

COULD YOU RESIST SIHRA KHAN?



FREEED

CARA CLARE

FREED

BOOK TWO IN THE JUNGLE'S QUEEN SERIES

CARA CLARE

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SNEAK PEEK: Nova by Cara Clare

Love Freed?

About Cara

AUTHOR'S NOTE

As you all know, when I started writing 'Bound', I intended for it to be a standalone romance. The story then became so much bigger than one book and morphed into a duet.

But now I've spent more time with Khan and Giana, I just can't seem to want to stop!

For now the series will become a trilogy. But I'm not going to say it will definitely end with three books. These characters, and the story, have a life of their own. And I'll write what they need me to write :-)

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GLIANA

The jungle convulses with the fury of the storm. Above us, the canopy is weeping, each tear driving straight into my heart to remind me how close I came to losing Shere Khan.

I walked away. He pushed me, and I let him.

I thought I was broken.

But then he came back, and he brought the storm with him.

As Khan stares at me, devouring the landscape of my face with his ink-black eyes, water cascades through the gaps in the trees and slicks my skin. I shudder, but he holds me with a strength that says he almost lost me once and will not allow it to happen a second time.

“Khan,” a voice whispers, *“we are coming for you...”*

I search for his gaze, but he is not looking at me anymore; he is staring into the shadows. “Did you hear that?” I ask, curling my fingers around his forearms, bracing myself for what’s about to come. Because something is, undoubtedly, coming.

And it’s not just the storm.

It's more than that. It's darkness and power, and it congeals in the air like tar dripping through mist.

"I heard it," he growls, hands braced on my hips now.

Before I can ask him what *it* is, the wind howls so loudly it almost snatches my breath away. It is screaming, bending the trees as if they were only saplings.

Pressed against me, Shere Khan shudders. The cool metal chain hanging from his wrist grazes my thigh. "We have to go." Khan takes my hand and tugs me after him as he begins to run. In the muted light, I am as clumsy as he is agile, but the need to be close to him propels me forward.

We move through the jungle's deepest crevices, and she leaves marks on my skin. She tugs at my hair, draws blood from my flesh, and licks with thorny tongues at my heels.

The air is charged with electricity. It settles into my bones and scratches my insides.

We reach a clearing and stop. Above us, lightning cleaves through the inky canvas of the sky. Each bolt throws the surrounding jungle into stark relief, the greens and browns of her foliage leaping out in vivid detail before the night reclaims them.

With each electric flash, Khan's silhouette shines brightly. And he takes my breath away. His muscles are tense, twitching beneath the swirling stripes of his tattoos. But at this moment, instead of looking like an animal ready to pounce, he looks like a man.

Just a man.

I have never seen fear in his eyes before. Seeing it now should terrify me, but it doesn't. It makes me want to smash my lips into his and claim his body with my own. Because I know, in my heart, he is scared – not just for himself – but for both of us.

Shere Khan is no longer trying to kill me; he is trying to save me.

Breath rising and falling heavily in his chest, he sweeps my wet hair from my

face. Rivulets of water streak down his chiselled features, but his stare is hard now – resolute.

“Gliana...”

“Tell me what is happening,” I shout above the storm’s anger. “Tell me so we can fight it together.”

He searches my face. His hair is hanging long and loose over his shoulders. His body glistens in the moonlight. The rain slows, and the thunder grumbles softly. But there is something quivering beneath the storm. And it scares me more than Khan ever did.

“We cannot fight it, Princess.”

A smile parts my lips, and I shake my head at him. “There’s nothing we can’t fight together,” I say, grabbing his hand and pressing his palm to my chest so he can feel my heart beating.

“Your fire,” he breathes, “how does it burn so bright?”

Instead of answering, I kiss him. He parts his lips and lets me gently explore his mouth with my tongue. His hands drop to my waist, but then he pulls away. “I promised my ancestors I would kill you,” he says, dragging his gaze up to meet mine. “To avenge our people.”

A moment ago, sugar-sweet pleasure hummed on my tongue. Now it stings with the acrid taste of my father’s evil. I swallow and it settles at the base of my throat. “I know,” I whisper.

“By letting you live, I broke my vow.”

I reach up and stroke the side of his face. He leans into me, looking – not for the first time – strangely cat like as he nuzzles my palm. “It’s okay...” I tell him.

When he straightens himself up, he shakes his head. “No, Princess, it is not. I made a pact with the spirit world, and I broke it.” He inhales a shaky breath. “They will make me pay for my betrayal.”

“Who will make you pay?” The air becomes cooler and my spine stiffens.

He holds my gaze. “The spirits of my ancestors.”

I have never conversed with spirits. It is a practise that was outlawed long before The Cullings took place. But I know there are those who still believe. Those who pray to secret altars and who wear their ancestors’ marks on their skin – pale tattoos hidden beneath their clothes.

“They will kill me for letting you live.”

I draw in a deep breath, but the air is ice cold. It swells in my chest and makes my heart throb against my ribs. “They can’t... can they?” As I speak, a gust of wind whips the back of my bare legs and makes me wince.

A sad smile twitches on Khan’s lips. “Yes, Gliana, they can.” He gestures to the rain, and the wind, and the darkness. “It has already begun.”

Thoughts tumble through my mind so quickly I can barely catch hold of them. Fixing my eyes on Khan’s, I stand back and tug my hair away from my neck, exposing my throat. “Then, end my life. I cannot be the reason you no longer grace this earth, Khan. I would rather die than live knowing you’re gone because of me.”

I look down at the ground, breathing hard and fast, trembling as the surrounding air grows colder still.

Then he is touching me. His fingers light on my throat. He traces a slow sensual line down to my shoulder, then cups my face in his hands and makes me look at him.

The place at the apex of my thighs grows warm. Just from the way he looks at me. With hunger. And thirst. And *need*.

His hands return to my waist, and he lifts me as if I weigh nothing. His scent envelops me like a blanket, comfort and strength cradling me tightly. He spins us around, lips crashing into mine as he pushes me against the nearest tree.

Without saying a word, he reaches up, takes hold of a thick green vine, and wraps it around my wrists. He jerks it tightly, then steps back, admiring his prize. His upper lip quivers with a silent growl of approval.

Anticipation parts my lips and makes me whimper.

Khan's muscular torso is already bare, but now he's exposing his lower half too. His eyes glimmer as he takes in every inch of me, caressing my curves with his gaze alone.

As he shows himself to me, he studies my face, and my cheeks flush as I take in the sight of him.

We should be running, hiding, doing something – anything – other than what we're doing right now but, even though I know all of that, I can't imagine being anywhere else.

Doing anything else.

If this is how it ends, then I can't think of a better way to go.

"I won't leave you," I tell him. "And I won't let you leave me."

Khan steps closer, pressing his body against mine, skin-on-skin contact electrifying every nerve ending as I feel him hardening against my thigh. "You're not in a position to make demands, Princess." He slides his hands up my bare arms, then curls his fingers around my wrists, gripping them on top of the cool vines that hold me in place.

"You won't leave me either," I whisper. "You can't."

For a moment, Khan simply stares into my eyes. Then he kisses me before pulling away again and letting go of my hands.

A smile plays on his lips.

"I feel safe in the jungle with you," I say, tilting my chin. "I feel strong. Invincible."

"We are not safe," he replies.

As if it is echoing his words, the jungle rustles and the rain begins again.

Curling his body over mine, Khan lifts his hands, tracing the skin of my thighs with the tips of his fingers, allowing his nails to ignite a trail of heat in their wake.

A gust of wind sets the leaves trembling above us.

“Should we run?” I ask breathlessly as he finds my core. “You said we should run...”

“I was wrong,” he says darkly, moving his lips to the spot just below my ear as he teases my opening with one torturous finger. “There is nothing we can do now.” He kisses my neck, grazing me with his teeth.

“Khan...” His name parts my lips like a heavy sigh and my eyes flutter.

He holds my gaze as he slowly hooks one finger inside me. When I whimper, he adds a second. “I should not have sent you away.” He applies pressure with the heel of his palm as he moves his fingers in and out. “I should have let you choose your own path.”

“Yes,” I breathe, “you should have.”

“So, choose, Princess. Right now. This moment.” With a flick of his free hand, he exposes his metal talons and slices the vines away from my wrists. Unexpectedly freed, I fall into his arms.

“I choose you.” I link my fingers together at the back of his neck. “I would rather die with you than live a thousand lives without you.”

A deep rumble vibrates in Khan’s throat. He is devouring me with his stare. He lifts my hand and presses his lips into my palm. His other hand is still between my legs. As he sucks my finger into his mouth, teasing the tip with his tongue, he begins to stroke my clit.

I shudder as pleasure coils inside me, but then he takes his hand away and smears my wetness over my bottom lip, pinching it between his thumb and forefinger. Hungrily, he leans in and sweeps his tongue over my mouth. I swear, he almost purrs as he tastes me.

“Mine,” he mutters.

I shiver. The warmth of his erection against my thigh is intoxicating. I want him inside me, but not yet.

And it seems Khan agrees.

Pushing me back against the tree, he drops to his knees then eases my legs apart, hooks one knee over his shoulder, and begins to expertly tease me with his tongue, his lips, his mouth.

As my fingers sink into his hair, he grabs hold of my hips. He raises his hand, and I know he's going to retract his talons, so I snatch his wrist and say, "No. Leave them out. I want to feel your metal on my skin while you fuck me."

Khan looks up from the ground, a grin tugging at the corners of his mouth. Seeing him like that – on his knees in front of me – makes me feel like a queen.

His queen.

The queen who tamed the tiger.

"As you wish, Princess," he growls. Then slowly, purposefully, he drags his claws up the inside of my thigh. When he reaches my center, he gently presses the cold metal to my clit, sending a shiver of electricity zipping down my spine.

I try to stay still, afraid to move because I *know* how sharp those talons are. But then the cold is gone, replaced by Khan's hot tongue. I gasp. His tongue swirls around my opening, lapping my wetness, sucking, and flicking, and making me writhe beneath him.

Hot.

Cold.

Hot.

Cold.

He pushes me harder against the tree, the vicious reverberations of my moans shaking my chest. Then he stands, takes a step back, and rips the shirt from my body.

I shiver violently.

I'm completely exposed, standing in front of him covered in mud, and rain, and scratches. But for the first time in my life, I *want* to be stared at. I want

him to worship me. I want nothing more than the look in his eyes as he drinks in my curves, my imperfections, my story.

Without saying a word, he lowers his mouth to my nipple and pinches it between his teeth. I suck in a sharp breath and groan loudly as he alternates between pinching and licking.

One hand is on my back, his talons clawing the spot between my shoulders. I have no idea if he's drawing blood from my skin. I have no idea if I'd tell him to stop if he was.

For a moment, a part of me almost wishes he was so that I could feel the proof of his passion, and see it, and remember it.

His other hand returns to my clit, but before I can sink into the rhythm of his touch, he's spinning me around, slamming me against the rough bark of the tree. It scratches my nipples, sending jolts of pleasure and pain through my body. I whimper and press back against him. His cock is at my entrance, but he lingers, waiting for me to beg.

"I need you inside me, Khan. Please." My body vibrates with the need for him.

This time, he retracts his talons and presses his hands on top of mine, pinning them as he slowly enters me. As I adjust to the feel of him stretching me open, my cunt pulses around him. "Fuck," he breathes. "You take me so well, Princess."

It's as though my body was made just for him. I can't move my arms, but I don't care. I can do nothing but cry out as he thrusts deeper inside of me.

Panting, his name falls from my lips like a prayer. He moves a hand to my throat and rests his fingers on my skin. He doesn't squeeze, doesn't tighten his grip, just leaves the heat of his palm pressed against me. A promise of both strength and restraint that takes my breath away even though he's barely touching me.

As he fucks me harder, the chain that hangs from his wrist falls between my breasts, cold and heavy on my skin. "Take me," I whisper, lifting it and pressing it into his hand. "Claim me. I'm yours."

I look at him over my shoulder and his eyes flash with uncertainty. Then he understands. He knows what I want, and without hesitation he brings the chain to my neck. Looping it around my throat, he leans back, applying just the right amount of pressure to make my head spin and my breath swell in my chest as he fucks me harder and harder.

I'm seeing stars. I'm on the precipice of a bone rattling orgasm, my entire body shuddering with the need to uncoil, but I need him to come with me.

Khan snarls and curls an arm around my waist, pulling me back onto his cock.

"Come inside me," I whisper, reaching down to furiously circle my clit while he fucks me.

My body is covered in sweat. I'm trembling. I'm so wet, and I feel the piercings at the tip of his shaft caressing my inner walls as he thrusts. Neither of us breaks our rhythm.

Khan leans forward, using the chain around my neck to jerk my gaze up to meet his.

"Come for me, tiger," I command.

He slicks his fingers with his tongue, then slowly circles my nipple while I match the rhythm of his thrusts with the pressure on my clit. My eyes roll back, and I scream into the rain.

He tugs the chain tighter.

He thrusts hard inside me one, two, three times more, roaring as he does. I cry out as my entire body dissolves and fireworks explode beneath my skin.

"Good girl," he growls.

As my orgasm rocks through me, and I pulse violently around his cock, he stumbles forward, punches the tree above my head, and yells at the top of his voice.

Everything throbs as his hot cum fills me up and then a sharp, searing pain grips my shoulder. He's biting me. Khan is biting me, and while his talons did not break my skin, his teeth do. They pierce my flesh and I scream as an

intoxicating mixture of pleasure and pain drips through my body.

The rain intensifies, pouring in a relentless deluge, soaking us to the skin. And yet we remain, standing against the storm, against fate itself, shuddering while the remnants of our pleasure reverberate through our limbs and blood pools on my shoulder.

“Khan...” A voice breaks through the haze of my orgasm. “Let her go.”

Khan steps back from me, leaving me empty. The chain drops from my neck. Barely able to stand, I turn slowly. There Khan is standing in front of me, shielding me from the person who spoke. His fingers twitch at his sides. “She is mine,” he says darkly.

For a moment, my heart swells with pride. But then I move sideways, and I see who the voice belongs to.

“Raksha...”

GLIANA

SIX MONTHS AGO

I'm cold and shivering, and the gash on my arm throbs with each heartbeat.

"You tried to run before you can walk," Raksha scalds playfully.

"I'm sick of feeling like the clumsy human around here." I fold my arms but flinch when the gesture stretches the edges of my wound.

"You can pout in a minute. Right now, we need to shelter. The storm's getting worse."

I squint up at the sky, barely visible through the canopy above. "Seems like it's stopping to me."

Raksha chuckles deep in his throat. "Clumsy human," he mutters, tweaking my chin just as thunder rumbles through the trees.

Reluctantly, I follow him through the undergrowth. I have no idea where we are; although I've become accustomed to the invisible paths and routes that

surround the village, this far into the jungle, everything looks the same to me.

Raksha, however, twists and turns as if he knows every blade and leaf by heart. Something inside me flutters with jealousy at the thought he knows her – the jungle – better than I do.

For so long, the jungle consumed my thoughts. For so many nights, I sat in my concrete tower and dreamed of running to her. When I arrived here, I imagined finally feeling at one with her – coming to learn her sounds and her movements the way the wolves do. But perhaps I will never escape the fact I am a human. Perhaps I am not meant to know her the way Raksha does.

“We can shelter here until it passes.” Raksha points into the undergrowth then moves a branch to one side, exposing a small dark cave.

“Sure there isn’t a bear hiding in there? Or a panther?” I ask, stooping to look into the ominous mouth.

“Hello? Anyone there?” Raksha calls, his voice echoing in the gloom. When he stands up, he puts his hands on his hips and laughs. “No one there. We’re safe.”

Rolling my eyes at him, trying to hide the smile that tugs at my upper lip, I fold myself into the darkness. It takes a few moments for my eyes to adjust. When they do, all I can see is Raksha’s silhouette. But I know his vision is better than mine.

“Let me look at your arm, clumsy pup,” he says, his fingers warm on my cool skin as he moves them from my wrist toward my elbow.

When he reaches the gash, given to me by the rock I tumbled onto when I tried to climb a too-large tree, he dips his head and I feel the tip of his tongue on my broken skin.

On the first night I arrived in his village, Raksha told me wolves use their tongues to tend each other’s wounds. I was sitting on the small wooden bed in the cabin his grandfather gave me, and he was washing my back with a warm cloth.

“Usually, we’d do this with our tongues,” he said before clearing his throat nervously and offering me a stuttered explanation. “It’s what we do. Wolves.

Like a ritual... if someone's hurt."

"I don't think we know each other well enough for that yet," I replied, laughing a little despite the pain.

Now, as I close my eyes and sink into the sensation of Raksha's mouth, I whisper, "Are you sure we know each other well enough for this?"

His tongue leaves my skin. In the darkness, I can just about see him sit up straight. A flash of lightning outside illuminates the cave, and his eyes sparkle as he stares at me.

"Maybe not," he says. "But I think we know each other well enough for this..."

He cups my face and brings my lips to his. Gently, he brushes his mouth against mine. His kiss is tender and loving, and completely at odds with the metallic tang of blood on his tongue.

When I taste it, I sigh and lean into him, sliding into his lap and wrapping my arms around his neck.

We kiss for a long time. But when I try to encourage Raksha's mouth lower, he stops. "We can't," he says, pressing his forehead against mine. "It is forbidden."

"But..." My heart jitters angrily in my chest. "I thought..."

"Maybe one day, little cub," he says. "But not today."

RAKSHA

He's fucking her. The bastard has a chain around her throat, and he's fucking her so hard she's screaming. I lurch forward, but The Bear grabs my shoulder and steadies me.

"Wait..." he mutters.

I jerk away from him. "The fuck I will. Look at what he's doing to her!"

The Bear pinches my face between his thumb and forefinger. "Exactly," he says, his silver-blue eyes quivering. "*Look* at her, Raksha." He forces me to turn around, so I'm staring back at the clearing.

As my eyes land on the bounty hunter, he sinks his teeth into Giana's shoulder and fury erupts inside me. But then she calls his name.

The fury turns to something else.

She is not screaming in pain. She is screaming with pleasure.

I stagger backward, chest tight, breath coming thick and heavy as the rain batters me through the canopy above.

The Bear follows behind but doesn't touch me this time. Instead, he stands

beside me as I bend double and brace my hands on my knees, struggling for breath.

When I eventually stand up and meet The Bear's eyes, my voice comes out in nothing more than a hoarse whisper. "How could she? *Why* would she?"

Staring at the icy blue of his eyes, the fury in my rib cage softens a little. Not a lot. But a little. Without replying, The Bear nods toward the clearing. The screams have stopped. Thank the stars they have stopped. "What do you want to do?" he says.

I stand up, straighten my shoulders, then spin to face the foliage that shields Gliana and Khan from view. "I want to kill him."

Before The Bear can reply, I am striding forward. Emerging into the clearing, rain pounds my skin and the air becomes suddenly colder. Above the sound of the storm, I call, "Khan. Let her go..."

Instantly, the tiger spins around. Even through the rain, I can smell him. If I hadn't already known he was a shifter, I would have known at this moment; his stench gives him away. It is the aura of a beast who knows no mercy.

Khan's eyes flash, and a growl hums in his throat. Gliana's lithe fingers curl around his upper arm and she whispers something to him. Normally, I'd be able to hear her, but her words catch in the wind and drift away from me. I focus on her fingers. I cannot look at her face. Or her body.

She is a stranger to me now. A stranger whose face I once loved but who, in this moment, coaxes nothing but rage from my heart.

Gently, Khan places his hand on hers. The chain that, minutes ago, was around Gliana's throat hangs from a metal cuff around his wrist. The Bear's words pound my brain. *He took my hand and left me to die.* Another flash of anger convulses in my muscles. They contract hard, my bones ready to snap and twist, the wolf inside me howling to be set free.

As my body prepares to shift, Khan's does too. He moves his head from side to side and steps forward, completely naked, Gliana's scent oozing from his skin.

With a flick of his hand, he removes a leather strap from his knuckles and

presses it into Giana's palm. She clasps it tightly and, finally, I look at her.

Really look at her.

She is naked. Her entire body is on display, her skin glistening with rainwater and sweat. I drag my eyes up from her hands to her face and my gaze snags on her breasts. She is breathing fast and hard, her chest rising and falling with a quiver that would normally make me hard, but now only makes me want to taste Khan's blood.

Remnants of him are all over her. Scratches and teeth marks and the scent of his cum dripping down her legs.

In all the time we loved each other, I never saw her like this. I never saw all of her. How many times did we stop ourselves from going too far? How many times did I resist because I dreamed of the day we could lie together without it feeling like a betrayal of the pack?

As my thoughts spiral, rage swirls like a tempest in my gut.

Watching me, Khan is poised to shift, angled in front of Giana as if he's trying to protect her. His protective stance almost makes me angrier than the fact he fucked her.

"Raksha, please...." Giana's voice finds me. And sends me over the edge.

I shift instantly, and Khan does too.

He's bigger than me as a man, and as a tiger. More ferocious, more experienced. A better hunter, a better killer, a better lover?

Khan prowls toward me, and Giana stumbles back into the shadows. I can hear her heart beating. I can smell her fear, but I have no idea if she is afraid for me or afraid for him.

Khan bares his teeth and releases a roar that rises above the storm.

His muscular, striped form betrays his strength, yet his sinuous grace only fuels my disgust. I can't stand the thought of his hands on her, of his scent mingling with hers, of her giving herself to this creature, or of him being the first man to know what it feels like to fuck her.

When he leaps, it's with an assurance that comes from the certainty of his superiority. But I'm no meek prey waiting to be exterminated. I am a mother fucking wolf.

The brutality of our clash tears through the clearing, our snarls and roars swallowed by the storm. I am all instinct and fury, my razor-sharp teeth aiming for his throat. But his counterattack is swift, and he knocks me to the ground with the sheer force of his blow. Towering above me, pinning me down, his breath hot in my face, he flashes his teeth.

He could end it right here, his deadly jaws inches from my throat, but he doesn't. There's contempt in his eyes and, as I struggle to rise beneath him, humiliation crawls violently under my skin.

Slowly, Khan releases me. I am on the floor, lying on my side, and remain still as he prowls around me. Turning his back on me, he begins to walk away.

Back to her.

To where she is waiting for him.

I push through the pain and rise, blood dripping down my fur. I manage to stand and, as if he has sensed it, he stills. Slowly, he turns around and our eyes lock.

In another life, tigers and wolves were comrades. Changelings. Shifters. Beasts.

We are different breeds, but we share a history and a deep connection to the spirits of our land that humans can never understand. Finding a tiger after all this time should be a revelation. Instead, it is a revulsion.

This tiger should not live. This tiger should not see another sunrise.

Lowering my head, my lips curling into a snarl, I dare him to return to the fight, but he is reluctant. He hesitates, breathing slowly and calmly. Behind him, Giana steps out of the shadows. The rain has slowed, and I allow myself to meet her eyes.

Placing a gentle hand on Khan's shoulder, she weaves her fingers into his fur

and – just like that – he shifts back.

He returns to his human form as if *he* has decided the fight is over and so, therefore, it is.

I don't wait. I lunge for him. I'm reaching for his leg, about to clench my jaws around it, and tear off his foot like he tore off The Bear's hand, when Gliana hurls herself in front of him.

I stop, seconds away from clamping down on her instead of him, and fall back onto my haunches.

For a long moment, Gliana simply looks at me. Then, crouching down, she extends a hand to stroke my face.

I pull away from her.

I shift back quickly, but turn away. She has seen me naked many times before and, every time, I tried to capture the look of excitement on her face. Now, though, knowing I'll see only pity, I cannot bring myself to meet her gaze.

No one speaks.

I can feel her standing behind me and can almost hear her thoughts racing for something – anything – to say.

In front of me, the bushes move.

The heavy ache in my chest lightens a little as The Bear steps into the clearing. Seeing him, Gliana releases an audible gasp and Khan growls under his breath.

The Bear nods at me. "Okay?" he asks. "Injured?"

I shake my head. "Only a little."

"Bear?" Gliana breathes. "How did you...?"

He can't look at her either. "Put some clothes on, Princess. Then we can talk." He does, however, look at Khan. "You too, tiger. We have a lot to discuss."

THE BEAR

Raksha cannot look at Giana because he is appalled. But I keep my vision trained on Khan for a different reason.

Looking at the princess should make me feel disgust; she let Khan touch her, she let him inside her. He took my hand, and she gave him her body.

But I am not disgusted.

She is radiant. The wildness in her eyes, and the traces of passion on her skin, are manifestations of the spirit she has kept bound on the inside for far too long. Like this, she is power, and lust, and strength, and freedom.

It is everything I ever wanted for her.

If I look at her too long, I will fall to my knees in front of her and betray my secret. I will tell her who I am, and I will beg her to let me inside, too.

So, instead of looking at her and allowing her to see the truth that rests in my swollen ribcage, I turn away.

Helping Raksha to his feet, I hand him his pack and watch as he takes out spare clothes and pulls them onto his slender, athletic frame. While Giana looks whole, Raksha looks broken. His wounds do not ooze lust or strength,

only pain. It swims in his eyes, too, and when he takes hold of my arm, he squeezes with a force that makes me think he will fall if he lets go.

“We found her. She is alive,” I say solemnly. “Remember that.”

He swallows hard. The rain has stopped, but the air feels strange. As if he notices it too, Raksha’s nose wrinkles, and he glances up at the broken space in the canopy above.

Night is approaching fast. The storm brought darkness long before sunset, but now the jungle is descending even further into blackness.

Stalking into the middle of the clearing, now clothed and with the leather cuff back on his knuckles, Khan looks up at the sky. Studying it, he frowns as if he can’t understand why the storm has stopped.

When Gliana emerges from the bushes, he stalks over to her and mutters, “We do not have time for a reunion. We should move while we have the chance.”

The princess is wearing a man’s shirt – Khan’s – and a pair of slacks that look far too big for her. Also the tiger’s, no doubt. Reaching into his pack, Khan takes out a piece of rope and hands it to her. She wraps it around her waist and ties it with deft fingers. “Not yet,” she says. “I have to speak to Raksha.”

The way she speaks is clear, and confident. As if she knows she has complete control over the beast in front of her.

As she walks past him, Khan does nothing but stare, his eyes tracing her silhouette and flickering with a heat that makes my stomach clench.

“Raksha...” Gliana speaks softly, as though she’s afraid he will turn and run if she startles him. Raksha’s shoulders rise and fall heavily. He’s facing me instead of her and can’t seem to unlock his gaze from mine.

Stepping around him, Gliana glances from me to Raksha. “How did the two of you...?” she asks before shaking her head. “I’m sorry. I have so many questions.”

“*You* have questions?” Raksha snaps. He is clenching his fists. Finally, he

looks at her. His eyes widen as he takes in her face. She reaches for him but changes her mind and brings her hand back to rest across her stomach instead. “He kidnapped you,” Raksha says quietly. “Do you know what he intended to do to you?”

Gliana nods slowly. “Yes,” she says. “I know.”

“Did he...?” Raksha swallows hard, as if his words are scalding his throat. He points to the spot where, just a few minutes ago, Gliana was crying out with pleasure. “Did he force you to...?”

She bites her lower lip, a sorrowful expression creasing her forehead. “No,” she says, barely audibly. “He didn’t.”

“Fuck,” Raksha breathes. Then he looks up. There’s a lightness in his eyes, a glimmer of hope, as he hisses, “Were you trying to persuade him to let you go? Because you don’t need to be afraid anymore, Gliana. We’re here.”

I wince a little as he speaks. I’m certain he knows the answer to his question already, but he’s asking it anyway out of desperation.

“He didn’t force me,” Gliana says – a note of defiance in her tone this time.

Behind her, Khan watches quietly. Instead of coming to Gliana’s side, he simply leans on a nearby tree, extends his metal talons, and begins picking at the dirt under his fingernails.

Looking up at me, he offers a jerky nod then looks at my gloved hand. “You lived,” he says bluntly.

Before I can reply, there is an almighty groan of thunder.

Khan stands up straight and I watch as his body visibly coils, ready for action. The ground shakes, the trees tremble, and a fork of lightning pummels into the earth just inches from where Khan stands. It slices a branch free from the tree above his head, and he dives to the side as it falls to the floor.

Gliana yells his name and lurches forward, but Raksha grabs her hand.

In front of Khan, the earth begins to smoke. Barely a second later, fire blooms into a huge column of heat that stretches up toward the sky.

Gliana jerks once more, trying to run to Khan, but Raksha holds her tightly. When the ground shakes harder, he tugs her closer. “Khan...” She calls for him.

At the sound of her voice, Raksha lets go of her hand.

Shere Khan answers her with a growl. He splays his talons at his side, leaps to his feet, and rushes to her, dodging the flames as they dance in his dark eyes.

When he reaches her, he pulls her toward him and Raksha cowers back. A wounded dog.

“Is this it?” she asks.

The fire burns higher, and higher, and it’s no longer orange. It is tinged with blue, and green, and there are swirls of jet-black smoke at its roots.

“Yes, Princess. I think this is the end.”

Before she can answer, a voice booms, “*Khan, we are coming for you...*”

GLIANA

My heart feels too swollen for my ribcage. As if, at any moment, it might burst through my chest.

Raksha is here. He saw me with Khan, and his heart is broken.

Somehow, the deeper I travelled into the jungle, and into Khan's world, the easier it became to forget Raksha. The life I had with him and the wolf pack seemed like it happened a million lifetimes ago to someone else.

A version of myself I no longer recognised.

Now he is here, and I cannot pretend I did not betray him.

For an entire year, we spoke of our love for one another. The only reason we did not lie together was because we convinced ourselves that one day we might be able to do so with his family's blessing.

At least, that's what I told myself.

Now, with Khan's heat still blooming between my legs, and his scent on my skin, I am wondering whether the truth is very different.

Perhaps I didn't give myself to Raksha because I knew, deep in the pit of my

soul, that what I felt for him was not love. Perhaps I knew he couldn't give me what I needed; the rawness, the passion, the breath-taking, suffocating, intensity that Khan pulls from my body.

Staring at me with wide, wounded eyes, I see these same thoughts flickering across Raksha's face. When he realises I gave myself to Khan freely, it is as if I can read his mind; he, too, is wondering whether I ever really loved him or whether I was simply playing at love because I knew nothing else.

I want to explain it to him. I want to find the words to make everything better, to ease his pain, to help him understand. But they turn to dust in my mouth and taste like dirt as I swallow them down. "Raksha..."

He cannot look at me.

The Bear can't either, and I don't know if it's because he is disgusted with me too or if he is simply being respectful.

He is the one who tells us to get dressed, so we can talk.

I am trying to understand how he came to be with Raksha. Was he looking for me too? Did he finally flee The Colonel's castle? What of Kaa? What of my parents when the alliance collapsed?

I have too many questions, and everything around me feels suddenly too loud and too hazy. I want to cling onto Khan. I want him to wrap himself around me and become my anchor. But to do so in front of Raksha would be cruel, and I care for him too much to be cruel.

"How did the two of you...?" I ask Raksha before shaking my head. "I'm sorry. I have so many questions."

"You have questions?" Raksha snaps. He is clenching his fists. Anger glistens on his skin. Finally, he looks at me. His eyes widen as he takes in my face. He is wearing an expression I have not seen before; wounded, humiliated. I reach for him but can't bring myself to rest my hand on his body. Not now. Not in this moment. Not like this.

"He kidnapped you," Raksha says quietly. "Do you know what he intended to do to you?"

I nod slowly. “Yes,” I tell him. “I know.”

“Did he...?” Raksha swallows hard. He can barely get the words out, but I understand what he is trying to ask me. He points to the spot where, just a few minutes ago, I was quivering with desire. “Did he force you to...?”

I inhale sharply and bite my lower lip. “No,” I promise him, barely audibly. “He didn’t.”

Raksha inhales a shaky breath. “Fuck,” he breathes. Then he looks up. There’s a lightness in his eyes, a glimmer of hope, as he hisses, “Were you trying to persuade him to let you go? Because you don’t need to be afraid anymore, Giana. We’re here.”

There is a note of desperation in his voice, and a flicker of indignation rises in my gut. Would he rather I had been raped than willingly gave myself to another man?

“He did not force me,” I say, tipping my chin up and crossing my arms in front of my stomach.

Behind me, Khan is listening to us. I can sense him, as if he is part of me now. As if we are one creature and, even though I cannot see him, I know he is there, and that he is mine.

I glance over my shoulder at him. Instead of coming to my side, he simply leans on a nearby tree, extends his metal talons, and begins picking at the dirt under his fingernails.

“You lived,” he says bluntly. He is looking at The Bear.

Before I can ask how they know one another, because it seems very apparent in this moment that they do, there is a heart-shuddering crack of thunder. The ground shakes, the trees tremble.

I stumble a little, then gasp as lightning strikes the ground and fire blooms into a huge column of heat that stretches up toward the sky.

Instinctively, I lurch for Khan, but Raksha grabs hold of me and I flinch at the contact.

“Shere Khan!” I call his name, meeting his eyes through the haze of the

flames. He is on the ground, his coal-black eyes wide like saucers. His energy shifts. Fear prickles his skin and mine twitches in response. Splaying his talons at his side, he rushes toward me. The fire burns higher, and higher, and it's no longer orange. It is tinged with blue, and green, and there are swirls of jet-black smoke at its roots.

Raksha lets go of me and, when Shere Khan runs to me, I grab onto him instead. "Is this it?" I ask.

"Yes, Princess. I think this is it."

I am about to answer when a voice cries, "*Khan, we are coming for you...*"

Its timbre is otherworldly, resonating from all directions. It echoes in the air, growing in intensity, and volume, and number – like a distant army marching towards us.

I put my hands on Khan's forearms. "You're sure there is nothing we can do to appease them?"

He does not answer, simply stares at the column of fire in the middle of the clearing, his eyes tracing it up toward the sky.

"What's happening?" Raksha ducks his head to meet my eyes. "Ana? What's happening?"

"My name isn't..." I shake my head, fear clouding my thoughts.

The Bear takes two strides and appears at my side. "Princess?" he shouts.

But his voice is drowned out by the wind. It is howling, literally howling, and the sky is a swirling pitch black.

Through the gap in the canopy, lightning arcs once more across the sky, and thunder rumbles in response. Leaves and debris are whipped up from the jungle floor, twisting and turning into a whirlwind that brings the storm right into our midst.

"They will not stop until I have been punished," Khan says, resolute now instead of panicked.

Raksha's eyes dart between the storm and Khan. "Who are you talking

about?”

“He was supposed to kill me,” I say loudly, hair whipping across my face as the wind grows stronger still. “But he loved me instead, and now he must pay the price.”

“What price?” The Bear asks, hand at his waist, ready to draw his dagger.

I shake my head. “Your weapons will not help us. The ones who seek us are already dead.”

“Spirits?” Raksha asks, wide eyed. “You are speaking of *spirits*?”

Finally, Khan speaks. “They made me swear to end the King’s line,” he says, looking at me. Only at me. “I swore to kill Giana. I broke my vow. So, now I must die in her place.”

Grabbing his hand, I turn so I am standing at his side. “And if he dies, I die. So, you should go. Both of you.” I look from The Bear to Raksha. “Run while you have the chance. They don’t want you. They may let you go.”

The Bear is about to speak when I feel Khan’s grip loosen on my hand. “Take her,” he says quietly.

My heart trips in my chest.

“Take her,” Khan repeats. He is not looking at me. “If you want her to live, take her away from here.” When The Bear hesitates, Khan raises his voice and roars so loudly my entire body begin to shake. “TAKE HER, NOW!”

I shout for Shere Khan and try to catch hold of him, but I’m too late. The Bear wraps one large arm around my waist and pulls me away. I scream and writhe in his grasp, but Raksha is there too. Grabbing me, pulling me, tearing my limbs and my heart away from the man I love.

“I will not leave him...” I manage to turn in The Bear’s grasp and claw at his face. He holds firm until I grab the hand that lays across my stomach. I pull, and it feels strange. I pull again, and his glove comes free in my hand. The Bear flinches. I look down and realise why it felt strange; there was nothing beneath it.

My mind reels back to when we met. Was he missing a hand then? Did I

simply not know it? The wound looks angry and new, but I don't have time to find the answer now. Instead, I throw the glove to the floor, kick again, and pull myself free.

Standing resolute in front of Khan, drawing myself up as tall as I can, I press my palms to the sides of his face and force him to look at me.

The wind intensifies, and the trees bend and groan under its force. Rain falls in stinging stripes onto our skin, and Khan's hair becomes wet black tendrils slapping his jawline.

"I will not leave you." I speak slowly, steely determination lacing each word. "Do not dare try to make me."

"Khan, you have defied the laws of our kind," the booming voice returns, now filled with a fury that chills my blood. *"You have forsaken your heritage for a fleeting passion. For this, you must pay the price."*

"No," I shout, desperation turning to anger, quivering deep in the core of my being. "You cannot punish him."

"Gliana," Khan growls, but I push him away and whirl around as though I might finally be able to see the creatures who haunt us.

"Take me in penance for my father's actions, and for Shere Khan's betrayal."

The storm seems to pause for a moment as the spirits consider my words.

"Gliana, I will not let you—" Khan darts in front of me but when he sees the look on my face he hesitates.

"My entire life, I never understood why I was here. Why I was drawn to the jungle, why I dreamed of changelings, why I always felt as if I did not belong." I push back my shoulders, so I am taller and stronger. "Maybe this is why. Maybe I was destined to reset the balance. To make things right. Maybe I was never meant to be here."

"Not like this." Khan's words come out in a broken staccato.

Finally, the spirits answer me. *"Khan chose to ignore our warnings. He had one task – one promise – to fulfil. He broke his promise. He broke our pact. Now he must face the consequences."*

I screw my eyes shut, trying to grasp hold of the strength that is slowly draining from my body. “Please don’t,” I whisper, tears stinging my eyes.

Khan’s eyes widen and he reaches for me, but it’s too late. A second bolt of lightning strikes the ground. This time it lands between us, and once again splits open the jungle floor.

“You will both pay the price,” the voice thunders.

A flash of terror crosses Khan’s face, and he shouts for me to run.

But instead of running away from him, I run to him. I jump over the now glowing crack in the earth and wrap my arms around him. If The Bear and Raksha are still here, I cannot see them or hear them. All I hear is the sound of Khan’s heart beating my name.

Gliana.

Gliana.

Gliana.

He tilts my face up to meet his and kisses me.

When I pull away, I grip his hand in mine. “We run now. Together. We may not outpace them, but at least we can try.”

A flicker of a moment passes, then Khan nods at me. “Whatever you say, Princess.”

We turn to flee, but the storm reacts with uncanny speed. Above us, the sky undulates with dark, ominous clouds, twisting and writhing as if they’re alive. Lightning dances and weaves like serpents, crackling with an electric energy that sends tendrils reaching down toward the earth.

As the spirits’ fury unfurls, I scream. The sound of my fear hovers in the air, but then it is swallowed by the howling wind; a wind that shrieks and moans, tearing at the trees and our skin.

As Khan holds onto me, the jungle herself begins to tremble. I thought her invincible, but it seems even she must yield to the spirits.

“Enough theatrics,” Khan roars, grasping my hand as he shouts into the

chaos. “You want to end us... end us.”

The words have barely left his lips when the fire, which had been dampened by the onslaught of rain, rushes back to life. Soaring up toward the sky, its flames become wild and untamed. Blue, green, and orange tongues of fire lick the wind and weave around the lightning.

“The end is coming, Khan,” the spirits boom. *“The end is coming...”*

GLIANA

A midst the chaos of the storm, something catches my eye – a fleeting shadow. But not the shadow of a tree bending in the ferocity of the wind or of dark clouds descending to suffocate us.

It is the shadow of a creature.

Something is moving in the undergrowth.

I search for The Bear and Raksha. They are standing on the other side of the fire, staring at me as if they might be able to will me to run if they try hard enough.

I look back at the bushes.

The shadow moves again.

At first, I think it's a trick of the light, a figment of my terrified imagination. But then I see it a third time, clearer now – a dark silhouette. Slowly, it steps out into the light.

My breath catches in my throat as I realise what I'm looking at.

A large black horse stands before us, its deep mahogany eyes flickering as

they reflect the fire in our midst, mane and tail whipping in the wind.

“Khan,” I cry out, pointing to the horse. “Do you see her?” My stomach clenches with hope. This isn’t just any horse. I know her. She’s the horse that carried me away from The Colonel’s castle. The horse that appeared to me in my darkest hour and led me to safety.

I step forward, tears of recognition welling in my eyes. “It’s you,” I whisper, my voice breaking. “You saved me. You helped me escape.”

She seems to recognise me too, her stance changing, her eyes flickering with something that might be understanding.

“She helped you?” Shere Khan asks.

I turn to him and nod. “She pulled me from the river on my wedding night.”

A smile parts Khan’s lips. “Bagheera,” he whispers. “Her name is Bagheera, and she is *my* horse, Princess.”

“*Your* horse?”

The horse takes a step closer, her stare never leaving mine. As she moves, the air around her grows calmer and warmer. Like the storm daren’t press too close.

I reach out to touch her mane. She doesn’t shy away. Instead, she leans into my palm, a soft whinny escaping her lips. And now, it’s as if the storm no longer exists.

The ground is still trembling, and the voices are still roaring, and the rain is still lashing our faces like a thousand ice-cold daggers being dropped from the sky.

But all I see is her.

“You’re here to help me again, aren’t you?” I whisper.

The horse nods, a deliberate and unmistakable gesture, and I know I’m right. I turn to Khan, ready for the two of us swing up onto Bagheera’s back and gallop away from the spirits who hunt us.

But when I look at his face, I freeze.

He staggers back, grabbing hold of my hand.

I follow his gaze.

Bagheera's form has begun to shimmer. A pale glow vibrates in the air around her muscular body. And then it starts... she begins to change. Right before our eyes. Like Khan. Like Raksha. But different.

While their transformations are harsh and violent, Bagheera's is breathtaking. As we watch in awe, the powerful black horse who took me away from Kaa and Calandria, and into the heart of the jungle, becomes a human.

A woman.

Older than me, but with skin so smooth it is almost iridescent. She has long, flowing black hair that dances with the storm. Her dark eyes are now flecked with gold, and she is wearing long black robes that flutter gracefully despite the harshness of the wind.

"Bagheera?" Confusion laces Khan's tone.

Behind us, The Bear and Raksha race forward. "The horse..." Raksha breathes. "You were a horse..."

Bagheera does not reply. Instead, she dips her hands into her robes and reveals an ornate wooden staff. She moves it slowly through the air. Vibrations move with it. Energy moves in invisible waves toward me.

What is she?

How is she?

The four of us watch in silence as she raises the staff, her eyes fixed on the fire.

"Shere Khan is right," she says calmly, lifting her eyes to the sky as she addresses the storm. "There have been enough theatrics. It is time for you to return to your own realm and leave these creatures be."

"Shere Khan must pay for his betrayal," the voice replies, but it is quieter this time. A whisper not a roar.

With a movement that is both graceful and powerful, Bagheera – the horse

who is now a woman – strides toward the fire. “And you must pay for yours,” she replies. Then she stretches her arms out wide and tilts back her head.

Nothing but large, inky pools, her eyes roll back as she begins to chant. She speaks in a language I don’t understand but feel deep in my soul.

Her staff glows, echoing the shades of the fire.

The jungle sways.

The storm responds to her, resisting at first, the winds howling, the lightning crackling, then lessening. Weakening. Dying.

Her control is absolute, and I have never seen anything so wonderful.

As her voice rises, the fire bends to her will, forming intricate patterns in the air. The spirits’ voices grow angrier, more desperate, but fewer.

Quieter.

Bagheera’s eyes are completely golden now, her lips moving so fast I can barely keep up with her words.

She has magic.

I have never witnessed it before, never even believed it existed in The Spirit Lands. Yet, I know deep in my soul that *magic* is filling the jungle.

I feel it in every cell of my being. I want it to fill me up and take me over.

“*This is not the end, Shere Khan...*” The spirits’ voices swell around us one last time before Bagheera plunges her staff into the ground, sending jagged forks of light skittering along the earth. As they spread further, and further, a deafening silence settles on the jungle.

Slowly but surely, Bagheera pushes them – and the storm – back from the clearing. The rain begins to calm, the winds lessen, the lightning retreats.

The jungle stills, as if she too is holding her breath.

Finally, Bagheera closes her eyes and sighs heavily. “The spirits have been silenced,” she says. “You are safe now. From them, at least.”

SHERE KHAN

The storm has cleared. Bagheera sent it away. But she did not just banish it; she removed all traces of it. The earth is dry, the leaves no longer glisten with moisture, and the air is clear. Except for the cracks in the earth, and the embers of the fire, it is as if the rain and the wind and the torment never happened.

I am pacing back and forth, trembling with a rage I am barely able to control.

Bagheera knows my secrets. She knows me like no other soul on this earth knows me. And yet I never knew her at all.

While The Bear and the wolf stare in wide-eyed wonder at Bagheera, Giana looks only at me. "It's over," she says, a smile parting her lips. "Can't you feel it? It's all over."

Seeing the glimmer of hope in her eyes, I want to smile back at her, sweep her into my arms, and carry her away into the jungle. I want to take her far away from the two men who are staring at her as if she is *theirs* as well as mine, and I want to spend the rest of my life making her my queen.

Every day.

In every way.

But...

“Bagheera?” I try to shake the remnants of rage from my muscles, even though the tiger inside me is clawing to be released. To demand answers. To make the humiliation that is scraping my insides disappear.

Bagheera blinks slowly.

“You banished them? How?” Giana asks.

“Spirits are good at making themselves *look* powerful,” she replies, her lips quirking at their edges. “Witches are the opposite. We look harmless, but we are strong.”

“A witch?” I snap.

More vicious humiliation hums beneath the surface of my skin. How did I not know? All these years, I never sensed it. Not for a moment.

“I am sorry I deceived you for so long.” Bagheera gives a small shake of her head. Her eyes are a dark hypnotic brown, deep and knowing. They are eyes I have looked into a thousand times.

Instead of asking how a witch came to still be living in The Spirit Lands, the question that falls from my lips is, “Why?”

A shudder grips my shoulders. A whisper of loss tightens its grip on my stomach. Loss and betrayal. In all the years I travelled alone, Bagheera was my only true companion. She saved me more times than I can count, in more ways than I can count.

“To protect you,” she replies, her voice smooth and quiet.

A growl rumbles deep in my chest. “To protect me?” Hot anger crawls up my throat and flushes my cheeks. There is no hope of quelling it now.

“She helped us too.” The Bear speaks in a tone that cuts through the heat of my rage. “She led us to you.”

“And she brought me into the jungle. She found me in the river the night I escaped from The Colonel.” Giana runs her hand down my arm then lets it

rest on my back. Her touch anchors me, and I lean into it.

I want to be alone with her. Away from here. Away from this.

Bagheera nods. "I helped you all," she says.

"Why?" I ask a second time, my jaw so tight my teeth hurt.

This time, Bagheera's eyes flicker, their gold freckles dancing in the dim light of the fire. "I will explain," she says, her tone slow and considered, "if you'll let me."

Moving in front of Giana, who seems transfixed by Bagheera's presence, I shield her from view. "I don't like this," I tell her darkly. "Let us leave, Princess. We lived. We are free. Whatever this witch has to say, it is of no consequence to us now."

But Giana shakes her head at me. "I think it is," she says. "I think it is of consequence. And I think we should listen to her." Stepping aside, her eyes wide and full of wonder, she takes in the woman who just commanded a storm to save us. Glancing at me, she says, "We can trust her, Khan. Don't you feel it?"

"No," I reply, muscles twitching. "I do not."

"I agree with Giana." Raksha speaks up, folding his arms in front of his chest, eyes darting to Giana to see whether she's smiling at him for concurring with what she said.

"Please..." Bagheera's voice is so smooth, so familiar – except, how can it be? "Let me explain. When you've heard what I have to say, you are free to leave. I will not stop you."

Barely hesitating, as if drawn to her by an invisible thread, Giana walks to Bagheera. Looking up at her, she tilts her head. "You helped the four of us for a reason. I want to know what it is."

Bagheera smiles, the way a mother might smile at an overly assertive daughter and rests a hand on Giana's shoulder. "Because you are special, Giana."

"Special?" Giana asks quietly.

My shoulders tense, and my mouth sets into a hard line. My princess is the sun and the stars, and she does not need a *witch* to tell her that.

Speaking only to Giana now, Bagheera says, “You have always been drawn to the jungle, haven’t you, Giana?”

She wraps her arms around her waist and nods. “Yes.”

“You have always felt different. Incomplete. Like a piece of your story is missing, but you know it’s out there somewhere if only you could catch hold of it.”

As Giana nods again, my entire body tenses. I do not like this.

“I have that piece, and when you have it too, you’ll understand why you are so very important.”

Taking hold of Giana’s wrist, I tug gently, but she pulls away and turns to look at me with fierce eyes. “Khan, I want to hear what she has to say. I trust her.”

“Please, Shere Khan,” Bagheera says. “Sit down and let me prove that you can trust me.”

Without hesitation, Giana sits down and tucks her legs underneath her. Raksha is at her side in seconds, so I stalk to her other side and edge closer. A possessive purr vibrates in my throat, and I’m fighting the urge to nuzzle her right here, right now, to show she’s *mine*.

Not his.

When she shifts closer to me and puts her hand on my knee, the purr deepens.

She squeezes gently, and my muscles uncoil.

“Very good,” Bagheera says, lowering herself to her knees, close to the fire.

After a pause, The Bear joins us. He has replaced his glove on his hand, and holds his arm awkwardly across his lap. I wait for a tug of guilt to jerk my stomach toward my ankles. But it does not come.

When we are all seated – The Bear looking almost as distrustful as I feel – Bagheera waves her hands over the flames. They had dwindled to merely a

small orange glow, but now they spark and become larger, hotter, fiercer. Magic radiates from them, and I am surprised by how easily I accept it.

Magic is something that was stamped out long before The Cullings. It is the domain of our ancestors. The Spirits. Not of the here and now.

Yet, it is here. And it is now. And I have to admit that it feels different to the magic my ancestors threatened me with. It feels lighter. Softer. Calmer.

Bagheera looks at Giana through the fire. Now an unnatural blue, the flames cast an eerie light on her face. “Are you ready to finally understand why your life has been the way it is, Giana?”

GLIANA

Witches vanished from The Spirit Lands long before The Cullings. My great-grandfather hated them almost as much as my father hates changelings and, while stories still existed of those who could transform into beasts, little was spoken of the women who could once yield magic.

If I am honest, I'm not sure I ever believed in those women.

The time when magic and witches, and a different kind of power, ruled our lands seemed like a fairy tale. An imagining. Something we dreamed of because it was comforting to pretend we weren't always a land of oppression and restriction.

And yet, I am looking at a witch. She stands in front of me, staring at me as she waits for my answer.

Just as the jungle sent me a changeling, now she has sent me a witch.

"You do not know me," I say quietly. "So, how can you possibly give me answers?"

Bagheera smiles slowly. "I know you, Gliana," she says. "I have seen your life unfold before me." She pauses and looks at Raksha and The Bear. Both

men remain silent, The Bear's icy eyes shimmering in the darkness.

"I have felt your pain and your strength," Bagheera continues. "And I know you desperately want to understand *why*."

As she speaks the word, my pulse thuds louder in my ears.

For as long as I can remember, unanswered questions have pooled inside me, turning to rust, coating the bars of my gilded heart until it feels as though I might crumble.

Why did my parents do the things they did?

Why did they hate me?

Why did they hate?

Why...?

"I can show you," Bagheera says, gesturing to the fire. "If you are ready to see."

The chill of the night seems to retreat as Bagheera's fingers flirt with the fire's edges. I brace myself as the flames twist and shimmer.

My stomach lurches. Suddenly, I feel as if my feet are losing contact with the ground. A rushing sensation fills my ears, and I'm pulled into the fire's embrace.

The ethereal heat warps the scenery around me. It is like if I've entered a living painting—each brushstroke causing the sights and sounds of the jungle to bleed into one another and become something else.

Somewhere else.

Nausea grips my stomach. I close my eyes and focus on the darkness. When I open them, the scent of blossoming roses envelops me, replacing the jungle's earthy aroma.

I am standing at the pinnacle of a garden bathed in the soft hues of twilight. Below, a sprawling castle stretches across the landscape. Its turrets reach up to the skies, trying to touch the sun as it retreats.

I know this place.

Yet, I know it as a place of pain and darkness. Not beauty. Certainly not a beauty like this. For when I lived here, Valoria's castle was full of shadows, and darkness, and sorrow.

Stepping forward, I wriggle my bare toes into the grass below my feet. A gentle breeze, laced with the scent of jasmine and lilac, stirs the surrounding air. It pulls my gaze toward an archway of roses where a young woman stands, reaching for a flower. With delicate fingers, she tilts the rose head and inhales its sweetness. She smiles, and her cheek dimples.

She is a vision of youth and beauty, and she looks familiar. As the folds of her dress billow, capturing the sun's last rays, she turns to look into the distance.

My breath hitches beneath my ribs.

She raises her hand and waves.

I can't move. My fingers twitch at my side.

Mother?

She smiles again, laughing this time; the sound strange and unfamiliar on her lips. Nearby, a figure emerges from behind the veils of a weeping willow. He is tall and striking, silhouetted against the retreating sun.

But he is not my father.

His eyes are too kind, his hands too soft.

Their gazes meet and hold – an entire conversation in a silent moment. The stranger reaches for my mother's hand.

And then I see it... the glint in his eyes.

The truth.

“You are a changeling,” my mother says, her eyes glistening with intrigue. “I have encountered a few in my lifetime, but never one as bold as you, sir.”

Without speaking a word, the stranger lifts my mother's hand and brushes her

knuckles with his lips.

Her smile wavers. Her breath halts.

And then the landscape changes.

The nights that follow are a tapestry of burgeoning emotions. The rustle of leaves, the gentle sigh of the wind, stolen glances, and touches, and ever-growing affection.

My mother and her changeling wander the castle's hidden pathways, and meet in secret corners. She is not yet a queen, she is a queen in waiting, but she is trapped here all the same.

"I am betrothed," she whispers as the changeling pulls her to his chest. "I must stay within these walls until I marry."

The changeling looks into her eyes and kisses her forehead. "Then I will stay with you," he whispers. "Until you are ready to run away with me."

I shudder as the scene darkens.

The chill in the air contrasts with the warmth of their intertwined fingers and the heat of their clashing stares. Behind them stands a fountain. Water dances freely into its basin, reflecting the silvery moon, casting fleeting shadows upon their faces.

"Describe your world to me," my mother asks, her voice quivering with anticipation as she trails her fingers in the water.

The changeling smiles. He kneels in front of her and rests his head in her lap. While she strokes his hair, and his cheeks, and his shoulders, he reveals stories of the jungle.

He talks and talks, until she captures his face with her hands. "Why does a hint of sorrow taint your tales?"

He looks up, then moves to sit beside her. "Because I don't want to tell you tales of my world. I want to show you. I want to carry you deep into the jungle and hide you there, with me, forever."

Instead of answering him, she kisses him. Deeply. And melts into his arms.

As time passes, and seasons change, their love deepens, their souls entwining tighter with each passing night. But their time together is running out. Beneath a cascade of wisteria, the changeling finally voices the painful truth. “You do not intend to run away with me, do you Eliyah?”

My mother wrings her hands together in her lap. “I’m sorry, Caelum, I do not think I am brave enough.”

“Do you not love me?”

“I do not think love is enough to bridge the gap between our worlds.”

As they pull away from each other, tears stain the ground beneath them.

The scene shifts again, thrusting me into the castle’s grand hall. The echoing of royal trumpets, the shimmering chandeliers, and the murmured conversations cannot drown out the hollowness in my mother’s eyes as she stands beside the King.

My father.

Being confronted with his image sends a blade of panic to the place where my throat meets my chest.

The hall buzzes with festivities but when the priest appears, the guests fall quiet.

My mother steadies herself on my grandfather’s arm, but he shows no sympathy for her plight.

Before the priest can speak, a flurry of noise at the grand entrance interrupts her. Framed by the massive oak doors stands Caelum. A sea of eyes turns on him, mouths hanging open in shock as he strides toward the altar.

Every footstep he takes resonates with purpose.

The air thickens as he approaches my parents. He stops, his eyes glistening as he speaks. “Eliyah, I love you with every beat of my heart and every breath of my soul.”

The hall becomes deafeningly silent.

“I love you, and I am asking you to love me in return. I am asking you to

choose me.”

He is staring at her when his gaze falls to her belly. Her hand rests nervously on top of it. Quickly, she moves her arm to her side. But it is too late.

Caelum’s forehead creases into a frown.

My mother’s eyes betray the secrets she’s been keeping.

She gives a tiny, almost imperceptible shake of her head, a silent plea for his silence. But Caelum cannot help it. His voice cracks as he whispers, “You are with child. *My* child?”

An audible gasp shakes the room.

The weight of the revelation is too immense, the scandal too glaring. The King’s eyes, already cold and unforgiving, darken with fury. “Seize him,” he bellows, gesturing to the guards who rush forward, weapons drawn.

The changeling barely hesitates. In a whisper of a breath, he becomes a magnificent tiger. My mother screams and stumbles backward. But with swift, brutal efficiency, the changeling – my *true* father – slays four of the guards, their blood painting a canvas of chaos on the pristine walls and floors.

My heart is racing. I do not want to be here. I do not want to see this.

Bagheera? Bagheera... make it stop.

No one answers.

Then from the edge of my vision, I notice a sinister figure lurking in the shadows. As he slithers into the light, his eyes reflect the crimson massacre before him.

Kaa.

Every nerve in my body screams as if it is on fire.

“Kaa, do something...” the King demands.

Without hesitation, Kaa retrieves an ornate crossbow from the wall behind him. Deftly, he raises it, then releases a bolt straight into Caelum’s heart.

There's a heart-wrenching roar of pain and then the once-majestic creature collapses, shifting back into his vulnerable human form. Naked and bleeding, he looks at my mother, eyes pleading for mercy, for love.

"Elijah..." He chokes on her name and blood coats his lips.

My mother takes a few steps forward. She looks down at him, scanning his wounds. For a moment, heartbreak swells in her eyes.

But then she turns away. Her face changes. Her features harden, and her lips form a thin line. Arms stiff at her sides, she walks back to the King and ascends the steps. When she reaches the altar, she takes a deep breath. Then she puts her hand on the King's arm and says, "Finish him."

The King stares at her. A smile tweaks his top lip, and my stomach turns in on itself.

As fear and disgust ripple through my body, the King draws a dagger from his waist and strides over to the fallen changeling.

With one swift motion, he stoops down and slits my father's throat. The life drains from Caelum's eyes, and a pool of blood spreads around him.

Grief engulfs me, so palpable I feel it in my bones. The taste of iron coats my mouth, and a crushing weight lands on my chest, making it hard to breathe. I fight the feeling, desperate for escape, only to be swallowed by another vision.

Blurry images flash before me in rapid succession, creating a distorted timeline I can't grasp hold of.

My mother – body writhing, drenched in sweat – screams into the night. Then my own screams fill the air. The nurse offers me to her, a tiny infant, barely even blinking. But she turns away.

Then I am older. Learning to walk, and to talk.

I reach for my mother's hand, but she snatches her fingers from me, her eyes glazed with cold indifference.

On his throne, the King wears a mask of disgust every time his gaze rests on me.

Soon, his disgust turns to rage, and his rage turns to violence.

Bitter arguments between the King and my mother play out against the backdrop of their opulent chambers, their voices raised in anger. Each time they lay their eyes on me, I sense their growing disdain.

Suddenly, a clearer vision emerges from the maelstrom of memories.

The grandeur of the castle's assembly hall comes into focus. My father, his regal attire emphasising his authority, stands in front of his subjects. With a voice booming with determination, he declares, "For the safety of the kingdom, for the purity of our lineage, we shall begin a war against the changelings."

He snarls with pleasure, and my heart clenches so tightly I can barely breathe.

The vision dissolves abruptly, snapping me back to the present.

The lushness of the jungle seems too vivid, too sharp after the hazy memories. Trembling, I stumble to my feet, my legs threatening to give way, and rush from the fire's glow. In a nearby bush, I empty the contents of my stomach onto the jungle floor.

I cannot hear, I cannot see, I cannot think.

Visions, and memories – a lifetime of moments – swirl torturously in my head.

When I finally return to my own body, and am able to focus on my surroundings, I brace my hand on a tree and breathe heavily.

Still numb, I turn back to the clearing. The faces that greet me are etched with concern. But it is Bagheera I seek.

"My father was a changeling?"

Bagheera's response is a silent blink.

Glancing down, I turn my palms upwards, half-expecting to see claws instead of nails. Fur instead of skin. But all I see are the soft, human hands that have always been mine. When I finally look up, my voice quivers, but there is a determination in it. "So, that makes me..."

“Yes, Giana,” Bagheera says, his voice gentle yet resolute. “You are a changeling too.”

THE BEAR

ELEVEN YEARS AGO

The grand hall, with its opulent chandeliers and ornate tapestries, has always been a monument to the King's wealth and power. I remember the first time I stepped foot inside this place; I was six years old and overwhelmed with pride.

Ripped from a cruel and fetid foster home, I thought being part of the King's staff would give me a chance to better myself. I thought I might find family among the other servants, work my way up, become *someone*.

Now – at just twelve years old – I know I was foolish.

The only things I have found here are loneliness and pain.

Tonight, the hall is eerily silent, echoing the chilling proclamation made just a few hours ago. On my knees, scrubbing the floors clean of the footprints left by the royal attendees, the scrape of bristle on stone brings back the hiss of the crowd as they salivated over the King's announcement.

There have been whisperings for a long time – rumours he intended to start a war – but I do not think I truly believed he would go this far.

The Cullings.

Even the name itself sends shivers down my spine. What have the changelings ever done to deserve such hatred?

The rhythmic sounds of my scrubbing and the distant murmur of the night's creatures beyond the castle walls are the only companions I have in this massive room. But then, another sound disrupts the rhythm—soft, muffled sobs, barely audible. I look up and, hidden behind one of the tall pillars, I spot Giana. Her usually bright eyes are brimming with tears, and the sight makes my stomach constrict with anger.

Instinctively, I move to get up, to offer her some solace, but then footsteps echo from the hallway. The King's imposing silhouette appears. Immediately, the entire room feels colder and more hostile.

Hidden in the shadow of the throne, I hold my breath as he approaches.

The King's angry reprimands echo off the walls, his venomous words cutting deep. "Always causing trouble, always an embarrassment."

I clench the scrubbing brush so hard I fear it might snap. The echoing slap that follows is a sound I'll never forget. As his calloused skin meets her softness, a jolt of nausea rushes to the pit of my stomach.

He strikes her again, and Giana's fragile form crumples to the floor I was just cleaning.

I expect him to walk away. Instead, he looks down at her, curled in a ball, and drives the toe of his boot into her stomach.

Giana cries out and scrambles away from him. He follows her and picks up a large iron poker from beside the fireplace.

My heartbeat throbs in my ears. I am trembling from head to toe. I want to jump onto his back and scratch out his eyes, but he is too strong and too vicious. And I am just a boy.

So, with as much strength as I can muster, I hurl the scrubbing brush toward

the grand double doors at the end of the hall. It clatters loudly as it falls. The King stops. He spins around and hollers, "Who goes there?"

When no one answers, he strides back through the hall, calling out, anger heating the air around him.

Swallowing my fear and anger, I scurry to Giana's side. I see the welt forming on her cheek, and the way her hands clutch her stomach. "Princess," I whisper, fingers brushing her face gently.

Despite the pain, she manages a weak smile. "I'm okay."

"Come, quickly. Cook will hide you until he has calmed down."

Giana nods as I help her stand and lead her to the door at the back of the hall which will take us to the kitchens.

Helping her walk, I pull her close. "Promise me something," I urge, emotion clouding my voice.

She tilts her head, eyes filled with tears and strength. "What?"

"Promise me you'll never let him break your spirit."

We stop outside the kitchen door. Inside, I can hear Cook clattering with pots and dishes.

Nodding fervently, Giana says, "Only if you swear you will always be here to remind me of my promise."

I squeeze her hand. "I swear it. And one day, I'll take you away from here. One day, we'll be free."

GLIANA

Bagheera is still speaking, but I cannot latch onto her voice. Khan is battering her with questions, and Raksha is asking me if I'm all right, and Bagheera is watching me. Staring at me.

My skin flushes with heat. A cold sweat breaks out on my forehead.

"Sit down, Giana," she says. "Let me..."

I shake my head. Raksha reaches for me, but I jerk away from him and – for perhaps the first time in my entire life – I do not take a moment to consider my options.

I just run.

Gasping, the cool night air of the jungle sears my lungs as I dash through the undergrowth. Each step feels disjointed. Trees, like silent spectators, stand in my path. I weave around them, but barely notice the thorny vines scratching my arms or the tiny rivulets of blood that spring from my skin.

I just need to be somewhere else.

Anywhere else.

The world feels muted, except for the deafening beat of my heart, which threatens to burst out of my chest. At the same time, my mind races, desperately trying to reconcile the images in the fire with memories of my childhood.

Distracted by my turmoil, I don't notice the vine lying in wait on the jungle floor. It ensnares my ankle, pulling me down with a crash that sends pain jerking through my knee. The air rushes out of me as I hit the ground, dirt and leaves cushioning my fall.

For a long moment, I lie completely still. As Bagheera's words settle deep in my bones, I search for proof that they are to be trusted.

Yes, Giana. You are a changeling too.

It feels like the truth, for it would explain so much. But I do not *feel* like a changeling.

I am scanning my body, searching for signs of a tiger lying dormant inside me waiting to be unleashed, when I hear footsteps behind me.

"Khan...?" I look up, trembling.

But it is not Shere Khan who has found me. It is The Bear.

With surprising tenderness, he bends down and begins to work on the vine, carefully unwinding it from around my ankle. He uses just one hand, his other arm loose at his side.

I watch, momentarily distracted by the precision and care of his actions as he braces my foot against his knee and teases it free.

Our eyes meet. The intensity of his gaze holds a familiarity I can't place, and a rush of emotion threatens to turn into tears.

I take a deep, shuddering breath. "I never understood why they hated me so much," I confess, my voice barely above a whisper.

The Bear, finished with the vine, sits back on his haunches, his eyes never leaving mine. "It isn't you they hated, Princess," he murmurs. "It was themselves."

I tilt my head and examine his face. When we first met, it was obscured by a mask. Now, it is exposed. And it is beautiful.

“You do not know my parents,” I whisper.

He simply tilts his head. “I know people like them,” he says. “And I saw what you saw. Bagheera showed us all.”

“Do you believe it?” I ask him.

“Does it matter what I believe?” he counters calmly.

“Yes.” I tuck my knees up beneath my chin and wrap my arms around them. “Raksha will agree with me because he loves me. Khan will distrust Bagheera because he is angry with her. But you...” I meet his eyes again. “Your thoughts are not clouded by emotion.”

The Bear is crouched in front of me, breathing slowly. He inhales a slow deliberate breath but does not smile. “We cannot know the witch’s motivations,” he says. “She may be pure and truthful. She may be manipulative and cruel. Until she reveals more of herself, we have no way of knowing.” He pauses, scratching his large beard. “Do you feel that what she showed you is real?”

I look down at my hands again, then rub my arms as a shiver trickles down my spine. “Yes,” I whisper. “But perhaps that is because I *want* it to be real.”

The Bear nods slowly. “Then the best we can do is keep our wits about us, and search for proof,” he says. “If proof is what you need.”

“I think it is.” My stomach unclenches a little. “I think that’s exactly what I need.”

This time, The Bear does smile. It happens rarely, and when it does it lights up his entire face. I rake my fingers through my hair then point to his mouth. “You have a scar on your lip.”

“I have many scars,” he replies, the smile disappearing.

I look down at his arm. “Your hand... how did it happen?”

He hesitates, his eyes darkening. “You have encountered enough hidden

truths for one day, Princess. Let us leave the story of my injury for another day.”

But before I can tell him I do not want to wait for another day because something tells me I need to know him *now* not later, a guttural cry cuts through the stillness of the jungle.

A cry I’d know anywhere...

Shere Khan.

SHERE KHAN

I tower over Bagheera, each muscle in my body rigid with fury. My fingers tighten around her slender throat. She doesn't resist, even as her face begins to pale, those deep brown eyes of hers widening.

"You evil witch," I spit. "Why would you conjure such things? What do you want with Giana?"

"I did not conjure them, Shere Khan," Bagheera's voice is coarse, squeezed tightly beneath my fingers.

"Liar!" My eyes flash, my muscles trembling as I try to resist the urge to snap the witch's neck.

"Do you remember?" she asks, barely audible. "When I found you?"

I meet her eyes, and my grip loosens a little. A memory batters my chest and dislodges the breath from my lungs. "I remember," I growl.

"You trusted me then. Without question."

"Because I did not know what you were."

"I hid the truth from you," she says. "But you, of all people, know what it is

like to conceal a part of yourself because you fear what others will do when they see it.”

My fingers twitch, still not letting her go completely.

“I am a witch,” she says softly. “Witches have been outlawed from The Spirit Lands for centuries. I was only able to stay because I am not a *full* witch. I am part changeling. For a long time, that kept me safe. But then The Cullings began.”

I do not break eye contact. I stare into her eyes as she speaks, searching her soul for lies. “Speak faster.”

“When Gliana’s father began his quest to extinguish changelings from The Spirit Lands, I knew I had to hide my true nature. All of it. His hunters were merciless. They slaughtered so many of our kind without remorse. I shifted to escape their blades, to stay safe. I planned to flee the city and look for the witch colonies to the East. But instead, I was corralled and taken to battle with the hunters. I witnessed such brutality in those years...”

Her voice trails off, her eyes clouding with a darkness that tugs reluctant sympathy from my gut.

“It was after one of those bloody battles that I found you, just a boy then, traumatised and alone.”

Anger flares beneath my skin and I screw my eyes closed. I can see it so clearly – Bagheera’s majestic form appearing beneath me as I clung to that hell-damned tree and breathed in the stench of death, and smoke, and blood.

Bagheera was my salvation. For over a decade, she was the closest thing I had to a home.

Again, anger threatens to overwhelm me. For years, I have been able to control every whisper of emotion. But Gliana unravelled me, and now I cannot be contained.

I unleash my talons and hold them against Bagheera’s cheek. “You lied to me. From that very first moment, you lied.”

“Because I had to,” she says.

“You think I would have betrayed you?”

“No, Khan. I think you were a child. An angry, confused, broken child. And the best thing I could do for you was to keep you safe and let you learn to take care of yourself.”

I look away but don't move my talons from her face. “Why?” When she doesn't answer, I meet her eyes again and repeat my question. “Why did you stay with me all those years?”

“Because I needed to make sure you lived, and that you did not kill Giana.”

I lower my talons a little. “Why?”

“I can't tell you everything. Not yet—”

I release a roar that makes the trees tremble. My grip tightens. Raksha is beside us in an instant, his fingers clawing at my forearm, trying desperately to pull me away. “Khan, let her go,” he shouts. But his touch simply inflames my anger.

It's Giana's voice, calm and commanding, that breaks through my rage. “Khan, don't.” Her words drag me back to reality. “We still need answers. We need her alive.”

Releasing my grip, I stumble back, my breath ragged. I watch as Bagheera gasps for air, Raksha's comforting hand on her back.

“I am all right, young wolf,” she says, bracing her hand on Raksha's shoulder.

“Did you see?” I turn to look at The Bear, who is standing behind Giana, then at Raksha. “Did you see the visions she showed Giana?”

“I saw,” The Bear replies.

“I saw them too,” Raksha nods.

“And yet you protect this witch? This woman who claims to know our destiny but chooses how and when she will drip feed it to us?” I lurch again, but this time Giana steps in front of me. She meets my gaze and holds it, silently ordering me to stop.

Any other woman, any other *human*, I would rebel. But for her, I obey.

Gliana nods and finally steps back, her fingers twitching beside mine. Slowly, she approaches Bagheera. “Why should we believe you?” Gliana speaks the words I’m thinking. “You lied to Khan for years. We don’t know you. All we know is that you have magic. Which means you could have conjured every single thing you showed us in those flames.”

Bagheera pushes back her shoulders, her black robes hanging loosely on her slight frame. She moves toward Gliana, and my body twitches with the need to step between them. “You know, deep in your heart, that what I showed you was real.”

Gliana meets her eyes. Defiant and brave. She does not quake or yield. She simply tilts her head and says, “Would I not know if I were a changeling? Would I not have felt *something*?”

Bagheera looks from me to Gliana. “Were you afraid when you encountered the tiger in the courtyard?”

“No,” she says. “I was not.”

“Were you afraid when you saw him by the watering pool?”

Gliana presses her lips together, then offers a small shake of her head. “No. I was not.”

“And when he was lying on top of you, talons exposed, ready to end your life, were you afraid?”

This time, Gliana does not answer but her eyes betray her thoughts... no, she was not afraid. She never truly believed I would kill her. Not once.

Bagheera nods slowly. “Sometimes, Gliana, the truth lies dormant within us, waiting for the right moment to emerge. Your lineage, your destiny – it’s all there. You just need the opportunity to coax it free.” The witch pauses. “But you need more than visions and stories of your past.” She smooths her robes over her hips and nods. “I understand that, and I can—”

“How did you know?” Gliana interrupts, her brow furrowing.

Bagheera inclines her head.

“How did you know about the watering pool, and the courtyard, and what happened when Khan refused to kill me? You were not there...”

“I saw it,” she says. “The same way I saw your past. I can show you too. And I can show you what it means. If you’ll let me. We cannot do it here, but there is a place—”

“No,” Gliana says sternly. “Before you show me anything else, or speak any more of destiny, I need something.”

Bagheera inclines her head. “Of course. What do you need?”

“I need to speak to my parents.”



“We will leave at first light,” Bagheera says. “I can lead the way back to Valoria from here.”

“We can’t go back there. Gliana cannot go back there,” I say loudly. Turning to the princess, I growl, “Kaa will have your head the moment you step foot outside the jungle. And we do not know if your parents are still alive—”

“They are alive,” Bagheera interjects calmly.

I ignore the witch and speak only to Gliana. “She *tells* us your parents are alive, but are we to trust her?” When Gliana doesn’t reply, I glance at Bagheera, distrust crawling beneath my skin. “This entire thing could be a ruse. Part of Kaa’s game. Part of his plan to lure you back to the cities so he can end your life. *She* could be part of his plan.”

Gliana purses her lips, thoughts visibly pinching her features. “Perhaps,” she sighs. “But I’m tired of running, Khan. Tired of always being two steps behind in my own life. I’ve been living in shadows from the moment I was born, reacting to what others throw my way instead of making my own choices.” She sweeps a gaze over all of us, her eyes filled with the fiery determination that stirs heat in my core. “This is my life. And I’ll be damned

if I let others dictate it any longer. I need to speak to my parents. If I can look them in the eyes when I ask them, I'll know if Bagheera is speaking the truth."

Raksha, still sickeningly protective of her, steps closer. "Ana, we just want to keep you safe."

Gliana's eyes twitch at their corners. She does not like that name. It is not who she is, yet she does not correct him. "I know, but I've been safe and look where it's got me." She sighs deeply, her voice filled with an ache I can't quite place. "Look where it's got us all."

Raksha opens his mouth to protest, but Gliana shakes her head and silences him. "I'd rather not walk into Valoria alone," she says, raising her voice. "But my decision is made. And I will if I have to."

My jaw tightens. I can feel Raksha and The Bear watching me.

Raksha speaks first. "Of course, I'll go with you," he says, attempting what I assume is supposed to be an endearing smile. "You know I always wanted to see the cities."

Gliana smiles back at him. It's a smile laced with nostalgia, and it makes my stomach twist with jealousy.

The Bear says nothing, just nods. And Gliana smiles at him too.

Finally, my princess turns her gaze on me. She folds her arms and taps her foot, and it's so damned alluring that I want to pull her to me and bite that stubborn lip of hers. "Fine," I huff reluctantly. "But if we're doing this, we're doing it my way. You let me figure out how we get in and out of the castle. And I'll need to teach you some fighting skills because I'm not taking you in there unless you can defend yourself."

Gliana grins at me, a hint of mischief dancing in her eyes. "Good," she says, cutting me off, her voice dripping with sultry satisfaction. "I knew you'd agree, and I'd like to tussle with you, tiger."



Night falls, casting a soft blanket of darkness over the camp. The rustling of leaves and distant sounds of wildlife create a lullaby that soon sends Raksha and The Bear into deep slumber. Somewhere in the shadows, Bagheera sleeps too.

“After so many years sleeping on four legs,” she said, “I cannot seem to get comfortable in human form.”

She looked at me then – perhaps seeing the betrayal pooling in my eyes – nodded slowly. “I will leave the four of you alone,” she said. “And see you at sunrise.”

Now, lying down, I feel Gliana’s warmth beside me, our bodies fitting perfectly together as I curl around her. The rhythmic rise and fall of her chest indicates she’s still awake, and in the quiet, her thoughts are palpable.

Finally, her soft voice breaks the stillness, her words just above a whisper. “Are you scared to go back to the city?”

The question catches me off guard. Fear is not a luxury I often allow myself. But with her, everything has changed.

I pull her closer, the silky strands of her hair brushing against my cheek. Taking a moment to gather my thoughts, I force them into words. “I was never afraid of anything until I met you.”

She shifts slightly, her head tilting up to meet my gaze, her eyes filled with curiosity and apprehension. “Why is that?”

A sigh escapes me as I search for the right words. “Because now I have something – someone – to lose. And the only thing that truly terrifies me is the thought of a world without you in it.”

Gliana wriggles back against me, the curve of her lower body fitting perfectly against mine. Her hand moves to the manacle around my wrist, and she

strokes the place where it meets my skin. “Why do you wear this? Who gave it to you?”

My breath hitches. “It is a long story, Princess.”

“Tell me,” she says, running her hand down my arm, stroking the swell of my muscles. “You can trust me with your secrets, Khan.”

I close my eyes. I have never wanted a woman to know me before. Never even been tempted to share the deepest parts of myself with another person. But right now, in this moment, I want nothing more than for Giana to look into the depths of my soul and see all that lies there.

Except, if she sees it, she may run.

“Trusting people isn’t something I find easy, Princess,” I say quietly, trying to make sure the words I speak are as truthful as they can be. “For a long time, Bagheera was the only one I trusted...” I bite back an ironic chuckle. “And it seems I’m not such a good judge of character afterall.”

Giana is still stroking my arm, her touch like embers on my skin. I expect her to keep pushing me for an answer. Instead, she simply hugs my arm closer around her waist and kisses my shoulder.

After a few minutes silence, when I’m almost convinced she is asleep, she whispers, “Do you believe I could be like you? Do you think that’s why we feel the way we do?”

Closing my eyes, I kiss her shoulder. “Honestly, Princess? I do not know.”

“You never sensed it? Something familiar? The feeling I’m... fierce? Like you?”

“Oh, you’re fierce,” I whisper. “You’re more tiger than I’ll ever be.”

“Don’t tease me,” Giana sighs. “I’m serious.” As she reaches back to stroke my face, the air between us grows warmer. She tilts her head so she can reach me, and her lips brush against mine.

“I’m not teasing,” I tell her. “Trust me, you’ll know when I’m teasing you.”

As our kiss deepens, I move my hands to her body. Tracing one finger down

her throat, barely touching her, I loop my other arm around her waist and pull her closer still.

“Close your eyes,” I growl, skimming my palms over the outline of her breasts as her nipples peak beneath her shirt. *My shirt.* “Close your eyes, and don’t make a sound.”

Despite my instruction, a soft moan escapes her lips as I whisper against her neck. And when my fingers trail over the silky-smooth skin of her belly, a shiver wracks her body. She presses her lips together, biting back the need to moan again, then places her hand on top of mine.

Gently, she guides my touch.

I stoke her thighs with soft, feather-like movements. I trace the curve of her hip with one hand, and her stomach with the other.

When she finally encourages me to slip my hand lower, and I discover how wet she is, I groan into her neck and harden against her.

“Show me what you like, Princess,” I whisper.

If I expected her to be shy, I was wrong. “Here,” she breathes, encouraging my finger to move in slow, deliberate circles around her clit until we find a rhythm that makes her breath hitch and her body tense.

“Now faster.” She takes her hand away and tugs open the top of her shirt, exposing her nipples to the cool night air.

Looking down at her, a purr vibrates in the back of my throat. I want to skim my tongue over her breasts, but I know if I break the rhythm between her legs, her orgasm will fade away.

As if she can read my mind, her toes curl and she tells me not to stop.

My hands hunger for more of her. My *body* hungers for more of her.

“Harder...” She tilts her pelvis into my palm, then reaches down and finds my other hand, guiding two fingers to dip inside her while the others continue circling her clit, harder and faster. “Don’t stop,” she whispers, reaching back and skilfully unfastening my trousers.

Her fingers curl around my cock, and the contact makes me growl.

When I break my rhythm on her clit, she growls too, but then she guides my cock to her entrance and gasps as I enter.

Sweeping her hair back, I kiss her neck and the bite marks I left on her shoulder, as I start to move inside her. Desperate, unbearable need builds within me, but she instructs me to move slowly, so I do.

I will do anything she asks of me.

Forever.

Even if it nearly fucking kills me.

A trickling sensation creeps down my spine and fills every cell in my body, pressure building, pummelling through me as I try to hold it back. Desperate for it to end but at the same time desperate for it to continue forever.

“I didn’t tell you to stop,” Gliana whispers, guiding my fingers back to her clit.

“Sorry, Princess,” I whisper into her shoulder, sweeping my tongue once more over the mark I imprinted on her skin.

Her body tenses. She becomes quiet and tilts her pelvis as I fuck her. Suddenly, her fingernails are digging into my arm. She shudders, and releases a silent scream, biting her own hand to stifle the sound as her orgasm rolls through her.

And finally, I let go, too.

Release comes in explosive waves, but when they subside, I realise Gliana is not done. “Again,” she whispers. “Make me come again, tiger.”

THE BEAR

Our makeshift campsite is illuminated by the dying embers of the fire. We're all supposedly asleep, but my mind is a whirl of thoughts and memories, each one more distracting than the last.

A sudden soft, stifled moan interrupts my thoughts.

In the dim glow, I see Gliana, her face flushed with a mix of pleasure and restraint. Khan's hand moves over her, his touch both confident and gentle as she guides him. When his fingers disappear below her waistband, her lips part and she closes her eyes.

He touches her slowly and with an intimacy that surprises me; so different from the raw, chaotic, passion that engulfed the pair of them just a few hours ago.

I know I should turn away. I know I should not watch.

Yet, I do.

And the sight ignites a fire in me – a mixture of anger, jealousy, and a surge of desire. My grip on the ground tightens, knuckles white, as my cock hardens.

It's too much. I have to get away.

Silently, I rise and slip into the dense thicket of the jungle, putting distance between Giana's heat and my desire. With every step, I try to cool the burning embers beneath my skin.

I brace my forearm on a tall, vine-bound tree, and breathe heavily. Instinctively, I go to move my left hand to my belt. When I remember it is no longer there, I release a pained growl and slam my good hand into the trunk.

"Is everything okay?" Raksha's voice, deep and soft, startles me.

"Needed a change of scenery," I respond gruffly.

"It was too much for you too?" he asks, his gaze skimming from my lips to my chest. He steps closer, the moonlight illuminating his face.

I don't reply.

"Whatever you share with her," Raksha ventures, "it is more than just a vow to protect her from Khan."

I nod, not trusting myself to speak. Not daring to tell him the truth.

"You don't have to tell me," he says. "But you can if you'd like to."

"I can't, Raksha. Not when I've kept it from her."

"It's all right," he says, "I understand."

We stand in silence, acknowledging each other's pain. Then, suddenly, Raksha's fingers brush against mine. It's a fleeting touch, but it sends a jolt of electricity through me. I turn to face him.

Before either of us can think, I close the distance between us. Our lips meet in a fierce, urgent kiss. It's a desperate attempt to drown our feelings, to forget, even for a moment. And we both want it.

Our mouths move in tandem. His hands roam my body, exploring and pulling me closer.

When we finally break apart, we're both breathless, our faces inches apart. "I'm sorry," I whisper, guilt creeping in. "You told me you need

Gliana's permission—”

“She chose another,” Raksha says, shaking his head. “She is not my mate anymore. Which means *I* choose.”

Before I can reply, his mouth finds mine again. This time, the kiss is slower, deeper. His hands travel down my body, coaxing a response from me I didn't know was possible because it has been so damn long.

He moves lower still, kneeling in front of me until his lips reach my waistband. Heat radiates through me as he flips open the buckle, and my breathing quickens with anticipation.

“It has been a long time...” I mutter.

Raksha looks up, a glint in his eyes. “Then relax, and enjoy,” he says, smiling.

A moan parts my lips, and I lean back as Raksha eases my cock free.

He takes his time, savouring each moment as he works his tongue and lips around my shaft. When he sends me over the edge, wave after wave of intense pleasure consumes me, and I brace my hand on his shoulder as I come into his mouth.

As the sounds of the jungle at night return to my ears, I remain still, taking in the sensations that radiate through my body.

My pleasure subsides, and I look down at Raksha, admiring his long braids and his stubbled jaw. His lips are slightly swollen from the effort of working my shaft, but he maintains a satisfied smile on his face. His tongue flicks out to taste the last drop of my cum.

Slowly, I lower myself to my knees. I reach for his belt, and clumsily unfasten it with one hand. But Raksha doesn't seem to care about my lack of finesse. Instead, he lies down and laces his hands together behind his head, splaying out his elbows as I crawl between his legs and lower my mouth to his waiting cock.

When we are both satiated, skin humming with the afterglow of our release, I untangle myself from Raksha's lower half and attempt to stand. Instead of

allowing me to, he hooks his legs around my waist and draws me back to him.

Rolling onto my side, I position myself next to him instead, and he nods approvingly as he rests his head on my shoulder. “We should sleep,” he says.

My eyes are already closed.

GLIANA

We have been walking for several days.

Just a week ago, my thoughts were consumed by Khan. Now, they are consumed by what lies dormant inside me.

What I am.

What I might be.

Yet, still, I do not sense it.

I am clumsier than the others. I am slower, and my night vision is terrible. I show no signs of being a tiger. Save, Khan says, for the fire in my belly when I'm angry.

“How long until we reach Valoria?” Raksha asks.

The muggy air hangs heavy around us as we navigate our way through thick undergrowth. The familiar sounds of the jungle are everywhere, yet she never ceases to surprise. Constantly throwing rocks, and roots, and predators in our path. Twice we have had to change course due to a roaming jaguar – even though Khan pointed out he'd battled one once and would willingly do so again.

“Not long,” Bagheera replies, causing Shere Khan to snarl with irritation.

Twilight is approaching and our pace is slowing. Each day, we have been walking until the moon is high, trying to cover as much ground as possible, but we are all tired. Even Khan.

“We should stop,” he says. “We need to rest.”

Bagheera does not turn around. She simply raises her staff and says, “We will stop soon enough.”

Khan grumbles under his breath, stepping in line with me as his shoulders roll with displeasure.

Instead of telling him it will be okay, I glance behind us. Raksha and The Bear are walking together. Since we began our trek, they have grown closer. They may think they have been discrete, but more than once I have seen them disappear into the bushes at night. They return in the morning, smelling of earth and sex.

And I am not sure how I feel about it.

I am not jealous, and do not have any right to be.

I am glad Raksha and I seem to be conversing as friends now, and that he has stopped looking at me with wide pleading eyes. But when I think about him and The Bear together, something stirs deep inside me. A mixture of curiosity and arousal.

Last night, as I lay with Khan, exploring his body and letting him explore mine, I allowed my thoughts to drift to Raksha and The Bear. Thinking about their mouths crashing together, and their hands on one another’s bodies, slickened my core and sent pulses of electricity skittering beneath my skin.

“Here...” Bagheera’s voice breaks through my torturous thoughts as I wonder what Khan would say if he knew what I had been fantasising of. “We should rest here. Through the trees up ahead.”

“Why?” Khan is quick to question her. Sometimes I think that if she were to say the grass was green, he would challenge her simply because she hurt him so badly. He trusted her, confided in her, travelled with her by his side for

over a decade. So, I understand how he feels. But his wounded pride is clouding his judgement.

“Because it is a safe place.” Bagheera stands straight and still, blinking slowly as she speaks.

Khan flexes his knuckles, the metal cuff on his wrist catching the midday sun which filters through the jungle canopy. His lip twitches, the way it does when he’s biting back a snarl. But he does not make a sound, simply stands back and allows me to walk in front of him as Bagheera parts the undergrowth.

He still doesn’t trust her; he has made that clear. But he has agreed to play nicely until we have spoken to my parents and, for now, he seems to be occupying his thoughts with how we can get into my father’s castle without being caught.

For a moment, as I follow Bagheera, everything grows darker. The trees seem to be huddled together, the air between them quivering with the same humidity that moistens my skin. Bagheera winds through them effortlessly, Khan and Raksha too. Only The Bear and I struggle to keep pace.

As he squeezes between two thick trunks, The Bear offers me his hand. I take it and follow him. Finally, the trees thin again and we emerge by a shallow stream. It trickles past us, two fallen trunks lying across it, flowing deeper into the jungle.

Using her staff to steady her, Bagheera steps up onto one of the fallen trees and crosses to the other side of the stream. Raksha does the same, but Khan stops to splash water on his face.

After so many days walking, my bare feet are sore, although I’ve been trying not to show it. When I look at the water, they throb with the need to be submerged, soothed, cooled. So, while the others cross quickly, I take my time.

“This way...” Bagheera speaks without looking back. Then, in the blink of an eye, she is gone. Disappeared into the shadows behind a large tree.

As she melts into the darkness, leaving only the faint whisper of her passage, I glance at Khan. He’s tense, every muscle taut, his eyes scanning our

surroundings.

A few feet away, Raksha sniffs the air and says, “Something is different here. I don’t think I’ve sensed anything like it before...”

“For once,” Khan growls, meeting my eyes. “I agree with the wolf.”

“You should follow me, young ones...” Bagheera calls, her voice rising above the chatter of the jungle.

While the others hesitate, I brush past them. They might be afraid of what they feel here, but I am not. It feels... familiar, and comforting, and it is making the hairs on the back of my neck prickle. Like fireflies are dancing on my skin.

Certain the others will follow, I push aside the heavy foliage in front of us and weave through a swathe of thick hanging vines. When I finally step into a clearing, golden sunlight streams through branches of trees like a thousand-armed candelabra spread across the ceiling of the jungle.

“I know this place...” I whisper as memories I can’t quite catch hold of swell in my ribcage. “It is so familiar.”

I walk gingerly forward, smooth stone and soft moss cushioning my soles.

The sounds of the jungle fade. A breeze licks the backs of my legs.

“How do I know this place?” I search for Bagheera, but all I can see are what look like ancient stone structures rising up from the earth, their surfaces covered in a mosaic of moss and vines.

“Princess.” Khan’s voice finds me. A warning. I turn to look at him, and realise he is – for the first time – standing side-by-side with Raksha and The Bear.

The three of them look like they are poised to run into battle.

Khan’s knuckles twitch. But I turn away. I am beside a tall pillar, decorated with intricate carvings I cannot interpret. I trace my fingers over the impressions in the stone and a sigh swells behind my lips.

In front of us, the earth dips down into a sunken courtyard. Trees emerge

through cracks in the masonry, their roots twisted around the stonework as if nature and architecture are engaged in a vicious but beautiful dance.

The air is thick with... magic.

“I don’t like this place.” The sound of metal slicing through air makes me flinch as Shere Khan bares his talons.

It's as if he and I are standing in two different worlds. While he senses danger, I feel... *power*. “Don't you feel it, Khan? The energy? The magic? It's extraordinary.”

Without replying, Khan looks at The Bear and says, “Why did the witch bring us here? Where is she?”

The Bear presses his lips together in a thin, displeased line. “I do not know,” he says, his eyes flitting momentarily to the chain that still hangs from Khan’s wrist.

“I brought you here because I wanted to show you what I have seen.” Bagheera reappears.

“Giana does not want to see anything more from you until she has spoken with her parents,” The Bear says calmly. “She made that very clear.”

My stomach tightens. Maybe Khan was right. Maybe this is all a trick.

Bagheera is standing below us, in the middle of the courtyard. Stretching out her arms, staff in one hand, she says, “What I have to show you cannot wait.”

Behind me, Khan unleashes his talons and his body stiffens, ready to change and carry me away.

But Bagheera does not stop. “This place was once the sanctum of wisdom and power,” she calls. “A meeting ground for the witches of The Spirit Lands and the leaders of the jungle beasts.”

“A meeting ground for witches?” The question leaves my lips humming as I speak.

Bagheera might have lied to Khan, but she has done nothing but protect me. I have no reason to mistrust her. And this place seems to claw away at any

remnants of doubt still stirring in my belly, leaving only excitement in its wake.

Bagheera nods solemnly. Then she crouches down and presses her palms to the floor. “The magic held within these stones allowed me to open a channel to the witches in the East. They helped me see what I needed to see. They lent me their power, so I could unravel the strings of fate.”

“Nonsense,” Khan snarls. “You’re speaking in riddles.”

“I glimpsed the past, the present, and the future.” Bagheera looks up at me, meeting my gaze. “Everything you saw in the flames was true, but there was more.”

“Ghana...” Shere Khan warns.

I raise my hand to silence him. Staring at Bagheera, I say, “Then show me.”

SHERE KHAN

Before I can reach Gliana, Bagheera lowers her staff with a strength that makes the ground shake. As it meets the stone floor, a crack appears. The crack begins to glow, tendrils of light spreading outward until the ruins in front of us are illuminated in a warm, golden glow.

The crumbling pillars slowly rebuild themselves, broken pieces of stone flying back into place as if guided by an army of invisible hands. Vines that had crept across the walls rapidly recede, disappearing into cracks that seal themselves shut. Ancient iron lamps suspended from the ceiling spark to life, casting dancing shadows across the temple interior.

At the centre of the temple, a wide shallow pool shimmers into existence, its glassy surface smooth and still. I drift toward it, drawn as if by some magnetic force I don't understand. The others are there too. I reach for Gliana, but she is utterly transfixed by the water.

As she looks into it, her deep brown eyes glaze over. She grips the edge, her knuckles pale from the force of holding on.

I try to resist. Try to remain upright, and lucid, and in control of my actions.

But I cannot. I have to look.

Peering down into the depths of the pool, shadowy shapes move under the water, blurry at first, then slowly coming into focus.

I see Gliana's mother, her eyes cold, her mouth pinched in displeasure. Roughly, she braids Gliana's long black hair, her fingers tangling the strands painfully. Gliana flinches at her touch, and my stomach twists with rage. The image wavers, replaced by a sunlit courtyard surrounded by towering stone walls. Gliana plays happily with a young boy, their laughter echoing. He hands her a small white flower, glancing shyly away as she brings it to her nose and smiles. The boy's eyes are bright, ice blue.

The visions in the pool accelerate, swirling faster and faster. I see Kaa in Gliana's bedroom. I see her travelling away from Valoria. I see myself sneaking into The Colonel's castle and hiding in the courtyard. I see her cheek redden when The Colonel strikes her, The Bear freeing her from her room, helping her escape the castle under the cover of night. Raksha appears. She kisses him in the rain, his clothes soaked and muddy. She presses her body to his and a deep sigh parts her lips.

The visions grow faster still. Kaa chains me to The Bear. We travel the jungle. I take his hand. He lies, bleeding, crying out in agony, crawling through the undergrowth.

Then I see her. By the watering pool. I take her, I hate her, I love her.

In the rain, she tells me I will not kill her.

But I do.

Gliana is beneath me. I feel her breath on my cheek. She meets my eyes. I bare my talons.

And I plunge them into her side.

Her blood slickens my fingers as I twist the blades. Her eyes widen, her mouth parts. And then she is gone. I have killed her.

No. That is not what happened.

I try to scramble backward and pull myself out of the vision. But the more I struggle, the harder it holds on.

I scream, roaring into the rain, but the vision moves, leaving Giana bleeding in the mud.

I see Calandria. The Colonel's once ivory towers are now black, and Kaa's swirling evil spreads unchecked across the lands, devouring everything in its path. People are chained and broken. The jungle is set alight. And as she fades to ashes, the wolves are ruthlessly hunted and slaughtered.

As the last wolf falls lifeless to the ground, the image in the water changes.

Giana is alive. Lying beneath me again. Except, this time I stay my claws. I let her live, and I let myself love her.

I see the temple, where we stand at this moment, as if I am watching from above. The four of us, Bagheera in our midst.

Then there is Giana.

Standing tall and proud as rightful queen, wearing a gown of emerald green. She surveys her kingdom, the jungle restored to its former glory, The Spirit Lands at peace. Darkness banished by the rising sun, light spilling over the land. A feeling of joy and hope so intense it brings tears to my eyes.

When the vision breaks, I surface gasping for breath.

Our surroundings are, once again, in ruin. Giana stumbles a little. I reach for her, but she steps away from me. Finding Bagheera, she whispers, "What was that?"

Bagheera takes Giana's hand and squeezes it gently. "The past and the present are real. The future is still uncertain. When Khan let you live, he set us on the path towards peace. But there are many possibilities."

"And what do any of those possibilities have to do with me?" Giana's eyes shimmer with tears.

Gently, Bagheera takes her hand. "With your heritage, Giana – part human, part changeling – you could unite the people of The Spirit Lands. You could bring peace. You could—"

Giana whirls away from Bagheera. She shakes her head then looks from me to The Bear. "You took his hand." The expression on her face is almost

unbearable. “You tried to kill the man who saved me?”

“You want to discuss this now?” My head throbs. Panic rises like bile in my throat. “After everything we just saw... you want to ask me about his hand?”

Gliana’s eyes flash. Not amber. Purple. A vivid shade of purple that takes my breath away. She stalks toward me, fingers splayed at her sides. “How could you?”

A sickening, unfamiliar, sense of guilt solidifies in my gut. But then it turns to indignation, and I growl in response, “You knew what I was when you fell in love with me, Princess. You always knew. Do not pretend to be outraged by my nature. It is *why* you love me. Because I am danger, and safety, and excitement. Everything you ever needed.”

She stops, her entire body quivering. There is a long, torturous moment of silence between us. And then she says, “I thought I could trust you. Even when you intended to kill me, at least I knew your intent. I knew you were not pretending to be something you weren’t.”

Panic swirls in my gut, but it is laced with anger. Before I can respond, Bagheera interjects. “Gliana,” she says softly, “listen to him.”

But Gliana shakes her head. “From now on,” she says. “I listen only to myself.”

THE BEAR

Grabbing onto a long, protruding root, Giana uses it to climb back up from the sunken courtyard. I expect Khan to follow, but he does not. With a shudder, he rips off his clothes and shifts. The manacle on his ankle presses deep into his fur. He lets out a loud, air trembling roar.

Giana hesitates. She is standing above us now, but she does not look back at the tiger.

With another roar, Khan turns and stalks away, jumping down through a gap between two old crumbling columns and disappearing into the jungle.

Perhaps I should be pleased that she has finally discovered what kind of man he truly is. But I am not, because she is in pain, and I cannot stand to see her in pain.

I look at Raksha and nod. He follows me to the place where Giana climbed up, ascending quickly. Reaching back, he helps me do the same, compensating for my uneven grip.

“That way.” Raksha nods in the direction of the stream. His nose twitches, interpreting the air in a way I cannot.

We find her by the water. Sunlight filters through the foliage, and the air carries the scent of damp earth. Gliana sits, bare feet dangling, toes curled as they touch the smooth stones beneath the surface.

“Would you like us to sit with you?” Raksha asks, hands in his pockets as if he is still unsure how to navigate communication with the woman he once loved.

Gliana smiles a little. “Thank you,” she says.

We sit either side of her but remain silent. My scars ache with the memory of Bagheera’s visions. I rub the place at the base of my arm where a wrist and a hand should be.

“I should have asked how you knew each other,” Gliana says. “When you appeared in the middle of the storm, I knew you’d met Khan before.” She shakes her head, annoyance tightening her lips. “I’ve been so preoccupied with trying to figure out if I’m secretly half *tiger* that I forgot what he said to you.”

“What he said?”

She looks up, her eyes locking onto mine. “He said, *You lived.*”

I nod slowly. “Kaa sent Shere Khan and I to find you. He chained us together so that Khan could not escape.”

Gliana lets out a deep sigh and shakes her head. “He took your hand so he could be free of you, and that is why he still wears the manacle. Because he cannot remove it without removing his *own* hand.”

“Yes, that is why.”

Gliana’s eyes lock onto mine. “Why didn’t you tell me? Why protect him?”

“I was not protecting him, Princess,” I reply. “You were grappling with enough. It didn’t seem fair to add my pain to that mix.” I pause, jaw tense. “But I’m sorry. You had a right to know the whole truth.”

Gliana reaches for my arm and holds it gently. “May I see?” she asks, fingers curled around the base of the empty glove.

Only Raksha has seen me properly without the glove. I glance at him. He is watching us with a warm gaze that stills the fear in my stomach. “Yes,” I answer her, voice hoarse.

Peeling off the glove, Giana scans the redness and the scars that betray the place where Khan severed my hand. “Is it painful?” she asks quietly.

“Sometimes,” I reply. “Now, yes.”

“Will the water help?” she asks.

“It might,” I reply.

Barely hesitating, Giana tears a piece of cloth from her shirt and dips it in the stream. She twists her body so she is facing me, and holds my arm. First, I look away, focussing on Raksha. But as she bathes my scars, and the pain eases beneath her touch, I finally allow myself to look at her hands.

Deft and gentle, they soothe in a way that makes my breath shallow and my gut twist.

“Do you believe what we saw?” she asks. “Do you believe they truly were visions of what might happen? That somehow I can...” She hesitates. “Make things better?”

I scratch my beard with my good hand, then push my fingers through my hair. “I don’t know, Princess.”

“Do you believe Shere Khan wanted you to die?”

“I believe he would have done anything to find you,” I reply.

When she looks up at me, through her thick dark lashes, she studies my face. Then she frowns a little. “Your eyes are so blue,” she says, as if the truth is teetering on the edge of her awareness. Hiding just out of sight.

I hold my breath, both desperate and terrified for her to know the truth.

Suddenly, her expression changes. Her hands pause. And I know I cannot keep the past from her any longer.

“There’s something else. Something I’ve kept from you.” I glance at Raksha. “From both of you.”

Gliana draws back her shoulders, taking her hands into her own lap and tilting her head as she waits for me to continue. Raksha watches me but does not interrupt.

“I am afraid to speak it...” My words are barely audible above the murmuring of the stream.

Gliana squeezes my arm. “You should be more scared *not* to speak it,” she says. “I have suffered enough untruths, Bear. Please, do not keep anything else from me.”

The moment hangs between us. I draw in a deep breath. Then I recite the words I’ve carried in my soul for over a decade...

“One day, Ana, I will take you away from here. One day, we will be free.”

GLIANA

I cannot breathe. As The Bear speaks, and I stare into his eyes, one word reverberates in my bones.

Blue.

Blue.

Blue.

My fingers travel slowly up to his shoulder, and then cup his bearded face. Pain and longing twist themselves around my heart and squeeze tightly.

“Is it really you?”

The Bear swallows hard but does not move or speak. He does not have to. Now I have seen the truth I can't unsee it.

“I thought you were dead...”

Behind me, I can sense Raksha watching us. Turning to him, I reach for his hand and pull him closer, so he is beside us both. We have barely spoken since we were reunited, let alone touched. But he does not object.

Still looking at me, but speaking to Raksha, The Bear says, “I knew Giana when she was a girl. I was a servant in her father’s castle. We were children together. We were friends.”

“His name is Barlo, but I called him Blue.” I am still stroking his face, unable to look away from him.

“And I called her *Ana*.” The Bear is staring at me as if he cannot believe he has finally spoken the truth.

“Ana?” Raksha breathes. It is how he knew me too, and the fact I shared that name with both of them feels strangely like fate.

The Bear nods. “Ana,” he repeats. Then his lip twitches into a smile. “We could not let others know about our friendship, so we wrote letters.”

I laugh and add, “In secret. We hid them in the wall and...” I trail off, pain slithering into the gaps between my ribs as I remember the day I realised Blue had not written back to me.

As if he knows what I am thinking, The Bear presses his forehead to mine. “I am sorry I left you,” he says. “If I could have stayed...”

I have too many questions and yet, at the same time, I have none. Without speaking, I fold myself into his arms and bury my face in his large, strong chest. “Shhh,” I whisper. “I have missed you so much. Nothing else matters.”

For a moment, The Bear does not move. But then he wraps his arms around my waist and whispers, “I have missed you too, Princess.”



“I’ll give you a moment alone.” Raksha stands and gently touches The Bear’s shoulder. The look they exchange sends a quiver of jealousy to my stomach, and I have no idea if it is Raksha or The Bear who I am jealous of.

“You don’t have to go,” I tell him.

Raksha meets my eyes, and smiles. "I won't go far. I need a run anyway. It's been too long." As he walks away, he pulls off his clothes and changes into the wolf I have not seen since the night he and Khan fought over me.

Watching him pad away into the trees, I bury my face in my hands and sigh. There are too many emotions swirling inside me. They claw at my skin, and make it feel as if it is stretched too tight over my muscles. Khan tried to kill Blue. *My Blue.*

"I dreamed of you for so many years, but then I had to stop." I knot my fingers with The Bear's and look down at our entwined hands. "Because it hurt too much."

The Bear lowers his head.

"Why did you leave?" I whisper. "Why didn't you come back?"

When he meets my gaze again, his eyes are flickering with something I can't quite interpret. A sigh shakes his large chest. "I was taken," he says. "They came for me when I was sleeping and took me to Calandria. I was given to The Colonel as a recruit for the guards."

"Who took you? Why would they...?" Realisation trickles through me, forming a burning, coal-like weight in the pit of my stomach. "Because of me... they took you away because you were kind to me."

"I believe Kaa orchestrated it," The Bear says, his hand gripping my arm, grounding me.

"Why didn't you ever come back for me? Why didn't you try to escape?" They are foolish questions. I know what it is like to be imprisoned in a castle, and I know it would have been impossible for him to run. Yet the girl inside me, who missed her best friend so much for so long, asks anyway.

"I was told that if I served twenty years for The Colonel, I'd be set free. I clung to that promise, counting down the days, always thinking of you." His voice trembles slightly. "But when I heard you were to marry him, and that you'd be coming to Calandria, I knew I would never allow him to lay with you." He pulls me closer and fixes me with a stare that makes my chest fizz with warmth. "I would have died before I let him do that, Giana. I should never have let him strike you, either. But I needed to wait until nightfall to

free you—”

I cut him off with a shake of my head, then press my finger to his lips. “Don’t apologise,” I tell him sternly. “Don’t ever apologise.”

As I look into his eyes, I see flashes of the boy I once knew. The boy who snuck into my room to bring me food, and who helped me down from my pony, and who held me after my father beat me. Then the man who unlocked my room and set me free.

“You could have told me in Calandria. You could have come with me then...”

The Bear smiles, but it is a smile heavy with sadness. “I thought the best thing I could do for you was to set you free.”

As gratitude overwhelms me, my entire body begins to quiver with heat, and I kiss him. It starts softly but then becomes a clash of pent-up emotions that forces us closer and closer.

When I turn in his lap, and wrap my legs around his waist, the kiss deepens. He is holding me close and, even though we have never done this before, his lips feel like home.

I feel him harden beneath me, but before I can tilt my pelvis to ease the pressure building between my thighs, he breaks the kiss and pulls away, holding me by my hips. “I’m sorry, Giana, we shouldn’t...”

I’m breathless, my cheeks flushed, my lips tingling. But he’s right. We shouldn’t. Not here. Not like this.

“I’m sorry too.” I clamber out of his lap and kneel beside him instead, slipping my hand into his. “But I don’t want you to think I kissed you because I’m angry with Khan. I kissed you because—”

“You don’t need to apologise either, Princess,” he says softly. “And you don’t need to explain. It has been an emotional day.”

I laugh and tuck my hair behind my ear. A feeling I’d forgotten settles in my chest – a sense of lightness and comfort. “It was always so easy with you,” I say quietly. “Why was it always so easy?”

Instead of answering, The Bear picks up his discarded glove and slips it back on. “We should go and find the others,” he says, moving to stand.

Before he does, I catch his arm, staying him for a moment. “Are you in love with Raksha?” I ask.

His eyebrow quirks a little.

“While we’re being honest, I’d like to know,” I say quietly.

After a pause, he replies, “If I knew, I would tell you.” Then he adds, “Are you in love with Raksha?”

Immediately, guilt heats my cheeks. “I don’t know either,” I admit. “The way I feel about him is so different from the way I feel about Khan. With Khan, it is like cyclones and tsunamis and forest fires. With Raksha, it’s...” I trail off, unable to find the right word.

“You love the tiger?” The Bear interrupts me. There is no judgement in his tone, just a question.

“Yes,” I say. “I do.”

He nods slowly, pressing his lips together in a way that emphasises the scar on his top lip. “And me?” He looks back at me, eyes charged with emotion. “Is it foolish to think you may still have feelings for me?”

It’s a question that stings, forcing me to confront a mosaic of feelings I have buried for so many years. “Is it foolish of me to admit that my feelings for you never really went away?”

“Gliana...” The Bear reaches out and runs his hand down my arm. His touch leaves a trail of warmth in its wake. But instead of kissing me again or folding me into his arms, he says, “Are you certain returning to Valoria is what you want?”

“You don’t think we should?”

The Bear inhales slowly, and a moment ticks by while he considers his next words. “I understand why you want to know the truth,” he says. “But are you sure your parents will give it to you?”

I open my mouth to speak, but no words come out.

“They are cruel people, Gliana. I saw first-hand the way they treated you. They may refuse you answers simply to torment you.”

I close my eyes, tears biting at the back of my throat. Although his words sting, The Bear is right. “They are not good people,” I say. “But surely there is some shred of decency buried deep inside them...”

The Bear inclines his head and squeezes my hand tightly. “I hope so, Princess,” he says. “I hope so.”

QUEEN ELIYAH

The air is stale, the light dim. Manacles weigh down my wrists, their cold steel chafing against festering sores. Each clink of the chain is a reminder of the life I once had, the freedom that was stripped away from me.

I've been in this wretched place for what feels like an eternity. The castle that was once my home has transformed into a loathsome dungeon, the embodiment of my misery. Every part of me screams to escape, to breathe air that doesn't smell of rust and despair. And yet, I know this is where I will end my days.

I know this is where I will die.

My stomach groans, empty for far too long.

They feed us scraps, barely enough to keep a bird alive. I'm wasting away in this darkness, both in body and soul, and I spend my days thinking of ways I might hasten my own demise simply so I do not have to bear this torture for one more moment.

When we were first locked away here, I was buoyed by hope. I believed someone would come to our rescue. I believed that Kaa would be overthrown and that my husband would retake his rightful place as ruler of Valoria.

Twelve months have passed. Time has slipped away, and it has taken all slivers of hope with it.

Shifting onto my other hip, to ease the ache from being pressed against the floor for so long, I turn to the outermost wall. My eyes have grown accustomed to the scant light that filters through the cracks in the stone, and I am now quite adept at using it to judge the time of day or night.

Moss creeps along those walls, and sometimes I fantasise about it overtaking the entire cell, swallowing us whole, ending this perpetual nightmare.

With great effort, I rise to my feet. My joints protest, sore from inactivity and the cold, damp conditions. I take a shaky breath, steeling myself for what I'm about to do.

In the corner, my wretched husband sleeps.

He is even uglier now he is so thin.

Gathering my tattered skirts, I cautiously approach the tipped-over pail lying in the corner. With each step, the sound of my shackles scraping against the floor fills the cell. The sound is a harsh contrast to the silence that dominates this place – a silence broken only by the distant cries of other prisoners, or the footsteps of the guards who revel in our suffering.

I position the pail carefully, hoping it will hold my weight. My heart pounds as I place one foot on its rim, and then the other, slowly standing upright. For a fleeting moment, as I unfasten my belt and stretch up toward the beam above me, I catch the smell of damp earth and foliage—the smell of the jungle.

I tiptoe higher, my eyes fixed on the rotting beam, praying it will hold my weight long enough for the noose to do its job.

But just as I am lost in this minor, stolen joy of imagining how it will feel to stop breathing, the pail topples. Balance escapes me. I crash to the ground with a resounding thud, my head banging against the unforgiving floor. Sharp pain radiates through my skull, my vision blurs, and just like that, the slivers of light, the scent of the jungle, the taste of freedom – it all fades away into enveloping darkness.



Awakening to a splitting headache, I find myself on the hard, cold floor. Each corner of this fetid cell is imprinted in my memory, but the familiarity does nothing to soften the impact of waking up to it day after day.

As my eyes adjust to the dimness, I see him sitting across from me. The king. My husband. Once clothed in the finest silks and velvets, he now sits in robes that mirror the filth of my own garments. This is the man who shattered my spirit, who reduced me to an object long before these bars ever did, who took my life and turned it into a living death.

“I thought you had died,” he says, his voice as devoid of warmth or concern as ever.

Summoning what little energy I have, I push myself to a sitting position, clutching my throbbing head. “If only I could be so fortunate.”

His scoff reverberates through the cell as he raises his eyebrows toward the beam. “If you had asked for my help, I would have given it gladly.”

I can't help but let out a bitter, ironic laugh. “I would not give you the satisfaction.”

His eyes meet mine, unflinching. “You were always good at playing the victim, Eliyah. Let's not forget, you chose to be queen. You chose to tie your fate to mine.”

“I did not choose *this*.” My voice rises, echoing off the walls. “I did not choose a man who would allow himself to be beaten by a snake like Kaa. I did not choose a weak, pathetic, disgrace of a man. I chose a king.” I suck in my cheeks then spit at his feet. “But it seems I chose the wrong one.”

“Say that again.” My husband's eyes flare with cruelty. “I dare you to say that again, Eliyah.”

“I chose the wrong man,” I say slowly, biting out each word with a force I

hope stings his mottled skin. “Clearly, Kaa was always the puppet master. The one who was *truly* in control.”

A muscle twitches in his jaw. For the first time, I see a flicker of something in his eyes. Not regret – no, that would require a soul – but maybe, just maybe, a trace of realisation.

“It takes two hands to clap, Eliyah. Maybe it's time you took responsibility for your part in this.”

“My part?” I say, incredulous. “I played no part in this. You did this. You alone.”

“No,” he spits. “Your daughter did this, Eliyah. Your disgusting, half-blood daughter did this.” His fists clench and his knuckles pale with the pressure. “If she had not fled on her wedding night...” He sucks in a rattly breath. “I should have killed her the day she was born. Better still, while she was still in the womb.”

I picture my daughter’s face. For perhaps the thousandth time since she was born, I wait for a rush of love or even familiarity to flood my senses. But I feel nothing. “Perhaps you're right.” I sit up and lean against the cold stone wall behind me. “Perhaps it would have saved us a lot of trouble.”

My husband’s lips twist into a vicious grin. “Well, look at that, something we can finally agree upon.”

GLIANA

“**W**here is he?” My voice reverberates around the ruins of the temple. From the courtyard, Bagheera looks up then gestures in the direction Khan travelled when he left.

“Will you go after him?” she asks as I climb back down to stand in front of her.

“No, I will not. Right now, I have nothing to say to him.”

Bagheera gives a short, sharp exhale that reminds me of the way horses huff when they’re frustrated. “Khan did not know The Bear meant something to you,” she says, lowering herself to the floor and crossing her legs, lying her staff over her lap.

I hesitate for a moment, then sit.

“Even you did not know until a few moments ago.”

“What are you trying to say?” My muscles twitch as annoyance flares in my gut.

Bagheera tilts her head and speaks quietly. “Perhaps Khan was right when he said that you knew what he was when you fell in love with him.”

I swallow hard. Thoughts of Khan drip through my body like knives slicing through waves. I pick up a loose piece of stone and roll it in my palm. “He left my oldest friend to die.” The words taste bitter on my tongue. I glance back toward the stream, where The Bear told me he would wait for Raksha to return.

“It is in his nature,” Bagheera says. “He is a hunter. Until he met you, he prioritised only two things – his quest for vengeance and his survival. The Bear stood in the way of both of those things.”

A frustrated laugh bubbles in my throat. “Of course, you would defend him. You were his best friend for over a decade. You must have seen him do all manner of terrible things.” I feel my nostrils flare and my eyes flicker as I speak.

Bagheera’s lips curve into a subtle smile. “Indeed,” she says. “And yet I still love him.”

“You love him?” Something coils in my gut. Jealousy. The urge to grab her and shake her until she tells me the truth. It surprises me thrills me in equal measure.

Perhaps it is not just pleasure Khan coaxes from my body but passion too. In all its forms.

“Not the way you love him, Gliana.”

The fire quiets a little. I realise I was gripping the stone hard in my palm, and loosen my fingers, letting it fall back to the ground. After a moment’s silence, I tell her, “I will talk to him when I feel ready.”

In reply, Bagheera simply nods. “Very well,” she says. “But do not stay angry with him for too long. You went through a lot to stay by each other’s side. Don’t let one small betrayal break you.”



By the time Shere Khan returns, the temple is wrapped in twilight, and we are preparing to sleep. Bagheera has not tried to make me talk about her visions of the future, or my destiny, or what she believes I can do for The Spirit Lands.

Perhaps because she senses it would do nothing but inflame me.

When Khan stalks back into the courtyard, he is completely naked. He scoops up his clothes from where he left them and unashamedly stands in front of us while he dresses.

As I watch him, my entire body pays attention. Despite being angry, I want him. Every inch of him. And it infuriates me.

“We should talk about what awaits us in Valoria.” I wrap my arms around myself, shivering as the temperature drops, and look at the others. “We haven’t discussed how we will get into the castle.”

“Khan tried for ten years,” Bagheera says as Shere Khan leans on a nearby pillar, deliberately not joining us. “Even he could not find a way past your father’s defences.”

“And this isn’t something either of you mentioned before?” Raksha, who had been swigging water from a leather flask, frowns at her.

“I assumed he had a new plan.” Bagheera says.

“I’m working on it,” Khan snarls. “By the time we arrive in Valoria, it will be fully formed. But I will not be rushed.”

“You should know,” Bagheera takes the flask from Raksha, “that the visions I showed you of the future are already merging.”

At this, Khan stands a little straighter.

Perhaps she is not so willing to put aside talk of the future.

Bagheera takes a long drink, then smooths her hands over her staff, tracing its intricate markings. “Although Khan set us on the right path when he refused to kill Giana, our enemy has still been tightening his deathly grasp on The Spirit Lands.”

“Our enemy?” I wrap my arms around my waist, wishing it was Khan holding me, and hating myself for wishing it.

“Your father’s aide... Kaa.” Bagheera sets the staff down on the floor and tucks her knees up beneath her chin.

“You saw this in a vision?” Khan bites.

“No, but I heard some travellers talking of it,” she says. “I was on the outskirts of the jungle, not long after I started searching for this place, and I heard a group of Calandrian’s whispering of their narrow escape from the city. It seems that when you and The Bear left to search for Gliana, Kaa took control of Calandria. Tabaqui persuaded the guards to vote for Kaa to be their next ruler.” She tucks her hair behind her ear, suddenly looking younger.

“What of Valoria?” I lean forward, my heartbeat quickening.

Bagheera shakes her head. “They did not speak of it.”

“Would Kaa have tried to take on your father’s army?” Raksha asks.

“Yes.” I reply without hesitation. “If he finally gained the power he has sought all these years, and if thought his reign was at risk, he would do anything to protect it.”

“In that case,” Khan says darkly, “we have no way of knowing what awaits us in Valoria.” He marches over, picks up the flask, and downs the last of it. “So, I won’t waste any more time *planning* until we get there.”

We are settling down to sleep, Bagheera readying herself to change back from witch to horse, when she comes to crouch beside me. “I know you do not want to think about it until you have the answers you seek,” she says, placing a warm hand on my arm. “But you are the answer, Gliana. You are the one who can make The Spirit Lands whole again.”

SHERE KHAN

TWO DAYS LATER

As we reach the edge of the jungle, towering trees give way to a vista I have seen more times than I can count. Usually, with Bagheera by my side.

But in all the years I lived in Valoria, it never looked like this.

“Kaa’s stench is everywhere,” I mutter.

“It is not just his stench,” Bagheera replies, pointing to the sea of black in front of us. “His flags are everywhere too.”

Next to me, The Bear folds his arms across his chest. “So, he not only tried to take on Giana’s father. He succeeded.”

“This will make it harder,” Bagheera says. “Getting into the castle was always going to be a difficult task, but the lay of the land is now completely foreign.” She turns to me and adds, “Khan, we do not know what awaits us

—”

Stalking away from her, my jaw twitches. She talks as if we are still a team. As if we are in this together. Bagheera and Khan. Just as we always were.

She is wrong.

She is no longer my steed. She is a witch, and nothing I have seen since she showed herself to us has made me want to trust her again.

Below, Kaa’s flags drape from the palace walls and flutter from the city gates. Each one is adorned with the menacing emblem of a serpent coiled to strike, its tongue like a dragon’s.

But something tells me this serpent has not yet dealt his most deadly blow.

We wait until nightfall, then creep from the edge of the city to the one place I know we stand a chance of being welcomed.

But when we reach it, the tavern lies in complete darkness. Not a flicker of light in its grimy windows. Not a plume of smoke drifting up from the chimney. On the door, a large black symbol, scorched with flames... a snake.

“Kaa,” Giana breathes.

“Kaa,” I reply with a growl.

Giana inhales slowly. Her breath hitches in her chest, and she hugs her arms around her waist. “It is real now,” she says. “We are here, and it is real, and Kaa is everywhere.”

My entire body twitches with the need to comfort her. Fear quivers in the air around her. I want to lick it from her skin and kiss the worry from her lips.

But still, she will not look at me. Instead, she looks at Bagheera. “Do you intend to change?” she asks.

Bagheera inclines her head. “Yes,” she says. “It will be safer for me, and for you all, if I am my other self.”

Pulling my gaze away from Giana, I look at Bagheera. She smiles softly at me and her body begins to ripple like a wave. Her transformation is different to mine; majestic and peaceful to my violent and painful.

She raises her hands, and her staff begins to glow. Then, like water turning to ice, her form shifts from that of a woman into that of a large black horse. I do not ask, or understand, what happens to the staff when she shifts. Perhaps it is part of her – a physical embodiment of the magic that lives in her veins. But, like her clothes, it disappears.

Her coat is shiny and glossy, her mane and tail wild yet well-groomed. I try to look away, but it is hopeless. I am unable to take my eyes off her as she takes a few steps forward.

Especially here, the instinct to talk to her the way I used to is so strong that I can't help reaching out and touching her neck. The feel of her coat beneath my palm is too familiar. I flinch and curl my fist.

“I'll take you to the stable.”

Bagheera simply blinks at me.

As we walk toward the vacant stables, I watch her closely. How did I not see it? The person-like movement of her head when I speak. The way she seems to so clearly understand what I'm saying.

When we reach the cover of the stable, she turns and stands stoically in front of me. She dips her head. Nostalgia tugs at my gut. Breathing shallow breaths, I step forward and rub her nose. She nuzzles into my chest, and a sigh wracks my body.

I lost her. I lost Giana. I lost faith in my ancestors. I am truly, for the first time since my family was taken from me, alone.

Closing my eyes, I press my forehead to hers. “I miss you,” I whisper. “And I hate you for lying to me.”

Without looking at her, I turn and walk away. I cross the cobblestoned yard outside the stables, sticking to the shadows. Then I pick up a pebble and throw it into the bushes. It lands with a thud, signalling for the others to show themselves.

When they emerge, they move hurriedly toward the front of the tavern, and I meet them at the door.

“How do we get inside?” Raksha asks, his ears twitching as he strains them for sounds from within.

I motion for them to follow me and head to the side of the building where I pull open the door to the coal store.

Below, thick blackness stares up at us.

“After you...” I say to Raksha.

His nose twitches, but he doesn't hesitate before jumping in. “Gliana, it's safe. I'll catch you,” he calls.

Careful to step around me, completely unwilling to take my arm, Gliana lowers herself into the hole too. The Bear follows.

Finally, I join them, pulling the hatch closed behind me.

The coal store is pitch black and smells of dampness, dust, and stale air. I can feel the dry, powdery coal beneath my feet as I take a few more steps into the darkness. A faint chill hangs in the air.

While Raksha and I can see clearly in the dark, Gliana and The Bear cannot.

Gliana's eyes are wide, pupils dilated. For the first time in days, I allow myself to stare at her.

She is beautiful. Even more beautiful now that she is angry with me.

My mouth becomes dry. Whether it is from the coal dust or the unfamiliar emotion cloying at the back of my throat, I do not care to know.

Without speaking, Raksha frees a torch from the wall and finds some matches. Almost instantly, the cellar is lit with flickering orange light, illuminating piles of old furniture, coal, and boxes.

“Wait here. I will make sure there is no one else in the building.”

“I don't sense anyone else,” Raksha says. Then he hands the torch to Gliana and tells me, “I'll come. It'll be quicker with the two of us.”

I do not object. The time for petty grievances is over. I might hate that he loved Gliana before I did, but he is the only one of us who has not lied to her.

So, I hate myself more.

Together, Raksha and I move silently through the coal cellar and up the stairs, our senses alert for any signs of danger.

Already, I know there is no one here.

The rooms are empty, the windows broken and the floorboards creak beneath our feet.

When we enter the bar, the smell of stale blood pummels my senses. Memories of nights sitting by the fire, drinking and brooding, come flooding back to me. This was once a safe place. The last place men like me – outcasts and villains – could hide.

“Even the King left us be here,” I mutter, stooping to pick up a blood-stained blade from the floor.

Raksha stands in the doorway. His jaw twitches.

“Yet Kaa has destroyed it.”

“People died here,” Raksha says, eyes flicking to the blade. “I have never smelled so much death before.”

“Then prepare yourself, puppy.” I stand up and pocket the blade. “Because something tells me this is just the beginning.”

GLIANA

I would rather sleep outside than in a place that feels so much like death. But Khan insists it is safer here and, though I am still too angry to look at him for longer than a few seconds, I know he is right.

Beyond the tavern, the air is still and quiet. Inside, we have each taken a different room upstairs and are attempting to while away the hours until sunrise. I am drifting into a half-sleep, just below the surface of consciousness, when something nudges the edge of my hearing.

I sit up in bed and listen.

Instantly, my skin begins to prickle.

In the room next door, I can hear the bed creaking. A guttural moan shakes the wall and makes me release a shaky breath.

Raksha and The Bear have not snuck off together since the day The Bear revealed our past. I was worried it had driven a wedge between them, but it seems they have reconciled.

Gingerly, I slide out of bed and press my ear against the wall that separates our rooms. As their muffled pleasure becomes more intense, my heart begins

to race. A forbidden thrill courses through my veins and, before I can stop myself, I am crossing the room.

I open the door and peek out into the hallway. Cautiously, I step out into the darkness, and tiptoe the few paces down the hall to their room.

I place my palm on their door. I'm holding my breath, as if they might be able to hear me above the sound of their own arousal. With my other hand, I gently turn the handle then push until a sliver of dim light appears.

Through the opening, I can see the silhouettes of two bodies intertwined. Raksha is lithe and graceful as he moves, and his skin glows in the moonlight from the window. His hair, still in its three customary braids, hangs over his shoulders.

The Bear is his opposite. He's taller and broader than Raksha, his hair shorter and more coarse, his body thick and muscular.

They are on the bed, tangled up in one another. The Bear lies down and Raksha settles between his legs, easing down his underwear. Slowly, Raksha guides The Bear's impressive cock into his mouth, and The Bear's eyes sparkle with pleasure.

Watching them, a murmur flutters from my lips and I dip back into the hall. I take two steps, retreating toward my own room, guilt and heat merging in my core, but then I turn around.

When I look back, they have switched position. Raksha is face down on the bed and The Bear is behind him. When The Bear enters him, Raksha growls into the mattress and lifts his hips so he can wrap his fist around his own cock.

I watch, transfixed, as their bodies begin to glisten with sweat, and their faces flush with heat. The Bear's thrusts become deeper and more powerful as he folds his body over Raksha's, kissing his neck and his shoulders.

When he comes, he is completely silent. Raksha is louder. He cries out and his entire body jerks with pleasure as his orgasm explodes onto the sheets beneath his stomach.

Eventually, they collapse into each other, exhausted and panting. The Bear

lies by Raksha's side, and Raksha slings a comfortable arm across The Bear's large chest. As they begin to whisper to one another, a second wave of guilt washes over me. I should not be watching them. I should not be *enjoying* watching them. Turning away, I'm about to retreat to my room when I realise I am being watched too.

"Did you enjoy the show, Princess?" Khan growls at me from the darkness. Although I can barely see him, I can sense him. I can feel the tightness in his muscles, and the lust coursing through his veins.

"You disgust me." My entire body bristles with annoyance but, at the same time, it aches with the need to be close to him. It has been too long since I felt him inside me.

"No," he says, "I do not."

He edges closer, and his hand finds my waist.

"I hate that I cannot hate you," I whisper as his fingers travel slowly up my side.

"You can keep pretending. If you like," he says, leaning in to graze my neck with his teeth. "Angry Gliana is better than no Gliana."

"You lied to me."

"I apologise." Those words, on Khan's lips, make me pause. I frown at him in the darkness.

"You apologise?"

"Yes," he says firmly. "I should have told you the truth when you asked why I wear this chain." Cool metal brushes my thigh as he moves closer still. "Am I forgiven?"

"No," I tell him. "You are not. You took The Bear's hand. You left him to die."

"He was keeping me from you." Khan's hand slides beneath my shirt and finds my breast. I glare at him in the darkness as his fingers begin to play with my nipple but, a moment later, a hum of pleasure escapes from between my lips. "Nothing will ever keep me from you, Princess. I would slaughter an

entire village of your closest friends if I thought they were trying to keep me from you.”

“How can you...” My breath hitches as he pulls open my shirt and sucks my nipple into his mouth. “How can you say that?”

He releases me and looks up. “Because it is the truth. I care only for you. Not another soul on this earth means anything to me.”

“Then you should care what I want, tiger,” I tell him, trying not to let my cheeks flush as he kisses the spot beneath my ear that drives me wild.

Khan pauses. He stands back and his brow creases. “You make a good argument,” he says. “All right, Princess.” He hooks his hand between my legs and simply rests it there, applying torturously little pressure to my now-aching clit. “How about this?” he says as he begins to move his fingers, barely touching me but making me come alive all the same. “In future, I’ll ask your permission before I maim...”

He finds the spot just above my clit, that drives me wild, and presses down firmly.

Just once.

Hard.

“Or torture.”

He removes the pressure, then applies it again, quicker this time.

“Or kill.”

This time a long, hard stroke that makes my clit throb.

“Any of your friends.”

I nod, unable to speak.

In an instant, Khan grabs me and pins me up against the wall. I wrap my legs around him and he clasps me close. I can feel the head of his cock at my entrance, and I know I am already wet for him. “I can always smell when you're ready for me,” he purrs. “You were ready before I even touched you.”

“That wasn’t your doing, tiger,” I taunt, jerking my gaze toward Raksha’s door.

Khan’s eyes darken. “Is that so?” As he speaks, he thrusts up inside me and begins to move.

My reply is a muffled, “Yes,” but I have no idea if I’m answering his question or crying out because of the way he is moving his hips.

Khan does not reply. Instead, he carries me back to my room, still inside me, hands clawing at my back, lips torturing my neck with kisses that take my breath away.

As the door clatters back, instead of moving to the bed, Khan lowers me into a chair near the unlit fire, grabs my hips, and flips me over.

I sit up on my knees, upper half draped over the back of the chair.

“You have no idea what it does to me,” he growls, “knowing that you’re always ready for me.” He holds my waist and pulls me roughly onto his cock. Unable to wait any longer, I use every ounce of strength in my body to press myself back against him.

“You’re not in charge this time, Princess,” he murmurs as he gently grabs my hair, pulling my head back.

“Then who is?” I moan, feeling him slide in even deeper.

“I am.”

I gasp as he enters me fully. He pauses, letting me savour it, then withdraws just a few inches before plunging back in.

I feel him shift his grip, still holding onto my hip with one hand while he moves his other so his thumb can rub my clit.

A familiar rush of pleasure trickles through every cell in my body as he rolls my clit back and forth, rubbing it up and down again and again.

“Did you miss me, Princess?” he asks, the power of his thrusts almost pushing me forward off the chair.

“No,” I tell him. “I did not.”

The movement stops. I try to move my hips, so the pressure on my clit continues, but he still doesn't move. There is a pained pleasure in my voice as I whimper, "Don't stop."

"I'll ask you again," Khan whispers. "Did you miss me, Princess?"

A smile twitches on my lips. "No," I say forcefully, enjoying my torture. "I did not."

With that, Khan pulls away from me. I look over my shoulder to see him watching me.

It's my move.

Slowly, I stand, then I put my hands on his shoulders and force him to the ground. When he is lying flat on the floor, I lower myself onto him. His eyes widen with pleasure, but then I sit up. This time, he forces my hips down onto his cock again. He takes my hair in both of his hands, holding me still, holding me up. He starts to slide himself in and out of me. It's driving me crazy. I want him so much I can hardly see straight.

Suddenly, I am whispering, "Please, please, please," although I'm not even sure what I'm begging for.

"I'm not going to let you come until you tell me you missed me, Princess."

"All right," I cry out as his thumb returns to my clit. My eyes meet his. "I missed you."

Finally, he smiles. He wraps his arms around my waist and pulls me down to kiss him. As he thrusts up into me, I slide my hand between us and stroke my clit with long, hard, circles. Just like he did.

With one hand still on my hip, he moves the other to my breast then licks his fingers and rolls them over my nipple. When he turns stroking to pinching, a jolt of heat zips to my core.

Pleasure assaults every inch of my body. It moves through me in waves, rippling again, and again, and again.

As I come, Khan's body stiffens, and he lets out a guttural roar, sitting up and pulling me to his chest as he growls into my neck.

We stay like that for a long moment, breathing heavily against one another. When he lifts his head and sweeps my hair from my face, a rush of emotion swells in my chest. “I really did miss you,” I tell him. “But if you hurt my friends again, I will kill you.”

“That is a fate I would readily except,” he says, pressing a kiss to the apex where my neck meets my shoulder.

Tweaking my index finger beneath his chin, I look into his eyes. “Do not tempt fate, Khan. I mean it. You love me, you love The Bear and Raksha too. You take care of us all.” I loop my arms behind his neck. “We have to be on the same side in this,” I tell him. “We have to trust each other.”

“You can trust me, Princess.” He squeezes the fleshy part of my hip and I swear I almost hear him purr. “Do you trust me?”

For a moment, I stare into his eyes. Then I nod. “Yes, but I do not trust this city. Not now it is under Kaa’s control. So, we should sleep. We will need our wits about us tomorrow.”

“Whatever you say, Princess.” Khan scoops me into his arms, stands, and carries me to the bed. “Whatever you say.”

RAKSHA

I wake to the smell of sex lingering in the air. And not just our sex.

Swinging my legs out of the bed, I pad into the hallway. The scent is stronger here, and it carries both Giana and Khan with it.

Since the temple, they have not touched each other, and I'm not ashamed to say I've taken pleasure in watching their icy attitude toward one another. Even though I've also seen the sadness in her eyes when she thinks no one is looking, and the way her body seems to vibrate with the need to be close to his.

But it seems they have found their way back to each other.

Pushing open Giana's bedroom door, I take in their naked forms, tangled together beneath the sheets. "It's morning," I bark gruffly.

Giana stirs, but it is Khan who looks up at me. I expect him to smirk – the cat who got the princess. Instead, he moves the sheet to cover Giana's exposed body, and says, "We will be down in a moment, pup. Why don't you see if there is any food in the kitchen?"

Allowing the door to clatter closed behind me, I shake my arms and hands to

free them of the need to shift. I have never spent so long in human form before, and it is starting to become difficult to resist the urges when they strike.

When I reach the kitchen, I step inside and lean against the wooden countertop. My feelings for Gliana have not disappeared. Even though I have distracted myself with The Bear...

No, that's not right.

I have not used him. I have enjoyed him. I care for him.

But I care for Gliana too. And like the urge to shift, the urge to tell her how I feel is becoming harder and harder to ignore.

"It seems our tigers are friends again," The Bear says as he pushes open the door.

I turn to face him, and smile as he hooks an arm around my waist and kisses me.

"It seems so," I reply.

"Does it bother you?" The Bear leans back against the counter opposite and folds his arms in front of his chest.

One of the most endearing things about him – and about this strange relationship we have developed – is that he isn't jealous. Not one shred. Not of Gliana's feelings for Khan, or my feelings for her, or hers for me.

"Yes." I turn and open a cupboard, pulling out a jar of what looks like thick brown soil. I open the lid and sniff. The smell is so strong it nearly knocks me out. Coughing, I slam the lid back on, nose wrinkling. "What is this stuff?"

The Bear laughs loudly, tipping his head back with a guffaw I haven't heard before. "It's coffee, Raksha," he says, taking the jar from me. "You have never tasted coffee?"

"Why would I want to? It smells dreadful. I'd rather lick rainwater from Khan's armpits than drink that stuff."

This time, The Bear quirks his eyebrows at me. “You might change your mind about that when you taste it.”

As he lights the stove and boils some water, I continue looking for food. I find none, but The Bear simply shrugs.

“The coffee will keep us going for now.” He spoons some into a strange-looking pot, fills it with the boiling water, then sets it aside. When he walks to the window, he peers out and says, “Should we fetch Bagheera?”

“I’m sure she would join us if she wanted to.”

The Bear nods. When the coffee is brewed, he pours it and hands me a mug. The smell is slightly less awful now it’s been diluted, but it still makes the back of my throat feel strange. “She has been right about everything so far,” The Bear says.

“Only one thing that we know of,” I correct him. “Which is that Kaa has taken over the city.”

The Bear tilts his head in agreement, and sips from his mug. As he drinks, he closes his eyes, then releases a deep sigh. “Fuck me, that’s good.”

I have never heard him curse before, and the sound of the word on his lips makes my cock twitch. In an effort to distract myself from it, I raise my mug and force myself to take a long sip. It has barely touched my tongue when I start coughing, run to the sink, and spit it out. Wiping my mouth with the back of my hand, I shake my head. “No. No way. Never again. That stuff is awful.”

“Do I smell coffee?” Gliana and Khan enter the room at the same time.

I spit into the sink again, and pump some water from the tap, lapping at it to rinse the taste from my mouth.

“Too strong for you, young pup?” Shere Khan drawls, pouring himself a large mug and drinking it down in barely a few gulps. This time, he does smirk.

“Only masochists would drink that,” I bite back.

“Is there any food?” Gliana’s stomach growls loudly as she repeats my circuit

around the kitchen, checking each cupboard.

“Seems not.” I fold my arms to stop my own stomach from rumbling.

“No matter. We should get moving.” Shere Khan slams his mug down and nods at me.

I frown at him. “Me? You want me to come with you?”

“As much as it pains me to admit it, your senses are sharper than a human’s. And you are faster if we need to run.” He rolls his shoulders back, his striped ink rippling beneath his shirt. “Gliana and The Bear can stay here with Bagheera.”

“And where exactly are you two going?” Gliana asks, tapping her foot. “I thought we were doing this together?”

His tone shifting slightly, becoming just a degree warmer, Khan’s lip twitches as he looks at her. He loves it when she is defiant. I can smell it on him. “We will enter the castle together, but we need information first. And there is no sense in risking your safety until we have to.”

“Information? I thought you said you knew how we’d get inside?” Gliana’s features sharpen with distrust.

“Sadly, no. With Kaa in control, the landscape has changed. Which means we need help.”

“Help?” The Bear narrows his eyes.

Khan nods. “Yes, help. From an old friend.”



As we make our way through the deserted city, death and fear hang thick in the air.

“To think,” I mutter. “All these years, I dreamed of seeing Valoria.”

“It was not always like this,” Khan says. “But it was always a hell hole. Since The Cullings, at least.”

We pause at the end of an alleyway, cloistered in shadow. “I was lucky,” I say, a little too loudly. “Lucky I wasn’t here when they were happening.”

Khan’s back visibly ripples with tension as I speak. “Lucky your cowardly kind took to the jungle and hid themselves away?” Khan growls. “Oh yes, wolf. You were lucky.”

I’m about to reply when he darts out of the alley, cuts down another, and then another.

It is as if he knows the entire city by heart.

Probably, he does.

Eventually, he brings us to what looks like a disused warehouse. Two large wooden doors close off the entrance, but Khan avoids them completely and gestures for me to follow him around to the back. Here, another door greets us. Smaller, and made of metal. Khan taps three times, and a small window opens.

He mutters something. It sounds like, “Amethyst,” and there is a long pause.

Then the door swings open. Inside, we enter a small corridor that leads to an even smaller set of stairs. We follow them down and emerge in a dimly lit room.

The air is half choked with smoke, and shady figures sit clustered at tables with their backs to the walls.

Some are gambling, others are drinking, a few are fucking.

In the corner of the room, there is a small dirty bar. Khan paces over to it and exchanges quiet words with the barman. When he returns to me, he nods, gesturing for me to follow him through to a back room.

“Who exactly are we looking for, Khan?” I ask as he bangs a large oak door with his fist. Twice.

“We’re looking for Louie,” Khan replies tightly.

“Louie?”

“He runs Valoria’s underworld. He knows this city, and the villains who live here, better than even I know it. So, if anyone can tell us what’s happening up at the castle – and how to get in – it’s him.”

“And he’ll help us because?” I bite the inside of my cheek. Relying on a criminal for help seems like a foolish plan.

“Because he knows I keep my word, and if he asks for something from me in return, I’ll be duty-bound to give it to him.”

Finally, the door opens and we’re greeted by a hulking, bald brute with arms thick as tree trunks. He scowls at Khan, then his mouth stretches into a grin. He lunges forward, and pulls Shere Khan into a tight embrace, thumping him on the back. “Well, well, well. The kingdom’s best bounty hunter returns. At last.” When he steps back, he leans on the doorframe. “And what bounty do you seek this time, Khan?”

“Actually, Tarro,” Khan replies, his eyes darting into the room behind the door. “It’s Louie I seek.” He takes a breath, then adds, “I need his help.”

Tarro clears his throat, and something flickers in his eyes.

“Is he here?” Again, Khan tilts his head, trying to look past Tarro into the shadows beyond.

“Khan... have you not heard?” Tarro says, his tone shifting with... fear? Is that fear I can smell?

As if he senses it too, Khan's eyes narrow to golden slits. “Tarro, where's Louie?” he demands.

This time, Tarro steps aside and allows us past. My eyes adjust quickly, taking in an empty desk and a large leather chair. “Times have changed, Khan. We don’t control things around here anymore.”

“Tarro,” Khan spits, stalking forward, flicking his wrist to expose his long metal claws. “Where is Louie?”

Tarro sighs heavily. He leans back against the desk just as Khan squares up to him, raising his talons to Tarro’s face. “He’s not here. He’s in jail, where

you'll soon be too if you're foolish enough to stay around these parts.”

There is a flicker of a pause, and then Khan laughs. “Louie? Jail? In all the times he’s been arrested, he’s never—”

“Things are different now. Louie can’t pull strings. Kaa replaced the King’s men with his own.”

“Kaa resides in the castle now?”

Tarro shakes his head. “No. He is still in Calandria. He gave Valoria to his jackal General Tabaqui.”

At the mention of the name, Khan shudders. He steps back and retracts his talons.

“Tabaqui has put almost every citizen on house arrest. No one is allowed in or out of their homes unless it’s a trading day. And his men can’t be bought like the King’s could.” Tarro taps the desk and sighs. “Louie is finished. He’ll rot in there along with the rest of them.”

As Khan turns away, rubbing his palm over his face, I take his elbow. “Do we need Louie? If the city is overrun with Kaa’s men, and even the king of the underworld has been captured... isn’t that a pretty big sign we should leave?”

Khan lets out a slow sigh and shakes his head. “Gliana needs answers. She won’t leave until she has seen her parents.” He meets my eyes. “You know how stubborn she is.”

Unable to stop myself, I chuckle. “Yes, I know.”

“Then it seems we’ll need to pay Louie a visit, and extract him.”

“Extract him?”

Khan nods. “At least this way, it will be Louie who owes us a favour. Not the other way around.”

SHERE KHAN

When we arrive back at the tavern, I tell Raksha to keep watch outside the stable.

“You’re not going to tell the others what we’re doing?” he asks.

“There isn’t time. I don’t trust Tarro as far as I can throw him. If we’re going to get Louie, we do it now. Before he has the chance to curry favour with a guard by telling them what we’re planning.”

Raksha’s eyes narrow. He pulls one of his braids over his shoulder and twists it in his hands. “Does honour amongst thieves not apply in this city?”

When I laugh, he tilts his head questioningly. “I have asked myself the same thing,” I tell him.

It’s funny, when we’re away from Giana, I forget how much I hate him. In fact, something inside me seems to almost enjoy his company. Probably because he’s the only other changeling I’ve ever met. Even if it is a fucking wolf.

“Well?” Raksha asks, staring at me. “Are you going to get her?”

I grunt at him in reply and disappear into the stables. Bagheera is dozing in a

back stall, her glossy black form barely visible in the shadows. At my soft approach, one dark brown eye cracks open, gleaming in the darkness.

“We need your help,” I tell her, folding my arms.

She lifts her head slowly, blinking away sleep. After scrutinising me for a long moment, she rises gracefully to her feet. With a shimmer, she shifts back into her human form and clicks her neck from side to side as she adjusts to her new body. “What is it you need?” she asks.

“I need a witch to help me break into a jail.”

Bagheera scuffs her foot on the floor. It reminds me of the way she would object to my plans when we travelled together – by scraping the earth with her right hoof. “You are not referring to the castle?”

“No. We need Louie to get into the castle, and Louie is currently languishing in the city jail. Plus, it’ll be a nice trial run. If we can’t get in and out of the jail successfully, there is no way we’ll get into the castle.”

Regarding me with her customary inscrutable calm, Bagheera reaches one long-fingered hand toward her waist. I tense, but she merely unhooks her carved wooden staff from her belt.

Holding it out in front of her, she casts her eyes down and mutters something I do not understand. As she does, it glows blue.

I take a step back, a familiar sense of distrust stirring in my gut. But then she holds out her hands. “Here,” she says. “Take it. I have commanded it to listen to your instructions now, Khan.”

I do not move. Apprehension climbs up my spine.

“When you are ready, use it to summon a mist that will mask your entrance,” says solemnly, stepping forward to press the staff into my hands.

“Use it? How?”

“Speak the words *kalorvë thel nistra* and the mist will come to you. It will confuse the guards, make them see threats where there are none. When they are fighting invisible demons, you can slip past, steal the keys, and free your friend.”

“Louie is no friend of mine,” I growl as my fingers curl around the staff. “You know that. You were there. You know what he has put us through over the years.”

“I do,” she says, something close to a laugh bubbling in her throat. “But I also know he has let you live. Every time he had the chance to kill you, he let you live. And that means something to a man like Louie. So...” She nods at the staff. “Take this and get him out of there. If he wasn’t your friend before, he will be after you’ve rescued him.” She pauses, smiling. “And it is better that he owes you a favour than the other way around.”

Without meaning to, I laugh and shake my head. “That’s exactly what I said to Raksha.”

Our eyes meet. Bagheera nods and reaches out to put her hand on my upper arm. “I’m sorry I lied to you, Shere Khan,” she says. “But our friendship was never a lie. I only ever wanted to help you.”

As I stare at her, the staff thrums with power. Bagheera is a witch, and this witch has just willingly handed her weapon to me. Perhaps I should rethink my distrust of her, after all.

But before I can reply, she taps the staff with her index finger. “Do not attempt to do anything else,” she says. “Although it will obey you, all magic comes with a cost. Especially when you are not trained to use it properly. Do only what is needed, then let it recede.”

I nod and gingerly put my hand on her forearm. “Thank you.”

She blinks back at me, a silent acknowledgement of the bond that – despite my trying to dislodge it – still ties us together. “We will be quick. In and out with Louie before they know what has happened. We will be back before nightfall.”



We approach the central city jail as the sun reaches midday.

At the wrought-iron gates barring entry to the courtyard, I look at Raksha and nod. The carved wood of Bagheera's staff sits heavily in my hands. "This better work," I mutter. As much because I am hoping she is about to prove I can trust her as because it is our only way into the jail.

"You remember the incantation?" Raksha asks.

I reply by repeating the words Bagheera taught me. At first, nothing happens. I try again. Still nothing. The third time, the staff begins to glow.

"Holy moons," Raksha mutters, stepping back as a rolling mist pours from the tip of the staff.

"Holy moons," I repeat.

Slowly, the fog billows forth, growing thicker and faster until it engulfs the exterior of the courtyard in a dense white haze.

"What now?" Raksha asks.

"Now? We wait."

As the mist seeps inside the prison walls, creeping up the uneven stone and swirling around the wooden pillars of the gallows, shouts begin to ring out from the guards' lookout points.

Still, the mist rises higher, blocking out the sun and our presence at the gates.

"Bagheera said the mist will conjure images that do not exist." I lock eyes with Raksha. "If that happens... whatever you see... remember it is not real."

Before Raksha can reply, the mist begins to shift. Something inside it darkens, swirling like a cyclone in a storm. A roar breaks out, rattling the prison walls.

The cries of the guards grow louder and more frenzied, their shouts bleeding into the echo of the mist's deafening roar.

I grip hold of the iron gates and peer through the bars. Slowly, carved from the very fabric of the mist, a shape begins to emerge.

"What is that?" Raksha whispers.

I can feel his hairs prickling with fear but cannot take my eyes from the mist as a huge serpentine body emerges, coiling and twisting, scales shimmering as they catch stray beams of sunlight.

“Is that...” Raksha takes a step back, “a dragon?”

In answer to his question, a pair of huge mist-formed wings unfolds, and I swear to the ancestors I can feel the wind on my face as they beat the air.

Cries of, “Dragon!” ring out. Footsteps thunder toward us on the cobbles.

“It is not real.” I grip Raksha’s arm. “It is *not* real.”

“It feels real,” Raksha says, clutching his chest. “I feel it here.” He meets my eyes. “Terror, Khan. Can’t you feel it?”

Shaking my head, I tighten my grip on him. “It is *not* real.”

Behind the gates, the dragon’s mouth opens wide, emitting a stream billowing orange mist that heats the air as if it truly were made of flame. The illusion is so convincing, I almost run.

“It’s working.” Raksha nudges me and points through the moving mist. “They’re leaving their posts.”

Barely a moment later, the gates swing open and prison guards stream out into the street. Colliding with one another, tripping over their own feet, they scream and run and leave the prison completely unguarded.

I nod at Raksha, hold on tight to Bagheera’s staff, and stride inside.

Beneath the gallows, I grab hold of a passing guard, throw him to the floor and rip the keys from his belt. My instinct is to kill him, but there is no time and no need, so I simply grab him by his tunic and snarl into his face, “Where are they holding Louie?”

The guard’s eyes widen. Above us, the roaring mist dragon swirls up into the sky then back down to hover above the courtyard.

“East wing...” the guard stutters.

“And where is the East wing?”

He raises a shaking hand and points to the other side of the courtyard. “Cell fifteen. It’s...” the guard draws in a trembling breath as the dragon once more beats its wings, “the large bronze key.”

I look down at the keys, lift up the bronze one, and he nods.

My jaw tics. The last creature I killed was the jaguar that attacked Gliana, and the urge to spill this man’s blood is almost overwhelming.

“Khan...” Raksha puts his hand on my shoulder.

I tut and let the guard go. As he scrabbles away, I jerk my head for Raksha to follow me.

We cross the courtyard, past the gallows, and enter through a pair of large oak doors which have been left unlocked by the fleeing guards.

As we move deeper into the prison, the sound of the chaos outside fades, replaced by the distant cries of prisoners.

“Let us out...”

“What is happening?”

“Unlock the cells...”

Nudging my arm, Raksha whispers, “Khan, we could free them...”

“No time,” I bite back, creeping swiftly but cautiously through the mist-filled halls.

Finally, we reach the wing that houses Louie’s cell. I flatten myself against the damp stone wall, peering around the corner toward his door. A single guard stands in front of it, the tip of his spear bobbing unsteadily as he listens to the chaos outside.

“You should leave...” Louie’s voice, smooth as ever, filters out from beneath the cell door. “Let me out, Franko, and I’ll make sure you escape unharmed.”

“And how will you do that, Louie?” the guard bites back.

“Let me out, and you’ll see.”

As Louie continues to taunt the guard, I hand Raksha the staff and nod for him to stay put. Then I free my talons.

My mouth moistens at the thought of using them. The way they feel when they slice through flesh. The moment of resistance before the blood spills free.

I am almost on him when some base instinct – fear probably – alerts the guard to my presence. But it is too late. My claws arc across his exposed throat, and he collapses without even a gurgled cry.

Using the bronze key, I unlock the door and heave it open. Inside, Louie looks up sharply from where he sits. His ginger hair is matted and dirty, his face thinner than when I last saw him, causing his cheeks to droop and his eyes to look sunken. But when he sees me, a grin spreads across his face.

“Well, well,” he says, “took you long enough,” although he looks unsteady as he rises to his feet.

“Be grateful I came at all,” I retort. “I was tempted to leave you to rot.”

Louie laughs loudly at that, but doesn’t attempt to move toward me, so I enter and tuck my arm under his.

As Louie leans into me, a sigh rattles in his chest. He clears his throat loudly, but his eyes are watery and his cheeks pink.

“Come, old friend,” I say quietly. “Let’s get you out of here.”

GLIANA

“I never thought I would see the day we were standing in a kitchen together drinking coffee.” The Bear pours me another cup. The pot is nearly empty – it is the second one we have made since Raksha and Khan left – and my stomach growls ever-louder with hunger.

“If only it didn’t smell of death and stale ale,” I reply, raising the mug to my lips and savouring its warm contents.

“You sound like Raksha,” The Bear says. “He told me the same thing...”

“Last night?” I ask, colour flushing my chest.

“Yes. Last night.”

As I finish my coffee, I tuck my hair behind my ear and wrinkle my nose at the way it feels between my fingers. “It needs to be washed.” I examine it closely, tutting at its oily hue.

“I can help you if you like.” Bagheera’s voice drifts over from the doorway.

“I thought you were staying on four legs?” The Bear says.

“I smelled the coffee. I couldn’t resist.” She walks to the pot and adds, “May

I?”

The Bear nods. “Help yourself.”

As Bagheera pours, she gestures to the sink. “I can help you wash it,” she says. “If you’d like me to.”

Like this, perhaps for the first time since she revealed herself to us, Bagheera seems... normal. Not a witch or a changeling, just a woman. A friend even. Drinking coffee. Offering to help me wash my hair.

“Thank you,” I tell her. “I would appreciate that.”

“While you do that,” The Bear says, placing a firm hand on my shoulder, “I will patrol outside. I want to make sure we are still alone.”

I squeeze his fingers, thank him, then head to the sink.

Setting down her coffee cup, Bagheera pulls a stool over and motions for me to sit down. Leaning back, I allow my hair to hang down into the basin. She picks up a bar of slightly grey, scentless soap and makes a tutting sound. “This will have to do,” she says. Then she adds, “The water will be cold. Are you ready?”

I nod, shuffling my shirt down over my shoulders a little so it doesn’t get wet, but clasping it closed at the front.

Bagheera is right – the water is ice cold. As it makes contact with my scalp, I breathe in sharply and shiver.

“Sorry,” Bagheera says gently, using her palm to keep the water from spilling into my eyes.

“It’s okay. It’s... refreshing.”

For a few long quiet seconds, Bagheera continues to dampen my hair, then begins to massage in the soap. “You must be tired,” she says. “It has been a long few weeks for you, and you have had a lot to take in.”

A sigh blooms beneath my ribs. “Yes. I am tired.”

“You have done well,” she says, helping me sit up now that my hair has been washed free of the soap. Reaching for a dishcloth, she hands it to me.

I sit forward on the stool and use the cloth to squeeze out some of the moisture. It catches some, but some drops escape and fall onto the floor, forming a small puddle at my feet.

“Shall I braid it for you?” Bagheera asks.

I nod, surprised by how nice it feels to have someone take care of me.

She uses her fingers to tease some free some of my tangles and says, “You are strong, Giana. But you do not have to be alone to be strong.”

I swallow forcefully, a clot of emotion settling at the base of my throat.

“Khan loves you,” she says, turning me sideways on the stool so she can begin the braid.

“I know he does.” My reply is a little sharp, a little indignant. Perhaps because I feel guilty for tumbling into bed with him last night, perhaps because I do not like the feeling that Bagheera knows Khan’s heart better than I do.

“He is a tiger, Giana, and he will always be a tiger.” She pats my shoulder. “He has done bad things. But he is not a bad man.”

“I know.” This time, my reply is softer. Because it is true. I know he is not a bad man. I would not love him this fiercely if he was.

When Bagheera has finished, she steps in front of me and smiles proudly. “You look lovely.”

I reach up and stroke the braid. It is damp but perfect. “Thank you.”

Bagheera nods, then gestures to the door. “You should get some rest while they are gone.” She smooths her robes, then helps me up from the stool. “And you should make your peace with Khan before we leave for the castle.” She meets my eyes and squeezes my hand. “I do not know what faces us, but I know you must reconcile with your tiger before we face it.”

“We already...” I stop, blushing a little.

“Your bodies reconciled,” Bagheera replies. “But I’m talking about your heart, Giana. Make sure he knows your heart.”



Upstairs, in sheets that smell of Khan, I close my eyes.

Outside, the city barely makes a sound. I search for signs that The Bear is pacing the perimeter of the building, but I cannot hear him or sense him.

As I sink into the mattress, a sudden wave of tiredness washes over me, and I feel myself relax. But then I jolt upright.

The crack of a hairbrush hitting the stone floor sends a rod of panic down my spine.

“Foolish, clumsy girl.” My mother’s voice seeps into crevices of my bones. “Sit still,” she hisses, yanking violently on my hair as she gestures for me to pick up the brush.

Sitting in front of her, cross-legged, I bite my lip and try not to cry. I hand it back to her, and my body tenses in frightened anticipation.

Sighing, the Queen resumes brushing but her strokes are rough and my scalp burns from her constant pulling. I want to ask her to stop, but last time I begged her to be gentle, she struck me hard enough to split my lip.

She gives another sharp tug that makes my eyes water.

I do not speak, but I do gasp as she rips through a particularly stubborn knot.

The brush clatters down again. This time, it is because she has thrown it to the ground on purpose. Not just because it slipped from her grasp.

My shoulders hunch, waiting for another pull or a sharp slap across the back of my head.

When nothing comes, I turn and look over my shoulder. She is simply staring at me, her eyes dark, her hands folded in her lap.

Raising her voice, she calls, “I need scissors. Bring me scissors.”

Dread solidifies in my gut.

I shake my head but cannot speak. I try to stand, but her fingers grip my shoulder and force me to stay seated.

It is Matilda who brings the scissors. She is only a little older than me, and her eyes shimmer with pity as she hands them over.

My mother's lip curls cruelly as she examines the blades. Matilda is about to walk away, when my mother says, "Hold her still."

Matilda blinks, her small hands shaking. "Ma'am?" she asks, barely whispering.

"You heard me." My mother nods.

"It's all right." I meet Matilda's eyes, and smile at her. "I won't struggle."

Kneeling in front of me, Matilda places her hands on my arms. My mother takes hold of my hair and tugs. The sound of metal on hair makes me wince, but I do not move for I know Matilda will be punished if I do.

A lock of my thick black hair falls into my lap.

A tear rolls down my cheek.



The next day, I sit alone in the courtyard, unable to stop fiddling with the short, ragged strands of hair that now prickle the back of my neck.

Footsteps approach on the cobblestones. I glance up and my stomach drops as Blue approaches.

Heat rushes to my cheeks. I imagine how I must look to him. I drop my gaze, blinking back a fresh wave of tears.

"Princess?" Blue's voice is soft, tentative. He crouches down in front of me, checking over his shoulder that no one is watching us, his brow furrowed

with concern. “Are you all right?”

I clench my trembling hands, staring at the ground.

Blue touches my shoulder gently. “Your mother did this?” he asks, a darkness in his voice that I haven’t heard before.

I nod and, finally, look up at him.

“Please, don’t cry,” he says.

“But... I look...” A sob wracks my chest.

“You look beautiful.” Blue grins at me. “Strong, powerful... beautiful.”

As I stare back at him, the humiliation that crawled beneath my skin begins to soften. “You mean that, don’t you, Blue?”

He nods firmly.

I reach for his hand, but daren’t touch him. Not here. Not where we could be seen. “Thank you,” I smile. “You always know what to say.”

He smiles back then, from his pocket, he produces a slightly crushed wildflower. He tucks it gently behind my ear. “Keep your light burning, Princess.”



When I wake, The Bear is sitting next to me on the bed. My cheeks are damp. I have been crying.

“You were whimpering in your sleep,” he says softly. “Are you all right, Princess?”

Sitting up, blinking back tears that still swim in my eyes, I do not answer him, just fold myself into his chest and wrap my arms around his neck. “I am now,” I tell him. “I am now.”

SHERE KHAN

I have no idea how long the dragon continues to swoop over the prison, but it is long enough for us to stumble into the shadows and slip out of sight.

“You’re getting better at this,” I tell Raksha as we round a corner. Already, learning from me, his movements are becoming smoother and quieter. He might even make a good hunter one day.

“I am not as useless as you’d like to believe,” Raksha bites back. “Wolves might not be a match for tigers in brute strength but we—”

“Talk too much,” I cut him off. “You talk too much. Be quiet.”

Still using me to hold himself up, Louie chuckles. “You have yourself an apprentice, Khan. And by ‘wolf’ I assume he means werewolf... you didn’t strike me as the type to crave the company of a pet.”

At that, Raksha’s lip curls into a snarl, but he doesn’t give Louie the satisfaction of answering back.

“You’re not shocked to encounter a werewolf?” I ask, narrowing my eyes and scrutinising Louie’s expression.

“No more shocked than I am by the fact a tiger just broke me out of prison.”

He raises an eyebrow. When I don't reply, he says, "So, the rumours were true. All those years, I was doing business with a changeling."

"Does that bother you?" I ask, tightening my grip on his waist as I encourage him to walk faster.

"Not in the least," he says. "As long as that business is conducted fairly, I couldn't care a jot whether you're a tiger, a pig, or a unicorn."

"Unicorns are not real," Raksha snaps.

"That we know of," Louie replies.

Tensing his jaw, Raksha points up ahead. "We are nearly there. What do we do with him when we—"

"Yes, Khan." Louie straightens himself a little. "What do you intend to do with me? Because I know you didn't free me from jail out of the goodness of your heart." He glances at the staff I'm carrying in my free hand. "And I know magic when I see it. Which means something is brewing."

"I'll explain inside." I meet his eyes. To my surprise, Louie nods and doesn't push me for more answers.

When we reach the tavern, it remains in darkness. No signs of movement.

Using the same route as yesterday, we take Louie to the coal cellar hatch and help him down. We ascend the stairs slowly, Raksha going ahead to check our path remains clear.

We are passing the bar when he stops and sniffs the air. "The kitchen," he says. "They're in the kitchen."

"Who exactly are we talking about?" Louie grumbles. I do not answer him, but when Raksha pushes the door open, he says, "Oh... well now, that's a surprise I didn't expect."

Gliana is perched on the countertop, her legs swinging gently. She is still wearing my shirt, and my slacks, and both are too big to show off the curves I crave. The Bear is next to her, and Bagheera is mixing what looks like a very watery stew on the stove.

Gliana hops down when she sees me. Her hair, freshly washed and braided, hangs over her shoulder. A growl tickles my throat. I want to grab that braid and kiss her.

As if she can sense what I'm feeling, she shakes the braid back and walks over, hands on her hips. "I've heard nothing about you," she says boldly. "But Khan assures me you can help us get into the castle."

Louie's eyes widen. He releases a low, heavy chuckle then whistles. "Khan," he says. "Don't tell me you finally captured your princess?"

Gliana narrows her eyes at him. "How do you know who I am?"

"Oh, Princess," he says, lowering himself into a stool The Bear has dragged over, "everyone in the city knows your face. It was posted through every door and plastered on every public space for months." Louie sucks in a deep breath and chews his bottom lip. "Kaa wants you dead," he says. "Which means everyone else in Valoria wants you dead too."

"I do not care what Kaa wants." Gliana draws herself up to her full height. For the second time, I swear I see freckles of violet dance in her eyes.

"Then what do you care about?" Louie is intrigued. I can see it in his eyes – the familiar sparkle that betrays his interest in something.

I step back, watching with the others as Gliana's presence seems to swell and glow and fill the entire room.

"I'm here to speak to my parents," she says, folding her arms in front of her chest. "Was Khan right? Are you the man who can help me do that?"

Louie assesses her for a moment, then braces his hands on his knees. He clears his throat, then looks at me. "Before I answer your princess's question, may I have a drink? I am parched."

The Bear moves toward the sink to oblige but Louie shakes his head. "This is a tavern, soldier."

The Bear's eyes darken. Louie is good at reading people, and it is undoubtedly unnerving.

"You are quite clearly a soldier." Louie takes in the dagger on The Bear's

belt and the trim of his leather gloves. “One of The Colonel’s. Although it seems you escaped before it became Kaa’s army.”

The Bear does not reply.

“Ale,” Louie says, tipping his head in the direction of the bar. “I don’t care if it’s stale or warm as old cow’s milk. I need a tankard of ale if you’d like my assistance.”

We sit in silence until The Bear returns. Louie shifts on his stool and holds his side as if it is causing him pain. I do not ask whether it is. I need him to feel like Louie again. I need him fighting fit, and it is more important that his mind is strong than his body.

Finally, after drinking down half the tankard in just a few large gulps, Louie wipes his mouth with the back of his hand and nods at Giana. “You expect me to help you enter the castle? Why would I do that?” He inclines his head. “How would I do that? I mean, surely, *you* know the castle better than anyone, Princess.”

“I knew it once,” she says. “But I only saw what I was permitted to see. And things have quite clearly changed since I left.”

Louie nods, his fingers curled around his drink.

At the stove, Bagheera focusses on the stew but I know she is listening.

“Khan, in all the years you hunted this woman...” Louie turns to me, folding one arm across his middle, “you never attempted to break into the castle. Yet you want to do so now? To free a king and queen who hunted you?”

“We are not breaking in to free them.” I take the tankard from Louie and help myself to a large sip. “Giana needs answers only they can provide.”

His nose twitching as he considers my answer, Louie rolls his tongue around his mouth. Finally, he says, “All right. I owe you, Khan. So, I’ll help you. On one condition...”

Giana answers for me. “Anything.”

“When we get in there... Tabaqui is mine.” Louie’s complexion darkens and his lips straighten into a tight line. “He made it his mission to destroy me.

Now it's my turn to destroy him."

A smile tweaks the corner of Gliana's mouth. She extends her hand to shake Louie's. Curling her fingers tightly around his, she says, "You have a deal."



It is almost midnight by the time we retire. In between tankards of ale and bowls of Bagheera's tasteless stew, Louie spent the evening telling us how Kaa's men, led by Tabaqui, took over the city.

"But," Louie said, eyes gleaming, "they've become complacent. They believe they've eradicated any resistance. Been so cruel no one would dare to stand up to them..."

"Which means we can take them while they're not looking," I replied quietly.

Now, lying next to me in the bed, Gliana rolls over onto her side and reaches for my hand. "Do you think Louie's plan will work?"

I trail my fingers up her arm and find the spot beside her collar bone that usually makes her hum with pleasure. "It is the only plan we have."

"Why not use the mist? The dragon got you into the prison." She closes her eyes, not quite giving into my touch but not resisting it either.

"Bagheera said the castle is too big. The mist couldn't fill all of it." I nudge closer and lower my head to kiss her throat. "And while I enjoyed the theatrics of it... I think Louie's right – we need to play to my skills."

Gliana's lips twitch. She opens her eyes and smiles at me. "And what are your skills, tiger?" she asks.

I flick open her top button. "Oh, I have many skills, Princess."

She arches her back slightly, moving into my touch.

"But what Louie's referring to is my ability to hunt... to slide unnoticed into

the shadows and kill a man before he even knows I'm there."

Gliana stops breathing for a moment. Something tingles in the air between us, and the spot at the base of my cock pulses because she *likes* hearing me talk this way.

"So, you will get us into the tower where my parents are being kept..."

I flick free my talons and reach down to trace a long slow line across her thigh.

She shudders beneath my touch. "And Louie will take The Bear and Raksha to ambush Tabaqui."

"If the guards think Louie is out for revenge, we'll be able to reach your parents without anyone realising we're there." I tease the edge of her underwear with my metal, and her legs open for me.

She nods, biting her lip. "That sounds... like a plan."

Easing her over onto her back, I arch myself above her. "These are in the way." I snag the wet fabric between my fingers.

"So, take them off, then," she says, smiling.

But I do not take them off. I rip them open. Holding them away from her with one hand, I use one talon to slice a long thin gash right down their centre.

Gliana gasps, and her eyes widen.

Arousal tugs at my core, and my cock twitches. I'm about to slide down between her legs and use my tongue to make her scream my name when she reaches for my face.

Cupping it in her hands, she says, "Khan?"

I do not like her tone. It is solemn, and serious, and not what I want to hear when I'm thinking about making her come on my tongue.

"I love you."

Okay... that *is* what I want to hear.

Always.

Every day.

I swallow forcefully and press my forehead to hers. “I love you too, Princess.”

I am kissing her gently, teasing her lips with my teeth, when she stiffens beneath me. “Did you hear that?” She sits up on her elbows, staring at the wall opposite us.

I strain my ears. I hear voices. Raksha and The Bear. And then I hear something else... the sound of a belt being unfastened.

Before I can ask how *she* heard it, Giana shakes her head and brings my lips back to hers. “I’m sorry,” she says, “carry on.”

But I pull away from her and study her face. Her cheeks are flushed, her pupils are wide. Desire dances in the air around her. “Do you love them too?”

My question catches her off guard. She sits up, fully this time, and draws her knees to her chest. “I love you,” she says defiantly. “But I *care* for them too.”

I nod slowly. An unfamiliar sensation flickers beneath my skin. It is not jealousy, but something else. “Then you should join them.”

She laughs, loudly, then frowns. “Join them?”

I climb on top of her, pressing her down onto the bed, and pin her arms above her head. “Yes, Princess. If you want to... you should join them.”



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"So, you will get us into the tower where my parents are being kept..."

I flick free my talons and reach down to trace a long slow line across her thigh. "Louie and the others will create a distraction. You and I will head for the tower and find your parents."

She shudders beneath my touch. "And Louie's men?"

"He is sending word to them as we speak."

She nods, biting her lip. "That sounds... like a plan."

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GLIANA

My palm rests on the door, nerves tripping down my spine like sparks of lightning at the beginning of a storm. When I push it open, The Bear is sitting at the foot of the bed and Raksha is standing in front of him, between his legs, belt hanging loose.

Although they are fully clothed, the intimacy of the moment makes me blush and I mutter a hurried apology.

Why am I doing this?

A moment ago, as Khan whispered to me that the thought of hearing me with them – through the wall – would drive him wild with lust, it seemed like a good idea. Now, I feel incredibly foolish.

“Gliana?” Raksha calls. “Wait.”

I turn back, embarrassment humming on my skin.

“Is everything all right?” The Bear asks.

My words catch in my throat. Gingerly, I step inside and press the door closed behind me. Leaning against it, hands behind my back, I look down at the floor because I cannot look at their faces and whisper, “I was hoping I

might join you.”

For a long moment, no one speaks or moves. Then the floorboards creak and, when I look up, Raksha is standing in front of me. His eyes flicker and his fingers reach for mine. “Do you mean...?” Tentatively, he strokes my palm.

I cannot speak. Wetness pools between my thighs at the very thought of being with them both, but I can’t tell him how I feel. How dare I? After all this time?

“If you do,” Raksha says, dipping his head to meet my gaze. “The answer is yes.”

Behind him, The Bear stands and slowly crosses the room. With both of them standing in front of me, the air crackles with heat. “Is that what you meant, Princess?” he asks.

In reply, I simply nod, then slip one hand into Raksha’s and one into The Bear’s.

They look at each other. Something passes between them, and Raksha smiles. “Then you really should be wearing fewer clothes,” he says, his eyes glistening with mischief.

I expect him to unbutton my shirt. Instead, he steps back and waits for me to do it.

I hesitate, but then meet his eyes. And, for the first time in a long time, I see him. The way he was when it was just him and me and the jungle.

Kindness, and eagerness, and *goodness* practically shine on his skin.

I unfasten the buttons slowly, not breaking eye contact.

But when I drop my shirt to the floor, Raksha’s focus shifts. He takes in my breasts, and my stomach, and the swell of my hips. He is still staring when The Bear crosses the room and wraps an arm around my waist.

I look up at him. His body is familiar. He pressed it against me in The Colonel’s castle, the night he helped me escape, and I have remembered it ever since. But his soul is familiar too, and it feels like home.

Moving his other arm to my waist, I take his hand and press it between my legs.

He closes his eyes, and a murmur of pleasure parts his lips. His fingers gingerly skim the top of my thigh, but they stop when they reach my underwear.

“We were...” I trail off, glancing in the direction of my bedroom.

I picture Khan standing on the other side of the wall, hearing every movement, every word, and a trickle of warmth drips down my spine.

To my surprise, The Bear smiles. Then he kneels down in front of me and uses his teeth to tug my underwear to the floor. Hooking them over my ankles, he tosses them aside.

He parts my legs and I gasp as his tongue finds my clit.

When I look up, Raksha is stalking toward me. He grabs my face, and our lips crash together. His hands find my nipples, his mouth finds my throat.

Pleasure builds so quickly inside me I can barely stand, and when The Bear begins to fuck me with his tongue, I feel my knees start to shake.

Snatching me away, Raksha picks me up and carries me to the bed. He puts me down gently, then removes his clothes.

I have seen him like this so many times before – naked and aroused – but this time it is different. This time, I need him to fuck me.

As if he senses it, Raksha runs his hands up my body as he positions himself between my legs. He doesn't hesitate or tease me or try to prolong it, just eases his cock inside me.

When he thrusts for the second time, a cry of pleasure parts my lips and I tip my head back. I am reaching for my clit when I feel another hand there instead.

The Bear lies down next to me, curling himself around my body, one arm above my head while the other slips between Raksha and me. As he rolls my clit beneath his fingers, his mouth warms my nipple and echoes the same rhythm. Swirling, applying pressure, finding a rhythm, then slowing down.

He pauses only to kiss Raksha, and the sight of their lips meeting lights the fuse on a new wave of tiny fireworks. Fizzing beneath my skin, the pressure builds, and builds, and builds.

I grind into The Bear's hand and tilt my hips, causing Raksha to hit the spot that makes me gasp.

I'm on the edge of an explosion, and I both need it and hate it because I don't want it to be over.

Reaching down, I still The Bear's fingers, then I ease Raksha off me and flip over so I'm kneeling. Taking the hint, Raksha moves to my head and slides his cock into my mouth. I have tasted him before, but he has never tasted of both him and me at the same time.

I look for The Bear. He is kneeling beside me, but he is hesitating.

"Are you all right?" Raksha asks him, biting back a moan as I swirl my tongue around the head of his erection.

I stop and turn around.

The Bear shakes his head. "I..." He stops, struggling for the words. Sitting up, I turn and skim my hands over his large, muscular forearms.

"What is it?" I ask, dipping my head to meet his eyes.

He strokes my face, then kisses me gently. "I'd like to look into your eyes the first time we..."

I frown, trying to follow what he's saying.

A small laugh shakes his chest. "I've dreamed of this moment for over a decade, Giana. And each time, I was looking into your eyes when I made you come."

I can't speak. I can hardly even breathe because love and lust are threatening to overwhelm me. Instead, I nod.

Behind me, Raksha sits back against the headboard and opens his legs wide enough for The Bear to sit between them. He rests against Raksha's chest and watches as I remove his pants. Then I brace my hands on his shoulders, look

into his pale blue eyes, and lower myself onto him. His eyes widen. I start to move slowly, then when he groans and kisses me so hard I see stars, I go faster.

I slide my hands up his chest, then reach back to brace them on Raksha's shoulders.

I feel Raksha's hands on my breasts, and The Bear's hand on my back. Their tongues devour me, their groans dissolve into mine. The Bear leans forward and Raksha shifts from behind him, kneeling beside us and touching himself as he watches us fuck. When he comes, he shouts, "Ana..."

This time, I let the explosion happen.

My back arches and I dig my nails into The Bear's shoulders.

He growls and kisses my hand and whispers, "Ana," again and again. A moment later, he thrusts up into me then shudders as an orgasm rolls through his body.

"Blue..." I mutter, kissing his cheek, and his jaw, and his lips.

He opens his eyes and stares into mine.

"There you are..." I kiss his forehead.

"I'll always be here, Princess," he says. "Always."

THE BEAR

ELEVEN YEARS AGO

Music and laughter spill from the wide doors of the King's grand ballroom as nobles in their finery swirl and glide through intricate dances I could never hope to learn the steps to. I pause in the servants' passage with an armful of empty goblets.

I hate nights like this. The King drinks, and the Queen seethes, and by the end of the evening they are either fighting one another or looking for Giana to release some of their pent-up anger.

She is inside the ballroom at this very moment, somewhere in amongst the whirl of colour. Since her mother cut off her hair, Giana has defied her by keeping it cropped. I think it suits her, accentuating the determined set of her jaw and strong curve of her neck. And I can tell she likes it too.

After depositing the dirty dishes in the sink, I make my way back toward the hall, but as I'm passing a darkened alcove, a hand darts out and grabs my

wrist. I'd know that hand anywhere.

"Princess," I breathe. "You shouldn't be back here."

Gliana steps into the flickering torchlight, eyes sparkling. "I needed to escape for a moment. And I wanted to see you."

Heat rises in my cheeks, but I try to shake it off – my instinct to protect her greater than my need to be close to her. "They will miss you soon."

Gliana bites her lower lip. Then she nods. "I'll go," she says. "But would you do something for me first?"

"Anything," I answer without hesitation.

"Would you dance with me, Blue?"

My heart stutters. I should say no. I should tell her to go back to the ballroom because if someone saw us, she would pay the price. But I can't.

I am twelve years old, and I love her, and I can't say no to her.

So, I take her hand and let her guide me into the proper stance. We sway gently, turning in slow circles. The music from the hall is faint, but we don't need it. We have our own rhythm.

She smells of rosewater and honey, so achingly lovely I want to remember this moment for the rest of my life.

"Someday I will have my own party," she murmurs, resting her head on my shoulder. "It will be held in the heart of the jungle, and I will invite only the animals." She laughs and looks up at me. "The animals and you, of course."

"And I would be there in a heartbeat." I stop as the music stops. They really will be missing her soon and she knows it too because she lets go of me and steps back.

"Thank you," she says. "I'm glad I got to dance with my best friend."

She is about to leave when I dart forward and take her hand.

Smiling, she looks down at my fingers as I lift them to my lips. With all the courage I can muster, I brush a feather-light kiss to her knuckles. "Good

night, Princess,” I whisper.

Gliana grins at me. “Goodnight, Blue.”



It is that same night when they come for me.

A hand clamped over my mouth stops me from shouting, and more hands on my arms and feet stop me resisting.

I'm dragged from my bed, past Cook's quarters, and out of the servant's entrance. A sack is thrust over my head and tied around my neck with a thick cord of rope.

No one tries to stop them. No alarm is raised.

No one cares.

Outside I'm loaded into a waiting carriage, wrists and ankles bound, mouth gagged. And as we travel away from the castle, I can feel my heart breaking.

RAKSHA

Khan wakes us before dawn. He rouses me first, and I almost jump right out of bed when I see him staring down at me.

“Khan...”

“It’s all right, pup,” he says, standing back and folding his arms in front of his striped chest. “I’m not angry.”

“You’re not?” I whisper, swinging my legs out of the bed, leaving Giana curled in The Bear’s tight grasp. How is he not angry? I was so angry I could hardly see straight when I found Giana with him. But he’s... fine?

“I want her to be happy,” he replies sharply. “And I’m man enough to make sure she gets what she needs.”

He is goading me. At first, I choose not to rise to it, reaching back and rebraiding my hair instead. But then I can’t help myself. “Oh, trust me,” I say, quirking my eyebrow. “She got what she needed.”

“Boys, really?” Giana’s voice wipes the smile from my face. “I took what I needed,” she says, unwinding herself from The Bear’s embrace. “It wasn’t a gift that you gave me out of the kindness of your hearts.”

My cheeks flush with heat. This side of her was always there – even when I first met her – but she is fierier now than I have ever known her to be, and I can't seem to get enough of it.

As if he can sense the arousal stirring in my pants, Khan jerks his head toward the window. “If we're doing this, we need to do it now, so play time is over I'm afraid.”

Gliana's smile wavers. She tucks a loose strand of hair behind her ear and nods. “All right,” she says. “Then let's do it.”



“Are you sure you know what you're doing, witch?” Louie asks, narrowing his eyes at Bagheera's staff. Though he was shocked to find out a horse, one he apparently once kidnapped, is really a woman, he has now taken the information in his stride. Clearly, though, he trusts her about as much as Khan did when she first revealed herself.

Bagheera's expression remains unreadable as she inclines her head and says, “Yes, Louie, I know what I'm doing.” Then she leans in and, close to his ear, whispers, “And remember, I know *many* things that you have done over the years, too. Just think of all the occasions you believed you were alone, no one but a horse for company. Think of the things I have witnessed you...”

Louie coughs loudly and claps himself on the chest. “Yes, well,” he says, flustered.

Next to Louie, Khan smirks. “She has the measure of you, Louie. We both do. You'd do well to trust her.”

Those words, from Khan's lips, make us all look up. Bagheera frowns.

As if sensing he needs to explain himself, Khan says, “She trusted me with her magic. She would not have done that if she meant us harm.”

Smiling, Gliana slips her hand into his and reaches up to kiss his cheek. “I

agree,” she says.

“Good.” Louie interrupts. “I’m glad we’re agreed. But are we all certain of our roles here? Because...”

“Your men have been told to meet us at the castle gates?”

Louie nods. “I delivered word to them last night.”

“Then everything is set.”



We wait in the shadows in front of the castle, hiding in front of buildings that now lie vacant, until we receive a signal from Louie’s men – the glint of a blade, catching the morning sun as it begins its ascent up over the horizon.

Gliana squeezes my hand and kisses me, then she kisses The Bear. “Take care of one another. I will see you both soon.”

The Bear lingers. He does not smile or tell her he loves her, but he does not need to. It is etched into his muscles, into the way he holds himself, and the way he looks at her. He forces himself to turn away, lightly brushing her hand as he does so.

“See you soon, Princess.” I grin at her.

“Don’t call me *princess*,” she says. “You’ve never known me as a princess. It doesn’t feel right.”

“You can agree on pet names later,” Louie huffs. “Now is not the time.”

Gliana smiles at me and gestures for me to follow The Bear. “Later,” she says, nodding firmly. “I’ll see you later.”

Leaving her with Khan is harder than I expected, but Bagheera walks beside me. She carries her staff proudly, fingers curled around its middle, occasionally stroking the etchings in its surface.

“Are you sure you are ready to expose yourself like this?” I ask her.

She doesn't look at me, just says quietly, “Yes. It is time.”

I glance back at Gliana, but she is no longer visible. “And you're certain she and Khan can get in via the tunnels?”

“If Louie is right about the guard who takes his mistress there at the end of his shift, then yes, Khan will get them in through the tunnels.”

“Then let's hope Louie can be trusted.”



We approach the castle gates slowly. The guards spot us immediately, and shout for us to reveal our purpose. We do not answer, simply allow Bagheera to walk to the front of our group and raise her staff.

As someone shouts, “Who goes there?” Bagheera raises her eyes to the sky.

Her staff begins to glow.

The air thickens, charged suddenly with an electricity that makes the hairs on my arms stand on end. Clouds begin to swirl ominously overhead. In front of us, Bagheera's eyes are closed, her hands extended outward, fingers twitching as if plucking at invisible threads.

It begins to rain. Slow at first, then faster and harder.

A violent gust of wind whips toward us, and a window high up in the castle shatters with the force of the gale.

“Holy gods,” Louie mutters. “She really is a witch.”

“She really is a witch,” I reply.

Bagheera strides forward, raising her voice.

Arrows rain down on us from above, but simply fall in mid-flight.

Her voice is a deep murmur, barely audible over the roaring of the storm she's summoning, yet her tone is laced with power.

When she next opens her eyes, a column of lightning, brilliant white and blinding, lances down from the sky, targeting the chain of the drawbridge with unnatural precision. The sizzling strike breaks the chain in two, and the drawbridge falls with a deafening crash, creating an open path for us.

Within seconds, guards appear, scurrying out onto the drawbridge, weapons raised.

Louie hollers for his men to draw their weapons, and we charge forward.

But the guards are terrified. They stand quaking in a small cluster, staring at Bagheera. They are still staring when a small, skinny figure appears behind them. “Don’t just stand there! Fight!”

“Tabaqui...” Louie growls, his grip tightening on the dagger he is holding.

I am preparing to shift – because a wolf in a fight is better than a human who’s never held properly wielded a blade – when The Bear grabs my elbow. “I have to find the servants,” he says.

“Servants?”

“I heard Louie talking to Khan last night. He said the servants are still here, locked up, being forced to work for Tabaqui and Kaa.”

I frown at him, trying to focus on his words instead of the rain lashing my skin. “That’s not our fight, Bear, not today.”

“I knew those people,” he replies darkly. “I *was* those people. I have to help them. You do not have to come with me but—”

I shake my head at him. “Of course, I will come with you.”



The Bear remembers the castle like it is a part of himself, even though he has not lived here for over a decade. The halls are quiet, but the windows shake with the sound of the storm.

“Where is everyone?”

“They’ll be coming from the guard’s quarters,” The Bear says. “Which means this way will be clear.” He grabs my hand and pulls me into a grand hall, across the flagstone floor, and through a door at the back. But when we round the corner, we run straight into a pair of guards who are – quite clearly – hiding from the fight.

Their eyes widen. The Bear grabs one of them. I try to grab the other, but he is too fast and knocks me to the floor. My blade goes flying. I scramble backwards, but the guard is on top of me. Pinning me down. He takes a dagger from his belt and raises it in the air.

Then there is an arm around his neck. It squeezes hard. The breath leaves his body, and he falls to the side, motionless.

Beside him, the other guard lays staring at the ceiling, eyes unblinking, blood pooling beneath his chest.

The Bear grabs my hand and heaves me to my feet. He nods at me. “Okay?” he asks.

“I’m okay,” I pant in reply.

The Bear nods, takes the keys from the guard’s belt, and moves to the door in front of us. When he opens it, we are greeted by a gaggle of people. Huddled together by the far wall, they stare at us as we enter.

“Cook?” The Bear searches the sea of faces. “Helen, the cook, is she here?” he asks loudly.

“I’m sorry,” someone mutters from the back. “She died a few months ago. She got sick and...” They trail off.

The Bear’s jaw twitches. His fists clench and unclench, and it is then I realise he is bleeding. “You are free,” he tells them, striding to the door opposite and unfastening the lock.

When he flings it open, they do not move.

“You are free,” he says again. “Go... now!”

This time, they move instantly. In a flurry of movement, they run from the room. When the last person disappears through the door, The Bear sways on his feet and lurches forward to grip the counter.

He clutches his side and looks down. A wet stain blooms on his dark tunic.

“You’re hurt.” I steady him, but he eases himself to the floor.

“I’ve had worse,” he says, tipping his head toward the hallway. “The guard back there. He got a strike before I finished him.”

I try to help him up, but he moans with pain and I let go. “We need to leave, Bear. We can’t stay here.”

“I don’t think I can.” He exhales slowly, still gripping his side.

A sense of panic grips my stomach and twists, hard. “Okay,” I tell him. “It’s okay. Stay here. I’ll fetch help.”

“Help?” He closes his eyes and swallows hard.

“Bagheera. She can either fix you with her magic staff or carry you out of here on her back, I don’t care which.” I smile, trying to make him laugh.

The Bear manages a half smile in return, but then leans back against the cupboard behind him. “Thank you,” he says. “I’ll just wait here.”

I crouch down, kiss him swiftly on the lips, and nod. “Yes. Wait here. I’ll be back.”

GLIANA

The tunnels below the castle have always been well guarded. I often dreamed of using them to escape but knew I would not get past the huge iron grate that separated them from the castle's basement.

Thankfully, though, that Louie was right.

As Khan and I wait in the shadows, a solitary figure appears. A woman, in a hooded cloak and a dark dress. She glances behind her, then slips into the entrance of the tunnel.

Shere Khan nods at me, and we follow her without making a sound.

Sticking to the shadowy edges of the tunnel, we draw closer to the flickering orange glow at the other end. Just as Louie predicted, the gates are open. The woman is pressed up against the wall, moaning, and the guard is hidden beneath her skirts.

Khan takes my hand. The woman's eyes are closed, and she is moaning.

A shiver runs through me. When Louie suggested the plan, I asked Khan not to harm the guard's mistress. But suddenly, I'm struck with the thought that he might not care what I have asked of him.

The woman's eyes flutter open, but before she can scream, Khan presses his palm to her mouth. She squirms, and the guard says, "Do you like that, honey?" his voice muffled between her thighs.

Gesturing for me to take his place, Khan moves to the side. I replace his hand with mine and hold the woman tight against me; surprised by my own strength.

This time, the guard seems to sense something is wrong and unbundles himself from her dress. He looks up from his knees. His eyes widen, and Khan drops to the floor so he is crouched opposite him. "You have a choice," he snarls. "You run, and take her with you, and never come back to this wretched castle or I slit your throat."

The guard's mouth drops open. "We'll go," he says, staggering to his feet. "We'll go..."

Khan rises too, and nods for me to let the woman go.

She is shaking, and she grabs onto the guard's arm as they run away. They are barely a few paces away when the guard's hand moves to his side. "Khan, he's reaching for his whistle..."

Barely hesitating, Shere Khan lurches from my side. Even though he is not a tiger at this moment, he moves like one. He pounces on the man's back and thrusts his talons into his side.

When he stands, he rips the whistle free and hangs it around his own neck.

The woman stands, wavering, for a long moment. Then she releases a loud sob and flees.

"Thank you for letting her live." I meet his eyes.

"I made you a promise, Princess. I don't break a promise." He wipes his bloodied claws on his shirt. "But from now on, the guards die. I can't risk letting them go."

I take his hand. "Agreed."



As we travel up from the basement of the castle, the air is still and quiet. The stairs to my parents' tower lie at the end of a long winding corridor. It is empty, save for a few spluttering torches. Clearly, Tabaqui and Kaa don't believe anyone would care enough to come and break them out. Or that they are strong enough to attempt their own escape.

As Khan moves through the castle, his muscles ripple, his tattoos darken along with his ink-black eyes, and I cannot help staring at him.

He is controlled, and majestic, and powerful.

And I want to be like him.

If there is a tiger inside me, I want her to be like him.

"This way." He beckons for me to follow him as we approach the tower door.

At the bottom, a guard stands watch, but he is dozing, almost asleep even though he is standing.

We approach silently.

Seconds later, the guard is lying on the floor with his throat cut.

I should probably be appalled or terrified. Instead, I am captivated.

Deftly, Khan snatches the guard's keys and opens the door. "There will be another at the top. At least one, maybe more."

He pauses, then takes the guard's dagger and hands it to me. "Use it if you have to."

I turn the blade in my hand. It is not the same as the shard of glass I used to slice Kaa's face. It is sharper and more deadly, and it feels good clasped in my hand.

We ascend the stairs silently. At the top, there is another door. Khan unlocks

it but, as it opens, we dart into the darkness behind it.

“Marco?” A gruff voice swells in the stairwell. A silhouette appears. It moves closer. Barely more than a shadow, Khan covers his mouth, thrusts his talons into the guard’s gut, then allows him to slowly slump to the floor. He wavers for a moment, then tumbles down the stairs and lands with a muted thud at the bottom.

When we enter the tower, after the darkness of the stairs, the flickering torchlight makes it hard to see but my eyes adjust quickly.

“There’s no one else here,” Khan says. He is scanning the small row of doorways in front of us. “Which one?” he asks.

“I don’t know,” I hiss in reply. “It’s not like there’s a royal jail cell.”

At that Khan laughs. “Then we’ll check them all,” he says, stalking to the closest door. When he opens it, we are greeted by nothing but darkness.

There are no inhabitants in the first three cells. But at the fourth, I freeze.

“Hello?” A weak, willowy voice trickles out from beneath the door. “Is someone there?”

My entire body stiffens. A moment ago, I felt powerful and bold and brave. Now, the dagger in my hand is too heavy and my heart is struggling to beat fast enough.

“Your mother?” Khan asks, his jaw tight.

All I can do is nod in reply.

Khan grasps my hands in his, the dagger squeezed tight between us. “Are you sure you want to do this, Princess?”

“Hello? Hello? Is someone there?” my mother mews.

Her voice makes the hairs on the back of my neck prickle. They tease the braid Bagheera made and become knife-like memories instead. I raise my hand to the base of my skull. Images of red raw skin float before my eyes. My gaunt face in the mirror. My hair on the floor.

“I want to do this.” I take the keys from Khan and thrust them into the door.

When I heave it open, it creaks and groans, but Khan does not help me – he lets me take the weight on my own.

The cell is dark. It reeks of faeces, and sweat, and decay.

My mother blinks up at me from the floor. Her legs are folded beneath her. Her gown hangs off one bony shoulder, dirty and too big on her tiny frame. She opens her mouth, but not a single sound passes her lips.

It is my father who speaks first. Hauling himself to his feet, using the wall to steady himself, he stumbles forward. “You...” he spits. “You dare come back here after all you have done?”

I look him up and down, waiting for fear to flood my body. But it does not come.

Behind me, Khan growls deep in his throat.

My father’s gaze lands on him and scans his strips, his talons, his face. His eyes widen, and he takes a step backward. He begins to shake. Rage swells beneath his fragile skin. “You came back, and you brought one of them with you?”

I look down at the blade in my hand. I turn it over slowly, but then I pocket it.

Raising my eyes, I pace toward my father. He backs away. “What are you doing?”

When he is pressed against the furthest wall, I slam my hand around his throat and I squeeze. Because something tells me this time, he will not be able to beat me.

He claws at my hand, but he is weak. He stutters, and tries to speak, but I do not let him.

“Gliana, stop!” My mother wails.

Khan grabs her and hauls her to her feet. Then he spins her around and makes her watch me.

“You are not my father.” I stare into the King’s eyes, and I see nothing. Pools of nothing, stretching for an eternity deep into his charred and festering soul.

No love. No kindness. No passion. Nothing.

When I let go, so he can answer me, he coughs and drops to his knees. My mother strains against Khan and he allows her to go to him. Gripping his shoulder with one hand, she rubs his back with the other.

Then she looks up at me. Her features harden. I see the flash of her scissors, and the cruelty in her eyes. “How did you find out?” she spits. “Who told you?”

“Does it matter?” I shake my head. Suddenly, everything I wanted to say to them disappears. The words I thought might coax an apology from their lips dissolve on my tongue. In the end, they have shown me the truth without the need for questions or coaxing.

It oozes from them.

It hangs in the air around them.

It is inescapable.

“Does any of it matter?” I whisper.

“Princess?” Khan slides his hand into mine and squeezes me tightly, grounding me, tethering me to my body.

“We have our answer. There is nothing else I need from them.” I turn to walk away but before I reach the door, my mother begins to laugh.

“You found your own changeling, I see. Even after all we did to keep you safe... you threw yourself at one anyway.” She staggers to her feet and closes the gap between us, swaying unsteadily, her matted hair hanging in greasy tendrils around her pale face. “You are a disgrace.” She raises her hand to strike me, but I catch it in mid-air and my grip tightens on her wrist.

“*I did not condemn the man I love to death. I did not spend a lifetime nurturing discontent and turning it into evil.*”

“He has twisted your mind,” my mother spits, glaring daggers at Khan.

“No,” I whisper. “He freed my mind.”

I pace closer.

“And my body.”

Closer still.

“And my soul.”

My father scoffs. “Your kind do not have souls,” he barks. “You are demons. Bastards. Aberrations—”

My father’s words are drowned by my mother’s screams.

I turn to see Shere Khan shedding his clothes, muscles twisting, and growing. In a split second, he is my tiger again, and his roar shakes the beams above our heads and sends my mother back to her knees.

“Demon,” my father mutters. “Demon...”

I stare at my mother. I am waiting for something, anything, to show me she regrets the choices she made and the person she became.

But her soul is as putrid as my father’s.

Khan turns his amber eyes on me. His entire body is coiled, ready to strike. His jaws hang open, and he tilts his head.

I walk to his side and wind my fingers into his fur then, looking down at my parents, I whisper, “Finish them.”

THE BEAR

The iron tang of my blood merges with the memory of baking bread and fresh laundry. I drag my eyes open and look up at the ceiling. It has not changed; dark wooden beams, spider-like cracks that form long winding grooves in its surface, pale stone, stains from the cooking pots.

As I struggle to stay lucid, sounds that aren't really here fill my head.

I hear Cook calling me. I hear the buzz of the grand hall at supper time. I hear someone laughing.

Gliana...

I try to move, but it sends a shockwave of pain through my body. For a moment, I give way to it. But then I turn onto my stomach. Breathing heavily, aware of the wetness pooling beneath my stomach, I hook my fingers into the grooves between the slated floor tiles and, using one hand, begin to drag myself toward the door.

It hangs open, light creeping in even though Bagheera's storm rages overhead.

As the air whips through the kitchen, a violent shiver makes my entire body

shake. I reach down, feel the wetness and the gaping hole in my side, then raise my slickened fingers and study their new, dark red hue.

“I have survived worse,” I remind myself, my fingers and arm burning as I begin to crawl again.

By the time I reach the door, my lower half is no longer strong enough to help. So my torso must do all the work.

Strangely, I feel no pain now and, even though I am outside and it is raining, it is no longer cold.

Below the kitchen window, the trough lies empty, tinkling as rainwater pummels its insides.

When I reach it, I hook my arm over it and haul myself up. My knees threaten to buckle, and I almost lose my footing on the slick cobbles, but I’m able to grab hold of the window ledge with the crook of my injured arm. Barely staying upright, I inch my fingers along the wall until I find what I am looking for... the loose stone.

I pry it free and toss it into the trough. It makes a shallow clunk as it hits the metal.

I reach into the hole, but my vision blurs. I blink quickly. Shadows are encroaching on the edges of my sight. I am about to fall when my fingertips brush something smooth. A smile tugs at my lips. I pull it loose and tuck it into my tunic to protect it from the rain.

Then I hear a familiar sound.

Hooves on cobbles.

I turn, expecting to see Giana’s small white pony. But it is not a pony.

It is Bagheera.

Relief floods my limbs and I allow myself to crumble to the floor.

She blinks at me and moves her head in a gesture that looks almost like a nod, and then she shifts. Unlike Raksha and Khan, she is fully clothed when she takes her human form. She smiles, and I try to smile back.

“I am pleased to see you.” I cough and hold my side. My tunic is drenched, but I can no longer smell the blood.

“You are alive,” she says, hurrying across the courtyard. “When Raksha told me you were injured, I feared the worst.”

I try to sit up, and cough again.

“Wait,” Bagheera says, putting down her staff. “Let me help you.”

Tucking her arms under mine, she eases me up and helps me lean against the trough. She looks down at my wound and shakes her head, raindrops clinging to her long black lashes. “It is a deep wound, Bear.”

I nod, holding my arm tight across my stomach in an attempt to stay the blood.

“It’s all right,” she says, her voice soothing and calm. “I can help you.” She presses her palm to my cheek and looks into my eyes. “Let me help.”

“Thank you.” A sigh shakes my chest. I close my eyes. Bagheera leans closer as if she is going to help me to my feet.

“I’m sorry.” A whisper I wasn’t expecting.

When I look up, she is staring at me. She raises her hand. Something glints in the pale light.

A blade.

My eyes widen. She grabs my shoulder and holds me still. I lurch sideways but she pins herself on top of my chest and brings the knife to my throat. I grab her wrist, but she is too fast.

The metal slices me open.

My eyes widen.

Bagheera rises to her feet and takes a few calm steps backward. She picks up her staff and tilts her head as she watches me.

The shadows in my vision are darkening.

I can't breathe.

I try to speak but blood pools in my throat, and rises into my mouth, and coats my lips.

Bagheera does not move. Just watches.

It is completely dark now.

I hear Giana's voice, but I cannot see her.

"Ana..."

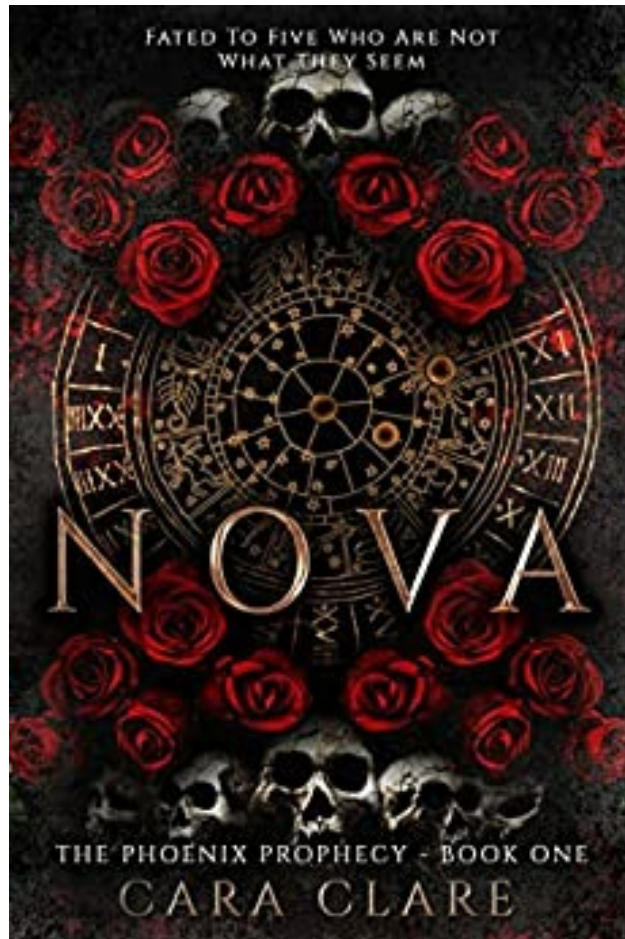
Thank you for reading 'Freed'! I hope you're as excited for the third instalment in Giana and Khan's story as I am.

[You can pre-order it here or by searching for Cara Clare on Amazon.](#)

In the meantime, if you're new to my books keep reading for an extract from my complete six-book series
The Phoenix Prophecy.

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NOVA, THE PHOENIX PROPHECY BOOK ONE

My ex joined the Anti Magick Alliance. He branded me with their crest. Turns out, he's played with the wrong witch.

I grew up believing I was human. My entire town hated supers, but I've always been drawn to them. Especially mages.

On the night my anti-magick ex finally took his cruelty too far and tried to kill me, my powers awakened. I burned his apartment to the ground and left him in the flames.

But now I'm on the run, hiding out in a town called Phoenix Falls. A town full of magick. A town where four super-hot mages believe I'm the key to a prophecy that will stop the underworld from rising.

There's Kole, the one they call The Viking. A powerful earth mage who's addicted to human blood, he scares and excites me. I know being near him is dangerous, but I like it. And I know he does too.

Tanner is the gentle one. An empath with a dark past. He knows what I need before I need it, and he has some serious history with Kole.

Mack is the daddy of the group. The Professor. *Super* hot. Like a guy from a coffee commercial. Silver hair, goatee, deep brown eyes. Oh, and the ability to shift into a friggin' polar bear whenever he feels like it!

Finally, there's Luther. The fire mage cop who hates humans. He despises me, but when two hot flames combine there's bound to be fireworks.

If they're right about me, I'm supposed to save the world. But first, I need to save myself from the wrath of the Anti Magick Alliance.

If only I had four powerful mage boyfriends to help me...

'Nova' is the first book in *The Phoenix Prophecy* series. It is a full-length paranormal romance novel with MM and a cliffhanger. Check author's site for TW.

Read the whole series in Kindle Unlimited.

CHAPTER ONE - NOVA

It is almost sunset. The air vibrates with heat. Sticky on my skin and in my mouth. On stage, the head of the Ridgemore Anti Magick Alliance is spouting his usual vitriol into a handheld microphone. He holds it too close to his mouth. It screeches when he raises his voice. He's almost reached the climax of his speech.

"Together, we will put those filthy fucking supers back in the shadows where they belong!"

The crowd roars. The noise is like a swarm of insects buzzing in my ears. My heart hammers harder in my chest.

"Here in Ridgemore, we know what needs to be done. And we're not afraid to do it!"

Another roar.

Johnny slurps warm beer from an almost-empty can, wipes his mouth with his arm, and growls in agreement. His left fist is clenched. Cracked skin stretches over his white knuckles.

He drops the can to the ground, grinds it into the earth with his foot, then takes hold of my wrist.

"We're leaving."

"We're not staying for the music?" I ask, trailing after him as he strides through the crowd.

He doesn't bother to respond.

In the truck, he turns to stare at me. His lips curl into a smile. He almost looks handsome, although it's been a long time since he was anything but monstrous in my eyes.

He leans over and drags a finger down my throat toward my chest. I'm wearing my copper hair long and loose. He flicks it out of the way and his eyes darken. "Did it feel good?"

I swallow hard.

"Did it feel good? Wearing our mark tonight?"

I bite the inside of my cheek so I don't flinch when he touches my red, raw skin. The emblem he burned into me a week ago. The symbol of the Anti Magick Alliance. Right there on my chest, above

my heart, for everyone to see. Another scar to add to my collection.

“Of course, baby.” I fix my eyes on him, saying what he wants to hear.

“Shame we couldn’t show them the other one.” His gaze lurches from my chest to my legs. Thankfully, the brand on my thigh healed a long time ago, so when he reaches it, pinching me through my jeans, I’m able to smile.

His fingers tug at my waistband. “Take them off.”

“Shouldn’t we wait until we get home?” I’ve perfected this tone; sultry, unthreatening, polite.

“I don’t think I can. Not now that you’ve got me all riled up.” His tongue darts out to moisten his lower lip.

I glance at the clock on the dash. “You wanted to see that show. On TV. It starts soon.”

He stops. His body has stiffened. “Right.” He sits back, takes hold of the wheel, grits his teeth. “After, then.”

I reach over and squeeze his knee. “After.”



By the time we get back, the apartment is dark. Johnny doesn’t turn on the lights, just heads straight for the couch and grabs the remote.

“I’ll be right there. I’m just going to the bathroom.” I’m lingering in the kitchen. The bathroom door is open. I’m half expecting him to tell me I should wait, but he simply grunts, opens a can, and lights a cigarette.

Closing the door behind me, I lean against it and flick on the light. It takes me a moment to adjust, then I step forward and examine myself in the mirror. I look like I haven’t eaten properly in weeks. Not because I’m gaunt or skinny—I’ve never been gaunt or skinny in my entire life—but because everything about me has lost its shine.

My hair is flat. Once a vivid shade of auburn, it’s now closer to rust than fire. Instead of sparkling, my eyes—my most distinguishing feature; one blue, one brown—are dark. Like murky water from the bottom of the ocean. Even my skin is muted.

I press my palm against my cheek and sigh. I’m turning into a monochrome version of myself, and I don’t know how to stop it.

It probably has something to do with the fact that I haven’t eaten or slept properly in months. Since Johnny got tied up with the Anti Magick Alliance—the ‘A.M.A’, as they call themselves—his behavior has become increasingly erratic.

He lives on cigarettes, beer, and whatever he can steal from the bar he works at. He rarely thinks to bring food home for me, and as my wages go straight into our joint bank account—an account I have no access to—I’m left scrounging off my colleagues at the pharmacy or, sometimes stealing from the grocery store.

The most vivid thing about me now is the mark on my chest. The series of interconnecting triangles,

scorched into me, with a blood-red tear drop tattooed in their center.

I trace my fingertips over the bumpy, raised flesh. I can still hear myself screaming.

When he tattooed my thigh, inked me with his initials, the pain was no worse than the kind I'd experienced a million times before.

But the poker... that was a new level of torture.

"Nova?" Johnny's voice bleeds through the bathroom door. "Nova, get in here. It's starting."

I inhale sharply. Hold my breath for longer than usual, grip the edge of the basin, then walk back to the living room.

He's still on the couch, staring at the TV. He looks sideways at me and curls his finger to beckon me over. When I'm in front of him, he tears his eyes away from the screen and puts down his can. He tugs at my shirt.

"Lean forward." He tugs it again. "Show me."

Closing my eyes, I pull back my hair and lean over him.

I hear him suck in his breath. "Fuck. Tor did a good job." He looks up at me, eyes twinkling. "Good birthday present, huh?"

Oh, yeah, I feel like saying. Best birthday present I've ever had—being tied down while you and your buddy melt my skin with a red-hot poker. Being left with this disgusting, fascist symbol etched below my throat for the rest of my life.

"All the guys are doing it now." Johnny's still staring at the scar, but his hands are creeping up beneath my shirt. "Getting their wives and girlfriends marked." He pulls me closer and grazes my stomach with his teeth. Now he's chewing on me. Like a dog slobbering on a bone.

He pulls me into his lap and licks from my throat to my chest. As his tongue laps my scarred flesh, my stomach twists. His cock is rock hard. He groans into my neck, then he flips me over, down onto the couch, on my back, beneath him.

His hands are everywhere. But I'm somewhere else.

I turn and look at the TV. The show he was so desperate to watch has started.

"Johnny..." His weight is pressing down on me. I try to move my arm, but it's trapped between his torso and mine.

He's grunting now. Thrusting, even though he's not inside me yet.

I keep my eyes fixed on the screen. Johnny has never been into Friday-night talk shows but, this week, a member of the A.M.A. is being interviewed alongside Nico Varlac. America's biggest supernatural celebrity. A werewolf and a self-appointed do-gooder with a mission to unite supers and humans.

Nico is waving at the studio audience. His hair is jet black. His shoulders ripple as he moves across to take his seat on the guest couch. I sometimes think Sam would have looked like Nico. If he hadn't...

"What the hell?" Johnny stops moving.

I turn my head. His eyes lock onto mine. He pinches my face between his thumb and his index finger, and squeezes. Hard. "What the hell are you looking at?" He growls. "Are you looking at him?" He jerks my face toward the TV. "While I'm fucking you, you're thinking about a filthy mage super?"

I open my mouth to speak, but he moves his hand to my throat and stands, pulling me with him. He holds me there for a moment, then throws me to the floor.

"Are you a sympathizer?" He steps toward me.

I bring my knees up to my chest and scoot backward. There is no point in answering him. His shadow falls over me. Illuminated by the glare of the TV, his face is cast in a light bluish hue. He's skinny, but cruel enough for it not to matter. He lunges for me. As he moves, something happens. The air shifts. A rushing sound fills my ears, as if I'm on a train and hurtling through a tunnel. I slam my eyes closed.

When I open them, Johnny is still moving, but he's like he's wading through treacle. Like time has slowed to a fraction of its normal speed. I stagger to my feet and duck sideways just as everything roars back to life.

Johnny stumbles and falls into the TV. It shunts backward on the stand but stays upright. He turns around. He's flexing his fingers at his sides, then his right hand moves, quick as a flash, to his belt. He pulls out his pocketknife.

I take a step backward, scanning the room for something—anything—I can use to keep him at bay. I look past him to the bathroom, but there's no way I'll make it in time.

He stares me down. For a moment, neither of us moves. I'm barely even breathing. Then he comes for me.

I jump sideways and race around the back of the couch. He trips on the corner of the rug. He's drunk and clumsy. Probably the only thing in my favor right now.

He rights himself. I know I need to stop him. Fear pulses through my limbs. I'm in the corner of the room. I have nowhere to go. The only thing I can reach is the vanilla-scented candle his mother bought us last Christmas. The only ornamental thing in the entire apartment. I grab it and hurl it across the room.

I'm aiming for his body. Anywhere on his body. But I've misjudged, and it's going to hit the floor instead.

As it does, a jolt of electricity shoots through me. So violent that I'm flung back against the wall. The candle hits the ground, and then...

Flames.

Huge, billowing flames come from nowhere. They spread sideways, casting a shield of fire between Johnny and me.

He's on the other side of them. He stops, knife still in his hand. "What the...?"

The fire is spreading, snaking across the floor toward my feet. But I'm not afraid. It licks my bare toes. I know it should feel hot.

It doesn't.

Johnny yells and drops his knife. He levers himself over the back of the couch, heading for the door. Before he can reach it, a wall of flames appears in front of him. He turns. More flames. He turns again.

He's surrounded.

I watch him panicking. His eyes wide, he drops his knife and starts to cough. Smoke is curling around the flames, enveloping his legs, his arms, his chest.

I step forward. The heat tickles my skin. As I move, the fire moves too.

Johnny is staring at me through the fire. His dark eyes lock with mine. I tilt my head and take him in.

He's the only boy I've ever been with. The boy who took me away from my last and shittiest foster home when I was fifteen. When I was lost, and he seemed like the sun and the moon. The boy who later

taught me to fear him, to obey him. The boy who told me magick was evil, and that supers weren't to be trusted.

As my thoughts spiral, I tilt back my head. My chest is tight. I open my mouth and scream. The sound reverberates through my bones as it leaves my body. The flames burn higher and harder, and I swear it's like the louder I scream, the bigger they get.

When I stop screaming, Johnny is staring at me. "Witch! You're a fucking witch!" He points at me. He's afraid. I look at his pants. He's pissed himself.

A tower of ferocious heat shimmers between us.

His expression changes. He puts his palms up, eyes wide. Like a mouse being hunted by a hawk. He's shaking his head now, trying to surrender. Trying to buy himself some time. "Nova. Baby. Please."

I turn away.

I feel the force of the heat on my back.

"Goodbye, Johnny."

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