

FORBIDDEN MATES

3

DARK
&
DEADLY
PREDATORS

LOLA GLASS

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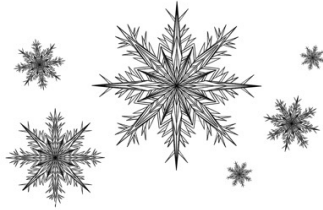
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Cover by Aura

To all the fairytales that preach love at first sight

CHAPTER 1

VAYME



Wind tugged my hair as my gaze swept the rocky mountainside.

It had only taken a moment to realize the town at the base of the mountain didn't hold the female the elves had sent me to find, but she had to be somewhere nearby.

I scratched my bonded xuno, Strong, behind the ears as I continued scanning the mountainside, until...

There.

A flash of blue caught my eye.

A tiny, fragile-looking woman stepped out of a hidden cave and looked down at the town below. Her skin was pale and her dress was both dirty and oversized, but her lips were curved in a soft smile, and her cobalt hair blew around her lightly in the wind.

There was an itch beneath my skin, a tingle of magic in my spine telling me there was something important about her.

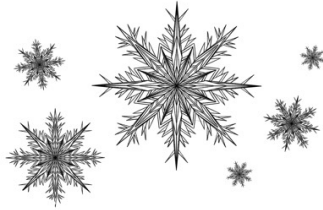
Her gaze snapped to me, and her happiness vanished as her eyes seemed to stare into my damn soul. I should've been too far for her human gaze to see me through the trees, but there was nothing else around that she could've been looking at.

She vanished back into the cave as quickly as she had appeared, seemingly just as excited to become my mate as I was to make her mine.

Veil, this was going to be a nightmare.

CHAPTER 2

KAELLE



I stepped back into the cave, lifting my hand to my heart as it hammered in my chest.

Someone—or *something*—was out there. Its aura was like nothing I'd ever seen before. Darker, deadlier, and so much stronger.

Some part of me was drawn to the danger of it, but I knew I couldn't risk myself that way.

My cave was where I belonged.

It was safe for me, and for everyone else.

Though it wouldn't be of much use against a deadly force radiating as much power as the *thing* outside, I shut the thick stone door my family had built into the cave for me and locked it, too.

My chest rose and fell rapidly, and my fear grew thicker, which meant my wind would be picking up.

I had to calm myself before I created a storm.

Before I destroyed what little my family still had.

Before I—

There was a loud knock on the stone door.

My body went still.

My wind blew harder, whipping my hair and dress around.

I would've seen my family on the path leading up the mountain if it was them or anyone else in the town.

And that meant that *thing* I'd seen out there was knocking.

It knocked again, louder.

My heart beat faster.

“Don't make me break down the door,” a masculine voice growled.

Veil.

It was a man.

A man with a dark, deadly aura.

Our veil separated our world from the next, and we cursed by it frequently for a reason unknown to me, but this man was certainly and solidly on my side of the veil.

My head jerked toward the back of my cave, looking for a hiding place, but there was nothing.

My cave *was* my hiding place.

It was safest—safest for me, and for everyone else, and—

Ice slowly grew over the door, and my panic grew fiercer.

The only magical beings in Evare with ice magic were fae.

And fae were warriors. Dangerous, vicious warriors, who killed without thought and rode on the backs of magical animals just as deadly as their riders. And—

The door shattered like glass.

The cave started to spin a bit as my fear grew more intense.

I was safe in my cave.

I needed to stay in my cave.

The man stepped inside.

The first look at him made the spinning stop completely.

He was *massive*. At least a head taller than the tallest man I'd ever seen, maybe two heads taller. And he was built like an ox, with wide shoulders and insanely thick muscles.

His hair was brown, falling wildly to his shoulders, and his beard was trimmed close to his chin. His skin was tan, his eyes

glowed a bright shade of silver, and his ears were long and pointed. All he wore was a pair of black pants and some dark fabric wrapped around one of his hands, too.

But his aura... it was thick, powerful, and dark. It felt like *death*.

I tried to open my mouth to ask him not to kill me, but the words didn't come out.

He crossed the entire cave in three steps before he stopped in front of me, studying me silently.

I tried again to ask him not to hurt me, but failed.

The man let out a long, frustrated sigh, and then said the words, "*Sillah ovim rett warum.*"

I didn't know what they meant, but I felt the tingle of magic in my veins as something within me responded to them. I inhaled sharply as I watched the man's aura swell—and then *change*.

The edges of his darkness began to glow the soft, barely-there blue of my own aura.

My gaze dipped to my hands, and I saw the edges of my faint blue begin to blacken.

"What did you do to me?" My panicked whisper escaped before I could consider the words, and my gaze jerked up to the man's.

He didn't answer me; instead, he grabbed my waist.

A shriek escaped me as his grip *burned* me, and he tossed me over his shoulder before striding out of the cave without a backward glance.

My magic swelled in my chest, and the wind whipped harder and faster, increasing its constant drain on my energy. The growing intensity of it didn't seem to bother the man, but it scared me badly.

I plead with my magic,

"Don't storm, don't storm, don't storm."

But the wind only continued to pick up.

“Don’t speak into my mind,” the man growled back, his voice just as clear as my own thoughts. *“Our bond will expire with the eclipse.”*

But the eclipse, the day all three of our suns were aligned and caused extreme sexual desire in anyone mature, was still nearly three *months* away...

And what kind of bond was he talking about?

“My magic,” I managed to say. “It’s getting out of control. If I can’t calm down, it’ll turn into a storm. A massive wind storm. The last one destroyed a dozen towns and a whole kingdom.”

“They should’ve been built stronger, then.” The man stepped out of the cave, and I bit back a scream when I saw the monstrous gray wolf waiting outside.

I tried to shrink away, panicked enough to beg, “Leave me here. Please, leave me here. I don’t have whatever you want.”

He set me on the wolf’s back. “All I need is your magic.”

“You don’t want that,” I whispered. “My magic kills people.”

“Then you’ll fit in with my fae.” He climbed onto the back of the wolf with me, and his body pressed mine against the wolf’s fur.

“I won’t hurt you,” a masculine voice I assumed was the wolf’s murmured into my mind.

When the beast started to move, I buried my fingers in his silky fur, my body weak and unused to the movement. His aura was just as wide as the man’s, but it was a strange gossamer silver that made it far less intimidating.

More wind whipped at me—natural wind, as the wolf ran.

For some reason, the natural wind calmed me enough that my magic’s tug on my energy slowed slightly.

I squeezed my eyes shut against the fear that was still swollen in my chest.

“I’m called Strongpaws,” the wolf said to me, as he ran. *“To the fae, Strong. Tell me your name, human.”*

“Kaelle,” I whispered back, though the wind whisked the word away as it left my lips. I reached out to the beast’s mind and repeated, “Kaelle.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Kaelle. Your magic is very powerful.”

“It will drain my energy soon enough, even if I don’t create a storm,” I admitted.

“It’s draining my bonded companion’s power as well,” the wolf agreed. *“Can you stop it?”*

“I can’t. It’s not controllable. It has a mind of its own, and responds to my emotions when I get really scared.” Which rarely happened in my cave... but I wasn’t in my cave anymore.

“We will have to outrun it, then.” The wolf was much more upbeat about the idea than I expected. *“Do not fear the speed. Vayme won’t allow you to fall.”*

“That’s the fae’s name?” I asked softly. He pronounced it almost like a more elegant version of the word “name”, with a “v” in place of the “n”.

“Yes. Vayme Vuuth, one of the three fae kings.”

My eyes widened. *“He’s a king? Why did he come after me?”*

“Unfortunately, that is his story to tell, not mine. Hold on, Tempest.”

Tempest.

Veil, what a terrible nickname.

I had spent eight years trying to control my wind, only to be called a wind-storm by my captors.

The fae at my back pressed me tighter to Strong as he picked up speed, and despite the war in my heart and mind, the storm that had been brewing within me eased to a violent, whipping wind.

Neither Vayme nor Strong chastised me or urged me to calm it. But that didn’t ease my fear... because I had just been

stolen from my home by a vicious magical warrior, and his bonded beast.

With my wind draining my energy, it wasn't long before dizziness overwhelmed me.

I whispered to Vayme and Strong that I needed to stop and eat something, but they didn't hear me, and I slipped into unconsciousness soon after.

When I opened my eyes, I found a furious fae warrior leaning over me, glaring heatedly.

Fear had me shrinking away, and my wind picked up rapidly.

"What is wrong with you?" Vayme growled.

I tried to tell him it was nothing. That there was just never enough food to keep me going with my magic constantly consuming my energy, but the words didn't come out.

He was absolutely terrifying, and clearly despised me.

Strong's furry head eased Vayme away from me, and my breathing grew slightly easier.

Only slightly.

I noticed the trees above me, and the relatively even dirt beneath me.

"*What ails you, Tempest?*" Strong asked me. His voice was measured, and calm.

"*My family brought food when they visited from town, but there was never enough, or any money for more,*" I whispered. It was easier to speak mentally than out loud.

"*You need sustenance,*" Strong said.

Vayme vanished from my line of sight, and I closed my eyes as I let out a shaky breath.

The wolf's voice was contemplative when he asked, "*What do you fear? The king will not hurt you.*"

“He stole me from my home. You both did. Why would I believe you have no intentions of hurting me?”

The wolf blinked. *“You lived alone. In a cave, far from others of your kind. It rather seemed like we were rescuing you.”*

“My cave was the safest place for me and everyone else. I put people in danger just by being near them,” I whispered. *“And whatever Vayme did to me, it certainly wasn’t for my own sake.”*

My aura was still blackened along the outside, as if it had been burned by the king’s.

Strong blinked again. After a long moment’s pause, he finally lowered his head toward me, almost like he was bowing.

Vayme returned, and I felt a surprisingly gentle hand on my wrist before a familiar soft fruit met my palm.

“Eat,” he commanded me.

I lifted it to my lips and took a small bite, careful to keep my gaze fixed on the branches and sky above my head so I wouldn’t have to make eye contact with the king.

“Why are you hungry?” he asked me. Though his tone wasn’t kind, it also wasn’t cruel.

I took another small bite of my fruit, not wanting to explain myself to him.

Considering the size of him and his muscles, he likely had no idea the extent some of us suffered for food. My town had been thriving, before my first storm. So had all of the others around us.

And then I’d woken up surrounded by gusts of wind at thirteen-years-old... and I had panicked.

When I panicked, the winds picked up.

And picked up.

And picked up.

Until my tornado was ravaging our land, violently destroying without purpose or restraint.

Even eight years later, we still hadn't recovered. Everyone was hungry—and it was my fault.

“Her family brings her food. There hasn't been enough for anyone,” Strong explained.

My face warmed at the king's frown. “The town looked fine. There were far more fruits and vegetables than they would need to keep themselves alive, even without the grain they were also growing.”

My defenses rose.

What was he trying to say?

That my family had starved me on purpose?

I refused to believe that, even as my mind returned to the soft curves of my mother's figure, or the strength in my father's build.

They wouldn't have done that... would they?

“You were mistaken,” Strong said calmly to Vayme, broadcasting his thoughts so we could both hear them.

I was no longer certain what to believe.

We remained where we were as I ate the entirety of the fruit. By the time I was done, my belly ached with fullness.

My town had large fields, but there were so many mouths to feed, and they had to sell some of those crops to the kingdom nearby to fund the other necessities they couldn't grow themselves.

They wouldn't leave me hungry. I couldn't believe that, for the sake of my own sanity.

Vayme tried to give me some type of crackers after I'd set the fruit's pit on the dirt, but I shook my head.

I was too full to eat anything else without making myself ill.

Though his expression was stony, he put the crackers away and lifted me onto Strong's back. My fingers buried in the soft fur, and Vayme's body pressed against mine once more as the beast began to run.

The motion and wind kept my thoughts blissfully silent as Strong ran. We stopped for an evening meal as the first of the suns began to set, and I managed a few of the hard, tough crackers, before we started again.

Darkness set in around us as the last of Evare's three suns went down, and I found myself peering at the forest around us. I could see in the dark without any problem, for some reason. I had to assume it was because of whatever Vayme had done to me to give me his magic and change our auras.

It was the middle of the night before we finally stopped beside a river. My body was so tight and achy that Vayme had to lift me off Strong's back, because I could barely move myself.

Vayme was silent as he pulled food from the large bag he wore on his back, handing me more of the crackers he'd given me for dinner. I'd only managed four of them, but the stack he gave me held six.

My gaze flicked from the crackers to the man, and I found him watching me.

I wanted to tell him I couldn't eat them—that my body would feel sick, and he could keep the food—but still felt uncomfortable around him. It was harder to speak when I felt uncomfortable, especially when factoring my soreness and exhaustion into that discomfort.

“You need to eat more than you are. You'll never make it back to the fae lands on a few crackers and one piece of fruit. We'll slowly increase your diet until you're taking in enough food to provide the energy you need.”

My face flushed as anger swelled in my chest, but I stayed silent.

He had not only stolen me from my home, but was also trying to control me with food.

And yes, eating was a necessity, but I had been surviving just fine. I didn't have a lot of energy, but I hadn't needed it. And

the less I ate, the faster I would go unconscious when my magic raged out of control, which was...

It was a way my family could've been controlling me, too.

I still couldn't consider that, though. They weren't controlling me; they loved me.

Bitterness flooded me, and I took a bite of a cracker, trying to hide my emotions.

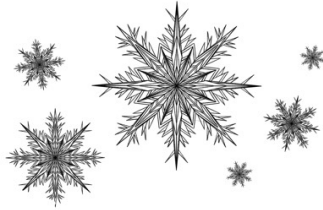
Vayne wasn't my friend.

He wasn't my ally.

I felt his eyes on me while I ate, but I didn't look at him.

CHAPTER 3

KAELLE



My belly was swollen by the time I swallowed the last of the cracker.

“We’ll bathe before we sleep,” Vayme said.

My body went rigid.

Veil.

What if he touched me?

What if he—

“Alone,” he said quickly. “You bathe alone. I also bathe alone.”

I didn’t relax much, though his words calmed the majority of my fears.

“I’ll wait here. Strong will accompany you,” he added.

I considered my options. Arguing might be best—though my chances of winning were slim. The massive fae king could always throw me in the river if I put up too much of a fight.

And truthfully, I was filthy, and had been for far too long. There was a tiny trickle of fresh water that spilled out of the stone on one of the walls of my cave, but that was the only water source on the mountain. Or at least, on the part of the mountain I had the energy to explore. I walked around a little most days to keep myself from going mad, so I’d seen as much of it as I could before my body grew too exhausted to continue.

Anyway, that trickle of water was for both drinking and bathing. I had two buckets—one for each purpose. It took about a day to fill one to the brim, so most of the water was to drink. The remainder, I used with a wet cloth to try to keep myself clean.

It was more difficult than it should've been, given that my magic tended to hit me with all sorts of dust and dirt.

A bath sounded... well, blissful.

I hadn't been truly clean in longer than I cared to consider.

When I looked at Strong, he stood and padded toward the river.

I eased myself to my feet, wincing at the pain in my legs and chafe inside my thighs from gripping Strong's fur between them.

Though I still felt Vayme's eyes on me, I continued ignoring his gaze as I slowly made my way to the river.

When I reached the water, I glanced over my shoulder to make sure I couldn't see Vayme. The side of his muscular shoulder and arm protruded from behind the tree he sat up against, but he was facing away from me, and far enough that I didn't think he would try to look at me.

It wasn't as if the man seemed attracted to me, anyway.

Hopefully, he wasn't waiting for me to drop my guard so he could attack. I didn't have much of a guard, so if he was, he was waiting for something he likely wouldn't even notice.

"My companion is a male of honor. He won't take liberties with you," Strong said, noticing my nerves. *"You have nothing to fear from us, though I understand it may be hard to believe that."*

I dipped my head, not feeling the need to say anything else.

Gingerly, I eased my dress off. A glance down at my bare thighs made me grimace and look away. The skin on the inside of my legs was patchy and red, and while most of it wasn't broken, I had multiple popped blisters where my undergarments met my thighs.

“You’re hurt?” Strong’s voice sounded in my mind.

“Where?” Vayme’s low, growly voice echoed through the forest, making me shiver. When I looked over my shoulder to make sure he hadn’t turned around, I found him in the same position as before, though much more tense.

Strong stared at me, waiting for me to answer his question.

I said nothing, just stepping down toward the water, dressed only in my undergarments. They had started off in one piece that covered my breasts, torso, and lady bits, the same way most human undergarments did, but my parents hadn’t had the money to bring me any new clothing since that first storm I created.

I hadn’t grown around my middle or chest since I was thirteen—really, I may have shrunk—but I did get a bit taller. So, I cut the undergarment in the middle with the one small knife I had, turning the garment into two pieces. It had been uncomfortable after that, so I’d cut it down a few more times until I could live with it.

After I cut them, the lower hem of the top piece fell to the middle of my ribcage, and the top hem of the bottom piece rested at my belly button.

The fabric was worn and scratchy, but I was still grateful I had it.

After the destruction I’d caused, I didn’t really deserve even that.

“Tempest?” Vayme growled, the second demand more threatening than the first.

I ignored the lump in my throat and said quietly, “A captor shouldn’t be concerned with his captive’s health.”

Silence followed.

A long, tense silence.

When I glanced at Strong again, his expression was distant, and I got the feeling he was conversing with Vayme privately.

I waded deeper into the water, and my eyes fluttered shut as I suppressed a groan.

Veil, it felt incredible. I wished the water was colder to ease my muscles, but the lukewarm was so pleasant, I wouldn't complain.

I stripped my undergarments off and tossed them to the dirt beside the river, then scrubbed myself with sand from the bottom. It felt like I was peeling away a whole layer of old, dirt-crusting skin.

"My king apologizes for not thinking to bring soap," Strong murmured into my mind.

I rolled my eyes, facing away from the wolf.

His apology was so unlikely, the remark was ridiculous.

Light wind blew the water around me as I scrubbed at my scalp with my fingers, and then braided my hair behind my head. Since I had nothing to tie it back with, I just left it hanging. It had been a long time since I last cut the blue waves, so they fell below my ass. If I had any amount of freedom in the fae lands, I'd ask someone to cut the strands.

Though I assumed we were headed to the Endless Wilds, a fierce jungle the fae were known to live deep within, Vayme and Strong hadn't mentioned them specifically.

I wrapped an arm around my breasts as I slowly waded back to the edge of the river, marveling at the pale shade of my skin. It had been so long since I'd seen myself free of dirt that I didn't even recognize the color.

A gleam of silver caught my gaze as I reached for my undergarments, and I froze when my eyes landed on my hip.

There was...

A massive handprint.

A massive, *silver* handprint.

It glowed softly, clearly brought on by magic.

My mind went back to the moment when Vayme had grabbed me in the cave.

I had felt burning, but I hadn't paid attention to where it was, specifically.

It seemed safe to assume the burning had been right where his handprint was.

I quickly examined the rest of myself to make sure he hadn't branded me anywhere else, and relief made my shoulders sag when I found nothing but bare skin.

And the damn handprint.

I forced myself to remain calm as I grabbed my undergarments and scrubbed them with a stone beneath the water. Though it was nowhere near as effective as soap would've been, it was far better than nothing.

My mind rolled through everything I knew about Vayme and his magic as I cleaned the fabric.

He was a fae, which meant he had ice magic, but I didn't know if he had any other power on top of that.

He could move extremely fast, and was stronger than any human.

He was immortal.

He was connected to Strong.

His magic had settled in my veins beside my own, and in doing so changed both of our auras, which were physical manifestations of our souls. That meant he had changed my soul.

We could also talk mentally, though he'd commanded me not to.

Vayme had also said he needed my magic for something, and seemed uninterested in my body. My magic seemed wicked, and fae were said to be wicked beings.

I wasn't sure how the handprint fit into his plan to use my magic, but I assumed it was a representation of the connection he had created between us when he said those foreign words.

As I remembered that moment, a shiver rolled down my spine and the words echoed in my mind.

“Sillah ovim rett warum.”

What did they mean?

My lips formed the shape of them.

“Sillah ovim rett warum.”

“You must not speak the vow,” Strong said, his words sharper than I’d ever heard them.

My head snapped to the side as I looked at him.

“If you speak the vow, you’ll seal the bond.”

“What is the bond?” I asked.

He said nothing.

Frustration swelled in my chest, but I hid it.

If I angered the fae king, he could hurt me.

I needed to stay calm, despite the wind that had begun whipping through the trees and snapping against my exposed skin.

Control.

I had to stay in control.

I bit my tongue to stop myself from saying the words that were itching to escape.

Veil, I was frustrated with the situation. Really, really frustrated.

I needed a way to voice that emotion without it coming off that way, so the king didn’t have an excuse to attack me.

I developed a plan as I continued scrubbing my undergarments, and then enacted it, musing, “If you don’t tell me what the bond is, I have no real reason not to seal it. It connected the king’s magic to mine—perhaps if I repeat his words, it will further connect us, and I’ll be able to share his immortality.”

Strong stared me down, as if daring me to try.

I tilted my head back. “What were the words again? *Sill* something...”

Strong's chest rumbled with a warning growl.

Satisfaction curled in my abdomen.

This conversation would tell me exactly where I stood with the king and his bonded beast. They could lie as much as they wanted with nothing on the line, but if I had a bit of control, they would either react violently, or they would tell me the truth.

“No, I think it was *Sillah*,” I said. “*Sillah ovim...*”

“Cover yourself, Tempest,” the king commanded from within the forest, and then I heard his heavy footsteps on the dirt. I lowered myself deeper into the water, so I was covered below my shoulders.

Did he really think my name was Tempest?

He hadn't bothered to ask me for it, and he must've heard Strong call me that before, so maybe he assumed that really was my name.

His angry, silver eyes collided with mine, his chest rising and falling quickly. “The bond between us is a mate bond.”

His words stunned me into silence.

I didn't know much about magical beings, but I had heard the stories mention their mates. A mate was like a husband or wife—but magical, and permanent.

“You do not need to know why I established the bond between us, but you should know that it will disappear when the next eclipse arrives, unless you speak the words to seal it. If you do that, the connection will be permanent. A mate bond doesn't vanish when one crosses the veil; it carries through every world that follows after death. Our souls would be bound together for the rest of our eternal existences.”

I said nothing, too stunned by the admission to speak.

“Strong tells me your undergarments have injured you, so you will wear the spare clothing I brought for the remainder of our journey. Should you cooperate peacefully, I will return you to your town after the eclipse has passed. Should you seal our bond, I will lock you in another cave myself.”

He set a bundle of fabric on the ground, then strode back to his tree and sat down.

My heart beat quickly in my chest, fear clouding my mind. The wind had picked up even more, as well.

When I looked at Strong, I found him looking away from me. That shouldn't have stung, but it did.

I was still alone. I couldn't let myself believe otherwise. All I had and could trust was my family, and that would always remain true.

I abandoned my old undergarments by the river and stepped out as carefully as I could, trying to keep my feet in the grass and weeds so I wouldn't coat them in dirt. My wind blew me dry quickly as I picked up the shirt and pants Vayme had left.

They were fae-king-sized, but the fabric was softer than anything I'd ever felt. I would have to tie knots in them to hold them up, but I could manage that.

I slipped the shirt over my head and looked down at myself. The long sleeves fell past my fingertips, and the bottom hem nearly hit my knees.

It took a few tries to roll the sleeves up to my wrists, especially with the wind blowing around me, but it slowed a bit as I stepped into the pants and began feeling more secure than I had a few minutes earlier.

The thought of a mate bond was a bit terrifying, but it was no longer a mystery to me. I understood the connection between myself and Vayme as much as I could without a better, calmer explanation, and that put me at ease. Whether he liked it or not, I had a small amount of control over our situation.

He had stolen me from my home, but I could trap him in our bond as retribution if he didn't agree to return me to my cave. And by sealing our bond, I could ruin his life if he did anything to harm me. Sure, it would ruin my life in the process as well, but what more did I have to lose? I had already been abducted and dragged away from the only home I had ever

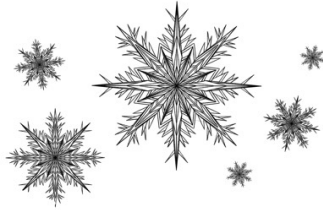
known, and I would never be able to locate it again or make it back on my own.

My lips curved upward just the tiniest bit.

I wasn't as powerless as I had thought.

CHAPTER 4

KAELLE



Vayme created a tiny, rectangular shelter of ice before he left so he could bathe. He told me in no uncertain terms that we would have to share it for safety, too.

I wasn't looking forward to sleeping beside him, but didn't bother arguing. It seemed safe to assume that our mate bond would make us both uncomfortable in some ways, and that there was no way around it.

I also wasn't under the impression that he *wanted* to sleep beside me, so that made it less nerve-wracking. Neither of us would try to snuggle.

Though I had read plenty of books with sex in them and knew how it worked, being hidden in a cave hadn't led me to experience anything related to intimacy. I had been curious before, but I certainly didn't want to learn anything about that from Vayme.

I stepped into the shelter and tried to get comfortable on the thick bed of ice. I didn't have a mattress in my cave, but I had a bundle of straw and blankets that were far preferable to solid ice.

Though I was exhausted, I found myself tossing and turning, trying to get comfortable.

Vayme eventually joined me, and I rolled onto my side, facing away from him. He was so big that my body pressed against the ice while he got situated.

My arm started to go numb, and I itched to move again, but bit my cheek and forced myself to remain still.

Vayme fidgeted a bit, and I inhaled sharply as his thick arm brushed my ass. He grunted an apology, and my cheeks burned.

Veil, it couldn't get less comfortable.

"You don't have a blanket in your bag?" I finally whispered, moving a bit so feeling would return to my arm and hip.

"No."

I closed my eyes and forced myself to stay still.

Maybe if I could ignore the numbness and discomfort long enough, I could sleep.

"Your magic's pull is getting worse," he growled a few minutes later.

My frustration swelled thicker. "I'm just going to sleep outside." I tried to get up, but smacked my head on the roof of the shelter and crashed back down to the ice.

Vayme muttered something under his breath, then rolled onto his side and lifted my head up, setting it on his thick bicep to rest.

I sucked in a breath when my face met the muscle, but my wind died down noticeably as I managed to find a slightly more comfortable position. Though my back brushed his chest the tiniest bit, and my cheek was pressed to his arm, I found myself starting to relax just a little.

There was a smell on his skin—something light, that reminded me of the scent of fresh rain in the wind.

It calmed me, and soon enough, lulled me to sleep.

Vayme made me eat crackers and fruit before we headed out with the first sunrise. We'd only slept a few hours, so I was too disoriented to protest.

My stomach heaved and rolled for a bit when Strong started to run, but it adjusted soon enough, and we continued on.

Three days later, we reached what Strong told me was near the outer edge of the Aching Chasm. The dirt was a deep crimson red color that made me nervous, but we didn't go anywhere near the deadly drop-off that housed an unknown number of gargoyles and who knew what other magical beings. Strong told me that the edge of the Chasm was safer than the Timeless Sands, and there was no way around traveling through one or the other.

I believed him.

Vayme and I only exchanged a few words each day. He fed me, and I ate whatever he gave me, even though the amount kept increasing. We shared the shelter in silence every night, and I always used his arm as a pillow. The only time we spoke was when I told him I needed to stop to heed nature's call, or he told me we needed to pause so I could eat.

The days were endlessly long.

I had too much time to think.

Far too much time to think.

And the more I thought about the cave and my family, the more I remembered the way my parents' bodies had grown thicker in the years since the storm, while mine remained painfully frail.

The more I thought about that, the more Vayme's words seemed to repeat in my mind.

"The town looked fine. There were far more fruits and vegetables than they would need to keep themselves alive, even without the grain they were also growing."

I didn't want to believe him, but he'd had no reason to lie.

And the more I considered it, the more I wondered if it was true.

My magic was dangerous. *I* was dangerous. Neither myself nor my family had ever argued against that. It was a frequent topic, in fact.

"It's too dangerous for you to leave the cave, Kaelle," they'd say.

“Your magic is deadly,” they’d add.

“We’re all still starving from the last time you lost control,”
they’d remind me.

The first two, I knew were true.

I *was* dangerous.

I *was* deadly.

But what if they weren’t still starving?

What if they had starved *me* because they were afraid of me?

What if they had only visited me to keep track of my magic?

I couldn’t let myself think about that too much, because every time I did, it made my eyes sting.

If they were really afraid of me, I had to believe they would’ve killed me.

But at the same time... what was the point of destroying a weapon you could use in your favor?

The town had struggled against the reign of a cruel king in a nearby kingdom when I was a child. I could remember my parents talking about the taxes no one could afford, and the terrible soldiers who would come to enforce them.

They hadn’t mentioned the taxes since my storm had destroyed all those towns and that kingdom. I was sure they had rebuilt, but they hadn’t been mentioned to me.

What if there was a reason for that?

What if they were lying to me, or using me, while starving me?

I didn’t want it to be true, but some part of me knew it was a possibility. Maybe that same part of me had always known but was too afraid of myself to consider the truth.

Though I tried to push all of those thoughts and possibilities away, there was so much free time passing that they lingered.

And lingered.

And lingered.

Another day went by before we reached the Endless Wilds. When we entered the jungle, I found myself looking around in both terror and intrigue. The trees around us were so monstrous that the smallest one I saw was even thicker around than my cave was wide.

The trunks and branches were decorated with leaves bigger than me, and wrapped in huge, vibrant green vines. I couldn't see any of our suns through the branches far above our heads, and found myself counting the numerous rivers and streams we passed.

The Wilds were full of life in a way the Human Lands and the outer edge of the Aching Chasm simply were not.

Auras flew past us constantly, and it scared me a little. I wasn't used to being surrounded by so many creatures, and it worried me to know they were there without being able to see what, exactly, they were.

The constant change in colors and life around us drained me even faster than usual. My stomach growled, and I struggled to keep my eyes open while night approached.

Vayme looked a bit suspicious when we stopped for dinner, but he didn't ask how I was doing. He and I didn't talk enough for that.

We bathed in a river again that night, staying close but keeping our backs to each other for both privacy and safety. When we reached the shelter, I fell asleep even before he tucked his arm beneath my head.

I still woke up lying on it, though.

Three more long days passed as Strong ran. I had started to understand why it was called the *Endless* Wilds. Even at the wolf's incredible speed, it was still taking what felt like a lifetime to get through it.

It was long past the middle of the night when we finally reached the outer edge of a fae city called Jirev.

“Be careful here, Tempest. This is not Vayme’s city, and he has little control,” Strong murmured to me.

The words didn’t make me feel any better.

Earlier that day, I’d tried to ask Vayme what to expect from the city, as well as a few other things about fae. He had told me I didn’t need to worry about it.

That answer was frustrating, but I had been too exhausted to push him further.

My eyes scanned the city as Strong ran. The homes and shops had been carved into the massive trees all around us. They were connected by bridges of wood, branches, and ice, though the latter seemed to be melting in most places.

There were a ton of fae around us, and all of them had huge, vibrant auras like Vayme’s. It was overwhelming, and I started developing a headache soon after we entered the city.

As we reached the more populated portion, the ache in my head grew to a sharp pounding that made my stomach churn.

I was in so much pain that I barely participated when Vayme stopped at a clothing shop. Since I could do nothing but stand there with my arms around my middle, he held a few dresses up to my figure before buying them. I was still wearing his clothes, and I supposed he would want them back.

Afterward, Strong carried us to a shop that sold food. Vayme sat us down in the far corner, and waved a male server down without saying a word.

Maybe I wasn’t the only person he didn’t like to talk to.

The man brought us food soon after, and I slowly worked on the soup and bread. The flavors were incredible, and I found myself wishing I didn’t feel so awful, if just so I could enjoy the food more.

A different man with a terrible, shadowy aura came up and exchanged a few heated words with the king as I finished up my meal. While Vayme remained calm, I could see his energy begin to vibrate with whatever he was feeling.

When the man finally stepped away, Vayme's emotions were strong enough that I was nearly choking on the damn things.

I was dizzy when he hauled me onto Strong's back again, and my stomach churned when Strong started moving through the city, quickly.

We entered some sort of stadium, with a large metal cage in the middle of the room and rows of benches lining the outside. Vayme seated me just outside the edge of the cage, and the crowd roared around us.

Everything around me blurred as I tried to look at the fae, but I saw nothing except auras.

So many auras.

So many colorful, massive, *violent* auras.

Vayme's wasn't even an outlier. I'd thought he was some kind of a monster when we met, but looking around, I was forced to accept that it wasn't just him—it was all of the fae. Either all of them were monsters, or they were just powerful, ancient beings with magic stronger than I had even realized was possible.

My own aura was nearly as large as theirs, but it didn't affect me because I was used to it. It was soft, calm, and *mine*.

I noticed that Vayme's aura had left mine and Strong's, and my lips curved down in a frown.

That didn't make me feel safe.

Especially considering I couldn't tell what was going on.

Vayme and I were nowhere near friends or allies, but we were bonded, and that meant he would protect me.

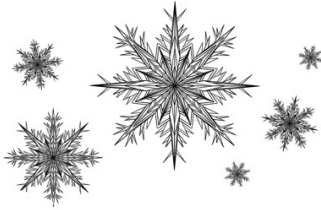
Or I was *pretty sure* it meant that. It at least meant he wouldn't hurt me, if our time traveling was an accurate representation of who he was.

My head ached so intensely that I began to sway slightly. When I closed my eyes, I could still hear the fae cheering and roaring around me. Their auras were so intense, the colors leaked through my eyelids.

The more time went on, the more I started to wonder what shape I'd be in when it was finally time to leave the stadium.

CHAPTER 5

VAYME



It took every fiber of effort I possessed not to look back over my shoulder at the fragile human on the bench as I walked away from her.

Soon enough, I met Kier outside the large metal cage built for the violent fighting events our people put on. My fists were clenched as I fought my own mind and the damn newfound possessiveness.

Kaelle was safe.

Strong would ensure that.

My rage was too fierce to allow myself to stay by her side. I could hurt her.

Kier had been in the cage, bleeding, wrestling, and grinning, when I entered the stadium. He still wore a feral grin when he stepped outside the metal bars. “You’re alive, then.”

There was no love between us. His people, mine, and Ravv’s had warred for centuries. We’d established peace for all our sakes, but that didn’t erase the impact of so damn many years of fighting.

I had lost friends to his warriors, as he had lost friends to mine. And yet, we had been forced to put that behind us and focus on the future.

A future that wouldn’t exist, if half my people had any say in it.

“For now,” I growled. It nearly killed me to ask for help, but I forced myself to add, “I’m struggling to stay in control, and

my human is fragile. I need a fight to release the tension before I harm her.”

Kier jerked his head in a nod. The bastard had never turned down a fight in his life.

“With weapons. To first blood,” I added.

Kier’s grin returned, still wicked as he strode back into the cage with his arms opened wide. I followed him inside, and he announced the match.

I waited until he’d turned to face me before tapping into my ice to create the greatsword I preferred to fight with.

Our people roared around us as our weapons appeared. Their bloodthirsty voices were vicious, but that was to be expected.

“Ready?” Kier’s ice swords were just as sharp as my own, but we wouldn’t attempt to kill each other. We’d spent far too much time and effort building peace to tear it down with one foolish act.

I jerked my head in a nod, and we began.

He slashed toward me, and I blocked in defense. My movements were stronger and harsher than they should’ve been, but that wasn’t surprising considering I’d spent more than two weeks traveling.

I slashed at him, and he dodged the motion easily.

Our speeds picked up as we settled into the fight, focused entirely.

Time passed, movements grew instinctual, and my mind slipped back to the conversation with Cev in the food shop.

My rage swelled, and I swung too hard, slowing myself by a fraction of a second. Kier took the opening. His sword caught my shoulder, and pain sliced through my fury. The cut wasn’t deadly, but it wasn’t shallow, either.

The crowd cheered as Kier stepped back, wearing that damn grin again. “Your human is distracting you.”

Of course she was.

She was my damn *mate*.

The woman's smell alone made it difficult to keep my hands off her skin. The scent of her fear set me on edge—and veil, she was constantly afraid of me.

And Cev's threats...

My gaze flicked back to her just long enough to assure me she was okay before I focused on Kier. There was blood rolling down my arm, but that was hardly a first.

“Again?” he asked.

I jerked my head in a nod.

We settled into position, then began.

Though my motions were smoother and less rage-filled, eventually, control of my mind slipped away from me again, and the distraction cost me.

Kier won three more rounds before I was bleeding enough to take my mind off Cev, my brother, and Tempest.

The pain finally cleared my mind enough during the fifth match, and after a long fight, I defeated Kier.

He challenged me again, and I couldn't say no.

Partway through the sixth fight, Strong said quietly into my mind, “*Kaelle doesn't seem well.*”

My gaze jerked in her direction without pause, and one of Kier's swords cut into the outside of my thigh.

I swore, looking back at the king and finding him a bit apologetic. His sword vanished from my leg, and I focused on the human for a moment.

My human.

She shouldn't have been mine, but veil, she was.

She looked fine from where I was, so I jerked my attention back to Kier when he asked, “Again?”

I couldn't refuse the fight, so I nodded, and we began once more.

Worry for my human pooled in my abdomen, but I didn't allow my mind or gaze to linger. I focused on what I was doing, until my sword finally carved into his back, ending the match.

"Come, now," Strong growled into my mind.

When my gaze flicked over there, I saw him holding up my female.

My *unconscious* female.

Kier's eyes followed my gaze. "Veil."

"Thank you." I lowered my chin toward him slightly. Though it was difficult, I ignored the fierce pounding in my chest and forced myself to make my way out of the cage at a normal pace.

"What happened?" I demanded as I went.

"I don't know. She was swaying a bit, but I thought she was just tired."

What if something was wrong with her?

The worry I felt with the thought was ridiculous. She was terrified of me, and even if she wasn't, I had vowed to take her back home after the eclipse.

Any feelings I developed for her would have to be inconsequential, despite her soft humanness and the look in her eyes that spoke to my damn soul.

To care for her would be to put us both at risk, and I couldn't allow that.

"We'll take her back to our room and find a healer if we can't figure out what's wrong," I said.

Strong agreed, and I adjusted her position before climbing on his back behind her. My body held hers securely against him, and I tried to keep my position stiff so the people who saw us wouldn't think anything of it.

I checked her pulse with my fingers to make sure she was alright. Thankfully, her heartbeat was normal, and she was still breathing steadily.

Strong got us back to Kier's castle quickly, entering the monstrous tree that housed it. The castle itself was larger than Tempest's town, but that reminded me of the way her people had starved her.

And that made me angry again.

I set her on the bed and checked both her breathing and pulse again. She was still functioning properly... so why had she passed out?

"Perhaps she loses consciousness at the sight of blood," Strong suggested.

"I was bleeding for a while before she passed out."

He considered it.

I did too.

Neither of us came up with a reasonable answer.

I started pacing the room to distract myself from my worry, and Strong rested his head on her abdomen so he could feel her breathing. She was still wearing my clothes—I hadn't asked her to change into her dress. She had seemed overwhelmed by the fabric in the shop, so I assumed she needed time to adjust.

What if it had been something more?

What if she was ill?

I continued to pace as my thoughts wandered, worry morphing into agitation and frustration at my helplessness. I didn't trust the other kings' healers. My brother was a healer, but he was back in my city, Vuuth. And as far as the Jirevs and Loires knew, he was dead.

Though there were many of my people that I trusted, Matían was the only one I trusted with my life, and now Tempest's. I couldn't trust any of them with the knowledge of my mating, and I certainly couldn't ask them for help.

My people were the reason I'd had to take the woman from her prison at all.

I continued pacing for another twenty minutes, until Kaelle's eyes fluttered a little.

In a heartbeat, I was seated on the edge of the bed, once again checking the temperature of her forehead and pulse at her throat.

Finally, her eyes opened. The wariness in the blue orbs made my chest constrict.

"What happened?" I managed.

It came out angrier than I wanted.

Her eyes closed again.

My jaw clenched as a moment passed, and another.

Finally, she whispered, "Fae auras are really bright."

I blinked, caught entirely off guard by her words.

Fae auras?

I'd heard of some demons seeing auras, but not a human.

"Since when can you see auras?" I growled at her.

Veil, I needed to stop sounding so angry with her.

Sure enough, Kaelle shrank away from me. "Since my magic came in."

I shoved a hand through my hair.

Her gaze caught on the cut on my shoulder, and her face turned a soft shade of green that contrasted far too prettily with the blue of her hair and eyes. "You're bleeding."

"I'm aware."

Her eyes shuttered.

Veil, I had no idea how to talk to her.

Every damn thing I did scared the woman.

"Is there a bath in here?" she asked me quietly, clearly intending to get away from me.

I didn't blame her.

If I was a small, terrified human female, I'd probably want to get away from me too.

"The bathing pool is there." I gestured to the corner of the room. I thought she'd choose the shower if I told her where it was, but didn't really want her out of my sight. Despite my own desires, I couldn't bring myself to lie to her, even by omission. "There's a shower in the bathroom. Water falls from the ceiling to clean you, if you'd rather."

Her eyes widened.

Everything scared her.

It should've made me want to push her away, but it made me want to wrap a damn arm around her and show her I could protect her. The desire was ridiculous, so I did my best to ignore it.

"No need to be afraid. Vayme will show you how it works," Strong said, stepping up to us and nuzzling her hand with the side of his face.

"That's okay, you don't have to," Kaelle said quickly.

"No, you shouldn't be afraid of our room." I paused, and then changed the wording. "*Your* room."

Strong shot me a look.

"*Our* room," I admitted, taking it back. "I can't sleep outside, or anywhere else. It's not safe for you."

She gave me the tiniest nod, and carefully eased her legs off the edge of the bed.

I should've tucked them beneath the blanket when she was unwell.

I should've... veil, I hadn't done a damn thing right with her.

I had no idea what to do with a woman.

She winced when she stood, and I grabbed her by the waist when she teetered. Though she sucked in a breath at my touch, she still looked dizzy enough that I worried she would collapse.

“I’ll find someone to bring you food, Tempest,” Strong said, as I held her upright and waited for her dizziness to subside.

She whispered her thanks.

Even after he was gone, she still didn’t seem steady.

I tucked an arm around her waist and stepped a bit closer to her so I could hold more of her weight, and then started walking. She reluctantly moved with me, and her chest was rising and falling quickly by the time we reached the bathroom.

“What’s wrong?” The damn words came out as a growl again.

“You’re bleeding on me,” she nearly whimpered.

She really *was* afraid of blood.

I withdrew quickly, and her knees knocked as she wobbled. When I caught her with a hand on her hip again, she stumbled toward me.

“I’ve never really been around blood,” she said, her eyes squeezed shut. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize.”

Her silence told me those words came out wrong, too.

I forced myself not to grit my teeth as I said slowly, “I am not angry with you. Situations where I have no control are... difficult for me.”

“Imagine being in my shoes, then.”

I blinked.

She had been stolen from the prison she considered home, by a deadly fae warrior who she was supposedly mated to, without any information as to why...

Veil.

That *would* be difficult.

I supposed I needed to tell her some things, but that would have to wait until she was clean and steadier on her feet.

“This is the shower.” I showed her how to turn it on, and watched rapture fill her eyes as the water began to fall.

Her hand stretched out, and her rapture turned to wonder. “It’s like rain.”

I made a noise of agreement. “Can you stand on your own?”

Her lips turned downward, her wonder fading away. “I don’t know. My head still feels like someone took a rock to it.”

I grimaced. “Because of the auras?”

“Yes.”

“You can bathe tonight, then.”

“Is it even night still?” she murmured.

“It is.”

Probably.

I shut the water off, and helped her over to the bathing pool. She eyed it, and then eyed me.

“I’ll need to stay nearby, in case you lose consciousness again,” I said bluntly.

I wasn’t about to let the woman drown.

Her face reddened.

I needed to give her an alternative before she worried, yet again, that I was trying to steal her virtue. “I’ll leave my back to you if you speak the whole time I’m looking away. That will be my guarantee you’re not drowning.”

The blush on her cheeks didn’t fade, but it stopped growing redder. “I’ll hum.”

I waited until she finally started humming, and then turned my back to her.

Her hum was soft, but smooth. While the song she’d chosen wasn’t one I recognized, it was calm and quiet. I found my eyes closing and heartbeat slowing as I listened.

There was soap sitting on a small shelf inside the bath, and its scent filled the air as she began to scrub herself clean. Tempest

would feel much better after using it; there was still dirt in her hair that had probably been there for years.

I didn't allow myself to consider that. If I thought too much about it, I'd have the urge to go back to her parents' town and slaughter everyone who'd dared mistreat the small human.

Her hum continued as she washed. I retrieved a towel for her when she was finishing up, and handed it to her without looking back when she stepped out. Even without seeing the woman bare, my cock was thick and hard, which I didn't acknowledge.

Kaelle was still drying off when Strong reentered the room with a female fae I trusted, Kee. Kee gave my human a curious look, then shot me a lingering one after she set two plates down on a small table beside the bed.

Though she was one of the fae I trusted most, I had never been interested in her romantically the way she was interested in me. To take a partner, I would have to enjoy their presence and body in a way I hadn't ever enjoyed anyone's, so I didn't see a future in which I was paired off with someone in any way.

It had been centuries since I'd cared enough to spend an eclipse with anyone at all. The idea had grown unappealing after a few decades of finding satisfaction in every way possible.

And yet my body had responded to Kaelle every time I was near her. Despite her fear, despite her dislike for me, despite everything, I wanted the human in a way I hadn't realized I was still capable of.

Of course, I couldn't admit that to her.

She was still terrified of me, and her terror certainly didn't make me hard. It was her body and scent that did, particularly at night.

Strong started guiding Kee out, but she stepped away from him so she could walk over to me. I fought the urge to groan.

"Vayme," she said. Her voice was soft, as if we were lovers.

I fought the urge to look at my human, to make sure she wasn't getting the wrong idea, and growled, "*King Vayme.*"

She nodded but didn't correct herself. "Some of our fae were worried when you disappeared. Giving a reason for your absence would help negate the effect of those who work against you. I can spread the word, if you want."

"Fine." The word came out an irritated grumble. "Tell them the other kings and I decided to make the events more memorable by stealing magical humans to fight in a battle. We went to the elves, to ask them where to find the humans, and then retrieved them. Now, we're back."

She put a hand on my chest.

I pushed it off with another growl. "I did not give you permission to touch me, female. Spread the news, and get out of my room."

Strong nudged her hip with his nose a bit harder than necessary, and she finally let him lead her out.

I turned to look at Tempest when the woman was gone, and found her strangely... red. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes looked angry, and her fists were clenched.

Veil, fury was a good look on her.

I waited for her to say something, but she didn't.

Instead, she let out a few long breaths, turned her back to me, and put on the fae-style undergarments and black dress. Then she stiffly walked back to the bed, where she sat down and started on the food Strong had brought her.

The dress hung off her shoulders and showed a strip of her abdomen, before falling to the tops of her thighs. It highlighted the starvation she had been put through and made it difficult for me to fight my rage toward her family again.

I assumed her anger was about Kee touching me, but it could've been about the human fight I had mentioned.

On second thought, the fight was certainly the source of her anger.

I crossed the room and sat down beside her. “The human fight is merely an excuse the other kings and I came up with so we had something to tell our people, rather than admitting our mating. You’ll have to fight, but you won’t be at risk in any way.”

She focused on her food, but her jaw was set in anger.

I... well, I had no idea what to say to her.

Clearly, my answer hadn’t cheered her up.

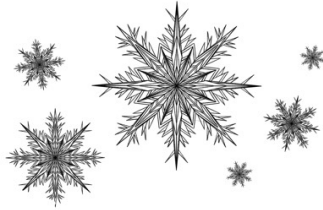
So I remained silent while she ate, and then added some of my own food to her empty plate before starting on my own meal. She stopped glaring at me when I fed her, at least.

We ate quietly, until Tempest curled up on the bed. Without an excuse to share it with her, I stopped in the bathroom to patch my wounds. When they were covered, I headed over to the doors and tried to make myself comfortable on the floor while Strong snuggled up with my human.

It took some time, but eventually, I fell asleep.

CHAPTER 6

KAELLE



I tossed and turned until Vayme started snoring, and then continued tossing and turning. My wind was irritating me, but there was still nothing I could do to stop it.

A few hours must've passed when I finally lifted my exhausted, frustrated gaze to Strong's.

He was already staring at me.

"You're worried about Kee," he said.

I closed my eyes again and ignored him.

If he knew her name, there was obviously something between her and Vayme.

"The bond will lead you to be possessive, Tempest. It's natural. If another male were to touch your body intimately, Vayme would remove his head."

"He would not."

"He would." Strong's words left no room for questioning, even though I still didn't think that was true.

"It doesn't matter. He didn't tell her we're mated, so obviously he doesn't feel any loyalty toward me. The bond will only last until the eclipse, anyway." I threw an arm over my eyes to keep myself from opening them again. I needed to sleep, not obsess over a man I didn't even want.

My wind was still blowing through the room in agitation, draining my energy and making everything worse.

If Strong was right, the obsessing was just because of the bond, but it was still frustrating.

“He can’t tell her or anyone else about the bond. Couples who seal their mate bond are often murdered in the fae kingdoms. There was a cult that killed mated couples many years ago, and enough of its members slipped through the cracks that the murders still occur.”

Shock flooded me, and I sat up quickly. *“What? Why wouldn’t Vayme tell me that?”*

“You’re already scared of most things. If he told you someone might kill you for your bond, it would be one more thing to fear.”

I was stunned speechless for a moment. Finally, I said, *“What if I’d told someone because he didn’t inform me?”*

“Vayme would’ve killed them before they could spread the news.”

“If he was really that concerned about my life, he wouldn’t have started the bond between us and then signed me up for a fight.”

“I can agree the fight was a bad idea,” Strong said. *“But the bond was the only choice.”*

Letting out a long huff, I dropped to my back again. *“Yet neither of you will tell me why it was the only choice.”*

“You are easily scared,” Strong reminded me.

My wind whipped around us lightly, but unfortunately, it didn’t throw anything at the giant wolf.

I wasn’t getting anywhere, so I changed the subject.

“Why are some of the fae bonded to giant bears and tree cats instead of wolves?”

“The bears are called idorr, and the tree cats are called esu.” He pronounced the words eye-door and ee-sue. *“Different types of beasts call each of the kingdoms home. The esu are best suited for the forest, so they live in Jirev. The idorr are best fit for the glacier, so they stay in Loire. Not all beasts are*

willing or able to speak mind-to-mind with a fae they aren't bonded to, so don't take offense if you meet some who are not. The esu are known to be quite particular about it."

That was interesting.

I eyed him, expecting him to offer the name of whatever he was called. He knew I had no idea about the proper name for... whatever he was.

He remained silent.

Strong was going to make me ask.

I waited another moment before finally giving in. *"What are the wolves called?"*

"We are xuno." He pronounced the word zoo-no. *"We enjoy the caves of Vuuth, so we remain there."*

"Caves?" My mind returned to the comfortable cave I had called home for so long.

"Yes. Our cave system is vast, and packed full of both magic and ice. It's much different than the small one you lived in."

"I loved my cave," I said a bit defensively.

"Then you will adore Vuuth."

I shook my head at him, and my stomach rumbled.

Though there was still anger in my veins, Vayme had trained me into having an obnoxiously large appetite that only seemed to be growing.

"Let's find you more food so we can both sleep," Strong said. *"I'll take you to the castle's dining hall."*

I reluctantly agreed, and we both slipped out of the room as silently as possible. The tiny fae dress I had on made me self-conscious about the thinness of my legs, and the way my ribs showed, but it seemed better to fit in than to draw attention to my humanness.

My worry that Vayme would wake up and yell at me for leaving the room faded as I put more distance between myself and the king. Strong walked at my side, and I slipped my

fingers into his fur so I would feel a little safer. My wind was still blowing more obnoxiously than I liked, but I hoped it would slow as I ate.

We reached a large room full of tables of different shapes and sizes, and Strong led me to one at the far end. He murmured for me to sit down, and then slipped through a door nearby for a moment.

My eyes slowly scanned the room, and I found two dozen fae looking at me curiously. Their auras were still massive and intense, but since there were less of them, they only caused a slight strain on my mind.

My face still warmed, though, and my wind picked up a bit.

Maybe my humanness was still obvious.

Strong returned a moment later and swept the room with a warning glare. Most of the eyes left me, and he sat down on the floor at my feet.

My fingers buried in his fur again for security, and I remained silent as I waited.

A few minutes later, a fae woman I didn't recognize brought me three large plates of food. When I thanked her, she smiled and bowed her head toward me.

My face warmed, but I nodded back, then started on the food.

As I worked on my meal, a small, pale woman with red-orange hair stepped into the dining room and looked around.

Her gaze landed on me, and lingered.

Her aura was more toned-down than most of the fae's, its size and color along the same lines as mine. And she didn't have a bonded beast at her side, which made me wonder who she was.

She stepped through the same door Strong had used, and then came and sat down across from me and smiled. "Hey. You're human, right?"

I nodded.

If I was supposed to fight other humans, it made sense that I'd see them in the castle.

I should've put the facts together and realized what she was, but between my exhaustion and the overwhelm of my magic, I wasn't thinking properly.

"I am too. I'm Laeli," she said.

"I'm Kaelle." I paused for a moment, trying to think of something worth saying despite my tendency to grow silent when faced with new situations. Finally, I settled on, "At least I'm not the only one."

"There's another one of us too—her name's Nissa. She has plant magic, and she's mated to Kier."

Kier was the king Vayme had fought in the cages, when the magic overwhelmed me. His aura was just as intense and deadly as Vayme's. "He's terrifying."

"Is your king not?"

My mind went back to the way he'd growled at me, towering over me with that awful glare in his eyes, and I shuddered a little. "Vayme is worse."

Laeli leaned toward me slightly. I wondered if she'd realized she was doing it at all. "Did he abduct you too? Ravv likes to tell me he rescued me, which is technically true, but I'm pretty sure he would've stolen me away even if I'd been happy in my old life."

"Yeah. My village kept me protected in a cave outside town so I wouldn't kill their crops with my wind. There was never enough food to go around, even before my magic came in," I admitted.

She caught my hand and squeezed lightly. "I'm sorry. The king of my city kept me locked in a cellar beneath their prison, so I can imagine the misery of that."

Horror swelled in my chest, but I tried not to show it. "Veil."

"Yeah. At least we're free now."

I nodded.

Despite the difficulties of her past, the woman looked confident. Maybe even calm.

I hesitated, but finally voiced the question lingering in my mind. “How are you not scared senseless? You don’t even look nervous about being here, and I feel like I can barely breathe through the terror.”

Laeli smiled a bit and leaned toward me more. “The best way to stop being afraid is to act like you’re not. The more confidently you carry yourself, the more people will believe you’re confident, even if you’re terrified on the inside.”

I sighed.

I had really hoped there would be a simple answer, like some kind of magic.

“That sounds... difficult,” I said.

“But worth it.”

I nodded reluctantly.

Someone brought her a plate of food too, and we both grew quiet as we ate. She was clearly just as hungry as I was, if not hungrier.

Hearing that she had been held prisoner made me feel slightly better about my own situation. Technically, I had never been imprisoned. I had stayed in my cave by my own choice, because my magic was terrifyingly strong. Even if my family had been starving me to keep me weak, I could have left. I could’ve walked away at any moment, but I chose to stay, because I loved my cave.

Because I loved my family, too.

And that made me feel slightly more at peace with the horrible possibilities.

As I continued to eat, the exhaustion of the day—or days, as I wasn’t sure what time it was—finally caught up to me.

I found myself sagging as I struggled to continue lifting my fork to my mouth.

Laeli studied me for a moment before asking, “Are you okay?”

“Yeah. I think I just need to go to bed,” I whispered. “It’s been a long week.”

Or a long week and a half, I supposed.

“Get out of here, then.” She waved me toward the door, and I nodded.

Strong stood with me, telling me to leave my plate where it was and lean against him as we made our way out. Even with him holding me up, the walk felt very, very long.

When we made it back, I collapsed in bed and slept.

And slept.

And slept.

Vayme eventually woke me with a touch to my shoulder. The touch was surprisingly gentle, and I wrestled my heavy eyelids up. My sleepy eyes collided with his intense silvers, and I tried not to suck in a breath.

Veil, the man was still terrifying.

Massive, and deadly in every way.

“You need to eat,” he told me.

I nodded and slowly slid out of bed.

My feet hit the ground, and he caught my elbow to help me as I stood.

Now that I was awake, I could feel the yawning pit in my stomach painfully demanding I fill it.

I was still wearing the fae-style dress from earlier, but saw my old human dress hanging over the bathroom door, clean.

Nostalgia hit me, and Vayme released my arm when I took it into the bathroom to change into it.

As soon as it was on my skin, I regretted the decision. The fabric was stiff and scratchy, and the fit was truly terrible.

I didn’t want to admit as much to Vayme, so I tied my hair up in a bun and said nothing as we slipped out of the room.

We walked down the hallway, and when I looked at him, I saw what almost resembled hesitation in his often-stony expression. I wasn't going to push him to tell me what he was thinking, so I didn't remark on it.

Finally, as we reached the dining hall, his mind touched mine. The brush of it shocked me, considering he had told me harshly that I was never supposed to speak into his mind.

"You deserve to know more than I've told you," he said.

I did... but I couldn't say that.

It might encourage him to stay silent again.

When he glanced at me, I gave a small nod to show I'd heard him.

"The fae kingdoms have only just recently established peace," he said. *"I was the one to initiate the peace discussions, and some of my people despise me for it. Some of them prefer to fight, as they know nothing else. It has been centuries since couples have mated or brought children into our world, so our numbers are dwindling."*

We reached the dining hall, and I still remained silent. It was mostly empty, which made me wonder what time it was, but I didn't ask.

Vayme gestured toward a table, and I sat down while he went to the door to request food from what I suspected was the kitchen. When he joined me at the table, he put a fair amount of distance between us and resumed speaking.

"A decade ago, my brother disappeared during a battle. He was killed—or at least, we assumed so—but no one recovered his body. I mourned him severely. He was the person I trusted most, as well as my people's only healer. Rather than throwing myself into battle, I was determined to honor his memory by ending the war the way he had been trying to convince me to do for most of my time on the throne."

Vayme's words stunned me.

I supposed after all his anger and silence, I hadn't considered the king to be a *person*. Certainly not one with family or

emotions. I hadn't really considered him to be anything except my captor, the stoic king.

He added, *"Only a few of my people were vocal about their desire to continue the war. They understood that I was mourning, and most looked forward to a future where we weren't in a constant state of losing our loved ones. Until two months ago, when my brother returned."*

I blinked.

"Matian swept into the city on the back of his bonded beast in the middle of the night, with a child in his arms. A young girl who looked like him, and carried a deadly magic in her veins. He told a story of getting severely injured in battle just outside Jirev, and being carried by his companion to the Timeless Sands while struggling to survive. Both of them had long been tired of the fighting, and decided not to return. They made it to an inn run by humans, and the woman who owned it offered housing if they would protect her inn from the nearby raiders for a few months in return," Vayme continued, pronouncing his brother's name *mah-tee-on*.

Our food arrived, and Vayme went on as we started to eat. *"He enjoyed the work, and the company of the humans. When the eclipse came, he spent it with the woman who owned the inn, and they agreed to continue sharing a bed afterward. Years passed, and one cycle, she found herself pregnant. They weren't in love, but Matian was thrilled to become a father. His daughter Pavia was born soon enough, without a lick of the magic that coursed through his veins, and both parents were relieved."* He pronounced his niece's name *paw-vee-ah*.

Though we kept eating, my attention remained fixed on Vayme's story. *"Halfway through her sixth year, she hugged their chef soon after waking. At her touch, the life leeches away from him, and the man collapsed on the floor, dead. She had already hugged Matian and ridden on his companion's back that morning, so he knew he and the xuno were immune to her magic. Her power was neither human nor fae, but a mixture of both."*

Vayme continued, *“Matian kept his lover from touching their daughter, but news of her deadly magic spread. Soon enough, they had the entire city hunting the little girl. He kept them at bay for a few weeks, but they finally got past his defenses and killed his lover. He swept his daughter away, buried his female, and then his bonded beast carried them both back to Vuuth. He begged me for protection, and I couldn’t deny him. Not while my niece stared at me with sad eyes, the first fae child I had seen in centuries.”*

Veil.

“With the power of death in her veins, Pavia was immediately loved by all in our kingdom, and many of my people wanted to go to war with the city in the Sands to take revenge against those who killed her mother. A rebellion grew among them when I refused—our people are bloodthirsty, and they yearned for the thrill of battle. Matian tried to convince them otherwise, but the rebellion only grew. They have declared me weak for refusing another war, and have made it their mission to end me so they can take that revenge,” he said.

“They don’t care that Matian and Pavia don’t want war?”

“No. They want battle, at any cost. Should the news of our mating spread, others will take their side as well, and you and I will be hunted. Already, the faction that seeks war with the Sands has paid in blood and power for the Monster of the Aching Chasm to kill me.”

My eyes widened with horror. *“One of the elves’ assassins?”*

Everyone had grown up hearing the stories. The elves had twisted the magic of a few different magical beings, turning them into mindless killers who hunted those they were paid to kill. They were ruthless, deadly, and unmatched in power. Some even said they were vampires, too, awful beings that required the blood of others to survive.

“Yes. Myself and both other kings have been marked by the assassins, which is why I went looking for you. One of the elven leaders told us of human females with life magic that were hidden away in your lands, and gave us your location. Because our magic is death and yours originates from life,

yours hides ours, so the assassins cannot hunt us through our power.”

“So you’re using us as shields?” I asked.

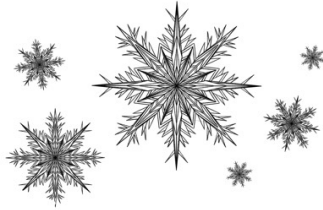
“We are.”

Veil.

I was definitely right about him being selfish—and there was a decent chance I’d end up dead at the hands of the Monster because of that selfishness.

CHAPTER 7

KAELLE



Our conversation was interrupted by another couple who entered the dining hall. My gaze lifted to them, and I blinked when I saw Kier's aura melding with a vibrantly-colored human one. Kier was tall, with tan skin and wavy black hair that curled around his ears. One of his arms was wrapped in a tattoo that seemed to be in a language I didn't recognize, but otherwise, he didn't look angry or cruel.

The human with him had dark green hair that fell to her waist in waves, skin a shade lighter than Kier's, and wore a brightly-colored fae-style dress. Her eyes glowed green, and she didn't look standoffish, but she didn't look friendly, either.

They approached the table, and her gaze met mine as she gave a quick greeting. "Hi."

Kier stepped closer to her, his stance protective and eyes narrowed at us.

Vayme barely acknowledged them before focusing on his food again.

"Hello," I said quietly to the human, whose name I knew was Nissa. "I'm Kaelle. I think Laeli told me about you. You have plant magic, right?"

"Yep." She smiled, and I tried to smile back, but my mind was still racing through everything Vayme had told me.

Mainly, the bit where one of the elves' assassins was hunting him.

“He hasn’t hurt you, right?” Nissa sat down next to me and gestured to Vayme.

My king lifted his eyes from his food to glare at her, and her king’s body tensed again.

Despite... well, *everything* that had happened with Vayme, he definitely hadn’t hurt me, and I couldn’t leave her with that idea.

“No, he’s fine. Thanks for asking, though.” I took her hand and squeezed it to assure her. She looked surprised by the breeze she could undoubtedly feel blowing off my skin, but didn’t ask me about it.

The fae woman who had brought me and Vayme our food reemerged with plates for Kier and Nissa, and the mood calmed as he sat beside her. I released her hand, and we were all quiet as we ate.

Despite the nerves that had me wanting to stay silent, I remembered my conversation with Laeli. She had told me that the best way to feel confident was to act confident, and... well, I wanted to try it.

So, I forced myself to speak up.

“Were you glad to leave your city?” I asked Nissa, as I finished eating.

“I was,” she said, and didn’t add to it. If her situation was anything like Laeli’s, I didn’t blame her for not wanting to share the details.

My gaze flicked between her and Kier, and my empathy grew.

I could certainly understand not wanting to share details with the king who had stolen her away, in particular.

Her question from earlier came to mind, and though it made me a bit terrified to do so, I asked softly, “Has he hurt you?”

Kier growled at my question, but she put a hand on his chest before he could attack me. “No. He hasn’t.”

I was fiercely grateful for her quick response, even though I had felt Vayme tense beside me, as if ready to protect me.

I nodded, and found my eyes wandering to the food that remained on Vayme's plate. Though my belly was deliriously full, I was still hungry somehow.

He silently placed some of it on my plate, and more gratitude swelled in my chest.

Nissa resumed eating as she asked me, "Do *you* miss your city?"

"Oh, I'm from a teeny, tiny town." I bit my lip, deciding it was better not to tell her that I had missed the town since I'd been moved into a cave for everyone else's safety. "Laeli was from a big city though, so I assumed you were too."

"My town was small, too. They would kill anyone who got close enough to try to take me."

My eyes widened.

My town had feared me...

But hers defended her?

"So they protected you?"

"In a way, yes."

I forced myself not to admit aloud that my mind had started going back to my own experiences.

If someone had tried to take me from them, would my parents have fought for me? Would they defend me, or kill anyone who tried to abduct me?

I had a sinking feeling that they wouldn't.

Nodding, I resumed eating while everyone grew quiet again.

"Have you seen any sign of the Monster?" Kier asked Vayme, as I scraped the last bite from my plate.

"Not yet. The ache in the rune has gotten worse, though."

The rune?

I looked over at Vayme curiously.

"*I'll show you later,*" he said into my mind, once again surprising me by speaking to me that way.

“Mine as well,” Kier agreed. “I assume they’ll search the human lands after losing the trail of our magic there, and then return here.”

Vayme nodded, and his expression, though still stony, seemed a bit thoughtful. “Should you need a place to hide, my castle is open to you and the female. They won’t expect us to rely on each other.”

“Thank you.”

“The Monster is hunting you?” Nissa asked Vayme.

“*She likely knows that the Beast of the Endless Wilds hunts Kier,*” Vayme told me, scowling as he said aloud, “Yes.”

“Does he really drink *blood*?” I wondered, unable to suppress a small shiver.

Vayme’s voice lowered. “I don’t know. Pray we don’t find out.”

We only spoke for another minute before Nissa and Kier left to attend the violent events that were supposed to help the kings keep the peace. When they were gone, Vayme and I headed back to our room.

After the door was shut securely behind us, he unwrapped his palm. My gaze caught on its silver glow, and my eyes widened.

He showed me the back of his hand, pointing out a brand that glowed a crimson color. I noticed his aura moving around it, as if hurting or unhappy because of the marking.

“Veil,” I whispered.

“I won’t let the Monster kill you,” Vayme said, as he rewrapped it. “I’m sure you’re worried about it, and for good reason. I took you so your magic could protect me, but I won’t let him hurt you if he does catch me.”

“Thank you,” I said quietly, though I doubted he could actually do anything if the Monster came for me. He was a warrior, and a king... but the assassins were monsters of legend.

Vayme slipped out soon after that to supervise the events and deal with his people. Strong led me to the castle's library at my request, and I spent the day and night with my nose buried in a book as I tried not to panic about the assassin hunting us.

The handprint on my hip ached a bit when he got too far from me, but he spoke into my mind to let me know that he'd stay close enough to prevent the ache from becoming true pain, so I survived.

The next day, Vayme dragged me out of the library. He'd decided I was going to train with the other two humans, so I'd be prepared for the ridiculous fight all of us would participate in.

Despite my reluctance, I tried to learn how to swing their stupidly heavy swords and move my body properly.

Two weeks passed quickly as we trained. My progress never quite satisfied the kings, and my body was never quite satisfied with the amount of food I ate. Though I gained weight quickly, I was still constantly hungry.

And I was still trying to come to terms with the fact that my family may have starved me on purpose.

When the day of the fight finally arrived, I was ready to get it over with so we could move on from Jirev. After the events were over, we would be going to Vuuth, which was made of caves.

Since caves made me feel much safer, I was looking forward to that security.

Laeli and Nissa made me dress in a ridiculous metal outfit that barely covered my assets for the fight. Nissa was attempting to get some sort of revenge on Kier, and Laeli was thrilled about it, but I was dreading the disgust Vayme would probably have on his face when he saw me nearly naked.

Though I wore fae-style dresses all of the time, and finally got a few inches of my hair cut so it didn't look scraggly, he had never seemed attracted to me in the slightest, so I had no hope that he liked the way I looked.

We still hadn't discussed the female fae who had touched him in our room that day, either. I assumed he was at the very least interested in her, if not actively *with* her.

Though we spent plenty of time together, he always slept on the floor in front of the door, and there was nothing romantic between us. We were becoming reluctant friends, I supposed, but I wasn't under the impression that our mate bond meant anything to him.

I was his shield, and nothing more.

Anyway, the fight had arrived, so all three of us humans headed into the cage with the man who was announcing the battle. The auras of all the fae in the stands had started overwhelming me and giving me a headache as soon as we entered the stadium, and it only grew worse as we moved further inside.

The deafening cheers melded with the raging rainbows of auras around me, and I fought to keep myself from lifting my hands to cover my eyes or ears.

The auras were insanely intense.

My gaze caught on one in the stands...

One that burned bigger and brighter than any of the others. Rather than shadowy or dark like Vayme's, it blazed like a fire.

It was so much larger than any of the fae's.

It had to be something important.

Or *someone* important.

Like... an assassin.

My gaze was still fixed on the massive aura, my head pounding and stomach rolling as Laeli called out to me, "Are you alright?"

My wind was blowing in agitation as I fought to keep myself rooted in place, my gaze following the aura as it began to move.

“I don’t know,” I said. “Something’s wrong.”

“What’s happening?” Vayme’s words were somewhere between worried and irritated.

“I don’t know,” I repeated. *“Maybe nothing.”*

“You’re staring at something,” he growled back.

“An aura,” I said. *“It’s larger than anyone else’s. I don’t know why.”*

Vayme said something else, but I didn’t hear it properly. There was too much going on around me, and I was too overwhelmed.

Could the aura have belonged to one of the assassins?

I didn’t know.

I would’ve expected their souls to be dark and deadly, not bright and fiery.

The announcer dragged us into place until the three of us faced each other, and then he shouted something. The crowd was too loud for me to make out the words, but I assumed it was the start of the fight.

He shut the door of the cage behind us, and the bright aura surged closer. The heady power of it made the pain in my head worse, and I pressed a hand to my temple as I fought the wave of dizziness that accompanied it. My other hand was on my sword, holding me up as I leaned against it, my face twisting in pain.

Slowly, the crowd’s roaring quieted.

The fae in the stands had to be getting suspicious, but the noise and colors of the auras were so bright that I couldn’t do anything but stand there helplessly. My wind was whipping my hair around, draining my energy, as well.

The aura neared the edge of the cage, and my heart sank.

An aura that bright and strong, coming straight toward humans who were mated to the kings...

There was no other option.

It had to be one of the assassins.

I whispered to the other women, "He's here."

The crowd had grown silent around us, but the colors of their auras were so, so loud.

"Who?" one of the other women asked me. I was too dizzy to tell which one.

"One of the assassins. I can feel him," I said.

The other woman asked, "How can you feel him? How do you know?"

"I see and feel auras. My wind comes from them. And his aura is *terrible*."

I knew the words made little sense, and his aura wasn't wicked or anything, but its fierce strength was so damn overwhelming. When paired with all the others around me, I couldn't even think straight.

"What are you waiting for?" one of the kings shouted from the stands. Not Vayme—he wasn't one for yelling.

My wind was so loud that the men couldn't have heard us. They didn't know that an assassin was there, or that he was at the entrance of our cage.

"What do we do?" one of the women demanded.

"I don't know." My gaze was fixed on the aura as it moved faster than should've been possible, right into the cage.

"We need to get everyone out," one of the other women finally said.

"Oh, it's far too late for that," a smooth male voice said. The aura appeared next to me, and I was so blinded by its intensity that I couldn't see, let alone breathe. "Which one of you is connected to Kier Jirev?"

He was looking for Kier, which made him—

“The Beast of the Endless Wilds,” one of the other women breathed.

“Hello, sweetheart. Is Kier using your magic to hide his?” the Beast purred.

The commotion in the stands further blinded and deafened me to Nissa and Laeli’s responses, if they responded at all. The auras were all moving, the fae were yelling, and my body started swaying a little. My wind was growing into a storm, and I was helpless to stop it as its drain on my energy picked up.

I was going to lose control and lose consciousness again, which could be a death sentence with the Beast nearby.

And if I was going to die anyway, I might as well take the fall for being Kier’s mate, so Laeli and Nissa stood a chance at escaping.

The cage door started rattling as someone tried to break through. The Beast must’ve locked us in.

I started to say that I was Kier’s mate, but just as I did, another woman blurted, “I’m mated to Kier. It’s me.”

“See how easy that was?” he asked.

Fire erupted alongside my wind, melding with the Beast’s aura and making it impossible to see what was going on around us. From what little I could see, it looked like...

Like he was drinking Nissa’s blood.

Vayme was speaking into my mind, but I was too out of it to hear the words clearly. My wind was blowing too hard, my panic was swelling too intensely, and my world was still too blurry with auras.

The Beast shouted, “Surely a fae king of any worth would at least attempt to defend the female he’s claimed as his. Come out and fight, Kier.”

My storm swelled.

“*Tempest,*” Vayme’s commanding voice finally grew loud enough to cut into my mind.

For once, I didn't hate the nickname, because it meant I wasn't alone.

The auras of the fae in the stands were fading, but fire and wind still filled my vision, making me stumble around the room as I tried not to get burned.

"Tempest, I need you to find the door and let us in. We're powerless out here," Vayme's calm, steady voice ordered me.

It shouldn't have grounded me, but it did.

"Look for my aura. Get the door open," he repeated.

"Use your magic so I can find you," I managed to whisper back.

His aura flared, just bright enough for me to make it out through the flames. For the first time since I'd met him, I looked at his aura and felt not afraid or uncertain, but... safe.

I ran through the fire, toward the pooling darkness of his soul. My wind blew hard enough to keep me from getting more than a little burned, until a large hand collided with my torso through the bars of the cage. My forehead nearly smacked the hot metal, but a pair of intense silver eyes met mine as his other hand caught my head, stopping and steadying me again.

"Get it open," he said.

My shaky hands found the lock and got it undone quickly. Vayme helped me throw the door open, then yanked me into his arms, hugging me fiercely to his chest.

There wasn't time for comfort, though.

I jerked my gaze to Kier's, and words tumbled from my lips nonsensically. My head still pounded so hard I could barely think, and my whole body hurt with the effort to stay conscious. "Nissa told him she was bonded to you, and he bit her. He's drinking her blood. We didn't know he was a vampire. I didn't know. I should've warned everyone."

My storm was still brewing, the winds rattling the cage as the magic grew more out of control.

"Laeli's on fire," I added. "She can't stop it. I—"

Kier interrupted me, his gaze moving to Vayme, who still held me firmly. “Get her out of here. Go to the elves. Tell them if their assassins kill any of our people, *including* our mates, we will consider it an act of war and will come for them as one.”

Vayme dipped his head in a nod, then threw me onto Strong’s back.

“*We can’t leave,*” I said into his mind, my panic still swelling as Strong took off. “*I have to make sure the other women are okay. They—*”

“*Your magic will be the death of all of us if we don’t leave, Tempest. A storm will give the Beast the advantage he needs.*” Vayme’s voice was still calm, but his words struck me silent.

I was dangerous.

Veil, I was deadly.

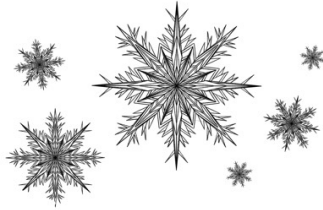
Of course, they needed to get me out of there.

My eyes stung.

I didn’t fight anymore, letting the tears fall down my cheeks as Strong ran through the trees.

CHAPTER 8

KAELLE



The fierce drain of my magic knocked me unconscious after a few hours, and I was lost to the blissful burnout. It wasn't the worst I'd ever had, but certainly could've been better.

By the time I woke up, it was the middle of the night, and Vayme was pacing in front of me. I seemed to have been set on my ass, with my back propped up against a snoring Strong's side.

We were still in the Endless Wilds, because the elves lived in a different part of them than the fae did.

A dozen esu, the jungle cats that often bonded with fae in Jirev, had caught up to us on the way out of the city. They stuck with us, intending to transport the elves back. I didn't see them, but assumed they were sleeping in the trees around us. None had tried to speak to me, and Strong said that wasn't unusual.

I didn't particularly feel like speaking to them or anyone else, anyway.

My metal lingerie was digging into my skin hard enough that I was bleeding in a few places. The edges of the metal weren't sharp, but they weren't made for riding on a xuno's back for hours.

Hopefully the metal hadn't cut Strong, too.

I sat up slowly, wincing at the pain of the movement. My headache was gone, at least.

“You’re bleeding,” Vayme growled, covering the distance between us before kneeling in front of me. His fists were clenched, and his jaw was, too.

“Just a little.” I tried to bend the metal away from my skin, but only succeeded in making the cut deeper. “It’s fine. I deserve it for losing control and putting my friends in danger.”

“The other kings and I are the reason your lives are at risk; not you. It isn’t your fault that you were given magic too wild to be controlled.”

His words made my chest swell with gratitude and my guilt subside drastically. “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me. I don’t have any spare clothes for you, and I’m not wearing a shirt. You’ve been bleeding, and there’s nothing I can do about it,” he said through gritted teeth.

“If my magic’s not my fault, my lack of clothing certainly isn’t yours.” I brushed hair out of my eyes, and he growled at me again. My wind wasn’t tugging at the strands, at least. Burnout did have that advantage.

“Stay still. The more you move, the more you bleed.”

“You’re really concerned about this.” I dropped my hand back to my thigh.

“Of course I’m concerned about this. You’re *bleeding*, Tempest.”

“Not concerned enough to use my real name,” I countered, finding myself too at ease with Vayme to bother biting my tongue.

His eyes narrowed. “Tempest suits you better.”

I scowled at him. “Maybe I should start calling you *Ice*, then.”

“Names are beside the point, *Kaelle*.” He emphasized my real name. “You’re bleeding, and it’s driving me mad. We need a way to stop it.”

At least he *knew* my real name.

I hadn’t been certain that he did up until that moment.

“I’m not going to ride with you in the nude, if that’s what you’re suggesting.” My voice grew hotter, anger building in my chest. “I’m not any more attracted to you than you are to me.”

It was a lie.

I was extremely attracted to him, physically, at least.

But he didn’t need to know that.

“*Not any more attracted to me than I am to you?* What does that mean?” His eyes were still narrowed.

My face flushed.

He was really going to make me say it. “You have made it clear that you’re not attracted to me. I’m saying that I’m not attracted to you either.”

His expression grew a bit incredulous. “What could possibly have made you feel that way?”

“Everything?” I gestured to him, as a whole.

My face was still red, and I was starting to feel... untamed? I usually let my fear get to me, but new emotions had taken over. Emotions like embarrassment, frustration, and maybe even a little stubbornness.

“I have been attracted to you since the first day we met. I’m sure you’ve noticed my body’s reaction.” He gestured to himself.

To his... lower half.

My cheeks burned hotter. “I can assure you, I have *not*.”

“Veil, Tempest. Give me your hand.”

I didn’t give him my hand.

His narrowed eyes morphed into a glare.

I glared back, though my face felt as if it were nearly on fire.

“I’ve smelled your arousal in the air after I shower. Give me your damn hand so I can prove you’re not the only one who feels it,” he commanded.

That revelation caught me off guard.

He had smelled how attracted I was to him?

I didn't know what to think about that.

I liked it—I definitely liked it.

But anything other than *like*, I wasn't sure.

I didn't want to let him win, but if I didn't let him prove it, I would always be wondering.

So... I finally gave him my hand.

“You know how the male body works?” he asked, as he pulled my palm toward his body.

Veil, my blush would never go away. “I've read about it.”

“You've read about sex?”

“Yes.”

The answer seemed to satisfy him enough.

My hand finally reached his body, and he slowly dragged the backs of my knuckles over his erection.

I sucked in a breath, taken aback by the hardness of him.

He was attracted to me.

He was definitely attracted to me.

I itched to ask him if I could see his erection, but assumed he'd find the question inappropriate, so I stayed silent.

Vayme released my hand, but I didn't move it away from him.

My gaze flicked to his face, and I saw his eyes fixed firmly on my hand, only a breath away from his... well, his cock.

He didn't look bothered, angry, or stony, for once. If I had to guess, I'd say he looked like he wanted me to touch him again.

Biting my lip, I lifted my fingers back to his erection, and slowly dragged them over the length of him.

Veil, he was huge.

The characters in the books had mentioned the size of males, but I had never been able to picture it, because I'd never seen a naked man before.

"You're attracted to me," I said quietly, reluctantly pulling my fingers away from him.

"More than I should be."

My stomach curled at the words, though not unpleasantly. My toes curled a little, too.

"I still can't ride on Strong's back in the nude. I'd feel uncomfortable."

"Not as uncomfortable as you would with the metal cutting into your skin." His voice had a growly edge.

"Do you have shorts on beneath your pants?" I asked him.

He blinked, surprised by the question. I'd seen the shorts he wore as an undergarment, though, so I knew he did. "Yes."

"Can I wear them? If I'm at least partially covered, I'll feel more at ease."

Understanding flooded his eyes. "You can take my pants, so we're both partially undressed."

I nodded and he stood, his hands going to the waistband of his pants.

Nerves hit me when I realized he was about to strip, and I said quickly, "I can wait until we're leaving. It's no problem to deal with the metal while we eat and sleep."

"No. The sight of you bleeding is driving me mad. After we get it off you, your body can start healing itself. The wounds aren't bad enough for you to need to drink my blood."

He stripped his pants off, and my mouth went dry as I watched. The powerful motion of his biceps, the way his body bent and moved...

The shorts he wore beneath them were tight. His erection strained against the fabric, and my throat closed as my eyes followed the length of it.

Veil.

The urge to ask him if I could see it—just once—hit me again, but I bit my tongue to keep my mouth shut.

I was being ridiculous, and I knew it.

He tossed the pants over a bush nearby, then stepped closer.

I tried not to stare at his erection, I really did, but I definitely failed.

He grabbed me by my waist and picked me up as if I didn't weigh a thing, then set me on my feet. "I'll break the metal with my ice to get it off you."

I grimaced. "Will it hurt?"

He scoffed. "Of course not. You know I won't hurt you." There was a pause. "Right?"

"Right," I agreed, my voice soft but honest.

He let out a relieved puff of air, and his fingers landed on the metal strips around my back.

"Can you try not to look at me?" I asked him, my cheeks reddening again.

"I can." His voice was reluctant.

"I guess it's okay if you look, as long as you don't judge my body," I said quietly, my face still hot.

He growled at me again, and pulled the metal away from my skin. I heard a quiet snapping sound, and the tension on my breasts grew significantly lighter.

There were a few more snapping noises before he eased the metal down my arms, freeing my breasts entirely.

My face burned as I felt his gaze on me, and I wrapped an arm around my chest. The cuts on the sides of my breasts and ribs hurt, and I could feel a few of them bleeding, but I ignored them in favor of covering myself.

Vayme bent closer to work on the metal wrapped around my lower bits, and his lips brushed my ear as I heard another snap of metal. "Your breasts are stunning, Tempest."

Suddenly, I didn't hate the nickname.

Not even a little.

Maybe it wasn't an insult at all. The fae respected power, so maybe calling me a storm was a sign of respect.

"The next time I imagine my mouth on them, I'll have an image of the real thing in my mind," Vayme added, his lips brushing my ear again.

Veil.

He had imagined his mouth on my breasts?

What else had he imagined?

I bit my lip hard to stop myself from asking.

There were a few more snaps of the metal before he slid it down my thighs, then helped me step out of it. He grabbed his pants, and I remained where I was as he eased my feet into the legs one by one. Though I itched to take control, I stayed still while he pulled them up and tied a knot in the waistband, so it rested on my hip.

He stepped behind me again, brushing his erection against my backside as he did. "Veil, if you knew how difficult it's been for me to keep my hands and mouth off you, you wouldn't worry about me *judging your body*." His hands landed on my hips and squeezed roughly.

I bit back a squeak at the pressure of his touch, and would've stumbled if he hadn't been holding me so securely.

Finally, after one last squeeze, he released me and strode into the forest. I turned to watch him go, and my eyes lingered on the bubble of his ass, so much harder to ignore without his thick pants covering it.

"*Where are you going?*" I asked him, a few moments too late to ask aloud.

"*Foraging. I saw a berry bush back this way. Sit down by Strong and let your wounds heal.*"

I rolled my eyes at his instruction to *let my wounds heal*, but sat back down and peered at one of the cuts on the side of my

ribcage.

My lips curved downward in a grimace at the sight of it, and my mind went back to what he'd said.

"Aren't bad enough for you to need to drink my blood."

What did he mean by that?

I hadn't heard of blood drinking for anyone but vampires... and fae didn't have vampiristic tendencies, did they? Vampires could only come from humans who became cursed by using some type of twisted, dark magic. I didn't even know where a person would find the kind of magic necessary to change themselves like that.

A day earlier, I would've sat and wondered in silence. But a day earlier, Vayme hadn't grabbed my hand to show me his erection, rescued me when the Beast showed up, calmed my guilt, or told me my breasts were stunning.

My perspective had changed when it came to him, I supposed.

I cautiously spoke into his mind again. *"You said something about drinking blood?"*

"Yes. Mates can drink each other's blood to heal," Vayme said, almost absent-mindedly. He seemed focused on whatever he was doing. Picking berries, I supposed. *"As far as I know, it works better after the bond is sealed, or if the pair is fated."*

"Fated?"

"Some couples' souls bond before they reach our world. A handprint will appear for them the first time they touch without a spoken vow between them."

My eyes widened. *"So we're not fated?"*

He didn't answer immediately, but finally said, *"I suppose there's no way to know, because I spoke the vow before I touched you. It's quite unlikely, though. Fated pairs are rare even among magical beings, and you're human."*

I was surprised he remembered the day we met so clearly, given how unhappy he'd seemed to be there and stealing me away.

“It doesn’t particularly matter, though,” he added.

“Because we’re not going to stay together after the eclipse,” I said quietly.

“Exactly.”

There was a moment of silence.

Some part of me almost felt... sad.

Not at the thought of being separated from Vayme, of course. We weren’t even friends.

But at the thought of going back to the silence and loneliness of my cave. Even if I had enough food, it would still seem far emptier after my time spent mated to the king.

“You’re still going to take me back home, right?” I asked him.

“I promised I would, and I’m a man of my word,” Vayme said.

Good.

That was good.

“But I’m not going to leave you there unless I know it’s safe for you. We’ll figure out what’s going on with your family and your town, and ensure that you’ll be safe and well fed, before I consider leaving you in that tiny cave. If a cave is all you want, I can provide you with as many as you’d like, even after the bond is broken.”

“We’ll see. I still love my family,” I said, but the words sounded hollow.

If they had really starved me to keep me weak, I wasn’t certain they deserved my love.

And I definitely couldn’t risk my life by staying there, if they were willing to deprive me for their safety.

I was dangerous... but I still deserved to eat and have my freedom. I supposed Vayme had helped me realize that, as ridiculous as it seemed that he would help me with anything.

“Of course.” His words were gentler than they had been. *“I’m heading back. Prepare to feast.”*

My lips curved upward. *“What a feast it will be. Berries, berries, and more berries.”*

He chuckled. *“A meal fit for a queen.”*

I bit my lip to stop my smile from growing, but it was still lingering when he got back and sat down beside me. One of my arms was still wrapped around my breasts, but he sat without a shred of self-consciousness as he spread his muscular legs out in front of him.

Truly, the man was a masterpiece. It was hard to imagine anyone with muscles more sculpted or a body more perfect.

And he had brought me a huge basket of berries, each of which was only a little smaller than my fist. The basket was made of ice, and the food inside it only made him more gorgeous.

He handed me one, and we both started eating. Though we were quiet, it was different than our usual uncomfortable silence. It was calmer, and more peaceful.

Strong was still snoring, so we left a large bowl of berries for him without waking him up. He needed to rest.

When our bellies were full, Vayme built an ice shelter and slipped inside. Though it was exactly the same as the ones he'd made on our way to Jirev, it seemed different.

Or *I* seemed different, I supposed.

I tightened the knot on my pants before stepping into the shelter myself. My arm was still around my chest, but realistically, I knew that wasn't going to last all night.

Vayme had already seen my breasts, but he hadn't touched them.

I wasn't sure whether I wanted him to.

On one hand, it would probably feel good.

Really good.

On the other, it would definitely affect how I felt about him, and I wasn't sure I was ready for that.

Despite my uncertainty, I sat down beside Vayme the same way I always had when we were traveling together. When I lowered my head to the ice, he lifted it onto his arm like he always did.

And then, after a moment of hesitation, he placed his hand on my hip. The fabric of the pants I had on separated us, but my face still warmed at the gentle intimacy of the contact.

I scooted just the tiniest bit, so the back of my body brushed his a little.

His chest rumbled softly, and my throat swelled as he slid closer, so his entire front pressed to my back. His erection was against my ass, and his chest met the bare skin on my back, making me warmer. Though his grip tightened on my hip, it didn't move any closer to my breasts.

His voice was low and soft as he said into my ear, "Sleep well, Kaelle."

My throat swelled. "You can call me Tempest, if you want."

"Don't hate it so much anymore?"

"I mostly hated it because I thought you didn't know my name," I whispered.

He chuckled. "You've given your name to at least a dozen people since I've known you. I'd have to be purposefully obtuse not to."

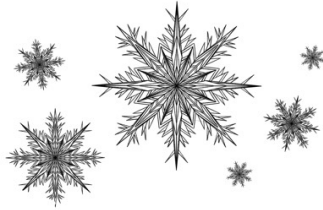
"Maybe I thought you were purposefully obtuse."

"I am many things, but usually, not that." He squeezed my hip again. "Good night."

I mirrored his words as I closed my eyes, and by some miracle, managed to fall asleep.

CHAPTER 9

KAELLE



We were moving again just a few hours later, after another breakfast of berries.

Though I was self-conscious at first, I quickly adjusted to traveling with my breasts bare. It felt natural, and forced me to grow more confident in my nudity.

Strangely enough, it even made me feel more comfortable with Vayme. He never tried to grab me or push himself on me, consistently remaining respectful.

We reached the elves late that night.

The Wilds didn't look any different when Strong and the esu stopped. When Vayme pointed out the shimmering, lace-like curve of a shield that kept everything except the elves out, I understood that they simply hid the entirety of their kingdom.

“What do we do?” I asked him, my voice heavy with exhaustion. I wasn't the one running, so I shouldn't have been so worn out, but I was.

“We wait. They'll send someone out to see us. If they're wise, it'll be one of their leaders.”

I nodded, and Vayme pulled me against his back.

Since I wasn't sure whether the shield was transparent for the elves, or whether they could see through it, I kept an arm wrapped around my chest as I relaxed against him. He was strong and warm, despite the ice of his magic, and my breeze

was a barely-there whisper. It still hadn't built back up to its full strength, and likely wouldn't for a few more days.

"Are you going to threaten them?" I asked Vayme silently, my eyelids lowering a bit.

"If I have to. I know their leaders well enough that I hope it's unnecessary, but I will if I must."

I nodded.

As we sat there, his arm slid around my middle, beneath mine.

"You can rest. I've heard that their city is vast, and it often takes time for them to come to us."

"Thank you." My eyes drifted shut, and I relaxed against him further. My arm around my chest started to sag, and he simply lifted his own to hold mine comfortably in place.

I only dozed for a few minutes before the shield rippled, and Vayme woke me with a gentle squeeze to my hip.

Two women stepped out. Both had luscious curves, and wore flowy, elegant dresses. One had long black hair, big hazel eyes, and light brown skin. The other had dark skin, light red hair, and big lavender eyes. I had expected them to look more magical than they actually did, to be honest, because they looked much like the fae but with far less muscle.

The dark-haired one's lips curved wickedly as she purred, "Well, isn't that a pretty mate bond?"

"Hello, Alida," Vayme said.

"Hello." Her eyes landed on me, and lingered. "Your magic is a breath of fresh air, you know. A cool breeze on a humid day."

"Every day is a humid day in the Wilds," Vayme's arm tightened around me. "And Kaelle is not looking to join the elves."

My head jerked a bit, surprised by the comment.

I hadn't known that was an option.

If it was...

Veil, maybe I'd consider it.

Then again, I didn't know anything about the elves except that they were mystical, and apparently appreciated wind magic.

I'd also finally started feeling more comfortable with Vayme, so it would probably be better just to stay with him.

"Why have you brought your human mate here, then?" the redheaded elf woman asked.

"The Beast of the Endless Wilds attacked Jirev and drank from Kier's human. He and Ravv sent me here to threaten you with the greatest war the Wilds would ever see," Vayme said.

Both women's faces grew grave, but Alida recovered the fastest, pasting on a nonchalant expression. "What do you want, then?"

"Your shields to protect us."

"Veil." Alida closed her eyes and let out a long breath.

"And the only other option is war?" the redheaded woman asked.

"Yes. Most of our fae are gathered in Jirev right now. We can remain there if that will make it easier, or Ravv and I can return to our own cities with our people."

"We could never defend against all three assassins at once. Protecting against even one is a stretch." Alida ran a hand through her hair, pushing the long, thick strands out of her face. "You're asking for too much."

"We are no happier about this situation than the rest of you. Far less, I'd say, considering our lives are on the line."

Vayme's voice was neutral, but there was enough danger in its undertones to make me suppress a shiver.

"You don't understand how much the assassins despise us." Alida gestured to the shield behind her. "We turned our city into a fortress so we don't have to deal with them."

"You still don't have to deal with them," Vayme said calmly. "But if you don't, you *will* have to deal with us."

“Obviously we cannot take on three armies worth of fae warriors any more than we can handle the assassins. At least if we go with you, we can use your damn warriors as protection too if the assassins manage to break through,” Alida said.

Vayme dipped his head. “You have a far greater chance of survival if you come with us. There is still a chance we could kill the assassins; we simply don’t wish to find out.”

The elves looked at each other for a few moments before turning back to us.

The redheaded woman warned, “We’ll need a few hours to gather enough willing elves. You’ll have to take whoever we can convince.”

“As long as they can shield us, we don’t care who they are.”

Alida’s eyes scanned the esu gathered with us, and then she nodded. Both women slipped back behind their shield, and my gaze tracked the ripple in fascination.

“That went well, didn’t it?” I asked Vayme silently, still not entirely certain what to think about the elven women.

“As well as it could’ve,” he agreed. *“That was Alida and Virre, two of the elven leaders. They won’t have nearly as difficult a time gathering elves.”*

“Are they queens?”

“No. The elves haven’t had queens since they created the assassins. I imagine you’ll meet the three ex-queens when Alida and Virre return.”

“Why would the ex-queens help us?”

His fingers stroked the side of my ribcage lightly, and I shivered a little. *“They are the ones who created the assassins. They shaped the spell that made them what they are. All of the elves helped, but the queens were ultimately the powerhouse behind it.”*

“I thought it was a curse.”

“Perhaps it ended up that way, but it was unintentional. The males chosen were the weakest of their kind. They volunteered

to receive the elves' changes and become their weapons, but no one realized what would come of the spell or the way those changes would affect them."

"Veil," I whispered.

"From what I know, the ex-queens have tried to alter the assassins' magic many times, and they carry immense guilt for what they did to the men. I suspect their guilt will drive them to join our protective party."

"That's good, I suppose. They must be strong if they were queens, and made the assassins what they are."

"Their magic is strong, but their minds may not be. Their guilt pairs with the natural insanity of an immortal life, which we call immis. We can only hope they remain sane."

"What is the natural insanity?" I asked.

"All immortal beings begin to unravel without a purpose. War gave my people purpose and prevented immis, but some other types of magical beings haven't been as lucky. We can only hope the queens are still steady-minded."

I nodded. *"According to the legends I always heard, there are no male elves. Is that true?"*

"It is. There are no female gargoyles either, so long ago, their groups used to form bonds. Now, both are alone." Vayme's fingers brushed my side again. *"I need to feed you. You'll have to come with me; I'm not comfortable leaving you alone this close to the elves' city."*

"Alright."

Strong lowered to his belly on the ground and dropped his head onto his paws. He would need to rest after running so much.

Vayme's hand slipped into mine, and he towed me through the jungle until we found a bush loaded with fruit I didn't recognize. He taught me about it while we picked it, and then while we sat down and ate. Surprisingly enough, I found myself enjoying his company.

We went back to the edge of the elves' shield after we finished eating, and sat down with our backs to a tree while we waited for them. Vayme offered to let me sit on his lap with my chest to his so I could stay modest while I rested, but I turned him down with flushed cheeks.

I fell asleep with my shoulder pressed to Vayme's side, his arm around my waist to hold me upright, and mine still wrapped around my chest.

Eventually, he woke me again.

I opened my eyes in time to see more than a dozen elves step out from behind their shield. Most of them were curvy, and all of them wore elegant, delicate-looking dresses. Their hair and skin were in a variety of shades and colors, and all of them were unique in their own way.

I noticed that three of them on the far side of the group had shimmering, curling golden tattoos on various parts of their body. One of them looked a lot like Alida, strangely, while another was tan with light pink hair, and the third was pale with golden hair. The pink-haired one had a firm grip on the other two's arms, but neither of them looked like they were considering making a run for it.

"Are those the queens, with the golden tattoos?" I asked Vayme, my gaze lingering on their markings as he stood and lifted me with him.

"Yes."

"I brought your defenders," Alida announced, gesturing to the group of women around her. Virre wasn't with her anymore, so I assumed she hadn't been one of the elves willing to come and protect the fae cities. "If the Beast was in Jirev yesterday, we need to leave now and move quickly."

"On that, we agree." Vayme stood. "The esu have offered to carry you. We will stop twice for food, but otherwise, we will run through the night."

A few of the women grimaced, but they all agreed.

"Here." Alida tossed Vayme a bundle of fabric, and he caught it easily. "So Kaelle doesn't have to hold her arm around her

breasts for the next two days.” She winked at me. “I’m sure there’s a story there, but we don’t have time to hear it.”

My face warmed a bit. “Thank you.”

“She speaks!” Alida exclaimed.

My face warmed further.

“Do not mock my female,” Vayme growled. “We may need your protection, but I will not accept cruelty toward her.”

Alida’s lips curved wickedly. “Your female?”

“Until the eclipse, yes.” The king’s voice slipped back into its typical stony neutral.

I ducked behind a tree to slip the dress over my head, and when I smoothed it out, found that it fit better than I expected. My own curves were thickening as my body grew healthier, making me closer to the shape of the elves than the fae.

It was made of a soft, filmy fabric with a higher neckline than I usually wore around the fae, and didn’t have sleeves. Though I liked the grayish-blue color of it, I found that I missed the soft fluttering of the fae-style sleeves around my arms.

I did like that the undergarments were built into it, though. That certainly made things a bit simpler.

The elves were climbing onto the backs of the esu as I stepped out from behind the tree. Two of the elf women shifted into wolf forms, which surprised me, but Vayme murmured to me that Alida and one of the ex-queens were sisters, and both were half shifter.

My king hauled me onto Strong’s back after a long, lingering look at my figure, and my cheeks heated again when I felt his hardness against my ass.

Strong slipped into the forest, and picked up speed as the esu caught him.

We ran, and ran, and ran.

Despite my prior dislike for travel, I found myself not minding the endless journey when it meant Vayme held me so close.

A day and a half later, we reached Jirev again.

Exhaustion flooded every line of my body, but I was still upright, so I counted it as a victory.

The smallest hints of my magic had started to return too, which was a good sign.

Vayme, the elves, and I met the other kings at the center of Jirev. The jungle had filled with fae as we wove through the city, and the mood was far more solemn than it had been before we left. Nissa and Laeli weren't with the other men, which worried me.

While the elves divided themselves into three groups, Kier and Ravv filled Vayme in on what had happened while we were gone.

Kier had apparently admitted the truth about the kings' mate bonds, and the assassins hunting them. I could tell that worried Vayme by the stiffness in his shoulders, though he didn't voice it.

When I asked him mentally to find out what happened to Nissa and Laeli, he didn't hesitate to ask how the other humans were. Both other kings glanced at me as they told him the women were fine, and I relaxed a bit knowing all three of us had made it out alright.

"Do we have time to stop and see my friends?" I asked Vayme, as he slipped onto Strong's back again.

"Unfortunately, no. I won't know the threat my people pose to either of us until I've had time to speak with a few fae I trust. We need to get out of Jirev quickly to make sure my enemies can't attack here. An attack now could break the tentative peace, and we cannot risk that."

I nodded.

"We'll visit again as soon as we can." He paused, and reluctantly said, *"Or I suppose we can stop in on the way back to the Human Lands."*

My stomach tightened at the thought of returning to my cave alone.

Of starving, and being confined to my tiny home.

Of stepping away from the freedom I'd gained.

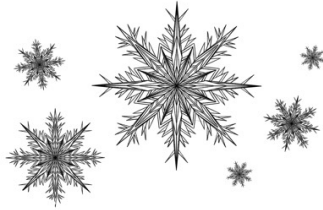
I said nothing, because I wasn't sure how to respond aloud. Or how to process my emotions about it.

Luckily, Vayme was too concerned with the possibility of an incoming attack to notice my silence.

After a quick stop in the castle to grab our things and change our clothes, we headed out so he could gather his people.

CHAPTER 10

KAELLE



I remained quiet on Strong's back while Vayme spoke with a group of his fae. My fingers tightened in the xuno's fur when he had a conversation with Kee, the woman who had made her desire for him clear in our room a few weeks earlier, but I didn't say anything.

Vayme and I still weren't really mates, even if we felt desire for each other.

Within a few hours, we were on our way to Vuuth, traveling through the Endless Wilds once again. The wind on my skin as Strong ran calmed me, and my own breeze's drain on my power was really slight.

Traveling with a large group of fae was surprisingly simple, since they were all bonded to xuno. We moved almost as quickly as we had while traveling alone, though my eyes continuously trailed over the fae and xuno in front of us. We were at the back of the group for our own safety, Vayme had said.

The elves remained near the back with us, and I found my gaze tracing over the three ex-queens who had stuck with us, including the one in wolf form. She looked much like a xuno, though she was a little sleeker, and her fur was the same shade of black as her hair. Even her glittering golden markings remained while she was in her wolf form.

By the time we stopped for the night, I could barely keep my eyes open. I leaned up against a tree with Strong curled in

front of me, protecting me as he slept, while Vayme spoke with some of his fae.

The elves with us plopped down near me, looking just as exhausted as I felt.

The one with the pink hair rubbed some dirt off her cheek and murmured, “Can you turn up that wind, Kaelle?”

My lips curved upward a bit. “I can try.”

I focused on my emotions—namely, the fear that I might die in the Endless Wilds—and the breeze picked up a little. Its response wasn’t quite what I hoped it would be, but I was still recovering from that burnout. A little sleep would get me back to normal, I thought.

The pink-haired elf groaned in bliss, and I heard a few other fae echo the sound among Vayme’s group.

“Are you alright?” he asked me, his voice alert.

“I’m fine. The elves just wanted to cool off a little.”

“Good.”

His mind slipped away from mine as he focused on what he was doing.

“Thank you.” The pink-haired elf flashed me a small, tired smile. “I’m Ismaray. This is Orah and Meeri.” She gestured first to the dark-haired elf, and then the golden-haired one.

“It’s nice to meet you,” I said, the words honest.

“Likewise.” She brushed a little more dirt off her face. “Any idea how long this trip is going to be?”

“Let me ask Vayme.” I repeated the question into his mind.

“We have two and a half days left. We’ll reach the Weeping Skies tomorrow night, then we have a half-day trek through the Skies, and a whole day of travel through the caves before we reach Vuuth.”

I repeated his answer, and the golden-haired elf, Meeri, grimaced.

Orah, the dark-haired one, leaned back against a tree and closed her eyes, resting. She'd spent both journeys in her wolf form, so she had to be even more exhausted than I was.

Ismaray pulled some crackers and dried fruit out of her bag, and made the other two women take some before passing them to me too. I thanked her and nibbled on the food, eating slowly to ease my stomach back into it after so much traveling.

Vayme returned while we ate, and he made me take more crackers and fruit from him. The elves' tasted different, so I didn't mind the variety.

When we were done eating, Vayme and I climbed into a shelter together.

"Are you sure we can sleep next to each other without making your people suspicious that there's more to our bond than survival?" I asked him.

"My people are already suspicious of that. I don't trust them any more than they trust me right now, so I won't let you sleep out of my sight."

I supposed there was no way to argue against that. Not if I wanted to survive the night, which I most certainly did.

So, I stayed quiet as I settled down against Vayme. His hand rested on my hip again while my head rested on his shoulder, and the quiet intimacy made my chest burn, though I didn't voice that.

"What if your people try to kill me?" I asked him quietly.

"Even those who hate me the most know that would risk their lives right now," he murmured back. *"The news spread widely that you're hiding me from the Monster. If you were to die, your magic would stop protecting mine, and the Monster would follow us to Vuuth. Their plan with the assassins hinged on me dying in Jirev."*

I nodded lightly.

That was good, I supposed.

"If that doesn't stop them and they still hunt you, I will relish the chance to send them through the veil. You are safe with

me,” he added.

I drifted off to sleep soon after, and despite everything, I did feel safe.

The rest of the journey unfolded exactly the way Vayme had said it would.

We spent the next day in the Wilds. The day after that, we were in the mountains of the Weeping Skies until lunch. After a quick meal of strange fruit that grew despite the ice and snow in the Skies, we slipped into a well-hidden entrance to the icy caves that stretched below the mountains.

My curious gaze followed the shapes and lines of the caves. They were far more beautiful than the one I’d lived in, a mixture of stone and ice that looked more like art than structure. Some of the caves had glittering walls and ceilings that made me stare in wonder as we passed them, and I noticed a few bubbling pools within them.

Though the caves smelled more of salt than my previous home, there was still a warm comfort to being underground that seemed to calm my soul. My fear eased as we continued, and my awe grew as I saw more of the beauty beneath the land’s surface.

Why would anyone have chosen to live in the sweaty, hot Wilds when there were gorgeous caves beneath the Weeping Skies they could claim?

I definitely understood Vayme’s preference for being underground.

We spent that night in the caves, and then the entire next day, too.

I felt more comfortable the further we were from the surface. I knew there was still danger in Vuuth, but I would always feel more secure hidden away from the world above.

When we finally reached Vuuth, I was so exhausted that it took me a minute to process what I was seeing.

The tunnel leading into the city was wide enough for three xuno and their riders to fit side-by-side. It opened up into a monstrous space that stretched as far as I could see. Veil, no, it stretched *farther* than I could see.

The city was shaped like an upside-down dome, growing lower in the center and higher on the outside edges. I could see stairs everywhere—grand staircases, and simple ones, too. Some of them were made of ice, but most were crafted from various shades and types of stone.

Down at the center of the city, deep in the lowest part, I could see a large formation protruding from the ground. It looked like a sculpture of some kind, but I couldn't make out what it was from where I stood.

My gaze followed the sculpture up, and up, until my eyes landed on the glowing stones above our heads that stretched above the city. They radiated light like the stars would've if they were on the surface.

"*You like it?*" Vayme asked me, his grip light on my hips.

"*Veil, yes,*" I breathed, still stunned by everything I was seeing.

"*This is only the top portion. The city stretches much further beneath the surface.*"

My eyes widened further.

Strong picked up the pace again, heading down one of the grander staircases as if he'd done it thousands of times.

He probably had.

It took some time for him to make it down to the statue that marked the castle's location, but when he neared it, my gaze scanned the shapes and curves of the large ice sculpture. It was...

"*A sword?*" I asked Vayme. "*Why?*"

“We are warriors, and we always will be,” he said simply. “And while it takes strength to wield a sword, it also takes wisdom to know when to put it down. The sword in the sculpture faces downward, to remind us that sometimes, it’s better not to raise our weapons.”

I liked that, honestly.

The castle was built beneath the statue, and was far larger than I’d realized from above.

Strong made his way down a few more massive staircases. A handful of fae that Vayme told me lived in the castle led the elves to their rooms and headed to their own, branching off when they reached the right level.

All of them were gone when we reached a smaller, more private set of stairs. We spiraled downward until I couldn’t see another staircase—and hoped I never would.

I looked around as we passed small, branched-off rooms connected to the large foyer area we were in. I couldn’t see inside them at our speed, but I hoped I’d be able to look around later. Usually, I wasn’t an incredibly curious person, but I supposed a lot about me was changing as I adjusted to being around the fae.

“This is my wing of the castle. It holds the king and queen’s room, library, baths, kitchen, and armory. There are extra rooms for their children or trusted allies to occupy, as well. A few unmated and unbonded xuno guard the space, so you will always be safe here. The only other fae allowed in are Matian and Pavia, and they have their own rooms here right now,” Vayme explained as Strong ran.

That made me feel more curious, too. I was looking forward to meeting the brother and niece that had apparently turned much of Vayme’s kingdom against him.

Strong plopped down on his belly in a large bedroom that held a massive bed, along with a shower that had no walls to hide its occupant. There was a closet and a bathroom, as well, but otherwise, it was empty.

A few of the crystals I'd seen above the city littered the ceiling, glowing just enough to make me feel like I was looking up at the stars rather than a sheet of rock.

The walls and floor were gray stone, and the blankets on the bed were black, thick, and soft-looking. I itched to feel them on my legs, but assumed I'd get my own room. The masculine feel of the one we were in made me think it was definitely Vayme's.

The king helped me off Strong's back, and the xuno wasted no time before climbing onto Vayme's bed and promptly falling asleep.

My lips curved upward as the sound of him snoring slowly filled the air.

"I'll show you to your room," Vayme said into my mind, his voice a bit quieter than I expected. When I glanced at him, I found him already striding away from me, and I had to hurry to catch up.

Those legs of his were too damn long.

He still had his bag on his back, and led me across the large, open area that I'd assumed was a foyer of some kind. Upon closer inspection, it seemed to be some sort of a huge, rectangular sitting space.

We passed a handful of couches and large cushions. I noticed a xuno passed out on one of them, and when my gaze skimmed the room, I found another beast on a different cushion, watching the area directly in front of the staircase.

I hadn't noticed the xuno guarding the stairs, so that scared me a little. Its glowing eyes met mine from across the room, and the barely-blue of them reminded me of my own aura. Something about the energy felt feminine, and sent a slight tingle up my spine.

I looked away from her as we slipped into a bedroom half the size of Vayme's. It was otherwise identical to his, with the same exposed shower, bathroom, and closet, though the blankets on the bed were a crisp white color.

“Why are there so many rooms if this is your space?” I asked Vayme, wrapping my arms around my abdomen to steady myself in my uncertainty.

It felt strange to have him place me in my own room, entirely alone again. I enjoyed my own company, but... I didn't think I wanted to be alone anymore. I'd had enough of that in my cave.

“One of the earliest ruling couples had many children.” He slipped into my closet and hung the dresses he'd gotten for me in Jirev, before dipping his head toward me slightly. *“Sleep well, Tempest.”*

Receiving nothing but a nod made me feel even more uncertain.

But I nodded back, not wanting him to realize what I was feeling.

He closed the door as he left, giving me a quiet mental command to lock it, and I reluctantly did so.

With the bond between us silenced, and my room empty other than me, I let my gaze scan the space again. It lingered on the bed, but I suddenly found myself feeling a bit restless.

And a lot uncertain, honestly.

I'd started to think Vayme and I had something of a connection, and more than just because of our mate bond. He was attracted to me, and I was attracted to him.

But that didn't mean anything to him, so I supposed it shouldn't mean anything to me either. Our bond would still break with the eclipse, and we were safe in the king's wing of the castle, so there was nothing to worry about.

Or at least, I *hoped* there was nothing to worry about.

Other than the Monster of the Aching Chasm.

And the fact that his people wanted us dead.

Nope; nothing to worry about at all.

I huffed out a nearly-silent laugh and slipped out of my dirty dress, striding over to the shower. If I was too lost in my

emotions to sleep, I may as well get myself clean before I climbed into bed.

Though the water felt only lukewarm, it was nice to scrub the dirt off my skin. There was no soap in the bathroom, but I'd survive without soap.

That was another thing I was uncertain about returning to in my cave, though; the filth. Being on constant alert about the amount of water in my buckets, and having only a few splashes of it to clean myself with every day was worrisome. I had never enjoyed that part of cave-living, but I wasn't sure I could manage it after being so clean for so long.

I pushed that thought away and scrubbed my hair before turning the water off. After drying myself with a soft, white towel I found hanging nearby, I slipped out of the shower.

Since there was no one around, I didn't bother putting any clothing on. There was no comb for my hair in the bathroom, so I left it in its awkward tangles as I tucked myself into the bed. My wind still danced over my skin, but it was light and gentle in a familiar way that relaxed me.

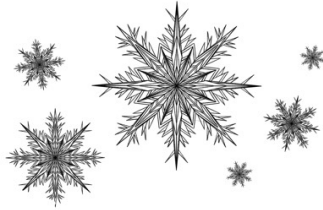
It felt strange to go to sleep without Vayme in the room, but I still found my lips curving upward as I stared at the ceiling of the cave. Despite everything, I felt safe again.

Safe, and comfortable too.

I fell asleep with a smile on my face, cuddling up with a squishy pillow that was a poor replacement for a muscular fae king, but good enough that it didn't keep me awake.

CHAPTER 11

KAELLE



I woke with an ache in the handprint on my hip that let me know Vayme had left me. I wasn't sure how large the king's portion of the castle was, but it couldn't have been large enough for the distance to cause me that much pain.

Slipping out of bed, I stopped in the bathroom to use the facilities, and found myself staring at my reflection in the mirror.

I had avoided looking closely in Jirev, and it had been a week since I'd really had the chance, on top of that.

But veil, I was different.

When I first got to Jirev, I had been gaunt and breakable. Now, I looked... healthy. Strong. My curves had filled in, and my face had too.

My hair, of course, was a wreck of blue tangles since I hadn't been able to comb it after washing it, but I even seemed to have grown into the color.

I stepped back a bit so I could see more of myself, and looked at the curve of my ass, the fullness of my breasts, and the softness of my belly.

Veil.

I was... beautiful.

Soft, curvy, and beautiful.

Not because of my family, or because of my cave.

Because of Vayme.

Vayme, who wasn't even interested in staying mated to me.

If his attention could lead me to grow so much stronger, what would a male who really wanted to be with me do?

Or what could *I* do, if I was in a position to take care of myself?

I stood up a bit straighter and headed to the closet, deciding I was going to learn how to do just that.

I was dangerous, but that didn't mean I couldn't live successfully. If anything, my power made me more capable, not less.

After a stop in the closet to slip my clothes on, I headed out of the room.

It was time to find a comb.

I managed one step outside the door before I halted.

There was a little girl with light skin and bright white hair laying on the floor right outside my door. Her chin was propped on her hands as she stared up at me with soulful, glowing, ice-blue eyes.

I stared back at her.

Her magic was death, wasn't it?

Her aura was as white as her hair, but teeming with life, strangely enough.

I fought the urge to take a step back, not wanting her to think I was afraid of her. Because I wasn't... I just didn't want to die.

"Pavia?" I asked, forcing my voice to remain calm.

She bobbed her head. "Who are you?"

Vayme hadn't said anything about me?

Great.

It wasn't as if I could tell a little girl I was her uncle's temporary mate, or that he and I were attracted to each other, but were absolutely nothing else to one another. She was young, and she had grown up human, so I wasn't even sure she knew what a mate was.

“Vayme’s friend,” I said. “Do you know where he went?”

She shrugged, remaining where she was on the floor.

“Is Strong still here?” I asked, trying again.

She shook her head *no*.

“Pavia?” A low, masculine voice that reminded me of Vayme’s called from another room.

I froze.

That had to be his brother, didn’t it? If Vayme was close enough to call for his niece, there wouldn’t have been pain in my hip.

“In here,” she called back.

I tried to step into my room again, but a large, masculine figure entered the sitting area before I could make my escape.

Unlike his brother’s, his aura was a peaceful gray color.

My eyes widened as I took him in. The man looked so similar to Vayme—insanely similar. Their noses and eyebrows were shaped slightly different, but otherwise, they may as well have been identical.

He blinked at me.

I blinked back.

“Who are you?” Vayme’s brother finally asked.

I didn’t know how to answer him any more than I had his daughter. “Kaelle.” There was a pause before I asked, “Where’s Vayme?”

“I don’t know. He didn’t wake me when he left.” The man eyed me. “Or arrived.”

“You missed a lot, then.” I let out an unsteady breath and brushed hair from my eyes. My tangled hair was the one thing I could tackle, and I needed to, since I was getting hit in the face by my own tangles. “Do you know if he has a comb?”

I knew the question was stupid as soon as it escaped me.

“A comb?” the man repeated.

“Yes, a comb. It’s fine; I don’t need it. I’ll be fine.” I tried to step back into my room.

“I have a comb!” Pavia stood suddenly. “I like your blue hair. You can borrow it!”

With that, she disappeared, moving faster than any human I’d ever seen.

Maybe she was only half-fae, but that half was definitely a boost above us humans.

“What are you to my brother?” Matían asked, still looking slightly suspicious.

“It’s a long story.” I sagged against the doorway, still fighting the urge to disappear back into my room. So much for the confidence I’d gathered. “I’m sure he’ll tell you when he gets back from... wherever he is.”

Part of me itched to reach out to Vayme, to find out where he was, but I didn’t want to bother him. If he’d really wanted me to know where he was going, he would’ve said something.

“You could tell me,” Matían said.

I supposed the basics of our situation were common knowledge. And if I wanted to be independent, it would be good for me to practice sharing what I knew with someone I didn’t know. It was technically my information to share, anyway.

I lowered my voice. “Vayme is being hunted by the Monster of the Aching Chasm. Alida, one of the elven leaders, sent him to find me because my magic is life-based. I was human—I *am* human,” I said quickly. “We’re mated, just until the eclipse, so my magic will keep hiding him from the Monster’s. There are elves with us now too, to protect the city in case he comes after Vayme.”

Matían blinked.

“I’ve got the comb!” Pavia skidded to a stop in front of me, her eyes bright and happy. “Here.” She shoved it at me, and I took it.

“Thank you. My hair is so tangled after traveling, I hope I don’t lose this comb in it,” I said softly, flashing her a quick smile.

She giggled. “I can find it for you if you lose it. Or my dad can; he’s really good at combing.” Her gaze jerked to him, and I saw the mischief in it. “Maybe he can comb it for you.”

“Pavia,” Matían warned.

“She’s nice!” Pavia protested.

He groaned and shook his head.

Something told me he was fighting the urge to tell her that I belonged to his brother—if just temporarily.

“That’s okay, I’m quite adept at combing myself.” I winked at her and started on the tangles to prove my point.

Her smile returned. “Will you go see the xuno with me? I’m looking for a companion. My dad says it takes time to find the right one.”

I glanced at her dad, and he answered for me. “Kaelle would have to ask Uncle Vayme if it’s safe first. He might want to go with her.”

She shot him a curious look. “Why?”

“Because she’s his friend.” He brushed the back of her hair lightly, far more gently than I would’ve expected from such a large man.

Vayme had proven himself gentler than I expected on a few occasions, too.

“His other friends don’t ask him to go places,” she pointed out.

Matían nodded slowly. “You’re right.”

She frowned. “Then why does Kaelle have to ask?”

When he didn’t answer, she looked at me.

“It’s a long story,” I told her honestly. “Too long, if you want to make it to the xuno.”

I didn’t know how long it would take to get to the xuno, but I knew I could drag the story out for a good long while if I

needed to.

She heaved a sigh. “Alright. You’ll tell me later though?” Her gaze was expectant.

Veil, it was no wonder she had the city wrapped around her finger. She was damned adorable, and persistent too.

“I think that’s probably up to your uncle and your dad. If they say so, yes.”

She huffed. “They’re too careful.”

My lips curved upward. “On that, we agree.”

She started to throw her arms around me for a hug, but froze before she reached me. I tried really, really hard not to shrink away from her, but veil, I was terrified she might kill me. She looked at her dad. “Is it safe? Will I hurt her?”

His gaze was uncertain as he looked at me. “How human are you?”

“Entirely. But Vayme’s magic is in my veins.”

He grew reluctant. “Better not, Pav. Just to be safe.”

She sighed and peered up at me. “Sorry. I’m dangerous.”

The simplicity of the apology and the lack of guilt in her voice struck me. I crouched down in front of her and said quietly, “I’m dangerous too.”

She frowned. “But you said you’re human.”

“Some of us have magic.”

Her frown deepened. “What’s your power?”

“Look at my hair.” I pointed toward the detangled strands, moving lightly in my breeze.

She studied them for a moment before her eyes widened.

“You’re blowing.”

I had to bite back a smile at her description. “My power is wind magic. When I get scared or angry, I sometimes make storms.”

“You *are* dangerous,” she agreed. But she didn’t say it like it was bad—she said it like it was amazing. “We’re friends, even if I can’t touch you,” she declared. “The xuno miss me though, so we have to go. Bye!” With that, she ran out of the room.

Matían’s gaze scanned the open space for a moment before he said to me, “You’ll be safe down here. And you can reach out to Vayme if you need him, right?”

“Right,” I confirmed.

“We’ll try not to be gone too long. There’s food in the kitchen, and there are books in the library if you’re bored.”

“Thank you.”

He dipped his head in a nod, then left the same way Pavia had.

Alone again, I tried to remember what I had been about to figure out before I ran into them...

Independence.

Yay.

I looked to my left and right, trying to determine where I should go. While I was definitely hungry, I could also use a shower with some soap.

Deciding I’d stop in the kitchen to find food first, I headed out.

It took a few minutes, and a lot of peeking into doorways, but I found it without too much hassle. The kitchen was much larger than the one in my parents’ house growing up, and it had a large icebox, which I knew was to keep food from spoiling so quickly. We’d had one about the size of my head when I was a kid, but the one in Vayme’s kitchen was at least as big as two of me. Maybe even three of me.

The dining room seemed to be connected to said kitchen, with a few tables set up in the room. That also reminded me of my childhood home, which put me at ease.

I found some fruit in the icebox, and while I itched to eat some of the larger, more involved meals in there, I didn’t want to anger anyone.

So, I took the fruit and sat down.

Everything was so quiet while I ate, it was almost a bit bizarre. I'd grown used to the noise of Jirev, and the constant wind of traveling, so the silence was strange.

Strange, but not unpleasantly so.

A few xuno walked past the open doorway while I ate, and while most gave me curious looks, none of them said anything. As she passed, my gaze lingered on the female xuno with the blue eyes who I'd seen the night before.

Something about her and her aura felt... important. I didn't know why, but it did.

I finished my fruit, then headed out to look for soap.

As I explored, I only found a few rooms on the whole floor with closed doors. Three, to be precise. It seemed safe to assume the two that didn't belong to Vayme belonged to Matían and Pavia.

I closed the door to my own room again as I passed it, just because the other three had.

The only soap I found in any of the rooms with open doors was in the bathing chamber, so I made my way back there when my exploration was done. There was no lock, so I simply left it closed.

No one else was around, anyway.

I stripped my clothes off as I looked at everything a bit more closely.

The bathing room had multiple pools in it, all of them much larger than the one in our room in Jirev. The ceiling was encrusted with some sort of glowing jewels that bathed everything in gorgeous color and moody light. They were a bit different than the ones I'd seen in the bedrooms, and above Vuuth, but equally beautiful.

I noticed steam coming off two pools at the far end of the room, and stopped to dip my toe in each of them to test the temperatures.

The baths grew hotter as I went further, and I found myself grinning at the blissful heat of the hottest one. It had been so

long since I'd felt warm water that I likely could've spent all day in it.

Slowly, I sank into the heat, groaning again as it engulfed me. There was a small shelf near each bath with its own bar of soap on it, so after a few moments of soaking and relaxing, I grabbed the soap and started to scrub the dirt from my skin.

As I finished washing my hair and simply sat back to enjoy the beauty and peace of the room, I finally admitted a small, quiet truth to myself:

I would likely never want to leave Vuuth.

Not if the alternative was going back to my cave and spending the rest of my days starving, filthy, and alone.

Maybe I should have taken Pavia up on her offer to let Matían comb my hair after all; truly mating with a fae for love would be the best way to guarantee that I wouldn't get kicked out of Vuuth.

And I knew Vayme well enough to be sure his brother was a decent man, at the very least.

Then again, mating could get me murdered. And considering the king's possessiveness, flirting with his brother while I was mated to him would likely cause drama.

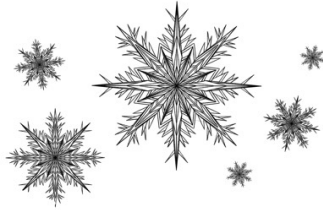
So... I wasn't sure how I was going to earn myself a place to stay.

I rinsed the bubbles from my hair and then gathered all of it into a bundle on the top of my head, closing my eyes and relaxing against the back of the pool.

Veil, maybe I would simply refuse to leave Vayme's bathing pool, and see what came of it.

CHAPTER 12

VAYME



I slid off Strong's back, slipping my pack off my shoulders and striding to Kaelle's door.

There had been no choice but to leave long enough to announce my temporary mate bond to the fae who had remained in Vuuth. I also had to fight a few fae who challenged me for the throne in response, so I'd picked up a few things for my female as an apology for the pain in her handprint.

Grabbing a shirt had seemed like a necessity, so I could hide the bruises and cuts on my torso, as well.

I knocked on her door, then waited for an answer.

Silence was all that greeted me.

She couldn't still be sleeping, could she?

With a frown, I pushed lightly against the door, to make sure it was still locked.

It swung open without pause.

I stepped inside and looked around the space.

My female was gone.

My body tensed, and my gaze jerked back to the sitting area.

"*She's in the baths,*" one of the xuno told me, apparently seeing my panic.

"Thank you." I walked to the bathing area and reached for the door, then paused.

Where were Matían and Pavia?

An image flashed in my mind—an image of my brother’s body pressed to my female’s.

Rage boiled inside me, and I saw red as I shoved into the room.

Kaelle’s surprised gaze jerked to me from where she sat in the hottest of the pools. Her hair was piled on her head, sweat rolling down her neck and over the swell of her breasts.

My cock hardened at the sight.

She didn’t try to cover herself in my presence, which only made me harder.

“What’s wrong?” she asked me.

I blinked, my rage vanishing upon finding her both safe and alone. “Nothing’s wrong.”

She lifted an eyebrow. “You *stormed* into the room.”

My jaw clenched at the reminder of the damn thoughts in my head. “Where’s Matían?”

“Pavia wanted to go see the xuno, so they’re wherever they would go for that.” Her face was red due to the heat, but her expression was serene, and so damn beautiful my body ached.

I bit my cheek, hard, to stop myself from asking whether he had flirted with her.

She eyed me. “I told him about our mate bond. Hopefully that’s okay.”

Relief relaxed my shoulders.

My brother was an ass at times, but he would know better than to show interest in the woman I was mated to, even temporarily.

“Of course. The whole kingdom knows.”

She nodded. “I wasn’t sure how to explain it to Pavia, so she just thinks you and I are friends.”

“Friends is fine.” I slid my bag off my shoulder. “I know I’m late, but I brought you breakfast.”

Her eyes lit up. “Really? Thank you.”

She started to stand, but if her bare, wet body was exposed to me, I wasn’t sure I’d be able to stop myself from touching her. “You can eat there,” I said quickly, the words coming out gruffer than I intended. “I’ll bring it to you.”

The peaks of her nipples were barely above the water before she sank back in.

Veil, the urge to take them in my mouth was nearly overwhelming.

“Perfect.” She flashed me a smile, and I walked to her side, sitting down next to the pool to pull food from my bag. “You could join me in here, if you want?”

Veil.

“The steaming pools aren’t usually used for bathing,” I said, focusing on the food as I opened the thick paper box of food I’d brought back for her.

“Why not? What are they used for?”

I tried not to let my thoughts wander to the nights I’d retreated to the pool in an effort to get my mind off whatever misery I’d dealt with during the day.

My voice was strained as I said, “Some fae find that the pain of the heat enhances their pleasure.”

She blinked.

If her face hadn’t already been red, something told me she would be blushing fiercely.

“I imagine it feels hotter for us than it does you, as my magic is only partly tangled in yours,” I added.

“Oh,” she finally said.

I wasn’t even sure if she knew how to bring herself to climax, let alone had ever imagined the extent of the intense sex lives many of the fae pursued.

Silently, I cut her a piece of the massive pastry I had brought her. I hadn’t stopped to eat, but I would wait until she was full

to fill my own belly.

She took the utensil from me and wrapped her lips around it. Her eyes fluttered as she groaned at the taste, and I fought a smirk of victory.

I'd known she would like it.

"That is incredible," she said, after swallowing the food and handing the utensil back.

I reloaded it and handed it back to her, relieved we were past the previous discussion.

Silence lingered in the air as I continued to feed her, itching to be the one to put the food in her mouth myself. Instead, I let her do it, knowing she wouldn't take kindly to more help.

"Are you one of them?" she finally asked me.

"One of what?"

"The fae who find that hot water enhances their pleasure."

I stilled.

My cock strained against the seam of my pants.

"If you expect me to give you answers like that, you'll have to give me some of your own," I finally said, handing her another bite.

"Alright. Ask me something."

Veil.

She was going to be the death of me.

The curiosity in her eyes wasn't just curiosity—it was a sign she was growing more comfortable with me. It certainly hadn't happened overnight, and I wouldn't allow myself to do anything to make her self-conscious again.

"Have you brought yourself to climax before?" I asked.

"Yes." She took the bite and handed it back. "Your turn."

My eyes narrowed at her, and she bit her lip to stop herself from smiling.

"Tempest," I warned.

“You said we’d trade answers. It’s not my fault you asked such a simple question.” A strand of her hair slipped free of the rest, and she tucked it back up in the wet, twisted bun. “Does hot water enhance your pleasure?”

“At times,” I said, a bit reluctantly.

Her eyes gleamed. “How often?” They widened, and the gleam faded. “And how many women have you brought here?” Suddenly, she was looking around the pool with an expression of illness.

It was my turn to ask her a question, but I couldn’t leave her with whatever thoughts raced through her mind. “I’ve never brought a woman here, and I only use the pools for that purpose once every few months.”

She let out a long, relieved breath.

“How do you bring yourself to climax?” I asked her, choosing my words more carefully. “And how frequently?”

Her eyes narrowed at me. “I didn’t ask *you* for details.”

“It’s not my fault you asked such a simple question,” I said, mimicking her reply.

She huffed at me, though it looked like she was trying to hide a smile again. “I was bored in the cave. I did it... probably once a day. Except during the eclipses, of course. I’m sure you can imagine how frequently I did it then.” Her response was reluctant, and her eyes lowered to the pool as she considered her answer to the second question.

I handed her the utensil again, and she took another bite before finally speaking.

Her voice was soft, when she did. “I would usually lie on my back, on my bed. Now, I realize how uncomfortable it was, but it was the most comfortable part of my cave. I would slip my hand between my thighs and work myself until I climaxed, letting my mind wander to the things I’d read.”

My cock throbbed at the mental image she painted for me, of her on her back in that cave, sweating and crying out in pleasure.

Otherwise, I forced myself not to react.

“Have you touched yourself since we met?” I asked her.

She met my gaze and wordlessly shook her head. “Have you?”

“Once. In the shower, while you slept.” I’d wanted to many, many more times, but we were rarely apart. And when we were, I was always doing something with my damned fae.

“What did you picture?”

I was still worried about scaring her away, but lying to her would only hurt her. “You,” I finally said.

Her eyes narrowed at me. “I’ll need more details than that.”

The mental images flooded me at her reminder, and I pushed them toward our bond. Her eyes flew open as the image of her with her thighs open, my face buried between them as she cried out in bliss, filled her mind too.

“Veil,” she breathed, her chest rising and falling rapidly, dragging my attention back to the swell of her breasts. “How many women have you been with?”

My gaze snapped to hers, my forehead furrowed. “Why would that matter?”

Her eyes were a bit dazed, and hooded, too. “It doesn’t. I just want to know. Have you had sex with anyone since our bond started?”

“Of course not,” I growled. “To ask that is to question my honor, Tempest. Only the worst of males would consider sharing his bed with another female while mated, even temporarily.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know.” She reached up and retwisted her hair, as it had started falling. “I—” she hesitated, and stopped herself.

I hadn’t meant to scare her into self-consciousness again. I appreciated her comfort far too much for that.

“I’m not sure how many women I’ve been with,” I admitted, reloading my utensil with another bite and handing it to her. She slowly took it. “It’s been a few hundred years since I’ve

shared a bed with someone, and it's rare for me to think back to those times in the past."

Her eyes went wide. "A few hundred years? Why?"

"I spent a few decades taking my pleasure any way I wanted it—so long as the other person consented, of course. It grew dull and unappealing, so I stopped. If I need a release, I can get myself there easily enough. Sex is selfish for fae, and for me, there was little satisfaction in sharing someone's bed simply to take my own pleasure."

Her expression grew understanding. "Before my magic came in, my mother spoke to me about sex a few times. It embarrassed me, but she wanted me to know what to expect so I could protect myself in case anyone in town tried anything. She told me that the greatest joy in sex was to see the pleasure of the one you love."

The idea was fascinating, truthfully.

Fae women gave the commands for the most part, when it came to sex. A male followed a female's commands until she reached her climax, and then did what he wanted until he took his. Neither worried about each other, or particularly cared how the other felt.

To be in a relationship where your own pleasure wasn't what mattered most would be something entirely different.

"You're looking at me strangely," Kaelle said, leaning over to steal another bite of the massive pastry I'd brought her.

"I'm thinking."

"Okay." She continued eating while my gaze lingered on her, my thoughts moving slowly but comfortably.

What if I had a life-partner or mate who would allow me to bring her pleasure the way I wanted to, as frequently as I wanted to? What if I had a female who would touch me or taste me, simply because she wanted to see my reaction?

Veil, it would be a different life.

A different *world*.

A world where I dragged my female into closets to ravage her with my mouth between the endless meetings I was forced to attend.

A world where I could sit her on my lap and touch her beneath my table during those endless meetings.

A world where I could come home to a woman who meant everything to me. One where she would see the exhaustion in my shoulders and take it upon herself to talk to me, to taste me, to sit on my cock simply because she wanted to make my day better and trusted me to bring her pleasure.

To share my life with someone in that way would be... glorious.

“Did you already eat?” Kaelle asked me a few minutes later, pulling me from my thoughts.

“What?”

She repeated the question, and I shook my head. “I planned to eat after I knew you were full.”

She shot me a curious look. “Why? We could eat together.”

The words struck me.

I didn't *have* to be alone.

Perhaps I had already found the woman who would be my perfect life-partner. Kaelle was softening to me, and besides that, she was gentle and kind. She had suffered more than most of us could imagine, despite the short number of years she had lived, yet it hadn't made her cruel or harsh.

And she wanted the same kind of relationship I had just realized I wanted.

“By my count, you owe me three answers,” I finally said to her.

“Alright.” She took another bite. “I'll only answer them if you're going to eat too, though.”

I reached back into my bag and pulled out my box of food. When I opened it, her mouth nearly watered at the sight of the savory, fragrant food she had never eaten before.

Setting it down between us, I pulled out my own utensil and filled it, taking an emphatic bite.

Her lips curved upward, and she took one of her own.

I was still worried about scaring her, but I didn't think we would progress if I didn't push her a little. "If I were to ask to slide into the water with you and bring you to climax with my fingers, what would your response be? Theoretically, of course."

Her eyes went wide. "Theoretically, I would say yes."

My cock throbbed. "And if I were to ask you to slide out of the water and spread your thighs for me so I could taste you?"

"Still theoretically?" she whispered.

"Of course." I took another bite, though food was the furthest thing from my mind.

"Theoretically, I would slide out of the water and spread my thighs for you." Her voice was soft, and a bit wobbly.

My cock throbbed again, harder.

"And if I were to tell you to show me how you bring yourself pleasure?" I asked.

"I would tell you to show me how you climax first."

I was going to lose control in my damn pants if she talked to me like that.

Forcing myself not to react visibly, I filled my mouth to stop myself from growling an order for her to get out and prove it.

Kaelle opened her mouth to say something, but before she could, the door to the bathing rooms burst open and my niece came barreling in, hollering, "Uncle Vayme! I missed you so much!"

She crashed into me, and I caught her with a grunt, hiding my damn erection with an arm. My brother stepped into the room behind her, and I fought the possessive tension swelling within me. "I missed you too, Pav."

She heaved a sigh. “I still didn’t convince one of the xuno to bond with me.”

“It’ll happen when the time is right.” I gave her a quick squeeze, and my gaze lifted to Matían.

When I found his eyes trained on the ceiling, mine jerked back to Kaelle, who had sunk lower in the water so just the tops of her shoulders were showing.

I fought a snarl at the thought that my brother might have seen more of my female. Fae were comfortable with nudity, but I couldn’t stand the idea of him seeing my mate bare.

“Give me a moment with my friend, and we’ll meet you outside,” I told Pavia, squeezing her lightly before releasing her.

“Alright. Hi, Kaelle!” She waved at my *friend* before running out of the baths, and Matían wisely left with her.

“I’ll install a lock on the door,” I told her, taking another bite of my food before closing the lid on both boxes and stacking them.

“Probably a good idea.” She eased herself to a standing position, and my gaze lingered on her figure before she turned and slipped out of the water.

Her bare ass was nearly as nice to look at as her breasts, but my gaze lingered on the handprint on her hip. Something about seeing the mark of my palm on her skin was intensely satisfying.

As she dried off, her back still facing me, Kaelle said quietly, “You should probably know, Pavia suggested Matían comb my hair for me earlier. She told him I could make him happy. She obviously doesn’t know about our connection, so it was nothing against you—but she might suggest something like that again, and I don’t think you want to be surprised by it.”

My anger surged.

Not at my niece, but at my damn brother. I knew it was ridiculous to feel that way, but veil, I couldn’t help it. “Thank you for letting me know.”

She nodded.

My gaze slid from my handprint to her ass again as she pulled on her undergarments and then tugged her dress over her head.

I needed to get her something... smaller.

No, not smaller.

Something with a cut out over her hip, so I could see my handprint any time I wanted.

My mind was made up as I grabbed our boxes of food and stood. "We can pick our earlier conversation up later."

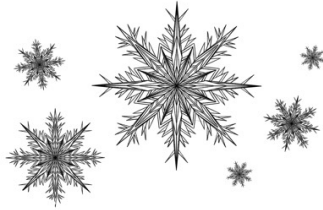
She flashed me a curious look. "Can we?"

My gaze swept over the curves of her form, barely hidden by the black dress she wore. "We *will*."

Kaelle's lips curved upward, and she followed me to the door. Her breath brushed my back as she whispered, "I look forward to it."

CHAPTER 13

KAELLE



Vayme was good with Pavia.
Very, very good with Pavia.

Though his energy level wasn't at the same fierce speed of hers, he spoke to her easily and she replied with the excitement I was coming to realize was natural for her.

I ate far too much food while she filled him in on everything that had happened while he was away. There was tension in my lower belly from the desire that had gone unsatisfied after our little interruption, but I ignored it.

Eventually, Pavia got bored of talking to Vayme and made her way over to one of the xuno. From what the little girl had said about the beast, I assumed she was Matían's companion, Wicked. Despite her name, she seemed sweet.

"What do you intend to do to keep your human alive?" Matían asked Vayme, his voice low as he gestured toward me.

"She's going to charm my people," Vayme said bluntly.

I blinked.

I *what?*

Matían gave me a skeptical look before shooting it back at Vayme. "She's not exactly... charming."

Asshole.

I hated that he was right.

"Of course she is," Vayme growled back.

I blinked again.

He was either insane or just delusional if he actually believed that.

“She has been through more than most of our people can comprehend. They might be asses, but they love Pav because of her story, and they’ll love Tempest for the same reason.”

“I thought her name was Kaelle.” Matían shot me another skeptical look.

“It is,” I said. “And where’s Strong, anyway?” Maybe a subject change would fix things.

“He’s been chasing a female for the past few years, and has begun trying to convince her to mate with him again,” Vayme said, his gaze still on me. “Think about it. Pav lost her mother—you lost yours too.”

“Because you abducted me,” I tossed back.

But we both knew that wasn’t really true.

He had abducted me... but I had lost my mother long before he showed up in front of that cave. I had lost her the day I created that storm, or perhaps the day she tucked me away in that cave.

Or veil, maybe I’d lost her the first time she lied about everyone not having enough food—the first time she’d starved me.

I wanted to argue that it wasn’t true, that my family had taken care of me as well as they could. But I could no longer deny the healthy weight of their bodies or the way they had never even bothered to bring me water to clean my skin with.

They had lied to me over, and over, and over.

Vayme didn’t disagree with me, but he didn’t look away, either.

“How am I supposed to use that to charm them?” I finally asked him. “I can’t just walk around telling strangers that I spent the last eight years of my life on death’s doorstep in a tiny cave.”

“Why can’t you?”

I scowled at him.

“Think about it—didn’t Laeli do exactly that? She would randomly mention her years of starvation in her cellar, and it made people feel for her.”

“I’m not Laeli,” I protested.

“Thankfully,” Vayme agreed. “But if you happen to meet my people, and mention your past while you do, word will spread. They will look at you differently. And while it may not save my life, it could protect yours.”

I heaved a sigh.

“You were starving for *eight years*?” Matían asked me, his expression entirely different.

“Yes,” I admitted.

“Veil.” He looked at Vayme. “You’re right. It’s a shitty plan, but there’s a chance it might work.”

“Isn’t it kind of manipulative?” I asked them both.

“It is,” Vayme agreed. “But my people won’t be concerned with morals when they try to slaughter you, so you can’t be concerned with them while you try to save your life.”

I supposed if that wasn’t a good enough excuse, nothing would be.

“Did you try the same thing with Pavia to stop the people who want war?” I checked.

Matían looked at Vayme. “No. Maybe we should, though.”

“It couldn’t hurt. I’m just not sure how we would achieve it,” Vayme said. “We can’t ask Pav to try to convince adult fae not to go to war.”

“No.” Matían drummed his fingers on the table, thinking.

“What if she took some fae with her to visit her old home?” I asked.

“No,” Vayme growled, at the same time Matían said, “Out of the question. They could hurt her.”

Right.

Bad idea.

“What if you sent a group of the most bloodthirsty fae to pick up some of her mother’s old things? If you told them they can’t start a war, but they can kill everyone who attacks them first, it would change their opinions, right?” I checked. “If fae warriors are as strong as you said, a group of them could handle a city in the Sands, I think. Why would it have to turn into another war?”

“We don’t know how the rogues would respond if we took down one of their cities,” Matían explained. “They could see our attack as a sign that we want war, even if we don’t hurt anyone else.”

“It’s a long journey from the Sands to Vuuth, or even to Jirev. Without your bonded beasts, it would be even longer. The chance of anyone having the desire or the strength to pass through the Wilds to get all the way here, and *then* start a war, seems really slim,” I countered. “Especially if they’re mostly human. Do you really think a bunch of humans are going to attack the fae if they know they have an alternative? I can tell you, they won’t. They were afraid of me, and I’m one of them.”

Both men studied me.

It was a bit unnerving, and I felt warmth spread over my face. “If you’re really worried they’ll see it as an act of war, you could send messages to the towns and cities nearby to let them know that it’s *not* an act of war, but one of revenge. I don’t think anyone would be surprised by fae taking revenge; you’re known as brutal, icy warriors.”

My cheeks continued warming, and words continued spilling from my lips. “You say your people want war because they love Pavia. If those fae manage to take the throne, they could do a lot more damage than just killing a handful of humans stupid enough to challenge them. They could ravage more of the Sands, including innocent children or men and women who have no desire to fight. I—”

Vayme put his hand on mine.

The gesture was simple, but sudden enough and intimate enough that I cut myself off.

“You’re right,” he said.

The words surprised me so much, they stunned me to silence for a moment.

“I am?”

His lips curved upward slightly. “Yes, Tempest. You’re right. Giving the bloodthirsty what they want, with guidelines, could potentially solve the problem. It won’t satisfy those who despise me enough to send the Monster after me, but it could make enough of a difference to tip the scales back in our favor.” He glanced at Matían, who gave a grudging nod.

Vayme’s brother was looking at me differently again, and I didn’t know what to think about it. “It’s a good idea,” he finally said.

“It is,” Vayme agreed.

Pavia chose that moment to run back over, her cheeks pink and her expression happy as she grabbed Vayme’s hand. “We need you to play too.”

“I thought of something even more fun,” Vayme said, leaning closer. “Do you want to go to the shops with Kaelle? She needs some new dresses.”

“Yes! And she needs a comb,” Pavia said eagerly.

“Then we’ll get her a comb. Perhaps we can find a blue one, to match her hair.” He winked at Pavia.

She burst out laughing before grabbing my hand. “Let’s go!”

Vayme, Matían, and I all froze.

There was supposed to be a chance her touch could kill me.

One by one, we let out long breaths when we realized I was fine.

Vayme’s magic must’ve been strong enough to protect me from Pavia’s.

I let her tug me to my feet, and followed her toward the xuno I knew her dad was bonded to.

“I’ll protect them,” Matían told his brother, striding toward us.

I saw the sudden storm in Vayme’s eyes.

He wouldn’t want me alone with Matían and Pavia. Though he trusted his brother, I knew the bond would make it difficult to watch me leave with another man.

“Come with us,” I called to Vayme, and then added mentally, *“I’m tired of the ache in my handprint.”*

“My people will be less accepting of you if I’m at your side,” he said.

“Then I’ll have to be extra charming, I suppose.” I added, *“And it’ll be easier to be charming if I’m not in pain.”*

His lips curved upward the tiniest bit, though the expression was a bit grudging. “Fine.”

“I’m going to ride with Vayme,” I told Pavia, giving her a quick smile.

“Okay! Be nice to her, Uncle Vayme,” Pavia called out.

“I’m always nice,” he called back.

She snorted. “If you were always nice, you would have more friends in the empty rooms.”

I bit back a laugh at her sass, and the sight of Vayme’s rueful grin.

“Can’t argue with that, brother,” Matían tossed back, looking highly amused.

Vayme shook his head, capturing my hand and striding toward the female xuno I had noticed on two different occasions, the one with the light blue eyes. “Would you be willing to carry us to the shops, Soft?” he asked aloud.

“Will you buy me a treat?” she countered, speaking into both of our minds.

He chuckled. “Of course.”

“Then I’d be happy to.” She stood and stretched a bit before dipping her head toward us.

Vayme lifted me onto her back—though he had to know damn well at that point I could get on myself—and slipped on behind me.

“Is your name Kaelle, or Tempest?” she asked me, as she headed up the stairs behind Matían’s companion. Speaking mind-to-mind with me was all the permission I needed to do the same with her.

“It’s Kaelle. Strong started calling me Tempest, so Vayme did too. I’ve tried to talk them out of it, but I think it’s a lost cause at this point.”

She chuckled into my mind. *“Surely they could have come up with a better nickname.”*

“You would think,” I agreed.

“Perhaps I’ll have to call you by your given name to balance out their unfortunate one.”

My lips curved upward. *“I certainly wouldn’t complain.”*

“Kaelle it is, then.”

She continued running, and my curiosity got the best of me.

“What do you know of Vayme and Strong? I’ve been around them so consistently that I’ve never heard an outside opinion, other than from my human friends.”

“Hmm.” She considered it. *“I have known both for too long to give a truly unbiased answer, but I’ll do my best. Both are males of honor, but not without flaws. Strong grows smitten with a new female he knows will never truly consider a mate every few decades. He currently pursues Vibrant, who will certainly never mate with the king’s companion.”*

“Interesting.”

“Mhm. The king himself is a more peculiar creature. Though confident and the strongest fae in our city, both physically and magically, he keeps to himself. He rarely pays attention to the females interested in him, and politely declines any offers he

receives. The man prefers books and weapons over all else, and has few fae he truly trusts."

"Why?" I wondered.

"I don't know. I suspect some fae would blossom with the stability of a mate bond, but because of their ridiculous stance against mating, they deprive themselves of that which they need. Unconditional love can lead to a truly beautiful amount of security."

I thought about Vayme and his quietness. He'd even seemed a tiny bit awkward with me, a few times.

And I wondered if she was right. Was Vayme someone who yearned for the stability of love, perhaps without realizing it?

I certainly believed what Soft said. Finding out that my family had likely been my jailers and that I was alone in the world, made me feel far more uncertain about myself than I had ever felt before. I had nothing to fall back on, if I failed.

Did Vayme feel that way too?

Being able to trust him to protect me had been just about life-changing for me. I knew he wouldn't abandon me, because he needed me to stay hidden from the Monster. And I knew he wouldn't hurt me, because he was a kind man despite the roughness of his personality.

All of those things had made it easier for me to open up to him. I was getting more comfortable speaking my mind with him, because I'd grown more certain that doing so wouldn't change anything about the way Vayme treated me.

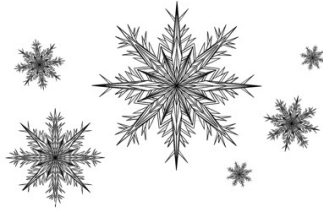
"Thank you for sharing your thoughts," I said to Soft. *"I appreciate your honesty. It gives me much to think about."*

"Of course. Thank you for trusting me enough to ask."

Her words surprised me, but in a good way.

CHAPTER 14

KAELLE



We reached the shops shortly after my conversation with Soft ended, and Pavia was immediately at my side, dragging me toward the stone buildings. The crystals above Vuuth glowed much more brightly than they had the first time I'd seen them, creating similar light as our suns, but more glittery and spread out.

Vayme and Matían wore similar neutral expressions as they followed me and Pavia. Though there were a lot of auras around, they weren't anywhere near as concentrated as they had been in Jirev, so I was alright.

Pavia towed me into the first shop, and proudly declared to the woman running it that she needed a comb for her uncle's friend.

The woman smiled and looked at me. "The king's *friend*?"

I blushed a bit. "Yep."

She laughed. "I think we can manage to find a comb. This way."

Pavia maintained her hold on my hand as we followed the woman deeper into the shop, where we found a row of toiletries. My eyes widened at the sight of all the different soaps, lotions, and perfumes. At the end of the row, I saw a basket of combs in varying sizes and shapes. I was at a loss for words, having never seen so many options in one place before.

Pavia released my hand and ran over to the combs, then started going through all of them in a painstakingly slow attempt to find the best one.

“There’s a better selection at Pera’s shop across town,” the woman said, noticing my surprise. “I try to keep some of everything to save people a bit of time, but the best choices will be there.”

“Oh, no, this is perfect,” I admitted. “I grew up in a tiny town.” I bit my lip, knowing I was supposed to throw in more about my past than I necessarily wanted to share. “And then I lived in a small cave for eight years, so I’ve just never seen so many products like this before. It’s a bit magical.”

Sympathy flooded the woman’s eyes. “Oh, dear.”

“Yeah. I suppose they have shops like this in Jirev, but Vayme was so busy that the only one I saw had clothing in it.” I flashed her a small smile, and her eyes softened even more as they flicked to our male company, waiting near the door to give us space.

“He’s a good king. I’m sure he’ll treat you well even after your bond fades.”

“He will,” I agreed.

She grabbed a basket off a pile I hadn’t noticed and handed it to me. “While little Pavia finds you the perfect comb, why don’t you look through everything else to find the scents you like most?”

“That would be great. Thank you.”

She flashed me another smile before handing me the basket and slipping away.

I started sniffing the soap bars, and glanced over at Pavia. When I saw Vayme beside her, holding up a few different options, my lips curved upward, and I went back to sniffing.

There were so many choices, I had no idea which to pick. All the different smells were a marvel. I liked the majority of them, but was uncertain which one I would truly want to smell like. It was a silly thing to wonder, but I wondered anyway.

There was a soft brush of skin against my arm, and I jerked my head to the side. My eyes met Vayme’s, and I relaxed again.

“Difficult decision?” he asked, his voice quiet and unassuming.

“Unfortunately. I don’t particularly know how I want to smell.”

“Your scent doesn’t need soap’s enhancement. You smell plenty delicious without it.”

My cheeks warmed, and I wasn’t sure whether to thank him or try to come up with some sort of clever retort.

He noticed my uncertainty and added, “Point out your favorites, and I’ll tell you which will pair the best with your natural scent.”

Gratitude swelled in my chest, and I pointed out the five I liked the most.

Vayme sniffed all of them briefly, and put three in my basket without an explanation or question.

“Oh, I don’t need three soaps,” I told him quickly. “Just tell me which one will smell the best, and I’ll pick that one.”

“All three of them will smell nice. A queen would have a whole shelf of soaps to choose from, and are you not my queen, if only temporarily?” His eyes were piercing, and I felt as if they cut into my soul.

“I don’t really think that’s how it works,” I finally said.

“I get to decide how it works.” He grabbed another two bars of soap, a few jars of lotion, and a handful of glass bottles holding some other kind of soap I didn’t know the use of.

My body burned with something between desire for him and embarrassment for myself, but I tried to ignore it. “What are those?” I gestured toward the strange soaps.

“Conditioner. It will make your hair easier to comb through.”

Veil, it sounded like a gift from the lost gods themselves. I spent far too much time detangling my hair. “Thank you.”

“A female doesn’t thank her mate for providing for her.”

“The proper response is *you’re welcome*,” I said, brushing up against his side.

He stiffened at the contact—the way one would when they were in pain.

I jerked away quickly, assuming he had hated the touch... but then I noticed the darker patch of fabric on his black shirt.

He rarely wore shirts.

Was he injured?

“What happened?” Without thinking, I grabbed the bottom hem of the fabric and lifted it up so I could see his abdomen. My jaw dropped when I saw a thick cut, not bandaged or covered at all. “Vayme!”

“I’m fine. A few of my fae challenged me after I explained about the Monster hunting me and about our connection. I won.”

“What if you hadn’t won?” I demanded.

“I would be dead,” he said calmly.

My heart dropped into my stomach, and I let go of his shirt.

If he didn’t care whether he lived or died, how could I ever let myself rely on him the way I’d started to?

“I’ve got them!” Pavia exclaimed, running up to us with a stack of combs.

“Nice work. Let’s see what you found.”

She beamed, and held up not just one or two combs, but six.

Six combs.

“Six?” I flashed Vayme a dark look.

“You need a big one for getting out the big tangles, and a small one for smoothing the rest of them,” Pavia explained quickly, taking my attention back. “Vayme said you get a lot of tangles ‘cause of your magic. And combs are *really* easy to lose.”

“That’s true,” I managed to say. “And you must’ve picked out the best ones, because these are really pretty.”

She beamed again. “I did.”

I wasn’t sure whether to laugh or to rip said tangled hair out. Both options seemed equally reasonable.

Vayme picked out a few other toiletries for me—all in multiples, of course—and then paid for everything. He helped the woman running the shop put it in one of the fabric bags all of the fae seemed to like, and followed me and Pavia out.

The king mentioned a clothing shop, and I shot him an exasperated look as Pavia dragged me toward one. She wore the same black dresses most of the fae seemed to prefer, though hers were shaped a little different to cover more of her. I had to assume that was her father’s doing, because the fae women didn’t seem to care about showing their bodies off.

I felt similarly after the weeks I’d spent among them. And my current dresses were a bit too tight, but I didn’t really mind. The fabric was smooth and soft, so it wasn’t as if I was in pain.

Though Pavia immediately started loading my arms with black fabric, my gaze kept wandering to the colorful dresses tucked at the back of the shop. Nissa had always worn colorful dresses when we were in Jirev, and something about them just seemed... happy.

And strong, and confident.

I wanted to feel those things, too, but I didn’t want to disappoint Pavia, so I stayed quiet.

Vayme prowled over to me with a blue dress dangling from his fingers. It was a light, faded blue, more like the color of my aura than my hair. “Tempest is going to try this on, Pav,” he told her.

“It’s blue!” she exclaimed.

“I know. It’ll look pretty on her, don’t you think?”

“SO pretty! Can I have a blue dress too?” She looked around for her dad, but he wasn’t in the shop.

“He went to get Soft and Wicked,” Vayme told her. “I’ll ask them to make you a dress to match Kaelle’s.”

“I don’t even know if I’ll like it,” I protested, as Vayme led me toward the curtained area for trying clothing on. His hand was on the small of my back, and it felt nicer than it should’ve.

Particularly considering he didn’t care whether he lived or died.

I needed to distance myself from him, so that when he left me, it didn’t break me. A fae warrior should be a safe person to care about, shouldn’t they?

My frustration swelled as I tried the dress on, and grew more intense as I looked at myself in the mirror.

Vayme was right. I looked stunning in the damn thing. And the missing fabric on the sides—which seemed to be fashionable among the fae—showed the print of the bastard’s massive hand on my hip perfectly.

I let out a soft huff before pulling the curtain open and gesturing to myself. “Well?”

“Veil, you’re gorgeous,” Vayme murmured, his gaze moving over me slowly.

My face warmed

“SO gorgeous!” Pavia exclaimed. “Why do we even wear black?”

“That’s a good question,” her uncle replied, his gaze lingering on my midsection, and probably the handprint easily visible there.

“What’s that?” she pointed to the handprint on my hip.

“A magical tattoo. You can ask your dad about it.” Vayme ruffled her hair, and she squealed, pushing his hand away.

The seamstress who ran the shop came in and exclaimed over how good it looked, and how she could make it fit perfectly. She took my measurements and quickly altered the blue dress while I told her a little about my past.

Vayme decided I needed a few *more* dresses, so they both had me choose my favorite colors. All the shades I picked were

blues, pinks, and purples, and Pavia requested matching dresses to all of mine.

After making a few more stops, we met up with Matían and the xuno and headed back to the castle. As much as I didn't want to admit it, my gaze kept sliding down to the light blue fabric fluttering in my breeze, and it made me happy. I knew it was silly for a piece of clothing to have that power, but it did.

Pavia was a ball of even more energy than she had been when we arrived. She told her dad and the rest of us all about the colorful dresses we were going to wear, how delicious the treats he'd bought her were, and how much she loved Vuuth.

I supposed it was important to remember that she had spent most of her life running an inn with her mother, before losing her, and was then brought to a new city. I'd started to feel like she was a bit spoiled, but a little girl who'd so recently lost everything she knew deserved to be spoiled, to ensure she knew how safe and loved she was.

As I watched her, I couldn't help but wonder how differently my life would've turned out, if someone had been beside me after the storm, telling me I wasn't a monster for what I had done. Those had been long, lonely, difficult years, made harder by my parents repeating how dangerous I was every time I saw them.

The more I thought about it, the more I remembered my father starting the conversations—changing the subject away from the books I'd been reading and back to how important it was for me to stay in the cave, to protect everyone from myself.

Still tired from the traveling, and a bit subdued with the weight of my thoughts and memories, I murmured a *thank you* to Soft and scratched her behind the ears before heading back to my room. Vayme had the bags of things he'd bought me, but I didn't need any of them at that exact moment.

Except maybe the combs, because veil, my hair was a tangled mess.

I closed the door and locked it, then leaned against it, resting my back and head against the thick stone.

My eyes shut, and I let out a long breath.

Everything was so... new.

I wasn't sure what to do about any of it, honestly. Or how to feel.

On one hand, I did feel better than I had in my cave. So much better, in so many ways.

But my emotions were insanely conflicted, and my thoughts were the same.

Mainly, I was struggling with knowing that everything was going to change again after the eclipse, so I couldn't let myself get too comfortable.

And it didn't help to know that Vayme didn't care whether he lived or died, which meant I couldn't allow myself to rely on him or trust him the way I'd begun to.

I wasn't tired enough to sleep, but I didn't want to go back out and face Vayme after what I'd learned. My room was basically empty, though, so there was nothing to do in there except shower.

And if I showered, I would inevitably remember my bath... and my conversation with Vayme.

My cheeks warmed.

I could always bring myself pleasure, but something told me I would have a hard time keeping my mind separate from the king's if I did that. And if he knew I was doing it, I was fairly sure he would find a way to involve himself, either by sending me more mental images of his fantasies or asking to join me.

Maybe I would've been interested in that earlier, but knowing what I did about his fights, I wasn't willing to let myself grow even closer to the man. He had likely been bleeding during our conversation about sex, of all things, yet he hadn't even bothered to tell me.

I walked over to the bed and collapsed on it with a huff.

The whole situation was a mess.

The intensity of a mate bond, without the feelings that should naturally precede it.

The intimacy of a relationship without the promise or expectation of anything past the eclipse.

Veil, I wasn't sure how to deal with any of it, or how to stop myself from growing more attached.

There was some chatter and commotion outside my room for a few minutes, and then silence that told me Pavia had probably left again.

A minute after that, there was a knock on my door.

I squeezed my eyes shut, not sure who I hoped it was. At least with Pavia, I didn't have to make conversation or have difficult discussions. Even with the difficulties, I'd probably prefer talking to Vayme than Matían, so that was something.

"Tempest?" Vayme called out.

I debated whether or not to feign sleep.

"Can we talk?" he added.

I really didn't want to talk, but couldn't see a refusal actually working in my favor, so I reluctantly slipped out of bed. It took a minute to unlock the door, but when I got it open, I found myself face-to-face with a massive, gorgeous king. He was leaning against the doorway in a way that somehow made him even more attractive.

Though I tried to hide the way I sucked in a breath at the sheer presence of him, I probably failed.

"Hi," Vayme said quietly.

"Hi." I slipped my hands into the pockets of my dress, trying to come off more aloof than I really was.

"Are you okay?" he asked me.

"Yes."

"You seem upset. Did I do something?"

I blinked.

He wasn't going to let me get away with my aloofness, apparently.

His gaze lingered on me, waiting for an answer.

Though I wanted to lie, close the door, and disappear back inside the room, he was giving me a chance to tell him exactly what was wrong. It would've been ridiculous for me to stay quiet, given the situation.

"You don't care whether you live or die," I said.

It was his turn to blink.

I gestured to his side, where I knew his open cut was. "You were in multiple fights that could've led to your death today, and you didn't tell me about them, or even take care of your wounds afterward. I can't rely on someone who can't be trusted to take care of himself, so I need to step out of this... whatever we are." I took a physical step back, to prove my point.

His forehead creased.

"I'm not upset with you; I'm upset with me. I should've realized where we stood sooner. So yes, I'm okay, and no, you didn't do anything wrong. I'm just... I need more distance." I started to close the door, but he caught it with a thick hand.

"We're mates, Kaelle." His gaze wasn't hard, or angry, but it was... intense. "*Whatever we are*, is mates."

"Temporarily," I countered. "As soon as the eclipse comes, we're nothing. So *whatever we are* is a reasonable statement. You know my history; you should understand why I can't just embrace being mates until the eclipse and walk away without looking backward. I need stability."

I tried to close the door again, but he was too damn strong. It didn't budge.

"I never said I wanted you to walk away without looking backward." Vayme's voice was steady.

"No, but you *vowed* to take me home."

"Did I say I was going to leave you there?"

My eyes narrowed. “You’re a king. You’re not planning on living in that tiny cave with me. There wouldn’t be enough water—and you’d die of starvation much faster than me.”

“I’m not letting either of us starve,” he growled at me. “I’m going to take you back so you can confront your family to get the full story, and then I’m going to drag your ass back to Vuuth, where I know you’ll be safe and healthy.”

“And alone. Away from you.”

“I never said that either.”

“It was implied!” I exclaimed, tossing a hand out toward him. “Our bond is going to break, and fae don’t take permanent mates anymore.”

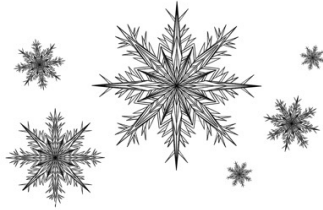
“We do take life partners.” He captured my hand and lifted it to his lips. My heart hammered in my chest as he slowly brushed a kiss to my fingertips, and then to my knuckles, where he lingered.

“What are you saying?” I was growing flustered, and I didn’t like it.

“Our bond will end with the eclipse, but that doesn’t mean *we* have to end.”

CHAPTER 15

KAELLE



My eyes widened at the suggestion that he didn't want our bond to be temporary. Or at least, didn't want some aspects of it to be temporary. "We've only known each other a month, Vayme."

"A month during which we've spent almost every moment together. I'm not suggesting we make vows; I'm saying the decision is ours to make, regardless of the bond breaking. We can stay together when we're no longer mates, if we wish to."

"Why would you want that?" I asked, my voice growing softer. "I'm human, remember? As soon as the bond is gone, my magic's effect on me will grow stronger again. The more emotions I feel, the faster it drains my energy. I was only conscious for a few hours a time in that cave."

"You were starving."

"And your magic wasn't there to ease mine. Everything will be different without the bond."

"Everything became different when the bond was created. We can handle another change," he said, his gaze steady.

"And what if we can't?"

"We deal with that when it happens. *If* it happens."

"That's easy for you to say, Vayme. You're a king. You're a warrior. If things end between us, you still have *everything*." I gestured to the rooms behind him, the castle above us. "I have nothing."

“I’ll provide you a home and fill it with supplies. I’ll help you find something to occupy your time, too.”

I huffed. “I didn’t ask for that. I—”

“I know you didn’t. I would do all of it out of selfishness, on my own behalf.”

I scowled. “How could that possibly be out of selfishness?”

He dragged my hand away from his lips and set it on his chest, over his heart. I could feel the steady, constant beat of it, and it warmed me.

“My body hasn’t responded to the presence of a woman in centuries, Tempest, yet I find pleasure simply watching you breathe. You’re clever, you’re kind, and yes, you’re delicate—but beyond your delicacy is a fierce strength of both mind and will. Your body is attractive, but your soul? It captivates me. And yes, it’s incredibly selfish, but I’m not willing to let you walk away from me.”

My own heartbeat was faster than his, my breaths shorter, too. “I don’t know if I would be willing to agree to be life partners, after the eclipse. Even if things were perfect, I would age like a human, and you’d remain immortal. We could never be equals without the bond connecting our magic. And Vayme, I believe in marriage. I believe in making vows and keeping them. I believe in choosing someone every single day, even when it’s hard. I believe in devotion, and love.”

“I didn’t consider your lifespan,” he admitted.

“You don’t want a mate bond.” I brushed a few strands of hair out of my eyes. My wind had blown them there, and the veil knew I couldn’t control that. “It wouldn’t make sense to consider starting any kind of a relationship when we don’t want the same thing.”

“I’ve lived long enough to know that the best things in life often don’t make sense.” He tilted my chin back, so our eyes collided. “And I have nothing against mate bonds. We’ll have to kill any cultists hidden among my people who come after us if we seal ours, but luckily for you, I excel at killing.”

I scoffed. “Even if all of that is true, it doesn’t negate the fact that you could’ve died multiple times today, and you didn’t bother to tell me! You could’ve been bleeding out while we were talking about sex, and I still would’ve been oblivious because you decided not to tell me. I woke up with pain in the handprint—for all I know, tomorrow, I could wake up *without* it.”

“I won’t let that happen.”

“Why should I believe you? You don’t care whether you live or die, Vayme. How can I let myself develop feelings for someone like that?”

He stepped closer and caught my face between his hands, leaning his head closer to mine. “I want to live, Tempest. My life wasn’t at risk in any of those challenges.”

“You already said it was!”

“No. I said that if they won, I would be dead.”

“Which is exactly the same as saying your life was at risk,” I shot back.

“I’ve fought in hundreds of challenges in the past few centuries. If any of my fae could beat me, they would’ve done so by now.” His voice was ridiculously calm.

“That is one of the stupidest beliefs I have *ever* heard.”

“I am very good, Tempest. I don’t say that with pride, or overconfidence. I say it as a fact. I am very, very good. I have never been close to dying in a challenge, and I never will be.”

I pushed his hands off my face and stepped back, shaking my head. “Maybe that’s good enough for you, but it’s not good enough for me. You lost when you fought Kier. I—”

My head jerked to the side as I heard Pavia’s voice in the spiral stairwell leading down to the king’s space. When I looked at Vayme, I found him still staring at me, waiting.

“Just go,” I finally whispered, gesturing him out of the room.

He stepped inside instead—then locked the door behind him and leaned up against it.

I huffed. “Vayme!” My voice was soft enough that Pavia hopefully wouldn’t hear through the door.

“This conversation isn’t over.” His voice was even quieter than mine, though it still held his complete certainty.

“Of course it is. I’m never going to see it the way you do. I will *never* be comfortable with being close to someone whose life is at risk so frequently.”

“Give me a solution, then. You’re my temporary queen—come up with a better alternative. If I step down in the next challenge, the fae who takes over will be worse. They will create more wars. They will kill more humans. They will attack the kingdoms we just made our allies.”

My throat went dry. “What?”

“Give me an alternative, and I will take it,” he said, his gaze steady.

“I...” I began, and trailed off. He had a point, as much as I didn’t want to admit it, and wasn’t comfortable with the cost of it. “Do you kill them after you beat them?”

“I don’t. I wouldn’t have any people left by now if I did.”

“So what’s the consequence if they lose?”

“Shame. We are warriors; there are few things worse than losing a fight.”

I ran a hand through my hair—or started to, extracting it when it got caught in the tangles.

Then, I started to pace just a little bit. My wind tugged at my skin and hair, but it actually felt fairly nice.

“I don’t want you to fight,” I told him.

“I know.” He watched me pace. Though his expression was still neutral, there was something in his eyes that almost seemed *happy*.

“If there’s no way around it, there would have to be a limit. One challenge a day—actually, a week would be much better, or even a month. And there would need to be a real consequence for them when they lose. Shame isn’t achieving

anything; if it did, no one would be challenging you right now. Give them a terrible job for the week until the next challenge, or something. A blow like that to their pride would probably be more effective.”

His gaze grew thoughtful. “That may be doable.”

“And *if* I were to consider any kind of a relationship, I would want to be there when you fight. I wouldn’t be able to sit at home, knowing your life was at risk. I would need to see the healer tend to you afterward, or bandage your wounds myself or something.”

“You don’t like blood.”

“I would get used to it, if I loved someone who was constantly bleeding,” I shot back.

“Okay,” Vayme said.

I stared at him for a moment. “Okay?”

“Yes, okay.” He stepped toward me and caught my hands, stopping me in my tracks. “I can respect that the challenges affect you differently than they affect me, and I will change how they’re done.”

“Well, that was easier than I expected.”

He chuckled softly. “It—”

A small fist banged on the door.

“Kaelle?” Pavia hollered. “I have treats!”

My stomach still ached a bit from our last treats.

When I opened my mouth to say so, Vayme put a finger to my lips to quiet me, stepping up even closer.

I eyed him curiously.

His mind touched mine for what felt like the first time in ages. *“If she thinks she’ll succeed at getting us out of our rooms by pounding and yelling, we’ll never have a moment of peace. Matian will talk to her. Give him a minute.”*

I sucked in a breath as he slowly dragged his finger over my bottom lip, and remained silent as he continued to do so while

we waited in silence.

“Pav,” Matían called out, his voice faint thanks to the door and walls separating us from them. He said something else, but his words were muffled enough that I couldn’t make them out individually.

She groaned, but didn’t yell again.

My eyes were still locked with Vayme’s as the silence slowly returned.

“I’m going to kiss you,” my king murmured into my mind. *“If you have any objections, now is the time to voice them.”*

I didn’t have any objections.

His lips met mine. It was sweet, but nothing like the fiery passion I’d expected.

I started to pull away, but before I could, he tilted my chin further. His tongue parted the seam of my lips, and I stumbled backward at the sudden intensity of his taste in my mouth. His tongue stroked mine, and one of his hands landed on my hip. He stepped closer, pressing against me as he kissed me, going slow enough to give me time to figure out how to kiss him too.

My fingers lifted to his shirt and dug into the fabric as he started walking me backward without pulling away.

My ass met the wall, and the rest of my back followed until I was pressed against both it and Vayme.

Every inch of me was hot, despite the wind blowing through the room.

My heart pumped hard in my chest, my hands sliding further up his neck as I hung onto him, pulling him closer.

One of my legs hooked around his waist, and he lifted me higher. I groaned into his mouth when his erection met my core, hitting me perfectly.

“Veil, you taste incredible,” Vayme growled into my mind, releasing my mouth long enough to drag his lips and tongue down the sensitive column of my throat.

I struggled for breath, clinging to him as he made me feel things I'd only ever dreamed of before.

"I don't taste that good. You're just out of practice," I whispered into his mind.

Vayne's rumbly chuckle made my lips stretch in a smile as the back of my head hit the wall. He sucked lightly on the skin above the curve of my breast, making me desperate for more.

"Let's fix that, shall we?" He moved to the side just a little, and his hand found the apex of my thighs.

I gasped at the contact, and he captured my lips again to keep me quiet as he slowly stroked my clit. His fingers were big, and his touch was rougher than my own, but veil, he was so damn perfect at it.

My hips rocked and swiveled desperately as he worked me slowly through my undergarment, dragging me closer and closer to the edge. His mouth was hot on mine, swallowing every sound I made. My fingers buried in his hair, gripping the strands to anchor myself as he brought me closer to my climax.

Finally, it all became too much.

I shattered.

The pleasure hit harder than I'd ever experienced—and lasted longer too.

His mouth stayed on mine as his fingers dragged it out for me, his touch soft but confident.

"Veil, you are good at that," I sighed. *"I don't even want to know how good you are when it hasn't been a few centuries."*

He chuckled. *"You're going to find out, Tempest."*

The words made my toes curl, and heat swell in my abdomen. I couldn't even imagine how good his touch would feel without my undergarments separating us.

"Are you still bleeding?" I whispered against his mouth.

"It doesn't matter." He recaptured my lips, but I eased them away from him.

“It does to me.”

He gave me a long look, then eased away from me. I remained where I was, one of my hands settling over my heart and the other resting on my abdomen. Vayme slowly peeled his shirt over his head, exposing his chest to me.

I’d seen him half-naked every day we’d known each other... but one of my hands flew to my mouth as I stared at him.

He looked *terrible*.

Cuts were scattered over his torso, most small and healing, but two were still wet and leaking. Nausea turned my stomach, but I forced myself to ignore it.

If I wanted to prove I could be there for his fights, I couldn’t be squirmy around blood.

“Veil, Vayme.”

“You’ve seen me bleeding before.” He stepped closer.

“It’s worse now that I care about you.”

His lips curved upward. “I can accept that.”

“And you’re not going to have a healer look at them?”

“I’ve survived hundreds of cuts like these, if not thousands,” he said. “I don’t need a healer. They’ll be gone in a few days.”

I hoped that wasn’t an underestimate, because I hated that he was wounded at all. “Do you have bandages?”

“In my room.”

I nodded, letting out a shaky breath. “Alright. We’ll go to your room, and I’ll patch you up. Hopefully without passing out.”

“I’m not going to let you pass out again,” he said, his voice low. “I’ve made every possible effort to keep you from getting overwhelmed by the auras; if my wounds are going to knock you out, you won’t take care of them.”

“It was a joke, Vayme. I’ll be fine.” I patted him lightly on the arm.

He didn’t look convinced, but I grabbed his shirt off the floor and handed it back to him. “You can strip again for me in your

room. We don't want Pavia to see you bleeding."

He jerked his head in a nod, and tugged the shirt back over his head. When he caught my hand, I let him lead me out of the room.

As we reached the door, he halted and said into my mind, "*You'll have to change so my brother can't smell your pleasure.*"

I blinked.

His eyes narrowed. "*Has he smelled your pleasure before?*"

"*Um... I don't think so. I was in the pool when we were talking earlier, so it's unlikely.*"

The response satisfied him. "*We'll have to be careful about keeping the doors closed so I don't have to fight the urge to remove Matian's head from his body.*"

"*Maybe we should just not do anything in my room? It'll be easier to keep Pavia out that way. She's already used to not going into your room, and seems to have an affinity for mine.*"

My suggestion satisfied him further. "*My scent will be more completely entangled with yours that way, too.*"

"*Are you going to be this possessive around everyone?*" I asked him.

He considered it as I changed into one of my tight, black dresses, giving the soft blue one a lingering look as it joined the other dirty clothes. Vayme's gaze tracked my every move, his eyes hot as they devoured my figure. "*Not quite. We're sharing a living space, so he's much closer than anyone else would be, and we're brothers, so there's a different dynamic. I had him and Pavia living here to ensure their safety after they first arrived, but it would be more than safe for them to find a home of their own now. Everyone adores Pavia.*"

"*Oh, I don't want you to kick them out because of me,*" I said quickly, straightening my dress and tugging to make sure it was in place.

"*I would never. I'll simply ask Matian if he would feel comfortable moving out. If he wouldn't, I'll deal with the*

discomfort.”

“*He’ll hate me,*” I protested.

“He was living with his lover in another land, allowing me to believe he was dead, for nearly a decade. If he despises you because I want privacy with the first female I’ve taken to in multiple centuries, he possesses far less intelligence than he’s led me to believe. The bastard’s lucky I didn’t kill him for letting me believe him dead for so long.”

I guess it didn’t sound as bad when he put it that way.

We stepped out of the room hand-in-hand, but halted when we found Pavia laying on her belly in front of our door again.

Her head was in her hands, and her eyebrows were furrowed as she stared up at us. “What were you doing in there?”

Veil.

My face heated.

“Talking,” Vayme said calmly.

“About what?” Pavia asked.

“Kaelle’s feelings. She’s tired of combing her hair,” the king said.

He was a far better liar than I was—though I *was* tired of always combing my hair.

“Me too,” Pavia said, looking at me.

“Perhaps we should both cut it short,” I suggested.

Her face fell. “My mommy loved my hair. I can’t cut it.”

My throat swelled. “Then we’ll have to practice our braids, won’t we?”

She gave me a small smile, and nodded.

“We’re going to keep talking in my room, Pav. Have fun out here.” Vayme rustled her hair, and her smile grew a little bit as she nodded again.

“*You can’t kick them out,*” I said quietly to him, holding his hand a bit tighter as we crossed the large space. I nodded at

Soft as we passed her, and she dipped her head in return.

“I won’t,” he reassured me. “But I doubt Matían will want his daughter consistently at risk of being exposed to just how thoroughly I enjoy bringing you pleasure.”

My face heated.

“There are no other children in the city, but it may be good for her to make friends with some of the fae outside the castle. He’s mentioned before that she would benefit from time spent growing herbs and plants, and with the seamsters and seamstresses. She was used to staying busy at the inn, so she’s having a hard time adjusting to the quiet of life in my rooms. He’s been hoping she’ll bond with a xuno to give her that extra protection, so he doesn’t have to worry as much,” Vayme added.

I couldn’t blame him for that. Or for wanting to keep her busy—she certainly had the energy for it.

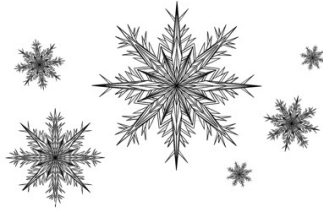
“I’ll speak with him tomorrow,” Vayme said. “Tonight, I’m yours.”

My face flushed as he opened the door to his room and gestured for me to walk inside, but I didn’t protest.

Only a fool would’ve turned down an invitation into a fae king’s bedroom, after all.

CHAPTER 16

KAELLE



Vayme stripped his shirt off again while I locked the door behind us, and despite his wounds, I found myself studying his body with thinly-veiled desire.

The man was a masterpiece.

He strode into the bathroom for a moment, and returned with a bundle of bandages, a pair of scissors for cutting them to size, a towel, and a cup of water. I wasn't sure what the water was for.

“Where should we do it?” I checked.

“The bed would be easiest.” He gestured toward it, and I headed that way.

Vayme surprised me by sitting his massive self on the floor, his back to me as I sat on the mattress behind him.

He explained quickly how the bandages worked—you just had to wet the wound and skin around it, then apply them with a dry hand—and I nodded my understanding.

Though it made me nauseous at first, my illness eased as I slowly cleaned him and patched him up, eventually moving from my seat on the bed to the floor so I could better get the wound on his side.

Things had changed between us, and it seemed like we were both still trying to figure out the new dynamic.

“Were you ever in a relationship, before?” I asked Vayme, as I finished up with the final wound on his chest.

“No. I suppose I don’t really even know what it requires,” he admitted. “My parents have never mated, so their connection has taught me nothing about the bond, either. You were never in a relationship, were you?”

“Oh, no. I was only thirteen when I went to the cave, so that would be... weird, to put it in the politest way.”

He chuckled. “Did anyone other than your family ever visit you? I imagine you were close with the others, since your town was small.”

“We were all close before the storm, but they hated me after it. My parents said that much, at least. I really only saw them a few times a month, and they never stayed long. My brother only visited once a year or so. I should’ve been more suspicious of them.”

“You were young, and they convinced you that your magic made you unworthy of anything more than they gave you. Leaving there as strong as you did is a testament to the strength of your mind and soul, Tempest.” His words were quiet, but firm.

My eyes stung a little. “Thank you.”

He brushed a few tangled strands behind my ear, though we both knew my wind would sweep them away again soon enough. “This will be a first for both of us. You’ll have to tell me when I do something wrong, so I can learn.”

“And you’ll have to do the same,” I whispered.

His lips curved upward. “I can’t see you doing anything wrong.”

A quiet laugh escaped me. “Prepare yourself for it, because—”

His mouth captured mine before I could finish what I was saying. I parted my lips for him without waiting for a nudge, and his tongue stroked mine.

All thoughts disappeared from my mind as he kissed me slowly and intimately, as if there was nothing else in the world he would’ve rather been doing. I migrated onto his lap as the

kiss went on, and his hands moved over my thighs and ass, slowly touching and exploring me.

Though he was hard against me, he made no effort to push me for more.

My breathing picked up, and my hips started to move as I rocked against his erection. It hit me perfectly, dragging me closer to the edge and making him growl. His grip on my body grew rougher, his hands on my ass as he helped me move.

His mouth was still on mine, swallowing my cries again as I lost control once more. I came down from the high panting, and he released my lips to let me catch my breath.

His lips brushed my ear. “You’re so damn gorgeous.”

I was too dazed by the double hit of pleasure to respond. My lips felt as if they’d be swollen for hours, if not days, after all the kissing, yet I was already wondering how Vayme would respond if I kissed him again. My body was blissfully warm, and veil, I wanted more.

“You’re really good at that too,” I whispered to him, earning a chuckle.

“I can do far better.”

“I’m sure you can.”

His lips landed on mine again—the kiss still slow and intimate. My fingers slid into his hair, tangling in the thick, soft strands.

A soft squeal escaped me as he lifted me off the floor and set me on my back on his bed. He didn’t break the kiss, but his body stretched over mine, strong and warm.

“*I would never hurt you,*” he said quietly into my mind, as he continued kissing me.

“*I know.*” I did. I knew he wouldn’t hurt me, and I trusted him. He had proven that he respected me, despite the insane number of differences between us.

“*We’ll have to stay quiet.*” He pulled away from me and settled on his knees between my thighs, opening my legs to

him. I was still fully clothed, but the way he stroked my legs told me he didn't care.

"Okay. Just cover my face with a pillow or something if I get loud." I wasn't positive where the night was headed but was absolutely on board no matter where it went.

After so many years in that cave, I was finally free, and I was going to live my life however I wanted. And while there was a gorgeous fae king interested in my body, I was certainly going to take advantage of the situation.

Vayme's hands slid back up to my ass, where he squeezed lightly before hooking a finger in the bottom of my undergarments. His eyes met mine. *"May I?"*

"Please."

I watched him slowly peel the fabric down my thighs, taking the opportunity to touch as much of my skin as possible in the process. The undergarment hit the floor, and he opened my legs wider.

His gaze was hot as he took in every inch of me. Any fear I would've had about him seeing me bare was gone thanks to those moments in the Wilds, when he'd stripped me naked and told me how gorgeous I was.

"You're absolutely drenched for me. Veil, I can't wait to have my tongue on you. Sit up."

My abdomen was tight with desire, so I sat up without a question.

He was sliding my dress over my head a heartbeat later, stripping me further. My face warmed as his chest rumbled at the sight of me, his hands sliding over my exposed abdomen and covered breasts. *"You have no idea how badly I wanted to touch you when we were traveling toward the elves."*

"I do, actually. Your constant erection made it pretty clear." I brushed my foot over his hardness, making his gaze grow hotter.

"Finding your fire, Tempest?" He undid the clasp of my remaining undergarment and slid the fabric from my chest,

revealing my breasts to him. His hands slid over them, making me fight to keep my hips from jerking.

“Or my inner storm.” I brushed my foot against his cock again. *“I want to touch you.”*

“You can, after I’ve tasted your climax on my tongue and watched you bring yourself pleasure as well.”

I flushed hotter.

“I believe you told me you would show me how you bring yourself release if I showed you my own first.” He lowered himself to his belly, relaxing between my thighs. My entire body clenched in response to the sight of his face above my core. His eyes were locked with mine still, and I realized he was waiting for me to respond.

“I did.”

“And?”

My throat swelled as he lowered his nose to my core and inhaled deeply, taking my scent into his lungs. Veil, taking my scent into his very *being*. His hands were still on my breasts, gripping them firmly.

I managed, *“And I certainly haven’t changed my mind.”*

His chest rumbled with satisfaction. *“Good. Now, I want your hands in my hair when I lick you. Show me how you feel about the way I touch you, since we’re staying quiet.”* He waited and watched while I slid my fingers into his hair, tangling them in the strands. *“Just like that. Ready?”*

I jerked my head in a nod, my eyes glued to the gorgeous, massive man.

He lowered his lips to my core and lightly dragged the tip of his tongue over my clit.

I barely managed to slam my jaw shut in time to stop myself from crying out at the intensity of the sensation.

He slowly continued working me, in no hurry to pick up the pace.

My hips started to buck and my grip on his hair grew tighter. It took every ounce of effort I had to stay quiet as he made love to me with his mouth, dragging me back to the edge of my pleasure with far too much ease.

His hands landed on my hips and held me in place when my motions grew too desperate, and the heat of his grip was too much.

I shattered, biting my cheek so hard it bled as the pleasure cut through me so damn fiercely. He didn't pull away from my core or even slow down, the strokes of his tongue still steady on my clit.

I tugged his hair until he lifted his gaze to me. Though my throat was dry at the sight of him pleasuring me, I said into his mind, "*Give me a moment.*"

His eyes narrowed.

"*I bit my cheek,*" I added, fairly certain the unimportant wound would distract him long enough to recover.

He released my clit with a suck that made my hips jerk roughly against his hold, and slid up my body enough to look into my mouth. "Open," he said.

I opened my mouth, showing him the bleeding wound in my cheek. His forehead knitted in concern as he pulled my lips open wider so he could see it better.

"It's alright," I said around his fingers.

"It's not." He pressed lightly against the outside of my cheek, and I winced at the pressure on the back side of my wound. "I don't want you bleeding without reason, Tempest."

"It's hardly any blood."

"Blood is blood." He nearly growled the words at me.

Maybe I shouldn't have made him take a break.

Deciding I needed to distract him, I slipped my fingers into the waistband of his pants and tugged lightly, murmuring, "You said you were going to touch yourself for me."

His eyes dilated slightly at the reminder, but he scowled at me anyway. “You’re bleeding.”

“I want to watch you climax.”

His eyes dilated further, and he undid the fasteners on his pants in two sharp motions. “This conversation isn’t over.”

“Agreed,” I lied.

The conversation wasn’t over... but I’d effectively ended it.

He pushed his pants down his thighs, and when his erection sprang free, I went still.

Utterly still.

His cock was absolutely huge.

How would it fit inside me?

Maybe fae women had larger vaginas—or stronger ones?

“It’ll fit,” Vayme said, his eyes gleaming with both desire and something that resembled humor.

My thoughts must’ve been strong enough to bleed into his mind.

“You won’t take me until I’ve stretched you thoroughly with my fingers, and we both decide you’re ready for me,” he added into my mind. *“Do you fear me?”*

“I don’t,” I said honestly. I wasn’t sure we would fit together... but I certainly didn’t fear him.

He spread my thighs with his knees and let his gaze slowly trail down my figure. My eyes were glued to him as he dragged a hand down the thick length of his erection.

Veil, that was the hottest thing I’d ever seen.

He lifted my hand to rest between my thighs and said in a low voice, “Show me.”

I touched myself lightly, barely paying any attention at all as I watched him stroke his cock again.

And again.

And again.

His fingers felt far better on my skin than my own did, but watching him... it made me hot, everywhere.

My hips jerked in response to my touch as his breathing picked up, the head of his cock dripping a bead of pleasure onto my abdomen.

My eyes followed the drip, and lingered.

“You’re going to wear my pleasure on your body tonight, Tempest. Where do you want it?”

Where did I...

Veil.

My breathing hitched as his mental images flashed through my mind.

His pleasure on my breasts, as he massaged them.

His pleasure on my abdomen, as he cleaned me with a towel.

His pleasure coating my core, his fingers slick as he touched me with it.

“That one,” I said, without a heartbeat to consider it.

“Then show me how you make yourself climax.”

My hips jerked, my fingers moving quickly while my eyes stuck to Vayme, watching his body respond to every stroke he gave himself.

I was close—so damn close.

But not close enough. It hadn’t been long enough since my last release. I was on the edge, and couldn’t push myself over it. Not while clenching my jaw so soon after so much pleasure.

My eyes burned with frustration, and I groaned softly, *“Veil.”*

“Arch your back for me.”

I didn’t hesitate to do so—or to freeze, when Vayme’s thick thumb trailed over my entrance, and dipped inside me.

Though I’d tried that once or twice, it had never been very pleasurable for me. One touch from the king told me it was different when he was the one doing the touching.

“*Do you trust me?*” His eyes lifted to mine as he continued to tease my entrance.

I jerked my head in a nod so quickly it was nearly painful.

With one hand wrapped around my thigh, he tugged me closer, and pressed the head of his cock to my slit.

My breathing stalled.

Was he—

Were we—

Did I—

Veil, he was huge.

He dragged his cock up my center and back to my slit before stopping it there and pressing against me lightly. It wasn't enough to stretch me, just enough to make me insane.

And veil, to make me want him so much it made my head spin.

He lifted my hand to his cock. “*Use me, Tempest. Unravel yourself for me.*”

It was so much more intense than anything I'd ever done before.

It was absolutely *insane*.

And yet I found myself slowly dragging the head of his cock over my clit, dipping him against my slit before dragging him back up.

He was smooth, hard, and foreign—and it was so insanely hot, I couldn't take it.

His hand covered my mouth as I cried out with my release, my body tightening with waves of pleasure even though there was nothing to tighten around. The thought of his thick cock inside me as I lost control only made the pleasure fiercer.

He snarled softly as he tugged my fingers from his erection and jerked a hand down his length once, and then again, before releasing all over my core. The warm heat of it was so foreign—and so, so good.

“Veil, you look incredible covered in my pleasure,” he swore into my mind. His hand still muffled my cries as he dragged his fingers through the slickness of his release, and over my clit again.

I was so damn sensitive, my hips jerked, and my mind spun.

“Roll over.”

I didn't even consider ignoring the command, rolling to my belly and propping my arms on the bed.

“Hands and knees,” he said.

It was an order, but it was so simple and direct, without any disrespect in it. He knew how he wanted me, and that was the easiest way to get me there.

His hands were on my hips, lifting my ass as I raised myself to the position I'd been instructed to.

“I'm not going to take you from behind yet, Tempest. Tell me if I do anything you don't like.”

“Okay. I—” I cut myself off as his fingers dragged over my clit, and a moan escaped me.

His hand smacked my ass lightly, not hard enough to sting, but hard enough to make my body clench and wonder if more was coming.

I wasn't sure why, but veil, I wanted more.

The thought made me so damn wet between my thighs, I felt my pleasure and his roll down my legs.

“Pillow in your mouth,” he said.

I bit down on the pillow.

“You're going to feel my fingers, now. There may be a small amount of pain, since it's your first time. I won't know if it's too much unless you tell me, understand?”

“Yes,” I whispered.

Veil, the way he had taken over was so damn hot.

More pleasure rolled down the insides of my thighs as he toyed with my clit a little more—and then slid a finger inside

my channel.

My words died.

My thoughts died.

My sounds died.

The feeling—veil, it was so much.

So, so much.

“You’re so damn tight. I can’t wait to feel you around my cock.”

I let out a strangled breath as he added a second finger and slid them in until he hit something near the back of my channel.

“Relax, Tempest,” he murmured into my mind, slowly pressing against whatever he’d hit.

My face twisted at the slight pain until he broke through, and it ended as suddenly as it had begun. He growled into my mind as his fingers slid in deeper. *“Veil, you feel good.”*

The words didn’t even process in my mind.

The intensity of what he was saying, the insanity of what he was doing... with my ass in the air and my tits on his bed and his fingers buried inside me... everything was so unreal.

He pulled out long enough to slide another finger in, then his spare hand found my clit, and it was over so fast.

I cried into his pillow as my hips rocked desperately, the climax hitting me so damn hard there were no words to describe it. It was so vastly different than any pleasure I’d felt before—so much deeper, and wilder, and more *free*.

I came down from the high faster than I wanted, my mind still blank of anything except shock at how good I felt.

“That was perfect, Tempest.” He stroked my clit lightly. The slickness of his release was still on my core, and still dripping down my thighs. *“Veil, I can’t wait to watch your body swallow my cock.”*

The words made me want him—fiercely.

Insanely.

Desperately.

I opened my mouth to say that, but a loud knock on the door silenced me.

“What?” Vayme growled.

“The Monster has been spotted outside the city. The elves’ shields are holding, but your council wants to develop a plan in case he breaks through.”

My heart nearly stopped.

Vayme let out a rough breath before replying. “Give me a minute, and I’ll meet with them.”

“Alright. Kee is on the stairs along with a few others, so be quick,” he said.

My throat swelled at the mention of the woman who had touched his chest in his room that day. Kee. He seemed to trust her—and she certainly seemed to be interested in him, because I’d never seen anyone else touch a fae they weren’t in a relationship with like that.

She hadn’t known we were mated, though. Maybe that would change things?

And his hand was still buried inside me; that would definitely change things.

Or at least, it would definitely change things for me.

I suddenly felt very, very self-conscious on the bed like that, exposed so completely to him.

Just as I started to move, he slid his fingers free of my body, and then his tongue dragged slowly up the inside of my thighs. His chest rumbled at the taste of our mingling pleasure, and he said nothing of the meeting. I sat up with my legs dangling off the edge of the bed, much more uncertain than I wanted to admit or accept.

“*Shower with me,*” he said into my mind, rising to his feet and offering me a hand. I took it, though I knew the fae well enough to know he wanted to wash the scent of what we’d just done off his skin.

“So we’re keeping what just happened a secret?” I asked him, more uncertainty swelling in me as he grabbed his bar of soap and scrubbed himself quickly.

“Not really.” He took his soap to my skin, the motions much gentler than when he’d washed his own. I itched to use my new soap, but I was fairly certain he’d dropped the bag in my room before he had kissed me. “I’d rather my people not know the specifics of how I make you climax, but it doesn’t need to be a secret that I do. Our plan hinges on the bond breaking, but that doesn’t mean we can’t share a bed.”

That... didn’t relax me.

Maybe it should’ve, but it didn’t.

I wasn’t sure what to do about it, or how to feel.

So, I changed the subject. “How long is your meeting going to be?”

“Long, probably. You should sleep in here while I’m gone.”

I cringed inwardly, and debated how to turn him down before finally saying, “I think I’d rather stay in my own room. It’ll be nice to have my own space again.”

He nodded silently. “Let me know when you’re going to sleep.”

“Okay. I can finish up, if you want to get going. I know they’re waiting on you.”

He grimaced but agreed.

My gaze lingered on him as he finished drying off, pulled on a pair of pants, and then strode out of the room.

“I’ll stay close enough that the handprint will barely ache. Please be safe.” He paused in the doorway, hesitating, and then shook his head and slipped out of the room with one last, “Lock the door behind me.”

I only waited until he was gone before padding to the door. Water dripped off my skin, but I wanted to lock it... and maybe see if there was anything to hear as Vayme left with his friends.

I opened the door just a breath and put my ear to it, listening closely.

“How long has he been outside the city?” I heard Vayme ask.

“Not long. He just arrived,” a female voice explained.

Though my throat constricted, I knew they were only talking business. And if Vayme hadn't been with any women in that many years, it was really, really unlikely that he would find himself suddenly attracted to her. It seemed safe to assume he had known her for a long time, since there were no new fae being born and whatnot.

The problem wasn't that I didn't trust him... it was that I didn't understand their relationship, or friendship, or whatever it was, and she had certainly seemed interested in him the last time I saw her.

Their voices faded, and I carefully closed the door.

Rather than locking it, I dried myself off as quickly as possible, slipped back into my dress and undergarments, and then stepped out of the room.

Staying in there without Vayme seemed wrong since he'd left to deal with whatever was going on with the Monster.

Whatever we were wasn't solid or certain, so I needed to make sure I had enough space to protect myself.

Thankfully, Pavia wasn't playing out in the foyer area when I stepped out. Matían eyed me with something near curiosity, but I just gave him a quick nod before disappearing into my room and locking the door behind me.

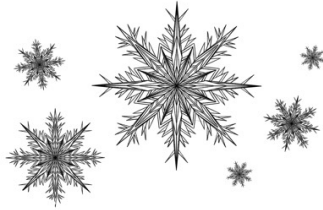
A long breath escaped me when I collapsed against the stone, and I closed my eyes.

There was so much uncertainty... and it was going to drive me mad.

At least there was nice-smelling soap to wash myself with. Maybe it would help me forget my worries.

CHAPTER 17

KAELLE



Unfortunately, the soap didn't wash away my problems. It did smell nice, though.

And the soap to make my hair softer was even more of a miracle than I'd hoped for. My comb glided through the strands easily after using it.

I let Vayme know when I was going to bed, and received a quick goodnight that only made me more uncertain.

He hadn't asked me to let him know when I woke up, so when morning came around, I didn't reach out to him.

Matian and Pavia—well, mostly Pavia—invited me to go see the xuno with them, and since I had nothing else to do, I agreed.

I wasn't about to snuggle up on a xuno with Vayme's brother, so I asked Soft to carry me. She agreed readily, without asking for anything in return.

The handprint didn't occur to me until we were on our way out, and Vayme was growling into my mind, *"Where are you going? Are you safe?"*

"I'm fine. I'm going to see the unbonded xuno with Pavia and Matian. Soft is carrying me."

He seemed to relax slightly. *"Stay clear of the city's edge. The Beast could have told the Monster what you look like, so he may be watching for you."*

"Are they friends?"

“I don’t know. It seems likely.”

“Well, I don’t plan on going far. Besides, the handprint would probably hurt too much if I did.”

“That’s true.” Vayme’s response was still gruff. *“You didn’t let me know you’d awoken.”*

“I didn’t know you wanted me to.”

“Tempest, I worry when I don’t hear from you. Next time, let me know.”

I sighed aloud so he didn’t hear, my uncertainty swelling, but agreed. *“Alright.”*

“I’ve got to get back to the meeting. I have word spreading that the challenges will be based on a list now, and will only occur once a week. Some of my people are gathering volunteers to retrieve some of Pavia’s mother’s things, as well.”

It was nice to be filled in on that, since he had taken my advice. I would’ve preferred to be involved in the conversations about it too, but I did understand that Vayme was likely the only person who saw me as a temporary queen. To everyone else, I was just a human shield to protect him from the Monster.

“Okay. Thanks for letting me know.”

I felt his hesitation through the bond, but he finally said, *“You’re welcome,”* and left it at that.

“Is everything okay?” Soft asked me, her mind touching mine.

“I’m not sure. It’s hard to say,” I admitted. *“Something’s wrong, I think. I’m just not sure how to put it into words.”*

She chuffed—the closest thing she had to a chuckle. *“That’s difficult.”*

“I know. I think I’m just bothered that I still don’t really have a place with Vayme. I think technically we’re... dating? But we have this mental bond that makes things intense, and I’m not even sure what it means to be dating from a fae’s perspective. He said to tell him if he did something wrong, but I’m also not

sure what's really considered wrong." I huffed out a laugh.
"It's pathetic."

"It's not pathetic. I think most beings—xuno included—struggle with the beginning of a relationship. Everyone has their own definitions and ideas of things, and it's hard to make them align. I imagine it's harder when one of you is a human and the other is fae."

"That's a good point."

"If you're confused, the king likely is too. He's old and stuck in his ways. I don't think he was joking when he told you to let him know if he did something wrong; something wrong probably meant something that bothered you or frustrated you."

A laugh escaped me. "Something tells me he wouldn't appreciate being called old and stuck in his ways."

"It's true though, isn't it? And direct communication makes life much easier for everyone." She winked at me over her shoulder as she slowed to a stop.

"You're right. I think I'll just have to talk to him about it whenever he gets back from this meeting he's at." I slipped off her back, and scratched her behind her ears after I landed beside her. *"We should be friends. You know how to deal with this place a lot better than me, and you see things more simply than I do."* After a pause, I quickly added, *"And I mean that as a compliment."*

She chuffed again. *"Then we will be friends. As a friend, I should warn you, it's likely that Vayme will send Strongpaws to stick with you through the entirety of his meetings. He will worry about you."*

"See, this is why I need you." I flashed her a smile, and she gave me a wolfish grin.

Pavia ran over and grabbed my hand. "Come on, Kaelle! We need to find you a xuno to bond with too!"

Soft's grin widened as she followed while Pavia dragged me into a portion of the city that looked packed full of xuno.

For the next few hours, we met, talked to, and scratched every beast we could manage, trying to establish bonds. Soft told me facts about each of them, and I had to stifle laughs a few times.

When Strong showed up to keep an eye on me, I laughed aloud, and Soft and I exchanged grins again.

Eventually, we made it back to the king's rooms, and I found my mind wandering while I watched Pavia play a game with Matían's companion.

Of course, my thoughts kept returning to Vayme and his meetings. Something about the way he had left, and how we had communicated in the moment, rubbed me wrong. I was trying to figure out what it was.

After a while, Pavia called out, "Kaelle, come play with us!"

My attention jerked to her, and I found her waving me toward her.

"No one likes to be commanded, Pav. Ask politely," Matían warned.

She sighed dramatically, but asked politely, so I agreed.

When I'd played long enough that I could sit back down on the cushion—with Soft on one side of me and Strong on the other—my mind went back to my interactions with Vayme, but I still couldn't figure out what the issue was.

Both Soft and Strong snuggled up with me in my bed that night. Strong stared at her like he expected her to leave, and she stared back at him with narrowed eyes.

I found myself looking between them, wondering what was going on, but didn't ask. They would tell me if they wanted to.

Neither of them said a word to me as their stare-off ended and they got comfortable. I wasn't sure what to think about that.

"How is it going with the female you're pursuing?" I asked Strong, after we had all settled. I hadn't seen Vayme all day,

and had barely heard from him, which added to the uncertainty I was feeling.

“Not well,” he grumbled.

I scratched him lightly behind the ears, and he closed his eyes as he relaxed. *“How does one pursue a female xuno, anyway?”*

“Compliments. Gifts. Snuggling. Spending time together. The same way one pursues a human female, I imagine.”

I nodded. *“Why isn’t she interested?”*

“She wishes to remain unmated until her companion selects a mate.”

“And you don’t?”

“Vayme is mated, remember?” He nudged the handprint on my hip with his paw.

“Only temporarily.”

He made a noncommittal noise, but said nothing.

“What does that mean?” I eyed him suspiciously.

He studied the ceiling intently.

“Strong,” I warned.

“Tempest,” he countered.

I huffed in frustration.

“He is truly an irritating male,” Soft agreed, broadcasting her thoughts so both of us could hear.

My lips curved upward, and I set a hand in her fur so I could scratch her too.

“Don’t try to turn my companion’s female against me,” Strong growled at her.

“Your companion’s female is my friend, Strongpaws.”

He glared at her, and I couldn’t suppress my curiosity any longer. *“What’s going on between you?”*

“Nothing,” they said at the same time.

I looked between them, not believing them in the slightest.

“Strongpaws and I were friends when we were pups,” Soft finally said, her eyes focused on mine as she ignored the xuno on my other side. *“Our friendship grew into romance, and we decided we would create a mate bond. The day we were going to seal it, he bonded with Vayme, and then introduced me to his companion as his friend.”*

Strong was staring at Soft, his eyes still narrowed. *“Many beasts choose not to take a mate until their companion does.”*

“And many take mates whenever they find the male or female they wish to bond with,” she countered.

He scoffed. *“I went to find you that night, and you were already gone.”*

“I’m not daft. I know when I’m not wanted, Strong.” Her use of the shortened version of his name sounded like an insult, and while I liked Strong, I silently cheered for her for it.

“You were always wanted. My circumstances changed, but my emotions did not.”

The flatness in her gaze told me she didn’t believe him.

Not even a little.

She closed her eyes, effectively ending the conversation. Though Strong growled again, he didn’t press for more.

“I love the way you stood up for yourself,” I admitted just to Soft.

“Powerful males are impressive, but they will take anything you allow them,” she murmured back. *“With a powerful male, a female must determine what she’s comfortable with, set her own limits, and respect herself enough to enforce them.”*

I studied the smooth stone ceiling, considering her words.

“You’re right. I think maybe that’s my problem with Vayme. I’m not very good at standing up for myself, or setting limits.”

I supposed that was what I had done when we discussed mate bonds, though.

He had been plenty receptive when I told him I wasn't willing to consider a relationship without the potential for it to end in a mate bond. When I said that, he had adapted his thoughts and expectations to suit me. That seemed... significant.

He likely hadn't realized it would make me feel uncertain when he left with Kee to attend his meetings. Or that he had never explained the full extent of their relationship, friendship, or whatever it was. He heard the Monster was outside the city, he showered, and then he left. There had been plenty of time for me to speak up, but I had stayed quiet.

Vayme was a good man, but he was also a fae warrior, and a king on top of that. He was direct and clear in his communication, so it might not occur to him that I could be hesitant about communicating the same way.

The fae were certainly confrontational, after all.

"You can learn," Soft said simply.

"Thank you." I scratched hers and Strong's fur lightly. As I did, I decided that when Vayme got back, I was going to ask him plainly about his friendship with Kee to hopefully settle my mind on the subject. Until then, I needed to figure out exactly what I was comfortable with, so I could set those boundaries.

I was still thinking when the xuno fell asleep, and the quiet sound of their snores made my lips curve upward slightly.

"Tempest?" Vayme's voice was grumpy in my mind.

"Don't sound so excited to talk to me," I murmured.

My sarcasm earned the tiniest chuckle from him.

"Have you gone to sleep yet?" I asked.

"Unfortunately, no. I don't recommend getting into politics. It takes far too long to make any decisions. Every warrior thinks himself a strategist, and veil, the discussions are endless." He sounded far wearier than I expected.

"Are you almost done?"

“I doubt it.” He heaved a sigh. *“Tell me about your day. We’re having a second dinner break right now, and I want to strangle everyone else in the damn room.”*

Though I’d been hesitant and a bit uncertain when he first reached out, speaking with him calmed me. I told him about everything I’d done with Pavia, but left out the conversation between Soft and Strong, since I wasn’t sure what he knew about it.

We chatted about the xuno I’d met that day for a bit, and then he sighed again. *“Someone just came to drag me back in. I’ve got to go. You’re tucked into bed?”*

“Yes.” I focused hard on the sight of my body curled beneath the blankets, tucked in with Soft and Strong, and felt the tiniest whisper of his satisfaction.

“Sleep well.”

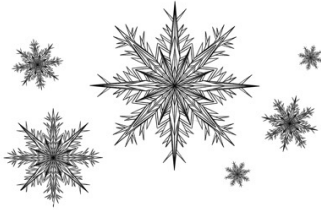
“Try to get out of there soon so you can rest,” I murmured back.

He made a noise of agreement, but I knew him well enough to doubt he would really try to end the meeting. He didn’t want to disrespect anyone he liked, and he was the kind of man who would surround himself with people he liked at the head of his kingdom.

My eyes lingered on the ceiling as I got back to considering what kind of relationship I wanted. Eventually, I drifted off the same way.

CHAPTER 18

VAYME



The next few days passed far too slowly, full of meetings and empty of sleep. I only managed an hour or so each day, and never caught Kaelle while she was home.

Pavia kept her busy, which I supposed I should've been grateful for, though I was itching to have her at my side in the damn meetings.

I finally made it down to my wing of the castle five mornings later, and found Kaelle curled up on a cushion with a book, scratching Soft's fur absentmindedly as she read. Strong was snoring quietly on her other side, and her book was resting on his head. She wore a light purple dress that made her look calmer, and my handprint showed clearly through the cutout over her side.

I stopped at the bottom of the staircase to simply look at her for a moment.

Veil, she was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen.

Her hair blew lightly in the soft breeze emanating from her skin, and her expression was set in a calm, relaxed position as her eyes scanned the pages of her book.

She was stunning.

And I had missed her more than I realized. There was something comforting about her. Something peaceful and happy, unless I'd scared her or made her angry, of course, though I tried not to do that.

Kaelle's eyes lifted from the book's pages after a moment, and her eyebrows lifted in surprise when she saw me.

I crossed the room to greet her, and she said, “I was starting to wonder if you’d ever come back.” Her voice was quiet, and despite the bit of playfulness in it, I didn’t think it was a joke.

Had I done something wrong?

I had itched to ask her to join the meetings, if only to sit on my lap and let me stroke her legs while my fae debated.

Veil, I’d been starting to wonder if I’d ever come back too.

The only reason I hadn’t asked her or invited her was because I knew she would enjoy herself more with Pavia, and it seemed selfish to ask her to suffer through it with me.

“As was I,” I admitted, offering her a hand.

She eyed it but didn’t take it.

Worry curled in my abdomen.

I had certainly done something wrong, but was too exhausted to try to figure out what.

“The challenge is tonight. I assumed it would worry you less if I showered and rested beforehand,” I told her, my hand still outstretched. “I would like you to join me.”

She eyed my hand again, but then lifted her gaze to mine.

“That *would* worry me less. But I’m not feeling particularly comfortable with where our relationship stands right now, so I don’t think joining you is a good idea.”

I blinked at her.

That was fair, but... surprising.

And I wasn’t sure why she was uncertain, truthfully.

“What worries you?”

Both of us turned our gazes to Pavia’s bedroom as she bounded out. Her face lit up when she saw us.

She sprinted across the room in a light purple dress nearly identical to Kaelle’s. Her hair was braided away from her face, and she shrieked, “Uncle Vayme!”

I caught her as she launched toward me, and lifted her for a hug. “Good morning, Pav.”

“You were gone sooo long!” she exclaimed. “I worried about you!”

My gaze flicked to Kaelle.

If Pavia had worried about me, how had my female felt? She didn't know anyone in my city except my brother and his daughter.

Perhaps that was why she had refused my hand.

“I'm sorry. Hopefully I can get everything taken care of soon, so we have more time to spend together,” I told my niece, setting her back down on her feet.

“You look worried,” she remarked, staring up at me for a moment. “Kaelle is worried too.”

My gaze and Pavia's both jerked to Kaelle, who gave Pavia a small smile. “I'm okay, Pav.”

“Pavia?” Matían called, as he strode out of the room. He looked surprised to see me, and when he asked what all had been decided, I gave him a quick summary. He nodded as I finished up, and said, “We're going to visit the xuno again, Pav.”

She groaned. “I want to stay with Uncle Vayme.”

“Uncle Vayme needs to catch up on sleep.”

“Fine.” She stepped over to Kaelle and grabbed her hand. “Let's go.”

Matían looked at me, the humor in his eyes telling me I was going to have to deal with *that* part myself.

“Unfortunately, I have to stay and talk to Vayme this time.” Kaelle covered for me, tugging lightly on the end of Pavia's braid. “You'll have to keep an eye out for potential companions for me.”

Pav groaned. “I have to go alone?”

“I'm right here,” Matían drawled.

She sighed. “I'm always with you.”

“Because you’re lucky.” He leaned over and plopped a kiss on her forehead. “Let’s go.”

She shot Kaelle a desperate look, and Kaelle mouthed, “I’m sorry.”

I caught my female’s hand as they slipped away, not giving her the chance to turn me down that time as I led her to my room.

Veil, I was exhausted.

After I made things right with my female, I would sleep.

“I believe I’ve upset you somehow,” I said to her, studying her from the side as we walked.

She nodded, but said nothing.

Though I itched to ask for more—or demand answers—I held my tongue. She needed to decide on her own to tell me what the problem was.

“You were gone for a long time,” she finally said. “I know what you were doing was important, and we spoke mentally, but it’s not the same as seeing you. It was hard not to think the worst.”

She needed reassurance.

I should have invited her to the damn meetings.

Changing directions, I led her to the baths instead of my room. She gave me an inquisitive look as we slipped inside, and I closed the door behind us—locking it too.

Kaelle eyed the lock with surprise. “You had it put in?”

“I did. No one can attend my damn meetings for me, but many fae can install a lock.” I released her as I stripped my clothing and then slipped into the nearest pool.

She sat on the ledge and let her toes dangle into the water. I grabbed the soap and started to scrub my skin. Though I would rather have pulled her in with me, I understood the importance of our conversation coming first.

I admitted, “I wanted to ask you to come to the meetings with me, but I didn’t want you to feel obligated. In most situations

we would have disbanded every evening, but with the Monster outside the city, it seemed unwise to dismiss everyone. We had fae creating distractions, tests, and diversions to see how hard he would try to break through the elves' shields to get in, and whether the elves could feel the impact on their magic. Walking away would have been difficult, and could have led to my death."

She nodded. "I don't blame you for staying; I understand why you did. It's just hard for me to feel sure, considering everything."

I needed to make her understand the way I had ached for her, and thought of her day in and day out. Veil, the Monster could hunt me down and end my life, and I'd pass into the next life with her name on my lips and her smile in my mind.

But there was no way to force anything with her. And even if there was, it wasn't what I wanted. I wanted her to think of me the same way I thought of her.

Constantly.

Obsessively.

With far more emotion than I wanted to admit.

I couldn't convince her of any of those things in the moment though, so there was only one thing to do.

I took her hand in mine and met her gaze with my own. "I'm sorry, Tempest."

She blinked, seeming surprised by my apology, and said nothing.

I lifted her hand to my lips and pressed a kiss to the back of it, giving her a chance to gather her thoughts.

"I think I would feel more comfortable if I could be sure of a few things," she finally said. "If I know I'll see you every day, it won't feel as if you've abandoned me. If you tell me about Kee and let me see you interact with her, I won't feel as if you're spending your time away from me in her bed. And I know those things aren't logical, but they're what I feel, so they're important to me."

My jaw clenched.

I had forgotten that she saw Kee touch my chest in Jirev. I should've remembered that and realized Kaelle would be uncomfortable with it even though nothing had ever or would ever happen between us.

I forced myself to regain control of my breath and mind before I said, "Those are reasonable requests."

She nodded, but looked a bit uncertain. "Then why are you angry?"

"I should have predicted your discomfort sooner and done something about it."

She bit her lip. "We can communicate mentally, but you can't read my mind. I should've spoken up sooner."

"Tempest, if a man had put his hands on you in front of me, I would be fighting a very powerful urge not to kill him... or he would already be dead."

Her face flushed a bit. "I don't think that's a compliment."

"It's a promise." I brushed my lips to the back of her hand again. "Next time, I will drag you into my meetings and sit you on my lap, so you're certain my people know who I belong to."

She sighed and ran a hand through her hair, pulling it away from her eyes and tucking it behind her ear. Her mind wouldn't leave it there for long, but she knew that. "This whole thing is overwhelming. I couldn't stop thinking about you, or missing you, even when I was angry or frustrated. I think it might be easiest if we end whatever we have, or just leave it at sex so neither of us gets our heart broken. Our lives don't exactly seem compatible, and—"

I put my hands on her thighs, rising to my knees on the stone seat inside the bathing pool. Her eyes collided with mine, and I held her gaze steadily. "It would have been easier for you if I left you in your cave, wouldn't it?"

She grimaced, but nodded.

“It would’ve been easier if I had let the war continue, or if I let the Monster end my life. Easy is not *better*. I’m sorry that I hurt you, and I will do everything in my power to prevent it from happening again, but ending our relationship isn’t the answer. And it *is* a relationship. If another female attempts to seduce me or touch me in a way that dishonors you, I will promptly end her life. Even Kee knows that, and has kept her distance.”

“You’re really stubborn,” she said.

“I am a king, Tempest.” I squeezed her thighs lightly, where I still gripped them. “It’s part of the job.”

“I think you’re more stubborn than the average king,” she countered.

My lips curved upward. “You must not have had a conversation with Kier or Ravv, then.”

“I guess not.” Her smile was small and reluctant, but genuine. “Alright. We can continue our... *relationship*. But if I don’t see you every day from now on, I’m going to have to be done.”

“I understand.” I dipped my head. “It won’t happen again.”

She didn’t look quite convinced, but didn’t protest.

“I have a request,” I said, squeezing her thighs again lightly. “I would like us to share a room and a bed. I have had a difficult time sleeping alone since we’ve been back from Jirev.”

Her face reddened slightly. “You’ve hardly slept at all, because of your meetings.”

“And that sleep has been restless,” I agreed. “I worry for you, and I itch to have you in my arms when you’re not with me. If you’re not comfortable sharing, I understand, but I would vastly prefer it.”

She bit her lip, considering it, and I gave her time to think it through. “Alright,” she finally agreed. “But you can’t kick Soft out. She’s been cuddling with me, and she’s started to become my closest friend.”

“Soft?” My eyebrows lifted in surprise. “And Strong hasn’t said anything?”

“They fight sometimes and exchange glares, but otherwise no. I know they have a history together, but they don’t bring it up very often.”

“Well, I have nothing against sharing with her.”

I would ask my companion how he felt about it, but I wouldn’t sleep apart from my mate if he hadn’t spoken out against it. Even if he had, we would discuss it until we reached a reasonable understanding and agreement.

“Okay. I’ll move my stuff after you leave,” she said.

I shook my head. “We’ll move it together, after we’re done bathing. I’m not leaving you again. The challenge is tonight, and you’re coming with me.”

She grimaced, but nodded. “Are you worried about it?”

“No. I’ve fought Ivel many times, and usually walk away with no more than a scratch or two.”

She only looked slightly comforted by that.

One of her hands lifted lightly to my hair, catching a strand and sliding softly down the length of it. I fought the urge to close my eyes and lean into her touch, or lay my damn head on her leg.

The days had been very, very long.

“I missed you,” she said quietly. “I didn’t realize how much I would.”

Though the words were a bit sad, pride swelled in my chest upon hearing them. “I missed you too, Tempest.”

I wrapped a hand around the back of her neck and leaned in, brushing my lips to hers. She sighed softly at the contact. Her toes dragged against my erection before she hooked her leg around my ass and used it to pull me closer. My cock met the fabric over her core, and she groaned lightly into my mouth.

I released her long enough to tug her dress over her head, exposing her undergarment-clad body to me.

“Veil, you are stunning.” I took her breasts in my palms and worked them lightly. “I’m going to taste your pleasure on my tongue when you’re wet enough for me.”

She moaned at my words, and watched with hooded eyes as I slowly removed her undergarments, baring her to me.

I certainly didn’t deserve to see her like that, but damn, I was grateful she let me.

One of my hands coaxed her legs open for me while I lowered my lips to her breast and took her nipple in my mouth. I fought the urge to bring my ice into play. She wasn’t ready for it—I knew she wasn’t ready for it—but veil, I wanted to watch her react to my magic.

She moaned and moved against me, opening her legs further. The scent of her desire was so thick, it surrounded me like a second skin.

“Are you wet enough?” I murmured into her mind.

“Yes.”

I released her nipple and kissed my way down her abdomen, lifting her hands to my hair before I dragged my tongue over her clit.

The taste of her exploded on my tongue, so damn erotic I nearly found my release then and there.

She cried out, her fingers tangling in and tugging on my hair as she rocked against my mouth. I worked her clit, and slowly slid a finger inside her channel.

Veil, she was so damn tight and hot.

My cock swelled, and I nearly lost control yet again.

Her hips jerked, and I worked her until she reached her climax, her voice loud, frantic, and desperate in a way I had only imagined.

A snarl escaped me, and I stroked my cock roughly as I found my pleasure, releasing into the water.

“Ohhh,” Kaelle moaned, dropping to her forearms on the smooth stone of the floor. “That was amazing. We should

never try to be quiet again.”

I chuckled, flicking her clit with my tongue again and making her hips rock a little in the process. “I’ll talk to Matían today.”

“You’re sleeping today, and fighting,” she reminded me.

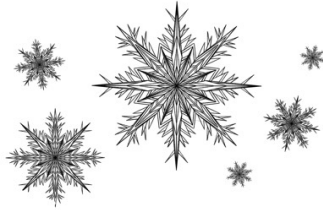
“I can do all of it.” I dragged my teeth over her clit, and she sucked in a breath.

“Veil, you’re making it really difficult to stay away from you.”

I chuckled. “Good.”

CHAPTER 19

KAELLE



“Bathe with me,” Vayme said. When he looked up at me with his face between my thighs, he was too damn gorgeous for me to say no.

“Alright.” I wasn’t sure how far I should let us go. He had very nearly entered me the last time we were together. I had been moments away from asking him to do so.

But after so many days apart, I was less certain.

I did expect that his idea of time passing was different than mine. It likely hadn’t even occurred to him that I would be upset. And even though I was still cautious, I did believe him when he said it wouldn’t happen again. Vayme had never lied to me.

He dragged his tongue over my clit one more time before pulling me into the water and sitting me on his lap. When we were settled, the length of his erection rested against my core in a way that made me ache for him.

Part of me wanted to just get it over with. If we had sex, the act would likely stop feeling so big and important, which would be nice. But at the same time, I doubted he would agree to sex just for the sake of *getting it over with*.

Maybe if I didn’t phrase it that way...

His lips brushed my neck once, and then again, before he leaned back. The movement slid his cock against my core, and I fought to keep my thighs from clenching in desire.

“Veil, you feel too good,” he growled against my throat.

“I want to get it over with,” I whispered.

He went still.

Dammit, I knew I should’ve phrased it differently.

“Sex,” I added quickly. “I want to get sex over with. I know we got kind of close, and—why are you growling?”

His fingers dug into my thighs. “Sex will not be something you and I *get over with*, Tempest. I had far too many years alone with my hand to ever allow that. When I enter you, it will be because I’ve made you so damn desperate, you won’t settle for anything except my cock. Understand?”

“Not really. I—”

“I will not budge on this.”

“Stop interrupting me.” I hit him on the arm, the smack soft enough that I could barely hear it, despite my wet hand.

His eyes gleamed wickedly, and he remained quiet.

“I was trying to say that I’m nervous, okay? It makes me nervous. I’d feel better if we got it over with, because it wouldn’t be looming over me anymore. I understand wanting to wait—and I can wait. But there’s some part of me that feels it looming. I think your reasoning is just as legitimate as my own, but that doesn’t mean I agree with you.”

His wicked gaze softened. “I suppose I didn’t consider that. We will meet in the middle, then. When you decide you want me, you climb on me, and take me. It’s your first time, not mine. The choice should be yours.”

His words warmed me and calmed me at the same time, but I wasn’t entirely sure I liked having all of the responsibility and pressure on my shoulders. “Thanks, I think.”

“You think?”

“What if you don’t want me when I want you? What if you’re not ready, and I—”

“I’m ready for you this second,” he said.

I didn’t mind the interruption so much, that time.

“I was ready for you in those damn meetings. I kept imagining you climbing on my lap without anything beneath your dress, and taking my cock without letting anyone in the room know. You could take me any damn time or day, and I’d want you. No questions asked, no hesitation given. My pause is for your sake, not mine.”

Heat curled in my belly.

He had fantasized about that?

I stored the fact away for later, in case I might be able to use it.

“Okay.” I nodded. “When I want you, I’ll take initiative.”

“Good.” He lowered his lips back to my throat and sucked lightly on the sensitive skin there. “Now, you’re going to ride my fingers while I wash you. I need to make sure you’re ready to take me, whenever you decide to do it.”

“Well, I won’t say no to that.”

Vayme turned me around on his lap so my back was to his chest, then grabbed his bar of soap. He dragged it slowly up my arm and then to my breasts, where he slowly circled my nipples with it, one at a time. The combination of grit and slickness was enough to make me flush with need, especially as his fingers slowly stroked my clit.

“Did you touch yourself while we were apart?” he asked me, his voice low in my ear. Goosebumps emerged on my skin, and my hips jerked against his hand.

“Did you?” I asked him, not wanting to be the first to admit it.

“I didn’t. If I’d had time enough for that, I would’ve sought you out so I could bring you pleasure first, and coat you in my release. Seeing my pleasure on your skin brought out something deeply wild within me, and I’m curious as to how I’ll feel if it happens again.”

A snort escaped me. “What a compliment.”

“It is. I can’t say I’m ever wild.” His teeth dragged against my throat, making me shiver as he worked my nipples with the soap and my clit with his fingers. “Did you?”

I bit my lip, and he slowly slid the soap between my breasts, moving it in a lazy trail downward. My body ached and throbbed, but his fingers stopped moving.

“Answer my question, or I’ll give you a reason to, Tempest.”

“What does that m—ohhh.” I cried out at the coarse pressure of the soap dragging over my clit.

It was slick, gritty, and rough...

And it nearly shattered me just like that.

Maybe I liked my pleasure the same way Vayme did.

He held the soap against my clit, but trapped me in place with his free hand so I couldn’t move against it. “Tell me, or you’ll leave this pool aching for my cock.”

Though it was a threat, I recognized the arousal in his voice, and the throb of his erection against my backside. The threat wasn’t a warning or a challenge—it was a game.

“Make me,” I whispered.

His teeth dragged over my throat, and he grinded the soap against me just for a moment. Just enough to make me reach for his hair and take hold of the strands, gripping them tightly.

He worked me again, and halted again before I reached my climax.

“Give me my pleasure, and I’ll tell you,” I breathed.

He chuckled. “That’s not how this works, Tempest.”

But I needed boundaries. He needed to see us as equals. He could order me around, and I could have a bit of fun following those orders, so long as he knew how to follow my orders too.

I sucked in a breath as he worked me with the soap again, taking me even closer to the edge before stopping.

“Get me off so I can stroke your cock and watch you cover my core with your release,” I said.

His body went rigid.

My lips curved upward just a little, even as I panted for breath.

I had more control in our relationship than I had realized.

As I thought that, the words to seal our bond drifted through my mind.

“Sillah ovim rett warum.”

I forced them away.

Obviously, it was the wrong time. There probably wouldn't ever be a right time.

“You don't want to pleasure me,” he finally said, his voice straining.

“Of course I do. I've been itching to touch you since the forest, Vayme.” I took a page from his book and sent him a mental image of me stroking his cock.

He gritted out a curse, and dragged the soap over my clit again, making me rock against his grip. “You'll answer my question after you've climaxed?”

“Yes.”

He bit down lightly on my ear, grabbed my breast in his free hand, and started moving the soap harder, and faster.

My breath hitched and my body rocked violently, responding with thrill to that tiny bit of pain mixed with pleasure. It wasn't long before I was crying out, my voice flooding the bathing chambers again as pleasure rolled through me from head to toe.

Veil, it was so much better when I didn't have to be *quiet*.

I pushed his soap away from my sensitive skin and slipped out of his arms, then out of the bathing pool.

He had loved it when I worked my clit with his cock, so I'd give him that—and more—for letting me have my way.

“Get up here,” I told him, taking charge again.

His eyes burned with heat, and he rose to his feet as I spread my legs wide for him.

“Lean closer and put your hands on my thighs. Hold on to me, but don't touch me otherwise. This is about you,” I said.

The man's eyes could've burst into flames.

I sat up enough to take his cock in my fingers, and he swore as I gripped the massive length of him. Though I didn't know exactly what I was doing, I had seen him bring himself pleasure, so I had a pretty damn good idea.

"Do you like when I take control?" I asked him, my eyes on his as I held him securely.

"More than I ever would've expected," he gritted out. "I couldn't stand it when other females did—but I find myself so damn eager to please you, all it does is make me want you more."

"Good answer," I whispered, and stroked him once.

His hips jerked as he thrust into my hand, and I let go of him, making him snarl at me.

"I'm in charge, Vayme. If you want me to change the way I'm touching you, you tell me," I warned.

He swore again, but didn't fight me as I took his cock in my hand and guided him back to my core. His hands gripped my thighs in a way that turned me on more than it probably should've.

His breathing picked up as I worked my clit with his cock, stroking his length every moment or two. The way his body trembled told me he was desperate to take charge himself—but he didn't ask me to do anything differently, so he must've been enjoying what I was doing.

"Stop," he gritted out, as his cock grew even harder in my fist. His fingers dug into my thighs so hard, they had to have been leaving bruises. Bruises I'd wear with a thick, heady pride.

"Stop, or it's over."

I interpreted his words to mean he was about to climax, and wasn't ready for it yet, so I stopped and waited. He throbbed in my fist, and though we both panted for breath, neither of us did a thing except stare at each other.

"I won't last much longer," he finally said, when the throbbing had slowed. "Have the last of your fun. When I've finished,

it's my turn to have my way with you.”

Thrill coursed through my veins at his words.

I dipped my head in a nod and started slowly moving him over my clit again. “You like how I look with your release on my core. How would you like to see it inside me?”

His eyes flared with heat, and his fingers dug deeper into my thighs. “Don't taunt me, Tempest.”

In response, I dragged his cock down to my slit and moved my hips a little.

Curses spewed from his lips as the thick head of him pushed against me just the tiniest bit. I pulled away long enough to stroke the length of him, and then repeated the motion, taking just the very tip of his cock. He wasn't even stretching me—I was in complete control, and he wouldn't thrust inside me, no matter how badly he wanted to.

I lifted my hips, my gaze fixed on my core as I met his cock, and the tip of him stretched my entrance just a tiny bit.

Vayne's nails cut into my thighs as his body trembled, and his snarls and curses filled the air as he found his climax.

His pleasure drenched my ass and slit as he released. His chest heaved as he came down from the high, and he pulled his cock away as his hands left my thighs. My body arched as his hands dragged over my ass, collecting his release and lifting it to my core.

I watched in dry-mouthed shock as he pushed his pleasure inside me again and again, filling my body further with the warm thickness of his release.

Then, he dragged his fingers over my slick core—and leaned over me, lifting them to my lips.

His eyes were hot, his chest still rising and falling rapidly as he gave me a single order. “Taste us.”

I was going to argue, but his fingers pressed against my mouth, and the desire to fight didn't even cross my mind.

My lips parted, and his fingers slid over my tongue. The delicious heat of his pleasure and the saltiness of my own assaulted me, and I couldn't help but moan.

“Swallow,” he said.

I swallowed.

His fingers stroked my tongue and the inside of my mouth slowly, before he finally withdrew them. Then his lips caught mine, the kiss slow and salty and so damn intimate it made my world spin.

He withdrew after a moment, leaving his forehead against mine as we both breathed hard. “The next time you want to torture me, Tempest,” he said in a low voice. “Use your mouth.”

Veil.

With that, Vayme removed my hands from his hair and set them on the ground on either side of my ass.

As I opened my mouth to ask him why he had, thick cuffs of ice grew over my thighs and wrists, holding me where I was.

My thoughts stumbled, and then froze for a moment. What he'd said came to my mind... something about it being his turn.

I supposed that was fair. And there could hardly be a way to take more control than to literally restrain me where I was, spread open and completely bare.

He slowly kissed each of the bruises and tiny cuts his fingers had left in my thighs, and then sank into the water, his predatory gaze moving over me. “You're even more stunning with my release dripping out of your body like that. Perhaps this will have to become our tradition after I take you— watching my pleasure drip out of you, drenching that pretty little asshole.”

My face flushed. “Vayme.”

“I let you take control the way you wanted it. It's my turn, now.” His eyes lingered on me as he retrieved the bar of soap and slowly washed his hair. Mine lingered on him too,

watching the flex of those massive muscles and the way his hands moved over his body.

By the time he finally made it back to me and slowly licked every damn inch of me, stretching my channel with his fingers as I climaxed, I was so damn ready to have his cock inside me, it was ridiculous.

Vayme dried me off before drying himself. His lips moved over my shoulder and neck as he held me in his arms, and then his forehead rested against my head too. “I’m so damn glad to hold you again,” he murmured into my ear. The man sounded absolutely exhausted, and I felt bad for keeping him up.

“Let’s get you to bed,” I said.

“After we move your things.” He brushed another kiss to my throat. “I’m not letting you get away from me that easily, Tempest.”

I tried to frown, but my lips curved upward of their own accord. “I’m not trying to get away from you.”

“Not anymore. I’ll keep you satisfied enough that you never have a reason to,” he agreed.

His hands moved with the towel as he dried me off, and it was strangely intimate. I wouldn’t have expected that intimacy, but I found myself enjoying it.

It was probably a bad idea, but veil, I could get used to having a massive fae king’s arms around me like that more often.

We moved my things to his room—our room—and then collapsed in bed together. I had my book, and neither of us wore anything but our undergarments.

The intimacy of that was even more intense than him drying me off, but I didn’t let my mind linger on it. We still hadn’t promised each other anything, after all.

Even if the words of our bond had started ringing through my mind again, with more insistence.

“Sillah ovim rett warum.”

“Sillah ovim rett warum.”

“Sillah ovim rett warum.”

I couldn't say them; I knew I couldn't.

And yet they kept repeating anyway, as if taunting me with a life I could have, if I decided to take it for myself.

Of course, I was smart enough to know those urges were a lie. If I sealed my bond with Vayme without him being certain he wanted to stay with me, we wouldn't work anything out. We would be tied to each other forever, both physically and mentally, and he would despise me for it. It would be a nightmare.

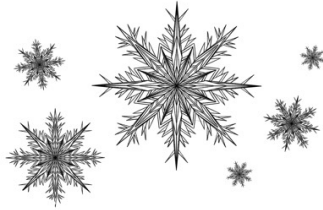
So, my mouth stayed shut, even if my mind didn't.

“Sillah ovim rett warum.”

The guarantee of stability that I wanted, but could never take.

CHAPTER 20

KAELLE



Vayme slept with his face buried in my hair and his body plastered to mine. Holding my book was a challenge, but I enjoyed the physical contact too much to move away.

A few hours passed before the door swung open and Strong came strolling in.

“We’ll need to leave for the challenge soon,” he said to both of us, eyeing our positions with interest.

Vayme stirred, taking a deep inhale of my hair and letting out a soft groan that made me warm.

“I’ll give you a few moments,” Strong said, padding out of the room.

Vayme’s lips found my neck, and sucked on it lightly as his hands slipped between my thighs.

A quiet gasp escaped me as his fingers brushed my core.

“Vayme,” I whispered in protest. Though I wanted him to touch me, Strong had said we needed to leave. I had heard Pavia talking faintly when the door opened, so I knew she was back.

Which meant we had to be quiet.

“I need to watch you unravel before I carry you out before my people as if on a platter,” he said into my mind, sucking my neck a bit harder. *“And I can smell your desire, Tempest. You’re reading a steamy book, aren’t you?”*

My face flushed.

It was becoming something of an obsession—both the king, his body, and what he could do to me.

“That answers that question.” He worked my clit through my undergarment, and I gripped his arm to anchor myself. *“But you owe me another answer. Did you touch yourself while we were apart?”*

My face burned, but pleasure still curled in my abdomen. *“I did.”*

“How many times? Where? Alone?” His growled demands made my toes curl, though his fingers had stopped moving on my core.

“Of course I was alone. In my shower, so your brother wouldn’t smell anything. I knew you were concerned about the smell. And... well... every day. Sometimes twice.” My cheeks may as well have been on fire. *“I kept thinking of the way you had kissed me and touched me. The way I used your cock, and the way you had me on my hands and knees, too. I couldn’t help it. I feel like you started a fire in me, and I don’t know how to put it out.”*

“I don’t want that fire to go out.” He dragged his fingers over my clit. *“I’m sorry I wasn’t there. I’ll make up for the lost time, starting now.”*

He made love to me with his fingers and mouth before he coated my breasts in his pleasure, and then we reluctantly washed the scent off before we finally slipped out of the room.

Strong didn’t look surprised by the extra time it had taken, and Soft looked a bit amused.

My face heated, but Vayme reassured me that the xuno weren’t bothered by sex the way humans were. It was natural to them.

He left me with Soft and Strong while he slipped away to talk to Matian, and I scratched Strong for a moment before going back to Soft.

“So you stood your ground?” she asked me.

“I did. It was easier than I expected.”

“And it will only get easier.” She stood and stretched. *“We’re going to the challenge?”*

“Unfortunately, yes.”

Her face formed a vicious grin. *“Good. It’s been far too long since I watched someone bleed.”*

A laugh escaped me, and Strong padded over, looking a bit suspicious.

Soft flicked her tail. *“We’re talking about the challenge, not about you.”*

He didn’t reply, though his gaze grew a bit less narrow.

Vayme came striding back out then, and leaned in to brush a kiss to my head before he lifted me onto Soft’s back. *“You’ll keep an eye on her?”* he asked the xuno.

“Of course. Kaelle and I are friends, Vayme.”

The way she addressed him like he was her equal rather than her king made me fight a grin.

“Thank you.” He scratched her behind the ears, then stepped back to Strong’s side and slipped onto his companion’s back.

The xuno took off without waiting for instructions, and I leaned down further, gripping Soft’s fur lightly as she ran.

We made it up the staircase and out of the castle soon enough, and then we were moving fast.

“Where is the challenge going to happen?” I asked Vayme, as we went.

“We have our own version of the stadium in Jirev,” Vayme explained. *“Without a cage, of course.”*

I nodded, though that last bit didn’t seem as obvious to me as it apparently was to him.

“If you grow dizzy from all the auras, ask Soft to get you out long before you go unconscious,” Vayme warned me.

I agreed, though I probably wouldn’t do as he asked.

I could survive a little dizziness.

The crystal lights above Vuuth were fading as if the suns were going down as we traveled through the city. It wasn't far, so we reached the stadium soon enough.

I found myself peering down at the large stone cavity in the ground. Shaped much like the city itself, it was rounded, with seating that rose in layers around a pit in the middle. The benches were already full of fae, who were a mesh of loud energy and laughter.

I was more used to the insane number of auras than I had been when we first reached Jirev, so I could still function properly, and hoped I could do so through the entirety of the fight.

When I brushed my mind against Vayme's again, I did so as gently as possible. *"Will anyone try to kill you while you fight, now that word is out about us being mated?"*

"It's possible, but not likely. To attack me in public would be a death sentence, even for my enemies. The majority of my people still want me as their king, even if they don't want to admit it. Our kingdom is stronger with me on the throne."

Soft and Strong made their way through the fae and xuno on our journey down to the very bottom of the pit. There were no empty benches, though I spotted a few small gaps and wondered where Vayme would want me to sit.

He led me to a bench full of fae I recognized from Jirev, and they made a little more space for me to sit between them. I noticed Kee right behind me, and my face warmed as my discomfort grew.

"You are the queen, even if it's temporary," Soft murmured into my mind. *"Act like it."*

She was right.

I turned around and gave Kee a small smile. "Hi, I'm Kaelle. I think we sort of met before."

She mirrored my expression. "We did. It's nice to officially meet you, as the king's mate."

My smile grew a bit brittle.

Kee studied me for a moment before she added, “I’m sorry if I made things less comfortable for you in Jirev; I wasn’t aware of your bond. I would never knowingly touch a mated male in any romantic manner. King Vayme seems happy with you, so I’m glad you’re here.”

My discomfort lessened slightly.

Only slightly.

“Thank you.”

She nodded, and I turned back toward Vayme.

His gaze moved over the people around me without lingering on anyone in particular before it landed back on me, and he nodded. *“This is going to work.”*

“It sounds like you’re trying to convince yourself.”

His lips curved upward, but rather than responding, he bent down and captured my mouth in his. My hands slid into his hair as he kissed me passionately, staking his claim on me for everyone around us. The overwhelm of their auras slipped from my mind, and my body relaxed at the intimate contact.

I was safe.

Vayme would protect me.

Nothing bad was going to happen.

Some of the fae in the stands cheered, while others fell silent.

When he pulled away, the king murmured into my mind, *“Trust me.”*

I did, so I nodded.

It was the rest of his people I didn’t trust.

My eyes lingered on his backside as he strode down into the fighting portion of the arena while the crowd roared around him. All he had on were his usual pants, but after hearing about the fae who fought naked in Jirev, I was grateful for the pants.

When Vayme reached the center of the circular space, he slowly turned, holding his hands out at his sides and calling,

“Where is the challenger?”

The auras swelled through the crowd as their energy level rose. A massive man and xuno with average auras swaggered down through the stands, and I remembered Vayme telling me that the man’s name was Ivel.

Unlike Vayme, Ivel *was* naked.

And apparently turned on by the challenge he was about to fight, or the crowd’s reaction to it.

I flicked my gaze back to Vayme quickly, and found his eyes on me again. Something told me he was making sure I wasn’t checking out his competitor too closely.

When I flashed him a small smile, I felt his mind brush against mine as if to let me know he’d noticed the gesture.

The men met in the center of the arena and shook hands. Neither of their positions were stiff, but neither man looked entirely relaxed, either.

Vayme needed to win to hold his throne... and Ivel needed to win if he wanted to become king. And now, there was likely some other consequence hanging over Ivel if he lost. Vayme and I had discussed that, but he hadn’t told me what they settled on as punishments when he was in those meetings.

Obviously, it wasn’t the right time to ask.

I didn’t have to though, because the crowd finally quieted, and Vayme’s voice boomed through the arena. “As you all know by now, the consequences have changed for challenges. Death is no longer the goal or punishment. The loser faces the harsh reality of a year working in the deepest farm, without reprieve during an eclipse.”

A hushed, unhappy murmur rolled through the crowd.

They were used to frequent battles for the throne, without any real consequence for the challenger. Though I didn’t know what their deepest farm was, it didn’t sound very pleasant, and the crowd’s reaction solidified my suspicion of that.

“Every challenge loss that follows the first will increase the time spent at the farm,” Vayme added. “The second will be

five years. The third will be ten. The fourth will be fifteen, and so on.”

The crowd went silent at that.

Fifteen was so damn many. I could understand that fae saw the passing of time differently than humans, but they still lived each of those days, and I couldn't imagine anyone really wanted to live them in a truly unpleasant situation.

“Do you understand the terms?” Vayme called out, his gaze lowering to Ivel.

“I do.” Ivel didn't look uncertain, but he didn't look entirely comfortable, either.

That meant he was taking the challenge seriously. I hoped Vayme would do the same.

Both men nodded at each other. Ice weapons appeared in their hands, and the fight began.

They were so fast, my eyes could barely follow them around the space.

Their bodies spun and swung, moving through the battle as if it were a dance. They moved too quickly for me to have any idea what was really happening or who was winning, unfortunately.

But their auras and those all around me continued to grow stronger as the fight went on.

My head began to throb, and dizziness slowly but steadily set in. I tried not to react to it, but keeping my eyes open grew more difficult as the strain began to work against me. My wind picked up its pace, but no storm built.

Soft pressed against my legs, reminding me that she was there and that I was alright. Though we didn't speak to each other, her presence let me know I wasn't alone.

By the time the fight came to an end, I couldn't see people anymore; just auras. The crowd was cheering again, but they had barely stopped, and I was pretty sure they would continue to cheer regardless of who won.

I forced myself to focus, until I saw Vayme's aura standing tall and strong while Ivel's was on the ground. That had to mean my king won, right?

Thank the veil.

No one had touched me during the fight or tried to attack me, as far as I knew, so that was good too.

Vayme called out to the quieting crowd for a few moments, and then I watched his aura move in my direction. He lifted me off the bench without a moment's hesitation, then slipped onto Soft's back with me. The warmth of his body and familiarity of his aura were calming as he pressed me against her soft fur, and she moved.

No one tried to kill us, thankfully.

Maybe his kingdom was more at peace than he suspected.

Or... maybe his people were waiting to see how his new challenges went before attacking us at one of them.

I supposed there would be no way to know which one was accurate until more time had passed.

"How hurt are you?" I asked him quietly.

"Barely. Only a few cuts. There's a deep one on my abdomen, but the others are only scratches."

I supposed if he was bleeding, that would explain some of his warmth against my back.

"I'll patch them as soon as I can see normally again," I said.

"Don't worry about me, Tempest."

I was fairly sure that our bond meant I would *always* worry about him until it was broken, but I didn't say that aloud.

Closing my eyes, I squeezed them against the onslaught of dizziness that accompanied Soft's motion. She wasn't unsteady, but veil, she moved fast. And speed did not work with my overwhelm. Not at all.

My stomach rolled, but I clamped my jaw shut.

I was *not* going to vomit.

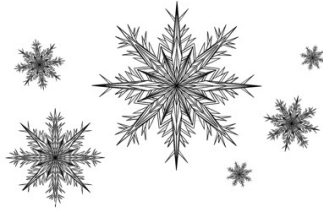
My willpower was swaying too when we finally reached Vayne's wing of the castle.

He thanked Soft, who said something in response that I couldn't make out perfectly, and added something else to Strong. Pavia's voice sounded in my ears too before he began carrying me away.

I assumed we were headed to his bedroom until he murmured to me that we were going to the bathing pools to help calm me. The pools sounded like something that might actually help, so I whispered an agreement as he continued onward.

CHAPTER 21

KAELLE



Blissfully warm water engulfed me as Vayme slipped into the same pool he'd found me in on the first day. I let out a soft groan at the feel of it, leaving my eyes closed in hopes that it would help me regain control of the dizziness that was overwhelming me.

He slowly and carefully peeled my dress over my head, tossing it to the side and leaving me in my undergarments. His arms wrapped securely around my middle, holding my back to his chest as I relaxed.

"I can—" I started to tell him that I was ready to patch his wounds, but he shushed me. His voice was calm and level, so that made me feel better.

I let out a soft sigh, but remained quiet as I waited for the dizziness and nausea to fade.

Vayme's hand moved lightly over my hip, relaxing me further as his erection rested against my ass.

Eventually, the overwhelm began to lighten up.

I opened my eyes after it did, looking around the room slowly to make sure I could see normally again. Everything looked okay, so I glanced over my shoulder at Vayme, and found those gorgeous silver eyes of his staring at me.

"Feeling better?" His voice was low and gravelly, and it gave me goosebumps.

"Mostly."

“Good.” He leaned in and brushed a kiss to my forehead before he dragged me back against him and pressed another kiss to my temple. “You scared me.”

“You knew there was a good chance that would happen, though.”

“That doesn’t make it any less worrisome, Tempest. I don’t like seeing you hurting, particularly when there’s nothing I can do about it.”

I supposed I couldn’t blame him for that. And veil, I was grateful he felt it, too.

I changed the subject, though. “Did you have any problem beating him? I couldn’t really see much even before the dizziness got too strong.”

“No. I know how Ivel moves, much to his frustration. He left bleeding far more than I did.”

The answer satisfied me. “I’m glad.”

“As am I.” He brushed his lips to my temple again, and we relaxed against each other as the pounding in my head continued to fade.

“You probably need to rest,” I said quietly, after a few more minutes had passed. “And I need to bandage your wounds.”

He made a noncommittal noise.

“Vayme.”

He leaned in and brushed his lips against mine lightly, calming and quieting me before he said simply, “You can patch me if you’d like, but I can sit here as long as you’re enjoying it. It was only one fight; I’m fine.”

I sighed, but relaxed against him again. “Alright. We can wait a few more minutes.”

It was already the evening, and while I’d gotten plenty of sleep, the combination of my wind’s drain on my energy and the overwhelm of my magic had exhausted me completely.

The peaceful heat of the pool slowly relaxed me more and more, until I slipped into the soft embrace of sleep.

Some part of me felt Vayme lift me out of the water and dry me slowly before setting me in bed, where I fell back asleep the moment my head hit the pillow.

When I woke up, I felt more than a little disoriented looking around the darkness of Vayme's room.

"Easy." His soft, thick murmur near my ear relaxed me, and I found his body pressed against mine.

"I'm supposed to bandage you," I mumbled, tripping over the words with the weight of sleep still hanging onto me and trying to drag me back in.

"I took care of it. Go back to sleep, Tempest."

Nodding lightly, I closed my eyes and lowered back onto the pillow before I fell asleep.

When I woke up for real, the castle felt quiet.

Very, very quiet.

Pavia must not have been there, because it was never so perfectly quiet when she was. As much as I liked her and her noise, the peace was nice too.

"You smell so damn good." Vayme's voice was gravelly in a way that made me shiver. His chest was pressed against my back, and one of his arms was wrapped around my abdomen, while the other was tucked beneath his pillow. His body was so tight against mine, I could feel every line of his erection between my thighs.

"So do you."

His arm released my waist so his hand could find my hip, and he slowly dragged his palm up the curve of my body. I still had my undergarments on, and part of me was grateful to him for not taking the liberty of undressing me while I slept.

The other part of me wished he had taken the liberty, so he could ravage me with a little less effort.

His hand skimmed my side again. “Do you feel better about the challenges now?”

“Mostly. I still need to see your wound,” I whispered.

He abandoned my hip long enough to catch my hand and drag it to his abdomen, where he ran my fingers over the soft roughness of his bandage.

That shouldn't have satisfied me, but it did.

“You were more affected than I was. I wasn't going to let you patch me up when you couldn't see straight, Tempest.”

Vayme's lips brushed my shoulder, and he set my arm back down where he found it. Then, he resumed moving his hand over my hip. “I have to admit, I slipped away for a few minutes while you slept.”

My stomach tensed. “You did?”

“I did. Pavia called out to me that she was leaving, and I had to say goodbye.”

Oh.

My body relaxed.

“Where did she go? Back to the xuno?” I asked.

“I'm sure they'll be there later. Matían packed their things and headed to my parents' house. He's decided to stay with them until he determines which part of the city he wants to live in. I offered him the floor above this one, and most of my xuno as guards, but he doesn't think he and Pavia are in danger. I don't think they are either.”

“Was she crying?” My stomach tensed again, this time with guilt.

“No. She's excited to stay with her grandparents, she was just worried she would never see us. I assured her that we would visit, and she perked up. She's excited to be on the city's surface, where she can see the lights change and try more new things.”

His response eased my guilt. “I'm glad.”

“As am I.” He brushed his lips over my shoulder again, continuing to run his hand up and down my hip. “And think about it—we have all this space to ourselves.”

My stomach curled for an entirely different reason. “That sounds nice.”

“Mmhm.” He pressed a kiss to my throat, and lingered there. “Did you know that mates can heal each other by exchanging blood?”

My throat swelled. “I think you mentioned that before.”

“Good. Remember that for the future. And fae heal much faster than humans—so if something ever happens, and you’re badly wounded without a way to get back to me, you’ll need to seal our bond to ensure your survival.”

The remark surprised me thoroughly.

I blinked, then blinked again.

And again.

And again.

Finally, I said, “You *want* me to seal the bond? What happened to not being convinced, and deciding what to do when we either fell in love or didn’t?”

“I would not want to continue living in a world where you don’t exist.”

Veil.

That was... intense.

“Well, I’ll try not to get wounded,” I finally said, not willing to agree to what he’d suggested.

“That is a given, Tempest.” His hand continued stroking the curve of my hip.

I changed the conversation topic before we went any deeper on the topic of mating. “Are you close with your parents? You’ve hardly mentioned them before.”

He didn’t answer immediately, and I wasn’t sure if he just didn’t want to talk about it, or if he was trying to decide what

to say.

Finally, he said, “I’m not close with them. My parents are... unique. When I was conceived, they were simply friends who were bored with life and edging on immis—immortality’s insanity, if you recall. Neither of them was willing to consider mating to prevent it, so they decided to have a child to give them purpose. It worked, so they had another as soon as possible afterward. They had planned to each take one of us and raise us separately, but before Matían was born, they fell in love.”

I blinked.

He was right; that was unique.

Vayme continued, “They were still against mating, and didn’t particularly want me after they found purpose in loving one another. When Matían was born, they saw him as evidence of their love, while I was simply a defense against immis that they no longer needed. It resulted in clear favoritism, and I was constantly being told to be more like Matían.”

My heart ached for him.

“It didn’t matter that I’d never lost a fight, or could best men forty times my age in games of strategy. Their dislike showed regardless of how hard I tried in every aspect of my life, how many things I mastered, or how quickly I learned. I wasn’t Matían, and I never would be. The previous king took me under his wing, so I moved to the castle as soon as I reached adulthood. The war began, and I became his closest advisor. He wasn’t a good man, but he was an intelligent one, and he saw my value,” Vayme said.

He went on, “When he died in battle, he gave me the throne, believing that I’d have the best chance at keeping our people alive as long as possible in a war we had all started to realize would never end. Matían eventually joined the ranks of my most trusted fae, despite our childhood, and became the only one I did really trust. When we thought he died, my parents blamed me for his death, and started the uprising against me. They quieted when he returned, but the damage was done.”

My throat swelled with emotion for his sake. His family had tried to have him killed for something entirely out of his control—or had at least turned his people against him for it. “Veil.”

“You are not the only one whose family treats them improperly.” His lips brushed my shoulder again. “We cannot control how anyone treats us, but we can control our responses to them.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t kill them,” I whispered.

He chuckled softly, rumbling against my back and warming me as he did. “Killing is often the answer, but not always, and I have always tried to be fair. Despite their treatment of me, they’re not necessarily bad people. Their disapproval during my childhood made me work harder. Because of it, I became someone I’m proud of. I suppose the pain of it will never be gone completely, but it has faded drastically in the years that have passed, and became nothing more than an occasional sting. When I stopped expecting them to treat me the way I used to hope they would, it took away their power to hurt me.”

“Veil, Vayme,” I repeated. “I’m sorry.”

He chuckled again, his hand still moving slowly over the curve of my side. “You don’t need to apologize, Tempest. Nothing that happened was your fault. You being beside me will simply give my parents another reason to compare me to Matian, but the handprint on your hip will force them to keep their mouths shut. Even they know better than to insult the king’s mate, however human she is.”

My face warmed. “You wouldn’t hurt them, would you?”

He didn’t hesitate. “I would. I would take no pleasure in it, but they would force my hand. Not retaliating against an insult to my mate would be a crime against you, and would put you at great risk. My people must know that I will protect my female at all costs. I would never let you become a target because of my refusal to act on an insult.”

My body warmed. “I don’t think that should make me feel good, but it does.”

He brushed his lips to my shoulder again. “I’m glad.” My stomach rumbled, and he heaved a sigh. “I’ve been neglecting my duty to you.”

“I’m perfectly capable of feeding myself. There’s always food in the icebox, and Pavia got mad at me when I didn’t help myself to it, so I’ve been careful to always eat what I want.”

“At least *someone* made sure you were fed,” he grumbled, clearly annoyed at himself.

“Look at these curves. They would start to disappear if I was starving again, Vayme. I’m doing just fine, so don’t be angry with yourself.” I squeezed a hip, followed by one of my breasts.

His hands did the same, and a satisfied rumble escaped him.

I added, “You’re trying, and the next time you have meetings, we’re going to make sure we still spend the nights and mornings together, so it’s alright.”

“The next time I have meetings, I’m going to drag you there with me.”

I laughed.

He hauled me out of the bed, padding out of the room without bothering to grab me a dress. I didn’t mind being in just my undergarments, since our wing of the castle was empty except for the xuno.

We would definitely be making our way back to the bed...

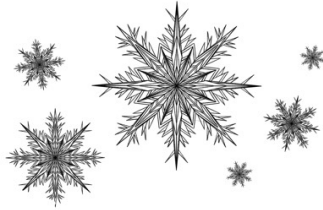
Or perhaps we wouldn’t bother with the bed at all.

My lips curved upward at the thought, and Vayme kissed the smile off of them before he set me on the table—literally, on top of it—and strode to the fridge.

All he had on was the tight shorts he wore as undergarments, and veil, I wanted him to take them off.

CHAPTER 22

KAELLE



I remained sprawled across the table while he put two bowls of food in the device that warmed them, and waited for it to work its strange magic. It had come from the human lands, according to Pavia, but no one in my town had owned one.

Vayme leaned up against the wall nearest to it, and his eyes slowly skimmed my figure as he folded his arms over his chest.

My body warmed, and I tried not to let myself get too flushed at the sight of him.

But veil, the man was gorgeous.

“Open your legs for me,” he said into my mind.

I looked over my shoulder to make sure there were no xuno near enough to see into the room, and found the space clear.

Slowly, I parted my legs. There was fabric covering my core, but it was slim, so it wouldn't conceal much.

His chest rumbled in satisfaction, and I slowly dragged my fingers lightly over the top of the fabric that covered my clit. His rumble grew louder.

“Free your cock for me,” I said into his mind, echoing his order.

He didn't hesitate to step out of his shorts, or wrap his hand around the thickness of his erection.

Damn, he was gorgeous.

“Take them off,” he commanded me.

I didn't have to ask what he was referring to.

Knowing it would drive him mad, I slowly undid the fastener on the undergarment around my breasts, and then stripped the fabric off even more slowly.

His chest was rumbling, the man nearly growling, as it hit the floor.

He grew louder as I slid my remaining undergarment down my legs. I got an actual growl when the fabric landed on top of the other piece.

“I don't know why you ever wear clothing,” he said into my mind, making me warmer as he dragged his hand slowly down his cock again.

“Something tells me you would have a problem with me walking around your city naked.” I opened my legs again for him, then dragged a finger over my clit, making him snarl.

“You don't wear clothes in our home anymore. Now, they're reserved for the eyes of everyone but me.”

“Then the same rule applies to you.”

“Agreed.” He strode across the room and captured my hand, lifting it to his mouth and wrapping his lips around my fingers.

“I want your ass in the air while I eat you on this table, Tempest. Now. I intend to stretch you with my ice, so you're ready when you want my cock.”

I flushed with his words, but veil, I wanted all of that.

...I just didn't want to let him have his way. He needed to be absolutely certain that we were equals, and that I could give orders just as well as he could.

So I countered, *“Why don't you sit down while I eat you first?”*

He laughed—the sound was rich, and so damn joyful it made me hotter. *“With pleasure.”*

His ass met the edge of the table, and wetness pooled between my legs as I slid down to the seat in front of him. His erection

was so damn huge, and I honestly wasn't positive what to do, but I would figure it out.

Leaning in, I gripped the base of his cock and then wrapped my lips around the head of him.

Vayme snarled, and his hands buried in my hair. His grip wasn't tight enough to cause me pain, but we had established that neither of us was against mixing pain and pleasure a little.

He dragged me further down his cock, showing me what he liked, and I groaned as I bobbed over him.

Veil, the taste of him would drive me mad. It made me feel powerful, strong, and sexy.

I had control of the king's pleasure.

I could pull away at any moment, leaving him wanting more, or I could give him the release he needed.

My body sang with pride at those thoughts, and I met his eyes as I told him with my lips still wrapped around him, "*Don't take over, Vayme. It's my turn.*"

He jerked his head in a nod. Though his grip on my hair didn't loosen, he didn't try to pull me back down.

My motions grew more confident as I sucked and bobbed, taking him deeper as I became comfortable with it.

His growls and snarls told me how much he was enjoying it—and the tight grip of his hands in my hair only intensified the sensation for me.

I slipped a hand between my thighs, and he snarled into my mind, "*If you touch yourself, you give the control back to me. I won't allow you to take your own climax while you taste me. That pleasure is mine alone.*"

Veil.

I left my aching core alone, bringing my hand back to his thigh as I changed the angle of my mouth.

Curses spewed from his lips as I worked him, and finally, he roared. Tremors rolled through his body, and he forced himself to stay still while I swallowed his release.

His chest rose and fell rapidly, his gaze intense as I met it from below him. His hands loosened in my hair, just enough that the grip was no longer painful. *“I have never allowed a female so much control over my pleasure before, Tempest, or even considered it. You must tell me if I push you too far or hurt you too much in my effort to stop myself from taking what I want.”*

I nodded, releasing his cock from between my swollen lips. A bit of his pleasure slid over the bottom one as I let go of him. When he noticed, he snarled again, dragging me into his arms and kissing me.

The brutality of his mouth on mine made my head and body spin.

Veil, he was too good at that. Too damn good at that. Something about the raw, rough strength of the way he did everything made him irresistible to me.

He ended the kiss and turned me around, lowering my forearms to the table as he set me up on my knees and lifted my backside. A squeak escaped me when he dragged my ass over the ledge of the table, sitting me on his face while the back of his head rested against the stone.

“Always so damn drenched for me,” he growled into my mind.

His tongue found my clit before I had the chance to respond, and a cry escaped me as my body jerked desperately in response.

I wanted him.

Veil, I wanted him.

All of him.

I opened my mouth to tell him as much—but then he bit down on my clit, and tilted my hips to change the angle of my core. The tip of something hard pressed against my entrance, rendering me silent.

Ice.

He had mentioned his ice.

And stretching me, so I was ready for him.

His tongue stroked my clit lightly, as if soothing the pain he'd caused.

But I didn't want it soothed—I wanted more.

“This ice isn't as thick as my cock, Tempest. You can take it.”
He slowly slid the tip inside my entrance, stretching me open.

All words died as he slid it deeper.

And deeper.

And deeper.

It was nothing like his fingers. It was so much bigger, and harder, and—

I cried out as he bit my clit again, the ice still slowly filling me and stretching me. When it finally hit the back of me, I felt so damn full, I didn't even know what to say or how to think.

“That's right, Tempest. It's new, but so damn good. Move for me. Get used to the sensation, and use it the way you want to.”
He sucked my clit lightly, and my hips jerked as another cry escaped me. The motion changed the stretch of the ice, and was so foreign, I couldn't help but repeat it.

Soon enough, my hips were jerking desperately as I rode Vayme's face, my cries growing louder and longer as I neared the edge.

But I didn't want to climax with his ice inside me—I wanted *him*.

“Stop,” I whispered.

He didn't hear me—and didn't stop.

“Stop, Vayme,” I commanded.

He halted where he was, his teeth on my clit and my body aching, so damn close to the edge.

“Take the ice out,” I said.

He snarled at me from below, and didn't do as I'd said right away.

“Take the ice out,” I repeated.

He slowly withdrew it, though I knew he could've made it vanish altogether if he wanted to.

My hips jerked and my body trembled.

“Sit down on the bench,” I managed.

Some measure of fury and concern warred in his eyes, but he slowly sat down.

When I eased over the ledge and sank onto his lap, his fury and concern vanished—replaced by overwhelming fire.

He lined his erection up with my slit when I met him, keeping his hands off my thighs. He had promised that I could take his cock whenever I wanted him—and he'd realized I wanted him right that moment.

Slowly, I let gravity pull me down over him.

And down.

And down.

We both panted for air.

My fingers dug into his hair and gripped so tightly it had to have hurt. His landed on my hips and squeezed me, kneading me, urging me to continue without pulling me down himself.

The stretch of him was blissful. He felt so damn much better than his ice—and I wanted more.

I was gasping for air when my clit finally met his skin as he bottomed out inside me. He was breathing almost as rapidly as I was.

“You’ll never be free of me now, Tempest,” he said into my mind, the words hot and gravelly. *“Every part of this body is mine.”* He squeezed my hips, my ass, my waist, my breasts. *“No one else has ever touched you—or ever will.”*

“A few minutes ago, you were still against mate bonds,” I panted out, speaking aloud.

“A few minutes ago, I was a fool.” He bit down on my throat. “This body is mine. This blood is mine. This *cunt* is mine.” The filthy curse made me throb all over, and I wasn't even

moving against him. “I’ll kill anyone else who thinks about touching you, bond or no bond. If you ever consider taking another male’s cock, you’ll spend weeks chained to my bed while I torture you with climax, after climax, after climax, until you forget your own name or why you would ever think about walking away from me.”

The world spun around me as I started moving my hips, just lightly. “That sounds intense, Vayme.”

“It’s everything, Tempest. Everything. *We* are everything.” He thrust deeper inside me, and I gasped for air. “I will never be done with you. Not in this life, and not in the next. You take care of me too perfectly—and fit me too well.” He thrust again, and I cried out louder as my pleasure swelled.

What was he doing to me?

What was he—

He thrust again, and it was over.

I screamed as the climax hit me like a damn boulder. It was so much more intense than I’d ever expected, and so much *better*.

My pleasure went on for what felt like forever as Vayme roared and filled me with his release, marking me in a way no one else ever had.

We both panted as we came down from the high, our bodies pressed together tightly and intimately. I started to climb off him, but he held me securely where I was, narrowing his eyes at me. “You’re going to hold me inside you until I hear you say that you belong to me completely.”

A breathless laugh escaped me. “Vayme.”

“I’m not joking.”

I laughed again, harder. “It’s always a battle for control with you.”

“Just the way you like it.” He captured my mouth in his, and kissed me until I had to pull away to suck in more air.

“I belong to you, just as completely as you belong to me,” I finally breathed.

“That’s right, Tempest.” He kissed me again, just a soft brush of his mouth on mine. “Now, I need to feed you.” He stood smoothly, and I gasped when he held me in place, leaving his cock buried inside me.

By the time he’d retrieved our food, it was cold again. My face was even more flushed, and I was nearly dripping with the effort to stop myself from rocking violently against him to take what I wanted.

How did I still want more?

What had the man done to me?

He must’ve plucked that thought from my head, because he murmured,

“I started a fire in you, remember?” He nipped at my throat as he sat back down, and I moaned uncontrollably.

Vayme lifted me from him long enough to turn me around, and then sank me back down over his cock a heartbeat later, with my back to his chest.

Soft, desperate sounds escaped as I fought the urge to rock against him.

“You fit me so damn perfectly, Tempest. Feel how tight that is?” He thrust in just a little.

I definitely felt it.

“Veil, you can’t help but tighten around me, can you?”

“No,” I breathed.

He released his grip on my thigh and grabbed his utensil, filling it with food and bringing it to my mouth.

“Not hungry,” I managed.

“Eat, or this ends.” He thrust inside me again, just as lightly as before.

I moaned, and forced myself to take the bite.

“Just like that.” He sucked on my throat a bit, holding me in place while I chewed. When I’d swallowed, he rewarded me

with another thrust of his hips—and a drag of his fingers over my clit that sent me over the edge.

I screamed again, rocking and jerking as he snarled about how perfect I was, and lost himself inside me again too. I didn't even bother trying to get off him after that one—the man wasn't done with me. That much had become clear.

He fed me a few more bites of the food, giving me time to breathe as he held me.

He said into my ear, “Feel where we connect, and how drenched we both are.”

I was no longer trying to take control. Vayme could have it; when I wanted it, I'd take it back, and he'd let me.

For the moment, I was happy to be at his mercy.

I lowered my hand to my core, and slowly ran it over the place my body stretched to take his. I trembled as I felt myself there—as I felt *us*.

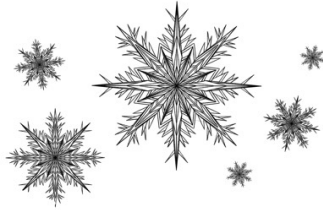
He was right; his release and my pleasure were all over both of us.

“Touch yourself, Tempest.”

I moaned, but followed the order... and soon enough, I was losing control again, adding to the wetness we'd already created.

CHAPTER 23

KAELLE



Eventually, we made it back to the bed. I was still struggling to understand how fae were so damn good at sex.

It wasn't like that for humans.

Or at least if it was, no one had written a book about it. And I was pretty sure they would've written about it if they'd realized it was possible.

So... fae had to just be really good at sex.

I certainly wouldn't complain.

After we napped and then took a long shower together, we headed out to the shops to pick up some of the herb that suppressed fertility. It had been a long time since Vayme had any reason to take it, so he didn't have any, and I obviously didn't either. It could be taken a few days after having sex and still prevent pregnancy, so neither of us was concerned about it, but we did want to make sure we took it as soon as possible.

Vayme held me close to his side as Soft and Strong walked behind us. They were just as far apart as they always were, and when Vayme noticed me eyeing them, he asked why.

"I don't know. Wishful thinking, I guess," I murmured into his mind.

His forehead wrinkled.

"Soft told me about how they used to be together," I explained.

The wrinkles smoothed. *"What did she say?"*

“They were both with me, actually. Soft said they were about to seal a mate bond when he bonded with you and introduced her to you as a friend. He’d changed his mind because his companion was unmated. He said he went to find her that night, but she had already left with her things because she knew when she wasn’t wanted. When he said she was always wanted, she didn’t believe him, and the conversation ended.”

Vayme nodded. *“Strong speaks of her rarely, but when he does, he does so with reverence. I’ve long believed him to still be in love with her.”*

My eyes widened. *“Really? She said he never chases any females who could actually end up mating with him, so clearly she keeps track of him. Maybe she has feelings for him too.”*

“She’s right. Perhaps we need to figure out a way to nudge them to have an honest conversation. They were best friends, once.” He eyed them too. *“I’m not sure how we’d achieve that.”*

“Neither am I,” I admitted.

“Hmm. We’ll continue to consider it.”

I agreed, and we continued walking. The light pink fabric of my dress rustled in my wind, reminding me...

“I need to find some shorts to wear under my dresses, kind of like your undergarments,” I told him.

He frowned, so I gestured down to the light hem, rustling in the breeze. *“I don’t want to know how many fae have already seen my ass.”*

Vayme’s eyes narrowed. *“We’ll find someone who can make them today.”*

A few hours later, we stopped at Vayme’s parents house, with a large quantity of fertility suppressant in his pocket, and a pair of tight shorts around my ass. I wasn’t looking forward to meeting them, but we knew we needed to stop in and see Pavia so she didn’t worry that we’d abandoned her.

His arm wrapped around my waist when we knocked on the door, and he held me close to his side as we waited for someone to answer.

A tall, muscular fae woman pulled the door open. Her face wasn't as severe as I expected based on what I knew of her, but I didn't let that sway my opinions.

"Hello, mother," Vayme said simply.

She studied us for a long moment, her gaze critical.

Vayme's fingers didn't tighten on my hip, and he didn't pull me closer. Despite what he'd told me, his position was full of confidence.

I supposed he'd had a long, long time to wrap his mind around the dynamics in his family.

"We're here to see Pavia," he added.

"You're not going to introduce your temporary mate?" his mother finally asked, her gaze lowering to me. It was far less critical than I expected, though a long way from friendly.

"I'm Kaelle." I didn't offer her a hand, though I did give her a small smile.

"Are you going back to the human lands after the eclipse?" she asked me.

"No." I didn't bother hesitating. "We'll visit, but I belong with the fae."

The woman didn't look convinced. I found it ironic that she expected me to be introduced but hadn't introduced herself, so I was also unconvinced. I supposed we had that in common.

"Uncle Vayme!" Pavia's excited shriek cut through the air, and a moment later, she was surging past her grandmother. She threw herself at Vayme, and he caught her easily in the arm that wasn't wrapped around me. His chuckle made my lips curve in another smile—a genuine one, that time. "I missed you so much!" she exclaimed.

"I missed you too." He squeezed her lightly.

She released him suddenly, turning her gaze to me, and her face lit up when she saw me. “Kaelle!”

I was the next to catch her, though I did so with a soft “oof,” and probably a bruise or two.

She dragged us inside, and proudly showed us both her room and every xuno in the house. Vayme’s parents both had companions who were mated to other xuno, and both pairs had pups running around the house. They were so damn adorable, it made my heart swell.

We spent an hour there before Vayme excused us, and then we headed back to his rooms—our rooms.

We spent the rest of the evening putting the fertility-suppressing herbs to the test, while trading stories of our lives between rounds.

We fell into a rhythm, after that, and the weeks passed by quickly. Vayme dragged me to meetings, and I listened in rapture, offering my opinion when asked.

And he asked frequently.

He explained his history with Kee to me, too. She and Matían had been together romantically for a decade when they were all young, and the two parted as friends. She didn’t understand why that meant Vayme wouldn’t consider anything with her, but I did, and it erased my questions.

I spoke with her many times, and she was always kind and respectful to me. We even traded jokes on a few occasions, so I had no choice but to let go of my grudge against her.

Vayme and I spent an obscene amount of time making love, and I kept waiting to grow tired of it, but it didn’t happen. When we weren’t naked together—and even sometimes when we were—we talked.

And talked.

And talked.

He told me stories of his life, and I told him of the books I'd read.

Sometimes, we wondered about the veil together, and what truly happened before and after our current lives. Those discussions made us hold each other a bit tighter. The idea of spending not just one lifetime together, but all of them, grew more appealing by the day.

The Monster was still waiting just outside the city, moving through the tunnels and checking the strength of the elves' shield. It had held against him without fail, even when he attacked it, which relieved all of us. Sometimes he disappeared for a few days, but he always returned, which worried us tremendously.

Vayme had offered to take me down to the deepest farm to calm my curiosity when I admitted I wanted to see the place. Apparently, it was very deep and exceptionally dark, with a strange smell and without crystals to light it. There, they grew multiple types of necessary food that couldn't grow beneath the lights in Vuuth.

Being down there was difficult on the minds of those who went, so there were only two fae who remained permanently. Those fae didn't mind the depth or darkness like the others did. Everyone else was a part of a rotation to spend a week down there every few years. I was intrigued, but not intrigued enough to be interested in that long of a trip quite yet.

The group of fae who had gone to the Sands returned with stories of razing the militia that had killed Pavia's mother, and the number of challengers on Vayme's list dropped dramatically. There were still enough challengers for one fight a week, but many, if not all of them, believed in the cause of the cult that had massacred mated couples long ago.

He didn't end their lives, but he and the fae he trusted kept track of their names and began an investigation into each of them. If any of them were found to be connected to the cult, they were thrown in prison instead of taken to the deepest farm, just until our bond was broken.

Vayme would kill them if they truly ended up posing a risk to us, though.

We had yet to be attacked by any of the possible cultists, but Vayme assumed the ones he hadn't thrown in jail were holding out hope that the Monster would do that job for them.

The challenges were still difficult on me, mostly because of the auras, and I suspected they always would be. I'd started to recover faster after they were over, at least.

As we neared the eclipse, Vayme grew more tense, waiting for the Monster to attack. He seemed certain that the assassin would do something.

I grew quieter as it came closer, having a hard time imagining how things would change when the bond was broken. I couldn't help but wonder whether Vayme would no longer want to be with me when the magic holding us together was gone.

The words to seal our bond had begun to echo through my mind in a maddeningly-rhythmic fashion, as if pushing me to speak them.

"Sillah ovim rett warum."

"Sillah ovim rett warum."

"Sillah ovim rett warum."

I still wanted that security, but I also still knew I could never take it.

So, I ignored the constant strain on my mind, forcing myself to say nothing at all when the need grew too strong.

"Sillah ovim rett warum."

I respected Vayme far too much to seal a bond I knew he may not truly want, even if it was driving me mad.

A few days before the eclipse, Vayme, Strong, Soft, and I walked into one last challenge before our bond would break. Soft and Strong were reluctantly becoming friends again, and

I'd noticed them staring at each other when the other wasn't looking.

Vayme suspected that the eclipse would push them to admit their feelings for each other, and we both looked forward to seeing the outcome.

Soft set me down on my usual bench in the arena, and I forced my breathing to remain calm and steady in an effort to stop the auras from overwhelming me.

Veil, there were so many of them.

My wind rustled my hair and dress, but I paid it no mind, focused on retaining control.

The fight began, and I followed it as well as I could despite the ache blooming in my head. Though my eyes still couldn't keep up with the fae movements, I'd learned how to tell who was in the lead by a few physical clues, and the motion of the auras.

Vayme was clearly winning, so I let my focus fade from him as the fight went on.

Closing my eyes, I let out a long breath to fight a wave of dizziness.

Veil, I was getting really tired of how easily I grew overwhelmed. It was ridiculous. I—

Ice flooded my mouth, and my eyes shot open.

I was no beginner when it came to ice. Vayme and I had used it in just about every way possible, I thought, so the ice didn't terrify me.

Or it wouldn't have terrified me, if it didn't taste so *wrong*.

I knew the taste of Vayme's ice, and that wasn't his.

Soft's head jerked in my direction, and her eyes widened as they collided with something behind me.

I didn't turn around to look.

I couldn't, because there wasn't time.

A thick hand encircled my throat, and a masculine arm went around my middle.

Soft lunged toward me, but the man holding me ripped me off the bench too quickly.

The ice kept me silent as he tossed me over his shoulder, then *ran*.

Soft's voice cut through my thoughts as she cried my name, sprinting after me. I sucked in a sharp breath through my nose when I felt the connection in our minds hit harder—and then *change*.

It swelled into something thick and permanent, altering the interior edges of my aura and *veil*, changing my soul.

Companions.

We were companions.

It felt so damn right, it nearly brought tears to my eyes.

The man holding me landed on the back of a xuno, and pinned me against its neck as the beast sprinted away.

"I'm not far behind you. Try to hit them with your wind—try to slow him," Soft urged.

Though slowing my captor would slow Soft too, I focused on my fear like she had asked.

My wind began to whip around us faster and wilder, cutting through the city as the man holding me sprinted. The xuno's fur blew into my face and mouth. I tried to wrestle myself away from the beast and his companion, but even with my storm brewing, the fae's grip was too tight.

The wind built, and built, but he kept running.

When I managed to turn my head, I saw Soft. She was close behind, but not close enough to take him down.

"I won't be able to stop the wind if it gets much bigger," I called out to her, my fear beginning to swell out of control with the wind. My last storm had destroyed the town I loved—what if this one could do the same to Vuuth?

What if my captors hurt me?

What if they *killed* me?

I knew starvation better than I knew myself, but I had never truly considered my death before, and it was terrifying. I wasn't ready to pass through the veil—I wasn't ready to move on from Evare.

“Don't stop it. Show the city the wrath of their queen,” Soft snarled back. *“If they're going to allow someone to take you or hurt you, they deserve to pay. These warriors can fight; show them that you can too, Kaelle.”*

I jerked my head in a nod before the fae man shoved my head back against his bonded xuno's neck. It was hard to breathe through the creature's fur, and I let that struggle fuel me.

Me, my fear, and in response, my magic.

The wind whipped around us, growing as the xuno continued to run. Its drain on my energy had become so intense, I knew it was already nearing the largest storm I'd ever created—if it hadn't gone over yet.

Strong and Vayme's nickname for me would be proven by the end of the hour.

“Where are you?” Vayme snarled into my mind. *“What happened?”*

I couldn't answer him; I had to focus on my storm.

On my life.

I had to stay alive, no matter the cost.

He continued speaking to me, but I tuned him out. I had to.

“Give it more, Kaelle. Give it everything,” Soft commanded me. *“We're near the edge of the city. If they get you through the elves' shield, the Monster will find you, and he will use you to get to Vayme.”*

Veil.

I pushed every ounce of my energy at the storm, urging the wind to take all of it. To *use* all of it.

My mind began to spin, and life began to fade from me rapidly. I wasn't dying—not yet—but the burnout would hit, and it would hit hard.

“If the Monster takes me, do whatever you have to do to keep Vayme away from me,” I whispered to Soft. *“I don’t care what the Monster does to me—just don’t let him hurt Vayme.”*

“The Monster will do whatever he can to get the king out,” she warned. *“Do your best to look weak and pathetic. Do whatever you have to, to make him think you’re not a threat.”*

Before I could respond, the xuno beneath me skidded to a stop, and the fae launched smoothly off his back, sprinting.

My head bounced against his shoulder as I wrestled against the complete exhaustion of my burnout. My wind was no longer coming from my skin. I had left it all behind me, in the city. Though my storm would rage, it would do so without my guidance.

More terror struck me when I saw the aura of the man—the assassin—in front of me. It was like the Beast’s, thicker than any of the fae’s and even more vibrant. It was alive with colors, brighter than Nissa’s flowers or the Endless Wilds or anything else I’d ever seen.

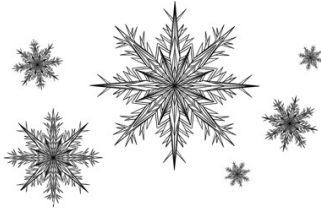
The colors swirled, shifted, and combined as the man they belonged to sprinted toward me faster than even the fae could move. I was in his arms a heartbeat later—and my gaze met Soft’s on the edge of the city before she and everyone else were so far behind me that I could no longer see them.

Stabbing pain blossomed in my handprint, reminding me that I was supposed to be at Vayme’s side.

Gray stone stretched above my head for a breath, before the thick overwhelm of my burnout dragged me into the dark bliss of unconsciousness.

CHAPTER 24

VAYME



Kaelle's funnel clouds tore through my city, sending ancient fae warriors running for their lives as Strong sprinted through the streets. My female's scent had been wiped away by her winds, and there was no sign of her anywhere.

Blood dripped down my leg as I leaned tighter against my companion. I didn't urge him onward; he didn't need my encouragement.

Not when the female he loved was beside my mate.

Someone had grabbed my Tempest, and Soft had followed her—that was all I had been told. Now that her magic was sending my people running for their lives, they would surely regret not standing up to help their queen.

If her power damaged my city, it would be pure revenge.

"They were moving toward the edge of the city!" a man on the back of his bonded xuno yelled as we passed him, pointing me toward the largest entrance before hauling away from an incoming funnel.

Fear for my mate pounded in my chest, and Strong ran harder, veering in that direction.

"*Seal the bond,*" I ordered Kaelle, my voice growing more desperate by the moment. I couldn't feel her mind against mine—she was either trying not to hear me, or unable to listen. "*Seal the bond, so you can heal like a fae.*"

The pain in my palm was ferocious, and my desperation swelled as we reached the edge of the city. There, we found Soft in a vicious battle with a male xuno whose fae companion was already dead at his side.

They circled each other, both already bleeding and snarling.

I didn't loosen my grip on my companion, lowering my head as he launched into the fight with a roar. Despite his issues with Soft, the two of them worked together to down the other xuno quickly.

They stepped away from his body, chests heaving.

"That was my kill to take," Soft snarled at him, ramming his side with her shoulder.

He let her throw him a few steps backward, snarling, *"What in the veil were you thinking?"*

"He's a traitor," she spat. *"He helped his companion steal mine, and they gave her to the Monster."*

Her companion?

Had she bonded with...

No.

"The Monster has Kaelle?" I roared.

"Yes. And someone must've gone to the elves about her storm, because their damn shield is no longer just keeping him out; it's keeping us in."

I was off Strong's back and running toward the entrance again, my head tucked and my shoulder forward. My body slammed into the shield like it was made of stone, and I roared again as I staggered backward.

Soft stepped between me and the shield before I could ram it again. *"This is not going to help anything. She made me vow to keep you away from the Monster, anyway."*

I glowered at her, daring her to repeat the words as I said aloud, "Nothing will keep me from my mate. We'll go to the elves and force them to take down the shield."

I looked out at the city below us, and the storm ravaging it.

There would be some damage, but Vuuth was certainly built strong enough to survive any amount of wind. There was no way to know how long it would last, though. She'd said her last storm had destroyed many towns and a kingdom, but hadn't told me how long it went on.

"She will never forgive you if you let her magic kill your people," Strong said, quietly. My gaze jerked to him, and he added just to me, *"I know the price of a female's refusal to forgive, brother. And it is not a price you want to pay."*

"I'd take her hatred over her death, every moment of every day," I growled back.

"She burned herself out more thoroughly than she ever has before. It will be at least a day before she's recovered, probably more like two or three." Soft said, her gaze tracking the funnel clouds as well. *"That's enough time to get your people into the castle for their safety, and talk to the elves to come up with a way to get her free, or at least to protect her until the eclipse comes. If she's unconscious for three days, the Monster may miss his chance to kill you entirely."*

"And he may kill her in revenge," I argued.

"There's no way to know without talking to the elves. The queens are here; they know the assassins better than anyone else."

Though I wanted to snarl at her, to throw myself against the damn barrier again, and again, I knew the xuno was right.

The Monster had taken my female as bait, so he wouldn't hurt her.

Or at least, I could pray to the lost gods that he wouldn't.

I found the ex-queens tucked in a room together. Orah, the half-shifter, was curled up on her bed in her wolf form. Meeri, the blonde, was painting in the corner of the room, her arms and dress nearly as covered in paint as her canvas. Ismaray, the

pink-haired one, was pacing the room, her dress swaying around her as she walked.

“Tell me you know where to find my mate,” I growled at Ismaray.

“I heard the Monster took her,” she said, her face tense with worry.

I fought a snarl and jerked my head in a nod.

“He won’t kill her. The monster—he’s not cruel,” Ismaray said quickly. “None of them are. Not really. We twisted them with our spell, but they were good men before we did. The Beast is the most bitter. He might hurt her, if he had her, but the Monster won’t. The worst he’ll do is drink her blood to stay alive.”

Another roar nearly burst through my lips at the thought of the Monster’s mouth on my female’s soft, delicate skin.

“No, it’s a good thing,” Ismaray said, brushing hair from her eyes in agitation. “He’s not going to kill her. The curse will push him to kill you, but if you stay in the city until the eclipse, he won’t be able to get to you. He’ll bring her back then, or at least walk away from her.”

“She is in pain because of our separation. I am not leaving her in his grasp,” I spat. Even if I wasn’t a man of honor, to leave my female with a creature that could hurt her with a blink of his eye would be insanity.

“If he kills you, he takes your magic,” Ismaray shot back.

“The last thing he needs is more magic. Those men are going to destroy Evare if we let them—and this is your chance to help stop him. A little pain is a small sacrifice.”

“I will not allow the Monster or anyone else the opportunity to hurt my mate,” I said, my voice growing lower and more feral. “You will remove the barrier around my city, or I will consider it an act of war against my queen.”

Her eyes flared with anger, her shoulders straightening and her chin lifting as the royalty in her past surged to the surface.

“We were brought here to keep you and your mate *alive*, Vuuth. If either of you die, my people will be at war with *three*

fae kingdoms. I don't care whether you like it or not—this is the best chance of survival for both of you. The shield stays up, you stay in, and the Monster stays out. Kaelle will be fine.”

I snarled and surged toward her, my sword materializing in my hand with a tug of my magic. I slammed into another shield, and met Ismaray's glower with my own.

Both of our chests rose and fell quickly.

“I will have enough warriors outside this room to end all three of you the moment your magic runs out, if so much as a hair on her head is wounded,” I gritted out. “I created our peace, and you can be damn sure I'll create war if anything at all happens to my mate, whether I'm in here or out there.”

Ismaray's fists clenched. “She has a far better chance of being killed by accident in one of your battles than by the Monster. I will not lower the shields. Leave us.”

With that, her wall forced me and the xuno from the room, then slammed the door behind her.

I swore and began pacing the hallway, reaching out to Kaelle again, and finding only silence.

I shoved my non-aching hand through my hair. “I'll go mad waiting to hear from her. Veil, I need a way through that shield.”

“We have no way to break an elf's magic. Focus on your people,” Soft said, brushing her side against mine. *“Ismaray knows the Monster, and we do not. If she says Kaelle is safe with him, I trust her.”*

“We'll see if there's anything we can do to help the wounded, and then find out who was friends with the fae and xuno we killed,” Strong said, nudging my other side. *“Worrying about Tempest won't help her. She'll want your people taken care of—and her enemies slain. We will cleanse the city of cultists while we wait for her to wake.”*

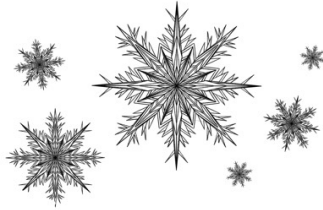
As much as I despised the idea, and the awful pain in my palm, it seemed like the only real solution. Throwing myself

into finding and killing the traitors in my city would distract me long enough for my female to wake up, at least.

And if I found out the Monster had hurt her when she regained consciousness... well, then I'd find a way through the damn elves' shields, even if it killed me.

CHAPTER 25

KAELLE



My mouth was dry and my stomach hollow when I finally woke. The pain in the handprint on my hip was worse than it had ever been before, and my entire body was trembling.

Then again, that dizziness could've been coming from the fact that I'd burned myself out thoroughly, and had no idea how long I'd been asleep. It could've been *days* since I passed out.

My stomach tensed painfully as I remembered everything that had happened just before I burned out.

I'd been captured by a fae and xuno.

I'd bonded with Soft.

I'd created a bigger storm than I'd ever realized I could.

And I'd been given to the Monster, to use as bait to lure Vayme in.

Fear suddenly cut through me, and I reached out to my mate.

"Vayme?"

"Tempest." There was thick, fierce emotion in his voice. *"Are you okay? Has the bastard touched you?"*

"I don't know. I think I'm alright. The handprint hurts so bad that if he did anything to me, I don't think I'd even know," I whispered back.

He snarled into my mind. *"The damn elves have me trapped in my city, with a barrier between us. Seal the bond so I know*

you'll be okay if he hurts you—so I have enough time to break through the elves' magic.”

My body stilled even as the words to seal it rolled through my mind.

“Sillah ovim rett warum.”

“I'm not sealing our bond just because we're afraid. That's a terrible reason to seal a bond,” I said, as the words repeated again.

“Sillah ovim rett warum.”

Veil, I couldn't seal it. Not when we hadn't even agreed that we wanted to be together permanently. Vayme's fear for my safety would fade eventually, and I couldn't bear it if it morphed into regret.

He had mentioned wanting me to seal it before, but only when overtaken by pleasure or lust—not in a moment of rational thinking. We certainly hadn't proclaimed love to each other either, though I knew without doubt that I was in love with him.

“It could be the worst reason in the world, and I'd still encourage it,” Vayme growled back.

“Just let me see what the Monster's doing. I'm in so much pain, I don't know if I could even say the words of the bond aloud right now anyway. How are you functioning at all?”

“I'm fueled by fury,” he gritted out.

If I wasn't hurting so bad, my lips would've curved upward at that answer. It didn't surprise me in the slightest. *“Give me a few minutes.”*

He didn't like that idea, and told me as much, but I tuned his voice out anyway as I slowly wrestled my eyes open just a crack.

The space around me was eerily still, without the tiniest sign of my wind. I'd well and truly burned myself out, and the violent way I was trembling made me wonder if I was going to recover at all.

If illness struck... well, then Vayme may have been right about me needing to seal the bond.

Its words repeated in my mind at the thought of it.

“Sillah ovim rett warum.”

“Sillah ovim rett warum.”

I was struggling to focus on what was physically around me, but forced myself to do so anyway.

I was on my back, and seemed to be tucked away in a small pocket within a slightly larger cave. A pair of large bare feet were pacing off to my side. The aura around them was definitely the same one I'd seen when I was given to the Monster.

If I scooted forward, I would've been able to tilt my head to look up at his whole figure. But, when I tried to scoot, all I managed to do was cause myself enough pain that I had to bite my lip to prevent myself from crying out.

The pacing in front of me stopped for a moment—and then a large knee hit the floor, and a pair of piercing red eyes met mine.

I sucked in a sharp breath at the sight of his face.

Veil, he was *beautiful*.

With pale skin, facial features sharp enough they could have been chiseled from stone, and wavy silver hair tied up in a bun, he certainly didn't *look* like a monster.

Then again, looks could be deceiving. After all, I looked like a small, weak human, and my storms could have still been raging through Vuuth.

“Your king hasn't come for you,” the Monster growled, his voice somewhere between angry and annoyed. I wasn't sure whether his anger or annoyance had a better chance of keeping me alive, honestly.

I opened my mouth to try to tell him that the elves were holding Vayme hostage, but the words wouldn't come out. I

was shaking too much, and all I managed to stutter out was, “Elves.”

He snarled and stood again, resuming his pacing.

“*Tempest?*” Vayme demanded.

“I’m alright. He realized I’m awake and asked about you. All I could get out was, ‘elves,’ and it made him mad, but he didn’t react violently. He has me tucked in a small space within a cave. I don’t feel like I’m in danger.”

“*Show me.*”

I sent him a mental image of the cave around me, and his next growl wasn’t nearly as angry as the last one. “*Ismaray told me the Monster wouldn’t hurt you. She’s one of the queens.*”

I remembered Ismaray from our journey to Vuuth. She had shared food with me. “*Something tells me you didn’t believe her.*”

“*Of course I didn’t believe her,*” he grumbled at me. “*I threatened her with war, multiple times. She wouldn’t relent. If not for the fierce strength of her shields, I would’ve gotten through them by now to kill her.*”

My lips would’ve curved upward if I’d been anywhere other than where I was.

Something about knowing that the fae weren’t all-powerful made them feel more... real, I supposed.

“*How long until the eclipse?*” I asked Vayme.

“Only a few hours, now. It will begin at the first touch of morning, and both my connection to the Monster and our bond will fade as it sets in.”

Good.

That was good.

Well, not the bond fading. That was terrible. But we needed to be free of his connection to the Monster, so *that* was good.

“*Can you bring food when you come for me? And water?*”

“*Of course,*” he growled.

My chest warmed at the thought that I could trust him to rescue me. *“How much damage did my storm do?”*

“More than I expected, but less than my people deserved.” His words calmed some terrified part of me I hadn’t known how to vocalize. If my magic had cost me Vayme, the same way it cost me my family, I wasn’t sure how I’d react or what I would do. *“The last of the winds are slowing as we speak. It won’t take more than a month or two to repair the damage, and now, people will respect you much more as my queen. You know how weakness is seen in my city.”*

I certainly wouldn’t mind his people respecting me more, though I hadn’t necessarily been mistreated. I supposed they would think before deciding to try and abduct me again, at the very least.

“I spent my time cleansing my kingdom of that damned cult while you were unconscious,” Vayme added. *“It will be safe for you when you come back—even after we seal the bond.”*

“I don’t think we ever agreed to do that.”

“We didn’t. I’ve decided I’m going to convince you.”

I would’ve laughed if I didn’t ache so badly. *“How do you plan to do that?”*

“In whatever way works, Tempest. Any advice?”

“No. I think you’ll have to figure that one out yourself.”

“I intend to.”

Vayme began packing things, and our conversation grew quieter and slower as he focused his effort on what he was doing. I wasn’t sure how he was moving so damn well, but I supposed he’d gotten much more used to pain in his long life than I had in my years in my cave.

“You’re alright?” Soft said quietly into my mind. *“The king seems to have calmed some.”*

“I’m okay,” I reassured her.

We chatted for a while, and she told me everything Vayme had left out, including the gory details. I hadn’t wanted to know all

of them, but I did appreciate being treated as an equal, and that Soft would leave no secrets between us.

The Monster continued to pace as the hours went by—until eventually, he vanished.

“He’s gone,” I whispered to Vayme, worry curling in my abdomen, alongside the cramps.

My pain and dizziness were getting so bad, I was starting to worry I’d pass out again.

The Monster’s roar rolled through the caves, and I heard a loud thumping sound.

Vayme sent me a mental image of the Monster slamming his fists against the elves’ barrier. My king seemed to be standing just inside of it—just out of the assassin’s reach.

And the Monster looked possessed. He’d shifted to his stone form, being a gargoyle, but his face and eyes were twisted with something I didn’t recognize at all.

The curse on him must’ve been truly awful, because when I saw him earlier, he had looked *normal* for the most part.

He roared and attacked the elves’ shield for what felt like a few more hours... until his noise finally faded.

Soon after, the pain from my handprint started to fade as well.

“The brand is nearly gone,” Vayme said into my mind. His voice was distant, and though my throat swelled with worry, I knew it was normal. *“The bond will be too, soon. Strong waits with the elves, to tell them when the Monster has gone, and Soft will bring me to you to ensure we can stay in contact.”*

“Okay,” I whispered back. *“Thank you.”*

“I’m the one who dragged you into this mess. Don’t thank me for that.”

Vayme sent me a mental image of the Monster’s insanity fading from his eyes—and then of the Monster dipping his head toward him as if in respect, before the assassin turned and walked away.

“I’m coming for you, Tempest. Never doubt that,” Vayme said into my mind.

I cried out softly as the last of the pain in my handprint vanished. A new feeling cut through my chest as the ice in my veins melted away. The darkness on the edges of my aura faded out until there was nothing left but my own pale blue, and the inner ring that represented Soft.

“The elves will take the barrier down as soon as they’re certain the Monster is truly gone,” she said into my mind.

“They’re being stubborn, but Vayme recognized the cave you showed him, so we’ll get to you soon enough. It won’t be long.”

“Thank you.” I closed my eyes and let out a long, slow breath.

Despite the chill in the air without Vayme’s magic to keep me warm, my body was beginning to heat already, responding to the start of the eclipse far sooner than it ever had before. I supposed it made sense that my time bonded to Vayme had changed me more than it seemed, even without his magic lingering in my veins.

The eclipse’s heat would be torture, especially while I was so exhausted from the burnout and my lack of food.

At least the painful handprint was gone. Something told me I’d miss it the moment I looked down at my hip and found it bare, but I couldn’t let myself consider that. Not while I was alone in a dark cave, with my vision growing worse by the moment, and my body still trembling slightly.

The moments passed by painfully slow. Soft checked in every few minutes while I waited, and I had a feeling Vayme was growling at her to do so, making sure she was keeping me sane.

Wetness blossomed between my thighs, and I found myself shifting positions every moment or two, as the need grew thicker and more overwhelming.

After so many weeks full of so much sex, my body seemed clueless as to how to ignore that desire, but I wasn’t about to

touch myself while tucked away inside a tiny cave, waiting for Vayme and Soft.

I was sweating, panting, and soaked *everywhere* when she finally let me know they were on their way. I rolled out from beneath the small stone lip slowly, lifting myself on shaky arms just to prove I could. I tucked my knees below me, holding them together firmly as I sat up and waited.

And waited.

And waited.

I'd just started to worry I might collapse in a pile of drenched, awful need when Vayme and Soft finally reached me.

He launched off her back and was pulling me into his arms so damn quickly, I hadn't even seen him move.

Tears stung my eyes as he gripped me tightly to his chest.

Neither of us said a word as he lifted me up onto Soft's back, keeping my body securely against his. His erection was pinned between us, but I knew that was the eclipse's fault and not mine.

"I'm glad you're safe," Soft said to me, her voice straining in my mind.

All of us were struggling with the damn eclipse's effects, including her.

"Me too. We'll talk more tomorrow."

I felt more than heard her agreement.

Vayme's jaw was clenched ferociously tight as she carried us, and I bit my cheek so hard I could taste blood as I fought my body as well. When she finally reached Vayme's chambers and found Strong waiting, he brushed up against her side possessively, giving me a small lick on my arm to tell me he was glad to see me.

I couldn't hear their conversation as Vayme hauled me off her back and toward our room—his room—but the way Soft's side brushed Strong's too made me hopeful.

And then the door shut behind us, and my hope was forgotten.

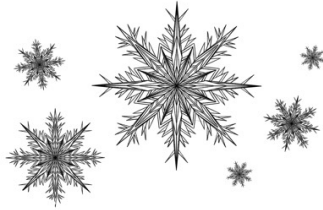
Vayne set me down on the edge of the bed, peeled a bag I hadn't noticed off his back, and ripped the top of it open. He pulled out a massive box of fruit, bread, and cheese, handing me a chunk of bread without a word.

I accepted it, but narrowed my exhausted eyes at him.

There was only one thing I wanted, and it wasn't food.

CHAPTER 26

KAELLE



He handed me a glass of water off the table beside the bed, too, rather than giving me what we both knew I wanted.

“Vayme,” I said.

“Tempest.” He managed to keep his voice steadier than mine. “Eat, so I can ravage you without fear that you’ll pass out again.”

“You say that like it’s happened before.” I lifted the glass to my lips and took a slow, reluctant sip.

I wanted his face between my thighs or his cock driving into me, not *water*.

But he did have a point.

And I was already light-headed.

He narrowed his eyes back at me. “I’d be scarred for the rest of our lives if you passed out while I was inside you. Eat the damn food.”

“Touch yourself while I do, then.”

He blinked.

“The eclipse affects you even more than it affects me, right? Because you’re fae? I don’t want you hurting. Bring yourself pleasure, and I’ll eat.”

His eyes blazed, and he unfastened his pants.

I took a bite of the bread in response.

His gaze burned into me as he peeled the fabric down his thighs before stepping out of it entirely.

My body somehow flushed even hotter at the sight of him, bare, hard, and straining. Though his desire was because of the eclipse, I let myself believe he was straining for me.

He stroked his cock once, and shuddered violently.

My toes curled.

“Your clothes reek of the Monster,” he said, voice low and gravelly. “Take them off.”

I set my bread and water down long enough to take my dress off with shaking hands.

He stroked his erection again, gritting out a curse.

I warned, “Don’t hold back. You know I won’t judge you for losing control quickly, Vayme. Especially during an eclipse.”

He gritted out another curse as he stroked himself again—and snarled as he found his pleasure, releasing on the pants he’d stepped out of.

“Veil, you are so damn hot,” I whispered, my body nearly tingling with need.

“The bread, Tempest. Eat it *now*.”

I picked it up and started on it again.

“I want you bare.” His voice strained again as he covered the distance between us. His fingers traced slowly over the edges of my undergarments, making me tremble again, for an entirely different reason. “Tell me you’re mine for the eclipse, Kaelle.”

“I’m yours for the eclipse. I’ve been yours for a while.”

“And you will be mine *forever*.” His fingers brushed my nipples, and my back arched a bit. “Take a bite, now.”

I took a bite.

He slowly traced the lines of the fabric over my breasts, his cock throbbing and jerking in response to the feel of me. My

toes were curled, and I was struggling to keep eating, but forced myself anyway.

Vayme finally peeled it off me, exposing my breasts. A low growl escaped him, and he stroked them as if they were something sacred, something he wanted to *worship*. Staying where he'd put me was a struggle I was starting to lose, but the bread was only half-gone. I knew I still hadn't eaten enough.

"I want your release on my skin," I nearly whimpered to him.

"Work on your food, and you'll get it." He pinched my nipples between his thumbs, and I cried out, so damn close to the edge of my climax. I was going to lose my mind if he didn't give it to me, if he didn't—

His fingers brushed the fabric covering my clit, and I cried out, grabbing his arm and gripping it tightly. My body jerked as the climax cut through me, the pleasure hitting hard and fast.

It wasn't enough.

It wasn't anywhere near enough.

But it calmed me just slightly, anyway.

"You're so damn gorgeous, Tempest." His voice was low and strained again. "Eat, so you can take my cock."

I moaned at his words, taking another bite of the bread when he snagged it from me and lifted it back to my mouth.

His free hand stroked his cock for me, and I watched, flushed and needy.

"Your breasts will wear my release as soon as your bread is gone, Kaelle." He held his erection, waiting for me.

I groaned, but took another bite.

He stroked himself again, and I quivered.

The pattern continued until the bread was gone—and Vayme had snarled again, coating my chest in his pleasure.

He made me drink water after that, and then made me eat the fruit and cheese.

The last thing I wanted in the moment was cheese, but he was worried about me, and I was too needy to refuse.

He peeled the undergarment away from my core and down my thighs as I ate, and then slowly teased my core with his tongue until I was done and crying out again.

Our movements grew jerkier, our thoughts beginning to fade as the eclipse started to take over completely.

As soon as I'd eaten the last of the food, Vayme rolled me to my hands and knees, lifting my ass and tilting my hips. Finally, he parted my thighs and slammed into me. I cried out as he slid home, giving me what I needed and craved. His fingers teased my clit as he dragged climax after climax out of me, losing himself inside my body over and over again until I was trembling again.

Despite the eclipse's haze over our minds, he noticed the trembling and carried me into the kitchen, still impaled on his cock. My world spun as he forced me to eat bite after bite, his erection throbbing inside me.

When he was finally satisfied with how much I'd consumed, he pinned me to the icebox and made me climax there a few times—before carrying me to the bathing pools.

We spent the rest of the eclipse there, until our energy was finally spent.

As the eclipse's remaining intensity faded away, Vayme left me on the seat of the hottest pool, hauling himself out of the water that must've been burning him while his chest heaved. "Veil, Kaelle."

"Veil," I mumbled in agreement.

My body ached madly, though it was an extremely satisfied sort of ache. I hoped I wasn't bleeding.

I leaned the back of my head against the edge of the pool, waiting for my racing heart to calm.

I usually despised the eclipse, but I certainly hadn't hated anything we'd done. Now that it was over, I didn't think I'd

ever felt so relaxed in my life.

As I rested, though, my mind ran over the spot Vayme's consciousness used to occupy.

It felt... empty.

Maybe *I* felt empty.

It was probably a side effect of the missing bond, as well as the sudden loss of his cock in my channel. I would survive it.

Though perhaps it might make me feel a bit lonelier.

I sighed softly and squeezed my eyes shut.

"That didn't sound like satisfaction," my king rumbled unhappily.

"Oh, I'm satisfied," I mumbled. My mouth didn't seem to be working quite properly; I needed more food and water.

He growled at me, then stood and strode out of the room. I knew he'd be back, so I waited where I was.

Sure enough, he returned with enough food to feed my entire town, and had multiple glasses of water tucked beneath his arm.

I eased myself out of the water as he set the food down beside the pool. He reached out to help me, but I waved his hand away. I couldn't help but notice his bare palm, free of our silvery marking, as he did. "Just worry about the food, Vayme."

He gave me an unhappy look, but pulled his hand back without touching me.

I finished off an entire glass of water before starting on the food, and silence set in between us as we ate. It was peaceful, though my satisfied bliss was fading into a calm sort of sadness.

I missed having his mind bound to mine.

I kept sneaking looks at my hip, too, bare of the handprint all my dresses had put on display. I hoped it wouldn't make me

sad when I put one on and had nothing to show but the soft flesh of my hip.

“My mind feels far too quiet,” Vayme finally said, slicking a few strands of wet hair away from his face. “I don’t like it.”

“I don’t like it either,” I admitted. “But it’s probably for the better, isn’t it? Your people still don’t take mates.”

He scowled at me. “I’m their king. I don’t follow their traditions; I make my own.”

“That’s another terrible reason to form a mating bond, Vayme.”

“What would be a good one, then?” He studied me, his gaze intense.

“I don’t know... love? Attachment? The realization that one’s life would be poor without the object of their affection as a part of it forever? Mating is permanent; it should come with a certainty that the person taking a mate will never change their mind, even when both mates inevitably grow and change. Shouldn’t it?”

“Of course it should.” He leaned toward me, placing both of those massive hands on the stone between us as he did. “Tell me, Tempest, do you love me?”

My face flushed, and I threw the question back at him. “Do *you* love *me*?”

“I thought I made it obvious that I did.”

My eyebrows shot upward. “*Obvious*? How?”

“I asked you to seal our bond. I protected you, and provided for you. I—”

“Those actions could just as easily be driven by guilt, or responsibility. You only asked me to seal it because you didn’t want me to die, remember?”

“What man wants the woman he loves to *die*?”

I lifted a finger to stop him, my hand trembling a bit yet again. “You *never* said you loved me.”

“Well, I certainly thought it. I love you, Tempest. I love the way your smile lights up a room, and the way you challenge me. I love your quiet strength, and having you in my arms. I love you. I want you to be my mate permanently—not just to keep you alive, but to make you *mine*. So I get to keep you through this life, and every one that follows. So I get to feel your pretty little mind entwined with my own. Is that clear?”

“Very,” I whispered, stunned by his words.

He loved me.

He really did want to mate with me.

He *loved* me.

Vayme popped another berry into my mouth, clearly not waiting for me to proclaim my love in return. Maybe fae didn't expect that—maybe they didn't worry as much as humans.

Or maybe he just didn't want to pressure me into speaking about feelings he didn't think I had.

Or... maybe I'd spoken too soon.

Because he leaned back, his body position casual but his gaze lingering on my face. “You didn't answer my question.”

“I suppose I didn't.” I brushed hair away from my eyes with a shaky hand. My wind still hadn't returned, but I was sure it would after I rested.

He waited.

I fought the urge to bite my lip and go silent, admitting, “I've loved you for a while. I'm not sure when it happened, exactly, but I do. I love you. You make me feel safe and happy, and that's so much more than I ever expected for myself.”

The intensity in his gaze shifted to a warm simmer. “Veil, I'm glad. I think I'd have to lock you in my room until I convinced you otherwise if you said no.”

I laughed. “You wouldn't.”

The challenge in his eyes told me he would most certainly consider it, at the very least.

His foot brushed the side of my thigh slowly, but the physical contact shocked me. A slice of pain erupted in my hip, and I yelped as I jumped a bit.

My gaze jerked to my side, and my lips parted as I watched his handprint reappear on my skin. “How...” I trailed off, not sure how to finish the question as I looked up at him.

His expression was just as shocked as my own. “We’re fated.” I stared at him in silence, eyes rounded.

“Our souls bonded before we reached this world, Tempest. They’re making that known to us now.” The pride in his eyes swelled. “I suppose now I understand why the other females were so damn unappealing.”

“I can’t feel you in my mind, though.”

“It’s not a full bond—just a handprint, to let us know that our souls are connected. A bond from the world before doesn’t have to be recreated in this one.”

My chest warmed. “So we made an agreement to be together before this life.”

“We did.”

“Maybe I really do belong with the fae.” I reached for his hand, and he slid closer to give it to me. Emotion burned in my throat as I studied the soft, glowing silver on his palm.

The first time we started a bond, he had been frustrated. It wasn’t a good start—not in the slightest.

Now, we could change that.

I lifted my gaze to Vayme’s. “I love you. *Sillah ovim rett warum.*”

Joy swelled in his face as our souls and magic began to knit together again, and a feeling of rightness washed over me. “*Sillah ovim rett warum*, Tempest. I love you more than life itself.”

Tears stung my eyes as a fierce tingle rolled through me. Our auras began to change again, but unlike that first day in my cave, I didn’t sit there and watch.

Instead, I surged toward my king—my *mate*.

He hauled me onto his lap, capturing my mouth and kissing me deeply as our souls and bodies changed, sealing the connection we both wanted so desperately.

There was no brutality, and no roughness, but... maybe a little pain.

He wrenched away from me a moment later, his nostrils flaring. “I smell your *blood*, Tempest.”

“I don’t think my human body was made to survive an entire eclipse with a fae king,” I admitted sheepishly.

The anger I’d expected flooded his gaze—but there was much more of it than I had expected. “I hurt you?”

“It didn’t hurt in the moment.”

He growled at me, set me on my ass, and parted my legs. My gaze was nearly glued to the marking on his palm—now glowing bright gold, rather than soft silver. There was no way a little fabric could hide that glow, which thrilled me.

“Vayme,” I protested, as he inspected me slowly, and thoroughly.

“It’s not as bad as I thought,” he said after a few minutes, dragging his tongue lightly over my clit as if in apology for getting angry.

My body shouldn’t have reacted.

It really shouldn’t have, after everything we’d done.

But something about hearing Vayme proclaim his love for me made me want him, just one more time. Just to solidify... *everything*.

“You can make it better,” I suggested.

He flashed me a narrow-eyed look. “Absolutely not.”

I heaved a sigh, staring up at the ceiling. “We’re mates now. For real, this time. I think that should earn me the right to whatever I want, for the night at least.”

“Technically, it’s already tomorrow.”

The bastard stroked my thighs and abdomen lightly, as if that would make me want him less.

But a wicked idea came to me—one he wouldn't be able to turn down.

The more I thought about it, the more certain I was.

“You could let me drink your blood.”

His hands went still.

“That would heal me, wouldn't it?” I asked.

His fingertips dug into my skin, and he finally answered. “It would. And you should know you are entitled to my blood any time you want it, Tempest.”

I eased myself up to my forearms. “Would you like it if I did, though?”

“Of course. It's supposed to be one of the most intimate things a couple can do.”

“Then it's only fair we try it.” I started to sit up the rest of the way, but Vayme caught my waist and lifted me carefully onto his lap. The length of his cock pressed against my core—hard again, despite the eclipse we'd just gotten through.

“No sex,” Vayme warned me, as I studied his neck in an attempt to figure out how I was supposed to drink from him. My teeth weren't very sharp, after all.

“I would never,” I lied, leaning toward his throat. His expression told me he didn't believe me any more than I believed myself.

I felt some strange kind of magic swirl in my lower belly, and a few of my teeth lengthened and sharpened.

His fingers dug into my ass as I slowly pressed my teeth to his throat. A soft gasp escaped me when the flavor of him flooded my mouth, and it quickly rolled into a groan when the shock morphed into a fierce, hot desire. It wasn't completely unlike the effects of the eclipse—just sharper, and focused entirely on what I wanted from Vayme instead of on my body alone.

I moaned, rocking my hips against his erection. It would take far more than that to bring either of us to climax after the eclipse, but veil, it still felt incredible. His nails dug deeper into my ass, and I rocked harder, encouraging him to lose control. I'd never minded the tiny cuts he left me—and now, he could heal them nearly as fast as he left them.

"Bite me too," I said into his mind.

"I don't need your blood." His voice was strained, and his nails dug in deeper.

"I wasn't asking, Vayme. Bite me, now."

He growled at me—but listened.

We groaned together as the pleasure heightened, and his hips jerked desperately.

"I need you inside me," I breathed into his mind, the flavor of his blood still in my mouth and through my damned veins.

"Tempest," he warned.

"You can give me your blood again tomorrow in apology."

He grunted. *"I'm hopeless at refusing you."*

"You want me too much."

"Undoubtedly." His hands glided over my ass, lifting me enough to line us up. *"Take what you need, mate."*

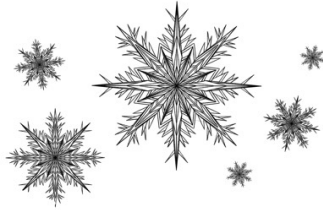
I sank down on him, and rode him until I screamed.

Somehow, it felt even better knowing that he was mine.

And not just mine—my *mate*.

CHAPTER 27

KAELLE



Vayme made me stay in bed for *days* after the eclipse. And not the fun kind of *staying in bed*—the kind of *staying in bed* where your mate feeds you more food than you can safely eat, and assigns two massive xuno to make sure you can't get out.

Then again, he also stayed with me through most of those days. He did attend a few meetings, but they were about fixing the mess my storms had made, so I forced him to leave me long enough to go to those ones.

Soft and Strong had spent the eclipse together, and seemed to be moving on from their past. They were all over each other, and it was adorable.

When Vayme finally accepted that I was fine, we emerged from the castle and made our rounds, letting the people closest to him know about our bond. Word had already gotten out because he had attended meetings, and the glow on his palm was impossible to hide, but telling them in person seemed important.

We stopped at his parents' house to tell his family that evening—well, to tell Matían and Pavia. His parents were there too, but we didn't particularly care about them.

Matían opened the door with a grin, having already heard the news, and congratulated his brother with a massive hug. I made sure my congratulatory hug was a quick half-hug, because I knew better than to do anything that might make

Vayme think I cared about his brother with more than a familial fondness.

Some scars ran too deep, after all.

His parents gave us both stiff embraces, which we returned just as stiffly.

Not all relationships could be mended, or needed to be.

If Vayme wanted to be close with his parents, I would support him, but until then, I'd survive awkward hugs and conversations. And if he never wanted to, I'd support that too.

Pavia waited patiently for her turn at the very end of the line, standing behind everyone else with a grin of her own... and a tiny xuno at her side.

"You found your companion?" I exclaimed to her, as I bent down so she could throw herself at me the way she always did.

"I found my companion!" she shrieked, hugging me fiercely. "And you're my uncle Vayme's mate!"

I laughed. "I'm happy for you! And yes, I'm his mate."

"Yay!" She pulled away, still grinning. "What's a mate?"

My gaze flicked to Vayme, and he shrugged.

I supposed if she'd grown up around humans, she probably didn't know.

"It's like a husband or wife, but with magic. Me and Vayme are going to be together forever, even when we cross the veil. Look." I pointed to the glowing handprint on my hip, revealed in almost its entirety by the cutout on my dress.

Her eyebrows raised and her lips parted. "Your magical tattoo changed. It's pretty!" She flashed her dad a quick look, and then leaned in close, cupping my ear with her hands and whispering, "We need to find my dad a mate. I think it would make him happier."

I bit back a laugh, pulling away and nodding with a solemn expression. "Let's do it."

Her lips stretched in a wide grin. “Yay!” She hugged me again, then finally gave Vayme his hug.

“I’m second now, huh?” he teased her, tickling her side. She giggled, wriggling in his arms.

When she leaned in and whispered to him, she told him the same thing, her whisper loud enough that all of us could hear. His face grew just as serious as mine had, and he agreed, “It will be our next mission.”

Matían looked amused more than anything, and dragged her into his arms as Vayme and I greeted her new companion with scratches behind the ears.

It wasn’t perfect... but veil, I loved it anyway.

It took a few more weeks to make sure everything was settled in our kingdom, but when it was, we headed out with Strong and Soft, as well as three bags of supplies.

Thanks to the shiny new mate bond Strong and Soft had, they ran with their sides brushing each other every now and then. Strong and Vayme had both tried to persuade me to ride on his back, but Soft and I had exchanged grins and refused.

Powerful males were impressive, after all, but we had to put our feet down sometimes.

My mate was keeping good on his promise to return me to my cave, though the way he was keeping it was vastly different than either of us had intended when he made the promise.

We traveled much slower, since there was no rush. Vayme gave me a list of beautiful sights we could see on the way, and didn’t complain once when I made him go to every single one of them, even though a few were just outside of Jirev, and one was all the way over by Loire.

When we stopped to visit Laeli and Ravv, we found them mated, much to my shock. I spent a good portion of a day cooking in their castle’s kitchen with Laeli, laughing up a storm as we traded stories. We spent the evening at one of their city’s apparently famous parties, drinking and dancing

until Vayme and I slipped away to spend the night alone together.

They had so many mated couples and fae children in Loire, it made my mind spin—and made me hopeful for a future where Vayme and I weren't the only ones in Vuuth with a bond.

When we made it to Jirev, we spent a day there too. Nissa had written me a letter, apparently, but whoever agreed to give it to me had never bothered to do so. My king growled a promise to find it, and make sure that never happened again.

He wanted me to be able to connect with my friends, even if just through letters.

I spent a day there in the fields with Nissa, though we mostly just walked around, chatting about everything under the sky. We told each other our stories, and talked about how long we wanted to wait to have kids—a *long* time—and said all the things we'd felt like we couldn't, back when we first met.

It made me feel like I'd found closure for all the time we spent there, and that calmed me.

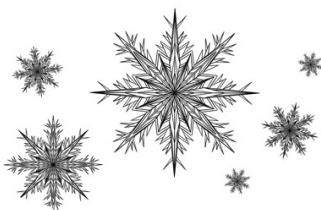
After one last night in Kier's castle, we finally headed back toward the human lands, and toward the family I didn't want to claim as my own.

We spent every night in an ice shelter, with my head on his arm and his body pressed tightly to mine as he murmured to me about how damn much he loved me.

I still thought I would always feel safer surrounded by stone, but with my king by my side, I wasn't afraid anymore. And to me, that was what mattered above all.

CHAPTER 28

VAYME



Kaelle was quiet as we traveled the last few hours to her parents' town. I didn't push her for her thoughts, knowing she would share them when she was ready.

"Let's stop at my old cave first," she murmured to me and the xuno, as we approached.

Strong turned, heading in that direction, and Soft followed.

When the xuno stopped, we dismounted. I took Kaelle's hand when she slowed near me, and she shot me a small, grateful smile.

I knew she hadn't really worked through everything she learned about her parents. Not entirely, at least. Scars like that took far more than a few months to heal, but I would make sure she was never healing alone or questioning her worth while she did.

She gripped my hand tightly as she led me inside her old cave, taking a moment to study the door. I remained far enough behind her that I could support her without being overbearing as she did.

We didn't speak a word as we walked around it. It had been overrun with water while we were gone, the bucket beneath the trickle missing completely. Whatever she had used as a bed was gone too, along with her books, and everything else that had once made it feel like a safe, warm space to her.

"They took my things," she said quietly into my mind. *"I wonder if they mourned me, or if they were just glad to have the items back."*

Anger swelled within me for her sake, but I didn't voice it.

I stopped her there and pulled her into my arms, hugging her fiercely. *"You know I love you, Tempest. We don't have to do this."*

She swallowed hard enough for me to hear it. *"I know, but I do have to do it. I have to find out, or I'll always wonder."*

Though I understood, I hated that it would likely cause her pain.

"Alright. As long as tonight, you're going to curl up in my arms and tell me everything you felt here."

"I will. I'll probably explode if I don't," she admitted.

I couldn't chuckle at her soft joke. Not when I knew she was struggling, and there was nothing I could do to help.

"You're helping me just by being here, Vayme."

I squeezed her tighter. *"Say the word, and I'll get you out of there in a heartbeat."*

"I know. Thank you." She tilted her head back and brushed a kiss to my lips. *"I love you too."* With that, she stepped away and pulled me behind her. *"We're walking there. I know riding the xuno would look fiercer, but I want them to see how strong we are. There's always a chance they might try to attack us, though I don't think they have any weapons. I think I was their weapon."*

"Then they will be doubly afraid when you walk in beside a fae male, wind blowing through your hair."

She laughed softly. *"I suppose. I'm not sure I should want to make them afraid, but I'm also not entirely against it."*

"If they fear your strength, they aren't worthy of it."

Kaelle squeezed my hand in response.

We made our way down the mountain, with Soft and Strong remaining close at our sides.

The town's members began to gather soon after we started our walk. I imagined the gossip flying through town—their human

prisoner had returned with a man holding her hand. Was she there to kill them, or had she truly believed herself to be loved?

There were enough people gathered when we reached the bottom of the mountain that I had to assume the entire town was there.

A soft-looking, middle-aged, human woman with tanned skin and blue hair stood at the front of the group. A man around the same age was beside her, with pale skin and dark hair. They had to be her parents.

Another man around Kaelle's age was with them, though he looked very, very uncertain. His hair was nearly the same shade as my mate's, giving away their relationship as siblings.

"Kaelle!" her mother cried, running toward us and throwing her arms around her daughter. My mate held my hand in a death grip, but hugged her mother lightly with her free arm.

Her mother added, "We were so worried about you! Where have you been?"

Kaelle released her, and her mother's gaze flicked to me. She looked back immediately, as if noticing my height for the first time. Kaelle had asked me to tie my hair up, so everyone could see the points of my ears and realize what I was, and I hadn't protested in the slightest.

"I was rescued by King Vayme of the fae," Kaelle said, her voice steady. I was damn proud of her for that steadiness.

Her mother's expression of worry cracked slightly. "Rescued? What do you mean?"

"Do you think I was blind to your treatment?" she asked, her voice quiet but strong. "To the softness of your body and the frailness of my own? You starved me, mother." My mate's eyes lifted to everyone in the town, many of whom seemed to be taking steps back, either to get away from me or Kaelle. "You all starved me."

"Your magic was dangerous," her mom countered, her voice losing all kindness as quickly as it must've gained it. "You

destroyed so many towns, Kaelle. Your magic made you a monster.”

“It’s Queen Kaelle, to you. Unlike you, the fae respect strength, and I am now mated to King Vayme.” After a moment to let the shock of her statement set in, she added, “I was a *child* when I lost control of the magic I didn’t know existed. You starved your own daughter; if one of us is a monster, it certainly isn’t me.”

“That is *enough*,” her father said, stepping up beside his wife with a red face. His fists were clenched, and the bastard actually looked as if he might swing at my female. “You will not disrespect your mother.”

I didn’t care what his relation was to her—if he swung at my mate, he would die.

“If you try to attack me or my king, he will end your life faster than you can blink,” Kaelle warned her father. “You have no power over me anymore. None of you do.”

She looked out at the town, and let the breeze blow through her hair for a moment as her father’s face reddened more.

Wisely, he didn’t make a move against either of us.

She mused, “My king offered to bring a battalion of fae warriors with us. It would only take a few to raze this whole damn town to the ground, wouldn’t you say?”

My gaze scanned the space quickly. “I could manage it myself, given ten minutes or so. No battalion needed, Tempest.”

A few of the people slipped back into their homes, hoping they could hide from the storm that may or may not be coming.

It wasn’t coming, but they didn’t know that.

Her lips curved upward softly, and she nodded as she looked back at the town. “Anyway, I thought about it, but decided it would be far better revenge to leave you here, suffering in the fields for every coin you need. While you suffer, I feast on fae delicacies and enjoy every moment of my immortal life with the fae king I adore—who worships me just as much as I worship him. If you had loved me, perhaps I would take you

with me, and offer you the same happiness. Instead, I leave you with the tiniest sample of the joy that could have been yours.”

I unclipped one of our large supply bags from Strong’s back, tugged the strings to open it, and tossed it toward them. The top layer of candies and other desserts we’d brought for that purpose spilled out onto the dirt, all of it wrapped pristinely in a plastic that would dissolve slowly, over time.

“You will never see me again, but in some part of my heart, I still wish you the best.” With that, Kaelle dipped her head toward her family, slipped a leg over the back of her companion, and took off.

I lingered, stepping up to her father with my sword in my hand. The ice was so damn familiar it may as well have been a body part.

I let the edge of the blade kiss his throat, and said in a low voice, “As her father, you were meant to protect my female. I will return after your death and curse your grave, to ensure you are incapable of hurting another child the same way in the next life.”

The redness vanished from his face as he paled.

Humans knew little of fae magic; he likely had no idea that I was incapable of cursing anyone. Even if he doubted it, the threat alone would haunt him.

After a long enough pause to scare him nearly to death, I finally released him and tossed a leg over Strong’s back.

He howled viciously into the sky, and Soft echoed his howl in the distance. Then, he snapped his teeth at the town members, and took off after his mate.

We caught Soft and Kaelle quickly, and my female threw herself into my arms, taking in deep breaths of air as tears leaked down her face.

I held her tightly, letting her cry as long as she needed to. She was mine, I was hers, and she knew I would never leave her.

Her sadness followed her for a few days, but by the time we stopped at one of our last destinations, it had faded into a steady resolve.

“Thank you for saving me,” she murmured, as we stared out over the edge of the Aching Chasm. My arm was wrapped around her, and she was tucked against my side. None of the beings and creatures that lived within it had any reason to venture to the surface, so we were in no danger. Even the Monster within would remain down below until he had another contract—and then, he would hunt his unfortunate target.

“Thank *you* for saving me,” I countered, brushing a kiss to her cheek.

Her lips curved upward. “I suppose I did.”

A chuckle escaped me. “You most certainly did, Tempest.”

Her smile grew wistful. “Laeli and Nissa seemed so happy working in the kitchens and fields. Do you think I should find something like that? A passion?”

“You seem happy attending meetings,” I pointed out. “The other humans don’t want to act as queens, but that doesn’t mean you can’t.”

She admitted, “I really do enjoy the meetings. Especially when you use my ideas.” She flashed me a grin, and I laughed. My voice carried over the chasm, and her body relaxed against mine.

“I appreciate your thoughts tremendously, as I always have.” I squeezed her tightly. “Eternity will be blissful with you, Tempest.”

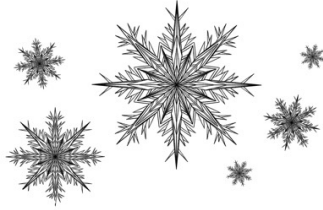
“Or at least a whole heap of fun,” she murmured, still wearing a smile of her own.

“Of that, I am certain.” I brushed another kiss to her cheek, and she turned in my arms, taking my lips in hers.

I couldn’t care less what the future held, so long as I got to hold the woman I loved through it all.

EPILOGUE

KAELE—MANY YEARS LATER



“*V*eil, they are adorable together.” I wiped tears from my eyes as Pavia kissed her new mate beneath a trellis of flowers that had been brought all the way from the deepest farm just for their celebration. Pavia had wanted a human-like wedding, so she’d gotten it.

“*You think everything is adorable right now,*” Vayme murmured back, his hand slowly stroking my bare, swollen abdomen through the cutout on the side of my dress.

“*It’s the pregnancy hormones. They’re going to kill me,*” I said with a sigh.

“*You know I won’t allow that.*” He brushed a kiss to my forehead. “*And this time, you’re right. They’re adorable.*” His gaze flicked to the xuno pups wrestling off to our side.

“*Though perhaps not quite as adorable as that.*”

Soft was growling at the clumsy little pups, trying to get them to behave, but they rarely listened. And Strong took so much amusement in their hard-headedness that I wasn’t sure they ever would.

A soft laugh slipped from my lips. “*You’re right. It would be hard for anyone or anything to be more adorable than that.*”

His lips curved upward, and he brushed another kiss to my forehead, still stroking my abdomen lightly. “*Our baby will manage it.*”

I choked back a laugh. “*Veil, I hope so.*”

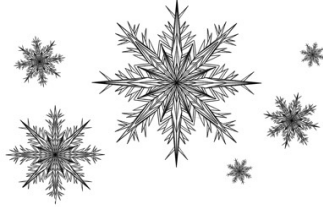
He chuckled softly, and we all stood as Pavia and her mate moved through the crowd, eyes bright and fingers intertwined. We were at the front, seated across from Matían and his mate, so we exchanged grins with them both before Pav stopped to hug them, and then us after.

More tears stung my eyes as she whispered to Vayme, “Thank you for always loving me.”

I started full-on crying when I heard my mate murmur back, “It was a privilege, Pav.”

Veil, I was so glad Vayme had dragged me out of that little cave and forced me into such a beautiful life—and so damn proud of myself for learning how to become strong enough to survive it.

AFTERTHOUGHTS



I had written a few cheerful paragraphs to close out this series, but I can't lie at the end of a book.

I just can't.

So here's the truth.

Shortly before I started this series, I had a miscarriage in a country I don't live in, while I was there for a book signing. I got home and finished what I had been working on, and then had to start a new series.

My emotions were shot, my anxiety was through the roof, and I was writing cheerful, hopeful books at a time when I was struggling to feel very cheerful or hopeful.

I buried myself in my then-current idea of a perfect book by toning down the humor and sarcasm and adding more plot. I planned fancy paperbacks and hardcovers, and I made it happen.

These books were a distraction from my grief.

They were something to get me through while I came to terms with what had happened as much as you can in a situation like that.

I still loved writing them... but I didn't feel them in my soul, the way I have with other books in the past. I don't know if I could've felt any stories in my soul at that point, honestly, and that's okay. It was nice to have a challenge and a goal while I struggled with my emotions and mental health.

But now that this series is finished, I find myself realizing I don't want that idea of perfection anymore.

I want the humor and the sarcasm back. The cheer and the hope, too.

I want *me* back.

So, I do still plan on writing more in Evare, but I'm going to be shaking things up again. The assassins will still get their stories, but now is not their time—my next series will be called *Claimed by the Wolf*, and will take place in the Broken Woods with the mysterious shifters lovingly called “assholes” by Ravv.

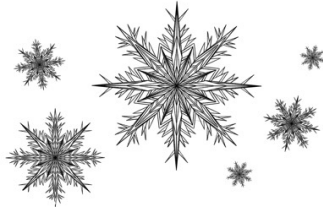
As always, thank you so much for reading!

All the love,

Lola Glass <3

PS one last thank you to the ladies in my [Facebook group](#) who won the giveaway to help me create a few characters for the series! Kiah, I hope you love how Matían and Pavia turned out!

BONUS EPILOGUE



Join Lola's email list with [this link](#) to read a free bonus scene about Vayme and Kaelle having some fun in a meeting! ;)

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lola is a book-lover with a *slight* romance obsession and a passion for love—real love. Not the flowers-and-chocolates kind of love, but the kind where two people build a relationship strong enough to last. That's the kind of relationship she loves to read about, and the kind she tries to portray in her books.

Even if they're about magic ;)