



FURY OF THE KINGS

COURT OF THE FAE PRINCES
BOOK THREE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
LACEY CARTER ANDERSEN

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DEDICATION

*To my children— you are my dreams come true. I love you with
all my heart.*

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ONE

Forrest

I thump the back of my head against the wall again in frustration. *What the hell does the Keeper of Death want with us?* The unspoken fae code to these types of deals is simple: humiliate and move on.

Just last year, a fae swore his life to another fae if she would only give him a kiss. The deal was done, and she made him parade about the party in a see-through dress while people laughed at his erection. It was at the Spring Palace, so of course, it ended in a *very* willing orgy before the young man was freed from the deal.

Years before, a Winter Fae swore his life to a Fall Fae for help after he'd been lost in the woods. The Fall Fae made him build a glass house piece by piece with his own two hands. When it was finished, the Winter Fae was freed, and the glass house stood as a reminder that the Fall Fae had put the Winter Fae in his place.

Yet, we'd been given no indication of what this Keeper wanted. We'd simply been thrown into this room and left to rot. *This is not in the sport of a fae deal.*

How many days have passed? It's weird, but I truly have no idea. I don't know if it's the darkness or something else, but

my sense of time has made this miserable experience seem even longer than it's actually been. *I think.*

“What does she want?” I whisper angrily.

But my words travel in the dark, uncomfortably silent room. “To bore us to death,” Cobar responds, irritation in his voice.

The Keeper hadn't been to visit us since we were first left here. I have no idea how much time has passed, but I'm getting angry. Angry because I'm hungry. Angry because the darkness hurts my eyes in a way that's hard to describe. And angry because this isn't how these deals typically go. I mean, I knew making a deal with the House of Death would end in weirdness, but this is more than weirdness.

“I can smell the dead,” Zane says. “I don't like this place one bit.”

“No surprise that dark catacombs deep underground aren't a fun and cheery place to be,” I say.

Sulien sighs. I know it's him, because he's been sighing a hell of a lot since we got here. “We just need to play the Keeper's game, no matter how long it takes, and try to get back to Cassia and fix things.”

“*If* they can be fixed,” Zane adds.

There's silence for a minute before I speak. “We were idiots to make a deal with the Keeper of Death that Cassia would marry us when we didn't know how she'd answer,” I say, feeling my heart ache at the memory.

“We took a chance. Maybe the next time we try, we'll win,” Cobar says solemnly.

She seemed pretty adamant that she wasn't open to the idea of marrying us. Which is strange. I'm pretty sure when my dad discovered my mom was his mate, he fucked her in front of everyone at the party, and they had a drunken wedding that very night.

If Cassia wants more romance than we're giving her, I'm not sure we have it in us. *Or is it not about the romance? Is it just that she doesn't want us no matter how we're packaged?*

"We're her mates. Eventually, she has to come around." I sound confident, but I'm not. Nothing about Cassia makes me feel confident.

"Maybe we should be trying to escape," Cobar says, surprising us all. "Maybe that's what the Keeper wants us to do in order to be free from the deal."

It's embarrassing that I never even thought of that. I've just been sitting here, glaring at the darkness. Cobar's smarter than we give him credit for.

"That's actually... a good idea," Zane says. "The House of Death isn't exactly known for communicating well."

I climb to my feet awkwardly, hearing the sounds of the others doing the same. Between the chilly underground and sitting still in the darkness, my body is sore. I roll my neck and touch my toes, shaking out the stiffness. "Alright, let's do this. I'll lead."

"I should," Sulien says.

It's hard not to roll my eyes. "Why exactly? Because you're the mighty Sulien? The man whose cock never gets soft?"

"Is that my reputation?" he sounds amused for a second, before continuing. "I guess you can lead, if you remember

how we got in here.”

Damn it. “Fine, lead, whatever, I don’t care.” *Smug asshole.*

“Alright,” he says. “Be careful. There are both bodies and bones on the ground. Stay close to each other. One hand on each other’s shoulders.”

We line up, me behind Sulien, Frost behind me, and Cobar at the rear, and make our slow way toward one of the walls. Sulien stops when he reaches one, and even though I can’t see him, I can hear him running his hand along the wall, searching for the opening. Vaguely, I do recall the Keeper leaving from somewhere around here.

“Stairs!” he says, and then we’re going upward.

“You really think this is the Keeper’s plan? To see if we can escape?” Zane asks.

Sulien shrugs in front of me, but only I can feel it. “Maybe. What other purpose would there be for her to just leave us in the dark like that?”

“Maybe she simply forgot about us,” Zane suggests, which seems like a Winter Fae idea to me. Fall Fae would never forget an enemy, and yet, we typically don’t leave them alive long enough to cause problems for us.

Enemy? I don’t know why I thought of that. We’re not her enemies. The House of Death may be odd, but they obey the courts. We’re not their enemies, we’re their leaders. They should be wanting to impress us. To flatter us. To make us remember the House of Death and bestow upon it more wealth and power.

This? This is a waste?

“Why aren’t they working harder to impress us?” I ask, being cautious with my footing on the stairs as I do.

“Maybe they are,” Zane suggests. “Maybe in showing us that they don’t care for our opinions, they’re trying to impress us in their own way.”

Cobar snorts. “You see, we Spring Fae tend to impress people with naked beauties, lots of food, and enough liquor to take down a dragon.”

“Oh, I’ve been to the Spring Court, remember, Cobar?” Zane teases back.

“The Summer Fae are no better!”

There’s a smile in Sulien’s voice. “We have fewer orgies.”

I laugh. “The Fall Fae often find themselves in the woods, lost among a number of naked beauties.”

“Mostly other men though, right?” Cobar teases.

I’m glaring, even though they can’t feel it. *Technically*, our hunters spend a lot of time alone and hunting away from the women. And, *technically*, I have seen quite a number of them finding comfort in the assholes of their friends, but I didn’t like the implication that I swung that way. I mean, it’s not like the Fall Fae are as dainty as the Spring Fae. A Spring Fae, in the dark, might just pass for a woman until you felt their erection.

“Lost in memories?” Cobar asks sweetly.

“Fuck off,” I grumble.

“The stairs have ended,” Sulien warns ahead of me, then slows, so we each come off the stairs carefully.

We're in another dark room, but Sulien isn't bothered by it. Instead, he's back to trailing his hand along the wall, leading us forward. Warning when there are bones or bodies under foot. It's strange working together like this. I wouldn't have thought to warn the people behind me about what's up ahead. It bothers me that Sulien always falls so easily into a leader's position and does it so well.

"Doesn't it seem like the House of Death has... too many dead?" Cobar asks from the rear.

He's right. Most of the creatures we've seen since coming here were dead. There were handfuls of fae, but they looked worried. Rightly so. The House of Death had made a deal with the fae princes, and The House of Death appeared to be taking advantage of that deal. The fae here have to know that in doing so, they're putting their entire house at risk.

There's silence for a minute before Sulien answers. "During all the great wars and the times of darkness, the most powerful fae among the House of Death would call home the dead. My grandfather said you could see the dead walking the streets, walking through the woods, marching back to the House of Death. The dead work these lands. There's always been some humans, but it's mostly the dead who plow the fields, build things, tend to the livestock. So the more dead, the more help they have here."

Another moment passes before Cobar's voice comes again. "There doesn't seem to be *that* many dead here."

Zane's voice comes, cool and calm. "Didn't your tutors go over all of this? The House of Dead can only use the bodies for so long. They go from bodies, to bones, and eventually they can't pull them together enough to be useful. The longer they're dead, the less useful they become."

I kind of want to change the subject. All this talk of death, in a painfully dark place, is unsettling. I could go the rest of my life without ever returning to the House of Death again.

“I’ve met a few people from the House of Death before.” Sulien says, followed by a warning about bones just up ahead. “Most return here when they’re pregnant and never come back to the courts, but they were always quiet, powerful, and unsettling when living amongst the other fae.”

“They are always powerful... and weird,” Cobar adds.

“Because they kill their babies if they aren’t powerful,” Zane whispers.

I shiver. *Were there babies amongst the dead in these catacombs?*

“Light up ahead!” Sulien whispers.

Our pace quickens. We make it through the room, and through another opening. Up ahead, a light grows brighter with every step we take and my heart soars. *Daylight! Fuck! I had no idea how much I was missing daylight!*

But then Sulien begins to slow. I’m forced to match his stride, we enter another room where I see undead standing in all directions in the room. The light wasn’t daylight, it was from a torch, held by the Keeper of Death herself. Her cruel smile adds an even eerie layer to the dark-haired woman as she stands in a gown that appears to be made of spiderwebs.

“Princes,” she greets. “How good of you to join us.”

Cobar strides forward and inclines his head to her. “We’ve made it out of your maze, m’lady. I hope that fulfills your wishes.”

“Fulfills my wishes?” she smirks. “No, good princes, that was nothing. Just the beginning of our time together.”

That wasn't our task? Fuck. “What do you want from us?” I ask, trying not to sound as angry as I feel.

Her eyes twinkle. “What do I want? I want everything.”

Around us, her soldiers close in, and I feel a sense of dread sweeping through me. This Keeper of Death, I don't understand her, or what she wants. All I want is to return to Cassia again, but the Keeper seems determined to draw this painful process out as long as possible.

But why?

TWO

Cassia

I'm lying at the sandy edge of a big beautiful lake filled with crystal clear water. There are woods all around me, thick and tall, and the scent of pine leaves seems to surround me. Sliding one foot into the lake, I groan and roll back my head. It's so warm. The water, and the sun, are just the right temperature on my skin. It's a perfect day.

"I thought you were only supposed to make those kinds of sounds for me."

My eyes snap open, and I see Forrest standing over me. Silhouetted against the bright afternoon sun, it takes me a minute for eyes to adjust before I can take him in. He's wearing nothing but a pair of tight fitted pants, and my hungry gaze slides over him. The big Fall Fae certainly has an impressive form. Not just his muscled body, but the clear outline of an impressive cock.

Watching sweat drip down his chest is more than a little distracting, especially given the six-pack the liquid trickles down. And then there's that cock... it should be criminal to conceal something like that.

"You just can't help yourself, can you?" he asks, his voice low and husky.

My gaze shoots back up, and I realize he'd seen me checking him out. It's more than a little embarrassing. But then, how often do I hang out by a lake in a skimpy white dress? Never, that's the answer. Not a single time.

"Want to take a dip?" he asks with a grin.

I shake my head. "I'm good here."

Suddenly, he's scooping me up.

I shriek, and my arms go around his neck. "Prince Forrest, no! Prince Forrest!"

He's in the water up to his waist, and the water hits my ass. It's warm, but I scream again. "Put me back! Put me back!" We keep going deeper until it's at my chest. "I can't swim!" I say, the words tearing from my lips.

Every muscle in his body stiffens, and he stops. Those brilliant green eyes of his lock onto mine. "You can't *swim*?"

I shake my head, and realize I'm trembling a little too. "No."

"How is that possible?"

My grip tightens around his neck. "Not all of us had time to learn to flop around in the water. Some of us had to work."

His expression softens. "I always forget how different we've grown up."

"Because he's an idiot."

My head snaps around, and I spot Prince Cobar on the shore. His blonde locks look extra luscious, and he's grinning, wearing what looks like a small towel, around his waist. The Spring Fae rocks the look though, as confident as I've ever

seen him, and that's saying something considering he's the cockiest bastard I've ever met.

"Sure, I'm the idiot and you're wearing that," Prince Forrest says, followed by a snort, and then his focus is back on me. "Are you okay? Want me to bring you back to shore?"

Somehow the sight of Prince Cobar in a washcloth, wondering when "something" might pop out under that tiny piece of material had distracted me from the fact that I'm in a lake with a crazy fae prince, and I can't swim. I instantly feel my muscles tensing back up, and I look around, trying to decide just how much danger I'm in.

"Are you going to drop me?"

"Only if you want me to," he says, in a very serious voice.

I eye him. "No, the girl who can't swim does *not* want to be dropped in a lake. Just want to make that clear."

His arms tighten around me. "Absolutely. I'll never put you down."

There's the sound of splashing, and then Prince Cobar is in the lake beside us, grinning like a fool. "But should he drop you, I'll be sure to catch you."

"I feel *so* much safer," I say, shaking my head. But the thing is, I kind of do.

A second later, something comes exploding from the water. Prince Zane emerges in all his glory. Pale, his beautiful white hair running down his back, and his chest bare. He wipes the water from his face and hair like some kind of dirty fantasy and then levels his pale gaze on me.

"*Whoa*," slips from my lips.

"Old Frosty isn't that impressive," Prince Forrest mutters.

Prince Zane, his gaze never leaving mine, speaks, his voice soft. “Beautiful day, isn’t it?”

For a minute, I’m tongue tied, glancing from him to the other two men around me. Swallowing around the lump in my throat, I manage, “Yeah, it’s pretty okay.”

“Come swim with me,” he says.

“We covered the fact that she can’t swim,” Prince Forrest says, eyeing him competitively.

“I can make it feel like you’re swimming,” Prince Zane responds, then offers me his hand.

It’s completely insane, but I reach out and place my hand in his. He pulls me from Prince Forrest’s grip until his hands are at my waist. “Trust me, okay?”

The idea is foreign and strange to me. Trusting my father and grandmother makes sense. Trusting a fae, people who have shown me time and time again that they can’t be trusted, hardly seems like a good idea. Especially knowing that their kind see us humans as little more than poorly paid labor. Still, I’m in his arms, in a lake, so I guess I better trust him.

I nod.

He smiles. That small smile of his that somehow feels like the biggest smile on anyone else. And then, he’s on his back, slipping through the water, and I’m lying on top of him. I gasp, clutching his shoulders, but I don’t slip into the water. Instead, it *feels* like I’m swimming. Sliding through the waves like a fish.

I laugh. His smile widens. Then, he spreads his hands out and ice begins to form on the water on our sides. With one hand still firmly around him, I let the other hand stretch out and touch the ice before it disappears into the water. The

mixture of warm and cold is strangely amazing. Hell, the longer we stay like this the more I can feel his cold body beneath me.

His very *hard* body beneath me, pressing solidly between my thighs. Mr. Ice is liking this little swimming adventure more than he seems to be willing to admit. And I like knowing I'm turning him on. It makes me feel strangely in control in a world where I have so little control.

I wiggle on him a little. The man gasps, and for a minute, I think we might sink. But then, he goes back to gliding through the water, his gaze fixed on me. No smile donning his lips, just an expression of interest that I like a little too much.

Then, we stop. I gasp, my arms around his neck, but, apparently, he can stand at this place in the lake. I'm pressed against him. Not sure if I should pull away, when our gazes meet and hold again. He glances down, leaning, drawing closer.

“So, you figured out a way to get her alone?” Prince Sulien is in the water. Where he came from, I have no idea. His long black hair is wet, and his auburn eyes are fixed on me with amusement. “You know, you shouldn't trust her. She'll break your heart.”

I glare in his direction. “I will not.”

He comes closer. “A woman like you will break a man's heart to pieces over and over again.”

My nipples harden in response to the low timber of his voice. “Is that from experience?” It's meant to be a joke, but the way his eyes darken... I don't think he takes it that way.

“Remember when we were kids, I would find the rarest seeds for you, sprout the flowers for you, and give you the

blossoms, and all you did was laugh. Once you even accepted a flower and went to show it to that Peter boy,” he sounds angry. No, jealous. Of a stableboy.

“*Peter?*” I ask, not sure if I even believe the whole thing.

He moves even closer. “Yes, Peter with the bright blue eyes. The one who always made you laugh. Who let you feed the horses.”

I laugh. “You sound jealous.”

He shrugs. “Maybe I was. But would it even matter? You had lessons with me because you had to. You laughed and played with him because you wanted to.”

I scoff. “I laughed and played with you too, all the time!”

“But would you have done so if I wasn’t the prince?”

“No!”

“Ha!”

I roll my eyes. “But only because you’re a royal fae, and you wouldn’t play with someone like *me*.”

“An easy out,” he grumbles.

“I’m right!” I exclaim, laughing.

He shifts closer, and his hand digs into the back of my hair. “I could accept all that. I really could. If only you didn’t keep breaking my heart.” Before I can respond, his lips find mine, and it’s the strangest thing to feel Prince Zane’s erection pressed between my thighs, and Prince Sulien’s hot mouth on mine.

Thoughts tumble in my mind. That I haven’t broken his heart. That I’ve never broken his heart, but the heat between my thighs and the hot mouth on my lips steals my words.

“LADY CASSIA.” The word floats to me as if from far away.

I kiss Prince Sulien harder, and one of his hands reaches out to grasp my breast. In seconds, he’s plucking my nipple through the thin fabric, and I’m wet and ready for him. Wondering what it would be like to be sandwiched between these two men in this lake.

“Lady Cassia.” The voice is feminine. Harsh. And unwanted.

Rubbing against Prince Zane, I hear him gasp and drink in the sound. Letting one hand drop down, I reach to touch him, and find him naked.

“Lady Cassia!”

The image of the two men shatters, leaving darkness, and then a bright light. I reach for them again, but they’re gone. Nothing more than a fragment of my imagination that I can no longer hold onto.

“Get your sorry ass out of bed!”

Ugh. No. It’s my dream, I tell myself and roll over, pulling the covers up over my head. The warmth of the bed lulls me back to sleep, and who am I to resist? Especially when I hadn’t yet slid my hand along Prince Zane’s cock. Or encourage Prince Cobar and Forret to come join us.

“Have you heard about what’s going on? Do you know anything?” The voice keeps talking.

I grumble. This sucks. Take me back to the dream with my four hot princes.

“Lady Cassia!” Loud. Shrill. Angry. The word jerks me awake in a way that’s both uncomfortable and irritating.

I open my eyes, and find Lady Nova standing over me, her bright green eyes peer into mine, but I just stare in disbelief. *What the hell is she doing in my room, shouting at me? And who the hell told her she could ruin my perfect dream?*

The fae from the House of War has her pale white hair loosely braided down her back, and a crown of green rest on her head, drawing attention to the slight point of her ears. She's dressed in greens and browns, pants and a shirt that look hardy rather than elegant like most fae clothes. Her sword rests at her side, as does a dagger, and for some reason, she seems dressed for war as she stands over my bed.

“Is this a dream?”

Her eyes narrow. “No.”

“If it's a dream, you're about to watch four princes do some very dirty things to me.”

Or watch my princes in a dark room being tortured by a shadowy woman with the power to mess with their minds and make the pain worse. But I don't tell her that, because as much as I'm embarrassed by the sexy dreams of my men, I'm terrified by my nightmares of them.

This time, her brow lifts. “I'm glad I won't be watching that. Now, pull yourself together and focus.”

Focus? On what? I just barely got back from all the “fun” of being kidnapped and running for my life. I feel like the least I deserve to do is sleep in. But... maybe this is some weird war fae thing. If it is, I hate it.

“Lady Cassia!” she snaps, yanking me from my thoughts.

I groan. “What?” before sitting up.

Her mouth curls into an almost-sneer. “Do you know what happened while you were getting your *beauty* rest the last few days?”

I stretch my arms above my head, yawning. My wrists still hurt from the damn iron cuffs, even though I let the healers do a little work on them. The wounds have scabbed over, but pain still radiates and throbs through them as I drop them back into my lap. I guess it was too much to ask that I escape from the pain through sleep for a little longer.

“Did the fae learn to fart glitter?”

Now, she’s definitely sneering. “No, the world kept going, even though you were needed.”

Something inside of me boils over. It’s not that I’m not used to being woken up. It’s not that I’m not used to functioning on little sleep after hard days. It’s that I’ve hit my fucking limit.

“Did you know that I was *just* rescued from being kidnapped? Maybe I don’t need to be woken up at the asscrack of dawn for whatever insane fae reason you have!”

Lady Nova puts her hands on her hips and cocks her head, staring at me thoughtfully like she’s trying to find the right words. I want to tell her there are no *right* words when shouting at a person until they wake up. I want to tell her that if I wasn’t so sure she could beat my ass within an inch of my life, I’d be chasing her out of my room even now.

“Where are the princes?” She crosses her arms over her chest and continues her staredown.

I roll my neck from side to side, trying to think. My neck hasn’t felt right in days, but that’s not the focus here. *When had I seen the princes last?*

Memories come slowly back to me of when I last saw them, shortly after we'd almost had sex. It was not long after I refused to marry them, a memory that feels like a knife twisting in my chest to remember. I rub my chest, wishing I could rub away the feeling, but stop when I see Lady Nova watching me.

"They left on horseback a few days ago, didn't they? I think that's what I saw before I went to bed."

Although 'going to bed' didn't seem like the right word for the vivid dream-filled days and nights I'd endured after the fae healers came to my room that night, stood over my bed, and started chanting. Basically, after the healers had done their thing, I'd pretty much slept for three days straight, getting up to use the bathroom and drink occasionally before crashing once more.

Oh, and then there were the visits from my dad and grandmother that felt like a blur. The healers called what I did a "healing sleep," which I guess is pretty self-explanatory. Even if it was also weird. And still is. This is the first time I've been awake where I feel like myself again. Where I'm aware of things around me, even if I still feel a bit slow

"You saw them riding away and that's it? That's what you're telling me?" she asks, shaking me from my thoughts.

I stare at Lady Nova, wondering why she's bothering me about four fae princes who could defend themselves against just about anyone or anything when having a little early morning ride. *Is it supposed to be my job to babysit them now?* No one had really gone over my duties, except that I was expected to enthusiastically get married and go to Pound Town as fast as possible.

Her expression is one of disappointment. “I keep asking myself if you’re cut out for this or not.” Then, she turns away from me and stares out the window.

Okay, that’s a lot of judgment this early in the morning.

“What? Not cut out for what?” I have no idea what the hell she’s talking about.

“To be the queen of all the courts. If you can’t even be bothered to wake up to receive information, how are you going to be able to help them rule?” She’s frustrated, but, hell, so am I. *Who knew snapping to attention to receive information was such an important quality for a queen?*

“Fuck you! You don’t know anything about me!” My voice rises in anger.

“I’m learning about you right now.” Anger...no, disappointment is on her face.

She’s really standing here judging *me*. How dare she! “And I’m learning about you! You, like all fae, sit on your high horses all day long looking down on everyone else like it’s your favorite fucking hobby. Yet, I guess, my big crime is sleeping in order to heal!” I clench my jaw so hard my teeth hurt.

Lady Nova shifts on her feet. “Ok, let me be more clear. Do you know where the princes are right *now*?”

Why is she asking me this? Why is this important? Yes, it’s bothered me that the princes haven’t visited me since our tough conversation, but I just figured they needed some space. I haven’t heard anything to suggest they’re in trouble in any way, so it seemed likely they were just sulking.

Lady Nova appears to have a different idea though. *They might be royal fae, but that doesn’t make them as useless as*

children. My gods, they're adult men!

“Sorry, but I don’t keep tabs on them.” Then, I give *her* a look. “But if keeping tabs on them is so important, might I suggest you do it yourself.”

That seems to surprise her. “Do you feel anything from them?”

“Feel anything?”

Is this a mate thing? Does she think I should be feeling something with them far away because she doesn’t know the truth? Maybe. I need to tread carefully here.

“Is there even a small part of you that feels off right now?” Her eyes are laser focused on me. It makes me uncomfortable.

“Off, how?” I don’t know what she’s talking about.

I might feel a little bit off-kilter right now, but I’ve felt that way since I’ve been kidnapped. Wouldn’t anyone feel strange in these situations? She’s acting like that’s not normal when it’s perfectly normal.

“Just off. Like something’s missing. Or maybe your chest hurts.”

Of course I feel that way, but my life is in ruins. “I feel all of the above. Is that what you wanted to hear?”

Her expression doesn’t change. “Yes and no. Now, do you know where they are?”

I shuffle through the day I saw them last as if something in it could explain where they are right now. That eventful day takes a while to get through, but the memory of their saddened faces appeared in my mind. I told them I didn’t want to marry them right now, and, apparently, broke all of their hearts. *Did that have something to do with them leaving that morning?*

I turn my attention back to Lady Nova, upset that the weight of those events weighs on my shoulders. “I don’t know where they are. Sorry. But they’re probably just taking some space, right?”

Lady Nova gives me another funny look I can’t read. “Get cleaned up and eat. We need to talk.”

She doesn’t say another word, just marching back out of the room. I glare after her and jump a little when the door closes, even though she doesn’t close it hard.

Rubbing my face, I desperately want to go back to sleep and continue recovering, but I’m up now, and I’m thinking about the princes. No, I’m worrying about the princes. I rub my chest where it hurts and climb out of bed, slipping on a white robe and slippers. Standing, I know what I need to get a better start on my day— a long hot bath— but I don’t have a chance to do much before there’s a knock at my door.

“Come in!”

A second later, the door opens and in walks my grandmother... and dad. My heart drops. My dad makes his way inside with a limp and a cane, but he makes his way inside! I don’t think before I race to him and hold him tight. I’d seen him regularly since I got back, but every time I felt the same sense of gratitude and happiness at how well he was doing.

The best of the royal fae healers had been working on him, and they’d been doing a good job. I’d have to personally thank them when I got a chance.

“Whoa!” he groans as I hug him tighter. “Easy there, Cassia, I don’t need any broken ribs.”

It takes everything in me to let him go, and then we're staring at each other. My dad looks good. Healthy and happy. His hair and beard have been trimmed up nicely, and the gray, weaved with black, gives a refined air to him. He's wearing fine clothes. A black silk shirt and white pants, both that fit his thin frame well.

"You look so good. Are you good?" My words are such a mess, I'm not even sure if he can make them out.

But, he grins. "I'm good, Cassia. Better than good. The healers are working on me every day, and I'm getting better."

"He might never be one hundred percent, but he's so much better," my grandmother says.

I pull away from the hug and turn to her. She's wearing a dress covered in blue flowers, her favorite color. It's silk too, probably because she might not be able to see the flowers, but she can feel the fabric. Her long gray hair has been expertly braided, and it falls over her shoulder.

She looks beautiful.

I hug her as she continues talking. "The healers have never worked with someone who has had such powerful magic—"

"Magic not help them for so long," my father interrupts, and I sense him giving my grandmother a look she can feel even if she can't see, I know, because *I* can feel it too. "Most of the people they heal are wealthy fae who are worked on with magic right away when they have a problem, not years later. It's a different experience for them."

Pulling back from the hug, I glance between them, my curiosity rising. My grandmother has her lip curled and her nose wrinkled, like she's silently having an argument with my

father, before the look fades away, and she's smiling once more. *What was that all about?*

But they both seem happy, so I just smile, figuring that I'm probably reading too much into it. "I can't believe we're really here. It's like a dream."

"Especially when you consider those sweet husbands of yours." They're not my husbands yet, but I don't correct her. "The whole time you were missing they swung between caring for us and searching for you. If I had any doubts about them before, they're gone."

"Really?" The princes never mentioned taking care of my family while I was gone.

"Oh, yes, Prince Sulien and Prince Frost were on your father's healers like flies on honey. They wanted updates on his care at all times, and put the fear of the gods into them. Prince Cobar and Prince Forrest came to visit us both often. They read to us. They whittled with your father. They even made sure to share as many meals with us as possible."

My father leans in. "Most fae are, well, as useless as shit on a horse's tail, but those four... I like them, Cassia."

It's weird how proud I feel, but also how surprised I am. Finding a man who would understand my loyalty for my family always seemed like an impossibility. But now, I have four men who care for my family without me even asking. While here I was worried that they were going to toss my family out when I was gone.

Damn it, they are good ones. I need to stop being such an ass.

"Dear," my grandmother says, and I give her my hand to squeeze. "We're headed to your father's healers again. Do you

mind if we check back in later?”

“Not at all!”

They both hug me again, and my father says, “We’re so glad you were okay. We were terrified the whole time you were gone. Your grandmother just kept saying that you were tough, and you’d be okay, but I hated being away from you. You know that you’re the best thing that ever happened to me. I’d give anything for you. I’d give my life for you.”

I kiss his cheek. “I know, but you don’t have to. I’m not going anywhere.”

He gives me yet another hug, laughing in my ear. “You are truly your father’s child.”

We say our goodbyes, and I watch them leave, my heart filling full. They’re happy. They’re doing better. And the four princes were good to them. I’m going to get ready and handle Lady Nova, and then I’m going to figure out my life.

THREE

Cassia

Bathing has never been so glorious. Today's bath was better than yesterday's in a way I can't explain. The water feels warmer. The scented oils are stronger. Everything is elevated. I feel renewed, like I peeled off my shell and emerged as someone completely different.

Which is what I desperately needed. Even if I make it a speedy bath. *Whatever Lady Nova needs, it better be good. And if it's to scold me for not babysitting the princes, I'm going to be pissed.*

After I'm done, I find the softest clothes in my drawers, and pull them on with a sigh. The movements awaken the aches in my still healing body, especially my wrists and ankle, but I refuse to let the pain ruin my afterglow from the bath. *Baths, clean clothes, a warm bed... life isn't that bad.*

If this is what it means to be Queen, then I might have to say yes.

My mind goes to that night around the campfire when the princes healed me, and the connection between us became a searing heat I couldn't ignore any longer. When their touch made me feel alive in a way I never have before. *If that's what*

it means to be queen, I can handle that too. Which is nice. Wasn't I terrified by the idea just a little while ago?

These princes are wearing me down, and maybe I don't mind it.

Heading out of the bathroom, I freeze. Someone has tidied my room and laid out trays of food. A freaking banquet of eggs, bacon, ham, breads, quiches, and even desserts.

So. Much. Food. For me. Just sitting here.

The sight makes my stomach turn and my eyes burn. My family was going to starve just a short time ago unless I found a miracle. Even without a miracle, life was all about surviving and scraping by. A feast like this... it would never have been within my grasp. I was lucky to *serve* food like this... *eating it?* It would have never happened.

And now? My family was happy. The new potions were working. My father and grandmother were relaxing and enjoying life. Fae were serving *them*. Life had changed in an instant.

How? And did I deserve this?

For some reason, all I want is for my men to suddenly appear and wrap me in their arms. Maybe even tell me that they care about me, not because of the potion, but because I'm special to them.

Some part of me knows that's insane. I'm just a human. A nobody. All of this will vanish in the blink of an eye if anyone sees the lies hanging over me like a cloak, but I'm starting to feel like maybe, just maybe, the lies can stay hidden and this life for my family and I can be real.

Real? All of this?

Maybe I don't deserve it, but does it matter? The miracle I needed was that potion and the princes. With it, my family is safe in a way they never could have been before. No matter what happens moving forward, I have to remember that. I don't deserve this, but my family does, so whatever soul-crushing secrets I have to keep to give them this life, I'm going to keep.

There's a bump from the balcony. Confused, I open the big doors. On the balcony ledge stands a dead raven. Its eyes missing. Flesh hanging off of its body, but enough feathers left to apparently bring it here. *What the hell?*

It moves strangely, cocking its head. I study it. "Uh, did you need something?"

Stiffening, it suddenly falls backwards. I dive forward, I don't know why, and watch it plummet until it strikes the ground below.

"That was weird. Really weird."

Is this a fae thing? Do dead animals regularly visit their balconies? Was someone sending these creatures after me to send a message? Or as a gift? I hate that I've worked for the fae all my life, and yet, seem to know so little about them.

I shake my head, looking away from the spot the bird fell, then stare out at the horizon. The early morning glow from the sun is just barely peeking above the treetops. The sight eases something in my chest, even though there's still an uncomfortable ball in my stomach. A ball that urges me to inspect why a table full of food made me feel so bad.

"But introspection is for the wealthy," I tell myself, followed by a humorless laugh. Then, I turn back to my room. "Or am I wealthy now?"

It's all too much to think about. Overwhelming in a way I'm not prepared for. *Breakfast might be necessary before I continue analyzing myself.*

Going back inside, I stare at the table in front of me. The breakfast spread is overindulgent, as usual for this palace. There are five different kinds of pastries, eggs cooked in every way imaginable, three different types of toasted bread, and all varieties of bacon and ham that exist.

I don't need all this food.

Even though not that long ago, I would have given anything for this.

Hands shaking, I make a normal-sized plate, knowing that the house staff might sneak what I don't finish, and start eating. The instant the food touches my tongue, I groan. Everything tastes delicious. Cook is really on her game today. Speaking of which, I'll have to go visit her sometime soon. She doesn't like the royals in her kitchen, but I suspect she'll make an exception for me.

Halfway through my plate, I come up for air and realize that Lady Nova hasn't returned yet. She jumped down my throat thirty minutes ago about being concerned about the princes and needing to talk, now she's missing in action. *Seriously, is this a war fae thing?*

Feeling agitated for reasons I don't understand, I go out on the balcony to finish the rest of the food. I sit in a corner on the floor and just soak in the slight chill of the tile.

Within moments, I sense movement in my bedroom and freeze. A feminine voice slices through the silence. "The princes are definitely gone." That's Dessi. A maid I've worked with more times than I can count, and the best source for any

rumors. Rumors I'm eager to hear about if they concern the princes.

"Yeah, but I heard," this girl, Hanna, lowers her voice. "That they're not coming back."

What?

Dessi scoffs. "Who told you that?"

Yeah, who told her that? After all the wooing those four have done, I doubt they'd just take off and abandon me. Maybe they're just pissed about my rejection of them, if you could even call it that. I wasn't telling them I *never* wanted to marry them or *never* wanted to be with them, just that I needed more time.

I feel a headache forming.

Now, it's Hanna's turn, and she sounds insulted. "I don't know where I heard it, but I know the elders are freaking out, all the fae are going nuts, and the elders are assembling a massive party of fae to return the princes. They're calling the princes fools. Saying they're love sick idiots."

Love sick idiots, but they left me? I have to hold down a snort of laughter. No. I don't think so. Something else is happening here.

"What do you think this is going to mean for us?" Dessi asks softly, sounding uncharacteristically nervous.

To my surprise, Hanna sounds nervous when she responds, too. "Nothing good. As annoying as the fae royals are, they offer us protection. If something happens to them, the iron demons will flood our lands. And you know what happens then."

Blood. Death. Destruction. Carnage. The history books paint a pretty damn accurate picture.

“We humans will hurt the most then. We’ll be recruited to fight on the front lines, even though if history is any indicator our bodies will just be there to slow them down,” Dessi says.

My heart aches. She’s right, but it’s not going to come to that. Wherever the princes are, I’m sure they’ll be back soon. They wouldn’t just leave. Not me, or their people.

“Maybe Cassia can do something about it,” Dessi suggests.

I stiffen. *Me? What the hell can I do about some runaway princes?*

“Depends how much she’s changed since all this queen stuff. Is she like us now, or them? Is she going to care what happens to us when she knows she’s safe?” Hanna’s words feel like a blow. Of course I still care about them! Everyone had to know that if I become queen, I’m never going to forget where I came from. Right?

“We’ll have to wait and see. The fae are trying to go easy on her after her kidnapping. It’s kind of funny. If they had any idea what she was used to, they wouldn’t be coddling her like that,” Dessi’s words end on a tired laugh.

At least she has my back. Sort of.

Hanna laughs too, but the sound is further away. “Having a fae queen who lived a human life hopefully means good things for all of us. Again, if she doesn’t let the royal life change her too much.”

Then, there’s silence. I sense that they’re gone, and I slowly finish my plate of food. Rumors are funny things. They usually have some truth in them, but how much is always the question. My gut says the princes left. Maybe because they

were angry I turned them down. Maybe just because they needed some space. But they'd be back. *Of course they'd be back!*

Standing, I return the table full of food and set my plate beside it, careful to make sure to leave everything as neat as possible. Then, I sit down in a chair and stare at the spread, wondering what I should do next. *Visit my family again? Go find out more about the rumors? Look for Lady Nova?*

My door slams open, and I jump out of my seat. Lady Nova strides in, and in a move that's both arrogant and elegant, she sits in the chair opposite mine. Without looking at me, her hands immediately dig into the platter of scrambled eggs, and she starts eating like forks and knives haven't been invented yet.

I try not to stare. And fail.

"Hello, again," I say, settling back into my chair.

She gives me a head nod and paws at a piece of ham that she shoves into her already full mouth.

Okay, so not all fae have table manners. Good to know. And not at all disgusting.

"Good," she says, little ham pieces spitting from her mouth as she speaks.

Do not vomit on the pastries. Do not vomit on the pastries.

"Is the way you're eating normal for the fae, because I've never actually sat and had a meal with one?" I probably shouldn't have asked, but I can't help myself.

She gives me a funny look. "It's normal for the War Fae and many of the Fall Fae. We're not as concerned with being perfect." Then, she licks a piece of food off her finger.

I snort, ignoring what she just did. “There’s being perfect, and then there’s being disgusting, maybe shoot for something in the middle. Especially with just how much food you’re wasting and ruining. The servants could eat what’s left if you weren’t so gross with it.”

She looks shocked. “The servants eat what we leave?”

“We barely make enough to not starve, so, yeah.”

She glances down at what she’s doing and smears her hands on a napkin before eating a little more politely. “Okay, got it, I’ll eat more politely before we have our talk, but someone should probably do something about the servant problem.”

Someone should. Maybe me. If I ever become queen.

I wait for her to keep talking. She says nothing.

“So,” I begin, trying not to sound too annoyed. “You wanted to talk about the princes?” I put an apple pastry on my plate, pulling flakes off of it, but my appetite isn’t quite what it was after watching half-chewed food decorating the table.

Lady Nova grabs a cup of juice and takes a giant swig. She pushes it towards me as if she’s offering me back my cup. I frown. I don’t want that drink anymore. She can use it. Hell, she can take it with her. Or burn it.

“I might as well, since everyone’s talking about it anyway.” She says, but she doesn’t keep talking.

Come on, lady, just out with it. This isn’t a game of cat and mouse. You have something to say. I want to hear it. Let’s just do this thing. Or are the war fae’s communication skills as good as their table etiquette?

“Ok, so?” I ask, trying not to sound as annoyed as I feel.

“So it looks like the princes aren’t coming back. At least, that’s what I heard from my servants, and you know their information’s the best there is.” She chews loudly, with even more food falling out of her mouth. This time, chunks of bread.

I’m in disbelief though. Not because of the rumor. But, more so, because after all Lady Nova’s research, which I’m sure she’s been doing a lot of, this was the conclusion. And, she believes it. Something this crazy!

“What makes the servants think they’re gone for good?”

Lady Nova shrugs. “Some of the princes’ most important items were taken along with them, mostly significant jewelry. Prince Forrest gave away every puppy from a litter he’s been watching. Apparently, he had plans to have his pick of the litter when they got older. Prince Cobar burned some bridges with some fae who were hoping their daughters might be eventually considered to have the honor of being his lovers. From what was said, he wasn’t just firm but rude and aggressive, not two words that are often used to describe Prince Cobar. Prince Sulien told the servants that his room could be used for any fae who need it moving forward. Prince Frost sent a few letters home, which he never does.”

My heart drops, but she keeps going.

“What was even stranger is that everything was done in a rush. It seemed Prince Frost wrote the letters a day before he left, but then woke his servant in the early hours of that morning to send out the letters for him. Prince Cobar had the fight with the other fae while they were leaving a late night party, and he was dressed for the road. Even Prince Forrest woke a servant with his list of choices for who the puppies should go to. People were too tired and irritated to ask much at

the time. But their actions, combined with what servants overheard about their deal with the House of Death, suggests that whatever deal they made, they won't be returning home."

No. This can't be possible.

"Why wouldn't they come back? They're princes! I mean, are they just going to a different court?" That might make sense. A little time spent in the Spring Fae lands surrounded by beautiful fae might be just what they need.

To my surprise, just the thought bothers me.

"You're promised to all four of them, and you don't know why they wouldn't come back?" She licks her fingers and wipes them down the front of her shirt.

I glare, growing tired of this conversation. "I don't know them at all. You realize that right? I knew Prince Sulien as a child, but the other three are strangers to me. *Prince Sulien's* a stranger to me." I clench my fists. Everyone keeps assuming I'm madly in love with them. That's the furthest thing from the truth.

Kind of.

She shrugs.

My jaw tightens. "Look, just tell me what you know."

She regards me for a long minute. Her pointy ears twitching ever-so-subtly, and her green eyes filled with mischief. "Ok, I'll give you the truth." She smooths down the front of her shirt, and sits up straighter. "They made a deal with the House of Death to find you."

"A deal with the House of Death? What kind of deal? Why the House of Death?" The questions tumble out of my mouth.

Lady Nova ignores them. “They’ve gone back to pay the price for the help they got. No one knows how long it’ll take. But knowing the House of Death, if they had to return to fulfill the deal, it could take some time. The House of Death doesn’t follow the court rules as well as the rest of us.”

Pay the price. What price? My mind races, thinking about how persistent they were with getting an answer out of me about whether or not I was willing to marry them, and how hurt they were when I said no. They left with that on their minds. It was the last conversation we had.

My heart aches. They deserve better. I need to *be* better.

“What can we do?”

Her expression says she takes offense at the word *we* in my question. “The elders have a plan set into action. They sent out an enormous party to try to make a trade with the House of Death for them. To get the princes out of whatever deal they made to save your life.”

I feel like I can suddenly breathe. “Thank goodness.”

They made a deal for me. They shouldn’t have to suffer because they helped me. A woman who couldn’t even agree to marry them.

Lady Nova glares. “No, don’t relax. Fae who give their word are bound to it. If they took on a stupid deal, which they probably did in desperation to get you back, they can’t get out of it. They have to uphold their end of it, and I seriously doubt some big fae group visiting them will change that.”

Did they just ride off to their deaths? Are they doomed? All for me? The House of Death doesn’t exactly sound like the kind of place you should make a deal with.

My heart pounds, and my hands begin to tremble. I put them on my lap, so Lady Nova doesn't see.

"Whatever it is," I begin, "It has to be bad, right? We're talking about the House of Death. I don't know much about it, but I can't imagine they make sweet, easy deals to help."

Lady Nova nods. "The elders' party is going to take way too long to get there too. You simply can't move quickly with a group that large."

What? What the hell? Then, they shouldn't have sent such a large group. If the princes need help, they need help now, just like I did when they came for me. We can't waste that kind of time.

"Well, that doesn't work for me. I'm going to get them myself." I push myself back from the table and stand, a plan slowly forming in my mind.

Heading to the dresser, I begin to pack a bag.

Lady Nova gives an unkind laugh, but I ignore her. "It took four princes, a deal with the House of Death, and a bloodbath to save you from your kidnappers. Do you really think saving them will be that easy? Do you really think you can just get on a horse, find them, and undo the deal?"

"I never said it would be easy. I just said I'm going to do it." I'm throwing clothes in my bag. I've got my blade in one of my drawers, I search each of them trying to find which one.

"So, you're confident that you'll make it through this journey and through a discussion with the House of Death to break a deal they made?" She's amused. I don't care.

Ignoring her, I smile when I find my blade and place it on my bed. I sift through my clothing until I find something to wear that I can travel in and fight in, if I need to. I can ask a

servant to throw together some food and supplies and ask them to get a horse saddled for me. Then, I should be ready to go.

“So you’re going to go head to head with the House of Death? With Lady Grave? A woman who has probably already had a premonition about all of this, and will be prepared for your arrival, one way or another. With the Keeper of Death? A woman who is among the most powerful of the fae.” Lady Nova questions me, like I’m not thinking things through.

I’m not, but it doesn’t matter. All I need to do is find the princes, and we can work through whatever the hell else is going on. I might not have awesome fae powers, but I have a brain, and I’ve been kicked around enough to be able to handle more than Lady Nova seems to think.

Lady Nova snorts when I don’t respond. “You’ll all end up dead.”

I snap. “If you’re not going to help, then at least shut the hell up!” I close my bag and face her, daring her to say another snotty comment.

Lady Nova grins. “Fine, I’ll help you find the House of Death and make sure you don’t die while you’re out there. You have my word.”

“Help me?” I’m honestly surprised.

Her grin widens. “Why did you think I was here? I’m from the House of War. There’s nothing we like better than a dangerous quest.”

It’s weird. I think this woman might be insane, but she’s also the only person who might help me with this crazy plan. Plus, it’d be good to have a House of War fae at my side.

Her expression turns serious. “We can’t tell anyone else the plan. You’re the future queen, and they wouldn’t let you go

if they find out. Or, worse, they'll assemble another huge party to go with you and it'll slow us down."

Wow. She's right. I'm not just Cassia the maid any longer. I don't have the freedom to just disappear into the morning light. I just hope no one thinks I've gone missing again.

"Got it. We'll do this quietly," I say.

"Finish getting ready. I'll get us more supplies and have the horses ready." She heads out of my room, and I stand there, calming my breathing and mentally preparing for the journey ahead.

Princes, hold on, I'm coming for you. You saved me once, it's my turn now.

FOUR

Cassia

It's hard to think about anything except the pain radiating through my body, but I try to focus on the sun. The sun is everything. When it sets, it'll be time to rest. It'll be a break from the pain.

The sun is all that matters.

As Nova and I keep riding, the heat slowly dissipates with the setting sun leaving behind a chill that's soul-deep. I fight back tears as my body bangs against the horse with each move it makes. My thighs, my hips, my legs, and even my ass ache. Whoever invented riding by horseback is an ass.

One thing about being poor is that I don't have a lot of experience with horses. I didn't realize how much that mattered until today. Maybe a person has to develop a certain... layer of scar tissue to enjoy riding the animals. Or they enjoy pain. I don't know. But I might hate horses. I might desperately wish I had certain princes here to teleport us slowly down the road.

I haven't said a word. Not a single complaint. Not just because Lady Nova would no doubt see that as yet another sign that I'm not meant to be queen, but because somewhere at the end of this journey are four men who I think I could love

one day. And if they're in danger, I'm going to be there to save them.

The guys need me. I can endure this. I can do this.

But if they're just off somewhere yanking each other's dicks, I'm going to stare for a few minutes, then be really pissed.

Lady Nova slows her horse until she's at my side, and then I slow too, staring at her, trying not to get my hopes up. "Let's stop here and make camp."

A squeal of joy escapes before I can contain it. I bring my horse to a stop, and swing my leg over to get off. I expect to land on my feet, but I land on my ass instead. It's like every muscle in my lower body has decided to give up on me at one of the worst possible moments.

"Ouch." I start to rub my legs, hoping to wake them back up, but they practically burn with pain.

Lady Nova doesn't say a word, but I swear I can hear her eyes roll. I guess that's better than laughing. Squatting down, she kindly put her arm around my waist, hoists me to a standing position, and helps me onto a rock. This fae is as strong as she looks. Stronger maybe.

"Not used to riding?" she asks, squatting, looking at my legs.

"Honestly? I've only ridden them three or four times. In town, when I was a kid and one of the farmers would let me."

She looks shocked. "Really?"

I nod. "Horses are for the wealthy."

"Wealthy?" she rubs the back of her neck. "Not wealthy. Warriors. Travelers."

Now, I do roll my eyes. “I should go back and tell my old self that I don’t need money to buy a horse, I just need to start swinging my sword around and soon my very own horse will appear.”

She sighs and shakes her head. “Regardless, you really need to toughen up. We have a long journey. If you’re already doing this poorly, you’ll only slow us down.” She’s not unkind in how she says it. She’s matter of fact. Which might be worse.

“Got it.” I look down at my butt. “So help me gods, if you do not toughen up, I will kick my ass myself.”

Snorting, she begins to unload both of our horses. I want to help. I really do. But I feel like sitting on this rock all prim and proper is better than crawling around on legs that don’t want to work, or managing to walk, but crying like a baby with each painful movement.

Prim and proper it is!

“You can’t be one of these weak queens,” she tells me as she sets up wood for the fire. “You know what I’m talking about, right? They ride in carriages and only care about looking pretty. Weak queens make weak rulers.”

“No need to worry. I’m hardy, like the oldest tree in this forest.” I puff out my chest briefly. It hurts. “Hardy like the hands of an old woman. Or the butthole of a whore. Hardy like the rocks in the mud, and arms of a mother.”

Lady Nova stares at me, wordlessly.

“You should see me scrub a filthy floor on my knees all day. And the way I move around a broom... hell, I’m the best sweeper you’ve ever seen. Plus, I can make a bed that looks, okay, not awesome, but super good.” Okay, I’d been trying to defend myself, but had I really just started listing off chores?

She clears her throat, eying me. “I’ve heard stories about your cleaning prowess. You’re a legend in the palace. It’s probably why you matched with all four princes.” She’s trying to hold a serious face, but it’s not working.

Oh, the lady can joke!

“A person has to be tough to handle those four.” I hold my head up high enough that I’m hoping she can’t see my insecurities.

This elicits a chuckle out of her. I smile back.

She stands in front of the wood she’s piled, her hands outstretched, and a raging fire crackles to life in the wood. My jaw drops. I know fae can do some pretty awesome stuff, but they usually don’t do it in front of us lowlife humans.

“You just did that with your hands?” I ask, staring at her and her hands. It looks so easy.

“You can’t make fire with your magic?” Her eyebrows furrow.

My stomach clenches. I’m human, or at least an incredibly weak fae as far as everyone is concerned. That should be common knowledge at this point. Of course I can’t make fire with my magic. I don’t have any.

I shrug. “I’ve never really tried.”

Lifting my hands, I try to move them like she did. I know nothing’s going to happen, but I try all the same. There’s half a second where I swear the fire grows, but then I realize it was just a trick of the light.

I’ve had one miracle in my life. I’m pretty sure that’s the limit.

Pointing at the burns on my wrists, Lady Nova's face turns grave.

I feel uncomfortable for reasons I don't understand. "Just the marks from my shackles. No biggie."

Her expression doesn't change. "Human bastards have always used iron to muzzle fae magic. I can't believe those assholes used it on you." Then she sits down next to me and touches my wrists. "These remind me of old images from wars of the past. Historians made sure we all remember how the humans treated us. The humans kept the fae in chains, all made of iron, so that not only did they not have their magic, but their skin burned all the time." Her voice trembles with anger.

I wonder if whatever happened during those wars is a part of why humans have so little now and fae have so much. It's strange that I never really thought about how the scales became so unevenly tipped. I just thought that them having magic meant they were bigger and stronger than us, and we just had to take it. If what she's saying is right, once upon a time we humans were the ones in charge, and we were as cruel as the fae are to us now. Maybe crueler.

I need to read up on our history.

Yet, none of that explains why she thinks little old me had iron cuffs. Even though, technically, they were. What makes *her* so certain they were iron? The healers never mentioned anything about it, although they seemed too scared to say much to me at all, for some reason. *Although I did hear something about the princes putting the fear of the gods in them about making certain I was properly cared for...*

But, I digress. "Couldn't these marks just be from the chain chafing against my skin?"

Lady Nova gives me a funny look. “No, these are burn marks, not chafing marks. Didn’t you know?”

It’s awkward. Trying to decide what to tell her, because I don’t want to completely lie. “Remember, I thought I was human until that ball. I don’t really have experience with iron or burns. Hell, iron is forbidden! If I had experience with it, you *should* be a little worried about me!”

“Fair enough,” she says, amusement in her tone, but she turns over my arms to continue inspecting my injuries.

Then, her words settle over me. My marks... do look like burns. *Does this mean that I have magic? And if I have magic, doesn’t that have to mean I do have some fae in me?* My pulse races at the thought. *How much easier could my life have been if I had magic? If I had been aware of any fae in me?*

I shake my head, not understanding how it’s even possible. I’m just a human. My father is human. And from what my father has said about my mother, which hasn’t been much, she was human too. So... could I have some distant fae relative? And... how do I find out if I do?

Something tickles the back of my mind. Distant memories in which my father shut down any conversation involving magic or our family line. Until now, I never thought about that being weird, but maybe it is?

My gaze goes to Lady Nova. She drops her hands from my arms, but still looks troubled. “You should know some basic things. Someone has failed you terribly, Lady Cassia.”

Failed me? My father and grandmother have never failed me in anything, right? *Except when it comes to knowledge about your relatives, especially anyone on my mother’s side,*

and anything about mother in general... but that was only because it's too hard for him to talk about her. Isn't it?

I wrap my arms around myself, fighting the urge to bare my soul. "I really don't know anything, at all." *Even about myself.*

She seems to be in disbelief. "Have you really believed you were human your whole life, were there no signs at all?"

Is missing information a sign? I don't think so. I think she more means magic squirting out of my ass, which has never happened.

"There were no signs. I—I don't even know if I have magic or not," There's no use in lying or trying to hide it, if we still have days of journeying together to get through, because she'll figure it out soon enough.

Besides, she obviously knows something I don't and knowledge is power right now. If I have some distant fae inside of me, maybe she can help me to... access my magic? Is that even a thing? Or help me find out how much? And if she can help me with these things, I won't have to lie about nearly as many things when I get the princes back.

"You have to learn if you can use magic. It's like not learning to read. If you have the potential for the ability, you should learn it."

I swallow around the lump in my throat. "How do you learn?"

She actually smiles. "Lucky for you, I often help in teaching young fae to use their magic. Even an occasional older one."

"Older ones?" I ask, confused.

She nods. “In rare instances, fae learn their magic later in life.” Before I can ask more, she continues. “Here, let’s try to play with fire.” She urges me to stand and guides my hands over the fire. “Ok, you want to get a sense of it. A sense of everything in the air right now. Do you feel it?”

I close my eyes and try to just be and feel. The truth is, I feel stupid. I don’t know what I’m trying to feel. The warmth in the air from the fire? The embers dying in the air? The smoke drifting to the skies?

Lady Nova keeps talking, not waiting any longer for a response from me. “Listen to what you feel. Try to pull from it.”

Pull from it? I don’t know, but I try to focus on the fire, the air, the embers, and the smoke. The way they interact. The way they weave harmoniously together. Strangely, I swear, I start to feel something, like a thread. It’s not tangible. I can’t actually touch it, but I try to latch on to it with my mind. I try to pull it in toward me. It’s slippery at first, but then I get a hold of it.

I feel it then, a rush, a surge of energy, thumping like a heartbeat. *My magic.*

“There you go.” Nova says.

My eyes flutter open to see that the fire is completely out. My jaw drops. Holy fuck. *How did I just do that? Where did I get magic from?*

“Nice job. We’ll try again later.”

Lady Nova restarts the fire while I stare dumbfounded at my hands. They put out a fire. *I* put out a whole fire with my hands—with my mind. It’s impossible. Because this means... I have some magic.

A smile flashes across my face. *This means everything.*

Lady Nova begins preparing dinner while I'm in the midst of a life-altering discovery about myself. *I have to be part-fae. There's more to my heritage than my father and grandmother have told me.*

I'm. A. Fae.

"Do you know how to use a weapon?" Lady Nova asks, shaking me out of my stupor.

Right, okay, a weapon? "Enough, I've had to protect myself a time or two walking to and from the palace to work." I recall attempting to use a weapon on Prince Sulien not too long ago.

My lapse in attention is cut short when Lady Nova *throws* a dagger at me. I catch it, barely. Inches from my fucking face. With hands that tremble, and a blade that's just a breath from my eye.

"What the fuckity fuck!" I shout.

She smirks and shrugs. "Looks like you know how to use a weapon."

"Not enough for me to be able to catch a dagger in mid-air! Hell, Lady Nova, what were you thinking?" I huff, lowering the dagger, hating the fact that I'm trembling.

"That's yours now. You're going to know more than enough about weapons by the time we're done with each other." Then, she grins.

"I better not fall asleep, right?"

Her grin simply widens.

“No, seriously, are daggers going to be coming at me in my sleep?” That’s just what I need after the weird nightmares I’ve been having about the princes since they disappeared from the Summer Court. Nightmares while I sleep *and* daggers coming at me.

She turns, whistling and stirring the food.

This is going to be a long trip.

I glance away from her and to the trees. A dead raven watches me, and I swear it’s the same one as before. A chill rolls down my spine. I glance at Lady Nova to see if she’s seen it, then back, but the thing is gone.

FIVE

Cassia

My eyes open to a dark sky illuminated by a fire, a welcome break from the nightmare involving Prince Sulien being tortured in a cold, dark place. A similar nightmare to the ones I've been having every night since we started traveling two days ago, although, to be fair, I've had the occasional good dream mixed in with the bad too. Embers float into the air above me, dancing with the stars. There's nothing but the sound of the cracking fire, and yet, *something* woke me. I lay on my pallet of blankets for a bit, trying to figure out what disturbed me. I don't hear anything. I don't sense anything.

Lady Nova sleeps peacefully on the other side of the fire, which should tell me everything I need to know. That woman has the instincts of a feral cat. If there was something around, she'd be awake right now.

So what woke me up?

Part of me wants to awaken Lady Nova and ask. Part of me thinks she'd gut me like a fish out of annoyance just for being so stupid if I did. But I guess I don't need to bother her right now. The only reason to wake her would be if I thought there was something dangerous, which I don't think there is.

Still, I can't go back to sleep. *Maybe it'd be worth it just to take a look around.*

I quietly climb out of the blankets and slip into my boots. I also grab a dagger and hide that in my boots, just in case. Standing, I glance around, the firelight shines on our campsite alone. Outside of that, there's only darkness.

Hesitating just a moment, I pick a direction at random and move away from the firelight. Something in the forest is calling to me. Maybe the lull of the moonlight. Maybe something else, but I won't be able to sleep until I find out what.

An indistinguishable feeling makes me keep going when logic would say to stop. Slowly, there's a sound. Something soft that I can't quite place. I walk through the forest, unimpeded, and follow the sound.

The forest is awake. I hear animals rustling. I see them scurrying about as I make my trek. As the sound grows closer, I notice that it's soft and almost musical. Like the song nature would play if she could. Drums, or are those the sounds of animals running? A flute, but it could be the whistling of the wind.

In too deep to stop, I listen and choose my directions with care, the sound growing louder with each step I take. At last, the music reaches an all-time high, and I stop in front of a tree, staring. *Is this tree the source of the sound? That's impossible.*

Staring at the bark, I squint my eyes. Something's off. The bark looks funny. Thicker and bumpier than any bark I've seen before, but it could be the fact that everything is different under the moonlight.

Is this some pixie nonsense? I don't know a lot about pixies, but the little creatures are trouble.

This might have been a mistake.

Still, I lean in closer, trying to understand what the hell is going on with this music producing tree when a pair of eyes opens and blinks in front of me. I jump back and curse, grasping my chest as if that will get my heart pumping again. It does. Too fast though, because my heart is racing.

What the hell am I looking at?

The eyes stare back at me, and I suddenly realize it's a tree spirit. These creatures live in many trees but usually slumber within the tree for long periods of time. Sometimes, no one knows why, they awaken. Knowing that they're harmless, for the most part, I let out a breath and turn my attention back to it. I've never been this close to one.

The spirit's gruff voice breaks through the sounds of the forest. "Who's disturbing my slumber? With the help of a little magical music, I finally fell asleep after the last lizard crawled across my face. Do you know how hard it is to sleep with animals crawling all over you?"

Wait. I bothered him? "Sorry."

"Sorry," he humphs. "Such a fae thing to say. A *useless* thing to say. Now, who is it that's disturbed my peace?"

I hesitate, trying to remember tales about tree spirits. Can this one turn me into a beetle if I piss him off? Or shrink me to the size of an acorn? I'm pretty sure he can.

I proceed with caution. Caution and politeness. "I'm Cassia Withers, and I'm honored to meet such a fine tree spirit such as yourself," I say, hoping that my words might soothe the creature.

Besides, I can kind of understand where he's coming from. Having animals crawl all over your face while you sleep *does* sound annoying. Still, this spirit was making the noise that attracted me and woke *me* up. That's how I found him, so he really has no room to be annoyed at me coming over to investigate.

"Cassia Withers?" The spirit's eyes widen. "It's you! Our future queen! Excuse me for not bowing, but..." The spirit looks down at its non-existent body then back at me, raising what could be its eyebrows.

I frown. "How'd you know that?" What does a spirit that lives in a tree know of the courts and royals? We're far from the Summer Court, and the spirit isn't close to the road where he'd hear passersby.

"Whispers live in the wind and reach far beyond your courts. I know more than you could imagine. Make a light, so I can see your face."

Now tree-beings think I can use magic too. Great.

"I can't."

The spirit stares and laughs. "You're a funny royal, but, a light, please, your highness!"

"Seriously," I say, feeling ashamed, "my magic isn't strong enough to make a light." Hell, I just learned that I have some fae in me *and* can do magic. Both things I hadn't quite wrapped my head around just yet.

"You're serious. You really believe that." He's laughing again, this time so hard that he shakes the tree making some birds fly out of it. "Your power is so strong, I can feel it radiating off of you."

I look at him, dumbfounded. I don't feel any power anywhere inside of me. How could he be feeling it? What's more, if I had powerful magic, wouldn't it have surfaced like all the other fae when I was just a child. Wouldn't they have seen I was a magical fae the day I was born?

He looks as startled as a tree spirit can look. "Could it be?" The spirit asks, then clicks three times. "No, it can't be. *Hmm. Hmm. Hmm.*"

What in the world is he talking about?

He continues speaking, this time softer, almost to himself. "They're the key. Her power's locked. Make the match and then just watch."

"Key? My powers are locked? What does that mean?"

"They're your key," he says, emphasizing each word.

I look around in aggravation. "Who?"

"The who that started this all!" he exclaims.

Who started what all? Wait. "The princes? They're the key to something?"

"To your power's locked. Make the match and then just watch."

Is he talking about me lighting the wood on fire? It's like a match, and then I can use my magic now? This wood spirit is both confusing and frustrating. *Why do all these ancient, powerful creatures have to talk in circles? Do they enjoy being annoying?*

"Are you talking about when I lit the fire? Listen, I'm completely confused," I admit, and my body begins to tremble.

He pauses, and I get the sense he's considering me for a minute before he keeps talking. "Some fae need a boost to awaken their magic. Troubled births can lock the power up tight." The spirit says more to the forest than to me. His eyes flip around as he speaks.

My chest feels tight. *Is that true?* "My mother died when I was born."

He frowns. "No. No. It's more than that. Your birth had to hurt so much that it hurt your magic. Pain responds to pain. Goodness gets trapped when bad is around. Magic can't work in the presence of pain." The spirit babbles on and on. I can't understand what he's talking about.

"Give me your hands." The spirit reaches out his own hand that resemble gnarled branches.

My hands instinctively curl into fists, and I hide them behind my back. I don't understand what's happening at all. "Why?"

"So I can help," he whispers softly.

The gnarled hand remains outstretched, and after a deep breath, I offer them to him. When he touches my hands, the lines on my palms take on a golden glow. The glow lights up the spirit's face, and I can see even more detail than before. The lines in the wood look like wrinkles on his face, and his eyes are a brown so deep that they look like knots in the wood.

"You will make a wonderful queen. The kind of queen that's not been seen in ages, if at all," he tells me as he traces a finger along the longest line on my palms. It shines brighter when he touches it.

I can't imagine what being a queen is even like. What does a queen do all day? Who does a queen talk to? Most of the fae

royals seem to do nothing at all, but could I do more? Could I maybe help the humans in a way they've never been helped before?

Maybe. *If I become Queen.*

“You will find happiness. More happiness than you can imagine. More happiness than you think should be allowed.”

Happiness. What a strange idea. *Haven't I always been happy with my father and grandmother?*

My gut turns. In a way, yes, but life was hard. Different from what the spirit is describing. I can imagine that kind of happiness even less than I can being Queen. I'm just not built for happiness. Starting your life off with the death of your mother doesn't quite set you up for a lifetime of shits and giggles. It set me up for a life of hardship and servitude.

I shake my head and try to pull my hand away, but the spirit won't let it go. His branches tug my hands into place with a little more force, as he stares intently down at the glowing lines.

“There's more. Do you want to hear it?” He traces another line, and four rays of light shine out from it.

“These are the four children I see in your future.”

Four? My vagina is not ready for that!

Four children. Is it one for each prince? I have to let that one settle in. All I've ever wanted was to be able to take care of my family—the one that made me. I've never considered making my own family.

“You can have it all, Cassia Withers, but you have to be brave. A lot of good is coming, and only if you are brave will you receive your true destiny. Follow your heart, but only after

you quiet the fear. Your fear screams so loudly I hear it in the wind too. Muffle it, and you'll see clearly." He lets go of my hands, and the golden light dims.

I stare at my hands. A future I've never tried to fathom exists...if I marry the princes, I suspect.

"Does that mean my only path to happiness is with the princes?"

"I never said that."

I frown. "Does this mean that no matter what our marriage will be... good? Will they treat me well? Will... any lies that have been told stay buried? Will they be happy with me?"

"Read in between the lines."

That's not good enough. "I need to know if they'll hurt me. Will they break my heart? Will they leave me? If I have children with them, will they be good fathers? Will they make sure we don't suffer? Will they love me if everything we've built is built on a lie?"

"Read in between the lines." He yawns.

I feel a tear roll down my face. "No, you have to tell me. I have to know for sure. I can't give them my heart and have them rip it into pieces. I can't handle it. If they do it, they'll break me, and I won't be able to pull myself back together enough to take care of my family."

His eyes close, and he blends in so much with the tree that I can no longer tell where he is.

"Please. I need to know. It's too much of a risk. Please."

"Be brave, Queen Cassia," he says, the words no louder than a whisper.

Then, the spirit fades entirely into the tree, and I'm left looking at nothing but bark. He's left me alone with the heaviness of everything he told me resting on my shoulders. *Why does everything have to lead back to the princes?*

I huff at the tree that's just a tree now. *What does a spirit know about me and my future, whispers from the wind or not?*

I can't think about any of that now. There's no future for anyone if I don't go save them first. I turn around and head back to camp.

It's strange. As safe as I felt following the sound, that's as unsafe as I feel now. Perhaps the magic of the music is gone. Maybe it's the darkness of the night or how far away the glow of the campfire seems to be, but I'm rushing, feeling nervous, remembering that I can't afford to run, trip, and hurt myself out here.

Then, I hear it. A low growl. A sound that sends every hair on my body standing on end. *I'm not alone out here. There's something in the darkness.*

The growl comes again, closer, behind me. I whirl around and see it. Red eyes in the darkness. Eyes that belong to... a wolf. It creeps ever closer, stalking me, and I wonder if I should shout for Lady Nova. *No, I'm close to camp. I can make it.*

A chorus of growls rise up around me, making my stomach sink, and I whip my head left and right, seeing eyes in the darkness on all sides of me. *Fuck. A pack.*

I'm running now, not as worried about falling as I am about being torn to pieces. Wolves are dangerous in the best of times, and these are certainly not the best of times.

Of all the stupid ways to die.

Then, eyes are ahead of me too. I slide to a halt, heart in my throat. “Nova!” I scream, no longer caring about embarrassing myself. “Nova!”

Grabbing my dagger, I yank it out. Even knowing how little it’ll do against a pack of wolves, I know it’s better than nothing. These creatures won’t find me easy prey.

The moon emerges from behind a cloud, and the woods brighten. I finally see the wolves for what they are. They’re dead like the crow, *undead*, flesh hanging off of bones, eyes dangling from heads. Some even have their organs spilling out their sides.

“Stop! Get away!” I shout.

They don’t listen, just close in tighter.

Sweat rolls down my back. *No, no, this can’t be happening. I’m on my way to save my princes. I can’t be killed out in the woods before I can even reach them, leaving them, and my family helpless.*

“Nova! I shout again, desperate, my hand clenching my dagger, ready to fight to my dying breath.

A ball of flames explodes through the clearing smashing into one of the wolves. It shoots back, hits a tree, and I watch in horror as its flesh burns away, leaving nothing but bones. I turn and watch as Nova strides from the trees, a sword in one hand, her other outstretched.

“Run for me!” She shouts, only wolves still stand between her and I.

Moonlight flashes across glinting teeth. *Do I run? Stay?* Terror consumes me, and for a moment I’m not myself. I’m above me, watching tangled threads connecting me and the

wolves, and darker black threads running from them and disappearing into the trees.

Balls of fire come exploding all around me. I hear the sound of a sword striking bone. Nova's war cry. And the crackling of flames.

I blink, still not feeling like myself, but I see wolves watching me. Eerie. Dangerous. Poised to kill.

One leaps at me. I cry out. Nova shouts my name. My blade slashes the beast as I dive to the side.

Stop! Stop! Enough! I feel a familiar rush of energy, then nothing.

Every wolf goes down. Collapsing to the ground like a puppet with its strings cut.

I scramble to Lady Nova. She catches me in her arms, her sword at the ready, but nothing moves.

Is it... over? That's impossible.

“What is this? What does it mean?” Why would undead wolves suddenly attack us? And why did they stop?

She steers us backwards until we're in the light of camp. Breathing hard, her eyes lock with mine. “It means the House of Death knows we're coming.”

“But they stopped the wolves? Why?” None of this makes sense.

Her expression changes to one I can't read. “I don't know. But I do know... we're in trouble.”

SIX

Sulien

It's dark, but the dark isn't nearly as bad as the cold. The cold creeps into my bones, making me shiver uncontrollably as I push the boulder towards the pile of other boulders in a corner I can only find by touch. As the Summer Prince, I'm not accustomed to the cold, however, I've experienced it in the Winter Court, and it's nothing like this. This cold radiates from beneath the ground... it comes from a place surrounded by death and darkness... it's a kind of cold I never imagined I would experience.

I shift my direction a little, pushing up the sudden incline. Even though I can't see in the pitch black darkness, I've learned where the pile I need to reach is, and that the footing is uneven here. Unfortunately, the movement pulls at my back, and I cry out in the darkness and fall to my knees. My teeth clench together as I fight the urge to scream again.

When the pain is manageable once more, I release a slow, shaky breath. The stinging lashes on my back seem to be taking forever to heal, and every time I move, they burst open again in a way that makes me feel vulnerable and weak.

And I hate feeling weak.

I bet the Keeper of Death used a whip of iron.

“Fuck you, House of Death,” I whisper, but my words seem loud in the deathly still place. “And fuck this task.”

All of this useless work I suspect was designed to break me down, and I hate that it’s working. Many see us fae princes as fancy pants, spoiled, pricks who have never known a day of hard work in our lives. But there’s a reason all of us are miserable shits who grow up and pawn our responsibilities onto our children. In order to strengthen our bodies to fight the iron demons, we’re put through hell. To have the mental fortitude and ability to strengthen the boundary with our mind, we’re put through hell. We know, in a way no other fae or human alike could possibly know, pain and hard work. Not that the humans don’t break their backs for us. But they don’t know what it’s like to have demons crawling inside their minds, feeling their anger and pain. Feeling every drop of death and destruction they’re able to create until we can force them out of our kingdom with our minds.

I remember waking to find my tutors trying to pry my hands back from my face. I remember my tutors cleaning the gouges I carved in my own face. And I remember staring at myself in the mirror wondering how it was that the pain on the outside didn’t resemble the pain I was experiencing on the inside.

All that’s to say, I know pain. Despite what I let others think of me. I thought I could handle whatever games the Lady of Death wanted to play with me until I humiliated myself enough to satisfy her.

I was wrong.

Everything hurts. My eyes ache from the constant darkness, and all the energy I have leftover after my repeated beatings and pointless tasks goes into keeping in place the

magical barrier that protects our kingdom. But even that feels like it is slipping away from me.

What will we do when we can't keep the barrier up any longer?

As I stumble toward the pile, my thoughts turn to the people of my court. They depend on me, and yet, here I am struggling under the weight of these boulders. Growing weaker with each step I take. Shame and guilt claw at my mind. *What will happen to them now that I'm enslaved to the House of Death? What if the Keeper of Death doesn't stop this game in time?*

All of us princes are struggling. I haven't seen the others recently, but I can sense them. We're not doing well, which isn't good for our people. If the four of us fall, so will the kingdom. Doing these menial tasks will only serve in destroying everything we've worked so hard to keep safe.

And why? Why is the Keeper of Death pushing us this far?

"Do you want a war with the Iron Demons?" I roar, my fury blazing like wildfire.

A terrible spot of light appears in the darkness, and I jerk back from it, lifting my hand to hide my eyes. It fucking burns so badly that it feels like staring into a thousand blazing suns... until my eyes adjust, and I find the Keeper of Death standing near me, a torch in hand. I don't know where she came from, since the walls around her still stand, showing no way in or out, but she looks like nothing more than a ghost. She wears a gray gown that spreads over her like spiderwebs, and bones are woven into her long, black hair.

She cocks her head in that creepy way she does, and I feel an icy chill when she's inches away from me. "You're smarter

than you look, Prince Sunshine.”

Smarter than I look... what did I say?

“How so?” I ask in confusion. The darkness, my pain, my exhaustion, all of it makes my thoughts feel like they’re swimming through butter.

“About what I want,” her words are low and filled with pleasure.

Then, it hits me. “Wait, you *want* a war with the iron demons?”

That’s not possible. No one would want that, especially a fae.

“Yes.” The word hangs in the air. “Peace has woven a slow and colorful tapestry over the lands. Death no longer visits us as it should, and my house is nearly empty. We have been forgotten—our power ignored. I need people to fill my halls. I need death.”

“No—”

“You have forgotten our place in this world. You don’t respect our house anymore. None of you do.” Her eyes lock onto mine as she speaks, each word a dagger aimed straight at me. “Now, you’ll have to.”

I almost laugh, but bite back the sound. “The House of Death has always been respected, and it always will be. If the courts have made the error of not reminding you of that respect, then we will correct ourselves at once. We will celebrate the day of the dead. Gifts will be sent. We will—”

She *does* laugh, but the sound is harsh and cruel. “It’s too late for that. We have you four. When you’re broken, the

barrier will fall, and the House of Death will have to be respected once more.”

Maybe it’s the pain I’m in. Or how unnerving it is to go from days, or hours, I’m not sure which, of complete darkness, to being in the light once more, but I almost can’t comprehend what she’s saying. Getting us to agree to the bargain with Cassia was never about humiliating us, or playing with us, it was... about destroying the kingdom?

I feel sick. *A fae bargain is never what it seems.*

“Keeper of Death, we will do anything to right the slight to your house—”

“You need not do more than you’ve already done. You’ve given me the lives of all your privileged, delicate, weak fae, on a silver platter. People who aren’t warriors like you and your men, with exception to the House of War. People who will be well-fed pigs being led to the slaughter.”

I shake my head, my hands clenching into fists. “You’re not old enough to remember the days of war and darkness. If you were, I’m sure you wouldn’t want that life.”

“I’ve read enough, sweet honeyed prince, to know that those were the best days for the House of Death. I will bring about a golden age for my people once more.”

I want to shout. I want to attack her, but I have to believe there’s something I can still say to shake this woman from her foolish ideas. Fae are known for being tricked by promises, trinkets, and sweet words. Not anger. Not threats.

Something must work to change her mind, but what?

She smiles, drawing closer, her scent of decay washing over me. “And all because you were so sure about your bride. But you were wrong, weren’t you? She was far too smart, too

powerful for you. She didn't want the four of you, even with your wealth and power." And the Keeper of Death sounds... oddly proud as she tears my heart into pieces.

Cassia. Just her name makes me feel like a knife is twisting in my heart.

Were we fools to think Cassia would want to marry us after we saved her? Maybe not. But we *were* fools to put ourselves in a position that now endangers our entire kingdom. Regardless of how we feel about her, we have a responsibility to our people. We might have never thought the House of Death would be capable of this, but we should never have taken this kind of risk.

Everyone's suffering rests on my shoulders, my brotherly princes, my people, and my Cassia. I'm to blame. *I* made a deal with Cassia. *I* had the potion made. *I* had her come to the ball. *I* didn't tell the others the truth. My actions got her kidnapped, and led us to this deal. It's all my fault.

Me and that damn potion.

This is my burden to bear until the bitter end. An end that seems to be creeping nearer and nearer.

"You should hear the way the other princes scream in pain. The way they shout into the darkness." Each word is spoken with complete and utter glee.

Cruel bitch. "There have to be people you care about enough not to want to unleash the iron demons on," I say, taking a chance, and hoping it pays off.

"No. I've never been fond of the living. Well..." she pauses, a far away look momentarily appears in her dark eyes. "Maybe once upon a time, but not anymore."

Damn it. Desperation builds inside of me. No doubt she'll be leaving me alone in this darkened room again soon. I have to take this opportunity to get her to see reason.

“Keeper of Death, I beg you not to do this. I, your Summer Prince, beg you to reconsider. There is so much more I can do for you now that I know your house wants more. You don't have to destroy the kingdom to gain all that you want.”

For a second, I think I might have appealed to her. If not her soul, then her greed, but the brief look fades like a trick of the lights. “I shall enjoy your people serving me in my halls until far past the point when they're nothing but bones.”

I lunge toward her, ready to rip her to shreds. But before I even take a step, she throws her hands in the air, and a protective force appears around her like a dark, glowing cloud. I crash into it at full speed, only to be repelled and sent flying backwards. Before I can even process what's happened, I hit the ground, and the air is knocked out of my lungs.

She cackles at me, her eyes swirling with darkness, and slowly raises her hands. As they move higher, the ground rumbles and dirt falls from the walls. Around us, tombs open and dead bodies rise. Some are nothing but bones. Others have flesh and tatters of clothes hang off of them.

And the smell... it's horrifying.

“I think this fae prince needs a lesson on how powerful the dead can be,” she says in a sickly sweet voice.

My eyes widen and my heart stops as the dead turn their empty eye sockets toward me. Within seconds, they begin to move, then crawl toward me.

I try to back away, but the force of her magic keeps me in place. I fight against it with all my might, but still, I'm held in

place. *I need to preserve my magic to protect the barrier, but if these creatures hurt me, I might be useless anyway.* Deciding to allow some of my power to surface, it crackles along my skin, humming with warning. I pull slowly away from the woman, but the dead are faster.

And even if I could get away, where would I go?

She laughs again as she and the bodies draw closer, and her fingers begin to glow with an ominous *light*. *I'm surrounded by the dead.* Some are just bones while others have skin and bits of hair hanging off of them. Faces with half jawbones and mangled teeth focus on me. One with decayed eyes cocks its head to the side and stares at me.

I try to crawl backwards, but the dead move closer. They form a circle around me, and I feel my heart beating so hard it rattles my whole chest. From here, I can see the hunger in the hollow of their eyes. My instincts tell me to run, but I know there's no way out. I can't even use my magic to fight them off. Not that my magic can stand up against the living dead.

At least, *and* keep the barrier around the kingdom in place.

There's no way out. I'm just going to have to endure this too. It's hard to breathe. Hard to accept what's about to happen.

My eyes sting. Cassia's life was worth this, all of this, even if she won't or can't love me. Those people hurt her. And they would have kept hurting her if she'd stayed. *Maybe even worse.*

I look at the crowd approaching me, and my thoughts don't waver. I may lose absolutely everything, but I don't regret saving her. Even if I can't bring myself to think about what will happen to my kingdom when I fall.

Bones dig into my ankles, and I close my eyes, thinking of
Cassia. *Please don't scream. Don't scream.*

SEVEN

Cassia

I open my eyes, and I see darkness: the complete absence of light. I hold my hands in front of my face and still see nothing. I feel around the space I'm standing in, and my hands hit a cold, hard surface.

What? Where the hell am I?

It's bizarre and unsettling. I can't orient myself with my surroundings. Walking with my hands in front of me, I either feel nothing or hit a cold, hard surface again. And then, there's the smell. The stench of something rotting fills the cold air. A smell unlike anything I've smelled before, but one that instantly reminds me of death.

Which is oh so comforting.

It's eerily quiet too. It's like being sealed in a tomb. The second the thought enters my mind, I shiver. Wherever I am, thoughts like that won't help.

Then, some unknown light source again comes at the edge of my vision, and gray shapes separate from one another in the darkness. I'm definitely underground given the fact that the walls, ceiling, and floor are made of dirt. "Where am I?" I

whisper. My feet move me forward through the dim space, trying to make sense of it all.

Pain radiates through my body unexpectedly, and I gasp into the darkness. I want to reach for the pain, but it's nowhere. Nothing on me hurts. It's an intangible pain, yet sharp, aching, and throbbing all at the same time. It pulls on me, propelling me forward, deeper into the darkness... a tether to some unknown source.

I keep walking, letting the pain lead the way until I turn a corner and gasp at what I see. Everywhere I look, beneath the light of a lone torch, there are caskets open to reveal decaying bodies: men and women, young and old, fae and human alike. There's no delineation between the caskets. They're all equal in death.

My whole body trembles as I make my way past it all. The cold air stabs into my skin until I'm shivering so much that my teeth chatter. The pain presses me forwards. There's nothing in front of me except darkness, but I keep going.

The feeling inside of me intensifies as the corner of the room comes into view. There's something in that corner that I need to get to. My body tells me that much, and I can't ignore the feeling. I quicken my pace, my feet hitting the dusty ground faster and faster until I see *him*.

Big, strong Sulien lies curled up in a ball on the ground. His body doesn't move. I don't even detect the rise and fall of his chest. A heaviness weighs down on me and tears sting my eyes.

Keep going. You have to know. But I stop short of reaching him, scared of what I'll discover when I get to him. *I can't lose him. Even though he pisses me off. Even though I don't know where we stand.*

There's just something between us. Something more than a shared history, more than the secret we share. Something inside of me resonates with something inside of him. I don't understand it. I haven't wanted to admit it. But the feeling is there.

What if someone has killed him? What if he's gone and I never got to tell him?

I take a shaky step forward. Suddenly, I can hear his raspy breathing. I can see the rise and fall of his body, and my chest aches, knowing that he's alive, but in what condition? His breathing sounds like gravel crunching.

Which can't be good, even though I'm no healer, I know that much.

I move closer to him, and now I see that he's covered in blood. Not one inch of the skin I see is free from it. *Shit.* He's been badly beaten. But by who?

Glancing around, feeling a shiver roll up my spine, I see nothing. Though logic says they couldn't have gotten far since the wounds look fresh. *Are they going to come back for more?*

If they do, I'll be ready for them.

"Prince Sulien?" I whisper.

There's nothing. Just the horrible sound of his unnatural breathing.

"Prince Sulien?" I say louder. "I'm here."

"No," he mutters, but he doesn't sound right.

My heart aches. "It's Cassia."

"Not here. In my head," he says.

I drop to my knees and reach for his arm, but when my fingers touch his skin, he hisses in pain. Jerking my hand back, I try to think. I need to touch him. To check him over. I need... to know if he's all right.

We'll try this another way. "Everything is alright. I'm here now. I'm going to take care of you." I run a finger along his cheek, and he cries out in pain again.

I jerk my hand away. The last thing I want to do is hurt him more.

He's not all right.

So, what can I do? Even if I see his wounds, I won't be able to heal him. He's too heavy to carry out of here, even if I knew where to go.

Tears form in my eyes. No matter what, I have to do something. But first, I need to find a way to help him, to bring him back to me.

I try to hold my sobs back, but as I lay down next to him, they escape. My Sulien. He's hurt. Someone hurt my prince.

"The barrier," he mumbles.

Barrier? Does he even know what he's saying? "The barrier is fine. You're fine. You're right here with me."

"I can't. Too weak." He gasps, like it's taking all he has inside of him to speak. Like each word is causing him pure agony.

He makes a sound. Like he's holding back a sob, and I can't handle it. I can't handle seeing him in pain like this.

My crying fills the chamber we're in.

His body tenses. “No, Cassia, no.” His hand rests on mine around his waist... like he’s trying to comfort... me?

I turn in his arms and lightly touch his face. “I’m okay.”

His hand is there, brushing my tears away. “Never cry. Not with me.”

He shouldn’t be comforting me. Why is he comforting me when he’s the one so badly injured? This man makes no sense to me.

“What happened?” I whisper, bracing myself. “Who hurt you?”

Someone I’m going to kill for doing this to him.

He takes a shaky breath. “The Keeper of Death.”

I don’t know who that is, but I press on. “Why? Why would she do that?”

He seems to struggle for a long moment before his voice comes out soft and weak. “She’s trying to break us. She’s working us day and night, so we can’t protect our kingdom from the iron demons. She craves war and death.” His voice is raspy, and his breathing is labored. He takes a pause, gasping for air. “I’m not strong enough to keep the barrier up.” He tries to hold his head up, but he can’t.

The barrier. The most important thing the royal fae do. “The others can handle it.”

“No,” he seems even more desperate. “We were separated. She’s hurting them too. I can feel them weakening. If we fall, the barrier falls.” He slumps forward.

I hold him closer, gently rubbing my face against his. “Stay strong. I’m going to fix this.”

“It doesn’t matter. None of it matters. You rejected us, the deal was sealed, and now we’re bound to the Keeper of Death forever.” His eyes close.

“Sulien, look at me!” I plead. “I’m going to fix this. I swear I am!”

His bloodied hand trembles as he reaches up to touch my cheek before it falls to the ground with a thud. I grab his hand and hold it tightly, hoping that he keeps fighting. He can’t give up. He has to keep going. We have to be together and figure things out between us.

I think I could love the princes, if they just gave me time.

We lay together, holding hands. As time passes, Sulien’s body relaxes against mine, curling against me. *I’m going to get him out of this, I swear I will, no matter what it costs me.*

EIGHT

Cassia

“Wake up!”

The words jerk me out of my dream so quickly that I’m left gasping for breath. My eyes open, and I stare at a cloudless sky in confusion. My blankets are warm. The ground is hard, and the day is bright. It’s so different from where I was just moments before that it feels surreal.

There’s a nudge against my arm. “Eat, and get ready to go.”

I roll to my side, my stomach turning from the moment, and watch Lady Nova shuffle around, packing her things and stirring the pot of food that hangs over the fire. It’s jolting going from my dream to this. Almost like even this isn’t real.

I can’t move. My body trembles, and all I can see with every blink of my eye is Sulien, beaten, bloodied, and ready to give up.

Tears sting my eyes. I lift a shaky hand and wipe my cheeks, where I feel the evidence of tracks of tears having run down my face. I must have been crying in my sleep, which is no surprise. Every time I blink my eyes, I see him again, and my entire chest aches.

It felt so real. Just like all the terrible nightmares I've been having lately.

Sulien was hurt. He was freezing. Left alone in the dark. It's like all the other dreams, each involving a different prince, and a slightly different terrible situation.

Part of me thinks that my mind came up with the worst thing imaginable because of my guilt. The princes were gone because of me. They were possibly in a dangerous situation because of me. *Of course* I feel guilty. *Of course* that could cause nightmares.

Yet another part of me doesn't believe that. No, this dream, like the others, was too real. It was... something else. A warning. An omen. I'm not sure which, but I'm unsettled. As much as I've loved my sex dreams with the princes, I hate these dreams just as much.

"You can't lay there all day," Lady Nova says, and our gazes meet. There's intensity in her eyes for a moment, before the look falters, and shifts to one of concern.

I don't want her to be concerned about me. I don't want to have to explain the way I'm feeling, all because of a dream. She'll think I'm the weak woman she fears I am. Yet, it feels wrong to keep this inside. If my grandmother and father were here, I wouldn't hesitate to tell them, and they'd say something in turn that would make this all feel okay.

But I'm not here with them. With my family. I'm with a strange woman. On a strange quest. To get back four men who make me feel confused and vulnerable in a way that scares me.

"Are you sore from yesterday?" she asks.

And the days before that... Maybe I am. But does it matter? Does any of it really matter?

Of course not.

I crawl out of my blankets, put on my boots, and sit by the fire. The air is warm, just as the air is always warm in the Summer Court, yet I'm cold. The chill from my dream, from that dark underground place, hangs over me, unwilling to let me go even in the daylight. Nova hands me some stew, which I take without a word, then she sits down next to me.

"You're oddly quiet today. Even more so than the other mornings. Are you okay?" She stares at me with genuine concern. I've been holding these dreams in for a while now, of course she'd notice something wasn't right.

"It doesn't matter," I say, and my throat is scratchy, more evidence I'd spent the night crying.

Lady Nova sighs. "If it's impacting what we're doing, it does."

"I'm fine."

"You're not."

Does she think I'll really admit a weakness to her? She's insane. "I can handle it."

"You're as stubborn as an old horse," she mutters, spooning food into her mouth.

"Being stubborn can be good."

"Not if it gets us all killed," she says with a glare.

I snort. "You don't seem to be in any danger."

She glares. "Are you forgetting the wolves that tried to kill us?"

Damn it. "But otherwise, uh, everything is okay."

“Now, sure, but you’ve been distracted. Fuck, Lady Cassia, you look like a woman haunted by ghosts.”

Her words make something inside me tremble. “Maybe I am.”

She sighs again. “What’s going on? And don’t give me any shit. I’m no genius, but even I can see something’s going on, something that’s affecting our mission.” She hesitates, then presses on when I don’t speak. “You know what a soldier does with an old horse that won’t move. We kill the damn thing, because it’ll just slow us down. Stop being an old horse, or I’m going to press on without you.”

Leave me behind? She wouldn’t dare.

“At least I’m not a stubborn mule with a temper,” I mutter.

“Keep stalling. Real queenly of you.”

I hesitate. “You’ll think it’s dumb.”

She lifts a brow. “Or, I’ll help.”

I glare, then decide the hell with it. “I keep dreaming about the princes.” I let my eyes meet Lady Nova’s again, but I find the amusement gone from her face, so I press on. “Only, they’re strange dreams. And they feel... so real. More real than you and I, even. Sometimes it feels like I can’t tell what’s real and a dream any more.”

“Okay, that’s okay. Tell me more.” And her voice gives nothing away.

I hesitate. Most of these dreams have been terrifying, and other times embarrassing and private, but the way Lady Nova looks at me with a mix of concern and something like desperation compels me to speak. At least about the scary dreams. So I take a deep breath, and push down the anxiety

bubbling up at the idea of saying these things out loud for the first time.

“Last night,” I began, my voice shaking, “I walked through dark underground passages filled with dead bodies. There, in the cold and darkness, lay Sulien, beaten and bloody. Broken in a way I never imagined. Mumbling strange things.”

“Did he tell you anything?” she asks, seemingly unbothered by the prince’s pain or the fact that all of this was just a dream.

Did he say anything?

My thoughts were lost in him. In the pain he was in, but I remember now, he did speak. “He talked about iron demons and a barrier falling.” I set my stew down and wrap my arms around my shoulders. “He spoke of the Keeper of Death. He said she wanted war.”

“The Keeper of Death, are you sure?” she asks, her tone serious.

I take a minute to think, then answer, “Yes, I’m sure.”

She’s silent after that, so I keep going. Talking and talking without taking a breath.

As I finish recounting my dream, I look up from where I’d been staring at the ground and meet Nova’s eyes. Her stew, bowl and all, lies on the ground—dropped and unnoticed. Her face, frozen in astonishment, sends a shiver through my body.

“What?” I ask, growing even more anxious. I anticipated she might laugh at me at the worst and reassure me at the best. I hoped she might tell me that it was just a dream, and that I’d feel better when I saw them again.

Her reaction doesn’t reassure me at all.

It was just a dream, right?

Her face is shadowed with concern, but she flashes a reassuring smile that's as fictitious as my dream to go off and live a normal happy life. "No—nothing, let's just finish packing. We should get going." She stands and kicks dirt at the fire to put it out, not even using her magic.

And she loves to use her magic.

"What's wrong?" I ask, studying her in confusion.

She keeps packing up. "Nothing. Just pack."

Except, she's shaking. Her hands struggling to shove things in her packs.

"Come on, you're scaring me."

Her head lifts, and her green eyes meet mine, panic in her features. "You sure you want to know?"

I nod, straightening my spine. "I need to know."

She continues packing as she talks. "It sounds like you're dream sharing. Not dreaming."

"Dream sharing?" I ask, frowning. I've never heard of such a thing.

"Powerful fae can slip into each other's dreams. Usually, they have to *try* to do it. But mates... they're so deeply connected that they can do it by accident."

Now, I'm shaking. "I don't understand what you're saying."

She finishes packing one bag, then dumps out the remainder of the stew. "What I'm saying is that everything you saw in your dream last night was true. Everything in the

dreams you've had about the princes since becoming their mate has been true and real."

"That's impossible."

She's moving faster. "Trust me, it isn't."

"I'm not powerful enough." *She said I had to be powerful, right? I barely have powers at all.*

Lady Nova starts to pack my stuff. "Eat," then continues, "I don't completely understand it myself, but what you were describing is the House of Death. I'm assuming you've never been there, right?"

"Right." This is insane.

"So, think about it." She grabs my bowl and hurries to the river near us to scrub out the dishes, while I just sit in shock.

This isn't possible. If dream sharing requires a powerful fae, that alone should be enough to tell me that's not what I'm doing. And yet, her explanation resonates with me. These strange dreams have been feeling so real, realer than anything I've ever felt before. Not because we're mates. Not because I'm some powerful fae. But maybe, just maybe, because the princes have been reaching out for me, and they're powerful enough on their own to make that happen.

Or what the tree spirit said about me is true.

More realizations hit me. *All those dreams I had while I was kidnapped...the bear, the lake, Sulien's bed...were real? We shared them? That means our intimate moments, our shared stories, even seeing Prince Zane's home, and learning how Prince Forrest got his scar was real.*

The feeling that I know them... that's real too. As strange as it is. I've gotten to know them in an unusual way, but at

least I've gotten to know them.

Then, a chill rolls down my spine. Prince Sulien. The dream last night. That can't be real too, can it? That would also mean that seeing Prince Forrest, Prince Cobar, and Prince Zane hurt and lost in those dark tunnels was real too.

Are they actually suffering like that?

Lady Nova comes back from the river, rushing along, and I finally understand why she might be in a hurry. *Is that what she concluded? Faster than me?*

I bolt off the log I'm sitting on. "Is it possible that Prince Sulien really is in trouble? Could he be hurt?" I ask with panic in my voice.

She gives me a pained look as she packs the rest of our belongings and begins to load them on our horses. "It's very possible, but this is bigger than the prince being in trouble."

Princes. I hadn't told her the other dreams. Of the princes being tortured. Of Prince Zane's ribs being broken. Of the illusions of bears they've sent chasing after Prince Forrest. Of Prince Cobar, blackened and blue, blood coloring his golden hair.

Tears sting my eyes. *But she doesn't know all of that.* "How? How could this be worse?"

Her eyes lock onto mine. "Do you know anything about fae favors?"

"I know they're dangerous," I answer honestly.

She nods. "But favors between houses and courts are not, not typically that way. Usually, they're just a way for us to play with one another. Humiliate one another, if you will. Sulien's father once asked for a favor from the House of War.

They had him wear nothing but the female armor from a fae of the woods, essentially golden leaves on his dick and nipples, and battle with the head of our house.” She was smiling, but her smile vanishes. “That’s how it always is. Nothing but stupid fun. I imagined the princes expected the same from the House of Death, but they had other plans.”

“To hurt them?” I ask, my voice cracking.

“To break them,” she responds, and I flinch at her words. “To break them so that they can’t keep the barrier around our kingdom in place. And the moment it falters, the iron demons will overtake our lands.”

This doesn’t make sense. “Why would any fae want that?”

“If there’s a war with the iron demons, there would be a lot of fresh dead. They’re stronger and can help the House of Death become more powerful. That, teamed with the princes’ enslavement to her, will mean that our kingdom will be in ruins. And if I were to guess, the Keeper of Death intends to use her dead to take over... and help her steal the throne. That seems to be what she’s laying the groundwork for anyway.”

The barrier and the war. That’s what he was talking about. All of it is beginning to make sense.

Lady Nova’s words sink in, and a knot forms in my stomach. As much as I didn’t like history, I remember many of the lessons. Especially the ones involving the days before the barrier, when the iron demons killed fae and humans alike. It’s true that in those days the humans held more power, or thought they did, than the fae, but when our numbers decreased, so did our power.

This time, I’m not sure humanity can survive the iron demons. The fae aren’t the warriors they once were, outside of

the House of War, and the humans are broken down servants rather than fighters themselves.

If this Keeper of Death succeeds, this very well could mean the end of us all. It'll certainly be the end of anyone like my father and grandmother.... The thought makes me sick.

“She won't really go through with it. No one can be this crazy.”

Lady Nova gives a harsh laugh. “If anyone doesn't mind death, it's the Keeper of Death.”

She must be demented. Sick in the head. That's the only explanation.

Then, something occurs to me. Something that makes my head feel light. “Why doesn't she kill the princes? That would be the easiest route to take to gain the throne, right?”

Lady Nova shakes her head, looking grim. “The princes' parents are still alive. If the princes die, the kings will simply have to step in and take over the responsibility of protecting the kingdom once more. And they have enough power to keep the iron demons out, so she wouldn't get the war she desires. She has to break the princes down, so the barrier falls, then she gets the war she wants.” Lady Nova puts the last of our things on her horse and mounts it. “We need to go.”

She's right. We need to go. We need to stop a war, save the men I think I love, and fix the things I broke with my thoughtlessness. They put the fate of the entire realm on the line to save me, and now I have to do the same. I have to save them.

All I can hear is the sound of my heart beating. It thunders hard in my chest. The reality of the situation settles into my

bones, and I take a steading breath. *The Keeper of Death wants a war? She's going to get one, just not the one she expects.*

I hurry over and swing myself onto my horse. My heart pounds, and with every beat, I find myself more sure of my path, and mission, to battle the Keeper of Death for my princes' lives and my kingdom's survival.

Settled into my saddle, my mind flashes back to my dream of Sulien and the shape he was in. Then, images of the other men come, and I fight the nausea that rises inside of me. *Time is of the essence.*

NINE

Zane

Ripples of pain travel through my body with each step I take, but I press on, following a staggering figure with flesh hanging off of its discolored bones and a torch clutched in its skeletal hand. Hisses of pain slip past my lips as I continue walking. This last beating had been fierce. Out of the darkness, a dozen of the Keeper of Death's soldiers had emerged to carry out the beating, and soon they were all around me, making my broken ribs, and the rest of me, hurt on a whole new level.

“With sharp bones used to cause pain,” I whisper into the darkness.

Only the clattering of the dead man's bones respond.

“A dozen dead tasked with causing pain and nothing more.”

Yet, I wasn't in that room with them for long. My mind had shifted to an even bleaker place, as it often did. This... shifting of my mind is something that had taken time to notice, but I'd determined that it was yet another of the Keeper of Death's powers. She could play with our mind. Make it seem like we were here for longer than we were, make us feel pain that's beyond what our bodies can actually take.

What a horrific power.

In the darkness. With the scent of death all around us. It was hard to notice what she was doing for awhile, but I slowly did, and now that I have, I've tried to focus on the world around me rather than where she tries to pull me within my mind. To focus on the cold floor, or the scent of the decaying bodies. It's unpleasant, but it makes it harder for me to be pulled into that... other world that the Keeper can draw us into.

Blood fills my mouth, and the coppery tang washes over my tastebuds. I spit the mouthful of blood out, but the taste still lingers. A gasp slips from my lips. The simple act of spitting feels excruciating with my back, shoulders, legs, and arms raw with the strikes from the dead.

The staggering figure disappears into a new room. I follow, more slowly, wondering what will happen next. What new hell the Keeper has in store for me. But when I enter the room, the creature has placed the torch on the wall. It stands, staring at me with one eye hanging out of the socket, a plate of food in its hand. It lifts the plate toward me, and even though I already know the food will taste like shit, I snatch the plate eagerly away.

Before I can give into my growling stomach, the figure staggers away, and the door closes behind it, sealing me in this new place. Whatever. I don't give a shit. There's light in here, food, and none of the dead to hurt me... I think. This is as close to paradise as I've experienced since coming here.

I grip the plate, surveying the room, wondering if dead hide in the corners. The faint light in the room does little to offset the darkness concealing most of the room, but it's so

much better than being lost in the shadows. Lost to the world of light.

I stagger forward, each step a struggle, but I'm unsure of where to go. Nothing feels safe. Then, I sense something in one corner. Heart in my throat, plate gripped in my hand, I inch closer. My skin feels clammy. *What is this? What new hell am I stepping into?*

A figure materializes from the shadows as I draw closer. *Cobar*. Slumped against the wall on the ground. Broken, beaten, but breathing. *It can't be him. They won't let us see each other, no matter how much I've asked.* The thought that I may be hallucinating flashes in my mind, but as I approach, I see him, a mirrored image of my agony.

“Cobar?” My voice is husky due to lack of use.

His head shifts up a little. “No, no, you're not real.” He sounds... almost frightened.

“I am. I swear, I am.”

He presses a fist to his forehead, then drops it, looking back at me, blinking against the light of the torch. “Okay.”

“Okay.” My voice cracks for entirely different reasons.

With as much urgency as I can muster, I close the distance between us, even though each movement makes my ribs scream in agony. I haven't seen another living soul for so long it hurts, much less any of the other princes, and until now I hadn't realized just how important that was. As the Prince of the Winter Fae, I'm known for being cold, but I guess I need human affection more than I thought.

I guess I need my friends. My brothers. To help me through dark times.

Kneeling down in front of him, I hiss at the agony the movement brings, but I don't care. The pain doesn't matter nearly as much as my friend. I hug him, causing both of us to suck in air from the pain it causes.

But then, one of his arms wraps around me. "You're real."

A laugh catches in my throat. "I'm real." I slowly release him, drawing back. "Have you seen them? Sulien? Forrest? Have you learned anything?"

Please let him have seen them. Please let them be okay.

His eyes meet mine, and I'm taken aback by the amount of pain and suffering reflected in his bruised and beaten face. He shakes his head slightly and winces. *Damn.* My heart knew he wouldn't have any information, but that simple shake of his head burst what little hope I had.

"Absolutely nothing," he murmurs, and I can hear the frustration and anger in his voice.

We're on the same page, and it's blank.

"What does she want?" I ask the darkness. "What could she possibly gain from doing this to us?" My anger builds, but I have no one to take it out on, and no energy to even try.

Cobar shakes his head again. "She was just supposed to humiliate us, force us to do favors for her, even strip us and gawk. What she's doing isn't the standard for our courts. These kinds of deals aren't followed through like this. It's one of those unspoken rules of engagement. I don't get it."

Cobar pauses and eats his food from a plate to his side that I hadn't even noticed. I look down at my plate. It all looks terrible, but I need the energy. I begin eating too, sinking down next to him, pondering if I should share what I think with Cobar or keep it to myself and let him flounder with his

thoughts. Floundering would do his heart some good versus knowing what I think is the truth. Telling him will drain him of any hope he may have left.

But he deserves to know.

“The House of Death has chosen a different path,” I begin, debating about how carefully I should speak my thoughts aloud. “It’s not about humiliation or favors or anything like that. The Keeper of Death is isolating us. And keeping us hidden. There’s a reason.”

Cobar clenches his fist in frustration. “But what is it? What the fuck do they want?”

I release a slow breath and decide the hell with it. “They don’t intend to ever free us.”

Cobar turns to look at me, his expression surprised. “What makes you think that?”

Don’t hold back. He needs to know.

“If they let us go at this point, our courts would rain down their wrath on the House of Death. They’ve gone too far. Their only solution now is to never let us go, knowing the deal we struck will provide them with some safety.”

His eyes widen. “That never even crossed my mind.”

I wince as I feel the iron demons bashing against the barrier. It takes effort. More effort than I ever imagined to reinforce the barrier, but I manage it, with the help of the other princes’ magic. I can feel it feeding the barrier, from all four of us. When I look at Cobar, dragging in air once more, he’s rubbing his head, looking miserable.

He finishes the food on his plate, his expression upset. “We’re the only ones who can rule. The only ones who can

keep the barriers up against the iron demons. We can't last forever against this torture."

"I know."

"So, how do we get out of this situation? How do we keep our word and keep our people safe?"

That's the question of the hour. It lingers in the air, heavy with the fate of our courts in its answer. *How do we get out of this?*

"We don't have any good options," I say. "If we fight back, or try to escape, the breaking of our word will cause pain beyond even what the Keeper of Death is capable of. We won't make it far enough to make any difference at all."

"So, we have absolutely zero good options." Cobar shakes his head in disbelief. "There's no way to escape a deal with a fae."

He's right... but my thoughts start turning. All wealthy fae hear fairy tales about the fae from a young age. Fairy tales that we more or less consider our history, since we have so little written history from the time the humans ruled. These stories are used to teach young fae about our ways. In those tales, we learned that it was rare, if not impossible, to escape a fae deal, but there was still hope.

I lean in, glancing around the shadows of the room, and whisper, "We find another deal. We strike an agreement that tips the scales in our favor. It's the only way out."

"Another deal," he repeats, then, he smiles. "Zane, you're a genius."

"Yet, it'll need to be a good one to entice the Keeper."

He frowns, nodding.

“One that doesn’t involve getting a woman to love us.”

Without another word exchanged between us, Cobar and I sit in silence. Despite my best intentions, my intentions to focus on a deal to get us out of this, my thoughts drift to Cassia. At the very thought of her name, my head pounds with a different kind of pain than I’ve been experiencing over the past few days. I feel our connection. I feel the way my soul is tied to hers. *And yet... she rejected us.*

“Why?” The question slips from my lips before I can stop it, my pain too raw to control my mouth. “Why did she reject us?”

It’s the question we’ve all been asking ourselves since we climbed on our horses that morning and made our way here. All logic says that Cassia should have accepted us without hesitation. She was our mate. She would be elevated to queen after marrying us. We had saved her, risking life and limb for our bride.

And she’d rejected us still.

“There must have been something she needed that we couldn’t give her.”

“But what?” I ask, my voice raw with my pain.

He hesitates. “Maybe she saw the ways we were broken and had no desire to be with broken men.”

“Cobar...?” *How can he say that? Are we really that bad?*

He closes his eyes and rests back against the wall. “Would you want to marry us?”

My entire chest feels so heavy it’s hard to draw in breath. “Yes, I would marry any of us, broken or not. The cocks might be a bit of a problem, but, otherwise, you’re not an ugly lot.”

To my surprise, his eyes open, and he laughs. “I could tuck it back for you.”

I lean beside him, so our shoulders touch. “You’d make a lovely woman.”

His head rests on my shoulder. “You would make a hideous one.”

It’s my turn to laugh, but the silence steals room in my heart once more. “Maybe we’ll never know, but I don’t think it was us. Maybe Cassia just meant what she said, she needed more time.”

He’s quiet, but then says, “She hadn’t had an easy life. Maybe trust doesn’t come easily to her.”

“And she doesn’t like the fae to begin with,” I add.

He shivers and curls in tighter next to me. “We’ll see her again, right?”

Even now, our mate has our hearts. “Right,” I lie.

A sudden shift in the air makes the hairs on my arm stand up. Beside me, Cobar stiffens. *Fuck. What’s happening now?*

I don’t know, but someone is coming for us.

TEN

Cassia

“Fuck on a stick,” I mutter to myself as we round a bend in the road and come face-to-face with a tangled web of trees. Literally. Their branches look like a very tangled spider web. The damn things are so woven together that I can’t imagine a bunny getting through no less two women on horseback.

“There’s no path here,” Lady Nova says.

No shit.

She leans over her horse with an easy grace I envy. Her horse seems like part of her, like her sword. Throughout the last day, not only has Lady Nova been teaching me how to fight with a sword, she’s been teaching me to use magic. And seeing how much I suck in comparison to her has led me to noticing all the little things about her that just seem fluid and easy. Like the way she leans over her horse, her long body stretched out, her blonde hair hanging in a braid over her shoulder. She looks like a fae warrioress.

How in the hell was I the one Prince Sulien made this deal with when there are fae like Lady Nova around?

“What do you think?” I prod, looking between her and the mess in front of us.

She takes a long moment to answer, and then a smile curls her lips. Not a happy smile. Kind of like the smile I'm sure she gets before she removes someone's head. "There's magic afoot."

Magic afoot? I swear, I repeat everything this woman says in my head and try to figure out how it makes any sense *before* I ask a stupid follow up question, but it still doesn't help. I thought with time I'd figure her out more, but that's been a big fat wrong way of thinking.

A breeze blows through the woods, and I shiver, curling deeper into my jacket. Looking overhead, I study the gray sky. Halfway through the day, everything had changed. It'd grown darker and colder, something I was hoping wasn't a sign of trouble to come.

Regardless of signs or not, we need to get moving. Lady Nova might be able to sit here all day, but I'm the one haunted by terrible nightmares, and a gnawing feeling in my gut that just won't go away. I need to save the princes, as quickly as possible, and set things right.

"Lady Nova," I murmur gently, "are you sure we're on the right path? I don't see a way to the House of Death here."

She glances toward me, brow raised. "No, this is the right path."

I blink stupidly, then decide the hell with it. "Then, lead on oh brave leader."

Her brow rises higher. "Oh, we can't get through here."

My jaw ticks. "But you just said this was the right way."

"It is, *your majesty*." There's a glint in her eyes that I don't understand.

My patience snaps. “Damn it, Lady Nova, this isn’t a game to me! We need to rescue the princes! Don’t you get how much they’re suffering?”

Those pale green eyes of hers lock onto mine. “You really care about them, don’t you?”

She caught me off-guard. “Well, I mean, I...”

“You realize you’re going to a place called the House of Death with little to no training to rescue princes you also seem to be pretending not to care about, right?”

I stare. She stares. She doesn’t know I’m not their mate or that I rejected them. Does she? I hate how damn astute this woman is.

“I never said I don’t care about them... I just also feel like everything’s been rushed since I met them.”

She cocks her head, seeming to ignore my comment. “You know, I did some digging into you.”

Uh oh, that can’t be good. “Yeah?”

“You’ve been kicked around by fae your whole life. Is it true a fae punched you in the nose and broke it for not organizing his shoes correctly?”

I stiffen, remembering that day. I was thirteen. “That’s right. But, so what? The fae are assholes to a lot of humans.”

“And another one ripped your thigh open with a firm kick from their steel-toed boot?”

“That’s just what it is to be human among the fae,” I say, feeling awkward.

“Is it true a fae once made you cut your hair because she thought it was prettier than hers?”

Fuck. “Where is this going?”

She shrugs. “Me thinks you have some deep-seated distrust of fae that’s completely founded.”

“Deep-seated...?” I scowl. “I don’t have any deep-seated issues. I have my own reasons for being cautious about the princes. I have my own reasons for not wanting to be ripped out of my life, away from my family, and be thrown to four men who will probably use me and throw me away like yesterday’s garbage.”

She smirks. “If that doesn’t say trust issues, I don’t want does.”

“Oh yeah, Miss...” I glance over her, “*Sword Woman*, are you saying you’re like a bright pink snuggly unicorn full of hugs and kisses?”

“Unicorns aren’t pink,” she says.

“*Unicorns aren’t pink,*” I mock back.

That brow goes up again. “But to answer your question, no, I wouldn’t say I innately trust people, but I *would* trust my mates.”

Boom. Okay, well, imagine Miss Sword Woman being surrounded by four men wanting to stick their dongs in her without being their mates, *while* lying to them about being their mate. I’m sure she’d be barking a different tune then.

Her expression gentles. “It’s okay to be afraid, but it’s also okay to listen to that voice inside of you that says it’ll all be okay.”

I bite my lip. “And what if you don’t have that voice?”

She doesn’t hesitate. “Then, you accept that you’re a little fucked up, but you’re going to be okay, and trust the world

anyway.”

Yeah, I can do that. Not.

Turning back to the woods, she sighs, “These branches blocking the road have to be the doings of the House of Death. They sent those wolves after us, and they’ve done this, probably thinking we’re part of a huge party from the Summer Court coming for them... and knowing that while the princes might be bound to their word, the rest of us could do a hell of a lot to get them out of whatever deal they made.”

I’m surprised. I’ve seen a lot of fae magic, but nothing like this. The House of Death really must produce the most powerful of the fae.

“Is it strange that they’d do this?”

Lady Nova looks troubled. “Not now that we know what they’re doing to the princes. The question is, how do we reach them as quickly as possible?”

Well, that’s easy. “How about we set everything on fire and burn our way through?”

The princes need me. As soon as possible. I’m not letting a web of trees stand in my way.

She smirks. “I like the way you think, but you have to be more strategic. Setting this mess on fire would probably set the whole forest on fire. Not only will that then make the woods too dangerous to travel through, but that’s not the stealthy entrance we’re going for here.”

I should have thought of that. This whole forest would be engulfed in minutes, and who knows what they’d do to my guys then if they knew we were this close to reaching them. At the same time, should we even bother trying to be stealthy at this point?

“But they already know we’re coming since they sent the wolves after us. Right?”

“Yes, but she likely thought we were with a huge party. Not that we were alone.”

Right. Because why would two lone people decide they could rescue four princes on their own and take on the House of Death. They’d have to be crazy. Or maybe in love.

Well, one of us might just be in love, the other? Crazy. I mentally shake myself. Focus.

My mind starts working. “So, they were expecting an army, right? Not two women on horseback, so chances are they didn’t weave this web of trees this tightly everywhere. Maybe we can find a way to slip through?”

Lady Nova draws back, considering me. “You know, Lady Cassia, you might just have the mind of a warrior after all.” She bucks her horse, and they head off the path and disappear into the trees, leaving me and my horse standing alone.

What the hell? Is she seriously leaving me behind?

I yank on my reins, and head in the same direction she had, with a mixture of determination and annoyance. The wind blowing against my face actually feels amazing, even though it’s cold. It pulls me from my thoughts, focusing me on the present. These House of Death fae might think they’re big and bad with their powers, their deals, and their tangled woods, but I’m a hell of a lot badder. I mean, I learned to grow a plant a little, start a fire, and even let my fingers glow, which is really useful because, because... okay, I need to stop thinking, or I’ll get in my head about how shitty I am with my newly found powers.

I keep going, but the trees tangle tighter and tighter around me until there's just enough room for my horse to get through. Horses are new to me, but even I can sense his unease. If this horse tries to get away, I have no idea how I'll stop him, or how I'll have any chance at finding Lady Nova.

"Everything's okay. It'll open up soon," I whisper as I reach down to stroke my horse. She's anxious, and I need her to keep going so we can find Lady Nova again. I carefully guide her over a fallen log and hold on tight as she has to slowly walk through a mass of creeping branches.

Am I even going the right way? I don't know any more.

A flash of Lady Nova's white hair catches my eyes, and I breathe a sigh of relief. I'm not lost. I might not know what I'm doing, but Lady Nova does, and I'm back with her. I'm okay.

My horse struggles, snorting and huffing, but she keeps pushing forward until we catch up. Stopping behind Lady Nova, I wait for her to say something, but she doesn't. She just stares at the tangled woods, so, I do too. There appears to be multiple ways to possibly make it through. But which way will get us to the House of Death?

"Do you have an idea here?" *Please let her have an idea.*

"Maybe." She frowns as she glances back at me. "Did your magic really just develop?"

I stiffen, unsure about what this has to do with anything. "Yeah, why?"

She takes a deep breath that shakes her whole frame. "Time for another lesson with your magic."

"Now? Don't we have better things to do?" I ask, gesturing to the woods.

“Trust me,” she says.

“But—”

“You’re going to need more than the abilities you have to survive what we’re up against.”

I hold my breath at the thought. Survival wasn’t a word I’d thought of at all. At least not *my* survival. I’ve been too worried about the princes.

“And me learning to use my magic is going to help us right now?”

“I think it might,” she says.

That’s all I need to hear. “I’m in.”

She looks relieved for a moment, then her face is a mask once more. “Close your eyes, Lady Cassia, and envision a golden light leading us through these trees.” She turns her horse around and comes as close as our horses will allow, looking painfully serious.

But I’m not convinced. “A golden light? Tell me this isn’t a joke.”

She glares.

“Okay, not a joke. Golden light. Got it.”

She shifts her horse, somehow managing to get even closer. “Give me your wrist. It’ll help you focus your magic.”

Offering her my wrist, I feel awkward when she takes it. Awkward for a brief moment before her touch makes me feel oddly calm. Calm and even a little happy.

Damn fae powers.

“Now, close your eyes and focus on that golden light.”

I do as she asks, clamping my eyes shut. For a second, all I see are the princes, sexy, annoying, and incredible, and then the princes in that cold, dark place. But before I lose myself in that vision, Lady Nova's touch sends that calming feeling through me again, and I refocus, picturing a radiant glow. I don't know exactly what I'm supposed to do, so I picture it bigger and smaller. I twist it, I turn it, and still, I don't feel like I'm doing what I'm supposed to.

Is something going to happen?

I stay like that for what feels like an eternity during which Lady Nova doesn't say a word. She only holds onto my wrist. So, I try something new. I try picturing the light moving through the trees, lighting our path, but still, nothing happens.

"Is this what's supposed to be happening?" I ask.

Silence, and then, "No."

I huff as I open my eyes. "Well, that was useful."

"Let's try something different," Lady Nova suggests.

I nod, glancing at the woods. "I'll start the fire!"

She sighs. "No, we're not done with trying this magic yet."

The golden light? It was a bust. How did she not see that?

"This time, focus on the princes. Think about how they make you feel. Hone in on the connection you all share."

My nerves flutter. "My connection to them?"

She tilts her head, studying me. "I'm not asking you to admit anything. I'm not even asking you to admit your feelings to yourself. I just need you to think about them and the way you feel about them, while focusing on the golden light."

Wow, this isn't awkward. Nope, not one bit. “Alright, I’ll try.”

I close my eyes again, and this time I try to think of the princes after spending days trying not to think about them. Instantly, I feel pressure on my chest. The pressure I feel every time I think about our fake marriage, the potion, the lies, and the sense that marrying them means being tied to them forever. Then, I stiffen, and remember that no one else is in my head. It’s okay to push aside those feelings and think about what it’s like to actually be with them.

Prince Cobar makes me smile. Prince Zane makes me feel safe. Prince Forrest surprises me. And Prince Sulien drives me crazy. Some deep part of me feels like they already own pieces of my heart, which is probably a big part of the reason they scare me so much, but the feeling is still there. They’re important to me. They matter to me.

And for some reason, I matter to them.

“Now,” Lady Nova whispers gently, letting go of my wrist, “imagine that golden light guiding us, leading the way to them.”

I picture the golden light, and I *sense* it awakening in front of me. My eyes shoot open, and to my shock, it’s there in front of me. Just a couple feet from my face. A golden light like a star, illuminating the space around it. Hovering in the air in front of me. No bigger than my hand, but radiating the kind of energy I can only imagine would come from the sun.

Lady Nova’s eyes widen and her mouth falls open. She doesn’t say anything, but I can feel her shock. Which surprises me. I thought she believed I could do this. *Is she really that surprised it worked?*

“Is this... an unusual power?” I ask, feeling uncertain.

She nods, letting the slight curve of a smile come through for just a moment. “It’s more than a little unusual. There’s no way you just have a fae somewhere in your distant family line.”

What? I’m going to have to ask my dad more about that.

My mind is spinning. “If this is some rare thing, how did you even know to try it?”

Her smile widens. “The last person I knew with this skill developed their powers at a similar age and in a similar way, so I took a chance.” Then, she winks at me. “Now, we don’t have time to dwell. Follow the light. It’s our way to your men.”

When she turns back around and starts riding forward, the golden glow leaps forward too and begins to sail through the trees, weaving in one direction and stopping, as if waiting for us. We ride forward, me behind Lady Nova, and the light continues to dart forward, but always stays near enough. A guiding light in the maze that is these tangled woods.

After a time, my mind begins to race. *How can I be a powerful fae?* Both of my parents were human. As far as my father has said, my grandparents were human too, and their parents before them. My father has always said our family line is as boring as boring could be. *There’s no logical explanation for the magic I now have.*

My father must have lied to me. Or he didn’t know himself. Maybe the fae was somewhere in my mother’s line, so he just didn’t know? I can’t imagine him purposely lying to me.

Right?

Right.

Except, I remember just a few days ago when my grandmother had mentioned the healer who was working on dad, and something about magic, and he'd shushed her. *Were they talking about him having magic, or something else? Have they been working together to lie to me all my life?*

No. This is crazy. I trust my dad. He's always been honest with me. If I can't believe him, I can't believe anyone. All this craziness can't make me start to doubt the people I care about most.

Pushing the thoughts aside, I try to focus on the present. We work our way through the labyrinth, guided by the golden light I created, but questions continue to gnaw at me. *No matter how I think about it, I shouldn't have fae powers.*

But I have powers, how is that possible?

My life can't have been built on a lie. The thought hovers in my mind, a growing storm cloud. All I've known is my simple life as a human. I accepted my fate living a life of poverty and servitude, and yet, somehow, dormant inside of me has been fae magic. The list of questions piling up in my mind is long enough to lead us right to the door of the House of Death.

Lucky for me, that's right where we're heading.

ELEVEN

Cassia

My eyes flash open. I stare for a minute in confusion. Torches burn along the walls of the dark space I'm in. Roots hang from the ceiling above, and crypts line the walls. *The House of Death*. The place is aptly named, and is becoming a place I'm all too familiar with.

Rising from where I was lying on the floor, I glance around, and my gaze falls on Prince Forrest and the woman standing before him. I dismiss her in an instant, unable to look away from Prince Forrest. His auburn hair is dirty and tangled around his shoulders. He has a swollen black eye and bruises covering his face. They've chained him to a wall by his wrists, where he hangs, looking battered and beaten.

Yet, he's awake. Conscious and aware as he stares at the tall female fae who stands before him. She wears a black gown made of lace and brown and pale green wings extend from her back, their pattern similar to that of a butterfly's. Long black hair falls down one of her shoulders, but as beautiful as she is, she radiates the kind of chill I imagine only a fae from the House of Death could have.

"I must go," she says, her voice low and cold.

“No, Lady Grave, you came down here for a reason,” he rasps, and my heart breaks at the sound of his voice.

She shakes her head. “I don’t know why I came to see you. It was foolish.”

“It wasn’t. You wanted to see what the Keeper of Death was doing because some part of you knows this is wrong.” He’s struggling against his chains, but it does no good, they hold him solidly against the wall.

“I may be the head of the House of Death, but the Keeper is our true leader. The most powerful among us. The most revered by the dead. I have no power here, even if I wanted to go against the Keeper, which I don’t,” she says, giving a little bow of her head.

“That’s not true. You can do something. You can stop this,” he pleads. “You know this is wrong. You know what it will do to the kingdom.” He tries to hold his head up, but it hangs awkwardly against the force of the chains and the angle he’s being held at.

Lady Grave clasps her hands in front of her with no expression on her face. “This war and the deaths that will follow aren’t the path I would have taken, but I don’t make the path. The Keeper of Death, in all of her power, does. She rules this land. She could rule all the land with her power. It’s not my place to question her or to rise up against her. It’s my job to simply follow what she has laid out.” She turns to leave, and I stand frozen, unsure what to do.

“I know you have premonitions, more powerful than any other fae. What have you seen happening if you let her do this?” he calls.

She answers without looking back at him. “Death is inevitable.”

“You pretend all of this death and loss doesn’t hurt you. But I know it does. I know the truth. *Your* truth.” Prince Forrest calls out, halting her movement. “I saw the look on your face when you explained that your son was too weak to live among the inhabitants here. I saw your pain when you told my father your child was given back to the forest.”

Lady Grave turns back around, shock splayed on her face before her expression changes to one of acknowledgement. “You were a young boy when I saw your father. When I spoke of the child I lost.”

“I remember, and so do you. Why make more families go through that same pain? Why do more children need to be lost?” He’s standing as tall as he can now, and I see the pain it causes him.

Lady Grave turns again to walk away, but she pauses and looks back at him before saying, “I’m sorry. One day, you’ll understand,” and disappears like a wisp of smoke in the wind, in a way that shouldn’t be possible.

The realization that I’m dreamsharing hits me. In real life, I’m on the road with Lady Nova. The princes are here in the House of Death. None of this is really happening, and yet, Prince Forrest will remember this too. Dreamsharing with him, and the other men, is a blessing I shouldn’t ignore.

“Prince Forrest,” I whisper as I approach him, not wanting to scare him now that he’s alone.

He raises his head and the light in his eyes when he sees me is as bright as the sun, which makes me feel even worse. This man shouldn’t be this happy to see me. If he knew the

truth about me not being his mate, he'd hate me for being the reason he ended up in this place. He'd hate me for not telling him the truth.

But I can't focus on that now, because none of that helps me. My guilt won't make his days any better, nor will it take his pain away. He deserves better.

"Cassia," his voice is soft and gentle, like he's not chained to a wall and bleeding. My heart aches at the sound of it. He can push aside everything he's going through and all the pain he's in to be gentle with me.

My assessment of this man was more than a little wrong.

"Prince Forrest, I'm here. Everything's going to be okay, alright? I'm going to find all of you and get you out of here, and then you'll be safely back home." Tears sting my eyes, but I force a smile into place. There's enough sadness in this dreary place, I don't need to bring more.

"The barrier. I must keep the barrier in place, but we're all too weak. Not just our bodies, but our magic. We can't keep this up forever."

"You won't have to," I promise, and my promise feels... powerful.

He doesn't seem to hear me. "Being here has given me time to think about every way I messed things up. About all the ways I failed with you. You deserved better."

My throat feels tight. "So you guys were as clumsy as incontinent badgers, it doesn't make you terrible people. Stop worrying about our awkward wooing."

"I can't stop thinking about it, you're my mate. My only mate." And he sounds so damn defeated.

The truth lingers on my tongue. “If I forgive you, then you have to forgive yourself.”

“Never.”

I swallow around the lump in my throat. “Prince Forrest, you’re a mighty Fall Fae and I’m barely a fae at all. You’ve gone above and beyond on your wooing of me, sacrificing life and limb to get me back.”

He gives a little smile. “You’re amazing. Funny, smart, sweet, and caring. If you can love me half as much as you love your father and grandmother, I’ll be a lucky man. Offering our lives in exchange to the Keeper for finding you was worth it in all ways. To know you’re safe and cared for.”

My stomach lurches at the reminder that they’re in this predicament because of me. All of this, the impending war and their torture, is because I got kidnapped, and they needed to find me. All I had to do was say yes to them.

They don’t deserve this. None of us do.

Prince Forrest groans. The chains are hurting him, contorting him in awkward positions. I hate seeing him in them. I touch the chains, angry that they even exist, and they disappear. I gasp and have to react quickly as Forrest comes crashing down. Catching him, I lower him to the ground.

Our eyes meet, but we don’t need words. I lean in and our lips touch lightly like mirrors reflecting one another, the same want on either side. The kiss only lasts a few seconds, but my soul soars. Part of the heaviness that has been resting on my chest eases, and when I pull away, I find myself missing him again.

“Prince Forrest, are you okay?” It’s a stupid question. Of course he isn’t, but I need to know.

“Call me Forrest,” he says with a smile. “You are my bride, after all.”

Our lips meet again, but this time it’s all consuming. He clings to me, his hands tangle in my hair as our mouths find each other again and again. And his lips taste like warmth, like marshmallows roasted over an open fire, homey and right.

Desire rears inside of me, and I want to make love to him. But even in this dream, he’s hurt. I can’t be the one to bring him more pain. So, I end our kiss, still clinging to him, letting the warmth of my body press against the chill of his own. Hating this horrible dark place.

Except is this where we need to be? “Where would you be if you could be anywhere right now?”

He speaks without hesitation. “With you in your room, where we first kissed.”

It surprises me. After all the amazing places he’s been in his life, my room with me is where he’d want to be? Still, I try. I picture this place melting away and my room taking shape. I put a deep need into the image, just the way I’d done when I’d touched his cuffs.

In seconds, we’re in my room, lying on my bed, freshly bathed, in our sleep clothes, snuggled under my old, ratty blanket. And, he was onto something, because this is perfect.

Prince Forrest turns to me in surprise, no longer beaten and bruised. “This is all I’ve been thinking about. Whenever they’re hurting me, this is where I’d picture myself being.”

“It is?”

He nods. “I liked your home the minute I stepped foot in it. I mean, I was surprised by how small it was, and by how little

you had, but your house felt like a home. Like love. Every inch of it.”

I smile. “That’s exactly how it was. You’re deeper than you led me to believe, Prince Forrest.”

“Forrest,” he corrects gently.

I shake my head, smiling. “After years of using titles, I’m not sure I’ll ever get used to not using them.”

“You will,” he says, taking my hand and letting it settle on his chest. “Because soon, you’ll be queen, and I’ll be one of your kings.”

“Scoot over!”

I let out a shriek when I see a shirtless Prince Cobar bounding up to the bed and leaping toward us. He lands right on top of me, and then pounds his chest, a grin on his face.

Then, I’m laughing. “You’re insane! And, there’s no way this bed can handle three of us! I don’t even know how it’s handling Prince Forrest’s weight!”

“Hey!” The big Fall Fae exclaims.

Prince Cobar squishes himself between us. “She’s right. I’ve seen houses smaller than you.” Then, he’s officially between us, and I’m turned on my side, clinging to him, trying not to fall off the bed. “Cozy.”

“Cozy,” Prince Forrest grumbles. “You’re like one of my puppies when they reach adulthood, bounding on my bed, still thinking they’re just a few pounds.”

“I could turn on my side,” he suggests, in a helpful voice, turning to face Prince Forrest.

“Not in my direction, you crazy Spring Fae! I don’t want your log hitting my thigh.”

I’m laughing as Prince Cobar switches directions to face me, his eyes wide and innocent. “For your information, I’m only half-sprung, so it’s not a full log quite yet.” Then, he wiggles his brows at me. “It could be though.”

“I’ve officially decided that you both were only ever able to woo women because of your titles,” Prince Zane says, and my gaze jerks to where he’s leaning against my wall. “Because these moves,” he gestures, “are appalling.”

He’s right. These guys have zero skills at impressing women, but I don’t mind. They make me laugh. I like being around them. What more could a woman want?

Maybe the fact that you already know they have huge dicks. I swallow, yeah, there’s that.

“I really think Cassia should be in the middle of us,” Prince Forrest complains.

Prince Zane comes and kneels down beside my side of the bed. “I think I like her right here where I can see her.”

The flirt.

I smile. “I don’t get the whole cold fae thing about your Winter Fae, you’re nothing but warmth to me.”

He touches my face. “You have no idea, but I hope someday you will.”

I shiver, trying to ignore my racing heart. “So, what will it be like to be married to you?”

His fingers glide along my cheekbones. “It will be... a fairytale. You’ll have everything and anything you ever wanted.”

Is he sure? “Could we have a polar bear as a pet?”

He lifts a brow. “Would you like a polar bear as a pet?”

My nose wrinkles. “I’m not sure. I just think I like knowing it’s a possibility.”

Then, he gives that little smile of his. “Everything is a possibility for you.”

“Except that the three of you will get along,” Prince Sulien says.

I glance up. He’s watching us from the doorway, his expression darker than usual. It’s in that moment that I remember what this is. A dream we’re sharing. All of these men, when they wake up, will be suffering again.

“You know, I think I might be able to love all of you,” I confess.

My words are met with silence, and then Prince Sulien says, “them, perhaps, but I think you’d find me a little harder to love.”

I speak without thinking. “Because you’re like a cat.”

His brows lift. “A cat?”

I might not have meant to say it, but it’s true. The way I feel about each of these men is different. Even the way I feel about Prince Sulien is unique.

“This is going to be one of her weird Cassia things,” Prince Cobar mutters.

I shoot him a glare, then continue. “No, listen, I’m right! You see, I had this cat I used to give what little scraps of food we had. She was a sweet little thing, black and gray, with a little brown spot on her back, nearly hidden by the dark colors.

She would come up and rub against my leg. I'd pet her, and she'd be purring, then suddenly bite me, lightly, then take off. Or she'd run over for pets, and when I'd kneel down to pet her, she'd duck from my touch. She was a strange little thing. Aloof, annoying, confusing, but I loved her. You, Prince Sulien, are a cat. Prince Cobar is a dog. Prince Zane is a horse. And Prince Forrest is—"

"Don't say a bear," he mutters.

I laugh. "I was going to say a 'tamed' wolf. I met one of them, and while I wouldn't want to be trapped with it hungry, it was basically like a giant, cuddly dog."

The vision fades away. Everyone is gone except Prince Forrest, who still lays beside me. *My stomach flips. Are they okay? What happened to them in the House of Death?* Prince Forrest rolls closer until we're looking at each other, and then my room fades away, and we're back in the dark underground of the House of Death.

Staring at Prince Forrest's suddenly hopeless face, I know what I need to do. As much as I want to just enjoy this stolen moment together, there's important information that I need to get across. Information that just might help this mission of ours.

I hold his face in my hands. "This is real. I'm coming for you. You'll all be free soon."

He turns away from me, shaking his head. "No, this is a dream. I'm dreaming of what I want to happen. Deep down I know we've lost you forever. We had one chance, that moment when we asked you to marry us, and you said no. We were so sure that you'd say yes, that we gambled with the Keeper. Now, she owns us, and there's no way out of the deal. Not when it's clear she wants to keep us."

“That was the deal you made?” I feel sick. “Oh, Prince Forrest...”

He puts his hand over mine on his cheek. “They’re going to break us, Cassia. Soon, we won’t be able to keep the iron demons out. I don’t know how much longer I can hold on.”

“It’s okay,” I tell him, staring into those deep green eyes of his. “I’m coming for you. We’ll be there soon, and we’ll get you away from the Keeper of Death. Just hold on a little longer.”

His smile is pained. “You’re not coming. And by the time anyone comes, it’ll be too late.”

Sunlight forces my eyes open. I blink trying to focus my vision, and find Lady Nova standing over me. “It’s time to get going.”

I suck in a trembling breath and shakily exhale, pulling myself up. *Did they really make that deal with the Keeper of Death? Did they really tie their fate to my love for them?*

I’ve been such a fool.

“Build up the fire,” Lady Nova orders, then adds. “With your powers.”

It takes a minute to focus back on this world instead of the dark one with Prince Forrest, but I pull out of my blankets and put on my boots. Putting a few logs on the fire, I lift a hand towards them and think about the fire I want, picturing the size, the color, and the warmth. Sparks erupt, then flames. Within moments, a fire roars. Normally, this is the time I do a little dance, but not today. Not with the princes haunting me.

“Another dream?” she asks.

I nod, watching her moving around, cleaning up the camp. “Prince Forrest was chained and beaten. He was talking to Lady Grave. It was clear she didn’t agree with the Keeper, but she was going to let the Keeper of Death do what she wanted.”

“That’s no surprise,” Lady Nova says, rolling up my blankets. “Lady Grave is technically the highest ranking fae in the House of Death. She visits the courts, when it’s required, and does what she has to do. But, in the House of Death they respect power over position. The Keeper of Death is the most powerful fae amongst them. Lady Grave would follow her command.”

It’s weird. “I just don’t get it. Fae are ruthless, selfish, assholes who—” I freeze, remembering who I’m talking to.

She shrugs, not missing a beat. “We are, with exceptions.”

Okay, I did not expect that. “So, the fae might be all those things, but I thought they mostly liked pretty clothes and expensive jewelry. How did one house end up focused on... death of all things? I mean, yeah, they’re from the House of Death, but still, Prince Sulien is from the Summer Court and doesn’t sport a hardon for the sun all day.”

Lady Nova cocks her head. “You’re a weird little thing, aren’t you?”

I stiffen. “Nope.”

“You’re not?” She arches a brow.

“No way. Totally normal.”

We stare for a minute before she looks away. “As much as I don’t want to think about Prince Sulien, the honorable prince of the Summer Court, sporting a hardon... to answer your question, the House of Death is as weird as the House of War in terms of being fae. Both houses deal with the darkest and

hardest parts of life, so that changes us. It's not strange that the House of Death seems unusual to you. What *is* strange is the fact that after all they've learned, they want more death and destruction."

I wrap my arms around my shoulders. "Do they like torturing the princes too?"

"Maybe," she says without hesitation, "but in all likelihood, hurting them is just a necessary step to getting what they want."

She finishes packing up the camp while I sit, feeling useless. "You know, I'm usually the one who does all the work."

"I figured, that's why I'm okay being the one to do it for you," she answers easily.

Lady Nova is a strange character.

When almost everything is loaded, she stirs the stew over the fire and gives me a bowl, then one for herself. I blow on the spoon, thoughts spinning. *We should be close to the House of Death. Shouldn't we? Then, we have to face our enemies.*

"Any idea what we'll do when we get there?"

She shrugs, sitting down on the log next to me. "You'll try to appeal to them as their future queen. Maybe try to bribe them or scare them into doing what you want. If that doesn't work, I'll kill them."

I stare. "Just like that?"

"Yup."

"What if I'm not so good at the whole scaring them or bribing them thing?"

She grins. “That’s okay, because I’m good at the killing them thing.”

“You’re prepared to just... kill all the most powerful fae?”

She starts eating, looking smug. “Fae are ready for powers and trickery, not a knife to the throat of a certain Keeper of Death. And if I take her out, the deal is done, and the other fae will stand down. At least, I hope.”

I eat slowly, thinking. “And what will happen if we don’t get there in time? Are the iron demons as bad as they say?”

Her spoon hesitates at her lips, and then she puts it back in her bowl. “How much do you know about the iron demons?”

“Almost nothing,” I admit.

She starts to eat again, her expression thoughtful. “Not much is discussed inside the kingdom, because the fae and humans want to forget. They want to forget the greater world and the greater history because it’s dark and dangerous.”

I sit up a little taller. “How so?”

It takes her so long to respond that for a minute I think she won’t. “There are multiple kingdoms on this continent. The Witch Kingdom, The Shifter Kingdom, The Vampire Kingdom, and the Kingdom we call the Iron Demon Kingdom, while others call The Monster Kingdom. While most of us can get along with one another, at least enough to leave each other alone, the iron demons are an enemy to all. As far as we know, they have no leader and no purpose. They simply roam about causing death and destruction.”

“Do the princes protect all the kingdoms from the iron demons?”

She shakes her head. “The vampires have built a wall to keep them out. The shifters have only a few places where the demons can get through, so they man their warriors there, keeping the rest of the kingdom safe. The witches are in the safest position, their lands are surrounded by the shifters and the vampires, and much of it is also uncrossable by mountains, so I imagine they deal with far less of the bastards than the rest of us.”

“And if the barrier falls around us, even for a short time, how bad will it be?”

She tilts her head as if thinking. “The iron demons have always been drawn to our lands more than any other. No one knows why. The creatures tend to line up along the barrier and push and shove, trying to break through. Usually focusing on a few points to weaken the princes the most. If one of those points were to fall, I imagine hundreds of the beasts would cross over and cause quite a bit of death and destruction before being killed. So, it’d be bad, but at least it’d help the vampires.” She gives a harsh laugh. “They’d be flooding our lands instead of trying to get into theirs.”

I don’t laugh. It’s not funny. “I think we should get going.”

Her pointed ears twitch. “Eager for battle, princess?”

“Eager to end this thing,” I say, ignoring the fluttering in my stomach.

TWELVE

Cobar

The acrid scent of despair hits me first as I'm thrown into another room. I've learned the hard way that this place is about deliberate cruelty. Moving boulders, whipping me, beating me, it's a game of cruelty and nothing more. They want me to push my body beyond its limit to drive me to madness.

Unfortunately for them, I won't let that happen. *If I can help it.*

Nothing's ever been this so difficult. Not the rigorous training I was forced to do during my youth, not even the brutal bloodshed of war could compare to this torment. It feels like we've been here for months, but I'm not sure, all I know is that my head pounds with each breath I take. I have to clench my teeth and focus on the barrier, or else I know it'll fall.

Some of the princes aren't reinforcing it any longer.

It's frightening. The only reason any of us would stop reinforcing the barrier is if we couldn't any longer. *What has the Keeper done to them that they can't?*

“Bastards.” Every one of the House of Death fae. They know what’s happening, and they’re allowing it.

“Do you think this is a game?” I clench my fist and press it into the wall, trying to stay upright in this new room. A new room that probably has some new horror in it. “If you keep this up, the barrier will fall. Is that what you want?”

But no one answers my angry words. Of course not. The cowards. But truly they’ll be the first ones to come running to us if the barrier falls, pleading for safety from the iron demons. Their lands, after all, are closest to the barrier.

A fire of frustration burns in me as I glance around the room, my eyes jumping from the pools of light from the torches to the shadows in between. Another hell hole. Lovely. But at least I don’t see any dead lingering in the darkness, waiting to cause more pain.

Then, my gaze slides over a figure on the ground, then back. My heart sinks. Sulien’s body lies in a heap like forgotten garbage rather than the Prince of the Summer Court. *Sulien?*

I rush to his side and kneel down, unable to breathe. My hand trembles as I roll him over and see his pale face stained with blood. And for one terrible second, I’m gutted. I feel like a man who has lost everything and has nothing left to cling to. And then, he breathes.

“Sulien,” I whisper raggedly. He doesn’t move or say a word in response, which is alarming, but as long as he’s alive, that’s all that matters. “What did they do to you?”

I shift, hissing in pain as I do so, and go and grab a torch to study his body, looking for the most severe of his injuries. It

only takes a minute to spot his back. The wounds on his back are so bad they take my breath away.

“They must be giving me the easy treatment.” That was one thing about being a Spring Fae, everyone saw us as dancing, prancing, giggling fairies.

But the Summer Fae? They see them as warriors.

“This must be why the barrier isn’t being held up by all of us.” *How can he reinforce the barrier when he can’t even take care of himself?*

Anger rises inside of me, but I push it to the side, knowing it won’t help. I want to use my magic to heal him. I could use it to help his injuries. Not all of them, but a lot of them, but I’m not sure I could do that and keep the barrier in place.

“Fuck.”

Luckily for him, I knew some first aid from our time battling the iron demons. I peel my shirt off and begin to shred it to make something to bind his wounds together, trying not to look at the strips of flesh on his back, and the gaping wounds, as I do so.

He blinks. His gaze falling on me, except there’s only blankness in his eyes. I don’t think he sees me, not really. *Does he even know I’m here?*

“Sulien, I’m here. Cobar’s here.” I wrap a strip of my shirt around a gash on his neck. “I’m going to get you put back together, okay?”

He says nothing. Just stares.

I loosen another strip of my shirt and keep talking, trying to sound cheery even though part of me wants to collapse right beside him. There’s something about the way he’s staring. It

worries me, and makes me envy him at the same time. *Is he somewhere else in his head? Somewhere far from here?*

Shaking myself, I try to focus. *No, we can't be far from here. If we are, we're not reinforcing the barrier, and then everyone dies. Our people. Our Cassia. I have to stay here, where it's dark and painful. And I have to bring Sulien back to us.*

"I can't wait to get out of here. Doesn't a nice bath sound glorious? And a steak? One of those big steaks just dripping with juices?"

My mouth salivates, even though it's been dry since we got here. Still, nothing. He doesn't even wince as I tighten the makeshift bandage. *What happened to you, Sulien?* This is more than just the effect of pain. They broke him.

How can anyone break a man like Sulien?

Looking at him like this hurts me, but I don't have the energy to focus on what happened to him, the barrier, and keeping myself going. All I can do is help him, so I focus on each injury I'm trying to stop bleeding, one at a time. It's easier than all the other stuff. Easier even than looking at his whole battered body.

I work silently, watching him. If his chest wasn't rising and falling, I'd be sure he was dead. But I try not to think about that. Not with my head throbbing, my body aching, and my best friend's wounds to tend to.

When I finish wrapping him up, we sit in a silence that unnerves me. Sulien's not the type to give up. He's not one for bowing or bending to anyone's will. The Keeper of Death's power over him is so strong. She's done worse than killing him. She's broken him.

“Think of Cassia,” I say. I don’t know where the words come from, but I’m shocked when his gaze flickers to me. “Think of our mate. Safe in your home. Her family protected. You did that for her. The moment she met you at that ball, everything fell into place.”

Somehow, just saying the words aloud makes me feel warmer. Stronger. The nagging weight on my chest, which I suspect is my connection to my mate, calms, feeling better. Happier. The feeling flows through me until all I can see is Cassia. Her long blonde hair. The soft curves of her face and body. The sparkle that leaps into her eyes when she’s teasing me.

When we get out of this, I’m never going to let her go. The House of Death might think it can break us, but we won’t. Not when we have Cassia to come home to.

“This is all my fault.” Sulien’s hoarse voice breaks through my thoughts. He speaks in a whisper that’s heavy with regret.

Frowning, I shake my head. “It’s not your fault. We all made this choice.”

He takes a ragged, wheezing breath. “I had a plan to get out of the mating bond. I didn’t want a wife. I didn’t want to be like him. So I had a plan.”

None of it’s a surprise. If we’re all a little fucked up, I’m pretty sure Sulien and Forrest are a whole lot of fucked up. Everyone knew Sulien’s mom killed herself. Everyone knew she hated her husband and her child. It’s no wonder that Sulien had hoped to create a plan to get himself out of getting married before meeting Cassia. And I don’t blame him for it.

“It’s not your fault. We’re all messed up. One thing that binds us is our deep desire to not become like our fathers.”

His breathing grows harsher, so harsh I want to beg him to stop talking. “Now, we’ll all suffer. For my mistake. We’ll suffer. Everyone.”

This place is destroying him on the outside, and he’s doing this to himself on the inside. I move closer to him, clenching my teeth as my raw back hits the room’s cold stone wall, and I shift him to lay his head in my lap, knowing this closeness will comfort us both.

Unsure what to do, I run my hand through his hair to soothe him. “This isn’t your fault. We all agreed to the deal. The Keeper is the one who took advantage of it.”

I still hadn’t quite figured this all out. The Keeper was abusing us to the point that when our courts came for us, they would execute a wrath unlike anything seen amongst the fae for hundreds of years. The Keeper would be lucky if the courts didn’t tear this castle down brick by brick and banish every last fae from the House of Death from our kingdom.

Why would anyone do something this stupid? Did she just want the chaos of what this fight would bring? Did she not realize how serious what she’s doing is? I have no idea, but the simple fact is that Sulien is not to blame for any of this. She is.

“All of this is the Keeper’s fault, and soon our courts will be here to make that clear to her. All we have to do is survive a little longer.” *I’m still not sure how much time has passed, but it has to be a few weeks, at the least. Surely our people are nearly here.* “You’re safe. All of this will be okay. Soon, we’ll be reunited with our mate and everything will be right with the world.”

I hope.

Sulien's eyes flutter closed, and I stare at his chest to make sure it's still rising and falling. It is, and it's mirrored with the sounds of his breath wheezing in and out in a way that's disturbing. In any other circumstances, the sounds his chest makes would alarm me, but for now, they mean he's still alive and fighting.

"If I had told the truth, this would be over," he sighs, so softly the words are no louder than a whisper, before drifting off again.

I stay by his side, feeling useless, unable to solve any of his problems. I think about what he said about telling the truth. I don't know what he wasn't honest about, but secrets and guilt are a huge burden to carry alone. I hope that if and when the time comes, he can summon the courage to tell the truth. *What do they say? The truth will set you free.*

Something like that.

It's easy to keep running my hands through his hair. Soothing in a strange way. After so much time alone, I'd been missing any touch. Any sounds that other people make. I just wish I'd found Sulien in better shape.

I let out a deep sigh and watch my friend, who's broken in every way possible. We're all in so deep, and the only one who can really fix this is our mate. Because even if our courts come, and we're free, we won't really be right again until we have her.

I've never thought a woman could fix all our problems, but I think she can fix ours. Somehow.

THIRTEEN

Cassia

The House of Death's castle looms before me as our horses race closer, and my breath hitches at the sight of it. The castle is an imposing fortress, with ebony spires cutting a stark silhouette against the sky. But more than how it looks, the way I feel when I look at it troubles me. There's a deep sense of emptiness that radiates from the structure, like it'd be abandoned long ago.

If I didn't *have* to come to this place, I wouldn't. I'd avoid it like the damn plague.

Our horses' hooves clatter against the worn, crumbled cobblestone path that leads to the castle's gates, and the sound rings inside of me awakening a sense of fear that I don't understand. Or perhaps I do. Through my dreams, I know this place. I know some of the horrors it contains and what the people within it are willing to do in order to achieve their own goals. Which is terrifying.

But it's not just that I know I have to face what's coming, the enormity of the task ahead sits in my stomach like a hot brick. My men are in there, and I can't leave until they're out, no matter what it costs me. For some reason, a reason I don't

understand, I'm willing to do anything I have to in order to get them back. Even face dangerous fae.

I won't feel good again until they're safe. What happens from there, I don't know.

It's strange, just a short time ago the fae were above me. As much as I sometimes mocked them, as much as a part of me hated them, I've also come to realize they frightened me. They had so much power over me. One wrong move and my life was over. It wasn't good for me to think that way, so I tried not to, but since coming out from under their foot, I've begun to realize just how exhausting being afraid all the time was.

Now, I'm afraid, but for different reasons. I might have been a powerless human at one point, but now I'm a fae too. Engaged to four princes. And I might not have awesome powers, but I think I can figure out a way to save the princes.

I hope.

Next to me, Lady Nova slows her horse, and I follow suit, until we're nearly at a walking pace beside each other. I'm breathing hard, I don't know why, but I'm waiting for her to say something. I'm not sure what.

"Is there a reason we slowed?"

She glances at me, her expression thoughtful.

"Not sure about my choice of outfit? Or is my hair all wrong? I've never met an evil Keeper of Death before."

She huffs out a breath and rolls her eyes. "I was trying to decide how best to approach this, but I'm just going to dive right into it, since I want you to survive."

"Comforting."

She pushes on, ignoring my sarcasm. “You must enter as the Queen of the four courts. Carry yourself like you already own the title. If you don’t assert yourself from the start, they’ll devour you. You must be the most powerful, most regal, most untouchable queen they’ve ever seen. Show them you’re not someone to be fucked around with.”

I feel it then, that familiar rush, that surge of energy building inside me, thumping like a heartbeat. My magic. I pause. It’s much stronger right now than it’s been, and the feeling is disorienting.

“My magic... feels stronger.”

She lifts a brow. “Not surprising.”

“What do you mean?”

She shakes her head. “Just a theory.”

“Care to share?” I ask, trying to hide my annoyance, and failing.

“Not yet. Just focus on what I said. There’ll be time for conversations later. *Be* the queen of the four courts. Demand what you want, or you won’t get it.” Then, she gives me a look. “Demand it, *politely*, with all the honeyed words of a fae royal.”

Honeyed words? Shit. I don’t have any of those. I have sarcasm. Can I dress that up?

But I don’t say that, I just nod at Lady Nova and turn to face the castle. With each step the horses take closer to the castle, the surge and rumble of my power grows. At least, I think it does. Whatever the feeling, it’s strange and uncomfortable.

At the gate to the castle, two guards stand on each side. I glance at them, then back to the road ahead, then do a double take. *Holy hell, the guards are... dead?*

“Lady Nova...?”

“Yes,” she says, not even looking at them. “Because of the House of Death’s ways, humans fear them. More and more have fled their village, leaving no one to serve them. And because they kill their young if they don’t show considerable powers at birth, their numbers have dwindled too. They used to use the dead just as needed, but rumor is that most of their castle is made up of the dead now. Be prepared to see a lot of them.”

“But, how do they...?”

“Just like you started a fire. It’s effortless for the most powerful of them. I’ve heard it said when they’re emotions are strong, they can make any dead around them rise.”

Suddenly, something occurs to me. “When I was kidnapped, dead creatures were following me. Could the Keeper of Death have been involved?” *Or what about the raven?*

She looks disturbed for the briefest moment before her lips pull into a thin line. “Possibly. We have no idea how long she’s been planning this.”

After we pass under the gate and into the courtyard, Lady Nova gives me a look. A *shut the hell up* look.

I nod. *Okay, royal fucking badass fae queen from here on out. I can do this.*

She gets off her horse in a smooth motion, and grasps my reins, indicating that I should climb down. It’s weird. She’s been doing a lot for me, but this is something she’s doing to

send a clear message that she's almost in a position of servitude to me. It's uncomfortable, but I guess I have to get used to my new role.

"Is the sky always so... cloudy at the House of Death?" I ask as we start up stairs leading to large doors.

"From what I hear, always," she says, and I sense she's done with the chit chat.

The door opens for us as we reach the top step of the castle. A pale, ghostly servant stands before me, his eyes vacant. His frame so thin that I wonder if they even have food in this place.

Lady Nova elbows me.

I clear my throat, standing up taller. "We're here to speak to the House of Death about my princes."

The servant narrows his eyes as he assesses me. "Then, you seek the Keeper of Death," he replies in a monotone voice, his bony hand pointing toward a foreboding passageway. "But your servant may not accompany you." His gaze shifts to Lady Nova.

I glance at Lady Nova, careful to not look for her approval. We nod slightly at one another as if I'm dismissing her, but her nod is the reassuring anchor of trust she has in me. I should keep going, and she has faith I can do it.

Or she's just saying, *quit wasting time, you don't have a choice*. I'm not sure which. Either way, I have to get going. I have to do this.

"I'll be back," I say.

She nods. "The four courts are with you."

Inside the castle, darkness suddenly surrounds me. For all the windows I saw on the outside, no natural light filters into the place. The only light comes from torches on the walls. Torches that are far more spread out than they should be, leaving massive pools of darkness between the sparks of light.

To think, I thought the outside of this place was unsettling...

The servant lifts a hand and points. “Go down this hall, always going straight, it’ll go deep into the ground, into the sacred space, and there you’ll find her, the Keeper of Death.”

“Thank you,” I say.

The servant doesn’t respond. Doesn’t blink. He just stands, looking like a ghost in the dark castle. And, somehow, my heart goes out to him. *Death is bleak. Terrible. No matter how you look at it.*

I walk in the direction the servant pointed me in. Living dead move around the halls in every direction. They’re in all forms of death from decaying bodies, to ghostly figures, and even servants whose bodies are decayed to the point of being skeletons. Each one that I pass pauses and stares at me, but they don’t move towards me or attack, which is somehow not as reassuring as I imagined it might be. I consider reaching for my dagger; but decide it’d probably be better not to start a fight when they’re not being aggressive.

Especially when they outnumber me, and I don’t know what they’re capable of.

Yet, they make me feel weird. Something in my mind feels a connection to them. If I closed my eyes, I’m pretty sure I’d feel cords running from me to them. *Is that normal? Is that because we’re all connected to the dead in one way or*

another? I don't know, but I don't have time to investigate them.

I pass more undead. They stare. Wordless. Unsettlingly.

“So, just keep going down the dark, creepy hallway?” I ask, flashing a smile to the undead.

They all lift their arms and point forward.

Unsettling. “Thanks,” I say, and keep going.

But at least it's kind of cool they respond to us when they're like that. I don't know how. If it's because they're being controlled, or because they have some life left in them, but I'm sure I'll figure it out one day.

I reach a staircase that appears to go deep into the bottom of the castle. As I begin my descent, I get that strange feeling again. Like something powerful and unexpected is building inside of me. *Is this place some kind of power source for the fae?* I have so many questions about my powers and how they work, but that'll have to wait for when I'm safely back home with the princes.

My steps echo in the cold, damp silence of the catacombs. I can hear the walls of bones whispering the long-forgotten tales of pain and suffering hidden here, and the whispers feed something in my soul, awakening the same unhappy feelings inside of me. Focusing on each step takes away some of the strength of the whispers, so I do. Praying this gets easier, and knowing it won't.

This place is strange. I don't like it. It feels... powerful and dangerous all at once.

Reaching the bottom of the stairs, I enter a chamber of crypts and restless dead, whose hollow eyes seem to be fixed on me. Dozens of dead guards line the wall like sentinels, an

erie army of death. Each looks frozen in time, their armor and weapons rusted and worn but they stand ready for battle if it comes.

Then I see her, seated on a throne with roots curling behind her. Something about her is both strangely familiar and so alien that I almost wonder if she's even a fae. Her hair is long and dark. Her gray gown clings to her like spiderwebs encasing her form, and she's painfully thin. Beautiful, in an unsettling way.

As I draw closer, her power surges towards me, taking my breath away. And now I know it's some of the power that I've been feeling. The power within her almost hums to the power within me. Like two wolves howling to one another, or two breezes mixing. Regardless, her power is overwhelming. I get the sense that she could end my life with just the flick of her wrist.

Yet, her expression is unexpected as her eyes fall on me. She's studying me, eyes wide, taking me in like she's been waiting for this moment, and it's unsettling. Surely, she's heard the rumors about me. She has to believe I'm some powerless creature with only a drop of power to my name, so why be fascinated by me?

Because I'm the soon-to-be queen of the four courts. That's right. *I have* to be the queen of the four courts. I can't forget. I can do this.

I stand up straighter and approach. "Keeper of Death," I greet, but I don't bow. A queen doesn't bow.

"Queen of the Four Courts," she responds, and there's an edge of something in her voice, maybe respect.

“Where are they?” I say, and nothing more, she knows who I’m talking about.

She smiles. Fucking *smiles*. And it hits me. I hate her. I hate her with every ounce of my being for hurting my men. For being the reason for all of this.

She motions with her hands.

I hear a whisper of noise. The air in the room changes, growing even colder. So cold that I see my breath in front of my face. Then, I hear the rattle of chains, and the rattle of bones, both such recognizable sounds that it sends a shiver down my spine.

My resolve wavers when my eyes are drawn to my men as they’re hauled in and shoved to the ground where they’re bound. They have iron chains around their necks, wrists, and ankles, but, somehow, that’s not the worst part. All the injuries I saw in my dreams are there, and more.

I clench my fists. “Unchain them.”

A broader smile dances across her lips. “You’re bold.”

My chin rises. “I’m not someone you want to piss off.”

“Cassia.” My name is a rasp of pain from Prince Sulien’s lips, but all four of them are staring at me.

There’s no faith in their gazes. No hope in their eyes, just desperation and fear. These are not the men I knew, and I’m going to make this woman feel every drop of pain she caused them, no matter how I have to do it.

“Trust me,” I tell them quietly. Even though they have no reason to.

The Keeper of Death sits on her throne with a look of amusement on her face as if to say the cute little human thinks

she can come in and just save her four princes. *I'm not that naive.* She must think I was raised on fairy tales and fucking happily-ever-afters. She can't know I was brought up in the trenches, but she'll see soon enough.

“We need to talk,” I tell her as a calm settles over me.

A chilling smile curves the Keeper of Death's pale lips.
“I've been waiting a long time for this conversation.”

FOURTEEN

Cassia

A cold tension hangs in the air as I stand before the Keeper of Death. I don't know if this is more fae riddle bullshit, or her trying to get in my head, maybe both, but I wasn't going to crack under her amused gaze. This might not be going the way I planned, but the stakes are too high to screw up.

My gaze shifts back to my poor men. Prince Forrest with his shoulders bent, wincing, as if even sitting still hurts. Prince Cobar, his curls filthy, streaks of blood and dirt leaving tracks across his face, his whole body trembling as if he might fall over at any point. Prince Zane with his intense pale eyes locked onto mine even while blood slides from an unseen wound on his arm, and something about the way he looks at me seems to be pleading for forgiveness. Prince Sulien, his shirt in shreds, gaping wounds covering nearly every inch of him, his gaze faraway, as if he's having trouble even focusing on the here and now.

This bitch made a mistake messing with my men.

“What do you mean you've been waiting for us to speak for a long time?” I demand.

Her eyes light up, like she was waiting for that question. “I've been waiting nearly twenty-three years, to be exact.”

What the fuck? I snort. “You wanted to talk to me as a newborn? What for? To hear what sounds I make while I shit?”

To my surprise, she doesn’t flinch or even react to my crudeness. If anything, she seems excited by it. “You’re brave. I’m not surprised.”

Damn fae. “Oh, really?” *This woman is playing some fucking mind games.*

“Not the least bit... because your mother is brave too?”

I stare at her. She doesn’t explain further, and I feel my eye twitching. “My mother? You’ve met my mother?”

What the hell does this Keeper of Death have to do with my mother? Was she the one who killed her? The question makes a pit form in my stomach. My father had always refused to tell me much about how she died. The assumption was that it was during childbirth.

When she doesn’t answer, I ask, “and how did you meet my mother exactly?”

Part of me wants to know. Part of me feels like this is some fae trickery. A way to distract me from my men and why I’m here, but I won’t be fooled. I’m watching the dozens of dead soldiers around the room, as much as I can in the shadows. If she wants to surprise me, she won’t.

“Oh, Cassia, how little you know. Your father must be as good at lying as he is at making love.”

I stare. “Gross.” *What the hell else am I supposed to say to that?* “There’s no way you and my dad... besides, my dad is many things, but not a liar. We both know you’re just trying to get in my head.”

“Hardly, *Cassia*,” she says my name again, but almost tenderly. “What I’m trying to explain to you, but you don’t seem to be getting, is that I’m your mother.”

I stare at her in disbelief, then laugh. “You can’t be my mother.”

This fae is trickier than I ever imagined. Perhaps she learned that my mother was the one person not involved in my life, or heard about her young death. If she thought this was going to be used against me, she’s wrong.

Her eyes shine like shards of ice. “Oh, but I am, *Cassia*,” and I’ve officially decided I hate the sound of my name on her lips.

I shake my head, unwilling to play these games with her. “No, my mother was mortal, and she died. I know my history, so if you want to play mind games, you better play them better.”

She cackles, and I feel that *something* inside of me grow warmer. Powerful. “Your father must have spun you such a pretty tale to protect you from the truth, didn’t he?” She rolls her eyes in disgust and looks away.

“My father—”

“He had a great deal of fae in him, you know,” she continues, as if she’s remembering something from a time long ago. “Surprisingly, he never manifested any power. That’s what drew me to him. He was a powerful fae who couldn’t access his powers. I was a powerful fae who wanted a child, and none of the other men I’d been with had produced the heir I so desperately desired. So, I took a gamble.” She stares off into the distance, a smile playing across her lips.

“I don’t believe you.”

“You will,” she says, her voice void of emotion, “but my powers proved too great for him. It cost him the use of his legs.”

“The accident?” I whisper. *She was that accident?* I don’t believe it... even though he’s never told me how it happened.

I’m starting to realize that my father didn’t tell me as much as I’d thought. There were secrets in my family history, secrets I’d been too busy to think about. Now though, I wish that wasn’t the case. If he’d told me, doubts wouldn’t be forming in my mind now about the truth of her words.

She taps her long nails on the arm of her throne. “It wasn’t so much an accident. More like a consequence of the spells that were used to ensure our love making resulted in a pregnancy.”

My breath catches in my throat. That can’t be possible. I can’t be the reason my father lost his legs. Words float in my mind. *How many times had my father told me that I was worth everything he’s sacrificed and more? Or some variation of that?*

I can’t take my eyes off of her. *Let’s play along here and see if we can untangle this as I do.* “Was I another consequence of you being together?” *Is that what she wants me to believe?*

“Yes, another useless consequence. My hopes that you’d have powers to rival mine were dashed away shortly after your birth. You were just like your father. So much power, and no way to access it.” A scowl emerges on her face, as if the thought of me as a baby pisses her off.

“I don’t believe you.”

She smiles. “Do you know how the House of Dead’s children grow up? Death is drawn to them from the day they’re born. Dead birds line the trees. Dead creatures emerge from the ground. Eventually, dead rise from their graves. Since your powers have emerged, you’ve been seeing such signs, am I correct?”

I know she sees the truth on my face before I can hide it by the way her smile widens. “You sent those creatures. Not me. I’m not your daughter. I’m not like you.”

“And you feel the power within you. It’s been growing since you came home, to the Kingdom of the Dead. It’s within you. Growing warmer. Growing bigger. And with powers like yours, even our dead are responding to you, aren’t they?”

I think of how the dead pointed down the hall when I asked them. *Is that not normal? Do the dead not respond to the other fae?*

“None of that is true.”

She seems amused by my denial. “Does your father still carve his little figures?” Suddenly, she produces a finely crafted wooden tree from her throne. “He always had a way with them.”

I feel sick. “It’s not possible.”

“And he’s the charmer, isn’t he? Even after he lost his ability to walk, I kept him around. He amused me. The man could make me laugh, tell a story, and he has the voice of an angel.”

He does. *How does she know this? Is she guessing?* She has to be guessing.

“But he had a weak heart. Far too soft. From the moment he set eyes on you, he was in love. He loved you more than he

ever loved me. And when it was determined that your powers were locked away, a useless source of nothing, he disagreed with what had to be done.”

Had to be done?

My heart clenches as I grasp everything she’s telling me. “You...you gave me back to the woods.”

She nods, and her apathy freezes my blood. “It’s what we do with the weak ones—the ones who dilute our bloodline. It’s true that it’s rare for a fae to have more than one child, unless they’re mated to more than one man, but it’s believed that if the children are returned to the woods, we have a chance once more.”

If she’s telling the truth, she tossed me out like trash. A living child, all because of my lack of powers. “So my father...”

“He retrieved you,” she finishes my thought, but her disgust flows through her words. “I don’t know how he did it, how it was even possible, to drag himself out to the woods, to escape our lands without me noticing, and to hide you away with your grandmother. Truly, I’d thought you died and he fled because of my choice. I never thought—”

I picture my father, unable to use his legs, stuck in this dark place, witnessing these creatures tossing his daughter in the dark woods. She’s right. How he got out, how he saved me and brought me to safety, I’ll never know. But I believe he did it.

Something in my soul feels warm and cold at once. There are so many pieces from my past that feel like they’re sliding into place, so many missing pieces, even from my father, that

make sense. Why he never spoke of my mother. Why he never spoke of how he was injured.

And then there's this woman. My mother. The instant I think the words, something inside of me shifts. An acknowledgment. I believe her.

Tilting my head, I realize what was familiar now. We both have the same hair color, the same eyes, the same face shape. If I spent my life in the dark with the dead, letting my soul wither away, I might look like her when I grew older.

And I hate it. I hate the deep realization that she's telling the truth. That she's my mother. That this horrible woman and I share blood. She doesn't deserve to share blood with me.

"Why does any of this matter? You threw me away. That's the end of our story."

She leans forward on her throne. "That *was* the end of our story. Until you matched with the princes. Until I felt your powers surge free. Until I realized a way to get everything I wanted and more. I needed to only find the right path through you to *them*."

"The deal you made with them. You knew my answer would be no," I whisper. The sound of my voice echoes through the chamber until it's drowned out by her laughter.

She shrugs. "I took a gamble on it after utilizing my sources. After learning just how deep your distrust, fear, and hatred for the fae lay."

No, she couldn't have played me this easily. "And now you plan to what, take down the whole fucking kingdom?"

"Yes," she says without hesitation. "The dead will rule. *I* will rule. And the fae will remember why they should always fear the House of the Dead."

I snort. “That’s stupid.”

She lifts a brow.

“What’s to stop the good old iron demons from killing you?”

She smirks. “Perhaps my army of undead.”

I feel it. My powers inside of me, growing, warming. She’s right. This place... something about it is changing me. I can feel it. Fuck, I can sense every dead person in this room. I can sense if they were men, or women, soldiers, healers, or something else. When I shift, I feel them shift, responding to me.

She stares. “Your power is blinding. Magnificent. One day, I’ll have a use for it.”

I shudder. “No.” My word whispers through the dead, through the crowd, to the castle, where more dead stiffen at my word.

“I know that your concerns lie with your father and grandmother. I know they are everything to you,” she says. “If you go to them now, I will gift you all the wealth, power, and privilege your life has been missing. You three will remain unharmed. I will give my word to you.” Her face is still, void of any emotion as she awaits my answer.

I glance away from her, and my gaze lands on the princes. This is all too much. Too much information. Yet, as I look at them, I know it’s not. I can handle this because nothing has truly changed. She’s dangling everything I’ve ever thought I wanted right in front of me. All I have to do is say the word.

But I can’t.

Because it's not everything I want. These dreams, this connection, our bond defies any logic and reason, and it is stronger than anything she can try to tempt me with.

Fuck. I think I love them. Not the kind of love that develops slowly over time, but a different kind of love, one you feel in an instant. One that knocks you on the ground and makes you want nothing but them for the rest of our lives. I don't know why I wasn't aware of it before. Maybe fear clouded my judgment, but I know, with time, this will grow into something amazing.

For myself. For them. For our kingdom. I have to save them. Even if I'm taking a frightening risk.

“Cassia, I'm offering you everything...”

She's not. “No.”

She arches her brow. “You don't mean that, Cassia. Think about your father and grandmother. I'm powerful. I've already destroyed your princes. Just imagine what I can do to you. And I will do it. Daughter or not, I will not let you stand in the way of my throne. You will refuse my deal, and you will die right alongside your men, becoming mine to rule in death anyway.”

I raise my head, feeling the dead in the castle lift their heads to mimic me. Then, there's the rattle of bones as the ones around me do the same. “No.”

She glances from the dead to me, and something unexplainable changes in the air. “Which castle do you want? When I'm queen, I'll give you whichever you choose.”

After all this time and all of my suffering, she thinks I can be bought. She thinks the feelings I have for these four princes can be set aside for a castle or some sense of security that

she'd provide. Unfortunately for her, her offer isn't even tempting. Just the thought of losing my men makes me feel like my heart is slowly ripping out of my chest.

There's no offer I'll take that leaves my men, and my people, at her mercy. Because as rough as life has been for me, my people do live in this kingdom. My father and grandmother. My friends at the castle. None of them deserve to die because I had a chance to protect them and failed.

"No."

She sits up taller in her throne, her eyes sparkling with rage. "If you don't want what I've offered, what do you want?"

My hands curl into fists. I feel dozens of the undead mirror my movement. Connections to them like threads pull at me, whispering at me, asking what I want. I think she senses it. This change. There's desperation beneath her rage. And fear. Otherwise, why would she even be offering me these deals? *If I have no power here, why not just destroy me?*

"Nothing but the princes."

She slams her hand on the arm of her throne. "Impossible. I made a deal with your princes. They're mine. A fae deal can't be broken."

A strange awareness crawls from the top of my head down my spine. No, a fae deal can't be broken, but maybe I didn't need to break it to save them.

"My princes asked me a question, and I'm finally ready to answer." Her lips part, but I press on before she can interrupt. "I love the princes. I want to marry them. My answer to their proposal is yes, and if I say yes, you have no power over them. Wasn't that your deal?"

She rises from her throne and steps off of her dais. Instinctually, I take a step back. Behind me, I feel the dead try to do the same, but stiffen, remaining in place. Her power is pulling against my own. Taking control over the undead once more.

The feeling is... unsettling. Like someone bigger and stronger, grabbing your arm and pulling you along. You want to fight back, but they're just so much larger.

“You don't mean that. You don't love these fools.”

I root my feet to the ground. “I do.”

Her lips curl. “You don't. Stop fearing the changes my rule will bring and accept this new order.”

“Accept my answer. It frees them from your binds. You gave your word.”

She stops short, and then her expression gentles in a way that seems impossible. Her anger melts away and tension leaves her body. I feel some of her controlling over the undead slip, and the air in the room changes.

“Impressive. You actually outsmarted your mother. That intelligence, you got it from me.”

I eye her, not trusting her new mood. “Actually, I'm pretty damn sure I got it from my dad. He, after all, wasn't stupid enough to throw away a child more powerful than you.”

Her jaw ticks. “You sure about that? You *sure* your power is stronger than mine?”

Feeling the dead around me, I test the strings that bind us. I feel her strings, thick, but not as thick as mine. Gray, while mine are gold. She's like an athlete who has trained better and

longer, against someone with a natural ability. I decide to test which is more important.

I do a dance move that the humans love. A silly one where my arms go in the air, and I spin around. Bones shift and skin flies as the dead dance around me. They continue mirroring my movements, a backup dance crew made of skin and bones. She lifts a hand, my hold on them fades, and I watch the dead smash back against the walls.

The Keeper of Death pants. “You’re not just smart like me. Or powerful like me. You look like me too.” She moves closer, closing the space between us.

Every muscle in my body tightens. I don’t trust her, but I’m not going to back down either. When she’s a couple feet away from me, a sudden burst of movement sends vines springing from her body, snaking toward me. I leap back, but the vines are quicker, curling around me. Trapping me, pulling me towards her.

“Mother?” I say sarcastically.

“Daughter?” she taunts right back.

I struggle for my dagger. It’s there. Inches from my reach. But even closer, I sense my magic, and I realize it’s waiting. Stronger than my blade.

The skeletons that line the walls begin to move at her command. I feel my connection to them, but I try not to pull on the cords. Not yet. They take their places, surrounding me. The perfect little trap by the Keeper of Death, except she doesn’t know me. She doesn’t know I’m good at getting out of a bind.

The vines sting and burn me as thorns erupt, cutting deeply. Pain courses through me, but I feel my power burning.

Hot and bright. Power at my disposal.

I don't know what I'm doing as I direct that power toward the vines, but I let those cords of magic out, and the vines around me are suddenly in flames before falling to ash around me. My mother leaps back, stopping the fire before it reaches her. In an instant, her countenance shifts somewhere between shock and pride.

Isn't it a bitch? She returned me to the forest for not having power, and yet here I am. Maybe more powerful than her.

“This is pathetic and foolish. You may have a spark of power, but it's nothing compared to what I possess.” She's suddenly there, face inches from mine, triumph in her eyes.

In a flash, I let those threads of magic out, not knowing what they'll do, but knowing I have to do something. I feel the power in my hands, and I act. Suddenly, flames are dancing from my fingertips as I slap her across the face. She's turned away from me, unmoving for a painfully long moment, before she turns back. A gasp slips from my lips. I've singed off half of her face. The flesh is gone, everything melted down to muscle and bone.

Fuck...

Her chilling laugh sounds through the chamber, unexpected enough that it makes me jump. “Oh, now that's impressive. But let me show you some real pain.” In a blink, she lunges at me, her fingers clawing at me.

I barely manage to sidestep in time, but I do. Probably because she's not nearly as numb to what I did to her as she's trying to pretend. “This can stop now. You gave your word. You have to let them out of your deal.”

“It’s too late,” she says. “Don’t you see?”

It’s not. I don’t. But when the dead suddenly start moving toward me, I try to take control of them once more. It doesn’t work. They press forward. The bones in their hands sharpened to blades, blades already coated with blood. Blades capable of giving me a very slow, very painful death.

“Is this what you want?” The Keeper shouts. “This is what you were so desperately waiting to see, my power unmatched by your own!”

A blade slashes at my arm, and I cry out as I dive out of the way, but not nearly quick enough to avoid the sting. Another blade strikes me across my hip, and I hear my men shouting my name.

It’s strange. Their voices. The sound of my name on my lips. It shakes something inside of me, reminding me of something Lady Nova said. *I need to take control, even if only for a moment. It’s all I need.*

Taking in a slow, deep breath, I pull on all the threads of the undead at once... and feel them, feel them respond, obeying me and not her. They shift their target, closing in on my mother. Her eyes widen, and I see her waiver momentarily, distracted by her own army turning against her.

It’s all I need. This moment.

Slipping my blade free, I launch myself at her without hesitation. Our bodies collide, and I drive my blade into her chest, twisting with every bit of fury and pain I’ve ever felt. My power surges into the movement, and fire pours from the weapon, illuminating her chest from within. Her scream fills the chamber. She tumbles back onto the ground, scratching at the blade, but her hands do nothing.

Then, I look at my men. At their wounds. At their broken bodies, and I pull on the threads around me once more. The army of the undead, sharpened hands outstretched, descends on my mother. Her screams fill the chamber, and the scent of fresh blood fills the air.

I don't move. I don't speak. The screams are all I can hear until they quiet. I can feel her heart beating still, slow, missing beats, almost gone, and I pull on the threads once more.

The army falls to the ground, a pile of bones and dead.

Moving to stand over her, my mother's eyes lock onto mine, filled with disbelief, and I focus on them rather than her horrific body. "You've been returned to the woods, mother. Enjoy its cold embrace."

Without another word, she takes her last ragged breath, and I do her the honor of tugging my blade free from her chest, feeling nothing. *Hopefully the woods will want her, because I sure as hell don't.*

FIFTEEN

Forrest

It's like the air rushes back to my lungs and the weight on my back is lifted. My body still feels like hell, but for the time, I realize that some of what we were experiencing was due to the Keeper of Death's magic, not just the beatings we endured.

I take in a deep breath and raise my head to stare at Cassia. The Keeper— her mother— lies still on the floor. Like the dead that surround her, she doesn't move, doesn't breathe, doesn't radiate life. She's learned a lesson she should have already known. As powerful as the fae are, there's a reason humans were able to control us for so long. A blade is just as deadly to our bodies as it is to a human's body. In that, we're the same.

Cassia looks confused. She turns those brilliant blue eyes onto us, and our gazes lock. I try to rise, but the chains jerk me back down to the ground. It's been so long since I've seen her. How long, I don't know, but long enough that my heart hurts. I want to go to her. To hold her.

If she really loves us. If her words were really true.

“The pouch at her waist has the keys, Cassia,” Cobar calls out.

His words seem to shake her from her stupor. She kneels beside the body of the Keeper of Death, just outside the pool of blood forming beneath her, and rummages through the leather pouch. I'm glad she doesn't show the body any respect. She doesn't deserve it.

After a minute, the jingle of keys sounds through the chamber. She lifts them and smiles, just a little, but the smile warms my heart. *We're free, we really are, and Cassia is here with us. It's unbelievable.*

And she might love us. *Really* love us. Even though it makes no sense. Not after how badly I fucked things up with her.

I draw in a shaky breath. I'd given up hope. I truly thought we'd be here forever while the Keeper of Death waged war on our lands and destroyed the kingdom. Witnessing Cassia take down her own mother to save us feels like I just watched a dream. We're free of the Keeper, and Cassia has been returned to us.

Hell, she came here, faced a dangerous fae, and somehow developed powers all to... rescue us?

Then she's in front of me, keys in hand, and I catch her wrist, waiting until she looks at me. "I'm sorry for how badly I handled everything between us," I murmur, my voice thick with regret. "I handled it like an entitled ass."

The soft laugh that comes from her tugs at my heart. "We already fixed that in our dream, remember?"

"What?"

She laughs, running a hand lightly against my cheek. "We fixed things."

"W-we did?" I stammer.

In our dream? What's she saying? I remember dreaming of her, of holding her, of making things better between us, but that was all in my head. That wasn't real.

Maybe it's my pain, my exhaustion, or my hunger or thirst, but I have no idea what she's saying.

"Wait. Have we been *dreamsharing*?" Zane asks, his voice a tinge higher than normal.

Cassia nods. Every muscle in my body stiffens as my mind starts to filter through all the strange dreams I've been having involving Cassia since she became my mate. Did we really *share* all of that?

Sulien, still bleeding and broken, asks, "What about us in bed...all of us?"

Cassia blushes and clears her throat before responding with a clear, "Yes."

That was a good dream.

"When I took you home to my castle?" Zane asks.

"Yes, I had that same dream, too. And the hunting dream," she says, turning to me. "I learned a lot about each of you, in a lot of different ways." And she sounds... almost embarrassed.

I rub at my wrists and neck as Cassia frees me, then moves on to everyone else. She said she was coming for us. She said she'd free us, and I didn't believe her. I couldn't imagine anyone, including my beautiful mate, freeing us from the Keeper of Death. I watch her, in awe, knowing how much I don't deserve her.

Cobar hugs her first, wrapping his arms around her and breathing her in. I want to push him out of the way and do the

same, but she's all of ours. She loves us, and we have to learn to share our affections with her. Even if it kills me a little.

"How is it that you have magic?" Cobar asks, sounding as confused about the matter as I am.

She gazes toward Cobar, a smile tugging at her lips. "Lady Nova noticed the burns on me from the iron chains and assumed I was fae. She encouraged me to try using my powers, so I did some small stuff. All of this, though?" She waves her hand around the room. "I didn't expect it at all. Well, that's not *exactly* true. I could feel my power growing as soon as I entered this place. I didn't understand why, and I had no idea I could do any of what I just did until I was doing it."

She moves on to Zane. He's quieter than usual, but he stares at her with awe as she unlocks the shackles from him. Then he takes her hands in his and kisses them.

"All you ever wanted was for your family to be safe. She offered you all of that and more, but you walked away from it. You walked away from your dream."

The smile on her face is thoughtful. "Dreams change."

She pulls him into an embrace that lingers. Then he holds her too, and my heart feels... full. Not empty. Not jealous. Full.

"You guys are rank," she laughs and waves her hand in front of her face.

"You didn't smell like roses when we rescued you either," I tell her. Laughter from all of us floats through the chamber. It's a sound I never thought I'd hear.

Then she slides over to me and gives me a hug. I suspect she wanted to be quick, but I pull her close, not wanting to let her go. She smells like sunshine, warm cookies, and the

outside world. But she feels even better. She feels like a woman that would fit perfectly against me... a theory I can't wait to test out further.

Then, she moves to Sulien. He won't lift his head, so she does for him. "You're okay."

He shakes his head slowly.

"Maybe not right now, but you will be," she says gently, then unchains him. "Let's get you all out of here."

Tucking herself under Sulien's arm, she helps him rise, then glances at us. We manage to get to our feet with a few unmanly moans of pain. I bite my lip, fighting against the urge to lay right back down. Outside is freedom. A life with Cassia. All that's down here is doom and gloom.

"I have something to tell you," Sulien says, and Cassia pauses, looking at him in confusion. "Something important."

Cassia's face goes ghostly pale. "Prince Sulien..."

"I just need to tell the truth. Trust me." His eyes plead with her. The rest of us stand there, watching them. Realizing this must be the secret that Sulien's been so reluctant to share.

She gives him a slight nod, but the confidence is gone from her stance. "J-just don't hate me," she whispers, her gaze moving between us.

Like that's even possible. No matter what she says, we're not capable of hating our mate. She's our everything. Our one and only. *Surely, she has to know that by now?*

Sulien takes a deep breath that rattles. "Cassia and I struck a deal the day of the ceremony. She would come, I would use a spell, and she would appear to be my mate." *That's impossible.* But he doesn't give us time to react, just presses on. "I thought

I had everything planned. It was a way for me to ensure I didn't have a real mate, and it was a way to ensure her family was cared for."

His words fall like an anchor around us. Cobar, Frost, and I look at each other, bewildered. If what he's saying is true, Cassia isn't really his mate, so isn't our mate, either. Which is impossible. I've known lust. I've known infatuation. This is neither of those. This is love. It's the bond between mates.

Yet, the way he speaks... he believes each word to be true.

"Impossible," I say, shaking my head.

"It can't be true." Cobar sounds broken.

"It's not," Zane says confidently, almost angrily.

Cassia suddenly looks like she's going to cry. "I'm so sorry. That's why I tried to stay away from all of you. I knew the spell went wrong. I was never supposed to match with you. I'm not your true mate." Now, tears are tracking down her cheeks. "I lied to you."

"No," I say, my heart screaming that it's not true.

"That's not the end of the story though," Sulien whispers.

Cassia is still holding him, brushing tears off her face. "Yes, we'd wanted to fix it. I thought if I just refused to marry you, we could fix things. We weren't planning to deceive you unless there was no other choice."

Sulien slips off her shoulders, wincing. She tries to help again, but he shakes his head, then stands before us, barely strong enough to be on his own two feet. His face blackened and bruised. His body covered in whip marks, and marks created from the jagged bones of the undead. "I've done all of you wrong by not sharing this. Especially you, Cassia," he

says, meeting her gaze. She, in turn, simply looks confused. “I never used the spell. We’re true mates. All four of us.”

Cassia’s mouth falls open, and she sucks in a deep breath, as if she’d forgotten to breathe for a moment. “That’s not possible.”

“I’d planned on using the spell, and then the sparks began, and it was too late. I didn’t know what to do, and then you matched with the others. In so many ways, I was in my own personal hell, having a mate that didn’t want me. Becoming my father—” His voice breaks.

A hushed silence falls over the room as his words sink in. Cassia is my mate. She rejected me because she thought she wasn’t. And now? She *is* my mate. She wants me. And I’m tied to the three men I now see as brothers.

And Sulien is just standing here looking like he’s ready for another beating? *Fuck, no.*

I stride toward Sulien and hug him gently, but also with enough gusto that he understands what I’m not saying out loud. Because of him, we all came together. Without him, our mate would’ve never come to the ball that night, and we never would have matched... I wouldn’t know her, and I wouldn’t have formed this brotherhood with Sulien, Cobar, and Frost. Sulien gave us all of this, even if it wasn’t done in the best way possible.

Pulling back, I squeeze his shoulder lightly and nod before looking at the others.

Cobar smiles tiredly. “Your deal brought her to all of us. That’s all that matters.”

“None of this would have happened without that deal,” Zane says, inclining his head.

Putting my hands on his shoulders, his gaze meets mine. “We’re not mad, Sulien, but for the love of the gods, work on your communication skills. One good conversation could have saved us a hell of a lot of this mess.”

“Communication, huh?” he says, a smile teasing the corner of his mouth, but disbelief still lingers in his eyes.

“We Fall Fae are experts at it, if you’d like some lessons,” I offer, grinning.

He snorts. “The day I take communications lessons from a Fall Fae—”

Cobar laughs. “Though I think we all could use a little help in that regard... and a little help to make sure we don’t let our pasts ruin our futures.”

Shaking my head, I glance back at Cassia. She’s smiling. Her gaze far away. Sulien’s disbelief mirrored in her face. “This is impossible, right?”

“That you’re our mate?” Zane asks, lifting a brow. “Hardly, we could have told you two all along that we were mates. We knew it deep in our souls.”

“It was just that easy?” Cassia asks.

“That easy,” he says with a shrug of his shoulders.

Still, she seems uncertain. “You’re sure, Sulien? You’re really sure you never used it?”

His gaze falls on her. “I’m sure. I thought I chose you to be my bride because you’d keep things simple, but I think some part of me always felt our connection. Always... just knew. Did you?”

Even in this dull light, I can see the blush that heats her cheeks. “I knew that you four were the most irritating people

on the planet... and yet, I still wanted to be around you.”

“That’s a win,” Cobar mutters.

We all laugh.

After a pause, Cassia gives us a funny look. “Do you guys think we can finish figuring this all out in a place that smells less like... death?”

With no hesitation, Zane says, “Certainly,” speaking all our thoughts aloud.

I place my hands under Sulien’s arms and allow him to lean on me as he walks. We find the exit and slowly follow the path to daylight. The whole way, Cassia is full of laughter and smiles, making small fires with her power to light our way. We’re a quiet group, but a happy one. It’s like a weight has been lifted from all of us and come to our safe escape, we’ll have nothing but happiness ahead of us.

As long as our magic can be restored before the boundary falls. The thought makes me stiffen. I glance at the others. Surely enough food and rest will be enough?

But as I reach for the boundary, I feel it, hanging on by a thread, and... I’m just not sure.

Cassia opens a door and light comes flooding in. As we blink into the light, forms take shape. There, waiting just outside our exit, is Lady Grave with a group of fae.

Shit. What now?

SIXTEEN

Cassia

My sigh of relief lay perched in my chest as I opened the door to step outside, but Lady Grave, a group of fae, and even Lady Nova, crowd the door, seemingly blocking our way. My heart leaps into my throat. *What will these fae do when they learn I've killed their fearless leader? And will we be able to handle this many of them when they try it?*

“Cassia?” Prince Cobar says my name in confusion behind me.

“We have company,” I whisper, and I sense they know exactly what I mean, even though my body blocks some of their view of the fae.

“Company we can handle?” Prince Zane asks.

“Yes,” I answer without hesitation. *At least, I think so.*
“Lady Nova?”

Her gaze meets mine, but I sense she's as uncertain as I am about how this will play out.

The crowd steps back, and Lady Grave stands before me. I know I saw her in Prince Forrest's dream, but it's truly like I'm seeing her for the first time. She's tall and beautiful with

long black hair and a flowing green dress. Wings like a butterfly's sprout from behind her back.

She bows her head. "I'm Lady Grave, the leader of the House of Death. Please, emerge from the catacombs."

I hesitate, but then step forward, my men following behind me until we've all emerged into the light. Glancing around the inner-courtyard we've stepped into, I realize that we've come out a different place than we came in. *Is it magic?* I didn't know, but every instinct in my body is screaming to be cautious.

Once we're all standing before them, they close ranks around us once more. There's tension in the air, and it makes me reach out for my magic again. For the threads that connect to all the dead in this castle. I tug on the threads, stealing the control from the fae in the House of Death.

I see shocked expressions come over their faces. Their magic pulls at the dead once more, but their threads are thin, weak compared to my own, and the control of the dead remains in my own hands. I don't bring the dead to us, just let, but I keep them at the ready.

Lady Grave gives me a strange look. One that holds both curiosity and a threat.

That's right. If you're trying to hurt my men again, you're going to have to get through me.

I keep my head held high like the queen I'm supposed to be. "Are you attempting to stop us from leaving?" I ask, keeping my voice strong and steady.

Lady Grave regards me, an unreadable expression on her face. "No, Queen Cassia," her voice soft like a breeze brushing

against a tree. “I’m not here to hinder you; I’m here to offer assistance.”

I scoff. *Yeah, right...*

“Like the kind of assistance you offered when the Keeper of Death held us prisoner?” Prince Cobar asks, accusation thick in his voice.

Her cool expression doesn’t waiver. “The Keeper of Death tried and failed to fight a fae stronger, or at least more clever, than herself. She also tried to fight fate. Both battles were fraught with conflict and ended as they were foretold.” Then, she glances at Prince Cobar. “Like I said, death was inevitable.”

What? This woman knew my mother would fail, and allowed this to happen anyway? Then what the hell was this all about? What was the point?

Lady Nova grins, stepping near Lady Grave. “They said you used a dagger to end the bitch. Nice.”

I grin back, trying not to look at the dangerous House of Death fae around me. “The fae are ready for powers and trickery, not a knife to the throat.”

Before I can say more, motion behind me draws my eye. Just between my men, I see *her*, The Keeper of Death, emerging from the shadows.

Holy hell!

My stomach flips, and my hand finds my dagger again, but I hesitate. She looks different, her eyes vacant, her movements stilted, like one of the many lifeless servants we passed in the corridors of this great house. As her body comes into sight, I flinch back at the little that’s left of her.

My dagger lowers. *That change was swift.* I take a shaky breath and turn back to Lady Grave.

She bows her head to me. “With the Keeper of Death no longer among the living, the bargain with the princes is complete.”

“It is, so we’ll be on our way.” There’s no softness in my voice because there can’t be, and my only goal now is to get my men home safely. To take them somewhere, they can heal from both what they went through physically, as well as what they went through mentally. They need safety, warmth, and love, not whatever this woman wants to offer us.

My mates. It’s my job now to protect them.

“You don’t understand—” she continues.

“I appreciate your offer, but we can find our way back just fine.” Looking around at my men, their expressions tell me they agree.

Lady Grave nods, then clasps her hands in front of her and asks, “Do you believe the kingdom will remain safe from the iron demons while you journey home?”

What?

I turn to my men. Disgrace and guilt paint their faces. Shame fills the air, and I know, I know they can’t keep the barrier up. It’s not their fault. No one could have held up against that.

Lady Grave stands quietly, awaiting my response.

But it’s Prince Sulien who speaks. “It may fall for a short time, I think, before we can get it back up. Some demons will get in, but hopefully, not many. Not enough to destroy the

kingdom, but surely enough that they'll cause death and destruction."

He looks so ashamed. So disappointed in himself. "You did well," I tell him, and smile. "You all did well," I say, looking at my injured men.

But I can tell none of them believe me.

I turn back to the woman in front of me, hating what I'm about to ask. "What can you do to help them?"

Seriously, as dangerous as I know these House of Death fae are, I doubt they're going to be picking up their swords and going to battle. They seem more in the realm of dealing with the dead than fighting the living. And with my control over their dead, I have a feeling they're not quite as dangerous as before.

So, I have to be smart. I have four injured men here, iron demons that may be on the loose soon, and a long way home. Getting help, even from them, might not be the worst thing. If we're careful.

Her expression never changes. She's a statue at my service. "I can marry you now to restore their powers and hold the barrier."

Everything in me tenses. *Is that really what would happen? If I marry them, will things get easier for them? Will it save the kingdom in some bizarre fae-magic way?* I have no idea.

Prince Forrest staggers next to me, bearing Prince Sulien's weight, and I turn in surprise. "Not a chance. I've learned my lesson, no one is going to make you feel rushed or forced into marrying us. No one." He follows his words up with a glare leveled at Lady Grave.

Prince Zane's firm voice comes from behind me as he draws closer. "This is our burden to bear, and our problem to solve."

Then, Prince Cobar comes closer. "Marrying us to save the kingdom is the last thing we want." There's pain in his eyes as he speaks. "Seriously. Don't do this."

My gaze finds Prince Sulien's, and his eyes are intense. "I will never marry a woman who doesn't want to marry me."

Wow. What a change in their tune. Before, they didn't even seem to see me as a person. Just the mate they connected with, who would fall all over herself for them, and marry them without a thought. It breaks my heart that they had to go through all this to realize that our relationship needs to be more than that, but some small part of me is glad they learned the lesson.

And... I've changed too. The terrible weight I felt on my shoulders at just the idea of marrying them is gone, because, what's really holding us back now? My dreams have shown me that having four husbands might be a hell of a lot better than having one, at least if they're these four men. Prince Sulien's revelation has erased my fears about being married to men I'd spend my life lying to. As a fae, my family is safer no matter what I do. *All my fears are gone.*

I want to marry these four insane men, even knowing they'll turn my life upside down. Even knowing that, if the tree spirit's predictions are true, I'll have my vagina torn apart by four giant fae babies. And even knowing that my family and I won't be able to spend all year at the Summer Court, since we'll be living in the middle of the four court's lands. Knowing everything, I still want to be with them.

So, why delay marrying my mates?

“Do you think the barriers will come down if I don’t marry you?” I ask, looking at each of my men one by one.

“We’ll do everything we can,” Prince Zane says, his tone filled with guilt.

But they can’t stop it.

The choice is easy. “I’ll do it.”

Prince Sulien shoves away from Prince Forrest, and then his hands are on my arms. Hands covered in blood. Our gazes meet, and this time I’m overwhelmed by the sight of the cuts and bruises covering his body. *He did all of this, just to get me back.*

“You don’t need to take this on. We’ll find another way.”

I gently place my hand on his cheek before facing the other three princes. “It’s happening,” I say. Then, I make sure to look at each of them. “Because I kind of love you idiots.”

It takes everything in me to pull away from their expressions of disbelief and walk over to Lady Grave. “Let’s do this.”

She bows her head. “Everything will be prepared.”

A rumble of dissent rises from Prince Frost, Forrest, and Cobar. I hold my hand up in the air, waving it to silence them. “The decision is made.” Then, my eyes lock with hers. “But I want your word that we’ll be safe here.”

“You have it,” she promises easily, and for the first time in my life, I feel the power behind a fae’s word. Something I don’t think I was sensitive to until now.

I release my hold on the strings to the dead, and I hear every fae there take an unsteady breath. Even Lady Grave looks like she might topple over for the briefest moment

before she corrects herself once more. *It's strange, this fae magic. But I like it.*

“You’re a very deadly woman,” Lady Grave whispers.

I smile, taking the compliment for what it is. “You have no idea.”

SEVENTEEN

Cassia

My men struggle down the hall as we slowly follow Lady Grave into the castle. I want to help them. All of them. But I can't. *At least not the human way.* Without another thought, I pull the dead to me, giving them my command and in an instant, my princes are being carried down the hallway. I'm sure in any other state, they wouldn't appreciate it, but they say nothing now.

"Which way to your healers?" I ask, realizing that's where we should be headed.

"This way," Lady Grave says, and then we're racing after her.

We weave through hallway after hallway until we enter a room that branches into multiple other rooms. A half a dozen fae stand, in gray gowns, their hair pulled back in matching styles. Their hands are twined together, and their gazes are our doorway, as if they've simply been waiting for us to arrive. Like all of this was planned hours before. Within seconds, they launch into action.

"Each room has been set up for each of the princes," one of the women says, speaking to the dead rather than me. "Follow your healers."

“Cassia needs tending to also,” Prince Zane says.

I glance down at myself and see my clothes stained by blood from where my mother attacked me. Then I return Prince Zane’s concerned look. “I’ll be okay.”

“You’ll take care of yourself,” Prince Forrest barks.

They all nod in agreement, looking uncomfortable in the arms of the dead. I realize they’re not going to budge on this, even if adrenaline is making it so my wounds don’t hurt, no doubt. So, I nod and smile. “I’ll have them fix me up.”

As my men are carried into the different rooms, my heart feels like it’s being pulled into four different directions. To my surprise, Prince Forrest looks back, battered and bruised, but his eyes intent. “Go with Sulien. He needs you the most right now.”

It’s the permission to do what my heart couldn’t decide, and I race after him. Two healers are standing over him as two undead step back. They begin removing the torn shreds of his clothes, and I circle around them to his head. My fingers tangle into his hair, and his eyes open.

“You shouldn’t see me like this,” he whispers.

“Why? Do you have an embarrassing secret tattoo?” I whisper with a laugh that ends on a sob.

He turns his head closer to mine, and I press my forehead against his own. His breathing is so harsh. I’ve never heard a fae like this. *Can he be healed? What if he can’t?*

“You’re going to be okay,” I whisper, and something shifts. The threads I’ve felt connecting me to the dead are there, but there are also new threads now. They’re different. Far more powerful, and I feel them running between me and my men.

They're blue, bright, and vibrant, but I don't know what they do.

"To the tub," one of the healers says.

I step back as Sulien is lifted into the tub by the dead. He's lowered into the water up to his chest. His eyes are closed once more, but pain mars his expression. The healers grasp things from baskets beside the back and begin to sprinkle them into the water, murmuring words.

"Death is powerful. Death is absolute. But this fae is not yet ready for the dead. He must stay here. Amongst the realm of the living. Until he's called home." They keep going, and then their words become chants. One of the women begins to run water over his face, and strange scents fill the air. Medicinal scents, not pleasant ones.

Another healer is suddenly at my side. She pulls up my shirt and begins applying a sticky substance to my wounds. When she glances up, she smiles. "Your majesty, these should be healed within hours. They're deep, but not deathly so."

When she's done, I thank her, and return my attention to Sulien. They're still chanting. Still adding things to his bathtub, so I stay still, giving them space, as time ticks away.

Soon, the blue thread calls to me to him. I don't know what I'm doing when I reach into the water and begin to wash his face, washing away the dirt and blood, revealing the extent of the bruises and cuts. Tears fill my eyes, but I keep going, even as I feel the power that blossoms from my touch. My finger traces a partially bad wound, and it fades to a scar before my eyes.

My heart races. I touch the bruises and cuts on his face, and they all fade. Not disappear, but fade.

It'd comfort me, if not for the way his breathing seems to fill my mind. So unsteady. So wrong. And absolutely frightening.

Unable to stop myself, I reach down into the water and let my hand rest on his chest. I listen to the wrongness of his breathing, and I tug on the power of the blue thread. It's unsettling, like trying to get a strange animal to obey my command, but I'm patient, knowing what it can do if it wants. Healing, apparently, is something I can do, but it's not nearly as easy as controlling the dead.

Then, his breathing grows less labored. Slowly, painfully slowly, it calms until his breath is that of a sleeping man. My eyes open, and I stare at his stunning face. The harsh lines. The dusting of a beard. The beauty that is this man, and the gentleness I know that lies beneath it all. I've known him all my life. How is it that it took me this long to realize that I love him?

One of the healers kneels down beside me. "The spell... he should sleep for a time, but we'll continue his healing."

I glance at her. She's the youngest fae I've seen in the House of Death. "Will he be okay?"

She surprises me by smiling. "He will be. But like most things, you just need to give it time."

It reminds me of my own words. *How often did I just need more time to face something?* Maybe this time I have to be ready to give that patience to someone else.

"Would you keep an eye on him if I go to see the others?"

"You have my word," she promises, and there's power in her words.

I rise and go to the next room, not even sure who I'll see. Prince Forrest is lying in a tub, not so different from the one Prince Sulien is in, only, he's awake, and the women are standing over him, still weaving their spell around him. I kneel at his side, and he reaches out. His big fingers brush my cheek, and he pulls them back to reveal tears. *When did I start crying?*

Without a word, I pull closer to him, holding back a sob. "I'm so sorry."

His hand slides into my hair. "Don't be sorry. Just be here with us."

He kisses the top of my hair, my forehead, then my jaw, and finally my lips. It's a tender kiss. One that's so strangely familiar. *How many times had we kissed in our shared dreams?*

Our kiss breaks. I whisper, "I missed you."

He laughs.

"What?" I ask, frowning.

He shakes his head, still smiling. "You have no idea how much I've waited for someone who misses me."

He has, hasn't he? I picture that little boy in the woods. The day he got his scar. The fact that no one was there to show him love or affection. The fact that no one comforted him. My Forrest really has waited a lifetime for this.

The happiness in his brilliant green eyes takes my breath away. "Good, now, never make me miss you again."

His deep laugh comes again. "You know, I'm trying really hard not to talk about our children."

I kiss him. "Maybe get everything... fixed first."

He gives a low growl. “Nothing used for making children is *broken*, my queen.”

It’s strange how much his words warm my soul, but I pull back from him. “Can I check on the others?”

“Please,” he says, and I can tell he means it.

Rising, I slip next door. Prince Cobar is lying in a tub, but the healers slip out of the room when I enter. I’m not sure if he was less injured than the others, or if I took so long with Prince Sulien and Prince Forrest that they’re simply done with him now, but I don’t care. I’m glad to be alone with him.

His gaze finds mine. “I just have to hang out now, letting the waters do their job.”

For some reason, I feel shy, lingering in the doorway of the room. “Do you want me to come in?”

He smirks. “I want you to join me in this bath, but there’s no telling what the waters would do to you. All we need is for you to grow a dick, and then that would complicate things.”

This man. He’s always going to make me laugh.

“Is that dick growing water?” I tease, slowly making my way in. “Did you lose something I wasn’t aware of?”

He snorts. “Don’t worry, I have no need of dick growing waters. I mean, if it gets any bigger, we’re going to have to do some seriously creative things to get it to fit.”

The man might not be far off on that. Still, I laugh. “You make my world so much better. You know that, right?”

“You do too. For me.”

My heart feels heavy, seeing the bruises on his face, chest, arms, and neck. Bruises, and the scars from cuts, probably

from those damn undead. They certainly know how to hurt a person. I just can't believe they hurt some of the people most important to me.

"I don't know what I'd do without you." The words come out easily, and I mean them. I can't imagine a world without Prince Cobar in it. The silly man is *going* to have to take better care of himself.

He grins in response. "Good thing you'll never have to know."

I move closer, letting my hand trail across the edge of the tub. "I don't know a lot about being mates, but does it make you feel like your world finally has color? Like all you want to do is be with you? Hold you? Love you?"

He leans up, then winces, breathing hard. "Why?"

Our gazes lock and I have an overwhelming desire to twirl his curls around my finger, yank him closer, and kiss him. "Maybe that's how I feel."

"About *us*?" He seems to be having trouble catching his breath.

"Maybe. So, is that how it feels?" I sit on the side of the tub.

He reaches up and pulls me down for a kiss that's incredible. Soft, sweet, and everything that I'd expect from Prince Cobar. Then, he draws back, just an inch. "That's exactly how I feel."

We kiss again, and I realize that I hate these tubs. All I want to do is lay with my men. Have them all around me, and never let them go, but the tubs don't exactly allow that.

"Have you seen everyone?" he asks, panting.

“Not Prince Zane,” I confess.

He smiles. “You know, you can drop the title. As our wife, you don’t need to address us so formally.”

Shit. He’s right. It’s actually kind of silly that I’m calling them “prince” this and that, but it’s going to take some getting used to.

“Good to know,” I say, trying to wrap my mind around the idea that I can really just call them by their names now.

“Now, go see Zane. He needs you.”

It’s kind of incredible. *Was I scared about having four husbands?* Now, I can’t even imagine having one. They might be a handful, but then they do things like look out from each other and melt my heart.

I rise. He catches my hand and kisses it.

It’s hard not to smile as I leave the room and slip next door, but my smile instantly vanishes when I see Prince Zane alone in a tub, his eyes closed. My heart starts to race for completely different reasons. *Did the healers help him?*

I hurry to his side and press a hand to his chest.

His eyes snap open, and my breath rushes out. We just stare at each other for a long minute before my hand on his chest starts to feel strange. I move to take it away when his hand catches mine and puts it right back.

“I was worried about you,” I whisper.

“I was worried about you, too.”

We kiss. Without a thought. Without hesitation. And the chill of his lips reminds me so much of him, like the scent of a

loved one, that I find my free hand tangling into his hair, tilting him the way I need.

I'm breathing hard, remembering how fragile he is as I pull back. "Sorry."

"Never be sorry for kissing me," he says.

"I need all of you to be okay."

He smiles, one of his rare smiles. "We're going to be okay. We have you."

We're in an enemy castle. They're wounded. They were just tortured. He's completely insane.

I shake my head. "That can't be all you need."

"It is," he says simply, and I believe him.

Just believing someone so easily is foreign to me. The only people I trust this much are my father and grandmother, and yet, I trust these men the same way now. I don't know if it's because of all we've been through, or if it's because of our mate bond, but the reason doesn't matter. I believe him, and he believes I'm all he needs.

It's official. I'm crazy about them.

I sigh. "You know, you guys are going to need to ease up on being so charming and sweet or I'm not just going to fall head over heels for you, but fall all the way down."

My words make his face glow. "Maybe we'll try to be the assholes you first met every so often to save you from the bumps and bruises."

"That would be nice!" I exclaim, then grin.

This. This feels right. Being reunited with the princes. Knowing we're mates and that all the lies and secrets are gone

between us. Now, all we need to do is get married... something I'm oddly ready for.

A little while later, the healers come back in and tell me that they need to do more work. Work that would be better done without me. Zane protests, but I'm not about to do anything to slow down their healing, so I promise him it'll be fine, then head out.

Outside, Lady Nova and Lady Grave are waiting to show me to my room. I don't want to go. Being near my men is exactly what I need, what I've always needed, and never known. But knowing that loving them means doing what's best for them, I go, feeling like I'm leaving my heart behind with each step I take.

EIGHTEEN

Cassia

The room has clearly been arranged for our needs. Big beds have been pushed together to form a bed that takes up a whole side of the room, complemented by soft-looking sheets and warm blankets. The fire is blazing on one side of the room, and a tub with steaming water stands at the ready.

I turn to Lady Grave. “Thank you.”

She nods. “Your friend, Lady Nova, will be two rooms to the right.”

“Good,” I say, looking at Lady Nova. “She deserves a hell of a lot after all she did for us.”

Lady Nova inclines her head, the smallest smile playing across her lips. *The woman is confusing, and dangerous, but she deserves credit for dropping everything and taking me on a journey to save the men I love. When I’m queen, I’ll make sure she’s rewarded for everything she did.*

“Would you like your men returned to this room after their healing? We’ve prepared their own rooms, and they’ll need continued healing tomorrow, but we thought you might want to rest together.”

My throat feels tight, but I manage, “That would be lovely, Lady Grave.”

“There are clothes at your disposal, the bath, and food. I can send in servants to—”

“It’s okay,” I say, “I can take care of myself.”

She looks surprised for a moment before giving a little nod. They walk out the door when Lady Grave looks back. “And can I trust you won’t be using our undead to kill us in our sleep tonight?”

For some reason, I smile brightly, “As long as my men are okay.” Then, I shut the door. *Let her push her healers even harder.*

Turning back to my room, I don’t know what to do with myself. So I just take it one thing at a time. I peel off my clothes, sink into the bath, and scrub the blood, dirt, healing gunk, and scents of death off of me. After I’m done, I dry, dress, and eat. *A lot.* I don’t know if it’s a consequence of the fae powers, or everything I’ve done lately, but I’m starving.

When I’m done, I crawl into the bed, but I don’t sleep. I curl up in the center of the huge space, and wait. The sky darkens. Night falls. And still, they’re not here.

I cry. I don’t know why. I’ve never been a big crier, but the past few days just seem to be hitting me, and I don’t know what to do with all my emotions.

There’s a quiet knock on my door, and then a healer opens it. She doesn’t say a word when I say, bring them in. My men come in looking like the living dead themselves. The healer closes the door behind them, and I pat the bed. “Let’s get some sleep.”

They slide in around me, Sulien facing me, Forrest behind him, then Frost behind me, and Coban behind him. The warm blankets are around us, and then there's Sulien's hands, brushing away my tears. We don't say anything. Not a word, but when I drift off to sleep, I dream about the four of us, cuddled together in this bed, happy and content.

NINETEEN

Cassia

I can't help but smirk at my reflection in the mirror as I don the eerie wedding dress. It's black and made of the same material that all the fae in the House of Death seem to prefer. Lace, lace so delicate that it feels like almost nothing as it lies against my skin. It clings to me, in every way, hugging the lines of my body until it hangs looser from my hips down.

Did Lady Grave really see this, too? Did she know what would happen down to the size of my wedding dress? I laugh, the notion is ridiculous. Still... the dress fits me perfectly. I only wish my father and grandmother were here to see me now.

Tears sting my eyes. Everything has been happening so fast. That's the story of my life lately. The world has been whipping by me, and I've been left clinging to nothing, trying to figure out which way is up and down.

“And what I should and shouldn't be saying.” I stare at my reflection, thinking about the moment I agreed to marry the princes. I was just trying to keep us moving, to get us, and the kingdom to safety, but I should have said I wanted to marry them. That I was scared, but I loved them.

“They’re my mates,” I tell myself, and something inside of me warms.

My mates. I never thought much about having a husband, and now I had four fae princes about to become my husbands. But regardless of what was on paper, they were my mates. Men who should love me forever and be ever by my side.

Yet, it isn’t just that they’re my mates. I *want* them at my side. I *want* to be with them.

The door to my room creaks open. I reach for my dagger, but Lady Nova steps in before I grasp it. She’s surprisingly wearing a dress too. A simple green one that comes to her knees made of a similar fabric as my black dress, and her hair is left loose around her shoulders, giving a feminine air to the fae that I hadn’t thought possible before.

“Is this traditional House of Death bridal wear?” I ask and twirl around to give her a full look at my ensemble.

She smirks. “That’s quite the look. It certainly does fit the aesthetic of this place.”

It does. This place is fucking creepy. “It’s weird that they have this dress in just my size, isn’t it? I mean, this whole thing is weird, right?”

Lady Nova shrugs. “The Keeper of Death was much more powerful than Lady Grave, but Lady Grave has the power of premonition. It’s likely she foresaw everything, and used this situation as an opportunity to get rid of the Keeper of Death.”

That surprises me. Something about the people of this place made me think the Keeper was held in high regard. Maybe because when she took control of the princes, none of them did anything to stop it. But, I guess not. Maybe they were just waiting for me to kill the bitch and get rid of her.

I don't know how I feel about Lady Grave plotting all of this out. If she did, she played the long game for sure, but at my expense and the expense of the princes. *And, seriously, though, I killed the damn woman with a knife. Weren't there easier ways for Lady Grave to get rid of her?*

My mind refuses to accept that. "But I just took the bitch out with a knife... and maybe an army of the undead."

Lady Nova chuckles. "Most fae are stupid and cocky. They rely on their powers more than common sense or logic." The faint smile on her face disappears. "Don't become that kind of queen. The kingdom can't take much more of that. You have to be smart. You've already proven that you are. Don't let becoming royalty take away who you are deep down inside."

I give her a knowing smile. "Don't worry. I'll make sure to add common sense to my daily queenly duties."

She glares at me, and I straighten my back, giving her my most regal look. She shakes her head at me as if she's not quite sure she believes me. Or, perhaps, she's not sure how seriously I'm taking this whole thing.

Maybe once upon a time I didn't. Maybe I was only concerned with my life crashing down and the four princes trying to spear me with their royal forks, but I've had time to think and grow. I realize that as a queen who lived her life as a human, there's so much I can do for the kingdom. Not all at once, but with time, I hope to make life better for the humans. And I intend to make sure the fae aren't left to continue being so soft and useless.

"You're certain?" she prods, when I don't say more.

"You have my word," I tell her, and I feel power vibrate through the promise. "I won't let anything keep me from doing

what's right and best for the kingdom." I'm not just a girl who takes care of her father and grandfather anymore. The kingdom's future rests on my choices. I can be a great influence on all four future kings if I work at it.

I turn back to the mirror, taking one last look at myself as just Cassia Withers, 'human' girl before I become the Queen of the Four Courts. *It's weird, it's actually starting to feel right. Me, as a queen. Me, as a mate to four amazing men.*

"How are they?" I ask, and I don't need to explain further, she knows who *they* are.

"They're doing better. The House of Death is strong, and so are their healers."

I feel some of the tension easing from my chest. "This is all so strange. Knowing they're my mates. Knowing this feeling inside of me is real and that I shouldn't ignore it."

"Fated mates are remarkably powerful."

My gaze moves to her in surprise.

"Given the brightness of the sparks when you found each other, that's exactly what you are. Fated mates have the most powerful connection among the fae."

This is crazy. "Yet, everything is still happening so quickly."

"But you're okay with it?" Her words hold a defensive air, and I get the feeling she would move heaven and earth to help me escape if I suddenly changed my mind.

"I'm okay with it. It's just fast." I hesitate. "What happens if after all of this they decide I'm not worth it? Or we have nothing in common? Or they're just terrible in bed? Like thirty seconds in, *explosion*, and out?"

She smirks. “You’ll figure it out. You’re mates.”

Deep breath. “Right. Mates who don’t have to worry about dishes, bills, or where our next dinner is coming from. But who also has to keep a whole kingdom safe from iron demons, make the fae play nice, and create changes that the fae might not like.”

“You can handle it,” she says, grinning.

I can handle it, I tell myself.

“Are you all right to travel back to the Summer Court without me?” Lady Nova asks. “The House of War wants me to stick around and keep an eye out here after everything that happened with the Keeper of Death.”

Smart idea.

“Of course! The five of us should make the journey easily.” I pause, thinking about their conditions. *They’ll most definitely need a few days of rest and healing first, though.*

She gives me a sharp look. “Keep training. Powers like yours, that have been tapped into only after finding your mates, are rare. That power will be the kind we haven’t seen in ages. You need to learn to harness it and control it.”

“Wait. Is that why they surfaced now?”

Lady Nova nods, adding, “It’s very rare. Only a handful of occurrences in our recorded history. You’re remarkable, Lady Cassia.” And, she sounds sincere.

She pulls me into an unexpected hug, and I can’t help but to think these past few days with her have been the closest thing to having a sisterly relationship I’ve ever had. She’s taken the time to teach me and encourage me and even protect me. I’ll never forget everything she’s done for me.

“Do you have time to escort me to my soon-to-be-husbands?” I ask, not wanting us to separate just yet.

Without her help, we all wouldn't be here.

“Absolutely, Queen Cassia,” she says, taking my hand in hers.

TWENTY

Cassia

A hush falls over the assembled fae as I step into the grand throne room and see my husbands-to-be. All four stand tall, marks from their torture still visible in the still healing wounds, and bruises, on every inch of their exposed skin, but they're no longer just barely breathing. Strength has been restored to them, which is surprising, given where we are. They wear suits that seem tailored to fit them, a dark orange one for Prince Forrest, a blue one for Prince Cobar, a white one for Prince Zane, and a deep green one for Prince Sulien.

My stomach clenches. *They look handsome and strong. Every bit the rulers of the Fae Kingdom.*

And I'm going to be their queen.

Lady Nova slips away from me, joining the people standing on one side of the aisle. Only the living are in attendance, and I'm beyond grateful for that. I'd never pictured what my wedding would be like, but even so, I'm firmly in the court of not wanting the dead here, although I can still feel them. Those threads from them to me are as strong as ever.

Because I'm a fae from the House of the Dead, like my mother.

It's strange. This is my mother's home. My mother's lands. And yet, I wish my father and grandfather could be here with me now. They're the only thing that's missing.

Harpers begin to play a song as old as time, and I force myself to move forward, white flowers cover the black silk fabric beneath my feet, delicate and beautiful. My gaze locks with Sulien's, and the look on his face takes my breath away. He looks... amazed. As do the other men. Insecurity makes me wonder if it's the black dress, but I know deep down it isn't. It's me. Just like I'm overcome by them, they're overcome by me.

I can't believe fate led us to one another.

When I reach them, I don't know what comes over me. I have to touch them, all of them. I have to know they're really here and safe. My hands run over their arms, their chests, and over their faces. I might look crazy, but I'm studying every bruise, every wound. *They're going to be okay. They are.* Unlike when I was hurt, both their bodies and magic were tested by my mother, so their wounds were harder to heal. They would take time, but the healers promised me that they would be fine again soon.

Tears gather in my eyes. "You're here."

"Where else would we be?" Cobar teases.

And you're okay. The music continues playing.

"We'll heal," Zane says, and it sounds like a promise.

"I've been through worse," Forrest responds gruffly.

We laugh, and Cobar elbows him.

Then, I face Sulien. "You're okay?"

He's quiet for a moment before he nods his head.

I reach out and touch his face again, and his auburn eyes meet mine. “You don’t look okay.”

For a minute I don’t think he’s going to answer, and then his lips part. “My body will heal. And as for this, I’m happy as long as you’re happy to marry me.”

My heart aches. “As long as my family will always be cared for.”

“Always,” he promises. “But you’re my concern. I want you to be happy, too.”

I grin. “Then, don’t eat snacks in bed, don’t chew with your mouth open, don’t flirt with other women, and don’t stand in my way when there’s something I need to do.”

“Agreed,” he says easily.

“It’s that easy?” I ask, lifting a brow.

“It’s that easy,” he repeats.

Shaking my head, I pull back from my men. The fae from the House of Death are still watching, although the music covered most of our words. Still, I feel my cheeks heat. I’d forgotten they were here for a minute.

“Are you ready?” Lady Grave asks, and my gaze goes to her.

Nodding, I stand taller. I’ve never been to a fae wedding, or one at the House of Death, I have no idea how this is going to go down. Hopefully, without a lot of nakedness and dancing. *The fae love their naked dancing.*

Sulien and Frost move to my left and Cobar and Forrest remain on my right, seeming to understand how this should go, even if I don’t. We form a half circle around Lady Grave, who stands at an intricate carved lectern. The throne room is

bathed in soft, silver light, as if the night sky expanded around us. The vast ceiling's paint resembles the starlit sky.

I wouldn't have ever imagined I'd be getting married to four princes, much less here in the House of Death, but it's perfect. Perfect, except for that my grandmother and father aren't here. But I know they'll be there and healthy for all celebrations moving forward, so that has to be enough to keep me smiling now.

I look around at my four princes—the future kings of the four courts, making eye contact and smiling at each one. *Damn, they're handsome. Why the hell was I fighting this so hard?*

Lady Grave looks out over the small crowd and begins speaking in a voice that sounds like a gentle breeze. “Under the watchful gaze of the moon and stars, above the graves of the fallen, we're gathered here today to witness a transcendent bond between these five fae. The fates have decided that they should be together, and nothing, not even death, can stand in their way.”

She's right. Nothing could keep us apart, even though many have tried. We've been through so much in our short time together, but we chose each other in the end. I know we'll do the same thing in our marriage. Before, I couldn't see it. There was too much going on, but my mind is clear now, and my heart is open.

“Each prince has prepared vows. We will begin with Prince Sulien.” Lady Grave points to Sulien, and he steps forward to face me, taking my hand in his.

“As children, I knew there was something about you, though I didn't know what, until we met again. When you came back into my life, my world transformed. You filled it

with warmth and richness, softening the edges, replacing shades of gray with color. Without you, I would've never discovered these things, and although I could live without them, I can't survive without you. I love you. I vow to be your protector and your confidant. I will cherish you in times of joy and comfort you in times of sorrow. I promise to prioritize you above all else and dedicate myself to you, our love, and our life together. And I promise that we will have a different marriage than any I've seen before, a better marriage. No one and nothing will stand in the way of that commitment. I am yours, now and forever."

He places the gentlest kiss on my hand before letting it go and stepping back.

Zane steps forwards next. His voice is steady, but filled with emotion. "You are the fire that melts my ice, giving warmth to my life. Not just warmth, but love and compassion. Two things I never knew how badly I needed before you. With you, I know I'll have a family that cares. That watches out for each other. And I know that we'll bring children into this world who feel loved and valued, the way they deserve to feel. I will be your unwavering support, your comfort at the end of a long day, and your companion. I will be your partner in every sense of the word. I am yours, now and forever."

He gives my hand a squeeze before returning to his place. I gulp down the emotions bubbling up inside of me. *There's two more to go, and I have to keep it together.* A steadying deep breath calms me down enough to take Cobar's hand next.

He grins at me with his beautiful full lips and flicks a rogue golden curl out of his face before beginning. "You are the sunshine in my life. I promise to try to shine for you as brightly as you shine for me. I'll share my dreams..." he

pauses and winks at me. “And my fears. I’ll share my bed with you... and these other three lugs, but no one else.” There’s laughter from us and the crowd. “I’ll be the kind of husband you can be yourself with, and you will *always* be enough for me. More than enough. My everything. My heart is yours to keep. Forever will I be your sanctuary. I am yours, now and forever.” He bows and returns to his place and claps Forrest on the back.

Forrest’s green eyes sparkle as he stands in front of me. He doesn’t take my hand, instead he reaches out and caresses my cheek, keeping his hand there. “Cassia, all I’ve ever wanted was someone to love and care for, and someone to love and care for me in return. To find a person I could truly know to the core and to be known in return. To have a connection that goes beyond the surface to our deepest selves that we keep hidden from all others. I know I have that with you, and I vow to cherish every moment we share, cherish you and the unbreakable bond we share. I’ve never loved before, but I’ll learn. I’ll learn all there is to love you completely to be everything you need. I am yours, now and forever”

He lets his hand fall back to his side, and he steps back in line. All eyes turn to me, and my nerves kick in. I take a deep breath and step back to face all four of the princes.

“I ran from you, afraid. Afraid of being hurt, of loving, but not being loved in return. Afraid of the intensity of our bond, but not understanding it. When we were apart, I felt an empty ache in my chest. It only eased when we were together, but still I ran. Without you, I was alone, afraid. With you, I am whole, I am fearless. Being with you... With *all* of you feels right, it feels like home..”

I stop a moment just to gaze at each Prince, each so different, each mine. Nerves that had been fluttering through me vanish. I know exactly what it is I need to do next. I go first to Sulian. “Sulian, I promise to make our home a place filled with love, laughter, and color. I am yours, now and forever.”

I face Zane, desperately holding back my tears that threaten to spill. “Zane, I promise to fill our home with warmth, to never let the flame of our love die out. I am yours, now and forever.”

Cobar, I see the mischievousness on his face, but sense the hidden emotions running deep. “Cobar, I promise our home will always be bathed in warmth, and my heart filled with love for you and our family. I promise to cherish your heart and...” I laugh, “and *our* dreams. I am yours, now and forever.”

“Forrest,” I say, tears streaming down my cheeks, “I promise to see you for you, for the incredible man you are. To always want you in my life and in my heart. I promise that our home will be a place full of love, a place that’s safe and good. I am yours, now and forever.”

I take a step back so I can take in all four princes, “I love all of you, and to each of you, I promise to help you rule and to be the queen each of your courts deserve.” I sigh, I feel the power of my words, but I feel lighter...happy even.

We turn to Lady Grave. “Let these five mates become one united soul, married, bonded by an unbreakable force of love that will remain, even in death.”

There’s a round of cheers, and I feel my heart glowing. *We’re married. It’s done. All we have is our future in front of us, and it’s looking bright.*

Then, for one terrible moment, I feel it. *The barrier*. A wall of red like a blinding snake weaving around the outskirts of our entire kingdom. It's like a living beast, moving, but also always staying in place, filled with power that comes from the very earth beneath it, and... me and my men.

I see the whole continent. I see the vampires, the shifters, and the witches... and the iron demons sprinkled throughout everything, dark splotches of cruelty and pain. Only our kingdom is safe from the iron demons, the monsters. And only because of the powerful barrier we've erected, keeping them at bay.

I shiver. Sweat rolls down my spine. If that barrier fell... no, no I can't think about that now. Not when faced with it. Not when feeling the power emitting from it.

Curling my hands into fists, I focus on the energy coming from me and my men. Theirs isn't nearly as bright as my own, but I can sense that their magic is healing. Rebuilding. Mine will be enough to protect them, and strengthen the barrier, for now. Because we're joined. We're one.

Hands grasp my arms. I try to blink away the vision, but then I see *them* more closely, and my focus shifts to the iron demons once more. They're not at all the way I imagined. The iron demons look like monsters, thrusting against the wall, trying desperately to break free. Big muscled beasts with claws and sharp teeth. Creatures that might have once been human before something terrible happened to them.

They thrust against the barrier. Something draws them to it. *Our magic? Our life?* I don't know, but they're relentless.

Coaxing my magic, I send more of it toward the barrier, watching the barrier grow thicker and brighter everywhere it goes. The light brightens from the barrier, brighter and

brighter until there's an explosion of light. The monstrous creatures race away from the barrier until they're gone from sight.

A shaky breath slips from my lips as relief moves through me. The barrier is easier to strengthen without the creatures fighting against it. Why? I don't know, but I'm just glad they're gone.

It must have been so hard, and so lonely, for my men to be responsible for all of this for so long. But, they won't ever have to do this alone again. I'll be right here with them.

I'm blinking. Zane's concerned face is near mine as he holds my face in his. He's breathing hard. "You're okay. That's it. You did it. That was the worst of it, it will never be like that again. Your powers are linked with ours."

Is that what just happened? Our powers linked against the barrier? My ears ring and my head aches for a moment.

Zane strokes my face. "I've never seen anything like it, the barrier is more powerful than it's ever been."

It's hard to process it all. "Is it really strong?" *Is it safe?*

Cobar is serious, and Cobar is never serious. "The iron demons stay by the wall, no matter what we do. This time, they left. They fled the barriers of our lands. No doubt, that will cause problems for the Vampire Kingdom, but that's not our worry now."

"So...?" I'm struggling.

Zane strokes my cheek. "Our marriage solidified the boundary. We're all safe. It's over."

It's over. Worrying about my secrets. Worrying about my family and how we'll survive. Worrying about whether the

princes and I are actually right for each other, it's all over.

“Is she ready?” Lady Grave asks.

They look at me, and I nod, even though I don't know what she's talking about. My men draw back to their places, their shoulders back, looking like they're ready for something. Something I don't have a clue about.

“Now, if you'll do me the honor of crowning you,” she says, and there's excitement in the crowd.

I'm surprised, but my men don't look surprised, they look happy. We all line up and kneel, and fae bring pillows with crowns made of flowers and bones. *This is it.*

As Lady Grave places a crown on Sulien's head, she says, “Rise, King Sulien Theros of the Summer Court.” Then, she reaches Forrest and places his crown, “Rise, King Forrest Wilder of the Fall Court.” Next is Zane, and he holds himself still as the crown comes to rest on his head, “Rise, King Zane Frost of the Winter Court.” Finally, she gives a small smile to Cobar when she places his crown, “Rise, King Cobar Bloom of the Spring Court.” They're all standing beside me when she takes a more delicate version of their crowns and stands over me before gently placing the crown on my head. “Rise, Queen Cassia Wither of the Four Courts and Lady of the House of Death.”

When I rise, cheers ring out over the crowd, and we turn to face them, linking hands. *I'm queen. They're kings. This really happened.*

Behind us, Lady Grave says more quietly, “You're now wedded, but to fully complete the ceremony, this marriage must be consummated.”

A nervous flutter dances in my throat as I try to swallow down the knot that suddenly formed there. I guess, if I can handle a battle with the House of Death, I can handle this too.

Right?

TWENTY-ONE

Cassia

“So, we’re not missing some kind of big party, are we?” I ask nervously as we’re led back down the hallway to my bedroom.

Cobar gives me a look, a little smile teasing his lips. “The party can wait. There are... more pressing matters.”

“Maybe I like big parties,” I mutter.

Then, Cobar’s shoulder is brushing mine. “We’ll have our own *little* private party.” His soft laugh eases the words.

Zane is at my other side, and his hand is suddenly in mine. “Tonight will be however you want it to be, just remember that.”

The bedroom door is opened by a dead servant, and we all head inside before the door is closed once more behind us. My gaze slides from the giant bed down to my feet. I take a deep breath, reminding myself that I can handle this. I already *nearly* had sex with the four of them once. It’ll just be the same thing, but taking things all the way this time. *So why can’t I seem to ignore the nervous flutters in my stomach?*

“So, let’s get this over with!” I say, trying to sound confident.

“That’s sexy, just what a fella wants to hear,” Cobar murmurs, followed by a wink.

Geez, he’s right. I laugh. “Okay, yeah, not the sexiest thing I’ve ever said!”

“You’re just overthinking it,” Sulien says.

I lift a brow. “Oh, really?”

He closes the space between us, those auburn eyes of his filled with desire. “Really. None of this has even a little bit to do with thinking. Do you remember that day we saw each other again after so long apart?”

I stare uncertain, but it’s Forrest who answers. “I don’t think we’ve heard this story.”

Sulien’s eyes twinkle. “I caught you mocking the fae in my room, and then you proceeded to offer to make me a bath. Do you remember that?”

My cheeks heat. “I’m not sure. That was... so long ago.”

He gives a sexy smirk. “You offered to bathe me.”

“She didn’t!” Zane exclaims, but I can’t look away from Sulien.

“I didn’t mean it! You made me flustered! I wasn’t thinking!”

Sulien’s grinning. “So, what would you have said if I’d agreed to your offer?”

I’m so embarrassed. I want to melt into the floor. “I-I don’t know.”

He pulls me closer. “I do.” And then, he kisses me.

The kiss starts out soft and slowly grows harder. When I spread my lips to draw in a breath, his tongue sweeps inside,

and heat uncurls inside of me, shooting straight to my core. I grasp onto his arm, trying to keep myself standing, but he tilts my head further and takes complete control. All thoughts melt from my mind, and I get the sense we're moving backwards until I fall back onto the bed.

Rasping in breaths, I stare up at him. "Do you really think it'll be this easy?"

He grins, reaching for his shirt. "I'll be that easy."

I watch him with complete fascination as he draws off his shirt, and then a gasp slips from my lips. The marks... they're worse than I even thought. He tries to get me to lie back down, but I'm on my feet an instant. Running my hands over the scars on his chest, I take a shaky breath, then move to behind him.

Fuck. His back.

A sob catches in my throat, and I reach out and touch one of the scars, running my fingers along it. "Does it hurt?"

It takes him a second to answer. "Not as bad as it looks."

I glance at my other men. "Are your injuries this bad?"

Zane shakes his head. "Not nearly. For some reason, the Keeper seemed to give Sulien the worst of it."

Anger rises inside of me. "I hate her. I hate that monster! I can't believe my own flesh and blood—"

"Family is who we choose," Cobar says. "She wasn't your mother. Your father, your grandmother, and us, we're your family. Just like our fathers and mothers aren't our family either."

For some reason, it's hard to catch my breath. I sit back down on the edge of the bed, feeling lost.

Sulien kneels down in front of me and takes my hands. “It’s okay, Cassia. We’re okay, and you’re okay.”

No, we’re not. “If I’d just figured all of this out sooner. If I’d just said yes—”

“If I’d just told everyone the truth,” he offers, an apology in his eyes.

No, this isn’t what I want. I feel bad, I don’t want to make Sulien feel bad. So much in our past is surrounded by complications and uncertainty, I just want things to be focused on the here and now.

I straighten my spine, trying to let go of my guilt, even though it doesn’t entirely work. “You’re right. You’re right. We already covered this. We know we suck at communication, and we’re going to work on it, so our kids have a happy family.”

“And we’re going to have *so* many kids,” Forrest says, with a grin. “But my son will be the largest.”

“Or daughter,” I tell him with a look of annoyance.

His expression in return is horrified. “If we have a daughter, she sure as hell better look like you!”

Cobar laughs. “Can you imagine a female version of Forrest?”

Everyone laughs, and my heart eases.

Sulien rises from his knees and kisses me again, long and hard. “We need to get you focusing on the present, not the past.”

I sigh and decide to be honest. “I have no idea how I’m going to do that.”

He lifts a brow. "I do."

I feel my nipples harden at the low timber of his voice. Hell, if he'd looked at me like that day when I offered to bathe him, we'd have skipped a lot of steps because I would've been forced to nail him right then.

He leans in closer and his scent washes over me, the scent of herbs, probably from his healing bath, but I find I like it now. He cups my face, his fingers moving restlessly against my skin until his thumb lingers on my lips. I lick my lips, and his gaze jumps to my mouth. Heat moves between us until the desire to kiss him is palpable. I feel like I'm losing my mind, like there's nothing I've ever wanted more than his kiss.

The muscles in his jaw twitch. He closes his eyes and swallows, and I swear he's counting in his head. *But why? Why is he putting this off?*

Reaching forward, I stroke his chest slowly, and his intense eyes open and fall on me. He leans forward and kisses me, pressing me back against the bed as he does so, until he's on top of me. And now, it's clear how much he's been enjoying what we've been doing. Despite his injuries, he's hard as rock, and I'm not at all minding the feeling of him pressing between my thighs.

It's strange, kissing him, being lost in his touch. His mouth is hard and possessive, he seems to know exactly what to do to turn me on. To make my head spin. He kisses me like it's the last time he'll ever kiss a woman, and he wants to make it last forever.

My nipples harden further. The thin fabric of the gown is not nearly enough fabric to separate us, or perhaps too much, I don't know any longer. All I know is that his hot, hard body against me feels better than any of my dreams.

He lifts himself, creating space between us, then pushes up the fabric of my dress. I gasp against his lips, feeling the cool air against my inner-thighs. And then, he breaks our kiss.

The bed shifts, and I blink my eyes open, head spinning. Cobar is lying on one side of me. Zane on the other. And in front of me, Forrest is slowly undressing. I'm not sure exactly what's going to happen, but my gaze is locked on the big man with auburn hair as his shirt drops onto the ground, and then he starts working the buttons on his pants.

When that fabric hits the ground, I'm left staring. Staring at a gigantic, erect man who seems to know just how impressive his cock is. Grinning, he reaches down and begins to stroke himself while staring at us. I'm about to react, I don't know how, when Sulien slides down my body.

I only have a second to realize what's about to happen when his lips are pressing into me. My legs jerk, and he grabs them, wrapping them around his shoulders as he presses deeper, working his way into my sensitive inner-folds. My head goes back. I reach down and grasp his hair.

But they're not done. These wicked men want more.

Zane finds my lips next. His cold mouth on mine, awakening my nerves in an entirely different way. His tongue slips into my mouth, and he seems to work in unison with Sulien, who licks my core slowly. My body jerks and shifts, aware of every flick of their tongues, and every touch of their bodies.

I feel someone start to undo the buttons between my breasts. Their hand is warm against my skin, but their progress is slow. Cobar suddenly curses, and then he grasps the fabric of my dress and tears it open.

Hands find my breasts. I arch into them, then jerk again as Sulien sucks my most sensitive nerves. It's all... too much. So much, but so good at the same time.

Cobar's lips find my breast, and I gasp against Frost's lips. I feel the bastard grin, and then he slides down, and his cold lips are on my other breast. My hands, somehow thrown at my side now, reach for their heads and hold them in place as they lavish every inch of me.

Time stands still as my body heats up. *It's just like before. Only better.*

Then, Sulien slides a finger into my core, and I barely manage to choke in a breath. I start to buck against his mouth and finger, feeling myself building to something amazing. Far beyond any orgasm I've had in life. It's almost frightening.

Almost.

Then, I feel it. That I'm right at the edge.

And they stop.

"I'm going to come," I groan, feeling frustrated. My gaze finds Forrest, and he steals my breath. His hand is firmly wrapped around his shaft, and precum beads his tip. "Come in me," I whisper.

They tense. I know they heard me.

"Are you sure?" Forrest asks, his words ragged.

I nod. "Come in me."

Sulien gently sets my legs down as Cobar and Zane pull back. Sulien removes the remainder of his clothes, and stands hard and erect before me. Cobar and Zane do the same, moving off of the bed, and undressing until I'm very thankful for the sea of impressive cock before me.

Only, I'm not the only one staring. They're gazes are dark and aroused. Just the way you want a man to look at you naked, only there's four of them.

Then, Sulien growls, lays on top of me, rolling us both so I'm on top. Before I can make a sound, he reaches for my breasts and grabs them roughly, using his thumbs to pluck them while I shift around, wet and horny on top of him. Flashes of pleasure come from my breasts and pool between my thighs.

I'm aroused. But irritated. Wishing he'd pull me lower, so I could have his big cock at my core, but he seems to be in the business of torturing me because every time I try to slide lower, he keeps me in place.

When a desperate whimper slips from my lips, his hands leave my breasts and he grabs my hips, moving me down further until he's sliding himself through my juices. It's incredible. Amazing. He's warm, and hard, and I'm throbbing at just the feel of him in my folds.

I just need him inside of me.

My vision waivers, and I grip his shoulders harder. "I'm seriously going to explode."

"Not yet, you're not," he says softly.

Cobar and Frost join us, lying at our sides, and I wonder where Forrest has gone. He doesn't seem like the type who would let this all happen without getting in on the action, but Sulien refocuses me by continuing his torturous sliding, that big cock of his slipping through my folds, but only teasing me.

I wiggle and shift on top of him, glancing at Zane and Cobar, who seem to be enjoying the show, cocks in hand. Stroking and staring intently.

Finally, I can't take it any longer. "Seriously, Sulien, stick a cock in me or give someone else a turn."

His gaze is filled with amusement.

Fuck him! Was he seriously waiting for me to beg for it?

But he simply says, "Your wish is my command."

I'm about to curse him out when I feel the head of his cock at my opening. Stiffening, I try to take normal breaths, but he begins to ease inside, and I can't stop myself from panting like I'd just run a mile. He's big. As big as I remember in my hand, only this time inside of me, and exactly what I want.

The fit is tight. If I wasn't so wet, it wouldn't work, but I am. I'm fucking soaking. Either way, it's amazing. *I'm definitely going to become an addict. I'm going to want dick in the morning, dick in the evening, and dick at night.*

It takes forever for him to reach his hilt, but when he does, I'm breathing hard. I feel the mattress shift behind me, and there's suddenly a hand at my back. Confused, I look behind me to see Forrest kneeling behind me, dick in hand. It takes me a long minute to realize what he's planning.

Oh, fuck, this will be good...

He starts working behind me. Sliding his cock into my fluids, probably against Sulien's cock, which would be funny any other time. *Didn't they hate each other not that long ago and then they're sliding their dongs against each other?* But, my amusement doesn't last when he comes back to my ass and begins to ease his tip into me from behind.

I tense. *Fuck. That's too big.*

My expectation is that his hard dick will end up splitting my ass, but instead, I gasp when he pulls out and puts a finger

inside of me. He works it slowly, awakening my nerves, before adding another finger to the first. I can hardly breath, hardly move, as the men continue to touch me slowly, and Forrest keeps adding fingers to my ass.

Pressure builds inside of me. A delicious pressure that whispers of an orgasm that will change my world forever. I start to shift my hips, and Forrest swears behind me before removing his fingers.

“No, I’m going to be inside of you when you do that,” he says, his voice husky with need. Then, that hard tip of his cock is back, and this time I know he’s going to give it to me.

A thrill of pleasure rolls through me as he begins to gently push into me, and I realize his fingers were a poor substitute for the sheer size of the man trying to fit inside me now. *Can I take him? Can I really handle this?*

I lean up a little. As much as I can. Looking at Zane with hesitation over the tight fit, he smiles, strokes the side of my face, and then kisses me. And, I’m lost. Lost in his kiss. In the chill. In the pressure.

Hands begin to stroke my breasts, stroking my nipples, and I jerk as my nerves buzz in excitement. It’s so good that it takes me a minute before I realize that big cock has slowly gone deeper. Deeper and deeper.

I’m about to say something, I don’t know what, when the nerves in my ass seem to awaken. My mouth forms an *O* even while we continue kissing, and I start to work my hips back and forth. Taking Sulien in and out at the same time I’m taking Forrest deeper.

Oh, fuck... that feels, amazing.

My eyes flash open, and I glance from Cobar to Zane, breathless as I ask, “If I can fit both of them... do you think I can suck both of you?”

“Fucking hell,” Cobar mutters. “Yeah. Whatever you want.”

Zane says nothing, just shifts on the bed, kneeling by my face. So, I take him first. And he tastes good. Wet and hard all at once.

Due to his size, it takes effort to suck him deeper, so deep that for a minute I’m choking around his hard length. But the groan I draw from him makes it all worth it. Then, I pull him out and turn to Cobar, doing the same, working him so hard that the fae grasps my head and pushes himself deeper.

Which is strangely hot.

The distraction is good. Definitely needed, because by the time both men are fully inside my ass and pussy, I think I would have come. Instead, they begin to thrust together, working my body, as I work Zane and Cobar in my mouth. Awakening every nerve in my body in a way that makes me feel like I’ve been struck by lightning.

In no time at all, we’ve found a rhythm. A rhythm that brings incredible pleasure.

At one point, I grasp Zane and Cobar and take them at the same time, managing to fit their two massive cocks in my mouth at the same time. It’s incredible to have all four of my men inside of me. So good that I feel like every nerve in my body is screaming in pleasure.

Knowing they’re enjoying it, feeling my body respond, it’s all I need. Before I know it, that building pressure grows inside of me until I explode.

My orgasm is like nothing on this earth. It's the stars shattering. It's the earth quaking. It's my world changing forever. The big cocks in my ass and pussy are working together, rubbing my most sensitive nerves. Two incredible men are in my mouth, filling it, shaking with their own desire.

I have them. All four men. They're mine. And they know how to make me feel damn good.

An orgasm hits again, and heat rushes to my core. I'm wet, soaking them as I ride them harder and harder. Cobar comes in my mouth, and then Zane finishes, both groaning my name. I keep going, moaning against the cocks in my mouth as I work the cocks in my body.

I can't stop. It feels too good. My vision fades, and I feel tears rolling down my face. My body squeezes and squeezes them until the men inside of me are coming too. And then, at last, I collapse, filled with their warm cum, happy and satisfied.

Zane and Cobar lay at my sides, but Forrest and Sulien stay inside me. I don't know what's happening until Forrest begins to work himself in my ass again, and Sulien goes hard.

"Again?" I whisper in shock, goosebumps rising on my flesh.

"As much as you want," Sulien murmurs, and the low pitch of his voice makes me shiver in anticipation.

Forrest's big hands grasp my breasts, and he pulls me back until I'm sitting up. The angle changes the way their dicks feel inside me, and then I'm crying out their names as they take me harder and harder. Working together to leave all my nerves screaming in pleasure.

It's like I can't breathe. Can't see. Can only feel their cocks working together, only my body separating them, which feels all kinds of right. And then, they're pushing me over the edge again. My next orgasm hits with all the force of a wall falling on top of me, and I'm panting as I grind myself on their hard dicks.

It's not long after that they come again, and I love it. I love the feel of them hard and wet inside of me. But Forrest won't let me collapse, he continues to play with my breasts as he sucks on my neck. "You're mine. Ours. No one else's." And he sounds desperate.

Like he has anything to worry about.

Finally, Forrest releases me and lies down on the bed beside Cobar, gasping in breaths. Sulien stays inside of me, but Zane pulls the blankets over us.

"That was amazing," I tell them, and I mean it. I'm *more* than satisfied.

Being queen, apparently, means having four husbands who take care of you, and your family. Being queen means having the power to make changes in our world that means a better life for all of humanity. And, being queen means getting as many world-rocking orgasms as I want.

Had I been afraid of this? I'm seriously an idiot.

"So, you think you can handle the four of us as husbands?" Zane asks.

I snuggle against Sulien's chest happily. "Absolutely."

"Good," Sulien says, "Now, rest. In a few minutes, we'll go again."

My eyes pop open. “In a *few minutes*? How many times do you plan to do it tonight?”

Sulien shrugs.

Cobar strokes my back. “Don’t worry, not more than you can handle. Maybe four or five?”

“*Four or five*? I’ll be pregnant by morning!”

Forrest slaps my ass. “Don’t threaten me with a good time.”

That night, true to their words, they fucked me like we were animals in heat. And much to my surprise, I liked every second of it. Even when Cobar and Zane decided they could both fit in my pussy at the same time.

Which, now, might be my new favorite thing.

TWENTY-TWO

Seven months later...

Cassia

The Summer Court at this time of year is pure perfection. I stand in the garden, letting the sun caress my skin as I stare out at the light gleaming on the surface of the nearby lake. I can't resist the playful urge to channel my magic, summoning dazzling honey-colored fireflies that dance around me. But even as I see them, I change the fireflies' colors until they're a rainbow of twinkling lights.

Being a fae has its benefits...

Grinning, I spin around, loving the way the grass tickles my feet. Everything, even now, I appreciate. Because as much as a part of me doesn't want to remember my time before my husbands, another part of me knows I can never forget it. If I do, I might stop fighting to have humans paid better for their work, and to make certain they aren't starving in our streets. I might stop fighting to enact laws that punish fae for hurting humans. And if I did that, all my friends, Beatrix included, wouldn't have happier lives.

How could I enjoy all this if I knew people I cared about were suffering?

Pausing, I sense the raven on the branch nearby and spot it in the shadows. He's dead. His feathers barely attached. His head permanently cocked in the way it was when his neck was broken.

"Rest," I whisper, and let my magic reach him. In his mind, I see a place. A nest. A tree. It was where he was happiest, and I pull on the thin thread from me to him and send him back to that place, where I see thick leaves and soft earth. It's a proper place for him to rest.

He takes off, disappearing into the woods.

Some of the dead who follow me need more. They need a purpose. They need me to give them a task, while others, like the raven, simply need to be told they can rest. *So I let them, unlike my mother.*

Death is a constant presence in my life now, but not in a bad way. It's just a part of who I am. The part of me I got from my birth mother. *It took time to accept that, but now that I have, I've made peace with it.*

I continue spinning, closing my eyes, thinking of what it means to be Lady Wither of the House of Death. Unable to stop my thoughts, I remember the conversation with my father when he revealed everything about my mother and my past. The conversation had broken our hearts and healed it all at once.

"I need you to tell me about my mother, about the Keeper of Death, with no lies, and no secrets." I'd told him, trying to keep any accusation out of my voice, and failing.

His shoulders had hunched, the happiness and health that was restored to him fading in an instant. "Please, just let me explain," he begged, his gaze pleading at me to forgive him,

even though I didn't yet know if he even needed to be forgiven. And then, he'd told me the whole story. "After your grandfather died, I left my home with your grandmother to set out on the world. To make my mark. Only, it was harder than I'd imagined to travel the roads as an inexperienced youth. One stormy night, lost in the woods, I'd stumbled upon the lands of the House of Death and met your mother out in the rain. She was beautiful and kind, leading me to safety, and allowing me to stay with her through the storm. Then, longer.

"During that time, I'd found her to be as smart and interesting as she was beautiful and kind. And I'd fallen for her. Hard. By the time any normal person should have been moving on, I didn't, because I wanted nothing more than to be with her.

"We spent months courting each other. Reading to one another, swimming together, even exploring her lands. I felt like the luckiest man on the planet. We were lovers, but we were also friends. So when she told me that there was a way we could have a child together, I leapt at the chance. I thought I could have the family I had always dreamed of."

His voice had started shaking then. "The night you were conceived, when the spell was used, I blacked out. I woke up weeks later having lost the use of my legs. Your mother, Lady Wither, seemed to feel terrible for what the spell cost me. I, on the other hand, simply felt broken. Like half a man. But then, she announced her pregnancy, and I knew I had to stop feeling sorry for myself. I had to accept that I could be a father, whether I had the use of my legs or not.

"I learned to use a wheelchair. I helped build your nursery and whittle toys for you, and the happiest day of my life was when you were born. The instant I saw you, I knew love in a

way I never imagined possible. It was like my life was incomplete until you were in it.” His eyes pleaded with me then. Pleading with me to believe him. To understand him in that moment.

“You have to know that I never knew about their tradition of leaving babies in the woods. I would never, never have done such a thing, no matter how much I loved her. I just couldn’t have been with someone who could do that.

“It all just felt like a bad dream. Even now, it still does when I think about it. They proclaimed that you didn’t have magic, and asked her if she wanted to give you back to the woods... and she did. Without thought. Without an ounce of love. You were just something... to be rid of. To be forgotten.

“I argued with her, but that was when I realized what she was. A person as dead inside as the dead she commanded. She never loved me. She never cared about me. Your mother wasn’t capable of it. She simply saw my untapped magic as something that could finally give her the powerful child she desired. So... I stopped fighting, knowing that I couldn’t win against who she really was, The Keeper of Death. She told me I could stay around as someone for her amusement because she liked me, and that was it. Like, I was one of her dead, she simply expected me to obey her.

“But I was different from who she imagined. My parents had raised me to follow my heart, and my heart was with you. So, I waited, and I pretended.” His expression had grown hard then. Determined, and I was bespelled by his story. “I followed the fae into the woods... I left my chair. I crawled. For a time, I lost them, and I thought I lost you. But then, they were gone, and it was just me in the woods, crawling, trying to find you, when I heard you cry. You hadn’t cried from the moment you

were born, so it felt like you were crying to lead me to you, and you did. Just a tiny thing. Those big blue eyes. That strong cry. Your grip on my finger, holding on like you never wanted to let go.

“Nothing mattered after that. Not how much it hurt to crawl and carry you through those dark woods. Not how much I had to beg and sell to get those farmers to let us in their cart, and how many people I had to beg after that to get us back to your grandmother. None of that mattered, because all that mattered was you. You were worth... everything.”

I'd cried when he'd told me the story. Picturing my father really believing my mother loved and cared about him. Imagining the moment he realized that she didn't, and that she was just going to throw me away. And everything he did after that to make sure I survived.

My father was a good man. He might have made a mistake never telling me about my fae-side... not just about my mother, but my grandfather, who had been like him, a powerful fae with no powers. But, he'd been afraid that if he told me about any of it, I would want to be acknowledged as a fae, and that it might lead my mother to find out about me, which would end in my death. Since the House of Death believed each couple could only have one living child, which is why they sacrificed weak children, he was worried that my mother would kill me if she found out I was still alive.

And maybe she would have.

I still wish he would have trusted me with all of this, but I understood he was just trying to protect me, like he'd done my whole life. I couldn't be angry at him for that. Especially when it led me to all of this happiness.

And we were happy. Him. My grandmother. Me. And my men.

Life was good.

I spin faster, although I'm aware that my sense of gravity is off and don't push it too far. The fireflies move around me, circling me in the wind as I laugh. Changing colors with my encouragement.

Thoughts of the changes I'd been implementing came to me, making me smile. Raises for all the humans had been met with happiness from the humans and minor grumbling from the fae. Making it a requirement to feed any human working more than a four hour shift had been met with more happiness from the humans and confusion from the fae. The fae sincerely didn't seem to know whether or not their human workers were already being fed.

Big surprise, huh?

There were other changes too. Far more than I can count. *But it's just the beginning. By the time this baby arrives, our kingdom will already be a far better place for them to grow up in.*

Cobar's voice reaches my ears before I see him, but I hear the smile in it. "Be careful with my baby in there." He approaches, and I stop spinning, watching him coming toward me.

He looks amazing. All my men do nowadays. They'd healed from their time with the Keeper of Death, both in body and in mind. Most of the time in their minds, at least. Watching them heal and change, becoming happier and lighter has been one of the highlights of my life, along with the baby growing within me.

He waves away my fireflies, wrinkling his nose. “Are these air bugs bothering my lady?”

I glare at him, then laugh, conjuring up more fireflies to hover around his nose. “Don’t worry, I love them, and our little one is safe with me.”

I hear a cacophony of noise and stare as my kings emerge from the woods, out into the clearing, heading toward me like a rumbling pile of puppies. They’re all finely dressed, their long hair left loose, and their feet bare, meaning they’ve gotten free from the terrible meeting they were in and were now ready for fun.

They converge on me with smiles and laughs. Their skin sun-kissed. Their smiles wide. Even Sulien’s.

“Whose baby did you say this was?” Sulien asks as he bends down to place a kiss on my stomach. The baby kicks his hand, and Sulien’s eyes light up. “You see? This baby’s mine.”

I lean in for the kiss he offers me, then Zane kisses my cheek and whispers in my ear. “You can lie to them all you want, but we both know whose baby this is.” He places both hands on my stomach and holds them there, looking down at me as if in awe.

Forrest’s eyes twinkle, and he smiles widely, running his hand down my back. “I won’t have to say a word when my green-eyed red-headed baby is born. You’ll all know the truth.”

Their laughter fills the air, a symphony of pure joy that warms my heart.

Time for some fun. “Guys, I can’t keep this secret any longer,” I tell them, a conspiratory grin tugging my lips. They

freeze and stare at me, waiting for my next word. “The baby is all of yours.” *At least in my eyes.*

They break out into cheers, giving each other high fives, and laughing loudly. Sulien’s eyes twinkle as he says, “Our baby will be the most loved in the world.”

All of us nod in agreement.

“Along with any more that might come,” Zane adds with hope and longing in his voice.

The wood spirit did imply I’d have four babies, one for each of my men. I can’t do anything but smile so much my face hurts. Whether that happens or not, I’m so in love with my family. We could have this one baby or we could have six more, I’d be happy all the same.

“You were smart to take a break from the meeting,” Cobar says, wrinkling his nose. “The elders do not seem to be getting the message that they control absolutely nothing.”

“Is that what you came to tell me? We’re implementing another law without their blessing?” I laugh. “I think I could have already guessed that.”

He shakes his head. “No, we came to find you because we missed you, and your dad and grandmother wanted us to stop by. They said your dad has some new dance moves to show off, but I think he just wants an excuse to see you.”

My eyes sting. Watching my father dance after he wasn’t able to walk my whole life makes me feel something I can’t put into words. There’s sadness at how much he missed and how much we suffered because he couldn’t walk, but there’s also pride at the fact that I could give him the gift of mobility back.

I’ll watch my dad dance every day of my life.

It's true that I'll never be able to thank him enough for going against the Keeper, saving me from a grisly death in the woods, and stowing us away on a wagon until we could reach my grandmother at the Summer Court, but I'm sure as hell going to try. Every day for the rest of our lives.

The baby kicks hard enough for it to be visible. All of my men jump in surprise at the sight. Then, they exchange grins, and I pray I won't have to listen to another round of them bragging about how strong and mighty their child will be. I mean, their words warm my heart a little too, but the rest of the kingdom is going to grow to hate them if all they can talk about is me and their perfect baby.

Forrest draws his shoulders back, so I know it's coming before it does. "If he's a boy, he'll be as mighty as the tallest oak."

"And if she's a girl..." Zane says, lifting a brow in amusement.

They've made it clear that girl or boy they'll love the tike, but they seem strangely concerned about their daughter needing to be protected. Something about her being as beautiful as me... yet they say it like it's some kind of curse they'll have to endure to keep her safe. Somehow, they seem to have forgotten who she'll have as a mother. So if they're planning for some fragile, little thing, they're going to have a surprise coming for them, boy or girl.

Forrest looks flustered. "Well, our daughter will be smart and strong... and I'll teach her how to take down a man with one hand as soon as she can walk."

"And how to sucker punch their dick before they can even get close," Cobar mutters, with a fiercely protective look. "She

can turn the damn thing into mush if a man so much as looks at her the wrong way.”

“Yeah, we wouldn’t want her to meet *any* men like her fathers,” Zane says, a small smile dancing across his lips.

“Definitely not,” the other three say in unison, their voices filled with horror.

It’s hard not to laugh. I think Zane’s secretly hoping for a daughter who turns out just like me, even though he hasn’t said it. A daughter who will put any man in his place. And, I think he likes to bother the others about it, just to see them flustered.

They might tease and say that Zane doesn’t have a sense of humor, but I know better.

“Our daughter can focus on laughing, fighting, and leading,” Forrest says, puffing out his chest. “Men can come... later.”

“Or never,” Sulien says, shooting him a glare.

I laugh and kiss each one of them, escaping when they try to pull me closer. These men, I swear, could touch me all day long, and it still won’t be enough. *It’s nice to know when this baby comes my men will have somewhere else to put all their cuddles and love... at least a little bit of it.* They certainly have a surplus of it right now that I know they can’t wait to unleash on this baby.

“What did the elders think of the idea of me officially telling the House of Death that they can no longer give their children back to the woods?” I ask, stifling another yawn.

Sulien’s eyes darken. “They don’t like standing against the House of Death, but as the most powerful fae in their house, they should obey your word for that alone, which I explained

to them. So, it won't just be their queen making a ruling about their house, it would be their leader."

"So...?"

He shrugs. "So, they will support your decision."

"Yes!" I pump my hand.

It's true that I don't need the elders' permission to change a law, but it certainly helps to have their backing. All the changes we've been implementing have been making some of the fae uncomfortable, so we're trying to remember that things have been done a certain way for a long time. Therefore, it might take a little while for the fae to accept doing things in a new way.

Yet stopping the murder of babies can't be delayed.

"I'm just glad that's done." And, I am. I know when the baby comes I'll have less time to focus on the welfare of my people, not none, but less time. Walking the line between accomplishing as much as I can before the baby, at a pace the people can handle, hasn't been easy.

Tired at just the thought of everything I still need to do, I lie down in the soft grass, and my men lie down beside me. Between the warm air and the soft grass beneath me, a yawn slips from my lips. "I'm a little tired," I tell them off-handedly.

"Tired?" Sulien sounds horrified as he sits up. "We should get you into bed. Perhaps the healers should be—"

I laugh. "Remember, I *told* you, I'm not made of glass. It's okay if I'm tired sometimes. It's okay if I'm sore sometimes. I'm growing some massive king's child, future ruler of one of the courts, in my belly. It'd be *more* worrisome if I felt just fine."

He looks uncertain, but I push on his chest, and he lays back down with reluctance. The others stare at me, but try to hide their looks of concern when I shoot them dirty looks. “Have you heard any word from The Celestial Equilibrium?”

Zane answers without hesitation. “They’re still making changes but swear that the castle should be ready for our arrival in a year’s time.”

That should be enough time for the baby to be old enough to be able to travel, and for grandmother and father to be ready. My father and grandmother claim they’re already ready to explore the kingdom and start over in a new place, but I suspect that despite their words, there will be things they’ll miss about the Summer Court. I certainly will. Giving them a little more time here isn’t the worst thing, even if we will get to return to it each year.

Sulien reaches over and takes my hand, then Forrest’s big hand is tangled with my other one. I glance between us and see all of us holding hands, looking up at the bright sky. The fireflies move above us, a rainbow of colors flying in the pure blue sky.

It’s strange. I’m happy. They’re happy. Life is so damn good that I never imagined it could be like this. We’re absolutely surrounded by love. And yet, soon this baby will come, and I know we’ll be even happier. It’s like a fairy tale. *I don’t know what I did to deserve all of this, but whatever it is, I’m glad I got my happily-ever-after.*

Happily-ever-after. I laugh, drawing my men’s gazes. *I guess they do exist.*

“What is it?” Cobar asks, his kind eyes filled with curiosity.

I just smile. “Everything.” And, it is. It’s just everything.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lacey Carter Andersen is a USA Today bestselling author who loves reading, writing, and drinking excessive amounts of coffee. She spends her days taking care of her husband, three kids, and three cats. But at night, everything changes! Her imagination runs wild with strong-willed characters, unique worlds, and exciting plots that she enthusiastically puts into stories.

Lacey has dozens of tales: science fiction romances, paranormal romances, short romances, reverse harem romances, and more. So, please feel free to dive into any of her worlds; she loves to have the company!

And you're welcome to reach out to her; she really enjoys hearing from her readers.

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