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L.A. MCGINNIS

CRUEL
IS MY
COURT

WICKED REALMS: BOOK 2

CRUEL IS MY COURT

WICKED REALMS: 2

L.A. MCGINNIS



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*For Daphnée, who always talks me out of choosing violence,
except when it's absolutely necessary.*

This one's for you.

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The team of horses thundered down the narrow dirt road, gritty dust sifting into the carriage, coating me and the only other passenger in a thick layer of brown.

I might hate him, but I couldn't stop watching Tavion Montgomery with wary curiosity, my stomach lurching in time with the rickety contraption. A few hours ago, I'd been sitting in my father's court, watching the daily audience with feigned interest. Now I was stuck in this death trap with my husband.

My fake fucking husband.

Who was taking me home to meet his family. I wanted to cry. Or howl.

Ironically, howling was more my *husband's* forte.

The road to Warrington Hollow was barely a road at all and my pervasive sense of doom grew heavier with every mile we rattled north on this fool's errand, because that's what we were doing.

Wasting time heading in the wrong fucking direction.

Keeping up this ridiculous pretense instead of joining Zorander's attack against the Fae King and his demonic army.

We should be with him.

I should be with him.

But Zor was twenty miles west, and we were heading in the opposite direction, all because of the pompous arsehole sitting beside me. *My fucking husband.* The thought struck me

so violently my fingers dug gouges into the luxurious leather seat.

Making this whole situation worse, every time the carriage swayed I was thrown against Tavion's hard, muscled body, forced to peel myself off him like skin from an apple, as if I had any fucking control over the laws of physics.

Maybe if I drew my knife the next time we hit a hole, I could accidentally stab the bastard in the heart and no one would be the wiser. I could always dump the body out of the side door. Obviously, the road wasn't heavily traveled; with luck, he'd never be found.

But unfortunately, we needed Tavion alive, so for the moment I set aside my schemes of murder.

"How much further?"

"Two hours, if the horses keep up this pace. From their scents, Lyrae and Crux are lagging a few miles behind, but still trailing us." Tavion's mouth tightened in frustration. "I thought they'd have given up by now and slunk back to their master."

"What a surprise. Apparently, they're every bit as stubborn as you." I kept my eyes fixed on the blur of trees outside and my mind off the fact that the Shadow King's most vicious protectors hadn't turned around yet. Every moment they chased us took us further away from the war we should be fighting.

Leaving Zorander to face the Fae King alone.

Which was unacceptable.

We'd just confronted—and killed—the Right Hand of the Fae King. Nearly died in the process. Now we'd been summoned back into enemy territory by the Oracle, an even bigger threat than Solok.

It was no coincidence Zor had been dispatched to the war in Caladrius on the very same night. We'd been split up, which meant he and his men were walking straight into a trap, and so were we.

We should be together, not apart. I rubbed my aching chest, trying to erase the hideous sight of Solok's death from my memories, trying to get rid of my overwhelming dread.

The feeling this was another of the Oracle's malignant games.

Tavion cracked his knuckles. "Anaria, *look at me.*"

"Why bother? You'll just lie, so let's not waste each other's time." I couldn't face him, was still so angry at how he'd manipulated Raziel and me into this charade that I didn't trust myself not to do something foolish.

Besides, my energy was best saved for the battles that lay ahead, and the way things were going, there were sure to be plenty of those.

"I could have handled this morning differently. I *should* have handled everything better."

Another hideous crack of his knuckles, then a meaty pop that made me wince. "I should have warned you about the king's plans for the war, about Zor leaving, but...fuck, you twist me up so bad inside, I never know what to say around you."

His fingers dug divots into his muscular thighs as he stared out the window, his big body—as immovable as a godsdamned rock—was rigid with tension. But something in his deep voice, maybe the tiny bit of actual remorse, plucked at my heartstrings.

"I keep fucking things up without even trying. And I can't keep doing that. I want to make things better between us."

His apology rang with truth, but I wouldn't—couldn't—give in to his groveling. Tavion had manipulated me for the last time. Every time I gave him another chance, he made me regret my moment of weakness.

"Tell me how to fix this, Anaria." I felt his expectant gaze on the back of my head, his hope that a simple request might fix everything broken between us. "Tell me how to make things right and I will. I'll do anything you ask, just tell me what you want."

Still, my gaze slid over to him. He might be a liar and a bastard, but Tavion Montgomery *was* handsome, long white hair pulled back from a chiseled face, forest green eyes—darker than mine—glinting with predatory intent, and okay, a fair amount of remorse that might even be genuine.

He was the picture of civilized elegance, dressed in the finest clothing, a ruby glinting on the end of the pommel of his sword. But beneath the gloss, an untamed wildness lurked. As much as it pained me, that's what I found most attractive, and I despised that I did.

I went back to watching the trees. “Then I'll make this simple. I don't want anything from you. There. Problem solved. You're welcome.”

I didn't have time for this bullshit. Raz and Tristan were somewhere in those woods, weaving through the forest at this dangerous pace—not that they could lose us. Tavion's black, luxurious carriage was the only thing for miles, careening along this one-track dirt road kicking up a cloud of dust, an unmissable target for Lyrae and Crux to track.

Exactly as Tavion intended.

Once we arrived at Warrington Hollow, they'd turn back around, reporting our safe arrival to the Shadow King, who would forget we ever existed and concentrate on winning this war against his brother.

We'd rendezvous with Zorander and the Oracle and hope she didn't slaughter us.

That was our plan, anyway, if it didn't get blown all to shite.

“And you accuse *me* of being stubborn.”

“Not an accusation. A fact.”

Red hair flashed between the trees, and I straightened, my stomach twisted in knots.

If Lyrae or Crux spotted Tristan... We couldn't afford a skirmish right now. This entire diversion depended on us not

raising any alarms. I slid closer to Tavion, ignoring how tightly my thigh pressed against his.

“Tristan’s too close to the road. If I saw him, Lyrae and Crux will as well.” I kept my voice down. Even with the thundering hooves, Fae hearing was keen enough to pick up the barest whisper. While Tavion vouched for the two males driving the carriage...I didn’t know them, and I didn’t trust *my husband*.

My lip curled at the thought.

“Either you’re seeing things, or something’s gone wrong.” That was fucking *condescension* in his voice, and I revisited my plan to stab him.

Viciously. Over and over.

I rolled my eyes instead. “Since I’m not seeing things, let’s go with something’s wrong.”

“Could be stonewraiths.” Tavion ignored my jab completely and drew back the shade on his window, letting in a fresh cloud of dust. “Or Howlers. They come down out of the mountains this time of year. How close was he?”

I snorted. “Stonewraiths don’t have red hair. I’ve never seen a Howler, but I assume they aren’t gingers, either. Twenty feet out my window, keeping pace with the carriage.”

Infuriatingly, Tavion leaned over me to peer out my side of the carriage, his huge body leaving me crowded and overwhelmed and breathless. My skin felt too hot, scorched almost, though he barely touched me.

Which was the entire problem. Tavion sucked up all the air inside the tiny cabin, making it impossible for me to ignore him no matter how hard I tried.

And gods knew I’d been trying for hours.

“I see him. He’s not signaling they’re in trouble and he’s heading deeper into the forest.” He sat back, giving me space to catch my breath. “The path was narrower through here, but it widens out in a mile. He and Raz are smart. They’ll make sure they’re not spotted.”

“Good. I’m too fucking tired for fighting.”

“I never thought I’d say this, but so am I.” Tavion sighed then shifted his gaze back to the window. “I never thought I’d say this either, but it’s good to be heading home.”

I kept quiet. I knew nothing about this ancient forest surrounding us, the road we were on, the isolated town we headed towards. Much like the last month of my life, I existed in a constant state of damage control and survival and today was no different. But whatever waited for us in Warrington Hollow wasn’t my concern.

The moment Lyrae and Crux turned back toward Blackcastle, we’d head for Tempeste.

And because we were so far out of our way, we’d be riding for our lives.

The Oracle had summoned us, and when the Oracle of Tempeste summoned you, you’d better damn well answer. That had been Tavion’s opinion a few hours ago after I’d lost the argument about riding in this godsforsaken carriage with him.

Outvoted, three to one, because I’d be *far safer with Tavion than out in those woods*.

I snorted and crossed my arms over my chest. I was still holding a grudge against Raziel for that betrayal, although his low, urgent argument about *not making the Shadow King suspicious when we were planning to meet with his enemy* was pretty damn convincing.

Coldness washed through me like I’d been doused in ice water. The air in the cabin tightened, as if we’d just passed through an invisible barrier, gooseflesh rising all over my body. The horses whinnied and the carriage jerked dangerously to the side, slamming my head against the back of the thankfully well-padded seat.

Tavion’s hand slipped over my shoulder, steadying me, sending another shiver of something *that definitely wasn’t desire* thrumming through me. “You’re safe, Anaria.”

“Forgive me if I don’t just take your word for it,” I snapped, moving out from beneath his fingers, leaving them dangling midair.

I moved away, and when a flicker of disappointment crossed his face...I didn’t expect it to hurt as much as it did.

“We just passed through the ward separating Montgomery lands from the rest of Solarys. The terrain grows rougher from here,” Tavion murmured, a touch of apology in his tone.

“The Fang Mountains are dangerous; the road will get steeper. With luck, we’ll lose Lyrae and Crux during these next few miles.” His warm breath brushed my face. “Welcome to my world, Anaria.”

A moment later the horses slowed to a walk. My back pressed against the opulent leather seat as we climbed the steep incline. I swallowed hard when the carriage swayed violently, gripping the edge of the leather seat as tightly as I could without looking completely desperate.

It was either that or cling to Tavion, because out my window, the ground dropped away into such a deep ravine, if that door opened, I’d plunge to my death.

Tension filled the tight cabin, and for the thousandth time, I wished I was on my own horse instead of in this death trap with a male I despised.

But they had a saying in Varitus.

You can’t change fate any more than you can touch the stars in the sky.

I used to believe those kinds of absolutes. That our lives were planned out, down to our final breath. That the stars in the sky were so far out of our reach, mere mortals could never hope to touch their cold, burning brightness.

But now I held the power of those stars inside of me.

Which meant, perhaps, my fate wasn’t yet written.

Maybe I was an arrogant fool, but I refused to be moved around like a pawn for one more moment.

War waited for us in Tempeste, but I was wiser than I'd been a few months ago. I understood there were dangerous secrets hidden beneath her streets. I worried about the danger...but those secrets...

We had to discover why the Oracle had chosen me—chosen all of us—to be her puppets in this war.

While I doubted the truth would set us free, ignorance would certainly get us killed.

Varitus had another saying, too. *Fate brings people into your life who are meant to be there.*

Tavion leaned back, settling himself beside me, the scant inch between us gone when the carriage hit another hole. With a curse, I pushed myself off him, ignoring his soft, seductive chuckle, and how hard his muscled body felt beneath my own.

Fate was bullshit. The Oracle brought us together to create a weapon she'd use to destroy the world.

Except I was nobody's weapon.

Not the Oracle's, not the Shadow King's—not anyone's.

I didn't know what I'd do with this magic or where this shite-for-a-road was taking us, but my magic was meant for more than destruction and death. There was no future in ruination and chaos, in these endless, bloody wars fought for a thousand years with no end in sight.

My entire life I'd been powerless and small.

At the mercy of a world that wanted to crush me.

I'd use my power to build something better, something glorious.

As if it understood me, my magic hummed in agreement.

When we crested the top of the road, I blinked in stunned awe.

Nestled at the foot of the Fang Mountains, Nightcainr Castle rose from the shifting mists of the forest like a lonely sentinel. With two black, monolithic towers looming above a thick canopy of pines, the jaw-dropping castle watched over the silent forest like a blackened silhouette, an impossible structure of fanciful turrets and arched windows.

The building seemed too delicate to be made of stone, every last inch decorated with intricately carved details and leering, wolfish gargoyles with long, curved fangs dripping with moss.

Twisted vines stretched to the tops of even the highest towers, as if the forest was trying to devour the castle as quickly as possible.

But the place was hauntingly beautiful, in a dark, ruined way.

Like we'd stumbled on something lost and forgotten.

"It's been a long time since I've been here. Apparently, my father has let it go," Tavion murmured, that touch of apology softening his tone, though I didn't know why he kept bothering. I could care less how much money he had, or how devastated his family home was.

This was a huge waste of time.

“Let’s hope we won’t be here long.” Out of habit, I reached down and rechecked the knives in my boots, then the iron bands on my arms while the carriage made its final turn in front of the castle.

“Zor and the army are a full day ahead of us now,” I reminded him gruffly. “We don’t have time to waste on pleasantries.”

I was still exhausted from our battle with Solok two days ago, though my magic was slowly refilling, hopefully in time for me to face whatever lay ahead.

I couldn’t believe we’d squandered so much time on this farce, just to convince the king I actually wanted to meet my husband’s family.

If the rest of the Montgomery clan were anything like Tavion, they could rot, for all I cared.

“I’m not planning to stay. We’ll be back on the road in an hour, with luck.” But Tavion never took his eyes off the castle, gravel crunching beneath the carriage wheels as we rolled to a stop in front of the grandest staircase I’d ever seen in my life, leading to a massive set of wooden doors.

“Good. How will we know when Crux and Lyrae leave?” I muttered before swinging the door open, ignoring the footman scrambling toward me. I jumped out, my stiff legs and back locking up the second I hit the ground. But gods, it was good to breathe air that wasn’t clogged with dust and dripping with Tavion’s musky scent.

This air smelled clean, filled with mountain winds and pine sap—cold and crisp.

I took a moment to drink in the view. Then Tavion had to ruin everything by opening his mouth.

“Don’t worry your head, wife. I’ll take care of the trespassers.” Tavion landed lightly beside me, the frantic footman setting the step down a moment too late. “I grew up in these woods.” His wolfish smile revealed too long teeth. “I’ll send them home with their tails between their legs before nightfall.”

I snorted, but took the arm he offered, the back of my neck prickling at the sensation of being watched.

“Then let’s make this convincing enough they fuck off back to Blackcastle,” I muttered.



THE CASTLE WAS LOVELY—NOT that I’d ever tell Tavion—a mix of black marble and dark wood that gave off a distinctively masculine vibe. Aside from a few tapestries, there were no paintings, or much color at all, except for an intricate blue and gold coat of arms inlaid in the center of the foyer floor—a ferocious wolf’s head intertwined with a blue flame, the inset sapphire mosaic beneath my feet dancing with an inner light.

This was the kind of money the Descendants dreamed of, luxury beyond measure, even though everything was slightly ragged around the edges. Far from bringing this place down to earth, the worn edges of the furniture spoke of hands lovingly stroking family heirlooms, of home and hugs and laughter.

Experiences I’d never had, never thought I’d missed...but I blinked from the unexpected pang tightening my chest.

Tavion was a right bastard most of the time, but at least he had family. For the first time since we’d begun this ridiculous trip, curiosity stirred inside me at the prospect of meeting his people.

And the deep, masculine smell of this place made me sway.

Sometimes I cursed my enhanced Fae senses, picking up all the small sounds and sights that had escaped me when I was human. But the smells...those I liked.

Every smell carried a thousand different subtleties, and this one was a mix of power and sandalwood with...a rich, deep woody scent lingering underneath. *Tavion’s scent*. As if, like he’d said, he hadn’t been here in years.

I jumped when the doors closed behind us with an ominous *boom*. The sound echoed through the empty castle, and I dropped Tavion's arm.

The dark, rich smell matched the haunted look of this place, my instincts prickling as I trailed behind Tavion from room to room, half paying attention while he pointed out details he thought I'd be interested in.

With sudden clarity, I realized I wasn't imagining we were being watched. The air shivered with tension, Tavion's voice grew more and more hushed, and I couldn't help glancing out every window we passed.

Raziel and Tristan were supposed to stay out of sight until the king's spies returned to Blackcastle, but I couldn't stop my nervousness. What if Lyrae and Crux found them?

What if they were fighting for their lives, right now, and I didn't even know?

"I thought I was meeting your family?" I finally asked, wondering if the Shadow King was right. Maybe Tavion's father was dead. What if there was no one here except for Tavion and me and the two footmen? I shivered as I realized... I could very well be alone, hours from Blackcastle and cut off from Raz.

Zor was a world away, headed to Tempeste. And Tristan... I didn't really know Tristan.

"You will, soon enough."

Tavion's nostrils flared when he caught my scent, a flicker of hurt darkening his green eyes. "You have nothing to fear. This is my home and I protect what's mine." His voice turned deeper, a glimpse of emotion flashing across his face. "You're safe here, Anaria."

"I'll decide where I'm safe. And where I'm not." We'd stopped in the heart of the castle, and I scanned the meandering hallway, the empty, dark rooms that blurred together, the smothering air that was so eerily still.

"I prefer to trust my instincts; they never let me down."

Tavion's snort was half amusement, half annoyance but I knew him well enough to see he was as worried as me. He'd expected someone to come out and greet us.

But the castle was empty.

For a moment I almost took his arm again but drew my knife instead. I refused to rely on Tavion, not when he'd betrayed me so many times already.

My nose flared, my eyes scanning every shadow and stone and dusty nook. Nightcairn was a marvel of old money and craftsmanship, and there were a thousand places to hide. The back of my neck prickled as if we were under surveillance, but the shadows were so deep I couldn't see a thing.

"I can't believe my eyes. Tavion Montgomery, back from the dead."

I hadn't heard his approach, but an enormous male prowled toward us on silent feet, long dark hair tied back from his weathered face, which was split in a wide, toothy grin. One second he sized me up through narrowed eyes, the next he wrapped Tavion in the kind of embrace only family could give, thumping his back like a drum before stepping away.

"Dane, I didn't expect to see you here." Tavion's face was a mix of surprise and delight, his green eyes alive and glowing. It took me by surprise how handsome Tavion was when his face wasn't frozen into that rigid, impassive mask. "I thought you'd be north, hunting in the Barrens before the snows came."

Was that the High Barrens? Interest prickled through me. That was where my family was from if the rumors were true.

"Stopped by to check on my brother. I'm heading back out tomorrow before the weather comes in."

The moment the stranger's amber-brown eyes landed on me, they took on the cold, empty flatness only a shifter could manage.

"I see you brought a...friend." That quick, feral tilt of his head was pure predator, and I'd wager his teeth were already

lengthening behind his clenched lips. I tightened my hold on my knife hilt and made sure my footing was firm.

“Anaria.” Tavion only paused a beat before adding, “My wife.”

One slow blink gave away the stranger’s surprise.

“Anaria.” Tavion’s fingers braceleted my wrist gently as he pulled me closer. “This is my Uncle Dane.” I tugged, but he didn’t let me go.

“Gone for nearly twenty years and the prodigal son returns with a wife. A bloodthirsty one, too.” Dane’s expression didn’t grow any friendlier as he spotted the knife in my hand. “Didn’t see that coming.”

“In truth, neither did I.” Tavion sounded...tired. I wondered if he was as exhausted as I felt, noting the fine lines fanning out from his eyes, the deep ridges around his mouth, and how much they resembled his uncle’s.

“You can trust her, Dane. I certainly do, so skip the interrogation. We won’t be here long.”

“Who else did you bring?” Dane shifted until he was closer. “Don’t even deny it, nephew. I smell them in our forest. You know the rules, Tavion. No strangers on Montgomery lands.” Tavion moved, too, without even seeming to, until he was between me and Dane.

I had mere seconds to choose—attack or run. The male’s suspicious, narrowed gaze never left me, and his clothes were well worn, the hilts of his knives polished from years of use, the callouses on his hands speaking of his skill in wielding them.

Not someone I wanted to go up against.

But I would if I was forced to.

“Like I said, we’re not staying long.” Tavion tightened his grip while I stared down Dane every bit as viciously as he studied me. “Two are friends...*were* friends of Julian’s.”

Tavion’s frown became a hungry leer filled with too sharp teeth. “Two are the Shadow King’s enforcers. Unfortunately,

we can't kill them; they must return to Blackcastle unharmed." As I watched, Tavion's teeth lengthened and his face grew darker, more wolfish. "But that doesn't mean we can't have some fun."

Just when I thought the tension would explode into action, Dane chuckled softly. "It's good to have you back, Tav. I've fucking missed you."

Dane shook his head like an enormous black dog, his hair spilling free as he clasped Tavion's shoulder. "Let's drive these pieces of shite from our forest, while you tell me what you've been doing these past two decades." His gaze slid to me and went flat. "Including about your delightful wife."

"Stay inside, Anaria," Tavion warned, brushing his fingers lightly down my back before he stepped away. "This won't take long."

They vanished the way we'd come, leaving me alone in the cavernous, empty space—some sort of midway point that hadn't been used in a very long time—lined with open doorways cloaked in shadow and a grand staircase leading to an equally dark upstairs. Every inch of this place felt abandoned and unused, draped in cobwebs and neglect, and yet, there was a presence here.

I pulled my other knife free, the hair on my neck prickling as I fought the urge to spin around to see who was watching me. Because I wasn't alone.

This whole fucking visit was a giant mistake.

We should have figured out a different way to shake Lyrae and Crux off our tail and we'd already be on our way to Tempeste. *But no.* My gaze skimmed the empty doorways and the pressing shadows beyond them as I waited for something, or someone, to burst out of the darkness and throttle me.

Had Lyrae and Crux gotten into the castle somehow?

Crux was a mindless brute, but Lyrae...Lyrae was clever and cunning and utterly lethal. I gripped my knife tighter, searching the darkness for signs of movement.

I hated to do this—I *shouldn't* do this—but I loosened one of the iron bands on my arms enough for a hint of power to slither through my veins and white starry magic to cling to my skin like mist. The icy bite of power was both a relief and a curse, but now I could protect myself.

I might decimate this entire castle in the process, but I could keep myself safe.

No need to rely on Tavion fucking Montgomery.

“He called you Anaria.” My throat closed off when the deep, raspy voice echoed from the room on my left, too dark for me to distinguish shadow from form. The voice thrummed with curiosity...but nothing more. No threat, no violence.

“What is your surname?”

“I don't have one.”

Rather, I did, but telling anyone I was Carex Centaria's only daughter would not win me any favors. In fact, that revelation might get me killed. “It's just Anaria.”

“My older son knew a girl named Anaria. Talked about her all the time.” There was a groan, a thump, like a piece of heavy furniture dragged across the floor. “But he's gone now. Dead, somewhere over in Caladrius, another victim of this fucking useless war.”

The male emerged from the shadows like an ungodly apparition, half Fae male, half white wolf, pale-blue eyes glowing from an elongated face caught between mortal and animal, sharp teeth spilling over soft lips drawn back in a vicious snarl.

I backed away until my shoulders hit the wall behind me.

I had nowhere left to go.

My pathetic knives would do nothing against him, and my magic...guttered and stalled, a heavy silence stretching between us when he halted, hands hanging loose at his sides. Each finger ended in a long black claw, curved and deadly, flexing compulsively, as if he imagined tearing into me.

Where the fuck was everyone?

I'd even take Tavion right now over facing this thing alone.

He'd made an effort to dress, but his shoulders were so wide they rent the fabric, white tufts of fur poking through. His furry, clawed feet clicked on the floor when he prowled out of the shadows, and only then did I notice his stomach was hollowed out beneath a billowing shirt, leather breeches hung loose on emaciated thighs.

“His name was Julian. Perhaps you knew him?”

I couldn't breathe, couldn't move. Fear sent magic streaming out of me, lighting up the darkness with stars, which only made the male look ten times bigger and meaner.

My breathing turned ragged. *This had to be Julian's father.* And once he discovered who'd killed his son...Tavion's wrath would seem gentle by comparison.

The male ran his taloned hand through the star-filled air, white light reflected in those bright blue eyes as the weight of his attention crushed me. “My eldest son worshipped you; did you know that? Julian thought you would save the world.”

I couldn't answer that. Could do nothing but swallow down my fear, as he narrowed his eyes. “So tell me...However did you manage to get my youngest son to marry you, when it's perfectly clear how much you despise him?”

The silence stretched out until it became deafening.

I cleared my throat. “I don’t despise him. Tavion only married me to save me from a worse fate.” I winced at my piss-poor choice of words. “Sorry. I didn’t mean it to come out like that.”

“Actually, I think that’s exactly what you meant.”

Since this was my first conversation with anyone outside our conspiracy group, I had no idea what the rules were. Did Tavion’s father even know why we were here? Or where we were going? Telling him...would put him in danger, possibly cost him his life. But he waited expectantly enough I couldn’t say nothing.

“My father planned to marry me off to some horrid male from the Shadowlands. Tavion stepped in and saved me. I am very grateful he intervened.” I even managed a shaky smile, eyeing the distance between me and the front door.

“Well, that cost you, didn’t it?” The male bared his teeth in a grin that only made him look more fearsome. “I wondered what my son needed the money for. I guess now I know.”

Another of my questions answered. *The Montgomerys are an ancient family and our roots run deep in Solarys soil. You do your bloodline no disservice in joining the two.* I’d thought Tavion was full of shite when he’d boasted to the king, but apparently...he wasn’t.

I didn't know if I could outrun Tavion's father, but my magic would slow him down...though I'd risk turning myself—and him—into monsters. A shite choice, but one I'd make if things got desperate enough.

“And this magic you possess?” he prodded, tilting his head in that unnerving manner as stars danced around his head. “I haven't seen this strong of magic in an age, and certainly never expected it from a wee girl.”

My temper flared at the *wee girl* comment, but I was more concerned about how much he'd already discovered in a matter of minutes. My name. My magic.

Holy gods, he knew enough to get us all killed.

“Something I'm still trying to figure out.” Fear gnawed at my insides, like those rats in the prison, while I searched for some way out of this before I was forced to do something I'd regret.

“Indeed.” He raised his head and sniffed the air, his nose flaring as if he scented my terror. And how couldn't he? Sweat dripped down my back; my knees were so weak I wondered if they'd give out.

A long, horrible pause as we stared at each other, then his shoulders slumped.

“I'm a piss-poor host, aren't I? Welcome to my home, Anaria Centaria. I expect you're starving if you came all the way from Blackcastle. If I know my brother and my son, they will take their time driving the king's protectors off Montgomery lands. Let's find you something to eat, while you tell me about Julian.” His eyes met mine and something died inside me at the utter devastation burning there.

“Tell me how my son died, because I haven't been able to sleep for months, not knowing.”



REGRET TWISTED inside me like a kite in the wind, but I followed Tavion's father down the dark hall, the *click, click, click* of his claws on the black stone floors matching the thudding of my aching heart.

If I told him the truth, then he'd kill me and...I blew out a breath.

Who the fuck knew what would happen then?

"I'm not going to harm you, so stop worrying. My fighting days are long over, and in five hundred years, I've never hurt a single woman...nor any *wee girls*." He glanced back over his shoulder, pale eyes gleaming. "I know exactly what Julian was mixed up in, though I'm surprised he was able to talk Tavion into such nonsense."

I clamped my lips together, hating I could be read so easily, and by a complete stranger, no less.

"Here we are." A wave of his hand had a handful of aged faelights glowing, illuminating scratched, dusty counters that hadn't been used in years. I pushed the iron band back into place, the magic settling, though not entirely going back to sleep.

"Dane brought a few supplies to get me through the next month." He nodded to a bundle wrapped up in paper. "I can make you a sandwich." The male flexed his clumsy, taloned fingers. "Not much good at anything else, as you can see."

"Here. Let me." I unwrapped the package, which was a loaf of bread, a hunk of dried beef, and some pungent cheese. I picked up the knife and pulled the loaf of bread across the counter toward me. "What's your name?"

"I suppose I left that out in the surprise of seeing my son with his new...*wife*." He hesitated on the word as if he meant to say something else.

"Lucius Montgomery. You already met my brother, Dane." He settled himself heavily on a stool, the wood groaning beneath his weight. "He's the only one who comes by to check on me these days."

Those words made him sound so lost. So broken.

“Dane was in the High Barrens?” I asked casually, slicing the bread into even pieces. “That’s north of here, right?” According to Zorander, my mother Adele came from the Barrens, which meant I could have family there.

I’d never thought about having family before now, but some ideas, once they took root, seemed to get big, fast. And this one...I blew out a breath. Best not to get ahead of myself.

“The High Barrens and the Wilds, yes. Have you been there?”

“No. I haven’t seen that part of the world yet.”

“Good thing.” Lucius leaned onto the counter, carefully tracking my every move. “Nothing much up there anymore except hunters and outcasts since the king burned out the whole territory. Only a few families survived the purge.”

I paused, processed what he’d said, then wrapped the bread back up, grabbed a hunk of cheese, and carved off a thin slice with a little more zeal than was necessary.

“What sort of purge?”

“Almost twenty years ago, the king sent his troops into the Barrens and burned out every village and town. Spiked the aristocrats in front of their palaces. Eradicated any common folk who didn’t escape into the mountains fast enough. Not many know about the attack, but Dane has...*had* many friends there.”

Lucius’s eyes found mine. “And we are far enough north that word reaches us before the king can snuff out the messengers. And the message.”

I blinked my burning eyes and piled on more cheese, followed by some dried sausage, then set the sandwiches on chipped plates, fighting my anger.

That was that, then.

I should have known better than to get my hopes up.

No hunting down my family once this was all over. The fucking Shadow King had beaten me once again. Whether

he'd killed them to hide Adele's existence or to cover his involvement in the conspiracy, it didn't much matter.

I had no one left in this entire world.

True, I'd *never* had anyone, but for a few brief moments there *could* have been. And that faint, gleaming hope was worse than having no hope at all.

I pushed the plate over to him. "Here, I hope it's enough."

"You're not what I expected." Lucius never took his eyes off me. "I thought you'd be some fragile little thing, barely able to survive this world. My guess is, life hasn't exactly been a bed of roses for you, has it?"

"More like a bed of nails." I took a bite, the strong cheese balancing out the smoky meat. "What happened?" I asked gently, nodding to his face, his body. I'd thought Lucius was a monster, but I was so, so wrong. Monsters—like the two kings, like Solok—hid behind pristine, handsome visages.

Beautiful on the outside, evil on the inside.

Lucius was just a sad, lonely man who'd lost everything. Grieving for his son. Trapped inside this castle, surrounded by memories.

Because everywhere Lucius looked, I imagined Lucius saw Julian. Saw him in every scratch, every dent, every worn-down step. This castle was filled with reminders of everything he'd lost.

I did this, I thought before I could stop myself.

Guilt came bubbling past all the layers of ice and iron I'd used to tamp down my emotions these past days. Nothing, it seemed, could protect me from Julian, no matter how hard I tried.

"How did you get...stuck in between?"

I didn't know how shifter magic worked, but Lucius was definitely stuck. More Fae than wolf, I decided—tufts of white on his cheeks, his neck, with elegant, pointed ears sticking out from the thick fur.

“Funny you say that because I *feel* stuck. Magic doesn’t always work the way it should and I’m old, which means most days my power works even less well. That’s the thing about age. You think you have everything all figured out, then reality comes along and bites you in the arse.”

“How so?” I nodded to his sandwich, which he still hadn’t touched. “I hate eating alone and it’s rude to leave your food untouched.”

Lucius sighed, but he picked up the sandwich and took a careful bite. His fangs were long, one of them cracked, the tip missing. Even in his state, I saw where Tavion and Julian got their good looks.

The old male had been handsome, probably still was once he fully transformed back to his Fae form. He was broad in the shoulders, ropey muscles stretched over big bones, but blue eyes that had once been clear were fogged with a helpless sort of grief.

He was utterly ruined in body and soul.

“Magic is fickle, even magic such as ours. We spend the first twenty years of our lives learning to master the transformation until it’s second nature. Shifting comes from here.” He lay his hand over his heart.

“Rooted in the deepest part of ourselves, the truest part of ourselves.” His face turned somber. “Break your heart and break your magic. The last time I shifted...I couldn’t change back to my mortal form.”

“Could you turn back into the wolf?”

“Perhaps...probably.” He sighed heavily, resting his elbows on the counter. “But I have no wish to become a mindless animal for whatever years I have left. As hideous as this is...” He shrugged. “At least I can still talk and think.”

“You’re not hideous.” I set down my sandwich. “Just... stuck. Could a healer help?” As if in answer, my magic stirred within me. Maybe, after taking Julian away and causing this, I could fix him.

He shook his head. “No, I’ve consulted them all. A couple mages. A witch or two. Nothing helped. The witches made things worse, so that was a mistake.” His sheepish grin told me how well *that* encounter had gone.

“Dane warned me, I should have listened.”

“If I could, I would try to undo this...but I can’t control my magic, much less make it do anything useful.” I set my elbows on the counter, mirroring his pose. “And I hate not being able to help you.”

“I don’t expect you to fix me, Anaria. It’s enough that you want to help me,” he said kindly. “Is there anyone to help you learn your power?”

“No. This magic is too different from everyone else’s.”

“Change doesn’t happen overnight. You have to give yourself time.”

I clasped my hands together, searching his face. “But what if we don’t have time? What if I need to figure this out *now*?”

“Then you do your best. There’s no rushing magic, I can tell you that.”

Lucius put his hand back over his heart, his next words freezing my blood. “Julian believed you were the only one who could unite the three realms. I always thought Tavion was too bitter to believe in anything. But he believes in you.”

I stiffened at the absolute surety in that statement. “Tavion doesn’t care about anything but himself.”

“A lie, and you know it. My son cares *too* deeply, he’s just afraid to lay his feelings out for all to see,” Lucius said baldly. “But Tavion is his own worst enemy, as you have no doubt discovered. There is something maddening about Tavion...I can’t tell you how often I wanted to wring his neck when he was young.”

“Oh, I know.” I couldn’t explain why it was so easy to talk to Lucius when I could barely stand the sight of his son. But I could, as if I’d known him my entire life.

Maybe, if Tavion was more like his father...*No*.

I didn't need Tavion being anything but the prickly bastard he was. Animosity kept things between us simple. *Uncomplicated.*

"You remind me of Julian." I curled my hands into fists at what a fucking waste his death had been. How effortlessly he'd made me trust him, after just a few seconds. "He was kind and he held to his beliefs."

"He most likely died for those beliefs."

I held my head high. "He did." I was every kind of a fool, but I had to tell Lucius the truth. A grieving father had to know how his son died, even though he'd hate me by the end.

"Lucius...I'm the one who killed your son. My magic... killed him."

He just nodded sadly. "I know. It's the only thing that could have." For a long moment we stared at each other over the wreckage of breadcrumbs and cut up cheese.

"Tell me how it happened. I want to know everything."

I t took everything in me not to vomit. I couldn't do this, couldn't look this decent, wrecked male in the eye and tell him how horribly his son had died. And for what? *For nothing.*

“Please, Anaria...I die a little more every day not knowing. I just...It's eating me alive.” His broken plea had me nodding. If he could bear listening...I could tell the story.

“Eat the rest and I will.” I nodded to the plate. “Starving yourself won't bring Julian back, but eating could give you the strength to turn Fae again.” I tried to smile but couldn't even manage that. “If you want to know about your son, then you have to eat.”

“You really aren't anything like I thought you'd be.” But Lucius picked up the food and took a bite, crumbs falling out of his mouth while he tried to chew, those long fangs getting in the way.

“I suppose starting at the beginning...” I blew out a breath, not sure if I was stalling or not. “The beginning, then.”

I told Lucius how I was raised and hidden in Varitus for the first eighteen years of my life. How Solok came and slaughtered everyone at Ravenshade Castle before stealing me away from the only life I'd known, even if it was a lie.

How my life—and Lucius's—changed in the blink of an eye when Solok threw that axe and a surge of my magic took his son away from him.

“Solok was there?” Lucius bared his deadly teeth, a growl rumbling in his chest.

“Yes. I passed out, and then...” Fuck, this was hard. I blew out a shaky breath at the memory. “By the time I came to, Julian was dead.”

I’d always remember what Julian looked like—how the ash flaked off his cheek when I’d brushed his face, how his unseeing eyes stared up at the sky. *Good. I should remember what I’d done.*

“Your son was brave and kind, and I wanted so badly to trust him.” I wiped my face on my shoulder before he saw my tears. “I wish I would have left with him that night. I wish I wouldn’t have hesitated because everything would be different now.”

Please, please don’t hate me for this, please... I squeezed my eyes shut. If there was one thing in my life I wanted to take back, it was Julian’s death.

“I do too, lass. But my son’s death isn’t on your head, it’s on Solok’s. That bastard’s days are numbered.” His vicious snarl made the hair stand up on the back of my neck, and I laid my hand on his arm.

“Solok’s days are *over*. He’s dead. We killed him two days ago then burned him. He’ll never hurt anyone else ever again.”

“*You* killed him?” His voice thrummed with disappointment and a little awe. “Killing such a creature... wouldn’t be an easy task.”

I closed my eyes and nodded, broken images flying back like shards of broken glass—Solok’s head thrown back in a ghastly scream, black vines and thorns erupting all over his body like a blight. Me loving every minute of his suffering when I shouldn’t have enjoyed it at all.

“I did.”

“Impressive. The longer-lived Caladrian Fae, especially those as deeply corrupted as Solok, are nearly impossible to kill. Their magic is too old and too strong for an easy death.

And they've had the time to learn to use their power in unnatural ways."

Well, that part was definitely true.

"I saw Solok heal himself almost instantly. But you're saying they're truly immortal?"

"The oldest of the Fae grow impervious to death. Carex, Serpens, Solok, the Mistress. All of them are over a thousand years old; Solok and the Mistress...were far older." His lips twisted into a sneer. "A thousand years of corruption has twisted their souls into something truly immortal. Only your magic—pure, untainted wild magic—can destroy that corruption. Weapons, even the best the Fae can produce, will only temporarily harm the flesh. Because what is housed inside that flesh is pure evil."

I shivered when I thought about the black line crackling down my side.

The mark on Raz's cheek.

"Your magic is one of the few powers that can kill an ancient Fae. Or a shifter." Lucius's eyes glowed, but not with fear. "You are a weapon capable of killing even the strongest immortals. And don't think both kings haven't taken that into account."

I hated to break the news to him, but I was already a weapon for a monster even bigger than the kings. But Lucius hadn't mentioned the Oracle, so I wouldn't either.

"None of this surprises you." I nodded to the last bite of his sandwich, which he shoved into his mouth in one go. "Julian told you everything?"

"Julian told me enough and Dane brings me news from the Barrens," he said around his food. "And I keep my eyes and ears open. You'd be surprised how much gossip escapes Blackcastle and makes its way north. I heard there was a Reaper in the Keep just this week."

Memories came back in an unwelcome, violent rush. "Her name was Ember. She was my friend and Solok used her against me."

“I’m sorry.” Lucius’s voice softened as he rocked back so quickly on his stool I thought he’d snap off the legs. “The Axe was cruel like that. He’s been a monster as long as he’s been alive.”

“A dead monster, now,” I reminded him, because Solok’s death was the only silver lining to this entire situation.

“Good.”

His voice came out low and deadly, then Lucius was lost in his memories and I in mine until the silence stretched out long enough to become uncomfortable.

“When you shift into another form...how does that work?” I finally asked. I found his magic intriguing, changing from one form to another, simply through magic. Not like mine at all, and yet, I couldn’t help but wonder if, at its root, all magic was the same.

“Like I said before, the ability comes from here.” He patted his chest. “The magic lives in your veins, in your bones, but the shift comes from a place of love. Your heart determines the strength of your magic. A corrupt heart yields corrupt magic, a pure heart creates untainted magic.”

“I would agree with that.” I’d seen too many evil, vile people use magic, and far too few decent ones. “Does shifting hurt?”

I mean, how couldn’t it?

Bones and skin and muscle rearranging themselves into a new form. It *had* to hurt.

“Shouldn’t you be asking your husband these questions?” His face scrunched with hesitation. “Tav might be better suited for this conversation than an old man who clearly can’t use his own power anymore.”

“I’m asking you. Maybe your answer will give me some clue of what I’m supposed to do with mine.” I cleared my throat. “And Tavion’s not really my husband—our union is just for show.”

“I’m not sure my son knows that, but I will take your word for it.” His smile warmed his entire face. “Sometimes, if you shift too fast, there is pain. The first few times are excruciating, and many don’t turn out correctly, like this.” Lucius spread his arms wide, giving me a good look at what might go wrong. “But the transition is usually painless and as easy as breathing.”

“So you think you can only shift to your wolf form but not the other way?”

“It’s easier shifting from Fae to wolf because the change is...less demanding. Deep down, we yearn to be in our animal form because we crave the freedom the wolf offers us. We need to run the forest, to hunt, to not know collar or leash.”

His gaze turned distant as if he had gone somewhere else entirely. “The wolf fights the change back to mortal form because it’s far easier to be a wolf than a Fae.” His mouth widened and I realized he was trying to smile.

“My wolf thinks the Fae have too many responsibilities and he might be right.” Lucius shrugged. “Hence my current situation.”

“I agree with your wolf. What I wouldn’t give to just disappear into the mountains and leave this mess with the kings behind.”

“You are already in the mountains.” He opened his mouth to say something else then went perfectly still. “Tavion’s almost back. Dane’s with him. They’ll be here momentarily.”

He leaned in and my heart clenched at his intense expression. “My son is...” His blue eyes bore into mine so deep, I couldn’t have turned away if I’d wanted to.

“There are things about Tavion you need to know, but I also know my son well enough to know he’s not told you any of his secrets. He’d fear...you’d think him weak. Tavion’s upbringing...wasn’t like Julian’s. There are good reasons for Tavion’s hard edges and his wary nature.”

I shook my head. I did not want to learn anything about Tavion that might soften my heart like it had already softened

for this lonely old male. I couldn't start down that dangerous path because I knew what lay at the end.

Ruination. Heartache. Sorrow.

"I don't want to know Tavion's secrets. I'm nothing but a means to an end for him, and as far as I'm concerned..." I clamped my mouth closed at the scuffling sounds echoing from the foyer. I lowered my voice.

"Tavion held Julian's death against me for a long time, and because of that, we've both said and done things to each other that cannot be forgiven. The sooner we part ways, the better."

Which might never happen given how connected we were by this awful magic.

"My son has a habit of burning every bridge he's ever crossed." Lucius's voice was quiet. "You'd think he would have learned, but it's his nature, I suppose, to..."

The air in the kitchen changed. Lucius's face flattened out to an impenetrable mask, the light dimming in his eyes. "Tavion." He heaved himself off the stool, held out his hand. "It's good to see you, son."

There was nothing but stunned silence behind me, then I turned to see Tavion's utter shock at his father's appearance, Lucius's shame as he dropped his eyes...but not his hand. Lucius kept holding it out, a trembling offer of welcome...and maybe something more.

Tavion's white hair was tangled and there was a bright red slash of blood on his cheek. His normally immaculate clothes were in disarray as if he'd tossed them on as he walked—his feet were bare and muddy.

For some reason, my eyes snagged on his pale feet, so at odds with the Tavion I was used to, booted and surly and difficult.

Those bare feet made him look vulnerable somehow.

"We were just eating," I said hoarsely, my voice unnaturally loud in the echoing silence. "Are you hungry? I can make you a sandwich." I dipped my eyes to his father's

outstretched hand then glared at Tavion, praying he took the hint. After a beat, he grasped Lucius's palm but dropped it quick enough that hurt flickered over his father's face.

"Your...Anaria and I were getting to know one another. She...told me what happened to Julian, and Solok. At least that bastard's dead, even if it was too late to save your brother."

Tavion hadn't moved, still frozen in place as his father went on. "I know the castle's changed since you were here last, but I hoped maybe you'd stay for a time. It would be good to have—"

Tavion cut him off. "Now that Lyrae and Crux are headed to Blackcastle, we'll be on our way. We'll take the horses but leave the carriage in the stable."

"That's all right, son. I know you have places to be. Maybe next time." The devastation written on Lucius's face skewered my heart, but he straightened his shoulders, tufts of white fur catching against the too large shirt as he struggled to keep his composure.

"We'd love to stay the night, if you'll have us." I glared at Tavion, daring him to disagree. "There are two more, though, if you have the room. Tristan and Raziell, but we won't be any trouble, and we really do need to be on our way tomorrow."

Lucius dipped his head, but not before I saw the tears lining his eyes. "Tonight would be wonderful. This house has been empty for too long. Dane's heading north before dark, so..."

"I'll stay tonight as well." Dane stepped into the kitchen, buttoning up his shirt, but not before I glimpsed a round scar on his chest, almost a burn. "I'd very much like to hear what trouble my nephew's been up to."

"Then we'll need food." I set my hands on my hips. Not that I wanted to cook, but if a night spent with some company took away that devastated look on Lucius's face, then I'd make dinner. "There'll be six of us. I suppose it's too much to hope there's a market anywhere close?"

“Check the pantry.” Dane jerked his head to the far end of the kitchen. “I brought some provisions when I came in yesterday. No markets to speak of up here. We get what we need from the forest.”

“I’ll get something started.” I looked pointedly at Tavion then the stool beside Lucius. “You three should get caught up; it sounds like it’s been a while since you’ve had the chance.”

Lucius settled himself back on the stool, shooting me a look of gratitude. “Where do you need to be in such a hurry, son, that you need horses...and are leaving the carriage behind?”

I swallowed down the ache in my throat and went to find this pantry, knowing that expectant, hopeful look on Lucius’s face as he held his hand out would stay with me.

Maybe all the way to Tempeste.

I’d never had a family, but there was something both heart-wrenchingly wonderful and incredibly sad about all of this.

One thing was clear. Tavion was more complicated than I’d ever given him credit for, though I shored up my softening heart against him. Trust would only hurt me in the end, and where we were going...

Chances were, Tavion Montgomery would be the least of my worries.

“Venison and potatoes it is,” I muttered, surveying the pantry packed full of food that had long gone bad. There was one decent bag of potatoes growing spindly sprouts and a hunk of fresh venison, along with some wrinkled apples. I’d worked with worse and headed back to the kitchen with my arms full.

“What are you doing, Anaria?” Raziel stepped in front of me, long black hair plastered to his sweaty face, the stubble on his jaw giving him a darker, edgier look, his sinful lips curving up into a devastating smile. He reached for the supplies I was precariously juggling.

Just the sight of him made my knees weak and then he was kissing me, his dense, musky taste a sensual echo that reached all the way to my core. He was so very careful to hold himself far away, not letting the sharp points on his collar so much as touch my throat. When he broke the kiss, his thumb brushed my cheek gently, as if he read every emotion on my face.

“Lyrae and Crux are gone and I’m all right. Better than you, trapped in that carriage with Tavion for hours.” His smile faltered. “Safer, but more uncomfortable in every way, I expect.”

“It was fine,” I muttered, my earlier resentment flooding back. “We’re all here and we’re alive, so that’s something.”

“Go ahead and be pissed at me, Anaria. I’d be disappointed if you weren’t.” Raz leaned in, his grin turning wicked. “But don’t stay mad for too long. I have plans for

tonight.” He pulled back and I saw the raw hunger on his face. “*Big* plans that I’ve spent this whole godsawful trip thinking about.”

“I *am* still pissed at you,” I told him, thrusting the venison and potatoes into his arms. “But I suppose I could be persuaded to forgive you. With the right amount of persuasion.”

“Lucky for you, persuasion is what I’m best at, princess.” He expertly balanced the venison on one knee while eyeing the sad little potatoes. “Dare I ask what you are doing with this?”

“Cooking dinner. Tavion’s father is all alone, and...he’s stuck mid shift, from the looks of things. Something’s wrong with his magic, and it has to do with Julian’s death.”

Raz sighed, managing to brush his knuckles down my cheek despite having his hands full. “Don’t make this your burden, too, Anaria. Julian wasn’t your fault.”

“I know, but...it’s like I can’t get away from what I did. Every time I turn around, I get another reminder of how important Julian was. He was the glue that held this family together, and I took him away, and now everything’s falling apart.”

Raz opened his mouth to argue then shook his head, as if knowing this argument was unwinnable. “I’ll help you cook, if you can stand having me in the kitchen.”

“I can stand you just fine.” Heat bloomed inside of me when he leaned in and caught my mouth in another quick kiss before I pulled away, biting my lip. “I know we should get on the road tonight...but Tavion’s father is so lonely, I promised we’d stay the night. But this will set us back another day.”

I couldn’t take my eyes off the small black dot just below his eye, the one that matched the lightning strike running down my side.

I should tell him about the mark on my side, I really should.

But I couldn’t.

Maybe I was a coward, but talking about the marks somehow made what was happening seem more real. And right now...it was easier to pretend.

“We wouldn’t have made good time in the dark, not in this godsawful terrain. And none of us have slept in days.” Raz peered down at me, eyes dark with concern.

“The horses will be better rested, and we’ll make up the lost time tomorrow. The army moves slow enough we can catch up to them, even if we have to ride like demons.”

“I’ll leave the route to you and Tavion.”

“And me.” Tristan shouldered up to us, eyeing the spindly potatoes with a frown. His dark red hair was pulled tightly back, and even inside, his bow and quiver were slung over his shoulder. “Is that dinner?”

“It will be in a few hours.” I bristled at the doubt in his hazel eyes. “And it’ll be the best dinner you’ve ever had.”

“I highly doubt that.” Tristan looked over my head down the hall, where the murmur of voices grew louder. “We should get on the road, Raz. We’re already a day behind because of this foolishness with Lyrae and Crux. If we want to catch up with Zor...”

“We’ll stay the night, leave before dawn.” Raziel’s tone was as stern as I’d ever heard it, and Tristan whipped his head around. “We need the sleep and the horses will be fresh.” His eyes fell on me and softened. “This isn’t up for discussion, Tristan.”

“Fine, but this is a mistake. Don’t complain when we’re late getting to Tempeste and the fucking Oracle takes our heads just for spite.”

“She won’t touch us,” I reminded him. “She needs us.”

“Until she doesn’t,” Tristan reminded me right back, and I just nodded because I’d never heard a truer statement. Tristan yawned. “What time’s dinner? Tell me I have time for a nap. I’m fucking *exhausted*.”

“You have time to check the horses,” Raziel said tightly. “Make sure they’ve been fed and watered and we have enough tack to ride out tomorrow first thing. You and I will keep our mounts. The gray gelding should work for Anaria and the big bay for Tavion.”

“Tell me again why I’m taking orders from...you?” Tristan’s eyes fixed on Raz’s spiked collar for a second too long and a burst of anger wiped away every coherent thought in my head. “If you’re so worried about the horses, go check on them yourself,” Tristan growled, hands clenched tight enough his knuckles were white. “I’m not your...*slave*.”

A fire sparked in Raziel’s dark eyes, and the bag of potatoes hit the floor with a dull thud. “Care to call me a slave again? I’ve kicked your arse before, but if you need a reminder, we can have a go outside if you’d like.”

Tristan’s lip curled higher. “Looks like you’re a little too busy being a cook’s assistant right now. I wouldn’t want to distract you.” But his eyes were on me, and I jolted at the absolute disdain in them. More than just simple aggravation, this was deeper, more personal.

“If I were you, Tristan, I’d watch your fucking mouth.” I conjured up a raging, vicious smile out of my churning anger.

“I tend to lose my temper when people insult someone I love, and I’d hate to turn you into a thorn covered monster by accident.” Raz had gone stock-still beside me, while down the hall in the kitchen, all conversation stopped.

Tristan, however, went pale, as if remembering what I’d done to Solok.

But his eyes swung between the two of us. “I never wanted to be part of Julian’s bullshite revolution. Remember that when you start ordering me around like I’m your stable hand. This is *your* fucking mess...and the second I can get free of this, I am gone.”

“Trust me, none of us wanted to be part of this, so stop acting like you’re the only one whose life got fucked up,” Raz snarled right back.

“Check on the horses, or we’re all dead. We eat, we sleep, we ride out first thing in the morning.” I’d never heard Raz use that tone before, filled with raw command and pure male dominance.

He jerked his head toward the door. “*Fucking now.*” My knees trembled from the utter power contained in his voice. I swore the hallway lights dimmed, and for one breathless moment, he was silhouetted in pure darkness.

“Fuck you, Raz,” Tristan growled, but his hands remained clenched when he stormed toward the doors, red hair glowing in the ancient faelights.

I picked up a rogue potato off the floor and watched him leave. “He had no right to say that,” I said quietly, my voice shaking.

“I can fight my own battles, Anaria.” Raz brushed his lips over my forehead, the musty smell of sweat and horse washing over me. “Though I have to admit, you stir something up inside me when you leap to my defense.”

“You can stir something in the kitchen, if you really want to help.” I headed for the far end of the hall on slightly wobbly knees, where the voices had resumed. “I had no idea Tristan was such an asshole.”

“He’s not all bad. He’s just...He’s still got some fucked-up ideas from his parents.”

“That’s no excuse. At some point, you have to decide what you believe in yourself, and if you’re a certain age and still saying shite like that, those become *your* beliefs, not your parents’.”

“True enough.” Raz scooted one of the escaped potatoes over to me as I gathered them up off the floor and dropped them back in the burlap sack.

“But depending on how they instilled those lessons in you, Anaria, they’re hard to unlearn. Tristan’s not like the rest of us. His father...His father was a right bastard. Tristan’s spent most of his life trying to earn that fucker’s favor, even though everyone knows it’s a waste of his time. When he was offered

a chance to win back their family fortunes... fortunes his father lost through bad investments, Tristan believed he'd finally be given some respect. The minute he got everything he ever wanted, he was yanked out of his life and right back into this... conspiracy."

"Why are you defending him?" I caught up to him. "And what was that... voice thing you did? You made me feel... strange."

His wicked, wicked smile... *Gods, that smile was going to be the end of me.* "In a good way, I hope."

"Definitely in a good way, but... there was a part of me that wanted to... I don't know, bow down in front of you or something." I frowned, wondering if I should mention the shadows, but maybe that had been my imagination.

"I'm glad to see I haven't lost my air of command." As if he couldn't help himself, Raz kissed me again a second before he disappeared through the door. "Because we're sharing a bed tonight, and I can't wait to get you on your knees like the good girl you are."

Goosebumps erupted all over me at the look on his beautiful face, then something rustled in the air behind me, a sound too faint for mortal hearing.

Even for my ears, the sound was like leaves in the breeze, but I whirled around, every muscle snapping to attention when a beautiful golden owl soared through the door Tristan had left ajar. Raz swept me behind him, rogue potatoes flying everywhere.

"A fucking shifter from Blackcastle. He must have tracked us here. Anaria, *get back behind me. Now.*" Raziel was already moving, pulling a sword from his belt like he meant to slice the poor creature in half.

"No, don't." I pushed his hand, and the sword, down. "It's all right. This is... I know who this is." I watched the owl expertly navigate the hall, avoiding pictures and furniture. "He's a shifter, but he's also an... ally."

At least, I hoped he was.

Torin's owl shifter lover headed straight for us, his wingspan brushing both sides of the wide hall as he bore down on us. I froze, but all he did was beat his wings hard enough to blow my hair back and alight on my shoulder, then offer me his leg like it was the most natural thing in the world.

"What the fuck, Anaria?" Raz growled, sword still in hand as I untied the cylinder from his yellow leg and unscrewed the cap like I'd seen Torin do.

"It's a message. We're supposed to meet the Oracle at the Wynter Palace, whatever that is." I handed Raziel the tiny message, Tavion, Lucius, and Dane thundering down the hallway as the owl swiveled his head, golden eyes blinking at the three angry shifters approaching.

Feathers brushed my face, and the owl was gone, soaring back down the hall and out through the door, Tristan diving to the ground to avoid a head-on collision.

Raz handed Tavion the note, and his face paled.

"The Wynter Palace? In two days?" Tavion's lips barely even moved. "That fucking bitch. She knows we'll never make it."

Even Tristan's surly temper didn't ruin dinner.

Nor did he dampen down Lucius's subdued joy in having his family around him, his blue eyes continually drifting over to Tavion, hope flickering in them like tiny, newborn flames.

The castle's dining room hadn't been used in years, according to Lucius, and from the inch of dust on the furniture, I believed him. And yet, tonight was the closest to home I'd ever felt in my life—all of us gathered around the table, the scrape of silverware across fine bone china plates, the occasional clink of glasses as a bawdy toast was made, usually by Dane.

The Mistress would have beaten me for how tough the venison was and how badly I'd overcooked the potatoes, but I'd come up with a respectable meal. I made up a second plate for Lucius, something neither Tavion or Raziel missed, but I wasn't letting him go hungry.

Not when he was so thin.

He and Tavion were awkward together, not at all what I'd expected, and though Lucius tried so hard—too hard, maybe—Tavion was barely civil. He was cold, almost, and definitely not making much of an effort.

My eyes burned. I wanted to kick Tavion's arse for putting that doubt on Lucius's face, but then everyone was laughing at another one of Dane's ridiculous stories.

Between countless ales, Dane had done most of the talking tonight, telling us about the High Barrens, the passes through the high mountains, the trolls and the stonewraiths, and gods help me, *the dragons*.

Even Tristan snorted into his ale at that.

The old male didn't have a shred of shame and I admired him for it. His stories were a mix of humor and fantasy, and while Tavion shook his head in dismay, I noticed Lucius encouraged his brother's embellishments, not that Dane needed any encouraging.

Finally, after the food was gone and my eyes were drooping, Raz set down his empty mug, squeezed my knee, and turned to Dane. "We'll leave before dawn. From the sound of it, you know these mountains. What's the fastest route into Caladrius?"

Dane scratched his chin. "There's a high mountain road that crosses the wall then leads south to Tempeste. That'll take you four days, if nothing goes wrong. I don't know where this Wynter Palace is, but if it's anywhere close to the city, you'll never get there in two days."

The room went silent, all of us wondering the same thing.

What was the cost if we were late?

Dane sopped up the last of his gravy onto the last of the bread. "I know a shortcut, if you're interested." He sounded too casual, his gaze flicking to Lucius first, then to Tavion. "We use it during the heavy snowfalls when the mountain passes are closed off."

Tavion's head snapped to his uncle, but Raz was already leaning in. "How short?"

"Cut your travel time in half." Dane's tone was too casual for my liking. "Safe as can be, since the tunnels have been abandoned for thousands of years."

A shiver went down my spine. "What sort of tunnels?"

Dane shrugged. "I've heard so many stories over the years, it's hard to say. But they're dry and wide enough for a fully

loaded wagon to pass through. We've mapped them out, though some have collapsed over time. The main tunnel, though, leads straight to Tempeste. We use that route to transport goods into the city." Dane grinned wolfishly. "For a fee, of course."

"You're a smuggler?" I shot back.

He winked. "I prefer to call myself an acquisitions specialist."

"Whatever you call yourself, you're smuggling goods—"

Dane cut me off, his eyes hard. "And people, and weapons, and pretty much everything else into Tempeste. Where do you think their food comes from?" Dane raised an eyebrow. "Since they can't grow a fucking thing in that barren wasteland."

"Dane," Tavion said warningly at the same time his father said, "Anaria doesn't know how things work up here."

Lucius set down his fork, slowly enough the room went silent. "Don't be an asshole, Dane. You'll guide them, and you're not charging them one gilder to use your precious tunnels."

Raziel cocked his head. "I highly doubt they're Dane's tunnels."

"They've been mine for five hundred years, so you're free to call them Montgomerys' Tunnels, if you wish." There was a too much wolf in Dane's toothy smile, and a bit of Fae male challenge, too.

In that split second, everything came together. "Ah." I looked across the table, Tavion's face tightening when I met his eyes. "I see now."

"See what?" Raz leaned back in his chair but never took his hand off me.

"I see where Tavion got the money to pay the Shadow King. Those tunnels are a fucking gold mine." I shook my head. "You realize you funded this entire war, don't you? That a lot of males will die because of that gold."

“If not for me, the Shadow King would have sold you to Gravelock.” Tavion’s voice softened the longer he looked at me. I glanced away. “You would be in the Shadowlands right now, at that bastard’s mercy, and he is *a fucking animal*.”

I didn’t feel it necessary to point out that Tavion transformed into an *actual wolf*.

Because the bastard was right.

And I hated that he was right. Hated that he’d saved me when I should have been able to save myself.

Hated that I owed him. Because this debt between us would have to be repaid.

“I have to admit...it’s genius.” Raziel leaned back in his chair, eyeing Tavion, Lucius, and Dane with new appreciation. “Taking the Fae King’s money and using his gold to fund the war against him. If you’re lucky, Montgomery, you might get the chance to tell both those bastards how you played them.”

“Doubtful, the way things are going,” I mumbled, though on some level, I did appreciate the brilliance of Tavion’s betrayal. “But fine, I’ll admit, that’s a nice twist.” Every word came out grudgingly.

Dane tipped his head. “Glad I could accommodate. It was about time the money went to something besides funding our extravagant lifestyles. Though buying Tav a wife wasn’t something I ever saw coming.” He slapped Tavion on the back then poured another ale.

The conversation turned to the war and these mysterious tunnels, Raziel’s fingers drifting higher and higher up my thigh while we both held separate conversations—though mine grew increasingly incoherent as more and more heat pooled between my legs.

“I’m exhausted.” I pushed myself away from the table and out of the reach of Raziel’s clever fingers, my weak knees already too wobbly to make it up all those stairs. “Is there somewhere I can sleep tonight?”

“Take your pick. There is an entire wing of empty bedrooms.” Lucius’s smile was lopsided, whether from his

fangs or all the ale. “Choose whichever one you’d like, but make sure there’s wood for the fireplace.”

“I’ll build you a fire.” Raz shot to his feet. “Can’t have you getting cold tonight, princess.” He leaned close enough his lips brushed the shell of my ear. “Not when I know about a hundred ways to keep you warm.”

I blushed, sure everyone in the room had heard.

“Thank you, Lucius. I think I’ll head to bed now.” *Gods, why did my voice sound so high?* “We have an early start in the morning.”

“I’ll see you off tomorrow.” Lucius pushed out his chair and came over, clasping my hand between his huge paws. “Thank you for tonight.” He leaned in closer. “For making me remember how things used to be.”

“You don’t deserve to be alone,” I told him, my voice sharper than I intended. My eyes drifted over to Tavion, though I didn’t mean for that to happen, either.

“Don’t be so sure of that,” he countered before Raz tugged me away and Dane launched into another ridiculous story, calling for his brother.

“Goodnight, then,” I said awkwardly as we disappeared. But Tavion’s eyes followed me through the door and that closed-off look on his face stayed with me for a long time.

I didn't say a fucking word as I let Anaria walk away.

A thousand of them hovered on my lips, just waiting to be spoken...yet not one came out.

Why was that?

Why did this female bring out the absolute worst in me, yet make me want to curl myself around her at the same time? Why did she make me tear out my hair one moment, but want to kiss her the next? Why could I not manage a single coherent thought while I was in her presence?

I saw her look—the last one she gave me before she disappeared. Her plea for me to be kind to this old bastard who'd ruined my life.

Anaria wanted me to be a better male, but I couldn't grant her wish. Lucius...He didn't deserve my respect. Or my love. He'd never earned my affection, not like Julian.

But the disappointment on her face gutted me. I was ruined, inside and out, a villain in the truest sense of the word. And yet, something sparked to life every time she was close, as if some small, forgotten part of me wanted to be a better male for her.

I blocked out my father's roar of laughter at Dane's latest story—nothing but strung together lies—and pondered the problem of my wife. Because even if I never got into her bed, or into her heart, we were, at least, married. In front of and blessed by the Shadow King, no less.

Sure, I'd manipulated her into the agreement.

Sure, I was a complete and utter cad.

I'd trapped her. Anaria had no other choice but to marry me that day, because even though I was a proper bastard and a complete asshole, the male she'd been promised to was worse. A depraved monster. Lord Gravelock would have destroyed Anaria. Systematically. Gleefully. Completely.

I gripped the handle of my mug and closed my eyes, forced myself to keep my shite together as the biggest fear I'd ever faced came back to me full force.

Anaria, her eyes glistening with tears, Gravelock's fingers digging into her arm deep enough to draw blood. The Shadow King, seeing nothing but a means to win his fucking war against his brother, and using the woman I loved to secure his victory.

I'd been so close to losing her that day, so fucking close.

I'd heard about the king's plan at the last moment. Only a desperate plea to Dane and a frantic ride to Blackcastle with some of our men and a small fortune of gold had saved Anaria that day. Some nights I still woke up in a cold sweat, thinking I'd been too late.

I took a deep drink of my ale to hide my shaking. I was fine with her hating me. I would take a pissed off Anaria who would never be mine over a dead Anaria any day of the week, even if I was doomed to a lifetime of torture.

Because that's what these past days had been.

Pure, unadulterated torture.

Close enough to drink in her jasmine scent, close enough to touch her velvet skin. Close enough to feel the hatred drifting off her in waves every time she set eyes on me.

I took another drink, clenching my hand into a fist beneath the table, willing some of this fucking fear to go away. After a fucking eternity, the shaking stopped, my breathing regulated.

Tristan was already half in his cups, my uncle lost in his bullshite story, but Lucius...My father watched me, even when

he didn't seem to be.

A habit of his and one I detested.

Acting like he cared when he did not give a shite. Pretending he wanted a relationship with me when he'd had a hundred years to build one and hadn't bothered.

And what in the holy fuck was wrong with my father? He was stuck half shifted, like a pup, something I'd never seen before, much less from my own kin. Much less from a *Montgomery*. My grandfather's idea of being a Montgomery involved backbones and honor and a menagerie of old-fashioned ideas that both Dane and I rejected.

Julian, however... Julian had embraced those ideals.

Julian, who'd been in love with Anaria from the very beginning. Or rather, he'd loved the idea of her saving the world and ushering in a new age, where all three realms were united and these endless wars were over. But Julian always was a dreamer.

And just like that, my brother's ghost swept in to ruin what might have been a good drunk. Once, Julian would have been sitting right beside me. No, he would have been sitting there, right beside my father. The two of them together, me and Dane on the other side of the table, trading our bullshite stories while Julian and Lucius had their heads together and...

I sucked in a breath.

I would not do this tonight.

I would not replay the past, over and over again, hoping for a different outcome. Julian was dead. Lucius could care less about me.

And I would never have Anaria, no matter how much I wanted her.

“This was mine; now it’s yours.”

Raziel dropped a well-worn pack in front of me then nodded to the enormous pile of luggage piled in the bedroom I’d chosen. “Tavion must have lugged everything you own from Blackcastle. But we’ll be traveling light tomorrow.”

“I won’t need much.” It wasn’t like the trunks of fancy ball gowns and jeweled slippers would do me much good where we were headed. Right now, the leathers I wore were the most valuable things I owned.

This bedroom had once been as grand as any in the Fae King’s palace or the Shadow King’s Keep. Now moonlight streamed in through the holes in the moth-eaten drapes, dust motes floating in the silvery beams.

“At least there’s a real bed,” I whispered against Raz’s lips, pulling out both his daggers and dropping them to the floor with a thud that echoed through the entire castle. My other hand slid beneath his shirt, my fingers greedily caressing warm muscle and skin.

“I’ve definitely slept in worse places,” he agreed, urging me to lift my foot so he could slip the knife out of my boot before he worked open my jacket. He palmed my breast with a soft laugh and I swayed when his teeth clamped down on my earlobe. Then I was trying to tug his shirt out of his pants so I could touch more of him, my fingers tracing every divot of his

taut stomach, the line of hair that disappeared into the front of his pants.

He groaned, and I lost myself in the sound of pure pleasure.

“Gods, I missed you all day.” He moved us closer to the bed, my heart skittering with every brush of his mouth, his exploring fingers. I cupped him through his pants, the hardness I couldn’t wait to have filling me.

“*Fuuuck*, Anaria. I won’t last if you keep doing that.” He claimed my mouth, fast and hard, giving and domineering at the same time. I wrapped a hand around the back of his neck and met his tongue stroke for stroke until the day’s pent-up aggravation flared.

I broke away, panting slightly.

“I would have rather been riding with you and Tristan than trapped in that carriage with Tavion.”

“Oh, I know.” His grin didn’t have an ounce of apology, and I caught his bottom lip between my teeth with a low growl. Then his tongue was in my mouth, and I forgot what I was angry about. I only knew how good he tasted.

“You realize this could be our last chance for a while.” Raz stripped off my jacket, and we became a flurry of hands and lips and primal pleasure until cold mountain air chilled my skin everywhere except where I was pressed up against him.

I couldn’t get close enough.

“Then we’ll have to make tonight count.” I hissed when his hands cupped my arse, the bulge of his cock pressed against my already damp core. I laid my hands on his shoulders, wishing we could somehow close the distance between us. But those spikes were already an inch from my face, and deadly sharp.

“You are going to feel me between your legs all day tomorrow.” His voice had lost all humor. All that was left was a raw, dominating hunger that left me dizzy. “I want to smell you all over me, because that’s the only fucking way I’m going to stay sane.”

Yes. That's what I wanted too, my hands touching him everywhere, trying to memorize the shape of him, every divot and valley. I ran my hands down his back, up his ridged abdomen, his broad chest, pausing on his collar, the iron ice-cold beneath my fingers.

He rasped in my ear. "Godsdamn, I need to be inside you right now. I can't wait any longer. Hang on tight." He cupped my arse and lifted me, my legs parting. The head of his cock prodded my entrance, then he slid me slowly down his body, sinking in deeper and deeper, until my hips were flush against his. I caught my breath at the delicious punch of pressure as his girth stretched me wide.

We both groaned.

"Oh my gods. You feel so good inside me, Raz." I pressed my mouth to the base of his throat, trying to keep quiet. The castle was so silent, every little sound seemed amplified. I grinned. "So...big."

"Such a sweet talker. You feel like fucking heaven, princess." His teeth sank into my shoulder, and the sound that came out of my mouth...

"That's what I wanted to hear," he whispered, fingers digging into my arse as he walked us over to the bed. "I fucking love the sounds you make, Anaria. Sometimes, just thinking about them makes me so fucking hard..."

We fell to the bed in a tangle, and I savored this sensation of falling and falling and yet...being held so safely in his arms.

Then my back hit the mattress.

The bed squealed like a dying cow, rending the silence in half, the shriek echoing down the hall and through the entire castle like a den of banshees.

We froze, my cheek—my entire body—pressed flush against him as I strained for the thudding of boots, the sound of voices outside our door.

Maybe they were all still drinking. Maybe they hadn't...

Of course they'd heard us.

People all the way over in Varitus had heard us.

I bit my lip. "Oh my gods, Raz. What the...They can't know what we're doing up here. They can't." *Gods, I was going to die from embarrassment.*

"Then you'd best put your hand over your mouth." He pushed into me and the springs squealed again, louder than before, if that was even possible. The situation was so ridiculous we started laughing at the same time. I was pinned beneath him—couldn't have moved if I'd wanted—both of us naked, and once I started...I couldn't stop.

"Oh my gods, why is this bed so loud?" I giggled, my body quaking with laughter, every movement making the bed squeal, his cock impaling me deeper.

Kind of a good news bad news sort of situation.

I groaned. "Tomorrow will be the most humiliating day ever."

"There's always the floor." Raz eyed the faded rug doubtfully. "But we have to get out of this bed first." He braced his arm behind my back and went to stand up, but only succeeded in angling his hips, causing a jolt of pleasure to spear through me. My moan turned into a giggle when the bed squeaked like a rusty spring.

"Fuck this. I'm standing up, and it's going to be loud as fuck. You ready, princess?"

I nodded, gripping his tanned, wide shoulders, though I could barely hang on, I was laughing that hard. "At least *try* to be quiet," I warned, leaning my forehead into his, praying we didn't alert the entire house. "Or as quiet as you can possibly be."

"Here we go." Raziel heaved to his feet, the bed squealing like a stuck piglet before the room went blessedly silent except for my insane giggling as he strode across the floor, my legs still wrapped around his waist. Then my back was flat to the wall, his lips tracing my neck, and I lost myself to him.

After everything—especially with this summons from the Oracle hanging over our heads—time seemed precious, and I was going to treasure every single second Raz and I had.

“I don’t think I’ll ever get enough of you, princess.” Raziel’s fingers dug into my arse, his hips pulling back then pushing forward, the sensation of his cock gliding into my channel electrifying.

“I never knew I could love someone this much, Raz,” I whispered against his ear. He groaned, his hips thrusting to meet mine, holding me steady with one arm, the other braced against the wall, his muscled abdomen flexing with every claiming stroke, shoulders tightening beneath my fingers.

Blue-black shadows seemed to gather behind him, and I vaguely wondered if my half-opened eyes were playing tricks on me as they rose to the ceiling.

One blink and they were gone, only the silvery shafts of moonlight remaining.

“I love you too.” He playfully nipped my bottom lip and I moaned into his mouth before I remembered we should be quiet. “How I love those sounds you make. One of these days, when we’re not killing our enemies or running for our lives, I’ll take my time exploring just what makes you moan the loudest.”

“Promises, promises.” Pleasure speared through me when he pulled out then pushed back in. The velvety slide of his cock inside of me was more intense in this position, the pressure almost more than I could take. Gods, this was sublime, pleasure lingering just out of reach as he slowly, thoroughly fucked me, lips devouring, teeth nipping.

“I always keep my promises.” Raz’s groan was ragged, his relentless strokes getting faster and faster, one hand cupping the back of my head so it didn’t knock against the paneled wall. Pleasure spread through me all the way to my fingertips, stoking my need higher and higher, until release was so close I could almost touch it.

Almost.

So fucking close.

“Raz...please.” I couldn’t let him go to do this myself, but I needed *more*.

“I’ve got you, princess. Hang on.” His thumb lightly brushed my clit, again and again. I gritted my teeth as the orgasm crashed through me, my channel tightening around his thick cock, my legs jerking as pleasure took me over.

Then he groaned against my throat and exploded inside me, filling me up, both of us sliding against each other, the slap of flesh echoing through the room.

Was that Raz’s name that just flew out of my mouth?

We both went still, our bodies shaking from the force of that climax, inky silence pressing in from all sides. I swore I could still hear my voice echoing off the walls. “Oh gods, they heard us.”

“They heard *you*, you mean,” he teased.

“I’ll never be able to face them tomorrow, Raz.” I buried my face in his neck. “Never.”

“Then ride up front.” His big shoulders shrugged beneath my hands as he lowered me carefully to the floor, our bodies sliding against each other, stirring up another flare of heat before he laid me down on the rug. “That way you won’t have to look at anyone.”

He pulled the blankets off the bed and tucked them around us, then reached around to squeeze my arse. “But I’m definitely riding behind you. For the views, of course.”

I giggled softly then nestled deeper into his arms, trying to escape the chill. “Do you think we can trust Dane?” I asked, scanning his face before gently touching the mark beneath his eye.

Gods, he was so beautiful. The most beautiful person I’d ever seen, and I pressed my lips to his, kissing him deep and long, hoping I’d still taste him tomorrow.

“I mean, what do you know about these tunnels?”

“Nothing,” Raz admitted, brushing his hand down my back. “But the Wynter Palace is four days away. The Oracle ordered us to appear in two.”

“If we’re late, then what?”

Raz blew out a breath. “Your guess is as good as mine, but given this is the Oracle we’re talking about...I’m willing to chance the tunnels, if they’ll get us there in time. I don’t know Dane, but Lucius seems decent enough and Tavion...His life is as much at risk as ours. And I don’t see another option.”

He held me tight enough I felt the shudder go through him. “Stay close for the next two days. I won’t let you out of my sight. If Zor was here, he’d have your back too, but he’s not. Whatever made these tunnels...If they run all the way to Tempeste, it’s hard to say what might be down there.”

Despite Dane’s flippant assurances, I couldn’t shake the same unsettled feeling.

This shortcut was a simple, neat solution to our problem, and usually, the easy answers carried the most risk. For now, though, I pushed away my unease and gave into my curiosity.

“Who do you think made them?”

“I don’t even want to guess at this point. Don’t leave my side, and if anything goes wrong, you take those bands off and protect yourself.”

Raz leisurely nibbled my throat, one hand skimming down my side, when he went still, yanking away the covers, freezing air sweeping in. I yelped and tried to drag them back, but his eyes were fixed on my skin where his hand rested.

“What’s this?” he asked, staring at where his fingers traced my hip.

“*What is this, Anaria?*” I’d seen him face monsters without batting an eye, but that was raw fear in Raziel’s voice right now.

I bit my lip. “You know how you have that dot on your face?”

“*Anaria...*”

“Well, this is like a bigger version of your dot. And way more amazing.” I rolled onto my side so he could get a better look. Maybe not a good idea, judging from his thunderous expression. “I mean, just *look at it*.”

“How long have you had this, *princess*?”

Somehow, *princess* sounded more like a rebuke and less like an endearment.

“Since Solok.” I forced myself to meet his furious stare. “Which makes sense since I was the one casting the magic. That day, my power touched you and Zor, Tavion, and Tristan, but...the power came from me. So my mark is...bigger.”

Raz ran a finger over the raised design, his brow furrowed. “You should have told me.” His low tone wasn’t angry, exactly, more like disappointed. Which was worse somehow.

“I planned to, but then I ended up in a carriage with Tavion all day.” I couldn’t entirely keep the snappish edge from my voice. “I wasn’t going to keep this a secret, if that’s what you’re implying.”

“No.” He blew out a breath. “No, that’s not what I’m saying. This just...” He swallowed, his eyes fixed on the mark. “This scares me, Anaria. Especially after what happened to Solok. Especially after seeing the king and the Oracle.”

I sagged in his arms, glad he’d finally voiced the fears that had been haunting me for days. I had no desire to become a monster, but at least I wasn’t facing this alone.

Neither of us were alone.

No matter what happened, we would be together, and as overwhelming as my fear sometimes became, it was never as bad as it would have been if I was by myself.

“I was planning to tell you,” I said again, laying my head on his chest.

“I know you were. My life...” Raz cleared his throat. “I’ve had a long life, Anaria. Most of it filled with war and fighting. A life that I would never wish on anyone, and that was before our failed revolt and this collar and everything that came after.

But I would endure everything all over again, if I'd end up here, like this, with you."

I sniffled when Raz pressed his lips to the top of my head.

"But you deserve better than this life we're living. You deserve every good thing I can give you, and I will lay this entire world at your feet, even though you've never asked me for a single thing. But you deserve all of it, Anaria. Every star in the sky, every beat of my heart. And I will give it all to you."

I didn't know what to say, could hardly speak, so I reached up to lightly touch his cheek, the lightning strike on my side throbbing when the pad of my finger brushed over his dark mark.

He shuddered in response. "The marks connect us, Anaria. In more ways than one." He grasped my wrist and pressed his lips to my palm.

"I know, Raz. Which means I don't touch my magic unless I have no other choice. And next time, none of you can be around me if I'm forced to dip into my power. Or we both know how we'll end up."

The moon was just setting, the stars still bright in the dark sky, and the morning air blossomed with cold, chilled dampness when Raz stomped out the front door.

I was right behind him, preparing for possibly the most humiliating experience of my entire life, when Lucius's soft plea stopped me.

"Anaria. May I have a moment? I never finished telling you about Tavion last night."

I tried to keep moving, but my godsdamned feet wouldn't listen.

Besides, this way, I didn't have to face the others quite yet, who'd certainly heard every single sound Raz and I—but mostly that fucking defective bed—had made last night.

"I already told you, Lucius, I don't need to know your son's secrets." By the gods, I was blushing so hard my face was on fire. "At the moment, we're allies out of necessity, but once we figure things out, we'll go our separate ways."

I glanced through the open door to the line of saddled horses waiting to take us to Tempeste.

"I have to get going, Lucius. If... *When* we come back, we can talk more."

A cowardly move, but we'd already wasted too much time. Zor and the army were already at the border of Solarys and Caladrius, according to Raziel. We only had two days to reach

the Wynter Palace, which, by all accounts, was an impossible feat.

“It’s clear you love Tavion. When we return”—*Please, don’t let us die on this ridiculous quest.*—“you two can fix whatever is broken between you.”

Lucius was a decent male, the kind I’d rarely met in my life, where men tended to be cruel and power hungry and downright evil. I wanted to help him, I did, just...not right now.

“Does my son feel the same way? About your alliance being a matter of necessity and nothing more?” Lucius tipped his head in that inquisitive shifter way. “Will he go his separate way when this is over?” His question seemed weighted somehow, like he was looking for a specific answer.

“I don’t care what Tavion *feels*. Your son made my life a living hell. Abandoned me to Solok in the Citadelle’s prison, threatened to stake me outside of Tempeste for the Fae King to find.”

He blanched at that, and I blew out a long breath. “I understood his anger. He’d lost his brother and needed someone to blame. I made the perfect scapegoat. But I’ll never trust him, not when I’ve watched him manipulate and lie like it’s second nature.”

“That’s my fault.” There was deep sorrow in Lucius’s voice, and I squeezed my eyes shut at what was coming. “Julian...was my oldest.” Lucius swallowed hard. “My *favorite*. I know a father’s supposed to love his children equally, but I was foolish and self-centered, never giving a thought to how my preferential treatment might affect Tavion.”

He shook his head. “How he might feel alone and unloved, unable to trust anyone ever again, but that was exactly what happened. By the time I realized my mistake...the damage had been done.”

“And now that you only have one son left, you want to mend what’s broken.”

“Before it’s too late, yes, I would very much like to make things right.”

My shoulders slumped, and the ice around my heart began to melt, just a little. And damn if I could make it freeze over again. “Is this where you convince me to give Tavion a chance?”

“No. This is where I tell you Tavion’s days are running out. My son is sick, a genetic mutation that we discovered too late, the same illness that took his mother from us.”

The ice around my heart disappeared completely.

“What sort of mutation?” I took in Lucius’s half-shifted appearance, searching for signs of sickness, but the old wolf shook his head with a rueful frown.

“Nothing like this. Celia’s disintegration began because she *couldn’t* shift at all. From there she grew weaker. Then she went blind. By the time she could no longer speak, she was completely bedridden. I tried everything, called in every favor from everyone I knew. I would have sold my soul to save her...but there was nothing to be done. My mate wasted away in a matter of months.”

“Does Tavion know?” I asked through numb lips. “About the mutation? About his mother?”

Gods, Tavion was such an arse, but...he’d lost plenty, too, just like I had. He just hid his losses better than I did.

“My son knew his mother was sick, but he wasn’t here during the worst of her decline. Tavion doted on his mother, and Celia...was proud. She didn’t want him to see her like that, especially at the end.”

“Your son shifted a few days ago just fine, so if that is a warning sign, he’s not sick yet.” Lucius’s face relaxed, relief shining in his eyes, sending another one of those stabbing pains straight into my heart.

“Thank you for such a small kindness,” he muttered. “I’ve lost one son, I cannot bear to lose Tavion, but...there is no escaping this, I fear.”

My own stomach was clenched tight, because from the look on Lucius's face—a mix of horror, fear, and pain—he was telling the truth.

I didn't like Tavion. He was arrogant and abrasive and we'd been locked in this conflict of ours practically since the moment we'd set eyes on each other. But...I would never wish a death like that on anyone.

“You believe Tavion has the same mutation?”

“How many silver wolves have you ever seen?”

“Exactly one, but that doesn't mean anything, because I've only ever seen one wolf shifter in my entire life.” I couldn't help the ghost of a smile that curved my lips. “And a half-shifted one.”

Lucius's fuzzy ears twitched. “Tavion's the spitting image of his mother. Julian had her eyes, but Tavion...He is his mother's son, through and through. Celia was a silver wolf and something about their blood, or their magic is...wrong. She wasn't much older than Tavion when she started showing signs. I just...” Lucius pursed his lips around his elongated fangs and sighed.

“Just keep an eye on him, will you? I fucked up my chance with him. In truth, despite how things look on the surface, Tavion's gotten the short end of the stick most of his life.”

I was going to fucking regret this, but...

“I'm doing this for you, not for him,” I said quietly. “What warning signs am I looking for?”

“Celia's illness started with hand tremors. Look for those. Then he will lose the ability to shift, then blurred vision, numbness, and stumbling.”

“I'll look for those signs.”

Outside, Tristan whistled for me to hurry up. I squeezed Lucius's fur covered hand. “You have to remember to eat, Lucius; there's enough in the pantry for a couple weeks. Starving yourself won't bring Julian back. And he wouldn't want you to be a martyr.”

“Dane’ll be back long before then,” Lucius curled his huge taloned fingers around my tiny hand. “It was nice meeting you, Anaria. My son wasn’t wrong about you. You’re going to change the world.”

I shifted uncomfortably at the devastating surety in his words. I’d never asked for any of this. I didn’t want to add someone’s utter faith to the weight already on my shoulders.

Not when the prospect of failure was already heavy enough.

I shook my head. “The world’s too big for me to change. I’d be happy for some peace.”

Dane and Tavion led us to the tunnel entrance, only a few miles away from the Montgomerys' castle.

But I kept my eyes on Anaria. She'd emerged from the castle looking like she meant to tear the world a new arsehole.

Or burst into tears.

The next second, she hid the twist of agony behind the careful mask she wore to keep the world at bay and anger ground inside me like broken glass.

I hated that she thought she had to hide her feelings from me.

One day, I hoped she trusted me enough not to.

The tunnel's wide entrance was cut into the face of the granite, an arch covered by a millennium of moss and lichens. Thick, but not so thick that I couldn't make out the writing around the opening.

The language of the Old Gods.

Ruts from a thousand wagon wheels led into the darkness, the ground compacted from years of constant traffic.

"Grab a torch." Dane nodded to the pile stacked neatly against the rocks. "It's dark as fuck down there, but it's only for two days. We'll reach Tempeste before nightfall tomorrow."

"Well, this looks promising," Tristan muttered, sharing an uneasy look with me. "Nothing to worry about in a dark,

endless cave. I'm sure this will be fine."

From my years as the Shadow King's general, I knew Solarys and Caladrian geography like the back of my hand, and there was no secret tunnel in the world that would cut our journey in half...yet both Tavion and Dane insisted this was possible.

"Two days underground?" Anaria whispered, eyeing the impenetrable blackness looming inside the vine-covered opening. "Are you sure about this, Raz?"

"We'll be safe enough. Stick between Tristan and me." I winced as I lit a pitch torch, the fire flaring hot enough to peel the skin from my face. "Stay close and don't stray outside the light until we know what we're walking into."

If I had my magic and not this fucking collar around my neck, I'd be a lot surer about this decision, but I doubted Lucius or Dane would put Tavion in danger, who was already disappearing into the shadows, his torch illuminating smooth, carved-out walls, the floor marked by hundreds of hoofprints and wagon wheel tracks.

If this was how goods were smuggled in and out of Caladrius, then this way should be safe enough.

But we were over a hundred miles from Tempeste, a four-day ride under normal conditions. I didn't know what Dane's secret was, but the thick smell of ozone drifted out of the mouth of the tunnel, so magic was involved.

Ancient magic, by the smell.

The revelation didn't make me feel any better.

I urged my horse forward, closely monitoring Anaria's mount. We'd given her the gentlest gelding, but the brute was a far cry from her little mare. He snorted when she dug her heels into his side, shifting the pack slung over the back of her saddle.

Tristan lunged forward and caught the reins. "A horse will sense your nervousness," he counseled gently. "He's only skittish because of the dark. Let me lead him for you until he gets used to the tunnel."

I nodded gratefully because I saw this for what it was.

His apology for last night.

Anaria frowned, but as far as I was concerned, Tristan was already forgiven. He was a product of his shite upbringing, and some prejudices took a long time to shake. His aristocratic, blue-blooded father saw to that.

With a whip and his fists.

And part of me understood. We all would much rather be somewhere else, and I expected when this was over, we would part ways.

“I suppose we’ll all have to get used to this.” She coughed when a cloud of black smoke enveloped her. If Anaria’s magic wasn’t so dangerous, I’d suggest she light the way with her starry power, but I didn’t want her touching that cursed magic ever again.

I couldn’t forget the sight of that long, black mark marring her creamy skin. A dot on my face was no great loss, but on Anaria...it was a fucking crime.

A fucking crime that could not continue, because if I saw one more fucking inch of black on her, I would tear this world apart with my bare hands.

“I hope you’re all ready for two days of darkness.” With a grin, Dane disappeared into the darkness, his torch barely illuminating walls.

“I can’t fucking wait,” Tristan grumbled, following Tavion, leading both his mount and Anaria’s gelding while I brought up the rear, black smoke from the torch billowing behind me.

I spent that entire first day convincing myself we hadn’t made a fatal mistake, listening to Dane’s increasingly embellished stories, and praying we’d make it to the next point where he promised fresh water and a fresh stack of torches before we ran out of light.

By the time our last torch was flickering, Dane finally muttered, “We’re here.” Then the torch spluttered and went

out.

The roar of rushing water rang against the rounded walls of tunnel, moisture dripping loudly from the ceiling above us, and the muddy floor beneath us was puddled, water splashing as the horses nervously stomped and pranced.

“Hang on, there’re more torches...Where the fuck are they? Oh, here they are.” In a matter of minutes, Dane had the small area lit and we headed to fill our canteens from the underground river running along the path.

“At least it’s cold.” Anaria dropped to her knees gratefully and dipped a handful from the fast-running rapids. “And fresh.” She swallowed gulp after gulp, her slender throat bobbing. Out of the corner of my eye, beneath the water’s rippling surface, something dark flashed by.

Something big.

Or just a figment of my imagination after hours down here in the darkness. I frowned at the water, trying to see through the current. I hated being off my game, and being underground was definitely throwing me off.

She peered up at me. “What’s wrong, Raz? You look like you’ve seen a—”

I yanked her backwards as an enormous mouth rimmed with sharp teeth erupted from the water. The ribbon-like creature had smooth, black skin and was big enough to drag Anaria down beneath the water; it would have, if I hadn’t spotted the threat a second before the attack.

“Fucking hell...what was that?” She fought for breath, trembling against me as I searched the water for movement. Predators usually didn’t give up so easily, especially if they were hungry.

“Goblin Eel.” Dane skidded to a stop at the edge of the river, searching the water as he pulled his blade free. “They don’t usually venture this far down from the mountains, but food’s been scarce since the purges.”

“Aren’t you a bit close?” Anaria asked breathlessly, her final word turning into a scream as the eel speared out of the

water in a long, wet lunge.

Graceful, if it wasn't so hideous.

In the blink of an eye, I saw everything I'd missed before—the tiny white eyes meant for seeing in the pitch dark, the long spiked fins jutting out from the sides, the skin not totally black but different shades of mottled gray.

The double row of teeth heading straight for Dane's throat.

I was almost rooting for the thing when Dane swung his sword up and cleaved its body in two, both halves slapping wetly against the tunnel floor for longer than was natural. The eel's flesh was a gelatinous white, a small amount of blood pumping out and staining the puddles blue.

When the creature was done moving, Dane bundled each half in a blanket and slung them over the sides of his horse. "Did I mention Goblin Eels are a delicacy in Caladrius? This little bastard will make this trip worthwhile."

The bastard had the fucking audacity to wink. "You know, since I'm not getting paid?"

In that moment, I could have killed the arrogant bastard.

Could have crossed the scant distance between us and buried my knife in his heart and felt good about the outcome. But we needed Dane to get us to the other end of this tunnel, wherever that was.

"The fucking thing nearly ate Anaria." My voice didn't even sound like my own, Tavion and Tristan both inching closer.

Dane scratched the back of his neck. "Well, like I said, they don't get up here that often, so I didn't think to warn you."

"What else is down here besides demonic fish?" I demanded. "You said this would be—and I quote—'*a walk in the park.*'"

Dane grinned sheepishly. "Parks around here tend to be dangerous places."

“Dane,” Tavion growled, advancing until his chest bumped his uncle’s, and it took me a second to realize he wasn’t bluffing. He was as pissed as I was.

“What else is down here?”

“Nothing, I swear. Stop being so jumpy.” Dane lifted his brows. “I swear I’ve never seen anything this far south. Not ever. These tunnels are always empty, you know that. That’s the first living thing I’ve ever seen this far south of the mountains.”

“One more day,” I reminded him softly, putting enough menace in my tone so he knew I wasn’t fucking around. “You said we’d reach Tempeste by tomorrow.” I narrowed my eyes.

“We’re still too far away. We’ll never make it.” I was a damn good judge of distance, and we’d traveled less than twenty miles today. By the time we stopped tonight, we’d be close to the border wall separating Solarys from Caladrius, but not over it.

After that, we were still three days from the city.

“Fuck us over Dane, try to sell us back to the Fae King, and I’ll feed you to those eels myself.” Anger made it easy to think about dropping him in that water and letting them rip him apart.

“Now why would I do that?” His dark eyes raked me up and down, dismissed me, then landed on Anaria. His gaze stayed there, a speculative look on his face that I didn’t care for one bit.

“When I want that Fae King dead every bit as much as you?”

I hid my surprise. “Just get us to Tempeste, and we’ll go our separate ways.”

Tavion stepped between us. “This is the only way, Raz. Dane’ll get us there in time.”

Dane’s eyes glowed with something I couldn’t identify. “If you don’t trust me, then listen to my nephew. There’s a shortcut up ahead. Of a sort.”

I looked between them, my heart pounding when I turned to Tavion. “How well do *you* know these tunnels?”

My heart skipped a beat at the look on Tavion’s face. Not fear...not quite, but...something I couldn’t put my finger on. “How do you think I got back and forth to Tempeste for twenty years? Like my uncle said...” A flash of doubt flickered in his eyes before he hid it. “There’s a shortcut. But not like anything you’ve ever seen before.”

I tugged Anaria closer. One wrong move and I’d rip this collar off and then...then Zor would die, right along with Dane and probably Tavion, too, the way my anger raged like wildfire.

“Tell me right fucking now what’s up ahead, or we turn around and take the long way, damn the consequences.”

Tavion just shook his head and lit up another torch before he mounted up. “You wouldn’t believe me if I did, Raz. This is something you have to see for yourself.”

But his eyes landed on Anaria, and his face softened. “Other than the crossing itself, there won’t be any more surprises. And the crossing’s safe, I swear.”

By the end of that first day, I'd lost all sense of time.

The darkness grew so dense it swallowed everything. Every muttered curse, our quick, panicked breathing, the rhythmic clomping of hooves all just... disappeared into a dense sort of silence.

Even our torches barely broke through the gloom, but every time my fear at being trapped underground flared up, I shut the feeling down.

And my approach was working, until out of nowhere, Anaria went rigid, the gelding snorting when she gripped her thighs tight around his sides.

"Loosen up on those reins, love," I murmured. "You don't want to get thrown in here." My heart thundered at the thought. No, that would be a fucking nightmare with the narrow corridor and five horses, hooves flying everywhere.

"Can you feel that?" Anaria asked, her pale eyes shining mirrors to the torchlight. "That sound up ahead?"

Now I could.

A bone-deep hum, like the air was brimming with silent music, the kind that could only be felt.

Beneath the nulling iron around my neck, my locked-down magic reacted violently. Old magic, and not the good kind. Terrible and ancient, like the world was breathing in and out. "We're probably close to the ward." I jerked my head to the ceiling. "It could be right overhead."

But the ward between realms never felt this... unpredictable.

Or dangerous.

“My magic is reacting to whatever this is.” She threw me a panicked glance. “What if the iron bands stop working?”

Down here in this enclosed place, one blast of Anaria’s magic would kill us all.

“This could be Dane’s shortcut.” I tried to sound reassuring. “I smelled the magic all the way back in Warrington Hollow. But we’re getting closer.” Even the glowering darkness seemed to lighten, pale-blue patterns dancing on the walls like sunlight off the waves.

Tristan waited for us to draw alongside before he jerked his head at the shifting blue light. “I don’t like this.”

“For once, you and I agree on something.”

Tristan frowned at Dane and Tavion’s backs. “Call me a fool, but why am I doing this again?”

“Because we were out of options, and I didn’t hear any better suggestions from you.” I kept my voice low. “Can you smell the magic?”

Tristan nodded somberly. “Older than any I’ve sensed before.”

One minute we were inside the rounded tunnel, darkness pressing in on all sides, the next, the floor dropped away and the narrow tunnel opened up into a cavernous space that took my breath away. Anaria gasped softly at the sheer vastness of the enormous crypt, the carved-out walls towering around us. Blue-tinted light danced in the ice-cold air, like we’d just plunged to the depths of the ocean.

In the middle of the room stood a glowing portal, the center gently swirling, the source of all this light.

But that’s not what any of us were staring at.

We couldn’t take our eyes off the piles of enormous bones along one wall—two skulls, each as big as Anaria’s horse, the

smaller one half crushed. They had the same yellow, aged appearance as Torin's throne and Anaria's head whirled around, her wide-eyed gaze meeting mine.

"We sleep here, go through there tomorrow." Dane jerked his head at the portal. "Once you're on the other side, you'll only be a day from Tempeste. The other end of the tunnel dumps out in the forest just outside of the city walls."

"Where, exactly?" Tristan asked, his knuckles white he was gripping his reins so hard.

"Now, I can't give away all my secrets for free, can I?" Dane countered, but this time, his smile did not reach his eyes.

Was this where he betrayed us? I moved closer to Anaria, the freezing cold air in the cavern growing tenser. Dane could play his games, but I had a feeling I knew where these tunnels went.

Into the catacombs beneath Tempeste.

And we did not want to end up there.

Tristan's eyes narrowed on Tavion, who studiously avoided looking at us. "We could have used these tunnels weeks ago," Tristan hissed, loud enough for everyone to hear. "But instead, we battled our way across the wastelands of Caladrius, chased by the Fae King's army."

Dane and Tavion shared a long look, then Dane scratched his chin. "These tunnels have been a family secret for a millennium. Our survival depends on them remaining a secret, as does the survival of every citizen inside Tempeste. Tavion knows better than to jeopardize their welfare."

I hated that his comment made so much sense.

Hated that it might have been something Zor said. Or me.

"What is this place?" Anaria asked softly, swinging her leg over the saddle before I could stop her. "And don't feed me your usual bullshit. These skulls don't resemble anything I've ever read about."

"There've been too many theories to count. Dragons. Goblins. Monsters. Even the Old Gods." Dane shrugged.

“Take your pick. I suppose any of them could be true.”

“How many times have you been through here?”

“In five hundred years?” Dane shook his head. “I couldn’t say. Five thousand? More? It hardly matters, because there’s no one alive who knows for sure what this place is, and we’re all just guessing.”

Anaria’s eyes snagged on mine. *The Old Gods wasn’t just a guess. Dane was full of shite.*

“Well then, I suppose it wouldn’t hurt to explore this place while we’re here.” In an act of pure sacrilege, Anaria tied the reins around a bone jutting out of the ground—what looked like an enormous femur. Dane opened his mouth to say something then snapped it shut.

So full of shite.

Her gaze drifted to the caved-in skull, her eyes darkening. I couldn’t stop looking at the jumbled pile of bones along the wall, while Tavion stared transfixed at the only complete skull, garishly displayed on a plinth, bigger than any creature I’d ever seen in the three realms, even north of the mountains.

I shivered, something Anaria didn’t miss.

There was definitely something drawing me—all of us—to the bones. I tied my horse beside the gelding and crossed the enormous crypt, dust coating my boots. Tristan dismounted, his keen eyes tracing every inch of this place before he casually unslung his bow, pulling an arrow from his quiver.

These bones called to me, begged me to come closer, to touch them. Out of the corner of my eye, I monitored Anaria’s slow, cautious approach toward the damaged skull, her lips twisted into a slightly pained expression.

I didn’t like this place, and I didn’t like feeling this way, but I reached out, running my hand over the smooth bone—a rib, from the curved shape. Magic rippled inside me, the first real appearance of my nulled-down power in nearly a hundred years, and I closed my eyes, swaying beneath the sudden onslaught.

Shadows stained the air around me black, Dane's eyes widening slightly, but I yanked my hand back before anyone else noticed my slip. We shouldn't be here.

I didn't know how I knew that, but we were never meant to see this place.

"Anaria. Are you all right?"

She made a faint, noncommittal sound, hands clenched together behind her back as if she was restraining herself from touching these bones. Tavion rounded the largest skull with a predator's intent, eyes as dark as those gaping, empty sockets, as I flattened my palm against the rib bone once more.

I threw back my head as magic was yanked up out of me, impervious to the iron collar, the nulling spell, even the tight leash I kept on myself. For one glorious moment, I plunged deep into the depths of my power, drinking down everything I'd been denied for a hundred years.

Glorious.

This was glorious, like diving into a cold, bottomless lake, sound and sight and smell disappearing until I was consumed by my magic.

My power called to me, crooning its malevolent song of death and destruction. I hated how much I loved that music, even when I remembered what atrocities it was capable of.

In that split second, with perfect, horrifying clarity, I saw the trap. Whatever these bones were, they had the ability to circumvent iron and nulling spells and personal control.

One touch, and they would take us over.

I whirled to Anaria. "Don't touch—"

The words were barely out of my mouth, when Anaria froze in place, eyes glazed, fingers resting lightly on the crushed skull, and I thanked all the gods in the skies those iron bands were holding.

Otherwise, we'd all be dead.

Well, Dane would be dead.

Tavion, Tristan, and I would be monsters.

I crossed to her, went to touch her before I decided that would be a mistake. "Anaria." Her eyes were blank, as if she'd turned inside herself...or was watching something none of us were meant to see.

Dread shuddered down my spine and landed in my gut.

"Anaria. Take your hand off the skull." There was nothing in her face, nothing but that horrible emptiness, nothing left of the girl I loved. "Anaria, listen to me, wherever you are, come back."

Her entire body shivered from some unseen force rippling through her flesh, her hair lifting as if surrounded by a phantom breeze. A bite of freezing air swept through the crypt, not from the tunnels...but from the portal, now glowing brighter.

"What the fuck is this?" Dane looked from me to Anaria, then over to Tavion, who hadn't so much as moved from in front of the enormous skull. He was so still I couldn't even tell if he was breathing.

And his hand, like Anaria's, was splayed flat against the skull.

“What the fuck is this?”

“Lower your fucking voice,” Tristan hissed as he knocked an arrow in his bow. “Trust me on this, you don't want to startle her. Not unless you want to end up a prickly monster.”

The air inside the cavern plummeted, an icy blast billowing from the portal, along with a dusting of snow. “Anaria,” I whispered sharply. “Lift your fingers, love.” But she couldn't hear me, too ensnared by the bones, and I gritted my teeth, prayed I wasn't making the worst mistake of my life, then ran my hand lightly down her arm.

Her leather jacket was stiff from cold, and I pulled her closer, trying to pry her hand from where her palm rested on the skull, but it didn't budge.

When I pressed my lips to her cheek, her skin was ice-cold, covered with a coating of hoarfrost. I could fucking taste the deep winter on her frozen skin, as if she was not standing in front of me...but was somewhere else far, far away.

“Anaria.” She relaxed against me, and I grasped her wrist, tugging gently. “Take your hand off the skull and come back to me. We have to go to Tempeste and meet with the Oracle. We have to beat Zorander and the army there, remember?”

Her lashes fluttered slightly, a hint of green flashing in her vacant stare before it vanished. “That's it, princess, let go. We're running out of time. We can't stay here.”

This had been a mistake.

We never should have come this way.

My gut had warned me, and I'd ignored my instincts.

The creak of a bow being drawn had me turning, and I met Tristan's narrowed gaze as he aimed his weapon at Dane's heart, who held a knife gripped between his fingers, ready to throw straight at Anaria.

“Put that knife away,” Tristan warned in a cold, uncompromising voice, “before I shoot it out of your fucking

hand.”

“Who is she?” Dane made no move to sheath his weapon. “And what have you done to my nephew?” Tavion, like Anaria, stood transfixed, his eyes glossed over with the same empty, vacant stare, his face a blank mask as a winter wind howled from the portal, snow drifting over the floor.

“Touch so much as a single hair on her and you will find out why they put this collar on me.” My lips curved up and it wasn’t a smile as much as it was a baring of teeth. “It’s not just for looks.”

Dane was shaking, but finally lowered his knife. “I don’t know what fuckery this is, but I swear to the gods, you’d better bring my nephew back.”

Fuck this. I wrapped myself around her, pressing my body to hers, hip to shoulder, burying my face in her hair, smelling the bitterness of winter. “Come back to me. Wherever you’ve gone, you have to come back. I can’t follow you...” My head snapped up.

“Tristan. Wake Tavion up. They’re...Somehow, they’re caught in this together.”

“How the fuck do you know that?” Tristan growled but headed toward Tavion, while Dane weighed the knife in his hand, as if debating whether or not to throw it. One growl and he lowered his arm.

“Wake the fuck up.” Tristan shoved at Tavion’s shoulder, but like Anaria, he remained oblivious. They were caught in some kind of vision...or a nightmare. Unease turned my stomach as I wracked my head for what to do, until I set my hand over Anaria’s, letting my fingers rest on the skull, just as hers were.

An unearthly chill crept up my arm before a noose of memories sucked me inside.

The rocky outcropping was slick with the season’s first snow, empty except for the puny Fae soldiers swarming toward me like ants, their spears crashing harmlessly against my thick, armored body as I looked down upon them.

Vitigis herded them towards my position, his furious roars echoing through the mountain passes like a dragon's rage, his great wings flaring wide as soldiers ran for their lives.

"Kill them quickly, Adaric. Now." Vitigis's eyes flicked behind me, where our most precious member waited.

The dredges of the once mighty Fae army flowed onto the ledge, their armor dented, their weapons battered after days of fighting. It was fitting this final battle would end here, of all places.

One sweep of my arm sent half of the soldiers tumbling to their deaths, a second razed the remainder to bloody, ruined corpses...until only one warrior remained, clutching his pitiful spear, little more than a needle prick against my black, impenetrable skin.

We'd once been small and soft like these creatures, but the magic had made us strong and unkillable. Amalla sometimes wondered if we were cursed, but how could we be, when we were the most powerful beings in the world?

Yet the tiny male was undaunted. "I will kill you and claim these lands for my own, in the name of Astragulus Centaria."

My laughter shook the stars in the night sky, sent a shower of snow and ice raining down over us.

Many had tried to take these lands from us—all had failed.

Behind me, safely guarded by Gattica's enormous bulk and Saphrax's teeth, Amalla fed her magic into me like life's blood, a steady stream of pure, undiluted power that sent lightning cracking up my arms and into the rock beneath my feet until the ground shook.

She was our anchor, our life force...our everything.

She was smaller than us and impossibly fragile, but so much more powerful, since she commanded the wild magic. The power of the entire world answered to her, and so did we.

We were hers to command, until the end of time. Four warriors, one perfect female, and we had ruled this world since it was little more than chaos and darkness.

But if she died...so would we.

So we protected Amalla with our bodies and our magic and our might.

She was our everything, our reason for living...our heart.

"I claim these lands in the name of Astragulus Centaria, in the name of my father, the king. I will smite you foul beasts and send you back to whatever Great Beyond you crept out from."

"Kill him and be done with it." Gattica's words sent snow whipping across the ledge, knocking the Fae prince closer to the edge. One more step and this would be over, and we could go home.

Corvus and Gelvira were not here, of course, so there were only the five of us to face ten thousand Fae warriors. I wondered if that had been a purposeful choice or simply coincidence.

Gelvira and her brother had become secretive of late, jealous of Amalla, of the power she commanded. But jealousy was fleeting when you lived forever.

A deep rumble shook the entire mountain, the stone vibrating against the soles of my feet, but the threat didn't come from beneath me...this came from above.

I'd lived for an eternity, was forged from the stars themselves.

But even a god couldn't stop the top of the mountain from splintering apart and plummeting straight toward Amalla. For a single second, her pale eyes met mine, defiant and raging and utterly furious, before her head splattered into pieces, her body disappearing beneath the cascade of stone and ice as the entire side of the mountain cleaved off and took the rocky outcropping with it.

Without so much as a final scream, we all plunged into darkness.

When I came to, I tasted blood.

Tristan stood over me, wiping his bleeding knuckles on his pants while Anaria swayed on her feet, her face filled with

confusion. Tavion gripped his head, surveying the room like he was seeing us for the first time.

“What the fuck just happened?”

Tristan offered me his hand and I caught my breath, finally realizing I lay flat on my back. “You went in and got stuck inside...whatever the fuck that was, just like they did.” Anaria and Tavion were both dazed and I felt like I’d just been dragged out of a bad dream, the horror of the vision still clinging to me like it would never let go.

“Did you have to hit me that hard?” I stretched my aching jaw, feeling it pop back into place.

“The choice was either my fist or Dane’s knife, and I figured a bloody lip was better than a stab wound any day.”

The second I was on my feet, I folded Anaria’s shaking body into my arms. “What just happened, Raz? It felt so real.” Her voice shook, her skin clammy, despite the freezing air in here.

“A vision.” *No, a memory.*

“It was like I was right there; I felt the rock crush me. Felt myself die. Gods, the pain was horrible.” Across the room, Tavion shuffled toward us, his eyes meeting mine, and in them, I saw every bit of the wobbly horror tangling me into knots.

None of us could shake off how real those terrifying moments had been. My swallow sounded loud and desperate in the silence.

“We’re not staying here,” I told Dane, daring the bastard to disagree. “We go through now.”

“There are more bones on the other side.” Dane fingered his knife, his eyes fixed on us. “Two more skulls. One’s even bigger than that one.” He jerked his head at the enormous skull and the piles of yellowed bones.

“But I agree. The sooner we’re out of here, the better. Whatever the fuck is going on, I want no part of this.”

“We’re fine now.” Tavion dragged his hands over his face, his eyes tormented and dark. “That was...just Anaria’s magic. Sometimes her power has an unsettling effect on those closest to her.” His gaze met mine and I dipped my head, taking his hint. Dane could think whatever the fuck he wanted, we had to get Anaria out of here.

Dane didn’t seem convinced. “Looked like more than *an effect*. You were in a fucking trance, Tavion.” He jerked his head at Tristan and me. “The ginger had to punch the collared one in the face to pull him out of his trance.”

“And my father’s a half-shifted mess of a wolf. Tell me again how the magic plays by the fucking rules?” Tavion growled. Dane snarled back, but his hand relaxed where he gripped his knife, and he didn’t look like he meant to carve our heads from our bodies any time soon.

“Raziel’s right, we go through tonight. Take our chances on the other side.” Tavion’s face was pale, but he caught me by the arm.

“Whatever you do, don’t touch anything once we’re over there. Like Dane said, there are more bones on the other side,” he murmured before letting me go. We headed for our horses while I kept my arm braced around Anaria’s waist, the only thing holding her upright.

Violence rose and rose inside me like an ocean tide.

I’d seen a lot of fucked-up shite in my life, on battlefields and in distant lands fighting for the Shadow King, but this fuckery...this I had no words for.

Somehow, the bones and the glowing portal were more dangerous than any battle I’d ever fought, especially with Anaria trapped in the middle.

Right now, I wished Zorander was here.

My oldest friend would know what to do next, and right now, I’d give all the king’s gilder to have Zor looking at this with clear eyes, and not through this haze of mangled, simmering rage.

Tavion led his steed to where Dane waited by the portal, the once dusty floor a muddy mess from the drifts of melting snow. I couldn't explain any of this, but my skin crawled from the magic thrumming in the air.

From Tavion's quick, panicked breaths, so did his.

"I'll warn you lot, this doorway has more bite than the warded wall up there." Dane jerked his head toward the ceiling to where the entire Solarys army thundered toward Tempeste. "But the pain will only last a second." Dane led his horse into the swirling light and vanished.

Tavion caught Anaria by the arm, his huge hand wrapping around her elbow, gently, like he was trying not to spook her. "Are you okay? I was...I couldn't reach you. I tried, but I couldn't. *I couldn't get to you in time.*"

His voice shook with agony, his hands trembling, and I wondered if he'd seen the same thing I had. I wanted to tear his hand off her, but the look of utter confusion and devastation lingering on Anaria's face stopped me. She didn't need violence, she needed support, even if it came from Montgomery.

"I know," she murmured, taking a shaky breath. "I know, but I was feeding my magic into you, and then..." She shook her head as realization hit me.

"That was...us?" I tried to make the vision make sense, and now it did, in an awful, twisted way. We'd all seen the same thing. The invading army, Anaria feeding power into Tavion, who'd been an enormous monster, lightning flickering down his arm, his legs.

We'd all met the same horrifying ending.

"I thought you'd used these tunnels," I demanded in a whisper. "I thought you'd *been here before.*"

"*I have.*" Tavion spread his hands. "A hundred times. But never...never like this. *I swear, never like this.*"

"You three want to stand around and chit chat? Fine. Have a party. I'm getting the fuck out of this horror show." Tristan

headed for the light, never hesitating as the portal swallowed him up in a swirl of glowing blue magic.

“Anaria and I are next.” I took her freezing hand, squeezing hard. “I’m right here and I won’t let go.”

“I know. I’m okay, just...still processing everything.” Her shaky, uncertain smile sent an arrow of vicious anger slithering through me. “See you on the other side.”

I took a deep breath and we plunged into the light, cold washing over me.

There was no pain, like Dane had warned, only an endless stillness, as if this place—this thin, effervescent veil between realms—stretched into infinity. So endless and eternal, we stood at the crossroads of the universe.

Anaria peered up at me. “What is this?” Her muffled voice echoed strangely, swallowed up by the enormity of the space we now inhabited. There was light and darkness, cold and heat...but mostly, a vast emptiness without end.

Snowflakes still danced in the air, the smell of a hungry, consuming winter gripping me as tightly as the vision had. The coldness swallowed up every breath I took and coated my tongue with frost.

“Different for us than for other Fae, apparently.” My voice rang hollow in here. “Dane seemed to think we’d be through in a matter of seconds. And he said there’d be pain.”

I gripped her hand tighter in case the magic tried to rip her away. “Are you okay? Are you in pain?” She shook her head as the ravaging atmosphere wrapped around us tighter, cold and brittle and threatening.

Anaria took one final look then nodded, tugging at my hand, her pale eyes glowing with stars. “I’m fine, but let’s not linger. This place...there is something very wrong about it.”

We were greeted on the other side by a pale-faced Tristan, then Tavion burst from the portal right behind us, his eyes slightly wild. Just looking at their faces, I knew. They’d experienced the same unsettling wrongness inside the portal.

If I'd had any doubt the five of us were bound together, there was none now. If anything in that vision was true, then Anaria's magic not only bound us together, she would be the one who doomed us.

Because if she died...so would we.

"We're not stopping," I told Dane bluntly, and Tavion's shoulders sagged. In relief or exhaustion, I didn't care. We were getting out of here as fast as possible. "We keep going until the end."

"It's another ten hours, maybe, until we reach the forest," Dane said, then he shrugged. "But have it your way. I can't say I'm not in a hurry to get out of here."

This side of the crypt was a twin to the chamber we'd left behind.

There were two enormous skulls, an even bigger pile of bones against the far wall, as if they'd been shoved to the side to make way. When Tristan drifted closer to one, that dazed, empty look on his face, Tavion pulled him away. After that, Anaria kept her head down until we'd cleared the room entirely.

But I didn't miss the tears she kept wiping away, how badly her hands shook. Anger rattled through me. We couldn't get out of this place too soon, even if leaving meant we'd soon be meeting the Oracle.

"At this rate, we'll reach the end by mid-morning," Dane explained in a hushed voice. "The main tunnel leads straight beneath the city, but I don't advise that way. There's one exit into the city proper, dumps straight into the market, but we don't use that anymore since the guards boarded up the archway."

I'd seen that opening, a crumbling arch engraved in the language of the Old Gods; the odor drifting out of that hole was so foul, I'd gagged.

"Most of us use the trio of arched openings below the city in the forest. From there, it's easy enough to blend in with the travelers on the main road and enter the city undetected."

“How far is the Wynter Palace from there?” Anaria whispered.

Tavion answered immediately. “A few hours up into the mountains, but the path is treacherous. The only benefit is, since the city wall is over a hundred feet high, the guards don’t monitor it closely.”

“I don’t like this,” I muttered. “We’ll be out in the open. What about the Taranth archers? I have no desire to end up with a bolt through my head.”

“Like I said, that side isn’t monitored by the king’s guard.” Tavion’s low monotone was devoid of emotion. “There’s only one thing there and the palace has been empty so long, I expect even the king has forgotten the Wynters ever existed.”

No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't get the vision out of my head, tendrils of darkness still dragging at me like saw toothed fingers.

If I'd been doomed before, now I was positively cursed.

Touching that skull had opened a doorway to the past. A past I wanted no part of. The ancient names kept playing over and over in my head. *Amalla. Vitigis. Gelvira.*

Those monsters...they were us.

Or rather, they were our ancestors, but from a world long extinct.

We'd parted ways with Dane moments after we emerged from the dark, dank tunnels. He went to sell his Goblin Eel at the market and recoup his losses; we climbed a rocky, arduous trail into the mountains, close enough to Tempeste the spires of the city were visible through the shifting evening mists.

Somewhere within those walls, Adele—if she was still alive—rotted in that horrid prison.

I'd left Ember behind.

But my plan had become clearer with every dark hour we'd spent in those awful tunnels. If there was a chance I could save my mother, I'd sell my soul to get her out.

Raz and Tristan had ridden out ahead to secure the rendezvous point, leaving me behind in dreadful, awkward silence with Tavion. A silence neither of us wanted to break,

thankfully. When we crested the final stretch of the path, the sight took my breath away.

The castle's main tower was an immense white column that pierced the sky like a blade, the very top disappearing into the clouds. The castle jutted off one side of the tower, the entire wing hanging over a deep ravine with nothing discernible holding it up. My stomach churned just thinking about walking out there, with nothing beneath me but rushing air and a two-thousand-foot drop.

Waterfalls spilled over the edges of the cliff the castle perched on so precariously, rising mists concealing the bottom of the chasm. The castle appeared to be floating in the clouds, with long, crystal windows that turned the sun into rainbows of brilliant color, a welcome sight among the stark black mountains and white stone.

The limestone exterior was covered by black, half-decayed vines, reminding me of Tavion's home. Except here...nature had been cannibalized by corrupted magic. The entire scene was something out of a fairytale, but when we stepped through the doors, something inside me stilled.

Much like Nightcairn, all houses possessed a certain smell.

Their own special aroma, a mix of stone and wood and plaster—the sweat of the people who'd built it, lived within these walls—as unique as the structure itself.

You could paint the walls, carpet the floors, hide the smell with flowers—or in this case, smoking pots of incense scattered on every table—but you could never obscure the original smell, which was too deeply engrained.

I took another deep breath, my nerves on alert, my heart racing so fast my chest hurt. Even rubbing my knuckles against my chest didn't ease the pain.

“Where exactly are we?”

“The Wynter Palace, north of Tempeste,” Tavion explained, shrugging off his coat, briefly making eye contact before glancing away, his shoulders rigid. He, like me, was

haunted by what happened in the tunnels, but to speak of it... No, I wasn't ready for that yet.

Better to focus on why this place made my instincts go haywire.

"Who does this estate belong to?" I ran my finger through the thick layer of dust on the table, my eyes watering from the smoke clogging the air. The incense was too strong, probably set out by Raziel or Tristan to hide the musty, abandoned odor. I set the lids back onto the pots and snuffed out the fire, the pungent aroma slowly dissipating.

"Why do you care?"

"Because I do." I turned slowly to face him, hefting my pack over my shoulder, the knot in my chest tightening. "I want to know who lives here."

"Nobody." Tavion guiltily shifted his feet as if he were an errant schoolboy. "The castle *did* belong to Lord and Lady Alaric Wynter, before they were put to death ten years ago. Another traitorous aristocratic family brought to their knees by the Fae King." His gaze filled with cold violence, while I tried to decipher why.

"So something terrible happened here?" I turned on my heel, taking in the grand room, that odd, comforting smell wrapping around me like a blanket. "Did this castle ever belong to anyone I...I know?"

"No one you ever met." Tavion had gone eerily still. "Why? What's wrong, Anaria?"

"Nothing. I'm just surprised, is all." I rolled my arms, my shoulders stiff with dread. "I didn't think anyone lived outside the city walls, given everything in this horrid realm has withered and died."

We'd emerged from the end of those black, horrid tunnels into a broken, withered forest, the smell of death staining the air. I'd forgotten how utterly ruined Caladrius was, how deeply the putrid corruption of this realm affected everything, even the unnatural stillness of the air.

There were no birds, no animals...no sounds of nature except for the roaring wind and the thunder of the waterfalls pounding the rocks into sand.

But no life.

I'd never realized how much I missed such things until they weren't there.

"You'd be surprised how many monsters lurk outside the safety of those walls," Tavion murmured, his gaze still fixed on me with unsettling intensity. "Are you sure nothing's wrong?" He studied the ceiling, the windows with unnerving slowness.

"Nothing's wrong, and monsters aren't going to drop out of the ceiling. I was just curious, that's all." For a moment Tavion studied me as closely as he did everything else, then he dipped his head.

I walked to the arched window, losing my breath at how high up we were. "The views must have been something before everything died." Indeed, a veil of icy mountain streams plunged straight down into the gorge, and beyond that loomed the broken, spiky tops of a once-lush forest and a sweep of brown wasteland that had once been green fields.

"Yes," Tavion murmured, his face troubled. "They were."

This house smelled unsettlingly familiar, but I'd never been here before.

There was a phrase for that in Varitus. *Memento domum* meant you were coming home to a place you did not yet know was home.

That's what this place felt like—familiar yet wrong.

Unless I *had* been here before, when I was very young... and the forgotten memory was still lodged somewhere in the deepest recesses of my mind.

Now that the reek of incense was fading, my enhanced Fae sense of smell picked up the subtleties I would have never discerned as a human. Someone had been here recently. A

female, not one of us. And Tavion had been here, too. Long enough ago his woody scent was little more than a faint trace.

I didn't like that.

Didn't like I could smell the past so easily. Didn't like the pictures his still-musky scent put in my head, especially on the heels of what had happened down in the tunnels.

There was the coppery tang of old blood and urine, the sour sharpness of terror. I spotted the dark streaks on the tile of the foyer. Blood, from the rusty color. My mouth dried out as the last of the incense faded away.

Because beneath all those lay something worse. The female's scent was one I recognized all too well. And maybe should have expected.

Torin's scent overlaid this place like a blanket, the heavy aroma of lilies.

Intertwined with the cloying incense, the flowery scent grew stronger to my right, where a grand staircase curved up to the second-floor balcony, and I shivered, the pervading chill growing stronger. Something—everything—was so, so wrong about this place.

A beautiful trap meant to ensnare us.

“Why did the Oracle choose this place for us to meet?” I asked carefully, already knowing Tavion would evade the question.

He knew more than he let on, was hiding something vital, something—from that guarded darkness lurking in his eyes—he would never reveal. Not to me. Not now.

Which was precisely why I could never trust this male.

“No idea,” he muttered, staying true to form.

Then he shoved his hair back. “We're close enough to Tempeste she won't have to use much magic to reach the castle, and I expect she feels a certain smug satisfaction, knowing we're in danger being this close to the Fae King.” A mix of lies and truth, and I nodded diplomatically.

There wouldn't be any immediate threats, as Raziel had checked the entire castle before he'd allowed me to set foot inside. Even Tavion wasn't as suspicious of the castle as he was of my odd behavior. We'd expected our meeting with the Oracle to be fraught with danger, but...there was something even darker waiting for us here, I just couldn't see what.

Growing up in Varitus, no one had ever taught me about being Fae—since they were monsters living beyond the wall—so I knew next to nothing about what I was.

But every breath told me this wasn't my first time here.

And I liked that idea less than any I'd had so far.

“Raz is taking first watch, but my guess is, the king's focus is on that approaching army, not us.” Even after we'd parted ways with Dane, Tavion hadn't said much. But I'd seen the questions in his eyes, ever since last night.

They were the same as mine.

“Let's hope so.” I glanced up the stairs. “I need a bath and sleep. Let me know if anything changes. I'd like to get dressed before we have to run for our lives.”

Tavion's lips quirked, the first sign of real emotion I'd seen from him since that awful vision. “You'll be the first one I tell.”

I followed Torin's scent up to the second floor, cursing the fact the smell only grew stronger. Was the castle known to her? Had she been friends with the Wynters?

A ripple of violent pain speared through my head, an ache behind my eyes growing worse as I rubbed my forehead. *Too long in those horrid tunnels*, I told myself. *That's all this was.*

After a long debate with myself, I picked the last door at the end of the hall—furthest away from the stairs in case of an attack—and peeled off my filthy clothes as I ran a bath into the translucent clawfoot tub, the gold, gleaming legs screaming opulence and wealth. The brown water eventually ran clear and was freezing, but I didn't dare use my magic to heat it up. I gritted my teeth and jumped in and out.

I pulled on clean clothes over my still-damp skin, wiped as much dust off the leathers as I could and twisted my hair into a knot, almost as tightly as my stomach was right now. This beautiful, wonderous place was a trap, yet I couldn't see how.

I'd been here before.

I remembered this smell.

Well enough my stomach knotted tighter, heart thumping, body shivering, and not from the cold. Beneath the faint male and female scents, the fading incense and the dust, Torin's familiar scent was a clear warning. Why had she been here? Was she trying to warn us?

Get out while you still can.

Too late, I wanted to scream, even if it was the truth.

I stumbled to the nearest chair, cradling my aching head in my hands. Pain turned to nausea, the sweet flowery smell mixing with the cloying incense, making me want to vomit.

Gods, what was wrong with me? Heat climbed up the back of my neck, then wrapped around my forehead like a burning crown until my skull throbbed in time with my pounding heart. Maybe I was sick, maybe I was...

You're in the wrong room.

I blinked and the faint female voice echoed inside my head again. *You're in the wrong room. Go across the hall. Open the door, Anaria.*

That was Torin.

Torin was in my fucking head.

An unseen force pulled me out of that room, had me wrapping my arms around my shivering body before I opened the door and stepped into the empty hall. *Wrong room.*

I scanned the hall again. *How was I supposed to know...* Something tugged in my center, like a rope tied around my middle, and dragged me to the opposite side of the hall, that sweet, smothering scent of lilies gagging me as I paused before the closed door.

My palm tingled slightly when I turned the golden handle, a faint hum of magic trickling into me.

The opulent bedroom was enormous, probably the biggest in the castle, the tall windows overlooking the mountain range to the north. I stopped fighting the compulsion and the pain receded slightly. Enough that I headed for the bed, where a trio of dragons carved into the headboard watched me approach, greedy eyes glittering.

The hand-carved dragons were fascinating, though I didn't think I could ever sleep beneath such a realistic rendering of fierce creatures who could swallow me in one gulp.

Or burn me to a crisp.

My nails dug into my palms as I surveyed the bed, the rest of the room fading away as that little voice kept urging me forward. *Look, Anaria. Look and see.* The bed had been left in complete disarray, as if the sleepers had been dragged out of here, the rug on the floor so rumpled I could almost imagine someone being hauled across the floor, kicking and screaming.

Long, hideous shivers wracked my spine. Had this bed belonged to Lord and Lady Wynter?

Was that why I was here? Did their deaths have something to do with the Oracle? Or did this have to do with us?

I turned toward the half-opened door, intending to find Raz, or Tristan, or even Tavion, when an unseen force spun me back around, shoved me one step closer to the bed.

I stopped fighting, stopped thinking altogether when the largest dragon's eye glittered in the light like a beacon, the inset stone flashing a brilliant ruby red. I climbed up on the bed and the thick, spongy mattress sagged beneath my bare feet, kicking up puffs of dust with every step until the air was thick with it.

But even that desiccated smell didn't mask Torin's scent.

She'd been in this room. *Stood right here.*

A trap, a trap, a trap, my brain screamed as I reached for the eye.

The ruby was a perfectly cut stone as big as my palm, burning with a red fire, the stone surrounded by a rim of gold. The face of the priceless gem was smooth—except for the fingerprint in the very center.

A garish blemish no one could miss this close.

I pressed my thumb down on that mark and the stone slid inward with a quiet hiss that echoed all the way to the depths of my soul. The revealed chamber was barely big enough for my hand to fit inside, but the plain, white stone contained within made the breath shudder out of my lungs.

I didn't know what the white rock was...but my magic did.

This was how I'd felt touching the broken skull...even before I'd seen the vision of how my friends died amongst the roaring of winter's snow and ice and the Fae army surrounding us.

As if fate itself crushed me in its jaws.

And now that it had me, it would never let go.

My legs shook so badly I could barely stand, and much like how the weak Descendant magic used to draw me in, the white stone begged me to cradle its smooth surface in my hands and let it warm after being cold for so very long.

I shook my head, trying to get rid of this compulsion.

Then I held my breath and picked up the rock.

And when I curled my fingers around the stone, I wondered if this was destiny nudging me forward, or another bad decision I'd come to regret.

While I wasn't yanked straight into another vision of my death and an endless, bitter war, this experience was deeper, more sublime.

This was a communion between entities, my magic reaching out a ribbon of star-drenched light, the stone faintly pulsing in my hand as the two touched each other. Tentative and curious, but there was recognition there, too.

“*Anaria.*” Tavion’s deep voice boomed outside the bedroom. “Where are you?”

The spell broke apart, stars dancing off in the wind, and I slipped the stone into my pocket, not daring wonder how I’d known where it was hidden.

Not daring to acknowledge Torin, of all people, had led me here.

Hiding places were commonplace amongst the wealthy and I’d seen my share of hidden rooms and passageways and secret cubbies. But I’d never seen anything like this carved headboard, and yet, when I traced the golden rim of the hole, the ruby eye locked back into place.

No, I shouldn’t have known how to do that at all.

“I’m in here.” I hopped off the bed just before Tavion crashed through the door. “Just exploring this place.” I gestured to the elaborate headboard. “I’ve never seen anything like this.”

“I have.” His lips thinned out, his eyes fixed on the rumpled rug.

“Once. Ten years ago.”

ANARIA

I stood on the balcony outside the glass doors of the bedroom I'd claimed and shook out the blanket, choking on the dust as I watched Raz and Tavion prowl along the edge of the dead, tangled gardens, while out in the trees I caught a flash of Tristan's red hair.

I didn't know why the Oracle chose this place as our rendezvous point, how the palace factored into her long, drawn-out game, but I wouldn't put it past her to have removed Lord and Lady Wynter ten years ago in anticipation of tonight's meeting.

The old spider gave new meaning to *long-held plans*.

All evening, the stone weighed heavy in my pocket.

A reminder of how vulnerable we were right now, and how little I trusted Torin. Whatever the Oracle wanted from us, Torin kept her own secrets, and while she claimed to be our ally, she was not our friend.

We were hours away from our meeting, and I hated that we still did not know why we were here.

What the Oracle wanted.

What she would demand of us.

I leaned on the banister and let the setting sun warm my face. If we knew anything of the Oracle's plans, we could stay one step ahead of her, but getting into that twisted head of hers would be impossible. I went inside and made the bed, tucked in the corners of the sheets, and stepped back. *We'd slept in*

worse, I decided, already getting that giddy anticipation of sharing a real bed with Raz for an entire night.

But before that happened, we had to decipher what happened in that crypt.

Because that vision had been...

A door slammed down below, and I recognized Raziel's quick, confident footsteps, followed by Tavion's nearly silent ones. I ran my finger over the smooth stone I'd shoved deep into my pants pocket, a sense of calm creeping through me as I pondered what the Oracle wanted.

For us to fight her war, of course.

But something told me her motives ran deeper, and I headed downstairs to find out how much the others knew. More than me, I'd bet. Especially Tavion, who was hiding something.

I found Raziel in what had once been a grand salon. The furniture was pushed together into the center of the room, the drapes tattered at the bottoms, panes of glass missing in the windows. The carpets smelled of mildew where the rain had soaked them over and over, the ruined wood floors curled up along that edge of the room.

This place must have been beautiful once. Loved, even, from the way the carpets matched the faded furniture and the family pictures that now hung crooked on the walls. Sad, really, the toll that ten years of neglect had on a castle that looked to be hundreds of years old.

"Perimeter's secure. Tristan's making a final pass, then he'll be in." I buried myself in Raz's embrace, drinking in his strength, but mostly his warmth since I was freezing. "There's no hot water or faelights, so this will be a rough couple of days. But I'll make us a fire."

"We've been through worse," I murmured, wanting to stay like this forever. Just being held made me feel safe. Even though safety was only an illusion, pretending was still nice. "We should talk about what happened in the crypt. Before the Oracle arrives tomorrow."

“We know.” Tavion shed his coat, tossing it on the nearest chair. “Tristan’s headed in.” Tavion crossed to a fancy, carved cabinet and opened the doors to reveal bottles of liquor. “Not bad, considering no one’s been here in years. Want a glass?”

“One,” Raz said quietly, brushing his lips over my hair. “We have to be sharp when she arrives. Fuck knows what she wants.”

“I’m not doing this completely sober, I can tell you that,” Tavion muttered, pouring out four glasses of a pale amber liquid, reaching one of them out to me. I took it cautiously. I’d never had a proper drink before, and the second I touched my tongue to the liquor, I immediately regretted my choice.

“That’s the most awful thing I’ve ever tasted.” I watched in amazement as Raz and Tavion clinked their glasses together before taking a healthy sip with not so much as a grimace. I set my glass down and the liquid hadn’t even stopped moving before Tavion tipped it into his glass with a wink.

“It’s an acquired taste.” Raziel sipped delicately, his eyes shining. “Gods, this is fucking good. Menrovian?”

Tavion inspected the label and nodded. “A hundred years old. Primo stuff, too.”

I shivered, remembering what had happened at Ravenshade Castle. Menrovian liquor had almost gotten me killed. No wonder the ghastly stuff tasted like death.

The front door slammed open, and Tristan appeared in a swirl of cold air. “You greedy sots. Starting without me is plain rude.” He took the glass Tavion shoved in his hand and drank the entire thing down. “Gods, that’s fucking good. Please tell me there’s more.”

“The Oracle will be here in a couple hours,” Raz reminded him, but Tristan just snorted. “She’s coming at dawn, and if you think I’m doing this sober, you’re sadly mistaken.” He and Tavion traded winks while I rolled my eyes.

“If you’re both pissed when she gets here, you won’t be of any help, and we all need to keep our wits about us. What do you think she wants?”

“To scold you for killing Solok.” Tristan held out his empty glass in mock salute.

“Maybe she’ll give you a medal.” Tavion’s grin widened as he poured him and Tristan another glass. “That would be my recommendation.”

“When I touched the skull, I saw all of us die.” I swallowed hard, the memory coming back full force. “We were fighting a war against an enormous force, but we weren’t...Fae. We were enormous—fifteen feet tall—towering over the invading forces. And we spoke to each other, but not with words. We talked inside our heads.”

Raz tensed then slowly set his drink down and pulled me back into his lap. I wrapped my arms around him, willing this sense of dread to disappear.

“Our magic acted in a way I’d never imagined magic could work. I could draw directly from the earth, then I channeled power—*lightning*—into Tavion.” I pointed to the snowcapped mountain looming outside the window. “I think we were there, if I have my bearings right.”

For a second, the vision swept back in, wiping away this sense of safety, the warmth of Raziel’s body around me.

I was back out on that ledge, magic flowing into my body from the ground, lightning crackling around me. Power, the kind I’d never before imagined, followed by a death I hadn’t seen coming.

“We were definitely in the mountains,” Raz murmured, his arms tightening as he gazed out the window. “An outcropping, where we’d been cornered by an army.”

I shook my head. “No, the outcropping was part of our plan. We wanted our enemies there...the cold made them vulnerable, the terrain...benefitted us. We’d killed all but one—a prince, I think—but then there was a boom, and everything went dark.”

“*Astragalus Centaria*.” The name was little more than breath spilling between Raziel’s lips.

“An ancestor of the two kings.” I nodded. He’d been mentioned in one of the books I’d read, though that seemed like a lifetime ago. “He brought his army to Old Valarian to conquer this world.”

Tavion’s face was pale, the half-full glass forgotten. “The mountain collapsed. We were all crushed,” he whispered, and my breath caught at that empty, hollow tone. We’d all seen the same thing, then, except for Tristan, who’d had enough sense not to touch anything.

As if he saw my thoughts, he lifted his glass with a saucy wink.

I nodded. “That’s what I thought, from the way the skull...” I swallowed down the bile souring my throat. “I think that crushed skull was me, a long time ago. I was one of the Old Gods, and the battle we saw was when the Fae conquered Valarian ten thousand years ago.”

“Your name was Amalla,” Tavion whispered, his drink forgotten. “I think mine was...Ardaric.”

“You saw all this...when you touched the bones?” Tristan threw back his glass. “Thank fuck I kept my hands to myself, since I’ve been raised right and I’m not a heathen like the rest of you.”

“So that room was where those first Fae conquerors buried the Old Gods?” I scanned the face of the mountain looming over us, the snowcapped summit. “They must have dug them from the rubble, then hidden them in the catacombs, after the war, where they’d never be found.”

I turned to Raziel. “Didn’t you say Torin’s throne was made from a skull found in the catacombs by the first King of the Fae? She displayed the skull so everyone would know the Old Gods had been defeated.”

If my skull...my ancestor’s skull...was the one that was crushed, and Tavion’s the one on the plinth, then the others—three more in total—belonged to Raz, Tristan, and Zor.

“I’ve been through that portal more times than I can count, seen those bones a hundred times. But before yesterday, I

never sensed anything unusual.” Tavion sat heavily into a chair, his drink cradled in his hands, whirling the liquid round and round. “But when I went through, what used to take a second felt like I was trapped between worlds for hours.”

“What did you see when you touched the skull?” I asked softly. Tavion tossed back the rest of his glass, then picked up the bottle and drank deeply before Tristan snatched it away with a curse.

“I wasn’t planning to touch the godsdamned thing. I’ve seen them before, you know. Enough times not to be curious anymore. But I swear, I heard the bones speak to me. I heard these voices in my head, and then the vision...it didn’t stop.”

His eyes landed on mine. “Until the mountain collapsed, and Anaria...”

“I’m never touching those fucking bones,” Tristan muttered, emptying out the bottle into his glass. “You lot are well and truly fucked.”

“You’re not outside of this, Tristan,” Raz warned. “I didn’t touch the bones...but I touched Anaria while she was having her vision, which was enough. If you think you can walk away...”

“Who said I’m walking away?” Tristan tossed back the drink in a single go. “You’d just drag me back into this mess, of that I’m sure.”

That vision of death, this sense of impending doom seemed to hang over every shaky breath I took. I’d never felt as trapped as I did right now, crushed between the Oracle’s impending visit, the stone I’d found through a High Seer I did not trust, and the fact none of us knew what came next, no matter how much we wanted to pretend we did.

“I’m scared,” I admitted, drumming my fingers on the table. “She’s orchestrating our every move. Chances are, she gave us that two-day deadline to force us down into those tunnels, knowing full well what they held. And why separate us from Zorander?”

“He’s leading the army,” Tavion reminded me drily. “Unless one of us would be a better general?”

“Don’t be an arse; I know what Zor’s doing. Every move the Oracle makes has been planned, for an eternity.” Even though I knew I shouldn’t, I slid my hand into my pocket and stroked the smooth stone, instantly feeling more settled.

“If we knew what the Oracle wanted from us, we could outmaneuver her.” Raz slid me a look that clearly said *good luck with that*.

“Dane said your family’s been using those tunnels for centuries. What about before?” Raziel went to the fireplace, blew the dust off the stack of firewood, then started stacking. “You’re telling me nothing strange ever happened before yesterday?”

“Legend has it, my great great grandsire uncovered the entrance on our family property, but given the blood of the Old Gods runs in our veins...I’d say that had less to do with luck, and more to do with providence.”

For once, Tavion didn’t give one of his smart-ass answers. “And no. I’ve seen those skulls and bones a hundred times since I was a pup, and never paid them any mind.” I lifted my brow and a ghostly smile danced across his face. “Of course, I was curious, but they were always just...there. I was never drawn to them, like I was yesterday.”

“You’ve been using the tunnels to smuggle goods in and out of Tempeste?” Tristan paced over to the stack of logs and flicked his fingers. The next second, a fire blazed in the hearth, as if it had been burning for hours.

“Dane turned smuggling into an art. Of course, these last twenty years it’s been a matter of survival for the city. As Anaria astutely pointed out, we’ve made our fortunes several times over these past two decades.”

Something about the intense way Tavion looked at me when he uttered those words—two decades—sent gooseflesh rising on my arms, though I wasn’t sure why.

“Caladrian gold spends just as well as Solarys gold,” he pointed out, his tone a touch defensive.

Not a surprise, since the bottle beside him was empty, most of the contents warming his and Tristan’s bellies. From the glazed-over look in Tavion’s eyes, the Menrovian liquor was starting to take effect.

“My gut tells me the Oracle will order us to fight in the war,” Raziel murmured. “But Zor’s bringing the entire army. I don’t see what difference we’d make, given he rides with five thousand armed soldiers.”

“Cut that collar off and you’d make a difference,” Tavion countered brusquely, his green eyes glinting.

I didn’t miss Raz’s quick jolt of surprise before he set two more logs into the fire then pushed to his feet, a golden glow licking his beautiful face. “If undoing the spell didn’t kill me outright, the Shadow King would know the second the spell was broken. There are certain...conditions to my imprisonment. I know better than to break them.”

Tavion leaned forward. “So you’ve often said.” He gestured to the luxurious room around us. “We’re far outside Solarys. Even the king couldn’t enforce his terms here. Julian used to regale us with tales of your...wartime accomplishments.” His smile tightened. “Anaria should know the manner of male she’s sleeping with, don’t you think?”

I bit back the *fuck you* that was on my lips.

Every single time Tavion approached being decent, he had to turn around and become a bastard.

“Oh, trust me, I know.” I ran my hand down Raz’s arm, never breaking my stare with Tavion as I smiled sweetly. “And I’m really hoping to get another reminder tonight.”

Tristan snorted then climbed to his feet, swaying as he pulled another bottle from the cabinet. Raz’s musky scent wrapped around me, a dark promise for later. Fuck Tavion and his constant need to undermine us.

“On that note...” Raziel gripped my hand and I let him lead me away, Tristan studiously reading the label on the

pilfered bottle, Tavion glaring daggers at the both of us.

“We’ll see you bright and early. If you stay up all night drinking, don’t blame me if the Oracle eats you for breakfast.”

The chill mountain wind hit me the second Raz shut the door of the bedroom, and I crossed to the balcony, closing the glass doors I'd left open earlier. "Oh my gods, it's freezing."

"Nights are colder up here. Colder than the city because the stone holds in the heat." Raz's lips twitched when he surveyed the little stove in the corner of the room. "I could find some wood..."

"No, stay. If you go down there, Tavion will make some snarky comment and you'll end up beating his arse, and then we won't get any sleep."

Raz waggled his eyebrows. "You're expecting to sleep tonight?"

I laughed and waggled mine right back. "I hope not, but we do have a big day tomorrow." The smile slid off my face at the thought of what was only a few hours away.

"Not that I want tomorrow to come."

"Well, wishing won't keep the Oracle away." Raz slipped behind me, tucking me against his chest, his finger tracing the iron band on my arm. "And I'll be right beside you the whole time. I'm not leaving you alone with that spider for even a second."

"I know." I stared out over the dead forest, the barren plain where I swore I glimpsed a black shadow creeping toward us.

“Even though I almost wish I was meeting her alone. I feel like that would be less dangerous.”

Raz tilted his head to kiss my shoulder, his thick black hair spilling over me, the only thing soft about him. I weaved my fingers through the silky strands, shivering at the deep, rumbling purr vibrating his chest pressed against my back.

The ache between my legs turned maddening, the tickle of his hair brushing over my skin becoming another sort of torment, his fingers trailing so, so lightly down my arm I shook with anticipation.

“How so?”

I hesitated, hating what I was about to suggest. “If we separated, she couldn’t use us. Together, we become the weapon she needs. Maybe not the best solution, but the further apart we are, the safer we are.”

The thought of us splitting up was loathsome, but if that kept these males safe and the Oracle powerless, the sacrifice would be worthwhile.

“Makes sense, but who’s to say she won’t use us individually?”

“Oh, she could certainly try,” I agreed, closing my eyes as his lips traced my shoulder then nibbled my throat.

“She’s known you for decades but gone to extraordinary lengths to get me to claim the magic. Now that I have...I hate to even say this out loud, but with me in the picture, you four are at risk, Raz. She’s going to use me to control you. Or vice versa, until she traps us completely.”

“Maybe she’s already trapped us.” Raz’s hand drifted further south, unbuckling my belt and opening my jacket, his warm calloused palm skimming my stomach, my ribcage.

“If we *were* under her control, she wouldn’t keep us in reserve. We’d be down on that plain or at the city gates. She’d use us to make a statement.” I jolted back against him when his knuckles brushed over my peaked nipple. I writhed beneath his touch, wanting him so bad.

“Holy gods, this air is like ice.”

“I quite like the effect,” Raz purred in my ear, pressing his chest to my back while cupping both breasts in his very warm palms before rolling my too sensitive nipples between his fingers. “Gods, I love your body...I can’t get enough of you, Anaria.”

I swooned, both at his tone and those words, my eyes drifting closed as I let him explore, trailing kisses down my throat, before he gripped my chin, turning my mouth to his.

Instead of kissing me, Raziel just held me still, our noses almost touching, so I saw desire burning in his eyes. So I saw he wanted me as much as I wanted him.

“If I had to walk through fire to be able to touch you like this, I’d fucking crawl on my hands and knees.” His erection throbbed against my arse, sending a wave of anticipation coursing through me like a river, his words melting my heart.

“I’ve lived over a hundred years, but these past months with you...have been the best of them, Anaria.” He paused, his lips pressed against my cheek.

“Do you remember what sacriviose means?” I nodded faintly, overcome by the emotions tangled up inside me. “You were supposed to be the sacrifice that saved our world. But you ended up being *my* sacrifice, Anaria. I don’t care about this world anymore because I would give everything up for you.”

My fingers dug into his forearm braced across my stomach, the corded tendons and muscles flexing as he caressed my body, taking his time, my eyes rolling back in my head—it felt that good.

An anchor.

Raz was my anchor, to right now, to this life, to everything.

When he slid that hand down my belly and into the front of my leather trousers, I didn’t bite my lips fast enough to stop my throaty moan. Raz just chuckled. “That’s it, let me hear you. Let the whole fucking world hear you.” One finger

slipped inside, and I moaned, a low, needy sound. “You are always so fucking wet for me. What are you thinking about to get you so dripping wet, Anaria?”

“You.” I managed to keep my voice down by some miracle. “Your cock inside me.”

“What else?” He sucked the side of my neck, sinking his teeth in, and I tried—I really fucking tried—but another little moan slipped out.

“You fucking me hard, not being careful.”

Raz blew out a weighty breath, steam wrapping around us. “Then you’d better hang on, princess, because I am going to make you scream tonight.” He drove another finger into me, hard enough that air exploded from my lungs. “Until you are a boneless, limp mess. Let’s keep this entire castle up all night.”

“We have a big day tomorrow,” I reminded him breathlessly, hardly able to think around his plunging fingers, his mouth roving over me.

“I know we do. Except you and I will have the only good excuse for not getting any sleep.” He caught my earlobe between his teeth. “Besides, I fucking want Tavion to know who you belong to.”

“And who’s that? I can’t quite remember.” My hips bucked when Raz furiously plunged another finger into me, and I couldn’t have stopped my moan if I tried.

“Me, princess. You belong to me. And I want everyone to know it.”

Maybe I should be angry about his territorial possessiveness, but I was secretly pleased. Raziel wasn’t interested in controlling me or holding me back. And we *did* belong to each other.

In every way two people could—heart and body and soul.

“Staking your claim?” I gasped when he unbuttoned my pants for better access. “I like that, I think.” His fingers plunged into me again, deeper this time, my hips meeting every stroke of his fingers.

“Good, because I intend to make you forget about everything tonight. I want you to relax and let me take care of you. Let me give you what you need, Anaria.”

“Your cock.” I licked my lips, pinned against his chest, eyes closed to drink in every last delicious, mind-blowing sensation. Every muscle taut in anticipation of his next touch, his next kiss.

I was so fucking close...

“My cock, my tongue, my fingers...my heart. You’ll get everything from me, Anaria. If I could give you the world, I would lay it at your feet. But for now, my heart will have to do.”

I opened my eyes to the vastness of Caladrius, lit only by a crescent moon. Damn, this male could make me go from panting with desire to a swooning romantic in a second.

“You already have my heart, Raz. You have *everything*.” Every broken, ragged part of me, which truthfully wasn’t much, but every last piece of me belonged to him.

“I want you in my skin. On my tongue. In my soul.” He lay me on the bed—which thankfully didn’t make a sound—peeled off my boots then my leathers, before kneeling between my legs.

“I want to taste you forever.” He grasped my knees, spreading me wider, his eyes darkening as he looked up at me. “When I die, I hope it’s with you on my lips.”

“No dying talk,” I scolded, my breath catching as he pressed his mouth to the top of my mound. “In fact, no talking at all.”

“Who am I to disobey a direct order from a princess?”

I was about to tell him I was no princess when his tongue slid up through my pussy, flicking across my sensitive clit. Then he lapped at me, furiously enough to catch every last drop, fingers digging into my thighs as he spread me wider so he could lick deeper.

Two days in the tunnels, he'd been right beside me, and I'd missed him the entire time. I didn't know how, but I did. But right now...Right now we were so close I swore I felt every beat of his heart, the blood pumping through his veins.

I wrapped his silken hair around my fingers, my other hand gripping the blankets, everything narrowing down to his devouring mouth, the vibrations from his low, needy groans, the tremors rippling through my core like shockwaves.

My hips rolled in time with his plunging tongue, his name spilling from my mouth, along with gods knows what else.

This was...too much.

Pleasure and aching anticipation mixed into one. Too much and not enough. I wanted to come and I wanted this to last forever.

I wanted to explode, and I wanted to ride the edge of this wave until we both tumbled off together and crashed back to earth.

“Fuck, Anaria.” His voice was a harsh rasp. “Say my name like that again.”

He ate me like he had a mission, and I closed my eyes, biting my lip as everything narrowed down to Raziel. His mouth, his tongue. *Him*.

Every breath became a desperate hiss edged with pain. My back was arched, my fingers tugging his hair so hard it had to hurt. Then he drove both fingers into me and sucked my swollen, sensitive clit between his teeth before biting down gently. “*RazielohmygodsohmygodsI'mgoingtcome.*”

For a second, I hung midair, every muscle tensed, not even breathing, suspended on a thread of pleasure that stretched but would not break.

Then I plummeted.

My orgasm shattered me and Raz took me in one furious thrust, aching emptiness turning to blazing fullness as he entered me, my core pulsing around his hard length.

His hips pistoned against mine as if he'd lost all control, hands gathering my wrists together and pressing them up over my head as I bucked, trying to get him deeper. Wild. I wanted him wild and untethered. I wanted his rawness, with nothing between us but breath and sweat.

“Raziel. *More.*” I was growling. Like an animal. “Give me *more.*”

“Hang on, I got you.” Raz lifted my leg over his shoulder, angled his hips, and slammed into me, fucking me hard, the headboard banging into the wall, my fingers still tangled in his hair so tight I had to be ripping some out.

I didn't care. Not when my next orgasm hit me hard enough to knock the breath out of me, my shaking body beyond my control, my soul shattering beneath the force.

“Oh my fucking gods.” Together, we rode an unending wave of bliss, every deep stroke teasing out my orgasm, branding me from the inside, and I crested again, as if this might never have an end.

I squeezed my eyes shut as the climax crashed through me.

How could this be so perfect? How could he know me so well that every touch sent my heart racing, every kiss making me fall deeper in love with him?

“Fuck, Anaria, I'm going to...”

I locked my ankles behind his back and held him deep within me as he finished, cock jerking as he spilled, my hands sliding over sweat-slicked muscle and smooth skin, his body undulating like a wave.

Perfect. He was fucking perfect.

And I was never letting him go.



I SNUGGLED DEEPER into Raz's arms, my leg trapped between his. There was something delicious about how well we fit

together, his fingers sifting through my hair, at least until my eyes locked on that godsdamned collar.

“Why can’t we cut that off?”

His eyes slid away, his shoulders sagging. “Like I told Tavion, freedom isn’t an option for me.” He lifted his gaze to mine. “It’s enough that you’re free of that life, Anaria. That you’ll never wear a collar again. If that’s all I get in this life, it will be enough.”

“Not for me. Not until you’re free, too. You shouldn’t have that thing on. Like Tavion said, we’re a world away from the Shadow King and Blackcastle. We could cut that hideous thing off tonight.”

He hesitated for so long my nerves got the best of me.

“It’s just cold iron, easy enough to cut if you have the right tools—blacksmith’s tools,” I urged gently, gauging the darkness in his eyes. “What’s stopping you, Raz?”

“It’s not just me who pays the price if I cut the collar off.” He rolled onto his back, one arm folded beneath his head.

“There is blood magic nulling my power. Magic that was cast when the collar was welded onto my neck. The moment the collar is removed, the king’s spell will break and the male who welded this onto my neck will die. Instantly.”

“Fine, he probably deserves to die, anyway.” I huffed, hardly seeing the problem. Maybe I was a bloodthirsty bitch, but whoever did this to Raz *should* die, as far as I was concerned.

But obviously, Raz didn’t agree. He just went still, a deep, abiding sadness seeping from him like poison. And his eyes... What I saw sent a shiver of fear straight through me.

“It was Zorander. If I remove this collar, Zor dies. His blood went into creating the spell and the Shadow King, while he doesn’t have powerful magic...he is a clever spellcaster.”

No.

That couldn’t be right.

That was...impossibly cruel, a trap Raziel could never escape from. I searched his face, my heart crumpling in my chest as I saw the truth in his eyes.

“Zor knows?”

Raz shook his head slowly. “Nobody knows. For the last hundred years, this was mine and the Shadow King’s secret. And now it’s yours.”

TAVION

In the Wynter Palace's sumptuous foyer, my head spinning from drink, I paused outside the door leading to the secret passageway, clenching and unclenching my hands, trying to release the tension building inside me.

I knew what I wanted to do right now.

Knew what I *shouldn't* do, those two things warring inside me, a tangle of conflicting emotion made worse by the amount of alcohol I'd consumed tonight.

My insides were in knots, my self-control shredded apart. I stood there for far too long, warring with myself. But I had to see for myself because not knowing was killing me.

I was probably a sadist, but I had to know for sure—*had to see them together*—even though the truth would destroy me.

Cursing my own weakness, unable to stop myself, I plunged through the door into the narrow, dark corridor.

I climbed the hidden steps to the second passageway that ran the full width of the second floor, offering peepholes into every bedroom, one of which was Anaria's.

This hidden passageway had been a prime source of income for House Wynter, blackmailing countless married officials and unwary aristocrats lured into bed by Lady Wynter.

I'd been here before. This was how I'd caught Lady Wynter, gathering enough evidence to sentence she and her husband to death. Dust and darkness tangled together with

intoxication until I stopped, stumbling into the wall, breathing harder than I should have.

But memories...memories had a way of catching up to me, and this fucking place held them in buckets.

The Wynters, with their cold, pale eyes and silver-white hair—the epitome of soulless High Fae royalty, devoid of honor and integrity.

Blackmailing one of the Fae King's favorite courtiers had sealed the Wynters' fates. After I'd condemned them, I'd been tasked with their execution, though at the time, I hadn't thought twice about taking their heads. The evidence had been that damning.

But now...now I wondered if I'd been wrong.

Were they innocents, like Anaria, swept up in a conspiracy that seemed to have no end?

Not that it mattered.

I would never wash my bloody deeds from my hands, never bring the Wynter's back to ask them. And that fucking treacherous spider would never tell me the truth.

That died here, at the end of my sword, ten long years ago.

The passage was pitch-black, but I could see better than any Fae, even better than Uncle Dane, who bragged to have the best eyesight in the Montgomery pack. Of course, my uncle's bragging was about the only legendary thing about him.

I paused, my shoulder slamming into the wall, though I barely felt the pain. I'd warned him to keep his mouth shut, but Dane would run back to father and tell him everything that happened in that crypt.

And once my uncle spilled our secret, Lucius would know what we were up to—because he was fucking smart, if nothing else—and...I snorted.

Even becoming an Old God wouldn't redeem me in my father's eyes.

I despised Lucius for every father-son moment we'd missed, every lonely night I'd waited for him to tuck me in, every time I'd waited for him to acknowledge me...only for him to forget my very existence.

And somehow, even after all that, I couldn't help but love the old bastard. A weakness after all this time...but there it was.

I loved Lucius.

But it would have been easier not to.

For years, I'd let that resentment fuel every decision...and I despised that, too. That even as I tried to eradicate him from my life, he was still always there.

I started up again, the liquor humming through me.

I'd stirred up so much dust, the air was choked with it. I held out my hand in front of me, my fingers trembling uncontrollably.

Where the fuck was I going again? When the Menrovia liquor had run out, Tristan and I, we'd settled on a bottle of... something I couldn't remember the name of, and then...then all I'd been able to picture was Anaria's mocking smile as Raziel hauled her...to their bedroom.

Right.

I was going to Anaria's room.

I started walking—stumbling, more like it—one hand skimming the wall beside me to keep me steady.

But my feet grew heavier the closer I got to the spyhole that looked into Anaria's bedroom. Guilt, maybe, or a flash of clarity, made me hesitate.

Then my hands were braced on either side of it, wondering what in the name of the gods I was doing.

I could hear them. *Smell them.* Fuck, I could *taste* her honey-amber arousal in the air. I didn't need to see her right now. I really didn't need...

I pressed my eye to the hole.

Holy fucking... Anaria was naked from the waist up, her beautiful breasts—the ones she'd teased me with just days ago—were heavy and peaked, Raz rolled one nipple between his fingers while she moaned, a throaty sound that sent my already-hard cock jerking.

I watched her face tighten in pleasure as Raz finger fucked her, her beautiful body bucking in his hands, head thrown back in utter abandonment.

A sense of awe came over me at the sight of Anaria giving herself over to him so completely.

That total trust... that's what I wanted.

Someone who loved me completely.

Enough that I could trust them back.

Someone who wouldn't hurt me or make me think I wasn't good enough. My heart stuttered when Raz lay her on the bed, tossed one boot over his shoulder, then the next, finally stripping off those scandalous pants, revealing perfect, creamy thighs.

Those fucking pants were going to be the death of me, because her arse in those pants had kept me hard as a rock all fucking day. I was still so godsdamned hard... I reached down, plunged my hand down the front of my pants, and pumped my aching cock, trying to find some relief.

Fucking Raz was in my way, his shoulders blocking the view, but Anaria's little moans and sighs were all I needed as I stroked myself, imagining her pink lips wrapped around me as pressure tightened in my spine, the release that had been building for weeks threatening to explode.

It had been torture keeping my hands off her in that fucking carriage, because every time she'd ended up on top of me, all I'd wanted to do was slide my hands through her hair and claim her mouth, make her purr, as loudly as Raziel did.

But I'd fucked that up, too, just like everything else in my life.

The sound of flesh slapping drowned out whatever noise I was making, one hand braced against the lathe wall, my eye pressed tight to the hole, my fucking cock aching from the pressure, my balls ready to explode.

Anaria's muffled scream sent me over the edge, spilling all over my hand, the floor, the wall as I came, drawing blood when I bit my lip to keep myself from screaming out her name.

I leaned my forehead into the rough wall, fighting to catch my ragged breath. Stars danced in my eyes, my body shaking from the force of my release.

Gods, she was going to destroy me.

And I wouldn't mind that destruction, not one bit.

Faint laughter sifted through the wall, the rustling of blankets as they settled themselves. I couldn't look away as Raz tucked Anaria against him, her glowing smile filled with love.

The euphoria slid away, leaving me alone and wanting, realization washing over me in cold waves.

This was as close as I'd ever come to Anaria being mine.

We'd never be together, not like that. Not in any of the ways I'd dreamed. I could love her all I wanted, but it would be from afar. I took a shuddering breath and tucked myself away.

Then I dragged my wounded heart back downstairs to finish off whatever alcohol was left and drink myself completely into oblivion.

ANARIA

From the looks of it, none of us had slept a wink. Silently drinking burnt coffee the next morning, we were bleary-eyed and sluggish, waiting for the Oracle's grand entrance.

Because I was godsdamned sure it would be grand.

As requested, we were in the wing that extended over the plunging ravine, while I half wondered if she planned to toss us from the windows and watch us break on the rocks below. I pulled my head out of those dark thoughts and took another sip of the bitter coffee, trying to blink this infernal brightness out of my eyes.

Raz had dragged five chairs in here, lining them up in a row, while I fidgeted.

The windows stretched along all three sides and offered views of the mountains, the gorge, the city of Tempeste, and the vast open flatlands, bordered on one side by the desiccated forest, and low, rolling hills on the other side.

Beautiful views, even with the ruination.

But at the far edge of the flatlands, a black shadow crept across the brown dirt, a thick cloud of dust rising around it. Looking closer, I made out the lines of soldiers, the leading phalanx of the mounted calvary, loaded war wagons bringing up the rear. If I was down there, I would hear thundering hooves, soldier's cries...Zorander's shouted orders to his men.

The Solarys army was almost here, and I swallowed down my horror at how little time we had left.

I'd never seen battle—not real battle—and I had no wish to.

I'd already seen enough death to last me the rest of my life, however long that might be given what these next hours might bring. Raziel hadn't said much this morning, either, neither of us wanting to put our fears into words, making them real.

Tristan yawned, his early morning fuzziness likely caused by the now-empty bottles littering the living room, while Tavion hadn't made a single snarky comment, which was odd, given he never missed an opportunity to torment me or Raziel.

He just sat as still as a stone, coffee cradled in his big hands, shoulders hunched over as if he'd had the worst night of his life.

"She'll be here any minute." Raz smiled grimly then pressed his lips to my ear. "Together, Anaria. You are not alone; we're facing her together," Raz said softly, trailing his hand down my thigh, giving my knee an intimate squeeze that sent my pulse racing, even as the air in the castle turned to ice.

A dark howling wind rattled the windows, almost obscuring the *tap, tap, tap* of taloned spider legs echoing from the outer hall.

"Scratch that. She's already here." Tristan leaned forward and braced his arms on the table, the foggiest gone from his face, his hazel eyes clear and alert. "And we are so fucked."

"A true statement if I have ever heard one, Lord Tristan DeVayne." The Oracle's horrible, raspy voice preceded her with ominous, creeping menace and everything inside me went silent—the prey's response to a predator—and my body stiffened when she scuttled into the room, Torin trailing a step behind.

The High Seer's hands were clasped tight, her cloudy eyes seeming to absorb, not reflect the blinding light flooding the room. She was as scared as us, a far cry from the unflappable

High Seer of Tempeste, and seeing her so unsettled...I couldn't stop the shiver snaking down my spine.

The Oracle's face split into a smile, grotesque black teeth not rotten but sharp and shiny, her jerky, insectile movements driving the last bit of air from my lungs, my thoughts turning into mush.

"I am pleased you honored my request."

Tavion, of all people, snorted. "A bit strongly worded for a request." His green eyes trailed casually over the Oracle—ignoring Torin entirely—his expression bored. But I recognized his tells by heart now, and beneath that calm mask, Tavion was raging.

"Why don't we cut the bullshite and call this meeting what it is. You summoned us. Now what do you want?"

"Compliance. Obedience. Acquiescence."

Her black eyes caught the light, a myriad of facets reflecting the bright snow-coated mountains. As if her creeping gaze wasn't bad enough, the intermittent glimpses of black, arachnid-like legs beneath her heavy skirts sent a fresh shudder of revulsion through me.

"And if we refuse?" I asked quietly, while Raz and Tristan exchanged an uneasy glance. The question had to be asked because the cost if we obeyed was impossibly high.

Our lives. Our souls.

An eternity trapped...as monsters.

"How quaint." The Oracle's monstrous grin widened. "You believe you have a choice."

"And you're saying we don't." Black astral magic filled the room with the weight of millennia. The entire castle shuddered and the floor rocked beneath my feet, my stomach lurching as I stumbled then caught myself.

"You never had a choice, silly girl. You've read the prophecy; you know the parts you must play. You should be celebrating your fates. You will live forever, long after the last

of the Fae rabble have turned to dust. Immortality is a gift I do not give lightly.”

“Forgive us if we resent our futures being controlled by someone with their own agenda”—Raziel’s hand tightened on my knee, fingers digging in—“even if our goals happen to be temporarily aligned.”

“My goals are your own. My will is yours. Think of yourselves as an extension of me, vessels awaiting their divine purpose.”

Tavion snorted. “Fuck your divine purpose. You want to rule the world? Find five more schmucks.” Hatred and rage coalesced in the Oracle’s eyes, and I wondered if Tavion had a death wish.

“Tavion,” Torin murmured reprovably, “watch your tongue.”

“You might be content to be her lackey, but I’ll not be a slave.” He tipped his head to me and Raz. “No offense to present company.”

“Asshole,” I muttered beneath my breath.

The Oracle smiled, such a horrible expression I thought I might be sick. “I made you. You belong to me, like a dog belongs to its master.” Something inside me railed against the slithering possessiveness in her tone.

“Obey,” the Oracle intoned, her voice thundering across the cosmos. “*Kneel.*” My body trembled, my muscles straining as I fought her crushing power, but she was too strong.

My body slid out of the chair, my knees crashing into the floor, shaking hands pressed flat to the parquet. Bile burned my throat as I fought getting sick. The others held out longer—Raziel the longest—but a moment later we all bowed before her, shaking with anger and fear, all of us forced to heed the Oracle’s dominance.

“You are mine.” Darkness danced across her face, her will pinning us in place like butterflies who’d lost their wings, every bit as helpless as those fragile, delicate insects. “And I have waited long enough for my revenge.”

“The truth comes out at last,” Tavion managed to hiss between gritted teeth. “Using others to fight your war. You’re no better than either of the kings.”

I shot him a look. Nothing would be accomplished by defiance.

This was more of a *live to fight another day* situation.

The Oracle’s eyes were silken menace as they drifted over to Torin. “Shall we do this the hard way, then?” Torin nodded, but her eyes were filled with misery when they found mine.

“You will bond. You will become my weapon to destroy the kings and bring the land back into balance. There is no choice in the matter, not for any of us, even me. If the magic dies out completely, all of Caladrius will be lost forever, a magicless wasteland between two verdant realms, and I will not allow that to happen.”

One glance told me the others were fighting this as hard as I was. *Good. We needed* to fight this monster.

“What do you mean for us to do?”

Her head swiveled to the window, to the approaching Solarys army.

“You will bathe that battlefield in freshly spilled blood and magic. A sacrifice that has not been made in a millennium. From that rain of blood, a new magic will rise, born from the deaths of ten thousand souls. Then I shall mold this dead realm into a paradise.”

“Can’t you use your own magic?” I asked quietly, keeping my head bowed, slipping my shaking hand into Raz’s, letting his quiet strength anchor me. “Mine is dangerous and unpredictable. You don’t want me out there; I’d be as likely to kill an ally as an enemy.”

“The Fae are all enemies, girl, *all of them*. Every soldier. Every citizen.” The Oracle’s voice resonated with the power of the universe, the floor trembling. “Do you think I care how many die? *All* of them must die for the magic to rise again. At the end of this, there will not be a single survivor on either

side. Bodies piled high. Blood so thick on the barren soil the dirt turns to mud.”

“*We’re Fae,*” Tristan pointed out, his voice a hoarse rasp.

My eyes met the Oracle’s, and in them I saw the truth before she spoke. “Not any more you aren’t. You are something greater, and after this battle, you will be mine. I will own every last piece of you, and you will do my bidding.”

“Not me. I won’t kill two armies so you can save Caladrius,” I whispered over the knot in my throat, the full horror of how she meant to use me hitting home.

“As we’ve established, you most certainly will.”

“Torin warned the Fae King a week ago...Zorander Vayle would arrive today with his army. The entire Caladrian force is waiting to ambush them. Their first battle will be a bloodbath, which the king will watch from the safety of the Citadelle.”

Torin dipped her head, but not before I saw her unseeing eyes were lined with tears.

“If you want him to survive, you will fight, girl. All of you will fight. Every time her magic touches you, the bond between you strengthens, and by the end of this, there will be no breaking you apart.”

“Why would you spend a century...*a millennium*...to remove Carex then tip the scales in his favor?” This was bullshit. *Utter bullshit.*

Beside me, Raz thrummed with anger, Tristan panting softly as he fought against the Oracle’s hold. But Tavion was enraged, the cold, clear kind of anger that might actually get him killed if he was able to throw off this crushing power and leap on the foul creature.

“Because putting one of you in danger was the only way I could compel you to use your magic and shed enough blood to restore the balance. You will fight this war, Anaria, even if it’s unwillingly. You will use your magic to rain blood down upon Caladrian soil and you will finish this.” She hissed. “Don’t think I don’t know how you fight this.”

Her black gaze swung around the room, and all of us—even Tavion—shuddered. “How all of you search for a way to escape your fate. You will not. This is happening,” she crooned in her spider’s voice.

“The blood shed on the battlefield will give rise to a new world. This dead realm will live once more, and the world will be restored to what it once was.” The clicking of her tongue sounded like pincers. “Once, this world was mine. It shall be so again.”

Torin’s quiet voice was tinged with regret. “If you do nothing, Zorander will die on the battlefield today. I’ve seen this vision so many times I can’t get it out of my head. The only way he survives is if Anaria uses her magic.”

She lifted her eyes to mine. “I am truly sorry.”

I met her gaze and put every bit of my raging anger into my gaze. “You did this,” I hissed. “You betrayed us, and I will never forgive you.”

“You mortals are so sentimental.” The Oracle paced restlessly to the windows, her feet clicking on the floor. “The Fae are expendable. The magic is all that matters. Once it is lost, it will never return.”

She crossed her arms behind her back, staring out at the mountains. “This room always did have such a beautiful view. It’s why I chose the Wynter Palace for our meeting today.” Her creeping gaze slithered over to Tavion. “The commander was kind enough to execute the Wynters for me, to make sure we had it all to ourselves. Isn’t that right, Tavion?”

Tavion’s lips pulled back as he bared his teeth at her, and in that moment, I wished he’d shift and tear her throat out, but her power kept us pinned down on our knees.

“As I said, time will look different to you after tomorrow. Fae lives are fleeting and insignificant. But I know I can count on mortals for one thing...” Her black teeth flashed. “Loyalty to your friends. Zorander and the Solarys army will be ambushed in a few hours.” The Oracle clicked her tongue at Raz.

“You know where they’ll be attacked, I’m assuming?” Raz asked through gritted teeth.

“Outside the entrance of the place they call the Caverns. The king’s new High Commander has stationed two hundred of his most deadly soldiers in those caves with their hunting hounds and fifty mages. A full complement of Taranth archers have been dispatched to the south to the bluffs.”

Tavion managed to lift his head. His mouth twisted in pain. “The commander’s name is Hightower, if I’m not mistaken. A brute of a male who will leave no survivors. But I know his tactics.”

The Oracle jerked her head in approval. “Then you’ll both know what to do, I expect. There are another few thousand waiting in the old forest, and they will trap Zorander between them. It will be a slaughter.” Her voice narrowed down to a hiss.

“You can stand by and watch, or you can stop this. It is your choice.”

“You bitch,” Tristan hissed. “You set this all up. What the fuck do you expect us to do? Stop the entire war?”

“You should thank me.” She scuttled over, clasped Tristan’s face in her hands, and lifted his face to hers. I lost my breath, waiting for her to snap his neck for his insolence, but she just brushed back his hair with horrific gentleness.

Worse. Oh gods, that was almost worse, and Tristan’s hazel eyes slid sideways and found mine, filled with the same horror I was feeling. “Do I even need you for this to work?” she murmured, pressing his face between her hands, his eyes bulging.

“Don’t hurt him,” I pleaded. “He didn’t mean it.”

She dropped Tristan, and I cringed as he hit the floor, but he was alive. “I’m offering you a chance to warn Zorander and prevent his death. The rest of his army, though, they will bleed.”

She’d trapped us so neatly, none of us could escape. Tavion glared steadily at the Oracle, so much rage in his eyes I

lost my breath.

“You have two hours before the Solarys army reaches the ambush. Enough time for Raziel to come up with something... clever. Use those old, rusty skills as the king’s general to your advantage. If you arrive late, well then, I suppose we’ll just have to see who survives the carnage.”

Ever so slowly, her crushing power receded from the room and my body went limp, aching muscles, tired of fighting her controls, finally able to relax. I slumped to the floor, my knees sliding out from under me.

Zor was riding into a trap. If we didn’t make it to the Caverns in time...

No, I wouldn’t think like that.

“Fly, little thief. Fly to save your friend,” the Oracle urged as I watched her from my place on the floor. “Remake my world for me. Perhaps we will rule Valarian together, you and I, when this is done. Sisters. *Queens*.”

All lies. This jealous creature would never share, *had* never shared anything. I pushed up onto my elbows, putting every bit of rage into my eyes as I could muster. “You are a fucking monster.”

“I’m not the one who tortured Solok before I killed him. Tell me, how did it feel when you ended him, Anaria?” Her black tongue flicked out to wet her lips. “Did his death make you feel powerful?”

“We should get going.” Raziel lifted me to my feet, brushing his hand lightly down my back, his eyes never leaving the Oracle.

“We don’t have a lot of time.”

Our horses were already saddled and ready, courtesy of two Tempeste guards whose faces were as blank as the sheer face of the mountain towering over us. Raz, Tristan, and I headed toward our mounts, though Tavion was nowhere in sight.

We had to get moving. Every minute might mean the difference between life and death for Zorander.

The Oracle skittered down the castle steps with a look of such gloating triumph, I wanted to rip that expression right off her face.

“Give me back my world. Bathe this soil in blood so the land can live again.” The Oracle’s raspy command made me want to vomit. Made me want to tear these iron bands from my arms and burn this world, not remake it.

Incinerate this hideous creature in front of me.

Torin emerged from the castle doors, hands hidden in her sleeves, her face pale.

I swung my leg over the back of the gray gelding, holding back my rage as I studied this foul thing who had trapped us so neatly. “You will regret this.” Just words, perhaps, but a promise, too. “There will come a day when I will make you pay for everything you have done.”

“A thousand males, far more powerful than you have made that very same threat, yet none of them managed to keep it.”

Her hideous black grin widened. “Mark my words, girl. You will be no different.”

A thousand males might have tried and failed, but maybe it took a woman to accomplish the impossible. The idea was something to hold onto, anyway.

Raz kicked his horse between us. “We ride for the Caverns; we can make it in time, but it’ll be close.” Raziel jerked his head to Tristan, once again the commander of an army, albeit an army of four.

“Once we reach the bottom of the mountain trail, we have to ride hard.”

Tristan had his bow and what looked like a hundred arrows strapped across the back of his saddle. “I’ll find high ground when we get into position. What’s your plan?”

“I’ll explain on the way,” Raz muttered, and the Oracle’s cackle sent my hackles rising, her foul scent stuffing up my nose, even out here. “You want this done, we’ll do it my way,” Raziel snarled. Then every thought emptied out of my head when Tavion loped out of the front doors of the castle, his silver fur gleaming, pale eyes landing on the Oracle with a raw, primal rage as he bared his teeth.

He was magnificent in this form, a sleek killing machine, even the Oracle spinning to keep him in view as Raziel kicked his horse into action, flying to get in between them. But Tristan was already there, pushing Tavion back a step.

Thank the gods. I had no doubt if Tavion sprang, she would kill him. “Tavion,” I growled across the drive, “stand down. This will get us nowhere.”

I jerked in surprise when something touched my leg.

“Anaria. There’s something I have to tell you while he’s keeping her busy.” Torin stared up at me with her bleak, milky gaze, then headed toward the far edge of the courtyard. I reined my mount away from the escalating situation, half hoping Tavion did rip the Oracle’s head off.

“What do you want?” I snapped, flipping the hood of my cape up over my hair. “We’re well and truly trapped, thanks to

you selling Zor out to the king. Are you happy now?”

“I’m not at all happy,” she admitted quietly. “Which is why I’m helping you.”

I glanced back at Raziel, hissing threats at the Oracle, who only looked amused, while Tavion paced back and forth, searching for an opening. “It’s a little late for a warning, I would think.”

“Did you find it?” she murmured.

“Find what?” I said innocently, widening my eyes, refusing to give her the satisfaction of knowing I’d fallen for her trap.

“The stone,” she hissed. “Did you find the stone I left you?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” I jerked the reins, moving the gelding away from her. She could fuck right off. She’d picked her side, and it was not ours.

“Don’t be difficult, Anaria. I *saw* what’s waiting for you down there,” she whispered. “I can’t help you directly, not with her watching. The stone was the only thing I could risk giving you. A powerful gift, to use only in the direst of times.” Her dead eyes began to glow, and I brought my horse to a halt.

“We are all caught in this now,” she explained quickly. “That part was not a lie. But just because you are caught, does not mean there is no escape.”

“Tell me, then, how do I stop this?”

Despite everything, my voice broke at the end, and Torin’s face softened. “There is no stopping this. Every time you use your magic, you bind the five of you tighter together, as the Oracle intended. Today will be the final step in that transformation.”

“But why?” I asked helplessly. “I don’t understand *why*.”

“Because once you have bound these males to you, the Oracle will control you all.” Out of the corner of my eye, Tavion leapt straight toward the Oracle. She knocked him out

of the air with a flick of her finger, sending him rolling across the ground.

“How?” But dread shivered through me, the memory of that horrible, impossible vision swallowing me up.

“Through you.” We both watched Tavion scramble to his feet, Raz and Tristan moving to intercept, the Oracle’s face gleaming in anticipation as Tavion leapt again, only to be flung through the air once more.

“To save Zorander, all of you will have to fight *together*. Once you spill blood today, you will be forever bound together. Once you are bound...if you die, the others die. That is the nature of the Oracle’s trap.”

The shouting, Tavion’s snarls, even the Oracle’s cackling faded away. “We already know that.”

“The magic is a trap, but it’s a gift, too, if you use the power correctly. Wield your magic with hate in your heart, and you’ll be marked by darkness, but wield such power to protect the ones you love, or to save an innocent...and who knows what will happen.” Her face flickered with emotion before she schooled it into a blank mask.

“Remember that, Anaria. Never cast your magic with hate, or you will become that which you despise most.”

“You have no idea what I despise.”

Torin’s smile grew sad. “Oh, but I do, because I despise her as well.”

Torin disappeared—just vanished—and so did the Oracle, seconds before Tavion leapt, jaws snapping on nothing but air before he landed on the other side of the drive.

I felt every bit of his frustrated, rumbling snarl as Raz reined his horse toward the narrow trail that led down to the flatlands.



I DIDN'T SPEAK a word of Torin's warning as our horses carefully picked their way down the dangerous rocky path, Tavion's wolf leaping from one rock to another with enviable ease. Not until we were well out of earshot did I dare voice the questions churning inside me.

"What are hunting hounds?" I asked Raz quietly, keeping my eyes on the steep path in front of me.

"Not really hounds at all. More like...like Tavion without the fur and the charming personality." Raz's lopsided grin was supposed to make me feel better, but I couldn't shake the guttering dread in my stomach. My hand slid into my pocket where the stone was hidden.

Why had Torin given this to me? What had she seen that was so terrible that she'd risk defying the Oracle to help us?

"And these mages?"

His grin disappeared. "The Fae King keeps all manner of creatures at his beck and call." We watched Tavion make an impossible leap over a narrow chasm, and the chatter of rocks tumbling down into the deep pit below had me gripping the reins tighter.

"The High Mages are magical assassins, trained to use their power to inflict death. One touch of their magic can stop your heart, turn you to ice, or burn you to cinders." He nodded at the silver wolf now ahead of us. "Tavion would be the expert since he was the High Commander of those forces for years. If he's decided his wolf form is better equipped to face this threat, then we are in serious trouble."

"Or he just doesn't want to talk to us," I muttered, breath shuddering in my lungs when the path dropped off in front of us.

One wrong step and our steeds would break a leg or send one of us tumbling over the edge where we'd snap our necks on the jutting rocks below. The foothills were close. Another few minutes then we'd be in a full-on gallop toward the Caverns. If the Caladrian army sprang their trap before we were able to intervene...I blew out an unsteady breath.

“What will we do when we get down there?” I swallowed as the flatlands came into full view, the black swath of the Shadow King’s army marching steadily in our direction stretched almost as far as I could see.

“I’m working on a plan.” Raz jerked his head at the approaching forces. “Stopping that army is first on the list.” He reined his horse in, and I did the same as he pointed to our right. “The Caverns are there, filled with hounds and supposedly fifty mages.”

Tristan indicated the elevated hill beyond Zor’s army. “If I was in charge, I’d station the archers there. The bluffs are just high enough to send volley after volley of arrows into the army, forcing Zor to move his forces in this direction, until they’re out of range.”

“Which would bring them into reach of the mages and the hounds,” I murmured, seeing everything all too clearly from up here, fear swallowing up everything else as I realized how deadly this trap would be.

“Zor will focus on getting his men out of range of the arrows,” Tristan added, a hint of grudging respect on his face. “Not on a hidden threat.”

“Most of the Caladrian foot soldiers must be hidden in there, hunkered down among the trees, waiting for Zor to come into range.” Raz indicated the vast, dead forest spread out to our left. “Zor will be trapped between the three forces. The mages will have the cover of the cavern to protect them, the soldiers in the forest can use the dead trees and rocks.”

“And the Solarys army will be out in the open, with nothing to hide behind,” I murmured, fear turning into something sharp and desperate.

“Zor will be right out in front, won’t he?” I couldn’t turn, couldn’t stand to see the truth that would be etched so clearly on Raz and Tristan’s faces.

“We’ll get to him in time, Anaria,” Tristan said quietly, and for once, there was no trace of anything in his face except for sympathy. “We’ll stop him.”

Down on that field, Zorander would be their main target. Maybe their only target. Take out the leader, and the rest of the army would fall.

The Oracle was right; today would be a slaughter.

I doubted a small white stone was going to save any of us today.

Or ever.

ANARIA

We descended the rough trail until the Solarys army was close enough my Fae hearing heard every minute sound—the rattle of armor, hoarse shouting, thudding hoofbeats on dry earth. Zorander was out in front, sure he had superior numbers and the element of surprise.

But the Oracle had signed Zor's death warrant with her betrayal, and right now, we were the only ones who knew he was charging into a trap, leading five thousand males to their deaths.

Once we hit level ground we raced south, our horses thundering over the rocky terrain. Tavion kept pace, his long strides gobbling up the distance with ease, tongue lolling over long, deadly teeth.

Then speed didn't matter, because we crested a rise and the whole of Solarys's forces were spread out before us in a sea of black, heading straight for the city, a spear of mounted riders drawing ahead of the foot soldiers like the point of an arrow.

Zor would be at the very tip of that charge.

He'd be the first to fall beneath whatever ambush the Fae King's forces mounted. I opened my mouth, but nothing came out except a strangled, helpless cry.

"Tavion. Go," Raziel ordered, and Tavion flew across the flat ground, his legs a blur as he raced for the Solarys army.

Raz gripped my arm, hard enough to break through my terror. "He'll warn Zorander of the ambush and give him a

chance to divert his forces.” Raz’s words were torn from his lips as we galloped, then we bore right, close enough to Tempeste’s defensive walls to see the flags flapping from the city spires.

The three of us climbed another short rise that was once densely covered with trees. Twisted gray trunks were all that was left now, sharp, pointed branches above our heads. From here, we watched Tavion race toward the army like an arrow of pure silver, straight for the leading wave of the army.

“The Caverns are there.” Raz pointed to a dark opening at the base of the mountain to our right. “The mages and hounds will be in there. The rest of the army”—he swung his head to the left, where the remnants of the decimated forest stretched out as far as I could see—“is somewhere in there, hiding in the trees. Or what’s left of them.”

I searched the trees, picking out small movements from the hidden forces. I barely remembered my escape from the city, though we’d taken this same route.

I had been so consumed with saving Ember, I hadn’t paid any attention to my surroundings. But we were so close to the city, too close for the archers that were likely posted right above our heads. “Last time, Tavion was worried about archers. Shouldn’t we be?”

Raz stared out over the flatlands, his eyes narrowed. “No, because they’re out on that bluff, like Tristan said. Waiting to force the entire army into their trap.” He pointed to some small figures moving on the rise.

“There. They’ll use the Taranth archers because they have a longer range. They’ll pin down the Solarys army long enough for the mages to set the hounds loose. The trees will make mounted calvary useless, so battle will come down to hand-to-hand. The hounds...will tear those men apart.”

I began to see how hard it would be for an army built for wide open battle to be reduced to one-on-one fighting. Spears wouldn’t do you any good within the thick trees, and Raz was right—horses would be nothing but a hinderance.

“Tavion will warn Zor in time.” Raziel was the picture of quiet calm, his gaze fixed on the scene below us. “We’ll do what we can to distract the mages and the hounds. Zor will likely split his forces in half and send one further south to launch an assault against the western wall.” He hadn’t taken his eyes off the archers. “We’ll all be sitting ducks, since the Taranth archers can hit a target more than a mile away. We’ll deal with them first.”

Zor and his men thundered across the wide-open plain, a cloud of dust at their backs, and even from here, I saw he had magic wielders riding with him. A shield pushed the dust out before them, shimmering with power. A shield that would not hold once they were attacked from all sides.

“How do you propose we draw out the mages and the soldiers in the Caverns?” I didn’t loosen the iron bands—would save my power until the very last minute—if I used my magic at all.

Don’t wield your magic in anger.

That’s what happened with Solok. My burning, consuming rage had ramped the magic up hotter and hotter. The anger had become glee then turned into cold, calculating vengeance. I couldn’t do that again.

I had to keep a clear head this time.

“My guess is, they’ve been hiding in those caverns for the better part of two days, waiting to spring this trap.” Raz scratched his chin thoughtfully, his eyes on that army. “The hounds will be jumpy and aggressive.” His gaze found mine. “Ready to attack anything that rides past.”

“You think an entire army will break position for three riders?”

“Two riders,” Raz corrected. “Tristan’s heading to higher ground.”

“This is ridiculous. They’ll never come after us.”

“They will.” Regret filled Raz’s heavy sigh. “Every single Caladrian citizen knows who you are, Anaria. The thief who stole the king’s magic. There is a reward of fifty million gilder

for whomever brings you in alive. When those mages—and the soldiers—see you, nothing will stop them from trying to capture you.”

“How do you know there’s a reward?” I snapped my mouth shut. *What did it even matter?* “Fine. What’s the plan, then?”

“Take your hair down, Anaria. Let them see you.” Raz didn’t try to hide anything, then.

I saw it all. How his love for me was tearing him apart. His fury that he had to use me as a decoy. His utter determination to keep us all alive, even when we were so badly outnumbered.

Then his face was a mask of calm when he pointed to the rise a short distance away. “Tristan, find a good position. Keep those mages pinned down while we make our pass, pick as many off as you can. We’ll regroup and ride hard for Zor and Tavion. Let’s hope they get that army stopped in time.”

Tristan pulled his cloak over his hair and raced toward an outcropping, dismounted, and climbed the enormous rock wedged between two twisted tree trunks before knocking an arrow, then he gave Raziel a nod.

I yanked the tie from my hair and unbuckled the leather jacket. Coated with sweat, it stuck like a second skin, and when I finally peeled it off, I rolled up my shirtsleeves. If I had to access my magic, nothing could get in the way, not when every second might count.

But part of me balked at the idea of touching my power.

After what happened with Solok...No, only if the circumstances turned desperate, I decided, would I reach for my magic. Only if there was no other choice. Only to save my friends would I touch this terrible magic. Only if we’d exhausted every other option.

If Torin spoke true, this battle would not only be the end of both these armies...it would be the end of us.

I refused to be used by the Oracle again.

No, I would defy her until the bitter end.

“Look at me, Anaria.” Raz’s eyes burned straight through me. “I will not let anything happen to you.” He urged his horse closer until our knees bumped. “I will never let anything happen to you.”

His hand slid beneath my hair, cupping the back of my neck, and then his lips crashed down on mine. A hard, demanding kiss. One that promised me tomorrow, and years after. One that told me he was every bit as afraid as I was right now.

When he broke away, we were both gasping, but something...something had settled into place within me. Confidence, maybe, if there was such a thing right now.

“Ready?” Raz gripped his reins tight, his scent wrapping around me as I turned the gelding, heart thundering in my chest. “Stay with me, do not look anywhere except straight ahead, do not falter. Keep your horse moving. Tristan will pick off anyone who gets too close.”

“I’m ready.”

I was so not ready, but I trusted Raziel completely.

If this was the plan he’d come up with, I would follow him wherever he led.

RAZIEL

Using the female I loved as bait to draw the Caladrian forces out of the Caverns was going to fucking destroy me, but there was no other option.

If we survived today, I would find some way to kill that immortal, foul creature who'd once again outmaneuvered us.

I fought against the bone chilling horror of what these next moments would bring, the myriad of mistakes I might make, and all the things that could go wrong. But the Oracle tossed us into a gauntlet, and this was the only way through that I could see.

"I can do this, Raz." Anaria straightened her shoulders, sitting forward on the gelding, readying herself for the desperate run we were about to make. "I'm not going to fall off. Don't look so worried."

"I'm just pissed we didn't get to sleep in this morning." I cocked my eyebrow, taking in those delectable curves under her thin shirt. I leaned closer and breathed deep. "How sore are you today?"

I was covered with her scent. Still tasted her amber-honey flavor on my lips every time I swept my tongue over them. If this went wrong, I'd take her with me to my death, though there was no real comfort in the thought.

No, I wanted forever with this female.

We deserved forever, and no one would take that away from us.

“Deliciously sore.” Her lips quirked up, green eyes dancing as they dragged slowly over my body. “Round two was especially...memorable.” Then her tongue flicked out and wet her bottom lip. Despite what we were facing, I was immediately hard.

“When we get back to the palace, I’ll show you what comes next,” I promised softly, praying I could keep my word. “Round three is sure to please, my lady.”

“Then I suppose we can’t die today, or I’ll never find out.” Some of the humor faded from her face as she brushed the dust from her lovely face. “So please don’t die, okay?”

“I shall do my best.” I tied my hair back, gave Tristan the signal, and urged my horse closer, my heart thundering. “I love you.” I stared deep into her eyes, “Stay beside me, keep pace, do not falter, no matter what you see.”

“I will. I promise.”

Anger churned in my gut as I took in her fear.

Pride swelled my chest at the stubborn, defiant tilt of her head.

No matter how afraid Anaria was, she’d do this. She would never back down; she would never retreat. She would always, always fight.

As for me, I’d be the flesh and blood shield between her and whatever came out of the Caverns, and nothing would get through me.

With luck, they’d see her hair and hold back their magic and refrain from loosing the hounds. If they did come out into the open, then Tristan would keep them pinned down long enough we’d be on our way to rendezvous with Zorander and Tavion and come up with a real plan that didn’t include using Anaria as fucking bait.

I was her shield. I would *always* be her shield.

The words became my mantra, echoing in my every breath, every heartbeat, until the fear faded away, replaced by cold, clear resolve.

I drew my sword, eyes pinned on the opening in the sheer side of the cliff. They'd release the hounds first, then the soldiers would be sent out, some archers among them. Then the mages would come, bearing their death magic.

We had to stay out of range, but the forest pressed in from the right, forming a narrow corridor. The corridor Zor's army would be trapped in if Tavion failed to stop his assault. We'd be trapped there as well, if we allowed ourselves to be.

"No matter what happens, do not stop." I pointed my sword at the corridor, the enormous pile of rocks in the center. "We'll make two passes. The first one will be straight past the entrance, the second...behind that rock formation, which will protect us from the arrows and the mages' magic, if we stay close to the trees. Keep moving, no matter what."

Once we made the turn, the hounds would be our biggest threat. Fast and deadly, they were vicious to a fault, but Tristan's arrows would fell them...if he could get a clear enough shot.

"I won't stop if you don't." Anaria kept her chin up, her eyes wide with fear, though she had no idea what was coming.

She had never seen war.

And she'd never seen a hunting hound.

"If I go down, you keep going," I told her steadily, fear clogging my throat. "You keep riding straight for Zor. Do not stop for me, do not wait for Tristan." She just narrowed her eyes.

"I mean it, Anaria. Swear to me you will not sacrifice yourself to save me. I'm not worth it."

Her face lit with fury, her voice little more than a hiss when she was finally able to speak. "Don't you ever say that to me again. You are worth everything to me, Raziel. *Everything.*"

Her words staggered me, filled with such rage and passion and utter conviction, leaving me breathless. But I couldn't be deterred, not if I was going to keep her alive.

“Anaria...” I matched her stubbornness, but she just waved her hand in the air.

“Don’t go down and we won’t have a problem.” I gritted my teeth to stop from screaming. If there was any other choice, I’d drag her back up to the Wynter Palace, but we were committed now.

I had seen too much death. So had Zor. Even Tavion had seen battle. And if there was one thing I knew about war, it was that we’d all do unspeakable things before this was over. Things that would leave an indelible mark on our souls.

I’d protect her from that, like I’d protect her from everything else.

“Take a deep breath,” I warned her. “And keep your horse at a steady gallop. The terrain is fairly flat, and we’ll stay clear of the trees.” I wished there was more I could say, but I dug my heels into the horse’s side and the beast leapt forward with a grunt, heading straight for the dark mouth of the Caverns that marked the end of the Northern Road.

The last time I’d been here, we’d camped in the mouth of the Caverns. The main cave was big enough to hold two thousand men. The smaller tunnels leading off could hide another thousand. And yet, according to the old spider, only mages and hounds and a smattering of soldiers were contained in that darkness.

If the Oracle had lied, if there were thousands in there... Ridiculous odds. Deadly odds.

Magic was the only way we could fight those numbers, but I’d never ask Anaria to use her magic, not after what happened with Solok.

Not when I’d seen the price his death had exacted from her.

An impotent, blunt rage hammered at me as we raced toward the opening. Pale, shocked faces emerged from the darkness—ten...twenty. The sound of our steeds’ thundering hooves echoed from the sheer face of the cliff, mixing with the

shouts of the mages and soldiers who suddenly realized who Anaria was.

And hopefully knew how much she was worth.

Anaria's long, white hair streamed behind her like a war banner, and when the first arrows flew over our heads, I shouted for her to duck and picked up the pace, our horses' manes whipping our faces as we entered the narrow chute between the cliffs and the forest.

The hounds' eerie, high-pitched baying was amplified by the Caverns, like demons screaming from the deepest pits of the Great Beyond. If they set those beasts loose, we'd never outrun them, and I doubted my sword would penetrate their thick hides.

One more minute, though, and we'd make the turn. Then a final pass and we'd be clear and riding across the flatlands to meet Zorander.

I didn't dare look back across the flatlands to see if Tavion had reached him in time, if the enormous force had ground to a halt. They'd still be fighting today, but it was far safer out there, where they still had room to maneuver, to form defensive lines, to keep their shields in place.

Another arrow whistled overhead, nicking the top of my head. A shriek of pain rang out behind us—Tristan found his mark. The air grew thick with arrows and magic, the whistling of those iron points blocking out everything except for my fear.

"*Stay down,*" I screamed to Anaria, who was laying as low on the back of her horse as she possibly could. A full patrol of archers was stationed at the Caverns' entrance as we flew past, bowstrings creaking as they let their arrows fly.

Pain ripped through me as an arrow from the next volley pierced my shoulder, and my arm went limp.

We rode straight into a shimmering cloud charged with magic, tendrils of black whipping through the air, reaching for me, brushing the ends of Anaria's hair, until they vanished. I

supposed we had Tristan to thank for that, but I was too busy searching behind us for any sign of those fucking hounds.

My horse stumbled, recovered, kept going, Anaria casting a frightened look back. “Don’t you dare fucking stop. *Go.*”

“*Raziel.*” She was still staring back...past me, at whatever was behind us. I had a good idea what caused her to blanch pure white, but I looked anyway, then wished I hadn’t.

“*Come on. Come on, Anaria, don’t you dare slow down for me.*”

The hounds ran on feet so quiet they didn’t make a sound. Five of the deadliest creatures I’d ever seen, enormous jaws wide to catch our scent, their powerful bodies straining as they picked up speed.

Their thick skin was crackled, so dark it was nearly black, their eyes a glowing white, saliva streaming from their open mouths as they gained on us. Teeth as sharp as razors glinted, dust rising behind them with every stride.

The Caladrian soldiers were every bit as deadly as these beasts, would slay their enemies without an ounce of mercy then eat the poor fuckers, too. But soldiers wouldn’t kill Anaria, not when she was worth a king’s ransom.

If this went badly—and it was heading that direction—she would be taken to the Citadelle to the Fae King.

But those hounds...

Those beasts were bred to run down their prey and tear it to shreds. They didn’t care about a reward, or her magic, or the Fae King. They’d shred flesh from bone.

And they were closing on us.



“KEEP your head down and don’t fucking slow down,” I grunted to Anaria when her eyes widened at the arrow sticking

out of my godsdamned shoulder. The fiery pain I could deal with, my dead arm...not so much.

Soldiers and mages poured from the mouth of the cave, some holding the hounds back, leashed with iron chains and magic, as another cloud of arrows and magic exploded toward us. Without this fucking collar, I could protect Anaria with the magic contained in my little finger, even against a hundred mages.

But I didn't have my magic, and when I took another arrow, then another, I cursed our foolish, failed revolt from a hundred years ago.

This fucking collar might be the death of me yet.

They hadn't managed to hit anything vital, but an arrow through the head or one touch of death magic would leave Anaria unprotected, and that was unacceptable. Not me dying—my death was a loss the world could tolerate—but I refused to leave Anaria to fend for herself.

A dull thudding and my horse stumbled, two long arrows sticking out of his front shoulder. He slowed, his gait turning choppy as he foundered on his lame leg.

My left arm hung useless, our enemies poured from the mouth of the Caverns, and out of the corner of my eye, I saw Anaria reach up and slide one of her bands down. Before I could shout a warning, a whip of magic speared past me, howling into the mouth of the Caverns, knocking mages and soldiers and hounds back into the darkness.

From the force of the blow, some of them would not be getting back up, others would never walk again, and we finally cleared the Caverns and circled to the right, rounding the enormous rock formation, which would give us cover for a few precious seconds. Switching places, we thundered past the forest, heading straight for where the Solarys army was coming to a grinding halt.

To our right, the mages and soldiers were climbing to their feet in front of the Caverns, reorganizing themselves into defensive lines.

We could make it. *We had to make it.* Behind us, three of the five hounds rounded the rocks, claws digging grooves in the packed ground. Another few seconds and we'd be back in the sights of the mages and soldiers, but hopefully out of range of the arrows, at least.

Anaria's mouth tightened. "You're covered in blood, Raz. We need to stop."

My horse was wheezing, every wet, dragging breath a struggle, and from the sound, he wouldn't make it much further. "I'm fine. Zor can take them out when we reach the army."

I managed a single glance to my right, where soldiers streamed from the entrance of the Caverns in chaotic confusion, hounds snapping at their masters, mages sending spears of magic after us, but we were out of range.

Yet they wouldn't give up. They'd follow us down onto the flatlands, if the Taranth archers didn't get us first.

"You have three fucking arrows sticking out of you," Anaria snapped. "You look like a pincushion." Thank the gods she hadn't spotted the ones sticking out of my mount.

"I've never been called that before." I mustered a faint smile through the pain, every jolting stride of my horse sending a fresh wave of pain through me. "I had no idea you were such a sweet-talker."

We both turned at the sound of hooves approaching, then Tristan caught up. "You got shot," he said dryly. "You need to learn to duck. Maybe Anaria can teach you since she's not full of arrows." His eyes flared wide when he realized my horse was moments away from going down.

"He was too busy shielding me to think about himself." Gods, she sounded pissed. "You're a fool, Raz, if you think you can protect me from everything. You're no good to me dead." Her anger faded, replaced by fear. "Do you hear me, Raz? You are no good to me *dead*."

Her voice broke on that last word, transitioning from a fierce growl to a sob, tears sliding unchecked down her face,

leaving trails of dirt. Each tear cut into me sharper than any arrow embedded in my flesh.

“We can’t stop. You have to keep going.” Tristan’s red hair blew over his face when he looked back over his shoulder. Whatever he saw behind us...he kicked his heels hard against his horse.

“Move, Raziel. *Now.*”

I urged my steed faster, trying to keep up the pace, but my side was soaked with blood, my fucking arm nothing but dead weight. My horse grunted in pain with every stride, head slung low. Anaria dropped back to keep pace with me, her eyes fixed on the arrows. “I’m fine. Keep your eyes on the ground in front of you,” I warned, trying to brace my worthless arm on my leg, but the damn thing kept slipping off.

“How bad is it?” I asked Tristan, since I couldn’t turn around to see what, exactly, chased us.

“If we don’t pick up the pace, we won’t have to worry about turning into monsters,” he muttered grimly. “Come on Raz, you have to *move.*”

I couldn’t. My horse was struggling, and from the sound of his breathing, he’d go down in a matter of minutes. Behind us, the baying got louder, a frantic, ravenous howl that sent my heart racing.

The hounds would be on us soon, and unlike the soldiers and mages, they did not care about rewards or gilders. All they cared about was carnage.

I wouldn’t let anything happen to Anaria. I could die knowing she’d never forgive me for what I was about to do. But if it meant she stayed alive long enough to live her life, then this would be worth it.

“Make sure Anaria gets to Zor.” Tristan reached out and ripped Anaria’s reins from her hand. “Do not stop until you get there.”

“No, I’m staying with Raz.” Anaria fought to take back control, but Tristan was too strong and urged his mount to a gallop, taking Anaria with him.

“I love you. I will always love you, in this world and the next.”

The last thing I saw was her pale, tear-streaked face looking back at me.

Behind me, taloned paws thundered, then my horse went down, the rocky ground tearing chunks of flesh out of my face as I tumbled over and over across the rocky ground until I finally came to rest in a crumpled heap.

A second later, the fetid, stinking breath of a hound swept over my face.

My chest crumpled when Raz went down.

He crashed to the ground with enough force to break his entire body, then rolled over and over until he lay still in the dirt, the arrows broken off from the force of his landing, blood pooling in the dirt beneath him.

“You fucking asshole.” I tried to wrestle the reins away from Tristan, tried to turn my horse around, but there was no convincing a thousand-pound animal to do what I wanted by tugging at its mane. “Go back.”

I cast a blast of magic, but the shot went wide, spiraling through the dead forest, tearing rotten trunks apart into deadly splinters. Then my magic guttered inside me, like a candle in melted wax, as I saw what pursued us.

The beasts were bigger than Tavion’s wolf, with hairless, cracked, dark gray skin, gaping mouths, and small white eyes. One of them slid to a stop beside Raz, nudging his limp form with its nose. A trio of mages appeared around him, one of them talking fast, pointing at the collar, before they leashed the beast with magic and yanked it away.

The other two hounds never stopped. They raced behind us, and even from here, I saw the shredding power of those sharp, taloned paws and the ferocious intent in their eyes.

“Take me back. *Take me back to him,*” I screamed, yanking so hard I ended up with handfuls of horsehair. “*You fucking bastard.*”

“No.” Tristan didn’t even have the decency to turn and face me, just kept hauling me away at this breakneck speed. If I wouldn’t shatter both legs, I’d jump, but if I did, I’d be no use to anyone. “He told me to get you to Zor and that’s what I’m fucking doing. *Those are fucking hounds*, Anaria. They will devour us if they catch us.”

“Please, Tristan, *please*. We can’t leave him behind.” I whirled around but we were already too far away. The mage’s were lifting Raziel off the ground, and then they were gone. “Let me go.” I was splattered in Raz’s blood from the first arrow, and agony turned to rage.

“You’re a heartless coward, leaving him like this.”

“I’ve known him far longer than you, so don’t you dare lecture me,” Tristan bellowed, his face twisted into an ugly grimace. “Do you think I want to save your sorry arse instead of his? *He’s fucking worth ten of you.*”

My heart stuttered at what I saw in Tristan’s face. Not hatred, exactly, more like disgust. As if I wasn’t even worthy of the former. Thank the gods the wind took my tears away as fast as I shed them.

Worthless tears that wouldn’t help Raziel one bit.

But I wouldn’t beg. Wouldn’t waste time convincing him I was worthy.

“You were supposed to be the end of this fucking nightmare of ours. Instead, you’re the beginning,” he growled before urging his horse even faster, the reins stretching out as my mount fought to keep the frantic pace. “You are poison. Everything you touch is either ruined or dies.”

Whatever was left holding me together shredded apart with those words.

Because he was right. He was so fucking right. I couldn’t see, couldn’t breathe. All I could do was feel wave after wave of failure wash through me. Tristan was right. I’d gotten Raz killed.

I’d get them all killed.

Or turn them into monsters. I pushed down the sobs trying to claw their way up my throat.

We pulled ahead of the oncoming forces, the sounds of the hounds' baying fading away until all I heard was the thud of my hammering heart as we raced across the desolate plain.

I didn't know how long before we stopped, the world a dark blur, my guilt even darker as it reached up and squeezed my heart in an unforgiving fist.

The Fae King had Raz.

He was hurt...*he could be dead.*

Some deep part of me stilled at the thought, considered it, then rejected it in the same breath.

I would *know* if Raz was dead. I'd *feel* it somehow. In my heart. In my fucking soul, I'd know if I lost him. He was mine and I was his and we were meant for each other.

The betrayal of leaving him behind gnawed at me, and by the time the Solarys army came into sight, I didn't care that I was safe, didn't hardly care I was alive. Better to have stayed—to have died—with Raz than leave him alone and injured with our enemies.

I well-remembered what happened down in that prison and had no illusions the king would wait to start working on Raziel. He'd want answers and he was an impatient male.

I'd called Tristan a coward, but I was the one who'd balked at using my magic, when I should have collapsed the entire cave onto their heads and crushed every last one of them.

I would make them pay for what they'd done to him. Fury, raging, fiery fury crested inside me, turning my blood to vapor. Stars danced around me in the vibrating air, and the closest soldiers retreated, murmuring and pointing.

Then I took a breath.

Spooled my magic back in. Tamped down my anger until it simmered like banked fire.

Still, anger was better than self-pity, even if it was more dangerous.

The moment we stopped, I wiped my face, pushed the iron band tightly onto my arm and yanked my jacket back on, though my fingers shook too badly to bother with the buckle.

Tristan dismounted, tied his horse and mine to the back of a wagon, and stalked away, not bothering to say a word.

My legs crumpled beneath me when I dismounted. I couldn't stop shaking, my empty chest aching, weakness spreading through me as the adrenaline leached from my body and my last image of Raz kept flashing through my head. His dark eyes filled with regret and fierce emotion when he'd murmured his final words to me.

I love you. I will always love you, in this world and the next.

How could he leave me with that?

Words that I would hear for the rest of my life?

I hadn't even told him I loved him back. Hadn't been able to muster the courage to utter a single word and an even deeper dread pooled in my belly. If Raz was dead, he'd never know how I felt about him, he'd never know...

"Anaria." Zorander strode toward me—Tristan a pace behind—his long legs eating up the space between us, his armor dust covered, lines of exhaustion on his handsome face.

His long black hair was pulled back, his expression cold, but his eyes were on fire, emotion pouring out of them and spilling straight into me. Fury, of course, but worry and concern, too. He was in his dark battle armor, like some kind of raging war god, and the sight of him opened up something inside me I'd tried to keep locked down.

I threw myself against him, threw myself into him so hard my cheek scraped on the metal of his breastplate, and I did not notice the burn of pain as his arms came around me and squeezed tight.

“We’ll get him back,” he whispered urgently against my ear. “We’ll get him back. It’s not your fault. Him using you as bait...was a foolish idea in the first place, and I will kick his arse when I see him again.”

All around us, the war party was in complete chaos and disarray as men shouted orders, horses whinnied, and wagons creaked as they were moved into place. Zor was like an island in a storm, and I clung to him like I couldn’t let go.

“You and your men would be fighting for your lives right now if we hadn’t,” I reminded him sadly. “We didn’t have a lot of options because the Oracle trapped us. Again.”

“True,” he murmured, and I sagged in his arms, my legs barely capable of holding me up.

“I’ve known Raz longer than I’ve known anyone else. It will take more than a couple arrows to do him in.” He pressed his lips to my ear, keeping his arms tight around me. If I wasn’t shaking with fear, I might have savored his closeness, but right now, I was consumed by guilt.

“They won’t kill Raziel, Anaria. There’s a price on his head. The soldiers will keep him alive so they can collect.”

“I thought I was the one with a price on my head?”

“There’s a bounty for each of us, though you’re worth the most,” Tristan muttered, but his face was thoughtful as he studied the city rising above us. “Together, we’re worth a king’s ransom. We should get in there and—”

I lost my breath when Zor swung me up into his arms as if I weighed nothing.

“Not here, Tristan.” Zor’s dark eyes flashed in warning as the sun disappeared behind a cloud. “Tavion’s gone to take out the archers. I suggest you join him and make fast work of them. There’s an outcropping to the east that will give you a good line of sight and enough shelter to shield you from return fire.”

“How many archers?”

“A hundred—fifty of them are from Taranth.” Zor jerked his head toward the army gathered around us. “Find Tavion, he’s with our best marksmen. You’re in charge of coordinating their positions to our best advantage. Once you’re set up, Tavion will do what he does best.”

Before I could ask what that was, Zor’s grim expression softened. “Tearing them to shreds might work the edge off his anger enough to make him fit company for the next few days.”

Then we were moving, the soldiers making way as we passed, a hum of curious whispers following in our wake. I wondered if they hated me as much as everyone else seemed to. Then Zorander ducked between the flaps of a tent that smelled of mildew and medicine.

He set me down gently, as if afraid I might break.

I felt like I might.

Not in body, but in soul. As if my very being was so brittle the slightest provocation might shatter me into pieces, like those barren trees in the forest had become splinters of wood.

“Are you injured?” Zor asked gently, hands hanging at his sides, and a different kind of sorrow ached inside me, remembering how safe I’d felt a moment ago, wrapped up inside them, and how much he must have hated that.

“Is that...Raz’s blood or yours?” He quickly stripped off his armor, then his belt, laden with weapons, dropping everything onto the floor with a weighty thud.

“Not mine...this is Raz’s.” I swallowed, suddenly nauseous at the blood coating my body. “Just...I left him behind, Zor. Just left him in the dirt.” I was too fucking cold, even inside this smothering tent. “I was afraid to reach for my magic, scared I’d turn us into even bigger monsters, and let him get shot. I hesitated, when I should have fought, and everything that happened after was my fucking fault.”

“Anaria.” Zor went to reach for me, and I stepped away.

“He sacrificed himself to save me, when I could have saved us both so easily.” I chewed the inside of my lip, my

thoughts a thundering roar. “But I was afraid to touch my magic.”

There was no judgment in Zor’s eyes when he gathered me against him, but this time, his warmth didn’t penetrate the coldness inside me, nor could I shake the sense that this was exactly what the Oracle wanted.

Chaos.

I refused to give her what she wanted.

She could trap us, trick us, turn us into whatever weapon she wished, but I refused to give her what she most desired. The cruel truth was, if I wanted to survive—if any of us wanted to survive this—we had to be as brutal and merciless as those controlling us.

We had to be heartless.

Which was a line I wasn’t sure I could cross.

“When Solok appeared in that clearing and had you by the throat, all I could think of was how I’d failed you.” I went to jerk away, to tell Zor he hadn’t failed me at all, but he tucked me tightly beneath his chin. “No, let me finish. In that moment, all my training, all my expertise was worthless, because there was nothing I could do when his hand was wrapped around your throat.”

I closed my eyes, failing to stop the tears squeezing out beneath my lids. “I’d never known such fear as I did in that moment. Never realized how it felt to lose something so precious...in the blink of an eye.” I became intensely aware of him, his smell, how steady his heart beat beneath my blood splattered cheek.

“I never told you why I cannot bear to touch females.” His lips pressed into the top of my head, resting there for a long moment, and I realized the only thing between us was his thin shirt and my leathers. Too little...but too much. “But maybe... I want you to know why. I want you to know it was never you, Anaria. If anything...”

Zor brushed a gentle hand down my back. “If anything, you healed me. Showed me there is still light in this world,

despite the darkness.”

I squeezed my eyes shut, not at all ready for the smear of ugliness I knew was coming.

“When I was young, when my family first came to Blackcastle from the Shadowlands, my father desired to join high society, to become part of the Shadow King’s court. There was a female of good standing, who had lost her mate at a young age. She was older than me, but of course you couldn’t tell because she was High Fae, and she was very beautiful. Fair, like you, with straw-gold hair and eyes the color of the summer sky.”

A chill trickled down my spine as I realized where this story was going, wondering how he could possibly stand holding me like this.

“I was instantly enthralled by her, and in a matter of days we agreed to marry, which made my father happy.” Tucked so snugly into him, I felt, not saw, Zor shake his head. “It happened so fast, I should have known from the start something was wrong. But I was young and foolish and blinded by what I now know was a compulsion spell.

“She wasn’t Caladrian Fae, she wasn’t even Fae, though she glamoured herself to look like one. Those first few months we lived in a grand house in the highest level of the city, overlooking what was once a verdant forest. This dead, arid plain was filled with waving grass and a shallow lake. The days were...heady, filled with lovemaking and sunshine and beautiful things.” When Zor shuddered against me, I wrapped my arms around him.

“But the nights were far different from the days...My dreams were dark nightmares stained with blood and pain and endless torment. At first, they happened only one a month, then once a week...then every night.”

There was such pain in Zorander’s deep voice, such terrible suffering, I could hardly stand to listen to another word. He’d always been an immovable boulder and hearing so much raw vulnerability in his voice destroyed me.

“One night, a year into our...*marriage*, I woke from my nightmare. I never understood how, or why, but I managed to pull myself out of my deep sleep, only to find my wife feasting on me, her fangs sunk into my side as she ate. She didn’t realize I was awake until I started screaming.” Zor went silent, as if he couldn’t stand to say another word.

“What...What manner of creature does that?”

“She was a Mimic. A twisted version of a Fae. They have skin as fathomlessly black as midnight, empty, soulless eyes, multi-jointed bodies, and rows of sharp teeth, designed for tearing. They can glamour themselves to appear as any being in any realm, even a High Fae. But they are abominations.

“They cast a sleeping spell on their victims, consume them, heal them before they wake, then begin the cycle over again. I was nothing but a source of food to her.” He shuddered, and I shuddered along with him, a tide of horror carrying both of us away.

“Every night she ate me, and every morning...” He swallowed, his throat working. “I fucked that hideous creature, thinking she was *my wife*. Planned a life, a family...a future with her. Just the thought of how naïve I was...Gods, the thought makes me sick, every day.”

“*Not your fault, not your fault, not your fault.*” I realized I was murmuring, over and over, against his ear as I held him desperately tight. “None of this was your fault,” I said, calmer this time. “I didn’t even know such things existed.” I let out a shaky breath that didn’t do a godsdamn thing to steady me. “What happened to her?”

“No one believed me. My father expected me to remain married, to secure his spot at court. But the fucking Shadow King knew. I could tell by the way he watched us together. I was forced to keep up the act in public for a few more weeks until I figured out how to escape. I spent those nights locked in a closet, where she couldn’t sink her claws into me. She would scrape them down the door, crooning about how good I tasted and how hungry she was.”

“How did you escape?”

He let out a wry laugh. “I joined the army, of course. Worked my way up through the ranks. As it turned out, I was good at killing, which was all that was required of a Caladrian foot soldier. That’s where I met Raziel. And Julian. And as they say, the rest is history.”

“No wonder you can’t stand me.” Everything came crashing back in—the exhaustion, the sense of failure, the reason I was so, so dangerous to these males. I tried to pull away, but he wouldn’t let me go.

“That’s the thing.” Zor pressed his lips to the top of my head, and I closed my eyes, hardly believing what was happening. “I *can* stand you. Somewhere along the line, I grew to like you, Anaria. And then...when Solok wrapped his hands around your throat and drew blood, when blind rage took me over, the sort I’d never felt before in my entire life, what I felt for you was deeper than affection, deeper than anything I’d ever experienced before.”

He lay his hand along my face, and gods help me, but I leaned into that touch, something weighty settling around my heart. “I’m falling in love with you, Anaria.”

I wanted to believe him. Wanted this so badly it hurt. To feel safe. To be loved and treasured and held as worthy by not just Raziel, but Zorander, too. More than I deserved, truthfully, given what an utter failure I was.

“This isn’t love.” I was surprised at how cold and clear my voice was. “We’re allies, Zor, and you’ve gotten used to me being around, that’s all.” *That’s all*. That’s all this was; that’s all I deserved.

There were about a hundred reasons why this couldn’t happen.

“That’s really what you think?” Zor asked softly, his lips moving through my hair, one hand smoothing up my back to clasp the back of my neck, his fingers easily encircling my throat. “We’re allies? That’s all we are?”

“Yes,” I said miserably. “That’s all.”

“Then this shouldn’t matter one bit.” Zor tipped my head back and brushed his lips across mine, a flash of heat going through me like a living flame.

Zor kissed like he fought, viciously and without mercy, and I melted beneath his relentless onslaught of lips and tongue and teeth. Then I was kissing him back just as furiously, driven by fury and need and frustration.

He tasted like a storm, lightning and power and darkness, all rolled into one as he kept me pressed against the long, hard length of his body, one hand slipping down to my backside, cupping my arse and yanking me tight against him. And when he ground himself against me...Holy gods, he was huge.

I was on fire—completely, utterly on fire—every inch of me vibrating with need.

Outside the tent someone shouted, feet pounding past, the flaps of the tent flapping open. Zor was in front of me in a heartbeat as I turned away, fixing my clothes, not able to face the healer stuttering that there’d been an accident and the general was needed to handle the situation.

“Wait here. I’ll be back as soon as I can,” Zor told me before he ducked through the flaps behind her, but his eyes were dark with promise when he looked back, and it took me a long, long time before I was able to steady my breathing.

Even longer before I fell asleep, curled beneath a thin blanket, replaying that kiss over and over again.

ANARIA

Stealing my own horse from the long line of tethered steeds was easy enough.

Stealing Zorander's favorite knife from his weapons belt was even easier.

Stealing a soldier's black cloak and finding a small enough helmet for my head had been far harder, but now I looked like any other grunt in the Solarys army and could do as I pleased. I untied the gelding's reins, thanking the gods above someone had fed and watered him. Judging from his anxious prancing, he was well rested, I barely threw my leg over in time before he was moving.

There was no doubt in my mind Zorander was going to kill me for what I was about to do.

He was more than welcome to try, providing I survived.

After that kiss, I didn't know where we stood. I'd waited for hours for Zor to return, waited until sleep took me over, then I'd woken up in the dark. Still alone, still confused. Still tasting him on my lips.

Power and darkness and desire, all rolled into one.

Reaching up, I touched my mouth.

He'd kissed me like he was waging war, and my shiver turned into a full-body shudder of expectant pleasure. Thoughts I'd never allowed myself to entertain kept slipping through, images of us tangled together while...

I sucked in a rough breath tinged with dust and body odor of five thousand unwashed soldiers. I had to take stock of my surroundings and get out of this camp without notice. Not moon over the male I never thought I'd have.

Hundreds of fires burned around me in the war camp, a half-moon shining overhead in a clear sky dotted with stars.

Far across the desolate plain, the city rose above the flatlands, brilliant squares of faelight shining from windows, especially the palace, which was lit up like a beacon, a clear sign to the invaders that the city was not afraid.

Somewhere, in one of those windows, the Fae King—my father—sat, waiting for the outcome of this battle.

Somewhere in the bowels of the city my mother rotted away in prison.

And somewhere inside those stone walls they had Raziel locked up.

I'd lain on that uncomfortable cot, staring at the tent's sagging roof, and spent the hours measuring how far I would go to save the ones I loved. For the first time since Solok had dragged me into this horrible place, I knew the answer.

All the way.

I was willing to go as far as—further, even, than the Oracle or Torin or either of the kings. I would give every last piece of myself to save Raziel, to free Adele, to burn this horrid city down to the ground, the king—and the Oracle—right along with it.

But there was something I would do first.

Something I should have done yesterday when I'd had the chance.

Once we picked our way to the outer edge of the tents, I turned my gelding loose. His hoofbeats rang hollowly across the emptiness of the flatlands, the cold wind whipping back the cape, my leather jacket keeping out most of the night's chill.

It took forever, but when the Caverns came into view, I slowed to a walk. The ridiculous helmet had rubbed my nose raw, but as long as my face stayed covered and my hair hidden, no one from the opposing army would recognize me.

Just a lowly enemy scout sent to gather intel.

In the silent no man's land between the two slumbering armies, I slung the cloak over my shoulder and worked the bands off my arms. Then I took the stolen chain, meant to connect two weapons together, stringing the bands onto it and fastening them around my neck.

Magic illuminated the air with a shimmer of white. Fine, then. If they were looking, the mages would see me coming, but that could work to my advantage.

No hate in my heart, no hate in my heart, no hate in my heart.

I chanted Torin's warning over and over as I urged the gelding forward, the *clomp, clomp, clomp* of hooves echoing loudly across the arid plain. They'd lit a few small fires in front of the gaping maw of the Caverns, Caladrian soldiers in their blue and silver uniforms, and mages in their nondescript dark robes gathered around them, faces lit by the flickering flames.

I stopped at the copse of dead trees sticking like spikes out of the cracked ground, tied the reins around the sturdiest branch, and walked away from the gelding, ignoring his soft, nervous snort at being left alone in the darkness. "Don't worry, I'll be back for you." The crackled ground looked like dragon's skin, a million scales of curled up dirt crunching beneath my boots.

The night smothered my quick, nervous breaths and the snapping of the fires—even the low hum of conversation seemed dulled down out here in the open.

I walked steadily toward our enemies, making no effort to be quiet. My hand slipped into my pocket, and I ran my thumb over the smooth white stone one last time, a sense of calm stealing over me. Fifty, a hundred...two hundred enemies, I

counted, with those awful hounds laying off to the side, restrained by leashes of black, ghostly magic. Some of them raised their heads then climbed to their feet, their hackles bristling.

I drew a shaky breath when the voices stopped and I made out faces outlined by the firelight, the gleaming greed in the mages' eyes, the sharp, hungry teeth of the soldiers, the raw hunger of the hounds.

I raised my hands when the mages snapped the leashes off the beasts, sending ten powerful, monstrous creatures streaking toward me, mouths gaping, teeth so sharp they glinted.

Food for their beasts, I'm sure they thought.

A spy to be dealt with.

Behind them, the soldiers' faces twisted with eagerness. These were the males who'd put three arrows through my lover. The ones who would die first.

Tomorrow, Zorander and his men could defeat the rest of the Fae King's army through blade and brawn as he had for hundreds of years.

But these men... These were mine.

Coarse laughter rang out, the soldiers anticipating the spectacle of the hounds ripping me apart. One of the mages cupped his hands around his mouth and howled into the sky, a mockery of the hounds, and yet the beasts joined in until the air shivered with their voices.

I was supposed to shed blood today so the Oracle's plan could come to fruition.

I would do no such thing.

I was going to save the ones I loved.

I was doing this for Raz and Adele and Zor. For Tavion and Tristan. For the innocents in Tempeste who would suffer once war overflowed the walls of the city.

I squeezed my eyes closed and culled every shred of my hatred away, leaving only my purest intentions behind.

Love. Protection. Friendship.

No hate in my heart, no hate in my heart, no hate in my heart.

I lifted my hands over my head and drew a deep breath of crisp air tainted with bloodlust and the beast's foul breath, who were snarling like a pack of ravening wolves as they bore down on me.

I willed my blood to ice, my temper into calm.

I was without sympathy or remorse, a creation of both the Oracle and the Fae King, and I would protect my family and my friends.

"I do this out of love," I murmured before I ripped the magic up out of me and cast a roaring wave of power straight into the hounds.

The starlight power tore through their tough hides, shredding them apart, growls turning to yelps of pain, snarls to whimpers as starlight morphed into white-hot flame. I stalked straight into them, through them, toward the mages and soldiers fumbling for arrows and swords and magic of their own, fumbling for whatever they thought might protect them...but it was too late.

Flanked by the burning, dying beasts, whose feet were scrambling in the dirt as they were consumed by my fiery magic, I sent another wave toward the charging soldiers, then one more after the retreating mages.

One managed to cast his magic toward me, and, curious to see what happened, I cast mine right back. For a split second, both our powers collided midair, then his shattered apart, along with the mage himself.

The rest of them panicked, some running for their lives—they did not make it far—some disappearing into thin air the same way Zorander did. I sent a spiral of magic after them into the ether, praying to the gods it caught up to them.

All around me, the ground was littered with bodies, but none of them were riddled with black vines and thorns. None of them were disfigured...just dead.

And not a drop of blood to be seen.

I burned them anyway, just to be sure.

Because denying the Oracle her prize would be my greatest pleasure.

After settling two drunken fights and putting out a fire that nearly caught an artillery wagon ablaze, I made my final inspection of my troops—a ritual I performed before every battle, both to settle my nerves and save as many lives as possible—when white light flared on the other side of the flatlands.

Not an explosion of fire, but of pure starlight.

I was already racing through the encampment when it flared again, brighter this time, a cresting wave of power that could only come from one person. When the light faded away, there would not be a single soul left alive on the other side of the field.

I threw open the healer's tent.

Empty.

Of course it was empty.

Of course I'd spill out my guts to Anaria, the first female in a hundred years to crack the ice around my frozen heart, and she'd decide to take on our enemies all by herself.

Of course.

I didn't know why I was raging when fear turned my blood to ice. I didn't know why every jagged breath hurt, or why my chest was caving in at the thought of Anaria being gone. But I buckled on my weapons belt, then hurled myself onto the nearest horse and spurred the beast across the barren plain to

where the magic had originated, toward the speck of a figure I'd seen briefly outlined against that deadly, brilliant light.

Footsteps, faster and softer than any horse's, pounded behind me, then Tavion ran at my side, his long body stretched out in a clean line as he overtook me and disappeared into the darkness.

"Fuck this." Between one breath and the next, I vanished from the back of the still-galloping horse and reformed to where I'd just seen Anaria.

She was already gone.

I blew out a long, unbelieving breath at the ashy remains of what had once been the king's deadliest hunting beasts, winding my way between the fallen soldiers, their blank, unseeing eyes staring up at the brightening sky overhead, the campfires still crackling merrily as if death didn't lay all around them.

Every last soldier was dead.

Mages, too, which spoke to just how much they'd been taken by surprise.

Or to how powerful Anaria was.

Streaks of black charred the ground from spent magic, acrid smoke swirling up from the corpses and the ashy remains of the hounds. The air stank of ozone, was so heavy with it I pressed a cloth over my nose just to breathe.

Not one drop of blood stained the ground—except for the hounds'—every single one of the dead whole and untouched, though their eyes were wide in terror, mouths stretched in a final, silent scream.

To the south a war horn sounded, then another. The other half of the Fae army was rousing itself to battle, and I spared one final glance up to the city towering over me.

Anaria was on her way into that hellhole.

I was no mind reader, but I knew exactly where she was headed.

To find Raziel and free him. She'd survived in this wretched city for weeks, knew its streets and was clever enough not to be found if she didn't want to be. I would waste precious minutes finding her and dragging her back to camp with me.

Time I couldn't afford to waste when my men relied on me to lead them.

I clenched my hands into fists as the horns sounded again. "*Fuck.*"

There were five thousand lives that depended on my next choice. Five thousand lives...against one. One that mattered more than all of them put together.

One that I would have traded my own for in a heartbeat, but...

A white shadow raced toward me, then Tavion slid to a stop, claws shredding the dry, packed dirt. "I have to go back." I jerked my head toward my waiting army. "Find her and bring her back. She can't have gotten too far."

The wolf's eyes glinted, his enormous head swinging to survey the carnage surrounding us, and then he chuffed and trotted in the direction of the city.

I vanished and reappeared in the center of my forces, already forming solid lines of defense, mounted calvary up on their steeds, foot soldiers armed and awaiting orders.

We were no longer trapped between three forces. Tristan had returned before my last-minute inspections to inform me the archers were either dead or routed, and Anaria had taken care of the mages and hounds, so now all that remained were whatever forces waiting in the ruined forest. A few thousand according to Tristan, if the Oracle told the truth which I highly doubted. No other horns sounded, and across the field, the other half of the Caladrian army slowly emerged from the trees to find their trap—the one they'd laid so carefully—was gone.

"They'll use their teeth, as well as their weapons," I shouted, my throat already raw and aching. I shouldered through my men, dodging sharp swords and axes. Soon, we'd

be fighting for our lives, but some of these men would never walk off this battlefield.

My job was to make sure most of them did.

“They will show no mercy, will give you no quarter, should this come down to hand-to-hand combat. Be sure to show them the same courtesy.”

I sized up the enemy streaming out of the forest, forming uneven lines of defense before they began marching towards us.

This wouldn't be a route, but with luck, I'd be inside that city by nightfall, and when I found Anaria...

I gripped my sword tighter.

She and I would finish what we started.

ANARIA

I guided my horse through the crumpled bodies of the Fae soldiers, the still-lit fires, the dead mages. Smoke spiraled from the hulking corpses of the hounds, and I wished I'd taken the time to wrap a cloth over my nose and mouth.

Bile burned in my throat as I spurred the gelding into a gallop.

I regretted sneaking away from Zor, but Raziel and Adele were trapped somewhere inside these walls. My father wasn't a patient male. Chances were, he'd already started on Raziel. And Adele...My mother might already be dead.

I wasn't a spy, or even all that clever.

But slaves knew how to blend in, and I was familiar with this city. Familiar enough to sneak inside the Citadelle. Perhaps into the prison.

When I reached the eastern doors, I left the gelding, tucked every last strand of hair away beneath the cowl, and wrenched them open, enough to create a sliver wide enough to slip through.

The cobblestone street was eerily silent, as if the entire city held its breath, waiting for the battle that was soon to come. *Good*. The eyes of the city would be on the skirmish below and not the thief creeping back into the Citadelle to right the wrongs she was owed.

To do that, I'd find a servant's uniform, and then...

I swallowed, staring up at the banners snapping in the wind, the sharp sound far too similar to the snapping of the hound's teeth as they bore down on me.

This was madness.

And it was too late to turn back.

I found the palace in chaotic shambles, slaves and soldiers racing in all directions, hurrying to their posts...or to their hiding places.

In the servants' wing I rooted through the pile of dirty servant's uniforms stacked in the laundry. Moments later, my white hair was tucked beneath a scarf, and I emerged as just another palace slave, holding a stack of fresh sheets, my leathers hidden in the middle. I hated that the uniform fit like a second skin, that the familiarity of servitude felt more comfortable than it should have, even after weeks of freedom.

I made sure the iron bands were firmly in place then slipped the white stone into my pocket.

With the sheets balanced before me like a shield, I headed to the narrow stairwell designated for slaves, slogging up the steps until I reached the room I'd once shared with Ember. One deep inhale told me the room was empty, but memories slammed into my chest when I pushed the door open.

Stacks of fine gowns were still piled on the floor and table, the bed rumpled, the windows and drapes tightly shut, as if this room had been closed up the second Ember left.

I couldn't keep my breathing steady when I set down the linens and picked up a brush, plucking out a long, dark red hair. Ember's hair.

How long had she waited for me, wondering if I was still alive?

How many times had she cursed me for leaving her alone?

I set the brush down and shoved the doors to the balcony open, only to stop in my tracks as the two armies collided below. Black-suited soldiers crashed into pale blue and silver

uniforms, horses and men screamed, swords and shields clanged.

I tried to pick Zorander out, tried...*Right there*. Leading a spear of mounted soldiers, he crashed through the front lines, barreled straight through the second, then the third, leading his men deep into the heart of the enemy.

My breathing turned shallow as they swarmed around him, then I couldn't tell enemy from ally as the dust-covered forces became indistinguishable.

From this height, the sounds of battle echoed dim and hollow. I didn't want to even imagine what it must be like down there, what Zor and Tavion and Tristan were enduring on that field.

Soldiers would die today, and the Oracle would get her blood.

But she would not get it from me.

I turned away from the battle, from my friends. They had their fight ahead of them.

And I had mine.

The crusts of half-eaten bread lying on the plate were dry as a bone, but not moldy, the water in the pitcher stagnant but potable. The battle would be my cover and I doubted anyone would notice a slave scurrying about the palace, looking for someplace to hide.

TAVION

No one noticed the silver wolf slipping into the city through the eastern door.

I'd tracked Anaria's delicious scent here, to where her gelding picked at the tufts of dry grass along the city walls, then followed that sweet-amber smell through the city, straight to the gates of the Citadelle.

Nobody marked me slinking through the city streets.

Not when a ferocious battle raged below. I was just another pale ghost on silent paws, the dulled clash of the distant battle ringing against the stone. I should be down there, not chasing down our errant charge, but I understood—even admired—her choice to face all the horrors this city offered just to save Raziel.

A brutal sense of pride sprang up in my heart at the sight of the burned hounds, the dead mages and soldiers. The utter ruthlessness of the slaughter. Anaria was ferocious, something the predator in me savored. A low growl rumbled in my chest at just how much I liked it, how much I wanted to claim her, make her mine.

And that fucking scent of hers... My spine tightened, padded feet flying over the cobblestones, faster and faster, because I couldn't reach her fast enough.

I slipped through the rear door, the one the guards used when they changed watch, timing it so I entered unseen. Had I still been the High Commander, I would have set extra patrols

around the Citadelle for this kind of an incursion, but Colonel Hightower was an arrogant git.

My guess was, all his men were down on that field with the exception of the small, elite squad guarding the king. Knowing Hightower, he was somewhere above me, watching the battle from the safety of the Citadelle, probably boasting to the king. I slipped into the guard barracks and shifted back into my Fae form.

My wolf fought the shift more than usual, growling and snarling, until I forced him, through sheer will, to let go and give me back myself. For a long moment I stood naked in the barracks, chest heaving, hands trembling, until my Fae form adjusted.

My skin prickled at the idea of being back here, at how long I'd played this part.

But I wouldn't be here long.

I'd find Anaria and get her back to Zor, even if I had to toss her over my shoulder, a proposition I wasn't entirely opposed to. I chose the uniform of a captain, a high enough rank I was assured of access to all but the king's chambers.

I gazed in the mirror and focused my magic inward, warmth spreading out from my belly as my face turned doughy, my hair dark brown, my eyes an uninteresting gray—suitably dull to escape notice in this place. Then I tamped down my scent as well, something Anaria didn't yet know how to do.

Which would make finding her easy. With luck, we'd be outside these walls and heading back toward the war within the hour.

I squared my shoulders, rumped my short, dark hair, and let the disguise sink into me. Not skin-deep but *becoming me*.

Until I was just another nameless Caladrian grunt.

When I smiled, my sharp, pointed teeth seemed to mock the wolf inside me that stared right back.



BY THE TIME I tracked Anaria through the palace, I was fuming.

To come to Tempeste had been brave, but mostly foolish.

To sneak into the royal apartments at the very summit of the Citadelle, just one floor beneath the king's own bedchamber on the day of a great battle was suicide.

No matter how noble her reasons were, Anaria was beyond reckless.

Beyond reckless and, while I admired her courage, I cursed every stubborn bone in her beautiful body. If Zorander and I hadn't seen her expend her magic, we wouldn't even know where she was. She'd be alone in this deadly place and, while she had her magic, there were terrors here she could not anticipate.

I traced my hand down the door of her bedroom, her delicate, flowery scent coating my nose and mouth so thickly I could taste her.

How many nights had I stood outside this room and watched over her? How many nights had I wondered if this girl was truly the one—the savior of our world—Julian believed her to be? She'd been so many things to me—my charge, my enemy...my wife. The latter in name only because I'd tricked her, but there was still some comfort in the title. *Wife.*

I liked the idea that we belonged together. Even if none of this was real.

No matter how badly I wanted her to be mine.

I took a breath and rested my forehead against the door, thinking of Anaria with Lucius. She'd taken care of him, a fact that both enraged and enthralled me. Lucius had never been a father to me, he'd left that task to Julian, and my resentment

ran too deep, the roots of my bitterness so entrenched I didn't think I'd ever shake them.

Wolves were pack animals.

But I'd never had a pack. I'd only ever had Julian, and when he'd...

I swallowed, forcing myself to the present, to the now, to what mattered.

Wolves were not meant to be alone. Alone, a wolf lost sight of themselves, turning inward and devouring themselves from the inside out. That's what I did before Anaria came along. It's what Lucius was doing right now.

I stared at my trembling hand and curled it into a fist.

This last shift had been...hard. Harder than most. But now was not the time to fall apart. I had to get Anaria out of here, and once she was safe, Tristan and I would return, slaughter as many guards as we had to, and get Raz out of the prison.

I pushed the door open, and Anaria whirled, her eyes narrowing on me, her hand flicking out so quickly I barely sidestepped the knife she threw. Almost perfect aim, the blade—one of Zorander's best—imbedded into the door behind me with a hollow *thunk*.

Then she was moving, diving for a pile of clean sheets.

I tackled her before she reached them, her fingers scrabbling on the floor, trying to reach the hilt of the sword sticking out of the pile. She kneed me in the balls and my vision went black, pain so intense it took my breath away roaring through me before I managed to pin her down.

"That wasn't very nice," I scolded.

"I'll carve your fucking cock off, you bastard." I kept both hands pinned down. If she accessed her magic, I'd end up a smoking hulk of ash like the hounds and I had no intention of becoming one of those.

"I don't think so," I crooned in her ear. "You always were clever, little thief, but I'm not about to let you mutilate me."

Not when I've come to save you." She went stiff beneath me, but stopped fighting, something I'd scold her about later.

"Tavion?" she breathed. "Is that you?"

"One and the same." Her body was warm and supple in my arms, and I reluctantly rolled off her with a groan then offered her a hand up. "What were you thinking, Anaria, coming here alone?" I tried, and failed to keep the heat from my voice as I pulled her to her feet.

But she didn't shy away, didn't back down, only squared her shoulders. "I know what happens in that prison, Tavion. And I will not leave Raz down there any longer than I have to."

"You can't get him out. Not alone." I didn't know why I was arguing with her when I should be carting her out of the godsforsaken city.

"I know." Her smile turned serpentine. "Which is why I'm glad you're here. Because it's not just Raz we're going after." Shadows darkened her eyes. "I'm going to find my mother. And when I do, if she's still alive, I'm taking her out of here and back to...well, wherever we go after this."

She wasn't even done and I was shaking my head. "No. Not happening. Do you have any idea of the amount of security around the prison? Around a prisoner as important as Raziel? If Adele is even still alive..." I shook my head again, struggling for the right words. I didn't want to crush Anaria's hopes, but she had to know how pointless this was.

"You made me leave Ember behind"—her eyes narrowed—"and then I had to kill her."

The accusation was a hammer blow, the coldness in her eyes sending a wave of frost over me as she held my gaze. "I didn't have a choice that day. But I have one now, and I will not leave my friends...my family here to rot while I spend my days free as a bird."

With a bitter smile, Anaria tipped her chin higher, every inch a queen, even in that dirty servant's uniform. She'd

always be a queen to me, no matter what she wore, the finest gowns or the poorest rags.

“Slink back to Zorander, but I’m staying. I *will* find Raz, I *will* find my mother, and I *will* walk out of here with both of them. With or without you.”

The wolf’s stillness crept over me; my heart cracked with shame. That she’d ever think I’d leave her here alone to face this by herself...

Even as my jaw tightened, I forced a mocking smile on my face as I bowed. “I’ve done enough slinking today, thank you very much. Tell me what mischief you are planning, princess, and I shall endeavor to make all your wishes come true.”

Anaria angled her head, but for the first time in weeks, some of that distrust slid off her face replaced by something that looked a lot like hope.

“How well do you know the prison?”

“As well as I know Nightcairn Castle.” I put my hand over my heart and mocked a bow.

She dipped her head, her eyes so vividly green they glowed. “I was really hoping you’d say that.”

“But you don’t just walk into the prison like it’s a fucking garden party. And if the guards don’t recognize me—and they won’t—I’ll end up in a cell right beside you.” The fear twisting my chest was excruciating, but the determination on her face only grew fiercer.

The steel of a queen, of someone who would take this world and bend it to her will, much like she’d bent me.

I fucking loved that look.

Loved to see that grit, that fierceness explode out of her like a raging storm, even though her anger was all too often directed at me. But like a bucket of icy water, everything dissolved into fear when she held her hands out to me.

“You’ll need a prisoner, then. I suppose you’ll have to arrest me, just like old times.” She held out her hands. Beneath

her resolve, her eyes twinkled, but there was a flash of fear, too.

“I’d think that would make your day, Commander.”

I couldn't believe Tavion was here.

Couldn't quite reconcile the swell of relief and even joy rushing through me, just knowing he'd come. Even when his face wasn't his own, his smile revealing Caladrian too sharp, shredding teeth.

Nor could I believe he agreed to help with my admittedly foolish quest to free both Raz and Adele from what had to be one of the most secure prisons in existence. Something told me when Zor found out, both our arses would be in slings.

Still, this was more than I could have hoped for, and some of my simmering resentment toward *my husband* faded away when he bowed before me, unrecognizable with his murky eyes and unremarkable face. I didn't know how long this truce of ours would last, but if Tavion helped rescue my mother and Raz, then I would certainly owe him...something.

"Who are you supposed to be, anyway?" There was a fancy crest on the chest of his uniform, metal pins on his shoulders, but I didn't know what any of those symbols meant.

"Just another mid-level grunt. Even in war, there are always a few guards left scattered through the Citadelle, though the king's elite guard is stationed one floor above." He jerked his head toward the ceiling, and I lost my breath.

"The Fae King is...*where*?"

"Directly above you, princess." Tavion's face hardened. "Let's hope we don't run into him, his guards, or anyone else

who questions either of us.”

He paused, then, “In times of war, anyone caught impersonating an officer, or attempting any crimes, including sneaking into the palace, will be killed on sight.” His lopsided grin was unrecognizable in that doughy face, but the arrogant attitude was all Tavion.

“So let’s not get caught, shall we?”

“Agreed.” I brushed past him and yanked my knife out of the door, and slipped the blade into the pocket of my dress where it clanked subtly against the stone. Thank the gods Tavion moved fast enough I didn’t skewer him. “When I was here before, they moved Adele from her regular cell down a few floors.”

“To the lowest level.” His expression flattened out. “Raziel will be on the second level, where prisoners of war are kept. With the battle going on, I doubt anyone’s had time to... uhm...*work* on him.”

I swallowed as his words hit home. “Then we should get to him before they have a chance. You might have to...carry Adele.” I held his murky gaze. “It would be in our best interest if Raz could walk.”

If they’d had the decency to pull those arrows out of him and remove the iron, he should be healed by now. If Raz was able to walk...Hope flared in me once more before I snuffed it out.

No sense in getting ahead of myself until I saw him with my own eyes.

“We’ll find him, Anaria.” Tavion’s fingers were rough when he tucked my hair back up underneath the scarf, his thumb brushing my cheek. “If Adele is alive, we’ll get her out, too, but you can’t get your hopes up. I couldn’t stand to see them crushed.”

“I know. I’m not.” A lie, and one Tavion smelled, his jaw clenching. “I’m *trying* not to,” I corrected myself and stepped away from the heat coming off his body that suddenly seemed far too intense.

“How do you want to play this?”

He stalked over to the window to stare down at the battle below, the muffled clash of fighting carrying on the winds, even at this elevation. “You want me to arrest you, but it’s not quite that simple. Do you know what they do to thieves here, Anaria?” His voice was so quiet, so solemn, I strained to hear him. “They are taken to the lowest levels of the prison where their hands are removed.”

My gut twisted, my brain already leaping ahead to how impossibly dangerous this would be.

For the both of us, if we were discovered.

“The cells are spelled against magic, to keep the strongest prisoner’s powers nulled down. Except for healing—that type of magic is allowed because...” His eyes met mine. *Because it was all too often needed.*

“But the hallways... If you have to, you can use your magic there. Maybe not full strength, but enough to get yourself to safety.” Tavion ripped a shred of fabric from the bedcover and wrapped it around one of my wrists, his fingers brushing over my skin, sending my pulse skittering.

“But the ruse will get us inside the prison. To where we need to be.” His eyes were filled with a grim kind of resolve, as if he’d tried—and failed—to come up with another option. “But once we are down there, if anyone outranks me, once they get a look at you...” His chest shuddered, then settled, a low growl straining to escape his lips.

“Prisoners stronger than me have tried to fight their way out of the royal prison. None have succeeded.”

“A thief it is, then.” I winked, though my forced smile stretched my lips too thin. “Not like it’s a lie, is it?” For one long moment we stared at each other, not quite enemies, not quite allies, just two people aligned in purpose at the moment.

“*Anaria.*” My name, but a question, too. A final chance to turn back, to abandon what was almost sure to be a disastrous rescue mission.

“I won’t blame you if you leave, Tavion.” I tilted my head. “This is...I don’t expect you to follow me to your death because of some ridiculous idea of mine. But if I leave them in there...I could never live with myself.”

Tavion blinked then jerked his head at me. “Turn around. Put your hands behind your back.”

I swallowed but obeyed, and he pressed me against the wall, my cheek resting on the blissfully cool stone. He was right behind me, and though I hadn’t smelled him when he’d arrived, I smelled him now.

Pure musky male, pine forests and cold mists, and I closed my eyes as the smell wound through me, sending my heart racing.

His hands were gentle when he bound my wrists, but everywhere he touched me left a trail of fire. The knots were loose enough I could slip out of them if I needed.

Tavion spun me around, my back against the wall, and dipped his hand into my pocket and removed the knife. Then he bent until all I could see was the top of his dark head, sliding his hand up my calf, then higher.

Gods, the friction of his calloused palms against my smooth skin, his warm breath brushing my thigh as he pushed my dress higher and higher sent shivers—and thoughts I shouldn’t be thinking—right through me.

“Hold still.”

His hands—whether his or the disguise he wore—were rough, and I swayed from his closeness, his scent, the fact that we were probably going to die. He buckled a knife sheath around my thigh. Slid the knife into it, then tugged my dress back down, fingers trailing slowly down my thigh, longer than was necessary.

“If anything goes wrong, you slip out of these bindings and you get out of there. They’ll be running a skeleton crew in the prison, but those fuckers...they’re bastards. If I go down, leave me behind. Use the knife.”

“I have magic, Tavion,” I reminded him. “The last time...I didn’t. But this time, they’ll be the ones who should be afraid.”

“Remember there are limits. Only the corridors, not the cells, unless you’re healing someone. If this goes wrong, do not wait for me. You run, do you hear me?”

I flinched at his order but I didn’t agree.

I had no intention of running.

I meant to burn this city to the fucking ground starting with that prison.

But I’d do it out of love, I reminded myself.



TAVION SHOVED me through the doors into the prison, past the leering guards, into the suffocating stench of blood and death and fear.

For a moment I froze in terror, memories clawing their way out—Solok’s whipping, his creeping hands, those days in the freezing cold spent on the stone floor, desperately trying to stay awake so rats didn’t chew off my fingers—before fear becomes steel resolve.

I survived that cell. I survived the king.

I would survive this, too.

“You know there’s a war going on?” One of the guards bared pointed, black teeth, so like the Oracle’s I gagged. “We have bigger problems than a slave girl.”

“She was caught stealing from the royal apartments. From the king himself.” Tavion’s cold voice thrummed with power, and I wondered if he even knew how he sounded. Or if he was so used to command, arrogance was just ingrained into him. The guards straightened, staring at me with renewed interest.

“Cheeky little bitch.”

“Indeed. Now let us through.”

They stepped aside, as did the guards a level below. And the ones after that.

Every level we descended brought fresh horrors, the guards growing ever more monstrous, the smell fouler, the prisoners thinner and more hopeless. Seven levels in all, until I didn't have to fake my shaking or my tears, which dripped off my chin as I saw the horrors of this abominable place.

Only Tavion's warm, steady grip on my arm kept me upright, and I'd abandoned all pretense of courage when we stopped in front of the final door.

Tavion pushed it open, the hinges groaning as if they were seldom used. The corridor was lit by torches, the ceiling black from soot, and a slovenly guard rose slowly to his feet, his one good eye raking over me, leaving me feeling in need of a bath.

"You're in the wrong place, Captain, not that I'm complaining. Females go on the fourth level."

"Not if they're thieves." Tavion's clipped, refined tone had the loathsome guard hesitating. Tavion jerked his head to the far end of the hall from where we'd come. "Now let me have my fun."

"I'm not supposed to..." His breathing turned choppy the longer he looked me over, and Tavion's hand squeezed tight enough on my arm that I yelped.

"Do you really want to argue with me right now?" Tavion crooned, and I froze at that tone. Once, I'd believed that coldness, that utter contempt to be the real Tavion Montgomery.

Now I understood that was only an act.

I wasn't sure when things had changed. Only that they had.

"Yes sir." The guard dipped his head, but his eye was black with lust. "You going to leave her down here after you're done?" he asked casually, nodding to a cell at the very end. "We do the cutting in there; I've got the brazier going for cauterizing so she doesn't bleed out."

“Very good. And no, the king wants her brought before him so he knows the job was done right.” Tavion’s teeth flashed, even sharper than before. “You understand.”

The male’s lips twisted in disappointment. “Pity. It’s been a while since we’ve had any new meat down here.”

He squeezed past us in the hall, and I gagged when he brushed up against me, though Tavion blocked me as best he could. Both of us relaxed when the door finally clicked shut. I held myself back from sagging against him in relief.

He ripped the bindings off my wrists and pointed me to the end of the hall. “Start checking the cells, I’ll go to the other end.”

I’d been in some dark places in my life, endured some awful, dark things, but this...This place was evil beyond all imaginings. This place was filled with a doomlike hopelessness that wrapped you up and squeezed the life from you as efficiently as a disease that would eat you from the inside out until there was nothing left.

I passed cell after cell where the inhabitants were scooted so far into the dark recesses, the flickering torches showing flashes of a white, spindly leg, a stick-thin arm. Eyes glowing from the shadows. I couldn’t tell if they were male or female or even alive.

“Anaria?”

I was plastered against the bars of the cell before I even knew I’d moved, shoulder shoved into those iron bars so hard it hurt, my hand stretched out as far as I could reach, toward the darkness where two pale eyes glowed.

She was alive. My mother was alive.

“Gods...how can you be here?” Her ruined fingers gripped the stained floor as she pulled herself toward me, emaciated body scraping horribly on the rock, her clothes little more than scraps.

My head emptied out.

In that split second, I mourned. I raged. I burned from the force of emotions warring within me.

But in the end, I cried, falling to my knees when her hand finally—*finally*—slipped into mine.

“You don’t have your collar on.” Her pale eyes narrowed on my throat. “What are you doing down here?”

“I came to free you. To take you away from this place.”

“Silly girl, there is no escaping this place.” But she reached through the opening and brushed her knuckles down my face as Tavion approached, pity in his eyes, his scent wrapping around me like a blanket as if he wished to give me some comfort.

Adele’s gaze drifted to Tavion then narrowed, as if she half recognized him. “You came all this way for nothing. Just ask your friend, he’ll tell you.”

“I’ll find the keys,” was all he said, leaving us alone, as if he knew exactly what this moment meant to me.

My mother:

I hadn’t known the truth when I’d met her before, but I did now. Adele was my mother, and now that I’d found her and she was, impossibly, alive, I would not give up until she was free of this place.

I wanted to see her with the wind in her hair and the sun on her face.

I wanted to hear her laugh, her stories of a family I would never know. I wanted her so far away from this miserable city and everyone in it, most especially my father, that Tempeste would become a foggy, distant memory.

“You did it, didn’t you?” Adele’s pale-blue eyes shone fiercely. “You claimed the magic and now that prick will never get his power back.” Her smile turned vicious. “Maybe now he’ll finally die.”

“You were the reason I claimed the power. You gave me the courage to take it for myself.”

She nodded. “Good. I’m glad one of us was able to take back what we deserved.”

“Tavion will find the keys and we’ll get you out of this cell,” I told her quietly. After that...I was wise enough to make no promises.

“I can’t walk.” She peered out at me, nothing behind that gaze but a hollow emptiness that made me want to howl. I wanted to fix her, to piece her back together until she was whole. But it was not up to me to heal Adele.

After what had been done to her...I wondered if healing—true healing—was even possible.

“I know. Tavion will carry you.”

Her face scrunched up in concentration. “I know that name. I’ve heard it before.”

“You knew his brother, Julian.” From the other end of the hall, Tavion’s quick, sure steps faltered.

She settled back on her heels, her hands slipping from the bars, resignation and a little fear on her face. “Ah. You know who I am, then. Did Julian tell you about me?”

Did she even *want* to know me?

Adele had been trapped down here, all alone, since I was born. Maybe she blamed me for her imprisonment.

Maybe she *hated* me.

“Julian is dead. But yes, I know who you are to me,” I said carefully, watching her face. I didn’t know who, exactly, was in these other cells, if they were even capable of listening. If they cared about anything but their own misery.

“We will get you out of here, Adele. But we have to find Raziel first.”

“Another name I haven’t heard in the longest time.”

Keys rattled then Tavion was in front of me, unlocking the door. The next moment, my arms were around Adele—*my mother*—her too thin frame crushed against me, every bone as

sharp as the knife strapped to my thigh. “We will get you out of here, and we will burn this fucking place to the ground.”

“*Anaria.*” She put so much motherly reproof in her voice, some part of me cracked wide open. *Cheated.* We’d been cheated of everything, by the king and the Oracle and fate.

And we were going to cheat all of them right back.

“Open every cell,” I told Tavion. “Every last one, and then we move to the next level.” A wild, savage glee coursed through my veins and despite the iron bands, my magic sang right along with it.

“We are going to free everyone inside this prison.”

“What about the guards?” Adele’s brow scrunched together, her hair floating around her head like spiderwebs.

“Leave them to me.” I slid the bands off my arms and slipped them into my dress pocket.

Stardust danced through Tempeste's prison.

Probably the first time in a thousand years this dismal place had seen anything except blood and screams.

Tavion's furious warnings kept me from losing my head more than once, but by the time we reached the second level of the prison, every prisoner had been liberated, every guard lay behind us in ashy piles on the floor.

By now, Adele was shell-shocked, her frail body barely covered by the tattered gown, but her eyes were feverishly bright as she watched guard after guard fall beneath my magic, cell doors springing open to release prisoner after prisoner.

We paused before the thick iron door that sealed off this floor while I prepared myself for Tavion's argument. We'd already had the same fight five times and I expected we'd have the discussion at least twice more before we reached the top.

"I can't go first." He growled, teeth bared as he carefully adjusted Adele in his arms. "There will be more guards on this floor. The most vicious of the prison's guards. They'll be armed, and some have magic of their own. Do not hesitate, Anaria. Strike fast and hard."

I glanced behind us, to the crowd of prisoners waiting for this door to open, for a clear path to be made. Once we liberated this floor, we'd promised them free reign to do what they wanted, and they were losing patience.

“Will do. Stay behind the door until the guards are down.” My eyes flicked from Adele to Tavion, and he gave me a shallow nod.

Power thrummed in my blood when he kicked the door wide, star flecked magic spilling through the opening in a mighty wave of white.

As it turned out, every protection on this prison was working to our advantage right now.

The thick iron doors sealed off the noise, the magic, the guard’s screaming, and by the time we reached the main floor of the Citadelle, the freed prisoners would flood the palace, then the streets.

Hundreds of them, and in the melee, we would escape.

That was the plan, anyway, if this worked.

Guards swarmed in then fell in smoking hulks to the floor. Out of the corner of my eye I saw a flash before fiery pain tore through my right arm. I faltered then turned and sent a spear of magic toward the guard rallying himself for another volley. Without a sound, he collapsed, a faint haze of power rising from him like mist.

“Damn it. Let me see your arm, Anaria.” Tavion’s voice teetered on the edge of demand and fear. “You’re burned.”

“We don’t have time for that right now.” My injury was the least of my concerns right now. We had a mob of angry prisoners at our back, and a fight between us and freedom.

“Now, where is Raziel?” I pulled out the keys and paced the length of the familiar hall, losing my breath when I stopped in front of the room where Solok had tied me down. Tortured me. Something rattled loose inside me, my body trembling beneath the onslaught of bloody, painful memories.

I couldn’t open the door, I couldn’t...

“Anaria, look at me.” Then Tavion was there, hand stroking down my back, gently taking the keys from my shaking hand. A wide-eyed Adele was on the floor, arms

wrapped around her knees, staring up at me. “Let me do this. You don’t need to see what’s inside this room.”

No...*Yes...yes, I did.*

I *did* need to see that room. To face what happened there. To know that I did not break—that I *never* broke. Not for Solok. Not for the king. Not for the Oracle.

And no matter what was behind that door, that wouldn’t break me either.

I sucked in a breath, praying I was right about that. “Unlock the door.”

“*Anaria.* What if...”

I shook my head. “Unlock the door, Tavion, and let me see him.” My eyes flicked up to his, and for one brief second, his changed back to forest green, raging and vicious and piercing, as if they saw straight into my very soul.

Just like they had the last time we were down here.

“I need to see what is in there. I’m ready, Tavion.”

The mob of prisoners stretched back as far as I could see, impatient, furious, hungry for vengeance.

I stepped forward and they retreated. I pointed to Adele. “This is my mother. You will guard her with your lives and give us time to free our friend.” I jerked my head toward the last door that stood between them and freedom.

“Five minutes and we all leave. That is the deal.” Magic whipped the air and they all shrunk back, fear in their eyes, but they gave Adele a healthy berth.

“I’m ready,” I repeated quietly as Tavion unlocked the door. “Let’s get Raz out of there.”

Everything inside the awful room was the same.

The stained table with the iron cuffs, the blood-splattered stone walls and ceiling.

Raziel was cuffed to the wall with heavy chains, slumped on the floor, broken arrows sticking out of him crusted with

dried blood where they were imbedded into his body. Tavion got to him first, unlocking the cuffs from his wrists, while I knelt beside him, tipping his head back and checking for a pulse.

“He’s alive.” I eyed the broken off arrows, the shoulder that was certainly dislocated, the scrape that abraded off most of his cheek, probably from when his horse went down. “Fuck. They just dragged him in here and left him.”

“Not a surprise, given they’re a bunch of ruthless savages.” Tavion set his hand on my shoulder, and I took a breath. “Be glad they forgot him, Anaria. This is good news compared to what they might have done.”

I cocked my ear, half listening to the angry hum of the prisoners outside. “They won’t wait forever. We’ll be lucky if we have five minutes to get the bleeding to stop.” Until we did, moving Raz would be too dangerous.

“Stand back and don’t look,” Tavion growled, and before I could turn my head, he slid one of the arrows out with a grotesque, wet sluicing sound. Raz didn’t even flinch. I gagged but kept my hands pressed against his chest, feeling his heart speed up, forcing the bile back down my throat.

I’d healed him before. *Once.*

Under the guidance of an actual skilled healer.

Tavion frowned then bent Raz forward to where the second arrow had punched out through his back, just above his shoulder blade, the point covered in dried blood. “Hold him steady, Anaria. Don’t let him move.” Tavion grasped the arrowhead and yanked hard while I gritted my teeth against that awful slithering sound.

“One more.” His eyes met mine. “The iron point is still inside him—that’s why he’s not healing on his own. Hold him steady, but you’ll want to look away.” He flipped out his knife, and this time I did turn away, my breaths erratic until he finally muttered, “Okay, it’s out. You can turn around, Anaria.”

Fresh blood soaked Raziel's left side, his pale face clammy.

"Can you use your magic on him? Like before?" Tavion asked cautiously.

"I don't know. Even if I did...I would have to take my time, feel my way through the healing, since I don't know what I'm doing." Magic danced all around us, but fear gripped me in icy fingers as I contemplated everything that might go wrong if I tried. Outside, the murmur of voices grew louder, and I climbed to my feet.

"I'm changing the plan," I murmured. "Come with me and get Adele, I'm giving them the keys."

"And if we get trapped down here?"

"I have my magic. You can shift into the scary wolf." I shrugged. "If you have a better plan, I'm all ears."

Tavion shook his head and climbed to his feet. "This is your show, princess. I'm just here for muscle."

When we stepped into the hall, the prisoners retreated a few paces, but no more, while Tavion scooped Adele up off the floor. Fear crept up my spine when I saw her thin legs dangling loose.

"They're getting restless," she murmured. "Though I can hardly blame them. I can't wait to get out of here." Tavion backed into the cell, Adele in his arms, giving me a look of warning.

I nodded to the iron-clad door, the one that led to the staircase up to the main floor. "Once you reach the top of the steps, there will be more guards, but not many. The main exit to the streets is to your left. Good luck." Then I handed the closest male the keys and jumped out of the way.



FRANTIC PRISONERS STREAMED past the open door, shoving and fighting for freedom.

I turned my attention to Raz, so pale he looked dead, then dropped to my knees before him, well aware of how keenly Tavion and Adele watched. Well aware of how sweaty my palms were when I pressed them to his chest.

His heart beat slow and faint, his breathing erratic.

I closed my eyes and settled myself. Settled my magic. Let the world fade away until there was only Raziel and me.

The one I chose.

The one I loved.

The one who was meant to be mine. Magic seeped from my palms in a warm and gentle wave, and I willed my stolen power to repair the torn flesh, the ruined vessels, to take the pain away and replace it with the love he'd long been denied.

Heal, I breathed. *Heal and be made whole again.*

There was a meaty, hideous pop when his shoulder slid back into place, followed by his deep, shuddering groan tinged with agony. The scarf came unwrapped from my head and I tore it away, pushing my hair back out of my face.

I love you so much, I thought, feeding more magic into him as slowly as I could, trying to focus to make sure it went to the right places, but it all became too much. *Please. Please come back to me.* There were too many feelings tangling inside me, I had too much to lose if this didn't fucking work.

When a callous roughened palm flattened over my hand and pressed it tighter into his chest, I opened my eyes to meet Raz's dark, confused gaze, his half smile fading away the longer he stared up at me. The scrape on his cheek was little more than a pink mark, the arrow holes slightly puckered but healing on his shoulder.

"You called me a pincushion," Raziel whispered, but he looked at me like I was the moon that all his dreams hung on.

A laugh that was more like a sob tore out of me, his face blurring as I blinked away the tears. "You *were* a pincushion, until Tavion pulled all those arrows out of you."

His brow wrinkled. “Where are we?” Raz’s eyes widened as he looked over my shoulder, then he scrambled sloppily to his feet, staring through the door to where the last of the prisoners streamed past, to Adele cradled in Tavion’s arms, to the blood-stained table where I once thought I’d die.

His face becomes a mask of confusion. “This is the Tempeste prison.”

“It is.” I climbed to my feet, bracing his arm as he wove unsteadily.

“And we are leaving this shithole for good.”

ZORANDER

The Caladrians might be a pack of voracious, soulless monsters, but the bastards could fucking fight.

With spears and swords and razor-sharp teeth, they attacked with an efficiency my men were not initially prepared for, until the rancid scent of fear stained the air as they'd glimpsed what we'd be facing.

Our lines had not broken, but they had wavered when the first of the Caladrian soldiers launched themselves at my men, tearing at them with those hideous teeth and claws. Corrupted by this realm's dying magic, they were little more than animals.

Once the first heat of battle faded, the odds evened out, and Caladrian soldiers died just as easily as Solarys ones. Not that their skill level surprised me. Tavion had trained these men for twenty years, some of his expertise was bound to rub off.

Nor was it in Tavion's nature to be sloppy, and so, the troops we met in battle were vicious and deadly, but we turned the tide. Except the tide kept coming.

A few thousand, that lying bitch of an Oracle had claimed, according to Tristan.

More like eight thousand, streaming in a never-ending river from the desiccated forest, the blood-soaked plain rumbling beneath my feet as they swarmed the flatlands, my soldiers rallying yet again.

A hail of arrows—courtesy of Tristan and his archers—flew overhead, and blue-cloaked soldiers dropped like flies, only to be replaced by twice as many.

One of them fell on the soldier beside me and ripped out his throat, swallowing the hunk of bloody flesh before I sliced my blade through the enemy's throat, a shower of blood soaking the desert-dry earth.

The Oracle would get her wish today.

Gallons and gallons of blood would be shed, and unless we stemmed the deadly tide coming out of those trees, few of us would be marching back to Solarys. It was up to me to ensure as many as possible returned to the only home they'd ever known.

These men—my men—weren't *bad*.

They just didn't know the world could be better.

They'd never known a day of peace or a bit of hope that the world could be different than it was. That this bloody war would stop claiming fathers and sons, that they had other choices than to fight.

But first, they had to survive today.

Two Caladrian soldiers charged, teeth gnashing, and I spun, taking the first one's head, slicing the second's calf to the bone before I stopped. My shoulders ached when I stabbed my sword straight through his skull into the dirt, yanking the blade back out, parrying and slicing through a third.

The Shadow King was a monster and his reign of terror was a thousand-year long travesty, but these men were my responsibility. They had families and lives that they deserved to return to. While the Caladrians had spent days waiting among the dead trees, we'd traveled for five days to reach this place.

We'd been fighting for hours.

Our energy was flagging.

And they still kept coming.

We fought and fought, but I couldn't stop looking up at the city above us, where somewhere, Anaria—and Tavion, too, since he hadn't returned—was saving Raziel. Whatever happened down on this battlefield, they would escape this place.

A great shout went up and men began fleeing, enemy and ally alike, then I spotted the hounds towering over the clashing armies. The foul beasts ripped through men and horses like they were water, giving no quarter to their own men, until Tristan saw the threat from almost a mile away, and a barrage of arrows thick enough to block out the sun fell, pinning the beasts to the ground.

Soldiers went through and finished them off, driving sword and spear through their heads until they stopped moving, but the distraction had been enough for enemy lines to advance, their leading soldiers ducking behind braced shields, the second line hurling spears with deadly precision.

My front line shredded apart, then enemy soldiers spilled into our ranks, slashing through the lines with deadly ease. And beyond them...our enemy stretched as far as I could see, the broken forest masking their superior numbers, and I cursed myself for relying on the Oracle's warning when I should have done my own scouting.

"Move to the front," I shouted. "Keep the line solid."

Still, Caladrius kept coming, wave after wave, driving us back to the east, toward base camp, as if we were sheep to be herded. But I was a warrior. I'd fought bigger armies, faced worse odds. And I was good at this shite.

The next few minutes were little more than muscle memory.

Step, step, stab. Turn, pivot, slash.

Blood splattered until I was dripping with it, layered with the dust, I soon had a crust of rust-colored mud over me, my boots caked solid.

A group of us had fought until we stood back-to-back, shields up, swords ready, surrounded by a circle of Caladrian

Fae, hunger in their eyes, mouths already stained with blood.

Tavion and Raz would get Anaria out of this realm and back to Solarys. A hellish pit for sure, but better than here.

“We’re fucking surrounded. Won’t get out of this one,” The soldier to my right muttered, his sword wavering.

“Keep your shields up. Do not falter,” I warned them before I disappeared.

My magic flowed through me like water, seamless and cold, ripping me through space from one place to another, landing only long enough to slice through a throat, slide my sword between a ribcage, hack through a hamstring.

By the time I landed, more out of breath than I should have been, the knot of my soldiers was surrounded by a circle of bodies, none of them moving.

But it was a temporary victory.

The ground was littered with black-suited bodies, far more than the silver and blue of Caladrius, and I ducked as a spear flew overhead, the bone crunching thud behind me telling me the weapon had found its mark.

“Over here. The general. *The general*,” someone shouted, and twenty Caladrian soldiers rushed me, more than I could ever hope to fight off, while all around me my men fought for their lives.

I waited until they closed around me, a tightening circle of swords and spears, each of them grinning in anticipation of being the lucky fucker to drag me in front of the Fae King and collect their bounty.

“I heard I’m worth a small fortune to your master. I suppose you mean to collect, you fuckers.” I grinned, tasting blood. “Let’s go.”

As one, they sprang forward, a sea of swords and knives and teeth, ready to rip and devour.

My magic bubbled up, cold and deadly, but tinged with something dark and foul. For the first time in my life, my

power tasted different, felt different, in ways I couldn't take the time to examine.

I went to disappear as the soldiers lunged, but instead, sent out a wave of darkness so powerful the air seemed to bow before it, warping and bending as the surge ripped through the enemy like they were matchsticks.

Through the black, vaporous magic, every soldier lay dead, nothing but ruined flesh and shredded fabric, their weapons lying beside them.

My mouth tasted of ash, like I'd swallowed a bonfire.

What the fuck was that? I'd never had magic like that before.

Then a Caladrian soldier surged out of the black cloud, skin in tatters, his sword aiming for my throat. I parried just in time, and then every breath was dedicated to trying to fucking stay alive.

The Citadelle was chaos.

I hoped the Oracle was happy, at least.

I'd denied her blood, but she'd gotten exactly what she wanted.

Prisoners tore priceless paintings off the walls and shattered crystal vases. Shards crunched beneath our feet as we headed for the street, dragging a shimmer of starry magic behind us. I'd expended a lot of magic today, more than I'd intended, and we weren't out of the palace yet.

Tavion carried Adele and I kept my arm looped around Raz's waist, his balance getting steadier with every step. All around us, Tempeste soldiers lay dead on the blood-smeared marble floors, embers floating past carried along by the heavy smell of smoke.

"Perhaps you don't have to burn this place down after all, princess," Tavion muttered as we picked our way through the melee. "Someone's doing your job for you."

"Fine, I didn't want to—"

A wall of steel and armor swept in to block our escape, then the Fae King scuttled in front of us, his long hair swinging loose, his dark eyes wild with rage.

"You didn't think I'd sense my magic being used in *my own home*?" he roared, advancing toward us on creeping, spiderlike legs. "I sensed something earlier out on that field—I *fucking knew it*."

“Tavion.” Magic pooled around me, slipping across the floor like fog. “Get my mother out of here. *Now.*”

Adele had no way to defend herself, no means to even run, if this went badly. *Please, Tavion, for once in your life, listen to me.*

The king’s eyes—faceted, like the Oracle’s—flew over to Adele then narrowed, as if he was finally putting two and two together. “I should have killed you when you were still in her belly.” His face twisted in fury. “Then none of this would be...”

My blast of magic blew Carex backwards into his own guards, sending them scattering across the marble floor, one of them screaming for help as he was dragged off by a horde of prisoners.

“Get my mother out of here. Raz, go with them.” I kept my eyes on the king pushing up, glimpses of his black-veined skin visible through his torn clothing. His guards climbed to their feet, weapons drawn, their ravaging gazes fixed on me. “Now. I’m not going to ask again.”

I felt Tavion and Raz fade back while power dripped from my fingers. No hate in my heart, no hate in my...*fuck it.*

I had nothing *but* hate in my heart as I faced this bastard. All I had to do was envision my mother’s hands, the hopelessness in her eyes, and that hate transformed into pure power.

I lifted my glowing hand, praying I never became anything like this monster in front of me.

“This is mine,” I told him softly, watching his face change as the truth set in. “Mine to do whatever I want with. Mine to use to bring you to your knees.”

“There are bigger monsters than me out there, just waiting for you, daughter.”

I forced a grin onto my face. “Oh, I know. I’ve met them.”

“Bigger, even, than her.”

I tried not to wonder what he meant by that. Then I didn't have time to wonder as Carex's insectile claws clicked and he circled to the right, trying to turn me away from his guard, to give them an opening to attack me from behind. Like I would fall for so simple a ruse.

Like Raz and Zorander hadn't chided me a hundred times for leaving my right side open.

Enough.

Enough of these games and petty maneuverings.

Enough of wasting time while Zorander and Tristan fought alone on the battlefield below. I sent a shimmering blast of magic straight through the remaining guards, and they scattered across the floor, smoke drifting from their unmoving bodies.

I turned my attention back to Carex. My father. *The monster.*

My breath grew thin as I contemplated just how deeply he'd damaged these people, this realm. How far down his corruption went. Whether or not there was any saving this realm, even if we managed to outwit the Oracle and defeat the king.

A big part of me wondered if we were just wasting our time.

"You are the real monster, hoarding your power and allowing the magic to become twisted and corrupt in the first place." My voice narrowed down to a slithering hiss, not the booming, otherworldly voice I'd used with Solok, but more like the Oracle's serpentine drone. "*You* stole this magic. Astragulas Centaria took the magic and the land for himself."

He snorted. "You stole the magic as well. Do you really think we are that different, *daughter?*"

"You twisted this realm into something dark and evil. You ruined these people, these lands. You sucked the life out of this place like the monster you are."

His eyebrows went up, his surprise seemingly genuine as he considered me. “You think this is because of me?” He waved his ruined hand at the wasteland stretching out around the city. “You think this decay is *my fault?*” His laugh turned jolting and rough, as if he hadn’t laughed in a millennium.

“Twenty years ago, Caladrius was a verdant utopia, filled with life. That all changed the moment you were born.”

His eyes glittered with malice. “This scourge is on your head, daughter. You stole my magic, and in doing so, took every drop of magic from the land and its people. We had no choice but to cannibalize ourselves, as the land had no choice but to feed upon itself until it was exhausted.”

Some of the prisoners stopped their looting to listen.

“You have caused every bit of misery you see.” The king’s voice rang over the quieting crowd, chaos settling at his commanding voice. “Many of these prisoners were in those cells because they were forced into lives of thievery and crime...*because of you.*”

His accusation rumbled through me like an avalanche.

He spoke the truth.

I couldn’t pinpoint how I knew it was true, only that it was. *I’d done this.* I’d ruined this realm and turned these people into monsters. I’d twisted the power into something awful and killed everything that had once been alive.

You are poison. Everything you touch is either ruined or dies.

Not the words of an enemy, but of an ally.

Tristan’s words. And as it turned out...the truth.

Did Tristan know what he was saying? Did they *all* know?

Every eye that had been fixed on the king in hatred and fury now slowly turned on me, and I shuddered at what I glimpsed in their faces.

“I was a child. It was not my choice.” I didn’t call him a liar, because somehow, a thousand small, innocuous details

came together to paint a picture that finally made sense.

Tavion's regret when he told me the views from the Wynter Palace had once been beautiful.

Dane's hints that the lands had begun dying out just twenty years ago.

The way the magic sang along in agreement with his words.

"Do any of us really have a choice, daughter?" Carex asked softly, tipping his head to the side, his smile revealing pointed teeth. "Or are we simply pawns of the Old Gods?"

Fast as an adder, his hand swept out, raking through the air between us.

I was already moving, rearing back from his low, vicious hiss, the one that warned me, a second before he struck, what was coming. But not quickly enough. The tip of his nail caught my throat, raking a furrow through my flesh...but no deeper.

Sharp, excruciating pain. But not death.

Another inch, and I'd be bleeding out on the floor.

Magic poured out of me so fast I screamed, a writhing, demanding force that might have torn me asunder if I had tried to contain it. But I didn't. I *couldn't*. I'd barely gotten my hands up when the ancient Fae power burst out of me, as if the magic had a score of its own to settle with the Fae King.

Like Solok, the magic was not kind to Carex Centaria.

Sharp curving thorns burst from his blackened hands, fingers becoming gnarled vines, half his face disappearing beneath a tangle of ruined flesh and twisting roots in a horrific, writhing mass. I would have stopped the transformation, but I couldn't lower my shaking hands.

Not until the magic decided it was finished.

And when it was over, I stared at the creature I'd created.

Only then did I become aware of the thudding all around us as everyone closest to us fell, their faces and bodies marked

by twisting black vines, mouths stretched wide in silent screams of pain.

The king writhed on the ground, ruined hands and feet scratching against the stone with a horrible rasp.

But beyond the king, beyond the smoking corpses of his guards and the fallen prisoners, I saw who approached, and my heart stopped beating altogether. The Mistress's lips were pulled back from her pointed teeth, her eyes burning as she bore down on me.

I turned and ran.

Tavion carried Adele out of the palace, through the doors, into the sunlight, rushing to get her out of range, his cape snapping in the wind. Prisoners scattered out of his path, recognizing him as their liberator, not one of their jailors.

Good.

I sucked in an unsteady breath, tinged with smoke and the strong scent of freshly spilled blood.

Adele was too weak to survive even a touch of Anaria's magic. I swallowed, watching them disappear into the crowd of prisoners fleeing through the city streets.

Once, Adele had been the most stunning Fae I'd ever seen. Proud and cold and haughty, yet fully vested in our plan to claim the king's magic and bring down his regime. Though, perhaps, that too had been one of the Oracle's lies. Shame roiled inside me like a nest of snakes when I saw what our plan had wrought—the sheer devastation of the once-beautiful female.

Adele might have been a willing participant, but Anaria was right.

We'd failed her mother in every way.

An emaciated prisoner lunged at me, a shard of glass clenched in his bleeding hand, and I shoved him away. "I'm not your fucking enemy," I growled, though his fever-bright eyes didn't register he'd even heard. By the time I got him to understand, Anaria—dressed in a threadbare servant's uniform

—was already facing the Fae King. Her hands were coated with magic, the king circling to her right, his guards flanking her, waiting for an opening to throw a knife or a spear.

“Anaria, watch...” I was too far away for her to hear.

But Anaria saw his trap and cast a fatal lash of magic into the guards, enveloping them in white, starry power that swept around them in a dazzle of light and motion, then sucked back into her in a voluminous rush. Every guard dropped like a stone, a faint haze of smoke rising from their crumpled forms.

I couldn't hear them over the chaotic rioting, but their lips moved, the king's malice apparent on his face. I couldn't see Anaria's face, but her hair floated in the air, lifted by the star-dusted wind whipping around her.

The prisoners broke away from their feverish destruction to watch, and their eyes flicked from the king...over to Anaria, none of their rage fading as they pressed in. I inched closer, trying to hear what they were saying, but could only catch bits and pieces.

Stole...magic...decay...your fault.

Oh gods. The bastard was telling Anaria the truth we'd been keeping from her. We'd kept it from her because we'd known this would lay heavy on her heart, weigh her down with guilt, even though this was not her fault.

Carex inched closer, his devouring gaze fixed on the woman I loved, his taloned hands flexing compulsively. Faster than should have been possible, his hand shot out and swiped a brutal, deadly arc through the air, straight across Anaria's throat.

I screamed a warning, my magic howling to get out, to protect the woman I loved, to erase this threat that wanted her dead. I flew forward, and though Anaria shuddered, there was no splatter of blood.

She exploded.

Magic filled the air in a roar, sending everyone stumbling backwards, fear painted on their faces as the magic enveloped those of us who were closest, the soul sucking coldness

thundering through us, as cold as the emptiness between the stars, as vast as the cosmos and just as deadly.

The iron collar repelled most of the blast.

The others around me...were not so lucky. Some died instantly. Some sprouted the unnaturally shiny black vines and thorns as Solok...and now the king.

The nulling spell was a double-edged sword, I realized, as the rumble of her magic shook the floor beneath me, the ceiling above, those closest to me screaming as the entire Citadelle rocked.

I didn't know if from her magic already being inside me, or the iron collar, or the gods smiling down upon me, but when the wave of white sucked back into her, when everything went still and quiet, I was the only one left on my feet.

The king—what was left of him—convulsed on the stone floor, hardly anything Fae left in his visage or his body. He was little more than a mass of black, writhing vines and thorns, shiny as if he'd been soaked in fresh pitch, his one good eye glaring balefully up at Anaria.

But she wasn't looking at him.

She was staring straight through the rioting crowd to the white-haired female bearing down on her with predatory intent. The Mistress kept up those slow, stalking steps, and Anaria stayed frozen in place as if she'd forgotten how to move.

"*Anaria,*" I screamed, but my voice was swallowed up in the vacuum of silence the explosion left behind. Then finally, *finally*, she whirled and ran.

Straight into my arms.

Her face was pure white, the red furrow across her throat shallow.

So close. She'd come so close to dying just now, and there was nothing I could have done to stop it because of this fucking collar.

“Tavion’s halfway out of the city by now.” I grasped her arm and pulled her along, her feet dragging on the floor, the glass, sliding through the blood. She tried to turn, to see behind us—if the Mistress was still following—and I hauled her against me.

“Keep moving.” My voice was harsh, but no good could come of her seeing that. “We have to get outside these walls before Carex locks down the gates.”

“Raz,” she gasped, her fingers trying to peel my hand away. “I...What did I just do?”

“What was required,” I told her. “Carex was going to kill you. His guards would have tortured you. Fighting back was your only option.” I would not allow her to blame herself for this outcome.

“Were those...Did I hurt anyone else?”

Refused to let her regret what she’d done, to regret any of this.

All around us, chaos reigned as prisoners shattered windows or ran for their lives, along with servants, and a handful of soldiers tried to keep order. One glance behind me showed thick smoke billowing out of windows on the higher floors, and standing on the steps, the Mistress locked eyes with me.

She drew her finger across her throat, then pointed at Anaria.

I didn’t look back again.

Neither of us spoke as we rushed through the streets. We finally left the frantic crowd behind, aiming for the eastern gate, my eyes peeled for any sign of Tavion’s billowing blue cloak, the fragile female in his arms. The sounds of fighting grew closer—the clash of metal, screams of the wounded, the thundering of feet charging.

When we reached one of the streets that overlooked the battlefield, we both stopped in our tracks, gaping.

“There are so many,” Anaria whispered. “More than...”

Her frightened gaze caught mine, and I nodded. “More than the Oracle warned us would be here. She knew we’d be outmatched, that no matter what we did, this would be a slaughter.”

“She wanted everyone to die,” Anaria whispered. “She meant to get her blood, no matter how hard we tried to stop her.”

On the battlefield, it was hard to tell one side from the other, but the enemy forces streaming from the dead forest seemed to have no end. I couldn’t pick out Zorander in the knots of fighting, but my old friend was down there somewhere, still fighting.

He had to be.

I slid my finger between my neck and the collar.

I should be down there. *I should be fighting.* I didn’t have my magic, but I could wield a sword well enough, and from the look of things, Zor needed every last able-bodied male he could get.

“Let’s keep moving.” I released her arm, but took her hand, wrapping my palm around her shaking fingers. “Tavion can’t be that far ahead of us. Once we catch up to him, you and Adele take the horse and ride back to the war camp. Tavion and I will find Zor.” My gaze drifted back to the fierce fighting, the bodies strewn across the bloody earth like fallen stones.

“No. I’m going with you.” Anaria squeezed my hand. “I let my anger take me over...with the king, but it won’t happen again. There are too many, Raz. You can’t expect to defeat them with swords and knives. You need my magic. It’s the only way to end this before everyone dies.” Her eyes landed on the collar, my finger still worrying the dulled edge.

No judgment in her eyes, only understanding, as if she knew how much being separated from my magic killed me.

“We go in together,” she said softly. “We come out together.”

I wanted to tell her her no. But she'd risked everything to get me out of the prison.

Risked everything to get her mother out of the lowest depths of that hellhole. We'd all doubted her, yet she'd kept her word. The only reason we were walking out of Tempeste was because of her.

I raised her hand to my lips and kissed it, holding her gaze the entire time.

“Then we should get down there.”



WE CAUGHT up with Tavion outside the eastern door. He was loading Adele onto the gelding, who was calmly munching grass, his limpid brown eyes watching us approach, nose flaring at the scent of blood soaking my side.

“Anaria will take Adele back to camp. Raz...you and I will find Zorander and Tristan; they've got to be somewhere on that field,” Tavion muttered. He'd transformed back into his own form, his green eyes slightly wild, some of the wolf leaking out, his clothes far too tight.

He turned to Anaria. “Get Adele behind our lines, but if they break, ride for the eastern border. Find the gate, cross over, and don't stop until you reach Blackcastle.”

“No.” Anaria shook her head, then she grasped her mother's hands. The female was shell-shocked, her eyes half closed against the light, and Anaria spoke softly, urgently, before Adele nodded, her eyes sliding over to me.

“Swords won't do enough damage.” Anaria tipped back her head. “Even your wolf can't make a dent in those numbers. But my magic will. We need the horse, Tavion. Could you carry Adele on your back...if you transformed?”

“If you think I'm going to ...”

“Could you carry my mother?” She tipped her chin up. “Adele can use her arms to hang on. Raz and I need the horse

to get onto that battlefield, and we do not have time to waste arguing.”

Tavion stared over her head at the raging battle, emotions flickering over his face too fast for me to interpret. “And if I do this?” His eyes fixed on her face. “What’s in it for me?”

Anaria clamped her lips together. “Get my mother back to the camp and keep her safe. You do that and I will give you whatever you want.” Anger bubbled in my belly at everything she offered, at the stunned realization on Tavion’s face.

“We don’t have time to fight.” She glanced to me, remorse glistening in her eyes. “Keep her safe for me, Tavion, and when this is over, we’ll negotiate terms.”

Everything around me turned to a dull roar. The battle, my heartbeats, everything dimmed down to the cracking of my heart breaking apart. My anger wasn’t for her, but at how deftly Tavion manipulated the situation to his favor.

Like usual.

Fury burned in my veins, but I’d seen this coming for weeks. Seen how Tavion looked at Anaria. I could practically pinpoint when his feelings for her had changed from hatred... to something else.

His bullshite excuse about saving her from Lord Havelock and the Shadowlands was only an excuse because he wanted her for himself and was too afraid to admit he had feelings—actual feelings—for her. One moment, the white-haired bastard stood before us, the next, the enormous silver wolf bared his teeth in a parody of a grin and I was helping Anaria lift Adele onto Tavion’s back.

“I really should buckle that saddle onto him,” Anaria muttered, ignoring Tavion’s rumbling growl. “I’d like to put the bit in his mouth, too. Which would serve him right, really.”

“I don’t want to be a burden.” Adele looked stricken, but Anaria shook her head and set her hand on her mother’s frail arm.

“You are never a burden. You are a joy to me.” Anaria’s smile was as gentle as I’d ever seen as she cupped her

mother's face and tilted her forehead against Adele's.
"Always, do you understand?"

"Be safe. Don't take chances." Adele's eyes filled with tears. "If I don't..."

"We don't ever talk like that, " Anaria chided gently. "After this battle is over, we will get you fed and cleaned up and you can rest. Then we'll talk about what comes next." She squeezed Adele's shoulder gently then stepped away.

"Wrap your arms around his neck. Hold on tight. Stay with Tavion; he'll get you out of harm's way if needed."

The wolf cocked his head and lifted his lip, baring his teeth.

I fought the urge to snarl right back.

Tavion loped smoothly away, Adele's arms wrapped tightly around his neck. I watched until they disappeared around the first sharp bend, swallowed down a million *I'm sorrys* and faced Raziel.

There was nothing on his face except dried blood and anguish, and my heart lurched in my chest. I despised these impossible choices that always resulted in someone getting hurt.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know how else to get her to safety and help Zor at the same time."

His jaw worked for a moment, his dark eyes brimming with hurt. But Raz didn't say a word as he held the gelding steady for me to mount then got on behind me, one hand braced on my belly to hold me in place while he kicked his heels into the horse's side.

I would have been better with an argument than his silence, because the tense quiet stretched out further and further, cutting me to the quick, deeper than words would have.

I'd hurt him and I wanted to scream, primal and loud and shrieking, at the sheer injustice of juggling too many feelings and too much pressure. Even with Raz's hard body pressed tight against mine, even as close as we were, I felt like we were miles away from each other.

And I despised that, too.

We were galloping so fast tears streamed from my eyes, my fingers twisted into the gelding's dark mane, thighs squeezing tight to keep my balance as we navigated around rocks and twists of the path leading down to the flatlands.

The battle came into view, dust choking me as we rode into the brisk wind blowing from the west. Raz pressed his lips to my ear, his voice a rough rasp. "There had better be a godsdamned long period of negotiation."

I squeezed my eyes closed and clasped my hand over his. "As long as I can make it, I swear."

"Good." I heard his teeth grind together. "Because you are *mine*, Anaria. *Mine*."

Normally, I might have pushed back on that statement, but after what he'd been through...I decided Raziel was due a little bit of male possessiveness.

We thundered down the trail toward the battle, while to our left the silver wolf streaked toward the rearguard of the Solarys army and the supply wagons, heading for the line of tents barely visible through the haze of dust.

Adele clung to his back, her fragile body leaned down until she lay almost flat, her thin, wispy hair flying behind her, along with the tatters of her dress.

A miracle.

That she'd survived that place for almost twenty years. That we'd gotten her—all of us—out of the city in one piece was a wonder.

I didn't allow myself to think about everything that might have gone wrong. What could still go wrong since we weren't finished fighting. At least we were alive, even though we rode into battle, even though we were battered and bruised, we would fight today, until we couldn't.

Raziel guided us through a gauntlet of rocks, pointing to a small circle of black uniformed soldiers, fighting their hearts out, surrounded by a sea of blue and silver. "My guess is, Zor's somewhere in there." He kicked the gelding and headed

straight for them, my heart pounding in my throat as I gripped the mane as tight as I could.

“How close do you need to be?” he shouted over the deafening hoofbeats, his hand tightening around my belly, trapping me tightly against him. “I’ve got you; I won’t let you fall.”

“I know.” Raziel kept me firmly in place, while I uncoiled my fingers from the horse’s mane, fighting my rising panic as we dodged ravaged bodies instead of rocks and trees.

The scent of blood thickened the air, along with fear and adrenaline, the faint odor of ozone stinging my nose. There were not many magic wielders in the Caladrian army, but Zor had an entire battalion of soldiers for shielding his front lines. They’d been put to the test by the amount of spent magic I detected.

“Closer,” I urged, searching for a clear shot, some way to kill only the Caladrian forces, yet leave Zor’s men untouched. But the battle was down to knots of men fighting hand to hand; there wasn’t a single opening where I wouldn’t hit our soldiers.

“You won’t be able to spare them all,” Raz muttered roughly in my ear, as if he’d read my mind. “They’re hardened soldiers, they knew the risk when they stepped on this battlefield.”

“There has to be some way not to harm our men.” *But there wasn’t.*

The gelding leaped to avoid a tangle of sparring soldiers, my stomach flipping from the hard landing. “Aim for the left flank, then I’ll circle us around.” My palms were too sweaty, my teeth grinding together when I let the magic off its leash, the massive swell of power turning my vision black.

Even the sounds of the battle melted away to a dull roar.

No harm, no harm, no harm.

While I prayed to whatever gods were listening to spare our soldiers, Raziel began our furious, desperate circle around the Caladrians, too intent on Zorander and his men to worry

about a single horse and rider. I cast my magic like a narrow spear, straight into the mass of fighting, though I couldn't separate enemy from friend.

No harm, no harm, no harm.

Over and over again I thought the words, prayed them, screamed them, and by the time we'd rounded the circle of enemy soldiers, though many lay dead, the rest turned on us, finally seeing the threat.

At the center Zorander raised his sword over his head, shouting something I couldn't hear, his blood-splattered face strained with pain or fear, his eyes locked on Raz and me.

The remaining Caladrian forces charged, teeth gnashing, swords and spears raised, my breath guttering in my lungs as I flashed back to my final night at Ravenshade Castle, the slaughter of the nearly defenseless Descendants.

How those Fae soldiers *ate them*.

"Go. *Faster*," I screamed, trusting Raz to not let me fall as I flung out both hands toward the wall of feral-eyed Fae.

I was no longer that innocent, wide-eyed girl.

And I was no longer defenseless.

I was death and vengeance, and we rode straight for them, magic crashing through them like a newborn star, the flash so bright I was nearly blinded. When Raziel finally reined the gelding to a sliding stop, impossibly, Zor and his men stood unharmed in a tight knot, surrounded by the bodies of the fallen enemy, while the rest fled back into the trees.

"Turn the horse, Raz. Take me toward the trees." We chased the fleeing soldiers, letting them disappear into the desiccated trees.

I waited, counting down the seconds, Raz's chest heaving at my back, Zor shouting something behind us. I raised my hands and dug deep. Deep enough to plumb the darkest depths of my magic, deep enough to yank out the last vestiges of power I possessed.

Protect them. I yanked up the power, praying Torin was right.

Protect my friends and these soldiers and all the innocents inside those walls. Keep them safe so we can build a new world. A better world where war doesn't exist.

I didn't give myself a chance to doubt.

I unleashed a blast of white star-filled power through the once-mighty forest like a razor-sharp cleaver, a blade of light that felled bone and flesh as easily as the dry, ancient wood.

The fleeing enemy never even screamed. They died where they stood until the forest floor was littered with bodies, until nothing but silence echoed from the once-great wood. An unnatural mist hovered above the broken trees and soldiers, flickering with the occasional twinkle of white light.

I slumped against Raz, grateful he held me so tight.

Otherwise, I would have slid right off onto the ground. Not one muscle wanted to work, even my brain felt bruised after that.

"My gods." One of the Solarys soldiers made the sign of the three mothers across his chest before pointing his shaking finger straight at me. "*Witch.* She's a witch."

"Shut your godsdamned mouth." Zorander strode toward us, a streak of dried blood across his face, fresh blood running down his forehead. "She saved your miserable hide."

"That was reckless." His dark, infuriated gaze locked on Raziel. "A foolish and reckless stunt that could have gotten the both of you killed. And don't even get me fucking started on using her as bait." His men started going from one Caladrian soldier to the next, stripping their weapons, checking them.

"Hello to you, too, Zor." Raz's chest rumbled with humor. "You're welcome, by the way."

"You're healed," Zor said in return, his eyes narrowing. "I see the fall didn't knock any sense into you."

"And I'm not in the bowels of that hellhole." Raz jerked his head toward the city, where thick, black smoke poured out

of the upper levels of the Citadelle. I sighed. My wonderful leathers were still up there, along with my favorite boots, probably burning to ash right now. I sighed again, picking at the filthy servant's dress I'd be stuck in for the near future.

"Can we do this later?" This deep, smothering exhaustion was turning my arms and legs to lead. The magic was gone, not so much as a spark of my power remained, leaving just an empty, dull echo inside me, and all I wanted to do was sleep.

"I'm taking her to camp." Raz wheeled the gelding around in a tight circle. "You have this?"

Zor jerked his head at the wide-open field, the knots of skirmishes still raging. "I'll meet you in a couple hours." His eyes narrowed, as if he'd just thought of something. "Where's Tavion?"

"At camp with Adele," I murmured, my voice a breathless whisper. "Are there healers there? She needs looking after." Zor's eyes flew wide before he went back to glowering at the both of us.

"So do you, from the looks of it." Zor's mouth was a thin slash, his eyes dark with anger, and I cringed, remembering how, exactly, we'd left things between us.

And the look on his face...Beneath all his anger was a raw vulnerability that just made me feel ashamed. "I'm sorry." I blinked my eyes, which were burning for some reason. Maybe from the smoke. "I'm sorry, Zor, I only wanted to..."

"I'll meet you in a couple hours," Zorander repeated, but his eyes were softer when he added, "Get some sleep, Anaria. You need it."

ANARIA

Raziel lifted me off the horse, my knees buckling when my feet hit the ground.

I should put the bands back on.

I really should. But the thought left me utterly exhausted.

“That shouldn’t be happening.” I managed to loop my arms around his neck, but even that took almost all my strength. “What is wrong with me?”

“You healed me, you dueled with the Fae King, then you wiped out most of his ground troops.” He slipped his arm behind my knees and lifted me up. “You used too much magic, too quickly, and you’re close to burning out. I’d say that’s what’s wrong, to start.”

I didn’t have enough energy to remind Raz about the hounds, the mages, and the soldiers in the Caverns.

“I don’t regret what I did,” I told him stubbornly. “And I didn’t have a choice. The king, at least, forced my hand.”

“Magic isn’t endless, Anaria. Power has limits. *You* have limits. I’ve fought wars before, and...”

“I know, but I...”

“Listen to me, Anaria.” He stopped between the rows of tents, his voice quiet as he searched my face, his lips tightening at what he saw. “There are limits you mustn’t exceed, because there is too high a price to be paid if you do. This war is just beginning, and our hardest battles still lie

ahead. If you burn yourself out now, you will not see the end of the war, do you understand?”

He buried his face in my hair, voice cracking. “You sacrificing yourself to save me...to save any of us is not acceptable. You going beyond your limits is not acceptable. This fight will be long and dangerous and you must always keep some of your strength in reserve. Right now, if the Mistress or the king himself were to appear, how would you defend yourself?”

“I would figure out a way.”

His chest moved as he snorted, but there was only pain in his voice when he answered. “Of that, I have no doubt. But I cannot defend you, Anaria. Not with the collar.”

“And if you take it off, Zor truly dies?”

“According to the king, the spell will kill him, yes.” He must have seen the flash of hope in my eyes because he added, “I’ve thought this through a thousand times, and the king had no reason to lie.”

I chewed my lip. “There is no way around the spell? Nothing that could undo the Shadow King’s magic altogether?”

“I’ve searched the libraries of every city and town I’ve ever been to, great and small. Zor’s blood was used to cast the spell, and you know how binding blood magic is. Break the spell, you break Zorander.”

He navigated the narrow corridor between the identical tents, where a few untended fires still burned. “The collar has to stay on. Only the king himself can remove it.”

“Have you tried asking him?” I asked, trying to muster a smile when his eyes flew wide in disbelief. “You never know, he might be in a good enough mood he’d agree.”

Raz snorted, flattening me against his wide chest. “Now why didn’t I think of that? Ah, this is the right one, I believe.” He kissed the top of my head before ducking into a tent, the mildewed smell vaguely familiar. Adele was fast asleep on the

cot, arms folded over her chest. The healer's head snapped up, her eyes flaring when she saw us.

I could only imagine what she thought—Raz, a blood covered and collared warrior. Me, dusty and exhausted, dressed in a ragged servant's uniform. Raz set me gently on the floor, one hand bracing my elbow to keep me upright.

“How is she?” I honestly couldn't tell if my mother looked better or worse, the lantern hanging from the center pole illuminating her skull-like head, only a dusting of white hair floating like a halo.

The circles beneath her eyes were nearly black, her paperlike skin crepey and dry, and her ruined fingers...one hand might be useable, but the other...

I looked away. Blew out a long breath.

“That she survived is a miracle in itself.” The healer's quiet voice was calming, taking the edge off my anger and fear as perhaps she intended. “She ate and drank a small amount, not too much or she would not have been able to hold it down.” The woman swallowed hard.

“She is High Fae, which is the only reason she is still alive. Perhaps, with time, she might regain her health.” She was so very cautious with her words I realized Adele's survival was a long shot. That even with her bloodline, she'd suffered too much, for too long, and I might have been too late.

The unfairness of that made me so angry.

That after everything, I was too late to save her.

“Her hands...What about her hands? Can you fix them?”

“Not here, my lady. But in Blackcastle, there are healers who are far more skilled than me. I can give you their names, and perhaps they can help your friend.”

“My mother,” I said quietly. “And yes, I would very much like their names.”

The healer's eyes widened, but she kept quiet, her gaze drifting back over to the sleeping female. “You must have made her feel safe for her to be sleeping,” I murmured,

wondering how long it had been since Adele had truly slept soundly. “Thank you for taking care of her. She is precious to me.”

The healer dipped her head. “It was my honor, my lady.”

“Just Anaria will do,” I murmured, sagging against Raziel. He was healing, but his body was still so ravaged, his face nearly as pale as Adele’s. Powerful...and vulnerable at the same time.

Oh so vulnerable, as we all were.

“She nearly burned herself out; can you check her over?” Raz asked quietly. “A lecture on how to be more careful with her magic might be in order as well,” he added with not one shred of guilt.

“I hardly need a lecture.”

“I think a lecture is exactly what you need.” Tavion ducked into the tent, which suddenly became all sorts of too small. “I saw what you did to that army, how much magic you used.” Then, *like I wasn’t even here*, the bastard told Raz, “She should rest, twelve hours at the very least. And put those bands back on.”

I bristled at his arrogance; every word sent outrage shivering down my spine. The arrogant git never stopped overstepping his bounds, and beside me, Raziel’s low, mean growl vibrated with the same repressed fury.

“I’ll take that under advisement.” My wide grin was a big *fuck off and die*. “Thank you for voicing your opinion, Lord Montgomery.”

“Anaria, that was not a suggestion.”

My grin grew wide enough my lips hurt. “Suggestion, opinion, whatever you want to call it, you can stuff it up your pompous arse.” Since I wasn’t about to wake my mother from the first decent sleep she’d probably had in twenty years, I kept my furious hiss as quiet as I could.

“You don’t tell me what to do. Not now. Not ever.”

“You are about to collapse,” Tavion hissed right back, the healer wringing her hands as she looked between us. “For once in your fucking life stop being a stubborn idiot and listen.”

“To you?” I chuffed out a low laugh. “Never.”

“Enough.” Raz stepped between us, fire lighting his eyes. “Tavion, get out.” His voice was even and calm but thrumming with violence, and I glanced to where Adele lay pale as a ghost. “Now, Tavion, before I take you out like the garbage.”

Tavion jerked so violently at the words, I wondered if cutting remarks hit him deeper and harder than others. If that was why he was so vicious with his own words because he knew they could be so much sharper than any other weapon he might choose.

Then I cursed myself for caring one iota about Tavion Montgomery.

“Rest. Eat. Put those godsdamned bands back on.” The second Tavion got the last word in, he was gone, a swirl of cold air left in his place.

“When you have a moment, can you check Anaria over? She’s on the verge of burnout and she has a gash on her nose that’s still bleeding.” Raz’s voice softened when he looked back at me, his brow wrinkled. “He’s not completely wrong, you know, even if he’s being an arse. Where *are* your bands?”

“In my pocket.” Truthfully, I was too damned tired to care about anything right now, much less locking down my magic given there wasn’t a drop left. Tomorrow, maybe, my power would refill, but right now, my head was blissfully quiet, my body limp with exhaustion.

Raz held out the bands to me then froze. “What’s this?” Along with the iron rings was the smooth white stone, which I’d completely forgotten about in today’s debacle.

“Where did you get this, Anaria?”

“At the Wynter Palace.” I let him steer me to the other cot and sank down, becoming acutely aware of all the places I

ached. My arse from sitting on that galloping horse, my feet from all the walking, my shoulders...

Probably from having the weight of the fucking world resting on them all the godsdamned time.

I reached for the bands, but Raz shook his head and squatted in front of me. "Here, let me take care of you, princess." He grasped my wrist with impossible gentleness and slipped on the first band, clutching the gleaming white stone in his palm. A strange desperation tightened my chest, seeing the stone in his possession.

My fingers curled, as if remembering what it felt like when I touched the smooth surface. I blew out a shaky breath, then another, trying to figure out why this bothered me so.

"Now the other," Raz urged, and I offered him my left arm, fingers only an inch away from what I desired. When the second band was in place, he climbed to his feet, knees cracking, armor creaking, my panic rising when I realized he was not going to give the stone back.

He tipped his head to the healer, an apologetic smile on his face. "Would you excuse us for a moment, my lady? We have some private matters to discuss."

"Of course, my lord." She dipped her head and vanished through the tent flaps as if she couldn't wait to get away from this shite show. I hardly blamed her. If I could have walked away from this, I would be long gone, too.

"Where did you find this, Anaria?" Raz balanced the stone in his hand, so white against the dirt-encrusted cracks of his palm. "In the Wynter Palace...but where?"

That was a trick question.

Answered honestly, Raziel would be pissed.

But I couldn't lie to him... I blew out a breath.

"Hidden in the headboard of what used to be Lord and Lady Wynter's bed. Behind the ruby eye of the largest dragon carved into the wood." I swallowed. "I've been carrying that with me ever since."

Raziel's eyes were burning. Fear, rage, love—all of those emotions were written so clearly my heart hurt. I swallowed. Between us, the stone gleamed in his trembling hand, as if it were the most dangerous thing on this entire battlefield.

I finally couldn't take the silence anymore.

“Raz. Do you know what that is?”

RAZIEL

Holy gods, Anaria had been carrying a keystone around in her fucking pocket like some kind of good luck charm.

Clearly, she had no idea what this was.

I could hardly think past the roaring in my head, the stone cupped in my palm, emitting a faint thrum of power like an explosion waiting to happen. There was more power contained in this innocent looking pebble than in a hundred mages.

Keystones were rare and coveted and dangerous, used for many things, some good, but mostly bad. They might lock a portal closed...or open one to another dimension.

They might amplify power...or take every drop of magic away.

One of these stones could rip the world to shreds in the wrong hands.

So who the fuck had put this into Anaria's hands? And why?

I dragged my hand down my face, wiping away the sweat. "Tell me how you knew where this was hidden." I let out a ragged exhale, the hair standing up on the back of my neck. "Because you didn't find it by chance."

"No." Anaria's face turned white as she tried in vain to hide her fidgeting. "Someone left it for me." *Oh, fucking gods, that could have gone wrong in so many ways.* She sucked in a shaky inhale. "If I tell you...you'll be pissed at me, Raz."

“I’m not...mad. Not in the least,” I told her, though I could hardly think past my fear. She scrubbed her hands up and down her arms, but her shoulders sagged.

“I’m not mad, princess. I’m going crazy right now, thinking of everything that could have gone wrong. This stone could have been a trap of some kind, something that could have hurt you.” Although, gods...a keystone was just about the most dangerous thing that existed in all three realms.

Not only that, she’d hidden this from me.

From all of us. I didn’t even know what to do with that. Not a betrayal, not exactly. But something close. At least, my aching heart thought so.

“I never want anything to happen to you. You are my whole life, Anaria.” I blew out a shaky breath of my own. “Just, next time...next time tell me, all right? If something feels off to you, if you find something like this, no matter the circumstances.”

“You wouldn’t have believed me. I heard a voice. In my head.” She shrugged helplessly. “I had a *feeling* something was in that room. You would have thought I was imagining things. *I* thought I was imagining things.”

I got down on my knees in front of her, this beautiful, perfect woman who owned my fucking heart. “Your word is gold to me. You say something’s wrong, it’s wrong. I’ll always believe you. *Always*. Every single time, Anaria. No questions, every fucking time, I’ll believe *you*.” She nodded, her eyes shining with tears.

I tipped her trembling chin up and kissed her wet cheeks. Kissed her until we were both breathless, until her eyes were filled with something other than sadness.

I held her against me, breathing in her delicious scent. “When this is over, Anaria, we are going far away from this fucking place. Across the ocean. Somewhere we can start a new life.”

She shuddered, but her arms wrapped around me. “That sounds like a nice dream, Raz. Where were you thinking?”

I buried my face in her hair, drank her floral scent down like a dying male. “I’ve heard there are islands where the water is so clear you can see all the way to the bottom. Sand so white the glare will blind you.”

“Let’s go there, then.” Her voice was so quiet, so filled with exhaustion it broke my damn heart. “Far away from here. Far away from this war. From all this ugliness.”

Tavion was right, though I hated to admit it.

She needed sleep and food and a good month without touching her magic. She was fierce and brave and clever, yet wholly unused to knowing how much power to expend and how much to keep in reserve.

I’d seen enough Fae burn out to know how close she’d come.

“So this was in the Wynters’ headboard.” She nodded slowly, her eyes drifting over to the stone, her pale green pupils dilating every time she locked onto it. Another wave of fear shuddered through me. She was already bound to the stone’s magic.

I didn’t know much about keystones, but their nasty magic was notorious for ensnaring people. And once it did, sometimes the only thing that would free you was death.

“Behind the dragon’s eye,” I urged gently. If we ever went back, the first thing I was going to do was search that fucking room from top to bottom for traps and clues and figure out who lured her in there.

And why.

We were in uncharted territory, surrounded by ancient magic I didn’t understand and plots I couldn’t see.

Gods, Anaria was already marked by the Fae King’s magic—she didn’t need some magical relic to lay claim to her soul.

That black crackle of freshly struck lightning down her side was bigger than anything I could have ever imagined. Touching the raised, black flesh had sent a reciprocal shiver of

power straight to my heart, and I didn't know what to make of that, either.

Except we were all in deep, deep shite.

She seemed to come back into herself, her eyes turning back to pale green. "I smelled Torin's scent in the Wynter Palace." She shook her head, like she was in a daze, and a little of the fog lifted from her eyes.

"No, something happened, even before that." Silence ticked by as she sorted through her thoughts. I didn't interrupt, giving her time to replay what must have been a scary experience.

"When I stepped inside, I wondered if I'd been there before. The palace felt familiar in my heart, in my soul, even though that sounds...dramatic. The foyer...smelled like home, but I couldn't figure out why since I'd never been there before."

Behind us, Adele shifted on her cot, letting out a small moan when she rolled onto her side.

Anaria dropped her voice. "I smelled the Wynters. Blood and fear, plus some older scents from a decade ago. Tavion's was one of them."

"The old spider alluded to that with her taunt about tricking Tavion into killing the Wynters. Who else did you scent?" I prodded, watching her hand convulsively reach for the stone.

"Torin. She smelled like lilies." Her breathing picked up. "Her scent grew stronger upstairs. I followed the smell into the room across the hall from ours, like I was being drawn there by some unseen force. All I know is, I couldn't have stopped myself if I'd tried."

She let out a brittle laugh. "But that's nothing new. The magic has always been like that for me. Something I was inexplicably drawn to, even though such power could kill me." She jerked her head towards my hand. "The stone is like that, isn't it?"

“They can be,” I hedged. “But keep going. You followed the scent into the room. How did you know this was hidden in the bed? There was a secret compartment, I am assuming?”

“Yes. And if I tell you some unseen force pulled me toward the bed, right to where the stone was hidden, you will think I was losing my mind.”

“No, I won’t. The Oracle’s been playing us for a century; she’s always one step ahead of us because she has the advantage of experience. Given how old she is, she’s capable of anything, so no, I won’t think you’re mad.”

“I heard a voice, telling me where to go, to *come find it*.” She shivered. “Torin’s voice, though I don’t know how that could be. She led me to the dragons, and one of the dragon’s eyes had a fingerprint in the middle. I pressed my thumb over the mark and a compartment opened.” Her voice was so quiet by the end I strained to catch the words.

“Have you noticed anything...odd since you found this?”

“Besides being caught in the middle of a war and staging a prison break from my father’s dungeons, then almost killing him?” Her eyes lifted to mine and, for the briefest second, twinkled slightly. “No, nothing odd at all.”

“That’s a no, then?” I tried to match her attempt at humor but failed to dislodge the dread weighing me down.

“That’s a no. At least, I don’t think so. I really thought that was...just a stone.”

I lifted my brow. “Locked in a secret compartment that Torin’s scent led you straight to before a little voice—Torin’s voice—told you to *come find it*?”

I shook my head. “Really, Anaria?”

“Okay, so I thought how I found it was strange and unusual, but in the end I *hoped* it was...just a stone.” She shrugged. “It’s not like the thing was glowing or anything. I could have picked something like that up off any street in any realm.”

I peered at the keystone. She was right about that. The color was a faded white, the surface smooth as glass, with the vaguest pattern inside, almost like snowflakes trapped in ice.

“Keystones have a myriad of uses. Too many for me to guess what this one might be for. But they are rare and prized by the strongest, most powerful Fae, handed down from generation to generation.” I held her gaze. “Sometimes, from king to king.”

“I can’t do this anymore, Raz.” Her whisper was broken and hoarse. I ached at the rawness there, because this was the truth. “It’s like...there’s never an end to this. One thing just leads to another, and then another, and then...”

Fear flickered in her beautiful eyes, her quick, panicked breaths picking up, and the anger burning in my belly ignited. How much more was Anaria expected to endure? How much more would she have to bear before this was over, if we even survived?

She wasn’t meant for killing and war.

She wasn’t meant to be anywhere near this.

“Why give me something so important, then not tell me what it’s for?” she demanded, her voice cracking at the end. “That seems senseless, even for Torin.”

“Agreed, but when has any of this made sense?”

“True enough.”

I weighed everything I knew about the world against what I knew of this female in front of me.

Her strength and will, her sheer defiance in the face of everything this world threw at her. The gods had chosen her... and so had I.

I would protect her and I trusted her.

Her magic was the most powerful I’d ever seen, and yet, she wielded it with fairness and mercy. More than either of the kings had ever shown their peoples. More than any other Fae would.

Who was I to take the stone away?

I cradled her hands, pressing the keystone into her palm. I swore she shuddered in relief when her fingers closed around it. I pulled her against me. “If the stone was meant to be yours, then it’s yours. Guard it, Anaria. Guard it well. Keystones are many things, but their power is legendary. People...kings... even gods would kill for what’s in your hand.”

I would have stayed like that for the rest of time, our hearts beating together, but outside the tent a great shout went up, the sound one of terror, not of a battle won.

Adele jolted upright, her pale eyes wide.

“Stay with your mother. I’ll find out what’s happened.” I kissed the top of her head, drinking in her delicate scent, the only thing that seemed to smell of home these days, and ducked outside, straight into chaos.



I SHOVED through the rest of the Solarys soldiers, many of them injured, all of them streaming away from the battlefield and into the emptiness beyond that stretched all the way to the eastern wall toward the gate that led into Solarys.

Fleeing.

Our entire army was fleeing.

Which didn’t make sense. The wall and the gate into Solarys were more than fifty miles away, a two-day journey on horseback, impossible on foot given none of these men carried food or water.

I dodged a charging horse, its wild-eyed rider hunched down, kicking the beast as hard as he could, as if demons were on his tail. They pounded by, knocking soldiers out of the way, catching my shoulder with a blow that sent me nearly to my knees.

Over the sea of heads, I strained to see why they were running, but there was nothing on the now-empty battlefield

except dead bodies and wounded, the Citadelle rising above the flat plain, heavy smoke pouring from the upper floors. More smoke now, thicker, as if the entire top floor was ablaze.

Good. I hoped the fucker burned to the ground.

Fighting the oncoming tide took too long, and every soldier I tried to question just pointed frantically over their shoulder and kept running. The ground was littered with weapons, swords and knives and spears, as if defending themselves no longer mattered.

As if the battle no longer mattered.

Finally, I heard Zor shouting orders and raced in that direction, shoving against the frightened males. The air was sour with their fear, not that I understood why. These were hardened fighters, most of them had been fighting in this army for a century, and nothing frightened them except the prospect of peace.

“Toss everything out of the wagons and load them up with as many men as they’ll carry,” Zor ordered the few commanders left, though everyone’s eyes kept straying up to the Citadelle. “Saddle the horses, two to a horse. Get as many out of here as you can. Anyone who can walk, head east.”

“What the fuck is going on?”

Zor pointed to the burning Citadelle and I shook my head.

“Yes, the fucker’s on fire. So what?”

“Look again, Raz.” Zor was paler than I’d ever seen him and this time, when I really looked, I realized the smoke pouring from the top floors was not only from the fire.

The dark cloud was something else entirely.

Dark wisps broke off from the billowing cloud as if they had a life of their own, whirling down and down and down... straight into the body of a limping soldier dragging his leg.

The male dropped to the ground, then flopped onto his back, his boots drumming on the ground as the shadowy mist sank into him and disappeared.

My chest began to heave.

If this was what I thought it was...

My blood turned to ice as I surveyed the enormity of that dark cloud, the shadowy wisps veering off and swooping down on the emptying battlefield like a swarm of carrion eaters. Across the vast flatland, bodies were reanimating, Solarys and Caladrian soldiers alike, some already climbing to their feet.

“Soul Reapers,” Zor murmured. “Thousands of them. Enough for all of us, I would think, if we don’t get out of here in the next few minutes.”

“But don’t they need an...” *Injury to get in*, I was going to say, but then I realized... Nearly everyone here was injured after the battle. Zor had a gash on his forehead, and I swallowed as the full weight of our impossible situation hit me.

“We have to get Anaria clear of this.”

After everything she’d already endured—after Ember—this was the worst fate I could imagine for her.

For any of us.

“Already done.” Zor cocked his head. “Tristan and Tavion are headed for the healer’s tent; didn’t you see them?”

I lost my breath as a cloud of Reapers broke away from the smoke and swooped down on a group of fleeing soldiers not twenty lengths away. A minute later they were all down, bodies convulsing as they were taken over.

A thunderous boom echoed across the wide-open space, and blackness spewed from the top windows of the palace, but this didn’t roil mindlessly like smoke. This cloud was sentient. This cloud had purpose, breaking off and hurtling toward the escaping army with focused intent.

We were caught right in between.

“Get the wagons unloaded and get out of here any way you can. Save whomever you can find and ride hard for the border,” Zorander told his commanders harshly. “Good luck.”

Then Zor grasped my arm, and we were flying, the world a nauseous blur until I stumbled in the dirt, Zor shoving me to the ground between the empty tents as the enormous cloud of Reapers streamed overhead like a thunderhead.

Zor and I crawled toward the healer's tent, then Tavion burst through the flaps, Adele in his arms.

"Get down," Zor hissed, yanking Tavion to the ground. "Don't move."

Tristan crept out, leading Anaria by the hand, his eyes widening at the sight above. "Fucking gods, where did they all come from?"

"The palace," I murmured, reaching for Anaria. Not until I had her in my arms did my pounding heart slow. "We're going to get you out of here. They'll focus on the men running and give chase. We stay still and quiet, they won't hunt us."

One by one we ducked back into the healer's tent.

We wouldn't be able to hide for long.

Our only hope was to move fast while they were focused on the unfortunate soldiers streaming across the flatlands toward home. I saw the absolute rage on Zorander's face he couldn't hide and knew exactly what he was feeling.

I gripped his arm and shook him. "This isn't your fault."

He yanked away. "We need horses," Zor muttered, then he looked to where his men were being...Slaughtered wasn't the right word, because what was happening was far worse than death.

Tristan nodded, but his narrowed eyes met mine. Horses would be a stretch.

Getting us all out of here alive...would be nearly impossible.

"What's the king after?" Tristan asked cautiously. "I mean, what's the point of turning his own soldiers into monsters?"

Anaria's eyes met mine as she wrapped Adele tightly in Tavion's heavy cloak, pinning it beneath her slender throat

with shaking fingers. This had to bring back every memory of Ember's transformation and death, and I hated that it did.

Tavion gathered Adele back up in his arms with more gentleness than I ever thought he was capable of.

"We took Carex's army." Zorander lowered his voice as another swarm of Reapers floated overhead, their shadows outlined against the canvas roof of the tent. "He's creating a new one. He does not care what his forces are made up of, so long as he controls them."

I nodded. "Chances are those Reapers are looking for us." I met Anaria's wide eyes. "If they find us, there won't be any escape. Even the Oracle won't be able to save us from what those creatures will turn us into."

We'd never find enough horses in time, and from the screaming outside of these tents, that cloud was getting closer. "Tristan, find yourself a horse. The fastest one you can find." Tristan disappeared.

"We have to split up." I crouched down until I was even with Adele. "Can you hang onto Tavion, like you did before? Allow him to carry you to safety?"

She managed a faint nod, pulling the cloak tighter around her. "Tavion will carry Adele and head north to the tunnels. Tristan's with you. Take Adele to your father's. Zor and I will take Anaria to the North Gate and then to Solarys."

Tavion's jaw clenched, but he didn't argue.

And yes, some fucking petty part of me was doing this to separate the bastard from Anaria, but splitting up made the most sense, so my choices were completely justified, despite my selfish motives.

"Those are my men out there." Zor's voice broke. "I cannot leave my soldiers behind, not with..."

"There are no horses," I told him steadily. "We have no other way out of here. *Anaria* has no way out except for you, Zor. Only *you* can get her out of here." Leaving your men behind was a shite choice, one a commander never wanted to make, but I'd be godsdamned if I'd let Anaria be taken over by

a fucking Reaper, and this was the only way we could save her.

Save all of us.

I looked at Tavion. “Can you avoid the Reapers if you head north? Once you’re across the flatlands, you’ll have to pass close to the city.”

He scowled but nodded. “If we leave now, maybe. The Reapers will stay focused on our army and the injured on the battlefield. Once we’re past that, we’ll use the forest as cover. We can reach the tunnel in a couple hours.”

“I’ll carry Raz and Anaria to the eastern wall. I have enough magic left for that.” Zor clasped Tavion’s hand, then Tristan ducked back inside the tiny tent, his face as white as death.

“I found a horse. That cloud...They’re almost here. We have to move.” Tristan squatted beside me, his quiver half empty, his bow slung across his back. But arrows would do nothing against the foe we now faced, only magic would kill them and Anaria was completely out.

If any of us were infected...

I sucked in a shaky breath, my eyes meeting Anaria’s. *No, I thought, that would not happen. I would not allow any of us to become one of those...things.*

“Good luck. We’ll meet you in Blackcastle in a couple days.”

“You’d fucking better,” Tavion growled, but he wasn’t looking at me. He was looking straight at Anaria, and I didn’t miss the echo of frustration in his voice.

In a flash of light, Tavion was replaced by the enormous silver wolf, and I lifted Adele onto his back, Anaria moving her mother’s arms so they were tight around the wolf’s neck. “Hang on. Don’t touch anything down in the tunnels. I’ll find you once we get to Blackcastle.”

She stopped in front of Tavion, leaned in close enough her nose almost touched his twitching black one.

“Keep her safe. Do not let her fall.”

The wolf chuffed out a snort, as if to say, *like I would allow that to happen*, then slipped through the tent’s opening like a ghost. The three of us watched them disappear, Tristan galloping behind, until they were swallowed up in the panicked soldiers streaming through what remained of the torn-apart camp.

Zor’s calloused hand tightened around my wrist, his other around Anaria’s, and the world became a dark blur, a chill wind tearing the breath out of my lungs.

ANARIA

We landed at the eastern edge of Caladrius in utter silence.

The ground beneath my feet was barren, not so much as a drop of life, but two steps away, on the other side of that glowing portal, lay a verdant forest older than time, along with water and safety.

At least, I hoped Solarys would be safe.

I wasn't sure about anything now.

Even the dying screams of the far-off army didn't reach us. Tempeste was little more than a dirty smudge on the horizon; even my Fae sight couldn't penetrate the miles between us and the horrors unfolding on that plain.

None of us spoke, Zor's hands still banded around both my wrist and Raziel's, as if he couldn't bear to let go. I tried to calculate how many soldiers we had left behind, how many Reapers might have been lurking in that cloud.

How many soldiers would rise from that field as something other than Fae.

Then I stopped counting.

I didn't want to know.

We were so close to the wall, the hum of magic vibrated up through the soles of my thin slippers, the air shivering with power, gooseflesh rising on my arms.

I was the world's worst traitor for running.

What sort of person runs and leaves the others to die? Or worse?

Glancing up at Zorander's clenched jaw, the utter stillness of his face as he stared west toward his army, I realized I wasn't the only one asking that question. Gods, I practically *tasted* the guilt seeping from his pores. His shame matched my own.

But saving Adele from such a fate... I chewed my lip.

No, there was no shame in wanting my mother safe after the conditions she'd endured for decades, though I wondered if my magic could have killed the Reapers contained in that cloud like it had killed the one inside Ember.

Zor's hand slipped away, his unsteady breath matching my own.

If he'd used all his magic today, if he hadn't left enough in reserve...we would be trapped on that field at the mercy of the king and his Reapers. Doomed with the rest of his men.

A harsh lesson, and one I finally understood.

"Can they track us here?" Raz asked quietly.

"Not normally. Traveling through space that quickly doesn't leave a scent marker, though I don't know enough about Soul Reapers to say for sure."

I made the sign of the three mothers on my chest. Something I never did. Something I hardly believed in, but all those poor souls we'd left behind, all those males now condemned to such a terrible fate...I owed them something since I was safe and they were not.

Since I was alive...and they were not.

Raz's eyes flashed, but he said nothing, his arm coming around me and folding me into his shirt, crusted with dried blood, his heart beating fast beneath my cheek.

I couldn't help but feel this—like so many other terrible things—was my fault.

I'd ruined the king, even more than he was already ruined. If this was vengeance, his way of getting back at me by turning an entire army into monsters, then I was done.

Done with all of this.

There was no winning against creatures as soulless as the king and the Oracle and even Torin. Nothing was worth the cost if I had to kill and kill and kill just to make this world a better place.

A better world could not be built on death.

Bones were no foundation for the future.

"I left the entire Solarys army behind on that field." Zor's voice shook, the words taking a minute to make sense. "There is only a small skeleton force in Blackcastle, enough to guard the Keep, maintain peace in the city, but most of them were here. Our spies told us we'd face a hard-fought battle, so I brought all our forces."

I became aware of how tightly leashed Zor was keeping himself, the stone-hard set of his jaw, the blackness of his eyes, as if he had just realized the most horrible thing.

Zorander Vayle was afraid.

He jerked his head to the wall behind us. The wall Ember—the Soul Reaper—had crossed over just weeks ago. "If all those soldiers become Reapers, the Fae King has the means to defeat Solarys, and I handed his victory right to him."

There was no pretense of Zorander hiding his shame or his guilt, not any longer. Everything was laid bare in the rawness of his voice, the agony etched on his face. Zor would never ask for comfort.

But he needed some. I wrapped my arms around him, one hand cradling the back of his neck, pulling him down to me. "None of this is your fault. None of it. You brought enough men to win this war. You planned for every known contingency."

Because Zor was thorough, and he would have done all those things.

“The Oracle trapped us all—me, you, Raz, your soldiers. She trapped us, with plotting that goes far beyond anything you can control or anticipate.”

His big body was a wall of tension against me, shaking with rage and helplessness.

“Those were my men, Anaria.” His voice broke. “They *trusted* me. They followed me here. And now they’re...”

“I know,” I told him, cradling his head against me, wishing I could give him something other than empty words. “And they came here to fight for you, because you’re a good leader and they respected you. You saved us, and now we need you, Zor. Raz and me...we need you.”

“And what the fuck am I supposed to do”—his vicious growl vibrated through my whole body—“when I couldn’t save a single one of my men?”

“You’re supposed to keep fighting, Zor. You’re supposed to never give up, even when the odds are...bad.”

Bad was an understatement, but he finally relaxed against me, his arms coming around my waist, his head buried in my shoulder.

Raz reached out, squeezing Zor’s shoulder, and he shuddered. So much guilt, so much pain, and I wanted to take it all away, but only time could heal the most grievous of wounds, and today’s defeat was something Zor would carry with him for a long, long time.

“How far can Reapers fly? Can they get into Solarys?” Another horrible thought hit me. “What about everyone in Tempeste? All those prisoners we set free? Are they infected, too?”

“I don’t think Soul Reapers discriminate between soldiers or shopkeepers,” Raz pointed out quietly. “My guess is, everyone who can’t get away will become infected.”

“Gods, how could there be so many Reapers?” I shuddered, unable to shake off the horror, or the sight, of that enormous cloud. “Where did they all come from?”

Raz blew out a long breath. “The king kept them in reserve, somehow, though I don’t know how you imprison an entity made of smoke and mist. Maybe the fire set them loose, maybe Carex saw an opportunity and freed them, but now...” This pause was longer.

“Now he has an army of monsters. They don’t need food or water. They will fight without fear, without hesitation. They will do his bidding, just like...”

Raziel went silent and didn’t bother finishing that sentence. *Like Ember.*

I should have killed Carex.

The magic had mutilated and twisted flesh and bone with abandon but stopped short of crushing his heart. Perhaps the king didn’t have one, or perhaps the magic knew something I did not, but nevertheless...I should have killed him.

One life for five thousand.

Oh gods, *more* if you counted the Caladrian soldiers now reanimated and walking. An army almost ten thousand strong against...I risked a glance at Zorander, his pale face, the streak of dried blood on his face standing out in stark color.

Whomever was left protecting Solarys would not be enough.

Even if we crossed this border and found safety, we would not be safe for long. By tomorrow, that army would be marching to Solarys. Ember made the journey from Tempeste to Blackcastle in two days. If this force moved half as quickly, in four days they’d arrive at the Keep and this war would be over, just not in the way we’d envisioned it ending.

Was this what the Oracle had intended all along?

For us to fail? For the king to raise an army of unstoppable monsters and crush the Shadow King and Solarys beneath his boot?

She’d wanted chaos.

Craved chaos, from that look in her eyes, and this...This would give rise to anarchy. One Soul Reaper had made a

terrifying opponent. An entire army of them, the biggest force on this world, was marching toward Solarys. Toward us.

How did you fight that?

“The hounds. The mages.” Every word struck fresh terror in my heart. “Can those bodies be used by the Reapers as hosts? Would the mages keep their magic?”

“Who’s to say?” Raziel breathed. “Not much is known of those foul things. The mages and the hounds were flesh and blood and they haven’t been dead a day yet. But I know nothing of a Reaper’s ways, nor did I think that many still existed.”

“They feed on the souls of the living,” Zor pointed out, staring out into the distance, “not the dead. That’s why they’re called *Soul* Reapers.”

“True enough, but like Raz said, we know hardly anything about them. The Oracle claimed the Fae King had many of them at his command, but she also said they dwelled underneath the city, not at the top of the Citadelle.”

Every time I closed my eyes, I saw the foul creatures spilling out of the cloud of smoke and the mindless fear of the soldiers charging away into the empty flatlands, even though there was nothing waiting for them except dust and death. Yet dying of thirst in a wasteland had been preferable to having a Soul Reaper devour everything that made you Fae.

“We’ll make for Deepwood.” Zor finally turned away from the flatlands.

“That’s three miles,” Raz said quietly.

“And we’ll be walking, since I’m out of magic.” Zor’s eyes shone with apology and regret when he looked down at me. “I know you’re tired, Anaria, but another hour and we’ll be under roof and safe enough. We’ll secure horses and ride for Blackcastle tomorrow. Warn the king. Maybe there’s some way to evacuate the city.”

“I can make it.” Perhaps a lie, but I would try.

Raz's arm tightened around me, but his eyes were on Zorander. "Let's get through the ward, then we'll make plans for tomorrow."

"Can that many Reapers get through the ward? I thought these were spelled against outsiders? I mean, I can see one or two creatures slipping through, but...an entire army?" I asked, hoping something protected these realms.

Otherwise, what good were the wards?

"Reapers are foul and evil, but they are old. They predate the walls and the wards, even the portals." Zor's brow furrowed.

"So yes, when the king decides it's time, they will come. Whether in their human hosts, or born on the wind, and I have a bad feeling there will be no stopping them."

We stumbled into Deepwood on the dredges of our strength, Raz holding me up, his steps as halting as mine. Zorander's boots dragged with every step by the time we reached the town's only lodging, a mix of tavern, brothel, and inn.

The low-ceilinged room smelled like cheap food and even cheaper sex, and given the noise level, I doubted we'd be doing much sleeping.

I'd tossed away my ruined slippers and was barefoot, and the back of my dress was sweat stained, if I could trust my dulled senses. Three miles replaying every second of what had happened in Tempeste had turned my brain to a fog of awful images that I didn't want to remember yet kept playing over and over again.

"Two rooms." Zor gripped the edge of the desk with white knuckles. "One night."

"I only have one room, General, and it's not your usual." The innkeeper smiled apologetically. "Given we are at war, it seems people are leaving the cities for the safety of the forest."

Zor glanced at me with even more apology than the innkeeper.

"We'll make do," I told him, eyeing the heavy brass key the innkeeper slid across the worn desk. Sharing a room with Raz and Zorander...I was too tired to put too much thought into it. The idea of having them both close made me feel safe, and right now, that was all that mattered.

“Top of the steps, third door on your right.” The man pointed to the steps in the back of the public room. Pipe smoke hung low, smelling pleasantly of cherries.

“We should warn these people,” I murmured and Zor’s mouth tightened, wearily scanning the crowded tables.

“I know. But not now.” He shook his head. “More people get hurt in a blind panic than in battle. There might still be some way to stop this.”

The room was no bigger than a broom closet, but cleaner than the three of us, and I crawled into bed, the thin mattress sagging beneath me before sleep devoured me whole.

I woke in darkness, a single shaft of moonlight spilling in through the window overhead, like a stairway to the stars. Raz lay on one side of me, his muscled arm thrown over my waist, and on my other side...

I turned my head slowly so I didn’t wake him.

Zorander was breathtaking when he slept. His face—normally so intense and grim—looked ten...no, twenty years younger, his long, dark lashes brushing his tan cheeks. Like the impenetrable mask he always kept in place had slid off at last, revealing every bit of his fallen angel beauty.

He’d washed off the blood, the dirt, and I turned my head to look at Raz, his golden skin clean, his hair smooth and silky.

I didn’t know how long we’d slept, but some of the bone-deep exhaustion had faded, my magic humming softly at my core, and my head was clear. Clear enough to realize we were in trouble.

The entire world was in trouble.

“From that frown, I must look like death warmed over.”

A band of moonlight fell across Zor’s handsome face, a ghost of a smile playing on his lips. Raziel nuzzled closer, his arm tightening around my waist.

“You don’t.” How could I tell him he was so beautiful he broke my heart? “You look...tired,” I finally settled on.

Not exactly a lie, not when putting all my feelings into words was impossible.

Zorander was more than tired. He was exhausted. Ground down by losses, and the Oracle's fuckery, and facing impossible odds time and time again only to end up losing.

But some of yesterday's shadows were gone, his eyes focused again in brutal efficiency, a reflection of my own mental clarity.

"So do you." His humor dropped away, something intense and real stretching between us. "You should go back to sleep." His fingers trailed down my cheek. "I don't know when you'll get another chance."

I didn't want to sleep.

Didn't think I could now that the full force of yesterday hit me.

"I know you don't, but you need to," Zor said softly, and I realized I must have said that out loud. "My magic is nearly replenished, but I didn't use as much as you did. You reached the very bottom of your magic, Anaria. Rest is the only thing that will fix that."

Raz's hand drifted down my belly, then lower still, calloused fingers tracing lazy circles on my skin.

Zor's eyes darkened. *Surely, he knew what Raz was doing.* My face heated and I shifted away. Those clever fingers followed, Raz's touch growing more insistent.

I was...The dress was gone.

Holy gods, I was naked. In bed. With Raziel *and* Zor.

Behind me, Raz chuckled, his fingers dipping between my thighs, sliding through the slickness as I closed my eyes, my face blazing. I tried to move away, but that only put me up against Zor, whose indolent smile grew more wicked as he tucked my hair behind my ear.

"Let me watch you come, Anaria."

The words shocked me, but the raw, unapologetic hunger written on Zor's face had me saying, "Yes."

"Thank you." Zor sounded solemn, like I'd just given him the greatest gift he'd ever received. "You are so beautiful. You don't know how many times I've imagined you like this." His mouth parted slightly, and all I could remember was the desperate way he'd kissed me in that healer's tent.

Then my hands cupped his face and my lips crashed into his, our tongues tangling with such abandon I couldn't tell where I ended and Zor began.

Only that I finally felt like I was *home*.

Every nerve came alive, everything narrowing down to his tongue, his lips, his thunderstorm taste drenching me with electric power. His teeth caught my bottom lip, his tongue plunging into a dark, claiming kiss that speared straight into my raging heart.

Raziel was pressed against my back, his fingers sliding through my wet folds, slipping in deeper, his thumb brushing my clit, a low, needy groan slipping from him when he discovered how swollen and ready I was.

"Fuck, princess, you smell delicious."

I would have answered, but Zor wrapped his hand in my hair and held me in place while he ravaged my mouth, kissing me like he could not get enough, and then everything just... shifted.

I wanted this.

Them.

I wanted Zorander's rough hunger *and* Raziel's gentle touch. I wanted to be trapped between them while they took my pleasure and gave pleasure right back, tenfold.

When Raziel's fingers plunged deeper, Zor swallowed down my needy moan with a vicious sound of his own, as if he could swallow my desire whole, then pressed me flat on my back.

Every barely-there brush of Raziel's thumb across my nub sent a jolt of need spearing through me, pushing me higher, that delicious tightening sensation growing more intense as every cell in my body waited breathlessly for his next touch.

Raz shifted so he lay between my legs, his warm breath brushing across my delicate folds before his tongue speared into me, hard and fast, a gasp of shock exploding from my mouth in an explosion that might have been his name. Or Zor's.

"That's it, Raz. Harder. She likes it hard, don't you, princess?" Zor's other hand slid up to encircle my throat, gently pinning me down, his eyes locked with mine. Raziel's mouth moved over me furiously, lapping and licking, hard and demanding until my hips bucked madly.

I could not get enough of this, of them.

Not enough kissing or touching or closeness.

Not enough of this warm, safe feeling, or this sense that we were meant to be together, and nothing, not even fate, could tear us apart.

Zor didn't look away, my hair still wrapped tightly around one hand, pinning me with his other as he held me still, inches from his face, his dark eyes ravenous and demanding. "Let me hear you, Anaria. I want to hear you fucking scream."

Raz's mouth and now his fingers worked me with no mercy, my hips moving frantically to the rhythm he set, every brush of his tongue sending a shockwave of sensation through me.

Every nip of his teeth sending a spark of need straight to my core.

Up and up, higher and higher I climbed. Something about being pinned down by Zor's consuming gaze made this more intimate than anything I'd ever experienced before.

Being restrained by someone as powerful as Zor...I didn't think I'd enjoy being captive, but godsdamn, I did.

So much.

As if they both held my pleasure in their hands, and I was nothing but molten glass. Loose and hot and boneless.

They could shape me any way they wanted, do whatever they wanted. *Anything.*

I was so fucking close, my body shook with need, release beckoning on a far-off horizon, when Zor growled in my ear. “She needs more, Raz. Give our queen what she fucking deserves.”

Raz plunged his fingers in deep, clamped his teeth around my too sensitive nub, and sucked hard, my heart thundering, body shaking in anticipation.

Zor kissed me again with no quarter, tasting of storm clouds and rain, of war and victory, and deep inside, my magic rose and crested, a crescendo of stars to meet his darkness. And when our magics met...

Pleasure exploded through me and wiped everything away, consumed every thought, every heartbeat, every breath, obliterating flesh and blood and bone until nothing existed outside of sensation and light.

I might have screamed their names or cursed them. I didn't know.

I only knew that Raziel didn't stop, wringing more and more pleasure from me, Zorander's gaze never leaving my face, looking like a male caught in an epiphany.

When the last of my orgasm faded, when I lay there wrung out and panting, utterly spent, Zor kissed me again, this time reverently, telling me with his lips everything he'd said aloud to me a day ago.

I'm falling in love with you, Anaria.

“I want...” I trailed off, Raziel's hand cupping my belly, his lips tracing my shoulder. I didn't know what the protocols here were. Did I...Could I ask for...anything I wanted right now?

“What do you need, princess?” Raz murmured into my ear. “Whatever you want, you will have. One of us, both of us...”

neither of us, whatever makes you happy.”

“Both of you.” The words came out fast and breathless, because once they were out, I couldn’t take them back.

Didn’t *want* to take them back, no matter how nervous they made me feel.

“Then you’ll have us,” Zorander murmured, unwinding his hand from my hair but keeping his hand banded on my throat, Raz moving out of the way.

“I’ll be gentle,” Zor murmured, his breathing ragged as he tightened his shaking fingers so, so carefully around my throat, his other hand trailing between my breasts, stopping on my stomach. “Careful.”

“What if that’s not what I want?” I asked, and he went still then retraced the line he’d just drawn until his hand gripped my throat again.

“Are you sure?” he asked, his voice rough. “You’re tired, you’re...”

“I don’t want gentle. I don’t want careful. I want you to fuck me like you kissed me, Zor. I want you to make me feel *everything*.”

He hung his head, his hair hiding his face, but when he spoke, his voice was raw. “All right, princess. Then that’s what you’ll get.”

I expected him to unleash himself on me, like the stormy scent that surrounded us, but he didn’t. Instead, he crawled over me, then slid down until he was between my legs, lifting one, then the other up over his shoulders, pushing forward until I was spread and utterly open for him.

“Gods, you are beautiful. Let me taste your pleasure, then I’ll give you what you want, Anaria.”

I might have made a sound, a whimper, really, and then my entire body arced off the bed at the first touch of his tongue. Another long, slow, sweet lick, then a flick of his tongue across my clit, the slightest nip of teeth.

“*Fuck.*” I went to slap my hand over my mouth, but Raz got there first, his kiss gentle and coaxing, swallowing every helpless sound I made while Zor sent me soaring into the clouds.

He was...*really* fucking good with his tongue, working me hard, rewarding every strangled moan that came out of my mouth with a hum that echoed straight into my core.

“Let go, Anaria,” Raz murmured, dragging his fingers across my lips before pushing one in, fucking my mouth slowly. “Let us love you.”

Yes, that's what I wanted. To be loved. To be safe.

Raz kissed me and pushed his finger into my mouth, eyes dark and ravenous, watching like he couldn't get enough as he fucked my mouth with his finger in perfect time to Zor's tongue plunging into me.

This was...This was...Oh gods.

Zor grew more demanding, coaxing another low, needy sound out of me, holding me firmly in place as he suckled me so I was forced to take what he gave me, unable to chase my own pleasure.

And then my climax was just...there.

Crashing through me like thunder, blood roaring in my ears, my body loose and tight at the same time. I shattered apart in a blaze of fire and heat, blood pounding in my ears, everything going dark.

I barely felt Zor lower my legs but groaned with pleasure when he pushed in, the head of his cock stretching me wide, filling me up, my orgasm rolling through me, around his girth, feeling more complete now that I was full.

Then fuller still as he plunged in the rest of the way in a long, deliberate stroke, a low, shaky moan coming out before I could stop myself.

“Hang on, princess,” was the only warning I got before Zor looped his arm under my knee and pushed my legs wide.

He fucked me hard and fast, deep, just like I'd wanted, a frantic, desperate pace...like I'd wanted.

My orgasm never stopped rolling through me, my core clenching around his driving cock, Zor keeping up the frantic pace.

I was pleading, cursing, begging.

I didn't even know what I was asking for, only that this pleasure was too raw, too all-consuming, and I wanted more.

I wanted *everything*.

This time, when his darkness and my stars crashed together, I swore the universe had been reborn inside of me, a galaxy of supernovas that burned bright in an endless midnight sky. My nails raked down his back, deep enough to draw blood, but I couldn't stop. I needed something to ground me, something to hold me to this world.

"Fuck, Anaria," Zor roared in my ear, his hips slapping against mine one final time before he went still, neck muscles straining as he came, his cock pumping inside me like he'd never stop.

He was fucking beautiful. Power made flesh. *An ancient war god*, I thought, though I didn't know where that came from.

He went down on one elbow and rolled off me, collapsing to the bed, his legs still tangled with mine. I met his half-opened eyes with a smile, which was all I could manage.

Gods, just breathing took too much effort right now.

"Did you feel that?" Zor whispered, his brow scrunching. "It felt like...some sort of magic."

I meant to say *what kind of magic*, but it came out, "*Whtkndfmngc?*"

Then Raziel nibbled down the side of my neck, and I closed my eyes, turned my face toward him, and let him kiss me into oblivion.

He kissed me until my heart slowed down, my breathing growing steady. Until I was a pile of soft clay, ready to be molded into whatever he wanted me to be.

“Let me make love to you,” he murmured, and I sighed as he sank into me, the feel of him inside me familiar and comforting, like I was coming home.

He moved gently, tenderly, every kiss a promise of a future, every stroke of his cock teasing some response—a shudder of pleasure, a quickening of my pulse, a small, low moan.

Our intimacy was so natural, so second nature we knew what the other needed without having to ask. I was ready for his kiss when it came. He moaned when I dragged my nails down his back.

And when we came, we climaxed together, as if this was the only way we could ever finish.

There was no crashing of magic this time...but there was something.

Something dark and glittering, dangerous and beckoning, so deep inside of us I couldn't quite reach it. But it was there, just the same.

And then the feeling was gone, and I held Raz's sweat-slicked body in my arms as the three of us fell asleep in a tangle of legs and arms and blankets and hearts entwined together.



ZOR WAS ALREADY awake by the time I opened my eyes, head propped up on his hand, watching me like he'd been doing that for hours.

“What time is it?” I asked, because while last night had been amazing, right now I had to pee, and Raziel was squashed against my back, snoring like a bear.

“Just after seven.” His appreciative gaze wandered down my body, and I blushed, until his eyes snagged on the black mark running down my side. “I didn’t know you had that.” His face darkened, his expression something I couldn’t decipher.

“It’s not a big deal. You have one, too.”

Zor’s mark was on his wrist, a raised, circular dot, like the one on my side. But from that mark ran a tendril of black, as thin as a tree root, disappearing into his armpit.

“Mine’s far larger today than it was a few days ago, but not nearly as big as yours, Anaria.”

I looked at my side and gasped.

The lightning bolt stretched down over the top of my thigh, crackling fingers spread out over my stomach and the front of my thigh.

“Holy shite,” I breathed. “That’s awfully fucking big.”

This shouldn’t be a surprise. What was a surprise? Raziel and Tavion had been nearby when I’d cast my magic at the Citadelle. Raz had been *inside* the cloud of power, but Zor... he’d been way down on the battlefield, far away from me.

Far enough to be safe, or so I’d thought.

He shouldn’t have been affected at all.

I’d used magic yesterday, and plenty of it, on the king. On Raziel, to heal him. On killing the mages and the hounds and the soldiers.

In fact, I’d expended all my magic.

Which, strangely enough, was straining to escape the iron bands right now. In fact, my magic was thrashing so violently inside me, my bones ached from the unrelenting pressure. I checked to make sure the iron was in place, something Zor didn’t miss.

“Your magic is back, I take it?”

“More than before,” I murmured, unable to hide my flash of worry. “How about yours?”

The grin I expected never came, only that level, flat stare, as if he was trying to see inside my head. “Mine’s back, too.” His lips—the ones I wanted so desperately to kiss again—tightened ominously.

“There’s only one problem, Anaria. The magic that just got stronger?” Zorander shook his head. “It isn’t my magic. This is something different. Like yours...but darker. I can still transport, but this...This feels dangerous, more like a weapon.”

“What does that even mean?” I whispered, grunting when Raziel elbowed me in the side.

“Why are you two talking so loud when I could sleep for another hour?” Raz grumbled, rolling over, his arm splaying over my side. “I swear, this better not become a habit.”

Zor and I looked at each other with the same wide-eyed expression.

The blemish on Raz’s face was the same size, a small black circle that would easily be dismissed as a mole.

But on his arm...

“Are you seeing this?” Zor hissed.

Oh, I saw it all right. A mark almost identical to Zor’s that ran from the inside of Raziel’s wrist almost to the crook of his elbow. Not as long as Zor’s. Twice as thick.

“Yeah, I found this fucking thing last night.” Raz sat up and rubbed his face, his hair wonderfully ruffled, his half-lidded eyes dipping to the black mark wrapped around my side.

“At least there’s no denying we all belong together.”

ANARIA

After spending too much time comparing our not-quite-matching marks, Zorander left to find us horses, deciding it would be best if none of us touched our magic and took a more traditional mode of transportation back to Blackcastle.

He returned in his shirtsleeves with two horses, and as I wrapped my arms around Raziel's middle, I couldn't much complain about how this worked out.

Zor had let me keep his precious knife, saying I needed a weapon more than he did, and I had to admit, I felt better with a blade strapped to my thigh beneath the filthy dress.

Tavion, Tristan, and Adele should have been through the portal by now, hopefully past those horrid skulls and close to the end of the tunnels. Whether or not they'd stop to see Lucius on their way was anyone's guess, though in my heart, I hoped Tavion took the time.

Somehow, the thought made me feel heavy, the image of Adele clinging to Tavion's back as he loped away seeming more like a premonition than a rescue.

Who was to say how long any of us had to say the things we wanted to say to the people we had in our lives?

And how many regrets would we have once they were gone, and we realized how much time we'd selfishly wasted? Maybe Tavion would realize that before it was too late.

“Are you all right back there?” Raz asked for the umpteenth time.

“I’m good,” I told him with a false brightness I didn’t feel.

The pressure of my still-building magic was almost too much to take. I kept fidgeting in the saddle, trying to get comfortable, which was hard when I was bursting at the seams.

Zorander fidgeted, too, a faint haze of shadow hovering around him, like the penumbra around the sun on an overcast day. His new magic, and if I squinted, I didn’t see stars but something darker, like small black dots spinning in the haze.

None of us spoke of last night, but there was an easiness to this morning, as if words weren’t as necessary, and every time Zor rubbed the mark on his arm, Raz jolted, while I felt phantom fingers gently stroke my side.

Strange.

Yet oddly comforting.

Being connected wasn’t all bad. I couldn’t say I minded it. I’d never had a family before, and the Shadow King had cheated me out of any kin when he burned the High Barrens. I tightened my hold on Raziel.

These two were my family now.

I was about to ask where we were when our horse startled, dancing sideways off the trail. The forest went still, as if every creature—even the smallest gnat—cowered in fear at something ancient and poisonous lurking within these trees.

Something older than time, crueller than nature, and when I caught a whiff of putrefied rot, my scalp prickled.



FEAR TURNED to rage the moment The Oracle skittered out from between the lichen-covered trunks, her bulky form blocking the narrow forest path.

This...monstrous *thing*, who played games with our lives was a fucking abomination. She'd manipulated us so cruelly and from the scheming look in her eyes, she wasn't yet done.

Dappled sunlight danced across her, making a mockery of the calm, lush setting, as if poison seeped into every crevice of this ancient, untouched forest.

"You sent us to our deaths," I hissed, leaning out around Raziel, who immediately shoved me back behind him with a curse. The Oracle's answering grin sent a shiver of horror through me.

"The Reapers were a surprise, even to me, but Carex always has kept many tricks up his sleeve." Her voice slithered through the trees, Raz and Zor closing ranks, forming a solid barrier between me and her.

There was no sense asking how she got here when she would only answer in riddles, but panic ripped through me at the cunning gleam in her eyes, as if everything she'd planned for so long was finally coming to fruition.

As if yesterday's battle hadn't gone terribly wrong at all.

"You should have killed your sire, child. That is a mistake that you will live to regret."

I leaned my forehead into Raz's back and closed my eyes. Hadn't I asked myself that very same thing? Didn't I know better than to leave such dangerous enemies alive?

But the magic had made the choice for me and I couldn't go back in time.

Leaning around Raz again, I watched her creep through the thick ferns, crushing delicate moss and flowers beneath her feet. Why was she here? Had I failed her so miserably she would drag me back to Tempeste to finish the job on the king?

A tremor of fear went through me.

Or did she mean to turn me over to the Reapers? Oh gods, they'd turn me into a mindless drone, and the thought of being given to one of the Reapers, like Ember had been, chilled me to the bone.

It was one thing to die fighting, or even running so we could fight again later, but I'd been a sacrificial lamb once.

I wouldn't be one again.

“What do you want, crone?” Zorander demanded, sword in his hand and his voice as cold as the stars in the night sky. “Those were my fucking men out there. *My men*,” he roared, fury bending the air around us, more of that odd, black mist swirling through the bracken.

“You sent us into a trap, promising vengeance and victory but giving us death.”

Her black smile was the epitome of evil. “Did I? I don't recall promising you anything. You have defied me at every turn, spit on the gift I have given you, searched for ways to escape the inescapable fate that lies before you. This world will not survive unless it is bathed in blood.”

Ever so slowly, she swiveled her head to me, and I couldn't breathe when she met my eyes. “I know what you did, Anaria. I know the games you play.”

She pointed her gnarled finger to the west.

“Bleed that army dry and restore the magic. Only then will you know peace.” That horrific smile widened, splitting her face in two. “If you refuse, this cursed force will march across the border and kill every single Fae in Solarys. Male, female, child. There will be no survivors, I will make sure.”

Rage turned to quiet anger, the kind that made me cold. I tipped my head to match hers, wondering if I could kill her.

If I could kill the king—if that was possible, not another of her lies—perhaps I could kill her, as well.

“But because you seem to require incentive...” She snapped a finger and a great silver wolf appeared out of thin air, struggling against a web of writhing black magic. Everywhere the strands touched, blood seeped through his thick fur. Adele gripped him with a stubborn defiance that might just get her killed.

My mother's eyes were filled with every emotion swirling through me.

Hate, rage, fear, helplessness.

"Let them go." I barely recognized my voice, it came out so warped. "*Right fucking now.*" I could barely see through the haze of consuming rage, could barely think, the urge to rip these bands off my arms and incinerate her almost too much to resist.

Almost.

She bared her black teeth in a parody of a smile. "Oh, I don't think so, little thief. I've learned my lesson with you. Best I keep the upper hand until I get what I want."

A moment later Tristan thudded to the ground, twisting and cursing, caught in more of the Oracle's hideous black magic.

A lift of the Oracle's withered hand had Adele and Tavion floating toward her, my mother's stick-thin legs kicking, her pale eyes narrowed in fury as she fought.

"I shall have your mother and the wolf keep me company until this is done. I'll take Lord DeVayne with me as well. I don't know why I didn't think of this before. You have one day to return to me with good news."

Adele turned to me, her face twisted in fear, Tavion fighting to escape, to get my mother to freedom, his taloned feet clawing in desperation but finding nothing to dig into.

Somehow, Tristan was on his feet, reaching for his arrows, but she clicked her fingers and his quiver and bow disappeared completely.

"Kill the army, Anaria. I shall be watching. If you fail... well, the land requires blood." A click of her fingers and Tavion yelped, blood soaking his beautiful, silver fur.

"I shall drain every last drop from these three until there is nothing left."

The last thing I heard was Adele's enraged scream when they vanished.

“Fuck.” Zor whirled around. “*Fuck.*”

I couldn't say a word, but if I could, I would have echoed Zorander.

My brain was frozen. *I was frozen.* Helpless, not able to shake this horrid terror that held my muscles still and wiped every thought from my head. I was nothing but shaking, boneless flesh, and I didn't know what to do next.

“There has to be some way to find them, to rescue them.” Raz's chest heaved, sweat blooming all over him as our nervous mount snorted, jerking against the reins.

“If we could find where she's holding them,” Zor growled, but his stare was already focused, determined as he sheathed his sword. “*Maybe.* Where would she take them?” As one, we looked behind us where the wall separated Solarys from Caladrius.

“Back to Tempeste?” Raz shook his head. “I don't think so. The city's burning. Filled with Soul Reapers. We wouldn't even get close.”

They were both right. With her magic—more powerful than any of ours—she could hide our friends anywhere. We could spend years searching...or we could do her fucking bidding.

“She gave us a day.” I met Zor's furious, dark gaze and smiled grimly. “We have to find that army and we have to stop them. Before they reach Solarys.”

Because I had no doubt that while she lied to us, she would keep her word on slaughtering innocents.

Chaos, after all, was her specialty.

“That army is ten thousand Reapers strong, Anaria.” I swallowed down my fear. I knew how impossible this was, and yet...we didn't have a choice. She'd seen to that. “This is too dangerous. Impossible, even for you. How do you know she's not sending us to our deaths?”

“She could be. But how many innocent lives hang in the balance if we do nothing? A hundred thousand? More?” I

shook my head, “Give me another option. Tell me where to find Tavion, Adele, and Tristan and we’ll go free them.

“I don’t want to kill anyone else.” Raz squeezed my thigh, his hand shaking as badly as I was. I laid my hand right over his, tears blurring my eyes. “Give me anything, because I do not want to do this.”

Trapped.

We were fucking trapped, and we’d barely made it out alive when our forces were evenly matched. Now we were what? Three against ten thousand? A hysterical laugh bubbled up out of me before I clapped a hand over my mouth.

“We didn’t make it this far to lose you, Anaria,” Raz said quietly, turning his hand palm up. I wove my fingers into his, leaned my forehead against his spine, and closed my eyes.

“I’m not losing you, and you won’t lose me. But we don’t have a choice. We’re going back. We’ll find a way to finish this and get everyone back.”

Such lies.

We’d all be dead in a couple of hours, and if we failed...if we died, I doubted the Oracle would have much use for an archer, a silver wolf, and my mother.

“We *will* finish this,” I repeated, my voice stronger, a hint of stardust swirling in the sunbeams. “And when that army is gone and we get our friends back, I will dedicate every ounce of myself to eradicating that bitch from the face of the earth.

After we abandoned the horses to the forest, Zor flew us toward Tempeste.

As it turned out, we didn't have to travel nearly that far.

The king's Soul Reaper army had marched eastward all night, ten thousand thundering soldiers that churned the hard, cracked earth of the flatlands to a fine dust. Soft enough their blood would soak in deep, giving birth to a new world, and I closed my eyes to the horror of what I was about to do.

Life from death.

Magic from evil.

There was no use defying the Oracle any longer, not when Adele's, Tristan's, and Tavion's lives hung in the balance. Not when a quick death would be better than what the future held for these men. Even the Caladrian soldiers, I imagined, were screaming inside their own bodies. She'd trapped us all so neatly, with no chance of escape, and when this was finished we would be her slaves.

Zor squatted down beside me with Raz on my other side, studying the army that had yet to spot us behind the small clump of rocks—the only cover for miles—Zor had landed us behind.

Once the host scented us, I would have no choice at all, but until that moment, I could pretend there was another way out of this situation.

I could walk away from this horror.

Find some remote place to live happily ever after, just like Raz suggested.

“They’re in a tight enough formation you could take them out in a series of blows.” Zor fell back into his role of general, pointing to the shambling soldiers closest to us. “One clean strike right there would fell the front five lines. Then we’ll move to the left, then the back, and so on. If we keep jumping, they won’t be able to lock onto our location.”

I remembered how fast Ember had moved, little more than a blur.

I wasn’t that fast, but if I kept my magic flowing, the Reapers *should* die before they got close enough to sink their teeth into me. I just couldn’t falter. Not for a second.

“How much magic do you have?” I asked Zor. My own power was straining to escape, and I had a feeling I’d need every last drop to finish this.

“Enough.” He scratched his jaw. “More than I should.”

I nodded. I hadn’t asked about the strange dark haze hanging around him, nor the way he kept rubbing the mark on his arm. But more magic was better than none, no matter what sort.

My eyes kept flicking to the sky for any dark shadow that looked out of place.

The army had been marching since yesterday, yet they showed no signs of slowing down. Normal men—even hardened Fae soldiers—would have collapsed from thirst by now, but these creatures showed no such weaknesses.

They moved like machines, stiffly but steadily, leaving a cloud of dust behind them that stretched all the way to Tempeste. This close, you could distinguish Caladrian soldier from Solarys, shopkeeper from prisoner, courtier from mage. Even the horrible hounds lurched amongst the reanimated horde, open jaws dripping saliva, black eyes gleaming.

I couldn’t say they were any more frightening now than they had been.

I wondered if anyone from Tempeste had survived.

“They’ll attack once they know where the attack is coming from,” I pointed out. “Ember was clever, but she was even more cunning with that thing inside her. They’re smart. And they’re fast.”

“We keep moving,” Zor said steadily. “I’ll carry you and I won’t give them time to regroup before we land in our next spot. Strategically, this is the most viable plan.”

“I have a better idea.” I pasted on a smile to hide my shaking. “Well, not better, but an idea.”

Raz groaned. “No. Not happening.”

I lifted an eyebrow. “You haven’t even heard my idea yet.”

“Still a no,” Zor said in solidarity, and I frowned at the two of them ganging up on me. “Attacking one flank at a time and keeping our distance is the safest strategy.”

“But not the most effective,” I murmured. The huge army slogged along, mindless, empty shells, driven only by the creatures inhabiting them. We’d all checked ourselves over for any wounds, no matter how small, but I couldn’t forget Ember’s attack, how sharp her teeth had been.

One small nick and there was no doubt they’d take us over.

A fucking papercut could do us in right now.

I shook my head, hardly believing what I was about to propose. “Drop me into the center of them and leave.”

Raz just crossed his arms over his chest. “That doesn’t even constitute an idea. And you’re right, it’s not better.”

I turned to Zorander. “One clean blast from the center of the army should take out most of them,” I explained quickly. “I didn’t have to use very much magic when I killed the Reaper in Ember, just a touch of the magic and the thing disappeared. This isn’t about power, it’s about reach.”

“This is about not acting foolishly and getting yourself killed.”

“Foolish, maybe, but I don’t intend to get killed. This is about completing the Oracle’s task as expediently as possible so she frees our friends.”

And my mother, I didn’t add. My mother who finally was free, only to become the prisoner of an even bigger monster than the king.

“The second you vanish, Zor, I’ll let my magic loose.” After last night, my well was overflowing. This wasn’t a power problem; this was a *how fast can you move before you get ripped apart* problem.

“I won’t condone this plan. This is too reckless, even for you, Anaria,” Zor growled softly, sweat dripping down his dust-coated face, leaving streaks of mud.

His thin shirt clung to his muscled body, and I understood the fear he was feeling, because every time I looked at him, I felt the same kind of helpless dread. He had no armor, nothing to protect him against these creatures.

At least I had my magic.

“I have no desire to be dropped into the middle of a bunch of Soul Reapers, but we don’t have the luxury of debating this right now. I have enough magic to cast a wave big enough to consume the entire force, once I know you are both out of range.”

For my friends, I would do this.

For the innocent people in Solarys, I would do this.

“But I can’t...I *won’t* cast my magic while you are close.” My gaze flicked down to the black line trailing up the inside of his powerful arm. “This isn’t about choices, Zorander. This is about doing the only thing left to do and having no choice at all.”

At the rate this army moved, shambling though the soldiers were, they’d reach the wall by midnight. Maybe the wall would fail completely beneath this many Reapers, all of them carrying such foul magic of their own.

I shuddered to think what would happen to Deepwood and all the other unsuspecting villages scattered through the forest once they passed through the gate. If the unwary inhabitants would become food for this army...or fresh hosts.

Either way, they had to be stopped.

“One clean blast will end them. I can do this.” I held Zor’s gaze as steadily as I could, given a deadly host marched only a few lengths away. “I *have* to do this; you know it’s true. If they get through the ward, they’ll slaughter every living thing they come across.”

“Or we head to the wall and you enforce it with your magic. We outlast them, we wait until their hosts die,” Raz suggested softly, his hard jaw set, his eyes cold. That coldness was fear, not anger, and I wanted to scream.

“I don’t know how to reinforce an ancient ward. And once the hosts die, the Reapers will just be set free to look for more hosts, then this cycle repeats.” Never in my life had I thought I would have to fight so hard to do something so foolish.

“I have to kill them.” The reek of death hung all around us, the foul, rotting scent of ten thousand Reapers. “We only have one chance.” I looked between them. I could defy them both, march into the thick of that host and destroy them myself, but I wanted us to agree.

I wanted us to make this choice *together*.

“We only have right now. If we wait much longer, we’ll be fighting them in the streets of Deepwood or Blackcastle, and then...then we might as well not bother.”

Raz shook his head, but Zor looked at the approaching force, eyes narrowed as he studied their movements. “I’ll get Raz clear.” Raz’s ferocious growl told me he wasn’t leaving so easily.

“Then I’ll come back for you. I’ll get you as close to the center as I can. You’d better be casting the second your feet hit the ground, Anaria. You cannot hesitate, not for a second. Swear to me, you’ll release your power immediately. You do not wait for me.”

“I swear.” I clenched my sweaty hands. “Get Raz out of here before they spot us.” I scanned the skies once more, but they were clear. Maybe the Reapers couldn’t travel far outside of a host. Maybe they were too high for even Fae eyes to see.

“You’re sure about this?” Zor asked, while Raziel muttered something incredibly foul. “Nothing you can think of that could go wrong?”

I wracked my brain, but all I could envision was Ember’s look of shock when the Reaper had left her body, before she melted into a puddle of black goo. *Oh gods, this was going to be horrendous.*

“No,” I said firmly. “This will work.”

“If anything goes wrong, if I so much as *think* anything is wrong, I’m getting you out of there.”

“Agreed.”

“This is a piss-poor idea.” Raz turned his furious glare from Zor to me and I glared right back. “This is not up to you. Taking on an entire army...*is not up to you.*”

“Then who else?” I took his hands, marveling at how much bigger they were than my own. “If I don’t do this...she *will* kill Adele and Tavion and Tristan. We tried to find a way to avoid this outcome. *I* tried to find a way not to spill blood, not to give her what she wanted, and she still outmaneuvered me.

“How are we supposed to outwit her when she’s probably a million years old? She’s watched a thousand wars, manipulated countless rulers, made kings, then killed them when they didn’t do her bidding. Maybe all we can hope for is to save our friends. Save my mother, buy us a few months, a year of peace before she decides to use us again.”

“This is not the way, Anaria.”

I nodded to the army, so close a faint haze of dust settled over us. “This is the only way. We get our friends and family back and we head to Lucius’s. We regroup. We figure out what comes next. Maybe there’s something we haven’t yet considered.” I sucked in a quick breath and ended up with a mouthful of dirt. “Maybe Adele knows something. She was

Carex's consort, after all. She would have been closer to him than anyone else."

"He is not our real enemy," Raz pointed out. "Not anymore."

I shook my head. "No, but he is one of them. That army is our first concern. Then the Fae King, then the Oracle." And then, if we managed to survive all that, we'd decide what came after.

Somehow, I doubted our future was filled with peace and quiet. Probably just more running for our lives and figuring out how to stay alive.

"I still don't agree"—Raz's eyes landed on me with the force of a blow—"but I will trust you, Anaria, to know your magic and to do this."

Raziel leaned in and kissed me, a quick, brutal kiss that left me gasping in the dust-filled air. His eyes dipped to my pocket where the stone was. "Use *everything* you have. No matter how dangerous, if it means you stay alive. Do not hold back; show no mercy."

Then Zorander grasped Raziel's wrist and they were gone, leaving me alone, the ground quaking beneath my knees. I slid the bands off my arms and into my pocket, the iron clanking in time to the marching feet. I brushed my fingers across the keystone, letting that cool, soothing magic calm me.

Stardust sparkled inside the dusty air, forming whirlpools of pure light.

A second later Zor was back, his mouth set, nothing showing on his face but ruthless determination. All around us shadows swirled softly, and like they had once before, they rose behind him, looking almost like wings.

"I can do this." The army was almost on us. "I'm ready."

"Focus on spreading your magic evenly through the soldiers, then keep pushing and don't stop until they're all down. I'll pick off the stragglers. I see anything I don't like, I'm taking you out of there. I left you alone and unprotected once, Anaria. I won't leave you again."

“My magic doesn’t differentiate between enemies and friends, Zor.”

If he reappeared while I was casting my power, if he got in the way... “You can’t come back until that army is down or I am out of magic.” But today, my magic had no bottom, just a depthless well that reached to the chasm of my soul.

“I’m well aware of what your magic does, Anaria.” Zor dragged his rough knuckles down my cheek, and I leaned into his touch, drinking it down like it was water and I was dying. “But you have your nonnegotiables, and I have mine.”

“Okay.” We didn’t have time to debate, and this was the only way to eradicate the enormous, cursed army. “We’ll only get one chance,” I reminded him softly, our eyes meeting.

Zor’s gaze settled into me, the picture of pure male dominance as he yanked me against him and kissed me, longer and deeper and fiercer than Raziel. As if he wanted to imprint himself on me until the end of time. The kiss scorched me to my toes, and I was still catching my breath when he tugged my hair back, forcing me to look in his eyes.

“You had godsdamned better come back to me. If you don’t, I will hunt you down and drag you back from the Great Beyond myself.”

And that look, that fierceness, was precisely why I was willing to take this risk. I would risk everything for these men.

Everything, and I’d never regret my choice, not for a moment.

The ground was shaking, the air so clogged with dust I couldn’t see ten feet in front of me. If the Reaper army attacked, we wouldn’t even see them until they were upon us. I tried to breathe normally when his hand banded around my arm.

“Last chance to change your mind.”

“Let’s get this done.” Being yanked into the space where Zorander moved through time always took my breath away—the air freezing in my lungs from that feeling of utter

weightlessness before my feet hit the ground with enough force to buckle my knees.

The second the pressure of Zor's hand disappeared, I dropped every tether I had on my magic, sending a wave of white, glittering magic in all directions like I was a stone dropped into a black pond, magic erupting from me so violently I gritted my teeth against the pain.

This was no time to balk, I warned myself, digging deeper. *No time to give in*, even though the agony was mind bending.

Soldiers died all around me, bodies thudding into the soft, stirred-up dirt, but more and more pressed closer, clawed hands reaching for me, deadly teeth gnashing, eyes filled with the sort of hungry intent that sent shockwaves of terror through me.

One slice of teeth or nails and I was doomed.

I screamed as power rolled out of me, through the army, out and out and out, until my throat was as raw as my soul.

A red mist of blood hung thickly, coating everything, thicker, even, than the dust. The air tasted of Reaper rot and copper, and I couldn't stop tasting it, even with my mouth closed. I choked, spitting out a mouthful of dirt.

My magic quailed then rallied, but the hesitation was enough for them to surge forward, for their broken nails to rake across my nose, taking out a chunk of flesh.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

Warm blood dribbled down my face and they turned feral, growling and snarling, clawing at the magic before solid, devouring stardust cut them down where they stood, until I was surrounded by a heap of bodies with no clear path through which to cast my power.

Stars danced in the air, heavy with the stench of death as the next wave of Reapers climbed up and over the pile of bodies. I couldn't push my magic out evenly and a claw nicked my arm, another raking across my back.

Until every inch of me stung and I was covered in cuts.

I was a Reaper buffet, and yet...not one tried to take me over.

Then our contest simply became a test of endurance. How long I could keep the magic flowing—how long they'd keep coming.

Every minute, each second, I reminded myself I had to do this alone.

Because if Zorander returned too soon, if my magic touched him...*No*.

I shoved the thought out of my head and pushed harder, delved deeper, screamed louder, and ripped another layer of magic out of me, my bones rippling, blood coating my mouth. The Oracle would get blood today from everyone, it seemed.

I swallowed the coppery bile back down, blinking the red from my eyes.

This army would not reach the border.

This army would not take another step.

My reality became an endless wave of pain, soldiers died and died and died, making no sound. I didn't know what was more unnerving, the fact that an entire host of once-vibrant Fae died so silently, or the fact that there was no end in sight.

I recognized a shopkeeper in his woolen vest—he'd made the croissants Ember had so loved.

There was the prisoner I'd handed the keys of the prison to who had only known a few precious hours of freedom.

Soldiers I vaguely recognized from the Keep. A girl who'd been a slave at the Citadelle, her servant's dress matching mine.

One of the soldiers climbed over the pile of bodies, using a prisoner as his shield. The prisoner fell away, and I stepped back to find a better position when my foot caught on the legs of one of the dead and I teetered, arms flailing for balance. A whip of magic roared out of me as the soldier—one of ours, ironically—drew back his gauntleted fist.

His blow had me seeing stars, then I crumpled to the ground.

ZORANDER

I saw Anaria go down.

Saw her disappear beneath a voracious horde of clawed hands and razor-sharp teeth and I was already moving, Raziel's wrist gripped in my hand. We were already armed.

Ready to protect her.

Ready to die for her, if need be.

The moment I landed us in the center of the host, Raz swung his blade in a deadly arc, slicing off soldier's hands and arms with ease while I scooped Anaria from where she lay, silvery hair coated in gore. I never stopped moving, trapping her firmly against me, my other hand catching Raziel's upper arm mid spin, and I completed my turn before the Reapers even knew I was there.

Then we were gone.

We landed miles from the cursed, dying army, in the middle of nowhere, empty wasteland stretching out in all directions, everything a blur of brown. Even the air didn't smell of death and rot, just the faintest hint of smoke.

My heart stopped when I saw how much blood leaked from her battered head, her mouth, soaking the front of her shredded dress. There were so many wounds on her body, bile rose in my throat.

How a Reaper hadn't taken her over... I turned my head and retched into the dirt.

I stumbled away from Raziel with Anaria clutched in my arms, cradling her head as I lifted her eyelid, taking a shaky breath when I found them still a pale green. *Thank all the gods.*

“She’s still her.” I pushed back her damp hair and examined her wound. *Wounds.* The top of her nose had a chunk out of it and her cheek looked like someone had taken a rasp to her face. Claw marks raked her torso, her chest, her arms.

Raz lay his palm over her heart and closed his eyes, pushing healing magic into her. “She’s just unconscious.” Her cheeks flushed pink as his magic began to work, the wounds disappearing beneath new, smooth skin.

“I can’t believe you let her do this.” Raz glared up at me, seething with a rage that I’d seen a few times, but had never been directed at me before, not as long as I’d known him.

“Her bullshite plan could have gotten her killed.”

“I didn’t *let* Anaria do anything,” I snapped. “And we both tried to talk her out of this, and we both failed. This wasn’t a *bullshite* plan; it was a *dangerous* plan. If you or I possessed this magic, one of us would have been at the center of that army, not her.”

Raz’s glower became a wicked smile. “I *do* have that kind of magic, or did you forget?”

“How the fuck could I?” I glanced pointedly at the collar I’d welded on him. The one act I regretted more than anything else, every fucking day for the past hundred years.

Yet some petty part of me sniped, “Not right now, you don’t.”

“True enough.” Some of his temper faded away. “Still a bullshite plan, because that *was* Anaria, alone, in the middle of ten thousand soldiers.”

“I know.” I pushed the hair out of her beautiful face, wiping away as much of the blood as I could manage. “Don’t you think I fucking know?” She was completely unconscious, pale as a ghost, tiny, fragile hands curled up. But she was

breathing evenly, her temperature normal, and behind her eyelids, her eyes moved like she was sleeping.

“She’s exhausted. Two days expending all her magic...She can’t do that again. If she drew too much...” Raz snapped his lips together.

“Maybe the wild magic doesn’t have the same limits our magic does,” I said carefully. “But you’re right. She’s drained, and we have to get her somewhere safe to recover.”

“Take me back there.” Raz stared at the stain of black in the middle of the great plain, a few Reaper-infested soldiers milling around as if they’d lost their sense of purpose. “I’ll finish them off.” He hefted the sword.

“Not worth the risk.” I didn’t give a good godsdamn if there were any left. “There’s only a handful of soldiers left with—”

The ground heaved beneath us, and what had been solid earth became a wave-tossed sea where we were about to be swallowed up. I was already kneeling beside Anaria, but Raz went down hard, barking out a curse when he realized how close he’d come to falling on the pointy end of his sword.

“What was that”—Raz climbed to his feet—“an earthquake?”

I got up, cradling Anaria carefully in my arms. My instincts prickled as I studied the wide, open plain, the white capped mountains towering around us. Everything was quiet, not a sound breaking the echoing silence. And in my experience, that was never a good thing.

“That wasn’t like any earthquake I’ve ever—”

This time we were all flattened to the ground and the rolling didn’t stop, a chill, foul wind screaming over us, coming from the direction of the Reaper army. I curled myself around a still-unconscious Anaria while the air warped and bent around us, my ears bursting, bones groaning beneath the onslaught.

“The magic.” Raz crawled closer, pulling at his collar like the iron was burning him. “The spilled blood, the dirt of the

realm, the Oracle's bullshite plan...This is the wild magic reappearing." The ground rumbled like a leviathan was beneath us, rising closer to the surface.

His gaze met mine. "If we're here when something that ancient rises, we are dead."

I didn't bother getting to my feet. I just held Anaria tighter then caught Raz's wrist. The next second, I dragged the three of us through space and time, that foul wind nipping at my heels with cruel, unforgiving teeth, as if it would not let us go.

With a luck I had not earned, we landed far enough away not to be swallowed by the maelstrom, but close enough to watch in awe as Caladrius remade itself.

Because that was the only way to explain the sight before us. The world spun up in a black, howling tempest of bodies and blood-stained earth, all the way to the clouds, then plummeted down, crashing back to earth with enough force the world itself trembled.

The ground rocked beneath us, and a great cloud of dust pushed by a wall of darkness washed past, smelling of rot and blood and death, but filled with something else as well—the rich odor of green growing things, of rich, boggy soil, and the sweetness of ripe fruit, so cloyingly heavy my head spun.

I remained curled around an unconscious Anaria, close enough to drag Raziel away if anything lunged from that whirling cloud, both of us frozen in awe and fear.

I almost wished Anaria was awake to see this, but it was enough she was curled up and safe.

The next chill wind was charged with ozone and the reek of wild magic, the smell touching some long forgotten memory inside me. Perhaps some memory hidden deep in my ancient bloodline, stretching back to the inception of this world, that recognized this rebirth.

The making of a new world.

Gods help us all.

Raziel's nose flared, his eyes narrowing as the magic unleashed itself, spreading out and out and out from where Anaria had killed the infected soldiers, then both Raz and I threw ourselves over her as the choking wave passed over us a harpy's keening whine, stealing my breath as it sped to the east.

Would that darkness reach Blackcastle and the Keep?

Or would the ward stop such a powerful wave?

Somehow, I doubted Fae magic would stand up to anything so ancient, and my mouth went dry as the dust settled around us, the mighty wave hurtling towards Solarys. For a hundred years, we'd questioned everything about the Oracle's motives.

Why she used us as her pawns, what she would do once the kings were gone. Why she'd waited a thousand years for her revenge.

But we'd never once asked ourselves what would happen when the wild magic returned to these lands, or what that meant for the rest of the world. Anaria stirred in my arms as Raziel climbed to his feet, hair blowing back in the warm, humid wind that came from where that swell of power had originated.

Where the Reaper army had died, an eerie green light glowed, like the sun had landed in the center of the wasteland.

"Are you seeing this?" Warning slithered through me, my instincts telling me to *run, run, run*.

"Holy gods." All I could do was gape as thick, swaying grasses sprang out of the bare earth nearest to that light, trees erupting from the ground, branches reaching for the sun. "We have to get out of here."

What that magic would do to our flesh-and-blood bodies if we were caught up in that storm of creation...I didn't want to know.

Didn't want to know what we might become.

Not after seeing the Oracle.

“What is happening...*Oh my gods.*” Anaria struggled upright in my arms then went limp, gaping at the expanding swell of greenish light, swirls of some strange magic mixed in. The barren land gave birth to forests and streams, birds bursting from the tops of trees in a rustle of wings.

“This is what the Oracle wanted,” Anaria breathed, pressing her hand to her belly. “The rebirth of the magic.”

Rebirth.

But to what end?

For a world inhabited only by those she considered worthy? In her eyes, the Fae were not worthy. So where was our place in that world? I’d been a warrior for too long, and I had no desire to trade a dark king for a dark queen.

“If that wave swallows us up...” Raz’s brows rose as he came to the same realization as me. “What happens if we get consumed by wild magic?”

The leading edge of the green swell of power devoured everything in its path. I clasped his wrist in preparation of spiriting us away, gathered my magic, and...nothing.

“*Zorander...* get us out of here,” Raz growled. I tried again. And again.

There was nothing for me to reach for, no thread of power to grasp, not from the right one, anyway.

I could reach that dark, cold power, but I had no desire to. That magic felt wrong, and my power to transport us away had disappeared. Horror shivered through me as I measured the vanishing distance between us and the churning edge of the green wave of light.

“I can’t.” My voice shook, my entire body trembling as I looked behind us, but there was nowhere to hide.

“I can’t find my magic, it’s like it’s...gone.” Helpless. I was fucking helpless.

I looked down at the woman I loved, then over at my oldest friend, and all I could think was...*I’ve failed you both.*

Anaria fought her way out of my arms and spilled into the dirt, skinning her palms on the rocky ground before she pushed up to her knees and crawled in front of us.

Before I could yank her back, she threw her hands out and cast a shimmering shield, seconds before the wave slammed into us with the force of an explosion. The fragile shield bent inwards with a groan, but held, Anaria's gritted teeth and closed eyes a testament to how much effort she put towards protecting us.

Everything.

She would give everything to save us, and my heart soared and broke at the realization.

I crouched behind her and wrapped my arms around her waist to keep her steady, letting her focus on maintaining the shield, bolstering whatever was left of her magic, the approaching collapse that I was sure was coming.

"Too much," Raz muttered, huddled behind her, hand braced on her shoulders. "She's using too much fucking magic." His eyes found mine, and they held the same fear that locked my heart in a vise.

He was right. We had to get out of here. Trees sprang up all around us, ice-cold water pooling around our ankles as a shallow stream flowed past us to the east. Above our heads, wide, green leaves unfurled to block out the sun, and then the wave was gone, roaring off to the east, leaving us in silence.

No, not silence.

Not the dead, empty silence this realm had become accustomed to, but a vibrant silence of rushing water and rustling leaves, where even the wind seemed to sing as it rippled through the newborn forest.

"It's over, Anaria. You can stop now."

Anaria slumped into my arms, her body boneless, though she stared in wonder at the chatter of birdsong chirping from the forest that hadn't even existed a moment ago. "She was right," Anaria breathed. "After all her lies...the Oracle was right about this. The magic returned."

Bought with the blood of ten thousand innocent men, I wanted to point out. Not that my men—or any of us—had been given a choice. No, we'd all been used as pawns by the Fae King and the Oracle to serve their own ends. Whatever those might be.

I scrubbed my face and set Anaria down beside the stream.

“Can we drink this, do you think?” she asked softly, touching her toe to the crystal clear water.

The trees were heavy with nuts. Brambles sagged beneath the weight of bright red berries, and Raz stalked over and sniffed them suspiciously. “Would you trust anything that wasn't here a minute ago?”

Anaria's nose wrinkled in answer.

“So no drinking and eating.” She peered through the forest, thick enough only the very tops of the mountains were visible, then ran her toe through the water again. I thought I felt the ground shudder beneath my feet in answer, but that could be an aftershock, the earth settling back into place.

“That would be wise.” Within these trees, we couldn't see much further than a few hundred feet, but I expected if I climbed one of these trees, this forest stretched across the flatlands, from the foothills to Tempeste to the Gulf of Kaerius to our south.

The sheer amount of magic it took to remake an entire realm...I didn't want to consider that. Not when we stood right in the center of such power.

“What now? Do we walk to the portal and head to Blackcastle?” Her green eyes glowed brighter than the dappled sunlight, her blood-flecked hair moving in the gentle breeze. “Or do we go north and take the tunnels back to Nightcain Castle?”

The trees around us rattled, birds squawking as they exploded out of the branches, a fell wind screaming through the newly made wood. A shadow of pure black swooped between the trees and engulfed her, Anaria's eyes flying wide, her scream cutting off when the Reapers swept her away.

Raz and I both lunged forward, arms sweeping through the misty black trail Anaria's captors left behind, but she was gone. The stream bubbled happily around my feet, and I bent down and picked something up from the rocks.

An iron band.

ANARIA

I thought I'd understood terror, but I'd never felt fear like this, being carried a mile above the world in the claws of the Soul Reapers. Two of them, actually, with their claws cutting my newly healed skin as they ferried me through the air, bearing me over the now-verdant plain.

Everything mixed together as they juggled me between them, nearly dropping me over and over again. Up was down and down was up and I was going to vomit.

I caught glimpses of the bright blue sky, the ground, the city of Tempeste looming closer and closer as the air was ripped from my lungs over and over again.

Fear became my only constant when I realized just how cut up I was, both from the fighting and the Reapers' sharp claws. I had so many wounds, so many places the Reapers could get in and yet so far...they hadn't.

Not that I could tell, anyway.

What if I *couldn't* tell?

What if they'd already infected me and I had no way of knowing? I lashed out with one foot, then the other, but they were too much like the wind whistling by, the city getting closer and closer.

A cold, silent city.

From this distance, there was no sign of life, only the faintest hint of smoke still trailing out of the top floor, as if the fire had burned itself out. Or all the Reapers had escaped.

Perhaps the city's inhabitants were hiding, driven under cover by the battle and the ensuing horror of what came after.

Perhaps they'd all been down on that field, and I'd killed them.

Then I had no time to wonder about anything but the ground rushing up to meet me as the Soul Reapers dropped me.

I spun through the air and landed badly on the stone steps in front of the palace, my ankle snapping before I tumbled down and down, coming to rest in a scraped-up heap at the bottom.

I swore I heard fell laughter as the shadowy creatures sped toward the top of the tower and disappeared into the windows still belching smoke.

My ears were ringing and my head ached. I tasted blood. I'd barely shoved myself up when skittering claws bore down on me and I stared up into my father's ruined face.

Gods, he was a mess.

Half his face was a twisted nest of black vines and thorns, an opaque white eye, exactly like Torin's, staring blankly from the tangled wreckage.

His body was no better, one arm so heavy it dragged on the ground like a gnarled tree trunk, his legs bent and warped and shiny like a beetle's. He hadn't even bothered with clothes. Not when there was nothing Fae—or civilized—left.

“Welcome home, daughter.”

“I would have preferred never to set foot in this shitehole again.” I forced myself to grin and took some small delight in the fact the king could not grin back.

My eyes flicked upwards to the smoke. “My plan was to make this city burn, you along with it.”

“I have no doubt.” His one good eye flicked over me in cold, calculating interest. “But it is time you return what you stole and restore me to what I once was.”

I snorted. “Nothing’s going to fix that disaster.” I looked him up and down for emphasis, my lips twisted in disgust. “Didn’t you hear me before? The magic is mine.”

Lying there, helpless, ankle cracked, my grin widened, even as I searched desperately for some scrap of magic, anything to defend myself.

Every bone in my body groaned as I pushed up, enough to spit out a mouthful of blood at his feet. “It’s mine and you will never know that kind of power again. You will die in that form, as hideous on the outside as you are on the inside.”

I kept grinning, blood running down my chin.

“As you will be, by the time I am finished with you.” Horror shivered down my spine even as I kept that grin pasted on my face, my father leaning closer until we were nose to nose. Black veins ran beneath his pale, papery skin—the scant few inches he had left.

“We shall be quite the pair, daughter, though you shall not live long enough to become accustomed to your new form.”

His curt nod had four vacant-faced soldiers lunging for me, then cold, cruel hands gripped me beneath my armpits and hauled me up the stairs toward him, to where I finally saw who stood behind him.

Three mages in plain brown robes stood solemnly, hands clasped in front of them, Reapers staring out through their glittering eyes with a voracious hunger.

And behind them the Mistress waited, her rail-thin body taut, her expression one of consuming rage. Her long, black hair was loose, but those dead eyes were the same, burning in a too pale face, sharp teeth visible between parted lips.

Fear, instilled into me since birth, slithered through me in an oily river when her mouth curved in a triumphant smile.

As if she’d finally won our two-decades-long battle.

Bet me on that. This wasn’t over yet.

“The Oracle is not the only one who can harvest the magic.” The king jerked his head at the mages. “We shall get

my power out of you, even if we have to take you apart bone by bone.”

I focused on my breathing, the cruel bite of the hands that gripped me, lifting my face to my hateful father. “I never broke for Solok. And I’ll never break for you.”

“We’ll see,” was all he said before he scuttled away, black, thorny legs jerking as I was dragged behind him, the mages and the Mistress falling in behind us.

Even the air in Caladrius was different now, charged with energy and wild magic. This realm was ripe with burgeoning power, so thick I could have run my hands through it if I was free to do so.

No one else noticed the change.

Not Carex, so intent on reclaiming the power he was blind to everything else, or the Mistress, so focused on her revenge. The mages and soldiers...they weren’t capable of noticing anything at all.

But I noticed.

I was the moth...and the flame was all around me.

I was bathing in fire, and I was not getting burned. Once, I’d dreamed of what it might be like to plunge into a magic so powerful it could destroy me. *This* was what that felt like.

Like I was being broken apart and remade into something completely different.

Something glorious.

And I was healing. My mouth tasted of magic, not blood.

My iron bands were in my pocket, and without them the wild magic slammed into me, like it could fill me up fast enough. But I didn’t know if even that was enough to save me.

Carex’s smug, triumphant attitude spoke volumes. He had two mages with power of their own. And if they bound me in iron...All the magic in the world wouldn’t matter if I couldn’t access it. He had everything in place to reclaim the magic, and

all I had was the promise of a lying old spider saying that the power was mine.

Not that the Oracle's word meant anything. And once they began carving me apart, it didn't matter what happened. Whether the king found his magic or not, I doubted he'd stop cutting until I was flayed alive.

My bare feet dragged through broken glass and wreckage as more magic flowed in, enough that my shattered ankle ground back into place, the king laughing when I whimpered in pain.

There were no bodies left in the palace, only long smears of dried blood.

I wasn't sure if that meant Soul Reapers could inhabit a dead body, or if Carex had them carted away before they began to stink. We approached the curving staircase to the upper floors and the two hounds posted on either side bared their fangs with a low, rumbling snarl.

There might have been a hint of Reaper malevolence in their pitch-black eyes, but I couldn't be sure. Perhaps the creatures were evil enough on their own. Then I was hauled up the grand staircase. Down the long, riot-ravaged wing toward Torin's chambers.

The Mistress prowled behind us. I couldn't see her, but I smelled her pent-up frustration, waiting for Carex to peel me apart.

Just the thought of my nemesis watching my torture had my spine hardening to steel, cold resolve prickling through me. The bitch could watch all she wanted. I didn't break for her fucking brother, I didn't break for her, I wouldn't break for the king.

Gods, the skin-crawling reek of this place sank into me like a stain I'd never scrub away. As if I was still locked in that cold cell, waiting for the rats to gnaw off my fingers. Every room, every corridor took me back to the weeks Ember and I had spent here as prisoners.

Pampered and well-fed, two sacrificial lambs waiting to serve their purpose.

The once magnificent palace lay in tatters, courtesy of the freed prisoners' rage and fury, not a single painting or statue spared from ruin. *The truth revealed, at least*, I thought as I was dragged past a painting of Carex standing victorious on a hill, cape blowing out behind him. The canvas was shredded, his face hanging in tatters, one eye balefully watching as I was hauled by.

I escaped this place once, and I managed to get Raz and Adele out too.

At least there was that. If today went horribly wrong, if Carex killed me, my friends weren't still trapped below in the prison. Raz and Zorander would find some way to liberate my mother, Tavion, and Tristan from the Oracle.

They wouldn't stop, not until everyone was free.

"I should thank you." Carex's pointed feet snagged on the fine wool carpet as we ascended the grand staircase, the deep silence swallowing up the sound. "Releasing the prisoners added greatly to the amount of blood spilled yesterday, the amount of wild magic gifted to me by the gods themselves. Caladrius is restored, as I soon shall be." His sharp, pointed teeth flashed in the dark.

Same old story, a male taking credit for something a woman accomplished.

As if the Fae King was the one who'd orchestrated everything.

As if his head wasn't on the same chopping block as mine. But perhaps he didn't know the Oracle's plans...or he imagined once he took his magic back, she couldn't touch him.

I wanted to laugh but stayed quiet, hanging there, limp in the soldier's hands, letting them think I'd given up.

But deep inside me, magic was a roaring inferno. There was so much of it drenching the stale air of this place, seeping

up through the cold stone—burrowing into me through every pore of my body.

An hour ago, I'd had nothing to fight with except a knife.

Not enough magic to light a candle wick, but now...

Power—the kind I'd only ever dreamed of—was *fighting* to get inside me, and I didn't know what to make of it, especially when everyone else seemed oblivious.

My father sneered down at me. “For eighteen years, I cursed your very existence. But today, you have given me almost everything I have ever wanted, daughter. And now I shall take the last piece owed me, then we shall be finally even.”

He was a cruel monster; his world had been filled with corruption and death and pain.

But Caladrius no longer belonged to Carex.

Hanging like a sack of potatoes between the two guards, I groaned softly, the pressure building as more and more magic flowed in. As if I was calling this ancient power home. As if the Fae magic I'd stolen from my father was only the tip of the spear.

I'd restored the balance.

I'd called the wild magic back.

This realm belonged to me, and every moment I spent here made me stronger. The cuts from the Reapers were gone, my ankle mended, my body stronger than I'd ever felt.

Just a little bit longer...and I would be powerful enough to level this city to the ground, my father right along with it.

The Mistress's creeping smile widened in anticipation of what she imagined would be hours spent watching me scream for mercy, tied down to that stone altar.

Then I stopped fighting altogether, letting my bare feet drag through broken glass and shards of stone as magic poured into me so fast my vision blurred, the smile on my face growing wider.

Once we reached Torin's chamber, there would be screaming, but it would not be mine.

Anaria was gone.

Deep within me, a chasm cracked wide open, my soul wailing.

Anaria was gone. *Taken.*

By a cloud of fucking Soul Reapers heading north.

“She has no magic,” Zor panted. “*None.* She can’t protect herself.” We raced through the forest, the trees blurring.

“Don’t you think I fucking know that?” I sucked in a raspy breath. “We have to get to her.”

But miles of forest stretched between us. A day, maybe, on foot before we’d reach Tempeste. *Too late.*

“I told her to save a reserve,” Zor grunted, mostly to himself. “I fucking told her.”

I didn’t say anything to that. Didn’t remind him that her bullshite plan—*the one he’d fucking agreed to*—would get her killed.

We raced through the ever-changing forest, along the stream that was now a roaring river, through trees that towered taller than any I’d seen in the three realms despite them still growing. The magic wasn’t finished, and I prayed we made it through this gauntlet of wood and water before we were devoured.

“Another few minutes and my magic will replenish enough for me to take us to Tempeste,” Zor growled. “Or close

enough.”

“We’ll be too late,” I snarled, leaping over a tree root. “Too fucking late, Zor.” The roaring in my head wouldn’t quiet, it only grew louder and louder with every desperate step.

Too late, too late, too late.

Too late to save the woman I loved.

Too late to save the princess who’d just saved our arses several times over, with not one thought about herself or what it might cost her. That we would fail her was abhorrent. That *I* would fail her was unacceptable after all my promises.

Yet here we were, fighting our way through this gauntlet of trees when saving her could be so simple if...

I skidded to a stop.

Zor kept going for another few paces then halted, turned, and trudged back. From the dark circles beneath his eyes, his clammy pallor, he wouldn’t be reaching for his magic anytime soon.

We’d been fools to think we’d escape the Oracle’s trap alive and make our way back to Solarys in one piece.

Utter fools.

And right now...my choices were fucking shite. Fucking shite, yet there was only one choice that would make a difference.

The one choice I’d never wanted to make.

“I’m taking the collar off.” I held Zor’s gaze, his mouth gaping open in shock. “That’s the only way to reach her in time.” There was so much to explain, too much for the scant few seconds we had left before this place consumed us, but I wished I had years to beg Zor’s forgiveness for what I was about to do.

For a century I’d willingly chosen slavery to keep my oldest friend alive.

I prayed he understood how much I regretted what I was about to do.

“Now?” The forest was exploding around us, and yet, nothing shocked Zorander more than this. “After all this time, I thought you’d given up.”

“I could have taken it off at any time, Zor. But I...was waiting for the right time. When it was the only choice left.”

Of course, I’d imagined that day would come on a battlefield, after my oldest friend had fallen beneath enemy blades, and I had nothing left to lose. I drew a shuddering breath. I never thought I would have to end his life myself in order to save the life of someone else.

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Zor growled. “Get the fucking thing off and let’s go get her.”

“I never told you the price of removing this.” I couldn’t stop the shaking that started in my knees and crept through the rest of my body like a cancer. “Never told you how the king truly shackled me after our rebellion.”

Gods, that fucking rebellion. So long ago.

“Godsdamn it, Raziel. Get that fucking thing off.”

“He used your blood to cast the binding spell, Zor. The iron binds the power to a certain degree, but iron alone could never contain my magic.” I blinked my burning eyes. “Only one thing could. I break this collar, you die. That is the true cost of my freedom. And the one I was never willing to pay.”

I held his stare. “The one I never *meant* to pay, not until you left this world first.”

My words rang hollowly between us, Zor’s expression changing in an instant from shock to understanding, then to fierce determination.

“I always wondered,” he said softly before he clapped me on the shoulder. “I always wondered what fell magic the king used to lock down such power.”

He shook his head, anger blazing in his eyes. “You *never* should have waited. You should have thrown that collar off and burned the whole fucking Keep to the ground.”

There was no one in this world who knew me better than Zor. We would die for each other.

But actually doing it...

Fuck. I'd never deserved Zor. But hearing those words, knowing he'd rather I'd sacrificed him for my freedom made me dizzy. I swallowed, rubbing my eyes, telling myself it was the dust making them water.

"Anaria has no magic, Zor. She can't protect herself. I need to get to her before it's too late."

Zor nodded solemnly. Then I was crushed up against him in an embrace so tight I couldn't breathe. "Take off the collar, leave me here." Unlike me, he didn't wipe his tears away, he let them flow down his face. "Tell her...tell her I loved her. I would have been proud to be a part of..." His lips twisted into a lopsided smile. "Whatever this is between us."

I slid my finger between my throat and the collar, a now-familiar tell that happened every time I imagined how easily I could free myself. But the collar had never been what held me captive, only my love for the male standing before me.

"Fuck." *I might as well drive my knife into his heart as do this.* "Godsdamn it, Zor." I'd never felt so alone, and he was still standing right in front of me.

Zorander watched intently, eyes burning. "Do it, Raz. Even if watching you take that fucking collar off is the last thing I see in my life, it'll be worth it. Promise me you'll save Anaria and kill the kings, and I'll go to my grave happy."

I...couldn't do this. Couldn't wield the death blow that would end Zor's life.

"I can't. It *can't fucking end like this*. You are my oldest friend." I could barely get the words out, then Zor placed his hand firmly over mine, over the collar that would end our friendship—would end *him*—forever.

"It's okay, Raziel. She's worth dying for."

A smile like I'd never seen cracked Zor's face in half, his eyes dancing with vicious humor. "When you and Anaria have

a son, name him after me.”

Those words broke me. The thought of a future he'd never be part of. I wanted to scream my wrath to the sky above. This morning, it had all been so close. A family, one I chose for myself. Love between all of us. Trust.

Now that future was gone.

“*Promise me,*” Zor ordered, low and vicious.

“We will.” I didn't know if my magic or Zor's cracked the iron in half, maybe both, but the collar fell at the same time Zor did, his eyes wide and staring, the tendons of his neck straining as he fought for his last breath of life.

The weight of the collar vanished, and Zor shuddered, a low broken groan coming out of this male who I had never heard utter a single sound of pain. I caught my friend before he went down and lowered him between the roots of a great oak where moss softened the rough bark.

“Sleep well,” I told him, closing his eyes, settling his limp form into place, crossing his arms over his chest.

“I will find you on the other side, my friend.”



ZOR REMAINED an invisible force behind me as I drew on strength I hadn't touched in a century, locking down the magic tight so the resurgence didn't rip me apart before I got a chance to wield my own godsdamned power.

Magic filled me to the point of agony, the tang of copper coating my tongue, the unrelenting rush turning my muscles loose.

This magic was different than I remembered, hungrier, meaner, changed. Some part of me remembered the shadowy wings rising behind Zor, Anaria's seemingly endless power when she'd killed the Reaper army, then I couldn't think anymore.

Pain grew distant, even the horror of Zorander's death fading away beneath the onslaught, darkness rising inside me like a great beast waking from a long sleep.

Save Anaria.

My power had always been temperamental and raging, more of a curse than a blessing, useful in war but in little else, and I forced that darkness to carry me across the divide between Zor's final resting place and the Citadelle in the space of one breath, my boots colliding with the stone steps hard enough to crack them, muscles screaming from the impact.

All around me I scented Anaria's blood, her fear, the stench of the Soul Reapers.

And the rotten smell of Carex Centaria.

The king had taken Anaria away from me, and there was no doubt what he meant to do next.

Rage wiped everything away as I plunged into the cold bottomless depths of my power and let the darkness consume me.

Until there was no me.

Only my will, commanding the magic to find Anaria.

To save her.

To slay anyone who stood in my way.

The world, the city, everything disappeared, sliced apart on the sharp edges of my wrath, and then I was moving.

After the Reaper-infested soldiers unceremoniously dumped me in the corner of Torin's throne room, I crawled to the nearest wall while Carex screamed at the mages to ready the altar for the ritual.

They hissed at him with razor sharp teeth, black eyes flashing.

"I heard it's hard to get good help these days." My father's glare promised a slow, painful death, and I tipped my head back against the ancient stone wall, letting the damp coolness seep into me along with a rush of fresh magic.

"Looks like they were right."

The cold of the stone against my cheek took the edge off the sheer amounts of power pouring into my body. The Oracle had called me a vessel in her bullshite prophecy, but I'd never imagined I'd end up like an overfilled canteen, bursting at the seams.

"We'll see how talkative you are once I start carving you apart," Carex hissed. "When I am finished, I'll spike your carcass on the battlements for all to see."

"For who to see?" I shrugged. "You sacrificed your entire army for your cause. I doubt anyone cares who you spike where." I held both their hateful stares, let them see I was not afraid.

"Do your worst."

The Mistress prowled closer, face glittering with malice as she focused on the king. “You *promised* her to me. *You fucking promised,*” she snarled, hands clenching and unclenching compulsively.

“Did I?” Carex looked genuinely confused. “Don’t know if there will be anything left when I’m done.”

She looked like she was about to explode, and even though I shouldn’t, I winked. “Shame when you don’t get your favorite toy, isn’t it?”

She bared her teeth and hissed, the personification of every nightmare I’d ever had about her.

The awful skull throne stared out vacantly and I pretended to be completely helpless as the mages prepared the altar, the slack-faced soldiers awaiting their next orders, the Mistress snarling and snapping like a rabid dog.

Better they believed me to be harmless than know the truth.

I’d never been more powerful in my entire life, and the second I figured out what to do, I was burning this place down. But for now, I needed something to help me contain the unrelenting pressure. I slid my hand into my pockets, searching for my iron bands...but my hand closed over the keystone instead.

Power thrummed through me in that odd, rhythmic pulse, like I held the world’s beating heart in the palm of my hand. Out of habit, I rubbed my thumb over the smooth surface, my magic jumping in response.

The inflow of magic was finally slowing, which was good, because every time I blinked I saw stars and my body was boneless. The rhythm must have something to do with the rebirth of the world, and all this wild magic...Maybe this ancient power was simply looking for a home.

If it chose me, I was fine with that, because I had a feeling Carex—and the Mistress—wouldn’t go down easily. They hadn’t taken my knife away. Clearly, they didn’t think I was a threat.

But I couldn't hold another drop of magic. All I needed was an opportunity—both of them to move close together, or close enough I could neutralize them long enough to take out those mages.

The Mistress never stopped staring and a shiver of dread went through me. Could she see what was happening with the magic when everyone else was oblivious? Or was she simply imagining all the horrid things she'd do to me for killing her disgusting brother?

“You'll finally get what you deserve, little thief.” *Vicious.* Her whispered threat echoed through me like a death promise. “I'll make sure you survive this so I can make you pay.”

I paid no mind to the glass knife scraping across the altar, that high-pitched screech echoing shrilly off the walls. Carex screamed at his minions for iron, for rope, for something to bind me with.

Screamed while he looked at me like he would eat me alive.

I gazed through the wide-open ceiling, where Soul Reapers circled lazily above the Citadelle's highest spires, the blue and silver of the royal colors still flapping merrily in the wind for a king and a court that no longer existed.

Outside I scented the healing land, the smell of death turning lush and green, the faint sound of wings in the air. Birds. Butterflies. *Life.*

This realm was alive once again.

I did that. Not of my own volition, and in a barbaric, horrendous way, but this whole realm was alive. Carex motioned the mages closer, then they all looked at me. I pushed myself into a sitting position, fighting my rising panic. Before they restrained me or bound me in iron, I would have to strike, and I could not hesitate.

Carex would die first, then the mages, then the Mistress, I decided.

The Reaper-infested soldiers I'd leave for last, and then I'd...burn this city down, providing there were no innocents

left. One slow breath in, another breath out as I tried to plumb the depths of my magic, layer after heavy layer, estimating how much magic I had to work with.

Too much, given how desperately this power strained inside me, how thinly my skin was stretched over bone and flesh, as if I was on the verge of being torn apart.

Breathe, breathe, breathe.

Imagine what it will feel like when this is over and we are all safe.

Breathe, breathe, breathe.

Carex shouted an order and the soldiers picked me up and tossed me on the altar, knocking my head against the stone, black dots dancing in my eyes as they wrestled me into place, trying to capture my flailing hands and feet as I kicked and fought.

Carex and the Mistress were too far apart, but I had to at least try. I reached for my magic, dragged my starry power up like an anchor from the depths...

The keystone flew out of my pocket.

My stomach clenched in horror as the relic shot through the air like a piece of slippery soap, the soldiers' cruel hands hauling me closer to those crippling iron shackles as the rock clattered and spun across the floor.

The squealing of the knife stopped.

“What treasure did you bring me, daughter?” The king scuttled forward like a crab, breath hitching when he saw what I'd dropped.

His eyes gleamed with pure greed. “One worthy of a king.”

“So I've been told.” I angled my head, torn between dismay at losing the stone and watching how cautiously the king inched forward. Even the enormous skull throne seemed to wait to see what happened next and a sense of foreboding shuddered down my spine.

This was the fifth skull.

The world was a puzzle, a maze of threads and paths that crisscrossed and ran parallel. Some never to meet. Some meant to intertwine, as though fate itself wove them together.

That the stone began its journey hidden inside a dragon's eye, only to end up here, in front of my father like a gift, could not be an accident. "It's a keystone," I explained softly, no longer fighting the soldiers pinning me down. "I haven't yet discovered what it's for, but I have been told it's worth a fortune."

This was the moment Torin foresaw.

This was the moment when I'd know if I could trust the High Seer...or if she was another one of the Oracle's pawns and had played me for a fool.

Carex reached for the stone, his blackened fingers barely brushing the white surface when the entire wall of books exploded and my ears hollowed out.



BLUE-BLACK MAGIC SWARMED THE ROOM...THEN stopped.

Everything in the room froze, as if time itself halted. My ears were ringing as I ripped out of the soldiers' grasp, scooted off the altar, and jogged toward the stone gleaming on the floor.

Carex, the Mistress, the mages, the soldiers—everything in the room—was frozen in time. Even the wall was caught mid explosion, an arrested burst of dark light showing me where the explosion began, yet the air inside this room was so very still.

I ducked through torn-up books and scrolls, deadly shards of wood and shattered stone suspended midair.

I thought I was beyond surprises, but my heart leapt into my throat when I saw who was on the other side of that strange magic, the cause of the now-suspended explosion.

Raziel was a vision of wrath, his eyes black as night, hair flying around him, that strange, blue-black magic erupting from his hands in writhing ribbons, slicing through everything in its path as cleanly as a knife.

What happened to him and Zor after I'd been abducted?

Had the wild magic transformed—or *corrupted* Raziel into *this*? And why could I move and no one else? I'd almost reached the stone when I lost my breath completely, finally seeing what I should have noticed before.

Raz didn't have his collar.

Only a band of white marked his tan throat.

The implications—and the cost—hit me the same time the spell broke.

The explosion roared, my eardrums bursting. Wood splinters and books flew overhead as I crawled over and swiped the stone away from the king's scrabbling grasp. One of the mages screamed before he was crushed beneath an enormous chunk of stone, debris raining down around me with deadly aim.

The temperature in the room plummeted, frost crackling over every surface, stinging my bare legs, turning my cheeks to ice, but I stayed flattened to the floor through sheer terror.

Those ribbons of power were everywhere, slicing like razors, and the room became a bloodbath, soldiers and mages going down, blood misting the air, someone screaming behind me.

The Mistress.

Screaming not in fear but in anger.

Because she could not break through Raziel's magic, though she was trying.

But his deadly power was a gauntlet of death, shredding soldiers and mages alike before a long spear shot through the air, piercing the Fae King's body with a black, glimmering sword, pinning him to the wall like a bug.

So much blood poured from Carex, it splattered on the floor like a waterfall, his desperate hissing making him sound like a trapped, desperate animal.

I didn't recognize Raziel, not the emotionless rage twisting his face, nor the blue-black power seeping from him like ink as if he walked in some darker dimension. My breathing was shaky as I backed carefully away, knife in my hand, white stardust flooding out of me unchecked, twining with Raz's magic, putting stars into his midnight power.

The king writhed like a serpent, mutilated legs kicking like an insect's. I pocketed the stone and cowered against the wall when Raz stalked past, but even hidden deep in the shadows, he never took his eyes off me, that dark gaze making everything inside me go quiet and small.

Whatever his magic, I wanted to hide from it.

This was...A tendril of black touched me and I closed my eyes, the sensation almost more than I could bear.

With every deliberate step forward, Raziel drove that sword deeper, the stones behind the king's mutilated body shuddering as the blade pierced ancient stone as easily as it did flesh.

But Raz never broke our stare as he smiled.

That arrogant, toothy smile was otherworldly, him...and yet not.

Raziel was something *more* than I'd ever imagined. Darkness personified. Power poured out of him, and whatever this was, I'd never experienced anything close. He was glorious. He was devastatingly powerful...He took my fucking breath away.

He frightened me down to my bones.

But...I couldn't stop looking at that white band, couldn't stop my breaths from heaving in and out. I clutched the stone so tight my palm ached, the truth too terrible for me to bear.

The cost...oh gods, the cost of him not having his collar...

“You always were a pitiful excuse for a king.” Raziel hoisted my father higher, black blood trickling down the shimmering spear of his magic, dripping off the ends of Carex’s feet.

“Your brother would have been a good king if he hadn’t been twisted by revenge.” Raz lifted the king even higher, his low, pitiful groan horrible to hear even though I loathed the bastard.

Outside of the whirling magic, the Mistress stalked, looking for a way in, her hateful eyes pinned on me. Mouthing something over and over again, rage spilling from her eyes, running like blood down her white cheeks.

“One brother ruined by power. The other by revenge.” Raz’s coal-black eyes slid to mine and my heart stopped beating completely. “This world will soon have a new queen. One this world deserves. One I shall follow even into death. Your time is over.”

I didn’t even see the steel sword in Raz’s hand, not until the blade was arcing for Carex’s throat, then the king’s head and body crashed to the ground in two different directions. The Mistress’s low wail brought me no joy, none at all. I shoved the stone into my pocket, wanting to get further away from this demon with black eyes who only looked like the male I loved.

But I was already flat against the wall. I had nowhere to go.

Holy gods.

Raz yanked his magic back and turned on his heel. He bore down on me, dark tendrils of power wrapping around me like the ghosts of the thorned vines I’d cast over my father just days ago. “Raziel?” The gleam in his obsidian-black eyes only grew wickeder as his big strong arms caged me in, trapping me between his body and the wall.

“Raziel.” I pressed the point of the knife against his chest. “Raz...can you hear me? Where is Zor?”

My terror mounted. There wasn't a shred of emotion or even recognition as he stared down at me, his gaze consuming and endless and utterly void. With a wicked, empty grin, he leaned in closer, the point of my knife sinking in, red blood welling around the tip. I yanked the blade away, my heart lurching. Raziel was a dark god, enough shadows spilling from him to fill the room, not a shred of white in his eyes.

And his collar...

"Raz." I sheathed the knife then brushed my thumbs gently over his cheeks, willing him to listen. "Raz, where is Zorander? Where is your friend?"

He blinked, and in that split second, I glimpsed warm brown eyes—the next, they were empty black as if I stared straight into the abyss. Whatever his magic was, his power gripped him with tight claws, that much was clear.

There was a scuffling behind me, and two mages cast their magic in a flash of white. Raz wiped them away without even breaking eye contact, their bodies cleaved neatly in half. *Oh gods, what kind of magic was this?*

"Raz, please. Where's Zor? You took your collar off." I gripped his face tighter, giving him a shake, ignoring his soft growl of annoyance. "The price of removing the collar was Zorander's life. Do you remember?"

I couldn't stop the tears then, couldn't stop my voice from breaking. "*Why can't you remember?*"

He blinked slowly, every one erasing a little more of that cold blankness and bringing back the Raziel I loved. "*Anaria?*" His confused whisper was pained, fingers digging into my arms as he leaned into my palms, a bone-deep shudder ripping through his body.

"*You're alive,*" he muttered. "I thought you were dead. I thought..."

"Where is Zor?" My voice wouldn't stop shaking, my heart shattering at the truth I already knew. "What did you do, Raziel? Why did you break the collar and the Shadow King's spell?"

He reared back, confusion clouding his eyes. “You...They took you. After everything...after fighting the Reaper army... you had no magic, Anaria. None at all.”

He frowned at the galaxy of stars surrounding us. “The Reapers carried you away. You were...I thought you were helpless.” His gaze skimmed over the room, catching on what was left of the Fae King, the dead mages, the blown-out wall of bookcases.

“I thought you were powerless,” he said more steadily. “Zor and I figured your magic was depleted and the Reapers were taking you back to the king.” His gaze slid over to Carex’s decapitated body. “We were coming to save you...but we couldn’t get here fast enough.”

We were still trapped in the center of Raziel’s magic, effectively stuck in an inescapable bubble, but some of my fear faded away as more and more of Raziel seeped back. His magic was the most dangerous, powerful thing I’d ever seen, tasting of brimstone and darkness, but his face softened as he looked down at me.

Raz reached for me then dropped his hand, anguish written all over his face. “We knew we’d be too late to save you. So we made a decision.”

The Mistress pressed against the bubble, her eyes flicking from me, then to Raz, to the king’s blood staining the floor. But she couldn’t come closer, her face a mask of frustration, her screamed threats echoing dully, as if the words came from far away...*I will find you. I will kill you.*

Tendrils of darkness hung harmlessly in the air, along with my own magic, coiling and twisting, the room thick with the smell of spent magic as those tendrils slowly spooled back into Raziel. The darkness in the room faded, the sky overhead finally visible again.

Thankfully, the Mistress couldn’t get through, still pacing and pacing as she screamed.

“Where is Zorander?”

“I...I left him in the forest,” Raziel finally answered my question. “He is...He was...” He swallowed, his silver-lined eyes filled with pain.

“I’m sorry. You didn’t...We thought you didn’t have any magic. But you didn’t need me to save you after all, did you?”

I didn’t answer his question. Could I have killed the king alone?

What if my magic hadn’t refilled in time and I had been helpless? Would I have ended up under Carex’s knife after all?

I didn’t know. So many things might have gone differently, but it was too late to ask those questions. “Take me to him.” I grasped Raziel’s hand. “Take me to Zorander.”

The room blurred, and the last thing I saw was the Mistress lunging for us, fingers ending in deadly claws almost catching me as we vanished.

ANARIA

Raziel carried me over the canopy of the great forest, traveling in the same way Zorander did but faster.

Impossibly fast.

Deathly fast.

My frozen lungs ached by the time we landed, my hands cold and clammy when Raziel led me to the base of the great moss-covered oak whose sweeping branches blocked out the sun.

The tree looked to be two thousand years old.

Not two hours.

Zorander lay at the base of the gnarled trunk like one of the fallen warrior kings from the books I used to read in Ravensshade's library—his beautiful face carved in stillness, arms folded across his chest, the roots forming a protective wall around him as if they were cradling Zor in their arms.

I fell to my knees before him, the dull ache in my heart growing sharper.

A waste.

What a fucking waste.

“Zor loved you. He didn't have the chance to tell you himself, but he wanted you to know.” My throat closed up when I glanced at Raziel, his face twisted with torment.

“He said...he would have been proud to be a part of... whatever this was between us. *Fuck.*”

He spun away, face buried in his hands.

I couldn't stop the tears spilling down my face. I couldn't lose Zor. *I couldn't.*

Gods, *what a fucking waste.*

Falling in love with him, then losing him...Had this been the Oracle's plan all along? Killing us off, one by one? This stank of her cruelty, and her cleverness, too. Because wouldn't it be better to cut us down while we were still weak?

The magic was definitely making us stronger.

And if she knew we were a threat...

Zor and I both noticed the change after that night in Deepwood. And Raziel...I eyed the dark magic streaming out of him, wrapping through the newborn forest like wayward shadows. We were all becoming more powerful.

Yes, she would kill us before she'd share this world with us.

As soon as the thought ran through my head, I knew what I had to do. I would not allow her to sacrifice us to her fucking cause.

My hands curled into fists, anger exploding from me like a shock wave. Raz ducked and the forest shuddered, leaves spilling down from the shaking branches, birds exploding up into the air with a thunder of wings.

No, I would not accept any of this.

I would not accept Zorander's death or our fate.

“*Anaria.*” I barely heard Raz's warning over the roaring in my head, the din of the forest trembling around me, the breaking of my fucking heart. Grief became a thousand jagged cuts, a thousand ways this could have turned out differently.

“*No.*” I screamed the word into the void, my denial ripping through the forest like a sawblade before I could stop myself. Then I crawled closer to Zor and threw myself over him,

stroking his already cold face and his closed eyes, brushing back his hair.

“I won’t let her do this.” I straddled him, gripped the front of his stained shirt, and ripped it right down the middle, baring his torso. Pale, bloodless, perfect. “I refuse to let him go.”

I didn’t care about the Oracle or the magic or this war between the kings. None of that mattered if Zor was dead.

The three of us had been broken by this world. But we’d survived long enough to find each other, and we deserved more time. The fucking world owed us that, at least. “You are going to live,” I hissed down at Zor, daring him to contradict me.

I’d just brought an entire fucking realm back.

I could save one life.

One life was all I’d ever ask this fucking world for.

A world that had given me nothing. Only taken and taken and taken. “*I am so fucking done with losing,*” I hissed to the silent trees.

“Anaria.” Raz’s hands were gentle but insistent as he tried to drag me away, a tremor of fear in his voice. “He’s gone. We can bury him here in the forest, but he’s gone.”

“He is *not* gone.” *He wasn’t.* He couldn’t be. Zorander was still here, I could feel his soul, caught in the magic welling up like an enormous wave, giving birth to the forest around us.

The wild magic wasn’t done rebuilding this world, and it hadn’t yet released Zor to the Great Beyond. There had to be a reason for that. The magic was going to save Zorander.

I was going to *make* it save him.

I pulled the stone out of my pocket, pressed my lips to the cool surface, and lay it on Zor’s chest, that gentle pulse of light beating at its core. I closed my eyes, focusing on that steady beat, willing the magic to listen.

Bring him back to me.

I will pay whatever price you desire.

Never mind the fact I'd soaked the earth with enough blood to rebirth this terrible power. Never mind the fact nobody cheated death. Not ever, not even in the books.

Death was absolute.

I sank deep within myself, Raz's panicked voice fading away as I trolled the depths of my new magic threaded with ribbons of the old. The Fae magic was still there—different, like muddy water is from crystal clear—different, but not weaker.

I didn't know how to do this, so I felt my way through the magic, searching for something to guide me.

Far beneath the two magics, far enough I had to dig, was a deep, steady throb, and I settled into that rhythmic beat, feeling it in my blood, letting my own heart beat in tandem with the world. Letting the magic sink deep into me, enough, I prayed, for what I was about to attempt.

Life for life.

I pulled Zor's precious knife from my sheath, slashed the sharp blade across both palms, then pressed them to his cold, dead flesh. "Give him back to me." My voice bent and warped, and all around us, the entire forest went still, sentinels to a rebirth of another kind.

I had power.

Power I'd used to shape this world into a paradise.

I threw my head back, keeping my hands firmly pressed to Zor's chest, and slipped the tether off my magic. Unlike before, it didn't burst out from me like a wave; heat trickled down my arms and sank deep into Zor.

After being powerless for so long, I had *real* power.

Power I could use for my own ends, not someone else's.

"Anaria, this is madness, *you cannot do this.*" Raz's own dark magic tried to snatch me away, only to be rebuffed by the whirl of wild, unbroken power shimmering in the air around us.

I can do this. I will do this.

*Take everything I have, I thought, maybe screamed aloud.
Take it all, just bring him back.*

There was a cost for immortal favors, and white-hot agony streaked down my side, as hot as lightning, as deep as the pit of the Great Beyond. My breath exploded out of me, and I toppled sideways into the twisted roots as Zorander Vayle took his first mighty breath.

Raziel turned me over gently, checked my pulse, looked at my eyes, then raised the dress high enough to get a good look at my still-burning side.

His fingers danced lightly down my side, tracing the wandering lightning mark. Even before he sighed, my heart already knew what he saw.

TAVION

I paced back and forth behind the glowing, impenetrable wall of magic separating this chamber in half and snarled at our captor.

A futile move, given she had us trapped like mice, but I had to fight back, even if I could only clash my teeth together futilely. I'd promised Anaria I'd protect her mother, and I intended to keep my word.

Adele lay curled behind me against the wall, the blue cape wrapped tightly around her frail body, fast asleep, thank the gods.

Tristan only pretended to sleep, watching the Oracle through slitted eyes, her scuttling movements jerkier than usual as she circled and circled before lowering herself to the floor of this strange chamber where she'd brought us, murmuring something over and over.

We were underground.

I sensed the weight of the earth pressing down upon us, my heart beating frantically as I paced back and forth, the pads of my paws bleeding, my claws cracked and broken from digging at the edge of the magic, trying to tunnel our way out.

The wounds from the Oracle were healing, my coat now matted with blood, though I'd licked as much out as I could, both Adele and Tristan watching me the entire time until I'd stopped.

Some things were better done in private.

“Settle yourself, Tavion,” Tristan murmured. “Save your strength for when we need it.”

Wise words, but I couldn't stop.

Wolves were not meant to be underground trapped in the darkness.

I'd barely tolerated two days in those tunnels—couldn't comprehend how Dane stood being down there year after year, even for all that money.

There were no torches or lights in this hole, only an impenetrable darkness, broken by the faint glow from the ward separating the small cavity in half. Instead, I paced and growled and watched the spider weave her web tighter and tighter.

She was conjuring something even my sensitive ears couldn't hear. A spell she hummed to the dirt, to the worms, to the tree roots hanging from the soft, rounded ceiling above us. A deep thudding rhythm drummed through the ground above us, sending a shower of dirt down over our heads.

But the Oracle's muttering never stopped, her jerky, unnatural movements matching my own.

“*Tav.*” Tristan's sharp tone—as dangerous as a dagger's—had me turning, pacing over to where he sat, Adele within reach in case the Oracle decided to lower the ward between us and attack. “What's she saying?”

I swung my head, but before I could so much as snarl, Adele answered for me. “It's a summoning spell. An old one. My grandmother was something of a witch. She'd mastered some simple spell work. I recognize some of the words.”

I met Tristan's gaze. *Summoning what?*

The drumming grew closer and more dirt fell, enough that Tristan shielded Adele from the brunt of it. I shook out my thick coat, sending a cloud of dust into the air. Tristan coughed, glaring at me reprovably. I chuffed, the closest I could come to an apology.

“Why don’t you fucking shift so you can talk to us?” Tristan growled, the words flat and accusing. “Hiding in that form won’t help us get out of here.”

A flash of fang was all the answer I was willing to give as the ceiling rippled above us, fear spearing through my heart as dirt rained down. I could not be trapped down here.

Not while my *wife*...while Anaria was still up there, somewhere, facing an entire army of monsters.

And I *couldn't* fucking shift back.

I’d been trying for hours.

Panic took me over for a minute, enough to send me leaping into the ward, foul magic cutting through me like knives, ripping and shredding until I slunk away with a pathetic whimper. The Oracle never even glanced up.

“Tavion,” Adele called gently, her blue eyes reflecting the pale glow from the ward. “Come here and lay down. You will not do us or yourself any good if you are worn down.” She patted the ground beside her. “Come here. You need to rest.”

Her soothing voice wound through me, something familiar and beloved about it. She sounded like Anaria, I realized, just like my wife.

“Come over here and lie beside me, rest, so you can fight later.”

Something Anaria might have said, and I padded over to her, huffed, then flopped down, making it perfectly clear I was complying completely against my will. Tristan just shook his head and closed his eyes, but Adele leaned forward, her gaze fixed on the Oracle.

“She’s...summoning something from below us, something that has been...dormant for a long while. Maybe forever.” Her face scrunched up as she concentrated.

“Something that will...” She shook her head. “I can’t understand enough to translate. I thought she said a power that will birth a new world from blood, but that cannot be right.”

Tristan’s eyes flew open. “Anaria.”

I was inclined to agree.

The vibration overhead...could be an army marching to war.

And somewhere up there, Anaria would face them. Whether alone or with Zor and Raziel at her side, I didn't know, but this was the moment the Oracle had spent an eternity preparing for. The bargain she'd struck with Anaria—with all of us—to restore the magic.

Somehow, I never thought I'd actually see it come to fruition.

“What does my daughter have to do with an ancient summoning spell?” Adele asked, her lips bone white. “And why, in the name of all the gods, are you looking at me like that, wolf?”

“Because while we were all led to believe the Oracle wanted the two kings out of the way so she could unite the three realms and place a queen on the throne, we've discovered her plans have changed,” Tristan murmured, his eyes bright when they met mine

On the other side of the barrier, the Oracle muttered and swayed, hair plastered to her forehead as the strain of what she was doing exacted a heavy toll. I didn't know what was more surprising, that the Oracle was casting magic, or that she had to work as hard at it as the rest of us.

“The prophecy promised Anaria would give rise to the return of the wild magic.” Tristan moved closer to Adele, while I sat up, curling my tail around her protectively. “Not the Fae magic you know, but something older and far more wicked.”

“I thought...” She clamped her lips together. “Anaria was born to take Carex's magic away, long enough for him to die. I've been rotting away in a cell, but I always assumed... something went wrong. She can't mean to bring back the wild magic?”

“The very same.”

“My grandmother would speak of such things.” Adele sat up, her eyes fever bright. “No good can come of this. The wild magic...” She shook her head. “Wild magic cannot be controlled.” Her voice began to shake. “This magic...If this power decides to no longer share this world with us, we are all dead.”

“Your grandmother...Anaria’s great grandmother...was a witch?” Tristan examined her, a thoughtful expression on his face.

Adele’s gaze wandered to the Oracle. “Something I didn’t think prudent to mention to Torin...*or her* when I was recruited to join their cause. Witches are...not exactly trusted, in any of the three realms.”

“But they are in the High Barrens?”

“There are many things in the High Barrens that are different than here, but this is not the place to speak of them.” Her shrewd gaze never left the Oracle. “And yes, Anaria has witch blood. Not much, but it’s there.”

“No wonder she attracted magic in the first place. Such ancient power sensed a kindred soul,” Tristan murmured, and I dipped my head in silent agreement. Overhead, the rhythmic vibrations slowed, the walls going quiet around us.

Did that mean the army was gone, or the war was over? I flicked my ears forward, listening intently, but there was nothing, only a deep booming silence that stretched out forever in all directions.

“I have no real magic of my own, but knowing some spells protected me in prison.” Adele brandished her ruined hands. “Not entirely, of course, but they kept me alive long enough to see my daughter again.” Her smile softened.

“Enough to see the sun again, to know Julian’s plan...mad though it was, worked. He was a good male, your brother. You are very much like him.”

I wished I was in my Fae form so I could laugh properly. *A good male.*

Adele believed I was a good male. I snorted.

“You think you aren’t? Only someone who *is* worthy deems himself unworthy. The truly arrogant always believe they deserve worthiness. Your brother loved you.”

Her blue eyes danced, despite this horrid place. “It was a long ride from the High Barrens to Blackcastle, and Julian loved to talk about his family, most of all. I know more about you, Tavion, than you probably would like.

“I know you couldn’t save your brother, and you’ve blamed yourself ever since. I know your father has never seen you for what you are. I know you care deeply for people, even when you hide it beneath pride and swaggering.” Painful memories, some of them true, but her caring smile never faltered, and I let that kindness sink into me, too.

Then the walls around us rippled, the earth undulating, dirt spilling over us. Tristan dragged Adele to the center of the room, and I planted myself between the Oracle and Anaria’s mother, lowering my head and bracing myself.

I wasn’t arrogant enough to believe I could kill her, but I could buy Tristan enough time to get Adele out of here...if there was even an exit to this hellhole. The Oracle magicked us into this chamber, and we hadn’t come through any door. But I couldn’t get through the deadly ward, not while the old spider was chanting with a savage intensity as if she was running out of time.

“What the fuck is happening?” Tristan crouched low as the tree roots hanging from the ceiling began to writhe. Thin, spidery roots thickened to the size of my wrist, driving down into the dirt beneath us until we were dodging those as well as falling dirt and stone. This small cave was about to collapse in on us and there was no escape.

“Finally.” The Oracle heaved herself up off the ground and scuttled to the wall separating us, stroking her claws down it, leaving glowing lines of iridescent light behind. “It is done.”

She was the wicked, ancient crone I remembered...and not.

Her form was changing, becoming leaner, longer, more elegant. Gnarled hands grew smooth and supple, her lined face changing to that of an old woman, then a goddess, white hair becoming a cascade of sleek black perfection.

She grinned, baring perfect white teeth, leaning close enough to the ward her throat hovered mere inches away from my fangs. “I shall meet Anaria to congratulate her on today’s victory. Perhaps she will find a way to rescue you from this place before your luck runs out.”

Then we plunged into a darkness so thick I cowered down, panic choking me. Tristan conjured up a handful of fire, the flare of light pushing back the darkness, illuminating Tristan’s face with a golden glow.

“The spider’s gone; there’s no way out.” He didn’t bother covering up the blatant fear in his voice, and like he said, the Oracle, and the magic holding us captive, had vanished.

“She can’t mean to leave us here,” Tristan added, his eyes wild as he scanned the tight space, filled with writhing, expanding roots.

“She did.” Adele eyed the roots twisting down between us, growing at an alarming rate. “If we aren’t crushed, I expect we’ll run out of air soon enough.” She laughed softly, though there was no humor in it. “At least I’m not dying in Tempeste. And I’m not alone. I suppose that’s something.”

I lifted my head and sniffed. The stifling air was rife with magic, singing with power, but Adele was right, the air was already close and stuffy. I chuffed softly at Tristan’s fire and with a snap of his fingers, the light went out.

“Fine. No light and more air.” He groaned. “I don’t know which is worse. And if we do get out of here, the first thing I’m doing is putting an arrow through that bitch’s heart.”

There was a shuffling sound and his shoulder brushed against me, Adele crawling closer, her hands brushing through my fur. I took on her fragile weight as she snuggled into my side.

“We wait for Anaria,” she said softly. “If I know anything, it is that my daughter will come for us.”

ZORANDER

L *eaves.*

Those were leaves above me.

And the sound of rushing water...a river was close by.

I took a deep breath of humid forest air, drowning in the depths of a thousand different smells and tastes. Trees and water and small furtive animals, all mixed together to create the smell of *life*.

So much spent magic hung in the air, everything coated with the unmistakable, delicate smell of amber-jasmine, as if this world had been painted with Anaria's essence.

"You are my oldest friend. I will miss you every fucking day."

I frowned, touching a finger to the fresh blood coating my chest, blood that was not mine. Blood that smelled of jasmine and amber. I tried and tried to pin down those words, that deep, familiar voice filled with so much anguish and rage.

Raziel. That had been Raz, but...why would he miss me when...

I brushed leaves off me, something tumbling off my chest. I picked up the small white stone, smooth as glass, squinting at the thing in utter confusion, then slipped it into my pocket. I never thought I'd ever feel this lost, as if I didn't belong here.

Where *was* here, anyway?

I was wedged between two enormous tree roots, big enough I couldn't see over them, but something—or someone—was rustling around to my right.

I found one knife, not my favorite, but this blade would cut just fine.

My muscles ached, weak with exhaustion, yet something new and alive pulsed at my center, my arms on fire as I pulled myself up, knife gripped in my sweating palm.

I was on my feet when the blade slid from my hand as I beheld the scene before me.

Raziel lay beside Anaria in the leaves, her dress pulled up to her waist, and they were inspecting the black mark on her side...which was enormous, the wicked bolt stretching all the way down to her knee, wrapping around her abdomen.

“Zorander,” she breathed, yanking her dress down, both she and Raz staring up at me like I was an apparition. “My gods, it actually...worked.”

“Fuck.” Raziel climbed to his feet then helped Anaria to hers, his face ashen. “It actually did.” *No collar*. I frowned at the band of pure white on his neck, its starkness a shock against the rest of his dark tan skin.

No collar.

That meant something. The absence of the iron was vitally important, and yet I couldn't get the memory to surface, couldn't quite grasp why that white line was so significant.

Then Anaria was molded around me like a glove, and we tumbled backwards into the bed of leaves, her arms wrapped around my neck so tight I could barely breathe. She pulled away long enough for me to see she was crying. No, laughing.

No...both.

“You're alive.” She cupped my face between her hands. “Oh my gods, it really worked. You're really alive.”

“Of course I'm alive.” We struggled upright, Anaria still clinging to me as if she couldn't bear to let me go. “What else would I be?”

I couldn't make sense of this, but instinct told me something—everything—was wrong with this scenario. Anaria was soft and warm in my arms. My best friend was a few feet away, staring and staring at me as if he'd never seen me before. But the hair rose on my arms, alarm tightening my gut.

What forest was this?

I was in Caladrius, I remembered that much. I'd marched across this realm a hundred times. Had traveled north of the mountains, across both the southern seas, all the way to the western edge of Varitus. But I had never been here.

The ancient smell was arboreal, rich in history, yet completely foreign.

Except for that vague hint of jasmine and amber that seemed to line every leaf, every bud, every draft of humid air. "Where are we? Is this still...Caladrius?" Even as I asked, I knew I had to be wrong.

Caladrius was dead, and this place...was very much alive.

Anaria blinked, sending fresh tears spilling down her lovely face, and I reached up to brush them away.

Reached up and froze.

The thin line on my arm was a torrent of black running from my wrist into my sleeve, but somehow, it went further. The mark ran all the way to my aching, thundering heart. I felt its powerful presence seeping into me, deeper than flesh and bone, far more permanent and everlasting.

These marks were eternal, like our bond. I didn't know how I knew that...I just...did. Like the information was etched permanently into my soul.

"The flatlands of Solarys. We're in the flatlands, Zor." Anaria's tentative smile was half regret and half apology. "How much do you remember? About these past days?"

I shook my head. I'd been marching my men west, heading across the wasteland toward Tempeste. To dethrone the Fae King and take back his lands. We'd almost reached the city

when...when...I reached and reached for what came after, but there was nothing.

Nothing but an empty place where memories used to be.

“Tell me where we are, Anaria.” The order came out harsher than I meant, my voice tinged with fear and desperation, Anaria shaking in my arms. “Because these are not the flatlands.”

A big hand curled around my shoulder and squeezed.

“She’s not lying, Zor. Three hours ago, this was all a barren wasteland. But the Oracle, after all her bullshit and games, wasn’t lying about the magic. Anaria did it. She brought this entire realm back to life.”

Anaria nodded, but the shadows in her eyes told me there was more, and I wondered if I wanted to know the rest.

“You did this?” She nodded slowly, her eyes never leaving mine.

She was so fucking close, her lips parted, just an inch from mine. I ached to kiss her, but...I glanced up at Raziel, braced my shaking hands on her waist and gently set her aside. She was his, which meant she’d never be mine.

Anaria was Raz’s and he deserved to be happy. “I need a minute, I think, to wrap my head around this.”

Anaria closed the space between us and kissed me anyways.

I was so shocked, so surprised that I didn’t fight her when her soft lips pressed against mine, her clever tongue sweeping in and dancing along my teeth, my own meeting hers before I remembered Raziel was *right there* and pulled away.

“You truly don’t remember?” She rocked back onto her knees, her hands sliding off my shoulders, a resigned smile curving her mouth. “You really don’t, do you?”

“Remember what?”

“Deepwood.” Raziel squatted down beside us, running his fingers down Anaria’s tear-stained cheek. “You don’t

remember these past few days, do you?"

I shook my head. "I haven't been to that shite town in twenty years. Maybe more." Gods, when was the last time I'd been there? Once more, I reached for a memory that taunted me but wasn't there.

Anaria wiped her face dry, her smile reigniting, eyes shining. "Actually, you..."

The air in the forest grew still.

As if something deadly prowled these woods, and the entire forest held its breath as the trees and rivers waited for the threat to pass. Even the sun dimmed down, the dancing, dappled shadows turning murky, and I pulled Anaria closer, Raziel protecting her other side as the entire forest paused.

The moment the air went still, I did, too.
The Oracle was back.

I felt her creeping power arrive before I ever saw her. I pulled out the knife, when I really just wanted to shove both Zor and Raziel behind me until she slithered back into whatever hole she'd crawled up out of.

Day turned to dim gloaming, a hideous black slime oozing over the newly birthed ferns and bracken, turning the tender, fledgling shoots rotten and withered. All around us the forest died, as if she couldn't help but snuff out whatever life she could.

Anything beautiful shriveled up, a thick layer of black dripping from the trees, drooping branches dropping dead, moldy leaves in drifts. They settled on the ruined, blackened ground, the smell of decay and mold shoving up my nose.

She stepped into sight.

No, she *appeared*, floating on the air, suspended by a breeze none of us could see or feel, her appearance sending shockwaves through me.

And then I knew something else as well.

This great rebirth—the prophecy she'd dangled before us like it was our great destiny—hadn't just been about restoring this realm to its former glory. This had been her restoration, as well.

The Oracle was beautiful.

In the way death can be beautiful.

Long black hair hung past her waist, and her face was carved from ivory, set with eyes of the darkest onyx. The odd, misshapen dress was an insult to her curves, half hidden by writhing shadows crafted from the deepest darkness. Her gleaming smile was as cold as the white tipped mountains around us, as empty as the sky above.

She kept running her hands over herself, and something about that preening caress made me want to gag.

“You have done well.” Even with the guttering horror of having her this close, a glimmer of selfish pride went through me. This forest, this entire realm—*her*—I’d done this.

All of this.

“A thousand years of careful planning has finally paid off.” Her eyes drifted to Zorander, her smile faltering. “There were sacrifices to be made for this to work. *Blood* sacrifices.”

“Sacrifices I was not willing to make.” I jerked my head in the direction of the city. “Carex is dead.” I didn’t bother telling her I wasn’t the one who killed him. Beside me, Raziel’s arms captured my waist.

“We did your bidding. *Now give us back our friends.*” My voice narrowed down to a hiss, my anger so intense I could barely contain myself.

Raziel vibrated with the same rage as me, Zor with utter confusion, yet both of them were ready and willing to launch themselves at her in a heartbeat should this come down to a fight.

“Still so defiant.” She had the fucking nerve to tsk me. “We shall have to do something about that attitude, little thief. Perhaps another lesson is in order.”

My rage turned cold. “Give them back. *Now.* We made a bargain, and I kept my end of the deal. Now keep yours.”

“All you Fae, such sticklers for your ridiculous rules.” She shook her head, running her hands down her restored, perfect

body. “Fine, then. I buried them right beneath your feet, little thief. Almost within reach, if you dig deep enough.”

Darkness bloomed in her eyes. “For someone as powerful as you, freeing them should be simple.” Terrible, wicked delight shone in her face as her words sent wave after wave of disbelief through me.

“In fact, this is your next task.”

Her beautiful face glowed with anticipation. “Yes, that is what we shall do. A series of three tests, I think, to prove your worthiness to the gods. *To me.*” Her ruby red lip curled up, revealing white, perfect teeth. “We shall see if fate agrees with my choices, since I have my doubts.”

This fucking bitch. I’d done everything she’d ever wanted, and now...

I blew out a long breath, which did nothing to quell the anger rising within me. A tide of fury that could burn away everything in its path if I wanted.

But not right now.

Now was too soon to show my hand.

Too soon for the Oracle to know who this newborn power answered to. She thought she controlled the magic, as if such a thing was even possible.

“We will not play your games; we will not complete your tasks.” All I could think about was tearing out her throat.

“I am done playing your games.” Every word sent stars tangling with her darkness. A tendril of her power touched me, leaving a trail of fire, blisters rising where it touched my skin. “Give them back. *Now.*” The trees shuddered, sending leaves showering down over us like emerald snow.

“You do not command me, mortal.” She sniffed.

Then she was gone.

“Fucking gods...what happened to her?” Zorander’s lips were white. “What did she mean...*she buried them?*”

“She took Tavion and Tristan. And Adele.” I frantically scanned the ground around us. There had to be an entrance to a cave, a hole...something that led downward. “She kidnapped them, using them as leverage to get me to do this.” I waved my hand at the newly formed forest.

“We have to find them.” I met Raz’s eyes. “We’ll have to start digging.”



DESPERATION AND PANIC grew as we made more and more passes over the forest floor. But beneath the leaves, the unbroken pale dirt taunted us with its even, impenetrable surface. If our friends were here, there was no way to reach them.

I dug random holes until my nails cracked, my fingers bled, feeding magic into the ground, using everything I had to try and locate them.

But I never did.

Raziel used his magic like a shovel, the soil soft enough for him to carve out a hole deep enough for him to stand in. Just seeing that hole, all that dirt piled around him, made me sick with horror.

Were they even still alive?

Or was this ‘*task*’ as she’d called it, already doomed?

“Even the Oracle can’t be that ruthless.” Now that we’d filled him in, Zor was caught up in the same impotent anger as Raz and me. He didn’t remember much.

But he knew our friends were missing, and we had to find them before we ran out of time.

“How far down?” I asked, for the thousandth time. “And where? Right below us?” I gestured to the endless wood stretching out around us in all directions. “Or just...*here*?”

Raziel walked to the spot where the Oracle had appeared, the splotch of oily black surrounded by a perfect circle of death and decay.

“This is where she came through.” He reached down, hesitated, then touched his fingers to the black mark. A wisp of smoke trailed from his fingers; his face twisted in pain before he wiped the black stain onto some nearby leaves.

“Here.” He pushed gracefully to his feet. “This is where they’ll be, right below this spot.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because if we fail, it would give her such pleasure to gloat over how obvious her clue was.” He dropped to his knees, Zor right beside him. “If we start digging now, we might reach them in time.” A shimmer of his blue-black magic stained the air, dirt already flying.

And then I saw her trap.

The Oracle meant for us to use our magic—every last scrap—to dig them out.

Magic that would bind us all more firmly together, magic that would bring us one step closer towards becoming monsters. A little broken laugh slipped between my cracked lips.

Such fucking irony.

We'd become the hideous, blackened beasts, while the Oracle would end up a beautiful goddess.

I braced my hand against the rough, gnarled trunk of the enormous oak that was almost Zorander's final resting place. Now it would be my mother's. Tavion's. *Tristan's*. I wanted to fucking scream. Then hunt down that foul creature and slit her throat.

Beneath my palm, the bark shifted, the massive trunk expanding to an unheard-of circumference, a faint cracking emanating from the tree as it grew faster than the bark could endure.

"I wish you could help me," I murmured. "I wish you could tell me how to save my friends."

One of the moss-covered roots swung across the ground, carving an enormous furrow through the dirt, before it curved around me almost protectively.

Raz popped his head out of his hole and Zor gaped as the tree trembled beneath my hand, as if...*as if waiting for my orders*.

My palm was slippery, but I kept it pressed tight to the trunk.

This was...no magic I'd ever heard of, but if there was the slightest chance the tree was somehow sentient, I would fall to my knees and give this forest whatever it wanted to save my friends.

"I know you are new and still growing." I felt foolish, talking to a tree, thinking it might actually be listening, but I didn't know what else to do. "Three of my friends are buried somewhere below me. Below you, maybe at your roots. We have to get them out."

Zor had joined Raziel in digging and I honestly didn't know which of us had the more fruitless task right now. Digging a hole to nowhere or putting all faith in a tree.

But there had been those in Varitus that had believed in gods more ancient than the Old Gods. Gods of nature and

creation and life. They believed that all life in this world was connected, and I closed my eyes, praying they were right.

“I don’t usually ask for favors.” My eyes landed on the circle of death the Oracle had wrought upon this beautiful place.

“But my friends and I are connected by the magic, just like you.” I ran a finger up the mark on my side, which throbbed faintly. “The Oracle will kill them, just like she killed that part of you.” I nodded to the withered circle. “If you help me save my friends, I will try to heal you.”

The tree shuddered again, leaves falling like rain.

Crack.

Crack, crack, crack. I was knocked backwards as those enormous roots, bigger around than my body, plunged straight into the ground. Deep crevices spread from the base of the tree as the roots delved deeper and deeper. I laid there, my mouth hanging open in awe.

Then Raziel dragged me away, cursing. “What is this?” he muttered. “We don’t need the forest coming alive. If they are down there, this could kill them.”

“This will save them.” I didn’t know where my confidence came from. But the forest had heard me and was trying to help. “I asked the trees and the magic to save our friends.” I glanced up into his face, tight with shock and fear as the entire forest floor came alive.

Roots burrowed deep into the ground, soil heaving and rippling beneath our feet as we stumbled out of the way.

“I didn’t know what else to do, Raz.” I gripped his arm, glad I had something to hang onto. “We can’t find them, but maybe...maybe the trees can.”

The ground shivered, cracks deep enough to swallow houses growing and spreading as we retreated toward the river. Raz snapped his head toward the deep, fast-flowing water. “If those cracks reach the river, all that water will flow down and fill the hole. They’ll drown.”

We traded a horrified glance.

“Stay here. Let me see what I can do.” Raz and I scrambled over the ferny edge and slid down the muddy bank, the stones digging into my bruised feet. Here, the river was deep enough I couldn’t cross on foot, the water running so fast the surface was churning white foam.

Zorander caught up to us. “The cracks have almost reached the riverbank.” Zor might not remember much, but his keen eyes took stock of the situation in a second. “You’re planning to use your magic to dam up the water?”

“If I can, yes, that’s the plan.” I tried to work out how to wade across, but the water was too deep. “I need to be in the center of the river for this to be effective.”

“There.” He pointed to where the river rounded a sharp bend. The three of us raced along the edge, my bare feet aching by the time we arrived at the steep curve. “A shield should hold the flow back for a few minutes.”

“Will a few minutes be long enough?”

“Raz, head back and monitor the progress. The second you have them in sight, signal us. Once they’re out of the hole, I’ll get us both out of here and Anaria can release the water.” Raziel flew back into the forest, the trees swallowing him up.

“The bank’s high enough to contain most of the water, but not all.”

“There’s only one problem.” My eyes lifted to his as Raziel’s shout echoed out of the trees. Whether anguish or victory, I couldn’t tell over the roar of the rushing water. “I’ve never cast a spell, not like this.” I eyed the sheer force of the water barreling down the chute.

Magic flowed into me through the ground, but the amount of power it would take to dam up that river was incalculable.

Gods, this was a bad idea.

“Build a wall of magic, stretching from that bank”—Zor pointed—“to this one. Then keep feeding power into it until I

tell you to stop.” He stepped away, running his hand down my arm.

I nodded, hoping I had enough magic.

I couldn’t fail, not when three—*five*—lives hung in the balance.

“I’ll be right beside you. Remember, keep the wall steady, and say my name when you can’t hold it together any longer.” Something flickered deep in his eyes as he held my stare. “I will get you clear.”

I tried to smile. “Promise?”

“Always, Anaria. *Always.*” He moved behind me, setting his hands on my shoulders, his warm breath washing over the back of my neck.

The next few minutes stretched out impossibly long. The only sounds from the forest were the horrible cracking of the roots and the groaning of the ground splitting apart. The sun beat down on us mercilessly, the water roared and roared, sweat dripping down my spine, the tattered, filthy dress plastered to my body.

Zorander’s hands never moved, not even when another deep crack echoed from deep in the trees and the entire edge of the bank cleaved open, a hole deep enough I could not see the bottom. Zor murmured in my ear. “Get ready. You can do this.” His hands squeezed, just once, his unwavering presence right behind me enough to give me courage.

The crack crept toward the river, then down into the rocks, then the river itself. Zor pressed his lips to my ear. “Now, Anaria. Do it now.”

I threw my magic across that expanse like a frail rope bridge, the raging river instantly building up and up and up against the shimmering barrier, higher than I thought possible, until I felt dwarfed by the wall of bluish-green water.

My magic buckled from the strain, and I shoved right back twice as fiercely.

I would not allow my friends to drown, not in a hole in the ground. *Push, push, push.* I would not allow the Oracle to beat us, and fuck her for even trying. I dug deeper, clawing at the magic, throwing more and more against the weight of the straining water.

Something popped in my right side, a bolt of pain searing down my side, but I kept casting, building my dam, the water twice my height. I would keep this river dammed up through sheer fucking spite if I had to, if only to defy a monster. Warm liquid trickled from my nose into my mouth. Blood.

“Come on, Anaria. Keep going. Keep feeding magic into the dam.”

I could hardly breath, only stealing quick, furtive gasps between yanking up magic, trying to keep my footing on the wet rocks, and wiping dripping blood away on the shoulder of my dress. This was a battle of wills. Me against the river. Me against the Oracle.

Me against the entire fucking world.

Part of me wanted to stop. Wanted this to end so I could collapse and breathe and just fucking stop.

I didn't. I couldn't, not until everyone was safe.

For a time, the magic roaring into my body from where my feet were planted in the muddy riverbed matched the amount of magic roaring out of me. Then the tide turned, forcing me to dig deeper and deeper to find enough to maintain the dam, much less make it taller to control the rising waters.

My arms shook from the sheer strain of feeding magic into this wall, which grew thicker and taller by the second. So fucking high. So fucking much water. Enough to wipe away an entire city.

Another deep groan, the riverbed trembling beneath my feet. Water poured over the top, an enormous hole forming in the center before I could patch it, spraying out a plume of river water.

I gritted my teeth. Magic webbed across the opening. The spray stopped.

We were not dying here.

I would make sure of that. I couldn't save my friends alone, but I could make sure Zor and Raz...and the forest... had enough time to get them out.

The tree carved a hole so deep into the ground I could not see the bottom.

Only those enormous roots digging and digging, slinging enough soil up to form a small hill in the center of the forest, right over top of the puny little hole I'd dug earlier.

We could name it Tavion's Hill, I thought before shaking my head at my own foolishness.

Yet hope thrummed in my chest, my heart aching from it as the forest fought like mad to save our friends. Fought every bit as hard as we did. That fucking bitch...

Later. Later we'd figure out what to do about the Oracle and these ridiculous *tasks* of hers, like this was some sort of competition. I pinched the top of my nose, leaping back as a crack spread slowly across the forest floor, swallowing up fragile ferns and wildflowers.

The forest was sacrificing itself to help Anaria, I realized.

Then everything stopped, the roots going still, the trees overhead still and quiet, the deep cracking of the earth replaced by pulsing silence. Something echoed up out of the depths.

A low, mournful howl.

A wolf's howl. A howl of pure desperation that sent shivers down my spine, both of staggering relief and utter horror.

They were running out of time, and I couldn't reach them.

"Tavion. Tristan. *Hold on,*" I screamed down into the endless darkness, boots slipping on the torn-up ground as I raced back to the river. They were buried too deep, it would take me too long to climb down and get them, too long for them to climb out.

True, I'd flown Anaria and me back from Tempeste, but...I couldn't pin down how I'd done that. My magic was different than I remembered, and I barely recalled anything about my failed rescue mission except the decapitated body of the king, the fear in Anaria's eyes...destroying Torin's room with an explosion of strange, blue-black magic.

No, whatever *that* magic had been, I wouldn't be touching that again.

Zor stood firm behind Anaria, bracing her up, and my heart guttered in my chest.

They were in the middle of the empty riverbed, legs braced wide before the churning wall of water straining against her fragile dam, the top higher than either bank of the river.

I cupped my hands around my mouth. "*Zor*. They're too far down; you have to bring them to the surface." I couldn't take my eyes off that fucking water about to overflow. The stubborn, fearless woman I loved all that stood between us and our doom.

"I can't leave her." Zor's head whipped between me and the girl holding the power of an entire river at bay. "If I'm not ready when her magic runs out..."

"Stop arguing and go get them, Zor," Anaria snapped. "I can hold this a few more minutes." Sweat poured down her face, her arms shook, but that determined look on her face never faltered.

"I'm trading places with you." I navigated the empty riverbed until I was beside them. "You get them out of the hole, and I'll help Anaria hold back the water."

"That's not what your magic does," Zor reminded me gruffly, then he shook his head. "Don't let anything fucking

happen to her, Raz.”

“I won’t. Now get them out before this goes sideways.” My stomach clenched with dread, but I jerked my head toward the now-silent forest. Water poured over the top of Anaria’s dam, soaking all three of us.

“Make it fast. We don’t have long,” I called after him as he wound between the trees. Zor paused on the edge of deepest crack, then disappeared. He reappeared a few seconds later with Adele in his arms, her thin arms clasped around his neck.

“Your mother’s safe.” I kept my eyes on the forest, my hands braced on her trembling shoulders. “Tristan’s out. And Tavion.”

Zor dumped the huge wolf unceremoniously onto the ground. Tavion’s side was matted with dried blood, and though I couldn’t hear over the roar of the water, after a heated discussion, Zor picked up Adele and vanished again, to where, I didn’t know.

“Raz...I can’t...” Water shoved us both back when another hole opened up.

My magic swelled. I sent it roaring straight into Anaria’s dam, shoring up the barrier, glittering black-blue magic twining with hers. That blast didn’t even *act* like my magic, and my mouth tasted like ash, but for the moment, the dam was holding.

“Zor got everyone out and they look unharmed. Dirty, but unharmed,” I clarified. “He took Adele somewhere safe; as soon as he takes Tavion and Tristan, I’ll get us out of here.”

She whimpered, the small, broken sound nearly sending me to my knees.

She’s brave and strong, but that sound...that sound could be my undoing.

“I’m running out, Raz. I’m almost out.” Even with my help, her hands shook so badly her magic jittered, small holes tearing in the dam, water bursting through them, screaming to be free. In seconds, the water was up to our ankles. Then our knees.

I sent more of my magic toward the dam, but Zor was right, this was not what my magic was for.

This was creation.

My original power was the opposite.

And I had no idea what my new magic was made of. Something strange and slippery, cold and ancient.

Then my world blew apart in a storm of choking water. One second, the dam was intact, a wall of churning blue-green water just a few feet away.

The next, Anaria's shield disappeared, sending stars spinning into the air, tendrils of deadly blue-black magic becoming harmless wisps of mist as the sheer weight of the pent-up river shredded the dam apart. I wrapped my magic around us, a stupid, desperate move that shouldn't have worked.

And it didn't.

I didn't hear Zorander's shout of warning behind us, didn't feel the ground cleaving beneath our feet, only Zor's arms going around us, yanking us out of the swirling, crushing water and into someplace else.

One second, the three of us were suffocating beneath the weight of a mighty river, the next we landed in a tangled heap, drenched and choking in a pile of dirt in the middle of the forest.

Water ravaged the riverbed, a thunderous, devouring wave that spread through the forest, pouring down into the deep cracks, flooding the forest floor, lapping at the mighty trunks. We lay panting on the hill—*Tavion's Hill*—all of us filthy, muddy messes.

All I could do was stare up at the sky through the leaves, chest heaving, flat in the dirt. Anaria's hand slipped into mine and squeezed, I squeezed back, too drained to do anything else.

"Let's never do that again," she murmured, and I tried to nod, but found I couldn't even manage that.



THE TORRENT RECEDED AS QUICKLY as it came, leaving wet, flattened destruction behind, burying pale green ferns and moss in a river of dirt and debris. Sitting up, I gaped at what a few minutes of flooding could wreak.

“Where is everyone?”

Zor slicked back his hair, the hardened general appearing slightly shell-shocked. If I had the energy, I would have made a joke, but I felt worse than he looked.

“That way. In a glen. Let’s hope the water didn’t make it that far.”

Anaria climbed to her feet with a groan, holding her side. I reached for her, and she pushed my hand away. “I’m fine. Just a strain.” But she was so, so pale, her hair plastered to her face, her dress in tatters. “I have to... *Oh.*” Her mouth dropped open.

I turned to see water pouring down into the cracks, the sound of it falling echoing up out of the depths. Enormous roots writhed as they worked back into place, trees settling with a groan that could be heard for miles. The woods were a dangerous mess, but Anaria slid down the hill, her back covered in thick clay by the time she reached the bottom.

I followed, Zor right behind, both of us jogging to catch up as she slogged determinedly through the soggy undergrowth. “Anaria, stop for a moment. Let me look at you.” Her hand was clutched to her side, her face pale as death, but she didn’t halt, not until she reached the blackened circle where the Oracle had first appeared.

She wavered and I caught her by the arm, not bothering to asking permission before I sent a wave of healing magic through her. She would have just told me no, and I didn’t have the patience for a fight right now.

Healing and death, those were my two gifts. I’d never been able to make sense of the irony, but right now, I was glad for

both. “Your ribs were broken.” I didn’t let her go this time, even when she tried to yank away.

“I know. But I have to do this before I burn out, Raz. I promised...” Her lips were bloodless. “I made a promise, and I mean to keep my word.” Tears and river water dripped down her face. “Please, let me go, I don’t want you touching me when I do this.” Her gaze lifted to the woods. “In fact, you and Zor should—”

“No.” I gripped her tighter. “You’re not sending us away. Not now, not ever again.” I brushed her cheek. Her skin was freezing cold. “We’re in this together, princess.” I tried to put as much swaggering humor into my voice as I could.

“We’re in this together and we stay together. No matter what.”

She was too tired to argue. She fell to her knees and plunged her hands into the soggy loam, down through the blackened, dead undergrowth. Zor knelt on one side, me on the other. I braced my hand on the small of her back, and this time, she didn’t fight me. Her fingers dug deeper and deeper, until she stopped and blew out a long, shaky breath.

“Last chance.” Her head hung low, hair dripping into the mess before us. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you two stubborn fools.”

I had no idea what this was about, no idea what she was planning, until the ground rippled beneath my knees. Zor and I pitched forward, almost face planting in the turf.

A mist of stars—spinning sluggishly in the air—surrounded us, the ground quivering. Then ever so slowly, the forest sprang to life all around us. Ferns unfurled in delicate whorls, tiny wildflowers emerged, delicate leaves and starlike flowers, until they covered the floor of the forest.

Anaria panted, but life spread out from her in a wave of green and purple, out across the ground and down the banks toward the river. The cracks smoothed out, even the dead trees glowed with the acid green of brand new leaves and moss.

“There. My part is fulfilled.” I didn’t know what she meant, her whisper little more than a breath of air.

I caught her before she pitched into the loamy soil, picking her up and following Zorander, though I looked back once. Call me crazy, but I could have sworn the forest was whispering.

And if I had to put a name to the sound, it would have been Anaria’s.

Adele struggled to her feet when we appeared—tried to take a step and stumbled. Tavion was right there, and she threw her arm over his back, then sank back down, watching our approach with tear-filled eyes.

“She’s okay, just exhausted.” I laid her beside Adele, who ran her hands over her daughter then pulled off the cloak and wrapped it around Anaria. “We’ll let her sleep while you tell us what the fuck just happened.”

“The fucking Oracle happened,” Tristan snapped, his tan skin covered in dirt. “That crone trapped us belowground, where we were almost crushed by tree roots and buried alive.”

Tavion stared at me, a low growl building in his throat as he eyed my neck.

“Yes, the collar’s gone. Now change back so we can fucking talk to you.” A tip of his head, and his pale eyes raked down my clothes to tell me why, exactly, Montgomery would remain in wolf form for the time being.

“Or fine, stay that way, but you’re of little use if you can’t add to the conversation.” Tavion sniffed, trotted beside Anaria, and curled around her, staring balefully at us.

“She cast a summoning spell.” Adele tucked the cloak around Anaria, elbowing Tavion out of the way. Somehow, the great silver wolf huffed with all the arrogance of his Fae counterpart but moved aside. “I thought the Oracle was summoning the magic, and she was, but not how I imagined.”

Adele’s eyes flicked over the thick canopy of leaves. “Is all of this from Anaria’s magic?”

“All of it.” I picked at my muddy clothes. “So what about this magic the Oracle cast?”

“That crone restored herself to...what she once was,” Tristan finished, crossing his legs. “She’s young again. While we’re...” He turned his arm enough for me to see the black veins running from his wrist up into his shirt. “We’re not the same.” Zor displayed his and I touched my face.

Tristan laughed, but it came out hollow. “Yours hasn’t changed one bit, you lucky bastard.”

I didn’t know if I agreed. Something inside me *wanted* that mark. Wanted proof Anaria and I were bound together, and I shoved away the glimmer of anger and regret that I didn’t have it.

“We go to the Wynter Palace,” I suggested softly. “There’s food, water...” My eyes wandered to Tavion. “Liquor. We can sleep, recoup, take the tunnels back to Nightcairn and decide where to go from there.”

“A boat to the other side of the world sounds good right about now,” Tristan muttered.

“We’ll pass too close to Tempeste.” Zorander shook his head. “Too close to the king.”

I took a shaky breath. “I need to catch you all up. There have been some...developments.” And I did, telling them about Carex’s death—what little I remembered from my rage-fueled haze—the grisly death of the entire Reaper army, the ancient forest springing to life from a wasteland. Me taking the collar off. I stopped, my hands suddenly sweaty.

My gaze drifted to Zorander. “When I broke the Shadow King’s spell on the collar, something happened.” Gods, this was so much fucking harder the second time around.

“When you welded that onto my neck, the king sealed his binding spell with a drop of your blood. Blood magic kept me from taking off the collar. Because if I ever did, your life would be the price.”

Zorander blinked in confusion. “I don’t understand.”

“You died, Zor.” I nodded to the faint traces of blood still on his bare chest. “Anaria brought you back using her magic. And her blood.”

“I...died?” His face turned stark white. “That’s why I can’t remember anything?”

“Eh, don’t fucking worry.” Tristan got up and slapped him on the back.

“There will be plenty more horrific things ahead for you to remember, I’m sure. Take your victories where you can.”

I didn’t have the heart to tell him that along with all the terrible things he’d forgotten, was that one night in Deepwood, in a room over an inn, where he’d finally found the love he’d deserved.

And somehow, I wanted to cry at the unfairness of that.

ZORANDER

Tavion carried Adele, Raz and I took turns carrying Anaria.

He slid the band back on one arm, then we found the other thankfully still in her pocket and put that one on her, too.

We headed northeast, or the closest estimate, given we couldn't see through the thick trees and there were no paths in this newborn forest. Not Fae-made, anyway. Yet paths seemed to magically open up before us through the woods, bracken and vines parting before us. Tristan climbed up to the top of the canopy every so often to make sure we were still heading in the right direction.

I was happiest when I carried Anaria.

It gave me purpose, her warm, soft body molding to me, her arm sometimes reaching up and cupping the back of my neck. The sensation was familiar and comforting and odd.

She smelled delicate, like the flowers around us. In fact, the entire forest smelled like her, every breeze bringing a hint of amber-jasmine to my nose.

But when Raziel held her, I was alone, and dark memories crept in.

A fire, burning me from the inside. A deep, abiding darkness, me trying to claw my way out of the shadows. I'd died. I'd gone to the Great Beyond.

I'd seen death every day of my life.

Lived it, breathed it, survived it.

I never thought I was afraid of death, had always imagined I'd embrace the end when it came to claim me, with a battle cry worthy of a song. Not this sick, useless feeling that crept up my throat and choked me.

Darkness crept in when Raziel stumbled, nearly going down, Anaria clutched in his arms.

We were all exhausted. Drained, dangerously so. And Caladrius was filled with dangerous creatures, some more dangerous than Soul Reapers. The air in here was silent, as if the forest swallowed up all sound.

"We rest here." I eyed the glen around us, as perfect a place to stay the night as any I'd ever seen. A small stream flowed quietly through, the floor was thick with moss, and the trees were so close together they formed a solid wall around us. "I'll take first watch, then Raz, then Tristan. Tavion can take the dawn shift."

"That works for me." Tristan hauled his rucksack over his head.

How he still had his pack on him, I didn't know—the rest of our gear was long gone—but when he laid out a meager spread of dried meat, bread, and some apples, I went limp with relief. Adele took an apple, and I set another one aside for Anaria, along with some cheese. Raz, Tristan, and I split the rest, while Tavion ducked off into the forest, presumably to hunt for his own dinner.

Raz gave Anaria over to Adele, let her mop the dirt off her daughter's face, dribble some water between her lips. She didn't rouse, not a surprise, given the sheer amount of magic she'd exhausted these past days.

Her color was already coming back, Raz explaining softly how she drew her power from the earth and the ground was the best place for her. Even as we watched, the mossy ground around her glowed faintly, a hint of stardust shimmering in the air around her, one of her hands burrowing deep into the soft moss like it was the softest of blankets.

I watched the glow bugs dancing in the air, the peace of this place settling into me. Raziel murmured something to Tristan, crossed the glen, and settled beside me. “One night at Wynter Palace, then two days in the tunnels. Then Nightcairn. What comes after that...we have to decide.”

I shook my head. “I don’t know these tunnels. That’s how you came into Tempeste?”

He nodded, chewing. “Tavion’s family has used them for centuries to smuggle goods into Tempeste, as it turns out. At least the bastard’s good for something. Made by the Old Gods is my guess. There’s a portal down there—shaved two days travel off the trip between realms.”

I filed the information away for later.

“The Shadow King always suspected goods were being smuggled from Solarys into Caladrius, but we never discovered how.” I paused, turning this over in my head. “Explains where all that money came from, though. The money the king used to pay my soldiers.” I clenched my hands tight. “The soldiers that will never make it home to their families.”

Raz dipped his head. “You can thank the fucking Oracle for that. Anaria did what she could to not spill blood, not give her what she wanted, but...she was forced to in the end.”

He stretched his feet out, his boots in tatters like his clothes. Like all our clothes. Raz followed my gaze and laughed. “Let’s fucking hope Lord Wynter is our size, or we’ll stink like fucking pigs down in those tunnels.”

I opened my mouth to say something when Tavion skidded into the clearing, whining. The food in my stomach curdled as I shot to my feet. Tavion dashed to a break in the trees, looked over his shoulder, and disappeared.

“Stay here,” I warned Adele, who nodded, her eyes fixed on that narrow break between the trees. “We won’t go far, just to the other side. If there’s nothing there, we’ll come right back.”

“Don’t be gone long.” Her ruined hands flexed, but she huddled protectively over Anaria.

“We’ll be back as soon as we can.”

I ducked between the trees and caught up to Raz and Tristan, which didn’t take long, given they were standing stock-still, staring at what lay trapped on the other side of the glen, not twenty feet away from us. Tavion circled, head low, jaws snapping.

“Are those what I think they are?”

“Silver Cave Weavers.” Raziel’s voice was hushed, either from fear or to keep Adele from hearing. “But I’ve never seen them so big.”

The carcasses were enormous, bound to the ground by vines and roots, one of them still struggling as the forest slowly crushed the hideous creature to death. A gushing sound and metallic silver fluid flowed out of a swollen abdomen, turning the moss below steaming black.

I’d only seen these hideous creatures once before, high in the mountains to the north, and even then, they’d been the size of a large dog, not the size of five draft horses.

How they hadn’t slaughtered us, I didn’t know.

“The forest is protecting us.” Raz jerked his head to the now dead beasts, seven in total. “The paths, the glen, this.” He glanced back to where Anaria lay. “She made a deal with the forest—with the magic—to save her friends. In return, she healed the damage the Oracle caused. Anaria kept her end of the bargain. I have a feeling this is the forest looking out for her.”

Realization hit me, then.

The dead circle the Oracle had caused, how she’d brought it back to life...

Cold certainty settled into me, along with a bit of relief. “We all sleep tonight.” Raz glanced my way, but I couldn’t stop staring at the dead beasts. “If this is true, then we have nothing to fear, and we’ll make better time tomorrow if we’ve

rested. We all sleep, we break camp at dawn, and we make it to the palace before dark.”



THE NEXT DAY we passed all sorts of fell creatures.

All of them dead, all of them being slowly consumed by the forest, some little more than bones, one of them leaving behind a carcass big enough for us all to stand inside.

“A Howler,” Raz muttered as we passed, none of us stopping. I was glad Anaria was still sleeping, thankful I had her in my arms. “Four times the size of any I’ve ever seen before.” My friend and I shared a troubled glance.

All these creatures were huge. Some of them unknown inside this realm.

And occasionally, a faint shadow darkened the floor beneath our feet, a Reaper floating overhead, looking for an easy meal. And I doubted the forest could protect us against those.



WE STUMBLED into the Wynter Palace just after dark, the last part of the rough climb frighteningly difficult, given the sheer drop off on one side and how utterly exhausted we were.

But locking that door behind us had never felt so good.

I’d carried Anaria upstairs, barely managing the sweeping staircase, stumbling down the long hall to the bedroom, Raz leading the way. “Stay with her,” was all he said, and before I could puzzle that out, he shut the door tight behind him.

I laid her down gently, arranging her so she’d be comfortable, spreading her beautiful hair over the pillow. Almost two days and she still slept, and though Adele had cleaned Anaria’s face, the rest of her was filthy.

As dirty as the rest of us, but somehow, on her, it just seemed worse.

I couldn't get my fucking heart to stop racing so godsdamned fast. Mud splattered her legs, and her dress... Gods, I couldn't stand to see her like this. I'd wanted an easy life for Anaria, filled with quiet joys and easy days and every good thing the gods would give her.

Not...this.

I covered her up in a blanket, dusty, but reasonably clean.

There was a mirror, dusty and the silver was mottled, but I pushed my sleeve up and inspected the mark on my arm, tracing the thick, veiny streak up to my bicep, then where it emerged from my shirt and spread across my chest.

A circle, with two lines running through the middle. I cocked my head, the image vaguely familiar.

Out of a book or a manual I'd once seen but, like these past few days, couldn't remember.

I jumped at the light knock on the door, then Adele popped her head in, a lit candle in her good hand, Tavion nipping at her heels. "I just wanted to see her, Zor, before I went to sleep," she explained, never taking her eyes off her daughter. "When it's been so long, you don't want to waste a minute."

The words rang inside me as she limped across the room, Tavion prowling to the foot of the bed before he flopped down with a groan. Adele perched on the edge of the mattress and took Anaria's hand.

"I never thought I'd ever see this place again." She looked around, a hint of wistfulness on her pale face. "Especially not this room. I figured the Oracle or the king would have razed this entire place to the ground."

"Why would you think that?"

"Because this is where Anaria was born." She stroked her fingers along the edge of the bed. "Right here, in this very bed."

Shock kept me speechless.

In all my secret visits to Solarys, I'd never been here, though I'd heard about the Wynters. Especially Lady Wynter, whose penchant for blackmail and violence was legendary.

Through the windows, faint fires still burned in the dark city, dull orange glows that flickered with a determination I had to admire. Overhead, the Reapers circled, like they had for two days, and I crossed the room to draw the drapes tighter.

"Here?" I repeated, barely stopping myself before I asked if she was sure.

Of course Adele was sure.

It was just...the Oracle had commanded them to appear here, before dispatching them to war. And there were no coincidences with that old spider.

She had to have known.

"I couldn't stand the palace. Everyone in the royal court wanted me dead, and the only reason Carex kept me alive was because I carried his child." Adele brushed a lock of hair away from Anaria's face.

"I hated Caladrius. I realized once I gave birth I would die, so those ten months became my entire life. All I wanted before the end was to hold her in my arms." She sighed. "Since his entire court had vied for a thousand years to take Carex's throne, an actual blood heir...was the greatest threat they could have imagined.

"But for some reason...the idea of being a father seemed to grow on Carex. Keeping me at the palace became too great a risk. This was our compromise."

"The Wynters?" I couldn't follow where Adele was headed with this, but I already knew I didn't like it.

Her smile deepened, to something knowing and almost cruel. "My suggestion, though I may have used a touch of arcane magic to convince him. Carex barely remembered the Wynters, though they'd been members of his court for centuries. But why would he? They were not his usual fawning sycophants. They rarely attended court, only the required royal

events, and kept to themselves, though they donated heavily to his war.”

I barely remembered where I was, what I was supposed to be doing, only the knife in my belt, inches from my fingers. *I should kill her.* The thought popped into my head then was immediately rejected.

Adele was Anaria’s mother, for fuck’s sake.

I was being paranoid.

Yet the sense of danger, that something truly awful was about to happen, that she was the source of it, kept rising. This female was a threat, in the same way my wife had been a threat, though I couldn’t see how.

Adele was the most fragile, delicate, ruined thing I’d ever seen.

Which made this even worse.

“The Wynters kept me alive, and I was able to hold my daughter. Twice, before she was taken away by that fucking witch. But once Anaria entered this world, it didn’t matter what happened to me. Only what she would become.”

I relaxed, watching her stroke her daughter’s face with such gentle care.

Gods, she’d slept with the king, gotten pregnant, and still stayed to honor her bargain with the Oracle. To honor her word to Julian. To fight for a better world. I relaxed. It didn’t matter what happened all those years ago, only that both she and Anaria were alive. *Safe.*

I dipped my head. “I see now where Anaria gets her courage. And her determination.”

“And her stubbornness.” Her smile turned sad. “And something else, I’m afraid.”

“Her dark sense of humor?” I asked, trying to lighten the mood. Tavion lifted his head, whining as his huge, silver head swung between us.

I’d forgotten he was even there.

His eyes snagged on mine, a thread of warning in them, as if his instincts picked up something I'd missed. I wrapped my fingers around the hilt of my knife.

“No, but that’s a nice thought, Zorander. Anaria was not only born here, she came here many times after, before she was smuggled to Varitus.” Adele peeled back the blanket, revealing Anaria’s bare arm. Adele ran her finger down her sleeping daughter’s pale flesh, much like she’d stroked the blanket so lovingly a moment ago.

In the trail left behind, a marking appeared of pure white. A branching tree, sparkling with power, every branch reaching for the sky. Breath exploded from my lungs at the sight, at the impossibility of what I saw.

“Lady Wynter was my sister. Wynter is our family name... Anaria’s family name. The king tried to wipe us out, but he didn’t know we were hiding in plain sight. Carex is powerful, but not all that clever, as it turns out.”

“Wynter?” The name was barely a husk of sound. “You are a Wynter?”

Her eyes slid over to Tavion, who lowered his head, lip rising to bare his fangs. “My family. Who Tavion condemned to death, then did the deed himself.” Her eyes narrowed. “I wonder what my daughter will think about that, when she finds out?”

Adele smiled at Tavion’s low, urgent whine, her expression too similar to the Oracle’s for my comfort, every piece of me trembling at the resemblance.

“The Oracle has been planning this for a thousand years, since Carex killed his own father and corrupted the magic. My family has been privy to those plans for three hundred years.”

I was debating slicing her throat when she smiled. “My fighting days are long over. I am not here to harm my daughter. *Or you*, general.” Her laughing eyes seemed to mock me. “I’m here to ensure Anaria follows through on plans that were put into motion long ago.”

I drew my knife anyway. There was a threat here I could not yet see but was beginning to take shape. Tavion climbed to his feet, circling the bed, padded feet silent on the dusty rug, a low snarl rumbling in his throat.

“I love my daughter, but she has a purpose. Anaria was meant to restore the magic and kill the kings, but she is meant for so much more. All of you are meant for so much more.”

“What is that mark on her arm?” I’d never seen anything like it. “How did you get that to appear?”

“As I explained to Tristan and Tavion while we were trapped in that tomb, my ancestors possess witch blood. Pure, *untainted* witch blood. After a thousand years, the Oracle, in her desperation, never thought to check that small detail.

“My ancestors moved to this godsforsaken place, joined Carex’s court, and hid in plain sight. When the opportunity presented itself and whispers went through the realms, the villages and towns, that the Oracle of Tempeste was searching for a female of pure blood to join another great rebellion, my family knew our time had come.”

Her smile grew serpentine. “You see, Zorander, power is an elusive thing, and our kind has waited a long time to get it back.”

“You mean...*witches* have waited a long time?”

Who the fuck was this female? I gripped my knife tighter, praying I didn’t have to slay Anaria’s mother while she lay sleeping beside her.

“I volunteered, was chosen, and played my part. In the Oracle’s play, but not mine. Or my people’s.” When she lifted her gaze to mine, her eyes were burning. Silver fire, the kind I’d never seen.

“They burned my world, you know. Right after I had Anaria, word got to Tempeste that there were witches in the High Barrens. Carex’s army drove them out, into the mountains. Even trapped in that hellhole, I heard the stories of what he did.” Her gaze drifted to the shuttered window. “But

none of that matters now.” When Adele lay her hand on Anaria, I wanted to tear it off.

“Anaria is half witch and half full-blooded Fae. And she’s claimed the magic.” Adele smiled up at me, not a hint of shame on her face that she’d fooled us all.

“My daughter is the single most powerful creature in this entire world. With the four of you by her side, she will be unstoppable. You need to ask yourself, Zorander Vayle, who do you fight for?”

Tavion was closer. Close enough to tear out her throat.

His eyes slid to mine, the question in them clear. *What do we do?*

If everything Adele said was true—and I suspected it was—the information might put us in a better place than we’d been before. And as I looked into my heart and answered Adele’s question, I realized none of this changed the outcome. Not for me.

“I fight for Anaria. And I fight for what’s right.”

“Good. That’s what I fight for as well. You don’t have an army. The old witch took that from you. But I will give you an army when it is time to fight.”

This time, her smile didn’t strike fear in me at all. But I despised her, just the same. I might have cared for Adele, as the mother of the woman I loved. Now she was just someone else who meant to use Anaria—her own godsdamned daughter—as a tool to gain power.

My heart clenched, but I kept my expression bland, as I had for the Shadow King for a hundred years, even managing a slight smile of approval when she added, “The High Barrens witches are known for their cunning during battle, and Carex did not kill as many of us as he believed.”

ANARIA

I woke slowly, slipping out of my dreams into a lazy twilight, more comfortable and warmer than I'd been in a long, long time.

The best way to wake up, I decided, pushing my feet deeper into the warm, fuzzy blanket at my feet.

I stretched my hands over my head, my elbows brushing something hard and unmoving on either side of me. Skin. I cracked an eye open wide enough to see a wide expanse of tan skin, marked with some kind of...black circle with lines running through it. I reached out, tracing the strange mark, still half snared by sleep.

"I don't know what the symbol means. But I like having your mark on me, Anaria." I froze at Zor's deep voice, my finger pressed firmly to *his* pectoral, while *his* half-lidded eyes peered down at me. When I pulled away, he clasped his hand over mine and pressed my palm firmly to his chest.

"No, don't stop." His low voice was barely a whisper. "Last night, Raz...filled me in on everything I forgot. Which, much to my surprise, was quite a lot." His lips brushed my forehead like a benediction. "I don't mind forgetting the rest, but our first time...I would have very much liked to remember that."

"A second first time, then." I inhaled his clean, rugged scent, and Raziel's. They must have found time to bathe, which was more than I could say for myself. But at least the

river had soaked some of the dirt away, and...the filthy dress was gone, thank the gods.

“Do you two have to be so fucking loud in the mornings?” Raz grumbled, burrowing his face into the back of my neck, one hand sliding around my waist, hand flared out over my belly. “First Deepwood, now today. I’ll never get any sleep.”

All the lazy, relaxed calm slid away as reality crashed back into place. The Oracle. The Reaper army. Me, feeding the last dredges of my magic back into the forest as payment for saving my friends. At least I kept my word, unlike that hulking spider.

Who was definitely not a hulking spider anymore.

“Is everyone all right?” *Gods, what was the last thing I even remembered? Healing the forest, I supposed, and after that...nothing. Until now.*

Zor nodded, his dark eyes shining with something I couldn’t quite put my finger on.

Regret? No, not exactly. More like worry and fear.

“Tell me the truth, Zor. If someone’s hurt, I want to know.”

“Everyone is fine, thanks to you. We’re in the...Wynter Palace.” Zor said that like there was so much more he wanted to explain, and his hesitant tone sent a shudder of anxiety through me, while Raziel hugged me tighter.

“Then what is wrong?” I couldn’t stop staring at the black circle, and the longer I did, the one on my side seemed to burn hotter. The mark looked so familiar, but I couldn’t quite place where I’d seen it before.

“This is from me?” Zor nodded. I traced the mark carefully, a perfect circle with two lines through it. “And you don’t recognize it?” The mark was horrifically beautiful, slightly raised from the even, tan skin, and when my fingers brushed over it, Zorander’s eyes darkened, a slow, sensual smile curving his full lips. I instantly went damp between my legs.

I liked that look. *A lot.*

Yes, a repeat performance of our first time was definitely in order. In fact, I had some ideas on what I wanted to try next.

Raziel raised his head, leaning his sharp-ass chin into my shoulder while I tried to wiggle away. “I recognize that symbol. Old Valarian. The mark means war.” He shifted when I rolled onto my back, laying his arm over my abdomen. Black ran from the crook of his elbow, up over his shoulder, stopping at his chest. His was different, but roughly the same size, an arrow inside a circle, the point resting over his heart.

I hated that I’d marked them, but something inside me liked it, too.

I loved knowing they belonged to me in some small way.

“Does this have a meaning?” I let my fingers play along the lines to the end of that arrow point that looked impossibly sharp.

“Death. This is the symbol of death.”

I snatched my fingers away, breath stolen from my lungs by fear. “Oh Raz...”

“Not your fault, princess.” Raz held me tight, not letting me escape, and Zor moved closer, keeping me trapped between them.

“Zor and I...we’ve always known exactly what we were. What our magic and our skills were meant for.” Raz nuzzled the side of my face. “Death and war, and so far, destiny has held true for both of us. War and death have been the only constants in our lives. The one thing we never saw coming, though, was you.”

“Me?” I swallowed, processing this, the gentleness of his voice sending a flicker of worry through me. I wanted to erase these past two minutes, and go back to thinking about sex and pleasure and simple things. Not death and war.

“*You*, princess.”

“For the last time, I’m no princess.” I laughed, glad to be on familiar ground, at last.

“Oh, but you are. Doubly so, as it turns out.” Raziel’s ticklish fingers danced lightly down my upper arm, Zor watching intently. At the foot of the bed, a silver wolf’s head popped up, forest green eyes blinking down at me as I yelped, pulling my feet out from beneath him.

Not a fuzzy blanket at all.

Oh my gods...I was using Tavion Montgomery as a foot warmer.

“Why are you here?” I murmured, wondering why Tavion was lying on the foot of the bed, and why he was still a wolf. He didn’t do anything except prowl closer and lay back down on my feet, setting his huge head on his front paws and watching me with those unblinking eyes.

“Because while you were sleeping, we all came to an agreement,” Zor said calmly, as if having all of them in the same bed with me was perfectly normal. “Including Tristan, who’s out rounding up horses for us and your mother, who revealed some pretty intense secrets last night.”

My mother had *intense secrets*?

“The question is, Anaria, do you want to hear those secrets from us...or from Adele?” Zor’s mouth hardened, rigid lines forming at the sides of his mouth. “Some of them...might be hard to accept, at least at first.”

I gripped the blankets and closed my eyes.

No. I wasn’t ready for secrets.

I wanted an hour, one hour of peace and quiet without my life being disrupted by...whatever this newest disaster was. And besides, what sort of *secrets* could Adele possibly have?

She’d been locked away my entire life.

Plus I was still processing how I had three gorgeous Fae males...okay, two males and a wolf shifter...in my bed.

“Later,” I decided, my weariness flooding back as if it had never left. “Right now, I need a bath.” I raked them over with my gaze. “Alone.”

“Pity. I thought I could scrub your back.” Raz climbed out of bed, his perfectly muscled arse on full display, and when he turned...my eyes went wide as he stroked his thick length with not a shred of embarrassment.

I turned bright red on his behalf, and Zor chuckled.

Raz’s grin lit up the entire room. “I’m going to take a piss. I’ll be back.”

“Don’t rush,” Zor murmured, taking my hand and flattening my palm back against his chest, over the mark. I brushed my thumb over it and the lightning strike on my side throbbed, Zor’s throat bobbing.

“We do have time. It’ll take Tristan an hour to get the horses ready.”

“He won’t be happy about being relegated to stable duty,” I murmured.

“No, he won’t,” Zor agreed. Then he leaned in and pressed his mouth against mine, gently, as if testing the waters. I kissed him back harder than he kissed me, deeper, more demanding, my own question that I needed an answer to.

The silver wolf leapt off the bed, the mattress dipping beneath his weight, but he didn’t go further than the foot of the bed, settling onto the floor, those green eyes watching me.

Tavion wasn’t leaving.

I should have been embarrassed, yet somehow, I found that comforting.

Zor’s calloused hand cradled my cheek with such gentleness, his mouth moving against mine, and I thought of how close we’d come to never having this moment, to never knowing this kind of pleasure.

Without breaking the kiss, Zor flipped me onto my back, his body moving against mine, as if he put all of himself into this kiss, into loving me, my legs falling open to accept him.

My hands and lips memorized every delicious, gorgeous inch of him, every divot and angle, every scar, wondering

when and how he'd gotten them and everything I didn't know about this male but wished I did.

Zor's fingers explored me with the same thoroughness, his low, rough hiss when he ran his fingers through my slick folds turning to a low, needy groan when he plunged them into his mouth and licked off my juices. Then he kissed me, and I closed my eyes, tasting myself on his tongue.

This was what being consumed alive must be like.

I wanted him to devour me right now.

When I opened my eyes, the room was thick with black magic, and behind him...rising above Zor were two enormous wings. Perfectly formed, ebony as the night, feathers as long as my arms.

"What are you looking at?" He leaned closer, his hair framing our faces, and then there was only him. Perfect. Beautiful. Powerful. "*Zorander*." His name slipped out; I couldn't help myself.

A war god, from some dark world.

And right now, he belonged to me. The world disappeared completely when his weight settled against me, his face strong and fierce and proud, his cock nudging at my entrance, my hand still flattened over his heart where I'd marked him as mine.

"Anaria?" He pushed up on one arm, the question written in his eyes.

"Yes. Always yes," I breathed, tugging him back to my mouth. "You taste like storm clouds and thunder. I can't get enough of you."

He laughed against my lips. "I should be saying that to you, princess."

Zor thrust into me with one powerful stroke, and we fit together so perfectly, my channel tightening, his soft gasp of surprise sending a jolt straight through me. I savored every sound he made, every brush of him against me.

This felt different than before. Not the frantic, rough pairing in Deepwood, but slow and thorough, a celebration of our souls, not a conquest of our bodies, and I closed my eyes and let myself fall deeper into this consuming pleasure.

“Anaria.” My eyes fluttered open. “Look at me. I want to see you.”

My blood was roaring, my body straining as need climbed higher and higher toward a precipice just out of reach. He leaned in, brushed his lips across mine, then pulled away, and I fell into his eyes, disappearing into the whirlpool of emotion swirling there, sucking me down and down and down.

I never wanted to come back up.

This was pleasure like I’d never imagined, and deep within me, darkness coiled with my magic, twisting tighter and tighter, as if our coupling had another, deeper level, one that could not be seen, only felt.

Soul deep, if there was such a thing.

Zor kept his pace slow and leisurely, as if he was drawing this out as long as he could manage. His arms shook from the strain, his chest now slippery beneath my palm, my hips rising to meet every deep stroke, my legs wrapped around him, ankles crossed, trying to urge him deeper.

My pleasure deepened into a slow, heavy weight, vaster than the both of us, stretching out past us, out through the stars. I could almost feel their glittering coldness as pleasure built to a crescendo, my hips rolling beneath his, my core clenching around him as if I could hold us together forever.

Like this. *Just like this.*

I never wanted this to end. I wanted every memory, every thought, everything from him, and in return I would give him every last piece of me and not regret it.

“Come for me, Anaria. Let me watch you fall apart.”

Those words and that deep, commanding voice rumbled through me like thunder.

And with them, the universe shattered apart, stars exploding behind my closed eyes, my body trembling beneath the force of my release that didn't seem to have an end. Zor groaned out my name, pumping into me with one final, mighty push before he followed me over the edge, both of us tumbling down together.

I opened my eyes to find Zor staring down at me, his dark eyes revealing everything he couldn't say. *I love you. I need you. Not even death can take me away.*

"I know," I told him, stroking his cheek. "I know."

I loved him. I loved them all. And I didn't know what to do with that. Love like this seemed too big a responsibility, juggling all these males, and yet, I wouldn't have it any other way.

There was a sweep of freezing air, the whisper of wolf-quiet paws heading for the door, then a thump and a low curse that could have only come from Raziel.

"Did you miss me, princess?" Raz crooned, ruining everything by pressing his freezing body the full length of mine. When I tried to wiggle away, he just chuckled and trapped me with his cold, powerful legs that had to be made of solid ice.

Then he was nibbling along my shoulder, and my protests faded away. "Relax, Anaria. Relax for me."

"Kind of hard to do when you're freezing arse cold, Raz." He just chuckled and sank his teeth into my shoulder with a needy groan.

I shouldn't want this again so soon.

I really, really shouldn't. But gods, I did.

Zorander's nostrils flared as he watched us, scooting back to give us room, his eyes glowing.

"I want..." I bit my lip, suddenly unsure. But Raziel just paused mid nibble and waited. "I want to get on top. I want to have you, Raziel." I felt bold saying that, and a little courageous, too.

“That sounds like a splendid idea, princess.” Raz’s voice had gone deeper, rougher, and when I looked over my shoulder and met his eyes, there was a raw, hungry fire in them.

“You can take me any way you want me, Anaria,” he murmured, not a trace of humor, just raw need, like he needed this connection between us every bit as much as I did.

I pushed Raziel onto his back. He was already hard, groaning as I stood his cock up and my fingers traced every glorious inch, marveling at how velvety smooth the skin was, the soft tip, tracing the veins that ran the length of him.

A drop of liquid welled at the end, and I dipped my head and licked it off. Gods, I loved how Raz tasted. Dark and dangerous and salty.

“Fuck, princess. You’re going to destroy me before I ever get inside you.”

“No,” I told him, then I narrowed my eyes. “You’re going to wait until I say you can come.” His low, needy whine was all I needed to take him into my mouth and swirl my tongue around the head, tasting him all over again.

Zor went so still I wondered if he was breathing, fingers digging into his knees, his cock rock hard, a savage, hungry look on his face. I never thought I’d want anyone to watch, but I loved his eyes on me.

Loved knowing that needy hunger was all mine.

“*Anaria*,” Raz groaned, and I smiled, standing his cock up as I straddled him then sank down and down and down, impaling myself on his thick, delicious length until I couldn’t take another inch.

I braced my hands on his chest and slowly rode him, our eyes locked together, his mouth falling open, fingers gripping my hips.

Then I leaned forward and did what I’d been dreaming of for months.

I trailed soft, gentle kisses over the white line around Raziel’s throat, across the tender skin, untouched by anything

but cold iron for so long. Every press of my lips teased a low moan out of Raz, every brush of my tongue telling him the same thing. The words I would say to him until the day I died.

I love you. I love you. I love you.

Zorander pushed up to his knees beside me, his eyes glued to where the root of Raziel's cock slammed over and over into my pussy. I straightened, bracing my hands on Raz's chest, my thumb brushing the mark on his chest, and set a slow, deliberate pace, intent on dragging every last moan out of Raziel's mouth.

I wanted him undone, boneless and wrecked, gasping and completely mine.

Gods, this was sublime. Power and pleasure all mixed together into a heady euphoria that sent me flying.

Zor leaned in and kissed me, all his previous restraint gone, his tongue tangling with mine, demanding an answer, and I met him stroke for stroke. Raz's hips pumped up into me, somehow matching the delirious rhythm of Zor's probing tongue.

Gods, this was too much. Too fucking much, and I loved every second of it.

Zor broke our kiss, yet his grip on my hair was demanding, possessive, pulling me forward until the head of his cock rested on my bottom lip. I flicked my tongue out, tasting salt and thunderclouds.

That was him. Then I tasted me as he pushed in slowly, a shallow stroke that had me opening wider to accept his girth.

"Take my cock," he ordered hoarsely. "Take it all, Anaria."

I obeyed. I let him push through my mouth and down my throat, the ridge of his cock rubbing on the back before he withdrew, then pushed in again.

Raziel slammed up into me, then his thumb brushed over my clit which had me moaning around Zor's cock. He pushed in deeper, holding my head still.

My orgasm tackled me out of nowhere.

I was too tangled up—between the taste of Zor, the feel of Raziel—too many sensations coming all at once, colliding inside me in the most glorious way.

But I was on fire when Zor spilled down my throat, thick and salty, my body spasming from the force of my orgasm, only the steady grip of my two males holding me upright.

I shattered to pieces in their arms, and when I collapsed, it was right onto Raz, who caught me and folded me in his arms. My face was wet with tears, and it was Zor who gently brushed them away.

“I know exactly how you feel, princess. I know.”



BY THE TIME my legs would hold me up, Zor had dressed and gone to check on Tristan’s progress. I didn’t know where Tavion disappeared to, but Raz promised me as soon as he found a shirt, he’d find the wolf.

After that last bout of lovemaking, I was still boneless and a bit shell-shocked. Not that I regretted a second of what we’d done. But we had to get moving.

My stomach growled and Raziel winced, rustling around on the other side of the room, then coming back with a sad little apple and a small hunk of cheese. “We saved these for you. There’s no food here; we’ve looked. Once we get up into the mountains, we’ll hunt something down and then you can eat, but until then...I’m sorry, this is all there is.”

Gods, none of us had eaten? For how long?

“The good news is, Tristan heated the bath while you were asleep; the water should still be hot.” Raz dragged his gaze down my body, his eyes darkening.

“You’ll have to make it fast. We leave as soon as Tristan finishes saddling up the horses. I expect he’ll be a cranky bastard since he didn’t get to sleep in like the rest of us.” A wink and he was gone, shutting the door behind him.

I limped to the bathing room, stiff from...everything, I supposed.

I sank into the steaming tub, savoring the heat.

I replayed everything while I scrubbed off days' worth of grime, picking apart each and every debacle, looking for all the things I'd done wrong. Like losing the keystone, for starters.

I had to be the world's worst guardian of important relics. Obviously, I couldn't be trusted with anything powerful, and yet I'd ended up with this magic that everyone seemed to want, except for me.

Maybe I could lose this, too, like the stone, and go live happily on a farm where no one could ever find me and wars and magic would be a thing of the past.

I was getting out of the tub when I froze at my reflection in the mirror, realizing why my arm felt strange. I got a good look at the raised tree that had somehow appeared on my arm overnight, enough to make out branches, a trunk, and the fact that the marking was white.

What in the name of all that was holy?

Even worse, the tree appeared to be glowing. No, more like glittering, as if every branch held the light of a million tiny stars.

And why did I have two marks when everyone else only had one?

I toweled myself off.

Maybe I was just lucky. I snorted. "*Right*. Because luck has definitely been something I've had in abundance my entire life."

Water was still dripping down my back when I stepped into an empty bedroom, which was too bad because I was freaking out over this glowing tree etched into my arm.

I wished Raz or Zor were here.

Even Tavion's wolf would have been preferable to suffering through this meltdown alone. But Tristan was yelling the horses were ready, and I didn't have time for my freakout, not when I needed clothes.

Something told me the mark had something to do with Adele's *intense secret*, just like something told me I wouldn't like the explanation of why I had this godsdamned thing on my arm. I picked through the pile of dresses, obviously laid out with care, obviously by Adele, rejecting every single one.

I missed my leathers.

A foolish thing to worry about, but I did.

Most of these would fit me well enough, and warmth filled my chest as I pictured Adele picking them out one by one, bringing them in here, setting them out for me. Having a mother wasn't something I'd ever allowed myself to wish for, but now that she was part of my life...

I blew out a long, shaky breath.

Now I had one more thing to lose. Because this cruel world gave with one hand and took with the other and I couldn't allow myself to hope for better.

Not when this wicked realm was a heartless bitch.

I pressed my hand to my aching belly. Everyone else had to be in worse shape. We had a two-hour ride to the tunnels, then two days after that before we reached Nightcairn Castle. I prayed somewhere along that route Dane had left supplies.

I sighed. None of these dresses would work.

I couldn't move in them, I couldn't fight. Would hardly be able to ride. I reached up and rubbed the mark on my arm. I shouldn't have been a complete coward. I should have let Zor and Raz tell me everything when they'd offered.

But I'd been distracted by hard, muscled bodies, and...I shivered. Well, I couldn't exactly regret how my choice had turned out.

Even if I did have to wait to find out what this mark was from.

Before I even made a conscious choice, I was standing in the drafty hallway beneath the dust-covered chandelier, peering at the doors lining the corridor.

Maybe, somewhere in this grand palace, there was something other than a silk ballgown or a dress slit up to my thigh. I clutched the towel tighter around me, dripping water all over the floor.

The Wynters' room was right across the hall.

Lord Wynter, surely, had left something behind. Breeches, a shirt, perhaps a jacket. Boots would be nice, though I doubted our feet were anywhere close to the same size.

I ducked into the dark room, getting my bearings as shadows became shapes. The enormous dragon bed was to my right—ruby eyes glinting—and straight in front of me was a hulking wardrobe, big enough to contain five men. From the clothing strewn all over, everyone had already raided Lord Wynter's wardrobe, but if there were breeches to be had, they'd be in there.

I made it all of two steps when something enormous rose from the darkness behind the bed.

The floor rocked beneath me. *No, that was me, swaying violently.* Just that quickly, fear turned me into prey, eyes fixed on the beast shedding those shadows like the water streaming from my hair.

I had to run.

But every muscle was locked up.

If I wanted to live, I had to force my leaden feet to *move*, but they wouldn't, the creature and I staring at each other. I was completely exposed, the stupid towel clutched to my heaving chest, my feet bare, and I'd left my knife in the bedroom.

Foolish, foolish girl, and now you're going to die.

How did this thing get past Zor and the others? Were we under attack?

"You need to leave, Anaria. *Now.*"

At first, I thought I heard Tavion's urgent warning in my head, before I realized the voice came from the monster before me.

"Please. I don't want you seeing me like this." *Broken.* That's how Tavion sounded. Broken and small and humiliated. How many times had I wanted to hear him like this? *Too many.* But now, now all that voice did was tug at my heartstrings in ways it shouldn't have.

He sank back to the floor, the darkness swallowing him up. "Please leave. And don't come back." Anguish thrummed beneath every word, while I eyed the door behind me. I hoped this wasn't what I thought it was, but one quick inhale told me otherwise.

Panic soured the air, panic and fear and desperation.

The rug on the floor was shredded, and so was the floor beneath it, splinters everywhere.

Had he been in here for hours? Trying to shift?

Fuck it. I tightened my grip on the towel and rounded the bed, letting my eyes adjust. *Oh gods...Oh gods, I should go*

find someone. I should...

He was down on all fours, his head hung so low I couldn't see his face, only hear his raspy, anguished voice. "Please. Please just leave. I'll be all right in a minute. I just need more time."

Tavion was caught mid shift, but unlike Lucius, his magic had done something hideous to him. He was twice his usual size, even bigger than his wolf form, pale skin and fur and something that looked like gray, scaly skin covering his body.

I didn't know what to do.

But I couldn't leave him like this.

I knelt down on the hard floor, trying to avoid the splinters. Once, Tavion had given me hope when I'd thought there was none. The least I could do was offer him the same. And if this was the mutation his father had talked about, then we needed to get him home, as quickly as possible.

"Tavion, listen to me." I reached out and ran my hand down his arm, marveling at how soft the silver fur was that sprang from pale, perfect skin. Even the scales were fascinating, cold and silvery and iridescent. "You can do this. I don't know how your magic works, but it's still there. If you were able to partially shift, you can do it again."

"Only one way," he panted, his powerful, muscled back flexing with every breath. "But I can't. I've been trying."

I remembered what Lucius said, about going from one form to the other, about how the wolf was easier, while the Fae form took more finesse and control. I scooted closer, and after a short debate with myself, I pulled his head into my arms and stroked his hair.

His chest rumbled, but I couldn't tell if he was in pain or was warning me off. I ran my fingers over his head, rubbing his soft ear between my fingers.

"Your wolf will be easier right now. But there will be limitations. When we get back to Nightcairn, we need you in your Fae form, Tavion. We need your input on what to do next, where to go. You can't do that as the wolf."

“No.” He shook his head but didn’t pull away. “But this... this is all I can manage.”

“What if you had help?” Gods, was this the stupidest thing I’d ever considered? Maybe, but I’d healed Raziel, and this might work the same way. “What if I fed a little power into you, like a boost to your own magic?”

I swore he shuddered against me. Tavion Montgomery, the most arrogant bastard I’d ever known, burrowed deeper into my arms. “Remember when I healed Raz? I could do the same for you, maybe enough to push you through the shift.”

I ran my fingers through his silky white hair again, and in that moment, I did not want to let him go. I wanted to hold onto him like this forever.

Something about having this powerful beast wrapped in my arms...I couldn’t understand how his vulnerability could make me feel so protective.

“You can try, but it won’t matter.” I felt like there were a hundred unspoken sentiments hidden in that sentence, but then Tavion pulled back, enough for me to see his face. I couldn’t stop my shock quickly enough, earning me a rueful smile.

“I was afraid of that. It’s never *felt* quite this bad, I can only imagine how I look. Sorry to disappoint, wife.” I couldn’t stop my jolt of surprise at the endearment, either, but he just shook his head. “I wish...you never saw this, Anaria.”

“We try my magic, just a little. Worst case scenario, you can change back into the wolf.”

“Yes,” he agreed softly, but then he looked away. “Except, I’ve missed talking to you these past days.”

He had been trying to shift back for days? Was that why he’d remained the wolf for so long?

“Even more reason for you to try, then. I’ve *almost* missed you being a huge pain in my arse.” I tousled his hair, like I used to do to Ember when we were little. “I have to admit, there were times I preferred the wolf.”

“There are times *I* prefer the wolf.”

“I know.” I dipped my head to hide the sudden burning in my eyes. “I think I would, too. Now tell me when you’re ready.” I slid the bands down until they hung loose around my wrists like ridiculously enormous bracelets. “I’ll just let my power trickle in slow. Where should I send it?”

Tavion gently grasped my wrist, guiding my hand to his chest, flattening my palm over his thundering heart. “Here. Send your magic here.” I refused to acknowledge how warm his skin was, the emotion swelling in his gaze, how every heartbeat seemed to echo within my own.

Absolutely *refused*.

Nerves, this was just nerves, and when Tavion was himself again, me and the arrogant bastard could go right back to our old ways. Enemies, forever.

This...this was too hard, feeling so much, so fast.

“Ready?” I was surprised at how steady my voice was, and at his nod, I let my magic off its leash. A drop. Just the barest drop, and yet, Tavion jerked as though he’d been struck, his body going rigid against mine, though he only clamped my hand against his chest tighter.

“You can do this,” I murmured, because I didn’t know what else to say while he trembled uncontrollably against me. If I could have wrapped my arms all the way around him, I would have, but he was too godsdamned big.

“You can do this, Tavion. We need you to do this.” I swallowed. “I need you to do this. *I need you.*” There it was, and the words weren’t even a lie. “I need you, *husband.*” The word slipped out of me before I could stop myself, but then I couldn’t take it back.

He whimpered, the small, desperate sound sending a burst of paralyzing fear through me. I didn’t *want* him to hurt. I wanted to protect him.

I stroked my fingers through his fur, over his ears, touching him everywhere I never would have if he’d been in his other form.

“You are always there for me; you always figure out what to do next. Now concentrate and shift. *Now.*” I put a little more force behind that last word than I intended, but ever so slowly, Tavion changed.

Silver fur melted away, replaced by pale, smooth skin. His size shrank down and down, until my arms did fit all the way around him. The scales were the last to go, disappearing slowly, his soft groan making me wonder if that part hurt. And when Tavion raised his green eyes to mine, they were fully, completely Fae.

Only a hint of the ravaging wolf was left behind, something I found I liked, just a little.

I brushed my finger down his too handsome face. “There you are. You did it. I knew you could.”

Then I realized I was sitting on a dusty floor in nothing but a damp towel, holding onto a very naked Tavion Montgomery like I couldn’t fucking let him go. I released him immediately and edged away, fast enough I got a splinter in my arse.

Tavion shot to his feet, and I tried to look away quickly enough—gods, did I try—but not before I got a godsdamned good look at my husband. Every fucking glorious inch of him.

Including the black mark that ran along his spine between his shoulder blades. A sword outlined by a diamond, the design slightly raised on his pale skin.

Before I could ask, Tavion bent down, sliding his fingers beneath my chin and forcing my eyes up to his laughing ones. “It’s only fair, you know, after teasing me with that strip show in your bedchamber at the Keep.”

Gods, I’d forgotten about that shameful little episode that seemed like eons ago. Tavion’s voice dropped low, a touch of a wolf’s hungry intention beneath every word. “Not that I haven’t thought about how delicious you looked, every fucking night since.”

His smile was nothing but pure predator, and I knew everything had changed between us, even before he said,

“Now you’ll be thinking about me too, princess, every time you’re in your bed, all alone.”

His eyes glittered. “Until I manage to find my way in.”

I didn't know where Tristan found six horses, but there they were, stamping their hooves on the overgrown drive. Easy enough to tell their opulent saddles and tack came from the Wynter stables, each decorated with enough silver and jewels to buy a small village.

"At least we won't be walking to Nightcairn Castle." Raz pressed a kiss to my shoulder as he passed, his eyes twinkling. "Nice saddles, by the way."

"I tried to find plain ones," Tristan grumbled, throwing his leg over. "But things were ridiculous in there." He jerked his head to the stable, a smaller version of the castle, right down to the arched windows.

I hadn't noticed it before, but new growth covered every stone surface with roses and honeysuckle and night flowers, their blooms fading in the first rays of dawn. Some part of me was sad, as if I was leaving my home behind, and then I shook my head.

I didn't have a home.

My eyes drifted back over the lush, rampant growth, the plunging waterfalls.

But if I did...this would be exactly what I'd choose.

"I'll lead the way. Remember the path is treacherous. We move slow, so we don't catch the attention of those things." Zor jerked his head to the Citadelle, the black cloud of Reapers circling the city.

We were all some version of ridiculous, dressed in Lord and Lady Wynters' clothes. Zorander looked especially uncomfortable in an embroidered black silk jacket over his old, leather breeches, tucked into high black boots. Raziel was in similar garb, while Tristan was the only one who'd retained his old clothes, dirt stained but intact.

The only thing he'd added was a beautifully carved bow and a quiver of arrows, fletched with dark blue feathers, tipped with razor sharp iron points.

Adele looked lovely in a pale-blue dress that hung on her thin frame, her wispy hair hidden beneath a scarf, a little color in her cheeks, her eyes blazing with excitement.

Tavion...I couldn't even look at him. He'd raided Lord Wynter's closet with little shame and no restraint. His embroidered, pale-blue jacket shone with silver threads, and his thick thighs strained at the seams of the dark gray breeches, which gods help me, made his arse look incredible.

Not looking. I was so not looking at him.

Then Raz was there, holding my horse still as I mounted while looking more ridiculous than anyone. I had a pair of breeches tightly belted around my waist, bare feet swimming in too big boots, and a short jacket over a billowy white shirt, pinned closed because otherwise I would be flashing everyone. But there were two leather hilts on the belt, both of them filled with sharp, deadly knives, so at least I could stab someone, if needed.

Most likely my husband, from that smirk on his face.

We were halfway down the mountain when Zor reined his horse to a stop, the rest of us following suit. Tempeste lay directly across the deep crevasse, flags waving merrily among the cloud of circling Soul Reapers.

But Zor wasn't looking at them, his eyes were on the long line of refugees that stretched from Tempeste's main gates to the edge of the forest. A mile, at least, they had to cover, with no shelter, not until they reached the trees. While we watched,

a pair of Reapers swooped lower, sending the people scattering, some of them carrying children.

Zor looked to Raz and I, then Tavion and Tristan, his question clear.

Do we head to the safety of the tunnels and leave these people to fend for themselves, or do we help them? I already knew my answer, but...this was a group decision.

“So much for our leisurely morning ride to the tunnels of doom. Looks like we have another busy morning ahead of us.” Tavion pulled an enormous sword out of the scabbard on his back. The blade looked suspiciously like it was made from pure silver and had to weigh a ton.

“Do you always pick the biggest fucking sword you can find?” Raziel rolled his eyes, and I couldn’t stop my mad grin.

“You’re just jealous. I have to slice through Reapers with something, since I lack your fancy magic.” Tavion winked.

“I swear to the gods, I’m going to kill you both by the time we get back to Solarys,” Tristan growled.

“Stop fucking around.” Zor hadn’t moved a muscle, his gaze still on the Reapers, the line of stragglers now racing for the cover of the forest. “Anaria. Come here.”

He jerked his head toward the city. “How far can you cast your magic?”

I measured the distance across the gaping cavern and my mouth went dry. “Not that far. I don’t think, at least.”

“Then we go down there and we give those people enough time to reach the forest. A mile, from what I can see.” He squinted. “The lowest level of the city is filled with people waiting to make a run for it. Let’s give them a chance.”

Zorander turned to Adele and Tristan. “You can wait for us at the bottom of the trail. The Reapers will focus on the citizens; they won’t even look in this direction. Anything happens...” He jerked his head. “The tunnels are that way.”

Tristan, to his credit, waited for Adele to answer first. If my mother wanted to stay, he would, too, even though his

hands were clenching the reins as if he was holding himself back from charging down that hill. Adele's eyes burned, and her smile...I didn't think I'd ever seen anything so ferocious. It was my stark reminder that there were things about my mother I had yet to learn about.

“No, I'm not hiding, not anymore. We all go together. We give these people a fighting chance.”

“Then everyone needs to keep up,” was all Zor said before he spurred his horse down the steep incline.

I barely kept up—none of us could—since Zorander had obviously been possessed by some wild recklessness that had nothing to do with safety and everything to do with getting down to that field as quickly as possible.

We thundered across the wide, open plain before the walls of Tempeste which was covered with waving grass that whipped my legs raw, even with the breeches. We'd almost reached the refugees when they spotted us and began running.

Not surprising, given everything they'd seen these past days. What was surprising was how many had survived. More than I'd thought, and warmth blossomed in my chest.

“We're friends,” I yelled, waving my arms, gripping tight with my thighs as we bore down on them. “*Friends. We're here to help.*”

Zor was already there, heading off a few of the men, staying out of range of their swords while he spoke fast, pointing to the city. No, above the city, where...

My eyes flicked upwards and I swallowed down my fear.

Where the Reapers had taken notice of our frantic race across the plain and were drifting lower. And lower.

I reined my horse to a stop. He immediately began munching on grass as I stripped off the jacket, then the iron bands, discovering I had exactly zero pockets.

Then Adele was there, her hand outstretched. “Give them to me. I'll keep them for you.” I hesitated for a moment before

dropping them into her waiting palms, the iron clanking dully. “Now go save the world.”

“Anaria,” Raziel shouted, and I looked over in time to see him furiously jabbing his finger toward the sky above me. Gods, somehow, in two seconds, the Reapers were almost on me. *And Adele*. This close, the dark shadows became gaping mouths and grasping hands, and I had no desire to be slashed apart by those sharp claws again.

“Duck,” I told my mother.

I flung out my hand, scattering a constellation of starry magic through the air, Tempeste citizens scrambling to get out of the way of the cloud of death descending upon us. A horde big enough to inhabit every man, woman, and child here.

They hit my magic like a thunderclap, while I fed more and more power into the dome forming above our heads. Above the citizens of Tempeste, who were smart enough to know an opportunity when they saw it. They ran for the forest, Tristan clearing the way, burning a wide path for them through the sharp grass, while Tavion and Zorander guarded their flanks.

Raziel, though, didn't use his magic.

Just shouted instructions, pointing to where I needed to shore up my shield, sticking close to Adele, his razor-sharp gaze everywhere, watching for any weaknesses.

Above us, Soul Reapers died by the hundreds.

Dying the second they touched my magic, and yet, were too mindless to stop themselves. Maybe, with the Fae King gone, there was no one to do their thinking for them, or maybe they just couldn't see past their hunger. But all I had to do was keep up the shield and let my magic erase them from this world.

One more blighted, corrupted creature gone.

I didn't know how long I stayed on that horse, hands raised above my head. Zor's shouting faded to a dull roar, a steady, desperate line of Fae racing from the city, their faces blurring together.

Eventually the sky grew brighter, the panicked screaming finally stopped, and the stream of people stretching between Tempeste and the forest began to thin. I tried to swallow, but my throat was too dry, the faint taste of copper coating my mouth.

“Anaria.” Raz caught me before I slid off my horse. “They’re gone. You can stop.” His dark eyes were worried. “Here.” He handed me a canteen, the warm, metallic water tasting like the finest wine I’d ever had.

“Three hours,” he said with no other explanation.

I just stared.

“Three hours, you held that shield steady. The Caladrians are all out of the city. Once they’re in the forest, we’ll ride east, try to reach the tunnels before dark.” Even in my state, I caught the flash of worry in Raz’s dark eyes.

You don’t want to know what kind of monsters lurk in this realm, princess. Tavion’s words from so long ago.

Raziel sidled up beside me, cupping my chin, his frown deepening. “You need more than just water.”

“So do you,” I husked, rubbing my sore throat. “None of us have eaten,” I reminded him. The distance to the mountains seemed like an eternity.

“I didn’t just expend magic for three hours straight.” He whistled and Tavion charged over, not a fucking hair out of place, the bastard. “Can she ride with you?” Raz asked. “She’s dizzy. If she falls...” Gods, I must look like death if he was willing to hand me over to Tavion.

“I’m not going to fall,” I snapped. “I’m fine.”

“Anaria.” Tavion’s eyes turned hard, as if he was putting the force of his will into his gaze. I remembered that look, and something hardened in me, as well.

“I. Am. Fine,” I repeated, every muscle in my body clenched. In anger, in fear, I didn’t fucking know. All I knew was...I couldn’t get on a horse with Tavion. I couldn’t feel his

broad chest against my back, his thighs against my...*No, I could not.*

“I ate this morning.” I straightened my spine, Tavion’s smirk saying quite clearly, he knew exactly why I was fighting this so hard. “I’ll make it to those tunnels without your help.”

Tavion just winked. “If you fall off, princess, you have no one to blame but yourself.”



I MADE it to those fucking tunnels through sheer stubbornness alone.

At least, really, really close to them. We’d finally stopped beside a stream running out of the mountains, cold enough from the snowmelt to freeze your blood, and I’d never tasted anything as delicious.

The enormous trio of arches was right behind us, but after a short debate about food, we decided hunting out here was more productive than whatever we might find inside. “Dane leaves most of the supplies on the other side of the portal,” Tavion explained. “And most smugglers bring their own, so chances are, there’s nothing for the first day.” He kept his tone light, but every time his eyes landed on me, they darkened.

Tristan was already gone, taking his pilfered bow and arrows into the foothills to hunt after starting a small fire. He really was handy, despite his bad attitude.

“Not so much,” Zor cautioned, squatting beside me. “You’re starving, and the water will make your stomach cramp. Not something you want to experience firsthand, trust me.”

“Thanks.” I wiped my mouth, though I could have plunged my face into that freezing cold water and drank until I burst. I was bone-dead tired, everything hurt, and my stomach ached. I used to know what starvation was, but this went deeper.

I was drained, down to the very last drop.

“You did well, Anaria. Those people have a chance now, because of you.”

“Because of *us*,” I reminded him softly, letting the water flow through my fingers.

“Because of us, princess,” Zor agreed, the corners of his eyes crinkling. “We never would have made it this far without you.” His soft, serious voice had me looking away. “None of this...none of it would be possible without you.”

“I don’t want to do this anymore, Zor. I’m tired of killing, tired of running. Tired of everything,” I finally said, watching Tavion lift Adele off her horse, catching her when her legs buckled. *I should get over there. I should be helping her.* But I was too tired to move.

“I know.” Zor ran his hand down my back, letting it rest there, warm and steady. “Once we get back to Nightcain, we’ll figure out what comes next. We could go north.” He kept his voice casual, but his eyes burned. “To the High Barrens. We’d be safe enough there, and we could stay long enough to get our strength back. The Shadow King doesn’t venture that far north, and the terrain is easy enough to hide in.”

I didn’t look away from his face. “Adele is from the High Barrens.”

His gaze shifted away, the lines on either side of his mouth deepening. “She is. She...still has people there, as it turns out. We might find allies there. Raz and the others agree, the Barrens are a viable option, maybe our only option right now.”

People. Adele’s people. *My people.*

The ones I thought were dead.

“What about these secrets?” I asked instead. “This morning you said my mother has some...‘*intense secrets*’ were your exact words.” I glanced up at him, my stomach cramping slightly, just like he said it would, as the cold water hit. “At the time, I thought you were just being dramatic, but you’re not dramatic, are you?”

“No, I’m not.” His eyes landed on my arm, to the white marking. This mark meant something terrible.

I didn't know how, I just knew.

I took a minute to watch Tavion half carry Adele over to the fire. He was so gentle with her, and as if he heard my thoughts, his green eyes met mine over the flames. *See?* he seemed to say. *Not a complete bastard after all, am I?* I snorted and looked away.

When I looked back, he was gone.

Out of habit, I scanned the edge of our camp, the line of hobbled horses, but there was no sign of him. He probably went to take a piss.

“All right, fine. What did my mother say to you last night?” I didn't want to know. I couldn't carry any more secrets or weighty surprises on my shoulders right now. It took everything just to put one foot in front of the other, but I couldn't just ignore this, either.

“Too much,” he muttered. “But it's time you knew everything, even if you aren't ready.” He brushed his hand down my cheek, sorrow written in his eyes and on his battle-hardened face. “Know this, Anaria—I love you, and I always will. Nothing will ever change that.” The sorrow changed to something fierce and harsh. “Nothing, do you understand?”

Gods, what horrible thing was he about to tell me?

“You've been given a gift, Anaria. Imagine everything you could do with such power. You could remake the entire world.” He turned my hand over, pressing a kiss to my palm, my eyes drifting closed as his warm lips pressed into my skin. “All I ask is you let me be a part of it, because I couldn't bear to be separated from you.”

I tried to nod but failed as Zor motioned Raz closer.
Backup.

Zor needed backup for this conversation.

Raziel headed our way, his steps steady and even, such a look of pity on his face I wanted to vomit. He'd almost reached us, my heart hammering so hard I wondered if everyone in camp heard the slippery beats stumbling over each other and my panicked, raspy breaths.

Secrets, secrets, secrets.

Secrets that will tear you apart.

Secrets that will wreck your world, little thief.

I frowned. I didn't know where this voice was coming from, couldn't put my finger on where I'd heard the slithering, female hiss before, cruel and malevolent and utterly wicked.

No one else showed the slightest sign they'd heard anything, yet the voice was so clear.

And so close.

One second, I was crouched on the bank of the stream, my hand in Zor's. The next, I was yanked away from camp and dragged through some dark, cosmic corridor, lined with razors and broken glass, the shadows slicing into me with brutal precision.

I emerged somewhere else.

Just as dark and smothering, but somehow...worse.

I'd never been in this room before, but I knew where I was. A sumptuous, cavernous room with a soaring ceiling painted like a midnight sky, the floor covered in gritty, ashy dirt, the howling wind still smelling of smoke and the foul, putrid stench of rot.

We were on the top floor of the Citadelle.

When I swept my foot through the ash, pristine white marble emerged. Through the blown-out windows I glimpsed nothing but clouds, the tops of the lower spires, the tangled maze of streets in the city below.

The rotting smell...strong enough to choke, was the Oracle's.

On the far side of the room, too far away for me to reach, trapped behind a web of black, Tavion fought to get free, bound by ropes of twisted black magic. Everywhere they touched left red burns, his skin blistering.

I ran for him, my feet dragging. I was tired. So fucking tired.

But I had to free Tavion.

Then my path was blocked. I dragged my eyes to the female before me. Not the Oracle. Someone I didn't expect but should have.

“Surprise, Anaria.” The Mistress's mouth curled.

“I told you I'd see you again.”

Pain exploded when the Mistress plunged her knife into my side and dragged the blade down through my flesh, opening me up like a gutted pig.

I doubled over, blood soaking my side, burning numbness spreading through me, Tavion's roar ringing off the ceiling like a battle cry.

"You killed my brother." She pulled her arm back, and all I thought to do was put my hands up and twist away. Her next strike went right between my outstretched palms, the blade slicing a furrow down the length of my arm before she spun away.

"You killed my king."

"*Anaria. Use your fucking magic. Protect yourself.*"

"*I'm fucking trying.*" I retreated, blood pouring from my arm, blinking the pain away, trying to wrangle my power into something useful. But my weakened magic slipped through my fingers right when I needed it most.

"Delicious," the Mistress crooned, her tongue flicking out to lick my blood from the blade. "I'm going to fucking eat you, Anaria, just like I ate Julian. I'll make him watch."

Tavion's roar shook the entire palace, his face a contorted mask of rage.

The Mistress shivered in pleasure.

“Get out of here, Anaria,” Tavion screamed, fear breaking through his rage, the acrid stench of burning flesh filling the air as he fought to get free.

The Mistress just grinned and raised her knife, stained red with my blood.

“Enough.” The Oracle slithered from the shadows, beautiful and deadly, but rotting beneath all that, nonetheless. Her cold, amused smile told me neither Tavion nor I would be leaving here anytime soon. She turned to the Mistress. “You can play with the wolf later if this goes to plan.”

“If you touch him, I will kill you.” The words slipped out like water, smooth and cold and fast. That protective fury came over me again. I would have called it jealousy, but this was too tame for jealousy. This was something that had only needed a spark to ignite.

And now that it had, nothing would put out this fire.

“I will make your death hurt, and I will make it last.” I grinned at the Mistress through the blood bubbling on my lips, and for one second, doubt shone in the Mistress’s eyes.

“Search her,” the Oracle snapped. “We have to find that keystone before my brother does.”

I laughed wetly, spraying blood all over the Mistress’s pristine dress like drops of rubies, which served the bitch right. “I lost it.”

Now that I’d started, I couldn’t stop, even if I’d wanted to. “It’s somewhere out there in those trees. Good luck. If you start digging now, maybe you’ll find it in a thousand years.”

“You lie.”

“I wish I did. The last time I saw the stone was in the forest. Now it’s buried in the river or deep underground.” A rush of dizziness hit me as blood kept streaming from the gash on my side.

“You’re to blame, you know. If you hadn’t taken my friends, I’d still have it.” I spread my bloody palms before her.

“Now you’re shite out of luck.” The Mistress cuffed me on the back of the head, just like old times.

“Entertaining as usual, Anaria. But you’ve ruined my fun twice now and you will pay. Those miserable Caladrian Fae were mine, just as the Reapers were mine, to do with as I wished. But they’ve fled into the forest. And I’m in the mood for a hunt.” Her smile gleamed in the darkness.

“You may have rid the skies of Reapers, but there are bigger monsters out there.” Her grin widened. “They are hungry, and you sent the people of Tempeste straight into their jaws.”

Tavion was screaming something I couldn’t understand, but she’d gagged him with a band of black across his face, his skin burning and burning and burning. I dragged my eyes away, my heart filled with more hate than I’d ever felt before.

“What do you want?” My wounds were on fire, and I couldn’t even call up my magic. Maybe this place wouldn’t allow me to.

Maybe I didn’t have enough to wield.

Shadows writhed along every wall like a living cage of darkness, like the one that ensnared Tavion. I turned my heart to steel, bracing myself up with stubbornness and defiance. Whatever her game was, she’d force me to use whatever dredges of magic I had left.

But the magic wasn’t refilling, not like before.

Maybe my body was too exhausted.

Maybe wild magic was a finite resource and I’d burned through all of it in a day.

“Think of this as your next test. Saving the people of Tempeste.” Behind me, the Mistress chuckled.

“I decided to make this interesting and filled the woods with Howlers and Cave Weavers. Save as many as you can, little thief, and when you are finished, perhaps I will give you back the wolf.” She flicked her fingers and a gash opened up across Tavion’s abdomen, blood blooming on his linen shirt.

“Although he’s sick, and he should really die.”

My lungs emptied out. No, I would *not* allow her to take him from me. I had to at least get him back to his father. I had to...

I couldn’t lose him. The words echoed through me like I was an empty temple and they were a bell tolling out the hours. *The truth, finally.*

The truth I’d fought to evade and deny and pretend didn’t exist was right there in front of me.

Tavion was right in front of me, just like he had been from the beginning. I cared about him. More than I could admit. So much it scared me.

“Hang on.” My voice came out strangled when my eyes met his, fear and pain and something even deeper shining in them. “I will come back for you.”

I turned to the Mistress, my hands curled into fists I wished I could use to pummel her bloody. “I assume you’re taking me to the forest?” I jerked my head in that general direction.

“Let’s get to it, then.”



I DIDN’T KNOW what a Cave Weaver was and I’d never seen a Howler—only pictures—but my insides turned to mush when the Mistress dropped me into the middle of the darkened forest, nails raking grooves in my arm.

The other one was banded across the still-bleeding gash on my side.

“I’ll have fun with the wolf while you’re away, little thief. I cannot wait to taste him.”

“I’m going to kill you the next time I see you,” I said, my heart stuttering from the force of my hatred. “Put one mark on him and my blade will be in your gut.”

I slipped off the too big boots. I wanted to say more. Wanted to taunt and goad her into doing something stupid, but...the Oracle would retaliate, and I refused to put Tavion in any more danger.

She sniffed. "You smell like prey. I hope this place shreds you apart and eats you alive." Then she was gone, the dark forest humming with night sounds.

I wondered how far away I was from Raz and Tristan and my mother. Were they searching for us? Did they even know Tavion was gone?

Or had the Oracle taken them somewhere, too?

I didn't have time to waste worrying about things I couldn't control.

I had people to save.

And monsters to kill, not all of them in this forest.

I worked my feet deep into the rich soil, magic seeping up into me, slowly refilling, though I didn't know how fast I'd recover given how badly I was cut up *and* starving. A branch dipped low, brushing my cheek, plump red berries hanging at eye level.

They smelled delicious, and I reached for one then stopped. "You wouldn't try to poison me, would you?" I asked softly, the leaves above me shivering like the entire forest was laughing. "Because I'm only here because the Oracle sent some fell beasts in here to hunt the survivors from the city."

Faster than was wise, hunger won out over common sense, and I popped a berry into my mouth. "Oh my gods," I moaned, the rich, sweet-sour flavor drenching my tongue. I popped them into my mouth by the handful until I heard Zor's stern voice in my head, telling me to *slow down, Anaria, before you make yourself sick*, and I filled my pockets for later.

I peeked at my side and saw the knife wound had closed enough it stopped bleeding. My arm...was scabbing over, too.

"Thank you." I wiped my face and cast my gaze around the dark, silent forest, wondering how I was supposed to find

the residents of Tempeste.

The Howlers and Cave Weavers, I suspected, would find me.

I was drenched in blood and the smell would carry.

But stars glowed at the ends of my fingers, just like the line of glow bugs leading deeper into the forest. “Okay, so I go this way?” I asked softly, wondering if I was going mad talking to the forest.

Then I was following those dancing lights, remembering a terror-filled night when Solok had come to Varitus and changed my life forever, until I ended up in an encampment. Makeshift tents, small, guttering fires, and exhausted Fae that eyed me warily as I approached, my palms held up before me in what I hoped was a universal sign of *please do not kill me*.

Several of the men moved shoulder to shoulder, scanning me for weapons. I kept my hands raised, tamping down my magic. Shopkeepers, most of them, from the lowest levels of the city. A handful of royals, dressed the part. One family in ruined, tattered finery, huddled off to the side. I recognized them as part of the Fae King’s court.

One woman finally approached, wearing her distrust like a shield, a line of jeweled earrings decorating her arched ears. Nothing but suspicion on her face. No wonder, since I was a blood-soaked mess dressed in male clothing.

“You and your companions held off the Reapers long enough for us to escape.” Her eyes narrowed to slits, as if she was trying to work out a puzzle. “Yet you are the Fae King’s daughter.”

“I am.” Her gaze hardened, violence flashing there. But there was no sense in lying. “He’s dead now, thank the gods. How many got out of the city alive?”

“This is all. Though if not for you, none of us would be here.” She swept her hand across the hastily erected tents and tiny, pitiful fires. “But we don’t know where to go next.”

I didn’t know what to say. Except for an ocean to the south, and the Cassiopian silver mines, I didn’t know of any

towns and villages.

But west took them into Descendant land, and east... straight to the Shadow King. Who, I had a feeling, wouldn't be a kind host to his brother's people. But I never got the chance to explain any of this.

A roar shook the woods, the trees, everything going silent in its wake, everyone crouching low as if that might save them. From the hunger in that wild, feral roar, I already knew hiding wouldn't do them any good.

"Howlers," she murmured, stark fear replaced by a spark of hope. "Is that why you've come?"

"It is." I scanned the trees, wishing I had Zorander's keen eyes beside me, or Raziel's magic, or Tavion's wolf. But I had none of them. Only me, against whatever was out there hunting these people.

Only me, and I would not let them down.

The guttural roar echoed again, along with a sharp, insectile clicking beneath the crashing of undergrowth as something enormous charged through the forest toward us.

"Stay here," I told her. "Stick together. Do you have any swords or knives?" I didn't know why I bothered. Knives would do nothing against what was coming, but sometimes courage was found in the smallest of things.

"A few." She bit her lip so hard she drew blood. "Almost none."

"Get your weapons together and place your strongest men along the edge, women and children in the center." I nodded to the encampment where people were milling around in a panic. "Put out those fires; no sense in giving these creatures any help in finding you."

Then I plunged into the forest toward the sound.

Glow bugs lit a path through the pitch darkness with dancing yellow-green light, far too merry for what lay ahead. I shook out my aching, clenched hands, stars spilling out, either from nervousness or desperation, I couldn't be sure.

The howling turned meaner, deeper, more desperate.

The glow bugs drifted to my left, guiding me through columns of trees and outcroppings of mossy rock. I pushed through deep undergrowth, shoving vines out of the way, dread tightening my muscles with every step. The forest dwarfed me, and I didn't expect to feel so lonely, or so incredibly small. But I did.

Just me. Against whatever was up ahead.

Lush ferns and bracken turned to mush, stomped down by enormous feet.

The air changed, from dense and green to rank and musty, as if something had crawled up out of a dank hole. The glow bugs swirled in front of me, a constellation of light blocking my way, as if to say, *stop, look, see*.

And when I did all those things, my mouth dropped open.

A perfect circle of trees trapped a writhing mass of creatures, the thick trunks forming an inescapable cage. Not that the beasts weren't trying. They raged against their imprisonment with a fury I'd never seen before, had never imagined. Claws as sharp as knives carved hunks from the trunks, spiked, hairy legs stabbing like daggers through every opening, searching for a way out.

And the sounds...clicking pincers, feral, raspy snarls, the thudding of big, heavy bodies throwing themselves against dense wood. Surely, they'd escape. Surely, all that pent-up strength and fury would tear through that living cage and then...then I would be all that stood between all of them and the worn-down Fae behind me.

I didn't bother trying to control my fear.

But I didn't give into terror, either. I might be shaking and lightheaded, but I was going to stand my ground. Whatever escaped that cage would not get past me.

I dragged my heel through the loamy ground in front of me. A line that I would hold, no matter what.

I let panic force magic through me in a torrent, down my arms, through my hands. Let adrenaline sharpen my vision and my senses.

Howlers...I never thought I'd see anything so awful, but the Cave Weavers were far worse. Spiders. Enormous spiders, their swollen abdomens dragging on the ground, pincers clicking as they worked their hairy legs between the trees, trying to pry open a wide enough hole to crawl through.

The forest gave them no quarter, the trees closing in ever so slowly, growing taller, thicker, branches intertwining overhead to form an impenetrable cage.

It was magnificent, and a little scary, all that power and might trapped within a sentient forest.

A forest that listened...to me.

But hope bloomed as the living prison closed in, packing the creatures tight until they were nothing but muscled, hairy bodies and soft, mottled ones fighting for space and air. It didn't take them long to turn on each other, tearing themselves apart.

The smell was...awful. Rotting.

Death and decay and foulness, all wrapped into one.

Then the ground beneath them opened up like a cavernous mouth and swallowed them whole. The trees stood back, a jagged line of earth at their roots, the screams of dying creatures and the roars of the ones still fighting, even as they fell to their deaths, rang up through that gaping hole, until the earth swept back into place.

In minutes, delicate ferns and flowers unfurled, moss coated the forest floor, and saplings sprang up with acid-green leaves.

If I hadn't seen it with my own eyes, I never would have believed it.

The silence was as deafening as their desperate roars had been, my ears echoing before the small, quiet sounds of the

forest rushed back in—the whispering trees, the hum of tree frogs, the gentle beating of a million tiny wings.

As if the forest, as much as I, never wanted to hear those beasts again.

“Thank you.” I blew out a breath and spooled my magic back into me, my fingers trembling. “If you could watch over these people long enough for them to get to where they are heading, I would owe you another favor.”

Moonbeams dappled the forest floor like quicksilver as I hiked back, my bare feet soundless on the spongy soil. It was like this forest had existed for ten thousand years, not a few days.

My wounds were almost healed, and I pulled a handful of berries out of my pocket, stuffing them into my mouth with a moan.

These things were seriously delicious. Sweet and sour at the same time. All in all, a good night, and a definite win. Now all I had to do was get back to Tavion and get his arse out of there. But first, I needed to tell the Caladrians to head south. I’d almost reached the encampment when the forest blurred into a rush of movement.

Humid, boggy air turned ice cold; darkness turned to the depths of the Great Beyond.

I thought the forest was moving, then realized...*I* was the one hurtling through space, wind tearing the scream from my lips, tears streaming from my burning eyes.

“Godsdamn it, not again.”

For a second, I thought I was back in that portal with infinity stretching out all around me, the silence so dense it swallowed up my startled curse. Then everything just... stopped.

Snowflakes danced in a brisk, merciless wind, like I’d landed in the dead of winter, but this place wasn’t the portal.

Not as vast, but more threatening somehow.

I wasn’t at the Citadelle, either.

And when I looked down, my dirty feet weren't on the forest floor. They were on cold, black rock, the cold biting into my bare soles like teeth.

W *here was I?*

The bitter cold air smelled like nothing.

Every breath turned to frost; the bottoms of my feet burned where they touched icy stone, even though I kept dancing back and forth. Starry power filled the frigid air with a pale glow, spiraling higher and higher as if this place had no limits.

But I was *somewhere*.

I sensed this place's boundaries with that strange, nameless instinct people have for knowing whether you are inside.

Or outside.

I took one step and tripped over a stone, rubbing my aching shin with a low curse. I was in some kind of cave, my starry magic expanding out far enough to illuminate a flat, even floor scattered with rough, tumbled rocks.

They'd fallen from somewhere, but when I peered up, the ceiling was so high I only saw shadows.

A closer look revealed something else. I'd seen this stone before. In the Shadow King's throne room, with its darker-than-night walls glittering with a million trapped stars.

For some reason, that revelation was more frightening than being here alone, or the empty vastness, or the fact I might freeze to death if I didn't get somewhere warmer and fast, because the howling wind cut through my thin shirt and jacket with razor sharp precision.

I spent too long deciding if I was safer in the center of this vast space, with nothing to hide behind, or over by the tumbled-down wall, where some hidden threat could jump out and eat me, then decided *fuck it*.

At least over there I'd be out of this godsdamned wind.

The pile of rocks had tumbled onto what had once been a polished floor, and as I got closer, I noticed something strange. Mixed among the rough, black rocks were shards of yellow bone. Enormous bones, the ends splintered like fingers jutting up out of the pile like sailors' desperate hands from a churning sea.

Those were...*Those were...*

My mind slowed to a crawl, grappling with what I was seeing, so eerily similar to what we'd discovered in those tunnels. But I wasn't in the tunnels. I was somewhere else.

Cold. High. *Mountains*.

These could be the Taranth Mountains, north of Tempeste. The only places further north were the Waste and the Gauntlet, and if I was there...I was as good as dead.

Oddly, the floor was polished to a jeweler's sheen, perfect, except for this odd pile of rock and bone, as if they'd been left here on purpose.

Like some kind of...ancient shrine.

My teeth chattered, my exposed flesh frostbitten from the cold. Who had brought me here? Was this punishment for killing the Oracle's beasts?

Or another one of her tests?

I ran my hand over the rough stone, stopping just short of the bones. I had no desire to touch them, no desire to get trapped in another vision while I unknowingly froze to death. A trap of the mind and the body, that's what this place was, if I allowed myself to be caught.

"A terrible death."

The male voice floated to me, raging and bitter and endless, like the howling wind.

“One that was not deserved, though none of us get what we deserve.”

“Who are you?” Magic poured out of me in a river of pure, undiluted light that spilled across the polished floor, devouring the shadows, revealing designs in the black stone. My magic left some of the designs faintly glowing, while others remained dark and inert.

Those were... Oh my gods, they were... My mind stopped processing what was etched into the floor as realization slammed into me.

“I decided we should meet, little thief. There is much to talk about. The future, for one thing. The cold will kill you in a matter of minutes, but my sister tells me you are quite resilient.”

I couldn't see who that voice belonged to, but I saw everything else with a clarity I wished I did not possess. Blindness would be better right now, because ignorance was a welcome shield between me and the truth that lay all around me.

And right now, I would give anything not to know what I did.

“Your sister?”

“My sister. You know her as *the Oracle*, as she calls herself these days. She thinks the name gives her a sense of legitimacy.”

Fuck. I stepped away from the crushed pile of bones so fast I scraped my bare foot over the closest emblem glowing in the sparkling black floor. Bands of gold, finer than any I'd ever seen, were inlaid by a stone mason who knew his craft.

A perfect golden circle, bisected by two lines.

A twin to the mark branded on Zorander's chest.

I swallowed down my fear. “War,” I said to myself, moving to the next, which was inert and unrecognizable. Then

I cut across the room to the glowing circle with the arrow, Raziel's mark. "Death."

Across the room another mark glowed, a sword and diamond. Tavion's mark.

My feet burned, I couldn't feel my hands, but I stumbled back to the center of the room, where a tree of pure Cassiopian silver glimmered with flecks of mica, like the stardust in my magic.

I touched my arm, the matching symbol etched into my flesh, and swallowed down my horror. The tree's branches pointed to the back of the cave, to the endless darkness lurking there, along with the owner of that dead, empty voice.

The Oracle's brother.

There were two of them. *Two Old Gods, not one.*

Killing the Oracle would have been a stretch, but now that there were two...I didn't allow myself to consider how bad our odds just became. If I survived this, then I'd worry about the fact there were *two of them*.

"In all my time, I have discovered one thing to be true. This world must be constantly fed in order for life to continue. My sister and I have been feeding that hunger for a long, long time."

Such lazy entitlement to those words. As if this world was at their mercy, not the other way around. "You are but the latest iteration of a cycle that has, and will, repeat itself over and over again."

I might never be as strong as these creatures, not when they'd existed...forever.

But I wouldn't underestimate them.

My best defense was using my own weakness against them. Make this creature see I was not a threat, and maybe he'd let me go. Or maybe he'd let his guard down, and I'd get a chance to kill him.

The thing about immortality...it made you over-confident.

And I'd been underestimated my whole life.

A meek little slave, ducking her head and scurrying through the halls. But always watching. Always aware. Always ready.

And now...I wasn't defenseless. I had power, I just had to figure out how and when to strike. To find a weakness wherever I could and exploit it.

"Since Carex killed his father?" I asked, because usually the best way to get the truth was to lead with a lie. The ruse worked remarkably well with humans and Fae, maybe it would work with a god.

"Since before his ancestor killed the rest of *us*." His answer thrummed with repressed rage, and followed by the sulking quiet, I imagined he regretted his show of temper.

This...might not be the trap he and his sister intended.

If he was as arrogant as his sister, perhaps I could get the information we needed to destroy them both. This god was alone. Maybe he'd been alone for a long time. Cut off and, from the sounds of it, *pissed off*.

"I am so tired of games," I said, wondering if I already had frostbite. I sent more magic spilling around my feet and, wonder of wonders, the stone warmed enough that maybe I wouldn't freeze to death right away.

"Your sister has us fighting your wars and killing Reapers just to prove ourselves worthy. It's becoming tiresome. Why don't we cut to the chase? What do you expect to get out of all of this?"

"A new world."

My snort turned into a puff of frozen steam. "I've already heard that song and dance. I mean...what do you truly want? Control of this world? Revenge on the Fae for killing *my ancestor*?" I took a halting step toward that awful darkness, my entire body fighting against the proximity.

"Because that's the truth. These are *our* ancestors who are dead. You and your sister survived. I would think you'd be

happy about that. More power for the two of you to share. Unless neither of you are good at sharing.”

“She said you were talkative.” I sketched a bow, scanning the dark edges of the cave, looking for an exit. “We will not be sharing power after all, it seems,” he said stiffly.

“Oh, why not? She seems like such the sharing type.”

“I saw what you did in the forest. Does my sister know the magic answers to you now instead of her?” I stopped breathing when his silky laugh rolled over me. “I see...She does not. That is good. Her ignorance will buy us more time to negotiate, little thief.”

“I’m not sure what you can offer me, since you’re stuck here all alone.”

Nothing but silence greeted that statement. Only cold shadows reaching out of the darkness, smelling faintly of rot.

“I never asked for the magic, so if the Oracle wants to be angry about her plan failing, she should be pissed at herself.” I eyed the floor, the inlaid emblems, the pile of crushed bones. We’d thought there were only seven Old Gods, but we’d been wrong. There were more. A lot more.

“What is this place?”

“The Hammer, your people call this, in the northernmost part of the Taranth Mountains. A place very few have ever seen, and none live to talk about.”

“That sounds ominous.”

“We were created here when this world was young and magic plentiful. We lived here for many years before we ventured out from the mountains to the lands you call Valarian. From the day of our birth, the world began dying. Every millennium, the magic grows weaker.”

“Do you know why?”

“Because magic feeds on death and blood. And this world will offer up only so much of those. For centuries, we fan the flames of war to keep the cycle going. When the magic has diminished to nothing, we make one final, mighty offering. A

sacrifice of blood and death to coax the magic to return. Every ten thousand years, these sigils reappear. All we needed to do was bring the right bloodlines together. Fate does the rest.”

I lifted my hand and stars fell between my fingers like sand. He was lying about the magic craving death and blood.

This power—this world—wanted none of those things.

As if in answer, the magic paused inside me, as if whispering, *look, watch, listen*.

“What do these symbols mean?” I asked instead, sweeping my foot across the floor. “What are they signs of?”

“Death and War, as you already know.” The two on my left glowed brightly for a moment—one of them Tavion’s dagger and diamond symbol—before they faded. “Conquest and wrath.”

Light rippled through the tree beneath my feet. “And then there’s you, Anaria. Life, in the truest sense of the word. The nucleus of everything.”

I refrained from touching my arm again, knowing somehow that would be showing my vulnerability to this monster. But I wondered about the lightning strike down my side. Why was I marked twice when none of the others were?

“Life?” I murmured, looking at my hands, the light glowing within. Terrible power, with terrible consequences, but maybe...Torin’s warning came back to me.

“Life is the only part of the magic that gives, not takes.”

What if it was how I *chose* to use the magic, not the power itself, that shaped everything? Intention, not chance, that determined the outcome?

There was something comforting in knowing I still had a choice in all of this, no matter how small.

“The magic is a double-edged sword. Everyone wants it, but few have the courage to claim it. Even fewer learn how to wield such power. And there are only a handful who did not allow it to consume them.”

My father wasn't one of the latter, and neither was the Oracle. I just prayed the five of us escaped that fate, because we all saw the results, and none of us wanted to end up like them.

"There are ten markings but only seven are glowing." I counted them again, trying to hold all the images in my head at once. "What do the others stand for?"

"Chaos and corruption." His dry laugh skated over me. "But you've already met my sister and myself. As for the other three, they no longer matter. Old gods for prayers that no longer exist."

"So when you were created, there were ten gods, but now there are only seven?"

"Interesting, isn't it, that the only two who survived the Fae purge were chaos and corruption?"

More interesting that the Fae managed to kill five immortal gods. Now that I was past my initial shock, my mind was starting to finally work. I replayed that awful vision again, trying to block out the flash of blinding pain when the rocks crushed me.

The panic—because the illusion felt so real.

There had been five gods in that vision, facing the Fae army.

And what a coincidence, none of them were the Oracle or her brother. I highly doubted the Fae had the capability to cleave the entire side off a mountain and crush a god, much less five of them.

I pursed my numb lips. "This is all very interesting, but why am I here? Why not Raziel or Zor?"

"You know why I brought you here, Anaria. Because you are the fulcrum upon which everything is balanced. Because you are a child of two worlds who controls the greatest power in our world." I didn't even try to puzzle out that last part, unless he was talking about the two kings.

"You know my name, but I don't know yours."

A sound that could mean a hundred different things issued from the darkness. “My name is too long for mortal tongues, but you may call me Corvus, if you wish.”

“And you haven’t answered my question. Why did you bring me here?”

“Because my sister is a thieving traitor, who trapped me, then took the three realms for herself.” The owner of the voice crept out of the darkness behind that slithering voice and I turned into an empty husk as breath left my lungs, thoughts vanishing from my head.

Fuck. The sight paralyzed me. Corvus was a mixture of the grotesque and the beautiful. Snarled, creeping vines that became writhing shadow, incorporeal yet there was recognizable form to him, a colossus of darkness charged with dark fire.

Ancient, dark, incomprehensible.

No mouth, no eyes...no face. Just a presence. And a mass that would dwarf either king’s throne room.

Those rotten smelling shadows crept toward me in fits and starts, as if they were afraid to come any closer. I let magic pour from my hands, starlight stolen from the heavens, and the darkness shrank back.

“What do you want?” Even after scraping together every scrap of courage, my voice came out high and thin, instantly carried off by the wind. *He was...He was...Oh gods, I had to get out of here.*

“Return the magic to me and I will give you everything you’ve ever desired.” That cajoling voice made promises that every part of me wanted to accept.

“And what do you think I desire?”

“A world free of chains and prisons and collars. Equality. Freedom.” Silken, tempting words, dripping with possibility, flowed from his mouth like wine.

He might as well have peered into my head and checked off my to-do list about changing the world. Everything I’d

ever dreamed of accomplishing was laid before me.

All I had to do was say yes.

“Why would you do anything for me? According to your sister, we’re just minions meant to do her bidding.”

“What do I care if the inhabitants of this world are miserable or happy?” Corvus’s enormous, vaporous form expanded like a spring storm cloud. “My sister seeks to control everything; I have no such ambitions. I want what you want, Anaria. Peace. Prosperity. Tell me your wish, and I shall grant it.”

Perhaps Corvus thought I would fall for his pretty words. That he could offer me everything I wanted, so easily, and I wouldn’t look deeper.

But I’d been promised many things before, and those promises were always a trap.

“Once she is gone, you will be free.” His crooning voice thrummed with power. “No more responsibilities, no more weight on your shoulders. No more wars. Your kind will be safe, going about their small, meaningless lives. Our paths will never cross again.”

“In return for peace, all I have to do is give you this?” I lifted my hands, dripping with stardust. “So you can kill the Oracle? A god, who’s existed since the beginning of time? *Your sister?*”

“Why should she be allowed to live?” Arms that weren’t really arms rose then dropped in a mockery of a human shrug. “She trapped me here for a thousand millennia. Ensured I could never leave. Capable of only small magicks, like bringing you here.” His admission only told me the Oracle was stronger than her brother, and probably smarter, too.

Only a fool would admit their vulnerabilities.

“Do you know *why* I have those dreams? Your sister made me a slave in a world where I had no value other than a commodity to be used up, or as prey for bigger predators.” I tipped my head back and stared up and up and up.

“Some things have not changed.”

Corvus would never understand this world had forged me differently than most.

The Oracle and the Mistress tried to break me, make me a malleable tool, but instead, they’d turned me into a warrior who would never stop fighting until I could fight no longer.

Who wouldn’t stop peeling back the lies until I reached the truth.

“What you offer is a dream,” I clarified, trying to make my thick, clumsy tongue work properly. “A dream I will build for myself. Not trade away my power for.”

“Why build it when it could be yours so easily?”

I looked down at my feet, the glowing symbol pulsing beneath, sending waves of light to the others. This place was a nexus. A place of beginnings...and endings. If the gods had been made here, they could be unmade.

What if *this* was the place I’d seen in the vision? Not some random mountaintop, *but here*?

My gaze drifted to the crushed bones sticking out of the rock.

The Oracle needed us because she derived her power—and now her youth—from the magic. She was chaos, and we were the key to both her survival and her resurrection.

But her brother was different.

Corvus did not thrive on peace. Because corruption... needed something pure to corrupt. Something like the magic. I could almost understand why she trapped him here. He would destroy the very thing that kept her alive.

Perhaps they really *were* at odds.

One thing was for certain. They were sides of the same coin.

The Oracle, with her greedy ruthlessness, and Corvus, with his wheedling manipulation, wanted the same thing. For different reasons, maybe, but the outcome would be the same.

They would destroy this world yet again if we didn't stop them.

And while the cold hadn't killed me yet, it soon would, judging from the numbness crawling up my legs, the lethargy clinging to my every thought, dragging me deeper into the darkness of sleep.

Yes, I very much wanted to sleep right now.

Corvus's tone turned sharper, more demanding, sending stabs of pain through my head. "If you will not give me your power, there are other ways to sway you to my cause."

Gone was the cajoling tone, and my muscles locked up, pain pounding through my head, my bones, my blood. This was brute force brought to bear. "You *will* give me what I want."

My starry magic rearranged itself on the floor, the sigils disappearing, starlight rearranging itself to become a moving picture.

"Look, little thief."

Tavion writhed on the ground, the Mistress poised over him, the Oracle a hazy form in the background, her gleaming smile the only clear thing about her. Tavion writhed in a sea of blood...his clothes in tatters, hands scraping the floor in desperation as he tried to escape.

A whimper slipped between my lips, my lethargy chased away by fear. *I had to do something. I had to stop this before they killed him.*

For one desperate moment, I considered taking Corvus's offer, even though it was a trap.

Anything to stop Tavion's suffering.

"If you wish for your wolf to live, you will return the magic *that is rightfully mine.*" He sounded desperate, frantic, before his voice slithered down to a cruel hiss. "Or I will let my sister devour him, until there is nothing left, not even his bones."

I could barely lift my heavy eyelids, my voice slurring.
“Fine. You want this, you can have it.”

What he couldn't know...I'd been steadily drawing magic ever since my feet hit the floor, every surge of power I fed into the sigils echoed back into me.

I thought of how much Raz and Zor loved me. How much more love there would be if we were given more time.

My heart turned to steel as I imagined Tavion and Tristan and Adele. The sacrifices they'd made. The ones I knew about...and those I did not.

I would fight for that love. That future.

I would honor their sacrifices.

Until I had no more magic to wield.

My half-frozen body was a lethargic mess, but the magic...As long as there was a spark of life in my brain, I could command the power to do whatever I wanted.

I pushed magic out of me in an explosion of star-drenched light that undulated across the floor in a tsunami of power that lit up the dark with the power of a nebula.

The brilliance was so bright I closed my eyes, heat searing my face, but the last thing I saw was Corvus scrambling to get away.

I wanted him to burn.

And when the wave devoured him, he knew it, too.

ANARIA

I was expending magic so fast my feet rose off the freezing stone, my body as weightless as the wind.

The closest to flying as I would ever get, the magic buoying me as power roared and roared out of me with unfathomable force toward the hideous creature, white flames licking his body with voracious splendor.

My power was different here.

This place made it different.

The erupting light that filled every crevice and crack of this place revealed what I'd known in my bones to be true the moment I'd landed here.

This *was* the rocky outcropping from my vision. The last stand against the Fae armies where my ancestor had died. Where all our ancestors had died.

I didn't know how those skulls made it into the tunnels...I didn't care.

Star-flecked power stripped away the protective shadows curling around Corvus, unveiling the shattered outcropping behind him, the mountains outlined by a dark night sky. The floor beneath me pulsed with power, giving and giving, feeding magic into me as if the world knew one of us would be its savior and one its downfall, and had made its choice.

I've made my choice, too, I sang to the world, the stars, the stone.

I will protect you with everything I have. Together, we will rid this world of the blight that has poisoned us all for so very long. A new world, filled with dreams and promises and life.

No more wars. No more death.

Help me, and that is my promise to you.

My frozen body turned to heated steel, channeling magic from ground to flesh to air, straight into Corvus's writhing shadows. Until they began to shred and thin, until his roars of pain shook stones from the ceiling. They shattered around me, sending glittering shards across the floor.

One of them knocked me out of the air, and I hit the ground so hard everything went black, and in those precious lost seconds, my magic stopped.

I climbed to my feet and dodged left to avoid the crashing rocks, then right, until I could scarcely keep my footing.

A lash of shadow whipped out, slashing across my shins, cutting deep, blood coating my legs, my feet. The cuts went numb, some putrid stench bubbling up from them. Poison of some kind. A death blow raced towards my throat, parried at the last second by a hastily conjured blast of starlight.

But I was on my feet. And I wouldn't stop fighting.

Black shadow and white light crashed, ringing against the cavernous walls as I advanced step by painful step, forcing him toward that drop-off.

I remembered that endless fall from the vision. The sharp rocks at the bottom.

A little bit further, and he'd have nowhere else to go but down.

But the sigils were far behind me now, the pulsing power no longer flowing through my feet, my body. One glance down told me I stood on nothing but rough stone, holding only a residue of magic, as if this ground was too barren to support such things.

As if Corvus had wholly corrupted this place.

“You should have taken my offer.” He sent out a lash of the darkest shadow. I barely—only barely—knocked it away. If I’d failed, I would have lost my head. I panted, reached again for my power, and dragged up the last spluttering dredges.

I never got a chance to cast them.

Something hit me between the shoulder blades so hard I slammed into the floor, breath knocked out of me, fingers clawing at the floor.

For a moment, time was suspended, starlight trickling from my fingers, cold seeping into my stunned body. I was defenseless, vulnerable, and that was the last of my magic, draining out on the floor, along with my blood.

“There. I gave you a chance to fix this, brother. You failed, though I did warn you, she is a defiant, stubborn little wench.” I managed to turn my head enough to see the Oracle, hands on her hips, staring at Corvus, a look of utter disappointment on her face.

“You swore the magic would return to us this time.” His voice narrowed down to a sniveling whine. “You were wrong.”

“I miscalculated. You know how unpredictable fate is. We’ve always found a way around this before, we will again.” Shadows filled the cavern again, devouring the last of my stars, until the faintly pulsing sigils were the only light in the darkness.

Of course they were working together. I clenched my hands into fists, tears freezing on my cheeks. *I knew better than to trust these evil creatures. Thank the gods I didn’t take him up on his offer.*

“Unfortunate we can’t kill them all and start over. I cannot wait another hundred years.”

Please, I begged the cold, dead stone. Please help me.

“Yes, for now, she stays alive.” Her eyes glittered as she nudged me with her toe. “But the others...some are disposable. Useful as leverage to force this one to cooperate, if

nothing else. The wolf is sick, he should be put down. We'll find another to replace him."

I managed to lift my head an inch off the ground. "You lay a fucking finger on him, and I will turn you both to ash." She put her foot in the center of my spine and flattened me to the floor with so much force my spine groaned.

"You will do no such thing."

"Why can't we rip the magic from her? She is so small and weak." He slithered forward until his venomous shadows drifted mere inches from my face. My lungs ached from the stench; I closed my eyes so the fumes didn't blind me.

"We've tried before," the Oracle explained impatiently. "We had to start over, remember?"

"She could be different." The shadows brushed my face, and my skin began bubbling. "We could try."

"No. I won't start over. We will make this work. Once the transformation is complete, even this one will bend. They always do." She nudged me with her foot. "Isn't that right, Anaria? You will do anything to save your males?"

I didn't know how much more we could transform, but looking at Corvus made me want to vomit.

The Oracle followed my line of sight and laughed.

"What you see before you took thousands upon thousands of years. My brother is impervious to rebirth; he will never return to his original form. You will never live long enough to become...that."

She ran her hands down herself. "On the other hand...it's good to have this body back."

I closed my eyes as Corvus's shadows slithered over me, my skin shrieking as blisters erupted all down my throat and arm. "What do we do?" he demanded.

"We finish this," the Oracle spat. "The Shadow King has to die, his people with him. Then the Fae in Varitus. Once we unite the magic of all three realms, this world will be ours again."

They weren't done. They'd never be done.

"I will not kill for you again."

"You will kill until we tell you to stop." Her laugh skittered down the walls. "If you defy us again, I will infect every Solarian citizen with a Reaper and force your hand." She shrugged. "In fact, I might enjoy that. I know my brother would."

I had to use my magic. I had to at least *try*.

I was too fucking scared, heart beating too fast, lungs not working. I was going to die here, and this was *complete and utter bullshit*.

Anger did what fear could not.

Gave me clarity. Gave me focus.

These greedy, jealous...*things*...had taken and taken and taken for so long, they would never stop. Glutting themselves on this world, over and over, until there was nothing left, then starting all over again.

It was hideous. It was unforgiveable.

I lay my palm on the frozen ground and begged the magic to answer me, one last time.

The Oracle squatted beside me, her smile consuming and hideous in its beauty. "We need war, little one. We need strife and conflict and hate. Such things are our life's blood. Soon enough, you will understand." Her knowing smile sent a shiver straight through me. "Such twisted warriors we chose for you, each with their own brand of darkness and yet, you try to stop what is meant to be. You cannot fight this." She drifted away, taking Corvus and his creeping shadows with her.

I could finally breathe, but I had nowhere to go, anyway, except that jagged drop-off. If I could move like Zorander, I might have a chance, but I was trapped.

These two evil beasts were what was wrong with the world, sowing darkness and evil through every realm, every empire, every town and village for all of time. They thrived on

death. They fed on life itself, and when the well of blood ran dry, they destroyed everything and started anew.

By some miracle, magic trickled into me from the frozen rock, from the darkness around us, from the snow drifting around my frozen body. Magic tasted wilder up here, like windblown slopes and frostbitten air, but there was so very little where Corvus had existed for so long.

I closed my eyes, tears freezing my lashes together.

I'd never felt so furious and so fucking helpless before in my life.

I need magic to fight them. Before it's too late for all of us. My bloody fingers scratched the rough rock, and the trickle of white became a steady deluge. Somewhere, deep beneath this mountain, in the cracks that ran to the center of this world, was untouched, undelved power.

Power Corvus hadn't yet corrupted.

I hoarded every last drop like a dragon gathers gold, calling the rippling, heated magic to me, and it came, slithering through the mountain below me. *Please, please. Just one more try.* Enough to make my final stand if nothing else.

"The wolf first, then the mother, then we will decide. Perhaps the archer, he seems like a spare to me." The Oracle had her back turned, nothing but bare flesh covered by a scrap of fabric.

Corvus had his shadows, but she had nothing protecting her.

The best chance I would have.

Maybe ever.

Please, I begged the world. If we want to survive, we have to make this count.

Magic spilled out of me like an exploding star.

Otherworldly power, blinding in force, etched itself on the backs of my eyelids, thundering against my chest until I could hardly breathe.

This was more terrible than anything I'd ever wielded before. Tinged with a wild, uncontrollable rage, as if the world itself howled for revenge.

Yes. I'm a vessel. Use me to finish this.

I became little more than a conduit, channeling power from the ground straight into Corvus and the Oracle, my lungs aching as I screamed and screamed, my arm shaking as a steady stream of star-kissed death flowed from my blistered palm.

Everything. I would expend every last piece of myself right now, as long as I took these two with me.

My scream became a roar, rocks raining down around me from above.

I couldn't see, light flashing in my eyes, black and white.

Good and evil.

I laughed at that, spraying a mouthful of blood across the floor. It seeped into the outline of the tree and vaporized.

My body was failing. Pain became my only constant, that and the endless stream of power funneling through me, my body twitching and jerking from the force of it.

More, I begged the world beneath me. *Give me more. Let's end this.*

But the flow stuttered and slowed, the cold seeping in to replace the power, and I yanked up the final dredges I could reach, spending the last of the magic in one furious burst, not caring about saving some for later.

Later didn't matter.

Only now.

When I finally opened my eyes, the inside the cave glowed a faint orange, embers glittering in the air. Miraculously, I hadn't incinerated myself, though I wasn't entirely sure how.

Corvus rose from behind the Oracle, little more than a writhing, smoking heap at his feet.

“You want to play, little human? We can play.” He climbed over his sister’s writhing form, heading straight for me.

My entire vision filled with black, twisted skin, enormous black thorns, putrid rot shoving up my nose, bubbling agony raking over me...Then cold punched me in the face and stole away my breath.

It took me a moment to realize...I wasn’t dead.

I was flying, the heavy scent of lilies wrapping around me. I sucked in a breath and instantly regretted it when my lungs froze, sealing in the rich, cloying smell. I didn’t even land—I crashed drunkenly into a bank of snow, arms and legs flopping. If I hadn’t ended up where I did, I would have broken several somethings.

I stared up at Torin, the golden owl shifter alighting gracefully beside her, golden eyes blinking.

“Now you owe *me* two favors, princess.”

I lay in the snow, eyeing my savior.

Saviors, I supposed, glancing at the bird.

“Seems like everything wants something from me these days.” The words were barely out of my mouth, and I retched into the snow, wiping bloody spittle from my mouth.

Torin only saved me because I was worth more to her alive than dead, and the fact she’d known where I was—*where Corvus was*—sent another wave of nausea straight through me.

“Take me back to the Citadelle. *Right now, Torin.*”

In a perfect world, I would have taken a minute to catch my breath, but Tavion didn’t have a minute. According to the Oracle, he was not leaving that tower alive.

Torin shook her head. “You don’t want to go there. I’m taking you to Zorander.”

“Bull fucking shite. Take me to the Citadelle. Tavion’s there. The Mistress will kill him if we leave him behind.”

I refused to do this again, even though there was some sense of twisted irony to this when Tavion had left Ember behind to save me, but I would never do the same to him. *Never.*

Torin just shook her head and reached for me. “You’re out of magic.”

I stepped away on shaking legs and patted my knives—my knife—with a confidence I did not feel one bit. “That’s not my only weapon.”

Torin frowned, white eyes staring out into the darkness as if she could see all the way to Tempeste. Perhaps she could. “Just once, I’d like to not end up in that shitehole at the end of the day.”

“And I’d like to not be freezing my arse off, barefoot in the snow. But we don’t always get what we want.”

“Fair enough.” She grasped my arm. “If I could heal you, I would. But I don’t have that sort of magic. Kill the Mistress this time, will you? I’ve been waiting for someone to do that for five hundred years.”

“Will that settle the debt between us?” I asked hopefully.

“Not even close,” she muttered.

While the High Seer landed delicately on her feet without a sound, my bare feet slammed into stone, hard. “You did that on purpose,” I grumbled, getting my bearings—in front of the Citadelle, just beyond the Great Arch—when the owl landed on her shoulder.

Torin stroked his head before she jerked her own towards the Citadelle. “We’ll wait here. One hour, then we leave. I’d help, but...if I use any more magic, I won’t be able to carry you both, not even to the tunnels.”

“I understand.” I climbed the blood-soaked stone steps, dragging my leaden legs. “I’ll be back, and I’ll have Tavion with me.”



TEMPESTE WAS A GHOST TOWN.

I’d never before realized how a city’s people were her lifeblood, the very thing that infused brick and mortar and stone with vibrancy. Without them, this place became nothing but soot-stained rock.

Beyond the city, the forest stretched as far as I could see. Somewhere in those trees, the Caladrians hiked toward a better life. I hoped the trees protected them and they never, ever looked back. I didn't stop until I'd climbed the last set of stairs to the top of the central tower. My legs had finally stopped bleeding, the deep gashes crusting over, the foul, poisonous odor something I didn't want to think about for too long.

I froze when a painful groan echoed from the end of the hall, pulled the knife from my belt, and kept moving. My chest hurt. My body hurt. I turned off the pain. I would not let Tavion down.

Adrenaline turned my mouth dry, my hatred even sharper than my knife, everything narrowing down to the agonizing groans coming from the room in front of me.

I was moving fast when I went through that door, getting my bearings. The Mistress, standing over Tavion who was writhing on the floor. No one else in the room.

I didn't stop moving, not even when I plunged my blade deep into the Mistress's abdomen and dragged the blade along her side, the edge of the knife shrieking when I hit bone. I grasped her tightly woven bun and yanked her head back, knocking her off balance, stabbing blindly, her blood coating my hand.

Bare feet had been a vulnerability in the north, but they were my strength now, a firm foundation as I gripped her hair and slammed her face into the stone wall, vicious glee going through me when something broke.

Teeth, nose, I did not care.

When she yanked out of my grasp and spun around, I was ready for that, too, her eyes widening in shock. Then she launched herself at me, nails lengthening to deadly claws, sharp teeth glinting.

"I've waited years for this, you little *bitch*."

What she didn't know was I'd waited too. I wasn't a frightened slave anymore; I had my weapons and knew how to use them.

She did not hold back, a dervish of slashing claws, teeth capable of tearing out hunks of flesh. But I didn't either, and while she fought in a rage fueled daze, I fought to save Tavion.

If I failed, he would die.

I kept repeating that, over and over, as I made every strike count.

When we broke apart, I was peppered with cuts, one eye swollen closed, nearly lost from a wild strike, but she was holding her belly together with one hand, her front drenched in blood. Black blood. "You're a slave," she spat. "A fucking nobody *slave*. I should have whipped you to death when I had the fucking chance."

Her gaze slid to the side, to where Tavion lay. "Just like your lover. He will never be the same again. Never." *I couldn't look. Couldn't look. If I did, if I saw...* I kept my eyes on the Mistress.

"If you were smart, you would have." I fell into a crouch, my shoulders loose, magic pouring into me, slowly—ever so slowly—healing my face, the cuts on my arms. I called up enough for a blast, but there wasn't enough there.

"But here we are."

She was healing, just like her brother.

Faster than I was.

Every time my blade sliced, I made sure to cut something vital. Every time I yanked my knife out, I found a new target, but every wound knit back together, every gash disappearing. We circled, stabbing, then dancing out of reach, until I was closer to Tavion than the door, slipping and sliding through puddles of blood, both red and black.

"You can't kill me, I'm too old. And when the Oracle comes back, we will have such fun with your wolf. I think you will beg us to end him before we are done."

My foot knocked against something hard, pain blazing through my foot.

I barely dodged the Mistress's parry and looked down. Tavion's ridiculously enormous—and very sharp—sword that almost cut off my big toe. She lunged and I ducked to avoid her strike, but more to wrap my fingers around the hilt of the sword and swing it up in a wild arc, the wind whistling as the blade sliced straight through her throat.

The silver blade cut as easily through bone as sinew, nearly separating her head from her body, only a flap of skin holding her together as she collapsed like a puppet.

The Mistress's eyes were wide open when she died, and the last thing to fade from them was the hate. I made myself watch until they went dim before I tossed the sword to the side and fell to my knees beside Tavion.

“Tavion. I'm here, I'm...” My mind stopped working, then I was running my hands over his ravaged body, some of the cuts so deep I glimpsed muscle.

“Anaria.” He didn't open his eyes, his tongue flicking out over his cracked lips as he groaned out a warning. “Get out of here. Oracle...said...she was coming back.” He managed to lift his hand, setting it over mine, and managed a faint squeeze. “Have...to...go.”

“I know. I know.” *Gods, there was so much fucking blood. How was I supposed to move him?* “I hurt her...but she wasn't dead.”

Oh gods. If she came back now...

I willed my heart to stop racing. “We have to get out of here before she does.” There were so many wounds, I couldn't find a place to grab onto, to lift him without hurting him more.

“You have to help, Tavion.” I was sobbing, and I couldn't stop. “I can't do this alone. *Please.*”

I swallowed the bile rising in my throat then slid my arm beneath him, through the blood and the gore, bracing my knees on the floor and lifting, trying to ignore his agonized groan, the way his breathing turned raspy and harsh.

“Torin's waiting for us down below. She'll take us to the tunnels, where Raz and Zor are. But you have to get on your

feet.” I glanced over the Mistress’s body toward the door, which was so fucking far away.

I leaned against him, lifted his arm, and wiggled my body underneath his so his arm draped over my shoulders. I grasped his wrist tight, tight enough to hurt, and closed my eyes, turning my heart to stone.

I had to get him up or he would die here.

Pain or no, he had to get on his feet.

I didn’t know if this would work. Tavion was twice my size, twice my weight, chances were, his legs wouldn’t hold him at all. But if I could get him upright, then to the door, then...Then I’d figure the rest out. I steadied my legs beneath me and pushed up. Gods, he was nothing but dead weight, every muscle in my body on the verge of snapping as I kept pushing up and up and up.

This time, the moan of utter agony that escaped Tavion’s lips made me want to vomit. I couldn’t do this. Couldn’t hurt him like this. Couldn’t...*I had to*. There was no one else. And if the Oracle came back, he was dead.

“Please, Tavion, help me here. Just a little.” Somehow, his feet slid beneath him. Somehow, he was upright, most of his weight sagging against me, his head lolling on my shoulder, face buried in my neck, blood coating me in sickening warmth.

This close, I heard every pained gasp, every small, tortured sound he tried to hide, even now, at his most vulnerable, tears sliding down my face, blinding me. My knees were wobbly, and both gashes on my shins had opened back up, but my legs held.

“Good,” I panted. “Good.” So many steps between here and where Torin was waiting, and he was losing too much blood. I gripped his side, sending a spark of magic into him, straight into the wound. He doubled over, panting.

When I looked down, the bleeding had slowed, so I did it again. “That...fucking...hurt.”

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry, but you have to walk.” *You have to be gone, because if the Oracle comes back, she will kill you, and then I don’t know what I’ll do.* He lifted his head, bloody hair hanging in my face as he bleakly gazed toward the door.

“You can do this. Lean on me,” I hissed. “Lean on me and do not stop moving until I say you can.”

The hall was a nightmarish gauntlet we stumbled down, nothing but rasping breath, groans of pain, and the scent of fresh blood. We took the servants’ stairs. They were closer, narrower, and I used my body to brace Tavion against the wall while I let his weight slide from one step to the next, his stumbling feet catching on the stair treads.

On the second landing, I trapped Tavion between the wall and my body, legs straining to hold him up, blood gushing down my shins unchecked. *Ten more to go.* “We’re almost there,” I lied, peering out the open window at the dead, empty city, the two tiny figures we’d never reach. “Just a few more steps, Tavion.”

We made those few steps. Barely.

But that was all.

All his weight rested on me when we stopped on the next landing, my shoulder bracing him against the wall harder than I should have, but if he went down, I would never get him back up.

My magic could do a lot of wonderful things, but this power did not make me stronger, and it was time I admitted I was injured, too.

“You came for me.” His lips trailed down my face, his breath wet and raspy. I’d heard that death rattle in the slave barracks plenty of times, but never had it sounded like this. Like my heart was crumbling right along with it.

I wanted to take it all back. Every wicked word, every insult, everything between us that was tinged with hate and resentment and bruising injury. Take it back and start over, and maybe next time, maybe things would be different.

I could almost understand why the Oracle and her brother kept starting over.

There was something so seductive about second chances.

I wiped my face on his jacket, leaving a smear of tears and blood. “Why did you marry me, Tavion?”

He raised his eyes to mine, still as green as a summer forest.

“Because I couldn’t let you go. And marrying you the way I did...” His gentle smile was something I would carry with me forever, even after he was dead.

“That was the only way I could keep you without exposing too much of myself in the process. But the truth is, I lost my heart to you a long time ago. I was just to fucking stubborn to admit it.”

“After we get out of here.” I swallowed, steadying my shaking legs as they bent beneath his weight. “When you’re healed and we’re safe, I want to start over. Without Julian between us. Without all our combined bullshit stopping us.”

“I’d like that.” His sigh became a breathless moan.

We stayed like that for a long time, and then my legs finally gave out. We slid to the floor together, his arms around me, my head against his chest.

“Leave me here, Anaria.” Tavion managed to touch my face before his arm fell limply away. “Leave while you can. Don’t make me...” He swallowed. “Don’t make me die knowing I caused your death, too.”

“No.” I shook my head. “No, I’m not leaving you.”

But we were too high up. Too far from Torin.

“At least the view’s nice,” I murmured, looking out over the city. I blinked, and the city was replaced by a golden owl looking almost aggravated.

If owls could look aggravated.

A flash and he became the Fae male, naked as the day he was born, but I could care less, as long as he was here to help.

“You take one arm; I’ll take the other.”

Yup, that was definitely aggravation in his voice, and I ducked under Tavion’s limp arm, the owl shifter doing the same on his other side, and with a deep, united groan that came from all three of us, we heaved him to his feet.



“HOLY GODS,” Torin whispered when we stumbled across the last few feet to where she waited, lurching to her feet. “How is he alive?”

The owl shifter—I still didn’t know his name—looked down at his blood-smeared body and grimaced.

“I don’t know. But if you get us out of here and to Raziel, I will give you anything you want,” I promised. “Anything, Torin. Just...hurry.”

“Ready?” The shifter murmured before settling Tavion’s weight back onto me, his shredded arms draped over my shoulders, face buried in my hair.

“Hang on, just a little longer,” I pleaded. “A few more minutes until Raziel can heal you. Then you can snipe at me, and I’ll argue with you, and everything will go back to how it was until the end of godsdamned eternity. *Just don’t you dare die.*”

Except, after this, everything would be different.

And my raging heart already knew it.

ANARIA

Raziel was already flying toward us when we appeared, shouting for Zor and Tristan to *get their godsdamned arses in gear*.

I couldn't say I'd ever heard that level of panic in his voice before.

Zor lunged out of the darkness as we collapsed in a heap by the fire, close enough the heat penetrated my still-frozen body. Zor peeled Tavion off me, Torin brushing dirt off her dress, her nose wrinkling.

Then Raz was in front of me, gripping my face between his palms, his eyes wild.

"Gods, Anaria, you're...Where did these burns come from?" I shoved him toward Tavion.

"I'll explain while you heal him. The Mistress...whipped him apart. And she used a knife." When Raz just eyed my battered face, I gripped his hand and set it on Tavion's chest. "Now, Raz. He's going to die if you don't."

Tavion writhed in pain when Raz ran his hands over the wounds, finally tearing off his bloody, shredded shirt, and then the world crawled to a stop. Everything after that seemed to be happening to someone else.

There was a single, frozen moment when everyone stared down at Tavion's brutalized body with the same horrified, furious expression.

Nobody spoke. Not Torin, not the owl shifter landing on her shoulder, and I was too far gone to do anything but try to keep breathing over the roaring in my head.

My eyes met Tavion's; that one glance held a thousand things we'd wished we would have said

but never had the courage.

Then Raziel swung into action, healing as he went, mending every deep wound, every burn, every lash mark. So fucking many. There were so many I wanted to demand Torin take me back to the Citadelle so I could kill the Mistress all over again.

At some point, Adele settled beside me and took my hand, stroking her thumb across my knuckles, bruised and raw from my fight with the Mistress.

Zor ran his hands over my legs, pausing on my shins, but I barely noticed as Raziel rolled Tavion onto his back, his eyes flashing up to mine for a brief second when he saw Tavion's sigil.

I shrugged. *That's not the half of it*, I wanted to say.

With a curse, he went back to work.

I didn't know if it took minutes or hours or days, but Raziel finally rocked back on his heels, his face pale. Then he was pressing my back to the dirt, right beside Tavion. "You are injured almost as badly as him. Stop fighting me on this."

"I'm not hurt that bad," I protested, mostly because it seemed like I *should* put up more of a fight.

His hands hovered over me, warmth already spreading through my body with an alarming mix of sedation and healing strength. "They were a lot worse...before." My lips felt ten times their normal size as the full effect of his magic sank in.

Oh...I liked this. It felt like flying.

"Stop talking, princess, and let me work."

“Hmmm. Okay.” I closed my eyes. I didn’t feel like talking, anyway.

He worked on my face for a long time, fussing over one side more than the other, until my cheeks didn’t pull tight every time I talked and that seared meat smell faded away.

“Take a look at that wound, Raz,” Zor muttered, and I managed to crack an eye open, long enough to see the worry on his face.

I squinted dazedly, wondering if that was bone glinting through the encrusted blood on my left leg. My weaker one, thank the gods, or I would have never gotten Tavion on his feet. Across that room. Down the stairs. I turned my head to check that he was still breathing.

Something settled inside me when I saw he was.

And for the first time, I didn’t care. I was tired of fighting this. Tired of pretending there was nothing between us when there had always been too much.

Julian’s death. Our false marriage.

And every moment after.

I closed my eyes and focused on Raziel’s gentle hands tracing the still-seeping wounds, putting aside those feverish, foolish thoughts. Tavion might have told me he loved me, but he also thought he was dying, and people said the dumbest things when they thought they were crossing over to the Great Beyond.

I’d be a fool to put too much weight on Tavion’s dying words.

“Where did these come from?”

It took a minute for Raz’s voice to penetrate my floating bliss and realize his voice was no longer worried. He was terrified, one shaking hand gripping my thigh as he motioned to Torin. She drifted closer, hissing at whatever she saw.

Adele swallowed, squeezing my hand in a death grip.

“This looks like some kind of poison.” Ever so slowly, Raz’s eyes lifted to mine.

“Who did this to you, Anaria?” he asked in the softest voice I’d ever heard him use. *And where are they, so I can kill them?* he didn’t add, though I heard his intent like he was sharpening his dagger on a whetstone.

“You don’t want to know.” I struggled up onto my elbows, staring at the gruesome wounds on my legs. The ones I could barely feel. The ones that should have completely crippled me, because that *was* fucking bone gleaming on my left leg.

I’d thought they were healing, but that wasn’t at all true. No, they were just...numb. A shiver of real fear went through me.

Those looked worse than they felt.

“Actually, we both want to know.” Zorander came to a stop behind Torin. “How could you even walk like that?”

Torin stroked the owl shifter’s head. “She didn’t just walk. She got that enormous brute down two floors of the Citadelle. And up on his feet, though I don’t know how.”

When I glared at her, all she did was smile sedately back. “I would have never promised you another favor if I thought you were going to sell me out.” To his credit, the owl seemed to agree with me when his head swiveled away from her.

“Fine,” I huffed. “The Oracle has a brother. Corvus. Another Old God. He’s hideous, because of course he is, and trapped in a cave north of the mountains, on the edge of the Wastes. Somewhere called...the Hammer.”

“Gods, Anaria...”

Any other day, in any other situation, seeing Zorander’s mouth drop open might have been amusing, but tonight... Tonight I felt the same way. “So two gods, instead of one, which complicates matters, I know. His power is...”

I stared down at my brutalized legs, finally putting two and two together and not liking what I came up with.

“His magic is corruption.” I swallowed hard. “The Oracle’s is chaos.”

“Corruption, huh?” My heart sank at the expression on his face. “I’ve never seen this before. I...” Raz held his hands out over my legs, and this time, they shook. “I can’t fix this.”

“Oh.” *Oh.*

I’d gotten so used to Raz healing *everything*, I’d never wondered what might happen if he couldn’t. And these wounds were bad. Bad enough to get infected. I glanced up at him, my stomach turning to lead. Bad enough that once this numbness wore off, I wouldn’t be able to take a single step.

We had the horses, though. I could ride.

“I’m no healer,” Torin finally said. “But I know of one.”

“No one touches my daughter except someone I trust.” Adele’s smile smoothed out into not a smile at all. “And I’ve never trusted you, Torin.”

“North of Nightcairn Castle, there’s a healer who can heal anything. Even old magic like this.” Somehow, Tavion had heaved himself onto his side. He’d even stopped bleeding. Mostly.

“Two days, Anaria. Can you last for two days?” His eyes met mine, filled with a fierceness that made me want to look away.

I didn’t.

Instead, I heard every desperate, whispered thing I’d said in that room and down those steps, every plea and foolish hope he’d whispered back.

We’d battled our way out of that city so we could look at each other, like this, across an expanse that seemed to shrink by the minute.

“I can last. I *will* last.”

“Good,” Raziel murmured, scooping me up out of the dirt, while Zor and Tristan pulled Tavion to his feet. I pretended I

didn't hear his low moan of pain or see the way he swayed when Tristan let him go.

"We leave tonight and pray to all the gods the Oracle isn't right behind us."

"I'm not praying to either of those fucking monsters."

"Fair enough." Raz traced his lips across my forehead and hugged me tight against him. "I thought I might have lost you today, princess. Don't ever do that again."

"Not planning on it." I tensed up when he lifted me onto a horse. *His horse*. "I can ride. I'm not helpless."

"Of course you can," Raz said, but he didn't turn his head fast enough to hide his eyeroll. "We need the extra horse. Torin's coming with us."

"Are you mad?" I snapped my mouth shut. Where else was she supposed to go? Above us, the empty city loomed; flags snapping in the wind were the only sound.

"The Oracle's second sight doesn't work in the tunnels. Let's hope Corvus can't see anything, either," Torin explained, mounting the horse as smoothly as Zor, even in her long dress. "I've used them plenty of times before."

Even Tavion looked at her, shocked.

"I've known Dane Montgomery longer than Julian." Her smile widened as she reined her horse toward the entrance, the owl flapping before he settled onto her shoulder once more. "Who do you think suggested Julian join our cause? And you?"

"That fucker," Tristan muttered, "pretended not to know a thing." His hazel eyes burned with golden fire. "Said he would shoot Anaria. Acted like he didn't know what any of this was about. *Fucking asshole*."

"That's Dane," Torin said breezily. "He always was a good actor, which is why he's so good at what he does."

"Which is?" Zor said icily.

“Whatever I need him to do,” the High Seer retorted, while Adele glared daggers at her back. This was going to be a fun ride.

Tavion approached his horse, paused, then heaved himself up, another one of those small, awful noises coming out of him as my heart lurched with something that felt a whole lot like worry.

He stilled, head bowed, all his weight balanced in that one stirrup, then with a hiss, threw his leg over, breathing fast as if he couldn't force enough air into his lungs.

His naked torso was covered in healing scars, some of them still seeping blood, and between his shoulders, his sigil flexed when he reached for the reins, the ends of his white hair looking like they'd been dipped in blood.

“Two days to Tavion's,” Zor muttered, and I realized he was looking at Torin. “You're sure those fuckers can't see us down there?”

“I'm sure,” Torin answered, but she was watching Tavion too, her milky gaze fixed on that mark on his back, her head tilted to the side, a bit too much like the Oracle for my liking.

“You'd better fucking be.” Zorander strapped a pile of torches onto the back of his saddle, then lit two more, handing one to Tristan and keeping the other.

Tristan looked back at me and winked, trailing a plume of black smoke. “I'll lead this time; it's not like I can get lost in there or anything.”

We filed behind him as Zor waited, torch burning brightly, before falling in behind.

Protecting us, like he always did.

“I never thought I'd be as happy to put this place to my back as I was after the last time I was here, but now...I fucking hope I never set foot on Caladrius soil again.”

A chorus of agreement came from the front, and I leaned back against Raz and closed my eyes. Gods was I so fucking

tired. I still felt every wound, every gash from these past days, like they were fresh.

But I was in Raziel's arms, and we were heading to Nightcairn Castle.

I let my eyes fall closed.

All that mattered was we were together, and we were going home.

EPILOGUE

Even in the dark—*especially* in the dark—I was eternally conscious of how close *she* was.

I was drenched in Anaria's amber-jasmine scent, her blood, her tears, her sweat, from where she'd half carried me down the hall, those steps. From where I'd held her in my arms for what I'd thought was the last time.

When I died, I'd take that delicious smell with me to the Great Beyond and whatever lay past those dark gates.

My head spun from blood loss and adrenaline and the sheer improbability I'd survived, because the Oracle wanted me dead.

That old crone knew something was wrong with me.

I tried to steady my shaking hands but couldn't.

She knew something I did not, and that was driving me mad. *Sick*, she'd told the Mistress. *He's sick, and he's no good to us. Put him down like an animal but take your time. Play with him. Make him suffer.*

What the fuck was wrong with me?

I'd wracked my brain over the question that was slowly cannibalizing my sanity and now, in the dark, I couldn't stop, panic flaying me open like a sharp knife.

My mother had died young, some illness that struck out of nowhere and had no cure.

My father was... My father was a fucked-up mess, and his problems had nothing to do with mine. That's what I told myself. And yet...something niggled at the edge of my memories, his utter desperation over my mother.

Visits during those last months, from seers and witches and even human healers.

As if Lucius was willing to risk anything to save her.

I fought the pain enough to turn, relaxing when I saw Anaria slumped against Raziel, the circles beneath her eyes darker. When I frowned, she gave me a little smile, her eyes lighting up.

Just that one small thing made me happier than anything had in...forever, I supposed.

Since Julian. Since my brother had last smiled at me, though I couldn't exactly remember when that had been. Or why.

Raz dipped his head, and I nodded back. The bastard had saved my life, and now I owed him...but somehow...I didn't mind owing him.

All of us together, riding for Nightcairn, felt right.

Before Anaria, we'd been uneasy allies, thrown together out of desperation and Julian's mad plans, but now... everything was different. I gripped my reins tighter, wondering if I was being foolish. I'd always wanted a pack—a family—and maybe...I'd finally found mine. Watching Zor and Raz make love to Anaria...Next time...Next time that would be me.

I was tired of fighting the inevitable.

I was ready to be happy. I wanted Anaria more than I wanted to live, even if I had to crawl on my knees to have her. Even if I had to share her, the sacrifice would be worth it.

She was worth it.

Time blurred together in the tunnel, hours spinning past like minutes, none of us saying a word.

In the shuddering silence, I replayed everything Adele had revealed to Zor and I last night, especially about the Wynters.

My breath turned shaky. I'd killed Anaria's kin, and somehow, I knew that, too, had been part of the Oracle's plan. Layers upon layers of cruelty and plotting, and when Anaria discovered what I'd done...

I squared my shoulders, resolve settling into me like tempered steel. I would take whatever punishment Anaria thought I deserved.

I would beg for her forgiveness, then earn back her trust. There was nothing I wouldn't endure for her, nothing I wouldn't sacrifice, as long as there was a chance of us being together.

Adele rode in front of me, her hunched shoulders skeletal beneath the thin, blue gown, and a jolt of anger went through me. Anaria still didn't know. Didn't know about her mother's betrayal. Didn't know she had witch blood. And from Adele's veiled threat, she would use the Wynters' deaths against me, as readily as the Oracle would.

I didn't trust her. Not one bit.

Not when her ambition outweighed her affection for her daughter.

Zor, Raz, Tristan, and I had snuck off that night and discussed everything. Quickly, and with no argument, we'd come to an agreement.

Anaria came first.

Always.

Her welfare outweighed our own. Protecting her was our only objective. Even if that meant from her own mother. But right now, we needed to regroup, out of earshot of Torin, who'd probably tagged along to spy on us, and away from Adele, who had plots of her own.

Raz muttered something foul about the smell, and Anaria's soft chuckle floated up to me, chasing away these miserable

thoughts. I turned, though even that small movement made the healing gash across my abdomen hurt like a mother fucker.

But the joy on her face was worth the pain.

I was just in time to see the smile slide off her face, replaced by a look of confusion.

“I...” Anaria’s pale green eyes locked with mine and in them were the beginnings of panic, followed by a glaze of confusion.

“There’s something wrong.” Her hand banded over her belly; her lips went white. “I don’t feel so...”

Anaria slid sideways out of Raziel’s grasp, landing on the ground with a heart wrenching thud.

I was off my horse before I even knew I moved, staggering over to her, fresh blood trickling down my side, but I didn’t care. I crouched down, cradling her in my arms. “What the fuck is this?” I snarled at Raz when he dropped to his knees beside us. “I thought you healed her?”

“I did. *I fucking did.*” His hands skimmed her body in fast, desperate motions, sweat beading on his brow as he paused over the wounds on her legs. They looked worse. A lot worse. “Poison. This has to be the poison.”

He held his shaking hands out over her body, and something inside me tore apart when he opened his eyes. “The poison’s all through her. Not just her blood...but everywhere. This is beyond anything I know how to fix.”

“Two days to Nightcain Castle,” I hissed. “We’re two fucking days away.”

“My healer’s closer.” Torin sounded so calm I half wondered if she’d planned this from the beginning. “Let me find her, bring her to the Wynter Palace. A few hours, at most, and Anaria will be recovering.”

Was it my imagination, or did she and Adele just trade a look?

I ground my teeth together, but Raz looked at Torin the same way I did. Like he wanted to wrap his hands around her

throat and squeeze.

“Could she last two days?” I asked softly, pulling her out of the dirt and into my lap, my heart stumbling in a broken beat. “The healers Lucius knows...they specialize in poisons. And we *trust* them.”

“I don’t know. I don’t think so, not with how fast she’s failing. She was fine...*fine*, just a few minutes ago,” Raz’s low murmur was agonized, his hand shaking as he brushed her cheek, her closed eyes, his magic doing nothing—*fucking nothing* to help.

Sweat coated her brow, her white lips were flecked with blood.

A bare minute ago she’d been laughing, and now...Now Raz looked like there was no hope.

“Then we head to the Wynter Palace,” he said softly. “And we trust no one.” I nodded subtly toward the seer and Adele, wild anger bubbling up out of me, out of control. *Raging*.

Anaria had nearly killed herself to save me, and I couldn’t do a godsdamned thing to help her.

I couldn’t lose her. *I couldn’t*.

I’d waited my entire life for Anaria. A woman equal to me in every way. A queen who would rule this wicked realm with an iron fist and a heart of gold. A queen I would follow, wherever she led.

“We go to the Wynter Palace,” I said loudly enough everyone could hear, then dropped my voice to a husk whisper. “Torin won’t let her die, Raz. She needs Anaria alive. We all do.”

His dark eyes flicked up to the High Seer, then to Adele, his lips thinning. “I know. That’s what I’m afraid of.”

I climbed to my feet, cradling her fragile body in my arms as I headed for my horse, desperation chewing its way through me. “After we get out of here.” I could hardly breathe as I repeated Anria’s words—*her own fucking promise*—right back to her, daring her to renege.

“When you’re healed and we’re safe, we will start over. Without Julian between us. Without all our combined bullshit stopping us.”

I skimmed my lips down her cheek, not caring who watched, then pressed my lips to her ear.

Because these words...were only for her.

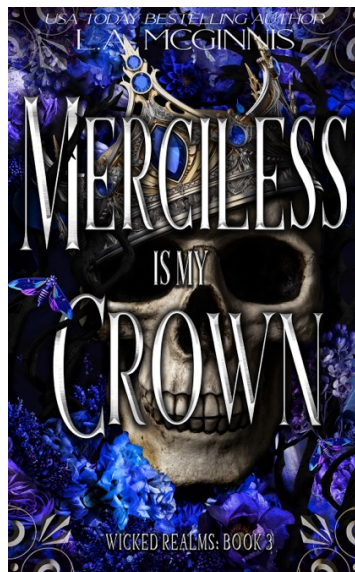
“You can’t leave me here alone. You’re my mate, Anaria. If you die...there’s nothing left in this world for me.”



I hope you enjoyed Cruel Is My Court!!

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MERCILESS IS MY CROWN



From the day I was born a slave, I’d dreamed of saving this wicked realm. I had the courage, but lacked the power. Now everything has changed. I claimed the ancient magic and killed the Fae King, making the Shadow King

my mortal enemy.

To protect the men I love, I’ll forge an alliance with the traitorous High Seer, forsake my destiny, and betray every vow I’ve ever made, to prevent the stolen magic from corrupting me and my warriors.

**Merciless Is My Crown is a dark fantasy romance with elements of forbidden love, found family and fated mates.



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