

FORBIDDEN MATES

2

DIARK
&
DREADFUL
BRUTES

LOLA GLASS

DARK & DREADFUL BRUTES

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About the Author

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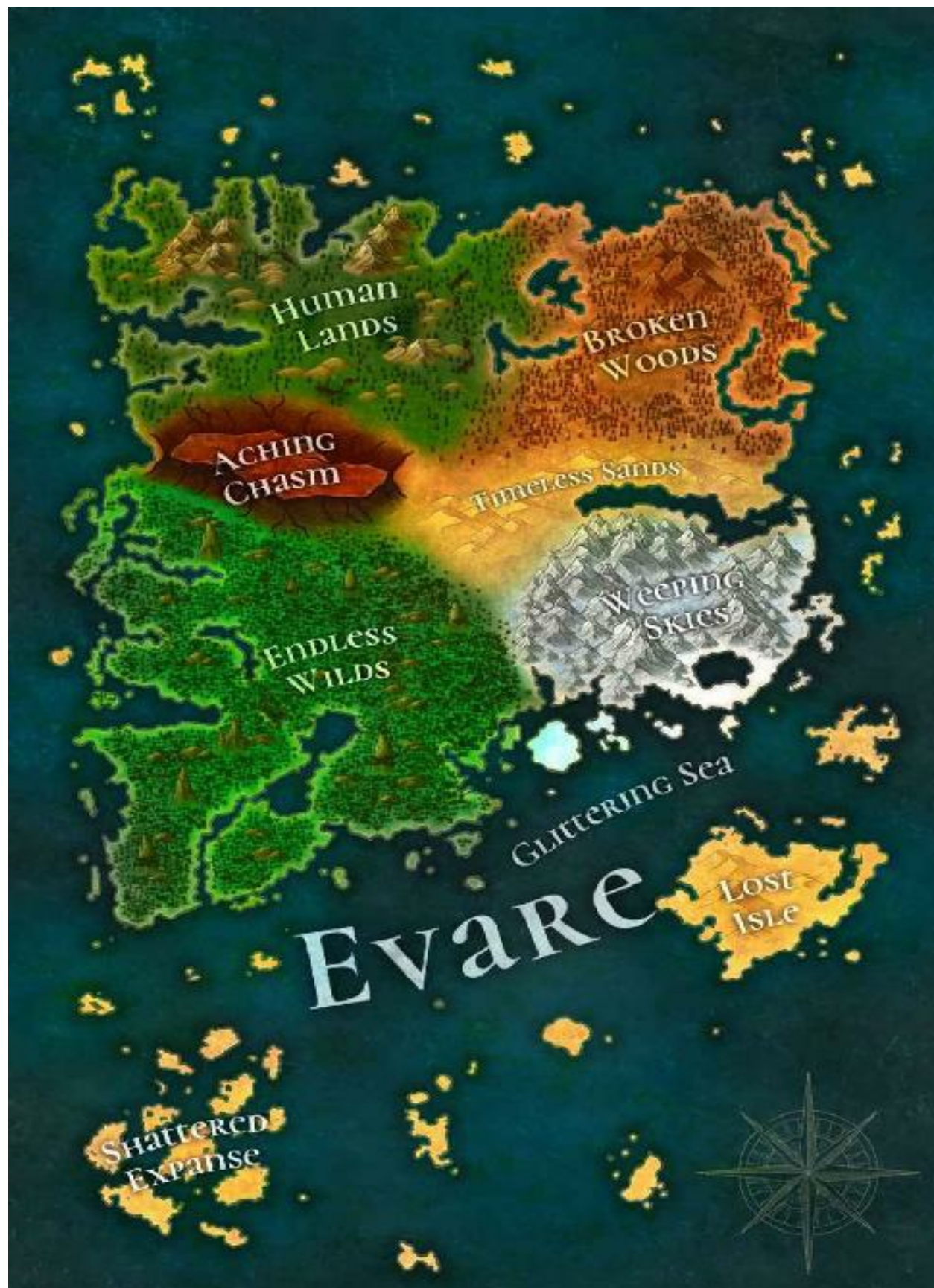
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Cover by Aura

To all the fairytales that ended with just one kiss



Human
Lands

BROKEN
WOODS

ACHING
CHASM

Timeless Sands

ENDLESS
WILDS

WEeping
SKIES

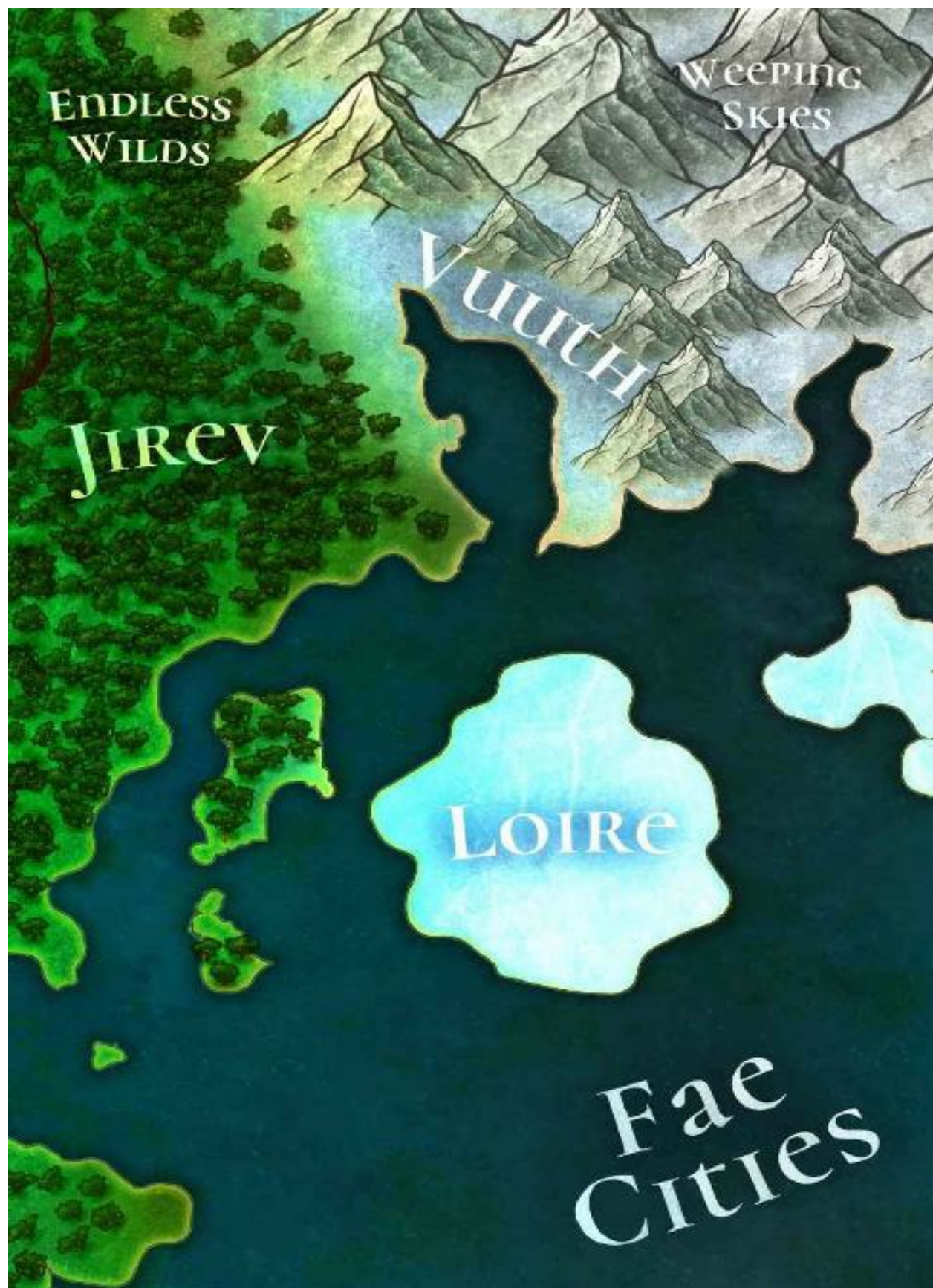
GLITTERING SEA

Evare

LOST
ISLE

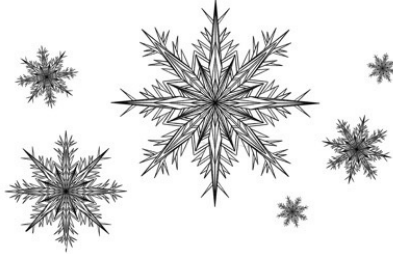
SHATTERED
EXPANSE





CHAPTER 1

RAVV



I stared at the city in the valley below, watching the streets as humans flooded them. Though the city was smaller than my own, it must've had ten times the population.

And I needed to find one human female among them.

My lips flattened in a line. If there was a way to survive that didn't require taking a mate—such as cutting off a finger or three—I would've done it without batting a damn eye.

But no amount of sacrifice would deter the assassin hunting me. My only chance was a human woman with magic that could hide mine.

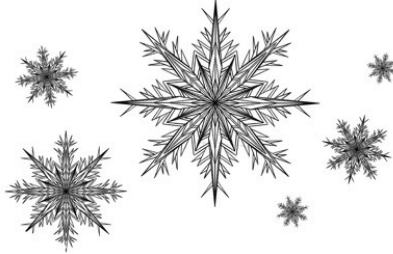
So I had to take a mate.

Temporarily, of course.

I gave the city one last look, cursing the elf who sent me after the female, before heading out to find her.

CHAPTER 2

LAELI



I scrubbed my filthy dress with a rough bar of soap, wondering how I'd been so damn unlucky.

Most people had *some* amount of bad luck, but me?

Mine had yet to be good.

The dented metal bucket I scrubbed my dress in was shallow, and the water in it was filthy, yet I scrubbed anyway.

“You’re taking too long,” Jern grumbled behind me. Like me, he was a human with magic. Unlike me, he had dark brown skin and a mass of curly blue hair. I was pale, with long hair that was either red or orange, depending on the angle you looked at me from. While his eyes glowed electric blue, mine were the same reddish-orange as my hair.

Both of us were equally skinny thanks to starvation; we were locked in a glorified cellar beneath our kingdom’s castle.

It was *below* the dungeon.

And since the floors were dirt, everything was filthy.

Everything.

“Move faster, Laeli.” Gora smacked me on the arm, and I flashed her a glare. All I had on was my scratchy undergarment, but it covered all the important bits. It didn’t smell great, but we’d get clean clothing in a few days.

I'd rather wait it out than sit around naked while my undergarment dried. Nudity led to discomfort, and discomfort led to losing control of my magic, which was not an option.

Gora was nearly as pale as me, with shaggy brown hair and small eyes that glowed an intense greenish-black.

I said, "I'm really damn tired of the two of you teaming up against me. I would never have supported your relationship if I knew it was going to lead to *this*."

This, meaning, me being the odd woman out. Constantly.

Having to stare at the walls of our jail every time they kissed.

Having to lay in the bed above theirs while they made love.

Veil, if I never had to think about someone having sex again, it would still be too soon.

The veil separated our world from the next, and was commonly used as a curse word.

Some part of me was happy for Gora and Jern, but I would've been much more enthusiastic about their relationship if I wasn't forced to witness every single moment of it.

"Don't boil the water," Gora warned, grabbing the bucket and dragging it away from me.

I scowled at her before looking down at my hands.

Steaming already—just my damn luck.

My magic was absolutely uncontrollable. I radiated heat constantly, up until I felt any kind of strong emotion. When the emotions hit, I turned into a walking campfire.

It was lovely. Very, very lovely.

If one appreciated being on fire, that is.

Which I didn't.

Because of my magic, our beds were stone.

Our walls were stone too.

The books we'd been given to entertain ourselves were hidden beneath a thick, plastic sheet that was meant to protect them if I caught on fire. It didn't happen often, though the steaming hands were damn near constant.

I heaved a sigh.

"I'll get the soap off your dress. Jern, want to read for her?" Gora looked at her lover. Err... betrothed? They planned on getting married the moment we were free, though none of us knew if that would ever happen.

"As long as you'll move faster than she does."

The couple exchanged grins.

"Stop being so nauseatingly adorable," I mumbled.

They laughed together, and Jern grabbed the book we were partway through. I wasn't allowed to hold the books, to make sure I didn't accidentally destroy them, but my friends didn't mind reading aloud for me.

As much as I complained about them, they kept me sane.

Jern started reading. I only heard a few words before I got a strange feeling.

My hand lifted to my chest as my heart started to sort of... hum.

I looked around the room, but saw nothing except our usual stone beds and dirt floors.

"Do you feel that?" I asked the others, interrupting Jern rudely. My hand was still pressed to my chest—and the humming in it seemed to grow louder.

"No..." Gora looked slightly concerned.

All of our heads jerked toward the thick stone door, and we all went silent as we watched something that looked a lot like *ice* crawl over the surface of it.

The ice spread and spread—until it shattered.

All of us ducked, throwing our arms over our heads as chunks of rock and ice

flew everywhere. A few of the sharp bits hit my exposed skin, but none of them hurt too badly.

When I lifted my eyes, my body went still.

I was steaming—*definitely* steaming—but there was a man in the empty doorway.

The biggest man I'd ever seen.

He was tall and strong, made completely of muscle that looked chiseled from stone. His eyes glowed an angry violet color, and his light skin was covered almost completely in sharp-looking shards of ice. His blond curls were wild, and the tops of his ears were pointed.

He was a *fae*.

But we were in the human lands, a long way from the Endless Wilds that the fae supposedly called home.

So, what was he doing in our jail cell?

And why did he look so angry?

A massive white bear stepped into the room behind him, and my eyes widened at the sight of it.

Its shoulders were a few inches taller than the fae's head—and its eyes glowed bright pink.

All magical creatures in Evare had glowing eyes, so the bear must've had magic. Or it was magical, in some way.

"I've been looking for you for *hours*," the fae growled.

I had no idea who he was talking to.

Gora and Jern clung to each other. Their magic wasn't the defensive or offensive kind. Not instinctively, at least. Gora could move wickedly-fast, and Jern could lift small objects with his mind sometimes.

"Get up." The man grabbed me by my bare, wimpy bicep—then he wrenched backward as a sharp electric current sliced through my arm where he'd

touched me.

I gaped at my bicep as a silver handprint slowly appeared on my skin... and then started to glow too.

The fae snarled the words, "*Sillah ovim rett warum.*"

Though I didn't recognize the words, it felt like some buried, ancient part of me did.

They rolled through me, and I took in a long, deep breath as I felt something vital inside me begin to *change*.

Where my magic's fire burned in my middle, something else slowly pooled. Something cold, something like... ice.

All fae had ice magic, if the legends were true, but how was it possible for the man's magic to join mine in my veins?

We should've been opposites. We should've—

Heavy footsteps sounded in the hallway outside our prison.

The fae man wasted no more time.

He plucked me off the ground by my waist, tossed me onto the bear's back, and then jogged out of the cell. I gripped the bear's fur for dear life as it started to run behind the fae.

Veil, they were fast.

I managed to lift my head and see over the bear just in time to watch us collide with a *wave* of humans.

The fae was already cutting through them, spinning and slashing with claws of ice on his hands, elbows, and shoulders. Every inch of him swelled with thicker, sharper shards of it.

The humans were too slow to defend themselves.

They should've run while they had the chance.

A few of them did as the fae reached the end of the hallway, and he let them

go.

Then he flashed a scowl over his shoulder.

I knew he wasn't scowling at the bear, but at *me*.

Gora and Jern caught up to us, wheezing and gasping. They'd stepped over the bodies of the humans without batting an eye, and I didn't blame them.

Being held captive for a decade really reduced the amount of empathy you felt for the people who could have freed you.

"You need to run!" I called to them. If the bear wasn't so damn tall, I would've tried to get off its back. But it was massive—and the fae had said he was looking for *me*, which meant he wasn't going to just sit by and watch me run away from him.

Even if he did, the bastard could catch me easily.

The bear I was riding took off down the hall.

I shrieked, gripping its fur even tighter as it skidded around a corner.

It ran hard for a moment, roaring loudly as it burst through a set of doors. The smell of burning fur met my nose, and it occurred to me that I might be burning the creature.

Panic hit me hard, and I let go quickly.

When I let go, I lost my balance, and flew off the creature's back.

My world tilted before I could scream.

I landed hard on my side, and then rolled.

My back slammed into a wall, and I saw stars for a long moment.

Somewhere off to my side, I could hear the bear and fae roaring and snarling. Humans were yelling, too.

When I managed to crack my eyes open, though, the only thing I saw was my thick red-orange hair, my undergarment, my body, and my flames.

Somehow, my bad luck had even managed to wreck the fae's rescue.

Granted, I wasn't sure he considered it a rescue. Perhaps he was abducting me.

There were worse things in the world than being abducted by a gorgeous fae man, though.

Like being locked in a dirt and stone cellar for ten years.

Closing my eyes, I took a deep breath in.

My flames didn't burn away the clothing I was wearing when I caught fire, just as they never burned me. I supposed I needed to consider that a blessing.

But when I got worked up enough to actually catch fire, that fire wouldn't vanish until it managed to drain my energy completely. It knocked me out for most of a day while my body recovered from the intensity of the magic.

Since the fae had touched me, I felt... different, though.

As I leveled my breathing, I opened my eyes again so I could watch my flames begin to shrink.

They'd only been open for a moment when a gorgeous, furious face leaned over me.

I blinked up at the fae man.

He glowered at me. "Stop your fire and end the pull on my magic."

I blinked again.

"She can't stop the fire," Gora said from somewhere behind the fae.

I didn't turn my head to look at her.

Something inside me said that looking away from the man who was legitimately *soaked* with other people's blood would be a bad call.

The fae turned his glower on the couple I'd been forced to live with for far too long.

Jern cleared his throat. "She can't control her magic. It drains her when it wants—and when she catches fire, she burns until it knocks her out."

The fae's attention jerked back to me.

I felt something crawl over my arms—and shuddered when I looked down at myself and realized it was ice.

It spread over my skin, killing the flames as it went.

I breathed rapidly when it closed over my throat. It was just a thin layer, but panic warred inside me anyway.

My fire burned hotter, melting through the ice in a heartbeat.

The fae man swore.

“Her flames react to her emotions. You'll have a better chance of killing the fire if you can calm her down,” Gora added.

“We don't have time for this.” The fae man scooped me up off the ground and tossed me over his shoulder. My face crashed into his back, and he ran. My flames didn't seem to burn him, which was lucky for him and not particularly great for me.

A moment later, I was squeezing my eyes shut to hide them from the sunlight that washed over us. The warmth from all three of our suns kissed my exposed skin, since I was still wearing nothing but my undergarment.

It felt good.

Veil, no. It felt *incredible*.

And the fae's warm, bare back felt even better.

Until he started running, and my face slammed against it. “Don't leave Gora and Jern!” I cried out, ignoring the stinging in my eyes.

He didn't stop.

Cries and screams echoed through the city as he sprinted through, moving so fast that I doubted anyone could even make out the shape of him well enough to see who and what he was, or why he was on fire.

The man must've run for half an hour, weaving through the city and then up into the barren mountains that rose above the valley.

I was lightheaded—and still burning—when he finally slowed and then stopped beside a small river.

I eyed the water, in too much shock at seeing the real world again to put together why he'd decided to stop there in particular.

He tossed me into the river, and a screech escaped me as I plummeted in.

I hadn't swam since I was a kid.

Would he let me drown?

Why had he gone to the trouble of saving me just to throw me in a river?

The water engulfed me, nowhere near as cold as it could've been. My shoulder brushed soft sand, and I realized how shallow it was.

I'd be fine.

The fae wasn't trying to kill me.

At least, not *yet*.

As if to emphasize that point, he grabbed the back of my undergarment and hauled me onto dry land again.

I gasped for air, my knees knocking as my bare feet hit the ground hard. My fire was out, by some miracle.

The fae growled at me like an animal, grabbing my waist to hold me upright. The motion put our chests fairly close to each other, but I didn't let myself think much of it. He was just trying to keep me from falling over. "Why are you so weak?"

"I was in a cellar for ten years. They barely fed us." My chest still rose and fell rapidly as I sucked in air, but I didn't catch fire again. "You'd be weak too."

His anger faded just the tiniest bit.

“Where’s your bear? Did it grab my friends?”

He glared at me. “She’s not a *bear*, she’s an idorr. And her name is Gleam.”

I blinked.

That was... not what I expected to hear.

“What’s an idorr, then?” He’d pronounced the word eye-door, so I made an effort to do the same.

“A magical animal much stronger, faster, and smarter than its distant relatives, the bears. They form a mental and soul-deep bond with some fae, becoming our life companions.”

I blinked again. “So... you’re married to a bear?”

At least he wouldn’t want to have sex with me.

Then again, he was gorgeous. Maybe I should’ve been mourning that fact.

“No,” he growled. “To be bonded with a beast is to be connected as friends. Gleam has a mate.”

Oh.

“And you don’t?”

“Enough questions,” he snarled at me.

“You don’t get to yell at me for not knowing something and then yell again when I try to learn,” I shot back. “*You’re* the one who abducted *me*.”

“I *rescued* you.”

“You and I both know you had some selfish reason for showing up where and when you did. And it probably has something to do with this.” I gestured to the silver handprint on my arm, and then to the matching one I’d noticed on his palm.

He glared at me.

I glared back, waiting for an explanation.

Finally, he said through gritted teeth, “It’s a mate bond.”

Damn.

That was *not* what I expected to hear.

“A *mate bond*?”

“Yes. It appeared when I grabbed you, which means fate has decided for whatever reason that we’re meant to be together. I spoke the words necessary to complete my side of the connection—don’t repeat them or we’ll end up stuck together permanently.”

Veil.

“I don’t even remember what you said.”

Even as the words left my lips, something in my mind whispered,

“*Sillah ovim rett warum.*”

“Good.” He jerked his head to the side. “Gleam is here. Prepare to say goodbye to your friends.”

“Where am I going? You’d better not kill them.”

He flashed me a dark look. “How do you intend to stop me?”

A shiver went up my spine as my magic threatened to surface again.

He released me and strode away.

I wobbled a bit, but managed to stay upright as I followed him down the river’s bank. We found his bear—err, idorr—companion setting Jern and Gora on their feet by the river.

The fae scratched his idorr-friend’s head, and she rumbled happily as she licked him in the face.

I *must’ve* imagined the curve of his lips in response to her, because he was a grumpy bastard.

Gora and Jern pulled me in for massive hugs, both saying something about how glad they were that we were all alive and free. I murmured my

agreement, though I was still eyeing the fae guy who was apparently my mate.

What *was* a mate, though?

He'd used the word the way I would use husband, and there was no way a handprint could be a marriage.

Right?

The fae guy untied a bag I hadn't noticed hanging from a branch. He must've hidden it in the trees before going into the city, because he didn't bother digging through it before he slung it over his shoulder.

Jern and Gora hid me behind them protectively when the man rumbled, "Time to go."

His eyes narrowed at them when they stepped a bit closer to each other, concealing me completely.

"Laeli stays with us," Gora warned.

I bit my lip.

It was sweet of them to try to protect me, but the fae bastard had hunted *me* down. I didn't know why he had, but I didn't think there was a chance he would leave without me after killing his way through the damn castle to find me.

The man didn't try to cut their throats for disagreeing with him, luckily. Instead, he said, "If you want food and directions to the nearest town, she stays with me."

The couple was silent for a moment.

All three of us were starving. We wouldn't make it far at all without food, even if the fae *wasn't* hunting us down. Which he would be, if we all tried to leave together.

"We can't go to the nearest town," Jern finally said. "Not with our eyes glowing. We'll be dragged right back to the king's cellar."

"I can't take you back with me," the fae said flatly.

“Coarse can take you back to Loire,” a feminine voice said into my mind. The way Gora and Jern jumped a bit told me they’d heard it too. *“He’s my mate, and he’s only a few hours behind us.”*

I assumed the voice belonged to Gleam, the idorr.

“We don’t need humans in Loire,” the fae growled. “They can find a damn human town to take them.”

“How long were you imprisoned?” Gleam asked my friends, ignoring the fae.

“Five years for me. Eight for Jern,” Gora admitted. “Laeli was there for ten.”

The idorr made a noise of sadness. I peeked over Gora’s shoulder to watch as Gleam plopped down on the dirt. *“We’ll wait for Coarse.”*

“Thank you,” Jern said. “Laeli needs to stay with us, too.”

“Oh, no. You two smell like mates; you can understand that Ravv and Laeli need to stay together.” She draped her head over her paws.

I assumed Ravv was the angry fae man’s name.

“Mates?” Gora looked over his shoulder at me.

“The handprint thing.” I didn’t bother looking down at it.

Seeing it glow on my arm kind of freaked me out, honestly.

When I looked over Gora’s shoulder again, I saw Ravv with his eyes narrowed at Gleam, who remained where she was without budging an inch. Something told me they were arguing mentally.

Ravv finally dropped his bag beside the idorr and then stormed into the forest, disappearing from our view.

I stared after him.

“Maybe we’ll get lucky, and he won’t come back,” Jern muttered.

Clearly, he was uneducated as far as my bad luck went.

“He’s coming back,” Gleam said pleasantly. *“There’s food in the bag. When*

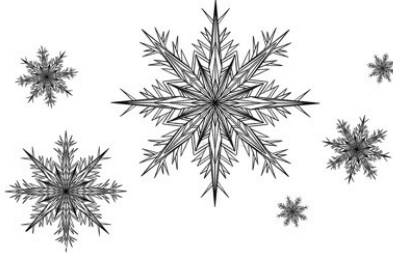
Ravv returns, he'll bring more."

None of us hesitated to open the bag, or to scarf down half the contents like the starving, wild animals we may as well have been.

My upper arm ached for some reason while he was gone—where the handprint was, actually—but I ignored the pain in favor of a full belly.

CHAPTER 3

LAELI



When Ravv returned a few hours later, there was another idorr at his side. The newcomer was even bigger than Gleam, and his face was twisted in an angry scowl.

Us humans were snacking on fresh berries we'd picked from a bush near the river, our bellies full as we leaned up against a tree. Gora and Jern were holding hands, their shoulders pressed together, and Jern had been fighting a smile for *hours*.

"Stop being so damn adorable," I grumbled at them, the same way I always did.

Except when they were having sex.

Then I just tried to ignore the sounds and the way the bed shook beneath me.

Ignoring it usually failed, and ended up contributing to my sex aversion.

At least *they* had enjoyed our time in the cellar as much as possible.

I stood up and dusted dirt off my ass. My undergarment was still the extent of my clothing, though it was significantly cleaner after my dip in the river.

The angry idorr growled as he stormed over to Gleam. He prodded her with his nose, sniffing, grumbling, and making frustrated noises. She rubbed the side of her face against his fur as he moved, her own noises resembling amusement.

Though I itched to ask what was going on, I didn't want to make either of the grouchy males any angrier, so I stayed quiet.

Gleam said, "*Gora and Jern, you'll go with Coarse. He'll protect you until you get to our city, Loire, and then he'll make sure you're fed and clothed.*"

She pronounced the city's name *lore*.

My friends stood behind me, murmuring their thanks and eyeing the angry idorr with a bit of worry.

I was kind of nervous he'd eat them, but it seemed unlikely after how kind Gleam had been. Then again, being eaten by an idorr was probably better than spending another decade in the cellar.

Or at least it was for me. The couple would probably disagree.

"Where are you going?" Gora asked Ravv.

"Jirev," Ravv said flatly, pronouncing the word, *jeer-ev*.

Gora and Jern exchanged looks that I didn't have to read to know they were wondering where Jirev was.

"*It's another fae city. Ravv is needed there for the next few weeks,*" Gleam said smoothly. "*You'll be reunited soon.*"

Veil, I hoped she was right.

And I really hoped she didn't intend for me to share a room with Gora and Jern when I got to Loire. Honestly, I'd share with Ravv before them.

It had been way too many years.

"Thank you," Jern said, as he gave Gleam a small smile. He pulled me in for a hug and squeezed me tightly, murmuring, "Do whatever you have to, to protect yourself from him."

"I'll be fine," I whispered back.

Gora wrapped her arms around both of us, squeezing tightly. "We'll see you soon."

My eyes didn't water.

They would later, when everything set in... but for now, I was still in shock that I was outside the cellar and sitting in the forest. The suns were still shining down through the trees, and it felt surreal.

It took them a few minutes to get up on Coarse's back, and Ravv finally had to haul them up by their clothes. Ravv then scratched Coarse behind the ears, and the big, grumpy idorr rubbed up against Gleam one last time before he gave her a warning growl. He looked at me, and his vibrant eyes lingered for a long, long moment before he turned and took off into the forest.

Coarse moved just as fast as Ravv, if not faster.

As soon as he was gone, Ravv shot me a look that said I was about to get threatened.

I raised my hands in surrender. "I'm ready."

His hands landed on my hips when I reached him and Gleam—but instead of lifting me, he gave me an irritated rumble and said through a clenched jaw, "You reek."

"I've been in prison for years," I shot back, my defenses rising. "Dirt and sweat are inevitable."

"I don't mind dirt and sweat." He swept me off my feet, hauling me back to the river.

"Then what's your problem?"

"The smell of your male."

My eyebrows lifted. "Jern is not *mine*."

He muttered something that sounded suspiciously like, "*he'd already be dead if he was*," before he tossed me back into the river.

I came up sputtering and angry. "What is *wrong* with you?"

A bar of soap came sailing toward me, and I barely managed to dodge the damn thing.

It disappeared into the river with a soft plunk, and I stared after it in disbelief.

There was a splash as Ravv dove in after it.

I groaned, staring up at the sky and asking the veil why my life always went this way.

Would it really be so bad if things worked in my favor just one time?

I'd traded a cellar for an angry fae man, and...

Well, fine.

Ravv was much better than the cellar.

Perhaps I'd had a small stroke of decent luck.

He surfaced with the soap and stalked toward me. Somehow, he managed to look threatening even in the middle of a river, holding a bar of soap.

"Turn around," he said.

I turned around.

His soap met the top of my head, and I winced at the pressure. "Too hard."

He grunted but eased up enough that it felt nice, instead of painful.

"I can wash myself," I told him, as his soap and fingers deftly worked through the thick length of my hair. "You don't even know me."

He ignored my offer and statement.

My eyes closed as his fingers massaged my scalp.

It was truly a bizarre moment. I stood in a river, with a gorgeous fae man cleaning my hair, while Evare's suns filled the sky with light above my head.

Part of me wondered if I was dreaming.

But I clearly remembered the escape. And when his soap and fingers moved down my arm, I clenched my jaw as they ran over the bruises there.

"How long until you heal?" he asked.

“I don’t know. Depends how much I eat, probably.” I paused. “Did I hurt Glean? I didn’t mean to catch on fire.”

“No, she has thick skin. You just burned a little hair.”

“*It’ll grow back,*” she offered, from where she sat on the dirt.

I grimaced anyway, dunking my head into the water enough to rinse the suds from my hair. “I’m still sorry.”

“Take your clothes off,” Ravv said, lifting his soap back to my hair and starting all over again there. I had to imagine there was more dirt than one scrub could take care of.

My body stiffened. “We are not having sex. I don’t care what the handprint means. I have a sex aversion.”

I didn’t know if a sex aversion was really a thing, but I was making it a thing.

“I’m not propositioning you,” he growled back. “Your clothes are filthy.”

“Oh.” I considered it.

The bastard was right—I was utterly disgusting.

I turned my back to him and started undoing the front. The water rose to my waist, so my ass was well-enough hidden that I didn’t think he’d see much.

“Alright, as long as you’re not going to grab me or anything. Do you have spare clothes in your bag? I’d rather not walk around in my undergarment.”

“That’s an undergarment?”

“Mmhm. What do fae women wear under their clothes?”

“Significantly less fabric.”

My face heated.

He’d probably been with hundreds of women.

He was probably *ancient*. He wouldn’t even be interested in my body.

“Humans are strange,” Ravv grumbled.

“You’re the one who showed up in my city without wearing a damn shirt. That makes you the strange one.” I tugged my undergarment the rest of the way off. “And I guess that means you don’t have spare clothes.”

“Only shorts and pants. I’ll find you something in the Timeless Sands when we pass through.” He plucked my undergarment from my fingers and started scrubbing it with the soap.

My face warmed a bit. “I’ve never even imagined going that far. How long will it take us to get there? Will we go through the Broken Woods?”

“About three days on Glean’s back to the Sands.” He continued scrubbing, making much quicker work of it than I would’ve. “We’re far enough west that we’ll dodge the Woods.”

I sighed.

I’d always been curious about the Woods.

“Don’t be disappointed. The shifters are assholes.”

“How?”

“Here.” He handed me the soap. “Unless you want me to scrub the rest of you.” His eyes gleamed.

I ripped the soap out of his hands, ignoring the obnoxious warming in my nether regions at the wickedness in his gaze. “I’m good.”

“What is a *sex aversion*?”

Heat bloomed on my cheeks. “I think I made it up. Maybe it’s real; I don’t really know. But I was trapped with Gora and Jern, and they were all over each other constantly. I started to dread any mention or thought of sex, and labeled it an aversion to make me feel better about the constant cringing.”

He barked a laugh. “Veil.”

“Right? It’s nothing against them; I’d feel the same way listening to *anyone* having sex so frequently. The bed would literally rock beneath me.” I shuddered.

“It was prison and torture in one, then.”

“Yeah.” I finished scrubbing myself, and handed him the soap. “At least it’s over.”

He slipped out of the river, taking my underclothes with him and wringing them out. I considered asking him to hang them over a branch or something so he could look away while I dressed... but decided against it. Ravv hadn’t made me feel unattractive or self-conscious, and he probably wasn’t attracted to me anyway, so there was no reason for modesty.

He had made that comment about cleaning the rest of me, but it was probably just a joke.

I started climbing out of the water, and he was quick to offer me a hand.

When I lifted an eyebrow at him, he rumbled, “So you don’t cover yourself in dirt. We’ll be riding close enough that your dirt will become mine.”

Right.

Ravv squeezed one last bit of water out of my clothing, then gave it to me. He turned away without me asking while I wrestled myself back into my wet undergarment, letting out a relieved huff when I finally fastened it again.

He grabbed his bag off the ground, filled it with some fruit he’d gathered while he was off in the forest, and then threw it over his shoulder again. “Let’s go.”

I agreed and headed over to Gleam. She batted a big eye at me, and then licked my knee.

My lips curved upward. “Is there any particular way to climb on without hurting you?”

She let out a chuff that reminded me of a laugh. “*You aren’t heavy enough to hurt me.*”

I didn’t bring up my flames.

It was difficult to get my leg up over her back, but I maneuvered myself up with a bit of effort. I was breathing fast when Ravv landed behind me without any effort at all.

Those long legs were a huge advantage.

“You’ll need to communicate with Gleam mentally while she’s running,” he told me, lifting me forward about a foot and then pushing me down until my chest was pressed to her back. He gave her a friendly rub, and she made a happy noise. “Not all beasts can or choose to speak mind-to-mind with someone who isn’t their companion, but Gleam does. You and I can communicate mentally too, but I’d rather not. Just tap my knee if you need to stop.”

I nodded, and he leaned down with me until his chest rested securely against my back and his arms wrapped around me. I noticed a mark glowing crimson on the back of his hand, but the glyphs embedded in the marking were in a language I couldn’t read, so I assumed it was some kind of fae magic.

Gleam walked for a moment, before she started to *run*.

Veil, she was even faster than I’d realized. The wind whipped my hair behind and around me, and my lips stretched into a grin as my exhilaration grew.

A few hours earlier, I’d been trapped in a small stone room with dirt floors... maybe my luck had actually started to turn around.

We ran for hours.

The excitement of it died down as my back started to get sore. The blissful comfort of having Ravv pressed against me didn’t fade, though. He braided my hair for me and tucked it in the back of my undergarment at one point, but neither of us commented on that.

When my stomach rumbled, we slowed long enough for me to gorge myself on some fruit and crackers he pulled out of his bag, and then started running again.

By the time we stopped for the night, I was absolutely exhausted.

“Do we just sleep on the dirt?” I mumbled to him, as I plopped down on my ass and stretched my legs out in front of me. My face scrunched as I reached for my toes, pulling on my tight muscles.

“No, you’ll sleep in an ice shelter.”

I nodded, my eyelids growing heavier.

Hopefully the ice didn’t feel cold.

I’d probably melt it whether it did or not.

“Do you catch fire in your sleep?” he asked.

“Nah.” I lowered my head to my knee, letting my eyes shut just for a minute.

“Laeli.” There was a slight growl to Ravv’s voice, and his huge hand landed on my shoulder. I thought the touch was gentler than I would’ve expected, but I could’ve imagined that.

When I didn’t lift my head, a thick arm slid under my legs.

I felt the ground disappear from beneath me, and leaned up against the fae’s warm chest as he carried me.

Something hard met my back. Some part of me registered that it wasn’t my stone bed, but it was a small part.

I relaxed against the ice, drifting off quickly.

I woke up in a pool of warm water... with an ice wall above my head.

A huge drop of water plopped onto my eye.

I attempted to wipe it away, but another one landed in the middle of my forehead when I did.

“Guess it’s time to get up,” I mumbled, lifting myself up onto my forearms in an attempt to find a way out.

I saw... five walls.

Panic swelled in my chest. “Ravv!”

The wall over my head slid away, and an exhausted, scowling man appeared above me.

“I thought I was trapped.” I dropped my head back into the puddle. Water flooded my ears, but at least I could see the trees above me.

“You wrecked my shelter.”

“I improved it. Every shelter needs a bathtub,” I mumbled back.

He scoffed at my joke.

“You’re grumpy,” I said.

Then again, it seemed like he was always grumpy.

Maybe there was a different word for it, if it was a constant state.

He disappeared from above me.

I forced myself to get up, and winced as I climbed out of the shelter.

Yeah, I was absolutely drenched. My hair dripped water everywhere—including down my face.

I yanked it out of my eyes as I looked around for Ravv—and found him stuffing more fruit into his bag. None of the suns were up yet, but I could see the tiniest sliver of light through the trees, marking the beginning of the first one’s rise. “Did you sleep at all?”

He didn’t answer me.

“*He didn’t,*” Gleam murmured, stretching out her long, heavy legs.

“*Why not?*”

“*He doesn’t trust the human lands, and you were out of his sight.*”

Rav growled at the idorr, and she chuffed, lowering her head back to her paws.

“Should we sleep together in the shelter tonight?” I asked.

“Yes,” Gleam said, at the same time Ravv growled, “No.”

I blinked again.

“I don’t want to wake up in a damn bathtub,” he said, closing his bag and

throwing it over his shoulder. “Let’s get moving.”

Gleam and I exchanged knowing looks.

We would get him to sleep in the shelter.

Or at least, she would.

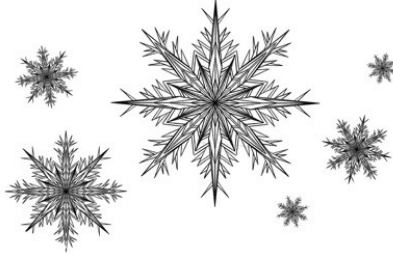
Ravv lifted my sore body onto his bonded idorr’s back, and we ate silently while Gleam walked.

Despite my exhaustion and soreness, and the fact that I was soaking wet, I found myself smiling as I watched one of the suns rise while we went.

So much for having terrible luck.

CHAPTER 4

LAELI



When we stopped for the second night, Ravv had to literally peel me off Gleam's back.

"Veil," he muttered, easing me into the ice shelter he'd created.

"Just leave me in this cold coffin to die," I mumbled back.

He hid his snort with another scoff. "You're not going to die tonight. Your muscles are just sore."

"Being trapped in a cellar does not prepare you for days of riding an idorr."

He made a noise of agreement, and started to ease away from me.

I dug my fingers into his arms. "You have to sleep too, so you're not grumpy tomorrow."

He grunted. "Ow."

I dug my nails in tighter. "No leaving."

"Fine." He grumbled, but maneuvered himself beneath me.

His body was way more comfortable to lay on than the ice. I relaxed against him, my body warming when I felt his erection against my lower belly.

He *was* attracted to me.

But he didn't expect that—a gorgeous fae man, being attracted to a human.

Maybe it was because of our mate bond. He still hadn't told me why he'd created it, but I assumed there was a reasonable answer. Eventually, I'd get it out of him or Gleam.

"Damn, you want me," I whispered.

"Go to sleep," he growled at me.

My lips curved upward, but I went to sleep. We'd probably wake up in a bathtub together, but I didn't mind. His body felt good against mine, and as stupid as it probably was, I trusted him not to do anything I didn't want him to.

The next two days went the same way, and on the fourth night, we camped by a river on the border between the Broken Woods, Timeless Sands, Aching Chasm, and Human Lands. The place we stayed was slanted down toward the Sands and the Woods, making it easier to see the land around us.

When I peered into the Broken Woods, I got to see the massive, dead-looking trees and reddish-brown dirt I'd been curious about since I was a kid.

The Timeless Sands stretching in front of us were made up of massive dunes in every shade of yellow, white, and orange.

The Aching Chasm was only identifiable by the way the ground had slowly started to morph from green to crimson. Eventually, the land would give way to a monstrous drop-off that went further than any being's eyes could see.

Honestly, I was grateful we were headed to the Endless Wilds rather than the Chasm. I shuddered to think about what it'd be like to go inside *that*.

"Eat before you fall asleep," Ravv said, handing me more food than I'd be able to eat in one sitting. Though he was clearly attracted to me, he hadn't done anything that made me think he was interested in pursuing that attraction, so I hadn't brought it up again. "All of that."

"I'm not that hungry," I protested, stunning myself with the admission.

How had I gone from *starving* to *not that hungry* so fast?

Then again, we'd eaten seven or eight times throughout the day. I was fairly certain Ravv was lying about being hungry during most of those meals, but I wasn't going to complain about him feeding me.

"I didn't ask if you were hungry. Eat it."

His eyes narrowed at me.

Mine narrowed back.

But after a long moment, I finally gave up and dropped my gaze.

He could win that one.

I ate while he used his magic to build the shelter.

"You'll sleep alone tonight," Ravv told me.

"No. I'm not sleeping in the watery coffin alone," I said bluntly. "If one of us wakes up in a hot bathtub, we both do."

He scowled at me.

I met his scowl with my unyielding stare.

It was his turn to give in.

He made me wait a long, long while before he finally jerked his head in a nod. "Fine."

"Fine," I repeated.

We washed up quickly before we went to bed together, and I didn't acknowledge his erection at all.

Or the way his arms wrapped around my back.

Or the way I wanted to grind up against him when I woke up.

Maybe my sex aversion wasn't real after all.

When we entered the Timeless Sands, I quickly realized how much I hated

sand. It got in my eyes and constantly stung my skin as we ran, making me agitated. That agitation led my power to drain my energy faster as I radiated more heat, making all of us miserable.

“We need to stop at an inn or something. I need a break,” I rasped to Ravv during one of our short food breaks. He had filled a large bowl with water for Gleam, and passed me one of his many water skins, making me grateful he had a bag full of supplies.

“We can’t stop,” he said.

I waited for an explanation, but it didn’t come.

“Ravv,” I protested.

“Laeli,” he mimicked my tone.

I gave him a dark look.

He mirrored that too.

“You said you’d find me something better to wear.” I gestured to my undergarment. “That requires going into a city, at least.”

“The Timeless Sands aren’t safe,” he growled back. “You’ll stay far outside the city—even while I get your clothes.”

I heaved a sigh.

He really wasn’t going to change his mind on that.

So finally, I agreed.

We rode for a few more hours before we stopped, and he built an ice shelter for me. After he herded me inside it and threatened not to give me my new clothes if I tried to leave, he headed to the nearest city on foot.

Gleam and I chatted for a few minutes before my exhaustion lulled me to sleep. It was only the middle of the afternoon, but veil, it had been a long few days.

A strange soreness and then *pain* in my arm woke me up shortly after Ravv left. It started as an ache, but graduated into a painful throbbing—and then an excruciating *stabbing*.

The pain was so bad it became a struggle just to breathe.

My heart pounded rapidly, and the heat radiating off me swelled.

The shelter was already dripping all over me. I didn't know how long it would last before holes started appearing in the structure, giving way to the heat of both the suns and *me*.

My mouth dried, and sweat dripped off me alongside the water falling from the ceiling like rain.

Veil, it was *scorching*.

I tried to reach out to Ravv's mind the way I did Glean's, since we were supposed to share a mental connection, but I failed. We'd never talked mentally before, so I didn't know how to find that bond.

"Laeli." Glean's low growl distracted me from the pain for a moment. *"There are raiders coming. Stay inside the shelter while I kill them."*

Fear made my stomach clench. *"What are raiders?"*

"Groups of humans and magical beings who roam the Timeless Sands, looking for things and people to steal. Slaves only exist in the Sands, but some of the most ruthless creatures in Evare rule the cities here. Ravv didn't want you to worry."

Veil.

"Do you know how to fight?"

She scoffed, reminding me of Ravv. *"I've fought beside my king and my mate for centuries. The fae are warriors, and so are their companions."*

Her *king*?

I hadn't heard of an idorr king, but growing up, I'd heard a few stories about fae kings and queens, so it wasn't difficult to believe that the idorrs had leaders the same way their fae companions did.

“Okay,” I whispered back, my teeth chattering a little. “But the shelter is melting.”

And the pain in my arm was driving me toward insanity.

She swore. *“Try to stay calm.”*

Considering my agony, sweating, and trembling, that wasn't a possibility.

The heat was going to continue.

“Is Ravv coming back?”

“He's just reached the city. I'm not telling him about the raiders until they're gone.”

That did *not* seem like a good idea. *“He needs to know.”*

“He'll abandon the city to get back to us, and we can't let that happen. If we walk into Jirev without something to cover your arm and his palm, his people will kill you both. There's no way he can reach us in time, anyway. I'll protect us.”

Veil, we were in trouble.

Something told me this was going to go very poorly.

I tried to lean into that fear, because the fear was less terrible than the pain in my arm.

A whimper escaped me as the pain grew worse.

My heat flared, and sunlight filtered into my shelter through a hole in the roof.

“Shit,” I whispered.

“You'll be alright,” Gleam promised.

I didn't believe her, but there was nothing else to do about it. If I caught on fire, it could knock me out—and being unconscious in a melted shelter could definitely lead to me being abducted by someone far worse than Ravv.

A battle cry sounded outside the shelter, and my body tensed as I heard

Gleam roar in response.

The awful sounds of swords clashing with claws and claws slashing through skin had me squeezing my eyes shut.

There was a cracking sound, and when my eyes flew open, I found a man with red eyes and horns grinning wickedly.

Demon.

He had to be a demon.

There were a few kinds of demons, and dragons were known as demons even though they technically didn't meet the qualifications, but—

He slammed the butt of his sword into the wall of my ice shelter.

Cracks ran through the ice from the first hit—and when his sword hit it again, it *shattered*.

I screamed as ice shards rained around me. My fire ignited, melting them before they could crash into me.

The demon pulled away from my flames, snarling something to another one of the raiders.

Another man jogged toward me, and I rose on shaky legs.

I needed to run.

The demon stepped in front of me as I threw a foot over the edge of the shelter.

“You come with us,” he said, eyes gleaming viciously.

I knew I should've run *toward* him—he was afraid of my fire, because not all demons were fireproof—but I couldn't.

I just couldn't.

I shrunk backward as the other man reached me.

The pain in my arm increased exponentially, and my knees knocked together. I screamed and crashed to the ground, landing back inside the remains of the

shelter, still burning.

“She’ll be useful in the forges,” a gravelly male voice said, as the skin of the man in front of me transformed to thick, gray stone.

Gargoyle.

He was a gargoyle.

Veil, all they needed was a sea dragon and an angel, and they’d have a whole damn party.

The man with the stone skin plucked me off the ground and threw me over his shoulder. It reminded me of the way Ravv had carried me out of the city, but it hurt much more.

Ravv must’ve been gentler than I realized.

The gargoyle hauled me away from the ice shelter, and I saw a snarling, fighting Gleam.

Though a dozen corpses surrounded her, some kind of magical bindings were around her neck and legs—and there were so many men and women holding those bindings that I didn’t think she stood a chance at escaping.

My screams died down as I was carried toward a massive cage on top of a cart.

Veil, were they going to cage me?

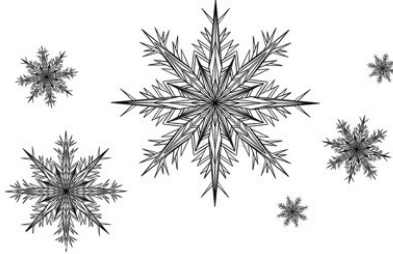
Some traumatized, terrified part of me shrunk further at the reminder of how helpless I’d been for so much of my life.

And now, I was right back to where I’d started.

I tried again to find my connection to Ravv—but the pain in my arm grew too intense, and I cried out for a moment before I lost consciousness, unable to fight the fear and pain any longer.

CHAPTER 5

RAVV



I gritted my teeth against the stabbing in my palm as I tucked the food, clothing, and other supplies for my female into my bag.

I hadn't been able to resist the urge to buy her things she never would've had in her land—or in her cell.

I wasn't supposed to feel a thing for her, and yet I found myself *liking* her fire. She wasn't afraid to speak her mind to me, and she was blunt about the horror of the mistreatment she had survived.

And the way her eyes lit up when she was happy?

It was becoming my weakness.

At least she couldn't feel the same pain with our separation that I was dealing with. I'd heard that a mate bond's physical urges were more difficult for a male to fight than a female, and that was a mercy for Laeli, because the damn things were going to drive me mad.

Mad with lust.

Mad with the desire to slay everyone who'd mistreated her.

Mad with the itch to hold her in my arms until she'd told me every damn thing there was to know about her.

Veil, even mad with the need to find the male she'd been trapped with—who had clearly been in love with the other woman—and make sure he knew who

she belonged to.

“I’m heading back,” I said to Gleam. We’d been communicating throughout my journey, so I could keep track of my bonded companion and my mate.

She didn’t respond immediately, but I didn’t let myself worry yet.

I picked up my pace, and finally, the pain in my palm eased just slightly.

“Gleam?”

She still didn’t respond.

My abdomen clenched.

Ice crawled over my hands, forming the claws I’d need to fight even though I was a few hours from the females.

I wasn’t through the city yet, but I started to run anyway. *“Answer me,”* I snarled into Gleam’s mind.

“Okay.” Her voice was groggy. *“We’re okay. I think.”*

Veil.

“What happened?”

“Raiders. They took us to a camp of some kind.”

I swore viciously and picked up the pace. *“How? Are you hurt? Is Laeli hurt? Why didn’t she reach out to me?”*

It didn’t surprise me at all that Gleam had stayed quiet about it. I was too far to do anything, and she would’ve thought she could handle the situation.

I would’ve thought so too, frankly.

“You told her not to speak to you mentally, and we’re both fine. Laeli’s on fire, and it looks like her energy is waning, but I don’t smell her blood. They drugged me with something, but I’m awake now. I don’t think we’re far from where you built the shelter.”

If we’d stopped near them, it wasn’t a shock that they’d come out to see who we were. They would’ve taken one look at Gleam, realized how much money

she'd be worth in their damned trading rings, and done whatever they could to get her.

"I'm coming. Let me know if anything changes."

"Alright." Her voice was still groggy, and I knew she'd need to rest. It would take time for whatever they'd drugged her with to wear off. *"Be careful."*

I found the glimmer of fiery magic in my veins and followed it to Laeli's mind. It took a few minutes, but I had nothing but time as I ran toward the females. Relief had me letting out a long breath when I finally found her mind. *"Laeli,"* I rumbled.

"Ravv?" Her voice was barely a whisper, holding none of the fire I'd come to expect from her.

"Tell me what happened," I growled. *"Has anyone touched you?"*

Images flicked through her mind and into mine rapidly.

The melting shelter.

The demon destroying the walls.

The gargoyles carrying her.

Her fire burning as they caged her.

The bars of the cage melting.

Her being dragged back out—and chained with metal that was melting over her wrists, burning her skin with every damn drop.

My breathing grew ragged. Not because of the running, but because of what had been done to her.

"They will all die," I snarled at her.

She didn't respond—and I felt her pulling away.

"Tell me what your male did in the cellar when your fire grew uncontrollable," I demanded.

"I told you, he's not mine."

“*Laeli*,” I rumbled angrily.

“*Jern and Gora would read to me,*” she whispered. “*Tell me stories. Recite poetry from books.*”

I couldn’t read to her—and I couldn’t have thought up a poem to save my damn life.

But I had stories.

Veil, I had more stories than most people could imagine. It was rare for me to share one, preferring privacy over friendship outside of a few people I trusted, but if it would help her, I’d give her as many stories as she wanted.

“*Gleam and I went foraging out on the glacier Loire is built upon,*” I began.

“*Loire is the kingdom we’re going to?*” Laeli interrupted. Though her voice was still soft, her interruption told me she was going to be alright.

“*Yes. All of the city’s buildings and many of the decorations are ice,*” I confirmed. “*The glacier it’s built on is massive, with many, many miles of peaks and valleys. There’s ocean around the outer edges, where some fae fish for sport. We release the fish to avoid angering the sea dragons below, but there’s still sport in trying to catch them. Laeli?*” I hadn’t heard her in a moment, and it worried me.

“*I’m listening.*”

“*We weren’t looking for anything in particular, just a moment away from everyone, to breathe,*” I explained. “*Gleam was distracted by a flying critter as she ran. You may not have realized it yet, but she can be very distractable—it worries Coarse constantly. She started following the critter, and managed to fall into a crevasse. My heart about broke through my chest as we plummeted.*” I paused, waiting for confirmation that she was there.

“*I’m listening,*” she said quickly.

“*I managed to morph one of the walls as she fell, so the fall became a slide. I nearly lost my head when we finally reached the bottom of the crevasse and the slide flung Gleam across the space. Rather than colliding with more ice, we slowed, and then stopped.*”

“There was a room inside the crevasse?” Laeli asked, her voice much more alert than it had been a few minutes earlier.

Though my fear still blazed brightly, satisfaction melded with it. *“Not just a room, but another city. We’d known one existed beneath the surface of the glacier but had never seen it until then. We found ourselves at a pair of gates made of ice, but the guards in front of them refused us entry seeing that I wasn’t mated.”*

“They only let mated people in?”

“Yes. It’s a haven for the mated. In Loire, mated fae are often killed, so the city was established to protect them.”

“Veil. So you’re taking me there when you get me out of here?” Laeli was coming back to life in my mind, which gave me immense relief.

“No. We’ll have to keep our bond a secret until it breaks with the eclipse.”

“Oh.”

There was a long pause.

I didn’t know why I felt the need to explain myself, so I squashed the urge and remained silent. If I told her who I really was and why the secret had to remain, she would look at me differently.

And for some ridiculous reason, I didn’t want her to look at me differently. Not yet, at least. Not until I’d had more time to... veil, I didn’t even know what.

To hold her while we slept?

To feed her?

The bond would drive me to continue doing both those things until our connection was broken, so that wasn’t it.

I supposed I didn’t want to admit the truth, whatever it was.

She interrupted my thoughts. *“How far away are you? And do you know how to kill a gargoyle? They have a gargoyle guarding me.”*

“Of course I know how to kill a gargoyle; I’m a fae warrior. All of Evare fears our fighting prowess.”

“It was a reasonable question. All you have is ice, and he’s made of stone. You broke my cellar’s door, but a door isn’t a person.”

“Ice can break any kind of stone with enough effort. Even a gargoyle.”

“Good. That’s good.” She sighed. *“How far?”*

“Two hours,” I admitted.

“I hope my magic doesn’t knock me out by then. I’m feeling really weak. The pain in my arm is fading a little bit, at least. Does your silver hand hurt?”

“The distance is causing you pain?” I demanded.

“I think so.”

Veil.

“I didn’t know it would hurt you, but I’m coming back. Stay conscious; I don’t want you unconscious with strange men,” I growled at her.

“If I could order myself to stay conscious, I would’ve done it years ago.”

“Alright, I’ll come up with another story.” It took a moment to think of one that wouldn’t lead to more of her questions.

“Tell me about fishing. I’m curious,” she said.

Fishing was plenty safe, so I launched into a story about the first time Gleam and I had gone fishing—and I even found myself enjoying the conversation.

But my purpose remained—I would find my mate and my bonded idorr, and I’d free them both. We’d get back on the road to Jirev so I could eventually get my people back home... where we’d have to deal with the civil war.

Two hours later, I told Laeli I needed her to be quiet as I approached the camp. Both of the females I sought would be hidden at the center of the space, protected from intruders. And both would draw attention in their own

ways, so it didn't matter which I freed first.

The last sun was almost fully hidden by the horizon, but that wouldn't affect the visibility for any magical beings.

Speed was my main advantage, outside of skill. Most magical beings were faster than humans, but other than the elves' assassins, none were faster than fae. Our speed, paired with our brutal strength and centuries' worth of battle, made us a threat to even the strongest magical beings.

I made it halfway through the camp before the first guard noticed me.

His first mistake was making eye contact.

His second was not crying out a warning to his people, because my claws severed his head from his body without giving him the chance to make a third mistake.

I removed the heads from two more guards before one of them finally had the sense to yell that they had an intruder. His head joined his friends', but by then, there was an unorganized group of raiders sprinting toward me.

"They're coming," Laeli warned me.

"I'll handle it. Don't distract me," I growled back, launching toward the first raider. He reeked of shifter, until the icy spikes on my shoulder caught him by the throat. With one sharp roll, they cut through his heart too, and then he smelled of nothing but blood.

The next raider was in her fox form when she launched toward me.

She fell just as quickly as the first.

I cut through the rest of them, one after another. They weren't warriors; they had no experience with war, or those of us who'd been trained to kill as we learned to walk.

The bodies remained behind as I ran toward Gleam's roaring. Their friends could bury them if they thought the men and women deserved it.

"Get Laeli and get out of here," Gleam snarled into my mind.

I ignored her, just as she knew I would.

My steps slowed when I found two men and a woman holding knives to Gleam's throat.

The men were demons, and the woman smelled like an elf, though her hair was chopped short and her clothing wasn't the long, flowing dresses the magical women usually wore.

"Any closer and we kill your idorr," the woman warned. She was on Gleam's back, her arms around my beast's neck and her blade already cutting slightly into Gleam's throat.

The men stood beside her with their weapons, close enough that if Gleam hadn't been restrained by the magical ropes holding her down, she could've bitten their heads off.

They were fools.

I lifted my hands as I tapped into my magic and formed three spears with my ice.

With one rapid motion, I slammed the ice into the raiders' chests.

The men collapsed to their knees, and a roaring Gleam flung the woman from her back.

I bent down and made quick work of her bindings.

"Are you alive?" Laeli whispered into my mind.

"I'm fine."

"The gargoyle grabbed me and ran."

I snarled, *"What? Why didn't you say something? Has he hurt you?"*

"No, I'm fine. Just being hauled deeper into the dunes. And you told me not to bother you."

"Still on fire?" I barked.

"Yeah."

I threw a leg over Gleam's back, and she shook her fur out before taking off

in the direction we could both smell Laeli's scent. *"We're coming."*

"Thank you," she whispered.

"Don't thank me for getting you captured."

"Technically, you captured me first."

I growled into her mind, *"I saved you."*

"By capturing me."

"You're my fated mate. I claimed what already belonged to me."

She scoffed. *"I am not an object to be claimed."*

"No, you're a person to be claimed. By me," I said bluntly.

"Sometimes you're a real bastard, Ravv."

"Most of the time." I leaned closer to Gleam.

"No, you're decent most of the time. Just growly and grumpy."

My grumpiness was an attempt at putting distance between us, but Laeli seemed determined to cross that distance.

If I let myself care too much about her, it could lead to both of our deaths.

My people... veil, I didn't even want to consider what they'd do to us.

"Can you keep talking to me? This gargoyle guy is holding me really tight, and it's going to terrify me if I'm not distracted." Though she tried hard to sound playful, I could hear the fear in her voice.

I snarled again, *"He's going to die."*

She didn't reply.

"Laeli?" I demanded.

"I'm here. I just don't want to talk about murder."

She was going to have a hard time fitting in with my people, then.

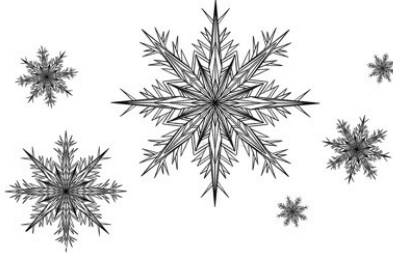
“More about fishing?” I growled at her.

“Sure. I liked your fishing story.”

I launched into another story about fishing, silently urging Glean to run faster.

CHAPTER 6

LAELI



I was starting to think the bruises on my legs might become permanent fixtures on my skin when Ravv finally went silent for a moment.

His silence could only mean they'd caught up to me.

"The moment you're free, run for Gleam," Ravv said. His voice was the kind of calm that would worry anyone with half a brain.

I nodded, my throat swollen with fear.

Helplessness was not pleasant. Not pleasant at all.

Gaining some amount of independence, and then losing it when I was captured, had me questioning everything.

Mostly myself, though.

The gargoyle holding me stumbled, and then went down hard. His body landed on mine, and I cried out.

I could practically feel the bruises developing.

Ravv collided with the gargoyle, and both men rolled off of me. I gaped at them as ice blocked stone and stone blocked ice.

My eyes could barely keep up with them.

Gleam's nose bumped my face. When I glanced at her, she grabbed the back of my undergarment in her teeth and towed me away from the fight. She

released me before my fire could burn her, thankfully.

Ravv and the gargoyle moved dizzyingly fast, but the gargoyle was clearly slower. When he turned, I saw a thick shard of ice sticking out of his back—and I watched in fascination as he slowed further, and the ice expanded.

The gargoyle finally went stiff.

He slowly crashed to his knees.

Ravv stepped back and waited there until the man's body was on the sand.

The gray in his skin slowly gave way to the paleness he'd had before he shifted.

Ravv finally created an icy spear in his fist, and then stabbed it into the man's chest.

His body didn't budge; he had been dead before it hit him.

Though my stomach churned, something told me that double-checking was necessary with a gargoyle. Ravv hadn't been violent without reason, yet.

Satisfied that the man was dead, Ravv stormed back to Glean's side. He lifted me to my feet before he dropped his bag and kneeled in front of me, grabbing my leg.

"What are you doing?" I checked, uncertain but not entirely against the way he was touching me.

"Looking at your wounds," he growled back. "That bastard hurt you."

I glanced down at my leg, and grimaced as I looked at all of my bruises. A few were clearly shaped like handprints—ones that didn't glow, thankfully.

Ravv didn't say another word as he lifted and turned my legs one by one, inspecting them.

He checked my arms out next—and then lifted my hair to look at my back and neck.

The look in his eyes was not a happy one when he finally stepped around to the front of me and started undoing the laces on my undergarment. He didn't

pay my fire any mind, since it had never tried to burn him.

“Uh, what are you doing?” I asked him again, though the answer was still obvious.

“Checking your wounds.” He didn’t even look up from what he was doing.

I plopped a hand down over the laces. “No, you do not have permission to strip me naked. Next time, ask.”

He finally looked at me. His eyes held enough silent fury to make me reconsider what I’d said. “You’re hurt. It’s my fault. I need to see the extent of the damage.”

I blinked.

I wasn’t...

I mean...

Did I really care if he saw me naked?

No, I decided, I did not. He was ancient, and undoubtedly had plenty of sexual experiences. And he’d proven that he could keep his hands to himself when we slept together at night, so... I trusted him.

Enough to strip, at least.

I finally pulled my hand away.

He made quick work of the fasteners, and then stripped the undergarment off my body. I flushed a little at his attention, despite the ache in my entire body, and by some miracle, the fabric didn’t burn.

I tried not to react as his gaze scanned my flame-clad figure clinically, looking at my wounds without paying any attention to the rest of me. My body heated when his gigantic hands landed on my hips and carefully turned me around so he could see my back.

When he released me and stood, his motions were stiff and uncomfortable. He walked back to the backpack he’d dropped next to Gleam, picking it up silently and digging through it.

When he pulled out a long-sleeved dress and some tiny strips of fabric, I frowned. “My flames will probably burn that.”

“Not if I’m holding it.” Ravv grabbed one of the strips of fabric—it resembled two triangles sewn together, with a few extra bits of glorified string—and maneuvered the glorified string bits over my arms. He adjusted a band of it around my back, and then fastened it between my nearly-nonexistent breasts.

I stayed silent, my body flushing at the contact between his knuckles and my breasts.

He stepped my feet into the other undergarment one at a time, pulling it into place over my ass and lady bits. Then, he slid the dress over my head and slipped my arms through. The fabric was insanely soft and clung in all the right places, form-fitting enough that most human women wouldn’t have even considered wearing it.

It fell to my feet, which I thought would make riding with Ravv and Gleam a bit difficult—but Ravv’s ice sliced through the skirt, then, cutting its length to the middle of my thighs.

“I don’t know how you’re preventing that from burning,” I told him, as he stepped backward and gave my dress a critical look.

He turned me around with one hand, his gaze lingering on my body. He ignored my remark and said, “You’re already gaining a bit of weight.”

My face warmed.

I started to say something in my defense, but before I got the words out, he added, “You look good.”

The compliment caught me off guard, and I went silent.

He added, “Mates can heal each other by exchanging blood. If you’re still bruised by the time we reach Jirev, you’ll drink my blood to recover.”

I didn’t know what to say to that, so I changed the subject. “I can’t ride on Gleam’s back, obviously.” I was still on fire, so that was out of the question.

“No.” He hauled me off my feet, with one of his arms beneath my knees and

the other around my lower back. It was entirely different from the way the gargoyle had held me, and made me feel closer to him, somehow.

My face pressed to his chest, and I realized the intimacy of it didn't bother me at all.

I trusted him... more than I probably should've.

Enough to relax against him as he started to run.

The sweat and sand coating his skin didn't bother me anymore. If anything, they made me feel safer.

Because they meant that Ravv had come after me when someone tried to take me captive. And someone willing to protect me without stopping to question it was someone I never wanted to walk away from.

Ravv ran through the darkness for a few hours before he finally slowed and then stopped. There were deep circles beneath his eyes, and exhaustion in his shoulders.

He built us a shelter with the last of his energy, then collapsed inside it without so much as a mention of me sleeping alone.

My fire was still burning, so I just sat down on the sand.

After that much running, there was sand everywhere. In my mouth. In my eyes. On my skin. Under my nails.

I may as well have been made of the damn stuff.

"Are you alright?" Gleam asked me, plopping down a few feet away from me. She was just far enough that my fire didn't have a chance of reaching her, which I was immensely glad about.

"I don't know," I admitted, pulling my knees to my chest and wrapping my arms around them.

I had finally started to feel a little less powerless, and then...

My eyes moved over the hand-shaped bruises on my legs.

My sight at night was much better than it had been in the cellar, which I assumed had something to do with my connection to Ravv.

“Get in here so I can close the damn shelter,” the male fae growled at me.

I was experienced enough with his grumpiness that my lips curved upward just the tiniest bit.

I rose to my feet slowly, then stepped over the ledge of the shelter and slipped inside. He pulled me down into his arms and held me securely against his chest as he closed us in together.

His ice skimmed my arms and legs, the touch slow and comforting as my chest pressed to his. I felt my flames flicker a few times, before going out entirely.

A long breath escaped me when they were gone. “I don’t know how you did that.”

“Your magic recognizes mine as its mate.” His fingers skimmed my arm, and his erection throbbed lightly against my lower belly.

A few long minutes passed in silence before I said quietly, “Thank you for rescuing me.”

“You’re my mate. I protect what’s mine.” His voice was low and gravelly.

For a moment, I let myself believe our connection would be permanent.

Just for one breath, I let myself picture what it would be like if I had the grumpy fae at my side for the rest of my life.

Veil, the idea nearly made my eyes burn.

I wanted that. Someone to protect me. Someone to rescue me when I was taken. Someone to put my fire out when I couldn’t do it myself.

“Why did you come for me?” I whispered, a few minutes later.

But by the time the words left my mouth, it was too late. He was already asleep.

I squeezed my eyes shut.

Though it took some time to wind down after everything that had happened, I eventually managed to fall asleep.

We woke up just a few hours later, then started to move again. Gleam seemed more rested than Ravv and I, which was a good thing since she was the one running.

That day and night passed uneventfully. We reached the Endless Wilds in the middle of the day after, and awe struck me as we barreled into the massive jungle.

The trees stretched up so much further than I could see, wrapped in thick vines and sprouting monstrous leaves. The colors were more vibrant than any I'd ever seen, and I found myself watching the scenery go by with much more interest than I had in the Human Lands or the Sands.

Gleam stayed on the jungle's floor, which meant weaving around trunks the size of houses back in my city, along with all the other plants we had to dodge too.

I didn't feel at ease in the jungle, but I vastly preferred it to the desert.

We stopped by a river that night. The water was moving rapidly, and Ravv warned me that there could be predators within, so he carried me in and kept one arm wrapped firmly around my middle. We both scrubbed ourselves clean quickly.

The cleanliness was worth the fear. I felt like an entirely new person without all that sand coating me. My body was still extremely sore and achy, and my bruises were only getting uglier, much to Ravv's irritation, but I hadn't been abducted by anyone new in two whole days. That felt like a victory, as ridiculous as it was.

Ravv and I climbed into his shelter together, still damp but also warm and sticky thanks to the jungle's humidity. I curled up in his arms, and he pulled me into his possessive grip.

"You're going to drink my blood tomorrow," he told me, his voice low but not unsteady in the slightest.

“That didn’t sound like a question.”

“It wasn’t one. Your bruises look even worse today.”

I rolled my eyes. “That happens with all human bruises. They look worse before they get better, and healing takes time.”

“I’m not walking into Jirev with a bruised mate. Every fae we see will assume *I’m* the one who hurt you.”

“You said the mate thing has to be a secret.”

“It does.”

“Then you can just tell your friends that I tried to run away from you or something. I’m sure your people don’t care about humans,” I said flatly.

“I would never hurt a weak, fragile, human woman,” he growled. “You’ll drink my blood. This discussion is over.”

I scowled. “I have no desire to drink your blood. I’m not a damn *vampire*, Ravv. Even if I did want to, I’d probably vomit if I tried.”

“Exchanging blood is intimate for mates. It’s a way to provide each other with life. The moment will be erotic, not nauseating.”

I blinked.

And then blinked again.

Sharing blood was *erotic*?

Maybe I did want to try it.

I’d been fighting my body’s attraction to Ravv since the first day we met. Maybe acting on it just a little would remove the temptation altogether.

“How erotic?” I asked.

I wasn’t really ready to jump in head-first, but why not dip my toes in?

I still didn’t trust Ravv completely. There were too many things I didn’t know about him for that. He hadn’t even told me why he’d come looking for me, or why he’d made me his mate.

But I trusted him to keep me safe, and I trusted him to tell me the truth about things that really mattered.

“I don’t know. I’ve never had a mate before,” he said.

And it was probably safe to assume that most couples didn’t give details about their love-making sessions following their blood-drinking. Especially if the mated ones were the only ones who shared blood, and they were hidden underground.

Just the thought of drinking Ravv’s blood made me shudder.

The idea certainly wasn’t an appealing one.

“I’ll think about it,” I finally said.

“You’ll do it,” he rumbled back.

I scowled again.

His arms tightened around me. “You’re mine, Laeli. Get that through your little human skull. Accept it. Embrace it.”

“I’m your *secret*,” I countered. “You don’t want me embracing anything.”

“I know what I said.” His voice was frustrated.

Was he annoyed that we needed to keep our connection a secret?

The thought made me curious, but I was too tired to keep pushing him.

“Good night. I’ll think about it tomorrow.”

“You’ll *do* it tomorrow.” He squeezed me, just once.

And then he muttered something that almost sounded like “Good night.”

That would’ve been far too civil for my grumpy fae abductor-slash-savior, so I had to have imagined it.

We traveled through the next day, and a few hours into the night too, before Gleam finally stopped. She was growing more exhausted by the day, and as we all ate, I scratched her head while I thanked her for carrying us.

She fell asleep quickly, and Ravv gave her one last pat before he created another ice shelter for us—this one bigger, and with thicker walls.

My mind went back to our conversation the night before.

He wanted me to drink his blood.

I halted outside the shelter as he disappeared inside.

“Laeli.” His warning rumble flooded the air.

No, I was not ready for that.

I turned and walked right back to Gleam’s side, then plopped down next to her. She was snoring loudly enough to scare off all the predators, so I’d just sleep beside her.

He stepped out and leaned up against the side of his shelter, his eyes narrowed at me.

I narrowed mine right back.

There was no way he could force me to drink his blood. Even if there was, I didn’t think he’d actually do it. He was grumpy and angry, but never cruel.

“You’re covered in bruises. You’re tired and achy, too. My blood will fix all of those things.”

“I told you, I’m not a vampire.”

Vampirism was a curse most humans feared deeply. Using magic we weren’t born with would corrupt our bodies and make us vampires, who were hunted and tossed into the Aching Chasm. I wasn’t sure what that magic was, or how to find it, but I knew it was deadly.

He was silent for a moment, his eyes still narrowed at me. A long moment passed before he finally said, *“You’re scared.”*

“No. It’s just... new.”

Fine, I was scared. In what world would I enjoy drinking his blood? What would be wrong with me if I *did*?

“Would it make you more comfortable if I drank from you first?”

I shuddered. *“No.”*

He stared at me.

“We’ll just tell everyone what happened with the raiders,” I finally said, looking away from him.

An image flickered from his mind to mine—and lingered.

I straddled him while he sat on the ground.

His hands were on my hips, his head was tilted to the side, and my mouth was at the crook where his neck met his shoulder.

Veil, it was intense.

My hand lifted to my throat, and my eyes jerked back to Ravv’s.

They looked... hot.

Steam caught my attention, and I swore when I looked down and realized my hands were smoking.

“You actually want to do that?” I asked him, my voice quieter than before.

“Not just because you feel guilty, but because you’re attracted to me?”

“You feel my body’s response to you every night, and we’re fated mates, Laeli. Of course I’m attracted to you.”

I huffed. *“I still don’t want to do it.”*

“What do you want in exchange?” His voice was more even than I expected.

Then again, he had probably anticipated my rejection.

What did I want?

The most obvious answers flashed through my mind.

Freedom.

Safety.

Security.

Happiness.

Ravv couldn't really give me any of those things, though. I didn't know why he'd come to find me, but it was safe to assume that he would have to answer to someone—his king, at the very least—when we got there.

And that person might want to use me for something terrible. Or they might want to kill me.

Veil, they might even want to send me back to my old kingdom, which sounded even worse than the other options.

So I couldn't ask Ravv for those things.

But there were other things I wanted, weren't there?

I bit my lip to stop myself from blurting out my answer.

Ravv was old, and that meant he was experienced in basically every way.

That meant he wouldn't have any moral issues with giving me what I wanted, hopefully.

I held his gaze. *"I want you to make me climax."*

He blinked.

I could've explained to him that I had never had the privacy to explore my own body. That I had been curious for years, without the freedom to try anything.

But I didn't explain any of that.

"How?" Ravv finally asked me.

"Pretty sure I shouldn't have to give you directions," I drawled back.

"You're an ancient fae, aren't you?"

His lips curved upward in an expression I'd almost call a smirk. *"I could bring you to climax with my cock, ice, mouth, or fingers. A combination of all four would be even better. I could make you climax once, or five times. I*

could—”

“*I get it,*” I interrupted him.

My face was hot, and I was still steaming, but I was more intrigued than bothered.

“*One climax,*” I said. Committing to more, before I’d even had one, seemed like too much. “*And you can use your fingers—that’s it.*”

Though I was interested in all the other options too, I wasn’t ready to jump in completely. I needed to ease in, and I’d feel safest if he was only using his hands.

“*Alright. Let’s go.*” He stayed where he was, waiting for me.

There was no way to back out now that he’d agreed to my plan, so I slowly made my way to the shelter.

Ravv followed me inside and sealed us in, then sat down in the middle of the space, and waited. He’d shown me that mental image of me sitting on him, so I knew exactly how he wanted me.

Letting out a slow breath, I finally eased myself onto his lap. I’d never sat on him—or anyone—like that, so it was a little bit dizzying. His bare chest was against my clothed one, his eyes nearly even with mine.

His hands landed on my hips, and he adjusted my position a bit, lining my core up perfectly with his erection. The clothing that separated us didn’t hide his desire from me at all.

“What guarantee do I have that you’ll uphold your part of the deal?” I asked him, my voice soft and a bit breathy. My body was warming, and I didn’t even have a desire to stop it.

“You could make the months until the eclipse very difficult for me if I didn’t,” he murmured, his eyes lingering on my lips as he spoke. “I need you to keep our bond a secret. You could announce it to everyone. That sounds like a damn good assurance to me.”

He wasn’t wrong.

“Alright.” I put both of my hands on his shoulders, and he tilted his head sideways a little. “What do I do? My teeth aren’t sharp like yours.” I gestured to his mouth, and his lips curved upward for me, showing off the sharp lines of his fangs.

“The bond will help you. Just bite me.”

I heaved a sigh, and he gave me a low chuckle.

“This feels like a bad idea,” I whispered, as I lowered my lips to the crook where his neck met his shoulder.

“Every fae warrior knows that feeling far too intimately, and continues anyway.”

“I’m not a fae warrior.” My lips brushed his skin as I spoke, and I was almost confident I saw him shiver the tiniest bit.

“Bite me.” His words were a command, then—and I shouldn’t have liked that, but I did.

I squeezed my eyes shut, and bit him.

My teeth lengthened and sharpened as they met his skin, and his blood flooded my mouth. It was surprisingly... good. I liked the taste a lot more than I expected.

“A few swallows will be enough,” he growled at me, his mind bumping against mine just long enough for me to hear, “*Veil, she’ll be my end.*”

Slightly offended, I drank slowly from him.

His blood wiped away the offense I felt, replacing it with thick need and desire. My body flushed quickly, wetness growing at the apex of my thighs.

I had a few swallows, and then I pulled away. My body was warm and trembling, and I could feel blood trickle down from the corner of my lips.

With a shaky finger, I carefully wiped up the dripping blood and stared down at it. I expected my stomach to turn at the sight, but it didn’t.

My eyes flicked to Ravv’s, and I found him watching me with hot, hooded eyes, waiting to see what I’d do.

I finally lifted my finger back to my lips and wrapped them around the digit, sucking the blood away.

His chest rumbled with satisfaction, and he eased me to the ground before positioning himself on his side. My breathing was already rapid—and then his hand landed on the inside of my thigh.

My breaths grew ragged as he slowly slid his hand up, and up, and up.

His knuckles brushed my core, and my hips jerked.

Ravv's lips curved upward wickedly, and he repeated the motion. *"This will be your first climax?"*

He already had all the power in our relationship.

Admitting the truth to him would give him even more power over me, and I didn't want him to have it.

So I lied. *"No. Jern and I introduced each other to sex years ago, before he was with Gora."*

Ravv's smirk faded, slightly.

His expression morphed back toward his usual anger, and his knuckles brushed me again. I itched to tell him the truth, so he could teach me the things I'd never learned about my body, but I ignored the itch. *"First in years?"*

"Yes."

That seemed to satisfy him a bit. *"You're drenched for me."* His knuckles swept over me again, slower, and I moaned.

He hooked a finger in the bottom portion of my tiny undergarments and tugged them down to my knees. When his knuckles brushed my slick, hot skin, I inhaled sharply.

Veil, I had no idea it would feel that good.

Ravv finally dragged a thick finger down the center of me. A noise escaped me at the touch—one I hadn't realized I could even make.

He lifted the finger to his nose and inhaled deeply. The man couldn't have forced the rumbling groan that escaped him as he smelled me.

My lips parted as he brought his hand to my nose and commanded, "Smell how much you want me."

My nostrils flared of their own accord, and I shuddered.

He lowered his fingers to my lips. "Taste it."

I couldn't argue. My body was too hot, and I was too desperate.

My lips wrapped around his finger, and I sucked.

He gave me another rumble—this one pure, masculine satisfaction. "Good." He slid his finger from between my lips and cupped my chin for a moment as he leaned closer and murmured, "You're going to beg me to taste you soon."

My throat closed as the erotic words hit me.

Ravv finally released my chin. He slid his hand down my front before slipping it between my thighs again. I itched to see him touching me, but with his whole display of dominance, I wasn't willing to risk moving in case it made him stop.

I took another staggered breath in, finding and gripping his arm as he slowly stroked me.

My lower belly tightened—well, my entire body tightened—as he touched me.

I wanted to ask him what I was feeling.

I wanted to make him tell me what to expect.

But I clamped my jaw shut as the foreign sensations slowly built up inside me, my body growing more and more tense.

Ravv buried his free hand in my hair and turned my head to the side. He pressed his erection against my hip as he lowered his lips to my ear and growled, "You are the most stunning creature I've ever seen."

I shuddered at his words as he continued stroking me. One of his fingers

teased my entrance. The tip of it slid inside me—and I lost control.

Cries escaped me as my hips rocked and jerked, the pleasure hitting me so much harder and faster than I'd ever expected. I sucked in air as the pleasure faded, and Ravv lifted his fingers back to my lips.

“If you were in my bed, that would be nothing but the start of our night,” he rumbled into my ear. “Clean my fingers.”

My body trembled.

I felt good, yet still wanted more.

“Clean them yourself,” I whispered back.

He chuckled, low and deep. “The first time I taste you, my face will be between your thighs. Clean my fingers or open your legs for more.”

If my body hadn't already been steaming, it was then. “Asshole.”

Veil, I wanted more.

I couldn't give him even more power over me, though.

My lips wrapped around his fingers, and his cock throbbed against me. When I released him, he dragged his teeth over my earlobe. “Sleep now, Laeli.”

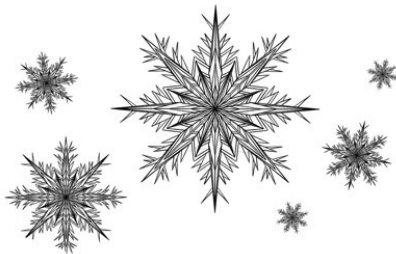
I bit my lip and closed my eyes as he rolled us both, so my back was cradled against his front. His erection was rock hard against my ass, but I'd grown to love feeling that. It was evidence of his desire for me that he couldn't hide, and it made me feel desirable.

It took time but eventually, I fell asleep.

My dreams were full of wicked fingers and a low, husky voice that sounded suspiciously like Ravv's.

CHAPTER 7

LAELI



I woke up wet in every way.

The shelter was dripping on us again, but it was far less annoying than the slickness and ache between my thighs. My undergarments were still around my knees, and somehow his touch had only made me more interested in sex, not less. My bruises were gone, at least.

“Damn, you want me.” Ravv’s words mimicked my own from that first night I’d felt his erection. His lips were against my ear, and his hardness had made its way between my thighs, straining against the fabric of his shorts.

“I don’t,” I whispered.

He gave me a low, rumbly chuckle. “Lie to me and I’ll be forced to prove it.”

My eyes squeezed shut as the memory of his fingers stroking my core warmed me further. “It doesn’t mean anything.”

“It means you want me.” He squeezed my thigh, where I hadn’t noticed he was holding me. “And you already know I’m willing to take care of you.”

As much as I wanted to agree, I couldn’t let him continue making the power dynamic between us any less even. And I wasn’t about to offer to take his cock in my hand; my inexperience would be obvious the first time I touched him.

If he realized I was a virgin before we had sex, he would take that power and use it against me even more.

“No thanks.” I eased my ass away from him, sliding his erection out from between my thighs as I moved.

“Laeli.” His eyes were narrowed at me as I stood. Our shelter had shrunk to its usual size at some point during the night, so there was nowhere for me to go.

“Ravv.” I mimicked his tone, giving him a flat look. “Open the roof.”

“You enjoyed my touch last night,” he said. Though there was no uncertainty in his words, it almost felt like a question.

He probably wasn’t used to women turning him down after he gave them the most erotic experience of their life.

Letting him wonder would be a way to steal back some of that power he’d taken from me... so I met his stare with my own and said nothing.

His eyes flashed with some dark emotion I couldn’t read.

“Let me out, or I will burn my way out,” I finally warned him. He knew I didn’t do well when I felt trapped, so if he didn’t listen, I would know he was being intentionally cruel.

The roof slid open, the way it always did.

I hid my sigh of relief as I stood up, tugged my undergarments back into place, and then strode toward the river.

No way was I getting on Gleam’s back so wet with my own damn desire.

Ravv caught up to me as I reached the water, growling, “Don’t even think about getting in alone.”

Anger was his normal state, but his voice wasn’t as angry as I’d expected. That meant I caught him off guard with my refusal, which was exactly what I’d intended to do.

A feeling of victory washed over me as we waded into the river together.

Ravv could try to control me all he wanted, but I was going to fight back until the bitter end.

...Even if it made me ache again every damn morning.

We rode through the day. It was late afternoon when Gleam started climbing up the thick branches and making her way higher into the trees. Soon enough, I was watching a city come to life around us. The homes were built *inside* the trees, the shapes of them carved perfectly without seeming to harm the wood.

My hair whipped around us as Gleam maneuvered over bridges I never could've imagined, and through the most incredible wood and vine arches. There were some ice bridges and arches too, but most of them seemed to be melting, so we avoided them.

There were fae all over the place too, and I noticed all of the men were dressed like Ravv, and most of the women wore short dresses like mine, or even less clothing. It didn't surprise me, given what he'd already told me about the fae's preferences.

"This is Jirev?" I asked Ravv, just wanting to be certain.

"Yes. Kier's city is impressive—though far too hot and sticky," the man behind me grumbled.

"Who's Kier?"

"Kier Jirev is the king."

Oh.

"King over all the fae?"

"No. Just this kingdom." His voice was flat, but that didn't surprise me.

Anger was his typical state, after all.

"How many fae kingdoms are there?"

"Three. The cities are called Loire, Jirev, and Vuuth, named after their current kings."

Veil, he couldn't have given me that information earlier? I should've been bothering him with questions throughout our entire journey.

“Loire is made of ice, this one is in the trees, and the third...” I trailed off.

“Underground. They live in caves inside the mountains on the border of the Weeping Skies.”

I shuddered at the mention of that cursed place. Dragons and winged demons lived in the wicked mountains, and we had all grown up being told stories about the brutality that happened there.

The Demon of the Weeping Skies reigned over the mountains, not as a king, but as a scourge. If the legends were true, he was some kind of twisted dragon that the elves had turned into a magical assassin. He was said to have more power than anyone else in Evare, except the other two assassins who were called the Monster and the Beast.

“I’m glad you’re not from that one. I don’t think I’d do well underground,” I admitted.

“You’re stronger than you think.”

My head jerked toward him, and I found his eyes scanning the trees. *“What are you looking for?”*

He didn’t answer me, of course.

I was beginning to wonder if no one had ever taught the fae how rude it was to ignore someone.

We passed dozens and dozens of other fae. Most of them were with massive creatures—some with idorr, others with gray wolf-looking things, and others with terrifying jungle cats.

Eventually, we approached the biggest tree I’d ever seen. There was a set of massive doors at the front of it, with a huge balcony attached to them.

“What’s this place?”

“Kier’s castle.”

I found it strange how Ravv didn’t call him *King* Kier, but assumed the fae just didn’t respect their leaders the way humans were expected to.

I found myself liking the casualness of that. A king who didn’t demand

respect probably wouldn't have a dungeon, or a cellar beneath it for people with magic they shouldn't have been born with.

"Is it safe for me to be in here?" I asked him, as Gleam landed on the balcony attached to the castle.

"The trees were enchanted by elves when the city was built. Your fire won't be able to hurt them," Ravv said.

That made me feel better about my flames.

Considering that Loire was made of ice, I doubted it would have the same protective enchantments, but I supposed we'd figure that out when we got there.

"Why do we need to be here, anyway? You live in Loire, right?" I asked him, as he slid off Gleam's back and pulled me to my feet with him. He'd wrapped his palm in fabric before we left the riverbed that morning, so the silver on it was hidden, and the long sleeves on my dress hid my handprint.

"We're at peace for the first time in centuries. Kier is holding a month's worth of violent competitions to promote peace." Ravv grabbed me by the arm, nearly in the same place he'd grabbed me in the cellar when he gave me the handprint. *"Walk by my side. Do not argue vocally with me."*

I raised my eyebrows at him as he started walking quickly. I nearly had to jog to keep pace with him, but he didn't slow down.

Asshole.

"Why would violent competitions promote peace?"

"Our people are warriors; we enjoy fighting." He didn't so much as look at me.

We passed a few fae with idorr beside them, and I frowned when I noticed them lower their heads toward Ravv, almost like they were *bowing*.

That couldn't have been right, though.

All of the fae were tall, and ridiculously strong. None of the women were built curvy, or soft at all.

I supposed *centuries* of war meant that the strong were the only fae who had survived.

A fae woman and a large male idorr fell into step with Ravv. Neither of them gave me a second glance, which made me feel sort of... small.

I despised the feeling, though I was certainly well-acquainted with it.

“Who else is back?” Ravv growled at the woman.

“No one. You’re the first.”

Ravv’s chin lifted a bit, his shoulders lowering slightly as he continued striding through the castle, dragging me along. “How many did we lose to fights?”

“None. I worked with Eisley, and we kept the peace well enough to avoid casualty.”

Ravv dipped his head. “Well done.”

“Thank you.”

We reached the end of a hallway, and Ravv and his companions strode into a room, giving me no choice but to enter too. The door was on strange hinges that swung open without a doorknob, revealing a simple room made of sleek, polished wood like the rest of the castle. There was a large bed against one wall, a bathroom and closet against another, and a small pool of sorts in one of the corners.

I was so damn confused that I didn’t even know what questions to ask.

“What’s your name?” the woman asked, when the doors were closed behind us and Ravv had released his hold on my arm.

It took me longer than I cared to admit to realize she was talking to me.

“Laeli,” I finally said, getting a closer look at her now that I wasn’t being dragged around. Her eyes glowed an intense shade of blue, and her hair was a vibrant purple at the roots that morphed into a gorgeous hot pink as the strands fell down her back. She had lightly-tanned skin, and looked strong enough to go toe-to-toe with any of the male fae.

Veil, she could probably kill me with the flick of a finger.

“I’m Elwynne.” She flashed me a grin. “Your magic is fierce, isn’t it? I can see the heat blazing off you.”

I glanced down at myself.

“Elwynne sees magic where most fae can only sense it,” Ravv said to me, before looking back at the other woman. “And Laeli’s power is uncontrollable. We need to figure out a way to prevent her from catching fire randomly.”

My flames weren’t *random*, and Ravv knew that. They responded to my emotions, and nothing else.

I flashed him an annoyed look.

Elwynne eyed me curiously.

“How do you two know each other?” I asked, looking between them.

If they were together...

Veil.

“I’m the king’s right hand. Or his left, if you ask Orvay.” Elwynne winked at me.

I was pretty sure she was making a joke, but it didn’t hit right. “The king? Is Orvay the king?” I looked at her, and then at Ravv.

When he met my gaze head-on without saying anything, I looked back at her.

Elwynne frowned. “No. Ravv is the king; you know that, right?” She glanced at him, and then back at me. “*Veil.*”

I took a step back.

And then another.

My mouth was dry. Though my thoughts raced with questions, I didn’t voice any of them. I couldn’t.

“Has there been any sign of the Demon?” Ravv asked her.

“No. There haven’t been signs of any of the assassins.” Elwynne was still frowning, her gaze lingering on me.

“We need to—” Ravv began, but I cut him off.

“What do you mean, the Demon?” My voice rose. “The Demon of the Weeping Skies?”

“Yes. He’s hunting Ravv,” Elwynne said. “That’s why he went looking for you; your magic is life to his ice’s death, so it hides your power from the assassin. You already knew that, right?” she looked to Ravv, but I didn’t.

My lips parted.

He really *had* come to abduct me.

He didn’t give a damn about me, my safety, or my health. He had protected me and called me his because he was using me to hide himself from a magical assassin.

And he was the damn *king*.

None of which he’d bothered to tell me himself.

Hurt curled in my abdomen, sharp, hot, and fierce.

“Get out,” I whispered.

Ravv’s hard gaze met mine.

“This is my room, right?” I said, raising my voice again. There were no clothes in the closet, and the bed was made.

Ravv jerked his head in a nod.

“Then get out. Veil, don’t even *consider* coming back,” I spat, clenching my fists as they started smoking.

Elwynne opened her mouth to say something, but Ravv caught her arm—much more gently than he would’ve grabbed mine—and led her out without saying another word. Gleam and Elwynne’s bonded idorr followed them out silently. When I felt Gleam’s mind brush up against mine, I withdrew harshly, making it clear that I had no desire to speak with her.

Tears stung my eyes as the doors swung shut behind them.

I slowly sank to my knees as water rolled down my cheeks. My hands caught fire, but I ignored the flames as they rested on my thighs.

I thought Ravv actually liked me. I let him touch me.

Veil, I should've known.

I squeezed my eyes shut and let the tears fall.

Most people just wanted to trap me so my fire couldn't hurt them. Because he hadn't trapped me, I had been lured into trusting him.

I'd been so *stupid*.

But he'd let me believe it.

He'd never told me the truth, or let me know what he intended.

The tears fell as my sadness morphed into anger.

Ravv was a *king*. He should've made that clear from the beginning, and he should've told me why he was capturing me. He should've known better than to tell me he'd saved me when he knew he'd only abducted me to protect his own ass.

He'd said all that shit and *touched me* when he knew none of it was real for him. The bastard had used me in more ways than one.

And now, he was going to pay for it.

Maybe not that night, or the next night, or the next...

But he would pay.

Because I would do every damn thing I could to piss him off.

The ache returned in my arm—a sure sign that the *king* had gone further from me than our bond wanted him to.

I shoved my way into his mind, and could've sworn I felt him wince at the sudden invasion as I hissed into his mind, "*If you go far enough to cause me pain while this bond is in place, I will spend every moment we're connected*

and every ounce of my energy melting your ice castle to the ground.”

He didn't reply, but the ache in my arm faded soon after I made the threat.

I wiped angrily at the wetness on my face as a few minutes passed.

That bastard didn't get the pleasure of making me cry.

The next time he saw me, I'd be colder to him than a damn ice fae.

A knock on the door dragged me to my feet, but the door swung open without waiting for an answer. Another fae woman's head peeked in immediately.

“Laeli?” she checked.

“Yep.” I crossed the room, hoping she couldn't see the evidence of my tears. My hands were still burning, which wasn't ideal, but I'd survive.

She was definitely fae, though she was smaller than some of the others I'd seen and at least a few inches shorter. Her skin was pale, her eyes glowed a bright shade of aqua, and her hair was white-blond, streaked with strands the same color as her eyes. She flashed me a grin, her gaze lingering on my burning hands. “I'm Easley. You're human?”

“Unfortunately.”

“Elwynne asked me to bring you a dress. She said you need to keep her involvement from Ravv, and I couldn't resist something that might piss off one of the kings.” She winked at me, and thankfully set the folded dress on the floor instead of trying to give it to me. Then she slipped out, leaving the doors swinging behind her.

I heaved a sigh, and spent a few minutes trying to figure out how to lock the door before I finally got it in place.

Though I wanted nothing more than to climb into the comfortable-looking bed off to my side, I wasn't willing to risk waking up in a bonfire.

So, I left the dress on the floor and made my way to the pool in the corner of the room. I eyed it as I approached. I hadn't bathed in a tub in more than a decade, but it certainly wasn't a tub. It was more like a tiny pond, though the sides seemed to be made out of stone instead of the wood the rest of the castle boasted.

I couldn't see the bottom of the pool, which made me a bit suspicious. It was still my best chance at getting clean, so I tugged my dress off. I used the bar of soap I found nearby to scrub my undergarments clean, just in case Elwynne hadn't sent any, and then slipped into the water.

It felt lukewarm; not cold, but not hot either. It was nice, I supposed, though I was fairly certain I'd always dream about the hot baths I'd had a few times as a kid.

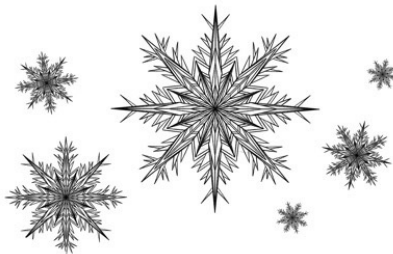
I refused to let myself think about my childhood for the sake of my sanity, so I forced myself to focus on Ravv.

And what he'd done.

Veil, the bastard was going to regret it. I'd make sure of that.

CHAPTER 8

LAELI



My fire went out at some point during my bath, and thankfully didn't reignite. I collapsed in bed when I was completely clean, satisfied the door was still locked, and didn't get up again until my growling stomach forced me to.

There were no new undergarments, so I started putting mine on—and then decided I'd have a better chance of pissing Ravv off if he found out I didn't have anything on beneath the dress. I tucked them under the blankets on the bed, hiding them just in case someone went into my room while I was gone.

The dress slid over my skin easily, and I sighed at the feel of the soft fabric. It was black and fell to the middle of my thighs, not loose but not tight, and clearly made for a taller and stronger woman than me. It had longish sleeves that hung off my shoulders, though I was confident they were supposed to sit on top. They covered my handprint, so that was all that really mattered.

I smoothed the fabric and slipped out into the hallway. My stomach rumbled painfully, and I patted it, silently promising it I'd fill it soon.

Since I didn't know my way around the castle, I walked up to the first fae I found. They were both male, and both standing with idorr beside them, so I assumed they were Ravv's people.

They weren't supposed to know we were mates, so I kept my mouth shut about that. I wanted revenge, but it would be much sweeter if I drove him mad instead of just going against his wishes.

Both men eyed me curiously. I gave them the biggest, friendliest, most human smile I could manage. “Hi, guys. I’m looking for food, do you know where I can find some?”

“The dining hall is that way.” One of them gestured toward a wall.

I supposed I could just wander in that direction, but that sounded like so much work.

And a wicked idea to contribute to my revenge plot was practically boiling in my mind.

“Oh, perfect.” I looped my arm through one of the fae’s, and his eyebrows lifted. The man was huge, so it was a risk to grab his arm without permission or invitation. I didn’t think I could make an ancient fae feel violated by touching his elbow, though. “Lead the way.”

The man looked at the other guy.

He shrugged.

We all started walking, and my smile morphed into a grin. “So you guys are from Loire?” I asked them, tapping into what little fae knowledge I possessed.

“We are,” the guy whose arm I wasn’t holding said. “You’re from the Human Lands?”

“Yep. The kingdom I lived in was called Rowain, and it’s a fairly unpleasant place,” I said cheerfully. “Luckily, your king dragged me back here. You wouldn’t know why, by chance, would you?”

Both men looked surprised. The one whose arm I was holding said, “You’re going to fight two other humans to end our peace events.”

Fight?

That bastard expected me to *fight*?!

Ravv could cross the damn veil for all I cared.

“Great,” I forced my grin to remain.

We stopped in front of a pair of doors, and the man I was holding gestured to them. “Here’s the dining hall. If no one serves you, go to the kitchen and ask.” He eyed me. “Politely, so they don’t kill you.”

Asshole.

My smile widened. “Perfect. Thank you so much.” I started to release his arm, and then paused. Next was the risky part of my plan. Ravv might not be as possessive as he had seemed... but maybe he was. “You know, I’ve never hugged a fae before. Or kissed one. Would you be willing to kiss me?”

The man looked taken aback.

I fought a snort at his expression.

“I have a life partner,” he said.

“Not a mate?” I asked innocently.

“No. She and I can’t create a bond without making ourselves a target for the cultists.”

Cultists?

Well, everything just got better and better.

Ravv was doing an incredible job at keeping secrets from me.

“Sorry I grabbed you, then.” I released the man’s arm and patted it lightly in apology.

“I’ll kiss you,” the other guy offered. “I have no partner or mate. I’d be interested in spending a night with you, too, to see how humans differ from fae.”

Oh, dear.

He’d just propositioned me.

I should’ve seen that coming.

“I’ll keep that in mind, but I’m still trying to adjust to all this. Maybe tomorrow?”

The man only looked slightly disappointed, and nodded. “Can I see your ears, then?”

I shrugged, pulling my hair up away from one and turning so he could see it.

His eyes lit with fascination. “Can I touch it?”

“Sure.” It was just an ear.

He ran a finger over the curve of it, and I literally felt nothing.

Still just an ear.

“Fascinating,” the man said.

His hands landed on my hips, and he turned me. I dropped my hair as my chest met his, and my hands landed awkwardly on his large pectorals.

I’d never actually kissed someone before, so I was glad he was taking initiative.

And it made me feel like I was making a point to Ravv to *choose* the man I was having my first kiss with, even if I didn’t actually know him.

The king probably wouldn’t even care, but it still mattered to me.

He tilted my chin up with one hand and lowered his lips to mine. The sensation was foreign and strange as his soft mouth brushed against mine, and then his tongue slipped between my lips.

He didn’t taste very good, but I supposed that was to be expected, since he was both male and fae.

His hands held me close as we kissed, and my lower belly tensed when I felt him grow hard against me.

The other fae finally cleared his throat, and I pulled away. Both of our chests were rising and falling a bit quickly.

“You have an audience,” the man said in a low voice.

My head jerked to the side, and I found a group of fae with a variety of appearances and bonded beasts waiting.

We were blocking the dining hall's entrance.

"Does the human taste different than a fae?" one of the guys in the group asked.

It was a good thing my face was already red, or my embarrassment would've been obvious.

"No. A little softer, though." His expression was thoughtful as he looked at me. "We'll share a bed tomorrow night?"

Had I agreed to that?

I didn't know if I was ready to commit that completely to my revenge plan. I couldn't turn him down with a crowd though, so I flashed him a smile and nodded.

He smiled back. "I'll find you."

With that, he and his friend vanished back into the hallway we'd walked down.

"Uh, sorry, everyone." I waved at our audience before slipping into the dining hall. Since I didn't want to wait and see if anyone would happen to serve me, I headed into the doors that I assumed led to the kitchen and poked my head in.

I was probably still red and flushed, but I didn't really care at that point. My stomach was rumbling fiercely.

My gaze collided with a group of male and female fae who looked like they'd just stopped in the middle of a conversation.

I said quickly, stumbling over my words a bit, "Hi. I was living in a cellar up until a few days ago, so I'm starving. I'll eat anything and everything, and I have no idea what I like. So if you have enough food, I'd love to have some."

There was a moment's pause before a sympathetic-looking woman spoke up. "We'll bring it out. Just sit down at any of the tables."

I nodded. "Thank you so much."

They brought me a dozen plates, loaded with food. My eyes got a little teary every time they brought me something new, and sometimes when I tasted said new food as well.

It was all absolutely incredible.

Fancy savory breads.

Elegant sweet breads.

Soups.

Pastas.

Salads of every kind.

Desserts, desserts, and more desserts.

I must've died and crossed the veil, because damn, it was something out of a dream.

I was already incredibly full when Eisley, the fae who'd brought me the dress, strolled back into the dining room with another woman. She looked just as short as me, and just as skinny too.

My heart went out to her even as I shoved another bite into my mouth, and I gave a quick wave to show that I'd seen her. We were alone in the dining hall at that point, and it would've been rude to ignore her even if we weren't.

Unlike Ravv, I wasn't an asshole.

At least, not most of the time.

Eisley gestured to the chair next to me, and the girl sat down as the fae introduced us. Though we were equally skinny and wimpy-looking, her light skin was a bit tanned and her long, wavy hair was a gorgeous dark green color. "Laeli, this is Nissa. Nissa, this is Laeli."

She looked a bit uncertain, so I figured it was time to be social.

"You're stuck with a fae bastard too?" I asked her, cutting into some sort of casserole.

Nissa's stomach rumbled loudly, and my sympathy grew. "Unfortunately."

I nodded. "It sucks, but at least there's food. I've been locked in a damn cellar since my magic came in, and my town rarely bothered to feed me."

"I was trapped in a tower," she admitted.

I shivered.

A tower?

Veil, I'd rather die.

She did seem to have had some sunlight in her tower though, and I envied that immensely. My prison would've been much more livable with a little sunlight.

Maybe I wouldn't rather die.

"I do *not* do well with heights, so I don't envy you. Here." I pushed one of my plates over to her.

Eisley tried to give me the plate back, so I gave her a dirty look. I had plenty, and Nissa was clearly starving too. "I'll have the kitchen make her something," the fae said, before leaving us.

I pushed the plate back to Nissa as soon as she was gone. "So what's your power?"

She grabbed one of the pastries I wished I could've forced my stomach to take. Those things were incredible. "Plants. They grow around me, draining my magic in a few hours. I have no control over it."

That was epic.

Sunlight, and plants.

Veil, I'd trade my fire and my cellar for her prison any day. I could deal with the heights for that.

"Damn, that's lucky. My magic is uncontrollable too, but it's fire magic. You can feel the heat in the air around me constantly, and if I feel anything too strongly, I burn."

“Really? Have you ever burned yourself?”

I grinned. “I’ve tried, but the fire dodges me. I’ll show you if you’re ever around when I light up.”

“Veil.” Nissa suddenly swore, crunching her pastry in her fist and grabbing her wrist with the other hand. There was a metal bracelet wrapped around it, and I assumed the metal was hiding a mate bond.

I’d reacted much the same when Ravv first walked away from me in the desert, so my heart went out to her for it.

“Do you have a handprint too? These things are miserable.” I tugged the top of my sleeve down, showing her my handprint for a second before pulling it back. “I told Ravv that if he keeps walking away from me, I’m going to melt his ice castle. He’s stayed close enough not to ignite the pain since then. He’s a grumpy asshole, but he doesn’t seem to want to start another war.”

“Is walking away what triggers it?” Nissa took a bite of her food, then set it down so she could massage her handprint through her bracelet. I wasn’t sure how much good the massage would do, because when those things hurt, they *really* hurt.

“Mmhm. Physical distance seems to do it.”

“Does it cause the men pain too?”

I nodded and tossed out a joke to lighten the mood. “Yep. They like to pretend they don’t feel it, though. Makes them feel better about themselves and those tiny fae cocks.”

She snorted, and I grinned at her again.

“Alright, here you go.” Eisley gave Nissa a plate and then sat down beside her. “How’s the wrist?”

She didn’t answer. I assumed it was because she didn’t want to admit she was in pain.

I didn’t think we needed to water things down for the fae who were using us for protection and treating us like shit. So, I answered for her. “Bad. Someone needs to find her king.”

“He’s helping judge the wrestling tournament, and maybe participating in it,” Eislely said. “We’ll have to go to him.”

I shrugged. “Ravv must’ve skipped it.”

“She said the men wrestling are all naked,” Nissa told me with a guilty grin.

Oooh.

My revenge plan was about to get even sweeter.

I stood. “Let’s get you out of pain, then.”

Nissa laughed.

Eislely grumbled, “Sit down.”

I needed to come up with a logical excuse.

My mind moved quickly.

Considering Ravv’s reaction to Jern’s scent on me, it was safe to assume he was possessive. But I didn’t know if Nissa or Eislely knew that, since it seemed rare for fae to take mates, and Nissa obviously wasn’t fae.

So I threw out, “Why? We haven’t established whether fae men are as possessive as their bonded animals are with their mates. This seems like the perfect opportunity to test the theory on someone who can’t burn the jungle down.”

“I’m sure they’re not possessive of females they’re temporarily bonded to,” Eislely countered.

“Kierden is disgusted by my ears, let alone the rest of me. Pretty sure possessiveness is off the table,” Nissa said.

Yikes.

The conversation topic changed, but I brought it back to the naked wrestling as soon as I could—and eventually, Nissa’s pain got bad enough that we all headed out to enact my revenge plan.

Er, I mean, to see if fae men were possessive.

The stadium where the fae held the events was built into another massive tree. I rode on Eisley's bonded jungle cat with her—which I learned was called an esu, pronounced ee-soo. It wasn't nearly as comfortable as riding with Ravv, not that I would admit it aloud.

Nissa had a bonded esu of her own already, which seemed like a pretty damn good sign to me that she and her king, Kier, were just as fated as me and Ravv, but I couldn't say that out loud either.

I itched to ask if I could meet a few of those magical animals without riders. It would be nice to have a big furry companion of my own to eat anyone who pissed me off. Despite the urge, I decided it was wiser to stay quiet about it until I had established a place for myself with the fae.

After all, I had no intention of going back to my city and being thrown in that cellar again.

It seemed to be the middle of the night, but thanks to my nap, I wasn't all that tired. Between my improved eyesight and some big light bugs I noticed flying all over the place, I could see just fine.

There were flowers blooming around the city, which seemed like a new addition. I assumed Nissa was to blame, since I also saw a few fae marveling over them, and I knew she had plant magic of some sort.

My bicep started to throb as Eisley's bonded esu carried us into a stadium full of roaring fae. She maneuvered down a bunch of rows of benches until we reached a few empty ones. The empty ones were just outside the huge metal cage that held two naked, fighting men.

Though their nudity was appealing, I found myself backing away from the violence. It was close to us—way too close to us.

One of the guys in the ring finally lost the wrestling match, and the crowd cheered even louder. The man who stood up was just as big as Ravv, with tan skin, wavy black hair that fell around his ears, and an arm of tattoos that looked like the ones on Ravv's back.

One of his palms was wrapped up, and when I glanced at Nissa, I noticed her

gaze riveted to him, her body pressed as tightly to the bars as possible.

He had to be her king, Kier.

And damn, he was nice to look at.

Kier offered the losing fae a hand, and pulled the guy to his feet before clapping him on the back. The other guy left the cage, and Kier turned back to the crowd, holding his arms out as he roared, “Who will challenge me?”

The crowd’s yells and screams grew even more ferocious.

“Do it,” I whispered to Nissa, nudging her with one of my shoulders.

“Challenge him. You know you want to roll around with all of that.”

Honestly, I wanted to see his reaction to her doing it, though I didn’t think there was a chance she would.

Her face reddened. “No thanks.”

“He would *ravage* her,” Eisley threw out.

I snorted.

Nissa fought a laugh of her own.

Eisley grinned at both of us before turning back to watch the fight.

My bicep had stopped aching, so I assumed Ravv was moving closer to avoid the pain, and to avoid me making good on my threat.

Kier noticed Nissa against the cage, and gave me the possessive reaction I’d pretended to be looking for. His gaze jerked to Eisley, and he snarled so viciously I could almost hear it over the sound of the crowd.

My eyes squeezed shut when his next challenger came out. I imagined he was beating the other man to a pulp, with his anger driving him. I’d seen firsthand how a king’s anger could make him fight, and it was vicious.

A pair of massive hands landed on my shoulders and wrenched me backward. They held me upright before I could fall, and Ravv’s intense, dark purple eyes collided with mine. “What are you doing here?” He inhaled deeply again, and then snarled, “And why do you smell like another male?”

“Neither of those things are any of your business,” I shot back, frustration welling inside me.

He snarled again, then threw me over his shoulder and stormed away from the cage.

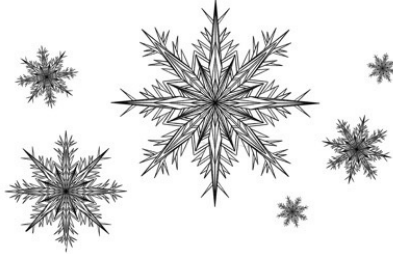
My ass landed on Gleam’s back. The king pressed me tightly to his bonded idorr as she carried us away from the fight. Ravv was breathing hard, his chest rising and falling as he gripped Gleam’s fur like it could keep him sane.

I didn’t think it could, though.

And for the sake of my revenge, I *hoped* it couldn’t.

CHAPTER 9

LAELI



G leam ran until we were back in my room in the castle. My dress was still on the floor—and I hoped my undergarments were still tucked beneath the blankets on the bed.

Ravv set me on my feet before stepping up right in front of me. His hands gripped my face, and he tilted my head back so my eyes met his. His grip was tight, but loose enough that I could’ve broken free if I really tried.

“What in the veil were you thinking?” he snarled.

“I was thinking that I wanted to watch the fae warriors fight, and—”

He cut me off by lowering his nose to my mouth and inhaling.

His responding roar was loud enough it nearly shook the damn ground.

He released me in a heartbeat—and then he was storming toward the door.

Elwynne appeared in the doorway before he made it out, and her massive bonded idorr was behind her. “What happened?” she demanded, looking between us.

Ravv tried to get past her, but her companion stepped in front of him, making him snarl at her.

She narrowed her eyes at him and didn’t budge. “What’s going on?”

“My mate kissed another male, and had his arms around her,” Ravv gritted out.

Her gaze jerked to me. “Are you insane?”

“No, I’m not insane. I’m not the bastard who started a mate bond with a complete stranger and then carried her across the world, lying to her about everything and then expecting her to just go along with it!” I tossed a hand toward Ravv. “Don’t blame me for *his* stupid decisions.”

“Regardless, you can’t kiss someone else while you’re mated. You could start another damn war,” she shot back, as she and her idorr stepped closer to each other, blocking Ravv more completely.

“He’s the one who’s losing control,” I snapped back.

“Mated fae are protective. If he kissed another woman, you’d lose control too.”

Ravv glowered at me. “I wouldn’t betray her that way.”

I wasn’t touching those comments. “Just tell me how to get out of this ridiculous bond and this city, and we’ll all be free of each other.” I gestured to my arm.

“The eclipse is the only thing that can break it. We’re staying out here to make sure neither of you leave.” She shot Ravv a warning look. “Talk to her. Fix this.”

The door shut behind her and her idorr.

I scoffed, striding back to the bed.

“Don’t consider climbing beneath my blankets smelling like another man,” Ravv snarled. When I tossed him a glare over my shoulder, I found him striding toward me.

I turned and planted my feet, putting my hands on my hips. “This is *my* bed. You told me it was *my* room.”

“That was before you went and kissed Toveo. Now, you’re sleeping with me again. In my arms. Where I know you can’t touch another damn male.”

My hands ignited, and I clenched my fists as they blazed. “You *used* me. You’ve used me this *entire* time. Someone has to get the stain of your touch

off my skin.”

He covered the rest of the distance between us and grabbed my face in his hands again. Despite the roughness, his grip didn't hurt in the slightest as he tilted my head back. He was trying to assert his dominance over me, but I wasn't giving in this time.

“I used your *magic* to protect myself from an ancient assassin, after an elf told me it was the only way I could survive.”

“You only protected me to protect yourself,” I shot back.

His voice went low and dark. “If I didn't care about you, I wouldn't have fed you. I wouldn't have washed you. I wouldn't have given you my blood, or touched you.”

“Oh, please. I'm sure you spend every night with a different woman.”

“I haven't intimately touched a female or had sex in nearly a century,” he growled back.

“Is that supposed to make me think you're a damn saint?” I sneered. “How impressive; you resist your urges with the women you respect. Because I'm just a worthless human, you abduct me, lie to me, use me, and—”

He cut me off by hauling me off my feet and whisking me away from the bed. The bastard tossed me into the bathing pool before I had a chance to shout at him.

I surfaced a moment later, sputtering and shoving hair out of my eyes. “You should've left me to rot in that damned cellar.” My voice shook with the fury I had no other way to express. My fire was still burning beneath the water, my flames growing instead of shrinking.

Ravv kneeled at the edge of the pool and leaned toward me. “No, I shouldn't have. Like it or not, fate declared you mine. Now, tell me what happened, or we stay here all night.”

“Cross the veil,” I spat.

“The only one crossing the veil tonight is Toveo, for touching what's mine.”

More rage flooded me, and I grabbed him by the arm, yanking him toward the water. The movement must've surprised him, because I actually managed to pull his heavy ass off balance. He crashed into the water right on top of me, dragging me beneath the surface.

My lungs screamed, but Ravv hauled me back out, spitting, "Dammit, woman."

"Damn *you*." I shoved him away from me, but he only gripped me tighter, treading water to keep both of us afloat. "You are an absolute *bastard*. Not once, in all those times you claimed you saved me, did it occur to you to tell me the truth! To say, 'hey, Lae, I only started this mate bond because I needed your magic to protect mine, so don't get too comfortable'."

He scowled. "Of course it occurred to me."

"But you didn't do it!"

"I had no idea when I was looking for you that you'd be my fated mate—or that I'd find myself *attracted* to you. This situation is difficult for me too, *Lae*. I'm being hunted by one of the very few beings in this world who stand a chance of killing me, and if I die, there's a good chance my kingdom dies with me." His words were low, his chest rumbly and unhappy. "It's not just my life on the line here."

I... hadn't considered that. "Why would your kingdom die? If you would just *talk* to me, we wouldn't be having this issue." I gestured between us, swimming in a tiny but deep bathing pool, fully dressed.

Or at least, as fully dressed as it got when you were a fae.

"It's complicated."

I scowled, pushing out of his arms so I could tread water myself. My back brushed the stone edge of the small bathing pool. "Get out of my room if you're not going to speak to me like I'm your equal."

He growled at me, "You drive me insane, woman."

"The feeling is mutual."

Ravv shoved his curls out of his eyes. "It's not a short story."

“Look at me. I have nothing but time.”

“There was a cult that slaughtered mated pairs a few centuries ago. They were afraid of the power mated couples possessed. My mother and father were the queen and king of Loire at that point—and they were fated, so they were one of the first targets. They narrowly dodged multiple attempts on their life before deciding to go underground, literally.”

My eyebrows lifted. “The underground city you found?”

“Yes. They ran from battle like cowards—one of the worst shames a fae can take on their shoulders. They left my twin sister and I to determine who would rule, but Ria had already joined the cult.”

“Your *sister* tried to kill your parents?”

“Yes. Outside of the cult, our people wouldn’t follow her. Most unmated fae didn’t despise mates, they just hadn’t found anyone they wished to spend their eternity with.”

“So you took over.”

“Yes. At twenty-years-old.”

Damn.

I was twenty-three, and I couldn’t imagine ruling over anyone. I could barely keep my own shit together.

Then again, I’d spent much of my life in a cellar, battling my own flames unsuccessfully.

“What did your sister do?”

“Built her own damn army of those who despise mated pairs and set her mind to find the hidden half of our kingdom.”

“Did she find them?”

“It took a few decades, but she did. Then, our civil war began.”

“Your *civil war*?”

“Yes. My army has been fighting to keep the damned Vuuths and Jirevs from taking over our kingdom, while my sister and her group of bastards have been at war with the mated city beneath our land. Even now while I’m here, they fight. The cult’s numbers are dwindling, but they’ll war until the bitter end.”

“Then who are all the people here?” I gestured toward the hallway. The guy I’d kissed had been single, but his friend had a life partner, so they couldn’t have been anti-mate.

“The warriors who care more about survival than a squabble about mating bonds.” Ravv’s shoulder blades hit the back of the bathing pool, and he pulled himself out. My eyes followed the swell of his biceps as he moved. “If they discover what we are to each other, there’s a damn good chance my warriors will be forced to take sides. And if they take sides, the civil war will escalate, instead of continually shrinking.”

“And which side would you choose?” I asked him.

“Anyone’s but the cult’s. I don’t condone anyone killing each other for love, of all things. If the cultists feel threatened, they should take mates themselves to make their magic stronger.”

“Why are they so strong that the mated couples haven’t been able to wipe them out?”

“Many of the mated couples have children. Few of them are willing to leave their fortress of a city to fight—and fewer are willing to kill their old friends and families. There can’t be many left, but they are persistent, and they hide well.”

“And it won’t end until the cultists are gone?”

“Even then, I’m sure they have members hidden among my army.” He closed his eyes for a long moment, and I saw the lines in his face. I saw the weight of his stress, and of his throne.

Suddenly, I understood his anger and grumpiness just a little bit.

He’d been holding an entire kingdom together through grit and willpower for *centuries*, fighting a war he didn’t want on both fronts.

“Would killing your sister end it? She’s the leader, right?” I asked.

“She is, but she’s careful to avoid any fights she knows she can’t win. Eventually, she’ll grow desperate enough to face me, and I’ll have the chance to end her.”

“Your warriors respect you though, right? If you took a mate, would they side with you?”

He grimaced. “It’s unlikely.”

“But you don’t know.”

“I don’t. Most would be loyal to me if the truth comes out, but some wouldn’t.”

That was better than nothing, I supposed.

“So what do we do?” I finally hauled myself out of the bathing pool too. I was a lot less graceful about it than Ravv was, but managed to end up on my ass, with my feet hanging in the water.

“You made that much harder than it needed to be,” Ravv drawled, leaning back as he stared at me. Despite his words, there was heat in his eyes, and they were lingering on my thighs. My dress had ridden up, and it barely covered me.

“Not all of us are warrior fae kings,” I drawled back.

“Thank the veil for that.”

I rolled my eyes at him. “I’m serious. What are we going to do about us?”

“You’re going to tell me what you did with Toveo, to start.”

“That is still not your business,” I said bluntly.

His eyes narrowed at me. “You belong to me. That makes it my business.”

“Did you not hear anything you just said? It’s not even *possible* for us to be together. And once again, you don’t own me.”

His eyes were still narrowed at me. “Tell me, *Lae*.”

I should never have let my old nickname slip. No one had called me that since...

Well, since all the happy shit in my past that I preferred to pretend had never happened.

I still wasn't going to give in. There was no way I could let him win. "Make me."

His eyes burned into me for a long, long moment.

My gaze jerked down when I felt ice wrapping around my wrists and my thighs, trapping me where I was. I pulled against them, but they were thick and unyielding.

Panic started to rise in my chest as he stood smoothly and strode over to me. Ravv's massive hand landed on my shoulder, and when I looked down again, I found his knees on either side of me.

For some reason, his presence soothed the panic I'd initially felt at being trapped.

His lips brushed my ear. "Tell me, and I free you. Stay silent, and you force me to figure it out myself."

How would he *figure it out* himself?

"What does that mean?" I demanded, though my chest was rising and falling rapidly. The dress clung to nearly every inch of my skin, highlighting the hard buds of my nipples but concealing my core, just barely.

"You think a dip in the water could wipe a male's scent from your skin entirely? I can find out exactly where his body touched yours without releasing you, Lae."

He wasn't giving up on the nickname.

I wasn't sure I wanted him to, as insane as that probably made me.

It was time to lean on my sarcasm again. "So you're going to *smell* me?"

He chuckled, but didn't answer me.

Instead, he lowered his nose to my neck and inhaled deeply. His chest rumbled unhappily, and I breathed in sharply when his tongue dragged slowly over the sensitive flesh there.

My body clenched as heat flooded me.

His tongue left my skin, and I relaxed for a moment—before he inhaled against my ear.

A snarl escaped him, and the silky heat of his tongue dragged over the curve of it.

A moan escaped me, my body clenching again, tighter.

I swore silently, and he chuckled.

He must've heard my curse in his mind.

If he was going to lick every part of me that smelled like the guy I'd been pressed up against...

Veil, he'd lick every inch of me.

My ears.

My belly.

My breasts.

Which meant... I was going to have to give in.

I was going to have to let him win.

Because if he tasted me like that, I wouldn't want it to end. And I'd grow too damn attached to the man who had lied to me and used me without even bothering to let me know what he was doing.

If I told him what I'd done with the fae in the hallway—Toveo, according to Ravv—it would still piss him off.

The whole goal of my revenge plot was to hurt him the way he'd hurt me. Telling him the truth might achieve that, too.

Especially if I embellished a little.

“I asked Toveo to be my first kiss, so I wouldn’t have to give it to you,” I breathed.

Ravv’s body went still.

The man absolutely froze.

His breath still tickled my ear, his chest pressed to my back and his knees at my hips.

“I wrapped my arms around him, pressed my body to his, and took his lips in mine.” I let my heartbeat pick up with the stress of the lie, knowing Ravv would interpret it as something entirely different. “His mouth made love to mine while I rubbed myself against him. I wasn’t wearing any undergarments, so he felt my bare breasts against his chest. He probably smelled how much I enjoyed it, too. He gripped my ass and squeezed my tits—until I climaxed, without so much as a damn touch of his fingers.”

Rav’s breathing was ragged as his fury swelled.

He had no way of proving me wrong without leaving the room, and that gave me all the power.

“When I thanked him and pulled away, he invited me to share his bed tomorrow night, and I agreed. As I turned around, I realized we had an audience. Fae from all of the kingdoms had seen me unravel against him, and knew that we’d be bare in his bed the next night. That made it hard to walk away from him, but I forced myself to go.”

A slow, low snarl that legitimately sounded like it had come from a wild animal vibrated against my back. Ravv slowly released my shoulder—and then he left the room so quickly, I didn’t even see him move.

A relieved breath escaped me when he was gone.

“*Wicked little human,*” Gleam murmured, her mouth parted in what almost resembled a grin.

I hadn’t even realized she was still in the room with us, and flashed her a warning look as I tugged again at the ice still holding me captive.

It didn’t budge.

“I won’t let you control me either,” I warned her.

“Good.” She lazily rose to her paws. *“Fate knew what it was doing when it paired you. My king has finally met his match.”*

With that, she slipped out of the room.

I focused on my anger, trying to force my damn fire to reignite—but all I got was a little steam.

Truthfully, I wasn’t all that angry anymore.

Sadness outweighed anger again... and veil, I despised it.

Eventually, my heat melted the ice enough that I managed to slip my wrists and thighs out of the icy restraints. I was exhausted, so I simply locked the door to my room and dropped into bed, curling up in a small ball.

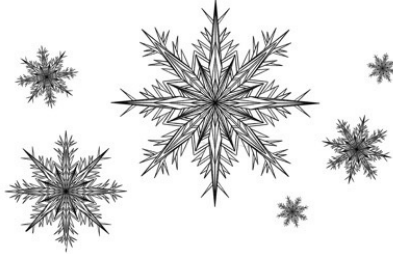
At least the mattress was comfortable.

At least I wasn’t in the cellar anymore.

I calmed myself with those reminders, and drifted off to sleep.

CHAPTER 10

RAVV



Elwynne cursed as she ran behind me, barely managing to keep the pace I set.

I was going to find Toveo, consequences be damned.

He had touched my mate.

He had stolen her first kiss from me.

He had made her *unravel*.

The bastard would pay.

Gleam caught up to me as I reached the castle's exit, and I landed on her back smoothly.

"I don't think this is wise," she murmured to me. "Laeli may have been lying about the extent of their connection."

"I smelled him on her skin," I snarled back. "She has no reason to lie."

"Of course she does. You lied to her while we traveled. From her perspective, you used her, plainly and simply. That makes you no better than an enemy to her."

"I'm not her damn enemy."

"Ravv." Her voice was amused. "You may be fated, but you haven't treated her as a mate. You fed her and touched her, but her life is at risk because of

you, and her whole world has been turned upside down. If she had done any of those things to you, she'd be your enemy. If she did all of them? She'd be buried in ice and earth already."

I shook off her reason, and the guilt that burned in my chest because of it.

My gaze jerked down to my wrist as it started throbbing, and I growled a harsh, *"Turn around. She's in pain."*

Gleam skidded to a stop in the middle of a large bridge.

Someone yelled at us, but I didn't let myself retaliate.

"You either want her as your mate, or you don't. If you want her, you'll go back to her room and apologize for losing your head and leaving her trapped in ice restraints. Then you'll apologize for making her feel like you were using her, too. If you want her, your place is to make her feel loved and important, not to lose your mind when she kisses another man in an attempt to get revenge."

"If that was her goal, it clearly worked," I growled.

Gleam chuckled. *"Of course it did. She's seen enough of your moods to know how to hurt you."*

As much as I hated the idea, I had to grudgingly respect her for it.

"And what if I want her? My people could lose their damn minds and turn on us."

"Many of your people have partners. They wouldn't hate you for having the same," Gleam said, starting her walk back in the direction we had come from. *"And if they do, you'll kill them."*

I barked out a laugh. *"That easy, huh?"*

"You know I find it sad that fae remain alone for so much of their lives. I'm still trying to convince Coarsefur to consider going into the mated city so he can find a companion. Being without a companion makes him grumpy."

"Everything except you makes him grumpy."

"True." She chuffed. *"A mate bond is good for everyone, including fae."*

We're not at war with Jirev and Vuuth anymore. Even if you do decide to seal your bond with Laeli, you could simply retreat to the mated city until you've had the chance to kill Ria."

"*I suppose.*"

A furious Elwynne and her playful bonded idorr, Swift, met us on the next bridge. The fae around us ignored us for the most part, thankfully.

"Gleam talked you down?" Elwynne asked, her expression wary.

"She did."

"Veil, what were you thinking? That human is going to hate you, if she doesn't already," she tossed out.

"*She probably does,*" Gleam agreed, broadcasting the thought to all of us.

"She doesn't hate me," I grumbled.

"She'd be a fool not to," Elwynne said, as the idorr began carrying us back toward the castle. "If you want her to go along with your plan now, you're going to have to grovel."

I had never groveled in my life, and I wasn't about to start.

"*Bring food when you do. She needs to eat more,*" Gleam said.

It had been irritating me since I left her side a few hours earlier that I hadn't made sure she ate something. Gleam's words pushed that over the edge.

"I'll apologize with food," I agreed, though not entirely thrilled about it.

I was still angry that she'd kissed another man.

Veil, I was furious about that.

But there was a small chance I had lost control of my jealousy, and overreacted.

"I'll get the full story on her and Toveo," Elwynne said.

I agreed, and we split up.

After a quick stop in the dining hall for a plate of food, Gleam and I headed back to the bedroom I'd been assigned. When I found the door locked, I opened it with my ice—Laeli hadn't figured out how to secure it properly yet—and slipped inside, scratching Gleam behind the ears before leaving her to sleep in front of the door.

She wanted us to have privacy, and still needed to rest so she could recover from our journey. And no fae would ever hurt a bonded beast outside of a battlefield, so I knew she'd be safe.

Laeli was in the bed, buried beneath the blankets. Her hair was sprawled over half of the mattress, damp and tangled.

I set the plate down on the table beside the bed as I sat on the edge of the mattress, smoothing some of her hair away from her face.

She made a soft noise at the touch, and her eyes cracked open just a little bit.

Her lips curved upward when she saw me, and mine did the same.

Her happiness vanished as soon as it had appeared, and then she groaned and buried her face in the bed. "Go away."

"I brought food."

"Keep your damn food," she mumbled into the blankets.

I slid further onto the mattress, sitting with my back to the wall as my side met hers.

"Unless you're here to apologize for being such an asshole, save us both the trouble and just leave," she added.

I set a hand on her back and slowly started to rub her skin.

She groaned again. "I hate you."

But she didn't ask me to stop, so it was progress.

"I may have lost my temper," I said gruffly.

"Is the guy dead?"

“No.”

She paused, and I continued rubbing her back.

After a moment, she asked, “Is he bleeding? Or afraid for his life?”

I scowled. “No. I didn’t go to him.”

Her shoulders relaxed slightly.

I stopped moving my hand, and she grumbled, “Rub my back or leave.”

A low chuckle escaped me as I turned, setting both my hands on her shoulders and pressing my thumbs into her muscles lightly.

Another groan escaped her—a louder one that sent blood rushing straight to my cock. If I wasn’t already hard just from the sight of her sprawled across a bed, veil knew the sound alone could give me an erection.

“I still hate you,” she mumbled. “And that wasn’t a good enough apology.”

A few moments passed. Her body was growing boneless beneath my hands, the knots in her muscles fading beneath my touch. “I regret losing my temper,” I finally said. “Your actions felt like a betrayal, and I don’t do well with betrayal.”

“I don’t think anyone does well with betrayal.” She paused before adding, “I shouldn’t have kissed that guy. I only did it to hurt you.”

“You did far more than kiss him,” I growled back.

She was silent for a moment before she finally admitted, “I may have exaggerated.”

My hands stilled.

“There was no groping. Or climaxing. And I didn’t promise to spend the night with him,” she finally said. “Though he did ask. I guess I didn’t really say no, but I wasn’t planning on actually going through with it. I just couldn’t turn him down with people around.”

I forced my body not to quake with renewed fury.

“Ravv?” she peeked over her shoulder at me, and the flash of those gorgeous amber eyes calmed me just slightly.

I gritted my teeth. “Give me a minute.”

She turned her head back to the mattress.

When I’d regained control, I slowly began to massage her shoulders again.

Her groans returned, making my cock swell thickly.

“You still kissed him,” I finally said. “It wasn’t your first?” I assumed if she had been messing around with Jern, they would’ve done that too, but humans didn’t make a whole lot of sense to me.

“It was.” Her response was quiet. “You hurt me. Not physically—never physically—but when you lied to me, that hurt. I spent so damn long in that cellar, with no one but Jern and Gora. And then you saved me and protected me. I guess I just wanted you to be a better man than you are, and that’s my fault, not yours.”

The words were a blow to my chest, and to my damn pride.

I’d never tried to be a good man, but I’d spent my life trying to keep everyone around me alive. I’d given everything for my kingdom, yet I hadn’t given the truth to my mate.

“I’m sorry.” My voice was lower than it had ever been, and rougher with emotion, too. “I’m sorry, Lae. You were looking at me like I was a damn hero, and I didn’t want that look to change. I was selfish—and you deserve more.”

“Yeah, I do.” Her words were quiet.

I continued rubbing her shoulders, working years and years of knots out of those muscles.

“You should probably go,” she whispered.

“No.” I dug my thumbs in deeper, and she groaned again.

When she turned to look at me once more, there was confusion in her eyes. “You just said I deserve better. That implies you’re going to leave me so I

can find better.”

“I said you deserve better, implying that I’m going to *be* better. I’m not leaving you to damn *Toveo*; he can’t take better care of you than me. No one can.”

She groaned again as I worked one of the more resilient knots in her shoulders, and those pretty eyes closed. “I am *not* committing to you.”

“You don’t need to. My palm and your arm both glow with the statement that we belong to each other.”

“You’re insane.”

“I never claimed not to be.”

She heaved a sigh. “Fine. We’re setting rules, though. I’m not here for a repeat of the bathing pool incident. If you ever dump me in a pool again, we’re done.”

“And if you ever come home smelling like another man again, I’ll chain you to my damn bed for an entire week, and drag you to the edge of climax on my tongue again, again, and again without letting you find release. Understood?”

“Veil, this is not progress,” she muttered, dropping her head to the pillow. “I changed my mind.”

“No, you didn’t. My rule is that you don’t let another man put his hands on you. What’s yours?”

“I’m going to regret this.” She pushed some hair out of her face, sagging against the pillow as I continued massaging her. “Fine. My rule is that you have to be nice to me. I’m tired of getting snarled at.”

I’d done a really terrible job of winning her over, hadn’t I?

“*Nice* isn’t measurable,” I said. “And I’m not practiced in it.”

“Then the deal is off.” She groaned at my touch.

“No. Come up with a way to measure it.” I worked one of the larger knots, and she lost her voice for a moment before finally straining,

“Fine. If I give you a glare or tell you to stop something, you stop. If you don’t stop, you’ve broken the boundary, and you give me as much space as I ask for.”

“As much as you ask for? No. One day of as much space as you want, and then I at least get the chance to grovel.”

I couldn’t believe I was bargaining for the chance to *grovel*.

But... maybe for her, I’d do it.

“Veil, you’re stubborn,” she grumbled.

“And you’re not?”

“Fine, fine. We’ve officially made rules. I won’t touch anyone else, and you’ll be nice to me, especially around water.”

“And we’ll share a bed every night,” I added.

“I don’t remember agreeing to that one.”

“You didn’t. That’s my rule.”

“Alright, if you’re making a rule about sharing a room, I need a rule that gives me space from you. I’m still trying to figure out who I am outside the cellar, so I need time apart, too,” she said.

I dug my fingers in harder, just to get another groan from her. “It’s not safe for you to have time alone here.”

“Gleam can stay with me, then,” she said. “Or Elwynne. Or anyone you want—I just need some space to make sure this is what I actually want.”

“I’ll be what you want,” I growled.

“It’s easy to say that, but harder to prove it. And so far, you haven’t proven it.” Her words were harsh, but deserved. “It’s going to take me time to move past your selfish reasoning for abducting me, even though you rescued me in the process.”

When she put it like that, I sounded like an absolute asshole. I supposed I deserved it, too.

“I didn’t intend to like you,” I admitted. “The goal was just to save myself. One of the elves’ leaders felt your magic through the earth, and sent me after you. If it was anyone but the Demon hunting me, I wouldn’t have bothered.”

“I don’t even want to think about the Demon coming after us,” Laeli mumbled. “Why is he hunting you?”

“Vayme Vuuth believes someone from his kingdom sent the assassins after us. He’ll look into it further when he’s back.”

“Well, that’s reassuring.”

“I won’t let anything happen to you,” I said.

“*You’re* afraid of the Demon. How would you protect me from him?” she countered.

“I’d give myself to him before I’d let him touch you.”

She groaned at the pressure on her shoulders. “Veil, you’re good at this. Don’t tell me you learned on your last life partner.”

I chuckled. “I’ve never had a life partner. You’ll be the first.”

“*Life partner* does not have the same ring to it as *mate*. And I never agreed to be either of those things, as you know.” She groaned again. “You’ve got to stop. I’m not going to be able to sleep without this next time.”

My lips curved upward wickedly. “I can think of another way to relax you.”

Her foot shot out, kicking me. It didn’t hurt in the slightest, but I grumbled at her as if it did. “Another rule: nothing sexual can happen until I’ve decided I’m willing to consider being with you in a romantic capacity.”

“*Something* sexual already happened,” I pointed out. “But that’s fine; you’re going to beg me to taste you soon.”

She scowled at me. “I’m not going to beg you for *anything*.”

“We’ll see, Lae.” I dug my thumbs into her muscles again, and she finally pushed my hands away.

“This is all too much.”

I dragged her into my arms. She sighed as I tucked her head beneath my chin, holding her close.

“I hate how much I like this,” she muttered. “Why do you feel so damn good?”

“Ask fate.” My chest rumbled against her back, and I pulled her closer, catching the tiniest bit of Toveo’s scent in her hair. “Veil, I need to scrub you clean.”

“Tomorrow,” she whispered.

“Only if you’ll let me touch you to mark you with my scent afterward.”

“Fine.” She sighed softly. “I should hate your possessiveness.”

“You’d be just as angry if you smelled another woman on me.”

“I’m not going to think about or acknowledge that statement.”

I chuckled. “Go to sleep, Lae.”

“My parents used to call me that.” Her words were barely audible. “Don’t use it if you’re going to hurt me again.”

My heart clenched.

I ached to hear her story... but I’d have to wait until she was ready to give it to me.

“I won’t.”

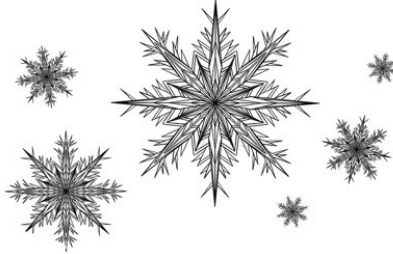
She made a noise of agreement, and then slowly, her breathing evened out. I cradled her to my chest, closing my eyes and focusing on the feel of her in my arms rather than the scent lingering on her skin.

She was mine; she would always be mine.

I’d survive a few hours of another man’s scent on her.

CHAPTER 11

LAELI



“**W**hat are you doing?” I groaned, as Ravv lifted me out of bed. I felt disoriented—I could’ve fallen asleep a few minutes earlier, a few hours earlier, or a few *days* earlier for all I could tell.

“I can’t stand his scent on you for another minute,” he growled at me, gripping me tightly to his chest.

“Really, Ravv?”

“It’s been nearly twelve hours. I let you sleep, and now I need you clean.” He slipped into the water with me, instead of dropping me in. “Go back to sleep if you want. I can wash you whether your eyes are open or not.”

I slowly wrestled my head off his shoulder, as his big, soapy hands ran over my back.

A groan escaped me at the feel of his touch—and his erection against my core. “This should *not* turn you on.”

He grumbled at me but resumed scrubbing. My dress was still on—which I assumed was because I hadn’t given him permission to strip it off me.

At least he had respected that.

“Can I take this off?” He tugged lightly on one of my sleeves.

“Mmhm.” I leaned away from him as he slid it over my head and tossed it to

the floor.

His eyes collided with my breasts, and he went still.

I glanced down.

Right.

I wasn't wearing anything under my dress.

"Veil, I need to feed you more," he said.

I tried to push him away, but he pulled me tighter.

"Asshole," I snapped.

"I can still see your ribs, Lae."

"You see me naked and your first comment is that I need to eat more? What is your problem?" I tried again to push him away, and he only dragged me closer. My bare chest collided with his, and I sucked in a sharp breath at the delicious heat of it.

"It was an observation, not an insult. You don't want to hear the rest of my thoughts about you," he growled.

My hurt swelled.

His mind opened to me—just opened, like a damn door.

The first thing I saw was a detailed fantasy of him with his fingers buried inside me and his lips wrapped around my nipple. My face was twisted with pleasure, my bare body pinned beneath his.

More images flickered.

His face between my thighs.

His cock filling me.

His mouth on my breasts, my belly, my mouth, and my throat.

Him drinking my blood.

"Breathe, Lae." He squeezed my hips and closed the doors between our

minds.

My chest was rising and falling rapidly.

“Don’t believe for a second that I’m not interested in your bare body.” He lifted me further up his cock so the length of it pressed against my core, though his shorts separated us. “I want you in every damned way there is.”

“Okay,” I managed.

The words were nearly a squeak.

He eased me away from his erection, set me on the floor so my legs hung off the edge, and then started scrubbing the rest of me down.

I was in too much shock to protest or take over.

His hands were strong but gentle as he slowly cleaned my skin, taking his time to massage my arms, legs, and feet as he went.

When he pulled me back into the bathing pool to work on my hair, my eyes were already closed, and I was relaxing against him. The way he massaged my scalp was blissful.

Ravv finally finished scrubbing me clean, and then held my body to his as I let myself snuggle against him for a few minutes. He was big, hard, and warm—the perfect combination.

And he held me like I mattered to him, which made me feel good, even if I knew I was going to have to retreat physically and emotionally from him as soon as we were up and dressed.

Eventually, I told him we needed to get out. He eased us both from the pool and dried me off before drying himself. I watched him closely, though I didn’t want to admit that I was curious to see if he would really treat me differently after our conversation.

I hadn’t gotten growled at in a while, which seemed like progress compared to the day before.

“I can get myself dressed,” I murmured to him, stepping away to put a little space between us.

He looked like he wanted to protest, but dipped his head in a nod.

Progress.

He dried himself and pulled on a pair of the tight shorts he wore as an undergarment, while I slipped into my own, and then the black dress I'd worn since the Timeless Sands. It was clean and fresh, when it hadn't been the day before, so I assumed he had cleaned it.

That made my chest warm a bit.

"I'd like to have breakfast alone, so we can spend some time apart," I told him, meeting his gaze steadily. "After I eat, you can show me around the city, if you're interested?"

He grimaced but agreed, and I slipped out of the room alone.

Even after our conversation, I was surprised it had been that easy. I scratched Glean's head as I passed her, and she continued snoring without missing a beat.

As soon as I stepped inside the dining hall, I noticed a tiny blue-haired woman sitting in the corner of the room, looking ill. There were only a few other people inside, and she was so much smaller than them that I had to assume she was human.

She had a gigantic gray wolf sitting next to her with its side pressed against her legs. Though she had three plates of food in front of her, one of her hands was buried in the wolf's fur while the other held her utensil.

After I stopped in the kitchen to ask for a plate of my own, I sat down across from the woman and flashed her a smile. "Hey. You're human, right?"

Veil, she was as pale as I was.

She nodded, and I noticed her hair lift slightly in some kind of breeze. There was no wind in the dining hall, so I didn't know where the breeze was coming from.

Maybe from her?

“I am too. I’m Laeli.”

Her shoulders relaxed slightly. “I’m Kaelle.” She pronounced it kay-ell. “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.”

Kaelle grimaced. “He’s terrifying.”

“Is your king not?”

She shuddered. “Vayme is worse.”

The poor girl looked absolutely terrified.

“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,” she admitted.

Damn, she hadn’t even been a *prisoner*. I knew my luck had been shitty.

“I’m sorry.” I reached across the table and squeezed her hand. “The king of my city kept me locked in a cellar beneath their prison, so I can imagine the misery of that.”

Her eyes flooded with horror. “Veil.”

“Yeah. At least we’re free now.”

She nodded, though she looked a bit nauseous. “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.”

My lips curved upward, and I leaned toward her. “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.”

She sighed. “That sounds... difficult.”

“But worth it.”

She nodded reluctantly.

Someone brought my food out, and we both grew quiet as we ate. A few minutes into the meal, I let myself look around the room until my gaze caught on a large man.

A familiar large man.

“*Dammit, Ravv,*” I growled into his mind, continuing to eat like nothing was wrong at all.

“*You wanted space. I’m giving you space.*” His words were far calmer than I expected. “*You’re free to be alone and do as you wish, and I’m free to know where you are and what you’re doing.*”

“*I told you Gleam or Elwynne could come with me.*”

“*Both of them are sleeping. Just act like I’m not here.*” He continued eating.

I looked back at Kaelle and found her slouching against her chair, her eyelids barely open. “Are you okay?”

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

That felt like the understatement of the century.

“Get out of here, then.” I waved her toward the door, and she nodded. She leaned against the giant wolf as she made her way out of the dining hall.

I expected Ravv to come over and sit by me, but he remained where he was.

“*What do you call the big, magical wolves?*” I asked him.

“*Xuno. The one with the blue-haired human is Vayme’s bonded beast. His name is Strong.*”

I took a big bite of my food. “*How well do you and the other kings know each other?*”

“Not well. We’ve been enemies for centuries, but we’ve met on the battlefield enough times to know certain facts about each other—and we were forced to get on civil terms as we negotiated for peace. It took a few years to get from peace talks to actually ending the war.”

I nodded, then focused on my food.

Eventually, Elwynne showed up at the dining hall and leaned in close to whisper something to Ravv.

I ignored the jealousy that stirred in my lower belly, refusing to envy a woman I didn’t know when it came to a man I had never actually decided I wanted. We were mates, but fate wasn’t all-powerful. It couldn’t always be right.

“A few of my warriors are getting too vicious in today’s events,” Ravv told me, his voice laced with irritation. Since it wasn’t geared toward me, my lips curved upward just a bit. *“I need to go deal with them. Elwynne will show you around the city today—just tell her when the distance starts causing you pain, and she’ll take you closer to me. I don’t want you at the fights.”*

“What if I want to see the fights?” I countered.

“You don’t.”

He was right.

I didn’t want to admit it, but I also didn’t want to go to the fights.

“Alright, I’ll stay with Elwynne.”

“Thank you.” I could tell the words were foreign to him. He wasn’t someone who thanked people often, but he was trying for me.

And damn, I liked that.

Elwynne sat down across from me, and someone put a plate in front of her a moment later. She thanked them, which warmed me up to her pretty quickly.

Something about the way they’d spoken to each other irked me, though. Her leaning in... it made me curious. And irritated. And... well, I still refused to call it possessive.

“You’re not interested in Ravv romantically, right?” I asked her, deciding not to let my resentment build when I might have seen incorrectly.

Her eyebrows shot upward. “Veil, no.”

I waited for an explanation.

Her lips slowly stretched in a smile. “You’re possessive of him already.”

“I’m choosing not to call it that.” I took a bite of my food.

She laughed. “I’m not interested in him as anything but a friend. Ravv, Orvay, and I have been friends for so long that Ravv’s nearly a brother to me. Orv and I are somewhere between lovers and life partners, anyway. We’ve spent every eclipse together over the past few centuries.”

That made me feel slightly better. “Orvay is Ravv’s left-hand man?”

She grinned. “Yes. Say that to his face when you meet him.”

Her expression was so contagious that I found myself grinning too.

Maybe Elwynne wasn’t so bad.

We headed out as soon as we were done eating, and spent the day wandering the city. Jirev was massive, with a huge marketplace full of shops.

We chatted as we walked around trying a ton of different foods, and Elwynne told me stories about the battles she, Ravv, and Orvay had fought. She bought me three dresses that fit and some more undergarments too, thankfully. I shared stories about my time in the cellar, laughing about Jern and Gora’s antics, and didn’t touch on anything before that time in my life.

Ravv ended up staying at the events for most of the day to keep the peace, and though the handprint on my shoulder throbbed a bit at our distance, I ignored the pain. He checked in a few times to make sure I was doing alright, and met up with us for lunch, but otherwise gave me the space I requested.

By the time we finally retreated back to the castle, I was exhausted. I fell asleep the moment my head hit the pillow, barely stirring when Ravv slipped

into bed with me and pulled my body to his.

The next day went the same, with Elwynne and I chatting and exploring.

But after lunch, Ravv's mind touched mine and asked me to find him. Elwynne led me to the location he named—a building not far from the castle—and when we got there, we found all three of the kings waiting, along with the other humans.

All three men were equally tall and intimidating, though they looked different. Vayme had brown hair and tan skin, was the only one with a beard (though it was trimmed short), and his hair was longer than the other two men's, falling all the way to his shoulders. I had to agree with Kaelle that he did look the scariest, though not by much.

“What are you angry about?” I asked Ravv, noticing the rage in his eyes.

“You’re going to start training.” Even in our minds, his jaw sounded clenched.

“And that makes you mad because...”

“Because I don’t like the idea of other humans swinging swords at you.”

Right.

Should’ve expected that one.

“It’s alright, I can probably cook them if they try to hurt me,” I said to lighten the mood.

“Your magic doesn’t work fast enough. We need to try to control it, too.”

“I don’t think it’s controllable. Nissa mentioned that she can’t control hers either, and I noticed Kaelle’s hair blowing around, which didn’t seem intentional.”

Ravv's gaze grew slightly curious, and I realized that at least a little of his anger was just a front to distance himself from the other kings and seem like more of a threat. *“Perhaps humans weren’t meant to hold magic as strong as yours.”*

“Seems likely,” I admitted.

“You still need to prepare for the fight we’re using as an excuse for having you here,” he told me. *“You’ll be training a lot until I’m confident you can go into the cage without dying.”*

“Thanks for believing in me,” I drawled back.

The kings put swords in our hands, and told us to fight each other to show them what we could do.

We exchanged blank stares.

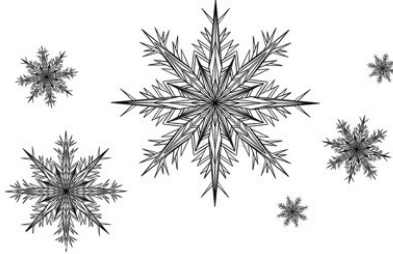
Those swords were too damn heavy.

They finally decided to start from the basics, and had us run through hour after hour of fighting positions.

My body was screaming by the time we went back to the castle for dinner and sleep, and I collapsed in bed afterward without so much as a word to Ravv.

CHAPTER 12

LAELI



The next two weeks passed in a whirlwind of food and training. We didn't see any sign of the magical assassins hunting the kings, thankfully.

Ravv gave me the space I asked for, and I appreciated it.

I also appreciated the comfortable feel of his skin against mine when we went to bed every night. And the way he massaged my scalp when I let him wash my hair.

My muscles were still sore when we finally entered the cage on the day of the fight the kings had planned, wearing the most ridiculous outfits I'd ever seen. They were literally metal lingerie, made with strips of metal that barely covered the important bits. We had small scarves of glittering fabric tied dramatically over our handprints, too.

Our swords were stupidly heavy, and though I'd gained plenty of weight with our constant eating, I was nowhere near the level of a fae warrior, nor would I ever be.

The crowd roared as we walked deeper into the cage, the sound nearly deafening. A fae man waited for us; he had announced our magic before we even entered.

Kaelle looked nauseous, so I leaned close to her and called out, "Are you

alright?”

“I don’t know.” Her gaze flitted around the massive crowds of fae in the stands. The stadium was so loud, I could barely hear her. The wind that constantly blew around her picked up, whipping all of our hair around our faces. “Something’s wrong,” she said, her voice barely audible.

“What’s going on?” Ravv growled into my mind. *“Why is her wind blowing harder?”*

“I’m not sure.”

“I’m getting you out of there.”

“I’ll be fine.” I stopped him quickly, before he did something to make the rest of the fae suspicious about the possibility of a bond.

The announcer dragged us into place until the three of us faced each other, and then he called for the fight to start with a booming yell.

We all stayed where we were while he crossed the cage, then shut the door.

One of Kaelle’s hands lifted to her head, pressing to her temple as she leaned her weight against the sword she held in her other hand. Her face was twisted, like she was in pain.

Slowly, the crowd’s roaring quieted.

Nissa looked at me.

I had no idea what was wrong with Kaelle, but everyone was staring at us. If we didn’t do something fighting-related, they were going to get mad. And then they were going to get suspicious.

I shrugged at Nissa, and lifted my sword.

She did the same.

Before we could take a swing at each other, Kaelle whispered, “He’s here.”

Her magic whipped around all of us, but I paid no attention to the way it slapped my skin.

The crowd was silent.

“Who?” I asked her.

She breathed, “One of the assassins. I can feel him.”

Nissa’s eyes went wide. “How can you feel him? How do you know?”

“I see and feel auras,” Kaelle admitted. “My wind comes from them. And his aura is *terrible*.”

Ravv demanded to know what was going on again, but I didn’t answer him.

My confidence was draining away, my body starting to freeze up the way it had when I was captured in the Sands.

The fear hit me hard—so hard I could barely breathe.

“What are you waiting for?” Ravv shouted from the stands. Kaelle’s wind was so loud he couldn’t hear us. He didn’t know there was an assassin there—he didn’t know he needed to run.

“What do we do?” Nissa demanded.

“I don’t know.” Kaelle looked just as terrified as I felt.

I tried to shove my fear away to talk to Ravv, to get him out of there, but couldn’t make my mind connect with his.

“We need to get everyone out,” I finally told them, my desperation swelling. My arms were already steaming; soon, they’d be flaming.

“Oh, it’s far too late for that,” a sexy male voice purred. A man appeared next to Kaelle, and I jerked away, stumbling backward. “Which one of you is connected to Kier Jirev?”

The man was gorgeous, with tan skin and wavy dark hair, and he had to be at least a little bigger than the fae kings.

Despite his beauty, his eyes were glowing red, and his lips lifted in a wicked grin.

He was looking for Kier... which meant he wasn’t the Demon hunting Ravv.

But veil, he was still right in front of us.

“The Beast of the Endless Wilds,” I whispered.

I didn’t hear a peep from the stands.

“*Get out now,*” Ravv snarled into my mind, but I didn’t move.

I *couldn’t* move.

The Beast’s grin widened, flashing me a glimpse of his fangs. “Hello, sweetheart. Is Kier using your magic to hide his?”

I didn’t say a damn thing.

Shouting erupted above us, and the fae in the stands poured out. They were warriors, but no warrior could compare to the elves’ assassins, if the legends were true.

The door to the cage started rattling like someone was trying to get through it. The Beast must’ve locked it from the inside, trapping us in and keeping everyone else out.

Kaelle’s wind had graduated to a ferocious storm, whipping at my fire and making the flames swell larger.

She started to say something, but Nissa blurted,

“I’m mated to Kier. It’s me.”

The Beast’s grin grew wicked. “See how easy that was?”

My magic flared bigger, brighter, and hotter.

I couldn’t see a damn thing, and stayed where I was as my flames grew, and grew.

I’d never lost control so completely while wind blew like that, dragging my fire higher and higher.

The Beast called out above the wind and flames, “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 fire kept burning.

The wind grew so strong that I had to move to keep myself upright, though my flames concealed everything around me.

“Find the door, Lae. Find the door, and get it open,” Ravv commanded me. His anger was gone, and a lethal calm was in its place.

He was locked out.

I saw some part of the cage in front of me, and surged toward it. My hands collided with thick bars, but I still couldn’t see through the damn fire.

It didn’t feel like a door.

I started moving, trying to feel around in hopes that I’d find it. The Beast still had Nissa—but if I couldn’t see the damn door, I couldn’t see the assassin, either.

“Stay as far from the Beast as you can,” Ravv ordered.

He must’ve gotten into the room.

The wind started to die down, and I let out a shaky breath as the mass of my flames slowly started to shrink. I turned my back to the cage’s bars and remained where I was, hoping it could keep me safe.

Finally, the flames shrank enough that I could see.

Nissa was unconscious, her shoulder bleeding and her skin an unnatural gray.

The Beast moved so fast—and he was close to me. Close enough that I could do something about it.

He had started as a shifter before the elves’ magic changed him, which meant he wasn’t fireproof, unlike the Demon and the Monster.

Despite the fear in my chest, the panic in my lungs, and the way I could feel my energy fading as my fire literally burned it away, I could do something to help.

With a yell, I launched myself at the Beast as he ran toward someone else.

Time seemed to slow as I crashed into him.

Ravv roared behind me.

The Beast let out an unearthly scream.

Ravv grabbed me, yanking me to his chest and snarling into my ear and mind.

The words didn't register.

Nothing registered except that same damn fear.

It was overwhelming. It made my throat hurt, and my chest ache. It made my mind spin. Veil, it made *everything* spin.

I closed my eyes against the terror, not hearing anything despite the voices sounding around me.

Finally, Ravv's chest rumbled against me as he said to someone else, "I'll follow the Beast's scent trail to make sure he's gone. You'll need to check the city for signs of the Demon and the Monster."

I wanted to say no.

I wanted to ask him to stay with me.

His chest rumbled again as he asked Elwynne to take me back to the castle, and she agreed.

Ravv's lips brushed my ear, and his mind touched mine as he murmured, "*Once, when Gleam and I went fishing, she fell through a hole in the ice and landed in the water. She's a fierce warrior, but she may also very well be the clumsiest idorr you'll ever meet.*"

I recognized what he was doing immediately:

Telling me stories about fishing simply because I told him reading aloud would help me.

And veil, maybe it didn't make much sense, but his words distracted me enough that my flames started to retreat just slightly.

“I need you to stop burning so you can get back to our room, where you’ll be safe,” he said gently, before continuing the story. *“There was a massive sea dragon just below the ice when she fell in. My heart nearly stopped when I saw it—but Gleam just swam down and rubbed against her, greeting the damned shifter like they were old friends.”*

My flames faded bit by bit as he continued, until finally, they went out completely.

I was still steaming, and I was fairly confident I’d be hot to the touch, but Ravv didn’t waste any time. He handed me to Elwynne as soon as my fire was gone.

She tucked me against her chest as she slid onto the back of her bonded idorr, Swift, and he ran.

Elwynne’s skin was red when she finally put me down in my room in the castle.

I crashed to my knees, and my flames erupted again.

“I’m so sorry,” I whispered to her, my eyes shining with tears. I was shaking—I was pretty sure I was shaking.

“It’s not your fault,” she said, her gaze steady and clear despite the burns she wore.

“It is.”

I was the one who couldn’t control my magic.

I was the one who couldn’t control my *fear*.

“You need to find something for your burns,” I told her. “And for Swift’s, if he has any.”

She shook her head.

I glowered at her. “Get something for your damn burns, Elwynne. I won’t be able to live with myself if you don’t.”

She hesitated for a long moment.

Swift finally nudged her arm, and then she dipped her head in a nod, and left.

My body quivered as I struggled to my feet and crossed the room. My hands trembled as I slid the lock into place, shutting it properly, like Elwynne had taught me a few days earlier.

With the door secure and my body still blazing fire, I finally stumbled over to the bathing pool and slipped inside.

Tears trailed down my cheeks, and my body shook with the weight of my terror.

My chest rose and fell rapidly, my heart beating like a drum in my ears.

I was fine.

But the memories the fear brought back...

They were not fine.

My family's home on fire.

The burns on my father's skin as he dropped me in the hay, staring at me with fear in his eyes.

The swords that had cut down the people I loved.

The dirt and stone cellar I'd been thrown into all alone, after losing everyone and everything I loved.

I squeezed my eyes shut and prayed—I prayed to the veil, to any of the lost gods who might still be listening, to *anyone* who could possibly hear me.

I prayed that they'd take my memories, that they'd erase my past, that they'd finally let me forget the horrors I had lived through.

But the memories didn't fade.

The tears continued to fall.

And the agony in my mind, in my heart, in my chest... it lingered.

Eventually, my fire burned through the remainder of my energy and knocked me out.

Through the haze of my exhaustion, I thought I heard someone pounding on the door.

Then I thought I heard Ravv snarling into my mind.

And then there was just warmth, and silence.

Everything was blurry when I opened my eyes.

I found myself cradled in Ravv's arms, tucked beneath blankets that smelled like us.

Memories flooded my mind again, and water pooled in my eyes.

"Lae," Ravv's voice and chest rumbled.

I squeezed my eyes shut and said nothing.

He lifted me to a seated position. I opened my eyes just a crack, and my amber orbs met his worried, intense purples as he growled, "You need to eat."

I wasn't hungry.

It might've been the first time for that, ever.

I didn't say a word as he set a plate on my lap.

Or as he lifted the food to my mouth and commanded me to take a bite.

Or as I noticed the broken doors positioned over the doorway.

I did as he said, slowly eating as much as I could manage before my nausea returned.

My eyes leaked tears every now and then, and Ravv silently wiped them away without questioning them.

He thought I was crying because of the Beast, and I didn't correct him.

I couldn't bring myself to consider saying the words aloud.

So I ate, and then I slept.

He held me through as much of it as he could, updating me about Nissa's recovery when I asked, and telling me that I was stronger than I realized.

I didn't disagree vocally... but my mind was another matter.

A few days passed before Ravv finally murmured to me that it was time to go back to Loire.

He lifted me onto Gleam's back, and followed us out of the castle on foot.

I didn't say goodbye to anyone.

He didn't ask me to.

I buried my face in Gleam's fur when Ravv mounted behind me, and his body pressed to mine as he leaned against me.

Vayme had taken Kaelle to find the elves, and threaten them with war against all three fae kingdoms if they couldn't protect the kings against the assassins they created. The elves had agreed, and sent a handful of their people back to protect us.

The mysterious women traveled with us, all of them outfitted in flowy dresses and riding on the backs of idorr with female fae.

Ravv left me to my thoughts as we rode throughout the Wilds for the rest of that day, finally stopping for the night when both moons were shining their light through the trees.

He set me down on a sturdy rock and then left me for a few minutes. Elwynne and Gleam were both close, though Elwynne was chatting with someone I didn't know, and Gleam was already taking a nap.

I noticed a few of the fae eyeing me. Some looked curious—others looked stricken.

“Is there a reason your people are staring at me?” I asked Ravv, my voice quiet in his mind.

“I had to tell them about the bond after the Beast’s attack. They know we intend to let it break with the eclipse, so no one’s tried to kill us yet.”

Yet.

I didn’t love that.

My mind was still dark with the echoes of the memories I was trying to suppress, so I just said, “*Fantastic.*”

Ravv didn’t reply to that.

He sat down on the dirt beside me a few minutes later, handing me a small bag of various fruits and vegetables. “*Eat, Lae.*”

I wasn’t hungry, but it wasn’t worth the fight, so I ate what I could.

His lips were pressed in a tight line when I handed the bag back, but he didn’t ask if I was okay.

He still thought I was just afraid.

A fae woman wove through the crowd, bowing her head slightly when she approached us. The bow was for Ravv, of course. “The Demon was spotted flying overhead,” she said.

Ravv’s jaw clenched.

The blood drained from my face.

I wasn’t ready to face another assassin.

The last one brought back memories that had nearly broken me, and he hadn’t even hurt me.

I didn’t want to know what the next one could do to me. And if he actually managed to kill Ravv... I’d be entirely alone again.

“The elves’ shield is holding?” he asked.

“For now.”

“How long will it hold?” I asked quietly.

“If the Demon attacks them, they don’t know,” the fae woman admitted.

Veil.

“It’ll hold.” Ravv’s voice was steely.

Since he was the king, I supposed he needed to be the voice of hope and whatnot.

The woman dipped her head again and slipped back through the crowd.

I didn’t bother disagreeing with Ravv’s statement. It wouldn’t do anything except make him angry, and I was tired of making him angry.

Veil, I was tired of everything.

Some part of me ached to go home, but I had no home. I didn’t have a family to return to, or a safe place to hide.

“In exchange for our bond, I’d like a house in your city after the eclipse,” I told Ravv. “Or a ride back to Jirev, if it’s safer there or they have a place for me. I don’t care how big it is, or even if there’s any furniture—I just want a place to call home.”

“Of course.” He didn’t hesitate to agree, and some of my tension dissipated. *“As long as you’ll forgive me for dragging you into this mess.”*

My lips curved upward, just the tiniest bit. *“I can try.”*

“Good enough.” He paused for a moment, then added, *“You’ll need to stay with me in the castle until the eclipse, though. After our bond is broken, you’ll be safe.”*

Even if I wasn’t safe, I wouldn’t be his problem anymore.

I supposed that was all he could offer me. He’d mentioned possibly wanting us to be life partners, but I was pretty sure that was just a possessive, heat of the moment thing. He didn’t know me very well, so even if he was truly interested in me, it was just because of the bond.

“That’s fair,” I agreed.

A few other fae came to talk to Ravv about their planned route for the next day, so he built me an ice shelter before he went off to talk to them.

I eyed Elwynne, who was chatting with someone else, and debated going over to talk. When she noticed me watching her, she waved me over. I gave her a small smile and shook my head, then made my way into the shelter and curled up on the ice.

Ravv closed it without joining me, and my throat swelled. He needed to act like he wasn't interested in me romantically while we were traveling with his warriors, so I'd be sleeping alone.

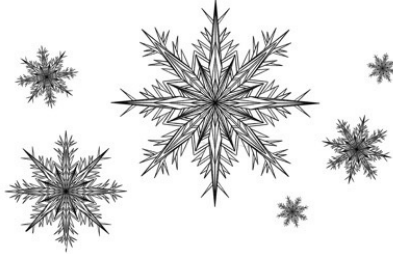
They might have already started wondering if we had feelings for each other, but I didn't know.

And some part of me was too worried about rejection to ask him if he was coming to share the shelter.

So I just tried to get comfortable on the ice floor, and when that didn't work, I watched the ice drip until I couldn't keep my eyes open anymore.

CHAPTER 13

LAELI



The next two days passed incredibly slowly.

The temperature gradually fell as we traveled through the Endless Wilds. We reached the frosty shore where the Wilds met the Glittering Sea that night, and I slept alone.

The next day, we filed onto a slim ice bridge that led toward the huge, frozen castle I could see a long way in the distance. I kept an eye out for the sea dragons that were supposed to live beneath the nearly-frozen water, but didn't see any.

The Demon flew slow, lazy circles over our heads the entire time we were on the bridge, and all of us were tense and quiet as the idorr ran through the day. His glittering red scales caught my eye and terrified me, but thankfully, he hadn't made a move against the elves' shield yet.

"We may need to leave at some point so we can attempt to lose him in the Wilds," Ravv admitted to me, as we finally neared the ice castle. It was even bigger up close, and I couldn't look away from the thick walls that looked like they wrapped around the whole city.

The bridge seemed to lead straight inside the castle. Because we were at the back of the group, Ravv's warriors had been pouring in for nearly an hour by the time we finally made it inside.

"Could the Demon melt the entire city?" I asked him, as Gleam carried us through the gate.

“No. Loire’s ice was enchanted by the elves the same way Jirev’s trees were.”

That was a relief, I supposed.

I took in the castle’s first massive room with a bit of surprise. The structure itself was made of smooth ice, of course, but thick, cozy-looking rugs stretched over much of the floors, and colorful landscape paintings hung at random on the walls around what seemed to be... the throne room?

There were a pair of frozen thrones pushed up against one of the walls like an afterthought.

The castle’s gates shut behind us, and Ravv slipped off Gleam’s back.

I glanced over my shoulder at him while he strode down one of the hallways, his mind brushing mine with the command, *“Rest. I’ll find you when I can.”*

That was a dismissal if I’d ever heard one.

Gleam carried me down a different hallway, moving faster than I expected. She barged into a room, dropped me on a bed, and then called out, *“I’m going to Coarse. Lock the door behind me,”* before vanishing.

The room suddenly seemed very, very empty.

And I suddenly felt very, very alone.

Theoretically, Jern and Gora were in the city. Part of me wanted to go out and look for them, too.

But with everyone knowing about my connection to Ravv, it likely wasn’t safe for me to go out alone.

I tucked my feet beneath the blankets and lowered my head to the pillow.

When I closed my eyes, all I saw was flames.

Veil, I needed to get my mind out of the past. I needed to find a way to shut my memories out again, to *forget*.

But it had been ten years, and I still hadn’t forgotten... which made me think I probably never would.

So I opened my eyes and peeked around the room. It was simple but cozy, with a huge, thick rug in a pretty shade of dark blue that reflected on the icy walls, making them look a little bluish too.

Other than the huge bed I occupied, and the rug, there was no other furniture. I could see two doors, which I assumed led to a closet and a bathroom. There were a few calm landscape paintings hanging up, showing images of the glacier the castle had been built on, and the ocean.

There were no books, not that I'd risk reading them if there were, and no other distractions either.

Which meant I needed to leave.

But I didn't want to risk my life, obviously.

So, after a few minutes of debating, I finally reached out to Ravv. I felt his attention the moment I did.

"I need you to find Jern and Gora for me," I told him.

"No." He didn't even consider it.

"I'm not tired enough to fall asleep right now, and I'm not staying in here alone all night. You said you would treat me better; this is your chance." I felt a little bad for tapping into his guilt, but he had left without a real explanation, and he was the reason my life was in danger in the first place.

"It's not safe for you to leave, and I don't want them in our room. Gleam went to Coarse?"

"Yes."

He grumbled but didn't sound surprised in the slightest. *"I'll send Elwynne to you."*

"I'd rather see my friends," I told him, my defenses rising a bit. *"I need to know they're okay."*

"We can find them first thing in the morning, but I'm being briefed about the war right now."

Veil.

I'd forgotten about the war, somehow.

"Elwynne needs to be there, then." I started closing myself off. *"I'll be fine alone."*

He swore. *"I'm sorry, Lae."*

I pulled away from him, then slipped off the bed. After I locked the door, I padded to the bathroom. My dress hit the floor as I walked, my toes digging into the soft carpet, and my undergarments followed.

There was no tub in the bathroom, just a large shower. Our room in Kier's castle had a shower too, so I knew of them, but I'd never used one before.

I watched the strange, large glass shape protruding from the ceiling as I turned the lever to start the water's flow. A moment later, water was raining on me. Though it didn't feel cold thanks to Ravv's magic, it didn't feel warm either.

Closing my eyes, I focused on the sensation. It was strangely soothing.

My body relaxed a bit as the water washed over me, wiping away two and a half days' worth of travel. I had survived—I was fine.

The Demon was probably still flying above our heads, but I would be okay.

He wasn't after me, anyway.

Ravv was in danger, but... well, I still wasn't entirely sure where I stood with him. He seemed to want me, but he didn't really know me, and I wasn't sure if I *wanted* him to know me.

He was grumpy and often angry, but fiercely protective.

He was rough and harsh, but gentle when it mattered.

He was demanding and insistent, but he...

There didn't seem to be a redeeming quality paired with those ones. Maybe confidence? The veil knew he had enough certainty in himself to fuel half a dozen other men.

Despite all of his negative qualities, the good ones seemed to outweigh the

bad.

That could be because he saved me, though. As much as I hated to admit it, he *had* rescued me, and that would undoubtedly color my view of him.

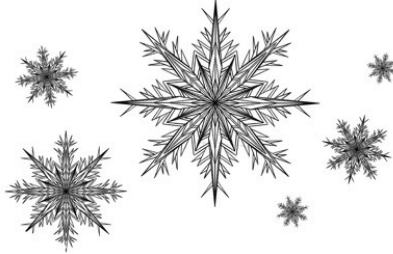
Perhaps when I was back with Jern and Gora, they could help me look at the situation objectively.

I scrubbed my skin and hair before drying off and walking back to the bed, where I collapsed in an absolutely unattractive heap of wet hair and hot skin and fell asleep.

My problems could wait until the next day.

CHAPTER 14

LAELI



Sunlight woke me in the morning.

It was incredibly disorienting to wake up to that, considering my years in the cellar and then my weeks living in a tree in Jirev.

I liked it, though.

The light made the icy walls and ceiling glitter, and my eyes trailed over the gleam of them before landing on the bed beside me.

Empty, and unwrinkled.

Ravv hadn't come to bed.

Insecurity thrummed unevenly in my chest.

Was he with another woman?

Veil, that was ridiculous to even consider.

But... still.

I had no idea what he was like in his kingdom, or whether or not we would have any kind of relationship at all.

My gut told me to distance myself further from him before he hurt me any more than he already had. I put on a tough façade, but it was just a mask. Beneath it, I was deeply afraid that I would lose everything again. I didn't have much, but I had started to feel like I had Ravv.

Veil, I didn't want to lose him.

But was I willing to fight for him? Was I willing to push him to make time for me? Or to try to get to know him more?

That, I didn't know.

"You're alive, right?" I finally asked him.

"I'm fine." His voice was weary. *"The war grew worse while we were gone, so we've been forming a plan. I'll take you to find Gora and Jern as soon as I get out of here."*

"Do what you need to. I can figure it out on my own," I said, slipping out of bed. My clothes were still on the floor—and still dirty.

"If you leave that room without me, I'll freeze you to the damn bed," he growled into my mind.

"You tried that already, with the floor in Jirev. I'll just melt your chains again."

"Don't, Lae. My people are not trustworthy."

"You do realize that probably says something about you as their leader?" I shot back.

"I'm aware that I'm a problem." His anger was fading. *"Unfortunately, the problem they chose. I'll end the meeting as soon as possible so I can get back to the room; don't do anything you'll regret. Gleam is probably in her room across the hallway—wake her and Coarse if you have to, but don't leave alone. I'm sorry to make you wait."*

"You've been apologizing a lot lately."

"Only to you. As far as everyone else knows, I regret nothing."

My lips curved upward just slightly as he pulled away, probably to focus on his meeting again.

There was nothing to do while I waited, though.

Nothing to occupy my mind.

And my smile disappeared as my thoughts slipped back to the past.

Back to the flames.

To the screams.

To the bodies.

A shudder tore through me.

Distraction—I needed a distraction.

All I had was myself. And I—

I pulled a pillow over my head and forced myself to count the seconds of my breaths.

In...2...3...4...

Out...2...3...4...

In...2...3...4...

Out...2...3...4...

Eventually, the panic subsided.

I continued focusing on my breaths as I waited for Ravv.

Veil, the way I was dealing with my past just seemed to be getting worse. What was I supposed to do about that?

The door rattled a bit when the king finally tugged on it. “*Unlock it, Lae.*”

I let out a long breath.

It was fine.

I was going to be fine.

Slipping out of bed, I padded over to the door. My hands shook as I undid the lock.

Ravv pushed the door open and stepped inside, then took one look at me before he wrapped me in a hug.

My body seemed to deflate as he gripped me against his chest. The bedroom door was still open, but he didn't give a damn. My eyes watered at the warm comfort of his hug.

"I'm sorry that took so long," he said into my hair.

"It's okay," I whispered.

It wasn't okay.

I liked him more than I wanted to admit, and he could never put me first. His kingdom would always be his top priority, and veil, I was too much of a mess to be okay with being the second thing someone worried about. I was already that with Jern and Gora, and it was almost as lonely as being completely on my own.

If I could just keep my distance from him until after the eclipse, I could have my own place. I'd have time to move on from Ravv, and time to distance myself from the shitty memories the Beast had dredged up too.

...assuming the Demon didn't kill us first.

I didn't want to consider that option, though.

"What happened with the war?" I asked.

"The cult moved against the mated pairs and managed to break through their city's walls in their latest attack. The mated fae slaughtered the cultists when they came in, razing their numbers. There can't be many of them left at this point. But the cult killed two of the city's fae—one was a child."

"Veil."

"Many of my warriors are trying to persuade me to move against the cult. A war on two sides would be harder for them to fight, and we could strengthen the gates of the mated."

"Assuming none of the cultists managed to fool you into believing they're on your side."

"Exactly." He slid a hand through my hair slowly, and I squeezed my eyes shut at the peaceful bliss of the feeling. "The bonded idorr of cultists almost

always abandon them after they've killed a mated fae, but it's not a certainty. A few of the idorr agree with them, which makes it difficult to tell friend from foe."

I could imagine.

"What you need is a way to destroy all of them at once," I murmured. "Like... a really big fire."

Ravv chuckled. "You're not getting involved in my war, Lae. My role is to protect you, not to risk your life."

"My life's already at risk. You saw the Demon flying above us just as much as I did."

His humor faded. "We have a plan for him too, now."

"What is it?" I lifted my face, meeting his gaze.

"We wait for him to attack. When he does, he faces the fury of an army of fae. Even a dragon can't survive our wrath."

"Aren't dragon scales impenetrable?"

"There are solutions one can coat their weapons with to cut through scales. We already have some hidden away in case the sea dragons decide to go to war with us, so we're ready."

I nodded, biting my lip.

There were many ways that plan could go wrong, but what was the alternative?

I didn't know of one, so I had no choice but to go along with it.

"Let's find your friends," he said, though he was already combing his fingers slowly through my hair again.

It was on the tip of my tongue to tell him we needed to stay in so he could rest, but the closer we grew emotionally, the more it would hurt when we separated.

So, I kept my mouth shut as he released my hand and led me out of the room.

“My male, you mean?” I teased him lightly as we walked, bringing back one of our first conversations in the mountains after he’d freed me.

He chuckled. *“Only if you want him to die.”*

I rolled my eyes at him, though my lips curved upward a little.

Ravv led me through a few hallways before we finally emerged from the castle. All three of our suns shined down on us, and I found myself squinting against the light. It felt good on my skin, but it would take time for me to readjust to it after so long in Jirev. I’d grown to like the sunlight during our days traveling through the Human Lands and the Timeless sands, so I hoped I’d start to like it again.

Ravv said, *“The idorr want to meet you, as well. Many of them are without companions because most of our fae stopped reproducing. The mated pairs won’t allow them in their city without being already bonded to one of those pairs, for their children’s safety.”*

My stomach curled with excitement. *“Do you think I can bond with one of them?”*

Veil, to have a companion...

It would change everything for me.

The fae could rely on their bonded beasts. They took care of each other, and became each other’s closest friends and allies. Having a bonded idorr would mean having protection and security, as well as never being so entirely alone again.

“Kier’s human bonded with an esu, so I don’t see why not.” He continued walking, both of us leaving distance between our bodies so no one would overthink if they saw us together.

My hope had returned though, fiercer than it had been in a long, long time.

My bond with an idorr wouldn’t break when the eclipse came around. It would be unbreakable, and soul-deep.

And damn, I wanted it.

“Let’s go to the idorr first. Jern and Gora can wait.”

His lips curved upward as he glanced at me. *“Alright.”*

There weren’t many fae in the streets as we made our way through. I assumed most of them were resting or just enjoying being home after so many weeks in Jirev.

The cultists lived somewhere outside the city, according to Ravv. Since the mated pairs lived beneath it, the king’s warriors were the only ones who lived inside the walls.

A flash of crimson caught my eye, and my excitement faded as I saw the Demon fly over our heads. His movements were slow and lazy, as if he was making an effort to let us know that he was confident he could kill us at any moment.

“The elves are still holding the shield, right?” I asked Ravv.

“Yes. They’ve been put in a protected wing of the castle, with guards that we trust implicitly. I doubt even the cultists would try to take the elves down though; no one wants to deal with the Demon.”

I didn’t blame them, either.

“This section of the city belongs to the idorr,” he told me as we approached a large street. *“Most of them are mated at this point, and the mated ones share homes the way fae who are life partners do.”*

“Where do Coarse and Gleam live?”

“They have a home here, but they spend most nights snuggled in my bed.” Ravv’s words were a grumble, but I could tell he wasn’t bitter or annoyed. He probably liked having two big fuzzy pillows to cuddle with. *“They have a room across the hall from mine, too. I assume they’re in there right now, but Gleam’s still asleep so I can’t ask.”*

We turned onto their street, and I stopped in my tracks for a moment.

Despite the large houses on both sides of us, there were idorr outside. *Everywhere.*

Draped over stairs.

Plopped down on the street.

Walking around lazily.

I even saw two tiny ones wrestling. They must've been babies, and that about melted my heart. Maybe I'd bond to an adorable, tiny idorr.

"How do you choose one?" I asked Ravv.

"You don't choose. When it's right, your souls catch on each other and the bond forms. There's no fighting it or swaying it. Fate decides."

Well, I guessed that was good. If fate paired me with an idorr, it couldn't be angry with me, at least.

Probably.

A bunch of their heads lifted as they looked at us, and Ravv put a hand to my lower back, making sure I didn't stop.

"How long does it take for your souls to catch?"

"It can be instant, or it can take time."

Veil, that was nerve-wracking.

His hand remained on my back as we walked slowly through the town. When some of the idorr murmured friendly greetings, we greeted them back. I didn't feel any tug on my soul, unfortunately, even when the adorable furball cubs ran over.

Ravv crouched down to greet them, his expression soft as he scratched them behind the ears.

My heart melted a little at the sight, though I had to keep that quiet. I kneeled beside him, petting the babies too. One of them snuggled right up against me, and I smiled at the soft brush of fur.

"So if I don't bond with any of them today, it doesn't mean it's hopeless?" I asked.

“Not at all.”

I laughed as the cub I was petting started licking my arm, urging me to continue rubbing its fur.

“Aren’t you sweet?” I teased the little guy.

A soft nose brushed my shoulder as a large female idorr approached me. *“He hasn’t quite figured out how to communicate with the fae yet,”* she murmured.

Her voice was calm, her body relaxed.

Veil, I hoped she would bond with me. Or her soul would bond with mine, I supposed. I could use that level of quiet confidence in my life.

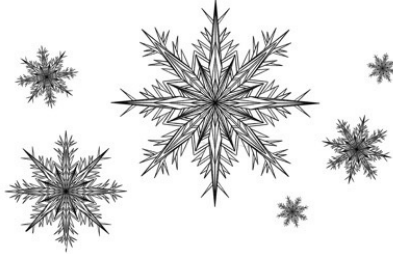
“Well, he’s beautiful,” I told her. Her eyes were soft as she sat down beside me and lowered her massive head to rest against my leg. I scratched her head with my free hand, and she closed her eyes as she relaxed.

After a few minutes, the cubs ran off to play together. A few more of the adults came over and plopped down beside us, so Ravv and I chatted with them. He told them about Jirev when they asked, and explained our bond, as well as the dragon over our heads. None of the idorr seemed very concerned about the Demon, but that didn’t surprise me since I’d seen how laid-back Gleam was.

My soul didn’t connect to any of the beasts’, so eventually, we thanked them for their company and headed out to find Gora and Jern.

CHAPTER 15

LAELI



“Vail, I’m tired of pretending not to like you,” Ravv grumbled to me, as we walked with an appropriate amount of space between our bodies.

“I don’t think you’re selling it well, either,” I agreed. “You’re not growling at me nearly as much as you used to.”

“I promised to be nicer. I’m not breaking the damn promise,” he growled back.

My lips curved upward slightly at the irony of his words paired with his growl.

“Where are Gora and Jern living?” I asked him.

“Coarse put them in one of the homes furthest from the cult and the mated fae. It’s on the east end of the city, overlooking the ocean. You’ll be a few houses down from them after the eclipse.”

My throat swelled slightly at his mention of my future without him.

I really needed to put more distance between us... I just didn’t want to.

“Can you show me my house?” I asked.

He agreed and tucked his hands in the pockets of his shorts.

My eyes scanned row after row of homes and shops, everything mixed

together as it lined the streets. The city seemed to go on forever, especially while we walked on foot. *“Are all of these homes full?”*

“No, only a fraction of them are occupied. The city was built to house growing families and a thriving society long before the cult came into play. It’ll be centuries before we build it back to what it was, even if we manage to clear out the rest of the cult and get the mated fae living back on the surface.”

I saw everything with new eyes, knowing all of that.

Suddenly, the massive city and rows of homes seemed more sad and eerie than hopeful.

There had to have been fae living there, once. The streets must’ve been full at some point.

The fae may have enjoyed the fighting, but the horrors of war were still horrors.

“Are there many fae where I’m going to live?” I asked him.

“Plenty. It’s where the strongest of our kingdom’s warriors live; the home was mine, before Ria tried to kill our parents and I took the throne.”

My head jerked toward him, my eyebrows lifting in surprise. *“You’re giving me your old home?”*

He lifted a shoulder. *“I don’t need it. I haven’t lived there in centuries.”*

Right.

It wasn’t really his home. He wouldn’t have given it to me if it was. His feelings for me were only because of the bond, and they would end with the eclipse, too.

If only I could figure out a way to stop developing feelings for him...

We continued walking, both of us lost in our thoughts. I itched to take his hand, but it was still buried in his pocket, which was probably a good thing anyway.

My stomach rumbled as we neared the houses, and Ravv growled at me.

“You didn’t have breakfast?”

“Someone abandoned me in a room all night and insisted I stay put.”

His anger vanished, though his jaw clenched. *“I’m sorry.”*

“Stop apologizing to me. If you want to be better, be better.”

He jerked his head in a nod.

I hesitated, and then added, *“Thanks for caring enough to apologize, though.”*

He nodded again, the movement slower and softer.

“This is Jern and Gora’s house,” he told me as we stepped up to a thick, icy door.

I rapped my fists against it and winced at the hardness. It may as well have been stone.

I heard murmuring on the other side of the door, and then it opened just a crack.

Gora’s suspicious eyes met mine—and then relaxed. She tugged the door open, and Jern yanked me in for a tight hug.

“Veil, we were worried about you!” he exclaimed, pulling away to look me up and down.

Physically, I knew I looked fine.

Emotionally, the last few weeks had been tremendous. And not in a good way, for the most part.

At least I was out of the cellar. I had to keep reminding myself of that.

“You look great!” he added, eyes bright and happy.

“So do you. Look, you’ve finally got some squish!” Both of them had filled out a bit, and it made me happy for them. They had on long sleeves and pants, much warmer clothes than me or any of the fae. Gora didn’t match the typical fae women’s style, but I imagined short dresses were far too cold for

someone who wasn't bonded with a fae.

Jern grinned. "Finally!"

He dragged me in for another hug, and Gora squeezed us both.

It was strange to see them clean. To see them *happy*.

"Show me your house," I told them. "Tell me everything. Do you have jobs? What have you been doing?"

"*I'll wait outside*," Ravv said, staying on the doorstep when Jern shut the door. "*Ask them for food*."

"The journey here was long and painful," Gora admitted. "But the fae have been friendlier than we expected. They gave us this place to live, and the first week, they kept it stocked with food for us. They asked us to help out on their farm, and have been paying us plenty to do so."

"We eat like kings," Jern agreed, still grinning.

My stomach chose that moment to rumble.

"Speaking of *kings*..." Gora eyed me.

"We're just friends. *Barely* friends," I said quickly.

"I was going to ask if he's been feeding you."

Oh.

"He usually stuffs me so full of food that I'm sick. We just got back here, though, so he's still trying to figure out the dynamic."

"Then we get the pleasure of feeding you," Jern winked at me.

Ravv growled into my mind, and I fought a snort. "Tell me about your farming."

Jern started throwing some food together for me. I hadn't watched anyone cook since I was a child, so I found myself watching his movements. Something about the motion was familiar and peaceful, though it brought back memories.

So many memories.

I tried hard to focus on their stories, but my thoughts were going back to the damn past again.

I could nearly envision my mother in Jern's place, cooking as she told stories with a smile on her face.

My throat swelled with emotion, but I forced myself to act like nothing was wrong.

Jern and Gora didn't know my story. They didn't know what had happened to my family, or how I had ended up in the cellar. I'd heard them whisper about their own pasts together, but it wasn't something I'd ever discussed with either of them.

Still, I was fine.

Everything was fine.

Their food couldn't compare to what the chefs in Jirev made, but I appreciated it anyway. They had to buy their own ingredients and figure everything out themselves, and I respected that.

I'd need to learn how to cook, too.

And get a job.

Veil, what would the fae let me do? I didn't have any skills, and my magic was more of a liability than anything, especially around things like plants, which could burn. There was no reason ice fae would need a human with fire magic. I certainly wasn't a warrior, either.

My bittersweet memories pushed that worry away for another day while I continued chatting with the couple as if nothing was wrong.

Eventually, I reached out to Ravv, to make sure he was doing alright. *"Is your ass numb yet?"*

There was no response.

Fear clenched my stomach as I thanked the couple and slipped out of their house. That fear heightened when I found Ravv sitting a few feet from the entrance, with his back to the house and his head on his shoulder. I dropped to my knees beside him and put a hand on his throat, checking his pulse.

It beat rhythmically against my fingers, and I let out a relieved breath.

Sleeping.

He was just sleeping.

“*Ravv.*” I brushed my hand against his face, but he didn’t stir. “*Ravv,*” I said a bit louder, speaking into his mind again.

He finally lifted his head, cracking tired eyes at me and frowning. “What happened?”

“You fell asleep.” I brushed a few of his messy curls off his forehead without thinking, and then withdrew my hand quickly.

My gaze darted around us, but I didn’t see anyone else. That didn’t necessarily mean they weren’t there or watching.

“You can show me my house another day,” I told him, pulling my hand back and standing up.

He looked exhausted, and proved that he was when he didn’t argue with me.

We walked back to the castle quickly. I tried to memorize the route as we wove through streets until we finally reached the massive structure. Then, I tried to remember the path through the castle as we headed to Ravv’s room.

I still wasn’t tired when he locked the door behind us and climbed into bed, dragging me into his arms the moment he was settled. I was still feeling a bit dark after all those damn memories had filtered their way to the front of my mind.

“At least today’s over,” he said into my hair.

“It’s the middle of the day.”

“It’s yesterday for me.” His lips brushed my head once, and then again. “I’m glad you’re here.”

As insane as it probably made me, I was glad I was there too.

He fell asleep quickly, leaving me staring at the ceiling. More memories of my mother slowly filled my mind until tears leaked from my eyes. The salty water didn't wake Ravv up, thankfully, as I cried for the woman I'd loved so damn much.

Veil, life had been easier when I could pretend the past never happened.

I needed a way to separate myself from all of the memories that had started returning after we faced the Beast... but I was starting to think that was an impossibility. My memories demanded to be heard, and no one could listen but me.

Eventually, I managed to quiet my mind long enough for a nap, and sleep's embrace was exactly the blissful escape I needed.

"Move over," Gleam said into my mind, as she nudged me with her nose.

I lifted my head, meeting her gaze with bleary eyes.

She nudged me again, and I scooted back against Ravv.

His hand landed on my hip and squeezed roughly. I thought I heard him mumble something, but couldn't tell what he'd said as I pressed my backside to his erection and used it to guide him backward.

His hand on my hip tightened again, and he pulled me closer until his erection was nestled between my ass cheeks.

My body flushed with heat.

"Gleam is here," I said into his mind. *"Move over."*

He didn't budge.

"Move over, Ravv," I repeated, pushing against him.

He finally slid across the mattress, dragging me with him, then muttered something that sounded suspiciously like, *"reek,"* and promptly fell back asleep.

One furry body plopped down right up against me—and then another followed on the other side of it, shaking the bed.

I lifted my head and found myself eye-to-eye with Coarse.

He stared at me.

I stared back.

A few minutes passed before he closed his eyes. His head was resting on Gleam's back, and she was already snoring again.

No longer tired, I found myself staring up at the ceiling. My heart beat quickly, my mind returning to the past.

My mother's smile flashed through my thoughts.

My father's hug.

My sister's laugh.

Tears flooded my eyes, and I squeezed them shut.

Veil, I needed a distraction.

Sleeping more wasn't going to do me a damn bit of good.

My stomach rumbled, and I placed a hand on it, silently shushing it.

"I can take you to the dining hall," Coarse said, his voice low and rumbly in my mind.

My first instinct was to turn him down just because I remembered how angry he had been the first time I saw him. But, I wouldn't be able to find the food on my own, and it wasn't really safe for me to leave alone.

"Okay," I whispered back, wiping the tears quickly. *"Thank you."*

It took me a few minutes to wiggle my way out from between Ravv and Gleam, and Ravv made a few grumpy noises when I did, but I eventually broke free.

I wrapped my arms around my middle as I followed Coarse out of the room, both of us peeking both ways before we slipped into the hallway. The doors

swung shut silently behind us, and my feet didn't make a sound on the hard, smooth ice beneath them.

"Thank you," I repeated to Coarse, as we walked.

He only grunted in response. It wasn't much different than what Ravv would've done, I knew.

"Stay close," he told me as we turned a corner. *"I don't know who will be in there. When we're inside, I'll let you know which fae to avoid."*

It felt too repetitive to thank him again, so when he glanced at me, I nodded.

He didn't seem angry at all anymore. Just a bit growly, and I could handle growly.

We stepped into a room fairly similar to the dining hall back in Jirev, and I looked around at all of the tables scattered through the room. Most of them were made of ice, like the castle itself, but all of the chairs looked much softer and cozier. There were a few rugs on the floor too, warming the space up. Though I questioned the wisdom of a rug in a dining room, it brought the space to life in a way I appreciated.

...and worried I might burn.

Veil, I needed to keep my magic under control.

There were only a dozen or so fae in the room with us, alongside their idorr companions, so at least it wasn't too loud.

Elwynne waved me over, and relief spread through me.

She would prevent it from getting too awkward.

There was an open seat at her table, and one of the fae sitting beside her shifted seats at her request, his bonded idorr moving too. The man on her other side got up and walked through a door nearby, but his idorr remained sitting, so I assumed he was coming back.

I took the chair that had been vacated first, and Coarse folded himself into the space beside it, lowering his head to his paws but keeping his eyes opened and narrow.

He hadn't been joking when he mentioned protecting me.

Elwynne introduced me to everyone around the table, and the man sitting beside her eventually came back with a plate of food. He was just as massive as Ravv, with dark brown skin, and deep crimson hair braided and tied up in a huge bun. He gave me a dramatic bow as he did, winking. "It's a pleasure to meet you, my queen."

I snorted.

As if I'd ever be anyone's queen. Even if Ravv decided to pursue that whole life-partners thing, I would never be a ruler.

Elwynne gave the man a good-natured smack on the shoulder, grabbing the plate from his hands and setting it in front of me. "Sit down, Orvay."

He grinned as he stepped back around her and took his seat again. "Can't say I ever expected Ravv to fall for a squishy little human with red hair."

My face warmed at the insults.

"Sometimes it looks orange," Elwynne tossed back, winking at me. "And she didn't used to be squishy. I think he takes pride in the way he's fed her enough to soften her up."

Damn, I hadn't realized the conversation could get worse.

"It's just because of the bond," I admitted, tugging my sleeve down to show them the glowing handprint. I noticed fascination in most of their eyes, more than anything else. Tugging my sleeve back up was a bit of a war, since I'd gained weight and all. "There are no real emotions."

Most of them looked unconvinced, but thankfully, none of them asked any more questions.

"You've bonded with Coarse too?" one of the women asked, her voice curious.

Coarse growled.

"No," I said quickly. "He's just here to make sure no one tries to kill me since I snuck away from Ravv while he was sleeping."

Elwynne grinned, shaking her head at me. “Bad call, Laeli.”

“I couldn’t stay trapped in that room any longer. It was starting to feel like another prison.” I started on my food, hoping it would get the subject off of me.

No luck, though.

“What was it like to live in a cellar?” Orvay asked.

“About like you’d imagine. Dark. Humid. Uncomfortable. Lonely. Everything was made of stone, so I couldn’t burn it.”

Grimaces went around the table.

“One of the other human girls was trapped in a tower, though. I’d take a cellar over a tower.” I tried to lighten the mood, but the words were at least partially lie.

I was afraid of heights, but Nissa had been allowed outside. She’d felt the sun on her face and seen other people, even if they were unpleasant people to see.

I’d only had Jern and Gora. And they were great... just not great enough that I wanted to spend all of my time with them, without any kind of reprieve.

“Damn. What about the third?”

“Oh, Kaelle was in a cave. She actually liked it, though.” I changed the subject, before it turned to something in my past that I wasn’t willing to discuss. I could barely think about those memories, so sharing them was out of the question. “Which of the events did Loire win? No one told me.”

The question was like lighting a fire inside all the warriors. They launched into a debate over which events they’d won, versus which ones they would’ve won if they’d chosen the correct warrior to fight in it. According to them, they could’ve taken all of them.

The confidence didn’t surprise me at all after my experiences with Ravv, though. And anyway, it wouldn’t do them any good not to believe in themselves.

Eventually, the group of fae at the table disbanded. Some went to bed, others

went to train, and the rest went to a tavern.

Elwynne and Orvay remained seated though, their gazes lingering on me.

“Stop staring at me,” I grumbled at them, brushing hair out of my face.

“We’re not staring at you,” Orvay said with a grin. “We’re trying to figure out how long you have until Ravv wakes up and realizes you’re gone.”

Elwynne rolled her eyes at him. “He’s joking.”

He mouthed, “*I’m not joking.*”

“You’re right; he’ll be furious if he wakes up and I’m gone. I’d better get back.” I flashed them both quick smiles.

“I’d recommend a shower, too. You smell like a man.” Elwynne waved her hand in front of her nose.

I grimaced.

I’d hugged Jern, which I wouldn’t apologize for, but she was probably right that Ravv would be annoyed by his scent on my skin and in our bed when he finally woke up.

And I didn’t want to be alone in the silence with my thoughts, anyway. Showering would be a distraction, if just a short one.

“Thanks.” I nodded at Elwynne before I slipped away.

Coarse walked with me silently, leading the way when he realized I was still clueless as to where we were in the castle.

We got back to the king’s space without any problems, and I locked the door behind me again. It occurred to me that I shouldn’t have left it unlocked in the first place, and I felt a bit guilty.

Coarse plopped back down in bed with Gleam, and I remained by the doorway as I stared at Ravv for a moment.

Veil, he was gorgeous.

Made entirely out of chiseled muscle and battle-honed strength. Confident,

deadly, and sure.

What would I give to have even a fraction of those qualities?

More than I could even comprehend.

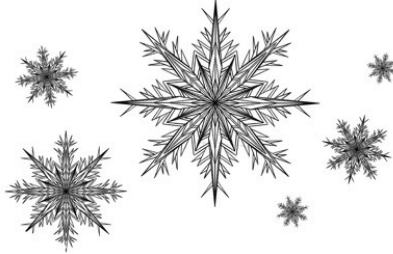
My eyes closed, and all I saw was fire.

I wasn't ready to sleep again.

Elwynne was right about me needing a shower, and showering definitely defeated climbing my *squishy human* self into bed with that gorgeous creature. So, I stripped and slipped beneath the water, embracing the warm, blissful peace of the shower.

CHAPTER 16

LAELI



My mind wandered as I scrubbed my hair.

Ravv and I hadn't had a chance to reestablish what our relationship truly was since the Beast's attack. It could have been gone completely, or it could be what it had been before the attack... which had been a tentative friendship bordering on more.

Most-likely, it was somewhere between those two options. Ravv had mentioned being tired of acting like he didn't want me, so he wasn't completely impervious to whatever he'd felt for me.

Despite that, whatever we were would end with the eclipse.

I closed my eyes and forced myself to accept the truth.

Ravv and I had no future.

Even if we were attracted to each other, there would be no real commitment. He would never choose me as his queen, and I could never let myself rely on him.

I'd survive. I had to believe that.

My mind went back to the fire, though.

Back to the loss, and the trauma.

I shuddered, still needing a distraction. I'd trapped myself in Ravv's room again, and there was no way out.

Which meant nothing to distract me.

Except...

My mind went back to the way Ravv had touched me in that shelter.

Theoretically, I could distract myself just by slipping a hand between my thighs. It would be a bit weird to learn how to touch myself in Ravv's shower, but he was the one who told me not to leave the room.

Which meant... I was going to do it.

I slid a hand between my thighs, then breathed in sharply as I dragged my fingers over the sensitive bud there. No one had ever taught me the name for it, but I knew Ravv had paid a lot of attention to it.

Slowly, I circled it.

My body shuddered.

Veil, that felt good.

My breathing picked up as I continued touching myself, not entirely certain how to make myself climax. Ravv had just kept going until it happened, so I supposed that was the best method.

"What are you doing?" he asked, as tension swelled in my lower belly.

I didn't answer him.

He growled, *"I'm the only one who gets to make you shatter. Take your fingers off your clit."*

A moment later, the bathroom door rattled.

My gaze jerked toward it, and my fingers stilled.

"Unlock it." Ravv's voice was low and deadly... but I took great pleasure in pissing him off, so I ignored him again. *"I will break my own damn door down,"* he all but snarled at me.

But... I still wasn't going to give him what he wanted.

There was a loud noise, and the door broke inward.

I spun to face Ravv just in time to watch him step into the bathroom as the door crashed into the wall, his eyes somehow both hot and tired.

The man didn't say a word as he crossed the space between us in three steps, pulled my hand out from between my thighs, and replaced it with his own. I was pretty sure I had a rule about nothing sexual happening, but that rule was going in the garbage, because I wasn't about to stop him.

My fingers landed on his chest, and I took a staggered breath in as he stroked me lightly, walking me backward until my ass hit the wall.

Why did his touch feel so much better than mine?

"I'm the only one who brings you pleasure," he said roughly into my ear, as my body flushed and arched in response to his touch.

He caught my wrist with his free hand, lifting it to his mouth and wrapping his lips around my fingers. His gorgeous eyes were locked with mine as his chest rumbled at the taste of me.

The pleasure built rapidly, and I cried out as I shattered on his fingers. His chest rumbled again, and he held my eyes as he lowered to his knees.

My chest heaved as he waited for me to say no—and when I didn't, he parted my thighs.

I grabbed his hair for support as he opened me up for him, parting my folds so he could get a good look at me. "*Look at this pretty, wet core,*" he murmured into my mind, leaning in close and inhaling my scent.

My entire damn body flushed.

The flush grew when he flicked his tongue over my bud, rumbling, "*And somehow you taste even better than you look, Lae.*"

The nickname snapped me back to the past.

Back to reality.

Back to the fire, and the terror, and the—

His tongue dragged over me again, and a cry escaped me.

My hips jerked.

My body trembled.

My mind was clear again, focused solely on the moment I was living.

Ravv lifted one of my legs over his shoulder, giving him better access to me. His finger teased my opening, and I cried out again as he slid it inside me, stretching me.

His tongue moved faster, the pressure growing more intense as he dragged me closer and closer to the edge again.

I had never felt so full... or so hot.

My body writhed and rocked in desperation.

I cracked my eyes open and stared down at Ravv. Seeing his face at the apex of my thighs, his hands gripping me, filling me...

It was too much.

I cried out as I lost control again, my body clenching around his fingers as the waves of pleasure rolled through me.

It was bliss.

Veil, it was bliss.

My head pressed harder to the wall as I struggled to catch my breath.

"You did so damn well, Lae."

The praise made me feel good.

Really, really good.

He stood up and released me long enough to grab the soap, dragging the thick bar to my hair. I didn't tell him I'd already washed it as he pulled me away from the wall, his body so tight against mine that I could feel him breathe. His erection pressed against my lower back while he massaged my scalp.

"Thanks," I whispered into his mind. *"I can wash myself."*

“No.” He continued his massage. *“And thank me by telling me the next time you need a release.”*

“That would feel like breaking some unspoken rule between us, and you’re busy, anyway.”

“Then we set new rules.” His hands slid down my neck, and I groaned when he tilted my head forward to massage the muscles there.

The conversation was starting to feel like the end of one we’d had in the bathing pool in Jirev... and I didn’t mind that.

Not at all.

But I still wasn’t sure he really wanted to continue growing closer. *“You don’t owe me anything. I forgave you for bringing me into your mess, remember? I can take care of myself in every way.”*

And if I couldn’t, which seemed fairly likely, I’d figure it out.

“I didn’t ask whether you could, I told you that you’re not going to,” he growled back. *“You’re mine, Lae. That means you’re mine to take care of. I’m sorry I left you alone in here for so long, but it won’t happen again. My new rule is that you tell me when you need to get off, and I touch you when I want to see you lose control. Make your own rule in retaliation, or don’t.”*

Veil, he was ridiculously good at getting what he wanted.

I supposed that made him a good king.

But I had to reestablish some semblance of control in our relationship. And while he was the king, all I really had control of was myself.

“My rule is that we don’t have sex.”

He jerked his head in a nod.

“That means no asking me. No suggesting it or mentioning it either,” I added.

If we were together that way, it would change everything for me. He would be my first, and that would inevitably mean something to me.

“I’ll always respect your ‘no’ when it comes to sex, Lae. That’s a boundary I won’t cross.”

I had known he wouldn’t argue about it, but his confirmation still made me feel better.

“Any other boundaries to add?” he asked, his hands sliding down my chest and lingering on my breasts. *“You get to make demands just as much as I do.”*

I hesitated to voice my thoughts.

I really didn’t want to admit what I was thinking.

“You’re not with any other women, right?” I finally asked him. *“Romantically?”*

He scoffed into my ear. *“I told you I’m faithful, female.”*

“I know. It’s just…” I trailed off, biting my lip.

“Tell me what you’re thinking, Lae. You know I’ll be truthful with you, so give me the same courtesy.”

I sighed. *“You know everyone, which makes me feel like I have no power in this situation. You’re the king, and I’m nothing. There’s no balance.”*

He was silent for a long moment.

“And now I’ve offended you,” I grumbled. *“I knew this was going to happen.”*

“You haven’t offended me. I’m thinking.”

I waited.

He started massaging my breasts, and I closed my eyes, relaxing against his shoulder as he did.

“If we were still at war, your magic would make you a great asset,” he finally said. *“Our enemies couldn’t use their ice with you on the battlefield, which would be a massive advantage.”*

“I’d burn them, too,” I pointed out.

“Double advantage, then.” He went quiet for another moment, still palming my breasts.

I enjoyed it too much to stop him.

“There are many places in my kingdom where we have to manually break ice,” he finally said. *If you could control your fire a bit, you could replace numerous weapons and many, many hours of labor.”*

I hadn’t considered that. Living on a glacier would mean cutting through ice frequently.

“I can try. The other human women have no control over their magic, though, so it might be hopeless,” I reminded him.

“Your magic is not the same as theirs. It’s all life magic, but plants, wind, and flames are all vastly different. They’ll have unique triggers, and different natural levels when it comes to energy and life.”

I supposed that made sense. Nissa had told me that her magic burned through her energy quickly, while my power simply remained warm until I lost control of my emotions and caught fire.

“Do you think I could control it enough?”

“It’s worth attempting.” His lips brushed the side of my head. *“Things will feel more balanced as you get settled here. I’ll ask a few of the idorr to stick with you for protection so you can move into your house now rather than waiting. I want you to feel comfortable and confident about your place here.”*

“Thank you.” Gratitude swelled in my chest.

“I told you to thank me by asking me to touch you.”

I snorted. *“You should know me well enough to know I’m too prideful for that.”*

He chuckled, low and rumbly. *“I would be too. Just kiss me, and I’ll know what you want.”*

There was some... uncertainty in his tone.

He knew my first time had been with that fae in the hallway, and had never tried to convince me to give him my second. I thought maybe he was just trying to give me the space I'd asked for. Or maybe he wanted me to ask him myself.

But there was always the chance he just wasn't interested.

"Do you even want to kiss me?" I asked him.

"I just kissed your core, Lae. Do you really need to ask?"

Right.

That was an emphatic yes.

"I don't know how to instigate those things," I admitted. *"And mentally, I really haven't been in the right place for it since the attack. I'm not sure I ever will be."*

"You will. When you want something, grab me and take it. I'm yours." Ravv's voice lowered. *"As far as me holding all the power in our relationship, you should know that's not true. All it would take for you to seal our bond is to repeat the vow I already made. If you decided to, you could claim me, and I'd be helpless to fight it. Our social positions may not be equal, but you possess the true power between us."*

He caught me by surprise with that.

I tried to recall the words, and they popped into my mind as if by some kind of magic.

"Sillah ovim rett warum."

The urge to speak them hit me, though it wasn't so strong I couldn't ignore it.

I pressed my lips together anyway, just to be safe.

He was right; I was in control of our relationship, not him. If I wanted to, I could make the rest of his life extremely difficult by sealing our bond.

I wasn't going to do that, of course, but knowing it was an option made me feel slightly better.

“I forgot about that,” I admitted to him. *“What does the vow mean?”*

“The exact translation vanished when the gods were lost. The oldest of our fae believe it’s something along the lines of, ‘my heart and life are yours’.”

That was much simpler than I would’ve expected.

His hands finally left my breasts, sliding down my hips and over my ass slowly. My eyes closed as he cleaned my core, his fingers torturously-slow on the sensitive, aching parts.

“You’re so damn soft,” Ravv murmured into my ear. The brush of his lips made my skin erupt in goosebumps as he continued cleaning me. “Tell me how Jern touched you in your prison.”

Those words snapped me out of the bliss I’d been feeling. “What?”

“You said he was the first to touch you. Tell me how.” He nipped at my ear.

“No.”

“Yes.”

“No, Ravv.”

“Yes, Lae.”

I huffed.

He nibbled on my earlobe, making me shudder. And the bastard was still stroking me, which felt incredible.

“He didn’t touch me,” I finally said. “That was a lie. We were nothing more than friends.”

Ravv’s fingers stilled on my core. “Did you touch yourself while they were in the room with you?”

I squeezed my eyes shut. “No.”

“Then your climax in the forest was your first, ever?”

“If you hold it against me, I will *kill* you,” I shot back.

“Answer the question.” His teeth dragged over my earlobe again.

“Yes, it was my first.”

“Veil, Lae.”

My face flushed. “You are *not* allowed to mock me for it.”

“I’m not mocking you.” His words were low and almost reverent. “I’m grateful that you trusted me enough to ask me for that, and I regret once again making you wish you hadn’t by withholding the truth from you.”

Oh.

The heat in my cheeks faded. “Thank you.”

Instead of telling me to withhold my thanks again, he simply leaned down and brushed his lips against my cheek.

My eyes closed at the soft, intimate touch. It couldn’t have meant as much to him as it did to me, but I relished it anyway.

His fingers resumed their motion on my core, and my body tensed at the pleasure of it.

“I’m going to watch you climax again,” he murmured into my ear, his free arm sliding up my waist until the weight of my breasts rested on it. “While knowing that no one else has ever seen you come undone.”

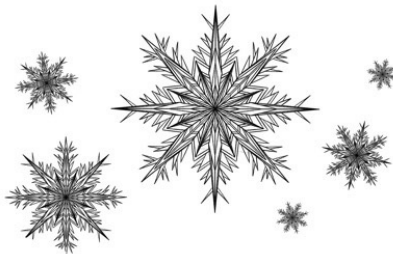
The flush returned to my face. “That sounds possessive.”

“Oh, it is.” His lips caught my ear lobe and pulled lightly as he increased the pressure of his touch. The man had me crying out a few moments later, working my body as if it had been created just for him.

And considering the intensity of our connection, maybe it had.

CHAPTER 17

LAELI



By the time we made it out of the shower, I was absolutely boneless, and Ravv’s cock was so hard it looked painful. I considered offering to touch him, but I wasn’t sure I was ready for it, and it didn’t seem like the right time.

He pulled on a pair of shorts while I put my undergarments back on—the fae called them scanties—and then we climbed back into bed together, wearing nothing else. There was no light streaming into the castle, so I knew it was the middle of the night, and Bright and Coarse had left at some point during our shower.

My face warmed with the realization of why they’d left.

I was noisy.

“Is Gleam upset that I scared them away?” I asked Ravv, as he dragged me to his chest.

“Of course not. She and Coarse have their own room, and she’s constantly telling me I need to occupy myself with a woman to lighten up.”

I snorted.

That did sound like Gleam.

“You used to *occupy yourself* plenty, didn’t you?” I countered. He hadn’t been with anyone in around a century, if he’d been honest about that, but he definitely didn’t act inexperienced. “And why did you stop having sex,

anyway?”

He made a noncommittal noise. “After the initial excitement of adulthood wore off, it felt hollow. Even before I stopped, I was only sharing someone’s bed for an eclipse once every few years, when particularly drunk. Sex is very selfish for fae.”

His hands began to move over my abdomen and hips slowly, and I frowned. “How is it selfish?”

“Both male and female are only there to take what they need from each other. The female fae makes commands, the male follows them until she’s found her climax, and then he does what he wants to reach his own. There’s no giving—only taking.”

“So you never touched a female fae just to make her feel good?”

“Of course not. I never gave of myself physically unless it was to get something in return. I find myself intrigued by the idea, now.”

I opened my mouth to say something, but Ravv yawned behind me, so I closed it.

He needed his rest.

But... I respected him, for what he’d told me.

I really, really did.

“Your skin is so damn soft, Lae,” he murmured into my ear as his hands settled—one on one of my breasts and the other trapped between my thighs, gripping the thick muscle there. “Sleep now.”

By the time I considered protesting, his chest was already rising and falling steadily against my back.

Images of Ravv touching me again filled my mind.

Him touching me in the shower.

Feasting on me in some sort of closet.

Tonguing me while I rode his face.

That last one lingered the longest, until the feel of thick, hot fingers on my core roused me from sleep.

I groaned as they slid over my bud—my clit—before dipping into my opening then sliding against me again. The slick heat felt blissful.

The fabric of my undergarment was tight on my hips, straining as it held his hand close to my core, until he tugged it down far enough that it didn't block his access to me.

The bed shifted, and then he was dragging me further up the mattress, backward, so I faced away from him. A cry escaped me when he sat me on his mouth, and then *devoured* me.

My hands landed on his bare abdomen as I caught myself, and my eyes were nearly level with his cock.

Ravv worked me so fast, all tongue and teeth and fingers. Cries escaped me as I lost control, pleasure rolling through me.

Veil, I wanted to touch him.

He kept licking me, tasting me, and touching me, even as the pleasure faded.

Ravv wasn't done with me, and maybe I wasn't done with him.

He snarled against my core as I gripped his erection over his shorts. The thick hardness of him surprised me, even though I had felt it against me so many times.

His teeth caught my clit, and I cried out loudly at the intensity of it.

His fingers joined his mouth and tongue, spreading and filling me. It dazed me for a moment—and then I focused on his cock again. He was throbbing in my grip, and it fascinated me.

I wanted more.

I pushed the stretchy shorts over him, freeing his erection. The sight of it had my lips parting as my hips rocked against Ravv's face.

He was so damn huge—and the head of him was already slick with the evidence of how much he enjoyed the way I tasted and reacted to him.

Ravv snarled again as I dragged a finger over his slickness. His erection bobbed for me, and I wrapped my fingers around the length of him again.

I didn't really know what I was doing, but he said he could use his hand to get himself off.

When I squeezed, he bit down harder on my clit, and I *screamed*.

The climax hit me, hard.

My body jerked as the pleasure cut through me, my eyes glued to Ravv's cock as he lost control in my grip, throbbing and releasing all over my hand.

I struggled to catch my breath as he kept feasting on me, his tongue moving slower to give my body time to recover.

“Show me how to touch you,” I breathed, as I finally released his erection.

“No.” He growled the word into my mind. “*Let me focus on you.*”

“I want to focus on *you*,” I shot back, shivering as one of his fingers slid to my asshole and dragged over the sensitive skin.

“*Just enjoy what I'm doing to you.*”

“Give me what I want, and I will.”

He snarled at me again—but finally peeled me off his face and flipped me to my back. I landed with a huff, and he tugged my undergarment the rest of the way down my legs before tossing it to the ground.

He left his shorts where they were, so I leaned over and pulled them down to his knees, revealing the rest of him to me.

Veil, he was gorgeous.

Massive, muscular, and still so damn turned on.

Ravv grabbed my hand as he kneeled beside me. He wrapped my slick palm around his erection, and slowly dragged it down the hard length of him.

All words died in my throat as I stroked him with his help—once, twice, and a third time.

He gritted his teeth and grabbed one of my thighs, pulling me closer before his fingers hooked inside me.

“How many times can you climax?” I asked him.

It felt like a stupid question, but I didn’t think he’d find it stupid.

“I usually stop after one. Theoretically, there’s no limit.” The words were a growl through a clenched jaw, and heated me further.

His eyes closed as I peeled his hand off mine, so I was free to touch him how I wanted. Changing the motion, I rolled my hand just a little. His face twisted in a silent snarl, his hips jerking and his cock somehow growing even harder.

I continued working him until he erupted again, and satisfaction settled in my chest.

“Veil, Lae.” The words were gritty and harsh, but not in anger, his chest rising and falling rapidly as he opened his eyes.

His fingers were still between my thighs, stroking my clit and buried inside me. I was breathing fast, my own hips moving with the need that had swelled inside me.

“You’re the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen,” he growled, pulling my hand off his cock. He lowered himself to the bed until his face found the center of my thighs, then grabbed my slick hand.

My mouth went dry as he lowered it to my core, then rubbed my fingers over my wetness, combining the evidence of his pleasure with mine.

He inhaled deeply, and his chest rumbled loudly.

An image flashed through my mind—one of his cock sliding into the slick heat of my core—and I wanted it.

Veil, I wanted it.

But—

I cried out as he slid three fingers inside me, stretching me while he ate my clit with renewed fire.

“You’d better soak this damn bed. I want you sweating, writhing, and desperate,” Ravv said into my mind. He dragged his teeth over my clit again, and I cried out as another climax hit me.

I was a panting mess when I came down from the high, so he got exactly what he wanted.

Honestly though, I couldn’t complain either.

My stomach was growling and the sun was shining brightly by the time we cleaned up and made it to the dining hall.

Ravv was keeping his distance from me again. Even though I knew it was only because his people wanted us dead, it still messed with my mind.

I wanted him to hold my hand.

To touch my arm.

To drag me close.

It was disorienting to go from touching so much to acting like we didn’t want to be near each other at all.

We sat with a few of his warriors again, though Elwynne and Orvay were both noticeably absent. I knew two of them from dinner the night before, and they both said something about it. When I explained that Coarse had gone with me, Ravv thankfully didn’t get mad.

He did tell me that I wasn’t allowed to leave his side without letting him know where I was going again, though.

After our late breakfast, we headed out to the idorr portion of town. I played with the cubs while Ravv asked them for their help protecting me, and when a few of the unmated idorr agreed, we headed off so I could see my house.

Ravv and I left the distance between us as we walked with all three of the

idorr who had become my temporary protectors. Two were male, and one was female. I couldn't remember their names, but I would memorize them when I wasn't so nervous about seeing the house Ravv had given me.

It seemed strange that he gave me his own home, even though he wasn't going to live there. It made me wonder what the rest of his people would think—and whether I'd eventually lose my house if he decided he wanted it back.

Though I didn't want to admit any of that aloud, I had to consider it.

What would I do if I never bonded with an idorr, and lost my house? I could move in with Jern and Gora. They would let me, but I really, really didn't want to do that, for all of our sakes.

I could go back to Jirev. None of the kings had been *nice*, but Kier's city and people had seemed welcoming enough. I could offer to do... well, honestly, I didn't know.

Maybe I needed to find a way to get in contact with the gargoyles. The gargoyle man who'd captured me in the Sands had mentioned me helping in their forges. If I could do that, I'd have some use. But I didn't know how gargoyles felt about humans, or whether I'd be safe in the Chasm with them. And it was the Chasm, so instinctually, I didn't want to live there.

Then again, Ravv had said they could use me to melt ice to make their lives easier. He could've been making it up in an attempt to help me feel better about my shitty magic, but there was a chance it was true.

He led me up to the door of the smallest house on the street. It was made of ice, like the others, but was a simple, no-nonsense building.

As I took in the shape of it, I decided that I liked it.

Maybe I even loved it. Only time would tell.

He opened it up without any resistance or keys. I knew the fae only locked their doors when they were inside, so that didn't surprise me.

I stepped inside behind him and one of the idorr, my gaze scanning the space. It was simple, with two bedrooms, a kitchen, and a living area with a

comfortable-looking couch. Both bedrooms had beds in them, and there were rugs over most of the smooth ice floors, but none of it looked lived-in.

Yet it was mine, at least for the moment.

And that made me love it.

“Thank you,” I whispered, as I dragged my fingers lightly over the soft fabric on the couch. I’d have to be careful not to burn it, but I would manage.

“Save your thanks.”

When I glanced over my shoulder at him, I found his lips curved upward just the tiniest bit. He said into my mind, *“You’ll still spend every night with me, either here or in my castle.”*

“That doesn’t exactly say we don’t have feelings for each other.”

“My people expect me to be protective and possessive while we’re mates—and while you’re keeping me hidden from the Demon. No mated male would sleep far from his female, regardless of his feelings for her.”

“The Demon’s still flying above us, so if I’m a protector, I’m a terrible one.” I gestured upward.

“He doesn’t know what I look like, and you’ve concealed my magic from him,” Ravv countered. *“He would have to burn the whole city to find me, and even then, he wouldn’t recognize me. His magic prevents him from purposefully killing anyone but his target, so you’re doing as good a job as anyone could ask for.”*

I didn’t really believe him, though his words did relax me slightly. *“As long as you don’t think it’ll get us killed.”*

“I can protect you.”

“Not while you’re sleeping.”

His scoff told me we were never going to agree on that topic, so I changed it. *“Alright, we’ll spend our nights together. I’m going to learn how to cook, too.”*

Ravv’s continued scowl told me he didn’t love my subject change, or idea

about cooking.

“It’s going to be great,” I told him, though I didn’t really believe it myself. *“Now, can you show me where you think I could be useful? I can try to melt some ice.”*

He grudgingly agreed, and we slipped onto the backs of the idorr who had agreed to stick with me.

It took nearly an hour on the beasts’ backs. Finally, we reached the part of the city beyond the fae-made rivers and streams that fed their crops

Ravv remained on the idorr’s back as he introduced me to Cree, who was apparently in charge of keeping the rivers flowing. He was one of the roughest-looking men I’d ever seen, with a thick, scraggly orange beard, and eyes that glowed black. His body was covered in scars, and he was built even thicker than Ravv.

“What do you want, Highness?” the man grumbled.

“Laeli has offered her magic up to help with the ice dams.”

The man looked at me.

A long moment passed before he finally looked back at Ravv and shook his head. “No.”

Ravv’s eyes narrowed. “I wasn’t asking. She can take care of the dams faster than any of the rest of you.” He nodded to me, and I slipped off the back of the idorr I was seated on.

“Fine.” The man strode away.

I looked at Ravv, and he waved me toward Cree.

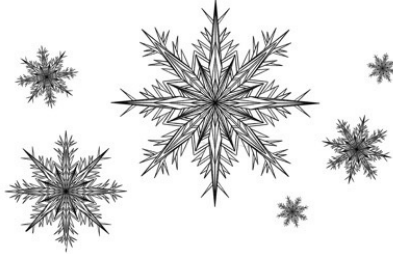
I hurried after the guy, with two idorr following me. Ravv remained where he was, watching me intently.

“Tell me if anything goes wrong, Lae. I want to know everything,” the king warned me.

I shooed him away mentally, the same way he'd shooed me with his hand,
and he chuckled into my mind.

CHAPTER 18

LAELI



I followed Cree to the river, and immediately saw the problem. The water was actively freezing, with ice slowly spreading from a set of rocks that felt like they possessed magic of their own. As it spread, it slowed the river's flow and started freezing the water.

There were dozens of massive metal tools on racks near the ice, and one fae was positioned on each of the icy rocks, hacking at it.

“This is the dam?” I asked Cree. The handprint on my arm was already aching with the distance between Ravv and I, but I was trying to ignore the slight pain.

Cree gave me an affirmative grunt. “The ice swells and spreads every night, and we spend every day keeping the water flowing.”

“What do the rocks have to do with it?” I asked him.

“They're enchanted, and part of the glacier's magic. This land was originally a prison, so there are enchantments everywhere to keep it frozen and prevent crops from growing. We fight through it.” He looked out at the two other huge fae and their large weapons.

All three of them were men, but I assumed Ravv wasn't concerned about them. He was certainly possessive enough to attempt to keep me away from anything he thought was a threat to either of us.

I did have two idorr by my sides though, and I'd have three to help protect me when the one carrying Ravv returned.

“You break the ice over and over again, every day?” I asked him, surprise coloring my voice.

Cree grunted again. “Our other option is to starve.”

I supposed I’d be willing to break ice every day if it was the only way to fill my belly. I certainly would’ve done it for food a thousand times over if given the opportunity when I was trapped in the cellar.

“Last I heard, you can’t control your flames,” the man said, his voice even.

Panic started to swell in my chest, and I ignored it fiercely as memories of the fire in my childhood home blossomed to life. “I’m learning.”

“You’re still young.” The man studied the river for another moment before calling out, “Pirr, trade places with Laeli.”

I blinked.

Already?

With no instructions?

I supposed he couldn’t give me instructions to help control my own magic. I’d have to figure that out on my own, if it was even possible.

When one of the fae stepped off the rock, I strode toward it like I wasn’t absolutely clueless.

I was absolutely clueless, though.

My heart beat erratically as I carefully placed one foot on the frozen rock. The pain in my handprint had vanished, at least. The surface was slick beneath the warmth of my bare foot.

I didn’t dare put my second foot on it, and instead lowered to my knees on the stone. Even that felt a bit slick.

I could feel the icy magic pooled in the stone, thrumming with life. It was as if someone’s life force had been embedded in the rock itself.

Where my magic touched it, the power seemed to recoil and shrink away.

I focused on my emotions—on my anger, frustration, and helplessness—and waited for my fire to ignite.

After a few moments, it burst to life beneath my palms, and the magic within the stone reacted immediately. The ice pulled back as my fire flooded the space, overwhelming the cold power.

I pushed harder, forcing the flames brighter and hotter until they met the icy magic and burned against the enchantment.

The ice fought back, hard and unyielding.

My fire burned on, and on, and on.

Some vague part of me sensed that the warring magic was draining my power, but I was too set on destroying the icy enchantment to pay any attention to the strain.

Finally, the ice started to melt.

I distantly felt a bead of sweat trickle down my forehead and face before sliding down the center of my chest.

There was a slight tremble to my hands.

I ignored that, too.

My stomach clenched as my determination wavered.

Veil, my energy was fading fast. Faster than the enchantment was melting.

That didn't bode well for me.

I tried to pull back, to conserve the tiny bit that remained, but failed.

Panic replaced focus as I fought the leash on my magic and tried to get my flames back under control. They flared brighter in response, burning against the power within the stone. Despite my pull, it continued draining me more and more.

I sucked in a panicked breath as my body began to sway.

The weakness in my limbs was thick and heavy.

The world started to spin around me.

Veil, I was burning myself out again.

This burnout felt bigger and fiercer, though.

My body trembled, and my knees did too.

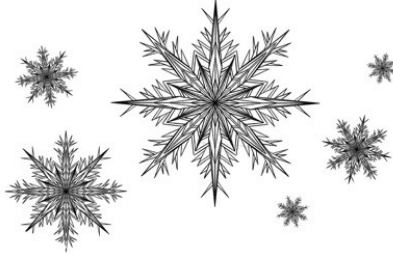
The trembling was too much.

One of my knees slid off the edge of the stone. As my center of gravity shifted, the rest of me followed my knee, and I plunged downward.

The water engulfed me as I fell unconscious, and my last thought was of the comfort I'd felt when Ravv held me in his arms that morning.

CHAPTER 19

RAVV



“**C**ree can protect her,” Gleam chastised me, as she and Coarse walked up to my side. “*The rest of the idorr can too.*”

I remained where I was, leaning my back to the wall while I watched Laeli kneel on one of the enchanted stones that constantly froze the river. “*I have a bad feeling about this,*” I told her.

She plopped down beside me. “*Your feelings aren’t always accurate.*”

“*Which is why I let her go,*” I grumbled.

Laelie wanted the chance to prove herself. Though she had nothing to prove, I would allow her that opportunity.

She needed to know that I would support her, if I was ever going to convince her to be my life partner. The woman still thought she was my lesser, for whatever damned reason.

“*Something is off,*” Coarse said, standing on Gleam’s other side and staring out at the glacier with narrowed eyes. All we could see was the ice, the river, and a strip of the ocean. If we squinted, we would see the tiniest bit of the Endless Wilds off in the distance.

“*I agree. Have you seen anything to be suspicious about?*” I asked him.

“*No.*”

I hadn’t either.

But there hadn't been any sign of the cult since we'd been back, which was a terrible omen. Ria's people always went silent in the days before one of their attacks.

She would be looking for us, and she'd see my bond with Laeli as a sign that I was fragile. On top of that, she'd expect it to mean my warriors and I were siding with the mated couples in the city below.

That alone would make us a target.

"They don't usually kill unmated fae, and you're technically not mated," Coarse said.

"This situation is not usual or technical. They will kill as many of us as they can. I—" The words died in my throat as I watched Laeli's magic burst to life.

Her fire blazed over the stone, and my eyes widened slightly as I watched it engulf the ancient magic none of my people could affect.

She blazed so brightly that I couldn't see her through the flames.

"There," Coarse growled, and my attention snapped to the side of the river.

I studied it for a moment before my eyes finally caught the movement.

Someone was running toward the river.

Not just toward the river—toward Laeli.

Toward my *mate*.

A second thought didn't cross my mind as I sprinted toward the coming storm.

"Watch my female," I growled at Gleam and Coarse, who snarled together in response.

Both of them wanted to fight, but there would be nothing left to fight for if they had time to hurt her.

Gleam stayed on my tail as I leapt over the river and launched at the fae sprinting toward my female. I threw my magic into my blood and skin, and

my icy armor and claws swelled for battle.

The moment I saw the fae's face, I recognized him as one of Ria's closest friends.

We had been friends once too, before the two of them joined the cult.

Now, mine would be the last face he saw.

He rolled to the side fast enough to dodge most of my warriors—but I wasn't most of my warriors.

My claws sliced through his throat.

He ducked backward, his eyes full of surprise as he grabbed at his neck.

The damned cultists thought they were as strong as those of us who had gone to war for our kingdom for centuries, but they were wrong. They were just a hell of a lot better at hiding than we were.

"Where's Ria?" I growled at him, while his blood dripped off my claws.

His eyes stormed, but he didn't answer.

It was better to send them a message than to waste my time on torture, so I went at him again.

His next motion was clumsy. Too clumsy.

He swung at me, and I ignored the burn of his sword as it cut lightly through my ice and into my side.

My claws sliced through his chest—where I found his heart, and cut through the organ without hesitation.

The man fell to his knees, gasping for air as his body began to shut down.

I was already searching the horizon, looking for more cultists.

There.

I turned toward one—but through the corner of my eye, saw Laeli slip off the rock she'd been kneeling on.

The water engulfed her, and I started to move.

“I’ve got her. Focus on the attack,” Coarse growled into my mind as he and two other idorr dove in behind her.

I hesitated for a heartbeat.

He could keep her safe.

I trusted that.

But the woman was *mine*.

Leaving her to her own devices... veil, it would kill me.

The fae woman I’d noticed dove into the water after Coarse, and a roar exploded through my chest.

I was engulfed a moment later, grabbing the woman. Her foot collided with my chest, but I ignored the painful impact as I threw her up onto the river’s bank before hauling myself out too.

Cree’s spear was already buried in her chest when I made it to my feet. The weapon pinned her to the ice while she took her last breaths. Though I knew she was a cultist, I didn’t recognize her, so there was no satisfaction in the kill.

“Two more headed into the city. One male, one female. Her hair was the same shade as yours,” Cree barked, the same way he would’ve if we were on the battlefield.

“Take the male,” I growled back, already sprinting toward the city. He stuck close to my heels, and I finally caught a glimpse of Ria’s hair as she and her ally parted ways.

He went around the city’s walls, and she headed inside.

I pushed myself harder, tapping into my magic to make the ice work beneath me. The distance between us shrank with every step, but I found myself reaching out to Gleam.

“Coarse has her?”

“Yes, and the other idorr and I killed another two cultists. We don’t see any other threats.”

“Is she conscious?”

“No. But she’s breathing, and Coarse doesn’t see any blood.”

At least she was alive.

“We’ll take her back to the idorr portion of the city while you deal with the other threats. She’ll be safe with us,” Gleam said.

The words didn’t bring me the relief they probably should have.

I was already having flashbacks to the moments she was with the raiders, when I knew her life was at risk and yet I couldn’t reach her.

“Thank you.” The words were hard to get out.

Ria wove behind a few buildings, and I cut down a street that would lead me to the same place her path would take her.

Toward the castle.

I threw every damn ounce of my energy into it as I ran, pushing myself harder and faster.

This wasn’t just one battle—this was the war, and if I could kill her, I could end it.

Or at least buy us enough time to find the rest of the damn cult.

I turned a corner and plowed right into her.

Ria didn’t scream—she threw a kick to my abdomen, and then tried to free herself from my arms the way she had a hundred times when we trained as children.

I turned her over as we slammed to the ground, so her front took the brunt of the impact.

With one sharp motion, she slammed a small, ice blade into the same place the other cultist had cut my side.

The pain surprised me enough for her to roll us both over, but I tightened my grip on her, grabbing her by the arms as my back hit the street.

“Learning new moves, Ri?” I drawled into her ear.

If I could piss her off, she would grow sloppier, and I needed her sloppier because I couldn’t kill her from our current position.

She laughed, but the sound didn’t ring with the joy of our childhood. It was bitter, and cruel.

As much as I didn’t want it to, it made my abdomen clench. Her blade vanished from my side, and blood began to leak from the deep wound.

“Not as many new moves as you, Ravv. It doesn’t get much newer than taking a *human mate*.” Though her words were slow and sarcastic, she was still fighting my hold.

“I’m sure your eyes and ears in my kingdom have told you exactly why I did,” I growled back.

“A bond for any reason is a death sentence, as you know well.” She finally managed to land an elbow to my wound.

I grunted as she wrenched herself free of my grip, flying to her feet.

Her blades grew quickly in her hands as I stood and charged toward her.

She spun away, slashing at me, but I was already moving again.

The dance went on, the similarities in our fighting styles coming through while we moved the way we had as children, with me on offense and her on defense. Neither of us gained or lost the advantage, even though we both bled from a number of wounds.

My fae slowly lined the streets, watching the fight, but none of them intervened.

“*Laeli needs your blood*,” Gleam said, not distracting me enough to give Ria an opening. “*She’s fading. Whatever she did to that stone took too much of her magic, and I don’t think her body can replenish it on its own.*”

Veil.

I shouldn't have let her risk herself in an attempt to be useful.

I should've protected her, the way I was supposed to.

How many times would I fail this woman?

"I'll be there soon," I promised.

I snarled aloud, moving faster and hitting harder. When I finally saw an opening, my clawed and spiked fist slammed into her temple. She crumpled to the ground, but I wasted no time.

"Grab her," I ordered Orvay, meeting his gaze long enough to see him nod before I sprinted toward Laeli.

I reached her a few minutes later, finding her in the home Coarse and Gleam kept in their portion of the city. She was curled up on the edge of one of the massive round cushions the idorr preferred to use as beds, her hair still dripping water and her skin paler than I'd ever seen it.

"Veil." I dropped to my knees and pulled her into my arms, carefully easing her onto my lap. *"Give us a moment, please."* Though I didn't look at Gleam and Coarse, they knew I was speaking to them.

"Be careful with her," Coarse growled at me.

I narrowed my eyes at him. *"She's my mate. I'm always careful."*

He glowered at me. *"Our souls connected when I pulled her from the river. She's my companion; protect her better."*

The revelation caught me by surprise, but in the moment, there was nothing I could do but focus on saving Laeli's life.

So I finally jerked my head in a nod, lowering my gaze back to the fragile woman in my arms.

When I convinced her to solidify our bond, she would grow stronger. Our magic would knit together, and she would become just as immortal as I was. Her body would heal faster, and she would be able to move much more

quickly.

But it was too late to seal anything now, and even if we did, there would be far too many consequences.

She'd need to drink from me if she was going to survive.

Though I was still bleeding from many wounds, I sliced through the skin at the base of my neck before hauling her higher and setting her mouth against me.

“Drink, Lae,” I commanded her, tapping into her mind so the words echoed there, too.

She didn't respond.

I repeated the words, louder, and she finally moved.

Her teeth pressed lightly against my skin as she took my blood into her mouth. A moment later, they cut into me, flooding me with the same fierce pride that had hit me the last time I fed her.

Blood rushed to my cock as she started to rock a little, moaning and groaning softly against my skin. My hands stroked her lower back. She was much colder than usual—she typically radiated heat when her desire grew. Even at her coldest, her skin always felt warmer than my own.

My cock ached and throbbed as she drank, until my eyes closed and the world began to spin. “You'll have to stop, Lae.”

She slowed.

“Ria wounded me too badly. I need some of my blood to heal myself.”

She pulled away, gasping for breath. When I forced my eyes open, I found her dazed. Her eyes were dilated, and her face was red with the lust coursing through her veins. She probably hadn't heard everything I said. “What? You're hurt?”

I dipped my head a bit.

“Where?” She tried to slide away, but I held her too tightly.

“I’m fine. I’ll heal.”

“No. Show me.” She pushed on my chest, but her touch was too light to move me. “Ravv,” she growled.

“Lae,” I growled back.

“You’re an ass.”

I made a noise of agreement, closing my eyes again to fight the spinning of the room.

“Are we—” She cut herself off. “I just heard Coarse’s voice in my head. It felt different than usual.”

“You’re bonded.” I was growing more tired by the minute.

Healing her had thoroughly drained my energy.

“Veil, really? He’s grumpy, though.”

“Only when Gleam pushes him, which she does often. He likes it more than he admits.” I brushed my lips against her forehead.

“Show me where you’re hurt.”

“Later.” I tugged her closer, and she pushed at me again.

“We need to wash up, at least. And I’m freezing cold.”

“You burned yourself out,” I grumbled at her.

“I almost killed the enchantment in that stone; I could feel it.” Her voice grew more excited, though she was still leaning against me heavily. “If I’m more careful, I can get rid of it entirely next time without knocking myself unconscious.”

“No.”

“We’ll agree to disagree.” She patted me on the arm, as if comforting me.

“You’re not doing it.”

“We can talk about it later. Take me home.”

I grumbled, but carried her out of the house. Everything was still spinning a bit, and moving felt much more difficult than usual, but I managed.

Laeli lowered her head to rest on my shoulder, her face tucked against my neck while her legs wrapped around my waist.

Gleam and Coarse fell into step with us as we walked.

“You need a few bandages,” Gleam warned me.

“I’m fine.”

“You’re not. It’ll scare Laeli if you pass out from blood loss.”

“I’m not going to pass out from blood loss.”

“You said that last time, too.”

I grumbled again but couldn’t disagree.

Gleam said, *“We’ll find some bandages. Watch her carefully so Coarse doesn’t get as grumpy as you.”*

I scowled at her, and she winked at me before slipping away.

Coarse growled at her, then growled at me, before following her away.

“They’re kind of adorable,” Laeli whispered to me.

“Ridiculously so,” I agreed.

She snorted, and I couldn’t stop a ghost of a smile from curving my lips.

“Between Gleam, Coarse, Elwynne, and Orvay, you’ve been paired with couples for a long time,” she said.

“Unfortunately.”

She smiled against my neck. *“You like it.”*

“I enjoy seeing them happy,” I admitted.

“But…”

“It grows lonely from time to time. I think it would for anyone. I saw my

parents together enough to believe that fae are meant to exist in pairs.”

She grew quiet for a moment.

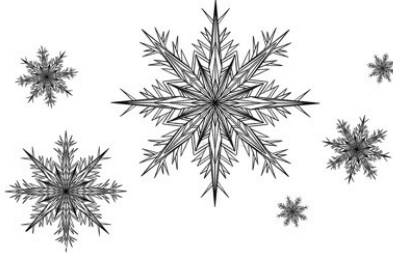
A long, long moment.

I wondered if she was also thinking that fate had paired us perfectly, but doubted it. She was far less certain that we suited each other than I was.

Because I knew Orvay would've taken Ria back to the castle, I didn't dare take Laeli there, and headed toward my old house instead. I tried to prepare myself for the emotional impact that would accompany seeing her sprawled across the bed that had been mine back when life was so much simpler.

CHAPTER 20

LAELI



Ravv pulled my dress over my head as he stepped into the shower with me and turned the water on. My eyes shut as it started falling, raining over my head and rolling down my face.

“Veil, you’re freezing,” Ravv grumbled, setting me down on my feet. When I wobbled, he stepped up close, spreading one hand on my abdomen to hold me in place with my back against his front.

“You’re the cold one,” I shot back. “Geez, are you *made* of ice? You usually feel warm to me.”

“Yes, I am made of ice. I have no idea why I would feel warm to you. You’re my personal fire at this point.” He dragged his hands up to my breasts and squeezed, making me want him. If I wasn’t so damn exhausted, I would’ve considered asking him to touch me, but I didn’t think I could stay on my feet that long.

“I see. You just like me for my warmth.”

“Yes, that’s the only attractive quality you possess,” he drawled, squeezing my breasts again. “Heat. Just heat. I’m disgusted by your ass, breasts, and mouth.”

I snorted. “Seems believable.”

“Very.” He lowered his lips to my throat and slowly kissed up the column of it until he reached my earlobe and sucked lightly. “I want to taste you again.”

Despite his words, he looked absolutely exhausted, and a bit dizzy too.

My legs trembled. “I don’t think I can stand that long.”

He gave me an unhappy rumble. “In bed before you sleep, then.”

“Deal.”

He released my earlobe and reached for some soap, but found none. “Damn. I forgot to restock it.”

My lips curved upward.

The fact that he’d forgotten something mundane made him seem more human to me, as silly as that was.

“I’ll head out to grab supplies while you’re asleep.”

“I still need to check your wounds,” I reminded him. “I might be in better health than you right now.”

He made a noise of disagreement. “They’re small wounds.”

“I’m starting to think that means you’re pretending not to be in pain.” I leaned away from him, turning slightly. My eyes caught on a bright red wound on his side, and widened. “What is *that*? Veil, Ravv! Who did you fight?”

He released me reluctantly. “It’s nothing to worry about. It’ll heal fast.”

I bent closer so I could see the wound. “It’s still bleeding. If it wasn’t something to worry about, it wouldn’t still be bleeding.” I poked at it, and he swore.

“Don’t touch it.”

“I thought it wasn’t something to worry about,” I shot back.

“It’s not.” He gritted his teeth. I was pretty sure it was out of pain, not anger, for once.

“Who were you fighting? What happened?” I repeated the questions he’d ignored.

“Ria finally came after me.”

I blinked.

It took a minute for the admission to set in. “*Ria*, Ria? As in, your twin sister Ria?”

“Yes.” He swore again as I pulled him further into the water—and again when I moved his arm so the shower would wash his wound.

“What happened?”

“She finally hunted me down herself. There must only be a few cultists left.”

“So she’s desperate,” I said, leaning down again so I could see the wound better. My lips twisted in a grimace as I did. “The coloring on this is weird. Do you think she could’ve poisoned you? Can fae even be poisoned?”

“Yes, we can be poisoned.” He was gritting his teeth. “But her blade was ice, and it’s difficult to poison an ice blade. She would’ve had to dip it before she left, and carry it all the way here.”

“That doesn’t mean she didn’t.”

“It makes it unlikely.”

“Okay, but I’m telling you, this doesn’t look good. Go check the mirror.”

He gave me an exasperated sigh, but left me and my shaky legs in the shower while he went to the mirror. When he reached it, he stared at himself for far too long before shuffling back.

“Well?” I asked.

“It’s poisoned.”

My eyebrows shot upward. “Is there an antidote, or are you dying? I feel like you should be more worried about this.”

“There’s an antidote. Gleam was almost back with the bandages, so she’s heading out for it now. It’s nothing to worry about.”

I huffed at him. “You really need to stop saying that.”

“You really need to start believing me.”

We were never going to agree on that. “Did Ria beat you?”

He scowled at me. “I’m not dead, am I?”

“Well, you *are* poisoned.” I gestured to his side.

“Only a coward who can’t win with skill alone uses poison. I’m not surprised my sister is one of them. She was always a poor loser.”

I rolled my eyes at him.

He shut off the water and pulled me close, lowering his nose to my hair and inhaling deeply. “Veil, you smell good.”

“I smell like a river,” I mumbled against his chest.

“You smell like my mate.”

My chest burned with his words.

He wrapped me in a towel, and then did the same to himself but tied it at his waist. The way he moved was strange as he walked me back to the bed. I studied his tense shoulders and the tight way he was holding his abdomen.

“You’re in pain, aren’t you?”

“I’m fine.”

I didn’t believe him. “Ravv.”

“Lae,” he growled back.

“Tell me the truth.”

He growled again....

But said nothing.

“Veil, Ravv. Seriously, what is your problem?”

The man couldn’t conceal his wince as he lifted a hand to rest on my hip.

I put both hands on his chest and steered him to the mattress. He reluctantly let me push him, taking one step back, then another, until he reached the

mattress and sank onto his ass.

“Take your towel off,” I said bluntly.

It was almost... an order.

He narrowed his eyes at me.

I narrowed mine back.

Finally, he undid the towel and it fell onto the bed.

Though my gaze caught on his erection, and I wanted to comment on it, my eyes moved quickly to a wound on his thigh. It was angry, red, and bleeding lightly.

I looked him up and down, then climbed onto the bed to see his back, taking stock of his injuries.

Damn, there were a lot of them.

“Your sister is good,” I remarked, grimacing as I wiped a bit of blood from one of the smaller cuts. It was a miracle he was still awake, considering that he’d healed me and bled plenty from his own wounds.

He made a noncommittal noise. “It wasn’t a typical fight. We grew up practicing together, so she knows how I move.”

“And you know how she moves?”

He confirmed it.

“Would she have been the queen, if she hadn’t joined the cult?”

“Yes. I never wanted the throne, and she did. I would’ve vastly preferred a life in this house, away from the drama.”

“Really?” He had me curious. “What would you like about it?”

“There would be no important decisions to make. No one’s life in my hands. I could spend my days breaking ice when we weren’t fighting, and I could walk off the battlefield without the guilt of my people’s blood on my shoulders.”

“If you defeated the cult and your parents came back, would you give them the throne?”

He chuckled, his back still facing me. “In a heartbeat, if the people would follow them. When they ran away, they ensured that our warriors would never allow them to rule again.”

My lips curved upward a bit sadly. I wished there was some way to make that happen for him.

His eyes were looking a bit unfocused, and worry curled in my stomach.

“I think you should rest. Climb under.” I pulled the blankets back. Though I needed to cover his wounds, Gleam and Coarse hadn’t returned with the bandages and antidote.

I still wasn’t sure about the bond connecting me to Coarse, which made me hesitant to use it. But, I was worried about Ravv, so I finally reached out.

“Are you getting close? He’s not doing good.”

“We’re almost there,” the idorr said, his voice surprisingly un-grumpy.

I hadn’t expected to end up bonded to Gleam’s mate, but I couldn’t say I hated the idea. He would protect me, as he’d proven when he pulled me out of the river. Our connection would make it harder when Ravv and I went our separate ways, but I would figure out a way to make it work.

“And you have the antidote?”

“We do.”

The steadiness in his voice made me feel slightly better.

Having Coarse would help me avoid relying on Ravv, I realized... and that was a very good thing, because I was really starting to worry that I was becoming dependent on him.

“Thank you,” I told Coarse.

“You owe me no thanks. I would help my mate save her king even without our connection.”

Right.

I bit my lip, really uncertain about how the dynamic of our bond was going to work.

That was something to worry about later, because at the moment, I needed to focus on Ravv.

His eyes were closed and his breathing was even, but I put the back of my hand on his forehead to check his temperature.

Veil, he really was cold.

Then again, I was too.

The doors to the room swung open, and Gleam and Coarse slipped inside. She had a dark blue fabric bag hanging from her jaws, and set it next to me on the bed.

“The bandages will stick to wet skin, so you’ll need water. Make sure your hands are dry when you put them on,” she said. *“And he’ll have to drink the antidote.”*

“Thank you.”

She climbed carefully onto the bed, leaving me to play healer.

Though I was flooded with uncertainty, I opened the bag and peeked inside. The bandages looked thick and tough, and felt the same when I brushed my fingers against them. They were a light color that would nearly match Ravv’s skin, too.

The bandages would have to come after the antidote, though.

It was a small vial of liquid in a strange yellowish-green color. The shade of it didn’t make me think it would cure anything, but I knew nothing about healing.

I uncorked the liquid and inhaled, nearly gagging at the scent of it. My eyes watered, and I pulled it away from my nose.

“The fae usually dump it down the person’s throat and hold their jaw closed,” Gleam explained.

I nodded, fighting a grimace as I parted his lips.

The man barely budged.

“I need you to drink this,” I said into Ravv’s mind, but he didn’t stir.

His lack of reaction made me worry more, so I just muttered a curse under my breath, and tipped the vial back.

As soon as the liquid met his tongue, Ravv’s body bucked. I held his jaw closed as tightly as I could while he fought me. The antidote finally went down, and I let out a long breath.

After smoothing his hair back, I slipped off the bed and headed back to the bathroom for another towel. I soaked it in the sink, and then went back to Ravv’s side.

He was still pale and cold, but I had to hope the antidote would work.

“How sure are you that was the right cure?” I asked Gleam.

“Sure. There are only two poisons that can be made from the plants that grow on the glacier, and the other one causes vomiting. It’s not deadly, so it’s only used to be a nuisance.”

That was better than completely uncertain, at least.

If he didn’t start recovering... well, then we’d have to start trying to figure out what else it could be.

I nodded and focused on the wound on his side first. It was already a bloody mess again, and my jaw was set in a grimace as I cleaned it up, then pressed a bandage to the skin with a dry hand.

The edges stuck perfectly, and I smoothed them just to make sure they were on correctly.

Moving on to the next cut, I found a bandage in the right size, cleaned the blood off, and covered it.

The room was nearly silent as I continued with both idorr watching me work. My movements grew confident as I got used to the motions, and Ravv’s coloring started to improve a little too. That made me feel more certain we

were doing the right thing in how we were taking care of him.

My body still felt cold and tired, so when I was finally confident that every inch of the king had been patched up, I let myself collapse on the bed and fall asleep.

I woke to the sound of soft swearing.

My eyes cracked open, and I looked around the room, a bit disoriented.

My gaze was drawn to the silhouette of a massive man in the bathroom, his bare body turned to the side.

It took me a moment to realize what he must've been doing.

“Don't mess with my bandages,” I warned, stumbling out of bed.

Veil, I was more exhausted than I realized.

“Go back to sleep,” Ravv growled back.

I ignored him, swatting his hands away as I stepped up to his side. My hip bumped the countertop a bit harder than I planned, and he growled at me again when I winced.

“Be careful with yourself, Lae.”

“Says the man who's bleeding from a hundred different cuts,” I mumbled back. He'd peeled the bandage about halfway off the wound on his side before I reached him, so I pulled on it a little as I leaned in to look closer.

The discoloration had mostly faded, but it still looked pretty damn grisly, and had bled through the bandage at some point.

“I think you need more of the antidote,” I admitted.

“*There are two more vials in the bag,*” Gleam said from the bedroom.

“You'll have to drink it after I replace this,” I told him.

“I've got it.” He tried to pull my hands off his abdomen, but I shooed him away.

“You healed me. Now I heal you.”

“If you’re offering your blood, you know I’ll have to turn it down until you’ve recovered.”

I hadn’t been offering that... but it was a good idea. I should’ve considered it sooner.

“You’ll drink from me,” I decided.

“No,” Ravv, Coarse, and Gleam all growled together.

“I drank from you, so it’s only fair,” I pointed out.

“You’re barely awake right now. When your magic returns, you can heal me if I still haven’t recovered. Until then, my teeth don’t go anywhere near your throat.”

“I’m sure you could drink my blood from some other part of me, if you tried.”

He narrowed his eyes at me. “Don’t tempt me, Lae.”

I narrowed mine back. “Don’t resist me, Ravv.”

With that, I ripped the bandage the rest of the way off his wound.

Colorful curses spewed from his lips as he bent over, trying hard to remain on his feet. I put a hand beneath the water, wet his skin with it, and then pressed the new bandage to his wound with the other hand.

He groaned. “You’re vicious.”

“My viciousness turns you on.” I dragged a hand lightly over his bare erection, making his body tense.

“Veil.” He dragged me closer and lowered his forehead to rest on the top of my head. “You’re right.”

“I know.”

After he drank the second dose of the antidote, I slipped an arm around his waist and tugged him back toward the bed. Neither of us was in the right

shape to act on his desire, so we just collapsed back in the bed together. When he'd pulled me to his chest, I whispered, "What happened to Ria after you beat her?"

"I left her to Elwynne and Orvay. They should've taken her to the castle and chained her."

My stomach twisted. "Do you have a prison?"

"Most kings have prisons, Lae," he murmured.

"But do *you*?"

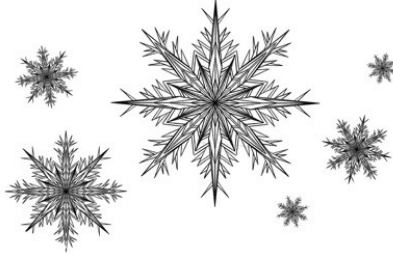
"I do. It's usually empty, though." He brushed his lips to the back of my neck. "There's nothing you could do to land yourself there. You're safe here."

I hoped he was right.

And sitting in his arms, I was comfortable enough to let myself believe him.

CHAPTER 21

LAELI



We slept for the majority of the next two days, with Gleam and Coarse bringing us edible, if questionable, food sporadically.

Ravv only had two wounds left that weren't entirely healed by the time the third day came around. My body was growing warmer by then, but my magic was still so small and weak that I could barely touch it at all.

I'd never burned myself out so thoroughly before, so I was surprised that my power continued to be inaccessible.

Still playing along with the façade about us not liking each other, Ravv left distance between us as we walked down the ice street, toward the castle. Gleam walked at his side, and Coarse walked at hers.

I was still uncertain about my bond with him, but there was no way out of it, so I knew I needed to figure out a way to get over it.

I was glad to have bonded, because it would mean I had an idorr on my side and wouldn't have to be alone, but Coarse was typically grumpy or angry. His connection to Gleam and Ravv was an even bigger problem, too, or would be as soon as the eclipse passed.

My fingers slipped into the pockets of the worn dress I'd gotten in the Timeless Sands. That dress had been through the veil and back with me, so it had a special place in my heart.

I'd have to figure out what to do about Coarse later.

“We’re still pretending not to like each other, right?” I asked him mentally, as we walked.

“Most people will know we’ve been together sexually at this point,” he said. *“Someone in the castle will have heard us and spread the word.”*

A flush stained my cheeks. *“We haven’t had actual sex.”*

“They’ll assume we have. Neither of us has been a quiet lover.”

“So?”

“So, we have to decide what story we want to tell them. I’d prefer the truth.” His gaze met mine, steady and soft.

“What’s the truth in this situation?”

“That we intended the mate bond to be temporary at the beginning, but now have feelings for each other. If the cult already wants us dead, I see no point in pretending otherwise.”

Veil.

He was admitting he had feelings for me, but what did that mean for our future? And what did I want it to mean? That, I still didn’t know for sure.

My cheeks warmed. *“I don’t know what I want to tell them. I’d rather we decide what we’re going to be on our own, and let everyone else know after.”*

He nodded, and his eyes finally focused on the city around us. *“We’ll keep up the façade until you’re ready, then.”*

I tried to ignore the way my heart sank just a little, even though I was still refusing to admit the truth about what I felt for him.

I remained silent as we slipped inside and headed down a few flights of stairs. Every fae we passed acknowledged Ravv, and most of them did the same for me. It was strange to be recognized that way, but not unpleasant.

We passed a few hallways before we reached the bottom of the stairs. I itched to take Ravv’s hand for comfort, but forced myself not to.

Maybe I should've agreed to Ravv's idea about telling the truth.

The smell in the prison made me shudder, and he gave me a concerned glance.

It wasn't the scent of old blood, or death. The prison honestly didn't smell like it had been used any more frequently than he claimed. It was just the scent of being underground that triggered me.

I met his gaze, not letting him see the fear that made my hands tremble in my pockets.

I wasn't in prison.

Ravv wouldn't trap me.

No matter how many times I repeated it, I couldn't seem to convince myself though.

"It's alright if you need to wait outside," he said, his voice gentler than I expected.

"No." My voice was steely. Or at least, I hoped it came out that way.

I followed Ravv into the dark hallway. There were very few lights, which made me more nervous even though I could see just fine.

We found Elwynne and Orvay leaned up against a wall, their shoulders pressed together. They weren't speaking, but they grinned when they saw Ravv.

"Has she said anything useful?" he asked.

"No, she hasn't," a feminine voice called from inside the cell to the right of them. "You know, my people will be making plans as we speak. In the time it took you to recover, they could've already infiltrated your walls."

"She's been like this the whole time," Elwynne said.

Ravv nodded, and his eyes flicked to me. *"Wait here."*

I obeyed his command until he'd disappeared inside Ria's cell. When he had, and I was sure it was safe, I stepped up next to Elwynne so I could see inside

the cell.

The chained woman's hair was the same color as Ravv's, but where he was built thick, she was all sharp angles and toned muscles.

"Careful." Elwynne's warning was barely more than a whisper.

I nodded, my gaze lingering on Ria as her lips curved up in a wicked smile. "Hello, Ravv."

"Tell me how many people you have left and where you've hidden them, and I'll do what I can to spare them," Ravv said calmly.

Her smile widened. "At least give me the respect of asking reasonable questions."

"If your war was reasonable, you wouldn't have killed a child in our parents' city. Your tirade became a joke the moment you ended an innocent life."

Ria's smile vanished. "That was an accident. A casualty of war."

"And yet my war, one that dragged on for centuries, didn't take the life of any children."

Her face twisted in a scowl. "So I'm a monster now?"

"You've been a monster since you tried to kill our parents in the middle of a damn eclipse," he growled at her. "Since you pulled others to your cause, corrupting more fae simply because you were *afraid*. All of us feel fear—and yet none of us turn to murdering our own damned families."

"Don't act as if you're better than me," she spat. "You walked in here with a plan to cut my heart out of my chest. You're just as much of a killer as me, *brother*."

Ravv didn't argue, or deny her accusation.

Instead he stepped forward. Though I closed my eyes, I heard a wet squelching noise that made my stomach turn.

Ravv's voice was low as he said, "May the souls you have wounded guide you to a better future, and may your next life be one of hope, understanding, and love."

Another squelch followed as he pulled his hand from Ria's body.

I stepped back without looking to see if he held her heart, my stomach still churning.

A few minutes passed before Ravv emerged from the cell, his hands in his pockets and a dark expression on his face. Gleam rubbed up against his side, and he slipped his fingers into her fur as he said quietly, "Now, we carry her body to the city below, so her people see that she's lost, and the mated can see that we want to establish peace."

Orvay dipped his head.

"Any warriors who side with them die too," Ravv said. "We're fighting with the mated, and anyone who objects can bring it up with me."

"We'll spread the word," Elwynne said simply. "Who will you take to the city with you?"

"Whichever warriors are most suspected to side with the cult."

"I'll have a group together by lunchtime," Orvay agreed.

"Thank you." Ravv slipped onto Gleam's back, and she headed up the stairs without pause.

The couple was surprised by his gratitude, exchanging looks I couldn't read before turning back to me. "What have you done to him?" Orvay asked, his voice a bit playful.

"Barely anything," I admitted. "He's the one doing things, and I'm just dragged along for the ride."

As if on cue, his voice touched my mind. *"I need you close for the next few days. It's not safe for you to be alone right now."*

Coarse nudged me with his nose, and I slipped onto his back. He carried me off toward Ravv and Gleam, and I buried my fingers into his fur.

It was a strange sensation, to ride on the back of the beast I was bonded to. There was a different level of trust and safety in it. I didn't feel at risk, or in danger, despite my lack of relationship with Coarse. I just felt... secure.

We followed Ravv and Gleam around the city for the next few hours. Ravv stopped or dismounted to speak with fae every couple of minutes, but I remained on Coarse's back for most of it. That feeling of security I'd felt riding with him only grew stronger, as more time passed.

Just before it was time to meet the warriors to take Ria's body, we stopped for lunch at a small shop in the middle of the city. When I told Ravv I wasn't that hungry, he asked for extra on my plate.

I rolled my eyes at him, but when the food was put in front of us, ate as quickly as I could so we weren't late.

Though I was contemplating his idea to stop hiding our relationship, I was still uncertain. I had enough to worry about on my own, and was still fighting off the feelings of being trapped that had returned when I stepped into the castle's prison. They warred with the memories that had started coming back during the Beast's attack, leaving my mind a mess.

Wanting a distraction, I glanced up at the sky. My gaze followed the gleaming red belly of the dragon soaring in slow, wide circles over the glacier.

I didn't know if he was trying to scare us, or if he could sense the elves' shield, or... if maybe he didn't want to attack us?

That seemed like a ridiculous idea, but I didn't understand why else he hadn't attacked yet, so my curiosity was growing.

At the castle, we met a group of fae waiting with a body covered in black cloth. A shudder rolled down my spine at the memory of Ravv stabbing her, and I tucked my face close to Coarse's fur. He hadn't spoken more than a few words to me while we ran around the city, and I hadn't spoken much to him either.

We were both still reluctant to discuss our connection, I thought.

I needed to fix that, though.

He rubbed up against Gleam's side after Ravv dismounted to speak with a few of the fae gathered.

"I'm sorry," I said quietly to Coarse.

"For what?" he sounded grumpy again, but I didn't mind.

"It doesn't seem like you wanted to be bonded to anyone, so I'm sorry for trapping you in this," I explained.

He was silent for a moment.

A long, long moment.

"I suppose it could seem that way," he finally said.

We started walking, staying at the back of the group with Ravv and Gleam at his command.

"There are many idorr who despair at their lack of a bond. I focused all of that energy on my mate instead, so I wasn't prepared when our souls connected. I'm uncertain how to care for and protect my female while also being your companion. I have lived a long time without needing to worry about that."

That made sense, and I didn't blame him for it.

"I'm sorry. It's weird for me, too. I hoped that bonding to an idorr could help give me some sense of stability when the eclipse separates me from Ravv, so I think maybe we both just need to adjust our expectations."

"I have made it clear to the king that our connection outranks his to you, and he will face my wrath if he hurts you," Coarse growled into my mind. *"A mate comes before a companion, but you are not his mate."*

The words stung, but I needed to hear them.

My eyes burned a bit, too.

"He's the first sliver of stability I've had since..." I trailed off, closing my eyes and taking a shaky breath in. *"Since my family died. There was a fire on my thirteenth birthday, when my magic came in. I woke up surrounded by flames. They died—they all died. The ones we didn't lose to the fire, we lost*

to the king's men's swords."

"You were a child, Laeli. Children can never control their magic. Don't carry the guilt for something you never would've done on purpose. Blame the fates or the gods for giving you that magic, but never yourself."

I wasn't sure how to respond to that, but his certainty lightened the heaviness weighing on my chest. *"Thank you for saying that."*

"You need to believe it," he grumbled at me.

My lips curved upward in a small, sad smile. *"If only it were that easy. I don't know how to make myself believe it any more than I know how to make myself stop relying on Ravv."*

"The king is generally a safe male to rely on," the idorr admitted. *"I trust him with my female's life more than I trust her with it."*

I snorted. *"That's terrible."*

"Gleamingeyes knows how protective I am of her. My trust in the king has nothing to do with her, and everything to do with him. He is an honorable male."

"You're not making it any easier for me to come up with excuses to put distance between us," I said with a sigh. *"He might be honorable, but it seems like he has no desire to stay with me after the eclipse breaks our bond."*

"I doubt that's true. Have you asked him? I've never seen him care for a woman the way he cares for you. Your bond is not as meaningless to him as you think."

My throat swelled. *"Maybe I'll talk to him about it."* I changed the subject, before I got too emotional. *"Have you and Gleam had any cubs yet?"*

"No. We had no desire to become parents during a war. Perhaps in the future, we will decide to try."

I respected that, tremendously.

If I had kids, it wouldn't be for a long, long time. I'd need a fae lifespan to

make it possible at all.

We continued speaking as we ran, covering ground on the glacier as we headed to the city of mated fae. I'd been nervous about talking to Coarse, but I was so damn glad that I'd pushed past it. We weren't so different after all.

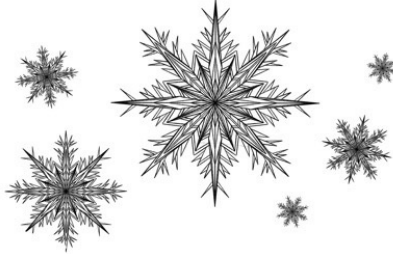
I even learned why he'd been so grumpy when we first met—because Gleam hadn't told him when she slipped away with Ravv in the middle of the night as they headed out to find me. He was angry because he had been worried about her.

Though I laughed inwardly at the story, it occurred to me while he was talking just how similar I was to Ravv's bonded idorr... and just how similar he was to mine.

I wondered if that might mean something for all of a heartbeat before focusing back on Coarse's story.

CHAPTER 22

LAELI



One of the suns had already set, and the other two were going down, when we finally reached the thick crevice that was the entrance to the other city.

“We sent word to warn my parents that I’m bringing fae who may want them dead,” Ravv said into my mind, as the first of our group slid into the crack. “They’ll be waiting at the gates to fight. Stay at the back for your safety; I don’t want you involved.”

I wasn’t going to argue in favor of my fighting abilities, so I nodded.

The fae holding Ria’s body slid down, and Ravv and Gleam followed them.

Though I would’ve hesitated, Coarse slid down behind them.

My stomach jumped into my throat as we launched toward the ground below. My terror was tangible, until we landed smoothly.

Even then, my heart still galloped as my chest rose and fell rapidly. I gripped Coarse’s fur tight enough to be afraid I was hurting him.

“Close your eyes,” Coarse growled into my mind.

I, of course, did the opposite.

My eyes flew open, my head lifting so I could see what was going on.

My heart about stopped altogether when I saw the battle that had broken out in front of the metal gates. A couple fought viciously at the head of the group,

and I knew they had to be Ravv's parents.

Among our people, the fae and idorr seemed to have turned on each other, and I couldn't tell friend from foe. I caught a flash of Ravv's face as he launched into the fight, ice claws and sharp shards erupting over his skin. He tore through the warriors with ferocity, working with some of them to kill others. I had no idea how he could tell the good ones from the bad ones, though I assumed he'd been filled in on which were most suspected to be working with the cult.

"Let me get down, and you can fight too," I whispered to Coarse.

"No." His voice was calmer than expected. *"The king and my mate have it handled."*

The words stunned me, but we stayed where we were.

I watched the fighting fae fall one by one, until Ravv stood in a group of those he must've trusted, with his parents behind him. His chest rose and fell quickly as his gaze scanned the faces of those left alive.

Finally, his eyes landed on one last man.

The man took a step backward—and then took a final strangled breath before my king tore his throat out with his clawed hand.

The contents of my stomach nearly came back up.

I covered my mouth, refusing to acknowledge the nausea. It was hard for me to face violence, but I knew Ravv was keeping his people safe.

Keeping *me* safe.

Given the opportunity, that man he killed would've likely killed me too.

The gore was still difficult to see, though.

"Someone grab the body," Ravv commanded.

I itched to ask him what had happened and how the battle broke out, but I knew the time wasn't right.

We would talk later.

...probably.

I could hope, at least.

Coarse and I stayed at the back of the group as Ravv led the other fae up to the gates of the city, where his parents stood, wearing icy armor that was splattered with blood.

“We’re here to negotiate for peace,” Ravv said evenly.

“She’s dead?” his mother asked. Her voice wasn’t quiet, but her expression was grave.

He gestured toward one of his men, who carried the body up to them.

Ravv’s father carefully pulled the fabric back, and he and his mate stared at their daughter’s face for a long moment before he gently covered her again.

His mother wiped at her watering eyes with a shaky hand. “It’s over.”

“Nearly. In the coming weeks, I’ll find the cult’s hideout to make sure they’ve all been eliminated. My most trusted men and women are working through the ranks of my warriors right now, making sure we’ve identified any who fear mate bonds and may retaliate.”

“We can come home, then,” his father said.

“Yes.”

There was a moment of silence.

It was... more tense than I expected.

“We’ll prepare our people for the move. When you come to let us know you’re ready, we’ll head back up with you,” his father added.

“Agreed.” Ravv started to turn away.

“Can we keep her body?” his mother asked quietly. “I’d like to bury her myself, and leave her with wishes for a kinder future.”

“Of course.” He didn’t bother turning around, giving the order to the man holding her body before climbing onto Gleam’s back.

Ravv's eyes moved slowly over me, making sure I was alright as Gleam strode past the rest of the warriors and their bonded beasts. She began to run toward a path off to the left of the slanted wall we'd come down.

Coarse remained where he was, planning to stay at the tail-end of the group so we didn't have our backs to anyone.

My eyes caught on one of the women in Ravv's group.

While the others were funneling out, she and her companion lingered a bit too close to his parents, who were both wiping at watery eyes, too engaged in quiet conversation to notice her.

"Do you see her?" I asked Coarse.

"Yes. If she moves toward the king's parents, she dies."

When a small ice blade appeared in her hand and she took a step, he wasted no time.

Coarse crossed the distance in a heartbeat, catching her off guard and removing her head from her body with his claws.

The woman's bonded idorr roared her fury, lunging toward Coarse. Her claws caught me in the arm as he dodged her, and I bit my tongue to hold back a cry.

He snarled back, slamming into her with his shoulder. She cried out again as she skidded backward, and then as his claws tore into her side.

When she retaliated, he moved enough to protect me from her claws.

I made myself as small as I could on his back while they traded blows, her injuries far worse than his. Ravv wasn't snarling into my mind, so he must not have known what was happening.

Ravv's parents and their bonded beasts joined the fight a moment later, and then it ended quickly.

I squeezed my eyes shut to avoid looking at the female idorr's body while Coarse traded words with a few others who had come to our aid. Soon, we had started down the path that would lead us out of the city.

Ravv and Gleam were so far ahead of us that they didn't see or smell our blood.

"Should we tell them?" I whispered to Coarse.

He grunted. *"I'd rather she lick my wounds in private."*

My lips curved upward a bit.

But Ravv wouldn't lick my wounds—he would be furious that I'd been injured without him noticing.

It would be easier to deal with his fury when we weren't on an hours-long trek back to his city... but he would feel betrayed if I waited that long to tell him.

I couldn't stand the idea of him feeling like I'd betrayed him on the same day he'd had to kill his own damn sister, so I couldn't wait.

"I'm going to tell him," I whispered to Coarse.

He made a noise of agreement.

I reached out to Ravv. *"Hey."*

There was a pause. Though I could feel his attention on me, he remained silent. I couldn't imagine the toll that day must've taken on him, and wasn't hurt by his silence.

"I need to tell you something without you panicking or growling at me," I added.

Another moment of silence passed.

I figured that was as much of a confirmation as I was going to get. *"After you left, there was a female fae who lingered too long. She looked suspicious, so Coarse and I were watching her. When she pulled out a knife and moved toward your parents, Coarse killed her, and then fought her bonded idorr."*

I saw his head jerk back toward the group before his eyes caught on me.

Quickly, I added, *"I'm fine, of course, but the idorr's claws caught me on the arm. I'm only bleeding a little, but—"*

He and Gleam were already charging through the group. The other idorr and fae dodged him without hesitation, giving him room.

Ravv plucked me off Coarse's back as Gleam snarled at her mate, poking and prodding at him with her nose. We skidded to a stop, and Coarse remained still while Gleam checked and licked every one of his wounds, growling and snapping her teeth at him.

Ravv was doing the same to me as he ripped the torn sleeve off my dress and studied my wound closely, then wrapped it tightly with that fabric. Though there was no licking involved, he was growling at me too. I could see the wound on his side bleeding through his bandage again, but something told me it was a bad time to bring that up.

"I'm okay," I repeated to him.

He said nothing as he held me tightly to his chest, leaning lower on Gleam's back so we wouldn't fly off when she started to move.

Coarse let Ravv and Gleam have their way. He gave me a deadpanned look when Gleam took off at an angry run, and he said, "*Does that really seem like a male who plans to let you go when the eclipse breaks your bond?*"

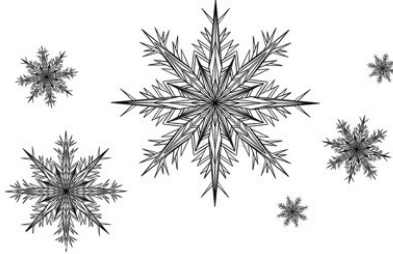
I didn't answer him, because the truth was too hard to believe, especially in my state of mind at the moment.

It had been a long, rough day... but we were all alive.

And we would figure everything else out when we got back.

CHAPTER 23

LAELI



It was dark and cold by the time we finally reached the castle. My body was exhausted and achy, and Ravv seemed insanely tense.

Gleam and Coarse slipped into their own room after leaving us at the door to Ravv's. Though I knew there was a good chance they'd come back in to snuggle up with us later, I figured they knew we needed a few minutes to talk.

Ravv scooped me up and carried me into the bathroom, turning on the shower before stripping the rest of my clothes off. His movements were harsh, and there was frustration evident in the way he'd set his jaw.

I put my hands on his face when he set me down on my feet. We weren't beneath the water yet, but it rained down off to the side of us. "Just breathe, Ravv."

"I'm breathing," he growled back at me.

I narrowed my eyes at him. "Talk, then. Tell me what's on your mind instead of ripping my clothes off. If you're angry with me, tell me why. We're awful at communicating, and we need to fix that if we're going to survive even just until the eclipse."

"I'm not angry with you. I'm just..." He let out a rough breath. "Veil, I don't even know. I'm not ready to talk."

"Then tell me what I can do to help you."

“Drink my blood.” He didn’t so much as hesitate, and his gaze went right to my wounds.

They weren’t small, and there were four of them in a row, so I could understand his concern.

But given the massive cut that had started bleeding through the bandage on his side again, I couldn’t do what he wanted.

“Are you going to drink from me first?” I countered.

He scowled at me.

“If you tell me your wound isn’t a big deal one more time, I will castrate you,” I warned.

“You might need my balls someday, mate,” he countered.

“And you might get your ass kicked by my flaming hands if you imply that we’re going to have kids before you even tell me whether or not you want to be with me after the eclipse.”

His lips curved upward the tiniest bit—and then they were on mine, and veil, he *kissed* me.

My first kiss was nothing compared to the way Ravv’s mouth met mine. He kissed me the way he touched me, like he needed me and would do whatever it took to have me.

My back hit the wall, and he tore my undergarments from my body as his mouth made love to mine. His hands were everywhere—hot, slick, and perfect.

Mine buried into his curls, pulling him closer and tighter as we devoured each other, desperation growing between us.

I wanted more—I wanted him.

All of him.

The thickness of his cock rocked against my clit, and I nearly demanded he strip his shorts off and fill me. Only his mouth on mine stopped me from making the command.

The intimacy of it was all-encompassing.

It was overwhelming, in the absolute best way.

And veil, I never wanted it to end.

When he dragged my mouth to his shoulder and growled at me to bite him, I couldn't resist the command. My teeth buried in his shoulder, and his cut into mine.

We gasped together at the bliss that filled us both.

Our bodies moved against each other as we drank, our souls seeming to intertwine.

But it wasn't enough.

I wanted more.

"I need you inside me," I breathed into his mind, not daring to pull my mouth from his skin. He felt and tasted too damn good.

"You're sure?" I could feel how much effort it took him to ask me, rather than taking what I'd offered.

"Now, Ravv."

"Veil, you're perfect." He freed his erection and lifted me higher in one smooth motion.

His cock slid inside me, slow at first. The way he filled me was overwhelming—my breath stalled for a moment, until he squeezed my ass and growled at me to breathe.

I sucked in air, and he slid further in.

And further.

And further.

I thought he hit the back of me when a burst of pain had my stomach tensing, but he eased against it, and the pain faded into an achy, brilliant bliss.

Moans and pants escaped me as I released his shoulder, too overwhelmed to

focus on anything but the way he stretched me.

“Tell me how you feel,” he commanded me, withdrawing his teeth from my shoulder and capturing my mouth again. I could taste my blood on his tongue, and it was so much more of a turn-on than I could’ve imagined.

“Full,” I breathed. *“So full.”*

“You fit me perfectly.” He sucked lightly on my lip before releasing it. *“I’m going to move, now. It’ll probably feel strange at first. Lose yourself in the sensations, and the pleasure will follow.”*

He thrust his hips, and my lips parted in complete and utter silence.

The pleasure that rolled through me was so much bigger and fiercer than what I was expecting. My body trembled with the force of it, and a soft cry escaped me when he repeated the motion.

“Veil, you’re tight.” The way his chest rumbled against mine when he spoke aloud made me dizzy with need. I was so damn close to the edge, and he knew it. *“I’m going to fill you with my pleasure, Lae. When you go off, I go with you.”*

He thrust again, and I screamed.

Wave after wave of bliss washed over me as I jerked and rocked and moved. He slammed into me, managing not to hurt me as he roared, flooding my channel with the thick heat of his release.

We came down from the high, sweating and panting. My arms were draped over his shoulders, and his face was buried in my hair. The shower was still on at our side, but neither of us even noticed the damn thing. Outside the sweat and pleasure, we were as dry as the Sands.

“Veil,” I whispered.

“That had better be a good veil,” he grumbled at me.

I laughed, still a bit breathless. *“So good.”*

“Then beg me to eat you while you’re full of my seed.”

I laughed again—so hard I nearly snorted. *“No. I told you, I’m never going to*

beg you. The power dynamic between us is already a mess.”

He gave me a deadpanned stare. “Stubborn female.”

“If I were any less stubborn, you’d clean your floors with me.”

He chuckled. “I wouldn’t.”

“No, but you’d get tired of me. You need someone just as strong as you.”

He made a noise of agreement. After a moment’s pause, he added, “You said I’ve never told you whether I want you after the eclipse.”

“You haven’t.” I fiddled with the curls at the back of his head.

“I told you in Jirev that even if we couldn’t be mates, I wanted you as my life partner. We’re fated, Lae. To me, that’s forever. Even if we weren’t, I’ve come to enjoy fighting with you too much to go back to sleeping alone. I thought you understood that, or I would’ve made it clear long ago. I’ve been giving you the space you demanded because you’re not certain—not because *I* have any doubts.”

My throat swelled, and my eyes stung.

“I think I knew that,” I admitted softly, not meeting his gaze as I continued playing with his hair. “It was just easier to believe you were pushing me away than to accept that I might want more.”

“I’m not trying to make your life harder.” He adjusted our position, and his lips brushed my throat once, and then again.

“I know. I think maybe *I* am, unintentionally. I’m not sure how to live life anymore, now that I’m free. It was always just about survival before.”

“Your strength got you here. Now, you have to learn how to trust yourself.” His lips brushed my throat again. “And me.”

“I already trust you. I’m the problem here.” My lips curved in a sad smile.

“Stop fighting with yourself, then. If I ask you what you want, what’s your gut reaction? Without thinking, doubting, or questioning?”

“You,” I whispered.

His chest rumbled against mine. “Good answer.”

I laughed softly, and he lifted his head from my hair, brushing a few strands off my face. His expression was soft, and aching-sweet. “Can I stop giving you space?”

“Yes.”

His lips captured mine, and he kissed me slowly. Intimately. His cock was still buried inside me, hard and thick and perfect, but the kiss wasn't about pleasure.

It was about *connection*. About hope, peace, and veil, maybe even a little bit of love. Not that I was anywhere near ready to pull out *that* word.

He released me after a moment, then rested his forehead against mine. His eyes closed, and mine did too.

I almost *felt* his mood change as his grip shifted, going from holding me securely against him to holding me like he was afraid I'd leave him.

A few moments passed before he spoke quietly. “I killed my sister today.”

My smile faded, and I wrapped my arms around him tighter. “I know. I'm sorry. You didn't have another choice.”

“Elwynne or Orvay would've done it for me. I just...” he let out a harsh breath. “She was my responsibility.”

Ravv had said that his crown was heavy, and I knew that was the truth in many ways. More than he'd even shown me.

“Your people respect you fiercely because you do the hardest things yourself. *I* respect you fiercely for that. Most kings would hand out the worst tasks to the people they trust, but you don't ask anything of anyone that you wouldn't do yourself. You should be proud of that, even if it's shitty today, tomorrow, and next week. You might not want to be king, but that doesn't make you any less incredible at it.”

He grimaced. “Don't lie to me. Tell me I'm a miserable asshole.”

“You're an asshole, but a good one.” I pulled him closer, and he didn't

protest the motion.

“If you’re trying to make me hard for you, it’s already worked.”

I laughed. “You’re still inside me. I know you haven’t gone soft.” I brushed a kiss to his cheek. “Tell me about your parents.”

“Tell me about yours,” he countered.

My smile vanished, and I tried to slip out of his grasp. He helped me slide off his cock, but held me in his arms even more tightly afterward.

“If I was as good a man as you say, you would’ve already trusted me with their story, whatever it is. You think I haven’t noticed you lost in your memories? I see flashes of your past through our bond, Lae. I keep waiting for you to trust me enough to tell me.”

My throat swelled, and I tried to pull away.

He held me tighter, gripping me to his chest. “You know that Ria tried to kill my parents. It was in the middle of the night, following an eclipse. Everyone was exhausted. I went to her room to see if she wanted to go for another round of drinks, to buy a few more hours until the alcohol sickness set in, but she was gone. When I tracked her scent to my parents’ bedroom, I found that she’d tied them to their headboard and was torturing them, slowly. Relishing their pain.”

My eyes widened with horror.

“She was drunk, and raging out of her mind. I dragged her from the room and made her tell me what had happened. She had fallen in love with a mated man who claimed he would leave his female to run away with her.”

He continued, “When she went looking for him as the lust set in, ready to run away, he admitted he would never be able to leave his mate and asked her to spend the eclipse in bed with both of them. She murdered both him and his mate that night, and it turned her against not just them, but mated couples as a whole. When we went back in to release our parents, they were already gone.”

The revelation was so insane, I could barely breathe.

“She lost her damned mind when we found that room empty, and tried to kill me too, but was too drunk to manage it. I hauled her back to her room and spent the night getting her sober. When the morning came around, she acted sorry for what she’d done, to convince me it was alright to sleep. Then, as soon as I let myself rest, she slipped away. I hadn’t seen her since, until today.”

“I’m so sorry,” I whispered.

He squeezed me tighter.

Closing my eyes, I let out a shaky breath.

I felt better after I told Coarse some of what had happened. And I trusted Ravv even more than I did my bonded companion, as insane as that may have been. So... I had to tell him.

“My magic came in on my thirteenth birthday, and I woke up engulfed in flames,” I began.

Ravv held me while I told him everything. He wiped my tears when I cried, and when I apologized for the tears, he licked them off my face.

I could tell that was just to get a pathetic little laugh out of me, but I appreciated it anyway.

When I finally finished talking, he turned off the water we had never stepped beneath, then hauled me to the bed. We would shower in the morning.

Breathing felt easier without carrying the secrets of my past on my shoulders alone.

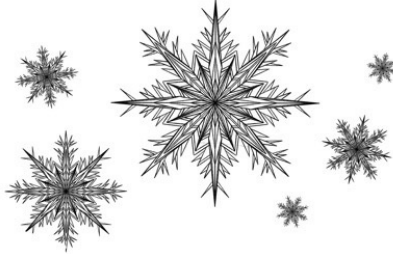
My mind felt clear, for the first time in far too long.

I curled up in Ravv’s arms, my bare body resting against his as he held me securely, and for the second time since we’d met, I let myself imagine what it would be like if we were fully mated.

And veil, it was perfect.

CHAPTER 24

LAELI



Ravv woke me up early the next morning with his face between my thighs, and then made love to me until I was so damn exhausted I was ready to go back to bed.

Instead of sleeping more, we went to a shop nearby, grabbed an assload of the fertility suppressant herb, ate a quick breakfast, and then went out with Gleam and Coarse to search for the cult's hiding place.

Though Ravv didn't say it, I knew the chance of us actually finding the hiding place were incredibly slim. There were dozens of other pairs of warriors scouting the glacier too, but the ice could be dangerous, and that made the search even more difficult than it already was.

We were so exhausted when we got back that night that all four of us collapsed in bed together. Gleam's sweaty, furry back was nearly plastered to my face, but Ravv's body was pressed to mine, so I didn't care.

The next few weeks passed by in the blink of an eye.

The dragon flew massive loops around the glacier, as if he was studying all of the fae from above while we searched for the cult's hiding place.

We got back to the house halfway through the fifth week of searching, ready to collapse back in bed with the food we'd grabbed from a shop nearby, when someone knocked hard on our door.

“We found it!” Elwynne called from outside.

Ravv didn’t waste a moment, throwing the door open and waving her, Orvay, and their bonded idorr inside.

Their eyes were bright, and there was dried blood on both of their hands and arms.

“How many?” Ravv demanded.

“Four.” She rattled off their names, but I didn’t recognize any of them.

“Did you lose any?”

“Nope. All dead.” Orvay’s grin was vicious.

Three others had attacked the city and been killed for it in the past weeks without any other casualties, too, while we were off searching.

“Veil, we might actually be done with this mess,” Ravv ran a hand through his already-wild curls. “You’ll have to lead me there.”

I fought a grimace.

My entire body was sore from the constant riding, but I couldn’t say that. Not when they’d finally caught the people who had been plaguing them for so long.

“Of course,” Orvay agreed.

“How far?” Ravv checked, glancing at me with a bit of concern.

We couldn’t be apart without pain, and it had been a long day already.

“I can handle it,” I told him.

“It’s about a four-hour ride,” Elwynne said.

Veil. It would be morning by the time we got back.

Ravv shook his head. “We’ll leave with the first sunrise.”

I blinked.

Elwynne and Orvay blinked too.

Coarse let out an amused huff and plopped down on the ground beside me, his mind brushing against mine. “*And you thought this male would walk away from you after the eclipse.*”

“You need to see it. I’ll sleep in the morning.” I closed the box of food I hadn’t yet started.

“Lae,” Ravv warned, his chest rumbling unhappily. He sat down beside me and reopened the box. “Your health matters more.”

“More than the security of our city?” Elwynne checked.

He flashed her a glare. “The city isn’t at risk. You took care of that already.”

“A few more of them could’ve been out foraging,” Orvay pointed out. “We cleaned up and buried the bodies just in case.”

“We can’t risk waiting.” I started to close the box once again.

Ravv ripped it open yet another time, leveling me with that glare he’d turned on Elwynne. “If you want to convince me of that, you’ll need to fill your stomach.”

“I’m not starving anymore. Look at all of this.” I gathered the squish on my belly in my hand, through my simple, soft black dress.

“I’m not watching all of *this* fade.” He grabbed my belly the same way I had. Somehow, it was much sexier when he did it. “You eat, or we don’t go.”

I heaved a sigh, but knew that fighting with Ravv about food was pointless. We had stopped hiding that we had feelings for each other, but we’d been gone searching all day every day, so none of his people really knew what we were to each other.

Elwynne’s eyebrow lift, and Orvay’s snort, told me they had figured it out.

“We knew you were together romantically,” Elwynne said, plopping down in a chair opposite of mine and grabbing Ravv’s fork. Orvay sat next to her, and after she took a bite of Ravv’s food, she gave Orvay one.

“We knew you were together romantically too,” I pointed out, as Ravv took my fork long enough to load it and fill my mouth again.

“The difference is, we’re not bonded.” Elwynne gestured between herself and Orvay. “There’s no magic pushing us to stay together.”

Ravv countered, “You’re also not being hunted by one of the elves’ assassins.”

“Still. I like the freedom of being together without anything forcing us,” Elwynne said. “If one of us changes our mind, we can part ways without a problem.”

If one of them changed their mind, they could part ways without a problem?

I fought not to wrinkle my nose at the idea.

Maybe I liked the idea of a mate bond more than I cared to admit. I supposed I had lived so long without stability that I wanted the guarantee of it.

If I was going to be with Ravv for an extended period of time, it wouldn’t be with the knowledge that we could part at any time. I’d tie him to me in every way there was, so he knew I was his without question, and I knew he was mine with just as much certainty. And if we ever fell out of love, we would figure out what we had to do to fall back *in* love. Our bond would be a vow that we would do whatever it took to make things work for us, for the rest of our existences. It was a huge commitment, but there was a lot of security in it.

Then again, even a mate bond could be manipulated, abused, or ignored. Ria had seen clear proof of that.

I wasn’t about to argue about mate bonds with ancient fae, though, so I kept my thoughts quiet.

We all ate quickly, then headed out once again.

The ride was long.

Really, really long.

And a bit cold, too. It was difficult for me to get a chill thanks to my bond with Ravv and my fire magic, but not impossible, and the glacier at night

made me shiver a bit.

The Demon in the sky seemed to be sticking closer than usual to us too, which was nerve-wracking.

By the time we finally reached the hideout, with an entrance that was nothing more than a crack between two chunks of ice, I was struggling to keep my eyes open. My body was pressed to Coarse's back, and his movements were steady enough that I didn't need to hold on tightly.

"Stay out here," Ravv murmured into my mind. His hand brushed my back before he and Elwynne slipped inside, while Orvay stayed out with me.

I didn't want to think about what might be happening inside the hideout, so I focused on Orvay. I had never spent much time with him, and I found myself studying him a bit curiously.

He hadn't said anything during the conversation about mates a few hours earlier, and that made me wonder how he felt.

He noticed me eyeing him, and his lips curved upward in amusement.

"You're stuck on the conversation earlier, aren't you? Humans believe in marriage more than fae believe in mating."

I sat up a bit. "I guess. Why wouldn't you be comfortable promising everything to each other when you've been together for so long?"

"I'd love to make Elwynne my mate," he said bluntly. "But she grew up in a family of nomads, so she feels safer knowing she has options."

"Aren't you afraid of losing her, then?"

His smile widened. "I won't lose her. If she tries to leave me, I'll follow her until I've annoyed her enough that she takes me back. Eventually, she'll realize she doesn't want to live without me in any life, and she'll become mine permanently. I'm a patient enough man to wait for that day."

As I opened my mouth to ask another question, Ravv and Elwynne came back out.

“It’s still empty. If there are any more cultists alive, they’re not here. My guess would be that the only ones left alive are those still hiding among our warriors, and there can’t be more than one or two we haven’t uncovered at this point,” Ravv said, his eyes landing on me immediately. They moved over me slowly, as if he was making sure I was in the same shape he had left me.

It didn’t exactly thrill me to find out that we’d gone all that way for nothing, but Ravv would be able to rest easier after seeing the hideout, so it was worth it.

“Ready to head back?” Elwynne asked, scratching her bonded idorr behind his ears.

Ravv started to say something, but a huge rush of wind cut him off.

My head jerked upward as a flash of gleaming red caught my eye, and panic flooded me.

“Get inside!” I yelled at Ravv.

He stepped in front of Coarse instead, protecting me with his own damn body.

The Demon landed in front of us a heartbeat later, shaking the glacier beneath our feet. I clutched Coarse’s fur as he tensed for the fight.

Ravv’s ice claws and shards coated his body, and Elwynne’s and Orvay’s swords appeared in their hands.

But the demon shifted into the form of a man—a gorgeous man, with light skin and thick, curly crimson hair. He was even bigger than Ravv and Orvay.

Rather than attacking, he lifted his hands up as if in surrender.

None of us moved.

“I’m not here to kill you,” the Demon called. “My curse drives me to track my targets, but I won’t be forced to act on the urge to take your life for a few more weeks.”

“What do you want?” Elwynne demanded.

“To make a deal with you.”

A moment of silence followed his response.

“We’re listening,” Ravv finally growled.

“I want you to kill me,” the Demon said.

There was a long, long pause.

I studied the man. He didn’t look like a monster. He looked... tired.

“Why?” Ravv asked, his fury shifting to angry confusion.

His voice was weary as he admitted, “My curse controls me entirely, and I’m tired of being its prisoner. Death would be my only escape.”

His words struck me hard.

I knew what it was to be a prisoner. To wish for a way out—*any* way out.

“What about mating?” I asked him.

His attention jerked to me, and Ravv gave a low, threatening growl.

“Mate bonds change your magic. What if taking a mate could alter your curse?” I added.

“This may all be a game to him,” Ravv warned me. *“Do not risk yourself in any way.”*

I didn’t think it was a game to him, though. I knew suffering well enough that I didn’t think anyone would be able to lie to me about it with any amount of success.

The Demon studied me for a moment. “And what if I make the female like me?”

“Then you’ll have to make sure she falls in love with you, or she’ll hate you for it,” I said bluntly.

He studied me for a long, long moment before he shook his head. “I have taken too many lives as it is.” His attention moved back to the fae with me.

“Find a way to kill me before the eclipse, or my curse will force me to take your life. Your elves’ shields may stop my brothers, but they’ll be useless

against me.”

With that, he shifted back into his dragon form and launched into the sky.

I let out a breath I hadn't realized I was holding as he disappeared above our heads.

“We move, *now*,” Ravv said harshly.

Our bonded idorr ran like our lives depended on it the whole way back to Loire.

The second sun was rising when we reached the castle, and I expected Ravv to go back to his room with me so we could get some sleep. Instead, he left me with a searing kiss at the door, and a warning to get some rest, before striding away to begin developing a plan.

Being left behind didn't hurt anymore, because I knew he was just taking care of me the best way he knew how. I wasn't a warrior, and all of us knew it.

Gleam collapsed in bed with me while Coarse followed Ravv to the meeting he likely had Elwynne and Orvay putting together, and I fell asleep almost as soon as my head hit the pillow.

My growling stomach woke me a few hours later, and I looked around blearily before realizing I was all alone.

Ravv was...

Veil.

Still in a meeting?

My handprint was throbbing a bit, but it had started to do that even when there was only a small amount of distance between us.

“*Where are you guys?*” I asked Coarse, not wanting to disturb Ravv if he was still having a conversation.

There was no response.

I tried again, and got nothing once again.

Gleam was still snoring, so I didn't dare wake her up. I'd been up all day and night, but she had been *running* the whole time.

On second thought, I hoped Coarse was asleep too.

Though I was reluctant to interrupt him, I knew Ravv would be furious if he found out I was hungry and hadn't told him, so I reached out. "*Are you still awake?*"

"Unfortunately. Still planning with my generals," he admitted. "*Are you hungry?*"

My lips curved upward at the way he had practically read my mind. "*Yep.*"

"I'm in an office just down the hall. Turn left outside our room, and walk down to the third door on your right. You can sit on my lap and glare at my people while I convince them to settle on a damn plan."

My smile grew a bit at the idea of sitting on Ravv's lap while he growled at his generals.

I swapped my dirty dress for one of his shirts before slipping out. I really needed a shower—and to wash all of my clothes—but he did too, so I'd wait for him.

Halfway down the hall, the door I'd been heading to opened, and a man stepped out.

Ravv's voice met my ears for a moment before the door shut behind him.

The man stared at me as I neared him, and I opened my mouth to say hello in passing.

He moved so fast, I barely saw him swing his fist at my face.

The pain of the collision didn't register as my world spun for a heartbeat, and then went black.

When I came to, my head felt like someone had taken a hammer to it. My body felt like it was turning too, but I could feel a muscular form against my back, so I knew that wasn't real.

My mind moved sluggishly, and the sharp pain in the handprint on my arm was enough to make breathing a struggle.

Some part of me could hear Ravv and Coarse speaking into my mind, demanding to know where I was and what had happened, but I wasn't functioning well enough to connect with them. Their voices and the bonds were there, but I was too weak to get a hold on them.

I forced my eyes open just a crack, and inhaled sharply when I found myself looking down at the city below us. My abductor and I stood on the roof of the castle, with just a thin strip of ice in front of our toes to keep us from plummeting.

Wind blew lightly at me, and I could feel my flames trying to ignite but failing.

Heights—veil, I did *not* like heights.

It was a good thing my mind wasn't working correctly, or I would've been a shaking, sweating mess.

“You have hunted and slaughtered us, but we will not cross the veil in vain!” the man holding me shouted to the crowd that had gathered at the base of the castle. My body stilled as he lifted the sharp edge of an ice blade to my throat and pressed hard. It nicked my skin, and a drop of warm blood rolled slowly down my neck. “The king's mate dies with me, leaving you with nothing but a broken crown, while the Demon of the Weeping Skies burns you all to ash.”

Ravv and Coarse roared into my mind, deafening me to the sounds of the man behind me and the fae below.

The last few times I had been captured, I froze.

I couldn't move, or think.

This time, I forced myself to fight those urges. I had to speak—if I didn't, I

would die. “Our bond isn’t sealed,” I managed to say. “We’re not mates.”

“You have a bond, and that’s dangerous enough,” the man spat into my ear.

A soft cry escaped me as he dug his knife deeper into my skin. More blood rolled down my throat until it disappeared into the dark fabric of the large, soft shirt I had taken from Ravv.

Ravv’s voice boomed into my mind, growing clear for just a moment. “*I’m almost there, Lae.*”

He needed me to delay the cultist.

It was my only chance at survival, so I forced my blurred mind to focus just a little longer.

“I didn’t ask to be mated,” I whispered. “I didn’t know what he was doing when he said the vow. We don’t—”

“Shut up,” the man snarled at me. “You lost the right to live the moment that handprint appeared on your arm. You are a threat to Evare, and—” His words halted, and his hand dropped away from my throat. The knife was still too close for comfort, so I didn’t dare move.

After a moment’s pause, he stumbled.

A scream pierced the air as we plummeted off the ledge—*my* scream.

I fell for a moment—the longest moment of my life—until a strong hand caught me by the ankle. The yank of the grip was painful enough to make me scream again, until my body slammed against the icy wall of the castle, and the shock of it silenced me.

The fae who had cut me continued to fall. I heard yells and cries erupt below me, but none of them processed.

Everything spun faster as more pain flooded my senses.

Ravv spoke into my mind, his words sure and calming, but I barely heard them.

The grip on my ankle began to pull me back up onto the roof.

The crowd and world hung below me, and the terror held me captive.

I finally cleared the ledge, and a pair of warm arms wrapped around me. I inhaled Ravv's scent deeply as his chest rose and fell, and I could nearly feel his fury spiraling out of control.

The smell of him calmed me, though the world was still spinning. I wasn't sure what that fae had done to me, but it wasn't right—I wasn't right.

My stomach churned, then, and I moaned.

Ravv parted my lips, leaning in and sniffing my breath. Curses burst from him as he hauled me up off the roof and back into the castle. He snarled commands at someone—I couldn't focus well enough to know who—as he stormed back through the hallways.

My knees met the cool ice floor of our bathroom just in time for me to lean over the toilet and vomit the contents of my stomach.

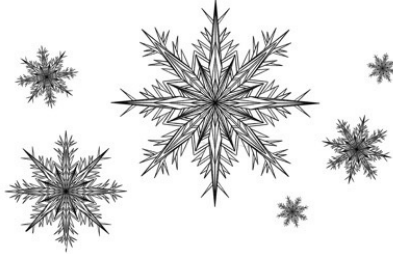
The sickness was more violent than anything I'd ever experienced before. It hit me again, and again, and again. Ravv's hands were on my arms, in my hair, on my shoulders. At some point, he had a cold, damp cloth on my forehead that felt so good I could've cried.

When my body was empty and my mind delirious, he carried me to the bed. His voice was soft and kind, his grip gentle but firm, and I managed to doze for a few minutes before the vomiting started again.

At least I wasn't on the roof anymore, I thought briefly, before losing consciousness to the sickness.

CHAPTER 25

RAVV



I tied the end of Laeli's long, thick braid before brushing a kiss to her forehead and slipping out of bed.

The fury coursing through me was thicker and fiercer than anything I'd ever experienced before.

The bastard had cut her throat.

He had poisoned her.

He had nearly *killed* her.

After I had been sitting in a damn meeting with him through the entire night.

I had trusted him... and it nearly cost me everything.

My gaze lingered on her small, fragile form. She was strong of will, but soft of mind and body. My female would never be a warrior, and I would never ask her to become one.

But veil, I needed her safe.

I needed her healthy and fiery, challenging me at every turn and grinning as she did.

She deserved a male who could protect her better than I had in the time since I'd found her, but there was no one better suited for it.

And the veil knew I couldn't let her go.

She was mine.

I began to pace the room as I thought over the possible ways to keep her safe. Staying with her at all times was the best idea, if not an entirely reasonable one. She was independent enough to need her space, and would never agree to a constant guard, especially if I was that guard.

Of all the possibilities, one lingered at the front of my thoughts.

Sealing our bond.

If we sealed it, I would have more complete access to her mind. She would be able to use my magic as her own if she needed to, which could help protect her as well.

Most importantly, she would heal like a fae. She would have our senses and speed, rather than the ones of a human, which would enable her to watch her own back more closely.

And perhaps at the very pinnacle of the reasoning, she would have our immortality.

My immortality.

My magic would make her mine, for as many years as we could manage to stay in Evare. It would bind her to me and me to her in a connection that would stretch far beyond the bounds of a lifetime.

She would be mine to love, protect, and care for through our *eternities* together.

I wanted that with her.

I didn't just want her to be mine, I wanted her to be my mine *permanently*.

Laeli cried out in her sleep, pulling me from my thoughts as I crossed the room to her. A moment later, I was holding her upright as she emptied her stomach into the toilet. Nothing came up except bile, but I had been drugged with the same herb on two different occasions, so I knew the pain and misery of the illness.

"I'm here," I murmured into her ear, as I lowered her back to the bed. Gleam

cuddled up beside her immediately, nuzzling her cheek to comfort her. I'd need to get water into her system within an hour or two, assuming she worked the same as a fae. It would all come back up, but the alternative was dehydration.

Then again, humans were weaker than fae. What if she could get dehydrated more easily?

I couldn't risk that, so I filled a glass of water in the sink and brought it back to Laeli.

I brushed a hand lightly over her forehead as I sat down beside her. She was clammy, but not cold. "Lae, I need you to take a small drink."

She groaned softly in response.

I put the glass to her mouth, and she opened it just a little.

A small stream of water trickled between her lips, and her face twisted in a grimace as she swallowed it.

I set the glass down when she pulled me closer, laying beside her as she pressed herself against me. I let myself close my eyes for a few minutes, knowing we'd be back in the bathroom soon enough.

Orvay and Elwynne were dealing with the backlash of what had happened on the roof, so I didn't have to worry about that. At my insistence, they had gone to bed for a few hours after the plans had been drafted, leaving me to work on convincing the generals.

If I hadn't been awake when the bastard took her...

Veil, I couldn't allow myself to think about it, or sleep would become an impossibility.

"Wake me if I don't notice when she starts feeling sick again?" I asked Coarse. Though Gleam was asleep, Coarse was watching my female with tired eyes from where he guarded the door. He had been sleeping in the meeting room when Laeli was grabbed, and I knew he felt guilty about it.

He nodded, and I let myself drift off.

Fifteen minutes later, we were in the bathroom again.

The cycle continued, with the pauses between visits growing longer over the next twenty-four hours. I made sure Laeli had enough to drink, even though it killed me to see her so sick. I made her take a little of my blood a few times to keep her strength up, but it barely helped.

In the four days that followed, her stomach slowly normalized, and she was able to start eating small amounts.

It was another two days after that before she recovered enough to ask to leave our bedroom. Gleam and Coarse were off in their own space, catching up on sleep without our interruptions now that they knew Laeli was fine.

“Ravv,” she grumbled, releasing her grip on me and rolling to her back. All she had on was one of my shirts again, as she preferred them to sleeping in her scanties. “I need to go for a walk, and I’m sure you have things to do too. I’ll lose my mind if we stay in here. You won’t even tell me about your plan to take down the Demon.”

“Because you’re not going to be involved in that plan.” I brushed a few strands of hair off her face. She still looked paler than she should’ve, and I’d need to feed her more than usual when she was recovered enough for it.

“That doesn’t mean you can’t tell me about it.”

I scowled. “I don’t want you in any more danger than you already are.”

“Knowing what’s going to happen won’t put me at risk, Ravv. And I deserve to know the plan.” Her eyes were narrowed at me. “If you’re going to start keeping things from me again, your bed will suddenly get very cold, and very empty.”

“You would miss me too much.” I slid a hand beneath her shirt, slowly dragging it up one of her thighs. My palm brushed her abdomen, and I teased the dip of her belly button with a finger. The scent of her desire slowly tainted the air, making my cock harder than it already was at the sight of her.

“You’d show up and grovel,” she said, her lips curving just slightly.

“I would.” I slid my hand back between her thighs and dragged a finger

between her folds, fighting a growl when I found her even more slick than I expected.

Her gaze suddenly grew soft, and she threw her arms around my neck, pulling me in for a hug and squeezing me tightly. “Thank you for taking care of me. I already said it, but thank you. I know I’m a frustrating patient to deal with, and you’ve been amazing.”

I left my hand between her thighs, pulling her closer with the other arm.

The best *thanks* would be to let me touch her, but I’d take a hug too.

“You’re supposed to say, ‘you’re welcome’,” she mumbled against my neck.

I blinked. “You’re welcome.”

Her lips curved into a smile against my shoulder. “Does no one ever thank you?”

I considered it. “I suppose not.”

“Veil. I’ll work on saying it more.” She pressed her lips to my shoulder. “You’re going to tell me about your plan when you’re more relaxed about everything that happened.”

“...okay.”

Laeli’s hand slipped into my shorts, and my cock throbbed as she gripped it.

She pushed my back to the bed, then slipped one of her legs over my abdomen, turning around so her ass was to me. I swore as her lips wrapped around my cock—and swore *viciously* when she lifted her ass off my abdomen, showing me every slick fold she had. She wore nothing under my shirt, and I’d never been so grateful for that.

“No touching,” she warned me, gripping the hilt of my cock as she wrapped her lips around me again.

I growled back at her, grabbing her thighs and opening her wider.

She released my erection, shooting me a warning look over her shoulder. “No touching, Ravv. You took care of me—now I get to take care of you.”

“You can take care of me by letting me make you scream.”

Her eyes gleamed wickedly. “Oh, I will.” My cock throbbed, and she turned back to it. “Let go, now. You can touch me again when I’m swallowing your pleasure.”

Her lips engulfed me again, and I forced myself to release her. I gripped the blanket as she bobbed her head over my length, taking me deep into her throat.

She was so damn perfect, her ass and core bare for me while my shirt hung off her slight frame, revealing the underside of those heavy breasts.

Veil, I wanted them in my hands. On my chest. In my mouth.

Her core was visibly slick with her desire, her hips and ass rocking and swaying as she worked my length, dragging me to my climax too damn quickly.

My hips jerked as I lost control, snarling and flooding her throat with my release. My face was buried between her thighs before my pleasure ended—and she was crying out with her own climax moments later, commanding me to fill her.

I, of course, obliged.

Enthusiastically.

Until she was sweaty and panting, wrapped in my arms and letting me press my lips to those perfect breasts as many times as I wanted.

And when she asked about the plan again, I told her everything.

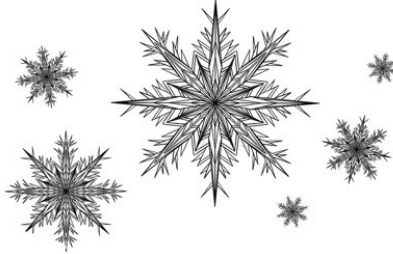
She didn’t like the idea of us killing the Demon, even though she understood him wanting to be free from his curse. I knew she saw herself in him, despite the difference in years and magic between them.

And though I would never admit it to her, in that moment, I started working on another plan.

One that would satisfy my female while still giving the demon the freedom he wanted.

CHAPTER 26

LAELI



When I finally managed to convince Ravv to let me out of our room, the first place we went was the dining hall. Elwynne dropped into the chair next to me as we finished eating, and she wrapped her arms around me for a quick hug.

“I’m glad you’re still alive,” she said, flashing me a grin.

“Me too.”

“I’m not going to let her die,” Ravv growled at both of us, taking our empty plates and striding toward the kitchen.

“I wish I could do something to help while you guys take the dragon down,” I admitted to her, my eyes following Ravv across the room.

Veil, the man was gorgeous.

And the fact that he’d taken care of me through my sickness... well, it made him even more attractive to me.

“I can’t imagine waiting inside, absolutely helpless,” Elwynne agreed.

“Oh, I can’t stay in the castle. Ravv won’t be able to focus if he’s in that much pain from being away from me. Me and Coarse are going to stay close, but out of the fight. We’ll stick to the shadows.”

She frowned. “Ravv will be distracted if you’re close.”

“After what happened the last time we were separated, he’ll be more distracted if we’re apart.” I lifted a shoulder, trying not to let my mind wander back to the roof.

It wandered anyway, and a shudder rolled through me.

She looked a bit concerned. “Are you okay?”

I forced a smile. “I’m fine. When do we attack?”

“We’re waiting for the king to give us a day and time.” She glanced at Ravv as he sat down beside us again.

He studied me for a long moment before looking back to her and saying, “Tomorrow morning, at dawn.”

“I’ll spread the word.” She gave me another quick hug before leaving.

There were others in the dining room, but none of them were staring at us. Or at least, I hoped they weren’t.

“You look upset,” Ravv said, his forehead creased.

“It’s nothing.” I brushed hair out of my eyes, and he narrowed his at me. “My mind just went back to the roof.” My fingers brushed my neck, where the wound no longer existed. His blood had healed it while I was suffering the poison’s effects, but I was starting to think I’d be able to feel it for the rest of my life anyway.

His gaze darkened. “You’re not scared someone else will hurt you?”

“No. I think you’re having everyone checked and rechecked for cult involvement.” I squeezed his hand, and he calmed slightly. “I just need a distraction, I guess.”

My mind went back to our bedroom, and my cheeks flushed at the idea of spending a few more hours that way.

I certainly wouldn’t complain.

We had been so focused on looking for the hidden cultists that we hadn’t had much time to get to know each other’s bodies. There had to be some things we hadn’t tried...

“If you want to go back to the river and attempt to break the magic on the rocks, the answer is no,” Ravv said.

“I do want to try that, but not today.” I leaned closer to him, and he tilted his head so I could whisper into his ear. “I was thinking maybe you can teach me something new?” I flashed him a mental image of me with my mouth on his cock earlier.

His eyes flashed. “How new?”

“Surprise me.”

His lips curved upward wickedly, and he stood, pulling me to my feet with him.

Ravv slipped his fingers between mine and towed me down the hallway.

“*Where are we going?*”

“*You’ll see.*”

I wanted to insist on an answer... but I was too excited to risk spoiling it, so I stayed quiet.

Our shoulders brushed as we walked side by side, alone in the hallway as we went deeper into the castle.

We turned a corner, and the smooth, even walls of the hall slowly began to grow rougher and change shape.

“*I’m going to need an explanation before I start to feel like you’re about to murder me,*” I murmured to Ravv.

He barked out a laugh, and my lips curved upward a bit. “*There are caverns beneath the castle—magical ice caves that run hundreds of miles below the surface. They stretch beneath the Glittering Sea and continue below the mountain range of the Weeping Skies. A few branches even continue below the Endless Wilds and can take you all the way to the Aching Chasm, if you know how to navigate them.*”

My eyes widened. “*How do you navigate them?*”

“*Ice magic.*” He lifted my hand to his lips and pressed a kiss to the back of it.

“We’re not going exploring. The caves closest to the castle are well-mapped and extremely safe, unlike some of the lower ones. The caves have magic of their own, and some are interesting. You’ll see.”

I tensed a bit with his explanation—not because of the magic, but because we were heading underground.

“Does it smell like your prison?” I asked him.

“No. It smells like the sea down here, so you shouldn’t be affected. Give it a minute and you’ll start to smell the salt.”

Relief rolled through me, and sure enough, the smell of salt slowly filled the air.

The walls began morphing further as we walked hand-in-hand. The ice became more crystalline, glittering in bright blues and soft purples. It grew jagged in some places, jutting out in wickedly-sharp icicles, and smoother in others, forming waves and swirls. All of it looked like art to me, and veil, I had never been exposed to art like that before.

It took my breath away.

“Legends say that centuries ago, these tunnels were full of pixies,” Ravv murmured.

“Pixies?”

“The tiny version of fae, with crystalline wings.” He held two fingers apart to show me how small they would’ve been. *“No one knows why they vanished, or if they really did exist. Some of the most ancient fae will tell stories about them, but fae that old begin to lose their minds, so they’re unreliable.”*

My eyebrows shot upward. *“Are you going to lose your mind too? How close are you to being too ancient?”*

He laughed. *“We call it immis when they lose their minds, and all immortal beings can get it. None of our fae have been lost to it for a long time, because we’ve had our war to focus on. Immis comes on with boredom or loneliness. Before the cult, fae used to take mates as soon as they felt it begin to set in. There were many couples mated as friends just to keep the madness away.”*

Some still live now, in my parents' city."

"Mated couples don't get immis?"

"No. They live for each other, and that gives them purpose." He lifted my hand to his lips again and brushed another kiss to the back of it.

"Maybe the pixies were all lost to immis, then. Or to the cult."

"Or perhaps there is more in these caves than we realize."

I didn't like the sound of that.

He must've felt me shiver, because he tucked me beneath his arm and pulled me closer. *"We're almost there. Fae frequent these caves, and no one has ever been harmed here. You'll see why we like them, soon."*

I nodded, though I was still uncertain.

Clearly, I didn't have the best relationship with anything underground.

We came upon an opening to a smaller cave, and I peered inside. There were glittering, glowing crystals dotting the walls, sending bits of light everywhere and reflecting off everything.

"Veil," I murmured, staring into them.

"Couples come here to make love beneath the lights, or dance below them. Sometimes both at once, or to do so while others do the same," Ravv said, his breath brushing my ear and making goosebumps erupt on my skin.

Worry curled in my stomach. *"Have you brought a woman here before? I'm like the fifth girl, aren't I? Or the hundredth?"*

He laughed—loud and booming. *"No, Lae. The caves are far too intimate for casual sex. Fae come here with their life partners, not for drunken pleasure."*

Though I still didn't love the *life partner* label, it was a lot better than a potential future without him. I wouldn't necessarily mind being alone, but veil, I'd miss Ravv if we parted. He had become more than just my lover; he was the best friend I'd ever had. He was stubborn, but so was I, and I'd started to enjoy making him growl at me.

I wanted to ask him if he'd ever consider sealing the mate bond with me, but I didn't want to ruin the moment. I'd never been somewhere as beautiful or as magical as the caves, and I wasn't ready to let them go yet.

We resumed walking, passing the large opening to another cave. Steam flooded the space, and yellow and orange ice shone softly behind it.

"There are hot springs in there. Some fae enjoy heat play in their love-making. The water would feel nice to humans, but it's a bit painful for us."

"A pleasure and pain thing, then," I said.

"Mmhmm." He nipped at my ear as his hand slid under the large shirt I was still wearing, and stroked my thigh lightly.

My body warmed at his touch, and he pulled me closer with his free arm, so his erection pressed against my ass.

"And multiple couples use these caves at the same time?" I whispered.

"Sometimes. It depends on the couple, and the cave. Some fae are too possessive."

"How would you know if anyone else was already in there?"

"With your ears, Lae." Ravv nipped at my earlobe.

Right.

He added, "If they want to be alone, they'll throw a small ice barrier over the opening, like this." A short, thin sheet of ice appeared over the cave's entrance, blocking it completely. "If they want it soundproof, they just thicken the ice."

In the blink of an eye, the ice disappeared again.

His tongue trailed down my throat, making me flush hotter, and his fingers brushed my core.

"Can anyone remove the ice just like that, though?"

I didn't have anything against people who were interested in orgies, but I personally didn't find the idea appealing. After living with Jern and Gora, I'd

heard enough of other people having sex for my whole life.

“No, it’s much harder to alter ice that isn’t your own. If I build a barrier, there are only a few fae in the city strong enough to take it down—and taking a barrier down here without permission would get a fae murdered in a heartbeat. We are warriors, after all.” He resumed walking, and since I was pressed against him, I did too. “Most of the male fae who make love in the caves with others around ask their females to leave their clothing on. We aren’t particular about nudity, but it’s one thing to see a fae’s body and a completely different thing to watch their lover enter it.”

My eyebrows shot upward again. “You’ve been down here to watch before?”

“When I was young and inexperienced.”

I supposed that wasn’t surprising.

We passed the entrance to another cave of hot springs, and another cave full of ice sculptures. All of the sculptures were of men with massive ice erections jutting upward.

I didn’t ask for a description of how that one was used, or allow my mind to consider the possibilities.

Ravv’s breath brushed my ear again in front of that cave as he murmured, “If you ever want to ride an ice statue, it will be a statue of *me*.”

I snorted—and then my humor died with a thought. “Tell me there’s not a statue of you in there.”

He chuckled. “There’s not.”

He went still for a moment though, and when I looked back at him, I got the feeling he was using his magic to check each of the statues.

A relieved breath escaped him after another minute, though, and he repeated, “There’s not.”

We passed a few more caves with interesting lights and crystals before we came to the final one at the end of the tunnel. It was smaller than the others we’d passed, and the ceiling was covered with even more of the crystals from the first cave. I let out a relieved breath when I didn’t see any statues or ropes

or anything.

“You scared me,” I grumbled at him.

He flashed me a grin. “You scare me all the time, Lae.”

That was fair.

And veil, his grin was heart-stopping.

A barrier closed over the entrance, making it entirely private.

“So which kind of possessive are you?” I asked him, as he turned me in his arms so our eyes met. I was pretty sure I already knew his answer, but I had to ask anyway. “The kind that puts up barriers, makes his female wear clothes, or is all about nudity?”

He didn’t even pause to think about it as he lifted me off the ground. “The barrier kind. The very, very thick barrier kind.”

My thighs wrapped around his hips, and he gripped my ass as he adjusted my position. I inhaled sharply when the length of his erection pressed against my core, hitting my clit just right.

“Now, if we were in a crowded room, and no one knew what we were doing...” he rocked his hips just slightly, and a soft cry escaped me. The lights dancing off our skin only made the moment more intimate. His voice was gravelly as he said, “I’ve always had a fantasy about making love on my throne, during a party.”

A groan escaped me as he started walking, rocking his cock against me with every step. “A party?”

“Mmhm. It makes me hard to think about whether we could get off without letting anyone realize what we were doing.”

My shoulder blades hit the wall, and his fingers lightly traced my back entrance.

“Who is this we?” I managed to ask.

“You and me. On my throne, during the eclipse. I throw a party in the castle every time it comes around. I have since I became king.”

Since his sister had hurt his parents.

It was a distraction, an—

“Ohhh,” I groaned as his finger dipped into my channel before sliding down to my back entrance again. He’d played with it a little, but had never gone any further than teasing it a bit.

“We need to talk about you not wearing scanties when you’re in public, Lae.”

“What about it?”

“I’m going to start seeing it as permission to spread these thighs whenever I want, and wherever I want,” he rumbled. “In my office. On my desk. In my library. In my hallway.”

“Veil,” I groaned, as the tip of his finger slid inside my back entrance. “What are you doing to me?”

“You wanted a lesson.” He lowered his head to my breast and caught my nipple through his shirt that I’d stolen. I sucked in a breath, rocking against his erection where it rested on my core. “You’re going to learn about ice.”

“Ice?” I echoed, already breathing a bit raggedly from the way he had his finger in my ass.

“Ice,” he agreed. “I need you good and wet before we start. Are you wet for me, Lae?”

“Yes,” I breathed.

“I’ll decide that.” He eased his erection away from me, making me groan again, but in frustration. At least, until he lifted me away from the wall and set me on the ground...

And then settled his face between my thighs, releasing my ass in favor of opening me up wider for him.

Ravv lowered his nose to my core and inhaled deeply, his eyes burning their gorgeous purple color. The glow reflected off the crystals on the ceiling, mixing with my red-orange and sending lights of both colors all over the cave. “Not ready yet,” he growled, and then dragged his tongue over my clit.

A cry escaped me as he licked me slowly.

“Show me your breasts,” he commanded, his eyes hot as he tasted me.

I tugged my shirt upward, pulling it up to expose them to him.

His chest rumbled in satisfaction, and my hips jerked at the vibration while his tongue worked slowly down the center of me.

Veil, he was going to lick *every* inch of me.

If he wasn't looking at me like I was the sexiest woman he'd ever seen, I would've been petrified.

“Shirt off completely,” he said.

I peeled it over my head, and he rumbled for me again. His finger found my back entrance once more, using the slickness to begin working into me.

“Play with your breasts for me.”

I stared at him, waiting for some kind of clarification. He had made it clear that he was *not* okay with me bringing myself pleasure on multiple occasions.

“Now, Lae.” His teeth scraped my clit in punishment, and I swore, jerking my hips to chase the pleasure that followed it.

“That's not my job,” I shot back.

His eyes gleamed wickedly. *“Good. Hands above your head.”*

My eyes were narrowed at him, but I lifted them.

His ice restraints grew over them, pinning them in place.

I took in an unsteady breath... and then let it out too.

I was fine.

Ravv hadn't trapped me.

I could free myself with my magic if I needed to, but I wouldn't need to. He would never do that to me.

“You're safe with me, Lae. Always. You tell me to stop, and I stop at any

time,” he said, his voice steely. His mouth was still on my core, his tongue against my clit, but it wasn’t moving.

I met his gaze and nodded.

“*Ready?*” he asked.

I jerked my head.

He scraped his teeth over my clit again, making me buck before he pulled his face away. His fingers ran over the bud, but they felt different. Smoother, and harder.

Ice.

He’d covered them with ice.

He dragged them around my clit slowly as he worked his finger inside my back entrance. My body rocked and jerked desperately, and I neared my climax. He increased the pressure on my clit until just before I lost control, and then halted.

My chest heaved, and my body throbbed.

So close—I was so damn close.

“Ravv,” I hissed at him.

His eyes were still wicked. “The lesson’s just starting. You don’t get to climax until it’s through.”

I groaned at him.

“You know I won’t let you out of here until you can barely walk straight, Lae.” He dragged his ice against my clit again, and my whole body shuddered. “You’ll get what you need, and more.”

I trusted him, even though I hated being patient.

I opened my mouth to say as much—but then a thick, smooth column of ice slid inside my channel, and all thoughts died in my throat.

It was...

I...

Veil.

His fingers dragged over my clit again, and I shuddered hard, so close to the edge.

“You look so damn good with my ice in your core, Lae. These pretty lips part perfectly for me.” He dragged a bare finger slowly around the ice that filled me, pausing to tease my clit a few times. “You’re going to take more.”

I couldn’t breathe well enough to ask him how he thought that was even possible. I was so deliriously close to the edge, I could hardly function at all.

Ice engulfed his finger, buried inside my back entrance—and then slowly, so slowly, expanded.

My breaths grew even shallower.

I swear, I almost saw the veil.

“When you climax for me, I want to hear you scream,” Ravv said, dragging his tongue over my clit.

My hips jerked.

I rarely screamed—only when we’d gone so many rounds that I couldn’t remember my own name until he said it in my ear.

“I’m not leaving this cave until you’ve screamed for me three times, so go ahead and stay quiet. I could do this all night.”

He was going to kill me.

The bastard was really going to kill me.

I—

He sucked my clit as he slid the ice in my core out, and then back in, and it was over.

I screamed, and screamed, and screamed as I climaxed, and climaxed, and climaxed.

I'd never felt so much pleasure, and the smirk on Ravv's face when I came down from the high told me he knew it, too.

"I'll count that as three," he told me, as the ice that filled me slowly disappeared.

I let out a relieved breath when it was gone, my heart still pounding fiercely.

"That was the hottest thing I've ever seen, Lae. I'm so damn proud of you. Next time, you'll take my ice and my cock together."

Veil, I couldn't even imagine.

We would definitely save that for another day.

"How do you want me?" I gestured to my drenched core.

"Just like this."

He lowered his tongue to my clit, working me until I was ready for more—and then he made love to me beneath the glittering lights until I could've sworn I was sparkling too.

By the time he carried me back to his room, the words of our bond repeated through my mind as if trying to force their way through my lips.

"Sillah ovim rett warum."

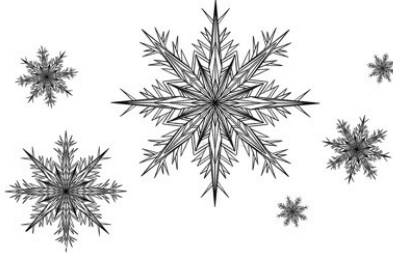
"Sillah ovim rett warum."

"Sillah ovim rett warum."

I wouldn't speak them, of course... but I had to wonder what it would feel like if I did.

CHAPTER 27

LAELI



The next morning came too soon.

I put an actual dress on for the first time in too long, and undergarments, too.

Ravv caught my face between his hands before we slipped out to meet Gleam and Coarse in the hallway. He tilted my head back, and I looked into those gorgeous eyes of his. “I need you to be careful today. I’m worried about you, Lae. I need you to come out of this whole, healthy, and safe.”

“I’ll be careful.” My lips curved up in a sad smile. “But only if you will too. The Demon doesn’t feel a drive to kill anyone except you. That makes this riskier for you than everyone else.”

“I’m not worried about me.” He pressed his lips to mine.

It was a soft, gentle kiss that had nothing to do with pleasure or desire—another kind I was coming to adore. I could get used to kisses about nothing but intimacy and comfort.

His forehead pressed against mine.

“Promise me, Ravv. Swear you’ll look out for yourself first.”

“I can’t make that promise. I’m the king; it’s my responsibility to put my people first.”

“Before your mate?”

“No. My people come before me, but not you. Never you.” He brushed his lips against mine again.

“It would kill me to lose you,” I said quietly. “I’ve survived a lot, but I don’t think I could survive that. I need you to stay alive.”

He closed his eyes and let out a long breath. “I’ll protect myself with the same ferocity that I protect my people,” he finally said. “I don’t want to leave you any more than you want me to leave, Lae. Especially not while this is silver, instead of gold.” His fingers brushed the handprint on my arm, and I shivered.

“If you die now, I’ll be forced to take someone else as my mate in revenge,” I whispered.

His eyes gleamed, and he growled. “Veil, you’re perfect.”

With that, he pinned me to the wall and kissed me.

By the time Gleam and Coarse joined us and my king released me, my lips were swollen, and I was nearly dizzy with happiness.

We met a massive number of fae out in front of the castle. The Demon was still flying slow circles overhead, the way he always was, and I let myself wonder if he was really just going to let us kill him.

All terror aside, he was an incredible creature. I’d never seen a dragon before, but he was majestic. His scales glittered like gemstones in the sky, and I had to wonder why anyone thought of dragons as demons. Sure, they could breathe fire, and were known for being vicious, and...

Well, maybe I didn’t have to wonder.

But still, he was beautiful.

Wasn’t there any way around killing him?

“*What would happen if we left him alive?*” I asked Coarse, as he stayed in the shadows of the large ice buildings we ran beside. Ravv was close enough that my handprint was throbbing, but I wasn’t in actual pain.

“He would eventually be driven to kill Ravv. Letting him go isn’t an option.”

“What if we trapped him somehow? Or made a deal with him?”

“Making a deal with an assassin is never wise, Laeli. His magic will drive him to uphold the agreement he already made. He will have to throw everything he has at killing Ravv.”

I knew that.

I did; I knew it.

But I didn’t want it to be the only option.

He had seemed so tired, and so sad. Was he really a monster if he was suffering so much that he’d request to be killed?

“What if someone formed a mate bond with him?” I asked. *“Do you think it would change his magic? Or stop his drive to kill Ravv?”*

“Your magic only hides the king’s because it’s his opposite.”

“Or because we’re fated mates.”

“But how would we find the Demon’s fated mate?” Coarse countered.

He was still right, and I was still wasting my time trying to think of an alternative.

“If he’s truly the man he claimed to be when we met him, he doesn’t deserve to die,” I finally said. *“He deserves a chance to be free.”*

“It may not be possible at all.”

“But it might be, and isn’t the possibility worth something? What if we could save him?”

“Some people don’t want to be saved, Laeli, and there is nothing we can do to change their minds.”

My gaze landed on the dragon above us.

Coarse was right, but I wished he wasn’t.

The Demon landed as we reached the outer edge of the city.

The fae yelled battle cries as they sprinted across the ice with their bonded idorr, but the Demon didn't blow fire.

He didn't roar or swing his spiky tail.

He simply bowed his head and prepared to die.

The fae with the scale-breaking weapons were at the front of the group. Those with the brutal strength were behind them. Ravv led everyone. Most of his generals had wanted a grander, more elegant plan full of moving parts, but Ravv had refused. There was no need for elegance in slaughter.

I watched all of them go, my eyes stinging as they lingered on the Demon.

The fae neared his massive form without a moment of hesitation.

My eyes slipped down to Ravv and Gleam at the front of the army, and I noticed them slow, as he shouted a command I couldn't hear.

The warriors around and behind him slowed too, until everyone on the battlefield stopped entirely.

I silently reach out to Ravv's mind, to see if I could pick up any of his thoughts, and heard him yell, "This is not a fight, it's an execution."

The Demon growled something back.

Ravv shouted back, "I won't kill you for being tired of living, Demon. Do you think you're the only one who grows weary of this world or the mantle you carry?"

There was a long pause, and the Demon asked what the alternative was.

Ravv called, "There are caves beneath my city. Even when your magic is at its strongest, you won't be able to escape the depths of them to find any target or agree to any more kills. If you try to shift and fly free, the ice will end you. Its magic prevents it from melting or being broken, just like my city's. If you truly wish to die, die with honor, traversing caverns of ancient magic even more powerful than you."

The Demon roared, and Ravv roared back.

After a moment's hesitation, the rest of the fae army roared with both of them.

The assassin shifted to his man form, and Ravv offered him a hand.

Coarse snarled into my mind and Gleam's about his mate carrying the Demon—and she must've snarled something back to him, because he cut himself off quickly.

I could've sworn the Demon's eyes locked with mine for a moment as Gleam cut through the middle of the army, carrying the assassin back toward the castle, and to the caves.

Though I hadn't asked Ravv to spare him, I couldn't help but wonder if he had heard something I said to Coarse... and if somehow, I had changed his mind.

Ravv apologized for the pain I would feel as he led the Demon into the caves with a dozen of his fiercest warriors. He wasn't willing to leave them alone with the assassin, so I spent the day hunched over in bed, trying to breathe through the agony.

All of the men were between my king and the Demon constantly, at my insistence. I would've rather gone with them, but Ravv had snarled at me when I even suggested that.

It was a battle I knew I wouldn't win with him, so I didn't bother fighting about it.

We spoke through our bond nearly constantly, my second requirement to Ravv going underground. Though I didn't want the assassin to die, I was still worried he would attack my king. Thankfully, he didn't.

Outside of me and my pain, the rest of the kingdom had erupted in a roar of dancing and drinking in celebration. They considered the battle won, simply because no one had died. Their music shook the castle's walls with its volume, and their drunken songs floated through the hallways at all hours.

Elwynne and Orvay stopped by to bring me food a few times throughout the day, seeming a little more drunk each time, but they were happy drunks. They apologized for my pain and asked me to join their revelry, but I refused every time.

When the suns went down, my pain still hadn't eased, but Ravv was finally on his way back out of the caves. He growled at me to accept Elwynne and Orvay's invitation for the sake of distraction. So, the next time they showed up, I let them drag me into the party.

Between the pain and the music, I couldn't hear myself think at all. It was actually rather glorious. I accepted the first drink they gave me—and when it dulled my pain, I accepted a second, third, and fourth. I danced, sang, and celebrated, losing myself in the party.

Eventually, I collapsed on a couch, snuggled up with Elwynne while Orvay cuddled her from behind, and fell asleep.

I woke up to a familiar growl. “Who touched her?”

Veil, my head throbbed.

My stomach, too.

I looked down at myself to see if I looked as if I'd been touched.

Normal black dress.

Normal red-orange hair.

Normal breasts, no nipples hanging out.

“I dunno. We all danced with everyone. It didn't turn into an orgy or I would've gotten both of them out,” Orvay mumbled back, his voice insanely slurred.

He had been drinking longer than me, but I couldn't imagine it was possible to feel any more terrible than I already did.

The pounding in my skull was getting even more painful.

I almost preferred the poison to the alcohol sickness.

I felt the bed shift beneath me—err, the couch?

Elwynne groaned and clutched me tighter. “No, Orr.”

“I’m behind you, Wynnie.” He patted her on the head.

She released me, rolling slowly and clumsily to face her lover.

“You reek, Lae,” Ravv said into my hair after he hauled me into his arms. My legs wrapped around his waist as he walked, and he held me close.

“My mom used to call me that,” I whispered.

“I know. Does it bother you when I use it?”

“No, I like it. It brings happy memories, not just sad ones.”

He squeezed me tightly. “I think we’ve had this conversation before. You’re still drunk, aren’t you?”

“Not sure.” I pressed my forehead to his neck. “I like you.”

“I like you too.” His lips brushed my arm. “I’ll find you something to eat, then we’ll get you showered and back to bed.”

I nodded. “Thanks for saving the Demon for me.”

There was a moment of silence as he opened the door. “I couldn’t very well kill him after you saw how sad and lonely he was,” Ravv finally said, setting me on my feet in the shower. “Stay here. I’ll find food and water.”

I nodded, leaning against the shower wall and closing my eyes. The water rained down on me, and it felt nice. It felt *cleansing*.

Ravv came back soon with food, and we both showered and ate, then collapsed in bed together.

A few hours later, we headed out to the city below the surface. Our group was bigger than it had been the last time we went there, and Coarse told me that was to help bring more people and their things. We had a group of

unbonded idorr with us too, to carry some of the younger fae who had never had a chance to bond with a beast.

My head and stomach ached from all the alcohol the night before, but Ravv rode on Coarse's back with me to make up for the time apart. The warm comfort of his presence eased the hurt, and his stories made me smile.

The gates opened as soon as we reached the bottom of the crevasse, with Ravv's parents waiting just inside them.

We were at the back of the group, so we watched our fae and idorr spread into the city in assigned pairs, keeping an eye on each other just to make sure there weren't any cultists left hidden among us.

When we finally reached the gates, Ravv lifted me off Coarse's back and slid his fingers between mine as we approached his parents. There was pride in his voice as he said, "Mother, Father, this is my female. Laeli, these are my parents."

"It's nice to meet you." I nodded at them, hoping I didn't come off as awkward as I felt. I knew there was still strangeness between Ravv and his parents because of the way they'd abandoned him, but we seemed to be ignoring that for the moment.

"Hello." His mother smiled, her expression kind and genuine. "My, you are beautiful."

My face warmed. "Thank you."

She stepped forward and put her arms around both of us for a tentative hug. "It's good to see you happy, Ravvi."

I bit back a snort.

Ravvi?

I loved it.

He looked a bit uncomfortable with the hug, so I leaned into him a bit when his mother finally released us and stepped back. His fingers dug into my hip,

and I had the feeling it was for comfort when he pulled me closer.

“Your magic feels unusual,” Ravv’s dad said, his eyes a bit narrowed. “It’s warm.”

I was kind of flattered that was the identifier he used. It would’ve been rude to point out the weight in my breasts and ass, or my weak muscles.

“Laeli is human. Her power is the opposite of ours; heat and fire. Life, to our death.” Ravv said bluntly, his eyes narrowing right back at his father.

“If you seal the bond you’ve begun, our people will follow you,” his mother said, almost eagerly.

At least she didn’t care about my humanity.

His father’s expression softened a bit, too.

“If we seal the bond, it will be because we wish to be together for the rest of this life and every other that follows. I don’t care whether your people follow me; we are at peace now, so there are no battles to drag them into. If they don’t approve of their king, they can leave. Now, we have people to help.” Ravv led me away from his parents, and I squeezed his hand for reassurance.

“That could’ve been worse,” I whispered.

“It certainly could’ve. Thank you for staying at my side.”

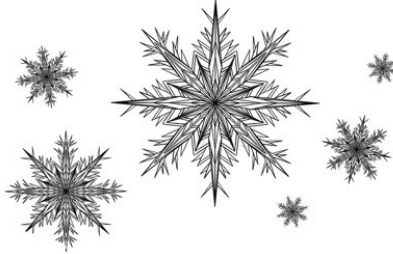
“Of course.” I brushed my lips to his cheek, and noticed a fae child watching us curiously as Ravv pulled me closer.

We spent hours helping others pack their things and load their bags onto the backs of the idorr who would carry them, and then spent a few more running back to the city. By the time we ate a massive meal that the castle’s cooks had prepared for everyone, and started helping with the unpacking, the suns had already set.

We worked until I could barely keep my eyes open, and then Ravv hauled me back onto Coarse’s back, and held me to his chest as the idorr carried us back to the castle.

CHAPTER 28

LAELI



The days began to fly by after that. Ravv and I hadn't discussed what would happen after the eclipse, but I didn't really think we needed to. As much as I would've loved to seal our mate bond, I wasn't letting myself obsess over it. We knew we would stay together, and that was what mattered.

I started working in the castle's kitchens to help feed the returning fae while they got settled, and Ravv left me with the chefs while he helped people move in. Our handprints ached more than usual with the distance, so he tried to stay as close as possible, and that made it manageable.

It didn't take long to learn how to cook, and I found myself looking forward to it every morning. I enjoyed the simple chatter with the other fae men and women who cooked professionally, and the bustle of it all.

A shipment of ridiculously large and delicious produce came in from Jirev one day, with a note from Nissa that made me grin.

Laeli,

I hope you're doing well! Kierden finally seduced me into his bed, and I think we might stick together for good. Only time will tell. I have to have a mate bond with someone to keep my magic in check, and I think he's too possessive to let me bond with anyone else, so we'll see what happens.

In other news, I've become a farmer! As ridiculous as it sounds, I think it's my life's passion.

How are you? Is Ravv still possessive? Have you guys gotten together, or are you going to part after the eclipse?

Come visit soon!

Nissa

P.S. if you need a place to live, I can always use another set of hands on my farm! I have so many extra plants, it'd probably be a relief if you burned some of them.

I paused what I was doing long enough to scribble out a reply so the fae from Jirev could take it back with them.

Nissa,

I knew you'd end up with Kier when you checked him out in that cage the first night we met. You would've let him ravage you there and then!

Ravv and I are still together! I don't think we're going to seal the mate bond, but he's dropped the whole "life partner" thing the fae here seem to do, and neither of us plans to walk away. His possessiveness only seems to have grown, so I'll be interested to see how different he is when the bond is gone.

I don't really have a passion in life. Guess I'm still figuring that out! I've been having fun in the kitchen these last few days, so maybe I'll spend my life cooking. At least my heat is useful here!

Have you heard from Kaelle? I hope she's not still afraid of Vayme. We might need to rescue her after the eclipse if she is.

Come visit me too!

Miss you!

Laeli

The warriors who'd brought the letter were happy to take it back. They didn't seem bothered about the journey they'd taken, and it made me think about what Ravv had said about *immis*. They needed a purpose to keep their sanity, and maybe some people would enjoy running back and forth between cities.

I supposed it was better than sitting on your ass day in and day out.

The night before the eclipse, I started cleaning up for the day, assuming we'd be going back to our homes just like always.

"No, no, no." One of the other cooks plucked a sponge out of my hand. "Tonight, we cook, so tomorrow, we can revel."

I lifted my eyebrows. "All night?"

She grinned. "All night."

My lips curved upward. "Alright, then. Let's do it."

Ravv came looking for me shortly after that, stopping at the entrance and frowning when he saw me working on some pastries I was still trying to master baking. Gleam wasn't with him; Coarse had spent his days helping the fae moving in, and he'd let me know a few minutes earlier that he and Gleam were heading in for the night.

"*You're not cleaning up?*" Ravv asked me.

"Sorry, Highness, she's cooking most of the night!" one of the other ladies called out, winking in my direction before she looked back at him. "We're keeping your woman."

His lips curved upward.

My stomach clenched as I realized it was our last night with the bond. Our last night being able to communicate mentally.

"*I can't leave them to cook alone. I'm becoming part of the team,*" I admitted to Ravv.

"Then I'm staying too," he said simply.

I stopped and blinked.

So did everyone else in the kitchen.

"Do you even know how to cook?" I asked Ravv.

"No." He grabbed an apron off the hook he'd seen me hang mine on every

night. “You can teach me.”

“I barely know how to cook,” I protested.

“We trained you well. You can do it.” One of the other women elbowed me, in the side this time.

“I’m not spending the night before the eclipse away from my female, Lae,” Ravv said.

“Alright, alright, come on.” I waved him over.

He washed his hands and then stepped up beside me. I taught him how to measure out the ingredients, which was overwhelmingly simple, and we were both quiet as we worked.

“This is surprisingly easy,” he remarked to me after a while.

“I know! It’s relaxing too.”

He made a noise of agreement. *“The company doesn’t hurt, either.”*

I flashed him a playful smile. *“Are you thinking about propositioning one of my co-chefs, Ravvi?”*

He chuckled, and I felt multiple sets of eyes on our backs as we continued working. Neither of us turned around to check. *“I’m far too busy thinking about how many ways I’m going to take you tomorrow to consider anyone else.”*

My face warmed, but I couldn’t stop my smile from growing.

A few of the other chefs’ life partners joined us, and one of them seemed to be among Ravv’s closest warriors. Though the warrior started a conversation with him, Ravv ended it quickly. He didn’t seem grumpy or irritated... just calm and contemplative.

The mood was comfortable and upbeat while we cooked, and Ravv’s body brushed mine every chance he got. If he wasn’t using his hands for cooking, they would’ve probably been on my figure too.

It was late by the time we finished everything and headed home. Ravv took my hand and slipped his fingers between mine, still quiet. My shoulder brushed his as we walked.

We walked to our room in the castle in silence. I wasn't sure what he was thinking—and in a few hours, I'd have no way to ask him other than out loud.

I wanted to collapse in bed when we got back, but I smelled like the food we'd cooked for dinner, so I headed for the shower, and Ravv followed me.

"We've made a lot of memories in here," I remarked, as I stripped and then slid beneath the falling water. My eyes closed as it washed over me, and I sighed at the feel of it.

Ravv's gaze lingered on my form as I cleaned myself, and for once, he didn't join me. I was still curious about what he was thinking, because he didn't look upset or angry. Just calm, and quiet.

He had a towel ready for me when I was clean. I stepped out, and he wrapped it around me, brushing his lips against my cheek and squeezing my breasts lightly through the fabric. "You're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen. Thank the veil for these perfect, human curves."

I laughed, and kissed him. "You're weird tonight."

"I've just been thinking a lot." His expression grew rueful.

"About what?" I dried my hair as much as I could with the towel, then padded out of the bathroom.

"About life."

"You're going to have to be more specific." I stepped into the closet, pulling one of his shirts out and slipping it over my head as he leaned against the doorway. "Life without me? If that's what you're thinking about, I'll have to fight you. And I know I'll win, because you won't hurt me, even if you've decided to cut me loose."

"Not life without you. Veil, I hope I never have to think about *that* again." He studied me. "Life without the bond."

Oh.

There was a small lump in my throat, and I couldn't stop my gaze from moving to the soft silver glow on his palm. I'd miss that when our bond was gone.

I'd miss a lot of things about it, honestly.

The mental connection, most of all.

"I've been thinking about that too," I admitted.

"What have you been thinking about it?"

"No, I'm *not* the one spilling my thoughts on that first. I already know that humans have different ideas about bonds, and marriages, and mating, than the fae, so I'm almost confident we don't agree." I tried to step past him, but he caught my hips and dragged me close.

When I squeezed my eyes shut, he tilted my head back, and waited.

Finally, I opened them.

Those gorgeous purple eyes of his were staring down at me like they were searching my soul.

"I love you, Lae," Ravv said.

The words were soft, but certain.

My throat swelled. "You what?"

"I love you. You make my life better, so damn much better. I love talking with you, fighting with you, laughing with you. I love the way you think, and the way you feel so damn intensely. I love you." His calm confidence wasn't overwhelming, or overpowering.

It was just... perfect.

My eyes burned as my emotions swelled. He brushed his mouth against mine, but I pulled away before the kiss could turn into anything else.

"I love you too," I admitted. "I've known for a while, but I thought I'd scare you away if I said it. You make me happy, Ravv. Happier than I ever knew I could be. And even more than that, you make me feel safe, in every way."

His lips curved upward, his eyes glittering with emotion, and then he kissed me again.

I could nearly *feel* his emotions bleeding into mine through the bond.

His fierce love.

His overwhelming gratitude.

His flooding peace.

When he pulled away, his hands gripped my face. My lips were swollen, and we were both breathing fast as our foreheads pressed against each other.

Ravv spoke again, his voice lower and rougher. “I’m not ready to let the bond go, Lae. I’ll never be ready to let it go. Seal it with me. Be mine in this life, in the next life—in *every* life.”

Tears swelled in my eyes. “Are you sure?”

“I’ve never been more certain of anything.” His words rang with honesty. “If it’s not what you want right now, I can wait, but—”

“I want it,” I whispered.

“You do?” His eyes widened, just slightly.

He was *actually* surprised that I wanted to be his mate.

“Of course I do.” I buried my fingers in his curls. They were longer than they’d been when we met, and I hoped he’d leave them like that. Veil, if I was his mate, I could *ask* him to leave them like that. “I always wanted the bond, but I thought you were just going to ask me to be your life partner forever.”

He chuckled. “I’d have to be a far less possessive male to accept that fate.”

“True. I should’ve realized.”

“You should’ve.”

His lips brushed mine again.

My throat swelled as the words of the bond rang in my mind.

Finally, I could say them.

“*Sillah ovim rett warum, Ravv,*” I whispered. “My heart and life are yours.”

The magic of our bond swelled and thickened in my chest.

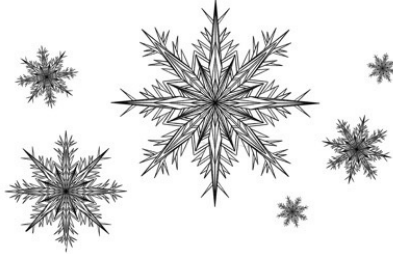
Ravv’s eyes glimmered slightly, and he repeated the vow he hadn’t meant when he said it in my prison all that time ago. “*Sillah ovim rett warum, Lae.* My heart and life are yours.”

The bond grew within both of us as he leaned in and kissed me, and kissed me, and kissed me.

And even though the eclipse was coming soon, even though we’d spend the next twenty-four hours dragging out every ounce of pleasure we could from each other, we made love more slowly and more sweetly than we ever had before.

CHAPTER 29

LAELI



I woke up an hour or two after we went to sleep. The filthiest dream I'd ever had was still running through my thoughts, and I was soaked between my thighs.

My mind was on Ravv and his damn fantasy—him sitting on his icy throne with me dressed in a fancy, glittering gown, perched on his lap. A party raged around us, but we were both blind to it, all of our efforts focused on hiding what we were doing—and bringing each other pleasure, as he touched me and entered me below the billowing skirts of my dress.

A glance at his raging erection, and a flicker of an image coming from his side of the bond, made me wonder if they had been my dreams at all.

His hand brushed my thigh, and the sight of the bright golden glow coming from his palm made pride swell in my chest.

My lips stretched in a smile when I saw the golden handprint wrapped around my bicep, too.

I could hear music playing somewhere in the castle, telling me the party had already started. The windows didn't let in much light, so I knew it had to be early still.

His hand moved over my thigh again, slower.

“Your fantasy is going to kill me,” I told him, brushing hair off my damp forehead.

“The smell of your desire is going to kill me first.” He slid his hand between my thighs.

My body clenched as he dragged his fingers over my clit roughly.

“The first time I take you today will be on my throne, Lae.” His teeth caught the sensitive skin on my neck, dragging lightly.

“You’re really serious about that?”

Ravv made a noise of agreement. “We have to do it now, before the party becomes an orgy.” He nipped at my throat again, then released me and slipped out of bed, taking a long moment to look at me. His hand slowly stroked the length of his cock as he stared down at my bare body. “Veil, you’re stunning.”

I was too busy staring at his mismatched eyes to process what he’d said. One of them was his own gorgeous dark purple—but the other had changed with our bond, and now glowed the reddish-orange of my own.

“You’re starting the eclipse by refusing me sex?” I asked, sitting up slowly as I tried to ignore the need burning in my veins.

I had never felt such fierce desire on an eclipse as a human—and it was still so early.

Ravv released his cock and stepped into the closet for a moment, then emerged with a thick, billowing dress. The same one from my dreams.

Err, his dreams.

Maybe with the connection between our minds strengthened, more of our thoughts would mix like that. I was honestly a bit excited to find out.

Ravv caught my hand and tugged me out of bed, then pulled the dress over my head. He eased my arms beneath the delicate straps, and arranged my breasts so they weren’t bursting from the bodice.

When he finished settling the fabric, his hand slid into the dress from behind, and he gripped my thigh.

A slit.

There was a slit at the back of it.

That damn fae king.

His hand slowly dragged over my thigh, and I moaned aloud. "I'm terrible at being quiet, Ravv."

"You'll do fine." He dragged his teeth over my shoulder as his hand found my bare clit again, and slowly teased the oversensitive bud. "Do this for me, and you can punish me in any way you like. If you want to make me spend the rest of the eclipse with my face between your thighs and my cock weeping without your touch, I will."

I groaned at the mental image, and he continued working my clit until I cried out with my release, my body tensing with pleasure as it warred painfully with need. "I just want you inside me."

"You'll have me, Lae." He continued working my clit. "I'll be yours to command."

"Fine. Let's go," I whispered.

His hand left my center, and I fought a whimper as he swept me up off the ground and hauled me down the hallway.

The music grew louder as we approached the celebration. We passed people already dancing and reveling in the hallways, none of them naked or doing anything sexual, which confused my need-addled mind.

"It hits harder for those with a partner," Ravv murmured into my ear, before nipping at it. "It's worse this time because we're bonded. Everyone else has a few hours before they feel it this strongly."

We reached the throne room, and veil, the need was only growing fiercer.

I wanted Ravv.

I *needed* him.

I was going to lose my mind if I didn't have him.

He walked me to the throne, barely sparing a growled greeting for the people who said hello or exclaimed about our sealed bond. The music was loud

enough to hide his growls, and I vaguely noticed that most of the female fae in the throne room wore dresses similar to mine.

It must've been a tradition or something—and he'd gotten me a dress to make sure I fit in.

My legs shook with the weight of my desire for him.

He finally sat down on the throne and pulled me onto his lap. His erection was against my ass, his hands on my waist.

Everyone was looking at us for a greeting, so he bellowed something about a successful and enjoyable eclipse. The crowd roared their approval, and the music grew even louder.

The groups of fae danced together, their bodies moving nearly as one, and soon enough, there wasn't an eye on us in the room.

My abdomen ached with need.

My body quaked and quivered.

Ravv fluffed my dress, slyly opening it at the slit so the skirts billowed around both of our legs. One of his hands remained on my waist, and the other slipped beneath my skirt.

He slowly pulled one of my legs up until my knee was against the throne, and then did the same with the other. The movement lifted me to meet his cock—and my skirts kept our movements hidden entirely.

"You're doing so damn well, Lae," Ravv murmured into my mind, as my body trembled with need. *"I'm going to make you feel incredible."*

He freed his erection, and his hand was hot on my skin as he found my slit through my slickness.

"Close that pretty mouth, mate," he said. *"The sounds of your pleasure are for my ears alone."*

I clamped my jaw shut as he eased me downward until finally, the head of his cock met my opening.

I bit down harder to stop myself from crying out—and even harder when he

pulled me down further. His erection was thick and hard as he filled me, and my pleasure hit as I sank down onto him.

Ravv's fingers worked my clit lightly, and the climax hit hard. He held me in place as the pleasure rocked me, hiding what we were doing from the fae in the room.

"That was perfect," he growled. *"And you're going to do it again for me."*

Veil, I was going to do it as many times as he let me.

The need was still so damn fierce.

He pulled me down again, until my ass met the tops of his thighs. The warm bareness of his skin there made me shiver.

He swore softly, his hips jerking slightly as his cock swelled inside me. My breathing grew staggered as he thickened—and then lost control.

Ravv held me still as I went over the ledge with him, my jaw still clenched and my body finally relaxing slightly with the relief of the quick releases.

"Look at the crowd," he said into my ear, after his pleasure had faded. One of his hands stroked my thigh lightly beneath my dress, and the other was still on my hip. "They know you belong to me—but they have no idea how completely I have you right now."

The world spun with his words, and the way his hand was moving closer to the apex of my thighs.

"Tell me you're mine, Lae."

"I'm yours, Ravv," I breathed. *"You said I'm yours. Prove it."*

He snarled softly against my ear, and finally touched me.

The pleasure hit me hard.

I had to clench my jaw so tightly it was painful to stop from crying out, but I did it.

And the pleasure went on.

And on.

And on.

We were on that throne for at least an hour—maybe two—before Ravv finally decided our appearance had been enough and hauled me away.

When we reached our room, we didn't make it to the bed.

He had me pinned to the wall and was slamming into me from behind before the door shut behind us.

And veil, it was perfect.

The rest of the day—and night—passed in what felt like a dream.

A very, very sexy dream.

We made love in the bed.

Against the wall.

On the floor.

In the shower.

In our clothes.

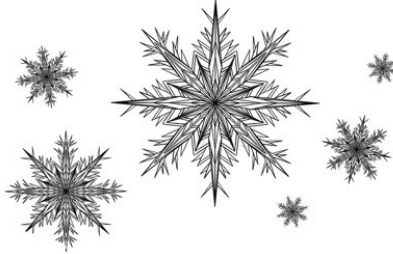
In our *ripped* clothes.

Veil, we even did it upside down.

I had never imagined an eclipse could actually be enjoyable, but damn, I'd hold on to the memories of our time together until the day I died.

CHAPTER 30

LAELI



I woke with a smile on my face, curled up in Ravv's arms and blissfully relaxed. He kissed me slowly, and then murmured, "I have a surprise for you."

My eyebrows lifted. "More than just the dress yesterday."

His lips curved upward. "Yes."

We slipped out of bed, and took a long, slow shower to clean off all the evidence of the *fun* we'd had on the eclipse.

After we were dressed in clean clothes, Ravv took my hand and led me down the hall, to the left. My gaze flicked to the door his meeting had been in, and I expected to feel fear with the memory.

Instead, I felt nothing.

The castle wasn't responsible for what had happened, and I'd seen my captor die.

We stepped past that door, and a few others, before we reached the end of the hall.

"What are we doing?" I asked, curiously.

He didn't answer as he twisted the doorknob and stepped inside the room, leading me in after him.

My eyebrows raised when I took in the space.

It was three times as big as Ravv's bedroom, with a huge bathing pool, a larger bathroom, and a massive closet. There was even a small kitchen in one corner.

Ravv set me down on the edge of the massive bed, and then sat beside me. There was a fancy box with a large bow beside him, but he didn't pick it up.

I stared at him, waiting for an explanation.

"You told me once that the power dynamics in our relationship were distorted. I came up with a way to fix that but couldn't make it happen until now." He pulled the lid off the box, and my eyes went wide.

Inside, there was a thin, silver band studded with jewels.

He lifted it from the box, and then set it on my head. "The announcement is spreading through the city right now. Loire finally has a queen again."

Tears stung my eyes. "I can't be the queen. What would I even do with my time?"

"Whatever you want. If the king fights on a battlefield, I think the queen can cook as many pastries as she likes." He gestured to the room. "We needed a bigger living space, of course. One that's not just mine, but ours. We can still stay in the house when you prefer it, but—"

I flung my arms around his neck and kissed him, hard.

He grabbed me, kissing me back without hesitation.

"This is perfect," I said against his lips. "You're perfect."

He chuckled. "I'm certain you won't feel that way next week."

"I will. I might want to smack you, but I'll still feel it."

He laughed, his expression relaxed. "The closet is full of dresses, too. I measured you while you were sleeping a few weeks back. You haven't been gaining weight for a while."

My eyebrows shot upward. "Are you serious?"

"Yes. You needed new dresses that were actually made to fit this gorgeous

human body, Lae.” He squeezed my thigh.

“Not so human anymore.” I gestured to the glowing handprint on my arm. It glowed bright and clear, declaring to us and the rest of the world that our souls had become one, permanently.

“Human in the ways that count.” He tucked my hair behind my ear, and then traced its curve with his fingertip. “And here. I love these little ears.”

I couldn’t fight my smile.

“We need to stop by the kitchen for breakfast, and then there’s something else I want to show you,” he told me, standing smoothly. “And you’re wearing one of your new dresses out. One without sleeves.”

“So you can show off my handprint?” I teased.

“So I can look at it anytime I want and remember that you’ll never be free of me again.”

I laughed, and he flashed me another grin before he disappeared into the closet.

We strolled out of the castle together, hand-in-hand, shortly afterward. Our bellies were full with food we’d found left over from the party, and we kept looking at each other and grinning.

At his insistence, I wore the delicate crown Ravv had made for me, and though I was self-conscious about it, I was also proud that he considered me worthy.

And glad that we’d figured out the weird power dynamic.

It would take time to really establish how things would work between us in the kingdom, but we would figure it out. I had no desire to start making any leadership decisions or to take any type of a queenly role, so it wasn’t as if I’d step on Ravv’s toes.

Unless he asked me to stop cooking.

I'd started enjoying it far too much.

We walked through the streets of our city, and the sounds of children laughing and playing floated through the air. They would spend all day outside after being locked in their rooms with books and snacks throughout the eclipse, Ravv told me. Like humans, the eclipse didn't affect fae until they reached maturity.

It took a long time to reach the outer edge of the city, but I was so content that I didn't mind. Ravv and I shared stories of our childhoods, laughing about how we had both come to understand what actually went on during an eclipse, and holding on to each other tightly. Coarse and Gleam would be resting and enjoying each other's company, so we didn't try to interrupt them.

When we finally slipped out of the city, we followed the river to the place where I'd burned myself out a few weeks earlier.

"This is what you wanted to show me?" I asked him curiously, as we approached the icy stones.

"Just wait. You'll see." He squeezed my hand lightly.

When we were close enough to see the rocks, surprise lifted my eyebrows. I had expected to find the river frozen over, since no one was there to break the ice.

Instead, I watched the water run smoothly, without taking pause.

The stone I hadn't touched was still covered in an obscene amount of ice that stretched over halfway into the river, but the one I'd focused my magic on only had a thin layer.

I had almost done it.

I had almost erased the magic completely.

And it was more than enough; the water was flowing just fine.

Satisfaction flooded me. "I did it. I burned away most of the enchantment."

"And that saved multiple fae an endless number of hours, day after day,"

Ravv rumbled. “You should be proud of yourself. You’re stronger than you know.”

I was stronger than I knew.

And veil, I was proud of myself.

I wasn’t the same woman I had been in the cellar. I wasn’t scared, lonely, or desperate. My luck wasn’t bad, at all.

Not anymore, at least.

I had been rescued by a gorgeous fae king, who became my mate.

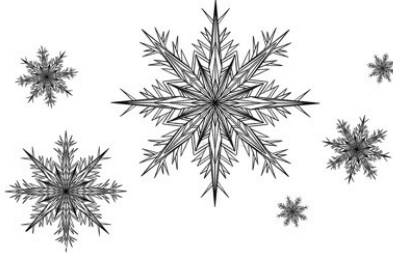
I had been brought to a magical city where my power was useful, not dangerous.

And I had fallen in love with a man who had become my closest friend.

It seemed safe to say that somehow, I had become the luckiest woman in the world.

EPILOGUE

RAVV—MANY YEARS LATER



“Are you sure this is safe?” I eyed my very pregnant mate, gripping her hand tightly as I walked beside her. We’d taken one last trip to the icy shore of one of our beaches, so we could watch the waves in peace once more before our baby joined us.

“It’s a chunk of ice, Ravv. I think I can walk on a chunk of ice without managing to off myself,” she drawled back.

“Ice becomes very dangerous when you’re pregnant, Laeli,” Elwynne called from where she sat on the beach, cradling her newborn. The golden handprint on her shoulder glowed brightly beneath our suns, and Orvay leaned over to press a kiss to it.

Elwynne and Laeli had managed to get pregnant at nearly the same time without discussing it, even though a handful of decades earlier, they had both proclaimed that they would never be mothers.

Change was a natural part of life, though. When my teary-eyed mate told me she had decided she was ready to be a mother, I simply took her into my arms and told her how wonderful she would be at it, then offered my baby-making services.

She had smacked me for that last bit—but I clearly knew what I was doing.

“Who knew?” Laeli tossed back.

“Every male fae with any good sense,” I grumbled. “Especially the ones with mates who run hot.”

“You’re all a bunch of overprotective bastards,” Laeli agreed, though her words were full of fondness. She had grown used to my protectiveness long ago, and though she would never admit it, she loved it.

“What are we going to name him?” she asked me. “I think he needs a strong fae name.”

“I think *she* needs a dainty human name,” I countered.

We had been making bets on the baby’s gender since nearly the moment we found out she was expecting.

The bets only grew grander as her abdomen swelled. Currently, the winner was set to earn six months free of any type of labor, including cooking, cleaning, and anything else they could come up with.

My female would need the time off after growing my massive baby, after all—in her words, not mine.

Laeli didn’t know I’d asked Alida, one of the elven leaders, what gender the baby was when she’d visited last.

Or that our little boy would have her hair, and my eyes. I would’ve told her, if I hadn’t known she would be furious with me for spoiling the surprise.

Pride swelled in my chest at the thought of him.

Life with Laeli had been a great adventure already, and it would only get livelier when another little soul joined us.

Coarse growled as one of his and Gleam’s cubs came running over to us, bumping his little head into Laeli’s leg a little harder than he probably realized.

“Careful,” I growled at her, as she stumbled.

I couldn’t growl at the cub, after all. And Lae was used to my grumbling.

“I’m fine,” she insisted, though she gripped my hand just the tiniest bit tighter.

“You’re always fine.” I eased a little closer, so I’d be ready when she lost her balance, whether it was the fault of an idorr or her straining ankles.

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” she tossed back with a grin.

I couldn’t fight the grin that slowly spread on my own face in response to her expression. “You should.”

“Oh, I know.” She winked at me—and then lost her balance with a shriek.

I caught her easily, and she huffed out a laugh as she stared into my eyes. Those gorgeous fiery orbs glittered with humor, and her hands weren’t even steaming.

She trusted me to catch her when she fell, and that made me a proud mate.

“Thanks, Ravvi.”

“Any time, Lae.” I brushed my lips to hers before setting her on her feet, back on the damn ice. “Be more careful next time.”

She grinned at me again. “What would be the fun in that?”

I chuckled, recapturing her hand.

A century earlier, I would’ve roared with laughter if someone told me I’d fall for a small, flaming human woman. Now, my eyes brightened every time someone said her name.

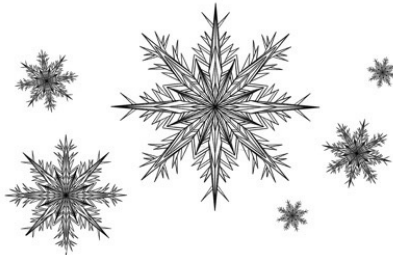
Truly, she had become my everything.

And I had never felt more fulfilled in my life.

THE END

(Keep reading for a peek at Kaelle’s & Nissa’s stories!)

AFTERTHOUGHTS



I think Ravv and Laeli may have just become my favorite couple I've ever written.

I'll probably have a new favorite tomorrow, but there's just something about his grumpy possessiveness and her snarky vulnerability that I love so, so much.

I don't think I've ever written a series like this one before. I'm always trying new things, but I *think* having this book take place along the same timeline as another in the series is a first for me, and I was surprised by how much I enjoyed it. I always have this feeling that there are so many more stories going on than just the ones I'm writing—all of the side characters have their own stories, and their own lives too. And that makes everything so much richer, when I sit down to write it.

But actually getting to write from another perspective while the same events are happening was so, so fascinating. It made me think much more deeply about everything and everyone. I hope it wasn't boring to read, because I had a blast writing it hahaha!

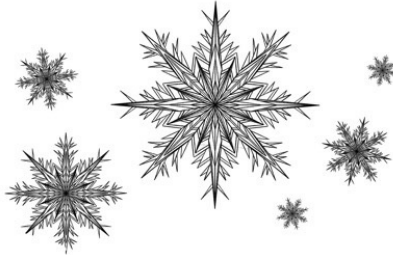
All jokes aside, I hope you loved Ravv and Laeli's story as much as I do, and I'm so excited to see where Kaelle and her stoic hero will take us. I'm already looking forward to the glittering caves of Vuuth and the wolfy companions! And the elves' assassins... yummm. I'm now fascinated by the Demon, but I'm also still excited about the Beast's story. It will be tough to decide which one to write next!

Anyway, I've rambled long enough. Thank you so much for reading!

All the love,
Lola Glass <3

P.S. I owe another thank you to the ladies in my [Facebook group](#) who won the giveaway to help me create a few characters for the series! Julie, I hope you love how Elwynne turned out! Her and Orvay's story made my heart melt <3

BONUS EPILOGUE



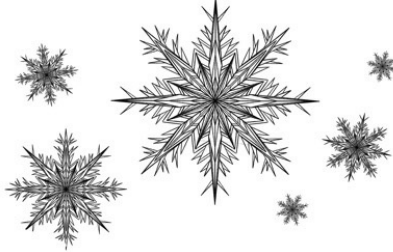
Join Lola's email list with [this link](#) to read a free bonus scene about Ravv and Laeli!

[LINK](#)

You'll receive updates on book releases as well as any upcoming deals and promotions. No spam!

DARK & BEASTLY FAE SAMPLE

NISSA



Who was that?
My gaze caught on a man I'd never seen before.

Even from my window, I could see that he was built much bigger and stronger than any of the others in town.

Though he strode down the middle of the street, he seemed to be dressed in nothing but a simple pair of shorts. Most men wore thick work pants and long-sleeve tunics to protect themselves from all three of our suns, even though those in my town were rarely forced to work in the heat of the day.

Most of them were rarely forced to work *at all*, thanks to me.

My brow furrowed, and I leaned closer until my forehead and nose met the window.

My gaze flicked between the newcomer and the other men and women walking the streets. He didn't seem to be carrying a weapon of any kind, and the way he moved was strange.

Or maybe not strange. Just different.

He didn't walk, or storm; he prowled, like the jungle cat I'd seen on the border where my town met the Broken Woods as a child. The shifters lived in the Woods, so entry was forbidden to any human who wanted to keep their life.

The prowling man in the streets halted abruptly.

My gaze may as well have been bound to him with rope, for all I could pull it away.

His eyes collided with mine, and even from my tower, I could see his gaze glowing dark blue with magic.

My heartbeat picked up.

Every magical being in Evare had eyes that glowed. It was one of the many things that set us apart from the humans and nonmagical creatures, which I was reminded of as I saw my own eyes glowing bright green every time I looked in the mirror.

The magical man didn't look away, and neither did I.

Something in my chest sort of... thrummed.

Was it hope?

Was it something more?

I didn't know, but I still couldn't take my eyes off him.

His gaze jerked to the side, in the same direction one of the guards was moving. After one last lingering look at the tower, at *me*, he began moving again, faster.

"What are you doing?" I whispered, my eyes following his form until he disappeared from my sight. My heart was still beating fast, and that strange feeling was still thrumming inside me.

Was he there to abduct me?

Veil, I hoped so.

A few other towns had tried to take me for my magic, but with the vast amount of food I grew for them, my mother's people had plenty of time to learn how to fight and plenty of money for weapons. They slaughtered everyone who came for me.

But no one with *magic* had ever tried to abduct me before.

I heard a snap as the metal lock on the door beneath me broke, and then a creak as the door opened.

My heartbeat picked up even faster.

Even if he was just going to kill me, I'd be grateful for the freedom of death.

I faced the top of the stairs head-on when the man cleared them.

His shoulders were back and his dark blue eyes glowed with emotion I couldn't read as they slid up and down my figure, slowly.

My face heated at the judgment that was undoubtedly running through his mind.

I was dirty, and shaking a little.

I'd been starving for years, though my oversized dress may have hidden that.

In contrast, he was absolutely gorgeous. Tall and strong, with lightly-tanned skin that practically shimmered with health. His ears were pointed, marking him as a fae, and inky black tattoos snaked up one of his arms before spreading over part of his chest.

His hair was thick and dark, the length of it curling around his ears. Most human men kept theirs cut close to their heads for ease, and the soft curl of the fae's made my lower belly tighten.

"Veil," I whispered. It was a curse, but also the word for the dividing line between our world and the world of our dead.

"You'll come with me," he said. Though his voice was low, it was flooded with the confidence and certainty of an extremely powerful man.

Then again, he was a fae.

I may as well have been a spider to him, ready to be crushed beneath the heel of his bare foot.

Perhaps if I hadn't wanted the same thing he did, I would've protested. Considering he was offering me the very thing I'd wanted for the past nine years, he wasn't going to hear an argument from me.

I crossed the room. My body felt weak, but I tried to control the shaking.

The fae looked a bit taken aback that I hadn't fought him on it, but turned and made his way back down the steps just as silently as I'd expected him to.

I followed him down, leaning heavily against the wall as I went. He was a lot faster than me, but I didn't call out to him. I was too worried about being caught by the guards outside.

He found me halfway down the stairs, his eyes narrowed as if he was about to lecture me for being slow.

"I haven't eaten much tonight," I whispered to him, not wanting to tell him how malnourished I was in case it would change his mind about taking me.

He grabbed my wrist, and an electric current raced through me. I jerked back, and he released me, looking down at his hand and then at my wrist.

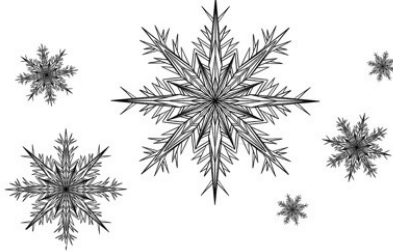
My lips parted in shock as I watched a silver handprint appear where he'd touched me... and the shock became horror when it started to *glow*.

When I looked at the man, I found his entire palm glowing the way my wrist was.

Without further ado, he threw me over his shoulder and ran down the stairs.

DARK & DEADLY PREDATORS SAMPLE

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.

I was going to be fine.

My chest was rising and falling rapidly though, and my fear was thickening, which meant my wind was blowing faster, and faster.

Some part of me could still feel the energy coming off the thing's aura.

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.

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 coated the door, slowly.

My body went still.

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 panic 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. 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 color, his ears were long and pointed, and all he wore was a pair of black pants and some dark fabric wrapped around one of his hands.

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 no words came 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 the words didn't come out.

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?" The panicked whisper escaped me 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 glance back at the place I'd called home for so long.

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PLEASE REVIEW

Here it is. The awkward page at the end of the book where the author begs you to leave a review.

Believe me, I hate it more than you do.

But, this is me swallowing my pride and asking.

Whether you loved or hated this story, you made it this far, so please review!

Your reviews play a MASSIVE role in determining whether others read my books, and ultimately, writing is a job for me—even if it's the best job ever—so I write what people are reading.

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-Lola

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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 shifters :)