her neck faded into view as she pictured what the jagged line looked like.

Ahmya tucked the last loose strand back into a braid as Kallan approached. He spoke to her reflection as if he too saw someone else standing in her place. “It is frightening to see you look docile. I much prefer the seductive look. You know,

the one where you're contemplating whether you are going to stab me or fuck me."

Mora narrowed her eyes at his reflection.

"Ah, that's the one." He laughed. "Glad to know you're still in there."

"Please don't do either of those things." Ahmya shook her head with a sigh. "I must greet the arriving guests. I'll see you both at dinner. I'll be the one in gold, seated next to the man in the crown."

Her hand hung on the door handle for a moment as she looked back at Mora with a smile that seemed almost sad. The feeling that washed over Mora was the same one she got when Rhyn warned her of irrelevant dangers. Like there was something that she hadn't figured out yet. Something important, something bad.

"Do behave," she said and then walked out.

Mora made her way to a dresser and fished through the top drawer. After finding what she was looking for, she tossed the small bag at Kallan, not sure why she was doing it. Maybe the good was rubbing off on her, maybe she was still trying to even the scales. No matter the reason, it felt right.

He caught it with ease and undid the tie, scrunching his forehead in curiosity.

When he dumped the contents into his hand, his eyes went wide. Every last thing from the bag had once belonged to him. A handful of coins, a die, an origami frog the size of a flower bud, and a key. He picked through the pile until he uncovered one more thing, the one she had been most hesitant to let him have.

It was smaller than his palm and the deepest shade of red. She had paid many times to have lip stains custom made that shade, and not once had they gotten it right. But that gemstone was perfect. Even in the way it caught the light it reminded her of blood. It was expertly cut to resemble a longsword with thin golden vines laced around the pommel and creeping down the hilt.

The moment Mora had noticed it, it had been hers. In truth, it didn't matter if she gave it back. That was the only piece of him that she swore would remain hers when their time together ended.

Kallan pulled out the chain that hung under his shirt. He slid it through his fingers until he pinched the glass feather that hung in the place the sword had been.

Kallan picked up the gem and pocketed the rest of his belongings. "This was my mother's. How did you—"

"It turns out you, also, sleep like the dead."

"Here." He handed it back to Mora with a sly smile. *Well, that was easy.* "Wear it. I would rather not risk it being stolen by any of our snooping guests, and I think you have already proven it's not safe with me. I'm beginning to see why Oryn trusted you with this job."

"Right, it takes one to know one, and all that," Mora said. "Do you think you can handle being without my protection for the first time in four days?"

He scoffed. "It seems much longer than four days. Between your constant attempts at losing me, making me commit crimes, trying to seduce me every night, and oh, we cannot forget the daily ritual of slamming a door in my face. I



am not sure how I will go on without it, but tonight won't be the night we find out. As I said, I'm not letting you go about this alone."

"It was worth another try." Mora checked that her dagger was still hidden on her thigh. "And if I had ever tried to seduce you, I would have succeeded, and you'd still be shaking on your knees."

He laughed. The casual joy, in even the briefest of his laughter, was contagious. It spread across Mora's features. First her lips, then her eyes; but when it hit her core it was smothered in a blanket of reality.

Her stomach dropped in a free fall to the bottom of her being. A place of darkness and dread. The weight of what was to come bore down on the room. Silence made the air grow thick.

She fixed her demeanor into one of practiced neutrality as her hand traced the hilt of the dagger hidden beneath her thin dress one more time. "We should get going." *The Shadow will have arrived by now.*



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

MORA WAS NO stranger to staring eyes, but it was those made of marble that made her skin crawl the most.

The great hall was identical in appearance to the rest of the Castle of Pearls. Every wall, column, and floor was made from a rare white marble. The furniture was decorated with the highest quality of gold inlay, suitable for the lavishly dressed socialites and aristocrats that filled each seat.

Hanging from the sky-high vaulted ceilings were matching white chandeliers decorated with pearls and faelights. The whole room shone in a polished glow, as if it was a work of art in itself and not even the dust in the air dared to touch it.

That was, until it filled with the scent of freshly prepared meats, baked bread, and pies made of fruits and nuts. Now the room was swarming with signs of life and colorful fabrics.

Still, the most prominent features of the great hall were its statues. Situated at even intervals along two of the walls, the lost gods towered over the room.

Mora had always been wary of them, but today they saw right through her submissive facade and countless glammers. Their penetrating gazes followed her every move.

They were too real, like the world had gotten it all wrong and the gods had never left. They weren't lost; they were trapped inside the marble statues, watching and listening and waiting for the day they'd break free.

Mora stood among the courtesans in the back of the room with pitchers of wine in their hands and flakes of gold on their skin while they waited for the king to speak.

They didn't typically replace the servants, but for such a special occasion, Oryn demanded only the best be shown off. And that's exactly what they were to do, show themselves off. Like flaunting merchandise in front of eager customers, waiting for the bidding wars to start.

None of them had much interest in what the king had to say, but as he clanked a knife against a glass chalice, he demanded attention that they didn't dare deny him.

"It is with a grateful heart that we welcome you to the first of many festivities to come. I know that some of you have not been to our home here in Harlen since my father's reign, and for others, this is a joyous first." His voice boomed loudly over a crowd of people eager to dive into their full plates and overflowing chalices. He gave a respectful nod to the corner furthest from where Mora stood, to the eerie dark that sucked the feeling of safety from the room like a vortex.

From this distance, Mora could barely see as one of the four mysterious figures returned his gesture in kind. She guessed by the long blonde hair that it had been the princess.

"We welcome all, and ask only one favor in return: that you do the same as we celebrate. Vale would not be what it is today without the generosity and kindness of its people. Let us show our guests that same kindness. And now, without further

ado, eat and dance and celebrate the vows we are to make. Celebrate your queen!”

Oryn thrust his chalice to the ceiling as the room erupted in cheers. Ahmya raised her own beside him before the pair took their seats and the feast began.

Scanning the room, Mora found Kallan standing like a statue beside the dais, along with two other Gilded Guards. The rest of their security, including most of the castle guards, were scattered throughout the great hall. She took in each of their faces, searching for the informant she had seen. None of them looked familiar to her.

“Mora,” someone hissed. Her attention returned to the wine in her hand, and she was made painfully aware that the rest of her company had already begun their night of filling chalices and batting long lashes at anyone with coin to spare. One of the courtesans gave her a pointed look and nodded to the Shadow Court’s table.

She was to be the one who serviced the ominous presence in the corner throughout the night, refilling their wine and treating them as welcome guests.

The path there took her directly past Kallan. He stood in full uniform, only missing his horned helm. He risked a discreet wink when she looked at him. In contrast to the white of the room and the white and gold of his armor, the vibrant blue of his eyes shone like sapphires.

With an overly sweet smile meant only for him, Mora batted her lashes at Kallan. If not for all the attention others pointed his way, he likely would have rolled his eyes at her feigned innocence. He was new and shiny and handsome, and

everyone looked at him like they wanted to taste his lips on theirs and wondered what it felt like to fall asleep next to him.

Mora had the pleasure of knowing that the Golden Boy snored louder than a drunken oaf passed out on a tavern floor. She wanted to tell them that they weren't missing out on much.

She was passing the king's table when Oryn twisted his beard between his finger and thumb, the signal that meant he needed to speak with her. She redirected her course, stepped up onto the dais and began politely refilling Ahmya's wine.

Oryn let out a loud rumble of a laugh while he talked with one of the Lords who had approached the table and a man she recognized to be Dromose by the stench of baneroot wafting off of him. A long strand of silky black hair fell into his face as he tipped his chalice to Mora in a respectful greeting. She bowed politely for Oryn. "A refill, Your Majesty?"

"More wine. Yes!" He scooted back in his chair to make room for her. As she leaned forward to reach his chalice, his hands caught on her hips and pulled her into his lap. Mora let out a girlish gasp and Ahmya tucked a loose hair back behind Mora's ear. To anyone else, it looked like the royal couple had claimed their toy for a night of fun.

"Stay awhile," Oryn demanded with a laugh that was matched by the two men who drank her in with jealous eyes. Appreciation and irritation conflicted in her mind when she realized what Oryn had done. Intentional or not, now that he had staked his claim on her, nobody else would so much as talk to her for the rest of the night.

The back of his finger followed the line of her jaw, and he leaned into her ear. Under the guise of flirtatious whispers he said, “The red-haired man, that is the Blade. I am sure of it. I want him dead, little Raven. Now.”

Mora giggled in the most feminine way she knew how. “Your Majesty, patience.” Ahmya’s eyes widened, having heard what her king had said. Mora found herself wanting to apologize, but there were no words to explain the betrayal of her promise. Not right then, at least.

Oryn laughed and ran his thumb down the center of her lip, then gripped her jaw in his hand and yanked her close again.

“Now that he has shown his face clear as day, I recognize him. He is more dangerous than he seems and stronger than he looks. Get it done tonight, and I’ll give you whatever you want and more.”

Oryn released Mora’s jaw and pushed her away with a hand on her lower back, excusing her to return to her duties. From the dais, Mora could see a threatening glint in the Blade’s eye and the bulk of muscle that covered his shoulders and chest. She hated to think how much more he could be than he looked.

She refilled her pitcher of wine and worked her way over to the corner of the room.

There were four of them, just as Mora had been informed there would be, seated alone at the end of the table. Three men and one woman. As she got closer, she could make out bits and pieces of their conversation.

She filled another chalice and stole a glance their way. The princess sat facing the room with her back to the corner. She was a petite and striking woman in a light blue satin gown. The amount of skin it left showing rivaled Mora's own.

Her ears ended in points sharper than the fae, poking out from her hair. Her skin was a beautiful tawny color and it shone, tinted a slight shade of green in some angles and purple in others, reflecting light the same way the bark of the Levana tree did.

Unlike with the fae, it didn't matter if faerie were old-blood or new-blood, if many generations had passed or not. The faerie didn't have *essyn*. They didn't grow weaker the further from creation their bloodlines got, slowly devolving into mere humans.

The faerie were beautiful and regal, if not a little intimidating.

Mora approached the princess first.

The Blade kept a threatening eye on her as she got nearer. His hair was a brilliant shade of red-orange. It was shaved on one side but otherwise fell past his shoulders. She tipped her chin down in a polite show of respect, but not enough that she would offend Vale's own by bowing to the enemy. "More wine, Princess?"

"Yes, thank you." She slid her empty chalice to the end of the table.

Mora filled it and went to pour the deep purple liquid into the Blade's chalice next. He put a hand over the top of it, and she barely stopped in time to avoid pouring it down his arm.

“Leave the pitcher,” he said with a sneer. “We are capable of filling our own cups.”

“Don’t scare the poor girl,” a man with a corset cinched tight around his ribs said. He was quite similar in stature to Mora, leaner and shorter than the other two men. Once she looked at him, it was hard to look away. His face was framed by sharp tattoos like crude arrows and slashing lines that bled down his neck and spilled onto his exposed forearms.

“She’s just doing her job,” he said through a mouthful of food. When his head turned to offer Mora a wink, she had to hide her shock at the white colorless iris stark in comparison to his other eye, which was a vibrant red. It was a color she had never seen on anyone before—human, fae, or faerie.

The third man had light blue lines tattooed on his cheekbones, not like the harsh lines on his friend’s face, but delicate and hard to see unless you looked closely. He had his light brown hair pulled back from his face to show off his pointed ears.

He laughed when he noticed her taking them all in one at a time. “I don’t know, brother; she doesn’t seem too scared to me. I say we aren’t trying hard enough.”

“We like a challenge,” the Blade replied. “You could always call upon her other services and show her how a monster earns his name.”

The three men chuckled and went back to eating their food like they had forgotten that Mora was still standing there, pitcher in hand, confused as to what she should do next. Any other courtesan would have obeyed, leaving the wine with a smile and walking away from the threat.



Maybe she should have walked away. Maybe she should have calmed the storm building in her chest and let the men have their laugh. But that wasn't who she was.

She leaned over the end of the table and tipped the pitcher over the Blade's newly unobscured chalice, letting the wine pour in a long and loud stream. A few people glanced their way, but they didn't dare to stare for long.

The Blade set his fork down and moved his hand to Mora's wrist, lowering the pitcher so the wine wouldn't splash as it filled. He looked at her.

"Try as hard as you'd like." Mora smiled.

He took the pitcher from her and set it on the table as he kept his grip on her wrist. Mora looked at it. She noticed a dark ring adorning one of his fingers and wondered how much he had paid for it. It looked expensive. Her gaze flicked back to his green eyes.

He pulled her so she had to lean over the table further, her breasts spilling from the fabric, almost baring her chest completely to them. "Everyone else here is scared of us. Why aren't you?"

"I don't scare easily."

"So I see. But there's something else there, isn't there. Anger, hate, and the slightest hint of desire. You want me to fuck you, to take your anger out on me, don't you?"

Mora looked at the princess in time to see her roll her eyes. "Go ahead and teach him some manners if you'd like," she said.

Mora's sweet smile fell. With her free hand, she grabbed the fork the man had set down and spun it around her fingers until it was in a position to tightly grip and slam it down. The metal tines impaled the hand wrapped around her wrist.

The princess erupted in laughter, but the Blade made no sound. He only clenched his jaw.

The few stares they had earned quickly turned away, reverting back to their own conversations and meals. Luckily, the Blade's back was broad enough her little slipup wasn't seen at the other tables. Not that anyone else would have cared much, aside from Oryn. But the king looked too enthralled in conversation to take notice.

She yanked back the fork, wiped it clean on the man's sleeve, and returned it to the table beside his plate. With her smile back in place, she picked up the pitcher and turned back to the brown-haired man. "More wine?"

"Can we keep her?" the one with the mismatched eyes asked.

The Blade turned and flexed his injured hand. The princess touched the wound and Mora watched as it sealed itself tight, healing before her eyes and leaving nothing more than a red patch of skin as proof of what she had done.

She had never known a wound capable of healing in the matter of a breath. Even Oryn's most skilled faerie took half the day to close her up properly.

Her heart almost stopped as he inspected the hand, worried he would notice what else she had done.

"Let's let the lady get back to her job," the princess said before the Blade could voice his anger. "Thank you, Lady—"

“Not Lady, just Mora.”

Most of the courtesans in the king’s flock were in fact ladies, highborn women who gave themselves to their king to get their families in his better graces or prevent themselves from being sold like livestock to some of the nastier lords in his court. It was a last resort for many ladies. It surprised Mora that the princess would know that custom. Most outsiders, even those in Harlen, assumed the courtesans were lowborn scum.

“Mora,” the princess parroted. Mora could have sworn she saw recognition flash across the Blade’s face, but she must have imagined it. Nobody outside of the castle would have recognized her by name. Nobody alive anyway.

“What a pretty name. Is that short for something?”

“Moravik, my surname,” she said, not entirely a lie, but the same false truth she had told the Name Collector when he documented her existence into the One Faith’s records. The one the informant had been looking through. “I have never been fond of my given name. If you’ll excuse me, I have other tables to tend to.”

She spent the rest of the dinner refilling chalices and searching faces for the man from the library. She kept an eye on Ahmya. She kept an eye on the Blade and his friends too.

Nobody bothered the table in the corner, aside from Riggs who was ordered to do occasional walk-bys. It was the king’s attempt to remind his not-so-welcome guests that they were being carefully watched. Despite the tension that never faded, the night went on without disruption.

The sun drifted behind the horizon, and laughter filled the room as the moon rose. Food had cleared from the tables and wine had flowed with an increasing speed. By all accounts, she ought to have found it pleasing to see the uptight crowd in such a state of chaos, with slouched shoulders and sloppy kisses disrupting the usually prim and proper nobles. Secrets spewed from lips with careless ease.

Her attention was fixed elsewhere.

Every time Dromose moved too close to Ahmya, it caught her eye. Every time a castle guard walked by, she expected him to threaten her for what she had seen in the library. Every time the Blade rolled his shoulders, she swore it would be the time he finally stood from the table and left.

Nerves coiled in her chest, and she dreaded what the rest of the night had in store for her.



## CHAPTER TWELVE

AFTER A PAINSTAKINGLY long night, the Blade finally stood from his table to dismiss himself. He whispered something in the princess's ear, after which she nodded, and then he walked toward the dimly lit corridor situated between the statues of the Mother and the Father.

Mora jolted her attention to the chalice she was filling when the Blade's gaze scanned the crowd for her, as he had been doing all night. He had seemed more wary of her after the stunt she had pulled. It had made her task of keeping an eye on him harder.

*And it's your own gods-damned fault.*

Her essyn was right. She felt like an amateur for letting her pride get the better of her and losing the advantage of being invisible among the crowd.

Kallan gave a signal—moving to the other side of Oryn's table—relating his approval for her to finally disappear into the night. The breath that had been caught in her throat finally escaped as she made her way to her hidden cloak and swung it over her shoulders.

The Golden Boy with his cobalt stare was the only one who noticed her leave. Soon, he too would slip away from the

festivities, catching up with her in the dungeons after removing his armor. The ceremonial garb was too bright to blend in and too loud to allow any sort of stealth. If it came down to fighting, he would have to do without it.

If Mora were to catch the Blade before Kallan caught up to her, there would be no risk of fighting and no worries over loud armor.

She walked on silent feet and stuck to the shadowed side of the corridor, tucking into doorways and staying a safe distance away from the man as she followed him. They took the corridor heading west and turned down a maze-like route that led to the stairwells.

He stopped, bending down to pull something from his boot.

Mora was close enough that she could attack. It would have been easy, neck exposed and back facing her. All she would have needed to do would be to sink the dagger in her fist into the soft spot between his neck and shoulder. With the right angle, he would be dead before he saw her coming.

She slipped her dagger back into its sheath instead. She wasn't going to kill him. She was done killing people.

He pulled a key from his boot and kept on his path through the corridors. Mora ducked into a servant's tunnel and took a hidden passage she knew to be a shortcut. The same she had taken every day since she had been freed from her cell, bringing her friend warm food and fresh water while Kallan prayed in the castle's private temple.

Once she reached the end of the passage, she peeked her head out to see nobody coming. She must have beat him there

as she had hoped; if she got there first, she might be able to listen to whatever conversations might be had between Rhyn and the Blade. It had been years that Rhyn had been stuck down there. Why rescue him now?

She darted into the dank and dark stairwell, stepping carefully and only knowing she was nearing the end when the smell of rot assaulted her senses. No matter how much time she had spent down there, it was never a smell she could get used to.

She heard loud voices coming from the cells, and not the usual chants and mad ramblings she was used to. The voices sounded angry. They sounded prideful and boasting, and none of them sounded like the Blade.

“—really think you could—”

“—dumber than you look—”

She knew those voices. She looked behind her but saw no signs of Kallan. As far as she could tell, the Blade wasn't close either.

Mora calmed her quickening breath and held her shoulders high, letting her cloak cover her dress and her raven-faced hood fall over her face. She stepped into the dimly lit room lined with the barred cages she hated so much.

A man who had become more skeleton than anything sat curled up in a ball in the back of the first cell. He used weak legs to push himself further away from the bars. The next two cells were empty aside from large stains that could have either been blood, or not.

She passed corpses that had given up on living and chosen to become part of the floors. She passed by a man that stared

at her with big dark eyes, like he knew what she was about to do and he was judging her for it. She would have thought those cold eyes belonged to a d'zev if the demons hadn't gone extinct long ago.

At the end of the long row, she reached the spot where her own cell sat empty, and a few paces in front of it, the reason she was there.

“Boys,” she said in a voice that sounded nothing like her own. The three castle guards stood around a limp form at their feet. All three men recognized the authority in her voice and stood at attention on her command.

“What have you here?” she asked.

“This prisoner was caught halfway to the great hall. You can tell the king to rest assured we have it handled.” The one who spoke turned his attention back to Rhyn in an attempt at dismissing her.

He was her current least favorite of the castle guard scum, but he was loyal to the king and had always had the good sense not to bother her if he ever saw her lurking about. She wanted to dismiss him right then, but there was something that he said that piqued her interest.

The timeline didn't add up. She had been watching the Blade all night, and not a single member of the Shadow Court had left the table until he had. There was no way he could have been the one to break Rhyn free of his iron cell.

Which meant that Rhyn had either figured a way out himself, which was highly unlikely—if he could have, he would have done it long ago—or the other option, one Mora



hated to consider, was that there was someone else in play. Perhaps the informant was more than just an informant.

Her heart raced to get back to the great hall. She needed to find where the Blade could have gone if he hadn't been heading to Rhyn.

*Stupid, stupid, stupid.* She had been too distracted to put two and two together; too careless. Too much of everything she shouldn't have been. But there would be time for spiraling into a hole of self-hatred later. She had something she needed to do.

"I will decide if the king shall rest assured, not you," she said. "And I am not so sure you do have this handled."

The newer of the guards fidgeted nervously, holding his breath to see what his mentor would do, if he would defend his honor and pick a fight with the Raven.

He didn't. Thankfully.

Her station beside the king gave her authority over the common castle guard. Normally Ahmya glamoured her hair and eyes when she needed to don the hood and lurk about, but even if they had ever managed to see her face—which was unlikely—they wouldn't be able to tell the difference with half of the torchlights kept smothered. As long as she kept her dress hidden, they would never second-guess her authority.

She nodded her chin. The guards obeyed and lifted the prisoner to his feet, holding his face to meet hers. The lighting made it hard to tell the extent of his injuries, but from what she could see, Rhyn had taken a bad beating before she had arrived.

His lip and brow were split open, and blood spilled down his half-swollen face. His tattered shirt was ripped down the middle, more than it had been, and one of his legs was bent the slightest bit in the wrong direction.

He stared past her, expressionless, as she took in the sight of him. She had seen him endure worse and live, but it still made her stomach turn with knots of sharp pain.

Mora ran a finger down the length of his cheek, careful to leave a gap between them. With a nod, the guards hauled him back into his cell.

“We’ll be here, should you try anything stupid.”

Mora didn’t move for them, smashing shoulders with the one she despised. He had no name to her; she hadn’t even cared to pay attention to what he looked like until then. He had the same dark beard she had been looking for, but his hair was shorn short to his scalp. Unless he had cut it recently, he wasn’t the informant.

She turned her attention back to Rhyn.

“I knew this was coming,” she whispered with her head held high, knowing the guards were listening. They knew the prisoner had a relationship with the Raven. There had been rumors as to what sort of relationship it was, but Mora had never cared to set them straight. The only person it bothered was Ahmya. “I struggled with the idea of seeing you go. I really did, I went back and forth on how it would make me feel to watch you walk out of my life forever.”

Concern flashed across his face as Rhyn locked his crystal blue eyes on hers with an eerie precision. He saw past her hooded shadows.

“What are you doing?”

“I knew I should be happy to see you leave a place such as this. As your friend, I should smile at the thought of setting you free, returning you to your family.”

Grabbing the barred door, she gave it a gentle push. It slammed shut and locked in place; the sound echoed past her. Her heart flipped in her chest, but she had to keep going.

“But then I thought about what it would do to me, and I realized that you of all people would understand. Because you get me, Emrhyn Flynn. You know me.”

His jaw clenched, and he gripped the bars with a look that Mora knew. He was hiding behind a cloud of foggy anger because he would not break. Not for her, not for anyone. He had been the one to teach her that same stubborn will to be strong. But she knew because she knew him. Inside he was shattering to pieces.

She reached through the bars. He grabbed her wrist with a tight grip and yanked her closer. “Why?”

“You should have known that I would never let you leave me.”

Breaking free of his grip, she turned her back to him, afraid that if she looked hard enough, she would see something in him that would make her fall apart.

The guards accompanied her as she walked away. She was leaving her closest friend behind her, walking away from him the way she had feared he would one day walk away from her.

She did what she had to. When it came down to it, there was no other option for her. No matter how selfish or how

cruel that made her. She couldn't let him go.

“What did I do to deserve this, Mor?” The nickname that only he called her was a stab to the chest as his voice cracked through the quiet.

She turned back to him, letting her companions enter the stairwell alone, knowing they would wait for her just out of sight. She closed her eyes and took a shallow breath of the stale air, reminding herself of why she was doing this.

“You let me love you.” She exhaled slowly, letting the words float on a whisper.

There was silence for a while, but just before she stepped into the stairwell, she heard him say something, almost too quiet to reach her. But she did hear it, and his words cleaved her in two.

“You got it all wrong, you know.” He huffed a short breath that could have been mistaken for a laugh, if Rhyn had even been one to laugh. “It was never me they were here for.”



## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

A TREMOR SHOOK MORA'S chest. She had felt it before, when she was ten years old. When Sadira, the woman who raised her, had died while Mora was racing her friends through the alleys, playing childish games and dreaming about first kisses.

She ignored it then, the rattle in her bones.

She wouldn't ignore it now.

Every sound that caught her attention made her run faster through the castle. The crackling of faelight emitting from sconces, the footfalls of heavy boots. She dashed in and out of the moonlight filtering through the windows. Her world blinked back and forth with every stride, crimson red to shadow.

She ditched the suffocating weight of her cloak. The light fabric of her gown trailed behind her as she raced the ache unraveling her heart. No matter her speed, time only slowed the closer she got to the great hall.

If they weren't there for Rhyn, they could have come for anything. Including her. But the more frightening "what if" was of Ahmya.

What if she had been right all along?

*You should have listened.* Her essyn rattled to be let free of her hold.

She saw no signs of the Blade or Kallan. In fact, there were no signs of anyone in the corridors. It was as if she had stepped into a void when she crossed back through the threshold from the dungeons. There should have been laughter. There was nothing.

A dizziness washed over her, air not getting to her lungs the way it needed to.

The sensation morphed, feeling like the walls were closing in on her as black spots danced across her vision. Her heartbeat thrashed in her ears.

She rounded a corner and collided into something hard. A strong grip caught her arms, the only thing that prevented her from tumbling to the floor from the crash.

“M-Mora!” Kallan huffed. There was an urgency in his voice she had never heard before.

The burn of bile snuck up her throat, threatening to spill the contents of her stomach onto his boots.

“Something happened, Mora. I was making my way to you and then—”

She tried to dart past him, but he caught her again. She squirmed to break free of his embrace, but it was pointless. He was stronger than she was.

Without knowing what she was doing, she pressed the blade into his neck. “Let. Me. Go.”

He froze, leaning back to ease the pressure that threatened to cut into him. His grip on her finally relaxed.

“Ahmya, she was feeling ill, so she took her leave. She—”

Mora broke free from his hold and sprinted down the hall, running away from whatever Kallan was about to say. She didn't want to hear it.

She needed to find Ahmya. She needed to see her with her own eyes and know that she would be alright. No matter what Mora got them into, she always ended up being alright. This would be no different. Whatever it was, they would get through it.

Wounds would heal, illness would fade. Everything would be fine.

The sound of laughter hit her like a crashing wave. The great hall came into view and inside it, people still drank and danced like nothing was wrong. Mora's terror didn't abate.

The king was gone. So was Ahmya, and half of the Gilded Guards. She looked to the corner of the room to find all four members of the Shadow Court seated at their same table. The Blade had returned to them already. Whatever he was doing was already done.

She was too late.

She slammed into a stiff shoulder. The man she had hit corrected his balance and continued his dancing. He almost ran into Kallan, who was weaving his way through the crowd to catch up with her. She had to force her way through to the other side.

She started to run again when she saw two castle guards rushing toward the courtyard she had visited with the king only nights ago.

The arched entry came into view first, too many guards standing below it, blocking her view of the garden.

“Move.”

No one noticed her.

“Move,” she said again. “Move!”

It was then that the crowd parted and, finally, Mora saw what they had all seen.

The Levana tree stood tall in the center of the garden, reflecting the moonlight with sparkling red and pink rainbows on the stone path. Its pearl strands had curled up into spirals for the night, and the branches swayed ever so slightly in the warm breeze, like nothing was wrong at all. Like it was just another night.

But it wasn't just another night, because hanging limb by limb from its branches was something that did not belong in a tree of any kind.

A body.

Broken and dripping with blood, it had been carved up in ways that even Mora's imagination couldn't have conjured. Guts spilled from the abdomen in mockery of the pearl strands, hanging like they belonged there beside the white gems.

The body's long red hair was curled in perfect ringlets, and not a single one had lost its shape or fallen out of place.

A horrific realization gutted Mora. The body was not a body at all. It was a sister, it was almost a wife, a future queen.

It was Ahmya.



And hovering in the pool of Ahmya's blood, staring directly at Mora, was Death.

Kallan caught her as she fell to her knees and retched.

A storm of scrambling servants and guards moved around them, but all she could see was Death caressing Ahmya's bloody face.

She could no longer hear beyond the drumming of her thunderous heart as a sword stabbed through her lungs. Her shaky attempts to draw breath had been rendered useless. The warmth was leaving her body, the numbness settling in.

She was staring Death in the face, and she was dying.

Her eyes fell to her caved-in chest, but she found no blood, no wound, no sword. There had never been anything there. She was, in the cruelest way possible, alive and well.

Every now and then she could make out pieces of what the voices said around her. “—her down from there—” “—nobody leaves the—” “—cleaned up—” “—announcement—are dealing with—”

“—you can't do that, she's—”

“—my kingdom, not yours. You—”

Someone reached for the tree. “No. No! Don't touch her!”

Servants and guards stopped to look at Mora. All the pretty song birds perched on the castle's roof took flight, escaping from her like her tears should have been escaping her eyes. But no tears fell. It was as if they had all dried up with the horror of what she saw.

The man reaching for the tree froze in place—waiting, she realized, for Oryn to tell him what to do. Eventually the man

left the garden, the body untouched.

Eventually everyone left, aside from the looming presence of someone's anger hovering above her and the closeness of someone else, on the ground behind her, wrapping her in his arms.

"Give us a moment," Oryn said.

"I'm not leaving." Kallan's grip on her grew tighter, as if he worried she would be yanked away by her pain if he loosened his arms in the slightest.

Perhaps he was right, there was no telling what her essyn would make her do.

"I need you to do your duty, soldier. You and Riggs gather your men, figure out who did this. Bring them to me. If I were you, I would start with the four members of the Shadow Court currently getting drunk in my great hall."

"I will carry out my duty, but I'm not leaving her," he said. "Not right now."

There was silence for a while. Bitter, lasting silence. No birds chirped from the roofs, no leaves rustled in the breeze, no laughter drifted through the air. For a moment, nothing existed outside of Mora and the slow drip of blood. *Drip. Drip.*

Unaware that time was still passing by, she stared at the drip, at the puddle it formed at the roots of the Levana tree. At the stream of crimson stained down the bark.

*Drip. Drip. Drip.*

"Mora, we need to go."

*Drip. Drip.*

“Mora? They’re going to lock you back up, we need to go. Oryn thinks you’re a threat, he’s afraid you’re going to—Mora can you hear me? Mora.”

*Drip.*

It took every bit of strength she had to push herself off the ground.

*Drip.*

Her hands shook, fingers ached, but she found herself untying the pearl-less strands that held Ahmya’s parts up. Her fingers were slick with blood, though she couldn’t remember touching the body.

The knots were tight. The skin was cold.

Thoughts came back to her, piece by piece as she arranged the parts of Ahmya on the ground. The strands of red curls radiated away from her sister’s face like the rays of the sun.

Death didn’t speak a word to her, she only watched from a distance as Mora closed lifeless green eyes. The last time she would ever see them.

She kissed the pale skin of a cheek. The last time she would ever touch it.

Still, Mora did not cry.



## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

SHE SENSED THE moment someone stepped into the garden with her. Two someones.

Her, and them, and Death; that was all that was left of the crowd of guards and servants that had come to see the spectacle of murder. It seemed even Kallan had slipped away at some point; she couldn't feel him beside her anymore.

The two sets of footfalls grew closer.

She wiped the streak of blood from Ahmya's face and placed a white flower behind her ear. Fallen pearls scattered around her, painted with various smears and drops of red.

As she stepped back to make sure nothing was out of place, that everything was as perfect as Ahmya would have wanted, emotion struck her hard. She studied the way the muscles of her heart tore, the tightness in her chest caving her ribs inward. She memorized the sickening feel of knots twisting and tying around her stomach and the bile burning its way up her throat. She repeated, over and over again, the scorching anger clouding her eyes and the heat setting her blood ablaze beneath her skin.

She made herself remember it all. Every painstaking detail. When she was done, and only when she was done, she

fed her sorrow to her darkness and let the numbness filter through her veins until the only thing left was an eerie calm and her essyn's lust for blood.

As she rose from the ground, a tendril of dark whispers and trapped magic wrapped around her heart, heating her iron cuff to a burning glow no longer hidden by Ahmya's glamour.

The Blade looked confused as he and his brown-haired friend watched her morph from a grief-stricken courtesan to a weapon of revenge, cold and expressionless.

*"They did this,"* Death hissed into her mind. *"Are you going to stand there and let them do it to you too?"*

*No,* her essyn replied.

"I will not." Mora said. She drew her dagger from beneath the blood-stained fabric of her dress. The weapon had been sharpened to a lethal edge before the night had started, to ensure the magic-infused steel was not only strong enough, but also sharp enough to slice deep into leather and bone and muscle. At the time, it had seemed overly cautious to prepare for such a need, but she was grateful for having done so now.

"Get the others, Slade. We should leave," the Blade said.

His friend turned to walk away, looking back at the scene of what they had done. He took two steps, and just as he tore his eyes away from her, Mora's dagger flew through the air.

The Blade saw it coming. He stepped in front of the hurling weapon, but it was too late. She was too fast. The man behind him stumbled. A choked sound filled the air.

"Slade!" He spun, catching his friend before he fell. The dagger was buried in the side of his neck, and when the Blade

pulled it out, Slade's hands clamped down on the gaping wound. Blood poured out.

The Blade propped Slade up against a marble bench and stood to meet her; the dagger looked small in his hand.

He attacked first. Rage-filled swings blew at her from both fists. She spun away from the dagger, not letting it make contact with her skin. He kept coming at her. She struggled to get close enough to reach a hit of her own.

Her ears popped as she stepped off the patio.

Pain cracked against her arm as she tried with foolish instinct to block a forceful hit she couldn't dodge. He shoved her down on the ground; she scrambled to get away.

A fist-sized stone caught her eye, and she reached through a thorny plant for it. She swung it with a grunt of force just in time to meet the Blade's next attack.

The stone collided against his threatening hand and her dagger went flying into the flowers. A screaming sound muffled through his closed jaw. It wouldn't have mattered if the scream had been loud. Nobody would have heard. They were back inside Oryn's barrier.

A glimpse of movement drew her attention to the entrance. She expected to see Slade struggling to stand, but he wasn't there. He wasn't anywhere in the courtyard. It was Death she noticed, lurking in the shadows, waiting like a vulture to see who she could reap next.

Mora pulled herself up, scanning the flowers for her dagger.

"Still," the Blade said, "you do not fear us, do you?"

“No—”

“Juddah.” Slade reappeared, running through the corridor with his wound no longer gushing, a sword in one hand and a misshapen axe in the other. When he was close enough, he tossed the axe and the Blade—Juddah—caught it with his good hand.

The walls around them flashed blue. Light emanated from the entrance on the opposite side of the courtyard. Kallan walked toward them, longsword drawn and threads of light skirting across the metal. Mora used the moment of distraction to sprint past the Blade. She would make him watch as she killed his friend. Make him suffer for what he did to Ahmya.

For what she could have prevented.

The Blade swung to catch her with his axe, but his attention quickly shifted to Kallan, leaving her running straight toward a waiting sword of her own.

Slade stuck the weapon out in front of him, blocking her from getting close. She hadn't managed to find her dagger, so all she had was another stone she had taken from the ground. This one had a sharp broken edge on one side.

Heavy breath filled her lungs, and the sound of clanking weapons echoed around them. She waited for Slade to make a move as they walked in a circle around each other. He held his sword still and kept his eyes on her fist, ready to block her if she threw the stone.

She had other plans.

“I don't want anyone to get hurt here,” Slade said wearily.

Mora huffed a laugh. "It's a little late for that."

She waited until he was in front of the heavy bench and then ran toward him. He lined his sword up to stop her and took a step back, but not far enough for what she needed. The sword sliced against Mora's arm.

The pain grounded her, narrowing her hunger for revenge on the man in front of her. A chilled breeze brushed against the sweat beading on her forehead and sent a shiver over her skin.

He flicked her blood from the blade of his sword and smiled.

Wasting no time, she channeled her pain to feed her anger. She tried her attack once more. This time when he took a step back, he collided with the bench. He didn't fall as she hoped he would, but it was enough to allow her time to get past his defenses. Using the bench to help her tired muscles jump, she wrapped her legs around his waist.

At that distance, all he could do was try to pry her off of him.

Then he did fall, rolling on the ground as Mora's repeated hits collided with whatever parts of him she could reach. Her hands ached as the stone cut into her palms, making it slick with her blood and hard to keep a grip on. More pain to feed her hunger for revenge.

*Kill him.*

His hand found her throat and he pushed her off, squeezing until air no longer made it to her lungs. Her head throbbed as she thrashed. In one last desperate attempt, she



clutched the stone with both hands and swung it down on him.

A crack was followed by a groan. His body contorted beneath her, hands releasing her throat and clasping his head as she scrambled to retrieve her makeshift weapon.

She gripped it in both hands and slammed it down, hitting his unprotected chest. He tried to push her off, but she kept repeating the strike until he stopped fighting back. Her blows grew slower and weaker. His chest heaved with each hit as he moaned in pain.

Another blue glow flashed behind her, followed by the clanking of steel. A shout, something she couldn't hear. A surprised laugh found the man's lips.

"V doesn't like—" Slade choked on a laugh; his words muffled with blood "—when people break his toys." His head rolled to the side and he spat the blood collecting in his mouth, refusing to watch her strike her final blows. Mora grabbed his face and yanked it back to her. For what they did to Ahmya, she wouldn't let him look away from her wrath. "I'm at peace with death. Are you?"

She plunged the sharp stone down again and again until her hand was buried in a hole in his chest. It took her until then to realize that the screaming that had accompanied the spew of blood had been her own.

Pulling her fist out from the gaping hole, she stood. His heart pumped its final beats from the palm of her hand.

A piercing whistle broke through the air, and a faint pressure pinched her stomach. She locked eyes with a man she

recognized standing under the marble arch, finally come for her.

He wore a hooded cloak. Loose curls of dark hair fell in his face and his beard was trimmed short against his jaw. The bow in his hands was aimed directly at her, but there was no arrow nocked.

Her gaze trailed down to the source of the worrying pinch. There, in the center of her exposed abdomen, was a hole. The still warm heart fell from her open fingers to drown in the blood at her feet.

“Get out of here, Juddah,” the man said, low and threatening, with a hint of an accent.

The pain shocked her body and she fell forward, grabbing a branch from the Levana tree to hold herself up. The cuff on her arm burned hot against her skin.

Her grip didn't last long, and she collapsed. There on the ground, she stared up at the crimson streaks that marred the opalescent white bark and listened to the faint muffled sound of shuffling feet and someone screaming her name. On the branch she had touched, a perfect red handprint wrapped around the bark.

Kallan slid on the ground beside her. She blinked the dark spots from her vision; there was blood running down his forehead and a gash on his cheek.

“Come on, Mora, stay with me. We have to get you out of here.”

“I can't go, I need Ahmya.” She choked on her own swallow. “I need a healer.”

“I know a faerie in Harlen. She can help us, but we need to go. I’m not going to let them lock you up.”

He scooped her, gently, into his arms and carried her away from the garden. Away from her sister’s dead body and fallen pearls and three pools of crimson that flowed together in swirling shades of lives lost. Ahmya’s, Slade’s, and in all the ways that mattered, Mora’s too.

She clung helplessly to Kallan. The sight of all that death burned into her memory, her revenge laid out beside the blooming flowers.

She had taken another life, and felt no better for it.

She felt nothing at all as Kallan walked her out the front doors of the castle, down the long set of steps, and away from all she had known for the past three years.

Her eyes were still as arid as the Crimson Dryland.



## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

ONE SLEEP, THAT was all the time that had passed since she had left a piece of her heart, cold and dead, at the roots of the Levana tree.

Already her wounds had been pieced back together and the blood had been washed from her hands. There was no proof of the trauma she had gone through. No new scars, no new ink on her fingers. She was whole but missing half of herself, healthy but overcome with sickness.

The only proof that the nightmare had been real were the pains that nobody could see. The ones she anchored her soul to, to stop herself from fading into a shell of rage.

One of those pains had been the sudden realization that she wouldn't survive losing another person; and even more painful, that she couldn't lose what she didn't have.

She would never again care, never again love. She was, in every definition of the word, alone. It was better that way, with less distractions.

Already she had tracked down the Shadow Court by herself and found out how they planned to get off the island with their ship heavily guarded and everyone with a sword

searching for them. It had been tricky, even for her, but she'd done it.

“Seasick already?”

Every one of her muscles pulled tight as her hand jerked to her dagger. “Gods!” She breathed. “I told you to leave me be.”

Kallan raised his arms to lean against a rotting beam at level with his head. “And I said I would never do that.”

“Why? Why are you here?”

“Well, it's a funny story really. I had this stunning woman in bed, I went to get her water, and when I came back she had vanished.” Kallan stopped when her eyes narrowed. “Can you blame me for wanting to make sure you were alright?”

She shook her head and slid the weapon back into one of her sheaths. On her way to the northern docks, she had made a stop by her old attic bedroom where her stash of weapons had been kept. She felt better, safer, with the weapon strapped to her. “If I wait until I'm alright, I'll lose my chance. I can't let them get away.”

The ship creaked and moaned as a wave swayed the floating vessel into the dock. Mora steadied herself on a nearby post and inhaled deeply through her nose. The salty air was musky with the smell of damp wood. The memory of a different boat flashed behind her closed eyes.

“How about you tell me what I can help with so we can get off this death trap?” Kallan offered, stepping further away from the rickety ladder he had climbed down.

Her lips pressed into a fine line, and she shook her head. “I don’t have room in my life for whatever this is, Kallan. Just go before your fate really does get tied to mine.”

Kallan’s hand fell to his sides as he looked around at the numerous barrels, bags, and crates that filled the room. The wooden slats of the floor above almost brushed the top of his head, and he had to duck beneath the beam he had been leaning against to get to Mora. He found his perch on a large wooden crate beside a barrel of fresh water.

“I know you think I am doing this in some elaborate ploy to be near you, and I admit that I have rather enjoyed being in your company, but I am not some lovesick puppy who cannot deal with a little rejection.

“Believe it or not, I was the one tasked with bringing justice for Ahmya’s death.” He leaned forward, letting his elbows rest on his knees and his fingers rake through his hair.

“Whatever this is’ is a partnership. Two people with the same goal. You want revenge, and I want justice, but we both want to see the Blade hang for what he’s done. And no matter how many times you tell me to leave, I will not, because I made a vow to my king that I would protect you.”

She tucked her cold fingers under her arms and looked anywhere but at him. She had already begun to set into motion her plan to separate the group. After that, she would watch the ship sail them back to the Shadow, unaware of the threat in its cargo hold. But then, if they survived as she had assumed they would, magic could be a great help in capturing them.

An old-blood would have been of more use to her, facing off against such strong opponents. But Kallan’s new-blood

magic was better than her nothing.

As much as she hated to admit he was right, she could use his help. But there was one thing he was wrong about.

“I don’t want revenge. It’s not what Ahmya would have wanted and—” and she had tried it already, been successful even, and it did nothing but make her worry she had gone too far toward evil to ever return.

She hadn’t realized until she said it that it was true. Ahmya never would have wanted this. She wanted Mora to escape her fate before it was too late.

“I won’t kill him. I can’t. But there’s still a chance if I deliver him to Oryn as we planned, it will be enough.” She could still get her cuff off.

“Then we will do it together.”

One more day of him, then all this would be at its end. Then she would be free of the thorn he had become, writhing his way toward her heart until she had no choice but to care. How much further under her skin could he get in one day?

“Fine,” she finally said, looking back at him. “But no attachments. No feelings. No more moments. Just the plan. Or I will put a dagger in you, got it? We separate them so we can take them one at a time. Starting with the Blade. If all goes well, this will be over by dusk.”

“You think we had moments?” He smirked.

Mora shot a glare at him, and he laughed. He pushed off from the crate. “Partners until dusk then,” he said. “Now; how can I help?”

“Hide this bag somewhere, then we get out of here and I will explain the rest.”

“What’s in this thing anyway?” he asked as he picked up the bag slumped at Mora’s feet.

She had the thought to warn him not to touch its contents, but it was too late. The tie had come undone, and as she opened her mouth to answer, he caught what had fallen out of the overstuffed bag.

Bones scattered over the floor in a crash, tumbling over cracks, into small puddles, and behind crates. Kallan collapsed.

She dropped to her knees and tried to peel his fingers away from the jaw clutched in his palm. He held it so tightly that the toothless edge cut into his skin and pools of blood swelled between his fingers.

His eyes clouded with a milky haze, and he started to convulse.

“Just let it go,” she hissed. If he could hear her, he didn’t listen.

Her dagger slid between the bone and his hand, trying to pry it away. It was no use. She needed to do something, and fast.

It briefly crossed her mind to kiss him, the result of too many fairytales read. But that was just that, a fairytale. A kiss would never wake him from a trance in real life, but there was one other thing she could try.

In a rushed decision, she pulled her hand back and let it fly, slapping his beautiful face as hard as she could. The bone



tumbled across the floor, and his hand flew to his cheek. Bloody fingerprints painted his skin with his touch.

“What the fuck was that?” he gaped.

“D’zev bones.”

“I gathered as much, but did you have to slap me so hard?”

“Would you rather I have stabbed you?” It had been her next thought, but she was trying to be better and slapping him had seemed the better option.

She picked up the bone and placed it back in the bag, scrambling for the rest. Her self-allotted time was coming to an end, and they needed to leave before anyone decided to check on the ship. From her watch that morning, she clocked guards coming and going in a predictable pattern, and it was about time for the next to arrive.

“I thought you had magic.” Kallan’s eyes bore into her as she scraped the smallest bones into a pile and scooped them into her hands. “Oryn said you had small magic, but the bones, they do not affect you. How?”

“The cuff.” She motioned to her bicep. The only good thing she had discovered about it was that it acted like a barrier between the bones and her magic. They were starved leeches looking for a meal, and she had a wall separating them from the one thing they wanted.

Kallan stood and pushed a bone she had missed toward her with his boot. She threw it into the bag and scanned the room for the rope that tied it shut.

“What exactly are the d’zev bones for?”

“Anything tainted by the bloodblight will react with the wall when it tries to cross into Vale. It pops, like a crackling fire. Rain evaporates, scavengers melt to soupy mush, and unwelcome people—well, they resemble soup too, only more clumps.” Spotting the rope, she crawled across the floor to reach it. “And those things are just regular bad. These bones are d’zev, which is worse than bad, and they feed on magic. One bite from a d’zev and you’d be dead before your next sleep. What do you think happens when *they* collide with that wall of pure magic?”

“I am getting the sense that it is something bad.”

“Worse.”

Kallan pulled himself up off the floor while Mora hid the bag among similar ones with far less dangerous and more edible contents. “Your iron cuff, it is infused with d’zev bone is it not?”

“Why do you think I’ve never left Vale?” She scoffed. “There’s a high chance it would melt my arm off. Now let’s go before someone discovers us.”

*And you wouldn’t live through the wall’s judgment. Why don’t you tell the boy that? Surely that would scare him away.* Mora shoved her *essyn* out of her mind.

They made their way back to the ladder as Mora continued, answering the questions she figured he would have stirring in his mind before he could ask them. And the talking helped keep her mind off the memories. “The king has merchants who smuggle the bones in somehow. This shipment came from one, a firerender who thought it was a good idea to hold his cargo hostage for more coin. I was sent to negotiate.”

“Why is it that I can’t picture you *negotiating* well?”

“I got the bones, didn’t I?”

Kallan crossed his arms, opening his mouth, but whatever his retort was going to be, it was cut off by a loud thump from the floorboards overhead. Another followed.

They held still, waiting to see if there were more. If only two were there, it might have been the guards. One after another, five more thumps sounded. Seven in total, enough to crew the small ship the Shadow had procured.

Muffled voices grew louder.

Kallan pursed his lips and looked back to the d’zev bones. “We can still get out of here.”

The boat heaved and jolted Mora forward. She fell into Kallan’s chest and he, thankfully, caught his balance in time to avoid a pile of crates. His hands were warm against the thin fabric of her sleeves, and he still smelled of sweet vanilla and metallic heat.

“No,” Mora whispered. It was too soon; they weren’t scheduled to sail until after midday. It was still early morning. “This is not happening.”

She steadied herself back on her own two feet and darted her gaze between walls. It was a merchant’s ship; there were no gunports to crawl out of, and if there were any windows, they were behind a locked door. She racked her brain trying to think of a way out of the trap they’d caught themselves in.

The sound of the sails snapping tight echoed through the ship as it jolted, this time with more violence as the ship left the docks. Mora’s stomach dropped with the noise, and then

her mind betrayed her, drifting from solutions to panic. To memories of the last time she had been on open water.

*The surface met her with a forceful embrace, swallowing her raft and replacing the air in her lungs with water. She was a child lost to the icy bowels of the sea.*

*The current wrapped around her legs and danced through the strands of her hair. The thundering sound of rain beating against the wall slowly morphed into the peaceful silence of the sea. She watched in serene awe as the sky diminished out of sight and her world dimmed to black.*

*It was the first time Mora met Death, but not the first time Death had met her.*

*Shadowy fingers reaching toward her, tendrils of hairlike darkness floating around the semblance of a face. A savior come to take her home.*

*She reached out her hand for the shadows and found the twisted ropes of a fishing net instead.*

*She was on a boat then, where young Mora met a fisherman and his redheaded daughter who had, by a real miracle, seen her go under. He had returned the air to her lungs and made sure she knew how stupid and how lucky she had been to have survived.*

Now every time she felt the sway of a ship she was right back there, stomach churning and lungs aching with salt water. Learning how alive pain made her feel.

The memory always ended with that same redheaded girl who wrapped a blanket around her shoulders and spent the rest of her life acting as Mora's lifeline. Now that Ahmya was gone, Mora was free to drown.

“Not to abandon hope, but in case we die—”

“We *will* die,” Mora corrected.

“Right, since we will be dying soon, I feel the need to make a confession.”

Mora couldn't listen. She was too busy pacing between columns and considering tapping into the ship's stock of ale. At least if she was drunk, she would die in a state of inebriated bliss instead of drowning in anxiety and salt water.

“Mora?” Kallan interrupted her scrambled thoughts.

She turned on her heel to see him standing, leaned back just enough to not look comfortable. Light seeped in from the gaps above them and reflected off of something metal at his throat.

A dagger, she realized. Held by a gloved hand.



## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

**M**ENACING WAS THE only way she could think to describe him.

It wasn't that he was particularly muscular or tall like the Blade was, and he didn't have the same wild insanity in his eyes as his tattooed friend. But that amber, it bore into her, and there was something about his calm demeanor. He was like gravity pulling her toward the looming threat of his anger, the kind of anger that festered under the surface, offering no warning as to when it would finally erupt.

Kallan was shoved forward, the weapon nicking his skin as they stepped into the light.

"How did you find us?" the man asked, his voice demanding but calm.

"I followed the smell of the bloodblight." The insult hit as she'd hoped it would, judging by the grimace she saw flash across his face.

"A new-blood like you? And part human at that." He laughed, a short and mocking sound. "Your rounded ears give you away. Someone like you wouldn't be strong enough to smell the bloodblight if it were right under your nose."

The room was cramped, and his backup far outnumbered her own, so it was a risky place to start a fight. But already, the dagger at her thigh was singing her name, her essyn whispering for her to throw it. She would control her temper, shoving her essyn back down. But if he had come to kill her, she would not make it easy.

She dropped her arms to her side and stretched her finger toward the weapon, prepared for whatever he decided he was going to do.

“Your boy toy here will be dead before you even touch that blade.”

“Boy toy?” Kallan snapped. He tried to stand straight to alleviate his obvious discomfort, but the dagger bit in.

“Ripley,” the man said, not raising his voice.

A head poked down the opening in the ceiling where the ladder attached to the ship. One red eye seemed to glow in the shadows. “Yes?”

“Tie her hands.” Still, the man’s voice remained low and calm as he spoke.

Ripley jumped down to join them in the cargo hold, looking like the definition of insanity with his mismatched eyes and jagged tattoos. He grinned, showing off four sharp teeth. A shiver crawled up her spine. She had seen few with sharp canines, only the old-blood fae, but never were the premolars sharp too. Whatever he was, it wasn’t anything she had seen before. It was unnerving.

“Letta said you wouldn’t let us keep her,” Ripley said matter-of-factly, without once blinking or taking his attention away from Mora.

“We’re not.”

“Come on, V, it could be fun. She stabbed Juddah with a fork and ripped Slade’s heart out.” He walked behind Mora and fought to hold her wrists back so she couldn’t access any of her weapons. Resting his head on her shoulder, he added, “She’s one of us.”

One of them? She was not one of them, whatever that was even supposed to mean. He pulled a small rope from one of the bags near them, thankfully not the bag she had brought, and tied it around her wrists.

The buzz of Kallan’s magic stole all their attention. The lights danced across his skin and onto the man’s arms through their touch. The man shot back, making no sound or indication that it had done anything but startle him. Ripley grabbed a bucket floating in the barrel and threw water at Kallan, soaking his chest.

Kallan was, once again, convulsing. The buzz of his magic got louder and the light got brighter. He managed to stay standing, but more time passed than Mora would have thought he could handle before the lights dissolved back into his skin.

His shoulders slumped and he gulped for air. The man put his blade back at Kallan’s throat and Ripley returned to Mora’s side, his smile wider and eyes more crazed than before.

“Don’t touch her,” Kallan said.

“Awe. He still thinks he’s in a position for threats,” Ripley replied. She struggled as he pinned his arms around her, too tight for her to slip free. He was the same height and size as Mora, but he was stronger than he looked.



“Get off her,” Kallan warned.

“Or what?” Ripley ran the back of his finger down her cheek, “What will you do?”

He couldn’t do a damn thing. Mora, on the other hand—Mora bit so fast he didn’t have time to pull his finger away before it tore against her teeth. He yelped, but the sound quickly turned into a laugh.

It burned. Mora’s tongue sizzled like she had drunk acid. She spat his blood onto the floor and gagged.

“What the fuck?” she hissed.

He calmed his laughter enough to speak. “Don’t worry, it wasn’t enough to do anything but sting a little.”

“What are you?”

“I can show you if you’d like. It’s quite the story really.”

“Bring her up, and take her weapons,” the man interrupted, silencing Ripley with a threatening glare.

She thought about how to break free from his hold, but if she did free herself from him, then what? She would still be trapped on a floating bomb with her hands tied behind her back and Kallan, well, he could fend for himself if it came down to it.

She was the only one who’d likely die if the ship made it to the wall. No one else looked human enough to not be able to heal, except for the man from the library. He looked as human as Mora, but somehow, she knew he would be much harder to kill than that. A good thing, because she wasn’t trying to kill him, she reminded herself.

Ripley was tasked with the effort of unarming them after they managed to push them to the bow of the ship and tie her and Kallan together around the chest, hands still tied behind their backs in an uncomfortable pinch between their bodies. Each weapon she had strapped to herself was now found and removed, carelessly tossed into a pile out of her reach along with Kallan's longsword.

Ripley removed the one from the sheath on her thigh. It was black with a waving serrated blade that shredded whatever it touched. It was her favorite one, and he held it away from his body like it was days-old trash before he dropped it into the pile.

Two more men joined them in the front of the ship, anxious to see what the commotion had been about. Mora's eyes widened when she saw a familiar face step up beside them.

"You're dead," she said to the man whose heart she had felt beat its last beat between her slick fingers. Slade, they had called him. And there he was, very much alive. She was conflicted by the relief she felt to not have killed him.

"It takes more than an angry human to kill me," he said like he wasn't bothered in the least with what she had done. He merely shrugged it off.

Another set of footfalls joined them. When the Blade made eye contact with her, his nostrils flared and he flipped an axe from the sheath on his back. In the light, she could tell that the axe was made of jagged bone and not metal. He was preparing to swing it at her when the man seemingly in charge of the group caught his hand, stopping him in his tracks.

"Veres," he hissed, "let me go."

*Veres.* The man from the library finally had a name. Oddly, it suited the ever-present scowl and the threat of violence that stained his disposition.

“Calm down, Juddah,” he said.

Juddah huffed and slid his axe back into its place, crossing over a second one on his back. “I find that hard to do right now.” He leaned against the rail of the ship and glared at Mora while Veres turned his attention back to them.

Oryn had been so sure that the red-haired man was the Blade, but with the way the other ordered them about...

“Which of you is the Blade?” Mora asked. Juddah laughed, and a wide grin grew across Ripley’s face. She clenched her jaw. “Which of you killed Ahmya?”

“Those are two different answers,” Juddah said. “The Blade is a name given by your king’s soldiers, a moniker for what they fear. If you had to put a face to the name, it would be his.” He pointed to Veres, who shook his head; not in disagreement, but annoyance, it seemed. “Your other question, I can’t answer.”

The princess stepped up beside Juddah. “You can call me Elletta,” she said kindly. “I can assure you that neither these men nor I have harmed Ahmya. I do not know who killed her, if you say she is dead, but it was not us.”

“Bullshit.” Mora spat. *They’re liars, they’ll say anything.* Her *essyn* reared awake inside her, trying to slip free of the cage she worked so hard to keep it inside. “You gutted her and hung her pieces from a fucking tree!”

One of the crewmen hovering behind them was the only one of the lot to flinch at her words.

“Is that why you are here? Did they send the two of you to arrest us?” Slade asked with one brow raised.

Kallan shifted against the ropes. “We will let the church decide your innocence, if you claim it.”

Mora pinched her lips together and averted her gaze from the crew. Her jaw hurt from clenching her teeth, but she didn’t ease the tension. She focused on the ache of pain.

She glared at Veres and lifted her knees to her chest when he moved to crouch down in front of her. Amber eyes trailed the hard edges of her face, the curve of her neck. He looked into her eyes as if he could see things about her that even she didn’t know.

He didn’t take his attention away from her as he leaned in, slid one hand between her knees, and held her foot in place with the other. She pushed her back against Kallan, trying to get away from the touch.

Sliding his hand down her leg, he pulled a small dagger out of her boot. The tension in her shoulders slowly dissipated, but he was still holding a blade at her, and far too close for any real sense of relief.

He cut the fabric of her sleeve with her own weapon and exposed the cuff. She had expected his expression to morph into one of hate or amusement; to look at her like she was a criminal who deserved her pain, or laugh at her like she was too pathetic to bother with.

His expression didn’t change in the slightest. “You’re scared you won’t make it through the wall,” he said. She flinched.

She wasn't scared, she was mad. He was right, she might not make it through the wall, and if she did, the explosion would surely kill her. The thought of dying didn't scare her though. In fact, it sounded kind of tempting. But if she died, she wouldn't have a chance to prove Ahmya was right about her being able to beat fate.

When she really looked at Veres, she saw everything she was trying not to become. The wall should have torn him to pieces. "You seem to have made it just fine. Any tips?"

"Me?" He offered a glimpse of a smile. "I've never been through, myself."

A tear, rip, hole; whatever it was, he had to have found a way in before. But there was no denying that the swirl of purples and blues in the distance had no flaws they could sneak their way past this time. They were going to be ushered straight through it.

"I guess you and I will find out together, if we're still worthy of the light." He winked. He might find out; she would be dead before she got the chance unless she found a way off the ship. He stood, towering above her as he looked at the wall in front of them. Kallan shifted behind her, pulling on the ropes between them and brushing his fingers against hers.

"For what you did to Ahmya, there's no hope for you," Mora said.

"Ahmya?" From Veres's mouth, the name sounded more like a foreign word than a name at all. "That was your queen?"

"She's not my queen, she's my sister."

"Was."

“What?”

He looked down at her. “She *was* your sister.”

Heat rushed to her face and she thrashed on her ropes. Kallan held steady, letting her use him as leverage, but she quickly discovered it was no use. The ropes wouldn't budge. *Fucking blight-fucked shit! Fuck!*

Veres nodded a silent command at Slade before turning back to her. “Not that you care, but it was Dromose we were in Vale for, not Ahmya.” The two of them disappeared through the doors of the captain's quarters. The rest of them went back to their own business and left Mora and Kallan on the floor to bristle with anger and confusion.

Lucky for her, Mora was stuck staring at the wall head-on, watching its rapid approach. And it seemed the closer they got, the faster they sailed.

“Any ideas on how to get out of here before we die?” Mora asked.

“One. But let's hope I'm dry by now or it's going to hurt us both.” Heat radiated around her hands as he used a bolt of his light to burn through the ropes on his wrists. When his hands were free, he worked to untie the ones that held them together. Everyone turned their eyes to them, squinting and trying to block the light with their hands. Juddah walked toward them, but they were already shaking the ropes away from their bodies. Mora's hands were still bound behind her, but they were out of time.

It all happened so fast. The carved figurehead had already moved to the other side of the wall. Kallan pulled her off the floor and they ran to the back of the ship in haste.

It was only a crackling pop at first, then a buzz louder than Kallan's light. The bones were absorbing magic and the wall was fighting back. She risked a look back, seeing panic set in the moment everyone heard it. The ship was almost halfway through the wall.

She locked eyes with Veres as Kallan led her on. Veres was standing stock-still in the doorway, no fear or panic. Neither one of them looked away. He didn't even flinch when plumes of flame erupted from beneath him. The ship came apart before her, shooting splinters of wood like deadly darts in every direction.

The last thing she saw, as Kallan spun her around and picked her up, was a menacing smirk and the deck caving in. They leaped over the edge, chancing the cold waters as the ship's fiery maw swallowed Veres whole.



## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THERE WAS SOMETHING almost peaceful about drowning. At least there had been when she was a child, ready to watch her own demise reflected on the undersurface of the sea. Now that she was older, and with her promise to live for, drowning was exhausting.

Mora thrashed her legs, trying to orient herself to which way was up. She had tried to stay in Kallan's hold when they hit the water, but the impact of the surface had torn them apart.

A chunk of the ship dove into the waves, broken from the figurehead she had just watched blow to pieces. What she once saw as a masterfully carved work of art was now a sodden half of a beast's face, its single eye glaring at her like it was her fault it would spend the remainder of its days hidden in the depths of the sea, never to be admired again.

She tried to move out of its path, but it was sinking fast. Her limbs were numb from the chill of the water, and her arms were of no use tied up. Her legs kicked, but she wasn't swimming.

The sodden wood punched into her chest and sent her racing toward the seabed. It stole the remainder of her breath



as she struggled with its grip, trying to free herself from the jagged edges. One of them tore at her shoulder.

Red stained the water, trailing her body as she sank.

She clamped her lips shut tighter when her lungs screamed for air. Her blood burned in her veins, and saltwater blurred her vision.

It was getting darker, but there were no godly rays of light to sing her to sleep and no shadowy figure of Death to wrap her fingers around. It was just her and the sinking ship above her. Both falling to pieces.

Then she came, like Mora had conjured her with a thought. A smug smile and two beady eyes.

*“Dear child,”* she heard in her mind, *“this just seems too easy.”*

Death toppled the wooden anchor with a single finger. Without the heaviness dragging her down, she was free to realize how lost she had become. There was nothing around her but water and trees, like a forest had grown beneath the sea and swallowed her up.

A thought overcame her, unwelcome and abrupt, that if she were to die there would be nobody to mourn her like she had mourned so many.

Her lungs seized and, just as her mind convinced her that breathing water was better than nothing at all, she saw Kallan far above her.

Cold invaded her lungs and she let herself fade into the sea, knowing someone, anyone, had cared to at least try. Even if he was too late.



A burning cough jolted her from the edge of death. Water splashed on her face and muddy sand gritted between her fingers.

Another cough ripped through her.

She rolled onto her side as she heaved. Chunks of apple and oatmeal spewed from her cracked lips. The smell was repulsive, but she couldn't move as she heaved again and again until there was nothing left inside her but the burning inferno of her raw throat and a deep-rooted cramp in her stomach.

She fell back in an exhausted huff and blinked at the blinding light of the sun now high in the sky.

The sand was dark, almost black. As was the water crashing onto the shore and retreating back in a steady rhythm, almost reaching her boots. Dark trees scattered across the shore, thinning as they followed the sand's descent into the water until only the tops of them poked through the surface, seeping their inky color into the water.

She knew of those trees. She had heard about the way they bled, had read about where they grew. Which meant there was good news after all, she knew where she was.

And more bad news. They were on the shore of the Deadwood Forest.

A voice came from her left, but when her attention shot toward the sound, it wasn't who she had hoped it was.

It was Ripley. The princess knelt beside him with her hand on his back as he expelled saltwater. His gaping wounds sealed themselves under her touch.

Mora scanned the dark beach, gaze jolting from tree to tree, looking for anything that could be a body.

“I hope you are looking for me with all that concern,” Kallan said, coming from behind her with a scratchy voice.

An odd sensation overcame Mora when she finally saw him. She felt lighter, despite her waterlogged clothing and hair. Her hands tingled; although, that could have been from the brisk temperature of the water or the tightness of the rope that was no longer holding them together.

She crawled over to him, too tired to stand. He sat up. His eyes immediately found the fresh gash on her shoulder. She batted his worried hand away right as someone yanked her up by the shoulders.

“What did you do? You bitch, what did you do?”

“Juddah, stop!” Slade yelled.

Mora’s head was spinning. She reached for her dagger, but her sheaths had all been emptied. Juddah shoved her and she stumbled, barely managing to stay upright. He tossed a dagger into the sand between her boots.

“Pick it up,” he snapped. “I will not kill an unarmed woman.”

She stared at it, inspecting the simplicity of its design. It wasn’t one of hers. Hers had been lost to the sea.

“No!” Kallan tried to stand on his own, but Slade appeared behind him and yanked him to his feet, holding her would-be hero back. “Don’t make it worse,” he said to Kallan. There was a wound split across the Golden Boy’s temple, and

his perfect hair was now a mess of wet locks. He looked worried. Afraid.

She told herself it didn't bother her. She had never needed a hero. As far as she was concerned, she was on her own and so was he. If there was one thing she had learned from almost dying with him, it was that she had been right. She couldn't afford to care about another person. Not anymore.

"Pick it up," Juddah barked. This time, she obeyed.

A storm cloud rumbled with the boom of thunder in the distance, the promise of a storm rolling in. Her skin prickled in anticipation; the sensation was like needles against the angry welts on her arm.

Her cuff had reacted to the wall, but she was thankful it hadn't been far worse. The thing had burned her sleeve clean off, and it had happened beneath the icy water. But she had made it. She had gone through the wall, and she was still alive.

There was a tinge of hope that bloomed in her chest at the confirmation that she wasn't yet the evil monster fate claimed of her. Her desire to get the cuff off burned just as badly as the damned thing did against her arm.

When she locked eyes with Juddah, he twisted his grip on his axe and charged toward her. She was tired and injured, and beating fate required staying alive. For the first time in her life, she chose self-preservation. She ran.

There were more trees ahead of her, thickening as they retreated further from the beach. They were tall and dark and full of needle-like leaves. Her mind told her not to go into the forest, but her body would not listen. She kept running as fast as her legs would carry her.

It was like stepping out of a daydream and waking up in a nightmare. A playground for all the disturbed beasts the wall had displaced from their homes. And as if the trees were monsters themselves, the whole forest seemed to grumble awake when she intruded on its slumber.

With her eyes focused down, trying to avoid raised roots, she shouldn't have been surprised when her whole body slammed into a tree; and she wouldn't have been if not for the forceful push that had caused it. She fought to slip free from the tightening hold on her wrists and was rewarded by another slam. This time she looked into his eyes as he did it.

Glowing amber.

That he had survived what she had seen him endure meant there was no way he was human like he looked; not even a new-blood could have survived being that close to the explosion. He wasn't fae at all, and he certainly didn't look faerie. He was something else, something more, that she had not read about in all her books. Like Ripley.

It didn't matter what he was, he was going to be hers as soon as she healed enough to take him.

"Who are you?" he demanded, anger finally finding his voice. He squeezed her wrists harder and closed the distance between them. His face hovered just above hers. "Who are you!"

"No one."

He yanked her arm out and pushed her sleeve up. The gray fabric was covered in mud and grime. He turned her arm without care for her comfort and then dropped it with the

same indifference. He repeated the process with her sleeveless arm, ignoring her cuff but looking for something else.

And she knew what it was.

He flipped her around and smashed her face against the oozing black sap. Her cheek scraped on the bark as he gathered her damp hair in one hand and held it up, inspecting her neck. Before she knew it, he had her collar in his grip and he yanked, tearing the shirt in two. Exposing her secret to the world.

Her heart sunk to the icy depths of herself.

She faced Veres. The bark bit into her bare back, but she was relieved to find that her underbust corset-style sheath kept the shirt from being indecent, proving it useful for more than just storing throwing blades and making her look like the sharpest edge of seduction.

Veres had swiped Juddah's dagger from her hand and was pinning her to the tree with it pressed against her neck. The muscles in his jaw visibly clenched. If he wasn't going to kill her before, he was now.

In a desperate effort, she turned her mind inward, finding that tendril of essyn locked away. Finally, she let the smallest ribbon of it free. It coursed through her veins like a dose of senweed, rearing her essyn's rage and pushing her magic against her cuff. With her essyn drinking in her emotions, fear dissipated.

She smiled.

"Mora!" Kallan shouted through the trees. She could hear the breaking of twigs and squelching of mud as he ran toward them, Slade hot on his trail.

Something flashed through Veres's eyes, but Mora couldn't tell what it was. Surprise perhaps, or irritation.

Slade caught Kallan just as they reached her. "Mora!" he shouted again.

"Shut him up," Veres said. Studying her face, he pushed the dagger further in. The blade threatened to reopen an old scar, one she had gotten long before she'd learned not to trust anyone. It spread from one side of her neck to nearly the middle of her throat and told the story of a man whose blood stained her fingertips black. Number four's life ended at the tip of the scar. Veres's would too if he wasn't careful.

"What is your name?" he demanded.

"Mora," she spat with all the ill intent she could muster though her raw throat.

The rest of his crew had caught up by then, even the few crewmen from the ship who she hadn't met and hardly noticed. Elletta looked concerned, Slade struggled to keep hold of Kallan, and Juddah looked like he wanted to kill her himself.

Ripley appeared on their other side with a wide grin and laughter sparkling in his red eye.

"I will ask you one more time." Veres adjusted his grip. "What is your name?"

She had many names. Ones she chose and ones that chose her. The Raven was quiet and smart, full of mysteries and bad ideas. Mora was a sister and a friend and the good person Ahmya had known her to be. Then there was Mor. She was broken on the dirt floor with a caring hand slipped into hers through iron bars, vulnerable and loved. But the last one, the

one that existed in her essyn's dreams and now in her fate, that was her true self. The one she hated. The one she ran from, even before her prophecy had been read.

That was Moranna. Someone that had never felt like her.

Saying the name out loud would be like giving her essyn permission to finish what it had started, turning her into that person once and for all. Like waking a monster and never being able to put it back to sleep.

She spat in Veres's face. If he refused to flinch, then so did she. They stared cold and daring at each other as he pushed the blade deeper, parting the scarred tissue.

“Her—”

Slade wrapped a hand over Kallan's mouth. “Hit me with that magic shit again, and I'll let Rip tear your throat out.”

Veres looked at Juddah, who shrugged. “Don't look at me, I'm not Arrowen. All I've ever felt from her is anger, pain, and more anger. She's like a contagious bad mood. I say we leave her for the wolves so I can go back to feeling my own emotions.”

“Maybe she just needs a hug.” Ripley smiled, crossing his arms over his chest and leaning against a tree like he didn't care whether or not they killed her. He would be entertained either way.

Veres relaxed his weapon. “You clearly don't care about your own life, so, if you don't tell me the truth, we kill him instead.” His dagger pointed to Kallan.

She really didn't see why her name was so important to them. He already knew about her darkmark.



“See, that’s where you’re wrong.” Mora smirked. The smell of smoke tingled her nose, but she couldn’t tell where it came from. In a forest like the Deadwood, it could have been any number of things. “It’s not my life I don’t care about, it’s everyone’s. Mine. His. Yours.”

Ripley’s laugh was a crazed sound that had her instincts begging her to run. “I’m still on board with keeping her.”

Veres nodded to Kallan’s captor. Kallan’s eyes squeezed shut. He bowed his head and covered his ears with his hands, still trapped in Slade’s hold. The hand struggled to remain clamped over his mouth as he bent forward.

Mora couldn’t see what it was that attacked him, but it had to have been something awful for the Golden Boy to react in such a way.

“Ah! Fucking fae,” Slade shouted and yanked his hand away.

Kallan escaped from his grip. His sneer was coated with blood that trickled off his pointed canines as he snarled. Mora had never noticed that his smile was laced with sharp teeth. Which also meant that Kallan was no new-blood as she had thought; he was an old-blood, despite his young age.

Some of the fae waited until long into their lives before having children, making fewer generations between them and creation. It was their way of fighting the diminishment of *essyn*, and Kallan must have come from a line that practiced it well. Most of the old-bloods were either far older than the Golden Boy, or dead.

A thread of blue light skirted across his hands, but the threat was answered by a growl, loud and deep, coming from

the forest behind him. Another growl joined with the snapping of a branch. A pair of eyes glowed through the shadows of the intertwining roots that blocked what could have once been a path.

Veres turned his attention for a brief moment, and she used the distraction to slip away from him. She grabbed Kallan's hand and took off.

"No!" Veres shouted.

But it was too late, they were already running.

And so were the beasts that had growled.



## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE FOREST WAS wanting and needy, grabbing at their flesh with desperate whips from low-hanging branches. They sprinted through roots and moss, and the land fought to keep whatever parts of them it could. A shoe, a piece of torn fabric, a clump of ripped hair. Anything to remember that they had been there, trespassing on the Deadwood's dreams the way the dead trespassed on Mora's own. As if they were each other's nightmares.

Kallan trailed ahead of Mora, keeping her hand tight in his. He ran faster than she could, and he could see better too, but she had adrenaline on her side. Something Kallan seemed to lack as he calculated every step and turn with calm decision.

There was pressure in her ears that set a headache low in the base of her neck. They slowed their pace when they could no longer hear the crunching of heavy steps on the forest floor, and tried to catch their breaths.

The lapping of waves had long since faded, and the trees no longer rustled in the wind high above them. Kallan led her behind a moss-covered boulder, and they crouched at its base.

He peered around the side. Mora remained ready to run, not convinced that it had been so easy to lose whatever chased

them.

She let herself catch her breath and dug her hands into a running stream. Cool liquid flowed between her fingers and calmed the nerves burning inside her.

The tendril of her essyn, still hovering beneath her skin, guarded her from the fear that should have told her something was wrong. She could recall no birds singing echoed songs or twigs snapping from rodents scurrying past.

It was so calm that Mora couldn't tell if nature had stopped making noise, or if she stopped being able to hear it. The sounds of the forest had been overcome by a sort of blinding quiet; not quiet exactly, but rather the complete absence of sound. The kind that said something was wrong.

She cupped the cold water in her hands and let it trickle back into the stream. It made not a sound. She picked up a twig and watched for Kallan's reaction as she snapped it in two. Nothing.

Touching her fingers to her ears, she expected to pull them away bloody. The only thing on them was the dark ink fading past the first knuckle, bone dry. Kallan looked back at her and tapped his ears. She shook her head.

Movement caught their attention.

Another came, this time on their other side. They stood back-to-back, feeling each other's movements. With their hearing gone, they saw every movement the forest made. They jerked at every sight, from seed pods falling from branches to birds perching in the trees.

Another movement flashed, this one large and dark and closer than the first two. Then there was movement

everywhere they looked.

She knew she wouldn't find anything in the sheath at her thigh, but she reached for it anyway. They were surrounded, and neither of them had a weapon.

Stalking closer were creatures like none Mora had ever seen. Their bodies were shaped like humans crawling on hands and feet. Heads and paws like a partially skinned bear. They were a mess of flesh and fur, their jaws hung from a disarray of crisscrossing tendons, and their teeth were jagged and broken inside their gaping maws.

One of the creatures stood on its hind legs and tipped its head back in what looked like a howl. Still, she heard nothing.

She could run, maybe then the pack would be divided and Kallan would stand a chance. But they had already proven to be too quick for her to outrun them, and they knew the forest far better than Mora did. Their best option would be to stick together and fight.

She scanned the ground, picking up a stick and breaking it in two. She wielded half in each fist and hoped for the best.

The creatures attacked, swinging wildly and without precision. Kallan's magic ignited, the blue glow too bright for the creatures. Their maws flew open. Hands covered bulging eyes. Claws protracted from their bony paws.

Mora's eyes struggled to adjust to the brightness, but she managed to jab one of her sticks into an arm when it tried to slash at her. Its head craned to the side and shot toward her throat, teeth bared and hungry to taste her flesh.

She darted out of its way. Hoping to draw at least a couple of them away from Kallan, she rounded the corner of the

boulder, careful to not run so far she would be lost. They would catch her quickly, so her best bet was to hide.

A desperate leap for a branch proved her best option. Pushing her foot off the rock to get more height, she flew into the air. As soon as her hands found the rough bark, she pulled herself up, climbing the tree as the creatures caught sight of her.

Two had followed. They sniffed the air, heads jerking back and forth with elongated noses leading the way.

One of them lurched to the trunk of her hiding place. It clawed at the tree, forcing her to climb higher. The other started running, slamming its boney shoulder against the trunk. Mora lost her balance when the tree swayed more than she anticipated.

Slivers dug into her fingers as she caught herself, hanging on a branch like fruit ready to be plucked. The thing below her jumped with an outstretched hand and clawed across the back of her calf. A scream tore her raw throat, but it made no sound she could hear. Her fingers slipped in the sap oozing from the branch, and she lost her grip.

Falling the rest of the way hadn't been quite as bad as she had imagined. She landed on her feet with an immediate tumble into the thick moss. A jolt of pain shot from her ankle fed into her essyn's desire to fight back.

A third beast joined the attack, freshly missing an arm that had been seared off into a short stump. It seemed they enjoyed the fear that built in a victim while they slowly, painfully taunted it, more than the game of chase they had played before. They formed a circle around her.

Mora slid herself under a fallen tree. The creatures swatted at the thick trunk, sending pieces of bark flying with each hit. She closed her eyes, trying not to get any debris in them and hoping she wouldn't get swiped by a claw or yanked out by her boots. It was almost a terrifying enough situation for Mora to start praying.

Almost.

She breathed in the pain, feeling the sting of the gash across her shoulder, the new one on the back of her leg, and the ache in her ankle from her landing. Her head throbbed; her cuff continued to burn into her. She needed to find a way out from beneath the tree.

If Mora was going to die, it wasn't going to be hiding like a coward. She would die with fury in her eyes and fractures in her heart.

She was about to stand from her hiding spot when a thunderous sound shook the fallen tree and her hands flew to her ears. She jolted back, curling into a ball to shield herself from the noise.

The tension she had felt in her ears snapped, and the silence was flooded with wailing cries and howling wind. The ground crunched beneath hurried footfalls, slowly growing quieter as they retreated back into the forest.

She could hear again.

Kallan called out for her. Mora rolled free of her hiding place and limped back to the last place she had seen him. He was standing in the center of a ring made of the creatures' lost limbs, two of them seared into pieces at his feet, illuminated

by blue light like a painting of victory, filled with the sorrows of a battle won.

Before she could ask if he was alright, something else drew her attention. A wall of black standing atop the boulder. It drooped back with a swift movement that made Mora realize what it was. A massive pair of feathered wings, tattered like the creatures that had attacked them.

Their savior turned to face them, mangled black fur peeling away from his cracked skull. Liquid gold dripping from his eyes.

The weight of Mora's dread had grown so heavy she had forgotten how to stand without it. The moment her relief washed it all away, her knees hit the damp moss with an audible thud.

Shoulders hunched, her weeping wolf snarled at Kallan and leaped down. Kallan's magic danced on his fingers, and he moved to Mora's side, ready for another fight.

*Kallan can see the wolf too, she realized. He is real.*

"Mora," Kallan hissed with urgency, "get up."

"It's alright." Mora eased his hand down, but he refused to extinguish his light. "He's not going to hurt us."

The wolf snarled again.

"It disagrees," Kallan whispered. "We need to get out of here, now."

Mora reached out for the wolf, willing herself to stand and go to him. To her, the weeping wolf was a safe place to rest her head. To Kallan, he must have looked like the god of all monsters.



“We’re going to be alright.” Mora’s hand lingered just above his snout.

The wolf stretched forward, sniffing at her shoulder. Kallan took a step forward, letting his magic surge across his hands. His reaction made the wolf snarl at him until he backed down and let the beast continue assessing Mora’s injuries.

She gently rested her hand on its snout. The moment she felt warm fur and the coldness of bone, he ran.

Like she was waking from her dreams, he was gone. The prickle of terror the forest induced filled the space the wolf had occupied.

“Now, can we go?” Kallan asked. “We need to find shelter before something else tries to eat us.”

Mora stood. “We need to find Veres. The sooner we get him back to Oryn, the better.”

“You know who he’s with. We stand no chance against him until we catch our breath and maybe drink some water.”

A branch snapped in the distance, and Kallan raised his brow like the sound proved his point. He was right, they couldn’t stay there, and they did need rest. But she could feel her *essyn* buzzing beside her soul, and she was afraid she didn’t have much time left. Fate was coming for her, and it was not slowing down.

“We can separate them, stick to the original plan and find a way to get them away from Veres. We stand a better chance then.”

Kallan stepped closer to her and put his hand on her cheek. She pulled away from his touch.

The two of them would part ways once they made it out—if they made it out. The only thing she had to offer him was the danger of losing his life, and she couldn't do what she needed to do while worrying about his safety. Especially if Veres was now set on killing her.

Kallan was a distraction to her. Mora was a threat to him. They were no good for each other; like oil and water.

“Mora,” he said, his empty stare looking down at her. His hands fell to his sides. “We need to rest first.”

As if agreeing with him, her eyelids suddenly felt too heavy to remain open. Were she to let her tired eyes flutter shut, there was no telling what fears might find her dreams. No guessing what awaited to torment her sleep. But she knew, deep down, she stood little chance at surviving if she didn't at least try.

“Fine,” she said. “Lead the way.”



## CHAPTER NINETEEN

MORA HADN'T THOUGHT it possible for the Deadwood to get any darker than it had been, tucked away beneath the sun-blocking canopy of trees. She was wrong.

“Kallan?” Her whisper echoed off the rock walls as she ran a hand along their surface to guide her way. “Light would be helpful.”

The cave they had stumbled upon had only a small entrance as a source of light, tucked deep into a crevice. Trying to navigate further into the unknown depths had proven difficult for her humanlike eyes. She couldn't help but draw a laughable parallel with herself; traveling to the depths of her soul would feel much the same. Unseeing darkness surrounded by jagged surfaces that could, with any step, cut her off from everything that existed beyond cold hard walls.

“Close your eyes.” The echo of Kallan's voice bounced around the cave. She had sworn that he had been in front of her from the beginning, but now it sounded as if he was behind her and beside her all at once.

She jumped with a gasp when he touched her. If she had found a weapon where she reached for it, he would have known firsthand how bad of an idea it was to scare her. She

was sorry to admit that she had been wrong all those days ago, thinking he would never have stood a chance at sneaking up on her.

“Close your eyes,” he whispered. This time it was obvious he stood behind her, his hand on her shoulder and his face so close to hers she could feel the heat from his body.

“What’s the point? I can’t even see my hand in front of my face.”

He chuckled softly, the sound doing its best to melt her irritation. “That is because your hand is not in front of your face.”

He stepped around her, guiding her wrist up. When he stopped, her hand was so close to her nose she could almost see it.

He pressed his palm gently into hers, his thumb caressing the edge of her thumb. Blue lights danced so dimly across his fingers that it wouldn’t have been visible in the light of day. In the pitch dark, it was enough of a glow to see the outline of her hand against his.

The light threaded around her own fingers without warning, as if his magic couldn’t tell where he ended and she began. It explored her, tracing its way through her fingers and down her arm before it faded.

It felt different, in so many ways, from what she had expected. The threads wove together with her skin and left a cold feeling in their wake. It itched, it tickled, and it vibrated her flesh with the want for more. When it was over, and the cave went dark, she found herself wanting that same feeling to

skirt over every lick of her pebbled skin. She wanted it to consume her.

“I have found dry kindling,” he said. “Close your eyes, and I will start a fire.”

She steadied herself against the rocky wall when he pulled away from her. “I think they’re closed.”

He chuckled. “They are.”

A shiver snaked up her spine and her nipples hardened as she waited, sightless. If he so much as touched her again, she might have melted beneath his fingers, unable to stop him from taking her completely, and unwilling to try. She breathed in deep.

A flash of flickering light bled through her closed eyelids, and his voice got louder, huskier. “You can open them now.”

*Careful.* Her essyn twisted against her heart.

Need dimmed to want, and want faded to a faint feeling that had her refusing his outstretched hand. At first, all she could see was the small pile of twigs and branches alight with the soft golden colors of fire. Then the light danced across the jagged rocks, illuminating the cave.

The ceiling was high above them, and the back of the cave went deeper than their new light reached. The air felt humid, and a trickle of water sounded from somewhere further than she dared to go. Sharp columns of rock jutted up from the floor and down from the ceiling, making a circle around the small opening where they had stopped to rest.

“It is creepy, I know,” Kallan said.

“That’s one word for it.” But it was also, as far as they could tell, safe.

“You are bleeding.” Kallan led her to a flat rock and gestured for her to sit. With the heaviness of her limbs threatening her with sleep, she had no objections. Until they had stopped running, she hadn’t realized how badly she needed sleep.

“We need to wash that cut before it gets infected,” Kallan said.

“Do you know how to dress a wound?”

“I led a regiment that spent most of its time past the wall. If I was not bleeding, someone else was. We all learned.”

It was easy for her to forget that the Golden Boy had seen battle. He was young, younger even than her by a year or two. She had never before pictured him wading into the mess of war, covered in grime as he was now. It was far easier to picture him grooming his hair in front of a gilded mirror and brushing specks of dust off his shoulders.

Kallan left her leaning against a wall where she rested her eyes for a brief moment, listening to the trickle of water.

The next thing she knew she was seeing images of Ahmya’s body snapping back together and staring at her with the dark eyes of death, pointing an accusing finger at Mora. She startled awake, the cool feel of something wet pressing against her forehead and Kallan’s crooked smile staring back at her. Her racing heart slowed as she took account of what was around her.

“Welcome back,” Kallan said, rinsing a bloody cloth in a makeshift bowl. There was fabric tied around her calf, and the

cut on her shoulder hurt less than it had before. The fire still burned. Nothing much had changed.

“How long was I out?”

He shrugged. “Hard to tell. I fell asleep after I wrapped your wounds. It is still dark out, but seeing as how the sun seemed to disappear the moment we set foot in this forest, I doubt that means much.”

She went to stand, but he pushed her back down. “You need more rest. You lost a lot of blood.”

She glared at him. He brushed his messy hair back with his hand. Blood dried in a trail from his split brow to his jaw, and his lips looked how hers felt: dry and cracked. His pale skin was coated in a layer of grime that covered his exposed chest.

He smiled widely and set his shirt, which he had been using as a rag, on a stone near him.

“I tried to use the moss first, thinking it would be cool and full of water,” he said, picking up a chunk of sodden green. He squeezed and thick red liquid poured out like a strangled sponge. “I don’t think I want to know where it all came from.”

“You mean it’s not ours?”

“No, it’s all like this.” He gestured to a small pile of moss heaped near the outer wall and the puddle leaking from the pile to the floor, trailing further into the cave. “Under the darkness it looked like the forest was damp with water, but brought into the light, it appears to be blood...or something like blood.”

“Well,” Mora said, “that’s—”

“If you are going to say anything other than horrifying, keep the thought to yourself.”

A laugh escaped her chest. “Are you afraid of my thoughts, Golden Boy?”

“Afraid?” He raised a brow. “Never.”

She shook her head. “Take care of yourself.”

He rinsed the cloth in a bowl of water and turned it on himself, starting with a cut across his stomach that had already started to heal.

“What about the fire?” Mora asked. “How much have you added to keep it going? Maybe we can keep track of time based on that.”

Her stomach growled as if saying *or we can guess how long it has been since you’ve eaten*. She had lost her last meal, after all, and there was no telling how long they had wandered between then and now.

Kallan stopped cleaning his wound and handed her an unfolded strip of fabric piled with berries. “I found them outside. The rodents seemed to enjoy them, so I figured they would be safe for us to eat too.”

“Are they?”

“I have not died yet.” His smile deepened. That was good enough for her.

The bursting juices from her first handful of berries hit her tongue with a gag. The berries were sour and pungent. She wrinkled her nose and forced herself to swallow the mush.



Kallan laughed. “I never said they tasted good, only that they did not kill me.”

“How,” she mumbled through the lingering taste that stained her teeth. “How are you not convulsing right now?” A stray chunk of berry dislodged from her tooth and slid across her tongue. She swallowed her gag to avoid having to taste the berries a second time.

“They are not so bad once you get used to them.”

“How many did you eat?”

“Enough to make my stomach stop digesting my insides, and not one berry more.”

The memory of Ahmya saying those same words stole all the energy from her. *If I am not fed soon, my stomach will digest itself—They haven't fed me yet today, and I swear I can feel my stomach digesting my insides—You can't blame me, Mora, my stomach is literally eating itself, I'm so famished.* A smile crept across her lips, but it didn't last long. She looked at the berries remaining in her hand and found that her appetite had gone too.

A pattering sound grew louder in the silence that sat between them. It was a steady thrumming beat before she realized what it was.

Nobody who had lived their entire life in Vale had tasted rain on their lips or felt the thumping drops against their bare skin. Mora needed that feeling more than she needed air to breathe. Even if admitting she wanted something, that she wished for anything as badly as the rain, was showing him the weaknesses that lived in her heart.

Refusing his help, she pulled herself up and followed the sound. It got louder as she limped her way out of the cave. Kallan followed close behind, lighting the way. When she took her first steps into the wall of fat drops pouring from the sky, it took everything she had not to break down.

It pelted her skin, sliding down her face like the drops were washing away every hint of worry, fear, anxiety, everything that had ever dared to live in her. Only Ahmya's death had left a stain so deep that not even rain could wash it away.

The needles on the trees had retreated into the bark, leaving the forest looking bare and dead. Without them filling the canopy, she could see glimpses of the sky above her. The dark flashed with a distant strike of lightning followed some time later by the cracking boom of thunder.

The tales Ahmya had taught her to read with had spoken of a time when the moon had been white, a light of hope high in the night sky that promised the return of the sun. When the God War ended, there was so much blood spilled into the land that it poisoned the dirt with a blight. The moon soaked the blood up, turning it a brilliant shade of crimson and resolving the gods of their sins. The bloodblight had already started to spread, but it was said that the moon was the reason the world had yet to die.

Now the moon looked so swollen that Mora swore it would pour the blood it had once taken back down on them, just as the stories had said. She felt it in her bones.

She stretched her arms wide and spun in a circle, head tipped back to let the rain drown her demons and the thunder quiet her soul.

She felt better knowing someone else felt the same way she did. Even if it was just the sky.



## CHAPTER TWENTY

SHE FELT LIGHTER with every drop that hit her tongue as she drank from the clouds.

Kallan stepped out from the shelter of the cave. Trails of water slid down his chest, racing from his collarbone to the waistline of his pants. His wet skin glistened under the moon.

Mud-slick boots slipped out beneath Mora, and his laughter joined the sound of the pattering rain when she fell.

“May I?” He reached out to her; rain-soaked hair fell into his eyes, and the memory of his laugh danced on his lips. He stood above her, dripping and full of joy.

“Just this once.” She grabbed his outstretched hand.

He pulled her up with enough force that she crashed into his chest. He pushed her gently away from his body with a twirl, like he had lifted her from mud to ballroom. The world flew around her in a dizzying blur until his other hand caught her waist and stopped her from spinning away from all that troubled her.

Strands of hair stuck to Mora’s face, and Kallan brushed them away, tucking them behind her ear. His fingers felt hot against the cold of her cheek as his thumb brushed against her skin. They were so close their noses almost touched, and the

hardened peaks of her breasts rubbed against his chest. He didn't break their eye contact except to look at her lips.

She pressed closer, his tongue pulled the rain from his lips, and his heart beat fast, thumping between them. He leaned in, and she let him almost kiss her, his lips so close to hers that the raindrops connected their touch. He paused there, searching her eyes for permission.

*You are weak, you cannot give in.*

She wanted to ignore her essyn, to forget the world and tear his pants from his body. She could have him beneath the pounding storm. Instead, she pulled away, dragging him further into the rain with a laugh. And then she put his hand back on her waist and they swayed in perfect circles in the mud.

He tipped his head back and laughed into the sky, his neck bared fully to her; it would have been so easy to taste his skin or end his life. He was vulnerable in front of her, and yet he didn't seem to mind.

Every now and then she did another spin, but he always pulled her right back into his arms. They danced to the rhythm of the rain as if they weren't standing in the middle of a forest filled with life-threatening dangers. It was only Mora and Kallan and the friction of the soaked fabric that separated them.

Lightning struck a tree nearby. They broke away from each other with a startled jump. The sudden crack was loud enough to hurt Mora's ears and leave behind a ringing sensation.

He pulled her back into the mouth of the cave where they stayed, watching the storm rage on. The entire time they sat there, neither spoke. Mora didn't know what to say when the only thought that plagued her mind was how comforting the warmth of his body had been, which was an unusual thing to miss for someone who preferred the cold.

"What is that?" Mora asked, nodding to whatever he had been fidgeting with in his hands. It wasn't the first time she had noticed the habit.

"A die." He held it up. "I use it to help make difficult decisions. Blue is yes, red is no."

She narrowed her eyes and fought back an amused smile. "And the other four colors?"

He shrugged. "By then, I usually know what I really wanted." He rolled the die across the ground. It stopped beside her; the blue side faced upward.

"And what is it that you asked this time?"

He pulled a flask from behind him and smirked. "If now is the time to drink."

"Well," she looked up at the pouring clouds, "depending on what day it is, it might be my birthday."

"By the light." He laughed. "My die has never failed me. Drink." He handed Mora the flask. Only after she had taken a big swig did he add, "careful, it is *very* strong."

The alcohol burned all the way to her stomach and lit her body with fire. Mora covered a cough with her forearm and handed the flask back. "What's in that?"

“Senweed, rum, and vanilla.” He tipped his head back and took a gulp of his own. Senweed was a fae drug, one that tasted disgusting and was strong enough to knock her out if she consumed too much. The idea of having drunk it herself was far less concerning to her than the idea of law-abiding Kallan consuming something that was not legal in Vale. Then again, they were no longer in Vale.

“Kallan,” a feminine voice said. It was coming from deeper in the trees than they could see. It was familiar, but sounded panicked and wrong. The tone was pitched too high to understand clearly.

“You heard that?” Mora asked, the senweed drink already buzzing through her blood.

“Unfortunately.” Kallan handed her a stick he had sharpened to a lethal point. He held up one of his own. His *essyn* had not yet settled enough for him to use his magic again. Sticks and fists would have to do.

Mora played with her grip on the makeshift weapon.

“Show yourself,” Kallan said into the dark of the forest.

A woman stepped out of the tree line, blonde hair plastered down her back and her green gown sodden. Even in the state she was in, Elletta looked beautiful.

Mora was both relieved and annoyed to see the princess. She might offer a way out of the deadly forest, but if the princess had found them, chances are the rest of the Shadow Court was not far behind. Mora was not ready to be forced into the company of murderous monsters who wanted her dead just yet.

Kallan released a laughing sigh.

“Princess,” he said, halfway between a question and a call. “If you are here to kill us, I am afraid it’s not a good time. I’m working on setting a mood here, and it’s not one that involves dying.”

Mora rolled her eyes and Elletta laughed, a small noise that would have caused Mora’s skin to prickle had the chill of the rain not already done so.

“Don’t you want my help?” she asked, stepping gracefully closer. “It will only cost but a little.”

“Cost?” Kallan asked.

“Yes, I can help you.” Her face flickered; for only the blink of an eye it seemed to not be a face at all.

Mora took a step backward, then another. “I don’t think that’s really her,” she whispered.

The figure in front of them, which looked like Elletta but did not walk like Elletta or sound quite like her either, did not falter again as she approached. She touched Kallan’s face, a gentle and harmless stroke across his cheek. Mora met her with disdain. Stick in hand, she pointed the makeshift weapon into the thing’s side.

“My, my, dear. I’m only trying to help.” When her attention diverted to Mora, her face shimmered. Her eyes changed from blue to green, her hair from blonde to fiery shades of red, dry as a bone. Her jaw and nose sharpened, losing the fullness of her lips and cheeks. Lines of stitching pulled across her joints, sewing her broken skin back together.

Staring back at Mora was no longer the face of Elletta, but that of Ahmya.



“Don’t you need me?” She asked, her voice dropping to a smokier tone. Mora’s heart stopped beating in her chest. She was exactly as she had been in Mora’s nightmare. The only way the thing could have known that would have been to see into her mind. Nausea wrung in her gut.

“We can find our own way.” Kallan retreated another step and tugged Mora back.

Mora stepped forward instead. Her makeshift dagger pressed harder into the monster’s side. “Leave,” Mora demanded. “Before I kill you.”

“I’m only trying to help,” the thing said innocently.

“You have no right to wear that face.”

Her face shimmered again, this time morphing into a young child with dark gray hair and graying skin. Silver-green eyes stared back at them. She was Mora, twelve years old with blood on her hands.

“I’m only trying to help,” she repeated. The words rang through Mora’s memories like a bell triggering a flood of suppressed guilt. *I was only trying to help.*

“P—please don’t hurt me,” her childlike voice cried. “I can help you if you’re lost.”

“What do you want?” Kallan asked, his voice laced with a threat Mora had never heard on his tongue.

The creature smiled with Mora’s child mouth, and her teeth were all needle sharp. “If you are lost, dear Kallan, I will help you find a way to ease a hunger. To ease a pain. I ask only one thing. I...ask only...only...” A gurgling noise stole its words. White blood spewed from its mouth.

Mora yanked her weapon from deep in its ribs. White sprayed her arm, and the monster fell.

Kallan turned his wide-eyed stare to Mora. “What did you do? What if it only wanted food or the cave? She could have led us out of here!”

The creature morphed once more. Its features blurred into a blank smear of skin across its sickly pale face as it lay in a puddle.

“I killed *it* before *it* could kill us,” she said, letting Kallan see the small threads of darkness that her *essyn* leaked into her. Keeping even that small tendril free was tainting her, shortening the time frame she had to get her cuff off. But if it kept them alive, it was worth it. “We’re in the Deadwood, in case you forgot. Everything wants to kill us.”

“I thought you wanted to avoid killing. Isn’t that why we’re risking our lives to capture the Blade without ending his?”

“Monsters don’t count. Not when it’s kill or be killed out here.” She slid down the rock wall and let her hands hang off her knees, still holding the weapon. “I did what I had to do, and as far as I’m concerned, I did it without adding a number to my count. That thing was not a person.”

“A number? What does that even mean?” Kallan shoved his die and flask back into his pockets and collected the rest of his sharpened sticks.

Storm clouds began clearing from the sky, and the moon peeked in and out as they floated by. “We should go while the moon can still guide us. We don’t want the fresh kill to attract more predators.” Mora stood. “And who knows who else is

after us. Oryn will have noticed my leaving, so the sooner we drag Veres back to the castle, the less time all Vale's soldiers will have to hunt me down."

"Don't avoid the question. We have enough time for that, at least."

Mora sighed. She shouldn't have said anything, but it was too late to take it back. She spun her stick weapon around her fingers.

If she were to save the Golden Boy from tying his fate to hers, she would need to push him away. Already he was getting too close. What better way to scare him off than the truth. "You saw my darkmark didn't you? That night in the garden, when the glamour fell."

Kallan stopped collecting his things and paid attention. "Yes."

"And you've read the prophecy it belongs to?"

The pounding rain slowed to a drizzle and the sudden quiet was almost too much to bear.

"Yes," he said sadly.

"I can't let my fate come true, I've already been responsible for the deaths of six people, Kallan. If bodies keep piling up on me, I will become that great evil the fates claim of me. I don't want that to happen."

"And let me ask you, Mora, at what number do you consider yourself having reached that evil?"

"I don't know," she admitted. She had been sure it would have happened by now, but she had still made it through the wall. She was still good. "I don't intend to find out. But if I'm

being honest, Veres wants me dead, and I'm willing to risk one more to make sure that doesn't happen either. I know you want justice; you want the church to decide his fate, but...I can't just let him kill me too. It will be risking everything, but I'll have nothing if I'm dead."

"And those six, why did you take their lives?"

"That doesn't matter. I'm still here with their blood on my hands."

Kallan shook his head. He pushed himself off the ground and retrieved his shirt. A piece of fabric was missing at the bottom, the piece wrapped around her calf she presumed.

He looked back at her, a sadness in his eye she couldn't figure out.

"Do you think I am a monster? That I am evil?" he asked.

"No," she said without hesitation. "Why would I—"

"I'm a soldier, Mora. How many lives do you think I've ended?" He didn't give her time to reply. "Let's go."



## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

THEY WALKED UNTIL long after the storm had stopped and the needles of the Deadwood pines returned to block the sky. Mora broke fallen branches into pieces, and Kallan placed them in X formations at the roots of trees to help mark their trail. It seemed the further they went, the denser the forest got, and there was no sign of escape. Only twice since they lost the moon had they found themselves walking in circles.

The only thing Mora was thankful for was that they had yet to run into any more toothy creatures or hungry beasts. It was a miracle they hadn't attracted anything, given that Kallan hadn't stopped talking for what could have been days of travel.

"What did the king offer you anyway, for killing the Blade?"

Mora hauled herself over a fallen log that looked too familiar. She scanned the ground for any of their Xs but saw none. "What did he offer you for bringing him justice?"

"Respect." He scoffed and jumped up on the fallen tree and then off the other side to catch up with her. "If I find who killed Ahmya and bring that person back for justice to be served, Oryn might finally trust and respect me enough to give me the title I deserve."

He was doing it for a promotion? To lead the Gilded Guard was a job any soldier would dream of. She shouldn't have been surprised he had such high ambitions. But the selfish nature of such a reason felt out of character for the Golden Boy.

Her mind drifted back to the other half of what he said. "*The person?* Please tell me you don't believe that the Shadow Court is telling the truth about their innocence?"

"All I'm doing is not jumping to conclusions," he said. "You and the rest of Vale seem to have already got that covered. Someone has to remain objective, so don't blame me for planning on finding the truth before risking my life to haul someone across the kingdom."

Mora stopped and glared at him. He wasn't wrong. He was doing a lot of that lately, not being wrong. It was infuriating.

Crossing his arms and offering her a raised brow, he stopped walking. "Your turn."

"Veres's head in exchange for my cuff off."

"What?" His shoulders stiffened. "That's why you're doing this?"

She bristled at his reaction; as if that wasn't nearly a good enough reason. It was better than his reason. It was all the reason in the world.

She crossed her arms to match his stance. "Essyn tries to delude you into using so much magic that you're weakened enough for them to kill your soul and control your body. It's all they want. Magic." Jerking her head away, she tried to calm herself but was unable to. She looked back at him. "How do

you think one would react if all that magic was trapped inside; the one thing it wants, unable to ever be used? And when it blames you for it happening?

“It attacks from within. *That* is why this fate has found me. It won’t be long before I’m nothing but bad, skin to bone, sweat to blood. I’m constantly drowning in my essyn’s thoughts. So yes, I will do whatever I need to get my cuff off and prevent this fate from catching up to me!”

There was a pregnant pause, both of them chewing on the words that she had said. Her saliva thickened in her throat. She had to dig her fingers into her arms to stop her hands from shaking.

“And how do you know that releasing it is not the thing that makes your fate true?” He took a reluctant step closer, his hands almost curled into fists before his fingers straightened. “How do you know it won’t be your magic that makes you so dangerous the gods will fear you?”

She laughed. “I already have everything I need to be dangerous. My magic is small, insignificant. No. If I go, it won’t be power that takes me there, it will be rage, and it will not be entirely my own.”

“Mora.” Kallan’s throat bobbed, and he didn’t continue. They just stared at each other.

A snap yanked their attention behind them. They looked at each other with wide eyes before they took off. With no regard for direction, they darted between the tight spaces the trees left for them. They jumped over roots and avoided rocks, and Mora did everything she could to not look back at whatever chased them. This time, she didn’t want to know.

“The trees,” Kallan shouted.

It took a moment for her to see it too. The trees were moving, sliding across the forest floor, forming a wall in front of them. Mora turned so fast that she slid in the mud and nearly ran into the newly formed wall. They were forced in a new direction.

The forest was leading them somewhere, and there was no chance it was somewhere good.

Roots reached for her feet as she ran. One caught Kallan’s boot, and he stumbled. She pulled him along and helped him find his balance, never stopping. But they had slowed, and more roots whipped out of the ground like snakes slithering toward them. Another wall of trees formed in front of them. Once again, they were forced to change directions.

They ran into another wall. This time it had come so quickly that they didn’t have time to turn. They fumbled to a stop. Roots weaved out from every direction, only halting when a cage had formed around them.

They were trapped.

Kallan grabbed onto one of the makeshift bars and jerked it back. It broke, but another filled the hole just as quickly. He kept trying.

Mora’s skin felt flushed and she squeezed her eyes shut, hoping that when she opened them, she would be back in the cave waking from another nightmare.

When she did open them, she saw Kallan pacing, roots still closing in on them as their cage started to shrink on all sides.



Kallan slammed his hands together, and his blue light arced from one hand to the other as he pulled them apart. She had never seen him use his magic that way before. He reached his hands between the bars, using the light to sever the root between his palms.

He went for another, but two thin roots shot out from the side walls and wrapped around his wrists, yanking them apart. The light snapped and vanished.

The roots held his hands out at his sides, not allowing him to touch anything or move. Another root crawled up and wrapped itself around Mora's waist when she tried to climb up. It pulled her until her knees gave out and her legs were pinned to the damp ground.

Stuck facing one of the walls, she looked into the dark, seeing nothing.

Then she heard them. The squelching of muddy moss grew louder. They were coming her way, and there was nothing she could do to escape the trap.

Kallan shook the cage with his thrashing as he let out a frustrated noise that sounded a lot like a growl or a series of low, animalistic grunts. The steps didn't slow or stop.

Mora tried to calm her breathing, slow her heart, and focus.

It was a red eye that came into view first. Then one at a time the Shadow Court stepped close enough to make out their faces. Veres's nostril flared as he got too close. He squatted down in front of Mora, one hand gripping the bars of the cage for support. The whole thing rattled when Ripley jumped on top of it.

“I hope you had a fun few days in the forest,” Veres said. “She can be quite cruel to unwelcome guests.”

“What do you want?” Mora snapped.

“I’m trying to decide if I should kill you or not.”

Ripley reached a hand into the cage and pulled a twig from Kallan’s hair, using it to try and tickle the points of Kallan’s ears as Kallan thrashed his head around to avoid the dangling arm.

“You’re lucky we found you, really. You could have been lost, wandering out here for weeks.” Veres turned his attention to Ripley, who was now trying to play with Kallan’s hair, earning growls and flickers of blue light from the Golden Boy. “Stop.”

With Veres’s warning, Ripley bared his sharp teeth and growled. The sound came from deep in his chest and was louder than Mora thought possible for a person.

Veres didn’t flinch or take his glare off the man. “Rip,” he warned. “Stop.”

Ripley laughed playfully. “Come on V, we aren’t all content without fun in our lives.” He tossed the twig and rolled onto his back. Someone behind them, Juddah or Slade, laughed. His head tipped over the edge of the cage, watching Veres upside down. “At least I wasn’t hurting him.”

Mora raised a brow. “If you are going to hurt us I would rather you get it over with so we can either find peace in death or be on our way.”

Veres smirked.

From the corner of her mind, she heard an eerie hissing voice. *“Now, child, we both know you’ll find no peace in death.”* She startled, glancing over Veres’s shoulder and seeing exactly who she had known the voice had come from. Creeping in circles around Slade, Death made a mocking smile at Mora.

Veres chuckled, “It’s not Slade that should worry you.”

Mora glared at him.

“Let us out,” Kallan said. He thrashed against his restraints.

“Why would I want to do that? You ruined our chance at getting to Dromose when you so rudely blew our ship to pieces.”

“*Your* ship is still docked in Harlen,” Mora said. “And if you didn’t want your plans blown up, maybe you shouldn’t have killed Ahmya.”

“We told you, that wasn’t us.”

“And you expect me to just believe that, that his—” she jutted her chin toward Juddah “—disappearance at the same time she was murdered was just a coincidence?”

They stared at each other, neither one so much as blinking.

“What did you want with Dromose?” Kallan asked, breaking the tension.

Veres stood and shifted his attention to the other side of the cage where Kallan was held. He looked him up and down.

Ripley rolled back to his stomach above her and he and Mora both watched as Juddah walked up to Veres and whispered something in his ear that Mora couldn’t hear.

Elletta approached the side of the cage and rested her chin on the roots next to Ripley's head while Kallan and Mora waited patiently to be let out or murdered.

“Oryn gave Dromose something that wasn't his to give.” Slade stepped up to the cage, Death following close behind with a wicked grin. He ignored the warning glare Veres and Juddah had both shot his way. “We went there to retrieve it as it was being handed off, but by the time Juddah got the key to the vaults, it was too late. It was already gone. We want it back, and as it turns out, Dromose is a hard man to find. Our only chance at learning what he did with it was if we got to him. When shit went sideways, we tried to follow him out of Vale. As you know, that didn't happen. I'm sure you can understand their frustration with you now?”

Mora looked from Slade to Death.

*“This one was stolen from me. I don't mind so much because, well, you know.”* Death laughed. *“I do love my games.”* Her finger caressed Slade's cheek. He didn't react, likely didn't even feel it. *“And this one is one of my favorites.”*

Back beside Slade, Veres eyed her with too much intent. She furrowed her brow, then looked away from those amber eyes.

Mora breathed deeply. She blinked, hoping Death would disappear. Of course, she didn't. She followed Slade around like she was tied to his side, and nobody knew a thing about it, aside from her.

“I can tell you where he will be next,” Kallan said. Everyone turned to him, even Mora. “Dromose; I don't know anything about what he has that might be yours, but I know where he will be for Revival.”

“Tell me.” Veres demanded.

“That’s not how this works. You get us out of this forest alive, then I’ll tell you.”

Ripley laughed and jumped off the top of the cage, landing in a crouch. He tilted his head at Kallan. “Then what, pretty boy? We just let you go? You try to kill us?”

“Then,” Kallan leaned forward as much as the restraint would allow him. “The best man wins.”

Ripley jumped up and smiled, “I think I might be starting to like the boy.”

Veres shook his head and turned away from her to talk with Juddah and Slade, presumably debating Kallan’s proposal.

For the first time, she noticed his black hair wasn’t covered by his hood. It was tied back in a knot and wasn’t all tight curls as she had imagined. His hair was more messy loose waves than actual curls, and only the pieces that fell to the nape of his neck ended in the same tight coils that he always seemed to have falling in his face. A gust of wind picked up and blew more of the strands free of his leather tie.

After what seemed like an eternity of not being able to move, the roots slid back into the ground and their cage dissolved around them.

Veres reached his hand down, an offer to help Mora stand. She leaned forward and spat on his boot before falling back. She needed to let her legs stop tingling before she dared to use them.

“Finally decide?” she asked.

“Killing can wait.” He grabbed her arm and yanked her up, pulling her too close to him. His fingers squeezed her bicep so tight she could feel her pulse in her arm. “I have been searching the world for you for three years. If I have any virtue at all, it is patience.”



## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

MORA LOVED THE dark, but she had been drowning in it for far too long. What had felt like a fortnight, Elletta informed her had only been four days. And there had been another two sleeps after that, tied up with thin roots around her wrists that connected her to Ripley.

She had hoped to see the sun by the time the trees thinned and the sky came into view. Instead, she saw the red of the moon.

She felt small standing before the towering buildings that butted up against the forest's edge. Black stone walls ended in pointed steeples and housed matching arched windows. Metal bars weaved in repeating patterns that all seemed to point high into the sky, beckoning her to look up until she was watching stars peek in and out of the clouds.

The town looked like Harlen, if everything had been painted black and stretched to more lethal points.

The entrance to the city was marked with a large metal arch that matched the spires decorating the ridge of each roof. Two soldiers dressed in white and gold adorned with the Twinblade crest of Vale stood guard on either side of it.

“Welcome to Kalandra, Vale’s newest victim,” Juddah said.

The only sign that life had once filled the town was the putrid smell of rot seeping past the front gate. They stayed hidden in the tree line while they waited for Veres to lead them on.

“Look.” Kallan pointed with his tied hands to the shimmering wall that bordered the edge of the town.

A line of stripped trees formed a fence between the wall and town. Each one was strung with rope and a hanging corpse. Scavenger birds picked at the bloated torsos, bones poked through flesh, and rotted limbs piled on the ground beneath them.

Kallan covered his mouth with the back of his forearm when one of the bodies gave way to rot and fell, its innards exploding from the pile it landed on. Birds fled as the repulsive sound rang through the night.

Mora hoped that the king had buried Ahmya.

“This is what your precious wall looks like from the other side.” Slade adjusted his cloak over his shoulders. The dark fabric covered the bright blues of his shirt and had small birds embroidered onto it with matching thread.

“What happened here?” Kallan asked with clear disgust.

“What always happens when Vale annexes one of our villages,” Elletta answered calmly.

Kallan shook his head in disagreement. “It is not always like this. Most of your people want the safety of Vale, they pray to be accepted into the Kingdom of Light.”



Juddah barked a laugh. “All they need to do is pledge their lives to Aemon and all their fears and worries disappear, right?”

“It is our worship of Aemon that powers the wall, a fair trade I would think.”

“And what do you think?” Juddah asked Mora, surprising her. The man had hardly acknowledged her thus far, aside from his constant glares and the few times he had offered to kill her.

“I don’t believe in the gods,” she said.

Every head in their unlikely group of travelers turned to her. Even Veres, who also mostly ignored her.

“I assure you,” Ripley offered, “the gods are real.”

“Oh, I don’t doubt that.” She tried to hold any emotion from her tone as she studied the colors swirling in the wall. “I just don’t believe in them; that they will ever return or that they ever truly cared about what they made here.” She looked at Ripley. “No god will ever get the privilege of seeing me on my knees for them, I can promise you that.”

“Can we bet on it?” A wicked smirk peeled his lips from his teeth on one side. And he pulled her closer with the ropelike root that attached them. “A silver coin, no—gold. I think a gold coin will do. By the time we’re done with you, I’m betting you’ll have broken that promise.”

Juddah shook his head and walked as far away from her as he could get without completely leaving their group. She walked over to the brooding man, Ripley letting her pull him along by her leash.

“What’s your problem? Why do you hate me so much more than anyone else does?”

He ignored her at first, continuing his strides to put more distance between them. From her peripheral she saw Ripley nudge Slade with his elbow and nod in her direction, letting the leash between them stretch as far as it could go.

“My ring,” he finally said. “I had a ring, you stabbed a fork through my hand, and then I no longer had the ring.”

She tilted her head quizzically. She remembered the ring; it was made of dark wood and had a line of purple gems embedded around the center. At the time, she hadn’t seen any harm in slipping it off his finger. In fact, she had felt she was owed it for putting up with his remarks.

Now, she thought about what that simple act of taking that ring might have caused. Like tipping the first in a line of dominoes and watching them fall until they hit her where she stood.

“That’s it?” she said through a clenched jaw. “You treat me like scum on your boot because I stole a piece of jewelry?” Her *essyn* reared in her chest.

She pushed Juddah, forcing him to stumble back. He caught himself and the muscles in his arms bulged as he clenched his fists. He swung at her. She ducked and snatched a dagger from his hip, holding it up in a threat. “You chopped my sister to pieces and hung her from a tree because I stole a ring?”

Her knuckles turned white around the dagger. The familiar weight of it sent a wave of joy through her *essyn*.

Another tendril slipped through the cracks of its cage, rejoicing in her fury.

Ripley and Slade approached together, the former pulling on the root to urge her off of Juddah but not exerting enough force to show he cared what happened next.

“Mora.” Kallan’s plea was ignored by all.

“I think I owe you a fight,” Mora sneered.

She aimed the dagger at his face, holding it with both her bound hands. She wanted to bury it to the hilt in his eye. The picture of him falling to his knees coursed through her so vividly she could already feel Death’s satisfaction.

Death laughed in her mind, stepping out of Slade’s shadow.

Mora struck; her restraints pulled tight to slow her force. A hand appeared in her path and the blade connected with it. She turned her head sharply. Amber eyes narrowed on her.

Veres removed the dagger from his hand and handed it back to Juddah without flinching or showing any sign of pain. He glared at Ripley next, then back to Mora.

“You are owed a life, but that life is not one of ours,” he said. “We need to go. Now.”

“Bitch.” Juddah sneered at her and then followed Veres into the town to find shelter from the coming storm. Elletta and Slade joined him. Kallan and Mora had no choice but to stay—their leashes were in Ripley’s hands.

“I like you,” Ripley said. “You remind me of someone I knew once.”

“Was she a bitch too?”

“She was strong, brave, and a bit stupid when she got too courageous.” He pulled her closer by the leash. “And she was like me.”

“What exactly does it mean to be like you?”

The look he tried to hide was the first time Mora had ever seen something other than chaotic joy in his eyes. “You’re not as smart as she was, so I will help you with one thing.”

“How is insulting her helping any?” Kallan asked. Ripley shot him a menacing glare.

She almost felt bad for the strong hate they seemed to have for Kallan. Mora wasn’t well liked either, but at least Ripley and Slade managed to talk to her. The same could not be said for how they were treating the Golden Boy.

“The ring. When Juddah made the sacred vow it represents, he also vowed to never take it off.” Ripley said. It was sentimental, a value Mora had forgotten about. She closed her eyes and released a heavy sigh.

She thought about the blood that stained her fingertips. It was a reminder now, of what she had done and what she needed to never do again, like a vow of her own. She would be beyond angry if someone took that reminder from her.

“Oh, don’t be sad, pet. Stay angry, it’s more fun.” Ripley pulled her and Kallan along. “Besides, an angry Juddah is far more tolerable than a sad one.”



The house they found was small, small enough that cramming seven people between its wallpapered walls made a pressure tighten on Mora’s chest.

She and Kallan were pushed to the floor and left to watch as Juddah busied himself preparing a meal in the kitchen. Slade cleaned up all the messes Juddah left and helped wherever instructed. If it weren't for the hearth heating the room to an unbearable point and making her sick, Mora would have found the sight entertaining.

Ripley sat on the table in the middle of the room, hands clasped around his knee, and Elletta perched on the bench next to him. The two talked about the types of flowers that grew in the Deadwood Forest as Elletta played with a twig, causing it to turn green and bloom with white buds. People were not the only things she could heal.

Veres stood with his arms crossed in the open doorway at the end of the corridor, one foot outside of the house as he watched for any lingering soldiers. His attention snapped back to her and Kallan every time either of them shifted positions.

“How are we going to get out of here?” Mora whispered.

“We will tell them what they want to know and hope that they let us go after that.” Kallan stretched his legs out in front of him and, on cue, Veres glanced their way. He and Mora locked eyes. This time, he walked over to them.

“Up,” Veres said, nodding his head as if that was somehow supposed to relay the rest of his sentence.

Mora narrowed her eyes at him. “Down.”

Veres's body grew tense and Slade said something to Ripley that had the red-eyed man joining Veres.

“I believe we made a deal,” Veres said.

Ripley knelt to her level, letting his fingernails turn to claws. He reached out and took her wrists in his hand, breaking the roots to free her from the restraints. He did the same for Kallan and went back to his seat.

“Dromose is spending the Revival holiday in the city of Dread. It’s an inland city in Vale. It’s down south, past the iron mines—”

“I know where it is. When is he arriving, and why Dread?”

“He’s set to get there the day of the festival. If I had to hazard a guess, he is going to make a deal on some precious gem his pirates risked the Fallen to collect. All the richest in Vale will be in Dread for the celebration, and the rich bleed coin for the rare and dangerous.”

Veres crossed his arms. Kallan pulled himself off the floor, and Mora did the same.

“How do you know this?” Veres asked.

“I was inside Oryn’s sound barrier during the dinner. The man likes to talk.” Kallan took a step back and stared directly at Veres. “He will be there.”

Veres nodded, then turned to look at his friends in the kitchen. Ripley was laughing at something Elletta had said, and Slade was setting a plate of bread on the table. Juddah nodded his head at Veres, accepting whatever unspoken thing the Blade had meant to say. He turned back to Mora and Kallan. “Come with me.”

They followed him two steps before he stopped. “Just her.”



## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

MORA HOVERED WITH one foot in the corridor, the other in the bedroom she had followed Veres to. The bed was neatly made and the fireplace was burning low. The room wasn't big by any means, but it was comfortably sized, with a bed centered on one wall and a window covered in drapes.

Veres walked to the mantel and poured a drink from a decanter of dark-colored alcohol. A dagger caught her eye; two of them sat on a small table a step away from the door.

She walked in further and slipped one of the daggers into her hand. She was about to take another step when Veres spun; his rough hand grabbed her by the throat, and he forced her back into the wall so hard the air stole from her lungs. The dagger in her hand shot out on instinct and connected with Veres's ribs as she tried to take a full breath. He didn't flinch.

She tore her surprised gaze away from his face to see the dagger embedded in his side, his blood seeping into the thin fabric of his shirt and coating her hand.

"Careful, *Shev'né*," he whispered against her ear. "Unless you want your boyfriend to hear me make you scream."

A shiver ran over her skin and she tipped her chin higher. "Pleasure or pain," she gritted out, "I will never give you the

satisfaction of my scream.”

Challenge flashed across his eyes, and she knew that she was making a mistake. Being around this man, it made her feel things she hated feeling. Fear, most of all. He made her skin crawl and brought out all of her defenses. Somehow, he made her feel weak, vulnerable.

“I’ve been told it’s customary to offer guests a drink. And seeing as how you are now a guest of this kingdom...” The gravely tone, mixed with his accent, sent a chill through her. His grip around her throat lowered to her collarbone as he took a sip of his drink and then pressed the glass to her lips. “Open,” he demanded.

Every stubborn bone in her body told her that no matter what the man did or said, she should refuse him. She should spit in his face and storm back out into the kitchen.

Her lips parted when he pressed the glass to her mouth, her body not quite caught up with her resolve. The liquid burned as it slid down her throat.

“Good girl,” he said with a smirk and stepped a respectful amount of distance away from her. The sound of thunder boomed in the distance.

With his back carelessly to her, he grabbed the decanter and poured a second glass. He took a drink before handing it to her.

Mora didn’t move. She watched him sink casually into the chair. He pulled the dagger from his side without a flinch as he drank from his own glass. Two cubes of ice clinked together as he pulled it back from his lips. He tossed the dagger onto the table.



If she was going to have to deal with the man while they waited for night to come, she wasn't going to do it completely sober. Kallan's senweed rum would have been better, but she wasn't one to be picky.

She knocked back the entire glass in one shot. The liquid scorched all the way down her throat and hit her stomach with a raging splash. She shook the aftertaste away and slammed the glass down on the mantel beside the decanter.

"What do you want from me?" she asked.

"It's not what I want from you, but what I have to offer you." He pulled a thin gold chain from his pocket and dangled it between his fingers. A pendant hung from the chain.

*Jewelry.* Mora scoffed. This was a waste of her time. She should have aimed that dagger higher and been done with him.

"This was a gift, given to me by an old family friend," he said as he held the necklace up for her to see. The pendant was a red crystal teardrop framed with intricate ribs of spiked patterns. It looked like a drop of blood crowned in gold. It reminded her of the sword she still had dangling between her breasts, the one Kallan would say belonged to him.

"Do you know what this is?" Veres asked.

Mora blinked slowly to stop her eyeroll. When she said nothing, he smiled.

"This," he let the crystal spin, "is the blood of the divine. Vienna, God of Truth."

From the motion, Mora could see that he wasn't lying. The red wasn't from the crystal itself but the thick liquid

sloshing around inside it. As sure as she knew the color of blood, she knew that it was true.

Whether or not it was from the divine was left in question.

“I haven’t yet decided if I am going to kill you or not. But if I choose not to—and make no mistake, the choice of your death is mine to decide—I might have an offer to make you.”

“This is all quite exhausting.” Mora stepped away from the heat of the fireplace.

Veres got up and walked over to her, getting too close, once again. “Hear me out, and I promise it will be worth it.” He handed her the necklace. She hesitated to take it, but her curiosity won her over and she grabbed the dangling pendant. Its many facets reflected the faelights on the walls. It felt delicate, like it might shatter if she pinched too hard, but dangerous, like it would slice through her if she tried.

“There is a ritual we can do, one that will allow you to take the truth from me, even when I do not want to give it freely. You need that,” he pointed at the necklace, “to do it.”

“Why would I want to do that?”

“Because you need to know that we had nothing to do with the queen’s death, and I know you’ll never believe me without proof.”

“And why do *you* want this?”

Veres shrugged and took another drink. “I think you’ll be more open to hearing my proposal if I’ve extended this gift to you. Am I wrong?”

It was tempting, she did want—no—she *needed* to know if he had been the one to hurt Ahmya. This was her way of finding out. But nothing was free. Especially not the truth.

“But if you insist on paying for the gift,” he said as if he could read where her thoughts were going, “you can do so by listening to what I have to say after. If you decline what I ask of you, I’ll let you and your little boy toy leave unharmed. If you accept, we will leave at nightfall. Together.”

“And if I refuse all of this? You’ll kill me?”

“There are worse things I could do than kill you.”

She inspected the vial. “If you are threatening me with torture, I’m afraid you aren’t the first. Likely won’t be the last either.”

“Torture?” He leaned forward to whisper in her ear. “I’ll chain you to my side like a dog, drag you around until I tire of the way you amuse me, and only when you’re on the brink of giving up will I hold your life in the palm of my hand and force you to live. How is that for torture?” He straightened his posture. “Tell me, *Shev’né*, have you ever worn a collar?”

She scoffed. “So, you’ll make me your pet after all?”

“No.” He chuckled eerily. “Not a pet.” He held the empty chalice between them and looked into her soul that way he did. “I treat my pets with respect.”

Mora’s grip tightened, and the crystal bit into her skin. She fixated on the pulse of pain, no matter how slight. A tingling surge shot from her chest to her fingertips.

She raised the pendant, ready to let the chain slip through her fingers and fall to the floor, letting the deal he offered

shatter against the stone.

“If it means anything to you, Ripley has been told to kill the boy if you refuse me.” Veres set his empty glass beside Mora’s. “But I’ve found that truth leads to trust a lot quicker than threats. The choice is yours.”

She took a deep breath through her nose. Once again, her life had put Kallan’s at risk.

*Let him go.* Her *essyn* nudged at her heart.

*After*, she promised herself. After she learned the truth about Ahmya, she would make Kallan leave her. She wouldn’t let him be pulled into this. Whatever “this” was. “Truth or not, I will never trust. Not you. Not anyone.”

“Is that a no?”

She bit her lip, knowing she was going to regret this. “How long does this promise of truth last?”

“Until you use it.”

“So, it’s a one and done deal? I ask you one question and you give me one truth, and that’s supposed to change my mind about you?” She chuckled. “I’m not so easy to win over.”

“Three,” he corrected, moving the small table over to where she stood. He set a chalice on the glass and nodded to it, prompting her to pour the contents of the pendant into the water. “And I never thought you would be.”

She bit the inside of her cheek, and her stomach clenched in dread.

Looking back at him, she snapped the pendant off the chain and tipped the crystal over the chalice. The blood

dripped thick, and when the pendant was empty, she set the broken necklace on the table.

“What now?”

He didn't bother to reply with words. He wrapped his fingers around her wrist and pulled her hard enough to flutter her stomach but gentle enough to not let the pain last. When her hand hovered over the chalice, a sudden sting slid across her palm. She only realized he had cut her when he tied a strip of cloth around the wound and watched it bloom with a splotch of red.

Flipping the handle toward her, he handed her the dagger; his palm waited open and ready to bleed. But it wasn't his hand she wanted to cut. She stabbed the dagger forward and it found its mark. The tip of the blade protruded through his forearm, missing the bone by a hair, and out the other side. Still, he didn't flinch.

He moved the chalice to catch three drops of his own blood before removing the weapon. The wound didn't heal like they did when Elletta was around. The one on his side hadn't either—blood still soaked into his dark shirt.

“Do you mind?” He handed her another strip of cloth.

“Not at all.” She smiled sweetly and tied it tight around the wound.

When it was secure, he picked up the chalice like she hadn't just stabbed him, again, and handed it to her. “Drink.”

She did, and then so did he, and she felt no different from before.

Until she did.

“What in the blight-fucked damn,” she hissed, holding the crook of her elbow in a tight grip as a burning sensation etched across her skin. When the pain ceased as quickly as it had set in, she pulled her sleeve up to see three small ravens flying across her skin just below the crease of her arm. As they froze mid-flight, Mora shot an accusing look at Veres. “What is this?”

He collected the chalice and his dagger. “The ink on my arm will disappear with each truth you take from me.”

“On *your* arm?” New ink marred his skin as well, three arrows lining the outside of his wrist. That meant that the ink on her arm—her face burned with anger. “You never said this truth promise went both ways. You lied to me.”

“I never lie. You never asked.”

*You need to start asking the right questions, Mor.* She heard Rhyn’s voice in her mind. She had failed him, and now she was trapped in a nightmare, knowing that the Blade could take three pieces of her that she would never willingly give. Like he was taking her heart in his fist and warning her that he would squeeze three times, but she would not know when and she would not know how hard.

She inhaled deeply through her nose and closed her eyes for the slow exhale. “Did you kill Ahmya?”



## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

SILENCE HUNG THICK in the air around them.

“Did you have anything to do with Ahmya’s death?” She asked when he didn’t answer.

Veres shook his head, “No, but you’re going to have to try harder than that if you intend to take a truth.”

He walked around the small table that sat between them and invaded the space she had hoped to keep for herself. She tried to step away, but the bed blocked her from moving. He gripped her jaw and pulled her face up to look directly at him.

“What is your *true* name?” he asked.

His question was a demand that pulled at her gut. “Sa—” She swallowed, her mouth feeling too dry to choke down the lie, that she was Sadira. She tried again “S—” A cramp set in, deep in her chest. It felt like someone had shattered her ribs and stuck all the pointy bits into her organs. She released a shaky breath.

The feeling intensified and she tried to rip away from his hold, but he tightened his grip. She felt the magic squeezing at her from the inside. If she resisted for much longer, it was going to kill her. “Moranna Moravik.”

The pain from within had gone as if it had never been there. One of the birds inked on her arm took flight and flew away from her skin.

Immediately, Veres dropped his hand, no longer threatening to stain her face with the bruise of his fingerprints. He turned away like her truth repulsed him and began cleaning up the mess they had made with the ritual, stacking everything on a tray.

“So, have you decided if you’re going to kill me?” she asked.

“Still deciding,” he said. “You didn’t even try that time.”

“No.” She smiled and moved until she could see his eyes clearly again. He stood still, allowing her another try to ask her question. She focused her intent into her words and spoke calmly, the same way he had. “Tell me the truth of every lie you have spoken to me since we met.”

The muscles in his jaw and neck flexed. He balled his fingers into fists. Whatever truth he was about to say, Mora would not react. She couldn’t. Not when she still had her end of their deal to hold up, had to stay in that room with him and listen to him talk and hold her tongue until she was alone. Kallan’s life depended on it.

After a slow blink, Veres encroached on her space again.

“I have never lied to you, Moranna.” An arrow shot across his skin and disappeared. Somehow, even if she hadn’t seen the proof, she knew he meant it.



“I’m sorry, he wants what?” Kallan asked.



Mora pulled the window shut. In the short time since she had opened it, the rain had started to blow in and there was a puddle forming on the floor. It was immediately too quiet, and she already missed the loud pattering. She wanted to go outside and stand in the storm again, not rehash the conversation for Kallan.

She muttered a slew of curses and paced the room they were intended to sleep in. They would be leaving come nightfall, when the guards next swapped posts.

“Some relic from the God War, he’s not big on specifics. It doesn’t matter though. I’m not accepting,” Mora said. “We go our separate ways tonight, and then you and I will also part. You should head back to Vale. The castle staff knows all the gossip, maybe they would have an idea who killed Ahmya.”

“Riggs is handling that. Mora, just take a moment to breathe; you haven’t sat still since he left the room.”

A heavy sigh escaped her, and she collapsed onto the bed. Staring at the ceiling, she dragged her hands across her face. “He said it wasn’t his idea, but I still find it funny he had the audacity to ask for my help after he tried to kill me back on that beach. Probably still wants to.”

Kallan stood at the edge of the bed. “You thought about killing him too.”

“Still might.” She sat up. “Whose side are you on?”

“If you help him, he thinks he can get your cuff off?” The bed creaked when he sat beside her.

She shook her head. “He knows someone who I can talk to, that’s all. Some really old guy who apparently knows

everything. Veres claims if anyone knows how to get an iron cuff off, it would be him.”

She bit at her lip. It wasn't as promising as what Oryn had offered, but the deal had been tempting; to go with the Shadow Court to Dread and seduce Dromose into telling her about his collections. She didn't know all the hows or whys yet, but it sounded safer than playing cat and mouse with a monster. It also meant working with Veres, and that was the last thing she wanted.

She opened her mouth to say as much, but Kallan cut her off.

“You have to say yes.”

“What?”

“There's something I need to tell you.” He looked at her. She couldn't quite read his expression. “If you bring the Blade back to Oryn, dead or alive, he's going to lock you up and then tell you that there never was a way to get the cuff off, not one that he knows of anyway.”

“How do you know that?” she snapped.

“A few years back, there was a riot at one of the border towns where I was stationed. The Name Collector and one of the church's acolytes were there recording those who made it past the wall; they started to cuff people who fought back.” He looked away from her, as if he had something to be ashamed of. “There was a woman, a new-blood metalrender. The acolyte stretched the string of hot iron to wrap around her arm, and she forced it back on him. It took everything she had, but the iron branded itself onto the acolyte's face. He was sent back to

Harlen, and the church spent three seasons trying to get it off. They never could figure out how.”

With the cold that crept in and the dizziness that washed over her, Mora might have fallen had she not already been seated. She felt a familiar numbness setting in.

“Mora?”

“Say it again,” she said.

“He lied to you, Mora. He doesn’t know how to get the cuff off. If you say the Blade is telling the truth, and if this is what you think you need, then maybe this is the best option you have. If we stick together, we can keep each other safe.”

*No.* She went to the mantel where Veres had left the decanter still half full and took a gulp. She turned around and opened her mouth, but no words formed. Dragging him or chasing him, she would have been crossing the kingdoms with Veres one way or another. Now her options were limited to one unexpected path: walking freely by his side.

She was supposed to capture him or kill him, not join him.

Then there was the matter of Kallan. He found a blanket folded on the bed and tried to use it to soak up the puddle at the window.

*At least his blood will look nice on your hands when you get him killed.*

“Fine.” She took another drink. “You might be right, but I don’t need your help. I’m doing this alone.”

“I know you are used to doing everything by yourself, but you don’t need to, not anymore,” he said, not looking up at her.

“I don’t have to be alone; I want to be alone. Did you consider that? What I need you to do is keep looking for a murderer.” The fire in the fireplace crackled out and died. The smell of smoke wafted to her nose. “I don’t care where; I just need you to go. I will figure this out on my own.”

He pulled himself up. “I’m still going with you.”

“No, you aren’t!”

“There are no leads about Ahmya. Either I go back to Harlen and get ordered around, doing the same useless things that Riggs is doing, or I make myself useful and stay by your side. I don’t trust these people; there’s so much they aren’t telling us. What can you do that they can’t hire anyone else for? What is it, exactly, they are trying to find?”

Shaking her head, she took a step away as he approached. She didn’t want him closer. She couldn’t let him touch her.

He stopped shy of being within her reach. “You need someone to have your back, and it sure as shit isn’t going to be one of them. I’m a skilled soldier. Let me keep you safe.”

“Leave.” Mora didn’t recognize her own voice as she spoke. “I do not want you, Kallan, I never did. I told you more than once to leave, and still you stuck around like a thorn working its way through me.” She closed her eyes, knowing the pain her words were inflicting, but she couldn’t stop. “You think so highly of yourself that you’re willing to die just to prove that, what...I need you? If you do this, you’re a traitor to the crown and Oryn will have his men hunting you too.”

“Mora,” Kallan sighed. She was going too far, saying too much. Her heart begged her to stop, but her *essyn* said *more*.

“They need *my* help, not yours. Why would you risk your life for no reason? They couldn’t care less about you.” She ground her teeth. “And neither could I.”

Kallan stepped closer to her; his hand stretched out.

“Leave,” she barked, straightening her resolve and telling herself that she was doing the right thing. That she didn’t care.

He took another step closer.

“Leave! Go back to your polished armor and live your perfect life!”

He let his outstretched hand fall to his side, and his eyes went vacant as he shook his head. Mora’s heart clenched. Her words had finally gotten to him.

Straightening his posture, he stepped close enough that they could touch, looking into her eyes and leaning in to say his goodbye. He was giving up on her. Finally.

Her heart missed a beat as it thrummed through her. She had expected to find relief, but she looked into his eyes, and he looked into hers, and something else nestled beneath her safely guarded heart. She found that ice-coated muscle in her chest to be stained by a bruise. That same dark shade of blue. She had a feeling that the color would forever tarnish her bloodied soul.

If she could go back in time, to stop herself from ever looking into those eyes, maybe then it wouldn’t be so hard to not care.

“Never,” he said, and then he pulled her into him and his body was warm and soft and his head hung to the crook of her

neck. “Never,” he repeated, letting the words trace around her skin with his hovering lips.

*Stop this.* She ignored her essay. *You selfish girl.*

Her fingers gripped the fabric of his shirt as if she was holding on for dear life. As if she might float away with her thoughts.

“I know you don’t need me.” He rocked his forehead against hers, their noses brushing against each other. “I need to do this for me. I need to prove to myself that I’m not just the king’s lap dog, that I’m not the kind of person who would ever let someone walk head first into danger all alone. Let me do this, please.”

*You can’t allow this.*

A loud knock startled them away from the embrace. The door handle rattled and then twisted as the door was pushed open.

“By the light,” Kallan murmured when Juddah appeared in the corridor, Ripley at his side.

“Just checking in,” Juddah said. He nodded at Mora. “She needs to learn how to stop projecting her emotions.”

“Wait,” Mora said. “Can you really—”

“Time to go.” A hooded and dripping wet Veres stepped into view. “The wall is moving; they’re taking the town.”

“Well,” Ripley smiled at Mora. “You coming?”

“Yes,” Kallan said.

Veres eyed their closeness, her hand brushing against Kallan’s fingers. He scowled. “And what does the boy have to

offer aside from a quick fuck and few sweet words for a needy heart?”

“I am a skilled soldier. There is nothing you can say to stop me from protecting her.”

Veres huffed a laugh and shook his head. As he walked away, Mora heard him add, “You are a fool to think she needs protecting.”

Mora knew in her soul that she hadn’t tried hard enough. She should have forced Kallan out of her life. She should have shoved him out the door and slammed it one last time, for good measure.

But her needy heart couldn’t let her do it.

Juddah raised a brow. “We don’t have time to argue. Grab some supplies before the damn wall eats us whole. Letta will heal your injuries on the way, so you don’t slow us down.”



## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

THE JOURNEY HAD been as she had pictured the Shadow to be, dark and dreary. The vegetation had been killed by the bloodblight, and most creatures they had seen since leaving the forest had been in various states of decay.

Since they had left the town to be swallowed by Vale, unease fell away to the familiar jesting of friends who had known each other for a lifetime. Mora and Kallan watched from the back.

As always, Veres kept an eye on them, glaring every time either of them moved off the path or sneezed too loud. At least they hadn't been tied back up for the trip; it was going to be a long one.

The trail they followed wasn't wide enough to walk more than two side by side, but Elletta was trapped between Ripley and Slade. The two bickered back and forth about who should step back to walk behind the princess instead of at her side, but they continued to walk with one foot on the trail and one in the moss instead of giving in.

Once, Elletta had tried to step back and let the men have the path to themselves. They had grabbed her arms and



refused to let her leave them, for it wasn't the chivalric thing to do.

Mora hoped, against all odds, that the land would be the one to give in and widen its path so the argument would end. She had also wondered if the path were to narrow, would they stop walking altogether?

"What is this?" Kallan said when he fell behind to fix his boot. Ripley and Slade both turned around, walking backward so they could watch without falling behind Elletta. She shook her head with a laugh and pushed them both off the path at the same time.

"You mean this?" Mora pulled a short and dull sword off her back. "Or this?" She pulled another. "I found them; they are practice blades, are they not?"

"You little thief, what else did you nab?" Ripley's teeth playfully dragged across his lower lip.

"Don't get too turned on," Slade grinned. "There's not room for a fourth person here."

"It's not stealing if the previous owner no longer needs them. Besides, we all grabbed clothes and food on our rush out the door. How is this any different?"

Kallan took one of the swords from her and tested it with a swing through the air. "These will work."

"V!" Ripley shouted. "When are we stopping? I want to watch Mora fight the boy!"

Slade drew his hands to cover his ears. "No need to yell, Rip. He can hear everything we're saying. And I doubt the little mouse will win the fight."

“My bet’s on her. Were you not there when she tore the heart out of your chest?” Ripley asked.

“Still wondering how you survived that one,” Kallan added.

Slade took the time out of their bickering to glare at Kallan before continuing. “Doesn’t count. Besides, this is a sword-on-sword fight, not some feral alley cat hissing match.”

Mora turned to Kallan, who was still playing with the sparring sword. “Did he just call me an alley cat?”

“He called you a little mouse before that, so at least you’re going up the food chain.”

She furrowed her brow and tried to match Kallan’s hand position on the sword. The grip was wrapped in strips of leather that rubbed against her palms. It was heavier than she expected it to be, and it felt clunky and unbalanced in her hand. She missed her daggers.

Juddah followed Veres as they veered off the trail they had been following all day. The mountains rose on their right, jutting into rocky points that looked far too steep to climb. Ahead of them was a scattering of trees that made a corner in the base of the mountain. A perfect place to stop for the night.

“Someone go find food,” Juddah shouted at them.

“I suppose I can,” Slade said. When he took another step, part of his shadow broke off. Death rose from it.

“No!” Mora let the sword fall to her side. “I’ll do it, just give me something sharp to throw.”

“Absolutely not.” Slade stopped. Death smiled over his shoulder. “I don’t trust you not to slit my throat while I sleep.”

“Fine.” She smiled at Ripley. “By the way, Slade stepped fully off the path and fell a step behind when he glared at Kallan earlier. He caught up before you noticed.”

Ripley looked expectantly to Elletta who confirmed. “I saw it as well.”

A devious smile spread across Ripley’s lips.

Slade shook his head and muttered, “Now we have to deal with *that* all night.”

The two of them ran to catch up with Juddah, forgetting all talk of food and sharp weapons when Veres vanished into the trees carrying his bow. She didn’t understand it, but she felt responsible for Slade now, like she needed to keep him alive to make up for what she had nearly done to him.

“Are they always like this?” Kallan asked. He placed the practice sword in the new sheath on Mora’s back. She offered her sword for him to return to its spot as well. Walking with the added weight made her whole body sore, but it would be worth it if she could convince Kallan to teach her how to properly wield a sword.

“Slade can be rude,” Elletta admitted. “Rip has a temper worse than any other I’ve known, and Juddah likes to act as if he is tough as stone. Veres—well, he is just Veres. But when they come together, they are kind and gentle and you will never find company that makes you feel more at home than their little family. So no, they are not always playful. But they are not always scornful either.”

“What do you mean, about Veres?” Mora asked. “He seems like he’s lonely, even around all of you. It’s almost like he’s...” Mora thought about what she was about to say, if it

was crossing a line. Elletta raised her brow, but still had a smile on her face. Mora huffed a small laugh. "Never mind."

It was silly anyway. It was only a moment, back at the house, when she watched Veres standing half in the front door, that she felt a familiarity in him; like he was hurting the same way she was.

Elletta remained with Mora. A slight limp had started to hitch the princess's steps. "That little family, each and every one of them has been through more than anyone should have to endure. But those stories are theirs to tell, not mine."

The three of them watched as the others gathered sticks in a pile for a fire. Ripley and Slade still looked to be bickering, and Juddah had even joined in on their antics.

"You keep saying their family, like you aren't a part of it." Mora said.

"They are a family, the four of them, and three others. As much as they accept me, they are bound together by a connection I cannot share." She looked pointedly at Mora. "But maybe one day you could."

Mora scoffed. No connection would ever bind her; she wouldn't allow it.

This time it was Kallan who pestered her with another question. To her credit, she showed no sign of annoyance like the others gave him. "There are three more of them? I do not think I can handle three more of them."

"You won't need to." Elletta chuckled. "Your involvement will be done by the time we return home. But I do suppose you have met one of them already. Haven't you, Mora?"

If this was the family Rhyn spoke of...she couldn't think of that. Mora feigned a sympathetic smile and walked away, eager to run from her own thoughts.

She needed to remember why she was there, why she had done all the things she had done. She had a fate to stop, a cuff to remove, and if she were going to do that, she now had a relic to find.



The loud clanking of metal on metal felt wrong echoing through the otherwise still night. It had been three days of travel, and they had practiced at the end of every one of them.

Kallan lunged forward with a diagonal cut. Mora swung her blade out to the side to block him. His hit sent a vibration thrumming through the sword that made her hands itch and almost made her let go.

She retreated a step as he prepared for his next hit, this one coming up from below. Mora was too slow to block him. She tried to bend away from his blade. Kallan laughed when she lost her balance. "We have been at this a while. Maybe we should stop for the night."

The suggestion felt too much like admitting defeat to Mora. She fixed her grip on the hilt and broadened her stance.

She lunged forward but misjudged the distance and ran her blade into Kallan's. She wasn't sure how to correct the mistake, and he used her hesitation to attack. She was forced back again and again, sometimes parrying successfully, mostly using her quick movements to dodge his blows. She was glad for that skill, at least.

“I told you,” Kallan said between heavy breaths, “you should practice the movements before we do this for real. And move that thumb before it gets cut off.”

“And I told you,” Mora sucked in all the air she could get and tucked her thumb under the guard of the hilt, “I prefer to learn the hard way.”

Kallan’s sword came crashing down, and the hit was enough for her sore wrists to give out. Her own weapon bounced back and collided with her face.

She had slowed the force enough for it to not hurt badly, but her mouth filled with the taste of blood, and she could feel her pulse in her lip. She used Kallan’s worry to catch him off guard and landed a soft blow of her own to his side, careful to not hurt him. It hadn’t taken long to learn that even a blunt sword could do damage.

By the time she was striking again, he was ready to deflect each of her hits. Their movements grew slower with each swing, and Mora quickly found herself stuck in the pattern of dodge and retreat.

Kallan slid his blade down the length of hers and with a flick of his wrist sent it tumbling to the ground. She backed into a hard surface. Kallan’s sword came up, and he grabbed the dull blade in his off hand to pin her against a boulder. He raised a brow, asking for her surrender.

He dropped the sword to his side and pulled her hips against his. She could feel him hardening beneath her touch. She pulled him closer, her breath mingling with his.

“No,” he said drinking her in, his thumb pulling her bottom lip down. “I believe I told you already, how our first

kiss will go.”

*With your come between our lips.* Her breathing hitched. He undid the buckles of her corset sheath and dropped it to the ground. His hands were soft, slipping beneath her tunic to her cold skin. She wanted him, any part of him, inside her.

“If this is how your fights always end, I want in.”

Kallan yanked back with an impressive growl and kicked the practice sword at his feet up into the air. With one swift movement, he caught the sword and held it to Ripley’s throat.

The action ignited something inside her. She bit her lip to refrain from making a noise. The pulsating pain made her core burn hotter.

Ripley smiled. He looked her up and down. “So the boy has some skill after all. Good to know.”

She shook her head with a huff before fixing her clothes and smoothing her hair down. She picked up her discarded sheath and buckled it back in place as Kallan righted his own disheveled clothes.

“I might kill him.” Kallan said.

“If you don’t, I will.”

“I come in peace to inform you that it’s your turn to bathe.” Ripley’s beaming smile showed off his four sharp fangs. “And that we can all hear you. Not that I wouldn’t have enjoyed the performance...but V wasn’t having it.”

Kallan rolled his eyes. “Which way is the lake?”



## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

RIPLEY LEFT THEM at the clearing surrounding the water. It was beautiful; the river trickled over the mountainside and pooled into a small lake. The princess was in the water, naked, when they approached, and Slade was laying on his back atop a boulder, out of the mossy mud.

“There you are.” Elletta smiled. Kallan looked away when she turned to them. “Join me, Mora, the men can wait their turn.”

Kallan found a stump to sit on, facing the forest so she could undress without prying eyes. Not that she cared. She had never felt shy when it came to her body.

She left her clothes in a messy pile on the shore.

When her feet found the water, she ripped them back out. The idea of bathing had sounded amazing when it had been offered, but staring at the bottomless lake, she found that she no longer wanted to get in. She could already feel the water invading her lungs.

“How deep is it?” she asked as quietly as she could.

Elletta, who was shorter than Mora, walked further into the water until ripples waved across her shoulders. “This is



where I can touch.” She took Mora in, still standing on the rocky shore. “If you’re afraid—”

“I’m fine.” Mora swallowed her hesitation and walked in, letting the water cover every exposed sliver of her skin. She sank until her knees hit the sharp rocks at the bottom and stayed there. She would force the fear from her chest, whatever it took.

Her essyn agreed, rising to the surface of her skin as the water engulfed her. She let the weight of her body pull her under. *You never have to fear anything if you wish it, just let me out.* She broke back through the surface a heartbeat away from passing out.

Elletta handed her a handful of berries, the same green ones she and Kallan had survived on in the Deadwood Forest. She shook her head, confused and not wanting anything to do with the sour taste they left in her mouth. “I’m not that hungry.”

The princess laughed. She demonstrated crushing the berries with her hands and mixing them with the water. They formed small bubbles, and she lathered the mixture into her hair.

It was soap. Mora’s head fell back, her chest shaking with the laughter she couldn’t contain. She took one of the berries and threw it at Kallan. “They’re soap berries,” she said. He caught it without looking and laughter of his own filled the forest. She felt entirely underqualified to ever survive in the wilderness alone.

When she was clean, they stayed to enjoy the solitude of the lake. Mora tested her panic, letting herself float in the shallows as she focused on the moon above her. She felt as if

she could reach up, stick her hand into the night sky, and scoop the stars out with her trembling fingers.

“Can I ask you something, Elletta?” Kallan asked, keeping his back to them as he moved to the rocky shore.

Mora let her legs sink back into the depths of the water, her toes finding the bottom. The princess swam closer to the shore, joining Mora where her feet could touch.

“Of course,” she replied.

“What is this relic Mora is supposed to help you retrieve?”

Droplets of water raced off Elletta’s body as she left the lake. One of her legs was made entirely of weaving vines and budding flowers, and there were enough hollow spaces that Mora could see right through it. It bent and moved with all the grace of her other leg. She was even more stunning than Mora had realized.

She draped her gown back over shoulders and Mora followed suit, letting her shirt cover her body while her skin dried off.

Elletta sat and started to massage her hip and the base of her leg of vines. “A sword,” she said. White light glowed dimly under her touch. “It was once a powerful weapon. It has a long and complicated history; I fear we don’t have time to tell you all of it. But it was taken by the gods when they left, and it has since been returned.”

“Returned from where?” Mora asked.

“The new world.”

“New?” Mora scrunched her brows, remembering something Kallan had said about the Shadow’s beliefs.

“Rurik and Rhea were imprisoned here, that’s what this world was originally meant for, but they made all this instead. To stop the God War, they needed to leave, and the only way to do that was to split the fabric of the world in two, taking with them all that they desired and leaving all they hated behind.

“They took the sword with them and sealed the gate with it so they could never be followed or found. It has only opened once since then, to let a small group back in, in hopes of finding the bodies of Rurik and Rhea’s children. They were meant to bring them back to the new world to be buried. The gods didn’t know that those they sent betrayed them by bringing the sword here.”

“This sword, it’s a weapon of the gods?” If she was right, they were talking about the Twinblade.

“It is. It’s powerful, and dangerous if placed in the wrong hands. We can’t let Vale keep that sword, and the d’zev’s hands might as well be the kings. Dromose is loyal to nothing but coin, and the Kingdom of Light has more to spare than we can imagine.”

“Dromose is d’zev?” Mora asked. Elletta nodded. Mora had thought the demons had all died out in the God War, but if that is what Dromose was, he was more dangerous than she had ever imagined.

“If Oryn had the Twinblade, why wouldn’t he have used it?” Kallan asked. “Why give it to Dromose if he could conquer the world with it?”

“The sword is still only half of a whole, dangerous to those nearest to it. We suspect that is why it was given to Dromose to hide,” Elletta said. “But even if they found the other half,

only one with balance between their soul and essyn can actually wield the sword. It's a rare thing to find in a person. The only one I know of happens to be Slade."

"Slade?" Mora asked in disbelief. She was overcome with relief, again, that she hadn't managed to actually kill the man, but her stomach dropped to see Death still lurking in his shadow.

Slade resituated on his rock. "Took years to figure out, and I swear Garren hit me with that damn cane a hundred times." He rubbed his arm.

"Don't worry, we would never use the sword for what you are thinking. We do not wish for any harm to come to this world." Elletta smiled halfheartedly.

"And you truly believe all this, about the gods and the new world?" Kallan asked with skepticism.

"I don't have to believe." Elletta buried her hand in the rocks, and green stems began to grow, creating a field of blooming daisies on the rocky shore. "I know it is true because I was one of the three that brought the sword back here. So was Ripley."

"And the third?"

"V is coming." Slade jumped off the boulder he had been resting on and walked over to them. "Story time will have to wait."

Mora stood, grabbing her pants to make herself more presentable before he broke through the tree line. She only got one leg in. He headed straight to her and forced her head to the side, taking in the cut on her lip and, as she had recently

discovered, the one that lined up with it on her brow. She had refused to let Elletta heal the wounds.

Veres looked down at Kallan. “You did this?”

Mora pushed him away from her. Ripley must have told on them. “No. You do not get to be mad about shit like this. I’m not part of your little family for you to worry about. This was my own damn fault and you...you have no right to care about me.”

Veres laughed. “You think I care about you?” He leaned into her personal space. “I don’t care about you. I care about what you can do for me, and you’ll do it better if you stop letting yourself get beat to shit. If you want to learn a new skill, pick up something more useful than a sword. That will do you no good when your enemies have magic.”

“And I suppose a bow will?” Kallan mocked.

Veres sneered at him. “If they are that close, she already knows how to fight. If they are far, throwing their magic at her, at least a bow stands a chance.” He eyed Mora up and down. “You’re a fucking mess. Fix yourself before we get to the wall. You have two weeks.”

He left as fast as he had appeared, leaving Mora fuming. She wanted to chase after him and get in a real screaming match, but his parting words had stung too deep for her to move.

She was a fucking mess; she couldn’t deny that. But there was no fixing all the mangled parts of her. She would enter Vale just as broken as the day she had left.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

DAYS WERE MEASURED in fragmented thoughts and cloudy skies. Mora became a void. Her body walked, but nobody was inside. She was empty. A shell of something that once had been.

It had taken a few days for it to hit her, but she had known it would. Not the grief—she carried that deep, buried beneath years of practiced denial—but the numbness. It always found her when her mind escaped its leash. That was when she craved the pain most. At least then, she would know she was still capable of feeling something. Anything.

For a fortnight, they trekked through the hills and valleys of the land. The closer to the wall they got, the steeper the terrain climbed. Rivers flowed from the mountainside, and the trail they walked weaved in and out of scorched trees. Everywhere Mora looked there was fog. It turned the valley into a lake of gray and crept beside them like a welcome member of their group.

*More welcome than you.*

By some miracle, the animals left them alone. Two-headed fawns with bloody teeth, grotesque crossbreeds with

not enough limbs—everything in the Shadow was either too much or too little to be quite right. Mora was both.

As she had every night, she practiced her moves with the heavy sword, swinging it in arcs up and down, side to side, and every angle in between. She grunted as she hit the blunt edge of the blade against a tree, stripping it of its bark at arm level.

Kallan practiced beside her, slowing his pace for her to keep up.

“I have been thinking,” Kallan switched to another routine she knew well, the blocking positions. She followed his lead.

“That I am getting so good at this, you’re willing to let me practice against you again?” she asked, remembering to add jest to her tone and a smile to her face; to act more alive than she felt.

Kallan ignored her. It hadn’t been the first time she had brought it up, and it wouldn’t be the last. He had been deliberately avoiding anything that could hurt her. It seemed, against Mora’s wishes, that Kallan had taken Veres’s threat to heart.

She might have had her “mood swings,” as Ahmya called them, but feeling things or not, that didn’t make her breakable. She wanted him to hit her, and she wanted to hit him back.

“I am not sure what to think about what we are about to do. If it is truly half of the Twinblade we seek, how do we know they don’t have the other half waiting to attack us?”

She let her aching arms relax at her sides, and the sword dangled into the thin layer of fog that swirled at their feet. She had gotten better in the short amount of time she’d had to

practice. She could finally hold the sword long enough to go on the offensive and get a few strikes of her own before her muscles started to scream in protest.

She said not a word of her aches to the others. If anyone had found out, Elletta would have been there to ease them in an instant. She liked the way it hurt when she moved. It was making her stronger.

When she didn't humor Kallan with a reply, he went on. "They are keeping secrets from us, you know."

"Why should I care?" she asked. "I have plenty of secrets myself. The point of them is to not tell anyone. Don't you have secrets you would rather keep to yourself?"

Kallan followed through with his last set in the routine before stopping. "I suppose I do."

"We can start pestering them about theirs when you're ready to share yours then. The less I know about them, the better." *The less you know about him, the better.*

He opened his mouth to speak, but the sound of distant clanking caught their attention. The rhythmic noise of soldiers walking in unison, their loud armor giving them away before they came into view.

Mora crouched as she crested the ridge, seeing their companions below, sleeping around the glowing coals of a dying fire. Only Veres was missing. He never slept near the others, always going off on his own at night.

They had chosen to make camp in a small cove at the base of the mountain. On the other side of the wall that kept them hidden, a group of soldiers walked on. There was nothing Mora could do from where they were.



She jumped at the chance for a fight, racing down the sloped rocks and pulling a stolen dagger from inside her boot. She reached the trail at the same moment the soldiers saw the smoke from the fire.

Kallan's shadow trailed behind her own, holding a blunt sword up in defense. They crept forward until the soldiers came into view again. They were pulling out their swords and signing to each other with motions that Mora didn't understand.

Death crouched beside Slade, petting his hair. *"This is going to be fun; don't you think?"*

"Shit," Kallan whispered. "They're looking for us, the Raven and..." He didn't finish his sentence, but it didn't surprise Mora that he could understand the signals. He was one of them, after all—Vale's soldiers—or he used to be. Mora didn't know what he was now. He likely didn't either, but if she had to guess, they had called him a traitor. "They're going to kill them."

No matter their reasons, Mora was not going to let any of them get what they wanted. She wouldn't let Death have Slade, and she wouldn't let Vale have her.

If she were being honest, she was excited to fight someone who looked like they would hit back. Blood ran ice-cold in her veins at the thought.

She darted out of the shadows and slid the dagger across the throat of the soldier who had given the orders. Her free hand covered his mouth to prevent him from making any noise. His blood soaked her sleeves before anyone knew she was there.

In an instant, Ripley was up, his red eye glowing and his nails turning to claws at his fingertips. Juddah and Slade were not far behind. Elletta had already disappeared by the time a second soldier charged toward Mora. Ripley intercepted him, knocking the man onto his back in the mud with half of his throat missing.

She felt slick blood between her fingers, and something inside her yanked the veil of numbness away. The warm liquid had woken her from a dream to find that she had killed again, and it had been too easy. It was always too easy.

Her bones turned to lead, making it too hard to move. All Ahmya wanted was for Mora to be good, and now that she was gone, it felt like a betrayal of her memory to violate that wish.

Chaos broke out around her, but she stood in the middle without a care—frozen in watch.

There were four more soldiers. Juddah fought two with his bone axes. One of the soldiers threw a gust of air from his hands and formed a cloud of dirt around Juddah. It didn't take long before the windbearer was on the ground with his hands over his ears screaming like something was in his mind. The wind and the cloud of dirt fell with him. Slade's focus was pinned on that soldier until the man's ears started to bleed.

Juddah swung hard and connected the smaller of the two axes he used with an armored chest; the bone sunk through the metal plate like butter. Slade held a sword, but any soldier who charged him fell to the ground with bleeding ears before he needed to use the weapon.

More noise came from further behind her. Kallan fought two more soldiers Mora hadn't seen before. She snapped out of

her trance, rushing to help as another two came running around the corner.

“That’s her!” one of them shouted.

Another came charging at Mora with his sword high. She dodged his first swing and stabbed her dagger behind his knee.

“Dromose wants her alive, you idiot!” *Dromose?* Oryn must have sent the d’zev. Whether to hunt her down or haul her back, she didn’t want to find out.

Her attacker faltered, leaving his throat open for her dagger to find its second kill. She watched his blood gush out as if slowed by the pleasures of its artful spray, painting the ground in shades of red.

Slade thwarted another, demanding Mora’s notice. As he was focusing on blood-spewing ears, an enemy sword lined up, ready to come down on his neck. It stopped, frozen before it had the chance to swing. Slade looked up just in time to see the man stumble back. A dagger that Juddah had yet to discover missing was buried deep in the attacker’s eye.

When the last soldier was down, Mora saw Veres standing on the other side of the camp. He was still as a statue and watching her like a hawk. He had a bow in his hand and an arrow nocked, but he didn’t point it at her, or anyone. He stood there, surveying what she had done like he hated that it had been her to do it. To protect them.

“Are you hurt?” Kallan asked, looking her over. She shook him off.

“Worry about yourself,” she said sharply. Her mind replayed the warm blood gushing across her hands and the lifeless bodies she had sent keening to the ground.

She scanned the scene, looking for *her*.

Slade sat on a rock, a cut on his arm being tended to by Elletta, but no Death. Mora cursed herself for not having seen whoever gave him the gash. Ripley sat at Slade's feet and watched. Juddah had removed his shirt and was using it to clean the blood from his axes, his bare back showing off a tattooed pair of wings. Veres made his way over to them.

In the far corner of the camp, hunched over a fallen soldier, she found her. Death noticed Mora watching. Even as the sun was setting, casting darkness onto the dead, she could still make out a wicked grin spreading across her shadowy lips.

*"Seven. Eight. Nine."* She heard the counting slither into her mind, taunting her. Death flickered in and out, appearing beside Mora between blinks of existence.

Mora took the dagger from the soldier's face and cleaned the blood on her pant leg, ignoring Death.

*"You were generous this night."*

Elletta looked at Mora and smiled. Mora returned the gesture, hoping it conveyed that nothing was wrong as Death played with the floating strands of her shadowy hair and drifted back into Mora's view.

"Go away," Mora whispered.

"Not until you hand it over." Veres stood before her, his hand outstretched. It took her a moment to figure out he had been talking about Juddah's dagger. Reluctantly, she handed it to him.

Her eyes found Death easily this time. She was ripping the essyn from another of the fallen soldiers. This one Mora

had killed. Veres's gaze followed hers.

"You protected them," Veres said.

She didn't know how to reply to that. She only looked at him with a blank face. He pulled the collar of his untied shirt away from his neck and shook his head. She wondered what she had done wrong this time. Aside from the dagger, she came up with nothing. She concluded that perhaps it wasn't her he was disappointed in. Maybe it was himself. Or maybe she was projecting.

"I think the words you were looking for were 'thank you,'" she said.

He walked away.

*"Look at how easy this was,"* Death said. *"You have gotten so angry."*

She was angry. Her life had taken a turn for the worse, and she was still racing ahead. She had no desire to go back. She had no life at the castle or in Vale; no life in the Shadow either.

She watched this little family she had been intruding upon. Unheard words spilled from Ripley's smile, and Slade patted Juddah's shoulders, both nodding their heads. Elletta brushed off the chaos and eased everyone's worry with a simple joke. Even Veres's eyes sparked with a hint of life as he found his family safe.

That was the difference between their pain and hers. When their bones broke and their veins gushed with blood, people came running to make sure they were alright, to put them back together again; but when it was her heart that bled and her mind that was broken, nobody batted an eye.

She let her head tip slowly back, eyes closing as she breathed deeply in. The smell of rain overpowered the smell of death as heavy clouds threatened to unleash once again.

Three men. Three steps closer to her fate, if she hadn't gotten there already.

She would find out soon enough. They would reach the wall by the week's end.

A soft hand slid into hers and for a moment, she wished she was feeling soft fur instead. She wanted the safety she felt in her dreams with her weeping wolf. She wanted the safety to break down. But he wasn't there, she was alone. She would not cry.

She opened her eyes just as Kallan's thumb brushed across her cheek. "Just know that I see you, Mora, and I am not afraid."

*"He should be,"* Death hissed, leaning into his ear.

*You'll be his downfall,* her essyn agreed.

He picked up the sword he had taken from one of the soldiers, none the wiser of the looming threats, and strapped it to his hip.

"The others are saying we must go. These men's absence may be noticed soon." He stood there, fumbling with the sheath to make it seem like he wasn't waiting for her. He never fumbled with a weapon. "They think the soldiers happened upon us while patrolling the wall, but there might be more looking for us. We need to be careful."

"Me," Mora said, "they were only looking for me."

Kallan nodded, slightly. “Let’s not let them know that though.” He left her to join the Shadow Court.

Mora straightened her shoulders and slowly let a mask fall over her face, her eyes coming to life and a hint of a smile playing on her lips. She buried it all: every dark thought, every tear, and every crack webbing through her heart of ice. Now that she could feel again, she had to pretend not to.

*Too much and too little to be quite right*, she thought with the hint of a laugh on her lips.

She would be alright because she had no other choice, and if she wasn’t, there was always her essyn, purring in her chest. *I’m here when you need me.*

She checked the bodies for daggers or any weapon other than the longsword she didn’t want to carry. She felt Veres’s heavy gaze on her, but did her best to pretend she didn’t. She wasn’t going to pass up the opportunity to arm herself. To her relief, he didn’t stop her.

“Let’s go,” Juddah said.

They left a pile of bodies folded over one another like crumbled pages of a torn book that had broken her heart. Kallan walked beside her, tying a strip of fabric around a gash in his arm. He was hurt again, because they were after her.

*The only way to save people from your life is if you live it alone*, her essyn reminded her. But she didn’t know if she was strong enough to do that.

“*You never have to fear being alone, my dear,*” Death hissed through her mind. “*Whether you see me or not, I’m always there.*”



Mora's world was closing around her, growing smaller with every day that led her back to Vale. She had spent so much of her life wishing to leave. She had never imagined that the moment she did escape, she would start her journey right back into the kingdom's shining golden clutches.

Now, the only thing separating her from her return was the threat of the wall's judgment over her. No matter Veres's promise that the tear in magic was safe to cross through.

"Are you coming?" Kallan asked. The others had already made it through the gap that fell beneath a fallen tree. The forest was thin, much thinner than the Deadwood, but the trees offered enough coverage that they wouldn't be seen crossing into Vale, and the small hole in the wall offered them the opportunity.

"You first," Mora said. Unless Kallan had been deemed a traitor and revoked from the kingdom of golden fucking light, he shouldn't have needed to use the hole to enter. That he chose not to risk the wall said more about what he thought of himself than anything he had said since leaving Vale.

The rest of them were no longer welcome guests; their invitations had been revoked the moment Ahmya had been found dead. This was their only way in. It had worked for them. And still, Mora hesitated.

Kallan pursed his lips and looked at her one more time before he left with a nod. He disappeared through the dark the same way the others had.

Mora was alone, but she felt a looming presence behind her. Something nudged her back, and she gasped. When she turned, she saw her weeping wolf.



She took a deep breath and released it slowly. A tear threatened to slide from her eye, but she held it back. It wasn't the time.

Moss squelched beneath his paws as he sniffed the air around her. Reaching her hand out, she paused. Last time, she had startled him with her touch, and he had run. It occurred to her then, watching his half-bone, half-fur snout search the air for the exact spot she stood, that he couldn't see through the thick gold swirling in his eyes. He was blind.

When he found her, he lifted her hand with his snout and forced her fingers to slide across his head. Then he trotted toward the fallen tree, tucked his long wings in tight to his body, and disappeared through the hole in the wall. He was telling her she would be okay.

She crouched down to peer through, but he wasn't there. She only saw legs: Ripley's, Kallan's, Elletta's. Veres was there too. He crouched down and looked back through the hole at her with impatience etched across his features. She sucked in a breath and held it.

He walked away the moment she got through and allowed herself the small prize of being able to breathe again. Her cuff had burned, and she was sure the skin had blistered around it, but she managed to keep the reaction to herself. She relished in the pain.

"That wolf from the forest," Mora whispered to Kallan when she stood. "Did you see it just now?"

"No," Kallan whispered back.

"Are you sure?"

“I am fairly certain I couldn’t have missed something that big and terrifying.”

Mora broke eye contact with him and shook her head. “I thought...It must have been something else.” A shadowy movement caught her attention. Slade smiled at her when he noticed her staring.

*“Enjoy your stay in Vale,”* Death turned back to Slade. *“Not everyone will make it back out.”*



## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

THE CITY OF Dread was alive with color that reflected into the sunlit cobbled roads. Music sounded weightlessly in the air and the smell of fresh baked bread wafted through the gates to the city.

As much as she detested being back in Vale, Mora couldn't wait to walk through the market and taste all the foods she had read about, feel the fabrics, and smell the perfumed scents.

They blended into a group of travelers to walk through the city gates. From what they could overhear, there was no talk yet of missing soldiers.

Mora hadn't told her companions the men had been after her, but if anyone aside from Dromose and Oryn had known Mora was wanted by the crown, they would soon find out. Missing soldiers wouldn't be missed if nobody knew they were there in the first place. And if they were missed, the city guard would be blaming her.

Ripley and Slade peeled away from the group and disappeared into the crowd.

"This is beautiful," Elletta said. She let a length of silk slide through her fingers. The bright pink was stark in

comparison to her dirty gown. It wouldn't take long for the princess to change into something more befitting.

“Do you have coin?” Juddah asked, rummaging through a pouch.

“Do I need coin?” Mora asked.

Juddah handed her a few coppers. “You need something, you buy it. We are not here to attract attention by stealing from people who are just trying to feed their children.”

“Are you leaving us?”

“When they get back, we're splitting up. Better chance at finding Dromose that way. Once he leaves here, our chance is gone, so stay focused and find out where he will be.”

The crowd of people pulled them further into the courtyard like they had stepped in quicksand and had no choice but to sink. It was a miracle they were able to stay together while being swallowed by chatter and bumping elbows, but Mora didn't dare leave their sides until she had to. She already knew she would be getting lost the moment she was left behind.

Slade returned with a small paper bag with a greasy stain on the bottom. It looked, and smelled, like he'd stuffed an entire bakery inside it. Death was no longer with him. “Keep your heads down. There isn't anything posted about us, but there are bulletins all over about a draft. Seems the king is preparing for war, and the best way to get drafted is by giving a city guard a reason to not like you.”

Ripley appeared back at her side next, slumping his arm over her shoulder and handing her something that looked like flaky bread and smelled sweeter than sugar. “If you look at

them funny, they'll put a sword in your hand and send you to the front line."

"The taverns," Mora said. "With so many people here for Revival, we are at less risk of being noticed, but so is Dromose. If there's any chance he's been seen, they'll be talking about it in the brothels and the taverns. The workers hear everything."

Juddah dragged his gaze up her body with a frown. Veres nodded, and Juddah spoke up, as if Veres couldn't bring himself to admit she had a good idea out loud. "Fine. V and I will take the brothels, Elletta and Kallan can hit the market, the three of you head to the taverns."

Mora took a bite of the sweet-smelling bread and let it dissolve on her tongue with a burst of flavor. She moaned softly before swallowing it down.

"Careful," Kallan said, his voice low and full of desire.

Veres couldn't get away fast enough. He stalked off, heading down the only dark alley in sight without so much as a word of goodbye.

"Stay away from the city guard, don't run into anyone who knows your face, and hear anything, meet us at the inn," Juddah said. "The one with the gilded rose on the sign."

"Let's switch," Slade said. "I'll go with V to the brothels. Maybe I can show him what it looks like to relax a little. You go with Gray to the taverns."

"Oh, come on, *Blue*," Mora said. "How awful could it be?"



A coin slammed onto the counter with a loud slap, joining the growing number of coppers that gathered in a pile. It was the

fifth tavern they'd found, and still there had been no word of a Dromose sighting. There had also been no word of missing soldiers or wanted Ravens.

“A feather,” Ripley said as he pulled his hand away and jumped up to sit on the bar top. “One tucked into that obnoxious hat the lutist is wearing. On the other side of the room.”

Mora considered the male in question. He was tall. His head poked over the crowd enough for her to get an eyeful of his colorful hat. Several feathers lined one side, tucked into a band. There was one for every color of the rainbow.

She returned her attention to Ripley, who was staring at her with a challenge in his one red eye.

“Which feather?”

Slade huffed a laugh and leaned back on his stool, resting his elbow on the counter and washing his disbelief down with a large gulp of ale. She swatted his arm away when he bumped one of the various daggers she had sitting perfectly straight and evenly spaced out in a line before her.

She had done well to heed Juddah's warning and managed to keep her hands to herself for the majority of the day. That was, until they entered the last tavern, crowded with enough bodies that she struggled to avoid being touched or slammed into as they made their way to the barkeep.

She had decided, after the second time her toes got stomped on, that she was owed a new dagger from each man who inadvertently touched her throughout the night. The ones who did so on purpose also provided her with a heavier purse and whatever else she liked the look of.

She couldn't help herself. If they were going to treat her like a whore, she was at least going to get paid for it.

"The blue one. No, the green one." Ripley finally decided on the feather in the middle of the array and made the decision final with a swig of his own ale.

"What do we think, boys?" Mora asked. The men gathered around her all chattered and laughed. "The green feather!" one of them spoke up. Ripley gave her a hard smile.

Mora's hand hovered over her newly acquired stash of weaponry, looking for the right one. She picked up an ornately carved hilt with a long, polished blade and weighed it between her fingers. She ran her thumb along the sharp tip and tested the strength of the blade by bending it against the wood.

She repeated the process once more, finding her perfect dagger with her second choice. It was lightweight and smooth, but strong and wickedly sharp. One touch and she had drawn blood from the tip of her finger.

They had been worried about blending in at the taverns, so they thought it only right to drink at each one. She had just enough ale in her that despite the rather deep cut, she didn't feel a thing. Which was a shame.

She sent out a silent thank you to whoever had taken such good care of the simple weapon and wondered which of the unsuspecting men it had been. There was nothing more attractive than someone who treated a dagger with the respect it deserved.

Smiling at the bead of crimson, she wasn't the least bit surprised when Ripley took her finger to his mouth and wiped the blood with his tongue.

“Double the bet,” Slade said without taking his attention away from his tankard, “if she does it with her left hand.”

“Would you like me to close my eyes too?” she asked with far too much confidence for the amount of ale she had drunk.

Her spectators all looked at her. Mora winked and cleared the daggers to the side. She slid her butt from stool to counter, beside Ripley to get a better viewpoint.

She twirled the dagger in her right hand and studied the man strumming away on his lute. Beside him, two women danced a jig and shouted incoherent lyrics of a song Mora had never heard. He bobbed his head in time with the rhythm. She memorized his movements. One, two... Three, four, five. Repeat.

One, she tossed the dagger carelessly up.

Two, she caught the hilt with her left hand and drew it back.

Three, she turned her head to Slade and closed her eyes.

Four, she arced her arm and released the dagger, sending it flying across the room just a hand's width above the unsuspecting heads of drunken men who thought they could dance.

Five, *thunk*.

Mora smiled, opening her eyes just in time to see the briefest hint of shock cross Slade's face. The drunken men around her spilled their ale with their excitement.

Ripley was buzzing with so much joy she could feel him vibrating.



“Alright!” she declared, picking up the heavy serrated one she had been admiring. “What’s next?”

“The not-so-gentle man with the sandy hair,” came a female voice from behind her. She turned to see the barkeep sliding a fresh tankard of ale to Mora with a nod to the man playing darts. He was only five steps from a large target on the wall. Mora had avoided the thing, deeming it too easy the moment it caught her eye.

It didn’t escape her notice that the man had been bragging about his aim all night, making marks all over the target with no inkling of the game Mora played.

She counted five daggers sticking various items to the walls around the room. The newest, a green feather pinned through the quill—its owner, none the wiser, still strumming along to his chaotic song.

“He’s a dirtbag if I ever saw one. Hit ‘em wherever you want, and this one’s on me.” The barkeep let go of the tankard with a wink.

“How about, I do it and you answer a question.”

Her eyes narrowed. “What kind of question?”

“Have you heard of someone called Dromose? We heard he was supposed to be visiting, and I’d like to chat with him.”

Slade fell pale. He dragged a hand down his face. Perhaps she shouldn’t have been so blunt. She was used to hiding in shadows and stealing information, not having to ask for it. She was, admittedly, not good at this method.

The barkeep laughed and shook her head. “You really are crazy.”

She looked around before getting closer. "All I heard is he'll be at the festival tomorrow night. Don't know who with, don't care why. But you'd be smart to not repeat the name again." With that, she pushed the ale to Mora and went back to filling empties.

"This ought to be good," Ripley said as he stole Mora's new ale.

Mora took the barkeep's word as all the permission she needed to scratch a particular itch she had been feeling. She threw the dagger hard, but carelessly, and watched as it soared toward the man. The blade collided with a loud clank against the dart he had just retrieved from the target, knocking it out of his hand and sending it sliding across the floor.

"Aye!" he shouted, looking around until he spotted Mora. A devious grin carved across his features. "I think you missed, lass."

Mora popped up from her seat on the counter, her feet landing on the seat of her stool. "I don't think I did."

Ripley moved his feet. She stepped onto his seat. The others followed his example, moving for her as she walked across the long line of stools against the bar.

"The only thing I miss is a good fight," she said, crouching on the last stool and putting her face right in his. "And you look like you could use a good ass-beating."

His arm swung with all his rage, barely missing her jaw. She had misjudged how fast he would be. That, or the ale was affecting her reflexes.

With the movement to dodge his blow, she fell sideways and landed her butt square in the lap of a handsome stranger,

who seemed to have no idea what was happening around him. She smiled at him, and then threw herself at the man poised to swing at her again.

She ducked, spun, jabbed her knuckles into the backside of his ribs. She almost lost her balance.

He threw a punch with deadly accuracy. It would have hit her between the eyes if she had still been there. Instead, his fist collided with another man's shoulder, giving Ripley the opportunity he had been anxiously waiting for. He flew across the room screaming like a banshee.

The tavern erupted in a brawl.

She felt pain lancing across the side of her eye, her head forced to turn with the momentum of a hit. She made no other moves. She made no sounds. The man laughed, overjoyed to finally land a blow.

*Little did he know.* She was a good fighter on a normal day, but when she stopped holding herself back, she was invincible. She just needed someone to crack her open first.

And he just had.

She fisted a tankard of ale and smashed it against his head. He stumbled backward. The person he bumped into pushed him back, right into her flying fist. His nose cracked, and blood gushed out. He tried to scream, but her right hook was already connecting with the side of his head and sending him tumbling to the floor. His blood splattered across her knuckles.

She was proud to have stopped herself from taking it any farther than that.

Ripley tackled someone, pushing him back to land on the man she had broken. He tried to push them off. Ripley jumped up with a massive grin matched only by her own. They surveyed the room, waiting for anyone to send an accidental fist or chair in their direction.

Slade stood at the counter cheering people on with the barkeep and pointing out the more entertaining of the hits, laughing through gulps of ale and dodging a flying boot that sailed between them.

A chair crashed against a man's back, making even Mora flinch. Slade, now sitting on the counter, howled with laughter. Delight beamed on Mora's face. And then Death reappeared.

Mora's heart stopped.

A loud noise rang through the tavern, sounding like an explosion. Everyone stopped as a crowd of city guards came pouring through the door, spears and shields held at the ready.

"On the ground, now!" they shouted.

If it hadn't been chaos before, it was now.

Mora darted, jumping onto the counter and staying low as she crawled as fast as she could. The crowd had yet to listen to the guards, and she used the mass as cover. She pulled Slade away from Death, and the two fell behind the counter. Ripley met them on the other side.

"This way." The barkeep motioned for them to follow her through the kitchen door.

Mora's buzz had begun to fade from the adrenaline coursing through her veins as they ran through the kitchen to

a back door that had been left propped open. When she slipped outside, she was met by a guard, hand held out, palm open wide. He blew a white powder in her face.



When Mora woke the next morning with the familiar ache of having slept in an awkward position, she found herself once again in a dank cell locked behind iron bars.

She moaned at the pulsing ache in her head and hauled herself upright. She was never drinking again.

“Oh good,” Ripley said from where he sat in the corner of her cell. “I was beginning to worry you had died.”

Someone down the row from them was banging against the bars so loudly they had to have been using their head. She hoped it was their head, at least then they would be feeling the same pain she was with each *clank, clank*.

Either way, she needed it to stop.

“Would you shut the unholy fuck up!” she said, punctuating each rage-filled word.

She looked around to find Slade also in the cell with them, along with three other men who slumped sound asleep in a pile of limbs and muddy boots. Slade made his way over, pissed off as she had ever seen him. “I hope you have a way out of here, because we’re looking at two years on the front line and Ripley doesn’t look good in gray. It dulls his eyes.”

Ripley nodded. “Not to worry, babes, Veres will kill us long before I get any uniform.”

With a d’zev hunting her and her fate quickly closing in, that was the least of her worries.

Mora made her way to the cell door and pulled a small dagger from her boot; the guards had been lax with their search. “Not if he doesn’t find out. This is just like the one in the castle’s upper dungeons.” With her back to them, her arms sticking through the iron bars, she shook the thin blade in the lock, and a loud clink echoed off the bars. With a gentle push, and not even caring to turn back to see the looks on their faces, Mora swung the door open. The hinges creaked loudly, and she felt a pulsing behind her eyes.

“Thank the gods for common criminals,” Ripley said. She ignored the backhanded compliment due solely to the hangover wrecking her body.

“Be nice,” Slade said. “There’s nothing common about Mor.”

She spun on her heel. “Do NOT call me that.”

Slade raised his open hands and took a step away. Ripley laughed, but Mora didn’t think any of it was funny. The others who had woken in the cells next to theirs shouted for her to release them as she turned and walked out.

She looked at the man with the two black eyes—courtesy of her fist—as he pleaded to be let out before his wife was informed of his crimes. She could have helped him, should have even.

She should have helped all of them.

Instead, she gave the thin blade to one of the men who had cheered her on in the tavern and hoped he knew how to wiggle a lock free. There was no time to do it herself.

There were only two city guards standing watch, and neither noticed as they slipped past and headed to the inn with

the gilded rose above the door. There was a comfortable bed waiting for her there, but she knew there would also be a lecture and a stern frown, and if she was lucky, a glass of whiskey.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

SOMEONE HAD TOLD Veres about their night out. Luckily, that person—whichever of them it had been—had left out the part about waking up in a cell with the threat of being drafted looming over their heads. Still, she avoided him and his no doubt judgmental stares.

Mora sat beside the princess and picked at her breakfast. Their table was on the edge of the market square and offered a perfect view for her to watch Death hover around Slade at a vendor's cart.

It might have been the oddest sight Mora had ever seen. The vendor was selling pink, yellow, and green carved miniatures of fabled creatures. There were dragons and unicorns, tiny people with wings, and things that sparkled even from far away.

Juddah, with his bulky muscles on display and his long hair braided like he was ready for battle, was arguing with the woman behind the cart. Slade, in his dark blue cloak and his pin-straight hair, looked as if he should have been wearing a prince's crown while he tried to mediate the situation. All the while Death watched on, amused by the spectacle but not so distracted that she couldn't still taunt Mora.



“*Soon,*” she hissed. She pretended to brush dirt from Slade’s cloaked shoulder. Mora swallowed thick saliva when Death sank into the shadows and vanished, leaving her able to breathe once again.

“What are they—”

“Personal reasons.” Veres cut her off. It gave her a small sense of pleasure to see Elletta glare at him.

Mora couldn’t help but notice his beard had been trimmed back to its shorter length. He looked more menacing with it like that, accentuating his sharp jaw.

“Ignore him. He’s extra grumpy today.” The princess toyed with a bowl of fruit and went back to pretending that she wasn’t also interested in whatever her friends were up to.

Mora popped a grape into her mouth. There were some battles she didn’t need to pick. Knowing whatever personal things they were trying to shake down a toy maker for was one of them. But that didn’t stop her *essyn* from whispering thoughts of burying a dagger in Veres’s throat for being such an ass. She could hear her heartbeat quicken as her ears started to pound to its rhythm.

*How much do we think he can handle before he starts to feel?*

Despite what her *essyn* wanted, the last thing she needed was more trouble.

*Do it, let us find out.*

She ate another grape and worked on lulling her *essyn* back to sleep, calming her pulse and taking slow and steady breaths in through her nose, out through her mouth. She

looked down at her hand and traced her palm with cold fingers.

*Mora writhed on the floor, the cuff on her upper arm burning hot against her skin, the smell of melting flesh bringing bile up her throat.*

*“No. Stop. No. No.” Her bloody hands covered her ears and she rocked back and forth, the pain searing into the gashes in her back.*

*The assault had happened fast, she hardly had time to comprehend what he had done. When the pain had shocked through her, Mora had screamed so loud she was sure she had woken all of Harlen.*

They all deserve death. Give them what they deserve, *her* *essyn* pleaded.

*“Just stop! Stop!” It didn’t want to listen. It fought her, trying to use magic that had been locked up for years.*

*Her cuff burned hotter. Her thoughts grew darker.*

*A warm touch reached for her hand, pulling it and her attention to the man in the cell next to her. She didn’t know his name, or if he could even talk to tell her what it was, but he had kind hands and he always reached for hers when she fell apart. His thumb rubbed into the center of her palm and gave her something to focus on that wasn’t threatening to consume her.*

*This time, his pale blue eyes looked at her, and he spoke. “Just breathe, Mor,” was all he said. He demonstrated for her, deeply in through the nose, slowly out from the mouth.*

*She didn’t know why, but she listened to him. And when she took a deep breath, the burning rage of her *essyn* calmed for the first*

*time in weeks, if only a tiny bit. After three deep breaths, she grew tired; by the fifth, she found a numbing sleep.*

*He never let go of her hand.*

Elletta quickly averted her gaze from the vendor cart to her bowl. The act was so sudden it caught Mora's attention and ripped her back to the present. A crescent-shaped cut marked her palm. She wiped her sweaty hands on her pant legs and scanned the crowd.

Where the princess had been staring, Ripley was leaning against the wall. His shirt sleeves were rolled and pushed up to his elbows the same way Veres's always were, but neater. His new black corset had a faint paisley pattern, and his black hair had been combed and styled in a way that it hadn't been since she had first met him in the Castle of Pearls; almost neat, but a bit out of place.

Mora could not deny the fact that the man was insanely attractive, in an unhinged, feral sort of way.

He was not the least bit interested in the barbarian and the should-be prince arguing with the toymaker beside him. He was staring back at their table. More specifically, at Elletta.

"I hope you're taking a tonic," Mora said quietly, "because the look he's giving you could impregnate a woman."

Elletta choked on whatever piece of fruit she had just bit into. She coughed politely into a handkerchief, and Mora could see the whites of her eyes. Hundreds of years old and the princess was blushing at the implication of sex. Veres shook his head in that disappointed way he liked to do.

Mora smiled, tossed her bowl onto the table, and stood from her chair. "I am going to go find Kallan before Ripley

ends up fathering my own children.” A sharp pain twisted in her stomach, and she walked away.

She had never met another person who made her want to argue more than Veres did, except maybe Ahmya when they were young. But even then, Mora was never inclined to scream in her sister’s face the way Veres made her want to scream in his.

She could feel Veres’s glare on her as she disappeared into the crowded market square. The faint sound of him shouting at her to not be gone for long disappeared in the breeze.

She had no clue where Kallan had gone, only that he had worried he would be recognized if he was seen by any of Vale’s soldiers or socialites. It turned out, he had spent many of his training years not far from Dread. He had narrowly escaped being recognized when he and Elletta had gone searching for word on Dromose.

If he was seen with the Shadow Court, he would be named a traitor to the crown. Another reason she needed to let him go. She had to at least try, again.

Caught in her aimless wandering while contemplating what to say to the Golden Boy, Mora ended up following the scent of freshly baked bread.

There were a few carriages parked along the road that jutted off the main square, but it was mostly filled with laughing people who darted in and out of the bustling shops. Two small girls peered out one of the carriage’s windows, pudgy fingers pointed at the shops and the colorfully dressed people.

In front of the carriage were two of the biggest horses Mora had ever seen. One of them whinnied, demanding Mora's attention. Its plaited mane was soft under her fingers.

The two had the same markings, a starlike shape of white on their muzzles and matching speckled patterns on their hips. If it weren't for the difference in shades of chestnut, they would have looked identical.

"They are almost as magnificent as you, darling." A waft of baneroot smoke blew around Mora, and she spun on her heel. Dromose caught her hand before she could pull a weapon from her sheath. "You won't be needing that, Raven."

Her stomach fell, and her body went cold as she yanked away from his touch. All the work she had done to calm her essyn had been reversed the moment she saw him. "I think you're mistaken; my name is Mora."

"What is a name, really, if not something that people call you? And I've heard you be called many things. So, I would argue that your statement and mine could both be true simultaneously." He twisted the burning end of the rolled baneroot against one of the horse's necks; both beasts quivered, tossing their heads in unison. Dromose smiled. "They are twins, sharing an essyn. A true rarity. If one is threatened or in pain, they both feel it, a way for the other to know that their shared mortality is in danger."

Mora turned to walk away, but he stepped in front of her.

"I am glad to see that the soldiers didn't hurt you. Then again, if your reputation is correct, I should not be surprised that you made it here untouched while they remain to be seen." There were red symbols inked down one-half of the d'zev's face and neck that hadn't been visible before. They

moved as he talked, distorting their shapes and rearranging, making it hard for Mora to read what they might say.

“You can tell Oryn to fuck off. I’m not going with you, and if you try forcing me, you’ll find out how little self-control I have when *my* mortality is in danger.”

He let go of her wrist. “You will be leaving Dread with me, but I’m not going to force you. I’m going to convince you instead. You will come with me of your own accord.”

“And how are you going to do that? More deals of my help in exchange for some impossible promise Oryn could never uphold?”

“I’m not here to make deals, darling. I’m here to open your eyes. Now walk with me.”

“No way,” Mora snapped.

“Look around you.” He held his hands up as if to show off the busy road. When Mora looked, she saw what he had meant for her to see.

Askians were fae or shifters once, until their *essyn* won over their bodies. Then they were soulless, shadowless beings. And there was one making funny faces at a child on the other side of the road, while puppeting a stuffed toy in the air.

Dromose offered her his arm. “You can either come with me, or ruin a perfectly good day for all these innocent people.”

An askian was nowhere as dangerous as Dromose was himself, but he was still worth worrying over. “I’m guessing Oryn doesn’t know that you’re threatening his people’s safety?” Mora slid her dagger back into its place and reluctantly joined the *d’zev* for his stroll, refusing his offered arm. “I have a hard

time picturing him allowing you to stay in his precious kingdom if he did know.”

He laughed, sticking his hands in his pockets as they walked. “You keep assuming Oryn sent me. He gave me that sword to hide, to keep it from corrupting him and turning his staff mad. That was the only smart thing he’s ever done. The man is almost as clueless as you are, darling. I could paint my shoe gold and tell him it was gilded with the tears of a god, and he would pay a fortune to make it his.”

“Then what do you want with me?”

“We happen to think you would make a better ally than an enemy.”

“You sent soldiers to capture me so you could ask to be friends?” Mora laughed. “I’m no expert, but I’m fairly certain that’s not how it works.”

“No,” he said. “That was not my idea, but Aemon was insistent. Imagine my surprise when you and I just so happened to end up in the same city after that failed attempt.”

When Mora stopped, Dromose did too. Her head was swimming, her heart was pounding, and her *essyn* refused to calm. She couldn’t think through all of its thoughts.

He turned back to her. “A coincidence I’m sure has nothing to do with the company you’ve been keeping or what they plan to try and steal from me. What is the matter, darling?” He nodded his head. “Ah, it was the Aemon thing, wasn’t it?”

She felt vaguely like she was going to vomit. What did a god want with her? *My darkmark*, she realized.

*The god of light is going to kill you.*

“He has that effect on people. He’s not all that special if you ask me. Aside from being a god, that is. But you—he thinks *you* are special. Tell me, what do you know about the Twinblade?”

“Quite a lot,” she managed to say through the heaviness that threatened to weaken her entire body. She couldn’t let the d’zev see how worried she truly was.

“Well, then you know it’s rare to find one capable of using it?” He looped his arm around hers and tugged for her to keep walking.

*Slade.* Mora looked back over her shoulder. They had walked too far to see any of the Shadow Court. She needed to keep it that way, keep him from her friend whatever it took. She swallowed, the saliva thick in her mouth, and feigned a smile. “Yes.”

“Well, congratulations, darling; you are it.”





## CHAPTER THIRTY

“TELL YOUR BLIGHT-DAMNED god that he’s wrong. There is no one, especially not me.” Mora laughed. “My essyn is the furthest thing from balanced.”

“Precisely my next point; at present there is disorder inside you, but your cuff can help keep your essyn in check if you know how to take advantage of such a thing. And with a few adjustments to your soul—and a little help from my *blight-damned god*, as you so eloquently put it—you’ll feel like a whole new person. Superior. Stronger. Self-possessed. All it would require is for you to accept your fate and let your darkmarked prophecy unfold.”

She was silent. So was her essyn.

They knew. Yet, what he was offering her wasn’t death, it was a way out of the rutted path she had been steadily digging herself into. A second option she hadn’t let herself consider before. A way to control her essyn, instead of pleasing it. A way to live in peace.

*No.* Her essyn recoiled.

She pulled her hand behind her back when she felt a familiar chill coating her fingers. The smell of smoke accompanied her heating cuff.

“I can’t imagine how exhausted you’ve been, running from your fate. Being dragged around and used, all those people wanting to take their little piece of you.” He took the baneroot stick from behind his ear and rolled it in his fingers. “I mean, did you really think the Shadow Princess would stop at just having you seduce information from me? Any woman could try that, but she needed *you*. She knows you have far greater talents, and as soon as she gains your trust, she will exploit them. We can set you free from all that. All I ask is that you want it.”

He was wrong, they didn’t need her for that. But he knew too much already, and all she could do was hope he didn’t learn more—didn’t learn about Slade.

He was right about one thing, though. She was exhausted. “I can’t let my fate come true. I won’t let myself become evil.”

His fingers traced the side of her face, leaving space so he never touched her. This time, Mora didn’t pull away. He looked into her cold, staring eyes. “May I touch you?”

“No.”

He dropped his hand with a smile on his lips. “Did it ever occur to you that maybe you are already evil?”

“The wall hasn’t worked like it’s supposed to in years,” he continued, walking mindlessly. “Look at the crime in Harlen. It has nearly doubled since Oryn took the crown. I mean, think about it. What makes more sense? That you have always had evil in your heart and slipped through unnoticed like so many others, or that there is some mythical line through the fates that, by a miracle, you haven’t crossed yet?”

“All I know for certain is that you shouldn’t fear it. There are people out there who don’t care. Good or evil, they just want you to be yourself. No matter who you are or who you turn into. It’s unconditional; the way Aemon cares.”

“I can’t—I—” She couldn’t breathe.

“Don’t be daft, darling. Think about it. I look forward to continuing this conversation when we meet at the ball tomorrow evening.” He looked her up and down. “I’m sure you’ll look exquisite in anything, but I do look forward to seeing you in a dress.”

He turned back to the blond-haired askian who had been following them. “Vargas,” he said. His voice was more commanding than the gentle tone he had taken with her. Vargas made his way through the crowd with ease. The second the askian touched him, they both disappeared.



Mora found Kallan seated with his legs between spindles of a railing, hanging off of a balcony high above the market square. The view from up there was beautiful enough to distract her, if only for a moment.

To one side, the city was crowded in colorfully painted roofs and stained-glass windows casting shadows of rainbows. Strips of fabric and canopies decorated the white stone buildings, something she never would have seen in Harlen. The city faded off into the base of the mountain.

In the other direction, a river cut through the land and fields of grass and manicured dirt lined neatly on either side. Newly constructed buildings stretched as far as the water allowed them to go, some of them not yet completed. The river

and the lake it flowed from were swollen and spilling water dangerously close to the edge of the city.

“Three Crowns River,” Kallan said without looking at her. “It’s one of many that floods every year and feeds the fields with the minerals they need to grow their crops.”

“That’s what Revival is about, is it not?” She plopped down beside him.

“Yes and no.” He pulled one leg up and rested his hands on his knee. He looked out at the fields. “The holiday is to give thanks to the gods for letting Vale’s lands thrive. Part of that is the river, part of it is fertility. But the main point is to celebrate what Aemon has given us and what he will continue to give in the coming seasons. He is the god of the skies, after all. His rain feeds our rivers and his sun grows our crops.”

Mention of the god who was not missing or hiding or looking for the other gods, but hunting *her* twisted Mora’s heart.

They sat in silence and watched the sun rise higher in the sky. There was such a stark difference between the Shadow and Vale. Mora could see how anyone would enjoy such light and beauty as what she looked at then, but she missed the gray. She missed the rain.

As she took it all in, she debated telling the Golden Boy what she had learned. It was hard to know whether it would be better to tell him or let him remain oblivious like the rest of Vale. He had been so sure of himself when they had first met. His job, his religion, his whole demeanor. Now he seemed just as lost as Mora felt.

“Do you believe the rest of the gods will come back, Kallan?” she asked without jest. She wanted to know what it was that made people keep faith in anyone who had failed them.

“I no longer know,” he admitted. “I used to. I used to think that Aemon was out there somewhere trying to find them while we restore our world to what it was meant to be, something deserving of their return.”

When she studied his face, she saw the same cracks she had seen when they had stood before the library. They were deeper now, more somber. “But now?”

“After all Elletta has told me about the past, I’m not sure. It feels as if the whole story is out there somewhere and we are stuck here, in the middle of it, with only pieces from either side.” He glanced at Mora; his blue eyes looked darker than before. “Now, I wonder if any of this is even worth saving.”

“Is that what we have been trying to do?” She offered him a smile. Small as it may have been, it was genuine. “Remember who you’re walking through this world with, Golden Boy. Don’t you know, I’m the big bad.”

Kallan laughed; the sound relieved the tightness growing in Mora’s chest. “You are not. We will get that cuff off and watch your mark fade away. It’s happened before. I’ve seen it. Fate can be broken, and if anyone can do it, it’s you.”

She bit her cheek. “There is something I need to tell you.”

Kallan laid back on the marble balcony and rested his head on his hands. After she had told him everything about her encounter with Dromose, about Aemon, and what they

wanted her for, he raked his fingers through his hair and left them there.

Blood bubbled on her bit lip as she stared unseeingly at the city below. Kallan stood and rested his arms on the railing next to her. He twisted his mouth, looking lost in thought.

Eventually, he sat back down at her side. “If Aemon thinks the cuff can help you to reach equilibrium, that it’s the key to you wielding the only god-killing weapon...then maybe you were right about needing it off in order to stop fate.”

“What if...” Mora breathed a sigh and let her head rest against the cold rail. “What if I just stop? What if I’m tired, Kallan. All this running and making deals and trying to be better—it’s exhausting. And the moment I let myself rest, grief seeps in and I just...I don’t think I can handle much more before I break.” *I don’t think I can handle you*, she wanted to add, but the words fell short of what they meant, and it no longer felt right to tell him to go. She was starting to hope he wouldn’t be just another person who ended up leaving.

She rested her head on his shoulder. “I’m on the verge of breaking. And I’ll never forgive myself if I hurt everyone near me when I finally do.” *Don’t let me hurt you*. “I just want to stop all the running and hide somewhere safely away from everyone, to let fate and grief take me. Damn the consequences.”

He slipped his fingers between hers, and she could feel his magic buzzing between their palms. “You can get through grief, Mora. I know you can.”

He had opened his eyes and turned his head to meet her gaze. “We can go to the festival tonight; they would notice if we left before then. But after, we sneak away before the ball

and let the Shadow Court and Dromose and the gods—let them figure their own problems out. They don't need you, they certainly don't need me, and we do not need them.”

“The ball?” Mora wrinkled her brow. “Is this the one Dromose spoke of?”

“The Blade didn't tell you?”

She bit the inside of her cheek. “He's either that pissed at me, or he truly thinks that little of me to believe I would ruin everything if I knew.” She didn't know which was worse.

Kallan's expression diminished into a bitter smile as he looked away. Mora gave him a nudge with her shoulder. “After we leave, what do we do then?”

“Whatever you want to do. I will follow you anywhere.”

Something like hope began to build deep down. It reminded her of the dream that she had once shared with Ahmya. A small light in her darkness. Dromose had been right about some people not caring, but she didn't need a god to have faith in her when she'd already had it right there in front of her all this time.

“We would still be running, if we left. We would be running from a god, Kallan. Are you prepared for that?”

“We will be doing that regardless. But on our own, there would be no more risking our lives for anything that didn't deserve it. I've explored the Shadow some. There are mountains and caves and vast spans of barely touched land; we could make a home somewhere he would never find us.”

“And what about me? Veres can't be the only one who knows about this all-knowing person, but it might take time to

find them on our own. Are you not afraid of what I might do or become if we don't figure it out in time?"

She thought about taking that truth from Veres, to make him tell her where this person was, but if she did, it would spark suspicion and she would end up back in restraints. If they left, they would be doing it blindly.

Kallan propped himself up on his elbows and smirked. "Never."

"You say that a lot." Mora laughed. "You better be careful, Golden Boy, or *never* might finally catch up with you."

His smile faded while he studied her face. "I know you have been trying not to, but it is easy to see you are starting to care about them; Ripley, Elletta, and Slade. If we do this, there will be no going back. It will be just you and I fighting for our peace against the Shadow Court, Vale's armies, Aemon and Dromose, the future, the past...the whole damned world." He chuckled.

A bell chimed throughout the city signifying time for prayer. Kallan didn't leave. He didn't move, aside from squeezing Mora's hand.

"You and I against the world." She couldn't help but smile. "I like those odds."

*This path will lead to death.* Her *essyn* constricted around her heart.

*You're wrong,* she thought. *This path leads to life.*





## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

DEATH WAS EVERYWHERE. Little dolls like shadows with buttons for eyes. They hung from merchants' carts and tree branches like ornaments to ward the night away.

The dark that crept across the sky threatened to swallow all color from the vibrant city, but those dolls were the only thing that complied. Everything else clung to color like it was their only lifeline through the dead of night, a time that would normally shut down businesses and close bedroom blinds.

But not tonight. Tonight, everyone aside from Mora was dressed for a party. Her black leather sheaths and white shirt stood out against the colorful dresses that floated through the crowds.

"What is all this?" Mora mused at the sight. Elletta led them through the crowd of people and past a pyre. Logs stacked high awaiting permission to burn.

"The women burn Death to keep her away," she said with too much glee in her voice for the words that it formed. "Your faith did teach you of the ethereal, did it not? You know of Death? Life? Love? Gosh, there are too many to name."

"Of course," Kallan said. Mora nodded her head as they weaved their way through the people. Mora's faith was not

found in the gospel, but in books. Books that told the histories in black ink instead of white lies. By the time she had learned the part about the ethereal Death, they had already met.

A doll was shoved into Elletta's hand by a small child with a smear of jam across her grin. The child offered one to Mora next but she refused, pulling her hand back and wrinkling her brow. Without missing a beat, the girl ran to the next woman in the crowd, letting them continue their way through the congested courtyard. Kallan laughed.

"A surprisingly accurate depiction, I would say," Elletta noted, inspecting the doll. "It's rather close to the paintings back home."

"The eyes aren't quite right," Mora said. The figure's eyes had been sewn into the head in black thread, but the shape made the doll look too happy. Even when Death smiled, her eyes never changed from her lifeless stare. When she realized her mistake, and the look Elletta gave her, she amended. "I'd assume Death would not have such lively eyes."

She scanned the crowd flooding in from the market quarter, looking for a dark figure as if she might have summoned her. As if Death was so morose as to watch herself burn hundreds of times over.

Mora would have, if it were her. She would have wanted to see how the people carved her face, the smiles they drew and the color of beads that resembled her eyes. Silver or green, everyone saw them differently. She would have smiled to watch her demise be celebrated with such vigor and laughed at how their efforts could not keep her away.

"Elletta," Kallan said as they finally saw the table across the fountain where their companions sat. "I am curious to

know more about your faith. It is different from mine in some ways and not in others. I know of the ethereal as they are in the One Faith, but—”

“Kallan.” Elletta flashed him a smile. “If you would like for me to tell you another story, you just have to ask.”

“I would like you to tell me a story.” He smirked, somehow making even his childish request sound like a flirt. Mora didn’t blame him. Elletta had changed into a light gown with slits up to her hips and cutouts around her ribs. Her leg of vines was budding with flower blooms like jewelry and her long hair was in intricate braids down her back. Mora would have been concerned if Kallan hadn’t tried flirting with her.

“Perhaps later,” Elletta said. Mora laughed when she saw the whites of Kallan’s eyes. The princess walked up to the table and sat between Ripley and Slade, the former of which blew a handful of petals into her hair.

Across the table, flowers were woven into braided crowns of leaves. The men were barbarians compared to the beauty they held in the palms of their hands.

Juddah worked tirelessly to fit small pink buds between leaves with fingers far too big for such delicate work. He had even shaved the thorns from their stems and set aside the wilted ones.

Even Veres worked on a crown, although with much less interest, and he seemed to be picking the greenery out of the roses instead of adding more of anything in. He stopped when Mora and Kallan approached.

Slade set his crown on his head, wild with blue flowers and small berries that matched his eyes.

“Just beautiful,” Mora teased.

“Ah, little terror, you can’t say I don’t put in the effort for seduction.” Slade adjusted the crown to make it balance evenly on his silky brown hair. Ripley snorted.

“This is stupid,” Veres interrupted, tossing his crown of budding and full-bloomed roses. Mora caught it before it busted apart against the stones. Red petals drifted to the ground like drops of blood.

She hadn’t at all been surprised to see him give up on the celebration so early. The thing that had come as a surprise to her was that he had shown up in the first place. He seemed more the type for a dark room and a bottle of whiskey than a party of song and dance. But then again, that’s not what they were there for.

“Wait.” Mora set the crown on the table and chased after him. He made no effort to stop or slow his walk.

“Wait,” she said again. “We need to talk, you and I.”

“Do we?” He stopped in front of a tavern but didn’t go inside. He waited for her; it was as much of a surrender as she was going to get from the man.

She swallowed her pride—choked on it a little, but swallowed it nonetheless. For once, she wanted to talk to him without it turning into an argument. She wanted to tell him about Dromose; she felt she owed him that truth at least. If she were going to bail on their deal, the least she could do was make sure he knew what he was walking into.

“I know I messed up earlier, *we* messed up.” She looked over her shoulder to Ripley and Slade, noting that Veres had walked just far enough that none of their words would reach

listening ears. “We shouldn’t have caused a scene, I know that. We wanted to fit in with the crowd and so we started to drink, and then I was just trying to, I don’t know, get to know them better. Things got out of hand.”

“That’s not what you were doing, and you know it.” He stepped forward, just shy of being uncomfortably close. “Don’t think I haven’t noticed the way you self-destruct when any little thing doesn’t go your way. It’s a miracle you’re still alive with how often you throw yourself in harm’s way. Let me ask you something, *Shev’né*.” He leaned closer, and she stood her ground, refusing to cower from him. “Does your life mean so little to you that you are that eager to see it destroyed?”

“I don’t want to die,” she said too fast. It was the truth, but not entirely an answer to his question.

“I’m not the one that you need to convince, and you’d better do it quick, before your reckless behavior ends up getting one of them hurt.” He nodded toward his family.

Kallan had begun to weave a crown, picking through the baskets of flowers. There was a sense of peace that fit perfectly into the spaces between them, seated around their crafts, making jokes. A peace that filled the person-shaped void where she had been.

“There are a few things I need to make perfectly clear,” Veres said, his voice low and deep. “You are here because you have a specific set of skills that we happen to need. The moment you prove yourself more of a hindrance than you’re worth, I won’t hesitate to kill you. The moment you get one of my friends hurt, I won’t miss when I aim my arrow at your heart. And considering I’ve spared you twice now, in every

sense of the word, your life belongs to me; and as such, you will start treating it with respect.

“You have no place among my people, Moranna. Stop trying to make friends. It’s not why you’re here.” He walked away, her steps following close behind and angry words bubbling their way up her chest. She wanted to see the hurt in his eye when she told him that he didn’t need her around to get his brothers killed, he was going to do it all on his own. And she wouldn’t even be around to blame.

She grabbed his shoulder to stop him. He yanked her wrist and twisted her around, wrenching her elbow with just the right amount of tension that it wouldn’t dislocate. Her chest hit the wall of the tavern. The force stole her breath from her lungs. Hot pain gripped the soft part of her shoulder where muscle connected to her neck as something dug in.

Veres snarled in her ear. “Don’t ever fucking touch me.” He spat the words like they were the last he would ever say to her. They probably were.

Before she could react, he was a silhouette at the end of a long alley.

“Leave him be,” Juddah said, walking over to her.

Her fingers found the damp spot on her shoulder, hot with an ache. Two indented semicircles marred her skin. “The bastard bit me,” she snapped.

“And you’re lucky that’s all he did.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? That you’re surprised he didn’t kill me? Because he threatened that at least twice while also demanding that I keep myself alive. Which now that I think about it is wildly confusing.”

Juddah pulled her shirt collar back onto her shoulder to hide the mark Veres had left behind. The touch felt natural, despite all the ways Juddah had made it clear he couldn't stand being near her.

"It didn't used to be like this, but this world is not a gentle one, and we all have our ways of coping. All but Veres," Juddah said. "He's never figured out how to. Frankly, we all fear he'll never start to heal. I'm telling you this only so you know that when you're advised to leave him be, it is not a suggestion to be taken lightly. When he leaves, he does so for a reason. And with the anger you're feeling right now, you'll only make things worse."

She looked back to where Veres had disappeared. He constantly rubbed his hand across his throat like he couldn't breathe and was always shaking his head. She had thought it had been disappointment in her, in others, the way Ahmya shook her head when Mora made mistakes. Then she thought he was disappointed in himself, but now, maybe he was just shaking away the bad thoughts. Like her.

He wasn't coping. She understood that.

"Well, he needs to do a better job of keeping it to himself then. He can't keep taking it out on me every time we talk. I have my own problems."

"If there was ever a person who could take it, it'd be you." He sighed. "But I know that doesn't make it right."

"Why? Why me? What is so special about me that you guys can't do this on your own?"

Juddah sighed. He looked back toward his friends and Kallan and nodded for her to follow as he started walking

back, the promise of explanation on his lips.

“Dromose would recognize us now that we’ve met. He knows who we are.”

“I was there too, remember? He knows me.”

He sighed. “Yes, he knows you as one of Oryn’s courtesans. Before we left, we heard Oryn telling his soldiers to find you but to keep it quiet. Seems the king didn’t want anyone finding out what you do for him, even after all that happened. You are his dirty little secret.”

“He has a lot of those,” she bit out. “But that still doesn’t answer the question. Why me? There are plenty of others who could pass as a whore.”

They stopped at the table but didn’t sit down. Juddah crossed his arms and looked at her.

“You have experience with this sort of thing, do you not, Raven?”

She glared at him. “How do you know about that?” It seemed everyone she didn’t want to know about that had found out.

“After—well, after everything that night, Oryn got sloppy with his sound shields. You aren’t the only one who listens. And the Blade isn’t the only one with a reputation.”

*That could have been how Dromose found out too,* she thought. She could have told him about what Dromose knew; she hadn’t gotten around to telling Veres. But the only thing she cared about now was keeping them from growing suspicious of her plans.



“Fine, but if you guys screw me over, I’ll wind up adding your blood to my kill list.” She wiggled her fingers.

“That’s blood?” he asked, a bit horrified. Ripley jumped up to grab her hand, inspecting the ink on her fingers.

“I’m sad to say my last few were unable to join the tally. My artist is a bit held up at the moment.” Her heart pinged. “But for you, I would carry a vial of blood halfway around the world to see it added to my ink.”

“I’m flattered,” Juddah said. “We won’t screw you over. I doubt it will even be that hard of a job for you. All you should have to do to seduce Dromose is show a bit of skin and be yourself. You’re exactly his type.”

“And what is that, angry?”

Slade smiled. “No.”

“Dromose likes the crazies.” Ripley shoved a small plate of tarts into Mora’s hand when she glared at him. Kallan joined them, a crown of every color on his brow.

“You think he’d love me.” Ripley laughed. “But nope. I’m too *unstable* for his taste.”

The tart was warm and melted on her tongue, rich chocolate exploding against her senses. She hadn’t had chocolate since her eleventh birthday.

She picked up a flower from the table and twirled it in her fingers. Kallan took it from her and added it to his crown. “Those are not for you.”

“And why not?”

“Look around.”

Every man there was either wearing one of the colorful crowns or focusing dearly on making one. The women had gathered in groups and were giggling and watching them like school children.

“After the fire is set alight and the prayers are said, the people of Dread have another tradition.” A wicked grin spread across Kallan’s lips. “The men make crowns like the one the God of Fertility used to wear. When a woman takes it from him, or is given it freely, they are bonded for the night. To... celebrate.”

She liked the idea of celebrating. But they were all supposed to be doing a job, hers being keeping up the charade. “Is this really a good time for all that?”

Slade laughed. “You’ve snuck into Dread to commit treason, doll. There has never been a better time for a little sexual exploration, heavy drinking, and risk of dying young.”

“You are hardly young, my brother,” Juddah said, to which Slade replied with a dramatic show of offense, his hand moving to his chest. “And we need to blend in while we look for him. This is how we do that. Slade has convinced us that yesterday was as much his fault as it was yours, so we are taking the chance of trusting you again.”

“And who are you giving your crown to then?” Mora crossed her arms and stared at Juddah, eager to change the subject before they all started openly judging her actions.

“Whoever can reach it.” He plopped the crown on his brow. The pink color accented the fiery orange of his hair, but the crown began to fall apart and a heavy flower slumped to cover his eye. He frowned. “I will fix this, and then I’ll be

taking offers from anyone who places ale in my hand or food on my plate.”

“Such a simple man.” Elletta laughed, taking Mora by the arm. “Come, you don’t want to miss this.”



## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

EMBERS RAINED FROM the night sky like falling stars. Two firerenders stood atop the nearby buildings and showered the pyre with their sparks. The heat churned Mora's insides, but she had to admit it was a beautiful sight to behold.

The people of Dread knelt with their palms outstretched toward the falling light. Kallan knelt with them. They all did; the city guard was watching.

But the Golden Boy didn't pray.

When eyes were closed and prayers were muttered to their savior god, Kallan inspected the lines on the palms of his hands instead. Mora's heart broke for him, and she hated that it did.

When it was over, the sparks ignited the pyre and a band picked up a fast-paced tune. Dancing begun to spread, and sweet tarts were brought out on trays, piled in high pyramids. By then, it was too late to ask Kallan if he was alright. Too late to say anything at all. Maybe she should have.

Kallan plucked a tart from a passing servant's tray. It was dark purple in the center; mixed berry. It had been Mora's favorite flavor so far, the perfect amount of sour to offset the sweetness of the custard. He pinched it between his thumb

and finger and, to Mora's horror, he held it out to her lips, expecting her to eat from his hands. He smirked so deep his dimple showed.

"Oh, no." She leaned away from him. "We are not doing this."

He laughed and let the dessert in his hand chase her in taunting circles around the table.

"Just eat it, come on Mora," he whined. "It's romantic."

"I'm allergic to romance." A laugh tore from her as she darted from his closing approach. She let the crowd swallow her whole, ducking and hiding behind unsuspecting people, moving with dancing couples as if she were their shadow.

A man grabbed her hands and twirled her twice before he let her go. She laughed and looked behind her to see Kallan squeezing between a dancing couple with an apology on his lips.

They weren't the only ones running. Some of the other women had been playfully chasing the men around, trying to take their crowns in a game of cat and mouse. One of them ran into her, and she was happy when her essyn stayed at bay. She laughed it off and kept running, careful to be sure Kallan saw her turn a corner. He got within reach before she twisted away again.

She broke through the crowd and found herself standing before the blazing fire. Sweat beaded on her forehead, and she wanted nothing more than to push her way back until she could feel the cool air on the other side. That was when he caught her, crown still perfectly situated on his brow.

He held the tart out, but instead of running or taking a bite of it, Mora plucked it out of his hand and shoved it in her mouth. It should have been a two-bite dessert, and trying to chew the entire thing proved more difficult than she had intended. Kallan laughed heartily.

Her cheeks swelled with food, and the tangy flavor left an ache in her jaw. She swallowed as much of it down as she could, trying not to spit it out with a laugh.

Ripley appeared as he always did, seemingly out of nowhere. “Careful with those.” He chuckled. “They’re filled with zicasia seeds.”

Kallan’s brows shot up, disappearing behind orange and pink flowers. Mora’s eyes bounced between his reaction and the pure bliss on Ripley’s face. She covered her mouth with a hand and swallowed the rest of the tart.

“What are zicasia seeds?” she asked.

“It’s not what they are, but what they do that matters.” Ripley put a hand on her shoulder and his other on Kallan’s. “It’s an aphrodisiac. A powerful one.”

That explained more than a few things. For starters, the people who couldn’t bear to keep their clothes on. Then there was the light bubbly feeling building in her chest and the heat low in her core. The shiver that had run up her arms when Kallan’s fingers had brushed her skin.

She looked at Kallan, and they both laughed hysterically. Mora had never laughed as much as she was that night.

“I’ll take a few more of those then, it seems I have some catching up to do.” Kallan said.

“I need water,” Mora fanned herself with her hand. The fire seemed to be encroaching too close to her.

Ripley winked, and Mora couldn't help herself. “You still have your crown; I'm surprised you haven't tossed it on Elletta's head yet.”

He started to say something but lost the words on his lips. He looked around before grabbing her arm, dragging her into the crowd of dancing people. When they stopped, he twirled Mora around in dizzying circles.

“No, no, no.” Mora tried to wiggle her way free of him, but he pulled her in. “I don't dance.”

“You already are dancing.” He spun her around again, three times, and then held both her hands in his. “Let your body do what it wants. Feel the music.”

“Right now, my body wants to run away and hide in a dark place somewhere far from this crowd and that fire.”

“You don't like fire?”

“Hate it.”

He spun Mora three more times, and by the time he let go of her fingers, she found her body kept moving to the tune even without his guiding hands.

“Keep your distance from Elletta. She's not what she seems.”

“What?” Mora scoffed. “You're talking about the girl who revives dead plants and heals injured rodents everywhere she goes. How can she be so bad?”

Ripley pulled Mora into a slow dance, despite the upbeat tempo. “Just be careful. She only helps others if it's, somehow,

also helping herself. If you get too close, she will only end up breaking your heart.”

“And the rest of you?”

“I have a feeling you’ll be the one breaking our hearts.” Ripley twirled Mora out, and she landed in Kallan’s arms. When she looked back to ask what he had meant, Ripley was gone.

The next time she saw him, he was wearing two crowns; one his own orange, the other a brilliant blue with little berries.

“Are you going to take this crown so I can stop wearing it?” Kallan asked. Mora had lost the rhythm of the music, and she stood in Kallan’s arms, halfway in an embrace.

“Maybe I was waiting to see if you would give it to me.”

“Pardon me, milady,” he jested. “I recall you threatening me not to. What was it you said again? No attachments, no feelings? I was merely trying to avoid a dagger to the heart.”

“No attachments.” She smiled and took the crown off Kallan’s head to place it on her own. “No feelings.”

But she knew long before that moment, it was too late. Telling herself to stop her feelings for him was like telling rot to leave a corpse long after Death had claimed it.

That cobalt stare didn’t look at her and see a monster or someone they could use to further their own agenda. She wasn’t a weapon, or a tool. She wasn’t Moranna. When she saw herself through Kallan’s eyes, she saw the person she wanted to be. Someone good.



It wasn't love. It could never be love with her. But it was something, and that something was terrifying.

Quickly, Mora grabbed his arm and spun them in an awkward move to hide behind a woman who danced nearby. The woman moved with the gauzy fabric of her gown like her shawl was her partner and the music was the pulse that beat through her veins. They were forced to keep up with her spinning movements to remain hidden.

"Who are we hiding from?"

"Am I seeing things, or do you know that woman?" Mora pointed over the dancer's shoulder.

Kallan peeked around Mora. She pulled him behind a larger group of dancers that offered a wider and less fleeting wall of bodies to hide behind. Kallan was searching the crowd keenly.

"By the servant with the drinks." She ducked beneath a flailing arm.

"Is that Oryn's seamstress?"

"It's Mags," Mora hissed. She smoothed the fabric of her shirtsleeves. "She *hates* me, Kallan. You were there, remember?"

"What is she doing here?" He crouched to match her cowering posture.

"I don't know, maybe this is where she gets fabric? She doesn't strike me as the kind to enjoy parties. She's more of a 'held up in a dungeon muttering chants to herself and eating children' kind of woman."

Kallan stopped trying to hide at that point and stared at her, fighting back his smile. Her flower crown slid to one side of her head and she had to reposition it as she stayed low, maneuvering her way through the crowd.

“Alright,” Kallan said seriously. “Well, you are not a child, so you should be safe, but I suppose we should hide all the—that’s Dromose with her.”

“What?” When Mora snapped her attention to the spot she’d last seen the old hag, both Mags and Dromose were gone. She laughed at the fleeting tension in her shoulders; she needn’t worry over them. Not anymore.

“Not our problem.” She shook her head and smiled.

“Not our problem,” Kallan mimicked.

When they made it to the edge of the courtyard, they looked around for Juddah or anyone who might notice them sneaking away. She spotted him still at their table, still working on his pink crown, making sure every flower was perfectly situated and every leaf was perfectly green.

Elletta was sneaking off to the shadows with a crown of orange weaved into her hair and one of light blue berries balancing atop it. Her face was alight with mirth.

Kallan grabbed Mora’s waist and pulled her close. All her thoughts were stolen away by the force of his body pressed into hers. In that moment, there was nothing more important than the way Kallan was looking at her.

“Are you finally going to kiss me?” she asked.

His lips hovered impossibly close to hers, while still refusing to touch. “I’m going to do so much more than that.”



## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

THE DOOR BENEATH the sign of the gilded rose swung open on creaky hinges as they darted inside. The way Kallan pulled her in, swinging her body into his, had the effects of the zicasia taking over her mind.

The air between them was charged and tense, with a feeling that demanded to be felt. It wasn't anything as simple as lust; it was more vital than the breath in her lungs, the blood pumping in her heart. Mora searched Kallan's eyes, hoping he could sense how badly she needed him.

With a silent agreement and a crooked smile, they rushed up the stairs. Their fingers laced together.

Every step drove her need deeper.

She couldn't wait any longer. She needed to know what he tasted like, what his skin felt like against hers, how his muscles would flex beneath her as she rode him into her own oblivion.

The distance to their room felt longer than the mad dash to the inn had been. An ache raced through her when it took three tries to place the key in its lock and swing the heavy door open.

Moonlight crept through the window and cast the room in a red glow. There was a bed placed in the middle of a plain

wall, a chair in the corner, and a table set between it and an empty fireplace.

“Do you want me to take the floor?” Kallan asked. Humor sparkled in his eyes when she looked from the bed back to him. But there was something else she sensed in his voice, a hint of truth. He would do it, sleep on the hard floor, if she said the word; if she ended it there and went to bed.

The thought made Mora want to laugh. How could he not know, in that moment, how much she wanted him? She closed the distance between them.

“Oh, we’ll be on the floor alright,” she said, her voice heavy with desire, “and on the bed, and that chair. And,” she leaned in until she could feel his hot breath on her own lips, “if you’re lucky, we can see how much that table can handle.”

“I believe in making my own luck.” He wrapped his arm around her waist, bringing her flush against his hard length.

She cocked an eyebrow. “Prove it.”

His fingers trailed up her collarbone, dancing across the column of her neck. His magic followed in their wake, making her skin tingle. A cold blanket of goose bumps washed over her as his fingers trailed to the back of her neck, into her hair. He gripped hard, pulling her head back until their eyes met, flickering his gaze only when she wet her lips with her tongue.

He ravished her skin, kissing up and down her neck, nipping at the tops of her breasts. Exploring hands learned each other’s bodies, fingertips roaming over curves and between muscled valleys. His grip tightened on her ass.

The soft heat of his hands dove farther down her thighs, almost touching the place she needed to feel him the most. He

pulled her up. Her legs wrapped around his waist. Her hand traveled up the column of his neck, and she slid a thumb across his lips.

“If you don’t give me what I want soon, I’m going to take it, regardless of your promise.”

Mora had been wrong. They were not oil and water; they were kerosene and fire. And they were going to burn the town to ashes.

A crooked grin spread across his lips as he carried her to the table. He removed her boots. She watched his eyes roam her body as he unlaced the tie at her waist and peeled her pants down, pulling them off one leg at a time; too slowly. He forced her knees apart and stood between them, chasing kisses across her collarbone and up the column of her neck, never finding her mouth.

“I believe we’ve waited long enough.” Kallan breathed the whisper into her ear before nipping it, his sharp tooth causing a pinch of pain to spike through to her core. She breathed heavily, stifling a moan.

“Yes,” she managed to say.

He yanked her hips to the edge of the table. She fell back on her elbows so she could watch him. Kneeling before her, her leg over his shoulder, he looked like a worshipper to a god; and she was his new religion. His magic sparked across her skin as he moved his fingers along her thighs. He spread her center with an aching touch, and then his mouth was on her and she couldn’t help a shiver that ran from her peaked nipples to her curled toes. He circled her clit, lapping at the wetness of her arousal.

She tipped her head back and held him harder against her with a hand entangled in his hair, pleading without words for him to never stop. A moan slipped from her, and he continued his assault on her clit with his wicked tongue. He slid a finger to her entrance, inserting it slowly. She moaned louder, arching her back off of the table.

“Don’t stop,” she commanded. “Don’t stop until you make me come.”

He placed another finger inside her, pumping them in and out, then sucking her clit into his mouth and nipping with his teeth. That’s all it took for her to explode, unraveling around his fingers.

She pulled herself upright and set her bare feet on the floor. Kallan rose to his feet and claimed her mouth with his own. He kissed her with a hunger that she had never known. He drew her lower lip into his mouth and bit lightly. The taste of her come on his lips was better than any aphrodisiac.

Mora pushed Kallan, leading him until the backs of his knees hit the mattress and he inhaled sharply. Heat rose from her core and spread through her chest.

The buckles of her corset sheath opened with a pull. She watched the rise and fall of his chest as his breath grew heavy. The sheath fell to the ground.

Biceps flexed as he reached behind his head to grab the back of his shirt collar, ripping it off with ease. The rest of their clothes quickly followed. She took in the sight of his freed erection. The palms of her hands pressed into his chest, and with a forceful shove, he fell onto the bed. The feet of the frame scooted loudly under the force of his landing.

The hard floor pressed into her knees as she knelt, kissing her way up the inside of his thigh. She licked him from base to tip, knowing he watched her every move like it was the most exquisite thing he'd ever seen. She felt him quiver against the warmth of her tongue. They locked eyes, and she took him in her mouth.

*"Fuck,"* he moaned.

The sound of desire in his voice had a smile turning on Mora's lips, knowing he needed her as badly and she needed him. The sensation building between her legs made her clench her thighs, desperate for fiction. She took him in her mouth again and again, up and down, memorizing the taste of him. Relishing in the sounds he made as she brought him closer to the edge.

Mora couldn't take it any longer; she was done playing. She climbed on top of him. His palm found her breast, and he sucked her nipple into his mouth as her back arched. Her skin grew sensitive to his every touch. The sharpness of his teeth scraping against her breasts and the feel of his length grinding between her legs was almost enough to make her come again.

*More.*

"You're beautiful." He whispered, looking into her eyes.

"So are you." This time, when she kissed him, Mora conveyed her desperate need. She couldn't wait any longer. "I need you inside me."

He grabbed her hip with one hand and rolled them over, moving fully onto the bed. "I know." He placed himself at her slick entrance. He hesitated, staring into her eyes, then thrust all the way in with one quick movement.

Pleasure shot through her, laced with a tinge of pain. He pulled back and then thrust again. Her body adjusted to his size quickly. She wrapped her legs around him and lifted her hips, allowing him deeper.

“*Fuck.*” he hissed between his teeth. “You feel so good, Mora.” Together, they found a rhythmic pace, but it still wasn’t enough. She needed him harder, deeper, faster. *Closer.*

“Harder, Kallan. Fuck me harder.”

He moved to his knees, bringing her hips up with him, but stopped at her entrance. “Say my name again.” She was ready to shove him down and take what she wanted; there was an itch deep inside her that only his cock could satisfy. He dug his fingers into her hips. “Say it again.”

She grinned up at him. “Fuck. Me. Harder...Kallan.” His magic crackled across his skin and onto hers before he buried himself deep inside her. Mora moaned with each punishing thrust. Pain seared through her hands as she pierced her own flesh with her fingernails, digging them into the meat of her palms.

The edge was fast approaching, and she was racing herself toward ecstasy. Blackness filled her mind and stars danced in her stomach, making their way to her chest, about to burst.

“Please,” she thought, not realizing that the word had escaped her lips until Kallan slowed his pace. She opened her eyes to see him searching her face. Her whispered vulnerabilities hung in the space between them, so she said the only thing she could say. “Don’t ever leave me.”

He did not shame her like she had convinced herself he might. He realigned himself with her, laying his body on top



of hers. All of her was pressed into all of him, skin to skin, soul to soul. “Never,” he whispered. “I never will.”

A tender kiss pressed into her; their rhythm slowed to emphasize every move their bodies made. She kissed him back, taking his tongue in her mouth and sucking at the fullness of his lip. For a moment, no matter how brief, he felt just as much a part of her as her own heart was.

He broke the kiss and hung his head, scraping her neck with his teeth. She nipped at his ear.

“Now make me come, Golden Boy,” she whispered.

The hungry look returned to his eyes, and his dimple appeared on his cheek. She saw blue flash in the corner of her eyes, his magic flashing on his hands.

In one swift motion, he flipped them over. She fell forward, hands on Kallan’s chest, straddling him with him still inside her. She grinded into him, lifting herself and slamming back down onto his cock.

She tipped her head back and closed her eyes. She rode him while her hand squeezed his thigh behind her and the other rubbed her clit. His fingers dug into her waist, and moans fell from his lips just as loud as her own. A wave of ecstasy vibrated through her. It grew stronger with every move.

Grinding faster, she was only concerned with finding her own pleasure now. It came to her like a wave of blackened stars that crashed into every one of her nerve endings. For a moment, she couldn’t breathe.

Kallan’s grip on her tightened. “I’m go—gods.” He followed her into release with a feral groan.

They collapsed into the bed, Mora's body falling limp on top of him with a heavy breath. His heartbeat thrummed fast in her ear, and her hair cascaded across the pillows. Their fingers played softly together.

He reached for his die from the floor, letting it roll onto the bed beside them. It landed on blue.

“And what did you ask this time?”

“If I was ready for round two. Like I said,” he nuzzled into her neck with a kiss. “The die never fails me.”

Mora laughed. She reveled in the feel of his warm lips exploring her skin.

*Don't ever leave me*, she had said. And she had meant it. She wanted them to stay right there, tangled in each other's sweaty embrace forever.

Things would have been a lot simpler if they had never left that bed.



Mora tiptoed through the corridor, a plate of food in her hand and the sun creeping over the horizon. They had barely slept, but she wasn't the least bit tired, and Kallan was packing their things to leave. She was buzzing from the high like she had been deprived of her Golden Boy her whole life, and now that she had tasted him she had a new addiction.

She froze in her steps when she saw Veres stalking toward her. There was no way he could know anything of their plans, but her heart still stuttered as he approached.

The mood was about to turn vile, but she reminded herself that she was not the type to cower. She could run and perhaps

sneak into her room before he got to her, but she held her head high and made sure to keep her walk casual; not to arouse any suspicions.

He stopped too close to her, as he always seemed to do.

“We need to go over the plan,” he said, in a worse mood than usual. “Unless you’re too busy playing house with your boy toy. Then, by all means, we can wait.” He huffed a laugh, and Mora couldn’t get a word in before he continued talking. “I shouldn’t be surprised you aren’t taking your responsibilities seriously; you act like a pathetic child. You have no idea what’s at stake, but that doesn’t matter, does it? The only thing you care about is yourself and *him*.”

Her stomach dropped, and heat blotched her cheeks. He was wrong about her. He had to be wrong. *Right?* She forced her thoughts to form into words and forced the words off her lips. “Go fuck yourself, Veres.”

She tried to step around him, but he moved with her, preventing her from taking a second step. He stared down at her with rage built up in his amber eyes. His jaw flexed.

“Careful,” he growled.

“I wasn’t the only one who chose to spend the night enjoying themselves instead of brooding in a dark room with a bottle of whiskey and my cock in my hand, so why don’t you take your pathetic jealousy and give it to someone else.” She ignored him while he started to talk. She made a show of looking down the corridor in both directions and then interrupted whatever insult he was spitting at her. “I’m sure there’ll be a whore sneaking out of here soon. Maybe if you pay someone, they’ll listen to you talk. Maybe even give you more than your hand did.”

His hand flew to her neck and he squeezed, sliding his rough calluses up the column of her throat. She could feel his breath against her skin.

“I assure you,” he said, his voice calm and low. “I can do more with this one hand than your prince charming could with every fiber of his being.” He forced her into the wall. His eyes seemed to glow in the sunlight. “And tonight, while you’re riding him in your bed, you’ll look at that wall before you and know that I’m on the other side, listening to every noise you make with my *cock in my hand*. And when he touches you, you’ll be thinking of that hand around your throat. And when he makes you come, it will be my name on your lips.”

Her whole body went hot, her *essyn* humming against her blood. Anger seeped from her skin, and her heart beat from her stomach to her head. She vibrated with it.

“And when you’re done, *Shev’né*,” he continued, “and you’re lying in his arms pretending like it didn’t happen, you’ll find yourself wondering if I was ever really there, if I heard your pretty moans begging him, *please*.” He lowered his voice and whispered the words that froze her heart in her chest. “*Don’t ever leave me.*”

He pulled back enough to look her in the eye again, his thumb rubbing small circles against her skin that contradicted the roughness of his demeanor. She didn’t think he even knew he was doing it until he pulled his hand away. “I can tell you right now I won’t be there, in that room, because I don’t care enough to be there. But that doesn’t matter, you can’t help it. You’ll still wonder, won’t you, Moranna?”

He left her slumped against the wall, a rush of cold filling his absence. He fixed his sleeve like he hadn’t just shattered her

heart in ways she couldn't describe—didn't understand—and then he walked away, stopping only to say his parting words.

“Why would I ever be jealous of your little toy? I wouldn't even have to be there to make you come.”

The bite mark still on her shoulder throbbed the rest of the way back to her room. The smell of the eggs on her plate churned her stomach. Her appetite had gone. So had her words.

She headed back to the room with a newfound anger and a need to prove him wrong that settled so deep into her that there was no way she could ignore it.

She wasn't pathetic, she wasn't a child, and she was not *that* selfish. She didn't want to be the kind of person who let someone else walk into danger head-on while she sat back and watched, or worse, ran. She needed to prove to him that she was so much more. But more importantly, she needed to prove it to herself.

Her happily ever after was going to have to wait.



## CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

IT TOOK SOME convincing for Mora to get her Golden Boy on board with postponing their plans, especially because it wouldn't be safe to show his face at the ball. But after discovering her new favorite way to let off some pent-up rage, he would have agreed to anything she had said.

After a day of planning and getting ready and avoiding Veres every chance she got, she had left Kallan at the inn and set out to finish what she had started.

There was a small castle in the middle of Dread. It wasn't as grand as the Castle of Pearls, and it hadn't been kept nearly as clean, but it was a castle nonetheless. Inside, tall marble walls and sweeping staircases were lined with life-size statues of doves. At the top of the steps lay a great ballroom full of Vale's wealthiest and most faithful. Mora stood in the grand doorway with her arm tucked under Veres's. Ripley and Slade stood at her other side.

"Do you see him?" Mora asked under her breath.

Veres nodded. She followed the direction of his gesture across the ballroom. The d'zev had his long black hair pulled back in a tie and waltzed with a woman in his arms. They were too far to see much else. Knowing what she was in for made

the hair stand up on the back of her neck. She wanted the night, the whole day, to be over with.

“We can’t risk him recognizing us,” Slade said, nodding to Ripley. “But we will be here keeping an eye out in case things go badly. Dromose won’t be one for mercy if he finds out he’s being deceived.”

*Oh, he already knows,* Mora wanted to say, but instead, “Remind me why we have to do this at a ball?” She flattened the fabric across her midsection.

The gown was red as the moon and soft as satin. It had been left in her room in a box with a matching red bow, and she had to assume it was from Dromose. It hugged every curve of her body and was cut into a plunging neckline that itched against her skin. Long velvet gloves covered her iron cuff, and there were slits in the skirt that went almost to her hips. It would have looked stunning on anyone. On her, it was lethal.

“You are not the only one it has taken years to find,” Veres said. “Elletta and your boyfriend were lucky enough to learn he would be here, but if he slips away tonight, we might never find him again.”

“He’s not my boyfriend,” Mora bit out.

“The entire inn would beg to differ,” Ripley said. Mora glared at him while he shrugged his shoulders in a not-really-apologetic apology.

“I would feel better about this if I had a weapon.”

“I have your weapon, should you need it,” Veres said, showing her the dagger strapped to the inside of his suit jacket. It was the same one he had used to cut her hand and take her blood.

“And we’ll be around the whole time, just in case this gets fun,” Ripley said.

He and Slade took off up a set of stairs and down a corridor that wrapped around the ballroom. It opened up to four large balconies that overlooked the dance floor.

“We should dance,” Veres said, sounding just as annoyed as she was. “I will hand you off to another man, keep it going until Dromose cuts in.”

“What if he doesn’t cut in?”

Veres looked at her, eyes traveling not to the low cut in her gown, but around her face. Elletta had painted her lips a shade of red that matched her gown. The color had been called “blood red” and they had picked it special for her. She had thanked the princess, even though it wasn’t quite the right hue. It never was. He looked at her lips. Then to her kohl-lined eyes and her slicked-back hair that fell down her back.

“He will,” was all he said. He led her onto the dance floor without another word.

They danced in silence, avoiding looking at each other as the symphony of music carried on around them. Mora found herself enthralled by the beauty of the room. She had always enjoyed the art of architecture.

Chandeliers hung high from the ceiling three floors above them. They were dripping in crystals and pearls and candles lit with soft flames that reflected light around the room. Long lengths of colorful fabric hung like ribbons between them.

The balconies above them were held up by massive pillars decorated with flocks of doves that flew in spirals up each



column. Some had been positioned on the railing above as well, the birds fading slowly into the walls.

“Why all the doves?” she asked, if only to break the tension strung tight between them.

“Vale used to be the home of the God of Love.” Veres spoke softly, his grip on her tightening slightly the more they moved, as if letting her know he was not yet ready to hand her away like a borrowed plaything. “She could transform into an animal like the shifters. Her other form was a white dove.”

Mora let herself really look at him for the first time since the hallway. His eyes flicked to her for a brief moment. His hair had been pulled back in a knot like it always was, but none of the strands around his temple had broken loose yet. He almost looked like a well-kept man.

Not able to hold her gaze any longer, he turned away. “Do you love him?”

Her muscles tensed. She pressed her lips together and drew a breath through her nose. “That’s not your concern.”

“It’s not,” he agreed. “Merely a curiosity.” He looked down to where her sleeve covered the two ravens still on her arm. “I may have gone too far this morning and—you don’t have to answer.”

He had likely meant it in good faith, but Mora couldn’t help but feel challenged by his words. She had to reply, if only to prove to him that he hadn’t affected her as much as he thought. She was too strong to be torn down by any man.

“I don’t think I am capable of love. Not in the way you are asking at least,” she finally said.

“Would you follow him to his demise if he asked it of you? Would you die for him, Moranna?”

She hated the way her name sounded rolling off his tongue. Like he had been saying it all his life, but never fully understood what it had meant until now.

“Is that how you measure your love, Veres? In death?”

Somehow, he made even a smile look sad.

They spun in circles, dancing as if they had done this a million times over and couldn't miss a beat even if they tried. Her steps moved in unison with his, one after another.

“I am still learning what love means to me,” he admitted. “I had always pictured it as an all-consuming and infuriating thing; to let yourself be utterly lost in another being.”

Mora leaned back as the other women did, slightly. She felt his hand on her lower back holding her up, not letting her fall. He swayed her from one side to the other before she rose again.

“I think that there is love,” she said, “and then there is *that*. And I fear I am capable of neither.”

They moved toward the middle of the floor with their sweeping circles, “I cannot say if Kallan is it for you, but I hope that one day you meet someone who changes your mind about love.”

“I never pictured you as a romantic.”

“Why would you? You know nothing about me, and it's best we keep it that way. After all, we'll be done with you soon.”

A man tapped her shoulder, and Veres gracefully passed her hand over to him. Their conversation was a haunting whisper in her ear, something so surreal she was on the edge of convincing herself she had dreamed it up.

She danced with three more men before Dromose asked for her hand. By the time she was in his arms, her feet hurt and her mind was beginning to spin with every twirl she was forced into. The smell of baneroot didn't help.

"I knew you would be stunning in a dress, but might I say, that color was made for you." Dromose spun her slowly. "So have you thought about our conversation?"

"I think you should tell me where the sword is. If I'm going to be leaving, the least I can do is give my friends a fair chance."

He chuckled, the sound drawing prickles from her skin. "Now, I don't care much about the princess, but the other three, why would I want them to have a fair chance?"

*Three.* Either the d'zev couldn't count, or he still hadn't seen Veres. "I thought a man like you would enjoy the challenge of a competitor."

His laugh was louder this time, ringing in her ears. "We are going to have fun together, darling."

Someone near them cleared their throat. "Excuse me," Dromose said as he stopped their dance. "I must talk to a dear friend, but please, don't go anywhere."

A taller man with broad shoulders and a bald head that shone under the candlelight whispered into Dromose's ear.

The man was wearing an impressive suit, but it was his multitude of jewelry that caught Mora's attention. One piece in particular, a dark ring with a band of purple jewels. The servant that she entrusted to help sell the things she stole had always worked fast, but he must have pawned the ring off before the king's guests had left Harlen. By the fates, it had found its way back to her.

As casually as she could, she looked around the ballroom but could not find Veres anywhere. Slade was leaning against a balcony talking to a woman in an almost-see-through gown, the fabric was so thin. Every so often, he would glance down to keep track of Mora. Ripley was keeping out of sight.

The man with the jewelry smiled at Mora when he noticed her attention on him.

"You have exquisite taste," she interrupted their conversation. His smile deepened.

"If you will excuse me," Mora curtsied slightly, letting her finger hover gently on the bare skin of her chest and keeping her eye intently on the stranger, "I fear I am not feeling well."

"Of course," Dromose said, his brow scrunched. He rested a hand on her shoulder and kissed her cheek. "Rest a while, grab some food. I will find you later; it seems I have matters to attend to."

Mora smiled politely. She slipped away from Dromose's touch and walked past the man who had come to talk to him, letting her trailing hand brush against his jeweled one.

She walked up a set of spiraling stairs that led to the upper balconies. She counted, stopping at the third door down the east corridor. She checked behind her as the man's gaze

trailed her into her web of expertly placed touches and careful words.

She slipped slowly through the door, making sure he caught a glimpse of her peeking back over her shoulder at him. This was not the plan, but the plan had been ruined far before the night had started, and this was something she knew in her heart she had to do.

She positioned herself on a velvet chaise under a window overlooking the city. She didn't have to feign interest. The view was beyond beautiful, and she knew that somewhere down there, Kallan, Juddah, and Elletta waited with horses at the ready to take them away from Vale. Her heart fluttered at the idea of leaving.

She heard the door creak quietly and felt a sudden presence in the room with her. He cleared his throat and Mora startled, her hand lingering on the red sword pendant hanging exposed between her breasts.

“Apologies, milady. I only meant to check on you, to be sure you were alright.”

Mora stood and made her way across the small study. She took the man's hands in hers. “Just a dizzy spell,” she said, her voice sounding nothing like her. It was too sweet. “I do hate crowds.”

“And now that you are alone?” He asked, letting his fingers trace the seam on her glove.

“Much better.” She pushed him backward and sat him down with just the right amount of force.

Leaning into him, she was about to press her red lips firmly on his when her heart did a weird flip in her chest that

almost hurt. She picked his hand up instead, kissing each of his fingers slowly.

“I do love pretty things,” she said with a sultry promise in her tone. “I can’t help but admire them.”

“Then I shall leave them on.”

The door flew open behind her, sending her and the man to their feet in a heartbeat.

“What is this?” Slade demanded. Ripley slid through the door behind him, and the small room felt much smaller.

“Do you mind?” the man asked, looking the two up and down. “This room is occupied. Find yourselves another.”

Mora choked back a laugh. Slade stalked over to them. “Sit.” He told the man, pushing him to a chair.

“Is this some kind of kink of yours, Lady Moravik?” Mora startled for real this time, unsure how the man had learned her name. Dromose, probably.

Slade leaned over the man’s shoulder from behind the chair. “Yes, now sit still.”

He took the ropes holding the curtains back and used them to tie knots around the man’s wrists.

“That’s the wrong guy, what do you think you’re doing?” Slade asked. Ripley leaned against a bookshelf decorated with fancy fountain pens and ornate feather quills.

Mora drew a breath, releasing it before walking over to the man and yanking a ring from his pointer finger. He started to object, but Slade tied a rope around his mouth so he couldn’t talk. She gripped the ring tightly in her palm. “A little

detour is all, but now that you ruined my cover, what am I to do with him?"

"Nothing," he replied. "Nothing is more important than finding that sword."

"Well," another voice interrupted from the still open doorway. "Isn't this an interesting sight to see."

Dromose's askian, Vargas, stepped through the door. "Slade, I never thought I'd see you again. It's been what? A lifetime?"

Ripley sank back into the wall and held perfectly still. Mora matched Vargas's steps, keeping herself on the opposite side of the room from him. He eyed her curiously as he approached Slade.

"I noticed you've found a replacement. It figures such a dangerous beauty would be tainted by the filth of you and your brothers." He sneered.

Slade clenched his fists. "Don't you dare," he forced from his locked jaw.

"Tell me, are they all here? Or is it just you and—" He found Ripley, his eyes widening ever so slightly. "This monstrosity." He looked back to Slade, "And what an upgrade she must bring to your little family of psychopaths. Do you take turns with her or have her all at once?"

"She's not with us," Slade snapped.

Mora rolled her shoulders as she side-stepped in front of Ripley. Vargas apparently did not share the same ideas as Dromose about the best way to get her on their side. The askian looked to prefer Aemon's method of force.

Mora took another step until she was fully in front of Ripley and the bookshelf.

“How cute, she’s protective,” Vargas mocked. Then he turned back to Slade and looked him up and down. “Your little trick won’t work on me anymore; you can’t torture the soul of someone who no longer has one. And I have been waiting a long time to see you die, Slade.”

Death seeped from Vargas’s skin like she had stepped all the way through him.

An icy chill crawled into the room as Mora studied the weight and balance of the fountain pen she’d swiped from the shelf. The tip wasn’t as sharp as a dagger, but if she threw it hard enough, it would work. She breathed deeply, quietly, and called to her essyn. She let it fill the space beneath her skin and form a hardened shell over her heart.

The pen flew straight as an arrow.

Vargas caught it with impressive speed, but he hadn’t seen the second one until it embedded itself deep in the side of his neck. His glare snapped to her.





## CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

MORA DIDN'T STICK around to see what he would do next, but she was sure a pen to the throat wasn't enough to kill an askian.

She ran, finding there was nowhere to go but over the railing as guards swarmed at her from either direction. If she didn't want to get caught, she would need to jump. And Ripley and Slade were right behind her.

She didn't give them a moment to think about it, she kicked off her heels and sprinted. She leaped from the balcony overlooking the dance floor, wrapping her hands tightly on a ribbon of yellow fabric hanging from the ceiling to stop herself from falling to her death.

She swung like a pendulum through the air.

Ripley flew off the edge and reached for a strip of orange fabric. Slade thought better than to follow her and took off toward a stairwell. The guards attempted to catch the end of the ribbon Mora clung to as its momentum sent her swinging back to them.

Sliding down the fabric enough that her feet could reach the bottom of the railing, she pushed herself off. The guard close enough to catch her bent over with a scream of pain and

clutched his head, Slade's magic taking its effect as he slowed his escape to help her. She swung back across the open space.

An arrow flew past her head and clattered against the floor of the balcony on the other side. At the peak of her swing, she let go, letting her momentum fling her toward the empty balcony opposite of where she had fled.

People gasped below her as she misjudged the distance and barely caught the railing with the tips of her fingers. She had forgotten about the people. Her body slammed hard against the railing, and her grip slipped. She dropped, catching herself on the bottommost rung.

Another whistle whizzed by her head. She watched the projectile tumble across the floor to a stop. It wasn't an arrow; it was a bolt. The guards were armed with crossbows.

It took effort to pull her body up and over the railing. She tumbled to the floor on the other side, rolling too fast when she hit.

She laid there, trying to catch her breath while watching chaos through the gaps in the balusters. Ripley climbed up the ribbon of hanging fabric. He had lost all momentum, and the ribbon hung still, aside from the jostling of his climb. Bolts flew past him two at a time.

Mora moved to better hide behind a massive pillar and waited to see Ripley get free. Once at the top, he leaped to the closest thing he could reach: the chandelier.

The ornate light swung with his impact. Its chain slipped one link, then two. He clung tightly as one of the passing bolts finally hit him. A growl ripped from him, louder than Mora

thought possible. The chandelier's chain slipped free of its restraints and set itself, and Ripley, oscillating through the air.

Screams ensued below.

Mora sprinted to the next balcony and gripped the railing tightly, flinging herself out as far as she could reach. Her outstretched hand found Ripley's as he jumped off the flying death trap. They swung down, hanging in the air with only Mora's slipping grip preventing them from plummeting.

Ripley dropped with a swing and a yelp of pain as he landed on the floor below them. Mora jumped down next, finding Slade rounding the corner at the same time.

"Go, go, go!" Slade rushed toward them. Mora registered what he had been saying at the same time she noticed the two guards.

She flung Ripley's arm over her shoulder, and together, they ran. Slade ducked his head under Ripley's other arm as he caught up, helping lighten the impossibly heavy load and allowing the three of them to run faster, albeit awkwardly. Mora forced the three of them to duck; a bolt narrowly missed Slade.

A head poked out from behind a tapestry hanging on the wall. A small hand waved, motioning for them to follow. Mora glanced at Slade, who had been glancing at her. Ripley's face scrunched in pain and offered no opinion on whether to trust the boy or not.

With no other options and no time to think, they sank through the tapestry and into a dark hallway just in time to hear the guards run by, none the wiser.

"Come," a small voice whispered.

They obeyed, following his shadow through the quickly narrowing passageway.

It smelled of dust. Cobwebs caught on Mora's gloves and stuck to her arms as they tried to keep up with their guide. They turned down a small set of stone steps and pushed through a hidden door to find themselves in another study. Ornate rugs adorned the floors, a window let the moonlight in, and a massive fireplace roared with crackling flames in the corner.

A young boy stood in the center of the room, the fireplace reflecting in his brown eyes and accentuating a massive scar that ran down the length of his face. His umber skin glowed in the firelight.

Ripley limped free of their support, leaning against a wall as he groaned in pain. His eye flashed between the colorless white and a deep red, momentarily matching the other. His pupils had changed to narrow slits.

"Get it—get it out," he managed through his grunts of pain, his voice deeper than normal. A growl rumbled deep in his chest. He turned to his side and steadied himself on a small table. The bolt stuck out, his blood dripping to the rug with a hiss, thick fibers melting beneath its touch.

Mora inspected the entry wound, trying not to move the bolt as she did. She knew nothing of removing projectiles. The only time she had been hit by one, it had been Veres's arrow that had gone completely through her.

Ripley's jaw chattered. The sound of his teeth clanking together sent a chill across Mora's skin.

“This is probably going to—” Mora yanked the bolt out before she finished her sentence.

He clenched his jaw tight enough she was sure he had cracked the tips off of his pointed teeth. His hand gripped her shoulder so tightly she thought his nails might have broken through her skin.

Inhaling a deep breath, he closed his eyes and held them tight. He didn't move until he had to release the breath. When she thought it was over, that he was fine, Ripley's eyes shot open—two black slits for pupils, two bright red eyes. Scales of ruby were breaking through the skin on his face and arms.

Mora jumped back.

“Rip, *stop*.” Slade rushed to his side. “You need to stop or you're going to kill yourself, or one of us.”

His muscles flexed visibly, then relaxed. Whatever was happening to him, he was trying to beat it. The scales retreated under his healing skin, but when his jaw clenched again, they tore back through. Blood trickled across them. They glistened in the light, and when he bent over in pain, Mora noticed small black spikes poking through the back of his corset.

“Poisoned iron,” the boy said softly, picking up the bolt. The tip was shattered. “You're going to need to suck whatever is left out of the wound.”

Slade looked at Mora expectantly.

“Oh, fuck that,” she said. Mora lived for pain, but even she had her limits. Besides, of all the things, it wasn't going to be a bit of blood that killed Slade. Death wasn't even in the room. “His blood is literally melting the floor, and you want

me to put it in my mouth? I've done that before, and no thank you."

"Quickly," Ripley half laughed, half growled.

"Go on." She ushered Slade. "You heal faster anyways, you'll be fine." She helped pull Ripley's pants down to the injury.

"Good gods," Slade said. "The things I do for the people I love."

He pressed his mouth against Ripley's lower hip and sucked, spitting the hot blood onto the rug with a hiss. The blood sizzled again, and Mora found herself thankful Slade hadn't made more of an argument for her to do it.

He spat again. More blood landed on the newly forming hole in the rug. Two small pieces of iron sat in the center of it. Ripley clenched his fists and banged them against the wall more than once while Slade worked. The boy watched curiously as it went on, Slade sucking and spitting until he could no longer taste the poison in Ripley's blood and no more bits of metal came out.

Slade sat back on his heels. He wiped his raw tongue with his shirt. Ripley's scales had disappeared, and his eyes had returned to their mismatched colors. Even without Elletta, the wound had started to heal.

"You good?" Mora asked.

He smiled that wicked smile he had. "Fantastic. You?"

"I just watched Slade suck your ass, I'm more than good."

Ripley fought back his laugh, shuddering while he hobbled to the door.

“Now that I know you like to watch, I’ll invite you next time.” Slade winked. They made their way toward the door, more than ready to leave, but were reminded they weren’t alone.

“I know you,” the boy said, his voice still quiet.

They all stared at him. He wasn’t dressed in fine attire like the adults; he wore loose pants and chunky boots. There was a satchel weighing him down, strung across his chest with too many pouches and tubes and pockets tied to it, all of them stuffed full.

“Which one of us do you claim to know?” Slade asked.

Mora’s eyes followed his outstretched finger directly to herself. “Her.”

That was a problem. He changed from a child to a threat the moment he claimed to know her. Her *essyn* hummed.

She studied his face, contemplating what to do with him. “How old are you?”

Slade rolled his eyes. “Whatever you’re about to do, don’t.” He went to Ripley, who was still using the wall as support.

“Twelve,” he said. He was older than he looked.

*Too young to hurt, I suppose?* Her *essyn* purred.

“How do you know me?”

“Books! You gave this to me, with the other kids.” He pulled open the flap to his satchel and pulled a book out. The leather cover was worn but displayed the name clearly, *Kezebel and the Sea of Silver*. “I followed you back to the library once. It was beautiful.”

She grimaced. She wasn't going to kill the boy, but things were not looking good for him.

"Why were you in Harlen? Who are you?"

She hoped his answer would be that he was nobody, that he was from Harlen same as her, just trying to make his way in the world.

"I'm Qenan. I was there with Dromose. He's my uncle, but I'm more like his assistant, like Vargas. We go everywhere together."

"You're a d'zev," Ripley said.

*He's a threat,* her essyn replied.

The boy walked over to the rug and inspected the hole Ripley's blood had chewed in the thick fibers.

"You're a wyvern." He eyed Ripley, who grinned wide. Mora had only ever read of wyverns and dragons in fairytales. And none of them could shift into people. Qenan looked between the three of them. "Vargas is not a good man. I only wanted to help you. I won't say a word to him or my uncle."

He was a d'zev, but he didn't look evil. He looked directly at them when he spoke, and there was a hint of admiration in his eyes. She could have been making a huge mistake, another one, but she had decided what she was going to do about the boy: nothing.

He pulled his hand from his pocket and twisted a marble in his fingers.

"You should leave," Mora said, patting his shoulder awkwardly. The boy nodded with a grin and ran out of the



room through the passageway. Two pairs of eyebrows shot up, and their amused smirks caught her off guard.

“I’m a good person,” she said, feeling the need to defend her actions.

“We should go too, before I pass out.” Ripley managed to limp his way along as they stepped out of the study. They found no guards waiting to kill them, but rushing footfalls grew louder. It wouldn’t be long before they were found again.

They helped Ripley, creeping through the corridors with a trail of hissing blood and his body growing heavier with every step.

“I’ll hold them off.” Slade left Ripley in her hold.

“No. I’m not leaving you.”

“You have to, or they’ll catch up with—” Vargas appeared at the bottom of the stairs in the blink of an eye. Slade returned to Ripley’s side. “Run.”

They ran down a long corridor and through a set of arched doors. Finally, they found their way to the dark and crowded city. Once they spotted Veres, Slade drew his longsword from beneath his cloak and turned to face the askian breaking through the doors behind them.

“Look at us,” Ripley said, too quiet. Mora’s chest tightened when he drew a shallow breath. Still, he managed a laugh. “Finally, some excitement.”



## CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

PATCHES OF SCALES tore through Ripley's olive skin as Mora half carried, half dragged him in a tired run. They struggled down the never-ending steps.

His blood seeped through the fabric of Mora's gown, spreading across her hip and the palms of her hands, burning the flesh beneath. She ignored the pain, keeping her eyes pinned on Veres's angered expression as he sprinted toward them, meeting them a quarter of the way from the bottom.

"Go help Slade!"

"How did this happen?" Veres demanded, taking Ripley from her. She looked back up the steps, but there was nobody at the top. She choked on adrenaline as her gaze jerked from tall shrubs to columns to roads that jutted away from the castle. Still no sign of him.

Veres carried the limp Ripley much easier than Mora had. Although Ripley was roughly the same size as her, he weighed significantly more than he looked. They approached a great black horse with lines painted down his thick body. He was terrifying and grand, and his muscles rippled as he pawed at the ground and threw his head.

"Slade needs help."

“Slade can handle himself. If Rip shifts, it will kill him.”

Mora’s attention was torn. She needed to help one and save the other. Ripley seemed to be getting worse. She had expected the wound to slow him down, but she had never expected this.

Someone ran down the steps with heavy breath. A weight lifted off Mora’s shoulders when she saw it was Slade. He didn’t look to be injured, but she couldn’t see much behind the cloak he was resituating on his shoulders. “There was something in the bolt that struck him. I tried to get it out, but I think there’s still some in there. He might not make it to Elletta, not with the city guard after us.”

“Vargas? Dromose?” Mora managed to ask through her pain. Slade’s eye widened when he took her in, but she shook her head and hid her injured hands behind her.

“They’re gone,” Slade said, his eyes still lingering on her burns.

Ripley shuddered, his jaw rattling as Veres set him down. Without further warning, his mouth split up the side of his face. Mora fumbled her step. His teeth sharpened all the way back, cutting almost to his ear. She couldn’t comprehend what was happening, it was like he was flickering between himself and a monster that was trying to tear its way out of him. His skin kept ripping open and mending shut, like the gods had sentenced him for Mora’s crimes and death by a thousand cuts was deemed too gentle.

The one thing she did understand, with painful clarity, was the blood-curdling screams that built in his chest and roared from his mangled lips.

He was in pain. Life-threatening pain.

*What have I done*, she thought, staring at her blood-stained hands, melted to the tendon in some places. She couldn't stop from trembling. *What have I done?*

She hesitated at the bottom step, stuck in a state of shock with a heavy cold settling into her core. She needed to wake from the nightmare like she needed air.

Veres appeared in front of her, fingers flexed into fists and mouth moving too fast to hear what he said. She focused on his words.

“Did you do it on purpose?” he barked out, the sound finally registering.

“I—What?” she asked, seeing Slade carrying Ripley down the cobbled street past the waiting horse.

“Was this payback for hurting your feelings? Did you mean to stop us from getting information from Dromose?” He was almost yelling at her, still in that growly tone but more intentional this time. “Did you do this on purpose?”

She felt the question digging at her chest, twisting her heart in a vise. It took her a moment to realize why. He was *taking* the truth from her.

“Why does it matter?” She gritted out. The pain got worse the more she fought it. Her nose stung with the smell of smoke drifting in the air.

“It won't to you, but it does to me.” He stepped closer. “Answer the question.”

“N—” The sound got caught in her throat with a tearless sob. “No.” The pain ebbed almost immediately, and with it, her

words began to fall too easily. “No, of course I didn’t! Do you really think I’m that awful, that I would purposefully get someone hurt like this? That I would put people I have grown to care about in danger on purpose? That I would betray them so easily?”

“I don’t trust you or your empty words. But I trust the magic, and I trust that you wouldn’t jeopardize your chance at freedom.” He marked an approaching noise from the top of the steps. “Take Havoc. Ripley cannot ride on a horse in his condition. They will walk toward the wall while you go get Elletta. Havoc will know where to go.”

He left her, taking off toward the sounds of the city guard with his bow in hand. Mora looked at the dark horse. Lines of faintly glowing red etched along him, showing through as if he were a shattered statue giving way to the embers burning inside him. His knowing eyes were dark as the Deadwood Forest. He tossed his head and snorted, his hooves pounding the ground and a cloud of breath blowing from his nostrils.

She hesitated to approach him, careful with her touch but relieved to find he did not emit heat as he looked like he might.

Pain lanced through her as she pulled herself atop the massive horse. She savored every moment of it. When he took off, she gripped the reins. The sensation shooting through her hands sent black splotches to her vision, and she felt too light to stay on Havoc’s back.

He galloped down the streets, turning left, then right, then left twice more before Mora lost her sense of direction. Before long, they arrived at the stables behind the Gilded Rose

where Juddah and Kallan were cinching sleeping rolls on horses of their own.

When Havoc came to a screeching halt, he reared impatiently as if he knew the dangers of taking their time. Mora fell from his back. Kallan caught her, holding her shoulders up before her knees hit the ground.

“What happened?” He tilted her face to meet his worried look, but she shook him off and steadied herself, refusing any more of his help. She was in no mood for his charity.

“Elletta, Ripley needs you.”

Without hesitation or reply, Elletta ran over to her horse, vaulting atop the white steed, and bolted. Mora quickly added, “They’re headed toward the wall!”

“We will follow. Let’s go,” Juddah demanded, mounting a chestnut-colored mare with full saddlebags. He grabbed the reins of two others and stopped at Mora, waiting for her.

Kallan refused to mount his own horse until she climbed onto one herself. He touched her with a gentle hand. “Are you alright?”

“Stop,” she bit out. She had almost gotten two people killed today. The last thing she needed was his sympathy. She felt her icy walls building back up around her heart. “No feelings, remember?”

She mounted her horse without his help.

“What about him?” Kallan nodded to Havoc.

“Havoc will be fine. Go,” Juddah ordered.

Havoc huffed in agreement and wasted no time trotting away. Kallan left shortly after, headed toward the edge of the

city. Mora started to follow.

“What did you do?” Juddah hung back to interrogate her.

“You assume it was me who hurt him?” she asked.

“I told Veres it was a bad idea trusting you.”

Mora held out her closed fist, nodding to it when he hesitated. “I saw an opportunity to do something good for a change. I’m sorry I took it.”

She dropped the ring she had taken from the man into Juddah’s open palm. Recognition flashed on his face. His shoulders relaxed. “Remind me to teach you how to keep your emotions blocked. It would be nice if I could stop feeling them.”

Mora took off. Between the reins in her hands and the wind on her skin, every one of her wounds was riddled with intense throbbing. She inhaled shakily and let the pain consume her, leaving only one thought in her tired mind. *Please don’t let him die.*



## CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

AFTER TRAVELING SLOWLY through the night, they caught up to the others as the sun began to peek over the horizon. They were far enough from Dread that Mora could breathe again, but she found herself struggling to remain completely upright on her horse.

All she wanted to do was keel over in a dark corner and feel herself rot away until she became the dirt in the ground and it became her.

That would be too easy, and far too peaceful a death.

Havoc trotted up to them in greeting. In the morning light, Mora could tell that the stallion was not just larger than a normal horse. He wasn't a normal horse at all. He was speckled black and gray, with those red lines etched into him still faintly glowing in the sun.

His teeth were sharp like Ripley's had been when his mouth had split open, and his eyes were not just dark, they were black. He was terrifying, but he was the only one who seemed to notice they had arrived.

Ripley looked healed and was sleeping with his head in Elletta's lap while Slade rearranged the contents of a saddle



bag, peering every few moments at Ripley. Death was no longer in sight.

Mora had been sure the fiasco at the ball would have been the moment Death took Slade. She had said one of them wouldn't be leaving Vale, and they were only a short ride away from the wall. Slade was alive. Ripley was alive. Maybe Mora had won. She could finally relax without the weight of Slade's life weighing her down.

As much as she resented Veres, she was relieved to see, when he approached Juddah, that he too had made it out unscathed. The two exchanged quiet words Mora didn't try to hear.

She hid her pain as she dismounted, feeling the dried fabric of her gown peel away from her burns. She swallowed back the bile rising in her throat and lowered herself slowly onto the ground where Kallan sat.

She closed her eyes and let sleep overcome her.

When she woke, all her pains had been mended. Nobody would have understood why she so badly wanted them back, needed them back. Her pain was her penance, and it was all she had to keep her mind from replaying everything she should have done differently.

"You're awake," Veres said. He was behind her, sitting in the grass and leaning against a tree with his bow beside him. Everyone else was asleep.

Mora crawled out from Kallan's draping arm and found a tree of her own.

"We should have just taken Dromose, like we originally planned," he said. "If Emrhyn managed to escape, we could

still..." His voice trailed off. Mora had to believe that Rhyn did get free, that he had taken his shot and broke out of the castle as soon as they had all left. She couldn't let herself believe anything else. Veres ran his hand across his neck.

"There has to be a way to find Dromose still." Mora offered.

"It's not your problem anymore."

Mora had prepared herself for his lecture all night. She had pictured every hurting word he was going to say and every mean growl he would make as he told her what an awful being she was. How much he hated that they needed her. What a mistake it had been to let her come with them.

Her mind had gone through it all. But what she was not prepared for was the hint of softness in his voice as he spoke again, not with anger or hate or even disappointment, but with a sense of calm like he had given up. He was done with her.

"He will have figured out why we were there by now, and the sword will be moved by someone else, guarded, and impossible to find." He stared off into the distance, fiddling with a wooden arrow and refusing to look at her when he spoke. "We were walking a fine line between war and peace already, and now it's snapped. Oryn will learn of this soon and send his new army to Direfell. We need to return home and prepare our kingdom for the repercussions of our mistakes."

*Our mistakes.* Hers being her failure, his being trusting her with the fate of the Shadow.

Each one of his words was a dagger twisting into her gut. She hadn't just gotten Ripley gravely injured; she had tripped

the livewire on an impending war in a world so delicately balanced on the tip of destruction.

Oryn had been building his army ever since Ahmya's death, waiting for proof to point his finger at the Shadow. She had just handed him a better reason.

She had sent everyone she knew out onto a battlefield for slaughter, and she could do nothing to help them. She was too weak. She needed to get stronger.

A coil of thick darkness wrapped around her heart, and her essyn purred. *Free me, and you will be stronger.* The cuff on her arm burned hot against her skin.

"We leave when Rip wakes." Veres stood. "I will keep my end of our deal, but don't be surprised if he refuses to see you."

"Wait," she said, expecting him to ignore her. He didn't. "The one you're taking me to, you said they know everything. We can ask them about the sword. We can stop this before it implodes."

"It's already imploded, Moranna, can't you see that? Your world is so small, you need to open your eyes to the truths that are right in front of you."

Her eyes were open. She saw things now she had never seen before. The softness in Juddah, the sadness in Ripley, and the duty that twisted itself around Slade's heart. These were not her enemies; they were reflections of her broken self. She was one of them.

The others had started to wake already. Veres went back to the camp and was helping Slade pack his sleeping roll onto a horse. They were laughing together, even after all that had gone wrong.

Mora sighed and stood to join them. She was halfway there when a shadowy figure appeared in front of her.

Death grinned.

Slade collapsed.

Ripley tried to run to him, but Elletta stopped him, holding him back. Veres was on the ground shaking Slade's head and telling him to wake up while Ripley screamed his name.

Mora ran over and broke through the wall they had formed around Slade. His skin was paler than normal, and he wasn't responding to Veres's attempts at waking him.

She fell to her knees and started pumping her hand into his chest. "Do something!"

A hand rested on her back. "Mora," Kallan said.

She pumped harder.

Veres moved Slade's cloak away from his shoulders and then pushed the fabric of his shirt away, exposing two puncture wounds at the base of his neck. Dromose had gotten to him, drank his magic and left his essyn to slowly die in its absence. Slade hadn't said a word.

She knew there was nothing that could be done, but she kept trying anyway.

"Wake up, dammit!" Mora stopped her compressions to feel for his pulse.

His skin was already cold.

Veres abandoned them, stalking off into the tree line. Juddah started to follow but stopped when Ripley let out a

gut-wrenching cry. He collapsed into Elletta's arms, and she held him with tears in her own eyes.

"What did you do?" Juddah demanded, looking directly at Mora.

"Why do you always assume it was me?" she snapped.

"Because I can feel your guilt punching into my gut!"

Her chest heaved as she closed her eyes. She pulled her hands away from the cold body and pulled them tight to her stomach. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." How had she not seen his pain?

Death didn't touch Slade's body. The shadowy figure walked away, as if nothing had happened that she cared about. That only made Mora more furious.

"It's not her fault," Ripley said.

"Yes, it is. If she hadn't—"

Ripley shot up and pushed Juddah. He pushed back and Ripley's white eye flickered red. "It's not her fault and you know it! Vargas has been after Slade for hundreds of years. Fuck, Mora wasn't even the first one to nearly kill him! It's not her fault!"

Juddah yelled a string of curses and punched his fist into a tree. He had to have been picturing the bark as her face. She would have.

"I killed him." Mora turned her attention to Elletta. "You brought him back. Do it again."

"No." Elletta looked back to Ripley who had collapsed in her lap and tucked his hair behind his ear. "There is nothing I can do now, and even if I could, I wouldn't."

Mora clenched her jaw and her essyn rose up in a flash of heat across her skin. “Why not? Because it doesn’t suit your needs?”

Elletta laughed. “I refuse to fall to the selfish ways of humans. When it is Death’s time, I have no right to stop it.”

Mora pushed Kallan away when he reached out for her again. She couldn’t breathe, she couldn’t see. She needed to be alone.

She walked away, not running, not crying, not anything more than walking. The numbness started to set in by the time she found a place to fall apart. When she tried to let herself break, nothing happened.

There was a wall around her heart that even she couldn’t penetrate.

It was the next night before Ripley’s tears dried up and Veres returned, looking more disheveled than ever before. She watched, dry eyed, from afar as they wrapped the body and each one of them bled over the fabric. Even Kallan joined their ritual.



It didn’t take long to reach the fallen tree that punctured a hole in the wall where they had crossed before. The horses had been coaxed through the wall without issue, and when it was time for each of them to crawl through the hole, Mora hadn’t hesitated. She didn’t care what happened. Her cuff burned no more than it had the last two times.

The moment they were on the other side, red and brown wings sprouted from Juddah’s tattooed back and stretched wide. He had been carrying Slade’s limp body, refusing to put

him down. Now he readjusted the weight, fixed his grip and nodded to Veres. "I'll take him home." Was all he said.

Mora watched, not able to feel the surprise she should have felt as Juddah leaped into the air and disappeared over the horizon.

With two people less than they had left with, they were finally back in the Shadow, ready for a journey that would take them weeks away from Dread. Mora turned her mind to the cold feel of her darkness. She thought of the light in her soul as she always had when she needed to reel her essyn back in, but now, instead of Ahmya's words coaxing her back, she had Kallan's.

She gathered those tendrils of her essyn she had let slip loose, and she pulled them, gripping them tight, jerking harder.

Nothing happened.

She tried and she tried again, until a panic set in on her heart. No matter what she did, she could not lock it away as she once had. She would think she had gotten it, but then a thought would creep its way past. It would start with Aemon's name, then Veres's words. Then a memory, the feeling of her arms wrapped around cold skin and the smell of rot setting in.

When all that dark was sprung loose again, she would let her magic surge, heating her cuff and re-agitating her burn. She would breathe the pain in with the smell of smoke and, for a moment, the biting edge of it would replace all her worries. She would be alright.

And then she would start over, trying to reel in her essyn.

By the seventh day, she was drowning in the silence that lingered between them. Hardly a word had been spoken loudly enough for her to hear. She could feel the steady jostle of the creature beneath her even when they had stopped to rest for the night, and their stops got fewer and further between as they got closer to Pryor.

Her mind had spiraled deeper with every soft crunch of grass beneath her horse's steps, and she had decided somewhere between the abandoned villages—overgrown with dead vegetation and fog—and the statues carved into cliff sides that her fate was tied to theirs now.

They had been walking a fine line between war and peace, but she had been walking a fine line between the light of her hope and the dark of her fate. She refused to let the dark win. After she got the answers she sought, she would start on a path to save herself, but she needed to save them too.





## CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

IT TURNED OUT, Pryor was not a place but the living being meant to possess all her answers. And he was awful.

“Veres,” he snarled.

“Pryor,” Veres replied.

Veres and Kallan had been the only ones willing to join Mora as she made her way up the rotting wooden steps of an old cottage on the outskirts of Teredun. The village had been full of people who shut their doors and peered out boarded-up windows as they passed by. By all means, the place looked abandoned. So did Pryor’s home on the overgrown hill overlooking the overgrown vegetation of the village; the further into the Shadow they got, the greener things began to turn.

The rafters of the porch roof were sagging, and the floorboards threatened to give out under their weight. They stood there, waiting for the man to unlock the many locks clicking into place on the other side of the door and hoping the cottage stayed standing long enough for him to do it.

The door swung open on creaky hinges, and the smell of dust assaulted them. Pryor was as tall as Veres with matching

wide shoulders and a mean scowl. That was about as far as their likeness went.

He was older, in his sixties as far as Mora could tell. Which meant there was a strong chance he was ancient. He had white hair, a scruffy white beard, and colorless unseeing eyes that all tied in perfectly with his long white robe and slippers.

They followed him in as he disappeared into the depths of the cottage. The space felt much bigger on the inside, with far more rooms and shelves than there should have been room for. And there were bones everywhere.

Piles of femurs on tables and pyramids of skulls stacked on shelves. There were animal bones and human bones and bones that Mora couldn't begin to guess what they had once been. Threaded strings of teeth draped through the rafters and above the windows like garlands.

There was a toothbrush and a bowl of small bones on a glass counter near a stool. It looked to be the place where he spent most of his time.

“Don't touch anything,” Veres warned them, which were the first words he had spoken to her in days—and she couldn't even count it because he had been looking squarely at Kallan when he said it, although she had a suspicion that he had meant the words more for her. She was the one, after all, with the tendency to slip things into her sleeves that didn't belong there.

She heeded his warning and kept her itching fingers to herself.

“How are they?” Pryor asked Veres.

“If you cared, you would already know.”

Pryor grumbled something under his breath as he found his place on his stool. His lack of vision didn't slow him down or challenge his steps. “I know why you're here, and the answer is no.”

A soft clink sounded against the glass counter. Veres had set something there. Mora stepped up to see.

It was a bone, but as much as Mora knew about where to cut and slice to inflict the most pain, where to stab to kill, and where to stab to avoid killing, she knew little of bones. If she had to guess, she would say it was a rib.

Pryor scrunched his forehead and picked it up. He smelled the bone, his eyes fluttering with his generous inhale, and then he tossed it back down.

“It's what you've asked for,” Veres said.

“I see that.” His gaze turned to Kallan, then to Mora as he seemed to look her up and down. He got up and moved too quickly; his body quaked and realigned as he approached her. He stuck his face in the crook of her neck and held her arms so she couldn't retreat.

“Oh, child.” He licked her skin.

Mora's borrowed dagger was at his throat before he stood back up with a short laugh and a devious smile.

“Your pain is so strong, it seeps from marrow to skin like oozing honey. It's a shame he will not let me have it.”

“We made a deal,” Veres threatened.

“Yes, we did.” He closed the distance between them. “I will not tell you what you want to know. I do not like you. The

d'zev's mind is too practiced in shielding anyway; even if I had something that belonged to him, I wouldn't be able to tell where he was."

"You are useless."

"But her," he turned sharply to Mora, "for what she has done for my son, and what she means to him, I will help the girl."

All three of them looked confused, but likely for different reasons. Mora started to recognize little pieces of him. His white hair, his symmetrical face and pale skin. She knew who this man was, and it only made her hate him more.

"Come. Sit," he ordered, maneuvering his way around baskets and tables of bones, leading them to a round table in the back of the cottage.

Pryor sat, he took a deep breath, and the moment Mora's butt hit the chair, he divided into three beings like the firerender had done when he had dosed her with his toxins. But Mora hadn't eaten anything, she hadn't smelled anything sour, sensed any danger—aside from him licking her—and her companions seemed to see all three of him too. She hadn't been drugged this time. He was three people.

"I should warn you," Mora said, dagger still in hand, "if this is going to be some game of riddles, I'm really not in the mood."

Pryor laughed, all three of him did. Then they spoke in unison, "Tell me exactly what it is that you want to know."

She closed her eyes and pictured the cold hard floor of a dungeon cell, smelled the iron bars rusting around her and the

familiar clanking of chains. She could almost see him then, the crystal blue of his eyes and his pale colorless skin.

Despite their similarities, he didn't look much like his father. He looked kind where Pryor looked cruel. Her heart ached to see Rhyn again.

*"In this kingdom, a question might cost an answer, but outside of Vale, it can cost much more than that."* This is what he had been talking about, his own father, and the price of her question that Veres had paid for with the mysterious bone. She looked at the number of bones surrounding them and wondered who they had all come from.

She pushed up her sleeve to show the mangled and burned skin around her cuff. Kallan looked at her with wide eyes. His mouth fell as if he wanted to say something, but he remained quiet, knowing she wouldn't have wanted his pity.

"Tell me all the possible ways that this specific cuff can be removed from me, that will result in freeing my magic for good while I remain alive and unharmed."

All three of him grinned. "He taught you well, clever girl."

Mora held her breath, waiting for them to dissect her request and crumble her hope like sand falling through her fingers. The original Pryor, the one seated, leaned back in the chair and crossed his arms over his chest. His fingers were covered in rings that looked to be made of bone, and his fingernails were broken in jagged edges.

The room dimmed while she waited; the moon had ducked behind clouds, setting the world in an uneasy darkness. The only light came from the candles burning in sconces.

“You can’t,” he finally decided. Her stomach dropped.

“But,” he scratched at his beard, “I see what he sees in you, so I will tell you of two possible ways to remove the cuff, both of which I cannot see the outcome for.”

“We should go,” Veres said, turning to leave.

“No,” she said. “I want to hear what he has to say.” There were some things she was willing to sacrifice to get what she needed. If removing the cuff caused her harm, she wanted to know about it anyway.

“Whatever it is, it’s not worth it.”

Mora ignored Veres, leaning her elbows onto the table. “Tell me.”

He smiled a wicked grin and matched her posture, his boney elbows making a sickening noise as they slammed into the table.

“Let the boy leave us,” he said, waving his hand in Kallan’s general direction.

He and Mora exchanged a glance. She gave him a slight smile, and Kallan walked out the front door, leaving Mora with Pryor and Veres, who refused to leave.

Pryor gripped her arm. His hands were cold and soft to the touch, as if his skin had worn thin and he struggled to keep blood flowing through all his extremities. Veres moved, too close to her, ready to intervene if anything happened.

“These cuffs were originally made to trap the gods,” Pryor said. “They failed, of course, but the One Faith found a better use for them.”

Dropping her arm, he continued. “The only way one has ever been removed has been for the essyn to grow stronger than the prison its magic is being held in. When that happens, the cuff will melt like wax on a candle. Unfortunately, even with all the practice in the world, your essyn is small. Which leaves out the first option of growing it through use. That would take more years than you have left.”

“Can I assume you’re going to tell me the other option then? Or should I prepare to beg?”

“Oh, how I would love to hear you beg.” He leaned back in the chair again. “But your pain is so much sweeter, and I do look forward to feeling it.”

Mora picked up Juddah’s dagger from the table and stood up to leave. It was a risky move, there was no way she would be leaving without getting the information she needed, but she also needed him to know that she was not playing games.

A cold sweat broke across her skin as she walked away.

“Sit back down,” they said. She paused, then obeyed with disdain etched on her face.

“Like the ethereal, essyn have been around since long before the gods came to this world and destroyed it with all their little experiments.”

“We aren’t here for a history lesson,” Veres said. Pryor ignored him.

“What nobody speaks of is the gods’ first attempt at creating their beloved followers. It didn’t work. The things they created ran wild and wreaked havoc on the world. With their next attempt, the gods made other gods, but they were too powerful. And so, with the third attempt, the gods trapped the

essyn and used them to make the fae, then the shifters, and finally the needy and dependent humans who worshiped them to no end.

“But the essyn have always been living beings. Of course, they, like their greater counterparts, were never alive in the way you think of living. They were simply power.” He inhaled another breath from a bone he pulled from his pocket. “But what the gods discovered was that when embedded in the soul of a real living being, the essyn did more than just keep them alive. If it was big enough, it evolved special abilities, like an extension of essyn and soul; magic, you call it. Of course, the realization also came with the discovery that essyn, if left unchecked, can take over your body, suffocating the soul within.”

“The askians,” Mora said. “Like Vargas.”

“Like Vargas.” One of the Pryors stepped away and returned a blink of an eye later with a cup of hot tea for him and one for Mora. She played with the handle like she was waiting for it to cool before taking a sip, but she had no intention of drinking anything the man had given her.

“The point of my ramblings is that your essyn and your soul are tied together, they are as one inside you. It is possible, however, for you to merge with another.”

“Another person?” Mora asked.

“You don’t need to hear this,” Veres said. “We should go.”

Mora didn’t budge.

“Another essyn,” Pryor replied. He leaned back in his chair. “The caveat being that your soul can reject the essyn, and



if that happens, well, it will kill you. You see now why I didn't tell you before?"

"How do I make sure my soul will accept it?"

"Nature's sweet demand for balance." He smiled. "You must take the essyn from someone whom your soul could recognize, someone your soul wants to be a part of."

"But giving your essyn away, people do that when they sacrifice to the gods, it always kills them."

Veres shook his head and walked away.

"Yes," Pryor seemed to be looking into her eyes without seeing her. "One cannot survive the separation of essyn and soul. You must slide your dagger into his chest and claim the blood of the heart with whom your own belongs." His smile cleaved her heart in two. Pain, he had wanted. He somehow knew what those words would do to her. "From this blood, I take for me."

The wooden legs of her chair scratched loudly against the floor as she stood. It rocked on two legs before deciding to remain upright.

"This was a waste of time." Mora stormed out, passing Veres by the door.

Pryor laughed harmonically. "So sweet, the smell. I can taste it in the air, the way your heart is wrenching and breaking! Poor girl. It seeps from the poor, poor girl!"



## CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

MORA STORMED OUT of the small cottage like an eager soldier rushing to battle her foe, only her foe was her fate and there would be no battle. Veres followed as they blew past his friends. They watched with curious brows and questioning eyes. She ignored them all.

“Mora,” Kallan said. “Wait.”

She walked faster when he chased after her.

At the bottom of the hill there were two ways to go, toward the desolate village or away from it. She picked away.

Her hope had died, and she needed to mourn it. She needed to mourn everything she had never been able to mourn. It had all been building up in her chest, and it was too heavy. The weight of everything she couldn't feel was crushing her, and she didn't want to be around anyone when it all fell apart.

“Mora!” Kallan shouted.

“Just stop!” she screamed, turning on her heel so fast he almost ran into her, Veres not far behind. The others seemed to be the only ones who could take a hint. They saw that she was a bomb about to explode, and they knew what was good for them. They stayed far away.

Kallan held his hands up in surrender. "I just need to know that you're alright."

She shook her head. She wasn't alright. She was the furthest thing from alright and it was building into something worse.

Words piled in her throat like nails for her coffin, ready to bury her.

"Stop following me," she said, her voice getting louder and more confident with what she had to do. "Stop trying to save me! Just stop, alright? I don't need you. I have told you that a hundred times, but you refuse to listen. Let me put it in plain words: whatever delusion you have going on in your head, get over it. Because this," she motioned urgently between them, "this isn't real, Kallan."

She breathed in through her nose, releasing her breath with a decision she could not come back from.

"I could never care about you," she said with her chin held high. "Only a fool would think otherwise."

He nodded his head gently, biting his lip as she assaulted him with her words.

"Leave," she demanded.

He looked her in the eye and stepped closer. She flew her hand up, her dagger poised to stab his chest if he got any closer. The tip dug into the fabric of his shirt and broke through the skin in a pinprick, soaking the light fabric with a small dark stain.

He looked at it, then to her. She clenched her jaw to distract her from the sting in her eyes. He leaned in.

“Fine,” he said. He stepped back once, then twice, and then turned away and left. Just like she had told him to. So why, she wondered, did her heart feel like it was clawing at her ribcage to break free. To follow him.

She couldn't let it. She turned her back to him and left, just as she had intended to do, but she couldn't ignore the sound of footsteps following closely behind her. It seemed Kallan hadn't been the only one looking for a fight.

She ignored Veres while she used the dagger to try to pry the cuff off her arm, never stopping her hurried walk. If she couldn't melt it off, she would cut it off.

Blood poured down her arm and the cuff bloomed red. The burn cauterized the bleeding the way the fire-render had stopped his own wounds. Heat seeped into the dagger where it touched the metal and scorched up to the hilt. She dropped it with a hiss.

“What are you doing?” Veres demanded as she plucked the dagger from the grass and slid it into its sheath, barely pausing to do so.

“What do you want?”

“You wield your words like a dagger.”

“What do you want?” she repeated.

He kept her pace, trying to read her expression as he studied her face. She tried to quicken her steps, but it was no use. His legs were longer than hers, and he could follow her anywhere, at any speed.

“I'm worried you're running off to do something stupid,” he finally said.

“Because that’s all I can do, right?” She stopped. “I make stupid decisions that end up endangering those I care about, those *you* care about. Well, no need to worry yourself any longer. There are no mistakes left for me to make, I’ve already ruined everything.”

Veres closed the distance between them, getting too close. “We,” he growled, “*We* have ruined everything. Nobody is putting this on you.”

*I am*, she thought.

Her fingers played unconsciously with the hilt of the dagger. His fists remained at his side like he was restraining himself from strangling her.

“I’m not talking about your war. Wars can be won. Wars can be fought,” she argued. “I’m talking about my soul! For years, I have been trying to keep myself under control, to manage the venom that’s tainting me in here.” Her fist slammed into her chest. “My fate is not a promise, it’s a curse, and I foolishly thought that if I was good enough, if I was strong enough, I could fix it. I thought that I could heal the parts of me that are dark. But there is no fixing me now. That was my last hope, Veres. Your war is just beginning, but mine has just ended. And I have lost.”

The hint of a smile crept into the corners of his mouth as he said, “Don’t pity yourself, *Shev’né*. You haven’t lost. You’re giving up.”

The dark *essyn* inside her stirred, angered by his accusations, or perhaps not wanting to hear them because there was truth in his words. Maybe she was giving up, accepting the fact that someday soon her *essyn* would infect her to the point that she would no longer care for good or bad,

light or dark. She would become the evil the stars had written for her.

Once upon a time, she had bristled at the idea.

Now, well, now she was just tired.

“You haven’t been fighting,” he said. “All you have done is hid under a blanket of fear and guilt.”

“Of course I have. I am afraid! I’m becoming a monster!” A tremor shook her chin.

He stepped closer, almost touching his body to hers. “There are far worse things to be than a monster.”

“Not for me.”

He laughed. “Did you really think that freeing your magic would change everything then? And then what, run off and be heroes with your lover and his shiny white armor?” His lips brushed the edge of her ear. “You never would have survived playing the hero, Moranna. It’s not who you are.”

She tried her best to ignore his words, but they ate at her like an acidic fog growing denser as it encircled her heart.

“You no longer need to concern yourself with who or what I am, because I did what you said, I opened my eyes, and I see the truth and I am done with it all.” She locked her eyes with his, and his shoulders went rigid.

“I am wrath. I am sorrow, pain and fear, pent up and exhausted. I’m going to explode, and it will be violent and messy, and I will take you all down with me. So I am leaving, before I hurt anyone else with my ruination.”

She brushed past him, but his hand gripped her arm. “You cannot just walk away from us. Your life belongs to me,

remember?”

“Why didn’t you just kill me?” she shouted, yanking her dagger from its sheath. “I could have prevented your war if I hadn’t failed, but you could have prevented so much more if you had ended my life like you had meant to! And all for what? So you could own me, was that it? Because I don’t buy this bullshit about needing my help. Anyone could have helped you. Why me?”

Grit found her voice as she went on. “What am I to you that you think you can just use me?”

He clenched his fist and his jaw. Pain lanced across his face. He started to walk away, but stormed back in anger. She realized what she had done then, she had taken a truth she hadn’t meant to.

“You,” the words ground from his teeth as he tried to hold them back, “are infuriating. You are a weapon, but even that you cannot do because you are too gods-damned broken. So, to give you the truth: right now, Moranna, you are *nothing* to me!”

Her whole body went cold. Her muscles turned weak.

He bared his teeth and ran his fingers through his messy hair, pulling it loose from the tie. “Maybe you’re right, I should have killed you. Maybe this is more trouble than it’s worth.”

“Then do it,” she barked. “Kill me, or let me go.” She shoved the handle of her dagger into his hand and positioned it against her heart, cutting her skin in careless slices as she tried to get him to hold it there.

He finally did. He pressed the dagger hard against her and leaned in. For a horrifying moment, Mora thought he was going to kiss her. It was much worse than that.

“Pathetic,” he hissed.

He dropped her dagger in the grass and left her.





## CHAPTER FORTY

**H**ER KNEES HIT the surface of a rock slab with a painful thud. She was dangerously close to the edge of a cliff, and her legs had given out beneath her, no longer caring if she were able to stand or walk or to drag herself even a step further. Her body shut down, and she collapsed into a mess of limbs and uneven heartbeats.

Ahmya's death washed over Mora with images of a broken and bloody body and rays of red hair. She could still feel Slade's cold skin on her hands and see the look on Kallan's face when she finally pushed him too far.

She shattered to pieces until all the stars in the sky had extinguished from the breath of her screams, and when no more tears would fall from her blurry eyes, the sky cried for her. Pelts of red rain beat violently against her skin.

She stared off the edge, into the sea of fog below. She had forgotten what was wrong with her in the first place, what had brought her to that point. The maze of emotions had taken too many twists and turns and weightless falls into the depths of her own being and gotten lost. She struggled to remember where it all started.

*Pain, she thought; Ahmya had died. But really...fear.*

Then anger.

Just when she thought she would never again know how to feel or move or breathe, a cold wet nudge shocked her system and she was dragged away from the cliff edge.

She blinked, and a low growl shook her to the core, sending a cold shiver like needles prickling across her skin. Above her, the weeping wolf stood, his torn and tattered wings extending from his back.

She pushed herself up and rested her forehead against a snarling snout that was more bone than fur. His decay had gotten worse, and gold tears streamed heavier down his face.

Not sure if her words would even have sound, she tried to calm him. “Don’t cry for me.” It came out as a raspy whisper. She pulled her head away and placed her open palm across her chest.

“I want them all to drown in the broken shards of their bloody hearts and feel what I feel in here. I want to force them all to know this pain.”

She tipped her head back and let the blood rain wash the soaked strands of her hair away from her face and wet her lips with the taste of copper.

The rain could hide her tears, but it could not wash away what she had done, and it could not erase the thoughts that haunted her future.

She breathed deeply. “I lied to him.” Her hands wiped the mess of thin blood from her face. “I said I was afraid that I was becoming a monster. But that’s not the truth.”

She looked at the wolf who could not see her. “I have *always* been a monster, and can I tell you a secret?” A hint of a smile flashed across her lips. “I fear only how right it feels.”

The wolf laid down beside her, letting her lean on him with her still-numb muscles. One of his battered wings moved to shelter her.

He was warm, but not like the fires that melted her skin and made her tired. He was warm like a lonely embrace. The kind that reminds your heart what it is beating for.

The storm settled in for the night, finding its home above the tattered remains of her soul while they fell asleep to the sound of the rain beating down on the Shadow.



Under the light of a new day, Mora was stricken with the stench of rot and the sticky red that had dried to a deep brown and cracked along her skin. She stood, taking in the sight of the green valley and scattered pools of blood that slowly seeped into the soil.

“Darling.”

Mora startled, grabbing her dagger while she spun to see Dromose and Vargas standing at the edge of the grass. She scanned the tree line in the distance and saw her weeping wolf retreating further into the shadows and disappearing.

Mora fixed her grip on her dagger. “You killed Slade.”

“Yes, well it was either that or watch him kill Vargas. He left me little choice in the matter.” Dromose walked up to her. She kept her dagger ready in case he attacked. “This has gone far enough, don’t you think? No more lives need to be put at risk. It’s time for you to pick a side.”

“Screw you.” Mora laughed. In the far distance, she could see the swirling colors of the wall. Two kingdoms and a god sat below them, all on the brink of war. “I already picked a side—my own. I’m going to find whoever killed my sister, and then I’m done with it all.”

“That’s not deciding, it’s backing out. And darling, you are far too deep in the game to back out now.” He started to retreat back to Vargas but stopped. “When next we speak, I expect you to have made up your mind. And do consider that Aemon knows the truth about your so-called sister. He would give it to you, if you were a friend.”

“I’m not changing my mind. Aemon, Oryn, the Shadow; maybe a lightmarked would stop you all from killing each other, but we all know that’s not me.”

“Darling, if any of us knew where the Lightmarked Prince was, we wouldn’t be needing you, now would we?”

The moment he touched Vargas, they both disappeared. Mora’s body felt weak, and her skin tingled in discomfort. There was no way she was willing to be used for the sword, by anyone. But what he had said gave her another idea.

If she could get the sword, it would be hers to decide what to do with: give it to Veres and Elletta, or to Aemon and Oryn. But she had a third option, one she had forgotten about. If she could get the sword to the Lightmarked Prince, perhaps he would know how to stop the war. Perhaps he could destroy the weapon.

If anyone could find him, it would be her.

Together, they could make sure nobody else died for the relic. What better way to change her fate than to help a hero

save a world that didn't deserve to be saved?

With her worst idea yet, she scrubbed the crusted blood from her skin and headed back to Pryor.



## CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

A FINGER BONE FELL through the air and landed perfectly back in Mora's hand, which was a good thing because the last thing she wanted was to have to move to chase the thing around the dirty floor.

She was perfectly comfortable and just where she wanted to be, lying on her back on top of the counter. She had one muddy boot dirtying the glass and the other leg hanging lazily off the edge, one arm tucked behind her resting head and the other playing a game of catch with the small bone. Up and down and up and down it went, never veering off its perfect path, straight into her palm.

Slippers shuffled down a short corridor until they stopped, accompanied by an audible huff.

"What're you doing here?" Pryor asked, grabbing his tea kettle from the small table in the corner of the room, the same room where her life had changed only the day before. Or was it two?

There was no telling how long she had lain on the cliff edge with her weeping wolf.

"You're the seer, oh wise one, shouldn't you already know?"

He scoffed. Not a morning person it seemed. “Unless you’ve changed your mind about the merge, get out of my house, child.”

“Actually.” She sat up, spinning both legs off the counter to swing them back and forth, feeling like a child with her feet not reaching the floor. “I have changed my mind about what information you are going to give me.”

“That is not how this works.”

She played with the bone in her hand, flipping it around her fingers. “What do you do with the bones? I mean, it’s obvious they are important to you, but what for?”

He fumbled with a match, breaking the thing in half and tossing it into a pail of broken and used matches beside the fireplace. He grabbed a new one.

“The faster you answer my questions, the faster I’ll be out of your hair. You can go back to being alone and grumpy in no time.”

A match lit, and he cupped his hand over the flame so it wouldn’t be extinguished by the chilled wind creeping in the cracks of his cottage. He held it low on a pile of kindling, and fire erupted in the fireplace.

“Bones are like sponges,” he said with his scratchy voice that grated on Mora’s nerves. “Similar to how d’zev and their bones eat magic, all bones soak up pain. It’s such a beautiful thing.”

He walked over to his counter where Mora sat and plucked the bone from her hand. “I can feel the pain the bone’s host endured in its life.” He sniffed the bone, his eyelids

flickering and his chest rising as he consumed its pain. “The sweeter the pain, the greater the high.”

“You’re a junkie. I can work with that.”

He pointed at her with the finger bone. “Don’t touch my things. This one belonged to an old woman who traded her finger for a look at her son’s future bride. The pain she endured cutting the finger off gave me enough energy to see her son marry his next three brides; and even then, some lingers in the bone still.”

Mora looked around the baskets, piles, and shelves stuffed with bones. “You don’t collect bones. You collect pain.”

“I consume pain,” he corrected.

She hopped off the counter. “I have a collection too, back in Vale. Books mostly, plants—but I can never keep them alive—and a few trinkets here and there.” She walked around the counter, tracing her finger over every bone she could reach. “I always keep my favorite books on display, somewhere they can sit proud and seen.”

Pryor trembled, trying to track her movements with his unseeing eyes. She stopped at the stool with his worn impression indented into the faded wood. On the wall behind it, there were shelves. Glass containers filled with bones, some just one bone, some with many. They were covered in a thin layer of dust.

She sat on the stool and spun in circles. He sneered.

“But my very favorite?” She pulled out an old box from beneath the glass display of the counter. It was the length of her forearm and as deep as her hand. “I keep that one within my reach, so I can read it whenever I want.”



She opened the lid.

“Don’t touch those,” he snapped, darting out for her. She was faster and moved the box before his clammy hands could take it.

Inside the box was one long thick bone that had been broken in two places and laid on a bed of velvet. If she were to put the bone back together like a puzzle, it would have been much longer than the box. She wondered if it had been broken to fit, or perhaps it had been broken to be removed.

She lifted the corner of the fabric and found the entire box to be full of small bones and fragments of larger bones that had been shattered. The box was crammed so full there was no room left inside it.

She took out a small piece, from a wrist or a knuckle or maybe a toe. She hardly cared.

“What makes these ones so special to you?”

He tried again, and failed again, to take the box from her.

She studied the way his lips twitched when she spoke certain words, his tell that she was hitting close to the truth.

“Is it the pain they hold?” Nothing.

“Did they come from someone like me?” Again, nothing.

“Or perhaps it’s *who* they came from?” His lips twitched, almost too slight to see. “Ah, was it someone special to you? Someone close to your heart?” He tried for the third time to press his luck, but he had not yet learned that Mora was quicker than him. For a wise man, he was quite the fool. And she was on the right track with her questions. Then her gut wrenched when something occurred to her.

“The sweeter the pain, the greater the high; and what sweeter pain than that you have inflicted yourself.” The pieces clicked into place as she spoke them out loud.

He clenched his fists tightly at his side. “Put them back.”

She looked at the box full of bones in her hands. There had to be dozens of them in there. “Are these Emrhyn’s bones?” she asked, her mouth suddenly parched. “You beat your own son so you could consume his pain?”

“They are not all his, and it’s of no harm when their bruises heal and bones grow back.” Pryor turned away, returning to his tea kettle to fill it with water.

“That’s right, you have a daughter too, don’t you?”

“Get out of here before I strip you of your flesh and pick out your bones with my teeth.”

“That’s not how this works.” She parroted. “You see, I need you to tell me something important, but I was afraid I had nothing to bargain with when I came here.” She put the bone she had been inspecting back in the box and picked up another.

He laughed. “You’re going to give me something that’s already mine? Child, you do not understand bargains.”

“No,” she said with a sly smile. “I’m no longer bargaining.”

She hopped back up on the counter and sat with her legs crossed while she dug through the box looking for the perfect bone.

“I believe this,” she said, “is called extortion.”

His unseeing eyes darted back to her. “What do you want with me?”

“I’m getting there. But first—ah, perfect.” She found a bone that looked much like the one Veres had given him, but it felt brittle when she pinched it and had cracks already forming on its surface.

“First, I must tell you that I have been lying for some time now. I tend to do that. You said my magic would never be strong enough to melt my cuff, and while that may be true, it is strong enough to spill out the edges. At least a little bit.”

She held up her empty hand in front of her face, letting her fingers hang limply, pointed down to her other palm cupped beneath them. She could smell the smoke before she saw it, thin tendrils of dark gray flowing from her fingers and pooling in her palm. When she had collected all the smoke, she blew it into Pryor’s forbidding face.

He waved the small cloud away when it reached his senses.

“It’s been a while since I could do this, I was a child when it started, so bear with me here; but I need you to find a d’zev for me, and—ah, let me finish,” she said when he opened his mouth to bark out an annoyed no. “Where was I? Right, I need you to find a d’zev, and if you refuse or fail—” she picked the rib bone from the velvet cloth and set it with a loud clank on the glass between them. Hunching over, she held a finger above the bone.

“I really do wish you could see this; it would make it much more dramatic, but let me explain. I’m touching a rib bone. Nothing wrong with that but a little skin oil. Now the smoke is starting to pour from my finger, my pointer finger. It’s

touching the bone, the bone is—ah, I do still have it—the bone is turning a nasty brown color. Soon enough, it will crumble in a pile of dust. And I can do this all day.”

Pryor’s hands gripped the edge of the counter with a harsh smack. She was, of course, lying about what she was seeing. Since leaving Vale, her *essyn* had been slowly escaping her hold, and she found that she could summon the smoke. It spilled from her like sweat when she least wanted it to, but she hadn’t been able to use it like she had described since before she got her cuff. And even then, she had only ever used it once, and it had been an accident.

But it was too easy to make him believe her threat.

“You bitch.” His nose crinkled when he spoke. The fireplace crackled loudly in the other room. “I can’t find Dromose or his sword. I already told Veres that.”

“Oh, I’m not looking for Dromose.” She smiled even though he couldn’t see it. She had a sneaking suspicion that he could tell either way. “I’m looking for a boy.”

“A boy?” he asked with disbelief in his tone.

“Yes, a boy. Like I said, he is a *d’zev* child. Before you go all *I can’t do that*, I have something of his.” She took a marble from her pocket and tossed it at Pryor. He caught it just as she knew he would. “That should make it easy enough for you, should it not?”

He cursed under his breath and mumbled something that she didn’t care to make out as he rolled the marble between his fingertips.

Two more of him appeared.



## CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

SHE WALKED OUT of Pryor's cottage with a satisfied smile on her lips. But the smile didn't last long. She knew what she would have to do next, and it weighed on her like the weight of her steps creaking against the rotting wood porch.

No matter how many apologies Mora had made in her life, they never got easier, and she knew the one for Kallan was going to hurt.

"So, it went well?" Kallan was leaning against the cottage with his hands in his pockets and his legs crossed casually, like he had been waiting there for some time. Mora looked around, unsure if she was hoping or dreading to see the others.

"They left."

"I thought you did too."

"You thought wrong."

"I'm..." her voice trailed off. She hadn't had time yet to think of how to say it. *I'm sorry* seemed too simple. Too easy. Anything else would have come out a jumbled mess of *I'm an awful person* and *I have a plan*, or any mixture of the two as she couldn't decide which to say first.

“Don’t.” Kallan spoke before she could make up her mind. He pushed away from the wall. “You don’t have to apologize; you said nothing that you hadn’t warned me of before. And you’re right, I just wasn’t listening. But I’m still not leaving you, no matter what this is between us. Friend or lover, I’m still here, as whatever you need me to be.”

Mora stepped closer but hesitated to get too close. She didn’t want to give him the impression that everything could go back to what it had been before. It couldn’t. “I don’t know what I need, but one day I might figure it out, and if I do, you’ll be the first to know.”

He smiled, that dimple appearing on his cheek. She got the sudden ache to feel the warmth of his hands and the softness of his lips. It couldn’t happen. Not like this.

“I have a plan,” she said quietly. “I might have a way to find the sword.”

“The debts between you two have been paid. You no longer need to follow the Blade. We can go, just us, like we planned.”

“I know, I just...” she couldn’t bring herself to tell him the truth. It was better that nobody knew of her hope. “It just feels like the right thing to do.”

“Well then, how could I say no to that?” He pulled a stiff strand of hair away from her eyes and tucked it behind her ear with a sad smile. She had to force herself to pull away. “I just need to know, Mora, that you are alright.”

“I’m not alright.” Her smile matched his. “But I never was to begin with.”



The road to Whitehorn was long. Mora washed the blood rain from herself in a stream and then walked until the soles of her feet hurt, which she hadn't thought possible after all the walking they had done since waking up on the shore of the Deadwood Forest.

"I think this is it," Kallan said. The words were like sweet honey to her ears. The sun was getting low, and her stomach growled. It would be evening soon, and Mora couldn't wait to stop for the night.

"After this is over, I think I need to sleep for a week or two."

He laughed and adjusted the sword on his hip. "As long as I can sleep near to you, I'm all for that plan."

"Of course." She tied her hair back with a leather tie. "I've gotten so used to it that it's weird now, to sleep without you nearby."

"What a pity," he mocked.

After they had finished preparing themselves to walk into a fight—Mora was convinced this was not going to be easy—they entered the town.

There weren't as many people as she had expected, but compared to where they had come from, it was full of life.

The dark buildings had the same tall pointed roofs she had come to love, with their ornate metal patterns and high arched windows jutting out from the walls. The streets were busy with people chatting and trading and going about their day as they always would.

Mora watched a young woman bounce a baby on her hip as she bargained with a baker over loaves of bread. She couldn't help but picture swapping lives with the woman and—nope, she couldn't do it. Even if she tried, she couldn't see herself with babies and baked bread and daily chores with needy husbands.

Her life might have been dangerous and, honestly, scary, but at least it wasn't mundane.

“There,” Mora pointed, “is that Havoc?”

“All I see is the back end of a horse. How can you tell that's him?”

She grabbed Kallan's wrist and pulled him along. They weaved their way down the long and narrow street, around a splashing water fountain, and down a set of stone steps. By the time they caught up with Havoc, he was whinnying with a pride she had never seen on an animal before.

“Good boy, Havoc.” She rubbed his nuzzle, surprised to find the fiery veins were cool and hard. Like the power flowing through him was trapped behind a pane of glass. A window to his veins.

They stood before a house, smaller than the rest that lined the block but just as beautiful with its dark stone door carved into a repeating pattern of foliage and pointed arches.

Kallan gripped the pommel of his blade when the door swung open. The dagger Mora carried was already in her hand.

“Put that away,” Elletta said, stepping outside to join them. “Why did you bring them here?” she asked Havoc, scratching his nuzzle the same way Mora had been doing.



Havoc tossed his head.

“You shouldn’t be here,” Elletta said to Mora, quietly.

Mora pursed her lips. “I want to talk to him.”

“No.”

“Come on, Elletta,” Kallan pleaded without shame. “She’s trying; we can still fix this if you—”

“Look at what happened last time she tried to right her wrongs,” she interrupted with all the grace of a queen. Not for the first time, Mora was reminded that the young-looking faerie was a royal, a fact that had become easy to forget despite her regal posture and expensive gowns.

“I just want to talk to him,” Mora said. “I’ll even give you my weapons, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

She huffed. “You couldn’t kill Veres even if you tried, he’s —”

“Elletta.” A deep voice came from behind them.

When Mora turned, she saw Juddah standing there. Either this was home, or he had returned to them after burying Slade. He was carrying a small stuffed toy rabbit in his hand. The sight of him carrying something so at odds with his appearance felt almost comforting, like she had walked back into her old life. Her new, old life; the way it had been for only a moment in time.

“Let them talk,” he said, walking up the stone path to the front door and opening it for Elletta to go inside. He turned to Mora. “He’s in the stable out back.”

He nodded for Kallan to follow him inside, the smell of a freshly cooked meal wafting out the open door.

Mora found Veres exactly where Juddah had said he would be. He was brushing down one of the bay mares, a cloud of dust releasing from the hair on her front leg as the brush slicked off her.

“Come to apologize?” Veres asked without turning to see who it was.

“I won’t if you don’t,” she said.

“Deal.”

She picked up another brush from the small shelf of supplies and began to brush the horse’s back. They worked in silence, cleaning dirt and grime from the mare before moving on to the next and then the next, finding a rhythm with their work until all the horses had been fed and brushed and stabled for the night. All except Havoc, who refused the confines of the stable and settled instead for following Veres around like his shadow.

Things with Veres, with any of them, would never go back to what they had been. She would always look at his face and hear him yelling those words to her. And they would all look at her and see someone fragile and pathetic. But she could deal with the discomfort.

She would help them. And then she would be free to leave them without guilt eating away at her insides.

Veres stopped their silent walk when they got to the back door of the house, and he emptied a bag of apples into the yard for Havoc.

“Your house or a friend’s?” she asked.

“A relative of Juddah’s, but she joined the half of the town that headed for Direfell to join our armies.”

“The Shadow drafts women too?”

“No,” he snapped. “We do not force anyone to fight who does not volunteer. These are brave men and women who choose to leave the safety of this town and fight for their kingdom.”

Mora sat on the step and leaned against the back door of the house. “I figured Vale’s armies would be going straight through this town. Why would they leave?”

She watched Veres pick up one of the apples from the ground and scratch Havoc’s nuzzle as he fed it to him. If she had to guess by his reaction, apples were a favorite of Havoc’s, despite having to struggle to get pieces off his sharp teeth.

Havoc left Veres’s touch to hunt down the rest of the apples that had rolled into the grass. Veres brushed his hand on his pants. “They will aim to attack the other side of the mountain, where most of our people have settled. The only way there from here is through the Crimson Dryland, and nobody with half a brain would travel through there. They will sail around. The settlements on this side of the drylands are at risk of Vale’s wall expanding, but they are safe from the upcoming war.”

Mora pulled the map Pryor had given her out from behind her sheath and unfolded it. It was small, a portion of a larger map that had been torn away, but it showed her where she needed to go, with a little red dot that moved when Qenan did. “Sailing through the Graves and the Crooked Strait seems more dangerous than risking the drylands. Or will they go the long way, to the Southern Sea?”

“The drylands are worse.” Veres sat on a step a few below Mora as she folded the map back up. “Why are you here, Moranna?”

*Right, to the point.* “I think I might know where to find the sword,” she said.

He narrowed his eyes at her. She fished the marble out from her pocket and held it out for him to see. “There was a boy, Dromose’s nephew, we ran into him during the ball. Well, he helped us escape, really, but in our short time together he mentioned that he goes everywhere Dromose goes.”

“Finding Dromose would be a start, but I already told you, he would have had the sword moved by someone else, so we couldn’t pry the location out of him if we tried.”

“The boy reminded me of myself; he was quiet, blended in with the shadows, walked with silent feet, and likes to follow people to places he shouldn’t follow. He could make himself near invisible just by letting people forget he was in the room. Speaking from experience, you can learn a lot when you’re so easily forgotten.”

A slight smile played on his lips, and he turned the marble around in his fingers. “You think he would know where the sword is, and this is his?”

“That’s the hope, and yes, I—I stole that from him. He had lots of things in his pockets, I doubt he’ll notice it’s missing.”

He nodded to the marble as he handed it back to her, his other hand rubbing his neck where his shirt collar hung loose. “What did you have to give Pryor for him to use that?”

“Nothing.” She shrugged. “I tricked him, made him think I was a threat to his precious collection. He gave me what I needed to know without much of a fight.”

He huffed a laugh. “I shouldn’t be surprised that you threatened a god.”

“A—what?” Her eyes went wide. “He’s a *god*?”

“Apparently not a very scary one.”

It occurred to her then that she had gone from hating the untouchable gods to threatening one, being hunted by another, and having a growing suspicion she may have a third doing his best to look out for her. She felt like she had stepped too close to the sun. “Does that make Rhyn a god too?”

Veres laughed. “He would love to hear you think that, but no. Pryor and Ginevra were lesser gods, making Emrhyn and Arrowen deities. Only the primals could birth a god.”

“Arrowen is his sister?”

“She is.” He pushed the cuffs of his sleeves up his forearms. “Before I decide if I want your help again, I need you to tell me what happened with Emrhyn, why you did what you did.”

Mora relaxed her shoulders and breathed in the cool air. The sun had started to go down, and the temperature was dropping fast. The cold felt good on her skin and the air felt more breathable than ever. “I’m not as heartless as you think I am, Veres. I did what I had to do; he had already been caught by the guards. I said things he and I both knew I didn’t mean, and I left him in a locked cage with the key in his hand and a dreaded feeling that I would never see him again.”

His head snapped up to her, “He’s not still in Harlen?”

“I don’t know where he is or what happened after that night. What I don’t get is why he hadn’t freed himself. Surely a deity could break through iron bars.”

“He was supposed to.” Veres ran his hands through his hair, pulling a few curls loose from the leather tie. His fingers settled on the collar of his shirt. “We all told him not to go, but he insisted that it was where he needed to be. Three years. He said he would stay for three years and then he would return to us with or without completing whatever it was he needed to do there. But they found out what he was and found a way to hurt him, bad enough that he couldn’t get out.

“He was stuck there for two more years before we were able to get to him and even then, he said no. He was too close to give up. It wasn’t until we were there for Dromose that he finally said yes.”

“He never told you why he was there?”

He shook his head. “Did he tell you?”

Mora remembered his words. *This is where my queen needed me to be.*

“No.” She lied. Whatever Rhyn’s reasons for keeping secrets from Veres, whoever he was really being loyal to, Mora trusted him far more than the man in front of her. She would not betray him, no matter how many mountains and rivers separated them. No matter how much time had passed, she would always hold his secrets just like she knew he would hold hers—in the darkest parts of their hearts.

“If anything happened to him, if Oryn...” She bit her lip, drawing the metallic taste of blood.

Veres stood and helped Mora up so he could open the door. She had taken his offer without even thinking about it. He paused, hand on the handle, and looked back to her. “I didn’t realize you and Emrhyn were so close.”

“Is it so surprising that I might have had friends?”

He laughed. “Friends? Only a little. But with Emrhyn? And he lets you call him Rhyn? Yes. Very. Not even I could get away with that.”

“Bold of you to assume you’re so special,” she snapped, without thinking. She was supposed to be playing nice, not throwing insults.

He laughed and opened the door a crack. He paused again. “Moranna, if we do this, I need you to stop trying to die.”

“If we do this.” She pushed the door open. “I need you to stop caring about my life.”

The others were gathered around a table eating soup and exchanging laughs. Kallan had filled them in on the plan to find Qenan, and when Veres gave them the option to go with or stay behind, it was not a surprise that they all chose to go along. They would follow Veres anywhere.

“So,” Veres said. Everyone at the table looked to Mora. “Now that we have agreed to blindly trust you again, what forsaken corner of this world are we dragging ourselves to?”

She hesitated, but opened the map and handed it to Veres. The little red dot floated in tiny zigzags right below the bold script on the page. It spelled out their destination in slanted letters with faded ink. But there was no mistaking what it said.

Veres smiled. "The Crimson Dryland."





## CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

THE DRYLANDS WERE worse than anything Mora had imagined, with the sun beating in a sweltering heat against her covered skin and the wind blowing crimson sand into her eyes like tiny needles.

It had taken them weeks to get there, and by the light of the never-ending sun, their journey would not be over soon.

The first fortnight had been beautiful. The land in the Shadow had started to decompose what men and gods had left behind. Cliffside that had been carved into statues were now crumbled to the ground like the broken body parts of giants. Trees had reclaimed old houses, breaking through the floorboards with their roots and splitting roofs with fallen branches. Even the ground seemed to rise around fallen temples to consume the rubble.

Most of the land was rolling hills of greenery or thick forests of lush trees. The tales Mora had heard of the Shadow were all filled with the darkness and evil that resided in the Deadwood Forest and near the wall. It was as if no one in Vale had ever seen past the frightful fog that blocked this beautiful view.

Mora had a strong feeling that the One Faith had made it so on purpose. If the people of Vale knew what existed outside its borders, they might not be too scared to ever leave.

Then again, the Shadow did have its fair share of monstrous creatures infected by the bloodblight, lurking behind boulders or blending into the green of the trees. Most of them had been constructed of masses of limbs and bones and always had sharp teeth.

Bright feathers, twisting horns, spiked tails, she had seen it all by the time they reached the eternal sun. They had been stalked almost their entire journey. A fact that nobody aside from Mora and Kallan seemed to care about, or even notice.

Since they'd entered the drylands, Mora hadn't cared to look back to see if anything followed them into the pelting assault of the frequent sandstorms. Veres had been right, nothing in its right mind would have entered willingly. Fortunately, none of them were in their right minds.

"There!" Juddah shouted above the howling of the harsh wind. Mora saw nothing but the same red of the same sand that had surrounded them for the past three days.

She looked at Kallan on the horse beside her, afraid to open her mouth and voice her question lest she get more sand between her teeth. Already she could feel the granules crunching when she bit down.

Kallan knew what her look meant. He shook his head. He couldn't see anything either.

She squinted, using her gloved hand to block the rays of light and wind. Finally, she saw it, the thing that Juddah had noticed long before it was in view.

It was a hound, almost as big as the weeping wolf she had become all too familiar with. Even through the deafening wind she could hear a growl rumble from deep in its chest. An orange light glowed from within it, visible to all.

Two more appeared through the blur of sand behind it. Then a person rose from the sand.

“Rip,” Veres warned.

Mora saw her friend crouched on top of his horse with a headscarf blowing off his face and a row of sharp spines poking out from the torn fabric on his back. She thought she even saw the flickering shine of red scales appearing through his skin, but it was hard to say for sure.

He looked as if he were about to leap from the horse and charge the beasts on all fours. A sight Mora would have loved to see if it didn't likely end with Ripley torn to shreds by a pack of stray mutts.

Veres flung his bow over his shoulder and nocked two arrows, his deadly aim pointed at the hound in the middle. The person started toward them, the hounds following close behind.

“I got them!” Veres shouted. “This isn't a fight we want, keep going. I will keep them from the chase!”

Havoc turned anxiously, rearing his head as he moved to block them from the hound's view. “Go!”

Juddah was the first to kick his horse into a sprint, then Elletta. The rest of them, including Ripley, wasted no time in following. They needed to stay close or they risked getting lost in the sea of red.

Mora looked back a moment later to see one of the hounds had noticed their escape. It was sprinting behind her, close enough that if it opened its gaping maw it would likely get a mouthful of her horse's tail whipping through the air.

Then it did open its maw, and it was more than gaping. The hound's jaw did not open like a regular dog's would have. It split the creature in half right between its eyes and down its neck, opening to a terrifying crevice of needle-like teeth and a glowing pit of orange deep in its core. It grumbled like a volcano about to erupt on her.

She kicked her horse into a gallop. The mare pushed faster with the threat of death hot on their tail.

"Go," she screamed as she caught up to Kallan. He made the mistake of looking back at the creature. It shot a beam of liquid fire from its core, and they barely moved from its burning path.

Blue light crackled along Kallan's skin and down the blade of the sword he had been given for protection. The hound closed its mouth and lunged at Kallan's horse. He swung the sword, nicking its leg. The light of his magic jumped with a sickening buzz across the hound's body.

The hound released a pained yelp that pierced Mora's ears. It jolted in shock and tumbled in the heaps of sand, using the momentum of its rolling fall to propel itself back up to its feet.

Mora refused to look long enough to see its eyes, but she knew, without a doubt, the thing was enraged.

It caught up to them before long. Kallan turned to right his horse from veering into Mora's path, and the moment his

attention was away from the hound, it leaped. So did her heart.

Mora pulled on the reins, steering herself into Kallan's horse. The hound hit her instead, slicing the horse and forcing her to almost fall off the racing steed. She righted herself as Kallan's sword forced the hound back to the sand.

They locked eyes, and she shoved the map into Kallan's hands, waiting until he took it before she let go. He shook his head with unheard words on his lips.

Mora pulled the reins to the left. The hound followed her away from the group, but her wounded horse wasn't fast enough. Razor sharp claws dug into her horse's rear. The mare whinnied a loud cry and stumbled. She pleaded for the mare to keep going as she swung one of her new daggers behind her, hoping to catch the hound before its claws caught her arm.

She sliced its shoulder, then its leg as it tried to climb its way up to her. She cried out when a claw latched onto her thigh.

It ripped her backward and she flew off her horse. She spun through the air like a rag doll. When she landed, she scrambled to her feet.

With a dagger in either hand, she snapped her head one direction and then the next, ready for the beast's next attack to come from anywhere. Her scarf blew away in a ribbon of silver.

A low rumble sounded to her left. She saw only sand rolling like waves and blowing up into the air.

The gentle orange glow building in the back of the hound's throat made it a visible silhouette of fire against the

backdrop of sand. Its head split open.

A loud growl tore through the air.

Mora's hand trembled as she tried to blink the sand out of her eyes. She couldn't see well, and it was only getting worse. Even if she could survive this, she was lost without food or water, and she couldn't tell which way she had come or where her friends had gone.

She felt her hope slipping away as the hound stalked slowly around her. Its hackles were a patch of quills that raised on its back. Her *essyn* focused everything she felt on one thing; killing the hound.

It inhaled deeply. When it exhaled, Mora jumped out of the way. Liquid fire shot out of the creature's lacerated face. A scream of fury came from her lungs, and she dove and crashed into the sand. The scorching liquid had singed the fabric of her pants, but she had missed the brunt of the attack.

One of her daggers had flown from her hand and buried itself. It was consumed by the sand like a stone tossed into the sea.

She scrambled up, seeing the hound shaking its head and preparing for another attack. A body appeared behind it. The closer it got, the more Mora could see. It was a woman, shorter than Mora and walking slowly, like every step was a challenge.

When she was close enough to make out her face, Mora's heart dropped. "Mags?"

The old woman shrugged. "We're all slaves to a master, in one way or another." Then she dropped to her hands and

knees, her aged body slowly morphing into that of a hound. In her new form, she somehow looked meaner than before.

Lowering her head, her hackles rose. Both beasts growled. Mora knew there had been a reason she'd feared the old hag. Sharp teeth, liquid fire, a desire to kill Mora: It all made perfect sense now that she knew.

She held up her last dagger and took a step back for every bigger step the hounds took forward. The sand tried to swallow her feet every time she moved, and eventually, she lost her balance and fell. She scrambled to her knees and reached for her dagger as it sank. Her hand pulled away with only a fistful of red granules. She dug desperately, but found only more sand.

Mags split her face open and crouched.

*Help me.* Mora was already on her knees, so she thought of the golden-eyed weeping wolf, remembering what Dromose had said about golden tears and who they belonged to. She hoped he was right for once. *I need you.*

Another rumbling growl broke through to her. She heard the churning of the beast's liquid fire bloating in its stomach.

*I need you.*

A whistle whizzed past her and her eyes flew open in time to see two dark arrows sink deep into the younger hound's chest. Its yelp was a dying cry. It convulsed violently on the ground. Mags turned her attention to it and bit at the arrow, trying to pull it free.

Another arrow flew, this one cutting into Mags's chest. She turned and growled.

Mora was yanked from the ground and pulled onto a horse. She swung one of her legs over so she was sitting properly, with Veres's chest warm against her back. She leaned forward so they wouldn't touch.

They took off, Havoc galloping much faster than her own horse ever could have. They lost Mags in the violence of the sandstorm.

With every jostle, pain lanced through Mora's thigh. She had so much sand in her eyes that they started to water, stinging and muddying her vision.

When Havoc slowed, Veres sighed and she could feel him relax his taut muscles. "I thought I told you to stop trying to die on me."

She laughed, as much as she could laugh with a dry throat and an aching body. "I thought I told you to stop caring about my life."



Various formations of red rock jutted out from beneath the sand when the storm eventually slowed. The broken end of a carved wing, pillars in equal distances, stacks of massive red bricks. All the same shade of red as the sand, all evidence that life had once thrived there. An entire village of people, homes, shops, and temples, now buried under layers and layers of sand.

Mora had ripped the bottom half of her shirt off and used it to wrap around the gashes on her thigh. The fabric had been soaked through with her blood and dried under the sweltering sun. It crunched when she tried to readjust it.



Her lips were dry and cracking, and her exposed skin had started to blister. She hated the heat, and being stuck practically in Veres's lap, on a jostling horse, while wandering lost made her hate it even more.

She tipped back her head and shook the last drop of water from their only canteen. It had run out long ago, but she hadn't considered it a dire situation until the lingering drops stopped completely. She cursed under her breath. Another day of wandering and she would find herself face to face with Death.

"We're almost there," Veres said with a scratch in his voice.

"And how do you know that?" she barked. She spread her arms wide. "Look around us, there's nothing but stone and sand and proof that we've been lost for days."

"We aren't lost." Veres adjusted on the saddle behind her. "Look there." He pointed to the horizon where the rubble turned from hand carved forms to more natural ones, getting bigger and bigger until they disappeared into the blazing sun.

"What am I looking at?"

"There," he said, "did you see it?"

Mora took a deep breath in through her nose and tried to focus her vision, concentrating on the shapes she was seeing and hoping that one of them would miraculously take the form of another living being. She saw nothing. And then she saw blue.

A flash of blue, to be exact.

“Kallan?” she asked, the hope returning to her like a wave of icy water she so desperately wanted to be sucked under.

“Kallan,” he parroted, urging Havoc to pick up his pace. How the horse hadn’t collapsed beneath the weight of them, Mora had no idea. She had walked only a short distance in the sand, and her legs had started burning from the difficulty of it, she couldn’t imagine having to walk through it with the added weight of two people.

She made a mental note to give Havoc all the apples he could eat whenever they got out of the barren graveyard of a dryland. They could eat them together, relaxing carelessly next to a cool lake in the shade of the trees. She could almost taste the crisp crunch and sweet juices on her tongue.

When they got close enough to see Kallan and Elletta waiting for them, all the tension in Mora’s body released with a deep sigh. Veres flinched when she relaxed into him, but she didn’t care, she was too exhausted to sit up on her own.

They were greeted at the mouth of a large canyon with halfhearted smiles and relieved laughs. Veres jumped down from Havoc. When his feet hit the sand, he closed his eyes and tipped his head back like he was just as glad as she was to be found.

Mora tried to dismount herself, but Veres caught her and helped her down as Kallan ran over to them, meeting her with a strong embrace that had them both falling to their knees in the sand. Mora moaned when the gashes in her thigh ripped back open.

“Glad you’re back, brother.” Juddah slapped his hand on Veres’s shoulder.

“Somebody get her some water,” Veres demanded, “and clean her wounds.”

Elletta was not far behind with a canteen.

Propped up against Kallan’s chest, Mora stayed in his arms as she savored the water wetting her lips and sliding down her throat. It had been two days that they had wandered through the drylands alone, but without the sun ever setting it had felt like time had stopped altogether.

“You don’t know how relieved I am that you’re alive,” Kallan said.

“I am too,” she coughed. “I’m glad we’re all alive.”

Juddah and Ripley were talking to Veres, probably about the plan for where they would go or how long they could afford to stay and rest. She hoped they were talking about the latter. Veres shook his head and started toward Havoc.

Elletta inspected the wound on her thigh with a discerning eye. “This is strange,” she said more to herself than to Mora. “It’s almost like its—”

Havoc made a painful crying sound that tore their attention to him. He reared up, stomping the sand just as Veres fell to the ground like someone had stopped his heart between footfalls. Her mind immediately shot back to Slade collapsing into the dirt. She swore she could feel his cold skin against her hands again.

“V!” Mora didn’t know who had shouted, perhaps it had been more than one of them. Everyone ran to where he fell. Juddah dragged him to the canyon wall and propped him against a rock as Elletta fell to her knees beside him.

“Where is he hurt?” She began feeling at his legs, Juddah at his arms. Mora watched on as Ripley bit at his thumbnail.

She limped over with Kallan’s help.

“Where was he hurt?” Elletta asked, this time pointing her attention to Mora.

“I don’t know, he never acted in any sort of pain.” Except he had, he had flinched every time she had touched him, she just hadn’t put it together. She hadn’t even thought to check if he was injured. She had forgotten that even without pain, a man could still be hurt.

“Here,” Juddah said. “His back.”

He pushed Veres forward enough to pull his shirt up, revealing deep gouges that stretched from shoulder to hip.

Mora couldn’t look away, but it wasn’t the glisten of blood that demanded her attention. It was the many scars crisscrossing beneath that painted a picture of pain so deep she could feel the metal whip that had once lashed against her own back again and again, too light to feel until the sting tore through her as it ripped back out.

Her scars had been stolen from her. His remained as a daily reminder of whoever had done that to him. She hoped they were dead, whoever they were. Part of her wanted to kill them herself.



## CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

“WHAT DO YOU mean it’s not working?” Mora watched the events unfold like a fever dream. She was seeing Veres through murky water.

In all their time together, Veres had never shown any signs of pain. She had stabbed him, more than once, and he hadn’t even flinched. She was beginning to think that he was unkillable.

Yet there he was, bouncing in and out of consciousness. Elletta ran her hands down his back, her fingers trembling. She slumped back.

“You’re just giving up?” Mora balked.

A light blue gown clung to Elletta’s thighs with the dark stain of his blood. “I have done all I can do,” she said, wiping her hands on the fabric and turning back to Veres. “You will live, but the wound will have to heal naturally.”

“Why?” Kallan asked.

Veres pulled his shirt back down, fighting his heavy eyelids to stay open. “Because the fire hounds are *nieveta*.”

He tried to push himself up but lost his balance and settled back into the ground with closed eyes. “They’re

ungodly, created by the hand of Death.” His voice sounded hoarse, and Mora handed Juddah the canteen of water, hoping he could force Veres to drink something.

“I might be able to help,” came a small voice from an opening behind a slab of stone that Mora was noticing for the first time.

Veres reached for his bow at his side, but Elletta stopped him.

“Qenan?” Mora asked.

“The map led us right to him,” Kallan explained. “Just like you said it would.”

“How can you help?” Elletta asked.

“Bring him down,” the boy said and disappeared back into the rock opening. Veres refused help as he stood.

They went from the desolate inferno of the desert to a cool tunnel that felt like a portal to a different world. It quickly opened to a vast space full of greenery with a stream of water flowing through the middle. A steady drizzle of water fell from the ceiling to a deep pool, and tunnels broke off on either side of the space.

Cave wasn’t the right word for it. It was open and bright, with sunlight streaming in through holes in the stone. The ceiling was so high above them, they could have fit the Library of the One Faith inside.

It was almost exactly like the daydream Mora had conjured about feeding Havoc apples. As if summoned, the massive horse nudged past her and joined the others at a water trough in the shade. She didn’t see the mare she had been

riding among them. Mora hoped she had died fast, without pains in her stomach or panic in her heart; the drylands had a way of starving a being with a hunger food couldn't satiate.

Even found, Mora was hungry for connection, thirsty for comfort.

Shuffling sounds followed Qenan as he riffled through his overflowing satchel. He took out two books, three scrolls, a pen, and a handful of knickknacks before he managed to find what he was looking for.

He ran back to them with a vial in his hand of opaque green liquid. "Here," he said. "It's a d'zev tonic...It takes a demonic thing to heal a demonic wound."

Elletta turned the vial in her hand and inspected the liquid. She smelled it and looked at it in the light before she handed it back to Qenan.

"It should be safe. Mostly plants and herbs, but the boy is right, it's been imbued with d'zev magic."

"Do you drink it?" Mora asked wearily.

"It's topical, but..." He pursed his lips and looked at Mora's thigh. His shoulders went slack. "I only have one dose."

"That's not a problem," Mora said. "Thank you for this." She took the tonic from him and handed it back to Elletta.

Mora left Kallan's helping hand to sit with her feet dangling in the pool. She had to limp there, but Qenan was all too happy to take Kallan's place as her crutch.

Arguing voices echoed through the cave walls, impossible to tune out. It was a battle of stubborn wills, and she wanted nothing to do with it. She couldn't help but scoff at Veres's

reasoning when he brought her name up: that she was weaker than he, that she would need it more than he.

As much as she wanted his pain to be gone—it looked much worse than her shallow cuts—her choice to give the tonic to him was not entirely of a selfless nature.

Some people lived for honor, defending morality and the greatness of all things light and honest and good. Others lived for family, sacrificing bits and pieces of themselves to keep their brothers safe, not caring if they were wasting away doing it.

Mora lived for pain. Bright hot or achingly dull. Untouchably deep or surface level scrapes. Pain was pain, and it meant she was still breathing.

“How deep is it?” she asked, peering into the pool of crystal-clear water. The bottom looked much too deep to ever touch, and still far too shallow to ever sink.

“I can touch except in the middle.”

“Did they ask you about the sword yet?”

“I don’t know where they hid it.” Qenan’s whole body slumped in shame.

“Do you think you could find out?”

He perked back up, looking around them. He whispered, “Like a secret mission?”

They both went back to looking at the water when Juddah walked up beside them. There was no reason to keep her question a secret from the rest of the group, but she didn’t want to give them more hope before she knew Qenan’s answer.



Juddah crouched down. “Hey kid, you know how to hunt rabbit?”

Qenan’s interest was fully piqued. He shot up from his seat, nodding his head. “I can teach you if you want. I know how to find them, it’s easy.” The boy turned back to Mora. “I’ll be right back, but...yes.” He smiled wide.

Juddah furrowed his brow and Mora shrugged like she didn’t know what the kid had been referring to when he’d whispered that last word. He led the boy by his shoulder to the tunnel that connected back up to the drylands. Ripley followed them out.

Mora raised her brow at Elletta, waiting for someone to tell her what was going on.

“We’re going to take a look down the tunnels, make sure it’s clear. The kid says nobody patrols here, but we’d rather be safe.” Elletta looked over to where Veres rested, his eyes shut as he leaned against the wall. She handed Mora the vial of green tonic. With understanding, Mora nodded.

Before she knew it, she was alone with Veres. She stripped her now empty sheaths, setting them neatly on the ground beside her boots.

“What are you doing?” Veres asked from behind closed eyelids.

“Taking advantage of the privacy,” she replied. “You should too, you smell awful and you’re covered in sand and blood.”

“No thanks.”

“Look,” she argued, pulling at the leather tie that held up only part of her hair. The windblown knots intertwined with the tie and made it a difficult task. “We both know they left us alone so I could somehow convince you to use the tonic to heal yourself. I have no idea why they thought you would listen to me, but I’m not going to try. I just want to get clean. And I’d rather do that with you facing the other way.” She spun her finger in a turning motion. “We can switch when I’m done.”

A dark brow raised in her direction. She ignored his look, still struggling with the leather tie in her hair. At this point, she was just yanking on it and hoping it would break before her hair ripped out.

“Stop doing that,” Veres said. “Come here.”

She hesitated, but obeyed. His fingers went to work in her hair as she squatted in front of him. It took time, but eventually he got the thing out with minimal hair pulling.

“You should at least let me help clean your wounds,” Mora said.

“Fine.” He sighed, handing her the tie.

As he walked to the shallow end of the sloping pool, Mora noted that aside from how slowly he moved, he had no obvious tells that he was in pain. If she hadn’t seen the wounds herself, she never would have guessed they were there.

Water rippled around him as he waded into the pool. Mora joined soon after, still dressed in her clothes that needed washing as badly as she did. Her thigh pulsed as the wound hit the water. She carefully ran her fingers through the open cuts to clean the sand out. When she was done, she kept her

distance from Veres and sank until she hit the bottom of the pool.

She didn't come back up until panic started in her chest, and when her lips broke back through the surface, she forced her breath to stay steady and quiet.

"I'm going to touch you," she said, wading closer to Veres as he rubbed water onto his face. He froze when she got near him. "Is that alright?"

"Why?"

"You can't reach your back, can you?"

After a moment of hesitation, he nodded at her to go on. She lifted the shirt up his back, exposing the raw wounds. He pulled it over his head and let it hang on his arms while her finger traced his scars, leaving tiny drops of water racing down his skin. His hair rested against the back of his neck in messy wet curls.

"What happened to you?" she asked.

"Something terrible," he said. "What happened to you?"

"Something tragic," she replied with a smile.

Water poured from her cupped hand and ran down the deep slashes that crossed his marred skin. He didn't wince once. Not until she pulled the dropper from the vial and dripped the entirety of its contents onto the wounds.

His shoulders straightened and his whole body quivered.

"I told you I wouldn't try to convince you," she said.

"It was my fault for trusting you then." He pulled his shirt off his arms and dunked it in the water, wrung it out, and then

put it back on before he left her.

“You shouldn’t trust anyone.” Mora stared unseeingly at the wall in front of her. “Always expect betrayal, and you’ll never be disappointed. At least in theory.”

“And in practice?”

“Betrayal always hurts.”

Veres sat back down on the same spot he had claimed before. “And the boy? Do you think he will betray us?”

Scrubbing the stains off her sleeve, Mora asked, “Have you seen his things?”

“The pack?”

“Books, pens, ink, scrolls, marbles, a little stuffed bear. You don’t bring your favorite things with you just to spy on your enemies.” She faced Veres. “Do you know what it feels like to be trapped in the place you’re supposed to feel safe? To want to leave your supposed home so badly that you join a group of dangerous strangers on a dangerous mission just to never have to go back?”

Thick black curls dripped water down scarred hands that were buried in his hair. He turned his head enough to meet her stare, if only for a moment.

Whenever his eyes met hers, it was as if the heat of their locked gaze was too intense to last for long. Too full of hate and resentment.

Like the world itself cut him off from her, he always looked away.

“He’s not going to betray us. He wants to help. He wants a family.”

“Is that what you wanted too?”

Mora laughed. She let her body float on the surface of the water. “When I grow to care about people, they end up dead. Why would I sentence anyone else to that kind of fate?” A picture of Slade flashed before her eyes, quickly replaced by one of Kallan.

Every last breath of air escaped her lungs as she let herself sink. This time when the panic kicked in, she welcomed it until it burned in her lungs and her cuff heated into her arm. Every time she sank in the water, the memory of drowning got a little less painful.

When she finally broke through the surface again, Veres was gone.

A reflection of light caught her eye from the edge of the pool. The sun sparkled against sharp metal. Sitting beside her boots was a black dagger with a long serrated edge, one she had thought she had lost to the sea.

She slid a finger along the cleaned and sharpened blade.



## CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

THE FURTHER INTO the tunnels Kallan led her, the darker it got. Eventually, it opened to another cave-like area. The space was more crowded than their oasis, with naturally formed pillars stretching from the ground to the ceiling like a forest of stone. Above them, hundreds of tiny lights shone like bright stars.

“Fyre bugs,” Mora mused.

“Qenan showed me this place when I asked if there was somewhere dark, but only when I told him it was for you. The kid seems to have taken a liking to his book girl.”

“Book girl? Is that what he called me?”

Kallan laughed. “I made sure he knows not to say it to your face. I told him you are more of a dagger girl anyway.”

He spun her around gracefully, catching her in an embrace. They began to sway, adding a step here and there, and before she knew it, they were dancing.

With their bodies so close, she breathed in the sweet scent of him, the same soap berry smell that lingered on her own skin. She let him puppet her like every part of herself was strung with invisible thread back to his hands; she would follow wherever he intended her to go.

It tightened her chest to admit it, but after weeks of growing distance, she was happy to be in his arms again. She had once thought of him as a thorn, something she needed to pluck out before it was too late, but she was wrong. The pains working their way through her soul had never been caused by him.

From the moment they had met, he had been the roots sprouting from her heart. Love or not, he was so deeply a part of her that there was no way to escape the danger.

“I saw the two of you, you know? That night of the ball.” He brushed her hair behind her ear and let his touch fall to her cheek. “I know I was meant to stay away, but I thought it worth the risk, to be there if you needed me. Then I saw you dancing in his arms and I knew I couldn’t stay.”

“Kallan.” Mora sighed, letting her forehead fall to his chest. It felt like someone had cinched a knot around her stomach. “We had to. It was—”

“I know,” he said. “There was no harm in it, I’m not trying to guilt you.” He spun her slowly, admiring her as she turned in circles beneath his hand. “I once watched you dance in the rain and thought it was the most beautiful sight I would ever see. But that night, the memory was tainted by my petty jealousies. I suppose what I am getting at is that this, well, I just wanted a new memory. To see you dance one more time.”

“One more time?” She paused.

He smiled, but the gesture didn’t reach his eyes. “Is it wrong of me to fear what’s to come? That one of us might not —”

“Yes,” she whispered, pressing her palm against his chest. “Giving thought to fears, giving them power, is like giving them permission to come true. Don’t let that one win, not after everything we have survived.” She slid her hand up to his neck and resumed their swaying dance. “We will be fine. Besides, if it all goes wrong, at least we’ll be watching the world burn together.”

Worry crept across her skin like frost when he didn’t answer. She had said the wrong thing, said too much.

“What if we are on the wrong side of this?” he asked. “If Dromose is with Aemon, we have to assume Oryn is too. Who are we to steal from a god?”

“Not all gods are good, Kallan.”

He drew in a breath with closed eyes and spun them around a towering stone pillar, then slowed their dance back to a dismal sway. “What are we to do?”

“I’m going to try to destroy the Twinblade.”

“What?” He tucked a finger under her chin and pulled her face up until she could look nowhere but the blue of his eye, branded in her memory. “How?”

“I don’t know yet.” A sad smile bent the corners of her lips. “But I can’t trust that it would be safe in anyone’s hands. Can you?”

He studied her face as she studied his. Finally, he smiled. “I trust it in your hands.” He brought his lips down onto hers, kissing her with a passion she had been craving since he had finally listened when she’d told him to leave.



His hands roamed down her body until they were at her waist and he could pull her even closer. She was starved for the feel of his skin against hers, and she saw that same hunger in him.

In silent agreement, they broke the kiss and began to undress. It was a different kind of dance, fumbled and urgent. But a dance that Mora knew every step to.

When only their shirts remained, they turned their hands back to each other. Kallan lifted the ripped fabric from her chest like it was the last remaining thread of his restraint. When it was gone, he ravished her.

He sank to the ground in front of her. Her hands laced through his hair as he placed a gentle kiss to each point of her hips. His fingers hesitated at her wound, tracing gently around the torn flesh. He placed a kiss just above it, then trailed his way back to her center. When he dipped his tongue between her legs, pleasure snaked up her spine. A soft moan played on her lips.

His lustful gaze watched hers, but his expression changed and he stopped his pursuit. “Is this alright?” he whispered.

Her fingers traced his jaw as she nodded. “I thought you were going to die,” she admitted. He furrowed his brow, rising to his feet. Her hand stayed on his warm cheek, thumb brushing his lip. “I saw that fire hound leaping toward you and I felt—I’m not even sure if I know what I felt.” *Like it was my heart that was being attacked.*

She didn’t know if that was love, but what she did know was that it wasn’t what Veres had described; she had not lost herself in the Golden Boy. With Kallan, she was found. “I know it in my bones that you and I are connected, like my soul

knew yours long before we met and when you walked into my life it felt like—”

“Like *there you are*,” Kallan finished for her, his lips pressing gently on hers. “You and I have a soul bond, Mora, something real. Let us forget about everything but that.”

She kissed him then, full of need. If he wanted to forget, she wouldn’t stop until there was nothing left but their bodies intertwined and her name on his tongue.

Matching her hunger, he opened his lips to take her deeper. All thoughts of gentleness dissipated like smoke in the wind. Mora gave herself over to the sensations. The feel of his skin beneath her fingers, his lips gliding over her breasts.

She lowered herself to the ground, encouraging him to follow. When he did, leaning against the stone pillar, she traced his jaw with her kiss. Their discarded clothing offered protection from the rough stone floor as Mora straddled him. She took his mouth in hers once again, addicted to the taste of him, overwhelmed by the feeling that she could never get enough.

“Do you trust me?” she asked him, taking a moment to catch her breath. He looked at her like he couldn’t wait to devour her, the deep blue of his eyes coming alive with the reflection of his magic sparking along her skin.

“Yes.”

*You shouldn’t*, the thought forced its way into her mind, laced with her essyn’s touch. “Then lie down.”

He adjusted himself, sliding away from the stone pillar, careful to keep her on top of him. He obeyed her commands

as if he lived to please her, needing her approval as badly as he needed air in his lungs.

Grabbing her torn shirt from under his leg, she bit at the fabric and tore into a seam, ripping the sleeve off. She was walking a dangerous line between her desires; it took everything she had to restrain her thoughts the same way she restrained Kallan's hands. A strip of fabric looping once, then twice, snaking between his wrists and cinching tight.

He tested his bonds. Mora smiled and grabbed the fabric, pushing his arms above his head. She crawled her way up his chest until she hovered above his face. Their fingers locked together. Both her hands and his were pressed against stone.

"Take a breath, Golden Boy. You won't get another until you make me come."

Heated and wanting, she felt his gaze travel up her body. He wet his lips and smirked. "As you wish."

She lifted her hips and slowly lowered herself onto his waiting mouth, his eager tongue inviting her lower, deeper.

A shiver stole her breath as her knees slid further apart. His tongue flicked against the most sensitive part of her, sending a jolt of intense and all-consuming pleasure through her core.

He lapped at her center, sucking her clit into his mouth. She leaned into him, creating a rhythm with her hips. He played into the motion until she was reaching the peak of her pleasure. Her lips parted in a loud moan, her body quivered with release.

She rose off of him, letting him regain his breath. She met his lips with her own, tasted her come on his lips once again.

She continued down his body, placing small kisses and licks along his carved muscles, until finally she was at his cock. She stopped, looking from his eyes to his shaft and wetting her lips. She placed a finger at his base and traced him up to the head, circling it.

A hiss of pleasure was all the encouragement she needed. She ran her tongue up his length, then in one quick movement, took him in her mouth down to his base. He gasped, his head arching back. She did it again, sucking hard as she reached his tip.

“Mora!” She wasn’t sure if he said it as a curse or a plea.

She wrapped her hand around him, adding a slight twist as she plunged down again, her other hand sinking her fingernails into his thigh. One more stroke and he had reached his limit. Kallan put his wrists to his mouth, tearing the fabric with his teeth. She watched his muscles flex as he broke free of the bonds and sat up, grabbed her hips and yanked her into his lap. He kissed her breast, sucking her nipple into his mouth and biting.

“Harder.” She breathed. He answered, pain rushing through her breast and tearing a moan from her throat. He did it again, this time to her other breast. She squirmed, grinding into him, desperate for friction. Fingers found her clit and pressed, circling her with rough strokes. She arched against him, feeling her pleasure building again. He brought his mouth back up to her neck and bit her, sharp pinpricks breaking her skin where his fangs dug in.

She felt empty, and she needed him to fill her as no one else could. She took his length in her hand and guided it to her entrance, her hard nipples grazing his chest. He groaned,

his fingers digging into her hair as she lowered herself onto him.

Her nails scratched down the length of his back as she tipped her chin to the ceiling, all breath stolen from her lungs. Kallan flipped her onto her back, positioning himself above her and thrusting in.

A moan escaped them both, and she rocked her hips to take him deeper. Kallan smiled, claiming her mouth with his as he drove into her, all power and muscles and sweat. Again and again he thrust, building the tension wound tight inside her, threatening to shatter her. His magic skirted across his chest, jumping to her skin where their bodies were connected. A scream of ecstasy ripped through her as the light crackled in a bite of pain she hadn't felt before.

Kallan kept going, pumping twice, three times more, before he chased her over the edge. Coming back down in slow heavy breaths, they held onto each other, the overwhelming sensation still tight on her sensitive skin.

She shuddered when he moved, still inside her as he brushed a sweat-soaked strand of hair away from her cheek. His fingers lingered on her face as he lowered his forehead to meet hers, both still trying to catch their breath.

“Of all the sights I have seen in this forsaken world, all the beauty and the pain, you are by far the most devastating, stunning thing that my eyes have ever looked upon.” Kallan's finger ran down the ridge of her nose, the plumpness of her lips, the curve of her neck. “My fingers have ever traced.” His lips followed in the path of his touch, words falling between kisses. “My lips have ever touched.”

Hesitation claimed his words as she drew his chin up to meet her gaze. She wanted to watch him say those words, memorize the sound of his voice and the glint in his eyes as he poured out his heart to her and she drank it in with a dying thirst.

A sad smile curved one side of his lips. “You, bare to me, is a memory I will always hold close. You are my salvation, Mora,” he whispered. “I love you. In every dream, in every reality, in every which way this world spins us. You are my dearest darkness, and I will be your light.”



## CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

SHE HAD FALLEN asleep entwined in his limbs, her bare skin and exhausted muscles hoping they would never part from each other. But as all things do, her peace eventually ended when the warmth of Kallan evaporated.

Mora woke with tired eyes. The air felt colder without Kallan there. Alone in the dark and eerie cave, she couldn't help but feel like she was being watched. When all the romance dissipated, all that was left was her paranoia.

She dressed and stepped into the tunnels. There was no sign of Kallan, only the echo of shuffling footfalls that made its way into her pulse. She double-checked that her dagger was in her sheath and then darted into the tunnel.

"Mora!" a whispered shout froze her in her tracks.

"Qenan?" she whispered back.

The boy caught up to her, somehow staying silent even in the echoing tunnels. He didn't stop when he reached her, he only grabbed her hand and pulled her along. An uneasy heat coursed through her.

"What's going on?"

“They’re coming. We have to go. We have to warn the others.”

“Kallan,” she blurted, letting the small hand slip from hers as she stopped in her tracks. A prickle flushed along the back of her neck.

“We have to go!” The boy tugged on her arm.

The sound of whoever *they* were got louder, closer. Mora let herself be dragged on until light seeped into the tunnels and she was sprinting on her own accord, barely able to keep up with the d’zev child.

They reached the opening to the oasis where the others popped up from their resting places.

“What’s wrong?” Juddah demanded, reaching for his axe. He had already been at the mouth of the tunnel when they approached, able to feel Mora’s growing panic.

“We have to go now!” Qenan answered. Mora’s attention darted around the cave. The pool, the vegetation, the tunnel on the other side.

“Where’s Kallan?” she asked, her tone sharper than a blade. An ache pulsed behind her eyes as she searched the cave a second time. Veres wasn’t there either, but that didn’t worry her. The man had spent most of his time watching the drylands above them, making sure nobody aside from them had seen Kallan’s signal flash through the sandstorm.

“We haven’t seen him.” Elletta said, trying to calm Mora’s nerves. The others gathered their things with haste and made for the opening that led up to the surface of the sand.

“I won’t leave until I find him. He could be in trouble.”



“Mora,” Juddah said. “We don’t have a choice. Can’t you hear them?”

She could. They would be at the cave soon, and it would be her against dozens if she didn’t find her Golden Boy soon.

“He’s not here,” Elletta said, her hand resting on Mora’s shoulder. She was the only one of them who offered no signs of impatience. “Mora, he is not here. I can sense life, and everyone’s is just as different as the soul it belongs to. I am telling you that Kallan is no longer here.”

*Or he’s dead,* her *essyn* slipped into her thoughts.

She looked at the princess, her lavender eyes peering back at Mora as she tried to determine the truth.

“Let’s go,” Juddah said, urging her one last time to join them as they fled the oasis.

She tightened her shoulders. She could not afford to feel the things that crept into her heart, so she pushed them away and focused her attention on fleeing. She scanned the cave one last time as she followed them into the blazing sun.



Veres sent Elletta and Qenan off on Havoc’s back with a slap. The horse whinnied and threw his head, agreeing to get the two as far from trouble as he could. The rest of the horses followed him, giving the illusion that they had all fled on horseback.

Qenan had not been happy at the idea of leaving until Veres had charged him with the important task of keeping the princess safe. After Havoc had gone, the rest of them took off into the drylands to find the sword themselves or die trying. They followed Qenan’s instructions to get to the Temple of the

Damned where Dromose and his followers lived. They stayed close to the ruins and kept the sun to their left.

It wasn't long before the temple came into view. It started as a dark mirage that shifted on the horizon. Now it was daunting formations of spiked pillars and masses of bone, a pyramid built on the grave of a battlefield.

“Juddah,” Veres said. “See if we’re being followed. Stay low.”

Mora flinched when Juddah yanked off his shirt and sprouted wings from the ink on his back. She had forgotten she had seen him do it before, when he had taken Slade’s body away.

Ripley laughed. “Slade had them too. They don’t work inside Vale, but out here, magic is free.”

“The wall blocks magic?” Mora asked.

He shrugged. “As much as it can, yes.”

She cupped her hand and let the smoke pool in her palm. She had only noticed it a couple of times before she used it at Pryor’s, the smell mostly, but she had attributed it to letting more of her essyn free. Ripley winked at her, and she dropped the smoke.

Juddah came back, flying low with his wings spread wide. As soon as his boots touched the sand they folded back into the lines of his tattoos. He shook his head to relay his message. There had been nobody.

*It could be a trap.*

Mora let her essyn curl against her thoughts. *We would be ready.*

Veres led them on, sneaking through the sand. The rock formations changed from red stone to black. In the distance, one side of the drylands faded to black sand as well. *The Sea of Silver.*

She recalled the maps she had seen of the Shadow. Few existed in Vale, but they all showed the fiery sea washing up against a crook of the Crimson Dryland. If memory served, that black sand dropped off in steep cliffs.

Veres raised his hand. They all obeyed, freezing in the last place their boots had landed. Without the shifting sand beneath their footfalls, it was dead quiet. Too quiet.

*Fwp.* An arrow buried itself in the sand between them, then two more. *Fwp. Fwp.*

They ran for cover, ducking behind a jutting rock.

“D’zev will keep getting up unless you sever their heads,” Veres warned.

“And don’t let them bite...” Juddah’s voice trailed off. None of them needed the reminder of what a d’zev could do.

Mora pulled her dagger from the sheath where it belonged.

They raced from rock to rock, making their way closer to their hidden enemies. A wicked smile had cast itself across Ripley’s face, and both his eyes shone red.

Vargas came into view first, then Dromose.

Behind them was the Gilded Guard, golden armor reflecting the sun in a blinding light. She recognized one of them, even with the horned helm covering his face. It was Riggs, and he was taking orders from Dromose.

Half of the Gilded Guard, including Riggs, followed Dromose as they disappeared through massive golden doors lined by statues of Aemon. The other half attacked.

An army of d'zev and askians joined as they charged, appearing from behind rocks and beneath the sand. Mora's side was grossly outnumbered.

"Moranna. Follow Dromose. Get the sword," Veres said. "I don't care what you have to do. Find it. We can handle this on our own."

She nodded, letting Ripley's excitement spill into her. When they stepped onto the field of battle, their weapons were poised for attack and eyes were glistening with bloodlust.



## CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

SHE WAS STANDING on dry land, but she was drowning.

Every noise was distorted like a fever dream. When she blinked, it got clearer. She blinked again, and she was awoken to the reality of screams and cries. Chaos had erupted around her. Swords clanking against swords, sand muddying with pools of blood.

Her hand trembled. There was an askian convulsing at her feet, his throat slit from ear to ear. She tasted his blood splattered on her lips. The bodies scattered around them like fallen pearls from the Levana tree, stained red with their life's blood. She had lost count of how many she had killed.

She didn't have time to think. She needed to find that damned sword. And she needed to get Kallan back.

"Mora," Ripley shouted from across the way. His face was covered in blood-coated scales. "Go!" He spun, picking up a sword from a fallen Gilded Guard and blocking an attack that had been meant for her. When the askian stepped back, Ripley tossed the sword into the sand with a sneer.

He dove at the man's exposed neck, and a sharp roar shook the ground as Ripley jerked away, clasping his finger

across a gash in his stomach. His jaw peeled apart, skin tore away. More scales appeared.

Wyverns had always been a thing of myth, but if there was any doubt that's what he was, it diminished as horns snaked through his thick hair. Mora could feel the heat radiating from him all the way across the field.

A bolt fired through the air, and Veres cut it down with a swipe of his sword, spinning with the momentum to drive the blade deep into an askian's stomach. In their time together, she had never seen him use anything but a bow, but it was clear he knew what he was doing. He kicked the woman off of his sword and blocked the next attack. The sound was lost in the noise of the fight.

Mora set a course for the temple, not letting the sand slow her intentions.

Fire blew across the drylands, and wind twirled it into a funnel. Ripley lunged for the firerender and bit into her neck. The funnel dissolved, but not for long. It picked back up, this time swirling with sand. The Shadow Court was surrounded by enemies.

Mora needed to help them, but they were behind her, too far for her to throw a dagger and in the wrong direction from where she needed to be.

She searched the bodies for a bow. *Pull, aim, release*, she thought. *How hard could it be?* She had seen Veres do it a hundred times. Between dropping their attackers to the ground and splitting arrows in trees, he had never missed. It was dangerous—stupid even—but she was desperate to help.

A sword swiped across Juddah's arm and a cry of pain tore from his throat.

She nocked an arrow and knelt to steady herself. It took all her strength to pull the string back. Resting her hand against her cheek, she closed one eye and scrunched her nose. She pointed at a d'zev heading for Juddah.

She held her breath and released.

A sharp hiss escaped her as a sting spread across her forearm. She dropped the bow and grabbed her arm where the string had slapped her.

Juddah pulled an arrow out of the sand, dangerously close to his foot, and spun around with a growl. His glare found her, and she dropped the bow, an apologetic look on her face. His attacker hesitated long enough for Veres to slice the head off his shoulders with a single blow.

A warm drop slid down her cheek as Mora stood. She touched it, pulling her fingers away to see blood. The soft fletching had cut her.

Running the rest of the way to the temple, she slipped through the golden doors.

"Last time we fought, you buried a pen in my throat," Vargas said, slowing Mora to a stop.

The inside of the temple was much like the outside, red stones and golden motifs, the hot sun shining down through holes carved in the walls. The solid gold floor reflected their images like a mirror.

Vargas stood alone, his blond hair tucked behind his ears, golden earrings on full display. He held a short sword in one

gloved hand and a rolled stick of baneroot in the other. It seemed he and his master shared their taste for the drug. He took a deep drag.

“It was surprisingly well balanced,” she said, twirling the dagger in her hand, the long blade still coated in the blood of the last askian she had killed. She wanted so badly to throw it at him and watch it sink into his eye, but she needed to be smart. She only had the one, and she couldn’t risk losing her only weapon.

Smoke puffed from his mouth in growing rings. He tapped ash from the end of the baneroot. “It was a rather exquisite one, I must say. I do think I owe you for that.”

“Think of it as a gift.” Mora smiled. “No payment required.”

The ache from her older wound fueled her, but the lack of motion and full use of her leg made her slow. She couldn’t sprint past the askian to get away. There was no choice but to face him.

Flicking his baneroot stick to the floor, he drew closer. “What kind of a man would I be if I didn’t show my appreciation in kind?”

Her dagger deflected the blow of his swing. He smiled, adjusting his footing, and attacked again. This time he feigned to her right, but turned left. The sword nicked her side.

Mora laughed. “What kind of a man would you be to hit a lady?”

“We both know you are no lady.”



She blocked a third attack. A hum reverberated into her wrist. He twisted the blade, catching it on the serrated edge of her dagger. A flick of his wrist and her weapon went sliding across the floor. When she lunged for it, he swung again, trying to catch her off guard. She rolled out of the way.

He wasted no time with his next strike. She saw the sword bearing down on her. Without thinking, she reached out and clapped her hands around the blade, stopping it just shy of her face.

“On second thought,” she breathed, “I would prefer my payment in the form of jewelry.”

With a grunt, he forced the blade further down, cutting into her palms. She flinched when a drop of her blood landed near her eye.

She gripped the blade tighter and used all her body weight to roll, twisting the weapon out of his hands and almost cutting a line down her forehead in the process. She jumped to her feet and flipped the short sword, swiping it across his stomach. He forced his knee out and hit her arm, sending the sword sliding across the floor.

Organs spilled in a bloody mess out of Vargas’s stomach. He caught them with his gloved hands. His eyes shot to hers. “That was a bad idea.”

“All my ideas are bad.” She grinned.

The wound closed as he stuffed himself back up like a burst sausage. “A gift from Dromose,” he said, explaining his healing. That was going to be a problem.

She mirrored his actions as he pushed up his sleeves and balled his hands into fists.

Vargas swung first, but she was just as fast as he was. They danced down the corridor, ducking and dodging and landing the occasional blow. Mora's knuckles cracked against his too straight nose, knocking it askew. Anger lit behind his eyes.

Surveying the damage with a pleased expression, she couldn't help herself. "Quite the improvement if you ask m—" The breath was stolen from her lungs and her words along with it.

Pain shot from her chest. A cough ripped from her throat. She stumbled, looking to the source of the pain.

That gods-damned pen was jutting out of her ribs just below her breast. Stuck in her lung. A wicked grin crossed Vargas's lips.

"Consider the debt paid," he quipped.

A Gilded Guard raced over to them. Vargas smiled. "Finish her. I'm going to go watch them gut her lover open and wear his entrails like a necklace."

*He's still alive.*

The guard shot a fiery arrow, and it whizzed past her head, missing by the grace of the gods she didn't care for. He nocked another flaming arrow. Vargas disappeared up a set of stairs.

The guard took his aim.



## CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

THE ARROW FLEW straight, but as Mora moved from its path, it stopped, gripped in Ripley's clawed fingers just before her face. She blew out the burning flame.

Ripley made a disagreeing noise when she reached for the decorative fountain pen sticking out of her ribs. "It'll only get worse if you pull it out now," he said. "Especially if it hit anything important."

The Gilded Guard drew back another arrow. Mora pushed Ripley to the side and ran at the man. His aim tracked her until she was too close, forcing him to step back. She slid past him, prepared for the pain from her wounds that ripped through her when she moved. Her essyn consumed the agony that threatened to take her out. She jumped up behind the guard as he turned around. His bulky white armor slowed him down.

He had been prepared to shoot her in the back, thinking she had run after Vargas. She hadn't.

She gripped the shaft of the arrow before it hit her in the face and yanked it from the bow, flipping it around her fingers and thrusting it into his unguarded jugular. He made a choked sound as he dropped his weapon. His hand flew to his throat.

He tried to pull the arrow free, but its barbed tip ripped into the vein. Blood gushed from the wound.

“Yeah,” Mora said with a shallow breath, looking at the pen still sticking out of her. “Definitely leaving that in there.”

The guard collapsed in front of her.

“I knew there was a reason I liked you,” Ripley said.

“Don’t get too excited, I still might die here.”

She grabbed a glass jar that had been tied to the guard’s belt and started up the stairs. Ripley followed her as they chased Vargas into a large room. He laughed when they caught up to him, turning around to show his empty hands. He was weaponless, having left his sword beside her dagger. She was weaponless too, she realized, too caught up in trying to steady her pain to remember to grab her favorite blade.

“Why are you, a lowly human, so gods-damned hard to kill?”

“Many have tried to hand me over to Death,” she grinned. “But it seems the bitch doesn’t want me.”

*“Now that’s not true,”* a feminine voice drawled in her mind. Death’s shadowy figure stepped out from where Vargas’s shadow would have been if he’d had one. Inspecting her nails like she couldn’t care less what was about to happen, she added, *“And I resent being called a bitch.”*

Mora’s heart dropped into a pounding in her stomach. She could feel her time to die growing near.

Vargas walked to her with wary steps, unaware of who mimicked his every move.

“I’m going to wait to see how this plays out.” Ripley crossed his arms and leaned against the doorway. “I’m really curious what your plan is here.”

Mora smiled, shaking the jar in her hand behind her back. Ripley raised his brow.

“And I see you brought a friend,” Vargas laughed. “Typical human, always dependent on someone to save them. Can you not fight your own battles?”

*“Was that jealousy I heard?”*

“You sound jealous,” Mora said. Death smiled. “I don’t see anyone eager to help you when you’re in trouble.”

Vargas barked a laugh. “Why would I be jealous? I can fight my own battles just fine.”

Mora retreated slowly with each word they spoke, guiding them to the torches that lined the wall. She let his pride think it was fear that drove her.

“Well,” she stepped back, “you devote your life to Dromose, and he can’t even bother to send you help. It doesn’t matter if you need it or not, knowing that you have it makes a world of difference for your self-esteem.”

He lurched forward. Mora dropped the cork from the jar and splashed the contents onto his face and chest. He screamed, rubbing his eyes as the liquid dripped down his face. She took the torch from the wall, but the flame went out when she grabbed it.

She reached for the next one. Vargas followed, rubbing at his eyes and blinking the sting away. When she grabbed the lit torch, it too went out.

“Come on,” she said. Ripley chuckled.

She glared at Death, who responded with a laugh of her own, the sound like a screech in Mora’s ear. “*I swear it’s not me.*”

“Allow me.” Ripley cleared his throat, stepping through Death. He focused his bright red eyes on Vargas. One side of his mouth split up to his ear and bared his sharp teeth. Vargas stepped back, his eyes darting around, but they had him trapped. Ripley inhaled deeply; a churning rumble sounded from within. He squared his shoulders and leaned slightly forward. Vargas flinched.

Ripley relaxed his taut body with a deep laugh. His face stitched back together, Vargas relaxed, glancing to Mora. Then Ripley blew gently at Vargas’s face, like he was extinguishing a candle flame. The opposite happened.

Vargas erupted in flames and stomach churning screams. He tried to wipe the heat away from his face and caught his hands on fire. His skin bubbled as the fire ate away the oil soaked into his clothes and skin.

“I really do hate fire,” Mora said, stepping around the screaming askian.

Ripley stretched his arms above his head. “I always wanted to do that.”

“Doesn’t the shift hurt you? Juddah made it sound like you’d die from doing it.”

“Well worth it. Did you see his face? I’m pretty sure he pissed himself.”

The cries of the battle below blew in from the openings in the walls. Ripley jumped up, pulling himself into one of the holes.

“Veres went up the stairs. He needs you, Mora, he’s not as strong as he lets on. Keep him safe and bring me that sword, would you?”

“Rip,” Mora took a shallow breath. “What are you going to do with it? The sword, I mean.”

Ripley’s eye darkened, a soft gleam reflecting in the sunlight. “It’s the key to going home.” He peered out the hole in the wall. “I should get back; the army is thinning, and I can’t let my brother steal all of the fun.”

“Are you going to sprout wings too?” Mora asked dryly.

“Oh, love, if my wings ever decide to make an appearance, the whole world will know about it.”

He jumped.



Mora barely made it to the top of the stairs. Her hands burned. Some of the flammable oil had gotten in the cuts on her palms. She slid her back down a wall and tried to catch her breath while she tore her remaining sleeve off and used it to tie thin strips of fabric around her hands. Her knuckles ached when she exercised her fingers.

Her pain was intense, but it was no longer enough. She needed something stronger. Something raw. She forced a sliver of sorrow to slip past her essyn’s dark wall. The memory of three words and a name.

*I love you*, Kallan had said.

*He could still be alive,* she thought.

*But not for long,* her essyn added.

She stared up the remaining set of stairs. She needed to make it before they killed him. A promise of “never” painted her vision, and she pulled herself off the floor, reveling in a different kind of pain.

By the time she reached the top, she had forgotten all about the pen in her ribs.

She stepped into the room and froze. Dromose was blocking her view and the path forward.

He tilted his head. “My, my, I didn’t expect you to still be alive.” His sharp nails grazed across her chin, down her neck. “Darling, it seems you picked your side, and you picked a fool. That makes us enemies, and I like to peel my enemies apart before I feast on them.”

A glow flashed in the room. She knew that shade of blue. Her stomach fluttered and she tried to move around the d’zev, but he caught her arm.

“Maybe I’ll make them both watch,” he said.

Letting her gaze drag up and down his red ink and pale skin, she smirked. Her essyn vibrated in her chest.

The whole world cowered at names like Dromose, but Mora knew much worse things than men like him. She’d survived worse things. And if fate was to be believed, she was a worse thing.

For the first time, her prophecy felt more like a gift than a curse.



“*Darling,*” Mora drawled, “I have demons in my head scarier than you.”

“Is that so?” He laughed. “Well then, come on in.” He moved, and Mora’s heart sank to the darkest pit of her soul when she saw what stood behind him—who stood behind him.

A breeze blew in through the openings in the walls, brushing against Veres’s loose strands of hair. He had been forced to his knees in front of a gilded throne. Riggs held his arms, and blood dripped from cuts across his chest. Kallan stood before him with the tip of his longsword held beneath Veres’s chin, forcing him to look up.

“Go again,” Dromose said. Kallan refused to meet her stare. He turned back to Veres and let a blue arc of light sear across the blade and onto Veres’s face and chest with a crackle. Veres sucked a breath through clenched teeth, not letting his scream escape him.

When Kallan removed the blade, Veres lurched. He attacked with rage, that anger inside him finally ready to explode.

“Two men you thought you knew, yet neither one is what they seem.” Dromose stepped back in front of her. Two askians held her back.

“Stop making him do this, or I swear to your blight-damned god I’ll murder you.”

“Me?” He laughed before he turned to Kallan. “Kallan, are you here because I’m forcing you? Or are you a loyal dog, obeying my command because you wish it?”

Kallan adjusted his grip on his sword. “The only ones I have ever been loyal to are my king and my god.”

Heat rose in Mora’s face. She had been such a fool not to see it. She was too wrapped up in her own thoughts to see the Gilded Guard he was; he had never stopped being one. His faith in his god may have wavered, but he had never truly abandoned it.

She had seen only what she had wanted to see. He had fooled her.

A pounding in her ears started as the tunnel vision set in. *Kill him, make him bleed.* Her essyn caressed her heart. The Golden Boy had promised to never leave, and then he walked away, shattering her heart with such ease. *So, shatter his.*

“I had thought you evil once. Then I saw you on that cliff and I knew. You and I are the same, darling. In our hearts, we are not evil. No matter what the world thinks.” Dromose walked idly around her. “I know you will do the right thing. Agree to come with me, and they both walk away free. No harm necessary.”

Mora looked around to Veres on the floor, his jaw clenched so hard his teeth might break. He was glaring at Kallan. Kallan refused to look at her, holding his sword ready to strike Veres down. The guards, the askians, Dromose, every one of them was ready and waiting to kill. They were all monsters in someone’s eyes, only doing what they needed to protect those they loved.

Mora had only ever done the same. She had tried to change, to do the right thing, and look at where it had gotten her. For Kallan, for Slade, and still for Ahmya, people would die by her hand; and she would not fear it.

She would always be a monster in the eyes of her enemies. Perhaps that was a good thing. They would be right to fear her.

The grin on Dromose's face faltered when he looked into her eyes. He didn't find sorrow at the betrayal. He didn't find rage as he might have expected. He found her calm.

Then he found her smile.

Her essyn reared and her cuff burned, scorching one of the askian's hands. He yanked away, and she spun out of the other's grip, swiping Dromose's dagger from his side and embedding it in the second askian's neck. The first came for her and she threw smoke in his eyes. He couldn't see her hands reach for his face. She gripped hard and twisted fast, snapping his neck. He fell to the floor, and she turned her attention back to the d'zev.

Dromose bared his sharp teeth and lunged. His bite seared into her neck.

Her essyn screamed in her chest, sending a pulsating throb through her whole body. The room erupted in screams. Dromose yanked back and spat her blood to the floor. His glare landed hot on her burning cuff.

The fool must not have known the cuff's strength. She swung her clenched fist. His hand caught it before she could connect with his nose.

"Mora!" a quiet voice screamed. *Qenan.*

The look on Veres's face mimicked how she felt; nostrils flared, eyes wide. His gaze darted to her. Dromose ripped away from Mora and wiped the blood from his lips. He hid his now blood-stained hand behind his back.

Qenan rushed into the room. “Mora!”

“Quiet him!” Dromose barked. Kallan ran to the boy, catching the collar of his shirt as he tried to duck free.

“Kezebel in the Se—” Kallan’s hand slapped over Qenan’s mouth. When he mumbled through it, blue light flickered. Mora knew it wouldn’t have hurt him; it was too dim to be the kind that caused pain. But it was a warning Qenan knew to obey.

“Get him out of here, now!” Dromose stalked in a raging circle around her, not letting her move. Kallan obeyed, leading the boy out through a dark corridor.

*Kezebel.* If there was one thing she had learned recently, it was that there were truths behind fairytales. The new world, the wyverns. And if Qenan had risked his life to tell her this one, it had to have meant something important. Perhaps the girl who lived beneath the Sea of Silver was one of those truths.

And what better place to keep the sword safe for Aemon than somewhere only a god could walk without finding their death?

Her gaze landed on Veres. Dromose was holding him down as Riggs drew his sword. “Go,” the Gilded Guard whispered to her. “Get out of here.” It was the first time she had ever heard him talk.

Mora’s attention flickered, glancing down the hallway where Kallan had disappeared, where her revenge waited like a missing piece of her. Then out the opening in the wall to the darkness in the distance, to the promise of her death that waited in the fiery waters beyond.

Both ways offered only a sliver of hope in her world of despair. Both ways threatened her with suffocating fear.

A sad look filled Veres's eyes, and she knew that he saw what she was about to do as clearly as he knew that she had to do it.

"No," he begged. But she didn't listen.

In another life, one that seemed so far away from her now, she would have picked her revenge.



## CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

SHE HAD JUMPED through the open space in the wall like it was the only thing left for her to do in life, like everything that came next would be done in death.

Her body slid down the sloped, polished walls of the temple and tumbled into the sand. She dragged herself up and let her body mindlessly carry her until water lapped at her feet.

The Sea of Silver was named for the fire that burned on its surface and the water that crashed in waves on its beach, but anyone who had traveled close had known the truth of the sea. It had another name, one that beckoned to her.

*The Sea of Sorrows.*

The red sand had faded into black rocks and black sand and black stone steps that descended the cliffs. The moon crested on the horizon, and the sun sank low, the shadows reaching the sand between her toes like the beach was a line that the dark of night would not cross.

Icy water raced up the sand, lapping over her feet and begging her to follow it back home. The dark depths called to her.

In the tale, the heartbroken Kezebel had taken her life by drowning in those waters. It was said that you could hear her

wailing on nights when the water was calm and the tide was high. Anyone who dared get close enough to listen was risking being lured in by the hypnotic sound.

Mora looked over the body of water and knew without a doubt that parts of the tale had been true, but it wasn't the sound of weeping that beckoned to her. It was the promise of peace.

She waded deeper, tears sliding down her face. Beads of sorrow swelled in her heart. The silver fire bit into her skin, and the water cooled the sting with a gentle kiss. It was every tear that had ever been cried for love or loss or broken hearts. It was a sea of pain, and so was she.

A deep breath filled her lungs, no longer stifled by the wound in her chest. That had gone with the embrace of the water. She released the breath and slipped beneath the surface, not opening her eyes until her heart pounded against her chest.

Her body took over her mind, and she inhaled deeply. Ice water rushed to douse her burning lungs.

There was nothing around her but the rays of the sun that broke through the surface. They danced solemnly through the glistening light. It was just like it had been when she was a child, serene.

Her soul was as light as her body in the weightless water. The current wiped away her tears, and her body landed softly on the sea floor. A gentle touch of soft lips pressed into hers, and Mora's lungs filled with air and a name that she couldn't speak.

But it wasn't him. It was a woman, a beautiful woman. She stared wide-eyed as the stranger's fingers traced the line of her jaw and the column of her neck to her collarbone. Her skin was pale enough to be translucent, the same shade of white as her long hair and the fabric of her flowing gown. She was celestial, a dying star that had been plucked from the sky and drowned. Ribbons of hair and fabric waved around her frame like rays of light.

A crash of solace washed over Mora. Like staring into a twin flame, they were two pieces made from the same broken soul. Without speaking a word, she was saying, "You are home now."

A warm embrace enveloped her as the woman took her hand. She pulled her up until she was standing far beneath the waves, but no longer underwater.

The sandy floor turned to marble, and fish swam by her head. She could breathe as if the water was air, but her hair still floated around her.

They were no longer alone either.

The newly changed floor went on as far as she could see and was packed with crowds of people dressed in ball gowns and tuxedos. Only one couple danced. A tall man, with rich brown hair shorn on the sides and a beard barely long enough for its braids. The woman wore a long pink gown, and her brown hair was plaited into a crown atop her head. Her smile made her eyes sparkle as the man twirled her around.

It was the woman beside her, still holding her hand. It was Kezebel.



“I was much like you once,” the woman spoke. “In love and in sorrow all the same.”

“I’m not in love,” Mora dared to speak. The words had traveled just as easily as Kezebel’s had, and no water entered her mouth when she opened it.

“If it weren’t love, would it hurt this much, do you think?”

They watched as the two spun together to the sound of nonexistent music. She squeezed Mora’s hand. “I too was betrayed, albeit in a different way; to love a god is an awfully delicate thing.”

“I’m here for something,” Mora said. “Something I think you might have.”

“I have not yet decided if I should give what you seek. Come.” She pulled Mora by the hand, walking, not swimming, across the floor. Walls appeared around them, and they were in a small room with an open ceiling, watching the fish swim above them.

The door behind her opened and a man walked through, carrying cups of tea on a tray with hands that were neither there nor gone, like his entire body was nothing more than a person-shaped pocket of water with faded colors and faint features.

“Am I dead?” She looked past the transparent form, half expecting to see her body drifting through the current without her. There was nothing.

“Do you want to be?” Kezebel took the tea and handed one of the cups to Mora. “For some, life is just an unfortunate side effect of death, a path you’re forced to travel. Do you wish for your path to end?”

Mora thought of all the times she had ever cried or bled or wondered of death. It wasn't an end she had sought, but when her mind got dark, she found herself wishing it had never started. She didn't want to die, but sometimes she didn't want to exist. She decided then that it wasn't the same thing.

"No," she said with conviction.

The girl smiled and pulled Mora into a new room, this one filled with chairs and more of the wraith-like figures walking about. As if it was merely another day.

"You are not dead, and neither are they." Kezebel stuck a hand out and brushed her fingers through one of the forms. Water rippled around it. "They are souls without bodies, not yet faded like the dead are. We trapped them here." There were hundreds of them, the souls. Young and old, faint glimpses of who they used to be.

"Why?"

"I couldn't bear to see them fade away. They are all like me, like you. There is nothing after life for most, and nothing as harrowing as the thought of those who lived in sorrow never finding their peace. This is a home for the lost and broken. A place better than the lives they lived."

The souls didn't look angry to be trapped there, but they didn't look happy either, like they were all stuck in their sorrows.

"Come, I want you to meet someone." She dragged Mora along. This time the walls arranged themselves with massive windows that reminded her of the buildings in Vale, tall and pointed with marble frames.

Sitting at a desk in the corner of the room was another woman. She wore plates of armor over a white gown. She wasn't pale like Kezebel; the water hadn't stolen the rich golden color from her skin. Her hair was floating like dozens of ribbons around her, in twisted locks of light brown that would have easily reached the small of her back. She was the most beautiful thing Mora had ever seen. Even prettier than Elletta, which until that moment, she had thought impossible.

There were two small children running through the room trying to hit each other with sticks. Mora had to move quickly to avoid being run into. The second child paused when he got to Mora.

"Excuse me, miss," he said, and bowed deeply before running off again.

"Sorry about that," the woman behind the desk said. She stood. "I like to let my memories play about sometimes; it helps it feel more like home down here."

"Your memories can interact with people?"

"Only when I make them." She laughed. "Although Rylan was a rather polite child. It's not off character for him to have apologized, even if it was technically me."

The moment she was close enough, she grabbed Mora's hand from Kezebel. The woman's eyes widened and her brows lifted before her expression fell into the familiar gleam that seemed to haunt every soul Mora had seen under the Sea of Sorrows.

"You are Moranna," she said. "Why are you here?"

"She's here for the sword. I haven't given it to her yet though, I wasn't sure if I should." Kezebel stood at the

woman's side, watching Mora.

"Who are you?" Mora asked, hoping not to sound rude.

"Levana," the woman said.

Mora's heart stopped. Or it felt like it did. She didn't need to breathe here, but she was newly aware that she couldn't feel the heart in her chest either. Levana was a popular name, but this one was trapped in the sea, between dead and not dead, and she recalled a set of marble eyes that had always felt like they were watching her.

"Levana?" Mora repeated.

"The God of the Seas." Levana lifted Mora's hand and spun herself beneath it like a dance partner. "The God of Love." She looked at Kezebel. "I used to be, at least. Now I am a soul who should have faded long ago."

Mora needed to sit down. As soon as she thought it, a chair appeared below her and she was lowering herself slowly into it.

Mora's hand was gifted back to Kezebel, who sat in a chair beside her even though Mora hadn't seen her move or seen the second chair appear.

"We don't have a lot of time." Levana sat cross-legged on the floor in front of them, leaning back on stiff arms as her gown settled onto her lap. "I will give you the sword, and in return you will do something for me."

"I'm not here to bargain," Mora said, "and I agree, we don't have a lot of time. I will take the sword if I must, but I'll be leaving here without indebted myself to a god."

Levana raised her brows. "And if I make you?"

Mora stood, dragging Kezebel up with her. She wasn't sure why the woman was still holding her hand, but it seemed important, so she refused to let go.

"You think you can scare me because you're a god? Not even a god, but the soul of one?" Mora tightened her jaw. She had already threatened one god and gotten away with it. There was nothing stopping her from doing it again. "I have no faith in the gods, and I will not allow anyone, no matter how powerful, to use me again. I may be insignificant and broken, but I will fight until my last breath, and even then, I will peel myself back up and keep fighting before I ever allow a king, or the fates, or even a god to force my hand. If you are not going to give me what I seek freely, then I will take it."

"And that," Levana was suddenly standing before her, too close, with her finger under Mora's chin, "is a weapon more powerful than any magic or blade; the way you feel things. Your love, Moranna, is so strong that you would do anything for it. I am more grateful for that than you know."

"It's not love that delivers me. It is rage."

"Oh, it is more than that." Levana placed her hand on Mora's heart. "It is hate and rage and sorrow and fear and stubborn will, but above all, it is your love."

"You are mistaken. I feel nothing unless it is pain. Pain from anger, pain from sorrow, physical pain," Mora said. "Pain from hate."

"And what is hate, without love? Sorrow without happiness? You cannot feel these things so deeply and yet deny the others. You hate with all your heart because you love with all your heart."

“A soul does not live on the same clock that your heart and body do. Your soul exists at all places and all times at once. It recognizes others long before you know why. And it’s not just love that forms that connection. As I said, you hate with all your heart. You feel everything with all your heart. You feel so deeply that you, my child, have more soul bonds than anyone I’ve ever seen. Most people are lucky if they form one, and it’s usually from hate. You have love and hate and ones that even I cannot understand.”

*You and I have a soul bond.* Kallan’s voice drifted through the current of her mind. She had been hesitant to call it love, perhaps because it was something else, something like the rage that warmed her skin.

“Can it be both?” she asked. “Love and hate together?”

Levana smiled and drew a long sword from a scabbard that she had not been wearing before. She held the sword out in front of her, hilt in one hand, blade resting carefully in the other.

“You are too stuck on what it is and what it isn’t. Would it be that awful to simply let it be?”

Mora couldn’t take her eye off the sword. It was made from a dark metal, and the pommel was black with dark pearls inlaid in it. The base of the blade was serrated in an odd pattern, and the blade was sharp on only one edge.

“This is the Sword of Creation, and I would like you to use it to free Love from the tree of my name that locks her within.” She smiled, stretching the sword out for Mora to take. “This is not a bargain, nor are you in debt to me. It is a favor, asked from one loving soul to another. Do this for me, and I can finally fade as I was meant to.”

“I can’t promise that.”

“I don’t expect you to. All I want is for you to try.”

Mora bit at her lip before nodding. She wrapped her fingers around the cold metal hilt. She picked it up.

It was heavy even in the water, and it was terribly unbalanced. She had half expected something bad to happen when she touched it. Nothing did.

“I’m glad I got to meet you, Moranna.” Levana took her hand from Kezebel one last time. “You cannot speak a word of what you have seen here. There are people who have come to terms with our deaths, these souls and I. It would be a terrible thing for them to learn of a place like this.”

When she dropped Mora’s hand, everything went dark.



## CHAPTER FIFTY

SHE CAME OUT at night. The sea fell from her lips like a goodbye kiss, sorrow giving her permission to walk away from its suffering trenches.

Something tried to follow her: three soft words, a lingering taste, a shade of blue. A soul of what once was, like the shapes of water trapped at the seabed.

The tide wrapped around her ankles, and when it pulled back to sea, it took with it everything that haunted her wake. There was an empty void in her heart where his name had lived.

Bare toes squished into the sand and the sword trailed behind her, numb fingers clinging to it as it clung to her.

Her essyn swirled in her chest, banging on its cage wall. It wanted to be free.

“Not yet,” she replied, “but soon.”





## CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

MORA STOPPED WALKING when she reached the top of the cliffs lining the beach. She had been swallowed on one dark shore and spat out on another, equally dark. From where she found herself, the temple was nothing more than a flake of stone where the moon met the edge of its domain.

She sat on the ledge. Her legs dangled into the air a deadly distance above anything, like the world had found its edge beneath her feet.

She watched the waves crash into white-capped flames as the Sea of Silver stretched past the edges of her vision, wondering if one of old-blood could see land on the other side. Maybe he was over there. If so, could he see her? Or was he staring into the mist wondering the same things she was?

The Sword of Creation lay at her side as she toyed with another, this one made of a gem the exact color of blood. It fit perfectly in her fist.

She spun it around, letting the sharp edges dig into her palm. She had not taken it off since that first time she had felt its weight around her neck. Now, the weight grew heavy.

The night matched her animosity, a chill biting at her skin and drifting through her hair as the air drowned in a

maddening red glow. With the chains of sorrow left behind, all she had left was a steady hand and a calculated fury.

“How long?” she demanded when approaching steps stopped behind her. “How long was I gone?”

Veres sat, his feet dangerously close to the ledge. He rested his arms on his knees and looked out to the sea. Deep down, a piece of her was relieved he had made it out alive.

“A few days. We looked for you, *Shev'né*, but we thought —”

“Unless you're going to tell me what *Shev'né* means, stop calling me that,” she snapped, not letting him continue. She already knew what they had thought: that she had run.

She'd wanted to. She was still going to. Not now, but after.

“If I recall, you have one truth left. You know how to use it if that's what you wish to know.”

She gave him a pointed look and changed the subject. “Dromose?”

“They both got away.” A comfortable silence sat between them. It said everything they failed to: *I'm sorry about him, I'm glad you're alive, I don't want to talk either.*

“Someone's coming.” Veres shot up, grabbing his bow.

She let the pendant fall back beneath her collar and pulled the Sword of Creation out of the grass, standing to join him. He eyed the half of the Twinblade in her hand, and a look of relief flashed across his features.

The weapon was heavy, but she could still use it. And before it left her hands, she planned on using it.

Veres handed her the dagger she had lost and nocked an arrow, drawing back only halfway as he scanned the tree line. She put the dagger in her sheath, happy to have it once again.

There was no noise, but she could sense someone was there. She could feel them watching her the same way she had felt Veres hesitating in the tree line, long before he had decided to approach her.

A bright light flashed in the trees, blinding them with the deepest shade of blue. He had come for her like she knew he would. He always did.

Mora wasn't going to wait any longer. She straightened her shoulders and walked into the forest, every step filled with lethal intent. Veres followed.

“Did he finally tell you his secrets?” Kallan's voice rang out, everywhere and nowhere at once. They slowed, searching for his voice in the shadows.

Mora flicked her gaze to Veres, then to the snapping echo of a branch. Veres drew the bow all the way, ready to fire.

“Of course not.” He was behind them now, toying with them. Making it a game. “The Blade likes to keep his secrets close.”

Again, she looked at Veres. Again, Kallan's voice moved. “He has a fate mark too, you know. Those old symbols. And I finally figured out what it says.”

Mora's eyes darted to Veres.

“Don't listen to him, *Shev'né*. He's trying to distract you.”

Kallan laughed. Mora spun toward the sound. Still, she couldn't see him. Her gaze shot back and forth, snapping

branches and whispering voices calling her attention. The shadows thickened around them.

“Ask him,” Kallan said.

She adjusted her grip on the longsword. Her face scrunched and then relaxed as she fought for her sense of calm. “Is it true?” She dared a glance at Veres. His gaze snapped to hers.

His aim trailed a shadow behind the branches. “It’s not what you think.”

“Tell her, Blade, tell her how her name is engraved on your chest,” Kallan said. “How the symbols spell out *Moranna*.”

Veres sneered, loosing an arrow between two trees. Someone dropped when it found its target. Armor clanked, and he fell into a stream of moonlight, dark hair falling to his shoulders.

A flutter started in Mora’s stomach and chased its way up her chest. Her arms dropped lower, already aching with the weight of the sword. She corrected her stance, raised her arms, and ignored the scream inside her.

“How am I your fate?” Her patience was wearing thin and her thoughts were racing with her heart. “Is that why you didn’t kill me? I was meant to hand you the key to your war?”

Veres nocked another arrow and trained his aim on the shadows. “The fates are not the only gods that like to leave their mark on your body.”

“He was always using you,” Kallan said, this time in front of her. She dropped a hand to her side, pulled out a dagger,

and sent it flying. With the sword too heavy for one hand, its blade fell into the dirt. She swore she felt it gasp.

A groan of pain came before her. Then the whistle of an arrow. Another groan.

A man was pushed into the small clearing they were trapped in. He fell to the ground, an arrow in his face and a dagger in his throat.

Mora raised the sword again, both hands back on the hilt just as a resounding cry filled the forest with agony. Everything that had been building in her chest dropped to her toes, weighing her in place.

Veres went rigid. He took a step, stopped, and looked back at her. The cry sounded again, sounding like Juddah. He scanned the trees. His eyes landed on her one more time before he ran. Her essyn rushed her thoughts with anger.

“If I explain everything,” Kallan stepped into the moonlight, “will you listen?”

“No,” she snapped, readjusting her grip. His sword was still sheathed at his side. He wasn’t ready for a fight. Mora was.

He must have seen it in her eyes, what she intended to do.

“I am begging you, Mora, do not make me do this.” He stepped closer, one hand finding the hilt on his hip. “I do not want to hurt you.”

“You don’t get to want things anymore.” Her essyn drowned out the noise of her screaming muscles, but she held it back, not letting any more of it slip free. Not yet. “You’re not

a person to me. You're just a feeling. A cancer that needs to be cut out."

He looked to where Veres had disappeared, then back to her. "They care about you, all of them. I am sorry I had to make him leave. I needed this to be just the two of us."

The swish of a blade followed Mora's lunge. Kallan parried, his sword clashing against hers. She attacked again. He evaded her. The Sword of Creation sang to her, wanting to be used, fighting to be used. It was lighter, adjusting to her moves and whispering where to hit. Her *essyn* answered back, burning the cuff on her arm as it translated her anger into action. She struck again, her scream backed by wrath. His blade blocked hers.

His eyes widened at her newfound fury. She pushed her blade into him. He pushed back. He was stronger. A hiss of metal filled the air as their blades slid away from one another.

She reached deep inside her soul, unlocking the hold she was barely keeping on her *essyn*. *Now*, she thought.

*Yes*. Her *essyn* filled her veins with a cold darkness.

The sword swung toward her, and she blocked it with ease. The times they had fought before, swords clanking together, sweat dripping from their skin—it was nothing compared to the rage that filled every movement between them now. That was laced with the tension of lust. This was her vengeance.

Kallan's swing grew stronger as he pushed her backward with every sweeping cut. The Sword of Creation absorbed the force of each blow. Her arms knew where to move the blade to keep it from tasting her blood. She blocked. Blocked again.

Grunted with the force of another blow, and twisted out of his path.

“Stop,” Kallan pleaded. “Please, Mora, stop this.”

“Was it you who killed Ahmya?” she sneered.

“It was Oryn,” he said. “But I swear I didn’t know until—”

Her sword seemed to raise and block on its own, a moment before his would have hit her face. She turned away and let her shoulder take the brunt of the hit, unable to completely stop the motion of his blade. She stumbled into the trunk of a tree as the metallic scent of blood broke into the air.

Kallan’s eyes widened. He loosened his grip, taking a gentle step toward her like he had, for a moment, forgotten that he no longer had the right to care for her.

As she pushed herself off the tree, the flat width of his sword hit across her chest. It forced her back. She was pinned by his body weight and his blade. He ripped the sword from her hand and tossed it into the dirt.

“You want the sword, is that why you did it?” An exhausted laugh chased her lips as she let her head shake back and forth against the bark. “It’s yours. I don’t care anymore.”

Kallan smirked.

“But you don’t get *me*. You will never have me again.” She snapped her head forward, crashing into his face with a sickening crunch. He yelled, and she broke free of his hold.

“Mora!” He caught her shirt and yanked her back.

She fought free of his grip but lost her balance, falling to the ground. He was on top of her before she could find her

feet. His legs locked hers down, his hands pinned her arms to the ground.

As she squirmed, her jaw locked tight and her essyn filled her ears with the need to fight back. It took all his weight to keep her down, adjusting his grip as she broke one arm free. A scream ripped from her throat, and blue flashed across his eyes. Mora knew what he was about to do, let her feel the real power in his magic, the hot lance of light that would burn into her. It would be easy for him to send that bolt of blue from his thumb to his finger and press it against her throat. Her death would be swift at least.

Her fingers stretched toward the fallen soldier and Kallan's dug into her open wound. She bit back a cry and reached for her dagger. It tore free with a spray of blood. Letting the distraction steal Kallan's advantage, she flipped them over. The blade of her dagger pressed tight against his throat. His hands landed above his head, palms open, fingers spread wide. He didn't try to push her off.

He didn't fight back.

"No!" Her fist beat against his chest, and her essyn froze her blood into ice. "You don't get to be the one to ruin me!"

"I thought I was doing the right thing, choosing Oryn," he said. "My loyalty has always been for my kingdom, my faith, but I was wrong, Mora. I made mistakes, but I have finally found my purpose. I can see it now, love."

She brought her head down to her fists, pushing her knuckles into her hair. It was all too familiar, her body all but collapsed on top of him. I love you dancing on his lips, on her lips, waiting to be said but never finding her voice. The



memory cleaved her in two, but that was all it was now: a memory. What was real was her dagger and her fury.

*And his still-beating heart.*

Her dagger found his throat again, pressing down with clear intent.

That familiar shade of blue pierced into her, almost stopping what she was about to do.

“You can see it too, Mora,” he said. “The blood of my heart has always belonged to you.”

Then his hand flew to the hilt and he twisted the dagger. “*Aes ti'val, evi ten'yk.*” The foreign words fell from his lips, and the weapon, gripped in both his hand and hers, sank deep, tearing through flesh and muscle and bone.

Death's beady eyes locked on Mora, a wicked grin stretching through her shadows as the metallic taste of blood misted the night air. Mora's chest caved in on her heart.

The last thing she saw was blue.



## CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

### VERES

MORANNA MORAVIK WAS supposed to die.

Never in Veres's life had he hesitated, never second-guessed himself, and certainly never missed. That was before he had met her, when his arrow had flown low and punched through her stomach like fire through ice, and he had just done it again, no weapon needed this time. He simply walked away.

She was his to protect now. His responsibility. He had tried to push her out, but his brothers wouldn't allow it. They claimed her as their own.

After Slade, Veres could not stand to fail again. But even he couldn't be everywhere at once. And since he'd met her, she had lived on the brink of death, seeking it out just to fight like a banshee to stay alive.

If anyone could win the fight, it would be her. That's who she was, a survivor. But his brothers, they needed him more than she did.

They wanted him more than she did.

So he had picked them over her. Still, he knew reason wouldn't have lessened the blow when she watched him leave. She wouldn't have understood why, even if he had said those words out loud.

Another scream rang through the forest in a melody of fear. The trees rattled and groaned, pointing his path through the maze in the dark. He made it back to the camp where a fire burned low. He pulled an arrow from a tree as he always did, the bark forming into the sharp point of the head and the soft of the fletching before it reached his bow.

"V!" Juddah sounded out of breath as he slid to a stop. "Who was that?"

"It sounded like Elletta, but she wouldn't risk Q's life to come back again. She can't be here." He pinched his eyebrows together, thoughts tripping over one another in his head. *Save her. Save them. Find them. Kill them.* He nocked the arrow. The pressure of his bowstring against his fingers focused his mind. The song of screams continued. He couldn't tell who they were from anymore. *A distraction.*

"That sounded like Rip." Juddah drew his axes, finding his place at Veres's back as the two spun in a circle, searching the trees for a threat. They found none. "There was no scream, was there?"

Veres scanned the shadows. "Kallan's here. He brought men."

A loud noise broke through the trees above them. Veres dropped his aim when Rip jumped down.

"There's three," Rip said.

“Why are they still alive?” Veres shook his head, throat closing up on his last word. He was already pushing too far with his anger and his fear. He felt the cracks fracturing against his mind and his bones.

“Give me a moment and they won’t be.” Rip tilted his head with a frown. “You didn’t hear it, did you?”

“Hear what?” Juddah asked. Veres was thankful for the man, he always knew when to take the conversion; when Veres couldn’t think to form words any longer. “The screams are not real, Rip.”

Rip bared his teeth, his gaze shooting to Veres, meeting his eyes with a flickering red of rage. “Mora’s screams are very real.”

His stomach dropped.

Moranna had been so careful to stay just out of his reach, and for her sake, she needed to stay there. Away from Veres. He needed to not worry himself over her.

“She will be fine.” But as he said it, Juddah’s hand clenched to his chest and he struggled to draw a full breath.

“What is it?” Veres asked, helping him to sit. There was no blood, no wounds that he could see. Still, Juddah looked to be in terrible pain.

*Her.* He was feeling Moranna.

Finally, Juddah’s shoulders relaxed in an exhausted huff. “Leave.”

Rip shrugged and took off, going after the missing soldiers. Veres didn’t move.

“Go!” Juddah beat a fist against his chest. “I feel like I need to kill someone, and I don’t want it to be you. I swear it’s never hurt this bad before. It’s like I’m ripping in two.”

Veres’s attention snapped toward where he had left her, and the world flashed blue, blinding him.

He was sprinting before the light faded. Gut-wrenching screams shattered against his ears. He forced himself to keep running, to find her when he wanted so badly to tear the forest apart and not stop until he gutted Kallan and painted his face in the boy’s blood, or watched Moranna do it herself.

*If she’s alive.* She was alive. She had to be.

A scream filled the air. It was her. As he got closer, he heard another, clearer, but deeper and quieter. It was Kallan.

They came into view when the glow had dimmed to a soft light around their bodies. She was limp on the ground. Kallan was on his knees before her. Veres drew his bow and released. The arrow flew true, but Kallan fell before it had the chance to sink through his heart. It blew through a tree, sending bark erupting from the trunk.

He dropped the bow. Juddah caught up to him, Rip shortly behind.

“Is she—”

“NO.” He refused to let her be gone. If she was dead, he had failed to protect his own. Again. Failing was all he ever did.

He hesitated to approach her, closing his eyes and giving himself one more moment of hope before he knelt at her side.

He knew what had happened, what this was. The moment he had seen that glow, he knew.

Kallan had heard everything Pryor had told her that day, about essyn merging, about the bond between souls. He had never trusted the boy, but Veres had never thought Kallan could be so cruel as to even think about doing this.

The only reason Kallan hadn't been killed in his sleep was that he loved *her*. And she was someone who deserved to be loved.

"Veres," Juddah said. He opened his eyes, his vision darkening. Juddah was kneeling beside Kallan as Rip paced, already wearing a line in the dirt. Juddah pressed a finger into Kallan's neck.

"He's dead," Juddah said.

Veres's hand shot to Moranna's wrist. She was cold, but—there—her pulse tapped against his touch. Light and slow, but it was there.

"She's alive." He almost didn't believe his own words.

Juddah fell back with a sigh.

"Shit," Rip mumbled.

Veres pulled himself closer to her, checking her for injuries. Her lip was split and a new gash decorated her shoulder but, on the outside, she had no mortal wounds.

On the inside was another story. He could almost feel the places where Moranna's heart had started to dissect, the places Kallan's betrayal had weakened her. He had seen it on her face when she had walked into that throne room.

She was like glass now, fractured and waiting to break. When she woke, Veres would have to be the one to shatter her world, telling her Kallan was dead. And he hadn't tried to take her essyn.

He had given her his.

Veres tried to move her. She stayed limp. "Something went wrong. Why isn't she waking?"

Rip collapsed to the ground. "Because she doesn't want to."

"You don't know that."

"Yes, I do!" All eyes shot to Rip, his voice growing too deep and his scales threatening to break his skin. "I actually cared to get to know her; me and Slade. I understand her pain, and believe me when I say, she will not wake up until someone gives her a reason to." He jumped back up. "This is her finally giving up!"

Juddah cleared his throat. "We have a bigger problem." He picked up Kallan's limp arm, and there beneath his wrist, a gold mark had started to appear. It was light at first, but then it grew clearer.

"Fuck," Veres said.

When he had awoken five years ago, he had set out to eradicate every single darkmarked person and find the Lightmarked Prince. He was going to redeem himself by saving their world from the bloodblight. From Aemon.

He had tried, and failed, every day since meeting Moranna to be strong enough to kill her.

He tried and tried again to locate the hidden prince, but he had failed at that too. And now there he was, hoping for the darkmarked to wake. Staring at the dead body of the Lightmarked Prince of Vale, a hero who had so selfishly sacrificed himself for *her*.

A mix of emotions fought through him; he couldn't control it. Juddah followed Rip back into the trees toward their camp, knowing Veres would need to be alone. Moranna's pulse beat in a steady, slow rhythm against his fingers. He let the feel of her heart keep him there, but his body ached down to his bones and he was starting to break apart. Like he always did.

He let go of her. His vision blurred with his defeat, the low hum of his guilt shivering over his skin. He kept the picture of her in his mind as he closed his tired eyes to pitch black.

Maybe if she had died right then, the Sword of Creation at her side and tears clouding the eyes of those who cared about her, the histories would have written her death as a tragedy and marked her down as a hero.

But Veres knew the truth.

Fate was not done with her.





## EPILOGUE

### AEMON

“TELL ME THEY are dead.” Aemon stepped off the stone path and approached the Levana tree. The moon was high and the strands had all curled into tight spirals, hiding from the dark like quivering children. He pried one open and forced the pearls between his fingers, inspecting their polished white color.

“They got away, sire, but there is something else.” Riggs hesitated to step closer. The Gilded Guard was afraid. As a traitor to the One Faith should be. Aemon snapped his fingers and the pearl strand exploded in his hand.

Riggs’s gaze fell to the polished stone patio, not daring to look in the god’s eyes. “It seems there has been news about who you had been keeping in the Fallen Kingdoms, a sighting of a certain prisoner. Here.”

The god tilted his head, a wicked grin forming on the corner of his lips. “He escaped?”

Riggs nodded, but the motion was pointless as a sound answered for him; a guttural howl reverberated off the mountains and carried over the sea, echoing from one end of

their world to another, all the way to the god's ears. Aemon's head snapped to the horizon of the castle courtyard.

*Brother.* He sneered.

"He was there when—" A choke tore from Riggs's throat, the air gathering in Aemon's hands.

"You have proven yourself unworthy of my kingdom, carrying our secrets to the Shadow Court for all these years." He stole everything from the mortal's lungs. With a sweep of his arm, the air thinned to a deadly blade and sliced across the guard's throat.

Aemon turned back to the tree and took a deep breath of its perfumed smell before Riggs's head had hit the floor. He hated the metallic scent of blood as much as he hated to see it staining his garden, but necessary measures would not be stopped by his own disdain.

He snapped his fingers, and a servant rushed in to clean the mess.

*"The prince is dead,"* Death hissed, appearing beside the headless mess.

"I don't care about the prince; he has served his purpose in keeping us informed. Where is the girl?" The tree responded to Aemon's touch, releasing the essyn it had collected in its roots, those that had been sacrificed in the tree's honor. For Love.

Most of his subjects sacrificed to him, but there were always the annoying few who insisted on saying the ethereal's name to help power the wall. He scoffed. *As if my sweet prisoner needs any help with such a feat.*

All they were really doing was creating extra steps. Nothing could reach her beneath the roots. Essyn would get trapped in waiting, the ripe fruits of Aemon's kingdom free to pick as he pleased.

*"They are almost to the mountains. She's still with them."*

"And my brother, did you know he was free and not tell me?"

Death chuckled. *"You would do right to remember that I don't serve you, dear. We are in this together. As equals."* She tore Riggs's essyn from his body and disappeared with a smirk and the purple light playing on her fingers, rubbing it in his face that one was not one he would touch. The guard hadn't given it when he lost his head.

No matter; the colorful lights of the essyn from the tree absorbed into his skin, powering him. But something felt wrong. Something tasted of rot.

His eyes snapped open. As he scanned the tree he finally saw it, the rot that darkened the pristine bark. He sucked in a breath. His fingers traced black veins of decay across a branch, drawing a line back to their origin.

Wrapped around a lower limb, like death strangling the immortality from the bark, was a perfect handprint. As dark as the night was red.

Aemon shuddered.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book has been a long time coming! Moranna, Kallan, and Veres have been living in my head—under a variety of different names including Mira, Kyrho, and Rowan—for years now. It all started in college when I found a little corner of social media that used the Sims 4 to tell stories. I know, that sounds super nerdy, but Sims has been my guilty pleasure since I was in grade school. I started telling stories as I played the game, some just for me, some posted on social media (shout out to the simstagram community).

Eventually, I wanted to try my hand at a fantasy story, and so Moranna came to be. The story never saw the light of day as a Sims story because I ended up getting too busy to keep up with everything that went into it—downloading CC, creating poses, taking screenshots, editing pictures, etc. But the story wouldn't leave me alone, so I decided to take the leap and chase my dream of writing a book!

Fast forward 90k deleted and reattempted words, I realized I had no idea how to write a book, and so the project got put on pause. I took free and inexpensive courses, watched too many YouTube videos, spent many, many hours listening to podcasts, read a ton of good fantasy books and a few good nonfiction ones, and did anything else I could to learn the art of storytelling. Then I tried again...and *Blood of My Heart* was born.

This story is unrecognizable from the story it started out as, and I could not be happier with the growth!

I have to thank my best friend, permanent third wheel in my relationship, and critique partner—Nikole—for listening to all my ramblings and crazy ideas since the very beginning! I know I can get carried away and over-enthused when my creative wheels start spinning, and you put up with it all with a smile (most of the time) and at least tried to act interested (most of the time). And we should all thank Nikole for her help in making sure the spicy scenes hit like they were supposed to! There are many interesting conversations in the choreographing of a sex scene.

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*Song for Sorrows* is going to be an emotional ride. I hope you're ready for some more Veres and Moranna!

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bonus material, and series updates.