



# HEART OF ICE

ROYAL ICE DRAGONS: BOOK 1

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HEART OF ICE

ICE DRAGON ROYALS

BOOK ONE



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*For every girl who has ever forgotten she's worthy:  
The crown has always been yours.*

## PROLOGUE



*H*anna

*A*ge Eighteen

“It’s too bad that monsters ruined your birthday,” Kaelan said sympathetically.

The two of us sat side-by-side, looking over the city... as we sat on the steep slope of the roof of the second-highest building.

He continued, “Her reign of terror has been bad enough, and the fact she threatens both our kingdoms... but ruining your birthday? That’s the real reason the Snake Queen deserves to die.”

He was mocking me. Kaelan said nothing sympathetically. If I was upset, he would hold me, he would listen to me, he would distract me—he was very good at distracting me—or he would kill whatever caused the distress. But he didn’t say sweet things.

The two of us were not sweet people.

And he knew I didn’t care about my birthday. The kingdom was waiting to hear the announcement that I could shift into a dragon, like my sister. Honor didn’t understand why I clutched that secret so tightly.

But when you’re a princess, it feels like you own everything ... and nothing. Nothing was ever really mine. At

least my secrets were my own.

“I’m not sure my birthday was ruined,” I disagreed, resting my hand lightly on his thigh. “I hate parties, I hate dancing, and I love killing monsters.”

*And I’ve loved fighting monsters with you.*

Kaelan ran his hand absently up and down my back, though his touch was cool. I had come to love the Ice Fae prince, but he wasn’t exactly snuggly.

Kaelan had other virtues, though. The long fingers he ran over my spine now, then curled around the back of my neck, were as adept at coaxing orgasms from my body as they were at breaking necks.

“It’s a good thing you were there,” he said.

The monster that came to life in their nursery had almost murdered my little niece and nephews, Briden, Lysander, and Xera.

“Speaking of which ... what brought you to the children’s wing that late at night?” His tone was casual, but there was nothing that was ever casual about Kaelan. He was always calculating.

Long after I should have been asleep that night, lightning had still coursed under my skin. I’d been desperate to talk to my sister.

I’d never fallen in love before.

My sister, Honor, had plenty of experience falling in love with royal assholes. I’d figured she would know how to handle the madness.

“My insomnia has its moments where it serves me, although it doesn’t make up for how many times it torments me.” I’d never been able to sleep well. My stepmother had terrorized me since I was nine years old, slamming my door open at all hours to scold me. The habit of sleeping lightly had settled into my bones. They grew restless in the small hours of the morning.



“Wasn’t that after we ...” a mischievous smile curved his lips. “For the first time?”

I didn’t want the ice prince to realize just how much he affected me. I was trying to play it halfway cool. Although after he had spent the last few weeks helping me to find and unalive the people who have tried to take my little nibblings from me, it seemed unlikely he hadn’t noticed I was falling in love with him.

But that was alright. He was falling in love with me, too.

“She’s on the move.” I leaned forward, planting my heels against the steep rooftop.

“How convenient. A way out of this conversation for you.”

I cocked an eyebrow at him. “It’s a way out of this conversation for *you*. Before I push you off this rooftop.”

“I think we’d better fly,” he said.

My heart soared.

So far, the two most joy-filled, wild physical experiences in my life have been sex with Kaelan and flying as a dragon.

He held his hand out to me. “Take my hand, Hanna.”

Our fingers interlaced, and we rose as one, standing on the edge of the rooftop. The streets of my beloved city lay far beneath us. They were familiar, but this view hadn’t yet become ordinary. Out beyond the rooftops was the dazzling blue sea. The spires of the castle where my sister ruled rose in the distance, so tall that this early in the morning, they were clothed in mist.

Far beneath us, Clia was making her way through the streets. She was one of the servants in the castle who was supposed to take care of Briden, Lysander, and Xera. But she hadn’t taken care of them at all.

If Kaelan and I were right, she had concealed the Snake Queen spell in their room, intending to kill all Honor’s heirs. Then the monster would have slithered into Honor’s room and struck her, killing not just her, but the twins she carried.

When I thought about it, my heart still bottomed out. I couldn't imagine the world without my sister and the babies. Honor and my niblings could be annoying, but they also meant the world to me.

Kaelan fell forward first, and he threw that magnetic grin over his shoulder at me. I grinned back and let him pull me, the two of us falling together.

We dove headfirst toward the city.

I shifted in midair, my wings snapping out. Every single time, it felt like a miracle.

I'd never have confessed it to anyone, but I had been afraid I wouldn't have enough magical power to shift into a dragon as my sister did. Every time I flew, they came with a wild rush of joy and gratitude.

Having Kaelan by my side made it even better. The two of us climbed, making sure Clia didn't see us. She was focused on her route, it seemed. But I was sure she felt wary about dragons at the moment.

Anyone who attacked our family should be.

Of course, Honor and her men said they could handle it. They did not think they needed me.

Although they loved me, it didn't seem like anyone in that castle needed me.

But none of them could infiltrate the spy Guild. That was something only I could do ... as long as no one knew I had enough power to shift into a dragon. There were rules that governed who could join the Guild, probably to keep someone like me from taking it over from within.

Maybe that showed good foresight on their part. I certainly did plan to take over the spy Guild and destroy it.

We landed on the rooftop of the spy Guild as Clia disappeared inside. For a few seconds, the two of us perched there, and I took the chance to study Kaelan's enormous, icy blue dragon form. He was as beautiful as the dragon as he was as a man.

Then the two of us shifted back. He wrapped his hand around my waist as I shifted, anchoring me to keep me from falling. I wouldn't fall, of course, and if I did, I had wings to catch myself. But it was still sweet. He took any excuse to touch me.

“How are we making our way inside?” he asked me.

“I'm going to break in.”

“Like they taught you?” His brows arched. “It seems like they would know how to guard against those kinds of attacks.”

“I've learned from better spies than anyone can hire from the Guild,” I told him.

“Your brothers-in-law?”

“They feel more like brothers. They're bossy like brothers.”

He grinned as the two of us moved down the roof, and I had the feeling he was hovering close to protect me, though I was sure he would've denied it. “Well, you seem like you need bossing.”

“That sounds very different coming from you,” I disagreed.

His grin turned slightly feral and altogether too sexy. “It should.”

I rolled my eyes. The two of us kept going until we reached a window.

It had three different enchantments that protected it, but I worked through them all quickly. He watched me with a look of admiration that made my fingers slippery and something in my chest glow. I loved the way he looked at me as if I was the most incredible woman in the universe.

I had spent like the last six years watching Honor's men look at her like that. It was what I wanted for myself from a man. I wouldn't accept anything less than someone who thought I hung the moon and stars too.

“The fact that I’d do something like this is probably part of why my teachers all hate me,” I said as I raised the sash.

I couldn’t resist the triumphant grin that came over my lips as we faced the open window, the two of us hanging casually over the city street far below.

Kaelan swung in first, clearly checking for threats, then offered me a hand inside.

When my feet touched down on the hardwood floor, he pulled me against his chest into a hug. He whispered into my ear, “Well, you are kind of a brat.”

I pulled back to look at his face, raising my brows.

“What?” he asked, clearly amused by the look on my face. “I love it. It would be boring otherwise. You are my brat ... and I have all kinds of plans to tame you.”

“I wouldn’t bet on that happening in a hurry,” I disagreed as I moved across the dark classroom.

“Hopefully not.” His grin was devilish.

Together, the two of us crept out into the hallway. It was strange to be in this place where I attended classes.

It was a regular university, it just had its shadow side. We all had some kind of cover, because having spies parading into the school every day would make us pretty ineffective. My cover story was the Posselbaum Academy, and I could look forward to years more of etiquette lessons before slipping off to night classes.

Kaelan took my hand as if we were on a romantic date as we walked the halls until we could overhear Clia talking with someone. Her voice sounded high and nervous. “Have you heard anything about my family?”

Kaelan and I exchanged a look.

I had spent the last few weeks fantasizing about what I would do to the person who had planted a relic that came alive in the children’s room. The vengeful fist clutching my chest wouldn’t relax that easily. But still. Logic kept me from bursting into the room when we needed to know the full risk

we faced from the spy Guild. And even though I had wanted to kill everyone involved, now something else made me pause.

I didn't know why Honor had been betrayed.

So how could I protect her from being betrayed again?

"I haven't heard anything about your family."

It was a deep male voice. I was pretty sure it was the head of the male department of the spy Guild. He was a misogynistic prick, so it wasn't that surprising to me that he was a traitor, too. "But I'm sure they're fine. The Snake Queen gave her word that if you did what she asked, they would be safe. And you did what she asked, didn't you?"

There was a hush. Then she said softly, "But it didn't work."

"Honor and the children are still alive," he said.

"So did she ..." The woman's voice wavered.

"You said you did what you could," he sounded merciless. "We can both take comfort in that. I don't know what the Snake Queen has done. I can't control her."

"And you wouldn't even try." Her words shook with tears and brimmed with accusation.

"No, I wouldn't. I value my life, so I would never double cross the Snake Queen." His tone turned pointed. "The Snake Queen has spies everywhere in this city, and so do I. You had better not think of betraying us to Queen Honor."

"I would never," she sighed. "We all know that Honor would kill me."

"Who wouldn't, after you tried to murder her children?"

Sobs rent the air as the spymaster left. His steps didn't even pause.

The urge to chase the spymaster down and end him raged so strongly that I could barely breathe.

Kaelan's arm circled my waist, anchoring me to his hard body firmly. Into my ear, he whispered softly, "Behave."

Usually, that word made me want to do the very opposite of behave.

But today, I agreed with him.

We listened to Clia leave. There was nowhere for her to go. We would catch up to her easily later.

Then there were just the two of us, standing in an empty classroom.

Kaelan touched my face, his gaze thoughtful. “Are you really sure this is the path you want to go down, Hanna? Concealing who you really are ... hiding your power away from the world?”

“Someone has to work through the spy Guild and find everyone who would harm my family. Everyone who is loyal to the Snake Queen and not my sister. My family would never let me do that work... they just want to protect me.”

“They even want to protect you from yourself,” Kaelan said. “The Guild isn’t the path you want to go down.”

“We’re both Royals,” I reminded him. “You know we don’t get to choose our path. We only get to choose how we walk it.”

The two of us followed Clia by foot this time, which always felt like a waste.

But I should get used to ignoring my wings. If I stayed here and did this work, it would be a long time before I flew again.

Clia didn’t head toward the servants’ quarters in the castle. Instead, she turned in the other direction, walking to the edge of that deep blue sea. She was shaking as she climbed onto the stone wall.

“Wait!” I called.

She turned. A look flashed across her face—sorrow? Self-loathing? Hatred? But she paused, and resignation settled over her features. “Did you interrupt me because you want to kill me yourself?”

“Not at all,” I told her, surprising myself. “I want to help you get revenge.”

I told her that she could work for me from now on. She was one of the Snake Queen’s people, after all. She would know others in this city. She could continue to work for the Snake Queen and feed me information.

“Though you’ll never go anywhere near my little nieces and nephews again. I will end you myself.”

“I didn’t want to do it,” she told me. “but I had my own little one at home ...”

She closed her eyes as if her body was drowning in the pain of that.

“The Snake Queen will pay,” I promised her.

Though I dreaded to think of how long it would take until we made her pay.



K aelan

Hanna and I had rented a crappy set of rooms over a tavern as our home base. She was supposed to be back at the Posselbaum Academy. Her sister had no idea where she was. And as far as my father was concerned, I was on a tour of the isle that we would one day invade, making polite diplomatic noises and taking down notes on weaknesses.

Neither my kingdom nor Hanna’s was ready for war with the Snake Queen. My father hoped to save our kingdom at the cost of hers.

For now, I found the most happiness I had ever experienced in these noisy rooms above the tavern.

Of course, I was deeply tempted daily to snap the neck of the fiddler who played, both badly and enthusiastically, for the

dancers in the tavern below.

But the bed that took up the small bedroom, pushed up against the windows that let the city light spill in, was clean and comfortable. Most of all, it was where I had held Hanna each night when our adventure hadn't taken us further afield. Every memory was precious to me.

"I have to tell you something," I warned her.

She was undressing for bed, shimmying out of her shirt. She always turned it into a little show for me, though she didn't have to. Her every movement charmed me.

She bounced onto the bed. "I'm listening."

"It will take time to force my father off the throne," I told her.

It would take more than time. I would have to marry in order to be eligible to claim the throne, and there was only one woman in the world that I could imagine myself marrying.

But she had just promised herself to the spy Guild.

"And all that time, my father will be a threat. To you, to your work in the Guild, to the spies you develop."

I knew that Clia was only the first of many. If Hanna could even charm me, I had faith in her ability to charm anyone.

"I know." She twisted the blanket in her hand, dragging it across her lap.

"There's something you don't know, something I haven't told you," I told her, and I could already feel the gulf growing between us that I had never wanted. My father ruined everything.

I sighed before I confessed, "We can form links with those who share our blood—though only one. My father has his fingers dug into my mind."

"What does that mean?"

"When I let him ... if I can stop him ... my father can walk through my mind, and given that he sent me here to marry you and bring home a dragon to marry—"



Her brows arched. “That seems a little abrupt.”

“You know you are mine,” I chided her. “How much does the timing matter?”

“Your father can use a spell to walk through your mind?” she asked. “How does it work?”

Of course she hadn’t missed it. She was just being difficult. Those two things were Hanna in a nutshell: she missed nothing and mocked everyone.

“We can see through each other’s eyes. Hear what they hear. We can’t see each other’s thoughts.” Thank the gods.

She nodded thoughtfully.

“My father—Edric—will want to know why I rejected marrying you, and if he sees what we know, he will use that information to curry favor with the Snake Queen.”

She tucked her long strawberry blonde hair behind her ears. “What do we do?”

“I have a plan, but it’s a terrible one.”

“Kaelan, we’ve been on quite the adventure together. I already know that whenever you have a plan, it’s a terrible one.”

She was smiling and usually when she smiled, I couldn’t resist smiling back. But not now.

“You’ll have to take my memories,” I told her. “So there will be no secrets for him to offer the Snake Queen.”

Despair flashed across her face. She knew what this meant. But then she nodded. “They won’t be lost forever. Eventually, our kingdoms will be safe, and we’ll be together, and I can give you the memories back—”

I shook my head. She was right: what was between us was deep and strong, and it meant all the world to me. “But it won’t be that simple.”

“Of course not,” she muttered.

“He’ll be looking for something. And the absence of a memory would tell him where to hunt.”

“So what do we do?”

“I can teach you a spell,” I told her. Thorne, Dare and I had prepared it long ago, though none of us wanted to use it. “It will replace what was real with a false memory. It will give my father a reason why I ended things with you.”

She looked as if her heart was being twisted apart. Shakily, she asked, “Shouldn’t I break things up with you? I would think that if you end things with me, King Edric might notice that’s not plausible.”

She smiled through her tears at her own joke, and I would have smiled too if I hadn’t felt as if I were drowning inside.

“We can’t control what the story is,” I said. “The magic will take what’s in my mind, my fears and doubts, and create something ... something my father will believe, because it’s rooted in who I am, and he knows me.”

He knew me far too well, after all the times he had torn through my mind, looking for something the way someone tears apart a room looking for a lost coin or a key.

“I see,” she told me quietly.

“That’s not all. It gets worse.” I hesitated.

“It gets worse?” she sounded disbelieving.

It seemed cruel, but I needed her to hear the words once, needed to see them once, before the feeling disappeared like smoke rising from a fire. “I love you, Hanna.”

Her face softened, and she blinked, the tears spilling down her cheeks as they rounded in a wide smile that stole my heart. “Of course you do, Kaelan.”

I touched her face tenderly, tracing her features as if my fingers might remember this moment when my mind forgot. “You aren’t going to say it back to me?”

“I’m going to hold on to it just like I hold on to your memories.” Her voice a whisper, as if she were trying to keep

it from breaking. “When we find each other on the other side of this, Kaelan, I’ll tell it to you then. But you know how I feel.”

I kept her face with my hands, resting my forehead gently against hers.

“It seems so cruel to have found you and then to give you up,” I said. “For the sake of our kingdoms.”

She gripped my forearms. “We will find each other again.”

She sounded so fierce. As if she would fight for me. It warmed my heart.

I shook my head. “Perhaps. But as passionate as my feelings are for you now ... when the magic turns my memories ... they may be just as powerful in the opposite way.”

I needed her to understand that the way I loved her might turn into hate.

But she was still looking at me with so much confidence in me and in our love. It made me feel gutted. “Hanna... once my memories change... I’m going to end things with you. It’s not going to be pretty.”

“I’ll know you don’t mean it,” she smiled up at me. “No matter what you remember, it won’t change the past. And no matter what you say, it won’t change the fact that deep down, you and I love each other.”

She was so innocent.

I was afraid that I would shatter that innocence.

“I have something for you,” I told her, drawing it out of my pocket. “I wouldn’t call it a gift.”

“What is it?” Her delicate fingers overlapped mine as she gripped the bracelet through my hand.

“It’s enchanted. It will mute your power. We use something similar for prisoners in my kingdom, but this won’t take all your power.”

“You want to get me into chains,” she said, sounding delighted.

“I do,” I admitted. I’d already enjoyed tying her up to the headboard in this simple room. “This way, you don’t accidentally reveal just how strong you are. Not until you’re ready for the world to see you as you really are.”

She held out her slender wrist. I slipped on the bangle, feeling the same swoop in my stomach as if I were falling.

Except I enjoyed that feeling when I knew my wings would catch me.

“I don’t want you to wear this,” I told her. “Remember deep down, I want to give you power. I don’t want to take it away from you.”

“I’ll remember,” she whispered. “We won’t forget who you really are deep down, Kaelan. Who we really are together.”

Her hands slid up my chest as she raised her head to kiss me. I drew her with me as I sat down in the chair, pulling her to straddle my lap.

We had tonight. Tomorrow, we’d destroy my memories. Our love.

I wanted to make the most of these last hours, even though I would lose them in the morning.

But knowing how much tomorrow would hurt her—how much *I* would hurt her—the cuff around her wrists seemed to dig into my skin.

## CHAPTER 1

### FIVE YEARS LATER



*H*anna

Tonight, like so many other nights, I didn't want to be a princess.

I'd need to blend into the crowd for my Guild mission.

My friend Trissa stepped back, eyeing me skeptically. I slid my hands up the sides of my stiff leather corset—thank the gods my sister's sense of style had swept the kingdom—brushing over the ridges that hid six tiny, sharp daggers.

Trissa's face relaxed into approval. "You look sexy. Men will be too busy watching your tits to watch their pockets."

I rolled my eyes. "It's my Guild graduation test. It won't be a simple pick-pocketing mission."

"They've always been before." Trissa was still smiling, and I wasn't sure if she'd intended the words to sting.

But she was right. While she'd been sent to assassinate one of the Guild's enemies—and gotten her nose broken by a victim who was reluctant to be murdered—I'd pick-pocketed nobles at royal functions.

Worse yet, the queen's husbands—my brothers-in-law—were the kingdom's best spies, and they had caught me. I had been thoroughly lectured, which I didn't mind. Those men loved me like a little sister and scolded me like one. But whenever I came within a half-mile of the castle—no matter

how disguised I was—I also found myself thoroughly *guarded*. I objected to that very much.

“I can’t do any more work at royal functions,” I said. “My sister made that very clear.”

Honor had accused me of trying to start a war. Really, I was trying to protect her, but she and her men would never let me put myself in danger. So, here I was, pretending to be a pick-pocketing adrenaline addict while I tried to ferret out the Snake Queen’s relationship with the spy Guild.

Trissa rolled her eyes. “The Guild doesn’t expect us to be loyal to anyone but the Guild. And even then ...”

“That’s fine, but I still have to go home for Solstice.”

“You could join me.” Trissa hooked one arm over mine as the two of us headed out of our apartment. “You *should* join me.”

The orphans of the Guild held their own elaborate holiday parties. I hated to miss them, and I hated the thought of missing the celebrations at the castle, too.

“I want to see my nieces and nephews at Solstice.” I couldn’t help smiling. “They’re pure chaos, coated in sugar and louder than the bells. They’re just what my sister deserves.”

“Is your sister planning to take over all seven kingdoms by shooting out so many babies?”

I stiffened, but she was going on. “You’d think her uterus would’ve fallen out by now ... especially given how big her passage must be with those eight—”

I yanked away from her grip. She dropped my arm, spinning to face me.

There was a flash of silver in her hand as she pulled a blade. But the second she’d reached for her blade, I’d already drawn mine, quicker than conscious thought. I held my twin knives low at my sides.

“You had better watch your face,” she warned me. “I was just playing. You’re a hopeless hothead, Hanna, and the Guild

knows it. They'll use your sister against you.”

Final missions were notorious for being ultimate tests of our weaknesses.

My biggest weakness was my family. The queen of our kingdom, my older sister Honor. The eight ridiculous men who adored her and, by extension, me. And my many, many nieces and nephews.

Technically, I was an orphan like the rest of the spy Guild—it was an admissions requirement—but I didn't feel like one.

I spun my blades and slid them back into the sheaths, loving the way they pressed against my ribs. “Are you really insulting my sister to rile me up?”

“Why else would I insult her? I love Honor.”

“Everyone does,” I said.

Her men didn't believe that. They were convinced that danger lurked around every corner, especially her most paranoid paramour, King Jaik. Though their overprotectiveness, which extended to me, had been diffused as Honor gave me more and more nieces and nephews. “There's only seven, by the way.”

“Only seven,” she mouthed, wide-eyed and mocking.

Golden-haired Lysander. Dark-eyed, mischievous Briden. Brilliant Xera. The twins, Kasia and Kaiden. The babies, chubby-cheeked and serious two-year-old Masen and the newest, Inoria, who clung to Arren.

Then she shrugged. “I remember. You know I never forget a thing.”

She could remember anything she saw or heard once; it stayed perfectly fixed in her mind. I would've been jealous—academics and spy work both came so easily to her—but I knew she remembered everything from the night her parents were murdered.

Sometimes our weaknesses are blessings.

The training master for the Guild, Kulak, looked up at us as if he hadn't expected us when we walked into his office. "Hanna. Trissa. You came for your graduation missions."

"What else did you expect?" I flung myself into the seat across from him, draping one leg across the arm of the chair.

Kulak was being deliberately disrespectful to us, pretending it was a surprise we had shown up, implying we wouldn't come because we couldn't pass. I'd always repay disrespect with disrespect.

I smiled at him. "The Guild needs some fresh blood. We couldn't leave our kingdom wanting."

Trissa's face was completely bland. But I knew that behind her tranquil face were some very untranquil thoughts, likely about how I was a hothead.

"I don't know that the Guild does need new blood," he said. "Trissa, Mistress Eledora has your mission for you."

Eledora and Kulak were always at war. She was the head of the female spies. Kulak and his ilk treated us as if we were the scum of the earth because we used men's weaknesses as one of our many strengths.

I didn't think we should be expected to resist when men's weaknesses were so often dangerous. But we could make them into something *delicious*.

Trissa didn't move, as if she felt the need to stay and save me from myself.

"Dismissed," he said with a flutter of his fingers.

She wasn't me, so she merely nodded her head and turned and walked away.

She'd told me once that she couldn't be me, no matter how much she'd like to react that way at times. "*I need this job.*"

She'd never believe me, but I needed this job too. Just in a very different way.

"What's my mission?"



“You’re useless to us now,” he said. “You’re always being shadowed by one of the Royals.”

“I can give them the slip,” I said, and it was the only time my bravado was false.

My sister’s husbands were inconveniently competent.

He shook his head. “Well, we’ll see. Your last mission is to steal Lord Tinnigan’s journal. Your best opportunity to get inside is during his birthday ball tonight.”

“Tonight? Not a lot of time to get a gift.” He was making sure I wasn’t set up for success.

But it didn’t matter. I’d be fine tonight.

Inside, I was buzzing with energy.

Lord Tinnigan was on my not-short-enough-list of potential conspirators with the Snake Queen.

Tonight, I could work on my own *real* mission as well as humor the spy Guild.

## CHAPTER 2



*H*anna

Luckily, Lord Tinnigan was hosting his party at home, as he turned thirty-nine for at least the eleventh time. I didn't have to defy my sister's edict that I was not allowed to carry out Guild work during any royal function.

I walked through the gilded gates on the outskirts of the city with my forged invitation and a smile that was wasted on the grim-faced guard. Judging from the guard's nondescript uniform, he had been rented for the evening.

He handed me back the invitation, and I walked through the yard that was littered with statues and fountains to the front door, which was opened by two smiling servants.

Once inside the glittering rooms—though it didn't take me long to spy the chipped gilt on the chairs—I made my way toward the birthday boy. Along the way, I effusively greeted noble after noble, convincing them they knew me, despite the magic altering my face. No one ever wants to admit they don't remember a face, and it's easy to convince them they do have a memory of you, nagging at the edges of their mind.

The birthday boy, Euster Tinnigan, had combed his oil-slicked hair in creative ways, and he had seized the opportunity to wear a birthday crown. I took a glass of spiced wine and observed him from across the room, inserting myself onto the edges of a conversation so it would look like I belonged.

Looking at him, it was hard to believe his journal would be a particularly fascinating document. Two young women lingered at his sides, and he was flirting with them brazenly.

Meanwhile, his wife, Clora, stood on the other side of the room, offering forced laughter and big smiles to everyone she spoke with. Still, her attention kept being drawn back to Euster, and every time, she looked at him as if she were considering sprinkling poison on his birthday cake.

His flirting was as thick and greasy as his hair.

Worst of all, I could see the faint outline of a book through his lapel. He kept his journal on him. I might have to flirt with him myself to get close enough to hook the book out of his jacket.

It was an annoyingly simple mission for someone as well trained as I was, although there was always the opportunity for any mission to go sideways, no matter how simple it seemed at first.

“Have you been to the tournament?” A boisterous young man asked the circle I’d slipped into.

“No.” A tall, gray-haired man—a wealthy commoner, I’d wager—responded, rather sternly. “An unsanctioned underground fight? I don’t want to displease the queen.”

“Why, do you think she could possibly tax you any more heavily?”

There was laughter from the circle.

The ever-present specter of war with the Snake Queen meant taxes were higher than in the past, when the isle was insulated from the world. I bit back any thoughts about how much worse it would be to live under the Snake Queen’s reign than my sister’s. It didn’t matter what people thought of her, or of me.

“Perhaps if you pay extra, you’ll finally be able to shift into a dragon,” a bald man said. His own line bear and wolf tattoos were almost obscured by the thick black hair on his arms.

For some reason, Kaelan's smooth, perfect skin over his taut muscles rose into my mind. Kaelan too easily stalked into my mind.

I slid my hands into the deep pockets cut into the sides of my skirt—pockets were another fashion that the court and the fashion world had embraced, thanks to my sister's influence—and turned to study the room. My hair moved softly across the bare skin of my back, where my dress cut away. Prickles ran up the skin covering my spine. I preferred my armor, but I had to blend in.

Several of the staff guarded the stairs that led up to the second floor. None of them seemed armed, though, so I doubted this noble knew that he was a potential Guild target.

What could be so embarrassing or useful in his little book?

Or had they sent me on a mission that didn't have any purpose at all?

Perhaps it would only be the training master who was waiting for me at the drop, and not an actual client.

The Guild made sure they weren't directly implicated if any of us were caught stealing and delivering the merchandise. That book would never come back into the Guild. I was supposed to meet someone later tonight and hand it over to them.

I wandered away from the conversation. Little canapes and overly sugared cakes lined elaborately decorated tables. Flowers spilled from urns as much as cleavage spilled from dresses. Most of the men wore jackets, but some of them had hints of tattoos peeking out of the sleeves; the current style had men's sleeves stopping short of their wrists to expose a hint of their magical gifts.

My skin seemed soft and smooth without a single tattoo. I wanted people to believe I was harmless. But that was a lie.

People whispered about how I couldn't shift into a dragon like my sister.

But, a nagging voice reminded me, we weren't those kind of sisters. Honor had been adopted into my family, the heir to

the throne, hidden away. I'd been born to be an ordinary girl, and it was because of Honor that I lived in the castle and answered—reluctantly—to *princess*.

No matter how many pep talks Honor gave her people, and no matter how much they cheered, most of us couldn't force ourselves into the dramatic form of a dragon.

No, against all odds, her best attempts to help make all of us powerful, Honor was still just so damned special. Whether she was wearing a crown or spreading her wings as the dragon, her shadow seemed to spread across the kingdom.

Nobody was racing out to tattoo themselves as deer or rabbits. As one man raised his hand to invite a smiling woman to dance, his sleeve pulled back to reveal a snake tattoo, which always made me wary.

The Snake Queen had never forgiven Honor for defeating her. For *living*. A lot of people thought Honor was awfully rude that way.

As the man beckoned, the woman stepped into his arms. He gripped her hip. She had wings tattooed across her exposed shoulder blades; her dress had been constructed to expose as much of her wings as possible, and seemed likely to slither off her body at any moment.

Still, watching the way their bodies moved in easy harmony, I felt an unexpected lurch of longing.

“My lady.” The young man who stepped to my side startled me, which made me immediately annoyed by myself, and therefore, with him. He offered me a hand and a cocksure smile. “Would you do me the honor of dancing with me?”

“No. I have a pressing date with a tea cake.” I moved away toward the dessert table.

I always received plenty of male attention, and it annoyed me even though I was disguised. In my everyday life, I couldn't trust that men truly wanted me. They were drawn to my money or my power.

It was no surprise my personality wasn't much of a draw, but I'd rather be alone.

Also, none of them were a certain Ice Fae prince.

The thought of Prince Kaelan's sharp-angled, stupidly-handsome face rose insistently in my mind. He had ruined me on romance forever. I really should track him down and thank him. Or rip off his testicles. Perhaps both.

The boy I'd just rejected pretended to shake it off, though I could tell he was upset at the public rejection.

He was distressed enough that he let himself be drawn into conversation with Duke Ferren, whose right sleeve hung empty. Usually, despite the power he had once wielded and the money he still waded in, no one bothered much with him.

His withered arm was a sign of an oath once broken and the magic taking its price from his flesh. And now he lit up at any attention, even talking to a boy wearing a thick coat of makeup to cover the pimples on his forehead.

The dance didn't come to an end. The music didn't stop. And yet there was a disturbance, the sense of a pause in the event. I turned like every other sap.

The man who stalked into the room stood taller than any other Fae. His eyes were dark and magnetic.

Despite his size and muscle, he moved with easy grace. A few women glanced eagerly at each other, then pressed forward. A few men bristled automatically.

His aura of power and strength that seemed to draw every eye toward him.

He was Ice Fae. I couldn't have explained the strength of that sentiment, but something about him made me sure of it.

Now, while everyone was curious about this newcomer—he must not have been invited, given the unrest that seemed to stir around the room, as if women were attracted to him and men were offended by his existence—might be my best time to strike. And yet, something kept me from pickpocketing the distracted birthday boy. He puffed, annoyed that both of his companions were now as distracted as he had been towards his wife.

Euster kept trying to get their attention back, and it was so pathetic that I almost could have felt bad about stealing from him. Almost.

The celebrating noble finally gave up on winning back the attention of his two fair ladies, and instead drew them with him to greet the new arrival.

I touched one of the many magical bracelets I wore and activated a simple spell to sharpen my hearing. Branok and Lynx had finally admitted I'd never have their ability to carry on one conversation and listen to another, and they'd helped me gin up the spell I wore.

My brothers-in-law were a lot to live up to as spies. Almost as much as my sister was to live up to in *everything*.

"I'm one of Prince Kaelan's advance guard," he explained, and my stomach flip-flopped no matter how much I certainly warned it not to.

Prince Kaelan was coming back to the isle?

"Well, how fortunate for us," the noble lied. "I'm so glad Prince Kaelan remembered my standing invitation. Might you be viewing any of the tournaments while you're here?"

"I'm not sure I could pass up the opportunity to watch your citizens bash themselves into oblivion," he said with a smile.

The noble turned to the crowd and threw up his hands in mock offense, though was pretty sure the underlying sentiment was true. "We are being besieged by Ice Fae!"

Too bad none of them realized the Ice Fae were assholes.

The last time Kaelan's boots deigned to touch our shores, things had gone so well that my sister had been in a high temper, tempted to ban the Ice Prince forever. Some of her men had calmed her down, although others, always hyper protective of me, had been eager to do the same and damn the consequences.

But the consequences were too high. Even I'd admit that.

The Ice Fae lived in a frozen, fake truce with the Snake Queen, their kingdoms separated by an inhospitable wasteland

that extended from the Gray and Spice kingdoms up into the icy reaches of the north. The Snake Queen quietly terrorized the Ice Fae with her monsters, who writhed up through that wasteland, and the Ice Fae ignored her to keep the scales from tipping into all-out war.

And either of those kingdoms might ally to take over our isle, now that they weren't afraid of the Scourge that once cursed our shores. Our own peace was unsteady.

Even though he hadn't been officially unwelcomed from the isle, after I changed his memories, Kaelan had promised me that I would never see him again.

But then, I didn't believe any longer in promises. Only children do.

I was tempted to leave the city, or perhaps the kingdom. His pull on me was powerful, even if that pull was perhaps to gut him or perhaps to fuck him. It was hard to tell.

This Ice Fae was staring at me.

I frowned at him, offended by his gaze. He stared back at me without the slightest expression. His eyes were cold and hard.

Then he turned to acknowledge Euster, seeming reluctant to do so. His face blurred.

He was using an enchantment. Why? Was he keeping anyone from seeing his real feelings? Was he simply ugly as sin and trying to preserve us all?

Euster kept trying to engage him, but this Ice Fae seemed to consider him a distraction, like a buzzing fly, from watching me. His gaze was distinctly unsettling.

He looked at me as if he could see right through me.

Looking at a spy that way is enough to make them instantly an enemy.

Could this be Kaelan himself? Masquerading as one of his soldiers? But why?



Euster wandered away, red faced and offended and once again handsy with his two female friends. One of them was staring at the Ice Fae even as the noble slobbered across her cheek.

Branok always said curiosity would be the death of me.

“He’s beautiful.” Clora sounded wistful, though she added an unconvincing laugh at the end. “You should talk to him.”

“I never talk to Ice Fae if I can.” That was too true, and I tried to chase the frown away from her face by adding, “As a rule, men are disappointing. I’d rather believe somewhere, in another kingdom, they’re better.”

She laughed. “True. He’s probably not worth the trouble.”

“Probably.” I agreed.

“Probably,” she said again, the wistfulness creeping back in.

“You should chat with him.” My gaze wandered back to Euster. He was kissing one of the girls now.

Clora’s gaze followed mine. She scoffed, as if twenty years of bad sex with Euster had soured her on the thought of trying anyone else. Then she elbowed me. “Look, I don’t think either of us can sneak in to talk to him, anyway.”

The Ice Fae was being mauled by women. He seemed to bear this tribulation of being adored with stoic immutability.

Could that really be Kaelan? Who else had such a commanding presence?

I wished I hadn’t found him as irresistible as I did. I had been young and stupid then. It was different now.

*Yes, now you’re old and stupid,* a small voice inside me said.

My inner voice is an ass.

A woman gripped his arm and tried to pull him toward the dance floor. He shook her off, as lightly and easily as if he were shrugging off an unwanted jacket and leaving it behind for a servant to pick up.

This arrogance was all dragon royal.

As he approached me, one arched eyebrow slid up. There was a faint scar through his eyebrow. I wondered why anyone would recreate that in a mask. If this was Kaelan, he must have borrowed someone else's face.

"Is there any particular reason why you're staring at me?" He sounded amused.

"Oh, it's nothing that can't be fixed." I offered him a smile. "We have wonderful healers on the isle."

Why was Kaelan coming back?

What did he want from my kingdom?

What did he want from me?

He raised his hand and gently brushed his thumb just underneath my lip. The movement was unexpectedly sensual, until he said, "And here's nothing that a glue enchantment can't fix."

I gripped his hand and pulled it down between us. The two of us were holding hands now as if we were about to dance, and I was still smiling when I said, "How dare you touch me."

"Then stop looking at me as if you want to be touched."

He was as arrogant as Kaelan. But the way he spoke didn't seem quite right.

Of course, since we last saw each other, it had been five years and a hundred fantasies of either quietly murdering him or making him die of jealousy.

I had told him, during the last night we loved each other, there was nothing he could say or do that would make me doubt the love between us.

What an idiot.

But I'd also never met another man who made me feel the way he had.

There was one way to know for sure if he was Kaelan.

I surprised the Fae by leaning in, my hands pressing his warm, hard chest. He didn't pull away. He smelled like an intoxicating mix of cedarwood and mint.

My heart raced as I leaned in closer, my lips almost touching the enchanting Fae. I wracked my brain, trying to summon the exact scent of Kaelan.

But I couldn't hold onto the past when the present was so intense.

All I could think of was the Fae so close to me.

I'd intended to kiss him before he could shy away, certain I'd know if this was Kaelan once our lips touched. But he didn't pull away.

Instead, his hand wrapped the nape of my neck possessively. He kissed me first. Warmth seemed to glow between us like magic itself as his lips met mine in a hard, punishing kiss.

A spark glowed in my chest that I hadn't felt in five years. A sudden ache blossomed between my thighs.

My hands roamed over his chest, feeling the hard muscles beneath the fine jacket. I exhaled in surprise at the intensity of his kiss, at the feel of his hand wrapping my bare neck. He kissed me as if he wasn't going to let me go.

But he didn't kiss me like Kaelan.

No, this was something else entirely. This Fae was wild and passionate, his kiss demanding and hungry.

His hand moved lower, trailing down my exposed spine to grip my waist tightly. When he pulled me closer, his arousal pressed against me.

I didn't feel annoyed the way I might have with another man. Instead, I swayed toward him.

His other hand cupped my cheek, touching me tenderly even as he kissed me with a hunger that left me breathless. His gaze was intent on my face, and he was looking at me as if I were a dream he wanted to stay in.

And for a few wild seconds, all that mattered was this Fae and the way he made me feel.

But as the kiss finally came to an end, reality came crashing back down. I pulled away from him, my breathing ragged as I tried to regain my composure.

He grinned at me as if we shared a secret. His kiss had been eager, wild, maybe even slightly clumsy. He was not Kaelan—and thank the gods for that, because one Kaelan was all the Kaelan the universe could handle.

But that kiss had been intense. As if he were two seconds from fucking me in front of everyone.

And my body ached as if it might give in to the temptation.

He paused, his lips just a breath away from mine. “Everyone is looking at us.”

“Everyone is looking at *you*,” I corrected. “I’m nobody.”

“That’s not true. You’re very special.” There was nothing comforting in those words. There was a hard edge to them.

His smile was sinister.

As if he knew exactly who I was.

So who the hell was he?

I pushed him away, no matter how much my hands wanted to linger on his chest.

“I have a pressing appointment with a tea cake,” I told him, echoing my words from earlier, no matter how much I didn’t mean them.

This Fae was dangerous, and a mystery, and I should run away until I had collected all the clues of his identity, his mission, and how to manipulate him.

But I wanted to be reckless.

I wanted to stay.

## CHAPTER 3



Thorne

The little dragon princess had a distracting sway to her hips when she walked away from me.

*“You just aren’t used to women walking away,”* Kaelan said into my mind.

*“Neither are you. Is that who you’re so obsessed with, her?”*

He scoffed. *“I left her.”*

As if Kaelan could ever really leave Hanna behind when she had strewn pieces of herself in all the spaces of his mind.

Well, almost all.

She was flirting with Euster now. I sipped my drink and tried to dodge the women stalking me through the crowd, like white tigers moving through the snowy trees on the taiga.

Somehow, she dragged Euster away from the two women who had been teasing him as if he didn’t have the personality of soggy bread. Impressive. She was almost as skilled at manipulating men as she was at lifting his book from his jacket.

Euster shifted at her hand under his jacket. She moved in and distracted him with a kiss, so seamlessly that Euster didn’t notice. His little book disappeared into her pocket.

*“Don’t forget this is who she truly is,”* Kaelan warned me.

The jealousy tinging his voice would have embarrassed him if he'd heard it.

*"Impressive?"*

*"Thorne."* Kaelan's voice was curt. I couldn't tell if he was more annoyed at me or at her.

*"I won't forget."*

But as impressive as she was, she hadn't seen the man who was watching her. Not one of Euster's guards. This was a rat-faced man in an expensive suit. But the suit had the faintest sheen of magic.

Spy Guild, perhaps?

If he were Guild, he should be on her side. Not following her as she made her way through the crowd.

She didn't glance over her shoulder before she disappeared down a hallway. She was no amateur.

He did look, but he didn't see me. Then he was gone into the hall too.

I drained my drink, smiled at a woman I was not going to stop and talk to, and followed them both.

She disappeared into the library with a flicker of her red skirt.

He looked back at me, horror written across his face briefly as if he'd been caught, and the magic at his fingers sputtered and died.

Then he disappeared through the nearest doorway with a flicker of my hands.

I was right behind him, pinning him against the wall in the oversized closet we had just entered. He let out a bark of pain, then bit his teeth together tightly, glaring at me. Unused china rained down around us as the shelf behind him shook.

"What were you going to do to her?" I asked him conversationally. I brushed some of the china fragments from his hair.

He cringed, appearing not to appreciate my thoughtfulness.

“Well?” I shook him, just a little.

An entire tea set shattered on the marble around us. One tea cup slammed into his head.

He crumpled into unconsciousness.

*“Why do you accidentally break people so often?”* Kaelan asked.

I hated letting him take a free ride in my mind.

I let the man crumple the rest of the way. He sprawled amidst the shards.

“This is unfortunate,” I admitted.

*“You were just supposed to see what we could use against her, and now here you are ... kissing her ...”*

*“She kissed me.”* That fact that would rankle Kaelan. He couldn’t see the smile that spread across my face.

*“Playing her knight. You don’t know who you are dealing with. Hanna doesn’t need your sympathy, she doesn’t need to be rescued.”*

*“Everyone needs to be rescued.”*

His sigh was loud in my mind. *“I should have made the bond with Dare instead.”*

“Mm.”

The shards crunched under my boots as I made my way back out.

I went down the hall, finding the room I was sure Hanna had disappeared into. It was a small library, lined with blue drapes and more statues and relics than books. What a waste.

She wasn’t here, but the faint, sweet scent of her lingered in the air.

*“You lost her,”* Kaelan sounded exasperated.

*“You lost her first.”*

## CHAPTER 4



*H*anna

Usually, a wave of peace settled over my soul in a library. But in the little blue-draped library, I'd been struck with absolute horror as I stared down at the noble's childish penmanship, apparently unchanged since his school days.

At first glance, the book seemed filled with dates he'd made for dalliances. But as I flipped through the pages, the rudimentary code he'd used dissolved in front of me. His letters and numbers formed again, into the actual text.

I was looking at an outline of the wards that protected the castle.

The wards that protected my nieces and nephews.

The ones put in place after the Snake Queen's monsters almost slithered away with Briden.

Where the hell had this come from?

I had to make sure Branok and Lynx knew this information was circling. Just in case something happened to me ... an eerie feeling swept up my spine. Had the Guild sent me to get this for a reason?

Was this a test of my loyalty?

I slipped back out into the party. In the hallway, I heard a faint sound of breaking things from a closet nearby. Nobles. They would have sex anywhere.



Then I was out into the happy, bubbling noise of the party once again. I let the doors slam shut behind me. My heart was racing, so I took a glass of champagne and smiled as I walked around the party, pretending to look for someone to buy myself time to think.

I needed to talk to my brothers-in-law.

If the book was fake, I'd turn it over to the Guild. If not ... it was going to grow even harder to keep up my fake allegiance. But that was a problem for future me.

Meanwhile, there were plenty of problems for current me.

Mostly, the Ice Fae who loomed in front of me.

I'd been watched all night. Followed. I had to get rid of him before I met Branok.

He held out his hand to me. "Dance with me?"

"No." I kissed him again, twining my arms around his neck. This time, it was a combination of desire and spy craft. I needed to get him alone.

And I needed him to stop watching me.

Slowly, I danced us back out of the room, the two of us stumbling along as if we were lost in each other. The dancers parted until we were in the hallway that led to the kitchens.

I'd forgotten how to breathe again when he ground against me and kissed me back eagerly. A low, feral growl rose in his throat, making me shudder with anticipation.

Our hands explored each other without hesitation. We kissed as if we couldn't get enough. He gripped my ass, pulling me against him.

The Fae lifted me, his muscular arms carrying me toward the door. My heart stuttered as the door swung open and he carried me into the solitude.

I hadn't felt this swoop of emotion, this lightness that was joyful and reckless, this pulse of lust, since Kaelan.

He let out a low growl against my lips as he set me down in the middle of the floor, before his lips captured mine again

in a wild, hungry kiss.

I pulled back to look at him.

“I forgot to get your name,” I whispered.

“It doesn’t matter.”

“You don’t want mine?”

“I don’t need to know who you are.” The Fae lowered his head to kiss me again. “You can be mine for one night.”

I laughed at his arrogance until his lips caressed the bare skin of my throat and my back arched despite myself. I gripped his cock, hard, through his trousers, and he let out a feral growl.

I squeezed even tighter and said, “That’s a little ambitious. I have a feeling I can be yours for about ten minutes.”

He was big and straining as if he was already on the verge of coming.

“What kind of noble girl fucks a Fae she doesn’t even know?” he asked.

“The kind who knows what she wants,” I promised him.

His thumb skimmed my décolletage, his gaze thoughtful. “Everyone here flaunts their tattoos. Why do you hide yours?”

My heart slammed against my chest like a bird trying to escape.

He’d spied the rune tattoo, etched in invisible ink, on my chest. No one ever noticed the spell that kept me from being imprisoned by oaths like the unfortunate duke.

“You look at me too closely,” I whispered to him.

“I see you too well,” he promised me, and I couldn’t read his tone. It was unsettling.

My hands slid across the hard angle of his jaw, and despite himself, he reacted by turning his face into my touch.

I whispered a word of magic as I dug my enchanted fingernails into his neck—just hard enough to draw blood.

Just hard enough to leave my enchantment in his system.

He stared at me for a second, his eyes hardening, as if the potion might not take him to his knees.

“Goodnight,” I said.

He took a step toward me, lurched, and fell to his knees.

I bundled the Fae into a closet and left him there.

And as I went off to deal with the journal, I tried to find a string of coincidences that made me feel better about what had just happened with one of the Ice Fae. I was thoroughly disguised, and yet ...I had the feeling I'd better keep looking over my shoulder.

Outside the party, I melted into the shadows. I needed to talk to one of my many, many annoying big brothers.

I wished I could fly. It would have been so much faster. More fun. More freeing.

As I walked, the peacefulness of the night felt deep and comforting as a soft bed after the noise of the party. I ran my fingers over the bracelet around my wrist, toying with the beads. Most of the beads were smooth; a few of them were textured, and I could use them in sequence to send vibrations to the bracelets the twins wore. We were limited to a handful of messages, but I didn't need to send them much info.

They would find me.

Lynx had crafted almost all of the jewelry I wore, which helped me activate different spells. The only other jewelry I wore was the magical bangle that blocked my powers—so no one would realize just how much raw power I carried—and it always felt the heaviest. But the most important spell of all, Lynx had tattooed: the spell that prevented me from being bound by vows to the magic.

My brothers-in-law were displeased I'd chosen the Guild over their precious academy, but they wanted to be sure I was never forced into taking any oaths of loyalty to the Guild. This way, I could take all the oaths I wanted; they would be

meaningless for me, and I'd keep all my limbs. The side-effects of the magic when it was wronged tended to be bloody.

Branok slunk out of the shadows alongside me. "What do you need?"

I'd felt rattled by the sight of the wards in the wrong hands, and now I thrust the book into his hands, feeling as if I'd just handed over my anxiety too.

He raised an eyebrow at me then began to flip through the pages.

He'd looked after me and comforted me since that day at the Posselbaum Academy when he rescued me from the Scourge and from being embarrassed in front of the other students. I loved all my bonus brothers, but there was something special about my bond with Branok.

And that bond wasn't just because we were both too bright for our own good, hopelessly conceited, and unrepentant about our flaws.

"You don't need to worry about whose it is or where it came from," I said. "Unless those *are* the wards, and you need to kill the man who had it, in which case, I'm happy to help. But I have a feeling this might be a fake."

"Is this your final for the Guild?"

"A final I'm probably failing," I muttered.

Branok glanced down the dark alley. "You weren't being followed."

"At the moment. And yet ... if I had my doubts that the Queen's sister could be trusted as a good little spy for the Guild, I'd certainly give her some fake information to fetch that endangered her family."

"They could also have tested you with real information that would indeed endanger our family." Branok flipped through the pages.

Even after all these years, it still struck me with a sense of wonder that these men considered me their family.

“That’s why I’m here,” I said grimly. “You know how much I want to be a spy for the Guild of Theseus.”

“I do,” he admitted. “Even if I don’t understand it.”

“Oh, come on, Branok. You’ve always been more well suited to spy craft than soldiering. Why in the world would you think I’d want to go to that school that pretends that misery is character building?”

“Because you have far more strength and power than they’ll accept in a spy of the Guild? You’re playing small, Hanna, and you’ll never be able to keep that up forever.” He handed me back the book. “Your instincts were correct. It’s fake.”

I let out a shaky exhale. That meant that most likely, there was some kind of enchantment on the journal. They would realize that I had taken it somewhere besides my final destination.

Branok was watching me closely. “Are you going to be alright?”

“Of course. I’ll just lie a bit. I did learn from the best.”

“Only from you would that sound like a compliment.” Branok’s lips quirked. “And it’s not too late for the Academy. Just ... think about it. I hate to see you waste your potential.”

“I’m not wasting anything.” It seems like the whole kingdom had heard the rumors about how I couldn’t shift into anything larger than a hawk. I still would have been welcomed to the shifter Academy. They took everyone now, and found different ways for different types of fae to serve. “All I’ve ever wanted is to be a spy. To use my wits and show I’m capable —”

I trailed off. Branok was looking at me too knowingly.

*To show I was as capable as the incredible Royals I’d grown up surrounded by.*

Though he thought I wanted to prove myself as a spy, but my real dreams were bigger.

Someone had to infiltrate the Guild, and Honor and her men would never have let me throw my life away to protect my family. So they could never know the sacrifices I made because I loved them.

It had been fine when I was young to stand in their shadow, to feel their glow reflected on my face, and to dream of the future.

But now it was time to make something of myself.

## CHAPTER 5



*H*anna

**B**ranok let me go, reluctantly. He probably would have preferred I fail my Guild final, but he'd never sabotage me.

"I just want you to know," he told me, "A royal Ice Fae ship has been spied off the coast, and he sent messengers ahead."

"Kaelan is coming back," I filled in.

"Unfortunately," he muttered, because Branok held a grudge like I did. "Will you be alright?"

I waved my hand. "I don't care anymore."

I'd destroyed Kaelan's memories, he had destroyed my heart, and it was all in the past. I didn't want to waste my life, waiting to wake Kaelan's memories.

Branok knew I was lying, but he kindly pretended to believe me.

"Good luck," he said, before enveloping me in a hug. I hugged him back, hard enough to give away how lost I felt at times when I wasn't with my family. He whispered into my ear, "Thank you for taking care of us."

For a second, I felt as if he'd figured out all my secrets, before he pressed the journal into my hands.

As I ran to make my meeting, I worked the spell to figure out what kind of enchantments were on the book. Listening spells were tricky. A simple tracking spell was easy... and easy for me to lie my way through.

I stepped into an alleyway to complete the spell. Pink magic flared around my hands as I gripped the book.

A tracking spell. I let out a breath of relief. Countering a listening spell and making it appear unaltered would have taken time I didn't have.

I changed my appearance again, because I was going to draw too much attention with my fine clothes in this neighborhood. I slipped off the skirt and bundled it up until it looked like a sleek messenger bag, pulling up the strap that had been hidden inside so I could sling it over my shoulder.

Underneath the skirt, I wore leggings along with my corset. I yanked off the high heeled sandals and crushed the straps down so they fit into the handbag. I slipped on the flats that had been sewn into the voluminous skirt with a few quick stitches. The slippers weren't great in hand to hand combat, but let me move quickly and silently.

Sometimes, it was better to be stealthy than to be violent.

Although my preference would always be both.

Dressed in the barely-there armored corset and my leggings, I made my way through the dark streets. A few ladies who stood on corners eyed me suspiciously, but I kept moving.

A patron stumbled out of the bar, leaving the door open behind him. Light and music spilled into the cobblestone street. He leered at me, and I ignored him as I caught the door before it could close.

Trissa was seated at the bar. Her lustrous dark hair fell over one shoulder, and she must have already scared off the men at the bar, because the seats around her were empty.

My stomach fell. Did she know what this test was? Was that why she had warned me about my family and invited me to an orphans' solstice?



I slipped onto the seat beside her, setting the journal down between us as if it were my day planner. “Hello there, old friend.”

She beamed at me as if she were delighted to see me. “I’m so glad to see you.”

“You passed a while ago, didn’t you?”

“Months. I’ve been waiting for you.” She rested her head on my shoulder, and my heart gave a little.

And then I reminded myself she was a spy too.

I couldn’t trust girl friends any more than I could the men around me.

I glanced around the room surreptitiously. I couldn’t help but feel like that Ice Fae was going to pop up into my life ... soon.

I should have mentioned to Branok that I’d probably cause an international incident this week.

“Did you meet anyone interesting tonight?” she teased me.

She knew I had a weakness for the Ice Fae.

How many Guild members had been spying on me tonight?

“I did,” I said. “Too interesting. I had to take quite the winding route to make sure he didn’t follow me.”

She hugged me, suddenly and spontaneously. I wanted to believe she meant that hug, so I hugged her back.

“See you tomorrow,” I whispered.

“We’ll celebrate.” Her smile was wide.

I nodded, but even though I’d been working all these years to hide myself in the Guild and reach this level, winning felt hollow.

Out on the street again, I made my way toward the Posselbaum Academy.

A soft footfall landed close behind me.

No one gets that close to a woman on a dark night with pure intentions.

I whirled and immediately seized their shoulders, driving my knee up full force.

A shocked rat-faced expression stared back into my face. His lips parted as if his soul had just left his body.

Setti. I knew him from the Guild. He'd taught one of our classes on stealthy self-defense, which he probably regretted now.

"What the hell were you thinking?" I demanded, pinning him against the stone wall.

I certainly wasn't going to apologize.

And I certainly would not take killing him off the list of potential options.

"What's wrong with you? You almost took my nuts off." He snarled back. The snarl didn't hide the suddenly higher pitch of his voice.

"What's wrong with you? Do you think women appreciate being followed at night?"

"My mistake, Princess, I thought you were fearless."

I hated being called Princess by people who meant it as an insult. Call me princess to try to make me small? Even though my rank was what made me so very *useful*?

No matter how insulting his words, his eyes were a little wild, his voice a little high pitched. He was barely holding it together. I deeply considered jamming my knee into his balls again on general principle.

Instead, I let him go. "I am."

It was the mistake. I knew as soon as my hands slipped off his shoulders.

There was something about the quick way his posture changed.

He buried his fist in my gut. Sharp pain blossomed in my side and radiated up my stomach, temporarily shocking the breath from my body.

I threw myself forward, slamming my forehead into his nose. He turned quickly, taking the brunt of the blow. He grabbed for my throat, my wrists, trying to wrestle me under control. Sparks of puce-colored magic flew around his hands. My skin burned wherever he touched, and I yanked away from him, my instincts overriding everything else.

The two of us wrestled each other down to the ground. For a second, his big arm got around my neck and he started to squeeze. The burning sensation spread along his forearm, and it felt as if fire raced along my skin.

I scrambled to escape the pain, to breathe. The next second, I had control of myself again.

I scrabbled for my daggers, pulling them out of my corset.

My vision was going black around the edges when I slammed one into his side. He was wearing light armor too, and the blade caught the armor and skimmed along it, before finally sinking through leather into flesh. But just barely.

It was a flesh wound.

I'd hoped for more.

He let out a grunt of pain and seemed to just try to choke me harder.

I could drop the daggers and wrench off my bracelet. Once the magic-muting bracelet was off, I had the power to win this fight easily.

But then he would know who I truly was. How much power I had. That I might, indeed, be able to shift into a dragon.

And I'd have to kill him to keep him from telling the Guild.

On the other hand, he would certainly kill me first, given the opportunity. So I had to choose wisely.

No one's ever made their best life just as they were being suffocated.

"Get off of her," a familiar feminine voice said. "Gods, you are an idiot."

I wasn't sure which one of us she was talking to. But at the moment, he finally let go of me and I could actually draw full ragged breath. My throat and lungs burned. Sucking in big gulps of air physically hurt, but I couldn't stop there's like I had been ravenous for air.

Finally, the last of the stars dancing around the edges of my vision cleared. I could get a good look at my attacker, but distinctly sulky, the woman who had intervened.

Eledora.

The head of the female spies.

She offered me her hand, and I let her pull me to my feet. He had already taken off, running almost silently back into the alley until he was swallowed by the shadows.

"Your final was an absolute embarrassment, but that's no reason to kill you."

I ran my hand over the now-fading burn marks across my throat, my chest, my arms. I was covered in bruises and raw burns. "Care to explain to me why he tried?"

"Aren't people always afraid of you?"

"Of me? The Princess that can't shift into anything bigger than a breadbox? Not particularly."

She gave me a knowing smile. "Even so. You have your sister and her kings on your side. You're a powerful foe, or friend, as the case may be."

"There aren't a lot of people I care about enough to consider friend or foe," I answered.

That was true enough. Given how many people wanted to use me, I'd grown good at reading people. But in the jaded way that's not exactly good for one's soul, but is good for one's survival.

This was a setup. I knew one when I saw one. Eledora wanted me to feel indebted to her.

“You’re not loyal to the Guild,” she said. “You don’t consider anyone there your friends?”

I didn’t think Trissa’s life would be easier if she were tied to me, and I wasn’t sure how I felt about her at the moment either. “Nary a one.”

“That’s too bad,” she said. “Then why do you even want to be a part of the Guild? Most people long for connection, no matter what they say. Especially young people.”

“I want something that’s my own. Something that doesn’t have to do with my sister.”

“And yet, you run straight to your sister with Guild information.”

“I haven’t spoken to my sister in a week.”

“We both know too well that speaking to your sister is not the only way you communicate with her, and she with you.”

I certainly wasn’t going to confess anything. “I have my own reasons for learning spy craft. I don’t need friendship bracelets.”

Her gaze swept over my injured body. “Do you feel loyal to the Guild at the moment?”

“I don’t have any loyalty to the crown. I’m sure that’s what you’re implying.”

“No, I don’t think you have any particular loyalty to the crown. I think you have loyalty to your sister.”

“Am I supposed to be sorry for that?”

“No. But I am.” She gave me a look that seemed sorrowful. “I’m sorry you were caught up in the little war between Kulak and me. You’d be a valuable asset to the Guild. And I suppose, too valuable an asset to me.”

“The Guild’s at war with itself?”

She shrugged. “Spies.”

“So what do I do now?”

“Nothing. Your divided loyalties are too dangerous, as much as I’d like to use you to take down Kulak.”

I stared at her, stunned stupid. I’d come so far. “What?”

“I’m sorry that this marks the end of your time in the Guild. You are so very gifted, Hanna.”

“No,” I said. “Come on. Let me help you beat Kulak. Give me a chance.”

“I can’t.” Her lips quirked. “You’re lucky not to be an orphan, not really, like the rest of us. But it does come at a cost. It seems like so little to pay for that kind of happiness.”

“Listen.” I didn’t try to hide my desperation, which was real enough. “There are so many other jobs I could work for the Guild. Ones that don’t require me to turn my back on my sister. I won’t pretend I won’t fight on her side if she ever needs me ... but no one else knows better the nobility and their weaknesses.”

She hesitated. That was all I needed.

“I was trained by the Queen’s spy masters as much as by the Posselbaum Academy, as much as by the Guild. You know it’s the truth. You know what I can do.” I held her gaze. “You need me.”

She made a show of hesitating. Whatever came next, she was setting up. I wondered if Setti’s attack had been Kulak’s work or hers.

“If you want a second chance at joining the Guild, you’re going to have to prove you can be loyal to the Guild.”

“I can. I can have people I care about and still follow the Guild.” I met her gaze, trying to make the threat in my words as clear as a knife set between us. “I’m sure you have people you care about.”

Her icy gaze locked on mine.

There was one thing that would get her to really trust me. But I couldn’t offer it. I needed her to think of it, to take the

bait. And I needed to trust that hidden tattoo that meant my oaths were nothing but whispers.

“We both know what I can do for you,” I said. “And what that means the female spy department can do for the Guild. And then... who will rise to lead the Guild.”

“You are an arrogant little thing,” she said, her face and voice stiff.

But she didn't deny it.

“I care about my family, I know. How terrible. But I can be a valued member of the Guild. Just don't make me choose.”

Her jaw worked. “I'll let you take your final again, but only under one circumstance. You take an oath promising that when you are on a Guild mission, you will complete the Guild mission, without subverting it.”

“Absolutely... if it isn't a mission that won't endanger my family. As long as that promise is in my oaths, I'll do whatever you order.”

“Are you really sitting there, as someone who isn't even a member of the Guild yet, and dictating your terms to me?”

“Yes.”

“Fine,” she said. “Let's discuss the terms of your oath.”

Magic tingled in the air. The night felt suddenly even colder, and goosebumps rose on my bare skin.

I told her what I was thinking, and she nodded. “Say it.”

“If I become a full Guild member, I'll swear that I will work for the Guild faithfully as long as my mission doesn't endanger my family,” I said, “and if I go back on my words, I'll lose the ability to use my legs.”

Her eyes were cold and flinty and satisfied, as if she had tricked me. Was she out of practice? Or had she wanted me to see that expression?

“So what is my new final exam?” I asked. “There must be something you have in mind, or you wouldn't have agreed to this in the first place.”

“You’re always so very insightful,” she agreed. “Yes, I do have a mission for you. I want you to steal a particular magical item from Prince Kaelan.” She tilted her head as she studied me. “Are you willing to prove you can work for the Guild? To steal from the Ice Fae? From Prince Kaelan himself?”

My heart raced at the thought of seeing Kaelan, beating harder than when I’d thrown myself off a cliff and flown.

“Oh, it would be my pleasure.”



## CHAPTER 6



*H*anna

I hadn't visited the Fae tournament. It had a terrible reputation, which usually would have drawn me right in, but the Guild had kept me busy.

Now we would see if I could complete this mission or if I would suddenly find myself with a whole lot of free time.

The tournament was underground, both literally and physically. Step by step, I wound my way down the dank stairs, feeling pressed by the crowd surging with me as we descended into the dark.

The labyrinths between the city had been filled in, but no one ever let them stay that way.

Sooner or later, Honor and my brothers would fill this dank, violent hole in once more.

For now, no matter how much Fae thought they were getting away with something, I'd guarantee their spies were watching. I almost slipped on a damp step and half expected Zehr to melt out of the shadows and grab my arm. Would they catch me?

We finally escaped the oppressively narrow stairs—we were all going to die in a fire—and stepped into the enormous expanse of a cavern.

The noise was deafening. The crowd's screams echoed off the walls as the Fae knights charged each other, their swords

clashing in a shower of sparks. The air was thick with the scent of spicy magic and blood. Fae have a love-hate relationship with iron; the metal saps our impulse control, and Fae have precious little to begin with.

The crowd gave off a violent, crackling energy, as if they were feeding off this casual bloodshed. Tiers of spectators felt like a faceless mob.

I searched the stands, scanning the faces for Kaelan, steeling myself to see him again.

A sudden pit had opened in my stomach.

I had to keep moving, blending in. I pretended that I was looking for someone, then picked a group of young Fae females who were screaming away. They seemed high on the sight of shirtless, bleeding male bodies. I moved toward them, making my face light up as if I'd just glimpsed my party.

But really, if I had to find my people here, my people would have been down in the melee.

Then I saw the stone ledges low above the arena, so close that an errant monster might be able to leap up and swipe one of the nobles off the stone.

Kaelan stood on one of those ledges, surrounded by a group of beautiful women. My heart lurched. For a second, the thrum of my too-fast heartbeat even drowned out the roar of the crowd.

His arms were crossed and he stood so close to the edge that one of them might be able to reach out and push him off. I'd like to see that.

My old paramour was as attractive as ever, so handsome I could barely breathe. My instant flair of jealousy felt like I'd been punched in the gut.

He shouldn't recognize me. I'd used magic once again to disguise my face.

But the thought of getting close to him made me feel as if I'd drown in my feelings. In my memories. In the ache of being unseen.

I was supposed to take the ring he wore on a leather thong around his neck. I'd seen that ring sway back and forth between us when he was on top of me. Once, I'd touched it curiously, and he'd gripped it in his fist. He'd made a joke. *"Priceless family heirloom. Key to my powers."*

Bullshit, obviously.

But the Guild wanted it.

Guilt stirred in my gut.

I slipped through the crowd, keeping my eyes trained on him. Women surrounded Kaelan, laughing and flirting, but his beautiful, carved-from-stone face was fixed on the fight.

He had never been so stony when he was with me. When we were together, he would turn to me, and that terrifying cold mask would fall away, light sparking in his eyes. Even when he didn't smile, the way his face changed when he looked at me had always made my heart rise, joy sparking between us both.

The crowd pushed and surged. I tried to let them carry me toward Kaelan as they pressed up against the railings, though I wouldn't be able to reach him on that ledge.

Here, our bloodbaths had to go underground, to an oppressive place that had once been haunted by the Scourge. But in the Ice Kingdom, blood was spilled casually across the white frozen earth.

His dreadful father, Edric, had sent him in to fight since he was a boy. He thought it would prepare him to fight the Snake Queen.

Was that where he had been since he left me? In the wasteland, slaying the monsters that slithered in endless waves up from the Spice kingdom?

The thought tore at my heart. No matter how much I wanted to punish Kaelan for hurting me—and more important, to have him grovel for the rejection I never deserved—I didn't want him to suffer in the war.

“Do we have any final contestants before we enter our last round?” The announcer called. “This is our one and only open call!”

There were shouts from the crowd.

I took a step forward, my gaze drawn to Kaelan. *Don't do it, asshole. For once, don't show off. I need to get close and...*

Kaelan's cloak slipped from his shoulders. One of the women caught it before it could slither to the ground.

He stepped off the ledge as easily as if he were stepping from a stair, and landed in a crouch on the blood-streaked floor of the arena. Then he straightened, that damned cool expression never shifting.

The crowd cheered.

I supposed if one were easily impressed, Kaelan did seem fairly ... god-like.

“Our last contestants will fight for the final spot in the last event!”

Maybe he'd get himself killed and I could just take the ring off his corpse.

But it didn't feel likely. A dozen other contestants crowded into the ring. They were a motley assortment. I spied one former Scourge, the only signs of his past his sunken eyes and bloodless lips. There was a half-orc, even bigger than Kaelan, who must have come on one of the ships that crowded the ports now from other kingdoms. There were some tall, deadly-looking men.

But even when the bell rang and they began to fight, I couldn't take my eyes off Kaelan.

One of the men broke away from the crowd toward Kaelan.

He tried to jeer at Kaelan. “You shouldn't have come in here, prince. Your rank won't save your ass in the arena.”

Kaelan stood and watched him coolly as the man prowled around him. Kaelan barely seemed to care.

Then the man darted in at him, launching a furious volley of blows. Kaelan blocked them one by one. He didn't fight back; he looked as if he was gauging the opponent. But the crowd didn't see that, or didn't care, because they screamed at Kaelan in disapproval.

He grabbed Kaelan's neck and tried to sweep him to the ground.

Kaelan moved like a predator, each step precise. He suddenly had the man in his grip and threw him to the ground. The man rolled a few times and scrambled up, his chest heaving, his face red. He threw himself at Kaelan again.

Kaelan stepped into the attack, throwing a punch across the man's jaw that sent him flying into the ground. Bits of mud and blood splattered up from the ground as the man landed heavily, and he didn't get up again.

The crowd wasn't jeering at him now.

The half-orc swept one of his opponents off his feet with a brutal punch that sent him halfway across the arena.

The crowd began to cheer, "Ogin! Ogin!" So that must be the half-orc's name.

Now the half-orc moved straight toward Kaelan.

No one cheered for Kaelan, but I doubted he cared. I elbowed a large and rather smelly man aside and shoved into the railing so I could see him better.

The big man shoved into me. "Don't you have any manners, girl?"

"None," I admitted, before reaching up—I had to go onto toes, swaying against the railing—to find the pinch point where his neck and shoulder met. He passed out within seconds, sprawling to the ground. The crowd surged over him.

I turned back just in time to see Kaelan and Ogin clash.

The orc threw hard, fearsome punches, launching all his power into his opponents with force that could shatter a skull or break ribs.

Blow after blow, Kaelan dodged and countered, graceful as a tiger.

As the fight went on, the orc began to slow. Despite all his power, he didn't have much endurance. Kaelan, on the other hand, seemed to pull the orc's energy into his own body. He moved faster, hit harder, and dodged with even more precision.

The crowd had begun to scream his name too.

Two fighters moved toward Kaelan, approaching his back. The movement caught my eye. Behind them were scattered the other bodies. There were only the four of them left on their feet. Since the orc would be easier to take down than Kaelan, they must have allied to take Kaelan down.

There was no way he could see them.

The orc grinned.

My heart skipped a beat in a protective flair. The second beat was a stutter of revenge.

I shouldn't mind the idea of watching a few Fae kicked the ass of the man who broke my heart. I'd already been reaching into my clothes for the potions concealed there, instinctively driven to help him.

Instead I folded my arms and leaned against the railing, curious to watch how this played out.

As I was watching Kaelan, someone else was watching me.

The Ice Fae sitting in the stands across from me, the arena separating us. The crowd would keep him from reaching me easily. From here, I couldn't see if his face was still marked where I had dug my claws into him.

But his gaze was locked on mine intensely. He wasn't even watching Kaelan.

Fuck. Had he seen through my disguise? Or had he simply noticed the way I was moving toward Kaelan? Did he think I was one of the many women circling his prince?

He finally tore his gaze away from me and looked down at the chaos below. He leapt to his feet. “Hey!” he shouted. “Behind you!”

Just at the same moment, the first of the Fae leapt to attack Kaelan from behind.

Kaelan swung and met the attack. He was fighting off three opponents now, moving with dizzying speed.

Gods. I didn’t want to admire anything about the asshole, but when he was fighting, he was exquisite.

My heart pounded in my chest as I watched Kaelan take a few cautious steps back, his gaze sweeping back and forth between the three of them. The crowd jeered again. Apparently, they had learned nothing.

Kaelan was studying them, coming up with a plan to destroy them. I bit my lower lip. Kaelan and I were enemies now. I had to steal from him. And that meant if I made one misstep, I’d be on the receiving end of that deadly stare.

He launched into motion.

He knocked down one Fae who didn’t get up, and another who lay there groaning, then turned to face Ogin.

“Now this looks more like a fair fight,” Kaelan said, then grinned one of his rare grins. “But it only looks like it.”

The orc charged at Kaelan, but he was too quick. In a flash, he sidestepped the attack and then leapt to kick the orc in the chest. As the orc stumbled back, Kaelan followed up with a punch across his jaw.

The orc slammed into the ground, unconscious, as heavily as one of his own punches.

The crowd erupted into cheers.

Kaelan stood victorious in the center of the arena.

He barely seemed to notice the cheering crowd.

He was staring at the Ice Fae. And when I looked up, the Ice Fae was pointing to me.

Kaelan's icy blue gaze locked on mine. Blood ran down his face from a cut across his cheekbone. He looked at me as if he saw right through me.

He touched his palm to his lip, then held his arm out. Blowing me a kiss.

The entire crowd seemed to turn and face me.

My cover was blown.

I tried to melt into the crowd, but everywhere I went, it seemed as if I were being jostled. It was hard to escape in the confines of the arena, and I finally escaped the crowd pushing me around for one of the narrow tunnels that still felt haunted. I leaned up against the slick wall, drawing deep breaths, trying to calm my racing heart.

Kaelan had blown me a kiss as if he were still obsessed with me. The way he had been when we were young and things were, for us, sweet.

*"You have the most beautiful eyes," he'd whispered to me then, caging me against a slick marble wall. "Intelligent and mischievous. The eyes of a trickster goddess like our goddess, Inara."*

*"Is that how you see me?" I'd teased him, walking my fingers up his broad chest. "As someone about to trick you?"*

*He'd smiled down at me, the genuine smile that crinkled the corners of his eyes, the one that felt as if it were just for me. "You're welcome to try. When I look at you, it's the first time in my life I feel I've met my match."*

*His lips had dipped low to my ear, sending an ache through my body even before he breathed out, "And I want to play any game you wish, goddess."*

I ended up racing up those slick, narrow stairs, feeling claustrophobic. I'd have to change my clothes, use magic for yet another face.

But most of all, I couldn't make sense of what had just happened.

I could never make sense of the Ice Fae prince.



And now the Ice Fae were multiplying.  
I was doomed.

## CHAPTER 7



Hanna

When the fight was over, they laid new sand over the blood streaking the arena floor, and the dance began.

I came back down the stairs, now with dark hair tinged with pink at the ends, a new face. I was still haunted by how the Ice Fae had seemed to find me. Was it because of how I'd watched Kaelan?

I was supposed to be a trained spy. I was good at my work. But when I watched Kaelan, were my emotions written across my face?

The dark ceiling dripping above us was transformed with magic to endless waves of crackling light, pink and purple and blue casting reflections on the faces of the dancers below.

I didn't want to dance. But I stepped into the crowd, raising my arms, letting the music carry me while I searched for Kaelan. I'd have to join the press of women flirting with the Ice Fae. It would get me close enough to him.

Even though it would kill me.

And would the other Ice Fae be there, ignoring the way women stroked his shoulders and whispered in his ears? I kept returning to the way his deep blue gaze had fixed on me as if I were the only woman in the world.

As my mind drifted, I replayed the way he had kissed me. My lips tingled as if I could still feel the intensity of his kiss.

I had seen Kaelan and I hadn't fallen apart. I wasn't thinking about Kaelan even now.

Maybe he had lost his power over me.

That thought lasted up until the moment I saw him again.

He strode into the party looking effortlessly put together. His jacket hugged his broad shoulders and lean waist and flared behind him as he walked, his dark coat turned up at the collar, his rakish full of hair sweeping his shoulders. Kaelan didn't dress like a prince. He was usually the most underdressed person in the room, it seemed. As if he had nothing to prove.

But the way the dark coat and trousers fit him was somehow still elegant, clinging to that muscular body, as if in his simplest clothes he could put anyone else to shame.

Women converged on him. They slipped through the crowd, a dozen arrows suddenly winding their way as casually as they could through a crowd of dancers, headed relentlessly toward their target.

Kaelan turned and began to wind through the crowd himself. He looked casual, carrying a glass of wine, but somehow his path never intercepted any of the arrows in time for them to catch him. I hid my smile, ducking my head. At least it seemed that he wasn't going to be all that interested in flirting tonight.

I didn't care what he did now, but it took a whole lot of effort for me to not care. I need to save my energy for theft and possible assassinations.

Maybe he was still stuck on me, and that was why he didn't flirt with any of these girls who were so obviously ready and interested. But I immediately dismissed the idea.

Just because I hadn't forgotten him, didn't mean that he remembered me.

And that would have been true even if I hadn't enchanted him to cause some amnesia.

I turned my back on him deliberately, afraid that I would get caught watching him. I couldn't repeat those mistakes.

Someone bumped into me from behind, hard enough to send me flying.

I landed against a hard chest, a pair of hands seizing my forearms to steady me. "Easy there."

I breathed in a scent of cloves and cinnamon that had once been familiar and I knew Kaelan was holding me even before I raised my eyes to meet his.

Icy blue eyes stared down into mine. His tone had been gentle, but his face was that mask. He wouldn't drop it for me anymore; he wouldn't even if he had recognized me. My chest closed up, as if I were staring at a childhood home where I could never return.

"Sorry," I said with a smile. "Someone jostled me."

"Do you want me to kill them?" His hands loosened on my arms, but he kept touching me. His hands were cool to the touch, but fire still ignited like sparks along my skin.

I laughed. Though with Kaelan, it was always hard to tell if he was joking, and he was exceptionally deadpan at the moment. "I think we should be merciful and let them live."

He tilted his head to one side, studying me. I forced myself to meet his gaze, trying to hold a breathless smile, as if I hoped he would choose me.

Branok and Lynx's spies must be watching the prince. They themselves might be milling in this crowd or lurking in the shadows with Zehr. There were too many people in this crowd tonight who knew me so well they might see right through my disguise.

Could that include Kaelan himself?

"Mercy then," he said. "Whatever my lady wishes."

"I'm not your lady."

“A pity. Most of the crowd seems willing to be my lady.”

“Most of the crowd wants something from you.”

“And you want nothing?”

*Just the ring, you maddening, arrogant jerk.*

His touch swept down my arms and gripped my hips, sending sparks skittering across my skin. The two of us began to dance, moving in easy harmony; Kaelan always led on the dance floor with so much grace. We had taken these steps before.

I could feel the jealousy radiating from the crowd, but it barely registered when his intense gaze felt so consuming.

“All I want is a story about how once, I kissed the heir to the Ice Fae throne.”

He let out a laugh. “Are you sure you don’t want a throne?”

“Not in the least.” Not as his wife, not anymore. And certainly not my sister’s throne.

“Your eyes glow like the fires at the temple of our goddess Inara. With intelligence as striking as your beauty.”

A warm glow spread through my chest. And then I remembered the other times he had complimented my eyes, and suddenly that glow faded into a hollow. “I’ve never seen one of Inara’s temples. We don’t worship those gods here.”

“You would like our goddess,” he said quietly. “She reminds me of you.”

I’d had other men tell me that I had pretty eyes, but once I had thought Kaelan was precise.

Once, he had called me his trickster goddess, and I had felt seen.

Now I knew these were lines he used over and over.

Now I knew he didn’t see me at all. I should be thankful for that, because it meant I could steal from him.

But instead my chest was tight, and the smile on my face felt as if it ached. I nuzzled his throat, kissed him, breathed out an enchantment that I hid in the hollow of his throat so he wouldn't see.

*No more silver tongue for you.*

*Say what you mean when you try to seduce a girl.*

I couldn't break the prince's ability to lie—that was deeper magic, and lying was a part of who he was—but I could make him clumsy with the next girl. When he seduced the next girl, I wanted to stumble on those compliments and promises that used to be mine.

“I want you.” His voice was deep, longing. “I've longed for you. I think of you....”

He trailed off, frowning, as if he had said more than he meant.

He wanted me? I'd longed for years to hear those words, but now he just wanted me for *tonight*.

My spell was working, because Kaelan would never have just spilled out such raw, rough words otherwise.

He kissed me again, his lips nudging mine open, igniting a flame I hadn't felt until the Ice Fae returned to the isle.

“You said I remind you of your goddess? And how do you worship your goddess?” I teased him.

“Privately.”

We were at the edge of the crowd. He had drawn me through them so carefully, and now we stood at the edge of the throbbing masses. The music echoed through the cavern so loudly that it felt as if I couldn't hear anything but him, and the room was so dark but so saturated with the rainbow of lights sparking above that I could barely concentrate on anything but his lips.

“You'll find there's very little privacy available on the isle,” I teased him.

“I find I always get my way,” he promised me, and then he dipped his head toward mine. He was still walking me backward, and our bodies seemed to move in sync effortlessly. The ground was slick and uneven underfoot, but with Kaelan’s grip on my body, there was no chance I could fall.

“But this is what I want,” I said archly, our lips hovering close together.

We had moved into one of the tunnels. The noise and the lights faded.

I could breathe.

I could let him kiss me.

Or I could use my enchanted nails to leave his body crumpled in a side tunnel and stroll out of here with his ring tucked into my pocket.

His lips were almost against mine. “Well, you are the goddess.”

Kaelan’s lips brushed mine in a soft, tender kiss. An invitation for more.

The memories of a dozen other kisses whirled through my mind. Standing three steps above him on the castle stairs and *still* not being taller. His fingers tilting up my chin as he somehow folded himself down to reach my mouth. The two of us sparring in the yard, and his smirk that made me want to punch him before his lips softened against mine.

I’d spent the last five years missing the way Kaelan touched me.

I could take what I wanted and it could be nothing to me, the same way it was to him. I was a nameless, faceless girl in the crowd. A few moments’ pleasure.

He paused as if he were checking in on me. His thumb caressed my cheek, the gesture kind. “Is this alright?”

I nodded. “Fuck me, princeling,” I whispered.

“I thought you’d never ask.”

He kissed me again, this time the kiss as deep and all-consuming as the way he looked at me. His hand wrapped around my throat, holding me against the wall, and my core clutched with need at the easy, possessive gesture.

I'd trusted Kaelan enough to choke me before. It had been the headiest, wildest pleasure of my life.

And even my well-honed spy instincts couldn't make me dislike that edge of danger now, when his hand tightened on my throat.

His body pressed mine, his cock hard against my lower belly. I'd almost forgotten how big he was until he was so close.

I reached for him, feeling his bulk in my palm through his pants.

His hand tightened on my throat. A warning. "Not yet."

"You don't feel like you need foreplay." My voice was breathy and high from his grip.

"Don't rush me." His lips teased against the side of my throat. "I want to feel your pussy wet and greedy for me when I finally take what's mine. I want you to scream my name."

Kaelan's words always ignited me, but I still managed to dredge up some mockery. "You want me to scream *princeling*?"

He let out a laugh against my throat, his grip tightening, and the world went floaty and my knees went weak.

"You might want to be polite," he whispered. "I just want to please you tonight, but I wouldn't object to punishing you. If you insist."

His grip tightened just faintly, another ratchet of the vice that was his powerful grip. Maybe I should have been afraid, but Kaelan was only dangerous in certain ways.

I trusted him to be careful, if not kind.

Once I had loved it when the two of us played at games and punishments. It was too familiar territory. I couldn't go



down that road tonight.

“I’ll be good,” I whispered.

His grip eased. “Wise choice, sweet girl.”

Kaelan would never have called me that if he knew who I was. I had some fine attributes, but *sweet* rarely made the list.

He spun me around so fast that I put my hands out instinctively and caught the wall. Now his hard cock pressed against the curve between my ass, and even with two layers of clothing between us, I felt exposed and needy.

“Unlace your corset.” His lips teased against my throat, over and over, feeling so good that my hips swayed back against his. His hands caressed my lower belly, teasing just barely into the tight leather pants I wore now.

His touch was so distracting that I could barely loosen the buckles. His big hand delved inside my corset, gripping my breast. His palm was rough against my nipple and my hips swayed back insistently, outside my control.

“You have the most perfect tits,” he whispered in my ear. “I’d come on them if I didn’t need to finish inside you. You’re *mine*.”

He said those last words with a wrenching finality, and my heart stuttered. He’d said those last words so loudly it almost seemed as if he’d intended them for someone else.

“That’s probably for the best,” I said in a cool tone that didn’t at all match the rapid beating of my heart or the hungry clutch of need between my thighs. “I’d hate to walk home covered in your cum.”

“You’re going to walk home with it dripping from this greedy little pussy,” he said, his hand delving finally into my pants, and my body jerking at his touch. “And you’re going to think of me with every step.”

“After tonight, I’m never going to think of you again,” I said breezily, wishing that were true. “Isn’t that what this is?”

He breathed against my throat, and then suddenly bit down, suckling and biting. I let out a gasp of shock, but then

his hand was between my thighs, stroking that need until I was moaning, even as he kissed and bit and marked me.

“What’s wrong with you?” I whispered. He paused, his whole body going still, and I gripped his hand, pushing him harder against my pussy. “Don’t stop.”

He grinned against my throat, and then he was kissing me again. I wished it wasn’t too dark to see his smile.

I’d have liked to see it one last time.

For a second, a sudden sense of loss almost overwhelmed me. This was it? The one last chance I had to look at Kaelan, to feel him, before he left the isle?

“Stay with me, goddess,” he murmured.

Whatever happens after does’t matter. Now is...

“Incredible,” I breathed as his hand kept working against my clit until my knees went weak. I leaned back into him, letting him hold up my weight as he teased me. It seemed as if I weighed nothing to him.

I let out a low moan as his hands caressed my breasts and clit, moving expertly, as if he knew exactly what I liked, where to touch and how hard to move. My core began to squeeze, but his fingers danced across my need, finding a new place to tease so I stayed at that aching edge just before an orgasm.

“I want your cock,” I whispered.

“And I want you to cum on my hand first,” he murmured. “And who do you think is going to win?”

I let my head roll back against his broad chest as he played me with ease, letting him carry me completely as my toes curled in my boots. The sounds of my breathing, of my moans, seemed amplified by the cave, echoing all around us. Then I was leaning in his arms, and he was gently caressing my breasts, still kissing my throat.

“I still feel like I won,” I murmured.

“I guess that depends on the game,” he said, then smacked my ass sharply, the sound resounding in the cavern. “Bend

over, sweet girl.”

“I’m still tender,” I said, my clit sore and aching from the power of that orgasm.

“Not as tender as you’re going to be,” he told me. “I want to hear the sounds you make when you take my cock.”

He pushed my pants further down my thighs. There was something degrading and delicious all at once about being half-dressed, my corset hanging loosely from its few remaining buckles, my pants tangled just low enough to expose me.

I reached back and gripped his cock, drawing him out of his pants.

“Is this how a royal acts?” I teased him. “Imagine if you were caught—”

“Yes,” he said, without hesitation. “This is how an ice royal acts. Taking what he wants.”

Then his hand pressed my lower back, his other hand gripping my hip. “And I said bend over.”

Abruptly, I found my palms flat against the wall, my ass pressed against his cock as he teased between my folds. The tip of his cock teased through my cum already soaking down my thighs.

“There it is,” he said in satisfaction, his hand teasing between my thighs, finding my clit. “You need me.”

“For tonight.”

He plunged into me and I let out a cry at the feel of his big cock sliding deep inside me. He pressed his tip hard against the inner spot that turned me to liquid need.

The two of us began to move. He was so much, so intense, and I let out a cry as he kept rocking inside me.

Gods, this was so good.

*He* was so good, when he wasn’t evil.

We kept going until I shattered around him with a scream.

“That’s right,” he said, still gripping my hips, plunging into me over and over as I tightened around him in rhythmic frenzies. “Scream for me, sweet girl. Remind me how much you need me.”

His hands tightened on my hips as the two of us rode over the edge together. My knees went weak, and he slid his arm around my waist, bearing me up.

For a few long seconds, the sounds of our ragged breathing mingled together in the air. He pressed his lips to my shoulder, kissing me over and over, until he finally withdrew. His mingled cum and mine spilled down my leg.

It had been a mindblowing orgasm.

But now it was over, and I was just sticky with my ex-lover’s cum, half-naked in a dripping cave.

“Are you alright?” he asked, still steadying me.

I pulled my pants up, wincing at how my damp panties clung to me now. “Perfect. I got exactly what I wanted.”

“Glad I could oblige.” He moved my hair to one side and kissed my throat one more time. I tried to push away a dozen memories of that same movement as he greeted me in the morning.

He’d made me feel special once.

Gods, I was stupid. Stupid, stupid, stupid.

I twisted in his arms. My hands slid over the hard planes of his chest, teasing him through his shirt. He lowered his head and kissed me, softly and sweetly.

I teased my fingers through his thick, dark hair, pressing my face against the familiar hollow of his throat so he wouldn’t see me breathe out an almost-soundless word of my spell. My nails sharpened, and I used them to cut the throng around his neck, holding it so that he didn’t feel it shift until he moved. Then I drew it up and folded it into my hand.

“You are so beautiful,” he whispered to me, taking my chin and pressing one last kiss to my lips. Then he began to re-fasten my corset.

“I can do that,” I told him, pushing his hands away.

I didn't enjoy his tenderness when I knew he gave this care away to every girl he fucked.

As he looked down at me, disappointment seemed to light his eyes. Then he nodded.

“See you around, sweet girl,” he murmured, before he put himself away in one smooth movement and turned his back on me, walking away.

*No, you won't.*

## CHAPTER 8



Kaelan

Thorne was waiting for me down one of those passages. Gods, I hated being down here in the caverns. All these years later, and the isle still seemed to stink of the Scourge that had once infested their labyrinths.

“Our sweet princess has taken your hook.” I told him.

“And your family heirloom,” he said grimly. He knew how much my mother’s ring meant to me, and he hadn’t wanted me to risk it on this game.

But the stakes were always high when Hanna and I played.

“And my cock.” I felt irrationally annoyed by the way Thorne had been feeling protective of her.

And yet ...

“There were marks on her chest and arms,” I said, miming the same marks on my own chest. “Burn marks. Either the palace healers are incompetent or she hasn’t bothered to go, because they look like they were healed by a first year student.”

“Mm,” Thorne grunted in response.

He probably thought I shouldn’t criticize when neither of us could heal anyone for shit. Healing was not our strength. Causing people to need healing was.

“Once she’s back in the castle, I’ll take over,” I told him. “I want you to find whoever did that to her.”

“I already did.”

“And? Who was it?”

He shrugged one shoulder. “A dead man.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose with two fingers. “Thorne. We are not murdering people on the isle. We’re here so Hanna can cause an international incident and be in our debt ... we are not the ones causing the incidents.”

“It was one small murder.”

“I should have kept the mental link with you the whole time,” I muttered. “so I could keep you under control.”

He grunted. That one meant, *good fucking luck*.

“Who was he, really?”

“Spy Guild. Lots of people would have wanted him killed.”

“Why would someone from the spy Guild attack one of their own?”

“Infighting,” he said curtly.

“Nothing to do with the Snake Queen?”

He shook his head. “I don’t think so.”

Hanna had joined the Guild to protect her family. How close to the center of that rotten apple had she managed to worm? I wished I could talk to her, face to face. As Kaelan and Hanna.

As future husband and wife.

But that would come later.

I checked the time. The Royals should have finally made their way in response to the complaints, and Hanna should just be reaching the arena. “Take her.”

Thorne nodded and the two of us began to walk down the passage. If I knew her, she had taken a few moments to collect

herself.

Now our paths would intersect again.

“Does she really not know that you see her?” Thorne asked. “Do you think she really fell for it?”

“I think she really did.”

I always recognized her. There was something about the way she carried herself, something that was regal and light-hearted at the same time.

“It seems stupid,” Thorne muttered. “And that doesn’t seem like her.”

“People are stupid when they’re in love,” I said. “I was once, too.”

Thorne grunted in response.

That one meant, *you’re still stupid.*

Or maybe it meant something even worse.



Hanna

It was bad enough to be leaking Kaelan’s cum into my pants as I walked back into the dance, determined to thread my way through all these giddy, dancing people and escape back up into the city. I’d drop off the ring, and then I’d go back to the academy and take a long, long bath, trying to scrub any scent of Kaelan from my skin.

And trying to scrub any sense of him from my mind, though I hadn’t achieved resounding success with that in the past few years.

But then I spied two tall blond heads making their way through the crowd.



Branok and Lynx were able to blend in when they wished, but clearly, they did not wish at the moment. Fae scattered around them, giving them a wide berth for wherever they were headed.

I turned on my heel and went the other way. Even with my enchanted face, I'd rather go live in one of those dank passages forever than run into my brothers when I was in a distinctly illicit environment and worse, covered in the marks from Kaelan's filthy mouth.

They had been there to pick up the pieces and discuss murder options with me after he broke my heart. I couldn't imagine how stupid they would think I'd been.

A girl who was imitating snakes with her hands crashed into me, and I shoved an elbow back into her—gods, what was with the snakes—and then finally stumbled out of the jostle of the crowd.

And right into the arms of an angry Ice Fae.

“What the hell?” I demanded as he abruptly slammed into me, forcing me brutally into the stone wall. I could barely breathe as his hands roughly slid down my clothes, his touch cold and unforgiving.

“We meet again.” His breath was against my ear as he shoved me into the stone. “You are a terrible kisser, by the way.”

“I can explain,” I began, only because he had pinned me so completely that I couldn't reach my daggers. Otherwise, I would have let them do the explaining.

“Hey!” Lynx's voice seared through the crowd. “Let go of that girl.”

I closed my eyes. Fuck.

“You always ruin my day,” I muttered to the Ice Fae.

“Oh? At least you're not unconscious shoved into the root pantry.”

“You just looked so much like one of the potatoes,” I explained.

The crowd parted for Lynx in a way they never had for me. Two of his guards trailed behind him, grim-faced, carrying iron batons in case the crowd surged against them. But I didn't think Lynx and Branok needed that kind of help.

Lynx stopped in front of us. "What's going on here?"

Gods, if I talked, I was worried he would recognize me.

"This girl stole from the Ice Fae Prince," Thorne took advantage of my pause.

Before I could respond, he suddenly dove at me and wrenched at my pocket. Lynx was on him instantly, shoving him back against the wall, pinning him there.

Thorne's hands were pinned above his head by glowing magic. He relaxed his hands, palms out, as if he were trying to show Lynx he was no threat.

The cut thong, and the ring on it, dangled from his hand.

Lynx turned to me. "Is that true?"

We were in a room with a thousand curious people, and I was a princess who had stolen from a kingdom with whom we shared precarious peace. I needed to get out of here without being caught for my kingdom's sake, even if that meant going to prison.

I pitched my voice softer and deeper than my own.

"No. Of course not. He's been hassling me and following me—" That was true. "And he made up this story for revenge. He gave it to me."

Less so.

"This little wench had sex with the Prince and stole his mother's ring from around his neck."

I tried to look like the picture of righteous indignation.

Lynx gave me a look that said it wasn't working.

"Arrest her," he said.

## CHAPTER 9



*H*anna  
*W*e entered the now-empty passage that had been so crowded before, and the stairs up yawned in front of us.

“Escort her to the prison, I’ll hear her case in the morning,” Lynx waved us off as Branok joined him.

Thank the gods. I might be able to give these two guards the slip, but Lynx was another story.

“Wait!” A deep, masculine voice seemed to shake the hallway. It certainly shook me.

Kaelan.

Then he came around the corner, his dark cloak fluttering from his shoulders. He looked grim.

“What?” Lynx demanded. “Would you like to be arrested too? Underground tournaments are illegal. It would be my pleasure.”

Gods, I loved my brothers-in-law.

“She was using an enchantment,” Kaelan said, and my heart sank. “I intend to see who was really stealing from me.”

Lynx rolled his eyes. He had always found Kaelan a bit tiresome. “Fine. Go ahead.”

Kaelan stepped in front of me.

This close, I was the only one who could see the slow, sinister smile that crept over his lips as he stared down at me.

*Oh, fuck.*

He muttered the word of his spell, and my enchantment melted off my face, feeling wet and drippy like tears that fell onto my exposed cleavage.

For a few long seconds, Lynx and Branok just stared at me.

“Fascinating,” Lynx’s tone was dry. “Let’s sort this out at the castle.”

I held out my hands, which had been chained together by the guards.

Lynx snorted. “Not a chance.”



As we entered the castle, the halls had been cleared. At least Branok had taken Kaelan and the other Ice Fae away, ostensibly to take their testimony, but I had a feeling he was protecting me from being face to face with Kaelan.

Small mercies.

“Lynx,” I attempted, “be reasonable.”

He quirked an eyebrow at me. Lynx had grown a beard, which distinguished him from Branok, and it was a good look for him. “You could have been reasonable to begin with, and not caused an international incident.”

“He was never supposed to learn who I am!”

“And yet here we are.” Lynx raised his hand as if to draw a banner in the sky—and then, using magic, he did raise one that floated along the ceiling.

*The queen’s sister steals magical relic from the Ice Fae*

“That’s really not necessary,” I snapped.

“The Ice Fae want a reason to partner with the Snake Queen and attack the isle, and you gave them one,” Lynx said. “Gods, Hanna. I’ve never met a more intelligent fool.”

My jaw. I made sure he didn’t see the rage that pulsed through my chest at those words. Lynx was so nice. It hurt when he was disappointed.

“You’re not really going to parade her through the castle in chains,” Zehr said in exasperation. His voice startled me—and Lynx—and we both looked up to find him watching us as he leaned against the wall ahead.

“Don’t interfere,” Lynx warned, but it was too late.

Zehr flashed, the world went cold, and the next thing I knew, the two of us were on one of the parapets overlooking the sea.

“He can be so long-winded,” Zehr sighed. “You already *know* you’re an idiot. There’s no reason to go on and on about it.”

“Well, thanks!” I didn’t feel like launching a defense of myself at the moment, but gods.

Zehr didn’t apologize. He leaned against the railing alongside me.

Zehr let out a sigh. “I hate to agree with my brothers, but it seems ridiculous that you’re doing all this to be a part of the Guild. You can’t reveal your full power. You can’t fly. You’ve made yourself small for them.”

“The Guild gives me a chance to have my own life. To have an adventure, instead of just being Honor’s little sister \_\_\_”

“Believe me, adventure is overrated,” Zehr interrupted. There was a bite in his voice that I wasn’t used to hearing. He usually seemed relaxed, even lazy.

“Is it?”

He leaned his elbows on the railing and looked out over the sea below. “You know we all adore Honor as much as the day we met her. She is extraordinary, and she’s only gotten

better over the years, even though she was extraordinary from the beginning.”

“I know how wonderful my sister is. I don’t need extolling of her virtues.”

Anyone who saw these men with my sister could tell how much they adored her. Even Zehr, who was usually so cool and controlled.

“Just be quiet and listen, or I’ll hand you back to Lynx,” Zehr said. “I’m trying to tell you she’s changed. Hasn’t she? With all those adventures, with the weight of her experiences. Think about it. You knew her before I did.”

“All my life,” I admitted. But when I thought back, I had to admit my childhood memories of Honor were perhaps blurred by how I’d worshipped her when I was a little girl. She’d always been so strong, clear eyed and quick witted.

“She had this innocent presence about her,” he mused, his voice fond. “She was so cheeky, but it came from this deep well of optimism. She felt so sure good would win out in the end, and so she winked at trouble and threw herself into danger.”

I felt a sudden pit in my stomach, a sense of alarm that was greater than anything I felt about the Ice Fae situation. My sister’s men never talked to me so frankly. I never saw any cracks in the relationship they all shared.

Maybe this wasn’t a crack, exactly. But it was a complication.

“And she’s still wonderful, but she’s not the same?”

“Of course she’s not the same. We’re all getting older. She saw horrible things. She knows now that good doesn’t always win.” Zehr turned to me, his eyes dark and unsettling. “You act like there’s something horrible about being protected here in this castle.”

“It’s not horrible,” I muttered, hating how I suddenly sounded like a sullen, scolded child.

Though that might be how Zehr saw me at the moment.

“And I understand,” he said gently, “because no matter how much you and your sister may exasperate each other, you are very much alike.”

I didn't think that Honor and I were alike.

If we were, wouldn't I like myself better?

Perhaps Zehr saw me with the same rosy vision that all the rest of Honor's men seemed to, and disappointment settled into my gut.

I felt loved in this castle.

I never felt seen.

“But there is a cost to those adventures you long for, Hanna. Don't you dare be angry at your sister for trying to protect you.”

His words struck me hard. And I tried to hide my reaction.

Instead, I settled my hands on high hips as I faced him. “Damn it, Zehr. You can't deflate me so utterly right before I have to go talk to her. You know she's going to yell at me. And we're sisters. You know I'm going to have to yell back. I can't let her get away with scolding me.”

Zehr smiled faintly. “It sounds like the rest of us should probably leave the room.”

My brothers loved me, but they didn't take very well to anyone shouting at their beloved Honor.

“Probably,” I admitted. Then, more quietly, I asked, “How bad is it, really, Zehr?”

He sighed. “The Ice Fae could justify a declaration of war, if that's what they wanted. While that is certainly what the Ice Fae *King* and the Snake Queen want—he needs to do whatever he can to distract her from invading his kingdom—I'm not entirely sure that's what Prince Kaelan wants.”

“Great,” I said. “So my best chance at not having pushed us into war is ... hoping he doesn't want too desperately to make daddy happy?”

“Exactly.”

The doors swung open.

“I knew you’d bring her up here.” Jaik strolled in, his crown tilted back on his dark curls.

“Go away,” Zehr waved him off with a casual shake of his fingers. “We’re coming up with the plan so that she and her sister don’t breathe fire at each other until they’re both immolated. You have never helped anyone to calm their tempers.”

Jaik frowned at him and closed the door behind him. “I came with a solution, actually.”

Zehr looked skeptical, but gestured for him to go on.

Jaik faced me with the same firm look I saw when he told my nibblings to eat their oatmeal. “Hanna, it’s time you went to the Academy. We can tell the Ice Fae that this was a stupid prank and reassure them that we did not, in fact, send a spy to steal from them. Sending you to the Academy can look like a punishment—”

“Because it would be a punishment!” I burst out.

“And we can reassure them that you will be staying out of trouble.” Half to himself, Jaik muttered, “I’d appreciate some assurances about that myself. Not that I feel wildly optimistic.”

“I’m not sure that Ice Fae are going to find that sufficient punishment for trying to steal one of their oldest and most valuable magical items,” Zehr said. “Did you have to do it with an audience, Hanna?”

“I think I was set up by the Guild,” I admitted.

“Speaking of which, it’s certainly impossible for you to keep up this Guild bullshit. You’ll go to the Academy,” Jaik said.

Zehr sighed dramatically, as if this conversation were exactly what he wanted to avoid. I couldn’t help bristling at Jaik’s tone.

“That’s where you belong anyway.” Jaik went on. “Then you can use your powers, openly, and you can protect your



kingdom and your sister if—”

I’d surrender my life to the Guild to protect Honor and my kingdom, but I couldn’t let them know my plans. “I can’t give up my entire life for my sister!”

They would never let me sacrifice myself for her.

The Academy was the last place I needed to be.

Jaik looked at me as if I had just slapped him. He probably would have preferred violence. “How can you possibly say that? Knowing how much she loves you?”

I hated that I looked like I cared about her so much less than I did, given what seemed like my obsession with the Guild.

I couldn’t die without letting her know how much I loved her.

“My sister’s love, like yours, is awfully overbearing.”

“You only say that because you still have so much growing up to do,” Jaik said dismissively.

Zehr sighed again, in case any of us hadn’t noticed the first time. “You know, when you came in here, there were three glorious seconds where I thought you might actually be helpful. But here you are ... not being helpful.”

“You can’t become *yourself* when you’re so wrapped up in someone else’s love, and what they’ve sacrificed for you, and what you owe them,” I told them. It was part of why I never wanted to fall in love again. “I do love my sister, so much. But there’s nowhere in this kingdom where I can step out from her shadow. Certainly not the Academy she rules over.”

Jaik looked grim, but before he could say anything, I added, “Do you think I would ever be anyone there but her little sister?”

He scoffed. “Do you think the Guild values you for anything *besides* being her little sister?”

Anger shot through me. It was worse, because it was true. “I’m good at spycraft.”

“Well,” Zehr said. “Since you’re so good at it, I’ll just return you to your chains and let you figure things out from there.”

I must really have pissed off the shadow king. The next second, the world went dark.

Then I was back in the circle of surprised guards.

Zehr slipped the chains back around my wrists and offered me a grim smile. “Good luck with that.”

“Jaik is going to pissed you stranded him,” I said.

Zehr shrugged, stepping back into the shadows, and then he was gone.

Lynx looked highly irritated. “Let’s get you to that meeting with your sister before you can disappear again.”

“That was not my fault,” I protested.

If I had been at all in control of my disappearance, I would not have come back.

Briden was scurrying down the hall, carrying an armful of something wrapped in a blanket that was probably illicit. He stopped and stared at me with open curiosity.

“Shoo,” Lynx told him, pulling the bundle out of his arms without missing a beat. A few cookies rained down on the floor and crumbs scattered across the marble. “You’re supposed to already be up in your room reading before bed.”

“Sorry, father,” Briden said, looking absolutely unapologetic. He took a step back and was gone. I couldn’t tell if he had walked through the shadow like his father, or if he was just that quick and quiet on his feet.

Lynx sighed. “Keeping that boy out of prison is going to be almost as difficult as keeping *you* out of it.”

Honor would never send me to prison. She’d send me to the Academy, which was probably worse.

At the Academy, I’d have to run and exercise.

Lynx pushed open the door to the throne room, which glittered beyond, and offered me a mocking half bow to welcome me in.

Honor stood from her throne as I walked in. Her long red hair was elaborately plaited, woven with jewels, but she wasn't wearing a crown. It gave her a headache. She was wearing a deep blue velvet gown, slightly tight and straining at the stomach, and I had a feeling she was pregnant yet again.

Given the thunderous look on my sister's beautiful face, I wouldn't point out her thick belly at the moment.

"You are ridiculous," Honor told me tightly.

"I had my reasons."

"I cannot *wait*," she told me. Then she sighed. "All right, get her out of the chains. We all know I was just being theatrical."

"We all know what the obvious solution is to this problem," Jaik said as he strode through the door. "We plead youthful stupidity, she apologizes to the Prince, and we send her off to the Academy."

"I'm not apologizing to him," I said, two seconds before every head in the room swiveled toward me and I realized I'd made a terrible mistake.

"You will do whatever it takes," Honor told me, her voice crisp, "to keep from plunging us into *war*."

"How long are we going to dance around the Snake Queen? She attacked us here on our own shores five years ago —"

"Until *I* feel we can win," Honor's voice was low and fierce, "we will not be going to war. And if there's any way we can avoid war at all, we will. You have no idea what war costs."

I pressed my lips together tightly.

"You did this, you fix it," Honor told me. "The Prince wants your side of the story. And so would I, before I decide if

I'm going to let you talk to him unsupervised. I asked you not to conduct Guild business—”

“In your castles! I stole the ring from him at that underground tournament.”

“Where you also should not have been.” Arren walked in through the side door to the throne room, the one that led to their apartments. He was a big, hulking man, swaying side to side as he carried Inoria, who was wrapped in a blanket and yawning as she fought off sleep.

Honor said coolly, “I didn't think I needed to tell you specifically not to start any wars!”

“As if you've never started a war yourself! You stole from the Snake Queen in the first place. That's why she's so desperate to take over your kingdom!”

“Now that the Snake Queen's recovered from her broken back,” Arren said with evident satisfaction.

“Enough,” Honor said. “Explain to me exactly what happened, Hanna.”

I didn't get far into my explanation—though I heard far more sighs than I liked—before the side door burst open.

Briden and Lysander were in front, the same size and so similar-looking they might have been twins, except one was dark-haired and the other golden-blond. They were ten and nine, and the ringleaders for the entire circus. The rest of the kids spilled in behind them.

“They couldn't sleep,” Lysander explained, but Briden's gaze met mine and he gave me a mischievous grin.

They were trying to save me.

“It might help if they were in *bed*,” Damyn pointed out. The towering warrior went to catch two-year-old Masen, who streaked through his arms.

Damyn muttered a curse word under his breath, and Honor glared at him, which was a refreshing change from how she had been glaring at me.

“Bed!” Talisyn called firmly, before catching one of the twins—I couldn’t see if it was Kasia or Kaden—and swinging the child over his shoulder. He reached for the other twin, but they eluded him.

Zehr put his head down into his hands and pinched the bridge of his nose in exasperation. Then he was a flash moving through the shadows, but the kids stayed one step ahead of him.

“Are you in trouble?” Briden whispered to me, popping up into the shadows to my right.

“So much,” I whispered back.

He held out his hand. “I’m always in trouble too.”

We probably both deserved it, honestly.

I grinned back at him and took his hand.

The two of us flashed into the shadows. Then we were out in the vast marble hallway, which was lined with ancient artwork of former rulers. They all looked down at us disapprovingly. At least we’d earned the judgment.

“Thank you,” I said. I felt like I should offer some aunt-like advice instead of just being a bad example. “I *am* in trouble, but I’m going to fix it.”

“Of course you are,” he said. “You always make things better, Hanna.”

Briden hugged me around the waist, and I hugged him back, before running my hand through his dark hair. He smiled up at me.

I would do anything for my sister and my niblings.

Even let them think I was just a lovesick fuck-up.

## CHAPTER 10



Hanna

Honor would have stored Kaelan in the yellow room. It had the most impressive ancient art and the ugliest puce wallpaper.

When I walked into the room, he was leaning back in an eight hundred-year-old chair, looking as arrogant as ever. His dark hair was artfully mussed, and his blue eyes pinned me as soon as I stepped in the door.

He was still dressed in the same black clothes he'd worn when we met before, which seemed far more pristine than I felt at the moment.

"Kaelan." The word burned in my throat.

"Well. I thought it would take longer for them to force you to apologize to me."

I turned my back on him to close the elaborately carved doors behind me. My hands shook slightly. With anger, but still. I didn't want to feel any strong emotions when I looked at his stupid, perfect face. I inhaled, exhaled. *Calm*.

When I turned around, he was still an arrogant dickhead with a smirk written across his face. *Calm* wasn't going to happen.

He leaned forward with a feral smile. "If you intend to offer your apology in the Ice Fae way—as would be the proper

diplomacy—you'll have to kneel in front of me and supplicate yourself.”

He settled back, tilting his chair onto the back legs, and added, “It should be character building for you.”

He was enjoying this far too much.

“Certainly, I'll kneel for you as an expression of my deep regrets.”

The expression on his face was surprised, but only for a fraction of a second.

Then I swept the chair legs out from underneath him, and he slammed on his back.

I dropped on top of him, my knees pinning his shoulders down. “Do you like me better on my knees?” I demanded.

He looked distinctly unimpressed. “Very cute.”

“I'm not trying to impress you.”

“I think we both know that if you weren't, you wouldn't be on top of me right now.”

“What do you want?” The timing was too precise: the assignment, the way Branok and Lynx had shown up. “Why did you set this all up?”

“My own entertainment, mostly. I was curious if you would take the bait.” He looked awfully pleased with himself for a man pinned to the marble floor. “I really thought you were more intelligent, Hanna.”

Those words reminded me far too much of our breakup conversation, when he had told me that I was too weak to bring home to the Ice Fae court.

“You set this up so we'd have to consider granting whatever stupid favor it is you want. So tell me what it is.”

“I don't think the Ice Fae need any favors from your tiny isle.”

“Then *you* need a favor from *me*.” The air seemed to crackle between the two of us as he stared up into my eyes.

He didn't deny it..

He suddenly popped his hips, trying to launch me off. The two of us struggled across the floor, both of us trying to get the upper hand.

I rolled on top of him and punched him mercilessly across the jaw, so hard that his head snapped back and hit the marble.

His big hand wrapped my throat and he forced me down to the ground, exerting just enough pressure that the world started to go black around the edges.

“You might start being a little more nice to me, given how much trouble the desire for revenge has already gotten you into,” he said scornfully. “Gods, we were practically children when I hurt your *feelings*. And you act like you're still one.”

“Tell me what it is you want from me.” My voice was strained, no matter how much I wanted to play it off.

He finally released me. I drew in a ragged breath as the two of us rolled apart, both of us scrambling to our feet. We faced each other, raising fists, ready to fight again.

He offered me a smile. “I can smell my cum on you.”

“Yes, it's quite pungent. You should get that checked out.”

He set the chair back on its feet. “Can we be civil?”

“Are you really asking me to be civil after talking about your cum?”

He sighed and took a seat in the chair, though he sat on the edge, still looking wary. Now he finally wasn't looking down at me. The man was far too tall.

“To take the throne, I need to be married.”

“I pity that poor woman,” I snapped back.

“You should. She's a real idiot.” He favored me with a slow smile. “So, will you do me the honor of a fake engagement?”

For a few long seconds, I stared at him, unable to even fathom an answer.



He drummed his fingers on the arms of the chair. Kaelan was smiling now, but it wasn't the nice, secret smile that used to feel like it belonged only to me. This was the predatory smile Kaelan offered his enemies.

“Do you think if I asked your sister to throw you in the dungeon, she would do it? In the interest of preventing an international incident?”

Kaelan had turned into someone so different, a graceful, handsome villain, and it was hard to believe the time we'd shared before. The spell I'd cast to take away his memory had made him despise me.

Which begged the question ... “If you dislike me so much, how did you choose me as your lucky bride?”

Women were always falling over themselves for the Prince. He didn't need me.

“There are only so many Dragons to go around. My people want to see me with another dragon. It means something to them.” He shrugged.

“Why?”

He ignored the question, offering me a cutting smile along with the words, “I don't need you. I need what you stand for.”

He'd meant the words to hurt, and they did. Like a slash through my chest.

Ah, fuck him. There was a point where it didn't matter that he had fake memories haunting his mind. This was who he really was.

“Why don't you explain to me what's in it for me? Besides staving off an international incident. I'm not that self sacrificing.” My sister and my brothers-in-law would go to war to defend me.

I couldn't let them do that. But Kaelan thought so little of me, he must believe I would.

“You don't have to stay on the isle and die of shame, with all of them knowing that I fucked you and you had a tantrum,

stealing my ring. You get to fix things. To pretend you have some power in your little world.”

With every word he said, our shared past seemed more distant.

“You know I can’t shift into a dragon.” The lie ached in my chest. I could imagine the look of disdain that would cross his face even before it happened.

It still hurt when he shrugged, the expression on his face saying he already knew I was weak.

It didn’t usually bother me. I didn’t care what people thought of me. What mattered was what I was doing for my sister and my kingdom.

But when Kaelan thought I was small, being underestimated hit harder than ever.

“I don’t need you to be able to shift into a dragon,” he said. “I just need the illusion that you can. I can accomplish that with magic. All I need is for you to come to my kingdom, keep your mouth shut, and stay out of trouble.”

I scoffed. “Kaelan, we have met before. You must know how unlikely that is.”

He met my gaze. “Sooner or later, you know that the Snake Kingdom will come for either your kingdom or mine.”

“I do know.”

“We’ll either be enemies or friends.”

I threw up my hands. “Honor will help you! There’s no need for us to pretend to get married.”

The thought of being in close proximity to this beautiful dickhead every day was agonizing.

“I’m not the king of the Ice Kingdom yet. I have no power to decide who the Ice Fae wage war against ... your kingdom or the Snake Queen’s. I only know we *are* going to war, and soon. And we are better equipped to win against you than the Snake Queen.” His gaze held mine. “The only way I can

prevent war is to marry. To take the throne. To make my kingdom ready to face the Snake Queen when she comes.”

“And you think I’ll inspire your people.”

His smile was a quick flash of fangs. “I believe you will inspire them just as much as you annoy me. So it is a sacrifice I will make for my kingdom.”

“And a sacrifice I’ll make for mine, I suppose.”

“Let’s give our oaths on it, then.”

My hesitation was all pretend. The tattoo on my body would protect me. I’d make whatever oaths I needed to, knowing they’d count for nothing.

I just needed to be careful. Once I lied about an oath, I had to remember the lie and pretend to act in accordance with the magic. Otherwise, it would become evident it was all fake.

Lying is so much more work than telling the truth.

But sometimes it makes life so much more interesting.

“And what oath are you making to me, Kaelan?” I demanded.

“What matters to you?”

“Preventing war. Protecting my family. My kingdom.”

“You sound like the good little soldier you claim you don’t want to be.”

How did he know? I stared at him, wondering just what Kaelan remembered.

“What do you really want?” he asked, his voice dropping to a low, languid sexy tone.

*I want to see the world beyond the isle. I want to prove myself. I want to be my own person.*

“I want for nothing,” I reminded him. “I’m a princess.”

“How could I ever forget?” he asked.

“I certainly cannot,” I said dryly. “My duty to this kingdom is the only reason I’m still in this conversation.”

Kaelan's eyes crinkled at the corners, the first time a smile from him had deepened into something real. My heart flipflopped despite itself. *Fucking heart. Grow up.*

"If you promise me, Hanna, that you will go through to a fake wedding, and that you will pretend to be deeply in love with me in public ..."

Gods. This was going to destroy me.

"I promise I'll do all I can to avert war. To destroy the Snake Queen."

I scoffed. "You'd do that anyway. There's nothing for me there."

"And I'll protect your sister and your nieces and nephews," he said. "With my life, if needed. But preferably with someone else's."

"Fine," I said.

I could already feel the tingle of magic gathering in the air, a sense of electricity like an oncoming thunderstorm. It was magic that would seal our vows and set the stakes if we betrayed them.

He pulled out a pen and notebook from his coat.

"Look at you, always prepared."

"How long do you think we have before your sister finds you?"

"Not long."

He passed me the pen. "Write your oath. I'll write mine."

"Mm, I think we should do the opposite. I'll write your oath, Kaelan."

He looked distinctly unimpressed.

"If we're going to be married, we should trust each other," I chided him. "And we'll read and edit before we say them. I'm not going to slip anything by you."

He quirked an eyebrow.

"What? You called me an idiot earlier."

“You’re an idiot in very specific ways,” he said. “I am aware you’re keenly intelligent and just slightly evil.”

I frowned at him, though there was something in me that glowed warm at the compliment. “I’m not evil. I’m not the one forcing a woman into marrying me.”

He scoffed. “I couldn’t force you. If you didn’t see a mutually agreeable path forward, you would knife me, stuff the corpse into the china cabinet,” he nodded at the corner, “and tell your sister *sorry, but I started a war today.*”

“I wouldn’t casually murder you,” I disagreed, then added, “There’d be nothing casual. It would be deliberate and delightful. Something I’d relish in my memories.”

He snorted and tossed the pen to me. I caught it out of the air—thank gods, I’d have hated to miss in front of him—and he produced another from his jacket.

Both of us quickly scrawled out our oaths. Then I studied mine, looking for the loopholes he might be able to exploit. I didn’t judge him for *that*. I would be trying to exploit any loopholes in my own oath.

Maybe the two of us could work together to take down the Snake Queen.

But I didn’t trust anything Kaelan said, any more than I’d trust a snake for a snuggle.

*Magic, hear my vows and bind me to them.*

He held the vow he’d written out to me, offering the other hand for my piece of paper. His fingers were long and deft, calloused across the knuckles. Those hands had felt incredible on my body once, as his hands swept down my hips, as he buried that sharply angled, beautiful face in my shoulder, his lips parting as I rode him...

I took the vow from him.

*I will do all I can to convince all I meet—and especially King Edric—that I am deeply in love with Prince Kaelan. I will follow through with my engagement, and this enchantment will not be broken until the day I marry him. If I knowingly*

*break my vow, strike me with the most terrible headache that torments me without lasting injury until Prince Kaelan gives me a kiss.*

I looked up at him. “You must be fucking kidding me.”

“No,” he said. “I even wrote the escape into your vows.”

“Yes, all I have to do is marry you.”

“It’s a fate an awful lot of women will envy,” he promised me. “But your oath left me with a lifetime of playing bodyguard. What if one of your nieces or nephews grows up into some terrible person who just begs to be murdered?”

My lips parted in distaste. “How dare you.”

“I heard them, you know,” he said. “Running around the castle. They’re practically feral.”

“They’re Honor’s,” I said, with a wave of my hand. “They scale the sides of the castle and cause general mayhem because she deserves them. But they’re delightful. And let’s be honest here: you heard all their nonsense because you were snooping.”

He didn’t bother to deny it. “Give me an escape clause.”

“Fine,” I said. “When the Snake Queen is off the throne, you and I are done with each other.”

When we finally agreed on our vows, he held his hands out to me.

I raised my eyebrows. “I don’t think so.”

He smiled down at me, his hair far more rakish and wild looking than usual at the moment when we had just wrestled across the floor. “We are going to pretend to be deeply in love. You’re going to have to touch me.”

“I don’t care about touching you,” I said lightly, before I rested my fingertips on his palms.

Electricity seemed to crackle around us that might have nothing to do with the gathering magic.

His big hands closed around mine, gripping me tightly. I rolled my eyes. Of course he had to capture me.

“Hanna, I promise you that for as long as you are sincerely practicing your oath to me...” His icy blue eyes met mine. “Your family is my family. I’ll fight for them and protect them with my life, if needed. But preferably with someone else’s life. Most of all, I will always protect you.”

“I don’t need to be protected.”

His eyes glinted. “You haven’t seen the Ice Kingdom yet.”

We both spoke the words of our vows. Kaelan’s deep blue eyes were intent on my face, and I couldn’t tear my eyes away from his sculpted lips, his chiseled jaw and sharp cheekbones. I was going to have to stare at that beautiful face every day. I barely even heard him speak, watching his lips shape the words of his promise. The world had gone very quiet for me.

I was making a terrible mistake. I could feel it in my bones.

The magic tingled around me, the hairs on my arms standing up at the electric crackle through the air.

The door burst open, and Honor faced us, looking highly irritated.

## CHAPTER 11



*H*anna

**M**y sister might not be wearing her crown, but her fingers twisted at her deep red hair as if I were giving her the headache that usually came from it. Her tone was sharp, but her face was pale, her cheeks colorless.

Scared. For me.

“What’s going on?” Honor demanded. “I felt that wave of magic down the hall.”

I hated when I worried my big sister, though that didn’t seem to prevent me from doing it quite often.

“Sorry,” I answered. Kaelan was still gripping my hands tightly, and he didn’t let me pull away, though I tried, so I ceased struggling and just smiled. “I was just making an engagement oath to Prince Kaelan.”

The look on Honor’s face said she couldn’t even speak, before she finally managed, “What?”

“I’ve been in love with him since we were first met,” I said. “Someone set up my stealing from him to cause an incident. But Kaelan is, of course, too intelligent to fall for such a stupid situation. We’ve decided to visit the Ice Kingdom together and see if we want to marry.”

“A wedding, not war.” Kaelan still gripped my hand in his. “It’s a tidy solution to the problem. And of course I won’t tell



anyone Hanna is a spy. Other kingdoms would look askance at having the royal court visitors be trained spies and assassins.”

Ah, Kaelan. Professing love and making threats all at once. That was just like him.

“I’d like to talk to my sister alone,” Honor said.

“Of course,” Kaelan said.

He pressed a kiss to my forehead. It seemed natural for him, though I felt stiff and awkward in every way.

Honor glanced back toward the hall as Kaelan moved past her into the marble entryway. A general feeling of malice emanated from the hall, so I assumed Honor’s men had congregated there.

“What are you thinking?” Honor asked.

“I’m fixing the mess I made,” I said.

“I didn’t ask you to do that.”

“You asked me to do exactly that,” I said.

“Not like this!”

“Well, you can’t be picky,” I chided. “Anyway, you know the oath isn’t for real. It’s just a game.”

She stared at me. “Are you getting revenge on me right now or on Kaelan?”

“I’m not getting revenge on anyone. I’m a princess. I do what needs to be done for our kingdom, and marrying Kaelan makes sense.”

She stared at me. “Are you enchanted? You must be enchanted. You’d never say that otherwise. You hate Kaelan.”

“You hated *Branok*.” It still outraged me. Branok was one of my favorites.

She sighed under her breath. “Hold on.”

Her eyes took on the slightly glossy, unfocused look they did when she was communicating with the guys. Seconds later, Zehr stepped out of the shadows of the corner, escorting Branok.

“—if she’s under an enchantment,” Zehr finished his sentence.

Branok pulled away from him, frowning. “You need to finish the sentence *before* you shadow travel me. You don’t realize how alarming that is.”

“I thought you knew,” Zehr looked smug. “I didn’t realize she only reached out to me.”

Honor rolled her eyes. “Both of you, focus.”

Branok produced a small potion bottle and held it out toward me. “Drink this.”

Honor glanced away, and Branok gave her a look that was tinged with feelings I couldn’t quite read. Shame? Grief? It wasn’t a look I’d ever seen Branok wear.

“What is it?” I asked.

“It’s a potion that will reveal how many enchantments you’re carrying,” he said. “You should have the anti-oaths enchantment and no others, unless you’re using something?”

I shook my head. “What you see is what you get.”

Some Fae walked around with a perpetual glamor spell so they always looked their best. Never trust anyone whose hair is always perfect.

“Then down it.”

I uncorked it and smelled it. “What does it taste like?”

“Hanna.” Honor’s voice had an edge of threat. “If you’re old enough to get engaged on a whim, you’re old enough not to worry about if a potion tastes like a less-preferred vegetable.”

“I’m not wild about vegetables,” I admitted, paused with the bottle halfway to my lips, “but Lynx made that one potion that tasted like earwax—”

Honor gently pushed the bottle up toward my mouth. I shrugged and put it to my lips and swallowed.

Then I glanced at the looks on Branok's, Zehr's, and Honor's faces. "What is it?"

"Is it broken?" Honor asked. She took the potion bottle from me, looking inside it as if perhaps I hadn't taken the potion. "Are you sure it's a good spell, Branok?"

"I'm sure," Bran said.

"What's going on?"

Branok said, "The enchantment should have lit up around you. A ring for each enchantment."

"But nothing happened," I said slowly. "You must not have done it correctly—"

"Of course I did it correctly." Branok looked offended. "Show me your mark."

I moved my corset aside to show them the mark hidden under the strap.

Honor winced at the mess of bruises and cuts and burn marks. "You should see a healer."

"It doesn't matter," I said. "I'll heal eventually. "

"Not from this," Branok said, seizing my arm. "Someone burnt away your mark. Did you not notice?"

I'd been such a mass of wounds from that desperate fight against Setti in the alleyway. I'd been planning to stop and see a healer. But now as I stared down at the wounds, I realized why Setti had come after me.

The entire point of that fight had been to ruin my mark. Now that realization thudded into me.

I'd made a real vow to Eledora to be obedient to the Guild.

I'd made a real vow to Kaelan to pretend to adore him.

"Who else knew about the mark besides us?" Zehr sounded calm but furious.

Branok turned and ran his hands through his hair.

Who else knew? That thought pulsed through my head. Friends might have seen the mark when we went to the baths,

and one of the Fae I'd kissed trying to find a Kaelan-substitute might have noticed it.

But there was one person I knew for sure knew that mark and exactly what it meant, because I'd been innocent. Innocent and stupid.

*Kaelan's lips traced the mark above my breast. "I thought you didn't want any of those ridiculous tattoos."*

*He thought it was stupid people wore tattoos to show their magical powers. His own body seemed like a mile of perfect, taut muscle and clear, almost sparkling pale skin.*

*"It's not a magic symbol," I'd said with a mischievous smile. "My brothers are trying to protect me from doing anything stupid."*

*"It must be nice to have brothers who protect you." He'd interwoven his fingers with mine, lying back in the pillows.*

*I'd been distracted then, asking him about the men he considered like his brothers, Thorne and Dare.*

*But I knew Kaelan well enough now to know nothing ever distracted him.*

I hadn't told him the exact purpose of the mark. But Kaelan was inconveniently intelligent.

"Hanna." Honor said urgently. "What exactly did you promise?"

"I... took two oaths," I admitted. "Since the mark was broken."

"How did it get broken?"

A lump formed in my throat. I couldn't betray the Guild. And since I was pretty damn sure this was the work of the Guild... Fuck. I couldn't force the words out around the oath that choked me.

"I can't tell you," I admitted.

Honor threw up her arms and turned away. "You're not going anywhere until I know you're safe. Kaelan suggested throwing you in the dungeon, and I'm seriously considering it

for your own safety!” After a second, she admitted, “And also, because I am wildly pissed right now.”

“Honor,” Zehr said quietly.

She pointed a finger at him. “Don’t use your reasonable voice on me!”

“I love her too,” Zehr told her. “We all want to see Hanna safe and well.”

“And not stupid,” Branok noted, absent-mindedly.

I frowned at him.

She paced around the room. Branok, on the other hand, settled into one of the chairs opposite me, folding one leg over the other. It might have looked as if he didn’t care, but I knew that expression on his face. He had a puzzle and he was going to solve it.

I racked my brain, trying to figure out what I could tell them.

“I think the Snake Queen is a danger to Honor,” I said.

“No kidding,” Honor said. “Bran, I thought you were teaching her spy craft. And yet here we are, stating the obvious.”

“No need to get mean,” Zehr murmured. But Honor was fixed on me and didn’t hear, or chose to ignore his words.

Sometimes I got the feeling that *choosing to ignore some things* was an important part of marriage.

“She’s working on some plot against our kingdom. Against *you*,” I said. “I want to go with Kaelan. To help him. I want to bring the Snake Queen down before she tries to take you off the throne, Honor.”

Her lips parted. “You’re going to marry Kaelan to protect me?”

“This may have been the Snake Queen’s work.” I touched the now-ruined mark. “Ultimately, it’s her fault either way. Let me pay her back, Honor.”

“I want you here and safe.” Her voice had dropped to a whisper. Honor must be afraid her voice would break.

Zehr slipped his arms around her from behind, and she leaned back into him.

“She’s your sister,” Branok said quietly. “She’s got to do what she must.”

For a second, I thought he was speaking to me, and I almost protested. Honor wanted to protect me, but I still needed to do meaningful work instead of staying the princess in the castle.

Then I realized he had twisted in his seat, delivering the words to Honor.

For a few long seconds, the room was silent. Branok bobbed his foot as if he were thinking. Zehr lowered his face and kissed Honor’s shoulder tenderly.

“I hate this,” Honor suddenly exploded. “I don’t want you heading off to marry some dreadful Ice Fae prince in service to the kingdom. Marrying our girls off for political alliances is something I’d like to leave in our past where it belongs.”

“Kaelan needs a bride,” I said, careful to respect the words of my vow. “And he wants me.”

Those words only stung a little when they weren’t exactly true. He wanted what I stood for. He didn’t want the girl he saw as weak.

“And I want to go, Honor,” I said. “I need to see the world beyond the isle.”

“But that means you’ll see terrible things. And you might never come home—” She bit her words off. Then suddenly she rushed over and hugged me.

I clung to my sister. When she was trying to convince me not to go, I’d felt resistant; it had made me desperate to escape. But then she was obviously trying to hold back a sob as she hugged me, and she whispered, “You can go with my blessing. I know you’ll just escape anyway if I say no...”

She let out a sound that was half-laugh, half-sob. “I’m so proud of you, Hanna, but you’re a total pain in my ass.”

And now I regretted trying so hard to leave.

“You’re a pain in mine too,” I promised. “But I love you. And I’ll come home.”

She nodded as she pulled away. “And the doors will always be open. We’ll miss you until you come home.”

But there was sorrow in her eyes, and it made me think of Zehr’s warning that adventure came at a cost.

I’d come home. I was determined to survive for Honor’s sake.

But new knowledge was settling into my bones, making them feel heavy and tired, even as I hugged her back and smiled.

I wouldn’t come home the same woman who left our kingdom.

## CHAPTER 12



Kaelan

The Ice Fae prided themselves on being as cold as our kingdom. We loved fiercely in our own way. But we didn't confess it, we didn't praise our children, we didn't hug and cry publicly. It always seemed to me that venting those emotions softened them.

But nothing seemed to soften the emotions that rushed over Honor, Hanna, and the approximately seventeen children who swarmed over them both. Hanna was still wiping her eyes when we finally headed down the dock.

I wrapped my arm around Hanna, and she looked up damp-eyed, giving me a small, soft smile. It was such a tender look of appreciation at the gesture that I regretted the fact I was already speaking. "Dry it up."

She stiffened. That tiny half-smile, which was so sweet, was gone now, and her eyes flashed dangerously. "Excuse me?"

I was committed now.

And perhaps I preferred this fierce version of her anyway. "You heard me. You're going to embarrass me. The sailors on my ship—and the people of my kingdom—are expecting me to bring home a warrior bride."

She crinkled her nose at me in disgust. It was adorable, which also didn't quite suit a warrior bride. Gods, I shouldn't



get so hard when she was angry. It was depraved. “I can cry and still gut you, Kaelan. I’m not any less dangerous because I have feelings.”

“I wouldn’t know what that’s like,” I said blandly.

“Nonsense,” she said with a dismissive roll of her eyes. “You’re obviously a bundle of feelings. Just because you aren’t brave enough to face them doesn’t mean you don’t have them.”

“Watch yourself,” I warned her.

She took my hand in hers and gave me a warm smile. That was when I became aware of the audience on the ship watching us as we came down the royal blue rug spread across the wet pier. There was cheering from her own kingdom, but my sailors watched her silently.

“No,” she said sweetly. “You chose me, Kaelan, and I’ll fulfill my vow to act like I adore you. But I’m also going to tell you exactly what I really think.”

I scoffed. “I don’t care what you think. That’s not why I chose you.”

That sweet smile of hers widened slightly. “Liar.”

She looked at me as if she could see right through me, and irritation made me want to lengthen my pace and pull away from her and those judgmental, beautiful eyes.

But we still held each other’s hands as we went up the swaying bridge to the ship, no matter how much I wanted to walk away.

Hanna and I were tied together, deeply.

Permanently.

The two of us stood on the top deck as the sails billowed. My sailors worked smoothly and in deep silence, the only sounds the wind and the snapping of the sails. Hanna’s silence was more chilly than the wind coming off the ocean.

She watched the city as the mist covering the sea gradually obscured it from view. And I watched her. She was clear-eyed

and quiet, revealing nothing of what went on in her mind as she left behind the gray stone walls and the lush greenery, the castle that rose up from the sea with tall, elegant spires.

I'd like to know what was going on behind those beautiful eyes. But I had already ruined any goodwill between us. It would have been stupid to ask.

At least it meant I didn't have to feel reluctant about reuniting her with Thorne, because his presence would almost certainly have cost me her goodwill. As the ship entered the open sea and her own kingdom faded behind us, I called Thorne.

He came up onto the top deck, his big shoulders hunched against the wind, his dark hair windblown. Hanna was still watching the sea, her strawberry blond hair blowing around her heart-shaped face, so she didn't see the way his eyes sparked when he saw her.

I elbowed her, and she turned wide eyes up at me.

"Your new best friend has arrived."

Hanna turned, following my gaze.

"Ah. I knew you'd be here," she said, as if she were reminding herself. "Unfortunately."

"Princess," he said curtly. There was no sign of that spark of life in his gaze anymore. He was back to being ... Thorne.

"Peasant," she responded with a smile.

"Not quite," I said. "Bastard, though, you could say, if you want to insult him. Hanna, meet my cousin, Thorne."

"It doesn't insult me," he said mildly.

Hanna's lips curled up in a polite, fake smile, and I had the feeling I was watching a well-practiced default expression cover her real surprise. I also had a default expression, but mine was stony, not a smile. It must be different to be a princess.

"I should have known who you were," she told him. "You're the second most unpleasant person I've ever met."

Thorne's gaze met mine over her head, since she was tiny compared to us.

"It's a good thing we don't need to rely on her to be clever." I said.

Thorne snorted. "You're going to make a terrible husband."

"Good," I said. "She doesn't particularly deserve a nice one."

"Dare will be nice to her," Thorne told me. "So you should be careful. You wouldn't want your wife falling in love with someone else."

"She can love whoever she wants, I don't care."

Thorne grunted. It was a particular grunt, the one he used when he was genuinely lost for words. He must be worried I'd fuck up this plan we had been working on for ages.

Hanna let out a soft laugh. "If you think being nasty to me is going to convince me I should try to be worthy of you, Kaelan, you should remember I'm no longer eighteen."

Her attitude changed in a second, from saucy to pained. She winced, reaching up to press her forehead with both wrists as if she were trying to keep her head from exploding.

"Are you alright?" I moved quickly between her and the crew's view from the decks below.

"Fine," she managed, but she wasn't. She curled over slightly as if she were about to vomit. "Just a ... headache."

It seemed like a terrible headache.

"Ah. Your vows." I was amused. "You can't insult me in public."

"I'll remember to save all my thoughts up for when it's just the two of us," she said, then let out a moan of pain before her lips sealed together tightly.

"Easy now, sweet girl," I teased her, because there was nothing particularly sweet about Hanna. Thank the gods. I

would've been scared I might break a sweeter girl. "I'll make you all better."

She turned furious eyes up on me, and I grinned as I took her chin between my fingers. I leaned forward and brushed my lips over hers.

My heart still raced when my lips touched her.

I'd intended a curt kiss, reminding her of my power over her.

But once my mouth was on hers, the familiar enchantment of her body against mine took over. Her lips were soft and pillowy; they were lips made for kissing. Or taking my cock. Powerful fantasies of her kissing, smiling, wrapping that red mouth around my cock soared through me, as if I'd come unmoored like a ship loose on the rocking waves.

She swayed against me, and the hard knot in my chest melted. I couldn't resist deepening the kiss. I tilted her chin up, teasing the tip of my tongue between the seam of her lips, and her lips parted. Submission, for once, the only way I could expect it from Hanna.

She put her hands on my chest and pushed away from me. I wrapped my arm around her waist to steady her after her headache ... and to keep her body close to mine. She radiated so much warmth, like she was made of sunshine.

Her lips were bee-stung and redder than ever, her eyes slightly dazed. She swallowed, and the seconds dripped between us as we held each other's gaze.

Thorne coughed.

"Right," I said. "I should have mentioned it earlier. Thorne does know, so there's no need for your vows to punish you. You can say what you like in front of Thorne."

Her eyes widened, and the next second she frowned, her lips parting to scold me.

I clapped my hand over her mouth. "But you should choose what you say to me carefully. I don't want the magic to punish you. I'm happy to do that myself."

She grabbed my wrist and yanked it away, her chest heaving. But perhaps she decided not to push me at the moment, because her cute little chin rose in the air before she said imperiously. “Show me to my room.”

“*Our* room,” I corrected.

Thorne gave me a quick shake of the head, warning me off. *She may actually murder you when she reaches the Ice Kingdom. Don't make her want to murder you all the more.*

He didn't bother to use her name. It wasn't just because she was standing right in front of us, unaware we were having a conversation about her.

Since the first time I met Hanna—and showed her to Thorne—we had referred to her as *she*, and we had known who the other was speaking about.

She'd been the only woman that mattered since I first saw her.

Hanna wasn't my true love. It went beyond that. She was my obsession. She was in my bones.

I ignored Thorne's advice. As usual.

*And you'll regret it, as usual,* he warned me.

I took Hanna's arm. As we walked across the ship, she smiled up at me, for the sake of the crew.

As I led her past my sailors, their jaws dropped when they saw her up close, their eyes widened, and then they looked away hastily. A sense of pride swept through me. She was intensely beautiful, but not in the bland, perfect way of so many of the wealthy in her isle, who used enchantments to perfect their features. Her blond hair had the faintest red sheen that only showed in the sun.

Sun-kissed freckles dotted her nose and high cheekbones. Most of the royals hid them. My people didn't freckle, and I found it charming.

She was a creature of the sun. I wondered how she would fare in the world of ice.

I hadn't brought her here to inspire my people.

I hadn't brought her here because of the prophecy I'd kept secret from her.

I'd brought her here because I was a selfish bastard.

The Ice Kingdom, with its endless winter nights, was a cruel place to bring this girl with the sun-touched skin and sparkling eyes. It would crush her more easily than make her queen.

But I needed a bride.

And she was still the only woman I longed for, in all the kingdoms.

## CHAPTER 13



*H*anna

That night, Kaelan, Thorne and I had dinner in the officer's mess with the captain and officers of the crew. It was a snug but beautifully decorated room, with deep red wood elaborately carved and fine china set by the serving girl who squeezed behind the chairs to deliver drinks.

Unfortunately, my company was about as pleasant as soggy bread.

"I've never been to the Ice Kingdom, please do tell me what it's like." I looked around the chilly table with a broad smile, hoping to finally draw one of them out into conversation. People loved to talk about their homes.

"Cold," the captain said.

I glanced around the terse tabletop. There was a nice side of beef that the captain had carved, but the food wasn't *so* good that it forestalled discussion.

Finally, I gave up, and when the serving girl cleared the plates, I followed her out. When I squeezed past Kaelan, he looked as if he were about to reach out and yank me onto his lap. But I made it to the doorway without being attacked by the Ice Fae and forced to pretend I adored him.

"Just getting some air before dessert," I told her when she glanced back at me as if I were following her.

She hesitated. “There’s no dessert. It’s generally not the custom in the Ice Kingdom.”

“But everyone loves dessert.” I’d been eager for adventure, but I felt less enthused about adventuring through a world where no one ate dessert.

“I’ll get you something,” she said, then came back with a pot of sugar and a spoon. When I looked at her quizzically—I totally would have hidden under the kitchen table and eaten sugar as a meal as a child, but I was twenty-three now—she prompted, “For your tea.”

“Thank you,” I said, taking the pot from her.

“I’ll be in with the tea in a moment,” she said, then touched the doorway and the amulet around her neck at the same time.

I cocked my head at her curiously, trying to figure out the Ice Fae customs. Although I’d been educated at the Posselbaum Academy to an exhausting degree, the fact we hadn’t left our shores for quite some time had meant our education in foreign manners was ... questionable. I was pretty sure the other kingdoms had changed as much as the isle in two hundred years.

“Excuse my superstitions,” she said quickly, flushing.

“No, go ahead, I have my own superstitions.” Such as *never trust an Ice Fae prince*. And yet, here I stood. “What does that do?”

“Fixes bad luck,” she said, the flush turning even darker.

“Bad luck ... serving Prince Kaelan?” I asked lightly, as a joke, but there was something in me that expected a response.

And I got quite the response. Her lips pressed together tightly, her eyes widening.

“Why’s that?” I asked sharply. “What does Kaelan do to his servants?”

“Nothing,” she said, looking desperate to escape the conversation. I felt desperate to understand—if Kaelan was cruel to his servants, then it didn’t matter how handsome or



skilled a fighter he was—but I also realized I was not repaying her very well for her kindness.

“It’s alright,” I said easily, determined to get to the bottom of this later ... without anyone realizing she’d spoken to me. It wasn’t as if I could barge into Kaelan and demand to know if he was even more terrible than I already knew. “Thank you for the sugar.”

I headed back toward the door.

“You might want to sweeten your cup before you go in there,” she said after me, as she finished brewing the tea. “It’s looked down upon, a bit, to sweeten your food. Especially for the nobles.”

“Of course it is,” I muttered. What a joyless people. “Thank you ... what’s your name?”

“Elinna,” she said.

“Hanna,” I smiled at her, but I was obviously making her uncomfortable by being friendly, so I headed toward the door back to the dining room. Gods. Manners are only important because they make people around us comfortable, except I had no idea how to make the Ice Fae *comfortable*. They seemed to eschew anything nice.

As soon as I pushed open the door, all six Ice Fae faces turned toward me. Then everyone but Kaelan and Thorne stood and excused themselves to work.

“I have the distinct impression I interrupted the first lively conversation of the night,” I said. “What were you all discussing?”

Kaelan frowned at me as if I were being rude, but apparently I could not help being rude, so my bad manners might as well be useful. “We were not having a lively conversation.”

“I apologize for making such a terrible accusation,” I joked as I took my seat again. I leaned forward as I set my arms on the table, giving Kaelan an eyeful of my cleavage.

He stared at me a second too long before his gaze rose angrily toward the door, but everyone was already leaving, so there was no one to be angry at. I smiled faintly. Kaelan did want me, no matter how awful he was. “I didn’t realize Ice Fae were so dull.”

“We can’t all talk as incessantly as you do,” Kaelan said.

“That must be why you adore me, Kaelan, you enjoy having someone so different from you around.”

Kaelan let out a laugh. “Is being delusional what passes for charm in the isle?”

“Unlike the women you usually sleep with, but I know my worth.” I shot back.

Thorne sighed under his breath.

“What?” Kaelan and I demanded, almost in one breath.

“There’s nothing I can say to fix this,” Thorne said, which was a distinctly vague statement.

Then he walked out and left the two of us alone, with the steaming kettle sending the delicious scent of tea through the air. I reached for the kettle, and Kaelan got to it first.

“It’s heavy,” he said as he poured my tea.

“I’m quite strong,” I promised him. “But you can serve me if you wish.”

He scoffed. Once he had poured my cup, he set the kettle down and walked toward the door.

“Aren’t you having any tea?”

“No.”

I shook my head. “Ice Fae are so boring.”

Kaelan gave me a smile that was all feral. “Remember to smile when people are watching.”

“What—” I began, but he was already lifting me out of my seat and carrying me toward the door.

I automatically gripped my blades, then stopped myself. After all, he wasn’t going to dump me overboard. He needed

me.

He was just trying to rattle me, to convince me he was the one in control.

Hilarious. I might be his unwillingly oath-bound bride in a fake marriage in a foreign kingdom, but I'd never be helpless.

He carried me out into the passage and toward our bedroom. I caught two sailors' grins and then the quick, abashed way they looked at each other, as if they shouldn't have.

I caught Kaelan's shirt, fisted it. My vision was blurry with his movement as he carried me down the hall—his hard-angled jaw, the flash of surprise in his eyes as I leaned into him like I loved him instead of protesting, his soft, pink lips. Then my mouth was against his.

I kissed the Ice Fae Prince like I had always loved him.

My upper lip brushed his, and his lips parted just slightly in surprise. I kissed his lower lip, drawing it into my mouth slightly, kissing him as if we had never stopped. His body was hard against mine as he came to a dead stop in the hallway. For a second, he was frozen.

Then he kissed me back, a soft, tender kiss, our lips teasing against each other's before he pulled away.

He looked down at me with those deep blue eyes and an expression I couldn't read. "Careful, you wicked little walnut," he whispered.

"*Walnut?*" I whispered back as he shouldered open the door.

"Funny that the *walnut* part bothers you, but you don't argue the *wicked*." He turned carefully as he navigated the doorway, watching to make sure he didn't strike my head or feet on the doorframe.

We entered a lavish room. The walls were painted a deep shade of blue, warmed by the rich reddish wood of the exposed beams across the ceiling and the floors underneath, and by the portholes lining the room, framed by silver

curtains. The world outside was dark by now. The bed dominated the room—which was large for a ship but small for a royal.

“I’m not going to even pretend I’d sleep on the floor,” Kaelan told me, once the door was closed safely behind us.

“Obviously neither of us are the kind to sleep on the floor,” I told him, exasperated. “Just do your best to resist snuggling with me.”

He scoffed. “Ice Fae don’t snuggle.”

“We’ll see.” I smiled at him. Sometimes it seemed like my happiness was directly linked to his misery. So I was determined to become a complete ball of light and joy. So warm that I burned him.

I half expected him to drop me on the bed and walk away now that we were out of sight—and now that he had failed to rattle me—but he set me gently down on the floor instead.

“There’s no reason for us to make each other miserable,” I pointed out. I let my dress pool around my feet, then stepped out and began to strip off my underclothes for bed.

He was going to be my husband, after all.

His gaze slid to me and away. His adam’s apple bobbed despite himself.

“We want the same thing,” I reminded him. “To bring down the Snake Queen and protect our kingdoms. Why are you being a jerk?”

“It’s my nature.”

“It certainly is. But it’s not just that,” I said.

“You think you’re going to figure me out?” He touched my face, the gesture almost tender as he skimmed my cheek. “I could eat a girl like you for breakfast.”

“Well, I don’t think we’re on good enough terms for that yet,” I responded breezily. “Just watch yourself, princeling. You wouldn’t want to fall in love with your wife.”

“I’m not worried.”

I pulled one of my sleep shirts out of my trunk and tugged it over my head.

He watched every movement of my body, his gaze unreadable.

I promised him, “If I’m sleeping next to you, love, you should always be worried.”

I’d let him decide what exactly he should worry about.

## CHAPTER 14



Kaelan

I barely slept all night laying next to Hanna, distinctly not-touching her. It was a restless night. All I wanted to do was grab her and drag her on top of me, to bury my face in her throat.

In the morning, I was awake when the first strains of sunlight glowed through the window.

I studied her face: the shape of her jaw, the way her red lips parted in sleep, the faint glow in her cheeks. The thought of resting the tip of my cock against that pillowy lower lip had me instantly hard.

I had to get away from her. I slid out of bed and strode to the small bathroom, keenly aware of her the entire time I was bathing. I worked my cock hard, imagining her beautiful mouth wrapped around it, those luminous wide eyes turned up toward me.

It didn't matter how many times I came. I still couldn't stop thinking of her.

When I had dressed again, I left the bathroom.

She'd just pulled off her sleep shirt to dress, and she stretched lazily, her arms overhead, her small breasts rising in the air as she arched.

It was deliberate, of course. Everything Hanna did was deliberate, and half of it was a provocation.

Gods.

I went out without a word to her. But it wasn't as if I could stop seeing her either, the way she had looked lingering every time I closed my eyes.

Thorne helpfully brought her to breakfast. The officers had already dined and cleared out to their work, so it was the three of us.

She smiled at the serving girl who served our oatmeal. "Thank you, Elinna."

She'd already learned the servants' names? When did she have time?

Once the girl was gone, though, she pushed her spoon into the glop and pulled a face. "Is this really what the Ice Fae nobles eat for breakfast?"

"It's what my crew eats," I told her. "So it's what I eat."

She exhaled under her breath.

"It will be good for you," I told her. "You're spoiled."

"Of course I am," she said. "And so are you."

"The five years I spent at the front with the Snake Queen say otherwise," I promised her.

Her eyes rose rapidly from her oatmeal to my face, widening with concern. I hated the soft, tender way she looked at me, full of concern. As if she knew anything about what I'd seen.

"Eat it or starve, princess," I told her as I rose from my seat. "It's all the same to me."

I spent the day avoiding her.

She spent the day looking at me when our paths crossed as if she knew exactly what I was doing.

But I was the one who had forced her into my room. Brilliant work on my part.

In the evening, she took down her hair, shaking it over her bare shoulders. A faint wicked smile curved her lips as she

began to unbutton her dress.

If she wanted my attention, she could have it. I sprawled on the bed to watch her undress. My cock rose to attention at the mere promise.

She held my gaze as she let the dress pool around her feet. Underneath, she wore lace-trimmed underwear. Her breasts were small and pert, with nipples the size and shape of raspberries; I'd loved to run my tongue around those nipples and hear the way her breath gave.

She reached for her sleep shirt. I raised two fingers—and my magic—and the shirt darted away in a sudden icy breeze. She threw her arms over her chest, covering her breasts against the cold, and frowned at me as I caught the flimsy white fabric.

“You wanted to give me a show?” I asked. “You have my attention, princess. What are you going to do with it?”

There were faint scars along the lean, muscular lines of her body. New ones. I didn't know the story behind them, and I resented the ignorance.

I wanted to know everything about her. Every vulnerability, everything that made her smile, every enemy, everyone I needed to destroy.

She strode forward toward me, running her fingers through her long hair and offering me a smile that made my heart stop. She was pure seduction.

Then she plopped onto the bed beside me.

“I'm not here to entertain you, Kaelan.” She propped herself up on her elbow, her breasts so close that it took all my restraint not to lean over and kiss the top of her décolletage. “If you want me naked in your bed, well...”

She offered me a slow smile that said she knew exactly what she did to me.





That night, I was jolted awake from my sleep. She half rose, twisting toward me.

“It’s alright,” I told her, feeling a sudden rise of protectiveness in my chest. There was something wrong with the ship, I could feel it, even before Thorne’s curt presence in my mind.

*Get her off the ship, he warned me. Fly!*

“Move, now,” I told her.

She was already bent over, pulling her trousers on, and she straightened to give me a look.

I swept her off her feet and threw her over my shoulder.

“Kaelan, stop! What is it? I need my knives!”

“You don’t need knives. You have me.”

She let out a scoff that I felt all through my body. “You’re half the reason I need knives.”

The hallway was dark. She didn’t fight me, as she must have felt the urgency as I moved toward the stairs.

“Put me down,” she said urgently. “Whatever’s going on, you need me by your side—not as dead weight.”

“We’re getting out of here,” I told her, gripping her wrist and going ahead of her up the stairs.

“There’s nowhere to go,” she said. “We’re in the middle of the sea. We don’t reach the Ice Kingdom for another full day —”

Who the fuck had she found to talk to about the maps? No one was supposed to talk to her. Everyone on this ship was deeply loyal to me, especially since I’d done my best—such as it was—to protect them from my father’s wrath.

I reached the top of the stairs, pushed through the first door. She turned back and slammed it shut the second before I opened the second door, the two of us moving in synchrony.

As soon as I stepped out onto the deck, all was chaos.

The main sail broke away from the rigging entirely and flew in the wind, rising above the ship like a pale white ghost.

Two sailors raced past me, looking terrified.

The next second, I saw the eerie silvery-gray snake that slithered in their wake.

Thorne leapt out of the shadows, his axe raised above his head. The snake turned on him, its movements unnaturally fast, and started to strike. He slammed the axe down, cutting off the snake's head, just in the nick of time.

"I guess I need something bigger than a knife," Hanna said, looking around for a weapon.

She looked fierce with her blond hair shining under the moonlight.

"Not your fight," I told her.

"If it's your fight, it's my fight, love," she said breezily.

"Take her," I told Thorne tersely.

I couldn't stand to leave my men and my ship. If I didn't come home—in a timely fashion—I knew what would happen to Dare.

Father always made sure I came home again, whether I wanted to or not. I never traveled with both Thorne and Dare at one time.

Thorne didn't hesitate. He shifted into the dragon, his enormous tail whirling across the deck and destroying what was left of the rigging. We wouldn't normally shift when it would wreak havoc. But protecting Hanna was urgent.

"No," Hanna shouted. One doesn't usually hear anyone shout at a dragon. She held up one hand to ward him off. "Let me fight—let me help." She turned to me, wide-eyed. "You know this attack has to be the Snake Queen!"

“And that’s exactly why you’re leaving,” I answered tersely. “I need to know you’re safe. Don’t worry. Thorne will protect you.”

“Kaelan!” she shouted.

Then Thorne had her in his claws, and he was airborne.

Only once I’d seen him flap off into the night could I turn my attention fully to the battle. I needed her gone for my sake as much as for her safety. I knew she was right; she could handle herself. But that didn’t mean she wouldn’t be unlucky.

The ship’s deck was covered in snakes. The boat floundered, with the sails gone, rolling and listing across the ocean.

I grabbed the first mate’s arm. “Where’s the captain?”

“Dead,” he choked out.

“What happened?”

“The ropes ...” he stammered. He’d seen so much in our covert war with the Snake Queen, but he still seemed horrified now. “They came alive... they turned into snakes.”

“Get an axe,” I told him, and he joined me as we tried to fight the snakes.

For every head I cut off, it seemed as if two more snakes appeared.

“Get everyone up here.” I ordered. “We need to get them off this ship.”

He moved toward the door to summon the last of the men, but a snake fell from the rigging, wrapping around his shoulders. I strode toward him, but it was too late.

The snake sank its fangs deep into the flesh of his arm. He screamed in agony as the venom quickly began to course through his veins.

I flicked the snake off his body with the tip of my sword and as it coiled to strike, sliced through it.

The first mate convulsed and then went limp, his body lifeless as the other snakes continued to slither around us.

How did I save the surviving crew from the Snake Queen's curse?

We were surrounded by an increasingly icy sea. Even as Ice Fae, their time would be short once we entered that freezing water.

*"There's an island,"* Thorne thought to me. *"Come this way."*

I felt the pulse of his thoughts, guiding me toward them.

"I'll be there as soon as I can, with as many survivors as I can," I promised.

There were only a dozen sailors left, all fighting the snakes.

"Jump into the sea!" I shouted at them.

And despite how terrified they must be, they trusted me. They leapt off the ship and into the icy waters.

The snakes slithered towards me.

I leapt into the air, transforming into my dragon form.

Then I dove toward the water, to rescue the first of the sailors.

I hoped I would have time to save them all before they sank beneath the waves.

As I swooped down, I could see the terror in their eyes. They were struggling to stay above the water, the icy waves threatening to pull them under. I landed in the water with a splash, using my massive wings to create a barrier against the waves.

"Grab onto my back," I roared, trying to be heard above the sound of the wind and waves.

They scrambled to obey, clinging onto me as I lifted them out of the water and onto my back. Their hands clenched onto my scales as if I was their only lifeline. A few more sailors

swam toward me, with frantic shouts, but I couldn't carry the rest.

I gripped two more in my claws, and my wings beat heavily as I struggled to lift all of us up above the icy waves.

When I turned my head to look back at the ship, the snakes slithered over every inch of it. Somewhere across the sea, the Snake Queen sat on her throne, smiling with her eyes closed, her hands gliding through the air as she raised her snake army.

With the sailors safe on my back, I took to the sky. I flew straight toward the ship, the wind whipping around me as I soared over the snakes. A lantern fell on the deck, and snakes slithered through the spreading flames as if these were no natural snakes.

Their hissing grew louder as I approached. Predators sensed they were turning to prey. I was the far more deadly predator.

I swooped down, my icy breath freezing them.

And yet ... the ship, now burning, was cursed. More snakes wriggled out of the flames. I'd had a momentary flash of hope I could save my men by getting them back onboard the ship, but it was gone now.

We had to flee to save them.

I carried them away. My wings beat heavily as I skimmed the waves, barely managing to carry them all across the moonlit water. Then the shape of the island rose in front of me.

If I landed, I feared I'd never find the strength to sail back across the sea. Instead I swooped over the sandy beach, letting the sailors spill off my back to safety.

Then I flew back. I searched the waves, which seemed to rock higher and higher now, searching for any trace of the last sailors.

But the tumultuous waves were too much for me, and I couldn't spot them anywhere. My heart sank as I realized that they were gone.

The Snake Queen had claimed yet another victory.

I roared in frustration, the sound echoing across the sea. I had to find a way to defeat her.

The memory of those hands reaching out of the icy sea, trying to find a purchase, and of their cries as I left them behind clung to me like a coat of shame I could never shake off.

As I flew back, one thought beat in my heart.

I hadn't seen Hanna on that beach.

## CHAPTER 15



*H*anna

**W**hile Thorne flew over the white-capped sea, his talons were gently wrapped around my waist. I wasn't going to fight him now and take a dunk in the icy ocean, so I just endured it, clutching his leg to hold myself upright as my bare feet hung above the wild waves. His wings felt like immense, dark shadows above me.

As we landed, his big wings outstretched and he fluttered slowly down. I had the feeling he was unaccustomed to providing a transportation service, at least one where his passenger had to be kept in one piece. He might not be gentle, but he was trying to be careful.

Then abruptly, his talons released me. I sprawled onto the wet, cold sand.

In his human form, he fell on top of me, driving me further into the sand and knocking my breath out of me.

His hard muscled body was draped over mine when my shock cleared.

I stared at the dark-haired face nestled against my shoulder. When he shifted, his mouth brushed my cleavage.

Then he abruptly scrambled back off me, looking horrified. "Are you alright?"

I groaned in response. "I thought you were on some half-cocked mission to protect me. Landing on top of me, when

you're so big, is the opposite of protecting me.”

He bristled. It was a satisfying response. “I am protecting you. I got you off that ship. I just...”

I got to my feet, shaking off the sand. “Yes, you got me off that ship. Then crushed me a little. I'm very grateful you saved me.”

He shifted, as if he were waiting for the jab. Perhaps I didn't sound sincerely grateful to be rescued. Strange.

“Now take me back,” I told him, and his brows relaxed, as if he needed me to be aggressive and annoying and I'd almost disappointed him. But no, he was in luck. I am always annoying. “We need to help Kaelan.”

He shook his head. “No.”

“What do you mean, no? We're talking about my fiancé!”

“Full of concern?” Skepticism dripped from Thorne's voice. “You want to show Kaelan that you are his equal.”

“I don't need to show him anything. I already know I'm his equal.” If he didn't realize that, he was going to be an easy target.

“Kaelan will make his way here.”

“How?”

“I sent him a message. I told him the way.”

I tilted my head to one side. “What kind of magic—”

He turned and began to walk down the beach. We were on a pretty small island; I wasn't sure where he was walking in such a hurry. Over his shoulder, he whipped back, “My responsibility is to keep you safe.”

I shivered. The sea at night was cold, even without having yet entered Ice Fae territory. “Does your responsibility include keeping me warm?”

“No.” He turned back, though he kept walking backward, as if he needed to keep distance between us. “Believe me, I



wish I could be at his side right now. I fought at Kaelan's side many times."

Heavily implied: it was a waste of his killing talents to send him away to watch a spoiled princess.

"My feelings exactly," I said. "Kaelan must have been aware that you're terrified of snakes and he took pity on you. But I need to get back to that ship so I can save his ass."

He grunted. Thorne seemed to give up on normal communication too easily.

I looked him over carefully. He looked huge and imposing and unstoppable as always, dressed in his dark clothes, his pale skin shining under the moonlight. The way he'd shifted back so roughly, though... "Are you hurt?"

"No."

I shivered again. The cold didn't just ride the harsh wind that swept the island. It felt deeper than that, a tingle of dark magic that raised bumps on my arms and made me want to flee.

Too bad the only place to return to was a ship full of snakes.

"Just a little case of shifting dysfunction earlier?" I asked. He did not look wildly entertained by me. But something about the island felt wrong. "Are you able to shift into your dragon?"

"Yeah." It was somewhere between a word and a grunt.

"Then show me what a big bad dragon you are."

The look he gave me suggested that he really did not appreciate my tone.

I added, "I think there might be something wrong. Some kind of enchantment..."

He gave me a curt nod, then seemed to concentrate. A shiver ran through his heavily muscled body. When he looked at me, his face was as stoic as ever, but there was something

wild in his eyes. “You’re right. I can’t shift. And I can’t send another message to Kaelan.”

“I’d be so happy you admitted I’m right, if it didn’t mean that we were stranded on an island waiting for Kaelan to come to our rescue. We need to figure it out first.”

I really didn’t want to end up stranded on an island with these two.

He gave me a curt nod. “We’ll survey the island. It’s safer for you to come with me.”

As if *that* were decided, he turned and began to walk. I frowned at his broad shoulders. I definitely did not want to split up, and I did want to explore the island. But his bossiness was grating.

The two of us began a trek across the island. The moon glowed on the sea which looked tranquil now. The isle itself was sparse, with outcroppings of spindly trees and desolate, windswept beach.

A shiver ran through me that had nothing to do with the cold sand pressing up against my toes. “We have to keep Kaelan from coming here.”

The thought of Kaelan and Thorne trapped here, without their magic, dying ... I twisted at the bracelet. I had to get away from Thorne and see if I could shift or if it was the island at work.

Abruptly, Thorne pulled off his sweater. “Take this.”

The movement made his powerful shoulders ripple. He handed me the thick soft royal blue sweater.

I felt like I shouldn’t take it for the sake of my pride. But I was cold. I’d rather be more comfortable and less proud. “Thank you.”

Our hands briefly touched, and he pulled away as if I had burned him. “I am Ice Fae. I’m much stronger and better acclimated to working in this environment than you.”

“Whatever helps you forgive yourself for being ever so slightly gallant,” I mocked him. When I pulled the sweater

over my head, it was soft and warm.

The sweater smelled like him, a clear, clean scent like falling snow mixed with peppermint. Though Thorne himself was rough, there was something deeply comforting about his scent that made me want to pull the sweater over my nose and breathe it in.

The two of us started down the slope of a steep sand dune. He reached out for my arm as if he were going to steady me, then stopped. His hand hovered at the small of my back as if he would catch me if I slipped.

But of course, I didn't. "How long do you think it will take Kaelan to reach us?"

"I don't know," he said grimly. "He'll try to save everyone."

Of course he would. Kaelan would be easier to hate if he were consistently an arrogant dickhole. "Well, I *am* grateful you were able to get us off the boat. I feel less grateful that you got us to this cursed island."

"It's better than dying in the sea, full of snake venom."

"It is better. But is it a lot better? Because if we die a slow death here, and we have to put up with each other the entire time, maybe the snakes won't seem so bad."

Thorne grunted. "I can't disagree with you."

"No, you really can't. I'm glad you are learning."

"Do you ever stop talking?" He'd fallen a step behind me coming down the sand dunes.

"Not really." I twisted the bracelet off my wrist and slid it into my pocket. "But I do have to pee."

I turned to find him watching me, a look across his face as if he were studying me.

"I'm sorry, are princesses not allowed bodily functions?"

"I'll turn my back."

“I’m not going to—” I looked around the island, still feeling the eerie tingle across my skin. Dark magic and the sense of being watched.

I didn’t really want to be alone. “Fine. Don’t be weird.”

He sighed and turned his back, facing the ocean with his arms knit over his chest.

I took a few steps away and then rustled my pants as if I were taking them down. Could I summon my dragon? That was the ultimate test of my magical power, something I could only do without my bracelet off.

Though I very rarely called on my dragon side these days. My fingers absently worried the dragon scale that hung from one of my bracelets. I closed my eyes and remembered what it felt like to soar, to be the one spreading my wings and not the one being carried.

Nothing happened.

I’d expected that, but fear still curdled in my stomach.

There had to be a reason our magic didn’t work, and we had to find it soon. I slid the bracelet back onto my wrist. “Someone must have enchanted the isle, don’t you think?”

Thorne still had his back to me. “Are you alright?”

“Yes.” I closed the distance between us and touched his elbow. I wasn’t sure why I did it; I wanted to anchor myself to something real.

There was something solid about Thorne. My heartbeat had turned wild when my magic failed, but as Thorne’s dark eyes searched mine, the rapid beating began to slow. His eyes were the deepest, richest shade of brown, and in the dim light here, they turned to obsidian.

He dipped his face toward mine.

Then abruptly, he pulled away as if he’d just been shouted awake from a dream. He turned without a word and began to walk on down the beach.

“What are you doing?” I demanded.

He didn't even bother to grunt.

He started into a thicket of trees, and I followed him. The trees were barren except for a few leaves rustling forlornly in the wind, as if even they didn't want to be on this island.

He held a branch for me, keeping it from whipping into my face. The way he waited brought us close together, and I breathed in the same scent that clung to his sweat.

We climbed over loose rocks that seemed to shift underfoot. My foot slipped—just slightly—and Thorne's hands found my waist, gripping me even though I'd already found my balance.

My sweater had ridden up as I tried to keep my balance, and his palm was on my bare skin. His hands felt warm against my skin—strange for the Ice Fae—and I was tempted to press back against him and wrap his arms around me, soaking in his warmth.

I pulled away. “Don't think that because I kissed you before, I want to kiss you again.”

“I'm aware you were kissing me for nefarious purposes.” His voice was dry. “Don't worry. I don't trust you enough to get that close again.”

But even as he said that, he followed so close to me that I couldn't escape the tantalizing hints of his scent and warmth.

As we emerged from the narrow, veiny trees, the wind found us again. My hair slapped wildly into my face, and I pulled it back, gripping it with one hand to try to tame it. Once I'd scraped the blond strands away, I could finally see ahead of us.

Ahead of us was a gap in the rocks that covered the island that looked distinctly like an entrance.

When I elbowed him, Thorne followed my pointed finger.

He dipped his lips close to my ear. “Do you think our enchantment trouble comes from there?”

“If nothing else, it will give us shelter from the storm. But I have a bad feeling.”

Thorne gave me a look. “I’d have more faith in your intuition if you hadn’t taken all the steps that brought you ... here.”

“Fair enough.” I headed for the entry anyway.

His big hand gripped my shoulder, making me pause. “Let me go first.”

He was welcome to climb into the creepy hole first, but... “Just because you’re bigger doesn’t mean you’re more dangerous than I am.”

Another grunt. Gods, he was going to drive me insane; how does one argue with a grunt?

Without another word, he headed for the entryway. But before he could continue climbing down into the stones, goosebumps prickled along my skin.

Someone was definitely watching us. I could feel the weight of their gaze on the back of my neck.

“Thorne ...” I whispered as I turned to study the forest.

A trio of young women stepped out of the forest. They were ethereal, each dressed in a white gown as if they did not feel the cold sweeping over the island.

Their faces were beautiful and they looked young, but that meant nothing with the Fae.

“Who are you?” they asked.

Thorne turned around with a start, and his eyes widened when he saw them. He moved swiftly back to my side.

“We’re just travelers.” Thorne flashed me a warning look.

As if I needed his guidance. I talked a lot, but I knew to choose my audience. Or victims, as Kaelan had once said.

A sudden rush of longing filled me. I would have felt safe with Kaelan by my side—but not the distant, angry version of Kaelan. *My* Kaelan.

There was something deeply not-human about three women who lived on an empty island and appeared in the

middle of the night to shipwrecked sailors.

“What brought you here, travelers?” The three of them strode toward us, hips swaying, smiles parting their lips in tandem.

“Our ship was damaged, and we came here seeking a safe place.” Thorne stepped in front of me. Suddenly all I could see was his dark tunic, stretched by his powerful shoulders above the lean taper of his waist. It was a nice view, but at the moment, I was more interested in facing the threat. He needed me as much as I needed him.

“So gallant,” I mocked him as I put my hand on his shoulder and stepped to his side.

The creatures hesitated, looking at him and then at each other as if they were perplexed.

Thorne turned his back on them so he could mouth to me, “We need to find high ground and warn Kaelan off.”

Then he turned back to them with a smile that was more like bared teeth. “Is this island your home?”

Thorne was trying to be polite. Both the manners and the smile seemed rusty and unnatural.

“Yes. Why are you so cold? Don’t you find us beautiful?” one of the nymphs asked, her lips pouting. The other two seemed to also pudge their lower lips in unison.

“Yes,” Thorne’s knuckles brushed mine, as if he wanted to take my hand. His muscles were tense, coiled like a tiger’s—ready to spring or to run.

“But you don’t like beautiful women?” The lead nymph smiled at him. “Is that why you love her?”

“Hurtful,” I muttered.

The three of them took a step forward and suddenly seemed to be right in front of us.

“She’s not beautiful.” The lead creature touched his shoulder, smiling up at him. This close, they were all eerily

perfect, without a wrinkle or freckle to be seen. “Look at me. Don’t you desire me?”

“All I want right now is a way off this island. Can you tell us how to leave?” Thorne held himself still. But I had the feeling it took an effort.

I pressed my back against his hard bicep, watching the other two, ready to fight. I’d let him do the talking. They hadn’t acknowledged my existence.

“Don’t leave.” They spoke at the same time.

“Is this place ... enchanted?”

“Yes.” She pressed her body against his. That meant she pressed herself against me, too, because the two of us were standing so close. Her skin felt damp and clammy like a toad’s. “And you will come to love your new home.”

He looked as if everything in him wanted to go for a weapon, but neither of us had a weapon at the moment.

Distressingly, all we had was each other.

He took a step back, clearly trying to keep an eye on all three of them at once, so we were closed up back to back. His back flexed against mine as he cupped her shoulders, and I wasn’t sure if he was holding her away. “As I said, we are weary travelers. Will you help us?”

“Of course. We haven’t had any visitors for so long. I’m sorry for the trouble that brought you here. Come, let us get you warmed up by the fire and something to eat.”

She held out her arm toward the entrance.

I did not care for the idea of climbing down into their little hole with them.

“We have friends coming soon,” Thorne told them. “We want to be able to help them, but magic doesn’t seem to work on the island. Do you know why?”

I hadn’t wanted them to know Kaelan was coming in case it allowed them to lay a trap. But I could see Thorne’s logic.



Maybe while they were trying to charm him, he'd be able to unwrap some of their secrets.

There was something that I did not appreciate about the way they looked at Thorne or the entirely different, entirely threatening way they looked at me.

Knowing we weren't alone long might stave off their nefarious impulses while we made sense of this island.

"Come with us," the lead nymph said. "Come out of the cold."

Thorne and I exchanged looks as we followed them. I didn't like the idea of going into their cave, but down there, we might find answers.

Or murder. Murder was also a possibility.

I wasn't sure what they really were. Nymphs, perhaps? Something supernatural, because no true living thing would choose to live on this cold, miserable island.

Thorne led the way, his shoulders relaxed even in the harsh wind. Most of us don't like being cold and miserable. But Thorne *was* cold-and-miserable embodied in human form, so of course he was impervious.

He stepped down in front of me into the cave as it opened from the small entryway to a large room. The females clustered together, smiling at him.

The space was warm and dry and decorated with wall hangings covering the rough rock walls and a thick soft rug under foot. One of the purple tapestries half covered the entrance to a hallway that stretched away into darkness.

A fire blazed in a metal wood stove at the center of the rim. Thick blankets were laid out around the fire, which leapt and crackled in the mesmerizing golden way that fire has.

"Come, sit, make yourself comfortable." The nymphs closed around Thorne, gently guiding him to the soft rug.

They left me standing there, and I lurked watchfully on the other side of the fire, making sure I could keep an eye on the

entrance to the cavern and also to the hall that seemed to lead elsewhere.

What was down the hall? I glanced at Thorne, wondering if he could distract them. They certainly seemed like they were very interested in him, running their hands over his shoulders and chest.

I felt an unexpected spike of jealousy. But Thorne's face was miserable. It looked as if the strain of being polite might cause him to rupture something.

He frowned back at me.

One of them waved a goblet in front of his face. Another floated grapes through the air at him as in a way that reminded me of Damyn trying to feed Masen his vegetables. She touched the grape to his stern lips.

Thorne shook his head at the food and offered them one of his usual grunts. They laughed as if he were charming. So there was definitely something supernatural happening.

They continued to ignore me while trying to hand feed Thorne. He focused his gaze on them, but I had the sense the entire time that his attention radiated toward me. He was trying to distract them for my sake. I edged slowly toward the narrow hall.

"Why do you seem so distant with us?" the lead nymph asked, as she leaned in toward him, cupping his jaw with her hand. Her perfect red lips parted.

He didn't pull away. It would be foolish to insult them. But he froze, and her face fell.

"Perhaps it's the girl," one of them said, glancing toward me. "Perhaps he's in love with her."

Her voice had taken on a mocking quality that I really didn't appreciate. Obviously, Thorne was not in love with me. But it wasn't as if I was so incredibly unlovable.

"I doubt it," another scoffed.

She leaned in toward Thorne again. Her eyes were on me as she whispered in his ear.

His wide-eyed gaze swept to me, as the other two turned and gave me a sickly-sweet smile.

“Go,” the first whispered to him, running her hand across his thigh.

He rose from the rugs. They all watched us expectantly, sneers written across their lovely faces.

The air in the cavern felt charged.

Thorne crossed toward me. His body looked stiff, as if it were not entirely under his control. He always moved with such predatory grace before.

“Thorne? Are you alright?” I asked, poised to run ... or possibly bash him over the head if it seemed necessary.

Thorne reached toward me.

“They ordered me to kill you.”

He said the words so flatly. For a split second, I barely registered what he'd said.

He grabbed my arm.

I shied away, prepared to strike back at him, but he yanked me toward the entrance.

Hissing, they leapt up, knocking over one of the goblets. Sand spilled out onto the cave floor.

He shoved me ahead of him. “Run!”

“She’s blocking the magic,” one of them shouted at the others. “We have to kill her!”

Thorne shoved me ahead of him when we reached the entrance, blocking them from me with his body. They were scrambling behind us. A hiss seemed to rise up, an unnatural sound from behind us that seemed to echo through the night as I stumbled back out into the salt-tinged air.

The sky felt darker than it had been when we went in. I ran for the open beach. We had to warn Kaelan not to land.

“Go!” he shouted at me, although it was unnecessary. I was already very focused on going.

The two of us raced side by side. Thorne kept glancing over his shoulder, looking wide-eyed and boyish and almost afraid. I didn't look back.

But it was when Thorne looked ahead of us that he growled a curse word.

An enormous icy blue dragon was winging his way across the dark sky, glimmering under the moonlight. He was headed away from us.

“Do you think he didn't try to land?” I asked. “Maybe it's just once you touch the island itself ...”

The two of us exchanged a look.

“My talons did touch the sand ...” he swiped his hand through his hair. “Does he realize there's something wrong?”

“He's probably busy with the snakes.” That disaster seemed far distant now.

As we made our way the rest of the way toward the beach, we found some of the sailors, wet and shivering and bedraggled.

“There's danger here!” Thorne warned them, and they gathered around as he explained the nymphs would try to seduce them and take control of their minds.

Was that what they had tried to do to him? Had he been acting when he stalked toward me, or had he almost succumbed to their magic before he overcame the spell?

Thorne was tall and powerful and forbidding, and the thought that these creatures could make him turn on me sent a flood of fresh fear pumping through my body.

“Why did they think that I could block their spell?” I asked Thorne. “That I could stop them from taking you over? We need to make sure the rest of the men don't succumb.”

“I'm trying to prepare them,” Thorne said. “So we can all fight. We need to disarm whatever entrapment they have.”

“Is it just because I'm female that my magic counteracts theirs?” I asked. “What was it like, Thorne? We need to know

how to fight them. If they're able to take their minds over ...”

“I don't know!” Thorne said gruffly. “I could feel them trying to influence me, and the most horrible thoughts entered my mind. But ... I was able to fight it off.”

He looked at the rest of the men. “You can do the same. The nymphs will try and take over your minds. I don't know what happened to the other men here ...”

There were white bones half-buried in the sand. I didn't know how I had missed them before, but they glimmered under the moonlight. “I have a feeling I do.”

Thorne's gaze followed mine. “I didn't even see the bones before.”

“What bones?” one of the sailors asked.

Fear clutched my stomach. Suddenly the snakes seemed like a far better deal.

“Maybe if we swim into the sea, the island's grip on us will fade and we—you can fly.” I worried the bracelet around my wrist.

“Maybe,” Thorne admitted. “But you won't survive long in that icy sea.”

“None of us will,” I said. “But it's better than being murdered by the nymphs. At least the sea gives us a chance.”

“It doesn't give you much of a chance, daughter of summer. And I have a mission to protect you.”

The nymphs emerged from the forest of sticks.

They glimmered ephemerally under the moonlight.

“Beautiful,” one of the sailors murmured, and they all turned to watch the nymphs. Their jaws fell open.

“Focus,” Thorne warned, giving me a worried look.

The sailors began walking toward them as if they were in a trance.

“Look away!” Thorne shouted at his men. He grabbed their shoulders, shaking them. “Get away from them!”

But with another step, the nymphs were amongst the men, running their hands across their bodies and whispering in their ears.

Then the nymphs turned and looked at us.

“Fight them,” Thorne shouted.

It was a losing battle. The men turned toward us, their eyes glazed, their jaws still hinged stupidly open.

The nymphs had that triumphant look on their face again, the same way they had looked at me when they thought Thorne would kill me.

The men ran toward us.

Thorne slammed one of them across the face, then whirled and kicked another in the chest. One came at his back, about to leap onto him, but I got there first, grabbing his arm and throwing him over my shoulder.

“Go!” Thorne shouted at me. “I’ll be right behind you!”

I plunged into the forest. I looked back as branches whipped around me, and there was a sailor right behind me, his arms outstretched, his face fixed in a skeletal smile. I whirled and caught a tree branch above me.

I kicked him in the chest with both feet, laying him out. In the distance, barely visible between the spindly trees, there were too many sailors between Thorne and me. Thorne was scrambling along the beach instead. Most of the sailors chased after him.

But mine was scraping himself off the floor.

I didn’t want to kill him; I wanted to escape him long enough to fix the curse. So I plunged into the forest, desperate to escape.

Finally, it was quiet. I had lost the attacker.

But worse, I had lost Thorne.

I didn’t dare raise my voice to call for him. We were being hunted.

But gods, I wished he was here with me.

Even though it was the last thing in my life that I wanted to do at the moment, I turned my steps back toward the cavern.

Thorne said he'd felt the nymphs try to manipulate him, and he'd been able to fight them.

Might he and Kaelan, if he landed, eventually succumb? The thought of being hunted by those two men was more terrifying than those dozen sailors. Imagining their eyes, cold and hard and dead, as they reached for me made me feel panicky.

How did I protect them both? How had Thorne resisted so far?

The wind whispered around me in the deep, cold silence.

Honor and the rest of my family would be asleep in the castle right now, in the warm, comfortable spaces I'd taken for granted. My bed would be empty, thick covers drawn up snugly. The enchanted lanterns would blink soft, rainbow lights between the books that filled the shelves.

My favorite things from my room—my jewelry and dresses, the doll my mother had sewn for me while she was pregnant, my collection of crystals and rocks, my beloved knives—were all sunk to the bottom of the sea.

I'd wanted to stand on my own feet.

Now I was utterly alone.

Unless I found a way to save these two men.

## CHAPTER 16



Kaelan

The men were gone. Thorne was gone. Hanna was gone.

I stared across the island as if I'd be able to sense her. The warmth and joy that she exuded seemed like a beacon ... but nothing answered me except the scream of the wind.

There was no trace of anyone except the scuffled footprints in the sand. One mark swiped across the sand obviously came from a dragon's talons.

I knelt and studied it, frowning. Had he struggled to set Hanna down? I hoped she was unharmed. Thorne would protect her with his life, but the man was not exactly gentle.

The sea pounded angrily against the beach and the wind seemed to scream, in hate or warning, as I trekked across the sand. The need to find Thorne and Hanna pulsed in my chest, as deep a need as my own heartbeat.

Then three nymphs emerged from the gray, withered outlines of the trees. The nymphs were as beautiful as the island was desolate. Long, filmy white gowns tangled around their legs.

"Hello traveler," one of them greeted me, stretching out her arms as if she might embrace me, although she was at a distance. "Are you lost like your friends?"

"Did you see them?" I demanded.



She nodded. "I'll take you to them."

Roads that are too easy never lead to pleasant destinations.

I glanced around the island, looking for any hint at where everyone had gone. These nymphs must know.

"Lead on." Thorne and Hanna might be in their clutches.

The nymphs led me toward a cave. One glance at the dark entrance, and I knew I wasn't going in there unless it trapped Thorne and Hanna. Only an idiot would climb down into the darkness.

I paused and faced the nymphs. Two of them pressed close to me, looking up at me with rapt eyes and seductive faces. The third began to sing, a beautiful, haunting melody that made my heart soften.

Hanna rose in my mind. She was so beautiful, but in a quirky, interesting way. The nymphs all looked alike: perfect and dull, as if they had been stamped like three glimmering wax seals.

"Where are my friends?" I asked again as one of the nymphs stroked her hands over my chest.

"Forget your friends," she whispered. "I'll be your friend."

I caught her wrists in mine. "I only tolerate two or three people, really. I won't make a good friend."

"Let me show you," she whispered.

As her lips drifted close to my ear, the power of her magic swept through me. Lust and desire coursed through my veins, making my pulse quicken.

My cock hardened. My heart beat faster. But it was the memory of Hanna's face that rose in my mind. She was far more alluring than the three magical creatures before me, even as they shimmied their gowns down their shoulders, exposing their perfect breasts, whispering dirty words.

The one directly in front of me held my gaze, a smile on her face, as she palmed her breasts in front of me, kneading and rolling her nipples between her fingers.

“Take me to my friends,” I ordered.

The nymphs’ expressions changed in an instant, from sweet and alluring to cold and menacing.

“This one must be under her enchantment too,” one said.

They hissed at me, baring sharp teeth.

“Must we?” I asked.

They lunged at me. I fought back, slamming my fists into their faces and kicking them away. Their long nails raked across my skin, drawing blood that flew across the sand.

I grabbed one of them and snapped her neck. The sickening crunch seemed to split the night air.

When I dropped her to my feet, she stared up at me, her head backwards, and then her lips parted in a smile. Her talons dug into the sand as she climbed to her feet, her head dangling from her neck.

Some of my men emerged into the clearing.

“Help me!” I shouted.

“Kill him!” the nymphs shouted.

My men walked past them in a daze toward me.

I backed up. I didn’t want to kill them after working so hard to save their lives.

“Stop,” I ordered them. “You’re under an enchantment. Fight it. Be stronger than the magic.”

“Even you aren’t stronger than the magic,” one of the nymphs hissed. “Sooner or later, you’ll either perish ... or serve us.”

Two of my men attacked me at once.

Fuck this, I was going to fly.

I tried to shift.

But it didn’t work.

Instead, I was still on the ground when my men threw themselves into me. Red bloomed across my vision as one of

them hit me across the face.

I dodged one blow, but the other struck me with a thick branch. The force was enough to rock me forward.

I barely managed to swing around and capture him around the waist before he could attack again. Another blow fell, awkwardly now, against my back. I didn't want to hurt him, but I had to stop him from attacking me anymore. I threw him at full force into the nearest tree.

The others came at me.

I would have to kill them with my bare hands to survive if I couldn't knock them unconscious.

The nymphs shouted words which I couldn't hear, but which seemed to fuel my men's rage and lust as we fought. One of them continued to sing, her song rising into the air, eerie and beautiful as it floated above the violence.

My men looked so desperate and wild.

But as I was locked in combat with the last man standing, the nymphs rushed toward me and swarmed over me.

Their nails, suddenly more like claws, sank deep into my skin. I tried to fight them off, but they clung to me. The upper part of their faces were still beautiful, but their jaws seemed to unhinge, revealing enormous mouths and sharp teeth.

They were going to win.

I was going to die on this nothing island.

My kingdom was going to fall under the Snake Queen's reign.

"No! He's mine!" Hanna's voice called out, close. I tried hard to fight them off, feeling a renewed surge of strength. I couldn't let them hurt her. "He's a spoiled, arrogant dickhead, but he's *mine*."

The next second, one of the nymphs flew off me. Hanna was behind her, carrying the tree branch she'd just used to swat a nymph.

Hanna's lips peeled back from her teeth with exertion, she was covered in mud and blood, and her hair was a wild tangled blond mass around her face.

Relief swept through me like a river undammed. Maybe no one else would have thought so, but she was beyond beautiful when she was wild. Imperfect and gorgeous and *mine*.

She continued to beat at the nymphs.

Abruptly, hissing, the nymphs pulled away from me. They ran for the cavern, tripping and slipping in the mud that didn't seem to stain their dresses or touch their skin.

"Come on," I told her, grabbing her arm and pulling her with me. They would come back. "We need to get out of here."

The two of us ran, but there was nowhere to go on the island.

Abruptly, someone launched themselves out of the forest toward us.

I whirled, ready to strike.

But it was Thorne.

Hanna leapt between us, throwing me a dark look that cut to my soul.

"You're alive," she said in relief, grabbing his arm. Then she was in his arms, throwing her arms around his chest and hugging him hard. He wrapped his arms around her in return.

I dropped my fists. I'd been keyed up and desperate to protect Hanna.

Though Thorne didn't seem to notice.

"I am." He was still holding her tightly, his arms like a shield blocking anyone else out. The look he gave her was filled with relief. "And so are you."

I had apparently been murdered by the nymphs and was now walking the island as a ghost, or so one would have thought from the level of interest anyone had in me now.

Something charged seemed to pass between them.

Unexpected jealousy flickered like a flame in my chest. Hanna had leapt to protect Thorne.

“Thank you for protecting her,” I told Thorne.

She quirked an eyebrow. “Protecting *me*? Didn’t I just save your life, princeling?”

“We will all protect each other,” Thorne said. “We need each other to get off this island. Hanna, you’re right. We’re better off risking the waves than staying on this enchanted land.”

“We can’t take her into the water.” I hated that I couldn’t shift. “She won’t last long.”

“I found a ship,” Thorne said, then corrected, “Well, I found ... a vessel.”

“I don’t like the way you just said that. But lead on.”

The three of us raced across the island. Sometimes we’d hear the nymphs or my men, and we hid. I didn’t want to kill any more of my men or risk another fight with the nymphs, not when we had a better option.

“I think we lose our ability to use our magic at all once we touch the island,” Thorne told me as our feet slipped through the soft, shifting sand. “Hopefully our abilities will return once we are off the island. But if it takes more time, than we have the boat to keep her alive.”

We reached a rocky outcropping, and it took me a second to pick out the gray, weathered vessel hidden among the rocks. Relief spiked through me before I realized how badly damaged the boat was.

“This is not seaworthy,” I said.

“Well, I’m not sticking around,” Hanna snapped, and I caught a glimpse of the nymphs and my men emerging from the forest in the distance. “You can pay me back by saving my life from the sea, if the boat sinks.”

She was already pushing the boat into the water. I had the distinct feeling she was going with me or without me, and I wasn't going to leave her.

I pushed Thorne into the boat with her then waded through the icy water, shoving the boat into the sea.

“Ah fuck,” Thorne said, with his usual deep expressiveness.

A thin, persistent trickle of water was flooding the bottom of the boat. Thorne slapped his hand over it, trying to stem the flow; a situation we could have fixed with magic might be fatal.

Hanna winced as the icy cold water touched her skin. Her face looked horrified and wide-eyed, just for a second, before she returned to that composed look.

I paused, ready to pull the boat back into shore, but she shook her head, blond hair flying.

“I'd rather die in the sea than spend another minute on this damned island.”

“You are so stubborn,” I told her.

The way she'd claimed that I was hers, all wild-eyed and dangerous, was a memory I would savor.

As the water reached my waist, shouts rose behind me, then the sound of splashing.

My men ran up behind me, trying to stop me. I gave one more heave to the boat and jumped in at the end myself.

I tried to shift, but I still couldn't.

The five men continued to wade after us, mindless of the water rising up to their chests which would soon claim their lives just as the island had claimed their sanity.

The sun was just beginning to break over the island. The nymphs stood together on the shore, holding out their arms and calling for my men to return.

“Fight off the enchantment,” I begged them one last time.

“They can’t,” one of the nymphs called, then let out a hysterical laugh. “They aren’t in love.”

As the men rushed toward me, I feared they would push me under the waves, then move on to Hanna, and I wouldn’t be able to reach her to protect them.

But when they rushed toward me, I finally shifted.

My wings sprouted first, and I leapt upward away from the boat before I could capsize it. My wings caught the updraft and I soared, feeling my tail explode from my back, my body grow. It felt as if I were stretching myself out after being stuffed into a too-small box for so long.

I flew toward the isle, blasting ice toward the nymphs. As long as they didn’t touch the land, I should be able to fight them.

Hanna’s scream pierced the air. I looked back to find Thorne trying to club the men off the side of the boat as they yanked Hanna toward the water. Thorne kept beating them off, but there were so many of them, and they were all clutching her.

She finally fell toward the water, letting out another scream.

I swept down and caught her up in my claws. The two of us soared above the chaos.

Thorne transformed too, and the boat splintered. He opened his mouth as he slammed into the waves between the men, who tried to scatter—terrified even through the daze of their enchantment—as he blasted ice at them. They froze in place, their mouths parted in eternal screams, the water around them frozen into icy shards.

It looked as if the nymphs were dead, and unfortunately my men too.

Thorne flew at my side. The two of us glanced at each other. Hanna clung to my talons as we circled over the ruins of our ship. Just a few flaming pieces were left, rocking across the waves. There was nowhere for her to be safe.

There was nothing left to do but race toward home before Hanna froze.

Thorne and I carefully got her transferred onto Thorne's back. She seemed fearless as we flew close together and I held her above his dark, blue-black scales. But when I let go, she clung to his neck and let out the faintest desperate cry.

I hated not being the one to carry her, but at least now I could see her and know that she was safe.

All I wanted to do was get her home and take care of her. I worried about her in the icy winds that blew across the sea, especially as we got closer and closer to the Ice Kingdom. But there was no place for us to rest.

Soon, Hanna. I wished I could tell her how close we were to safety. I'd get her into a hot bath, check her wounds, have the servants bring her a feast.

I'd tell her she was brave today.

Relief swept through me when the dark shape of the castle against the setting sun became clear. The dome beside it glowed with its unnatural greenery.

We were home.

Pride rushed through me. I couldn't wait to show her my vast kingdom.

When we landed in the empty courtyard, I shifted before Thorne. Lights spilled out of the castle—it seemed to always be awake in this land where night lasted so long—but the courtyard stayed empty. The servants knew to give me my space.

She was already throwing her legs to one side, then starting to slide down his dark scales.

His enormous head turned back over his shoulder, watching her with the most concerned expression a dragon's face can manage. But I was the one who held out my arms to her.

She must be desperate, because she slid into my arms.



I lifted her down, surprised as always by how light she felt to me.

She looked exhausted, her eyes dark smudged, and she was shivering. The desire to sweep her off her feet and cage her against my chest, to carry her away to warmth and make her cozy, was so powerful I barely resisted. “Are you alright?”

Her magic must be spent from keeping her warm. I gripped her hands in mine, using my magic to send warmth sparking through her blood. It was a harder spell for me—I ran cold, not hot—but her lips parted as if the warmth were orgasmic. Answering warmth flooded my chest.

“Oh, with you by my side, Kaelan, how could I feel anything but spectacular?”

Apparently, exhaustion did not impact her sarcasm muscle.

“I’ll get you to my apartment and you’ll be able to rest,” I promised her. “A hot bath and getting out of Thorne’s sweater should make you feel much better.”

The sweater pissed me off. But I shouldn’t let either of them know that. If she saw my weakness, Hanna would steal all of Thorne’s tunics and sweaters and parade around me in them.

Thorne shifted back. Out of my peripheral vision, I could see his big form moving toward us, but I couldn’t tear my eyes away from Hanna’s pale, tired face ... or the smile that darted across her lips.

“Thorne was very gallant.” She sounded mischievous. Another muscle that apparently couldn’t be worn out.

“Thorne has to be,” I said curtly. “I charged him to protect you.”

“Protecting me doesn’t mean he had to give me his sweater.” She favored Thorne with a smile that seemed directed toward me as much as at him. “Thank you for keeping me alive, Thorne. For protecting me.”

The double doors from the castle swung open.

King Edric, my father, general asshole, strode through the doors. He looked barely older than I—so it went with the Fae—with dark hair that hung around his shoulders and bright, quick silver eyes.

Thorne and I exchanged a look.

“Hanna, I’d like you to meet my father, King Edric.” We all made our bows. “Father, here is my fiancée.”

“Well, almost.” My father said cheerfully. “We will see if she is worthy.”

Anxiety knotted in my stomach. I wasn’t afraid of much, but a childhood fear of one’s parents roots so deep we still feel those fears as adults.

He offered her his arm. She managed a smile, always graceful, even with her hair hanging knotted around her face and her eyes shadowed. He didn’t seem to notice the bedraggled state she was in.

He drew her with him toward the castle.

I’d been dreaming of patricide for a long time, but a fresh blade of fury buried itself in my tight chest now.

I had no choice. Not until I swept him off his throne. I traded a look with Thorne, and then we followed him.

The castle glittered with the first rays of sun catching the ice encasing the stone. Hanna’s lips parted in awe at its beauty as she stared up at the castle, and I felt furious watching my father talk with her. This was supposed to be my moment.

We entered the enormous lobby, and the doors were slammed shut behind us. My father led her into the small ballroom, located off the throne room. Though he had turned virtually every room into a second throne room, and this was no different; there was a dais with a smaller throne where he could smile down at the dancers.

A dozen beautifully dressed young women thronged the room. They brightened when they saw us.

What was his game? I recognized the daughters of various nobles and one exceptionally wealthy commoner. Inara. Kuria.

Noxy. Each girl was more polished and dull than the last.

My father exclaimed dramatically to the crowd, “The last contestant has arrived! The contest can begin.”

Hanna gave me a slightly wild-eyed look. “What contest?”

“The engagement trials, of course.” Then Edric raised his voice and told the crowd, “May the best noble woman win my son’s hand!”

Hanna gave me a stricken look that lasted just a heartbeat, before she was smiling and composed.

Her blond hair was stringy around her shoulders, and Thorne’s blue sweater was stained with blood and dirt. The other women thronging around were dressed beautifully, their hair impeccable.

The way she had looked at me—with wild hurt in her eyes before she blinked it away—clung to me.

I turned to my father. “This is a surprise.”

“The trial allows for all the nobles to feel their daughters had an equal opportunity to become your queen,” he said. “It’s an ancient tradition.”

“Fine.” I shrugged. “As you wish.”

Hanna’s lips pressed together angrily, and I knew she had heard me.

I turned and walked away before I might threaten the life of a king, and push us both into far more danger.

## CHAPTER 17



*H*anna

I had serious regrets regarding saving Kaelan's life.

But I was a princess, so I always fixed a smile on my face until I could figure out how to fuck up someone's world.

I looked back for Thorne and Kaelan, but they had disappeared.

Fury swept through me, so hot and intense that tears prickled at the back of my eyes. Tears that I would never let fall.

Kaelan had created this situation and dropped me into it, yet apparently he wasn't interested enough to watch this nightmare play out.

Why the hell had he staged such an elaborate game to trap me in his kingdom ... when if I lost this contest, I might not even be his fiancée?

And if this was his father's doing, or someone else's, not his ... why the hell hadn't he warned me? Prepared me? I was dead on my feet, without a spark of magic left.

The other girls shied away from me, giving me scornful looks. Their gowns were obviously expensive.

Edric cleared his throat. All the girls turned toward the dais where he stood, towering above them even more than he naturally did—Kaelan had clearly gotten his tall, leanly

muscled frame from his father—and they smiled at him as if they hung on his every word, crowding toward the dais.

I stayed in the back, crossing my arms over my torn sweater. A man with blond hair and a rakish smile walked across the dais to join Edric, and there was a low breath from the girls as if they were all in awe of him. I crinkled my nose.

“Kaelan’s most trusted advisor, Dare, will oversee your training and experience in the trials. There will be five trials spread over the course of the next few weeks. Now you will simply be shown before the court. Whoever wins my son will stand before him as part of a new day for our people.” Edric smiled, but it seemed shallow, as if he weren’t eager for his son to replace him on the throne. “For those of you who have entered late, there will be one final review of the debut ceremony.”

No one had to look at me, but I could still feel their attention.

“I wasn’t aware that I was missing anything. It’s too bad it took Kaelan so long to convince me to come to the Ice Kingdom.”

Everyone pretended I hadn’t spoken.

I felt a faint throbbing in my head, but at least my rejection of Kaelan wasn’t strong enough to trigger full-on vengeance from the vows. Still, I pressed my lips together tightly. Right. I was supposed to be madly in love with him. In public.

I could not wait to discuss this betrayal with him one-on-one.

He was lucky my blades were at the bottom of the sea.

But for now, I’d compete in the trials and do my best to win. For all I knew, they murdered the failed brides.

“Dare will judge, as he knows Kaelan’s desires quite well,” the king said. “I wish you all luck impressing him.”

Edric spoke to Dare quietly.

I used my magic to sharpen my hearing so I could eavesdrop on them. A few girls skirted me, fanning out far

away from me and giving me rude looks. I gave them a smile and shook my clothes out in their general direction; one of them yelped as a little sand flew into her cleavage.

“Kaelan looked surprised,” Dare said to the king. “I thought you told him.”

“Just because I’m letting you sit on my throne to judge them doesn’t mean you should judge me, Dare.”

Dare inclined his head. “My apologies, my king.”

“Kaelan knows that the bride doesn’t matter,” Edric went on, more softly. “He needs to marry any living body who will produce heirs and not embarrass us. And now the nobles will all know their daughters had their chance and failed, if he does end up marrying the ... dragon princess.”

His voice was thick with contempt. He glanced toward me. I was certainly underdressed for the occasion, but then, I had also saved his son’s life.

Also, he was out of luck if this *living body* was supposed to not embarrass him. I was definitely going to embarrass these fucking Royals.

Edric was a threat, but as he left, my attention focused on Dare. I was so curious about him. Kaelan’s other best friend.

Dare rocked back on his heels as he stood on the dais, crossing his arms over his leanly muscled chest. He was handsome, with the kind of jaw that seemed carved from steel and pillowy lips, no matter how sternly he pressed them together. A tattoo edged up from beneath the tall collar of his tunic, and I was curious what it was. I thought Ice Fae, or at least Ice Fae Royals, didn’t wear tattoos.

Dare seated himself in the king’s throne with a dramatic flare of his cloak, then crossed his legs at the knee. Lounging back into the throne, his gaze studied all of us—but it seemed to linger most on me.

“One more time through the steps,” a woman said wearily from behind us, and we all turned.

Two Fae stood in front of us, and another Fae with a fiddle stood beside them, looking as if the instrument tucked under his chin were a curse.

Clearly, everyone else had practiced often, because as the music was struck up, they began to move with elegant grace.

I mimicked them as best I could. I was still barefoot, my feet cold and sandy as I stepped back and forth across the marble.

Being a princess was ridiculous.

I couldn't stop thinking about how much I wanted food. The girls looked horrified by my appearance whenever we came face to face, but I didn't really care. All I wanted was a thick piece of buttered toast ... a lot of cheese ... a bowl of bacon and potatoes ... some nice soup ... a wedge of apple pie. No, an entire apple pie. An entire feast of food rose before my eyes, currently a far stronger fantasy than any orgasm.

When the dance instruction paused and we took a break, one of the girls threw a look at me, then flounced toward Dare.

I turned to watch as she melted before him in a curtsy so deep I'd have considered it degrading. He looked weary, but cocked a finger at her in invitation.

She swayed her hips up the dais steps. After she spoke to him, both of them looked toward me.

I gave them a friendly wave.

"Ladies." Dare's voice was deeper than one might expect. "Please gather."

He was still leaning on one arm of the dais, lounging lazily. Not only was he making us hop through hoops like little drained dogs, he didn't even seem to take it seriously.

"Repeat your question, Noxy," he told the girl. "I think it will be edifying for us all."

"Yes, Lord Dare," she said in a sickly sweet tone.

I could've sworn Dare's eyes rolled ever-so-slightly heavenward.

With a nasty smile toward me, she asked, “If someone isn’t taking this seriously and doesn’t value the opportunity to compete for the Prince’s hand, shouldn’t they be released from the competition?”

It’s always odd to me when people try to be passive aggressive. I am, by nature, aggressive-aggressive.

“Noxy,” I said, because I certainly wasn’t going to let myself forget her name. “Given how I look, I certainly don’t seem to be the best competition. So why are you afraid of me? Because you know Kaelan actually adores me?”

She scoffed. “How could he? But anyway ... this trial is not just about what Kaelan likes, but what the kingdom needs.”

“All right, Noxy.” Dare cut in. “Perhaps the most important part of the trials is your ability to follow orders and keep your mouth shut. That’s an essential skill for an Ice Fae queen.”

I had to keep my mouth shut to win? That also did not bode well for my success.

“And Noxy, I assume you’re offended by Hanna’s appearance, but trying to be oh so subtle?” Dare looked amused.

“She’s not taking it seriously,” she protested.

“Yes, this was purposeful. I showed up dressed like this to demonstrate my scorn for the entire concept of women competing for a man’s attention,” I said.

Eleven shocked faces met mine.

Dare propped his chin in his hand, his lips covering his mouth. I was pretty sure he was hiding a smile.

“Actually, it’s because my ship sank. Luckily, my hero, Kaelan, saved me from the icy water.” I smiled at her, even though I was gagging inside.

“Yes,” Dare said, once more looking unimpressed by us all. He stood, glancing down at us all. “Prince Kaelan chose



her, in his wisdom. I'm not going to remove her from the pageant for looking a bit... mangy."

Noxy sighed.

"You're all dismissed." Dare waved his long fingers at us dismissively. "You'll be presented to the throne room in a few minutes. Make yourselves perfect."

The women moved away in a flurry of activity.

"Mm," Dare said, meeting my gaze. "You are dressed rather inappropriately. In ... Thorne's sweater, I noticed."

I hooked my fingers on the collar. The warmth of the sweater—and his scent—had comforted me throughout that brutal final flight. Especially once my magic began to fail. "What is this, Dare?"

He sank into the throne again. He had towered over me while he stood, and even sitting down, he looked intimidating. "I can't control what the King does. We all have to manage as best we can in this castle."

*Kaelan needs me.* The thought raced through my mind. But why didn't he just talk to me?

Was it because he couldn't?

"Anyway," he continued. "You're not as pretty as they are—at least, not at the moment—but I can't tell what you would look like if you weren't so ..."

He made a dismissive gesture.

"You don't have much imagination," I chided.

The general air of judgment in the room annoyed me, even though I didn't give two fucks what most of these people thought about me. I had a feeling Dare was important to Kaelan.

Dare just seemed like a dick, though.

What was I missing?

"Go join the other girls." He waved me off. "The doors open for the royal court soon, and if I were you, since you

can't fix the way you look, I'd practice the steps again so you save a little dignity."

Whenever someone is condescending to me, I have the most perverse urge to do the opposite of whatever they ask. It's a terrible trait in a princess.

And now that impulse led to me abruptly straddling Dare's lap.

"Up close," I asked innocently, "Is it easier to imagine me if I were presentable? Oh, tell me, Lord Dare, how do I make myself pleasing to our princeling?"

He froze, his hands tightening on the arms of the throne. "What are you doing?"

His eyes were wide as they met mine. For the first time, Dare had dropped his lazy insolence, and he looked afraid.

But he wasn't afraid of *me*.

Unfortunately.

"You're afraid to touch me. Why? Because Prince Kaelan might murder you?"

His jaw tightened. "You belong to him."

I scoffed. "He belongs to me. Not that these girls know it yet. And you're right ... I'm not as pretty as they are."

He watched me warily. I ground down against his lap, feeling the way his cock pressed hard against me through my salt-stained trousers. Little Dare apparently didn't fear Kaelan's wrath, because he had sprung to attention.

And Dare felt quite well-endowed. A hard bar pressed up against my thigh, and for the first time, I felt a faint ache of longing for something besides toast and apple pie.

"But can they save your life?" I trailed my fingers up his shirt. His adam's apple bobbed as I paused, my fingernails just barely raking his skin. "Or take it?"

"Nothing about this is wise," he gritted.

“No? Kaelan needs me. Does he need you as much?” I smiled at him, then rose from his lap. His cock tented his trousers in a most noticeable way. “Don’t fuck with me, Dare. You won’t like what happens.”

He stayed still, watching me as if I were a predator, as I moved away.

And I liked it.

One of the girls abruptly rushed toward me. “Come with me,” she whispered. “They’re letting us all use the bathroom.”

How I’d fallen. From spoiled princess to assigned bathroom breaks.

She took the sleeve of my sweater gingerly between two fingers and drew me with her into a large marble bathroom.

Everyone else was primping in the bathroom nearby, standing at the mirrors, but she pulled me past them into a room with an enormous sunken bath. Steam curled along the top of the water, and the scent of herbs hung in the air.

“I don’t think I have time—” I started. Well, fuck it. They’d waited for me. Maybe they’d wait for me again.

I stripped off the sweater and trousers. Gods, they reeked, was that the real reason Dare had seemed so afraid of me? I quickly climbed into the water and began to scrub myself. I wished I had time to savor a proper bath.

“Oh,” she said, sounding surprised and turning away. I didn’t have time for modesty, and spies don’t prioritize that trait. “There are... some clothes for you.”

She gestured at the hooks on the wall, which held not only a few towels fluttering above the stone, but also a dress—a shimmering, gorgeous blue gown.

“Why?” I asked. “What’s your name?”

“Imara,” she said hesitantly. “But I don’t want any of the girls to know I helped you ...”

“Of course not,” I said. “So we won’t be besties. I can live with that. Where did the dress come from?”

“Thorne brought it to my sister and asked for my help.”

Someone in the hall shouted for us.

“I hoped he asked nicely.” I climbed out and quickly toweled off.

“He never asks nicely.” She cast a worried look toward the door as I pulled the dress on.

Without asking, she moved behind me and began to fasten the laces.

I summoned the few ragged strands of my magic and used an enchantment to dry my hair instantly. The two of us rushed out as soon, her fingers still moving against my back as she did the last laces.

I was still barefoot, but at least no one could really see my now-clean feet under the sweeping skirt.

The other girls were already sashaying into the ballroom as the courtier announced their names. We ran furiously, then switched to delicate steps and big smiles as we stepped into the din of the hall. A thousand faces seemed to be fixed on us.

As I entered, I was overwhelmed for a second by the sheer number of people lining the hall.

The room seemed more like an auditorium, with tiers overlooking the dance floor and the highest nobles crowding the ice white marble floor. There were so many faces that it seemed like an endless sea. I hadn't known there were this many people in the Ice Kingdom.

But it only impacted me for a minute. These people didn't matter. Either I would find allies here, or I wouldn't. Maybe Kaelan and I would truly be allies, maybe Thorne too, but there was nothing that mattered about impressing any of these nobles.

The music piped up, far too cheerfully for me when I'd gone this long without a carbohydrate.

We began to do our stupid little dance. As I went through the steps, I didn't look for Kaelan or Thorne. I had so much to say with Kaelan when I caught up with him.

I was so focused on my thoughts as I went through the dance steps that at first when Noxy whirled toward me and we almost collided, I thought it was my fault.

“You are an embarrassment,” she gritted between her smile, right before she stepped on my foot.

Her sharp heel sank into my bare skin. I gasped at the pain as it gouged into the top of my foot, but I kept on dancing, kept a smile fixed on my face ... more or less.

I could murder her later.

That had been no accident. She'd hurt me as deliberate sabotage.

In the sea of faces, only one face stood out to me.

Thorne was watching me from the balcony. It was the intensity of his gaze, the sudden aura of fury that seemed to emanate from him. Our gazes met for a long second.

I kept my eyes on him as I twirled through the steps, taking a turn and finding his gaze again.

Those dark eyes could be so hypnotic.

Kaelan and Dare stood on either side of him. I had been so fixed on Thorne I hadn't even registered them at first. Kaelan's hands strangled the railing as he watched us, but his gaze kept being drawn away from me.

I followed his gaze to Edric, standing on another balcony. His back was to us, not even doing us the courtesy of watching as we played this game.

I continued to move through the steps, fixing a blank smile on my face. I was a princess, after all. I was always good for a blank smile.

There was something about the way Thorne was watching me that sang through my body, bringing new energy to my exhausted limbs. I raised my arms and whirled through the steps, feeling my body begin to move to the music naturally. The lively music sank through my skin, warming as Thorne's gaze.

Then the dancers moved between us.

When everything cleared, only Kaelan and Dare were watching me.

Despite all Kaelan's insults, he watched me with desire written across his face. I couldn't tell, from the glimpses I caught of his face as I turned and smiled, if that desire was real or pretend.

Dare, on the other hand, propped his chin in his hand as he leaned on the railing; his lips were curled up, and his gaze flickered from me to Kaelan and back again.

The last strands of music faded. We ended in poses, in two lines of six each facing each other. Noxy stood directly across from me, one arm raised above her head, her other hand extended with perfect grace.

Her fingers were long and elegant, her white-blond hair perfectly coiffed.

Kaelan walked down the line, studying all of us in turn. He made some small comments to each of the girls, complimenting their dancing or their dress. "Kuria, you are quite graceful. Imara, your gown compliments your eyes. The purple suits you."

He reached Noxy.

He gazed at her expressionlessly, his hands tucked behind his back.

She beamed at him. She was strikingly beautiful. Her eyes were wide and a deep shade of silver-gray, her features delicate.

He turned without saying a word.

Her brows fell, but her smile never faded.

Kaelan and I stared at each other for a few long beats. His lips parted, but I didn't want his compliments.

I wanted an explanation.

No, I wanted him to grovel for putting me in this humiliating situation. He could kneel the way he'd wanted me

to kneel.

His lips closed again and he turned away. His posture was perfect and stiff. Noxy's stiff smile broadened in relief. She thought he had scorned me too.

But she misjudged.

He felt my scorn.

Was Prince Kaelan, the terrifying Ice Fae, just slightly scared of me?

I liked that idea.

I wanted desperately to talk to Kaelan. But as soon as Kaelan finished his inspection, he seemed to be swallowed by the crowd.

The room came alive with thousands of people thronging to meet and congratulate the prospective brides. I smiled and greeted everyone who found me, all the while making my way deliberately toward the door.

Then finally, I slipped out of the ballroom and into the cool of the hallway. Two guards, watching the doors, looked at me in surprise. But I was used to being judged by servants.

Where was Kaelan?

"This isn't where you're supposed to be, little princess," a mocking voice said.

I turned to find Dare, leaning against the marble wall, his muscular arms braced across his chest.

"I just wanted to get a look at the palace that will be my home."

"Is that so?" He tilted his head as he studied me. "And what do you think of your home so far?"

"It seems lovely. Cold. Empty. Wasteful."

"And yet, as I understand it, you have an entire castle you don't use, Princess. Why don't you turn that into a shelter for the poor? Why haven't you given all your money away?" He clucked his tongue.

I studied him. Kaelan had told me about his two best friends, but he hadn't told me enough. "Why are you so important to Kaelan?"

He splayed one long fingered hand over his chest dramatically. "Important to Prince Kaelan? I'm not sure I would say that. I'm touched by your insight."

"Why don't we go ask him? Take me to him." I paused as an idea struck me. "Actually, take me to the kitchen first. Then take me to Kaelan."

"I would not do that to him."

"We'll have a nice chat, the three of us."

His lips twitched. "No, you just want to go badger him."

"He's the love of my life," I lied. I couldn't take another of those headaches. "I think it's understandable I wasn't entirely delighted to get here and find his interest is divided with eleven other brides."

"His interest is not divided, and you know it." Dare's green eyes were intense, and they raked over me as if he could see right through to my heart. "You wanted to know why I'm special to Kaelan. Why are *you* special to Kaelan?"

"You really don't know? Does he not talk to you either?"

"The Ice Kingdom is full of secrets." The way he looked at me, as if he could strip my secrets away, made me want to slap him, even before he went on. "You're pretty. Intelligent. And you seem cool-headed enough. But there isn't anything particularly special about you, is there?"

"Not a thing," I said. "And it's too bad about the secrets. I find open communication is so much more helpful. Which is why, as I requested, we should go speak to Prince Kaelan."

"I'm not doing that to him," Dare said. "I think you need some time to cool off. At any rate, you are needed back in the ballroom. You can wait your turn to speak to him. He has so many people to greet."

He swept one arm toward the ballroom obviously trying to usher me in there. It made me feel quite suspicious.



If Dare sent me to the ballroom, I'd bet Kaelan was in the opposite direction.

“Thank you for the instructions to find him,” I said glibly, before heading toward the doors.

From the shiver up my spine, I had the feeling he watched me until I had stepped back inside the party.



Kaelan

My father was waiting for me in his study.

“You wanted to see me?” I asked as I strode in.

“Yes. We have a guest to welcome.”

I wasn't sure what he was talking about or what he wanted, so I went to the bar to pour myself a drink. Did he have something else terrible in mind for Hanna?

He scoffed. “This is not about your princess, don't worry.”

The link between us should be closed, but I could never escape my childhood fears that my thoughts were leaking to my father.

After all, he had walked through my mind as if it were his own house, his footsteps resounding, all the years I was growing up.

“Would you like a glass?” I dropped a few mint leaves and berries into the bottom of a glass, then poured in the cool clear liquor and began to muddle it. I needed more than wine to face my father.

“No. I'd rather be clear headed when we converse with the Snake Queen.”

My fingers froze on the spoon.

I turned, my face smoothed to neutral. Not that it was easy to hide my emotions from my father, no matter how blank I tried to seem. “The Snake Queen is visiting our kingdom?”

I’d spent the last five years freezing my ass off, hacking up snakes and monsters as they slithered across the border. My father faked being friendly with the Snake Queen to hold her off, but I wasn’t ready to pretend.

“Her emissary,” Edric corrected. “The Snake Queen is always so curious about Honor and her family.”

I grunted.

“You spend too much time with Thorne.”

“Agreed.”

My father clapped my shoulder. “You can pay your respects. Then you can go back to this strange business of finding a bride.”

“I found one,” I said dryly.

“You claimed Hanna was unsuitable. I wanted to offer you options. From within your own kingdom.”

“That was five years ago. She’s grown.”

“Perhaps. You’ve changed in the past five years as well.” Edric gave me a gauging look.

But I’d already experienced the *gauging look* from Hanna’s brothers-in-law—all eight of them—so my father’s seemed muted in comparison.

“Let us greet the Snake Queen’s emissary.” He clapped my shoulder.

I nodded and didn’t shy away, a practiced skill. I’d hidden from him in my mother’s skirts when I was four. I would never forget how her hands had folded in front of her, her knuckles white as she squeezed her hands together, while I reached out for her. She hadn’t reached for me as my father’s guards dragged me across the floor.

“You do know the Snake Queen tried to kill me?” I reminded him.

“You, or your bride?” Either way, he didn’t sound concerned. “The snake attack was unpleasant of her, but it’s not worth breaking the pretense of a truce. It’s better than having her soldiers come over our borders. You *did* survive.”

“I always do.”

But of course, the death of my crew didn’t matter to him. Even though they had been my private crew since boyhood. The captain had taught me to sail and taught me to lead. Something my father never could have taught me.

Now they were at the bottom of the sea and he wouldn’t bother to even mention it to the Snake Queen.

The two of us walked together down the halls. Distant, high strains of music floated to us from the ballroom.

Edric despised parties as a waste of time, but he threw enormous, lavish ones constantly. Wine and spirits flooded the castle, along with loose conversation...and my father’s spies.

He’d have invaded all of their minds if he could. But only a blood relation or marriage let two people form a link like we had.

The Snake Queen’s emissary was waiting for us in one of my father’s lounges. She was tall and bone-sharp, her dark hair falling in thick, loose waves down to her waist.

Not just the queen’s emissary.

Her daughter.

Seraphine.

My father hadn’t mentioned her identity for a reason. He had sent me to meet Hanna years ago in hopes of finding an alliance along with a bride.

But he had also sent me to meet Seraphine.

Seraphine hadn’t seemed interested, but it was my refusal of her that had cost me the last five years of my life at the front.

“Seraphine,” I greeted her, taking her hands.

“It’s such a pleasure to see you again.” Her smiles never touched her eyes, which were golden amber, her pupils narrow—as if she were part snake herself.

“Though it’s less of a pleasure to see him married,” she told Edric, who laughed with her.

“I hope you had a pleasant journey,” I told her.

My father had to play his diplomatic games with the snake kingdom, so I knew why he had welcomed her here—at least, one reason.

But why had the Snake Queen sent her?

If Hanna failed the trials, would Seraphine be waiting? She was too regal to enter the contest herself, but given her mother’s cruelty, I wouldn’t trust her not to sabotage the brides.

“Are you looking forward to seeing all these girls throw elbows to be the one standing at the altar, Kaelan?”

“No.”

There was no humor in my blunt response, but she laughed anyway.

“He’s placed all his money on one horse,” Edric said.

Seraphine gave me a gauging look. “Is it the blond?”

“There’s a lot of blondes.” Hanna’s face rose in my mind.

When my father revealed the trials, hurt had flashed across her face. And something else.

Shock.

She hadn’t expected me to betray her.

I could tell her that I hadn’t, but why would she believe me?

“Aren’t you a lucky man?” Seraphine said.

“Indeed.”

She laughed at me again, and Edric joined in politely.

When I was finally able to escape, I headed through the castle toward my apartment.

We'd been back in my kingdom for a few hours, and my plans were already going to shit.

As I turned the corner, Dare slunk out of the shadows. I dismissed the guards at my door and let Dare in with me. The windows were open, letting in the fragrant scent of night-blooming flowers and of fruit trees that could never bloom naturally in our kingdom.

I hadn't missed my apartment, as luxurious as it was. I'd prefer to leave this castle behind forever.

"Be careful," Dare warned me. "Hanna is looking for you."

Relief flooded me. "Good."

Dare raised his eyebrows as if he didn't approve of my optimism.

"I brought you a gift." Dare opened his jacket with a wince. "Such as it is."

My cat clambered up his shirt in a blur of orange and gray, then hissed at Dare as he clung to his shoulder.

"I hate your cat, by the way," Dare said. "Your father would like to feed him to his hounds, and I'm not sure I'd object. It should be a testament to my loyalty that I hid this cursed creature down in the village."

"Finnias!" I held my arms out to my cat, who leapt to the floor and looked up at me with more disdain than I'd seen from even Hanna.

Apparently I was guilty of yet more betrayals. I went to my writing desk and picked up a few cubes of the cheese I'd ordered delivered to my room.

"How dare I leave, I know." I crouched down on my heels to be closer to Finnias, who regarded me from a few feet away. His tail lashed angrily.

“If you start meowing, I’m changing my allegiance,” Dare said dryly.

But once I’d held out my hand, Finneas ate the cheese. His whiskers tickled my palm.

“Do you think your father still intends to marry you off to the Snake Queen’s daughter?”

Finneas butted his head against my knee, and I began to rub between his ears. “She wasn’t interested before.”

Thank the gods for that. There was only one woman I could imagine marrying. Gods help me.

But the way Seraphine had smiled at me, something feral and sharp in her gaze, made something inside me tense for an attack.

“Perhaps she’s changed her mind.” Dare perched on the edge of my writing desk, pouring himself a glass of my best wine. “For that matter, Hanna isn’t interested, is she? But you still seem determined you two will marry.”

When I looked up at him, Finneas leapt onto my shoulder. He butted the side of my face, purring.

Winning the cat’s forgiveness was a lot easier than winning Hanna’s.



Hanna

Of course, I quickly found my way out of the party again, and into the private wing of the royals. I slipped past the guards and strolled along, stuffing my mouth with the canapes I’d carried with me out of the party.

It was not that difficult to find Kaelan’s apartments. I followed the general stench of male arrogance ... and the

expensive paintings that lined the wall. The finest things must lead to Edric's apartments, which seemed to be down an entirely different hall.

I turned down the second nicest hallway, and a servant came past me muttering about devoting his life to chopping up steak and cheese for cats. It made me think I was in the wrong place, especially when I saw no guards down this hall.

The castle was a labyrinth. I'd have to make a map. There's nothing as embarrassing as getting lost when you're trying to be sneaky.

There *was* a very large bust of Prince Kaelan, larger than life, standing at the end of the hall. The white marble stared down the hall, looking quite fierce, gripping a sword.

Where the hell had this monstrosity come from?

I brushed the crumbs off my cleavage and let myself into my future husband's apartment.

He wasn't in the expansive living room. A round table stood before enormous windows, which overlooked a blooming green garden in the courtyard. The garden made no sense, given the ice I'd seen stretching for miles as we flew in.

Two lush couches framed the fireplace, where a fire burned merrily. Books and paper and a pen lay thrown on an elaborately carved writing desk, accompanied by a glass of wine and an absurdly large platter of cheese and fruit for one person.

I carried the platter with me as I strolled through his apartments, though I didn't find him until I reached the bathroom.

Kaelan faced away from me, his broad back rippling as he stood in the water. He was drinking wine in the bath.

"You should really have guards." I sat down at the edge of the water, hiking up my dress so I could dangle my feet in the tub.

I set to work eating his cheese. Kaelan did not deserve cheese.

“I knew you would come find me, and I didn’t want to inconvenience you.”

“You don’t think that the royal heir should be protected?”

“I feel quite confident I can handle you.”

I scoffed. I was tempted to huck the cheese at him, but I popped it into my mouth instead. “What the hell is this, Kaelan? I am supposed to compete to win your hand?”

“I did not choose this,” he said. “I have every intention of following through with our engagement. This is Edric’s ... decision.”

The emphasis he put on the word *decision* suggested that he could have found many other words to substitute.

I kicked my feet back and forth in the water. “I’m a fine actress, Kaelan, but I’m not sure I can convince anyone I’d strain myself to prove worthy to marry *you*.”

He scoffed a laugh. “No, of course you would never want to exert any effort to impress anyone. You wouldn’t want people to think you care.”

He set his glass of wine down beside me. I took the opportunity to pick it up and take a sip. He watched me, looking more pleased than I had expected.

He set one hand on either side of my hips, caging me in. His hair was wet and slicked back from the hard planes of his face. “And yet... you don’t want to slink back to your own kingdom like a wet cat either. Your family would welcome you home, wouldn’t they? They’d tell you that your failures don’t matter, that you are oh so *loved*. You don’t have to prove anything to the Dragon Royals.”

The words hung between us, conjuring images of home. The warm, cozy castle. The voices and laughter of my nieces and nephews. The affectionate, gentle teasing of my sister and brothers-in-law.

A hollow opened in my chest.

The asshole was right.



I didn't want to go back there. Not yet.

His voice dropped, became seductive. "But you have to prove something to yourself, don't you?"

"No," I disagreed. "I know exactly who I am. I have nothing to prove. Not to myself, not to anyone else."

He gave me a disbelieving look. "Hanna, for me to take the throne I have to prove myself. And that means you need to prove yourself as well."

I shook my head, and he caught my chin as he had so many times before. His gaze was intense, and he looked at me the way he had before he had kissed me before.

But instead he said, "I want you by my side."

Something inside me melted. Something that was supposed to be a wall, that kept crumbling no matter how much I tried to rebuild it.

The water rippled around his powerful body as he stepped back. I felt like I could finally breathe when he gave me some space.

"But why?" My mind was whirling. "Why won't you tell me anything? Is it because you can't?"

His silence was enough, even before he said, "You're so clever, I'm sure you can figure everything out."

"I can't tell if you're a manipulative asshole, or an enchanted Prince in need of rescue, or both."

"I'm definitely in need of rescue," he said, raising his voice slightly. I had the distinct impression he was talking to someone else. And then his gaze fixed on mine again. "You looked beautiful tonight."

"I most certainly did not."

He stepped back toward me, between my thighs. "When you were dancing, you were the only one I could see."

Since he was lower in the water than I was, we were nose to nose now. We were so close that I could just lean forward and brush my lips against his.

I would've kissed him, if we were in public, and I needed to pretend to love him.

"Well," I said, ignoring the way my heart stuttered in my chest. "That's terrible situational awareness. That's why you need guards. What if someone had walked up and stabbed you while you were blinded by my spellbinding beauty?"

"I can take care of myself," he promised, his eyes twinkling. "But I do appreciate your protectiveness."

I scoffed.

His lips quirked. "It was very cute when you declared that I was yours."

Despite his smile, there was a wild, intense air crackling around him. Around *us*.

"We're bound together by an oath," I protested. "Just because I say you're mine doesn't mean I wish it to be so. The magic insists: you are mine, and I am yours."

"Certainly," he said mockingly. "The magic."

He dipped his head. All I could see was the sensual shape of his lips, the firmness of his jaw. Longing rocked me as he rested his hands lightly on my thighs. My heart beat too quickly, quicker than it did in a fight, as our breath mingled.

Our lips hovered close together. I breathed in the wintery scent of him, the clove-scented soap.

Our lips brushed. I wasn't sure if he kissed me first, or if I kissed him.

It was hard to focus on anything else with his mouth on mine. Kaelan kissed me tenderly, his lower lip teasing against mine, a soft, barely there kiss before he angled his face to one side. His lips brushed mine again, and I drew his lower lip into mine.

He let out a groan, then abruptly grabbed my waist and yanked me forward.

I grabbed his shoulders for balance as he pulled me close, holding me so my face was above his. I wrapped my legs

around his lean, hard waist. The silky material of my gown floated across the water.

He deepened the kiss, teasing open my lips. My lips parted, welcoming him in, and the tip of his tongue sought mine. The ache between my thighs intensified, wanting more of Kaelan, wanting more than his tongue inside me.

I broke away first, but I couldn't help drawing a ragged breath, as if I had forgotten to breathe when his lips were on mine. I hoped he couldn't tell how much the kiss had affected me. "You know you don't deserve to kiss me."

His lips quirked ruefully. "I promise, I didn't know about the bride trials."

"Would you have warned me if you had known? Would you have let me choose whether to come and play for your hand?" I asked, already knowing the answer.

"No." His deep blue gaze met mine. "I would have done anything to get you here. Lie to you, kidnap you. I need you, Hanna."

"Why?" I demanded.

He shook his head. "Trust my plan."

"That would be easier to do if your plans didn't all suck," I reminded him. "You haven't told me anything, and I've seen so far are a string of failures. A sunken ship. An island full of corpses."

His arms were still wrapped around me, carrying me through the water, which rocked around us as he took me toward the steps. "Trust *me*."

I laughed. "Absolutely not."

"You certainly are in need of rescue from her scathing tongue," Thorne said from the doorway. Had he been here the whole time?

Or had Kaelan called him with one of those magical messages? But I hadn't seen him mouth a spell, and I would have noticed. I'd been paying far too much attention to Kaelan's lips.

“These are my apartments as well now, are they not?” I demanded.

“That was the plan,” Kaelan said regretfully. “I would prefer to keep you quite close to me. And to try to keep you out of trouble.”

“That seems unlikely when you yourself, Prince Kaelan, are the most trouble I’ve ever seen.”

A tiny smile played around his lips. “Unfortunately, I have to send you to the girls’ dorms. All the prospective queens will be staying in one wing together.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Can I still become queen if I kill another contestant?”

“It would probably only raise you in the eyes of the court.”

Tempting.

He set me gently on the steps, steadying me until I found my footing.

“Go through the trials, Hanna.” His voice, always steely, softened. “The Ice Fae need you.”

“What about you?” I demanded. “Do you need me, Kaelan?”

The moment hung between us. Behind me, Thorne hesitated.

“I need the queen you can pretend to be,” he said, his words flat and hard. “That’s the only reason I came back for you.”

Hurt rushed through me, as if the rejection five years ago had merely been stored, not soothed. That rejection felt like a physical sensation, a bitterness at the back of my throat, a pit opening in my stomach. Like an upturned bottle of poison.

“I see you’re still an idiot,” I told him. Even though it wasn’t entirely fair. Even though I was the one who had swept away his real memories and replaced his love with ... this.

Thorne stepped down behind me. The water rustled and I turned to push him away, ready to storm away from Kaelan.

But Thorne hauled me up against his body. I writhed and kicked, and for a second, he threw me over his shoulder as if he was going to carry me upside-down through the castle like a toddler having a tantrum.

I caught a glimpse of Kaelan's amused face and stilled. Fuck the Prince. I didn't want to be in this room anyway. Let Thorne save Kaelan from my wrath.

As Thorne carried me back through Kaelan's apartment, he shifted me so I was cradled against his chest instead. His thick arms were gentle, his face set and grim.

"Thorne," I said, as he carried me through the halls. My gown was heavy now, soaking wet, and left a trail of droplets behind us. "Why does Kaelan need me?"

He grunted in response.

"No." I fisted his now-damp shirt in my hand. "You are going to need to learn to talk, my friend."

He shook his head, an abrupt, curt movement. Then I realized just how many guards we were passing.

Two guards swung a door open, and Thorne carried me into a hall.

When I first heard "dorm," I'd imagined some kind of orphanage for wayward princesses, with rows of beds and no privacy from my new besties. But this was merely a separate wing of the castle.

Were we being guarded to protect us?

Or to keep us captive?

He set me down in the doorway of a room. "The key is in the door. You each have your own room."

"Small mercies." I pushed open the door and glanced inside. A bed, a wardrobe in the corner, a window that decidedly did not look out at the courtyard like Kaelan's lavish apartment. "Carry me in, Thorne."

He shook his head again.

Curious faces appeared at doors. These women were supposed to be future queens, but they peeped through slit doorways like spoiled children.

I would've eavesdropped too; I just would've done a better job of it.

“Good night, Princess.” His gaze held mine meaningfully. “Rest. You will need your strength for tomorrow.”

The two of us couldn't speak openly. I nodded, then went into the room—which was simple but clean and warm—and as I closed the door, Thorne mimed turning a key in a lock.

I nodded, but I hesitated once I had closed the door between us. I could feel him there on the other side, still so close.

It wasn't until I clicked the lock shut that I finally heard his boots walking across the floor away from me.

I crossed the room, sank onto the bed, and pressed my face into the pillow so no one could hear me. I could barely breathe, but this was the only way it was safe for me to finally replay the things I had seen.

The devastated ship.

The murdered sailors.

The judgmental gazes.

The cold and exhaustion. The forced steps of the stupid dance. The humiliation of being dirty and bloody and hungry while I was surrounded by all those perfect girls.

Most of all, Kaelan flirted with me and teased me, but there was a gulf between us that felt vast and deep, as if I were always walking at its very edge, feeling my feet slip beneath me.

*I wouldn't have come back for you.*

My body relaxed into sobs, shedding the tears I had hidden all day.

## CHAPTER 18



*H*anna

The next day, I woke to sun leaking in through curtains I'd forgotten to close. My head ached, and I felt heavy, my eyes aching and swollen.

I'd cried myself into a tear-hangover.

I had taken a bath the night before, barely keeping myself awake enough not to drown in the fragrant bubbles before I stumbled into bed, still damp.

Someone knocked on the door.

"One minute," I called, but as I looked around my room for clothes, that was a lie.

I picked up my clothes from the day before—Thorne's sweater included—but they smelled even worse than they looked. I dropped them on the floor. Then I cast a glance at the discarded dress from last night's ball.

I couldn't wear it to breakfast. It was an evening gown, and I'd be fiercely judged if I tried to eat a muffin in an evening gown in a royal court.

Of course, I'd be judged just as much if I paraded into breakfast naked.

Though imagining Kaelan's reaction was intriguing.

I snatched the sheet off the bed and wrapped it around my body. Surely Kaelan or Thorne or even Dare would help me

procure clothes, but I'd still have to talk to one of them and ask.

The knock came again, sounding slightly frenzied.

I gave up on being at all respectable and pulled open the door, coming face to face with a young woman about my age with a fluff of orange hair frizzing around her narrow face.

She froze, clutching a armful of fabric to her chest. "Your Highness, may I come in, please?"

"Certainly," I said, holding the door for her. "But I do wonder why."

"All the other girls brought their servants with them. But Prince Kaelan said that your ship was destroyed?"

"Sunk to the bottom of the sea, along with a significant portion of my dignity."

She gave me a look like she didn't know how to respond. "Ah ... it seems the Prince generously sent a wardrobe for you. And he sent me, as well."

"*Generously?* Did he tell you to say that?"

She flushed.

Too late, I remembered to smile. "My fiancé is very generous. But I also know he just wants me to make a good impression on his court. After all, he'll want them all to love me as much as he does."

Maybe Kaelan did love me, deep down underneath all the animosity and mockery, the altered memories and scorn.

Deep, deep down.

"Well, let's see them," I said, holding my arms out towards the dresses. She nodded and called over her shoulder, "Bring them in!"

I would have dressed in more than a sheet if I'd realized that a dozen servants would trek in, bearing an elaborate array of dresses and jewelry.



I watched the parade of gowns, more impressed than I cared to be. “Where did Kaelan get all this overnight? Unless he has hobbies I don’t know about.”

I wouldn’t judge. I would find it delightful, actually. I would love for Kaelan to surprise me.

Right now, I pretty much just expected the worst.

“Rumor has it that Thorne personally roused a dozen shopkeepers to gather these items for you. Only the finest clothes.”

It would have been a grand gesture if I hadn’t already been a princess. I’d had a lovely wardrobe. Unfortunately, all my favorite dresses were now under layers of saltwater.

I tightened the sheet around myself a little more firmly as they trooped through my room, and then, thankfully, they were trooping out again, with jewels and gowns glittering on practically every surface.

My new friend—even if she didn’t know she was one yet—let out a semi-hysterical-sounding titter of disapproval about the clothing draped over every surface. “Oh! I have to get this tidied!”

I worried about her already. She seemed as if she would be overwhelmed with the challenge of organizing outfits.

“Did Kaelan choose you for me personally?” I asked, having a sinking suspicion that he had chosen someone specifically to torment me as well as to manage my gowns.

She turned to me with even wider eyes, which I hadn’t known was possible. “I don’t know about that. That would be quite the compliment!”

“Would it, though?” After all, Kaelan had chosen me for his bride, and that was hardly a compliment. This choice of the main servant might be yet another insult.

“I don’t have the best reputation,” she admitted, right before she stumbled over the train of the dress she was carrying. There was a distressing ripping sound as she tumbled to the floor.

“Are you alright?” I asked as I dashed to her side.

I gripped her elbow and tried to help her up. But she was red-faced and refused to let go of the fabric, and she somehow grew tangled up with the dress. She resisted all my efforts to help her while calling me *your highness* a distressing number of times.

Once she was finally disentangled and sitting on the floor, she looked even more wide-eyed than before.

I was definitely going to have words with Kaelan about his “generosity.”

“We must get you ready for breakfast today,” she said brightly, scrambling up from the floor and dusting her hands off on her dress as if nothing had ever happened. “All of the contestants have breakfast with the Prince. Then, the first of the tests begins.”

“And what does that consist of?”

She shook her head, wide-eyed. “I suspect only Lord Dare would know.”

Well, that was too bad. It meant I might need to talk to the man.

Then again, the thought of the terrified look on his face when I planted myself in his lap last night warmed my soul. Time with Dare *could* be fun. I just had to be creative.

“Well, then let’s get me dressed, and then we’ll head on to breakfast.”

To my surprise, the dresses were to my taste. I’d have expected Kaelan to torture me with something pink and fluffy. I might’ve done the same if I could to him. But the gowns were beautiful and sexy.

“Ouch!” My new servant was bleeding suddenly.

“What happened?” I cried, before realizing she’d tried to open a box and somehow stabbed herself on a pair of daggers.

“I’ll take those,” I said as she stuck her wounded fingers into her mouth. I checked the dress I’d chosen, and it had the

same scabbards sewn into the bodice that all my gowns at home had. Thorne must've woken a small army of seamstresses. "What's your name, anyway?"

She was such a hazard; I was sure Kaelan would be determined to keep me stuck with her.

"Azora," she said.

"Lovely to meet you," I said. "Is there anything else sharp around here that I should know about? Before you hurt yourself, or before I need to hurt someone?"

She let out a laugh as if I were joking, and then stopped as if she realized I wasn't. "Only those. Lord Thorne said you might need them."

"If only I could," I muttered. The magic would punish me endlessly if I were to stab my fake fiancé.

On the other hand, I could probably get away with stabbing Dare a little. That would not displease the magic. And it would very much please me.

Once I was dressed—and my puffy eyes repaired with the help of a little magic—Azora escorted me to breakfast. The ladies were leaving their maids behind at a set of elaborately carved double doors.

When Azora joined the other maids, they shied away from her as if they were shocked she dared to say good morning.

I had so many questions.

But for now, I needed tea and sweets.

I swept into the room with the other girls. There was a long table spread in front of a sumptuous buffet. The room overflowed with green plants and blue flowers, and it was cool despite the sunshine flooding in through a wall of windows.

I crossed to the windows, ignoring the Fae who was playing the pianoforte in the corner and the murmur of the girls. The windows looked out over the strange courtyard: a dome over it radiated magical sunshine, covering vast acres of lush greenery and a deep blue lake. I could barely see the stone

wall on the other side of the castle, just rising over the trees. The castle must be huge, the halls a virtual labyrinth.

I'd need a map.

The feeling in the room shifted. The girls' excitement spiked. But most of it all, a sense of radiating power and confidence behind me prickled on my back. It compelled me to turn, and so I stayed planted right where I was.

Behind me, I could hear the girls rush Kaelan, no matter how subtle they tried to be.

But when I did turn, I was rewarded by the sight of a small war over seating arrangements. Kaelan in his ice blue tunic, a ring of silvery metal in his dark hair, lingered with his coffee near the table. The girls shifted around, trying to figure out where to sit so he would be beside them; two hovered over their seats but didn't take one yet.

Meanwhile, Dare stood at one end of the table, his hands on a chair back already, his light brows arched over that hard-angled, mischievous face. I felt an edge of spite; he was the gamemaster, but he judged these girls for playing to win.

Thorne stood by the door, looking as if he wished this was over already. *Same*. The two of us locked eyes, and for a pulsing second, the rest of the room fell away.

I poured two cups of tea and carried one over to Thorne. "You look as if you need this."

He took it from me with a grunt.

But I'd like to think it was a *friendly* grunt.

When I turned back, Dare had seated himself. So I ignored all the girls vying over Kaelan as I strode to the buffet. Once I had my plate, I pulled out the chair beside Dare and plopped down.

He stiffened without even looking toward me.

"I'm not going to fight for a spot next to Kaelan when you and I can have such an interesting conversation," I smiled at him.

“I doubt that we can,” Dare said dryly.

I sank my teeth into a berry muffin, soft and warm and soaked with butter, and almost groaned. Once I swallowed, I asked, “Do you think he likes the attention?”

“No.”

Kaelan seemed immune to the girls’ flirting—polite, but distant, standing in their midst answering questions but not asking them.

Then he said something to Kuria, and she beamed. When he had moved on, she turned and flashed me a devilish smile, as if to say she had won. But Kaelan was already pushing through the girls toward breakfast, leaving her in his wake.

These men were pissing me off as much as the girls. I didn’t want to watch Kaelan flirt with other women, of course. But the way they treated these women was as unimpressive as the way the woman fawned over them.

So I focused on my muffin.

Abruptly, the chair beside me was pulled away from the table, and Kaelan took a seat beside me. The clove-and-cinnamon scent he carried, along with the fresh, icy scent of the world outside, settled over me.

Suddenly every girl was fixed on me. If hatred could start fires, my hair would’ve begun smoking.

“Good morning, princeling.”

“Princess. You have crumbs in your cleavage.”

I touched my hand lightly to my chest. He couldn’t embarrass me. “Are you jealous of my crumbs, Kaelan?”

He scoffed.

It wasn’t a *no*.

“Do you know what I was thinking about last night?” I asked him, stirring my tea lazily.

“Murder?”

“Surprisingly, no. I was thinking that you knew who I was when we met in the arena. You know who I was when you called me *goddess*.”

And he’d known who I was when he gritted out his longing, too.

“I was playing a role.”

“You always are, aren’t you, princeling?”

His jaw worked. “Call me that one more time.”

“You’d think that me pissing you off would be a welcome relief from all these girls adoring you.”

“They don’t adore me. They adore what I have.” He took a sip of his tea. “And what I *will* have.”

The throne. But now that I was in his miserable kingdom, the day when Kaelan would take the crown and we would cut off the Snake Queen’s head seemed so far distant, I couldn’t even quite imagine who we would be when we arrived.

“I’ll stop calling you *princeling* when you stop calling me *princess*.”

“It is your rank.”

“And you are my princeling.”

He scoffed at that and turned his attention to the women who had found their seats, with some very dignified jostling for the positions nearest him.

For the next half hour, I watched Kaelan talk to all of those women, pointedly ignoring me.

And Dare watched us both, tilted back in his chair, his lips quirked and amused.

Even my pastries tasted bland when I was trying not to care about Kaelan.



Kaelan walked with us to the palace gardens, which shimmered with prismatic light coming through the bubble. Little rainbows fell across the emerald grass.

“It’s gorgeous,” I said.

“It’s delightful that your wealth hasn’t ruined your love of simple things,” Imara said, smoothing her skirts.

I glanced at her, surprised to hear what sounded like a compliment.

Then she added, “Though I suppose the isle doesn’t really have much to offer, does it?”

“You’ve never seen my isle, have you?” I shot back.

She gave me an affronted look, as if she didn’t understand why I dared speak to her.

I stuck my tongue out at her.

She turned away with an offended look and hurried after the girls, who were following Dare. They nearly tripped over themselves in their eagerness to get to the next trial.

Meanwhile, I took a step forward, only to find myself pressed against a warm, firm body. A muscular arm slid across my stomach, and my body quickened with heat, my mouth suddenly dry.

Kaelan.

I knew his touch even before I caught the spicy scent of him and heard the low, sexy rumble of his voice as he whispered in my ear, “Behave.”

Despite my treacherous body, which wanted to melt into him, I tried to step away and spin to face him. But his grip was firm, so I only managed to spin halfway, finding myself with my breasts caged against his chest.

“You’re the one who should behave,” I told him, his arms wrapped around me so intimately. “You were flirting with those girls at breakfast.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Hanna. Have you ever seen me flirt? I don’t have to.”

It was true he had been his usual icy self. I wasn't sure why they even tried battering themselves against the glacial wall he pretended was a personality.

"I have," I insisted. "You flirted with me. Before ..."

I trailed off because of the way he was staring at me. He was still too close for comfort, reminding me of our difference in size.

"Let's not talk about before," he said. "You know I wouldn't have come back for you if I hadn't needed you."

He was repeating the same words from the night before. I'd had time to grieve his rejection all over again. So why did my stomach still bottom out?

The words stung worse than a slap. They were such a rejection of the past we shared.

Or didn't.

"Get your hands off me," I hissed at him.

He leaned down to whisper into my ear. "No."

That was it. I might have to pretend to be in love with him in public, but if I stabbed him in private, surely the magic would release me. But then he added, almost inaudibly, "People are watching."

For a moment, I was still too angry to play along.

"If you do want to win me," he said, "you might want to learn about the next trial."

I followed his gaze to where Dare was holding court with eleven eager contestants. Thorne stood on the outer edge of their little circle, his powerful arms crossed over his chest.

"You are the one who couldn't resist me," I reminded him. "You can't seem to stop insulting me *or* kissing me ... why is that, Kaelan?"

It was another question I knew he wouldn't answer, but at least he let me go.



When I arrived at the edge of the circle of contestants, Dare greeted me with his arms folded over his chest and tilted his head at me. “So kind of you to join us, Princess.”

The other girls tittered. I glanced around them, letting judgment show on my face. “That was not a very noble sound.”

“Being late isn’t exactly becoming of a noble either,” Dare said loftily.

“Awfully lofty for someone who’s never on time himself,” Thorne muttered, and I hid my smile.

Dare went on as if he couldn’t hear Thorne. “Today, you’ll demonstrate your magical power.”

Well, this was going to be a tricky line to walk. I’d always hidden much of my magical power because I didn’t want anyone to realize I had enough magic to shift to any form I wished. I was quite powerful.

But I was dulled by the bracelet on my wrist. Sometimes it felt as tight as a cuff. A reminder that I had bound my own powers so tightly to blend in where I never belonged.

“You will use your magical power, playing the instrument of your choice, to create a beautiful song laden with sentiment. Then the song’s magic should create the garden sculpture that you imagine.” Dare swept his arm toward the twelve columns placed along the perimeter of the lake.

This task was ridiculously easy. I’d worried for nothing. Making pretty things and making pretty music: those were pastimes I had left behind along with my childhood when I dedicated myself to protecting my sister and her children.

“You may gather whatever magical tools you need today, and let me know your choice of instrument. It will be placed here for you, and after lunch, you will be able to begin working on your creation. Judgment occurs tomorrow after breakfast.”

Is there a time limit on how long we can work for today?” Imara asked eagerly.

Dare smiled at her. “There are no limits. You may be as dedicated as you like, although I imagine since all of you are of royal blood and have significant magic, you will be done with your task before sunset and will be ready to join us in the dining hall for dinner with the King and his court.”

The other girls exchanged pleased smiles.

I’d rather eat alone in my room with a good book. Nobility were exhausting.

I found Azora, who brought me pen and paper, and then I sat down in the library to sketch my garden.

I wasn’t as good at sketching as I used to be, and the knowledge of that, as I scratched my quill across the paper, tainted the act. Maybe I could have enjoyed drawing if I hadn’t been so conscious of how much skill I’d lost since I focused on spycraft.

I was sitting, somewhat hidden from view by the bookcases, when I heard two of the other contestants come in.

“She won’t be here for long,” one of them said to the other.

“But why is she here at all?”

“No one knows for sure, but I heard a rumor that Kaelan just had to humor his father. The King wants Kaelan to marry another dragon, since the people love the idea of her so much.”

The other girl sighed. “Have you heard the rumors that on the isle, anyone can shift to a dragon?”

“I’m sure that’s just another lie spread by the royals of the isle, pretending they are more than they truly are.”

“Still, imagine if it’s not just the royals? Can you imagine if the common people thought they could shift into dragons?”

They both laughed. I bit my lower lip, indulging in a brief fantasy of slipping off my bracelet, transforming into a dragon, and incinerating them right there. But I would never do that.

Not in a library. Books are much too precious.

“Eavesdropping ears so rarely hear anything they don’t regret,” a voice said from behind me. I jumped, and from the

frozen sounds coming from the other side of the bookshelves, the girls who'd just been speaking about me had heard the voice too.

I turned slowly to face Dare, who was leaning against one of the bookshelves, his arms crossed once again.

“You lean a lot, have you noticed that?” I asked him. “Is your back alright? Old before your time?”

To be honest, Dare's ability to make himself comfortable anywhere was the one thing I found slightly endearing.

He gave me a thin smile. “It's nice to know you've noticed me.”

“It's hard not to when you seem to be the king's chosen instrument of torture.”

There were hushed sounds as the girls escaped the room. The door closed with a click behind them.

Dare raised his eyebrows. “We're alone.”

“Yes ...” I said in a drawn-out tone. I was concerned about why our solitude was notable. “So now you're going to threaten me again?”

He shook his head. “No, Princess. Just ... be aware. There are many here who are jealous of the attention you're receiving.”

I gave him a quizzical look. “What attention?”

Dare just stared at me for a moment. “The kind of attention that makes you dangerous.”

Kaelan's attention.

Kaelan's *desire*.

Was it bare for everyone else, but I couldn't see it through the layers of hurt between us?

I stared back at him, my expression flat. “I was dangerous long before I received any attention.”

We held each other's gaze for a long moment before Dare broke the silence. “I see.”

“Good,” I said, “Because I’d hate for you to be caught off guard.”

“Well, I suppose now I don’t have to pretend to be nice to you.”

I let out a small laugh. “Was that what that was? You’re not very good at being nice.”

He shrugged. “Perhaps. But I have many other winning qualities.”

“Name one.”

“I’m open-minded. I’m the only person in this court who hasn’t formed an opinion on you yet.”

“And what is the general opinion? That I’m unworthy of Prince Kaelan?”

“Oh, certainly. They were sure some tender isle princess was unworthy even before you arrived looking like a drowned rat.”

“It’s interesting to be the beloved Princess in my own kingdom and considered trash in yours.”

“Don’t take it personally. The nobles of the Isle generally consider everyone else trash.”

“And I’m sure for you, that’s the only kind of people that matter,” I shot back.

“You don’t understand me quite as well as you think, Princess,” Dare said. “Which puts you at a disadvantage in this contest.”

“Did you have anything to tell me about the contest? Any little tips?”

“I’m not going to cheat, Princess. This contest is yours to lose.”

“Mine to lose?”

“It’s obvious Kaelan wants you to win.”

“Is it? I could tell he’s obsessed with me, though he denies it. It’s nice to have confirmation from his best friend.”

Dare tilted his head, studying me. “But why?”

“I’ve been wondering myself. My life was much nicer before Kaelan took so much notice of me.”

“I’m just curious what makes you worth all this fuss.”

I rose and crossed to him. He took a step back, his shoulder blades bumping into the bookcase behind him, and a look of alarm flashed across his face. It was funny to see this dragon shifter, who was so much bigger than me, retreat. He wasn’t afraid physically. He was just afraid of me touching him.

“You want to know who I am to Kaelan,” I murmured. “And I want to know the same. Why does he care so much about you? You seem like a common scoundrel to me.”

His brows arched. “A common scoundrel. How insightful of you. And here I was beginning to think you didn’t notice anything.”

That is quite the insulting statement to make to a spy. But I was used to being underestimated. No matter how much it hurt—and it always hurt—it was still a tactical advantage.

So I let people think as little of me as they wished. Their scorn always led into their punishment.

The air between Dare and I felt heated and charged as the two of us stared at each other. I was tempted to run the back of my finger over the sharp line of his jaw or to see if I could muss his perfect hair.

“We’ll have to see if we come to understand each other,” I said.

Whatever he was going to say next was drowned out by the low sound of bells, and he practically leapt past me.

“We’re wanted for lunch. We shouldn’t be seen leaving the library together.”

“Worried about the appearance of being seen alone with one of the contestants?” I inquired, with feigned concern. “Or worried about being seen leaving the library after being alone with the Prince’s obsession?”

“I would just hate for anyone to think I would ever do anything improper with such a mangy princess,” he informed me.

“If you call me ‘mangy’ again ...” I said lightly, “You know, Dare, every time you insult me ... I’m going to have to punish you later.”

His eyes widened slightly. “You are absolutely insane.”

“Very much so,” I smiled up at him, feeling bright as sunshine when he gave me that taken-aback look. “And I do hope you’ll remember that.”

Kaelan was already seated when I arrived at lunch. I sat on the other end of the table, ignoring the way his eyes kept flickering toward me.

Thorne came and sat beside me. I wanted to be alone with my thoughts, but Thorne only grunted hello and then began to tuck into his own lunch. There was something warm and comforting about his presence, though; when he had chosen to sit beside me, I didn’t look pathetic.

After lunch, we were dismissed to the lakeside to work on our statues.

As I strolled along the path that surrounded the tranquil lake, I noticed that the other girls had gathered things to use to fuel their magic. They carried little trinkets or, in Kuria’s case, an entire armful of crystals and ancient goblets.

In the isle, we didn’t use objects to trigger our magic. I turned the charm on my bracelet over and over again in my fingertips, worrying it.

We were in the Ice Fae Kingdom, in an Ice Fae competition, and perhaps I should play along with Ice Fae magic.

I just didn’t want to give up the scale.

It was one of my own scales.

It was a reminder of who I truly was, no matter what I had to pretend. Honor had pressed it into my hands when she realized I wouldn’t give up on the Guild.

The glittering, iridescent purple scale felt like my connection to my power—my own power that I denied.

*No.* I would help Kaelan, and I would hope I could bring his memories back, so he could truly see me. But he couldn't have all of me. If I gave him too much, I might start to forget that my weakness—and our love—was all just pretend.

I glanced over at Noxy, who was laying objects carefully around the columns of her trellis.

She carefully unwrapped what looked like an enormous seed, held it reverently in two hands for a few seconds, closed her eyes and murmured a prayer over it. She opened her eyes and dropped it into the water. She watched it float down with a look on her face that I couldn't quite decipher. Regret? Fear?

Whatever it was, it was erased when she looked up and saw me watching her. An ugly sneer transformed her face. "Watching me isn't going to help you. I have sea magic."

"Congratulations to you." My dragon could swim beneath the sea as well as fly through the sky. The only thing that made me jealous was that others didn't have to hide their power. "I was merely curious. We don't have any Sea Fae back home."

"Right. Your kingdom exterminated them all."

I stared at her in horror. "Three hundred years ago. It wasn't my sister ... or her father ..."

She blew out a breath of dismissal and turned away from me.

As I walked the rest of the way to my column, I glanced back at Noxy. From the look on her face, and the way she was smiling as her lips formed words, she'd said something nasty to me. Or maybe tried to curse me.

We were all far enough from each other that her voice didn't carry, though. So I just gave her a big wave and a smile.

If I ever shifted back into a dragon, I might accidentally immolate her before I had the chance to recover my senses.

It was a nice fantasy to indulge.

Then I faced my own empty column, which rose from the water just off the shore. Water lilies clumped at its base.

All around the perimeter of the lake, girls were sitting at their chosen instruments. The harps and lutes, violins and pianos, seemed so out of place in the lush greenery of the gardens.

I sat down at my harp. It was a surprisingly sedate instrument, for someone like me who tended toward chaos.

That was probably why my stepmother had inflicted the instrument on me. But I'd fallen in love with it.

Sitting here now, I couldn't find any inspiration to play. I absently fingered a few simple songs I'd learned as a child, watching from the corner of my eye as the other girls' flowers bloomed and climbed up the columns.

Statues began to form from the flowers.

I had to admit that Noxy's creation was beautiful, as deep blue tentacles of vine sprouted from the water and crept up her column, beginning to weave into an elaborate shape, as if she had called forth the arms of the sea.

As I began to play, letting my fingers find their own strings of notes, the drawing I'd made seemed stupid and childish. But I couldn't think of anything else for my sculpture.

Then Kaelan walked out of the castle.

He was smiling, his head down a little. It was the way he ducked his head when he smiled in public, as if he had to hide that he had a kinder side, a laughing, funny side.

But he did. And I longed so much for him to smile at me again the way he had, when he had dropped his walls. He had been *happy* with me.

And as I stared at his dark hair, his big shoulders hugged by his embroidered tunic, his magnetic smile, my heart squeezed like the treacherous little bitch it was.

That smile wasn't for me. It was Dare who had won that smile from Kaelan, who was already back to his usual stony,



unreadable expression. Dare was still grinning, though, his blond hair was tousled, his eyes bright.

Even across the distance, Dare's gaze found mine.

And even across the distance, he looked at me as if he looked right through me.

Then he looked at the sad, empty column. It was the last one standing empty, looking so plain.

Kaelan turned to head along the path, away from me around the lake. Dare gave me a shake of the head that might have been disapproving or mocking as he followed Kaelan.

Kaelan stopped at the first girl's sculpture. She beamed at him as she began to play, and he watched her with that expressionless face, his hands folded behind his back. His posture was so tall and perfect.

She seemed to play even more quickly, more desperately, as if she were trying to get his stony demeanor to break.

*Good luck, sister.*

I turned back to the harp. I couldn't bear to watch Kaelan for another second.

But I couldn't stop seeing his face in my mind.

My fingers began to find their own way. The strands that rose into the air were sad at first. Then I began to remember the better moments with Kaelan.

The way he had said my name, a way no one ever had before in my life. *Hanna*. On his lips, the name had sounded like the final word casting a magic spell.

The way we had run hand-in-hand from danger, our feet slipping through the rain.

The way he had crushed me against his chest, hiding me, and the way he had ducked his head to murmur one word in my ear. *Behave*. Had he forgotten that? Was some part of him, buried deep inside, replaying our moments like a ghost?

The music turned more cheerful.

Sometimes when we carry something alone, it almost feels as if it never happened.

But those moments had happened. They were real, even if I was the only one who remembered them.

He had touched me so reverently, as if I were precious. He had grappled with me playfully, both of us laughing but also deeply competitive. He had looked up at me with such pride when I pinned him down. Desire had sparked in his eyes as he slid his hand across the back of my head and pulled my head down to his. His kisses had been as wanton and wild as he was usually controlled.

But when the magic changed his memories, he had looked down at me with such disdain.

Filled with regret and longing, as my song rose, vines began to grow up the column.

Some nobles circling the lake had stopped work to watch and listen to me. I couldn't pour my heart into singing about Kaelan. Not when anyone could hear.

I broke off my song abruptly, and a discordant chord seemed to hang in the air, too long.

He was at Noxy's sculpture now. I fixed a smile on my face that I didn't feel.

I could cry alone. Enemies only deserve our smiles, not our tears.

Kaelan had his back to me now. I could only see Noxy's face, and Dare standing beside him.

So I studied the broad shoulders, remembering when he had leapt in front of me to shield me.

*It doesn't matter, Hanna. Until he remembers ... until he can be good to you ... he doesn't exist.*

I wouldn't pine over someone who didn't see my true worth. Even if it wasn't his fault.

Dare wasn't looking at Noxy, even though she was animated and sparkling, smiling widely at them both.

Dare was staring at me.

I stuck my tongue out at him.

Then Kaelan turned toward me. Dare started to walk with him, but Kaelan murmured something to him quietly. Dare looked toward me, frowning, but nodded. He walked in the other direction.

Kaelan strode toward me.

His movements were so quick and determined that they reminded me of the moment before he grabbed me and kissed me. I turned back to my harp, my fingers sliding across the chords, but I couldn't bring myself to play more than a few notes.

I didn't want anyone to hear the way I hurt. It was too vulnerable. I laid my hand on the side of the strings, feeling their last vibrations against my palm as the music died.

"Good afternoon." Kaelan sounded polite, for once. Polite and distant.

That casual, politeness just irritated me.

"Good afternoon," I answered.

Such flat, simple words. But when Kaelan loomed over me as he did now, his hands tucked behind his back, the air between us felt charged like the tingle before a lightning storm.

"The other girls have all played for me."

"Good for them."

He walked toward my sculpture and studied it. I did the same. Deep blue flowers bloomed across the greenery. It was pretty, it was so simple, and obviously unfinished. The other girls had formed elaborate sculptures already.

"Is this it?" he asked.

"No."

"Good. I would hate to see you lose before the trials even grew interesting."

“You claim this was all Edric’s doing. Why did he recruit your best friend?”

“This is not Dare’s fault.”

“Right. Because you aren’t in control of what happens in this castle. The King is.”

His jaw tightened. “Have you been in control a day in your life, princess?”

“Oh, princeling.” I took a step toward him, keenly aware of how we were being watched by all those at a distance. I fixed him with a tender smile that didn’t fit the barb in my words. “No one gives a princess anything. I *take* control. And you should take lessons.”

He glanced away, looking at our distant spectators and when he turned his gaze back to me, his face had relaxed. He was always expressionless. It made me want to slap him.

“I don’t need lessons in taking control.” He caressed my cheek with his thumb, looking into my face fondly. “I could provide you with some lessons in obedience.”

“You’d have better luck teaching your cat to play the harp.”

“My cat is probably better behaved than you.”

“Probably.”

He held his hand out toward the harp. “We are being watched ... and they will expect you to play for me.”

“Of course. I’d be delighted.” I took my seat again on the gilt bench.

With Kaelan watching me, my fingers felt clumsy and slow as I began the first few chords. It felt like an abrupt opening, but I played only the upbeat portion of the song.

I shook off my clumsiness, knowing I was just self-conscious in front of him. It was ridiculous. Kaelan should be proving himself to *me*, not the other way around; he was the one who had forgotten what he should know about me, deeper than skin and bone and mere memory.

My fingers began to move on their own accord, playing faster, pouring out my heart.

Just for a second.

I stilled the strings with a hand, and a discordant chime split the air. Smiling as if that were intended, I began again, playing a song from my days of practice.

“That’s not a song with magic,” Kaelan cut in.

“I don’t owe you my magic, princeling. The song is between me and this fancy bush I’m wasting my life creating,” I glanced at the sculpture. The vivid blue flowers seemed to wave at me, and I relented. “You’re lovely, plant. I apologize.”

“Do you want me to leave you alone with the plant?” he asked. “Because you are considerably more convincing with the plant than you are pretending to adore me.”

I scoffed. It was funny to have him insult my ability to pretend to love him when I, in fact, still loved him. Curse me. “I’m a wonderful actress. You aren’t giving me much material to work with... who would believe I could love you when you’re so unbearable?”

His eyebrows arched. “Perhaps I should let Noxy play for me again and show you how believable it is.”

“She would never actually love you. She wants you for your crown and your money.”

“Yes,” he admitted. “The same as my mother and father once.”

“Your mother was like Noxy?”

Noxy was strumming and singing lustily now. We couldn’t hear her, but I could see her putting her whole body into the music.

“No. Not like Noxy.” Kaelan raised an eyebrow slightly, looking unimpressed as he watched her play. “*You* remind me of my mother.”

“Of course I do. And what did she do to leave you forever traumatized so you could take your spite out on me?”

“She died.” He said the words with practiced expressionlessness.

Oh, fuck me. “I’m sorry.”

“My parents were happy ... for a while ... despite the marriage not being their choice.”

“Mm, and it makes sense the product of that joyful union would be a creature of light and bliss like yourself.”

“Have you ever considered that you are entirely too mouthy for a princess?”

“I have, and I’ve come to the conclusion that I’m just the right amount of mouthy for a queen.”

He reached over and played a few notes on the harp. To my surprise, I recognized the start of a tune. He had learned to play at some point, though I couldn’t tell how well.

“Play for me, Hanna,” he told me. For the first time in our conversation, his tone had changed, sounded real, almost friendly. “I want to hear you sing.”

I could just imagine myself singing the heartbroken song I’d been playing for him. The way he would look at me if I bared my soul to him, even just in music.

He would be able to see just how I truly felt.

I shook my head.

He blew out a slow breath. “You are maddening.”

“Me?”

“We made an arrangement.” His voice had gone very soft. He glanced at the crowd watching us in the distance, then suddenly seated himself behind me.

His hard body pressed against my back. His thighs, warm and muscular, pressed against my own legs. I felt enveloped by him. I couldn’t help but breathe in his intoxicating scent.

He reached past me and began to play, his muscular arms caging me on the bench.

He *was* good. Curse him.

“I remember our arrangement,” I whispered over the music. “I am holding up my end of the bargain.”

“You’re being stubborn and difficult.”

“I agreed to a fake marriage, not a personality transfer. I’ve always been stubborn and difficult.” *And you used to like it.*

“I could fix you.” His voice was confident.

I let out an exasperated gasp, twisting to face him, but his arm circled my waist first, and his head dropped forward, blocking me from the crowd. He pressed a faux-tender kiss to my cheek.

“I don’t think I could fix you,” I whispered back hotly. *Not anymore.*

Even if he had his memories back, he seemed like a different man than the one I’d loved before.

He raised his head and those icy blue eyes stared into mine. We were close enough to kiss, our breath mingling.

“Play for me.”

I shook my head. “No.”

“Don’t make me punish you.”

I let out a laugh. “How exactly would you accomplish that? Being your fake fiancée is already punishment for the sins of this lifetime *and* the last.”

His lips brushed the shell of my ear, sending a shiver down my spine. “I could show you just how little control you have.”

“I’m aware I’m in your kingdom, where—”

“I’m not talking about losing control because you’re in my kingdom, or my fiancée,” he murmured. “You’re not in control because you’re *mine*.”

The words were so painfully true they stabbed my heart.

“Asshole,” I said with a smile.

“If you’re going to call me names, sweet girl...” He dropped a kiss on my shoulder. “I’m going to deserve them.”

His hands slid from my waist down my thighs. My dress had a long slit up the inside, and as he drew his hands back up, one of his hands found bare skin. I gritted my teeth, forcing myself to be still. To pretend that his cool palms on my body did nothing for me.

But his touch did everything to me.

His touch ignited a firestorm of desire in my body and a firestorm of memories in my mind.

“How dare you touch me in front of an audience,” I told him. “I’m not a trained dog to play tricks for your amusement or to—”

“I wouldn’t do this to a dog,” he said, his tone amused. “And they can’t see anything from this distance ... except a tender moment between two lovers. They don’t see a battle between the future king and a brat throwing a tantrum because she doesn’t want to play the harp.”

“Why did you pick me, Kaelan? Just to torment me?”

“If you’re so tormented, why do you like it so much?” His nostrils flared. “I can smell your desire, Hanna. You’re soaking with it.”

His fingers slid across my panties, pressing the damp fabric. “Literally.”

“My body desires you. My *mind* despises you.”

Let’s not talk about my heart.

“Just play.” His lips teased against the bare skin of my throat, and I barely restrained myself from tilting my head to welcome him in. “All I’m asking is that you play for me.”

“All you’re asking is that I save your kingdom.”

“All I need from you, Hanna, is a pretty face, a quiet mouth, and an attempt at following orders.”

I scoffed. In response, his fingers delved between my thighs, coaxing an ache from my body that made me feel hollow inside, full only of need.

“I would never take orders from you.”



He tsked in my ear. “A pity. You might find there’s pleasure in submission.”

“You might find the same.” I leaned back into him. Ah, fuck this. His fingers felt good against my aching need, and I couldn’t exactly storm away. So I might as well take what I truly wanted at the moment.

Maybe I couldn’t have control. Or the love of this man. But I’d take an orgasm.

“Better make it good,” I whispered to him. His warm, hard shoulder felt like just the right fit for my head. “There’s no point in scandalizing the nobility if you don’t make me come.”

He let out a soft laugh that I felt vibrate from his chest through my back. “You’re hard to punish, brazen as you are.”

“Was this supposed to embarrass me?”

“Showing you how easily I can control your body?” His lips swept across my throat again as my body jerked, my core squeezing hungrily against nothing. “No, you shouldn’t be embarrassed. Those people mean nothing.”

“I’m the only one who matters,” he added, his fingers pumping against my clit, sending warmth throbbing through my body until I sag against his shoulder. “That should be the lesson.”

“You have no idea what I could do to you, princeling.”

“Mm. Such talk from a little girl afraid to play the harp.” His face nuzzled my throat. “Are you afraid of what I’ll hear in your music?”

“I’m not afraid.”

“Then play.”

I rose abruptly, letting my dress fall around my thighs again. “Why does it matter so much to you?”

“I want to see you be brave.” His tone was slow. Lazy. *Intentional*. “For once.”

I smoothed my dress over my legs.

I didn't know exactly what he saw in his memories. The thought had tormented me for years.

"In such a small thing," he added. "It's only music, Hanna. A bit more bravery than that would be required of a queen."

"Don't forget, princeling, I'm not yours. I let you touch me because I like it. It's your one value—it would be a shame to waste it." I smile at him as I remind him, "I'll never really be your queen."

"Of course not." He spoke as if the very thought was ridiculous. "But I can make you into what I need, or close enough. I can't do that with any of them."

He swept his arm out, encompassing the other potential brides.

"Why is that?"

"Because while I know exactly what you are ..." He smiled, finally, but this one was cold and cruel. "But they don't. To them, you could be anything. The strongest princess. The most dangerous dragon. The most worthy bride."

For a few seconds. I stared into his handsome, smiling face. Those eyes were so icy and distant, and I didn't even fantasize about slapping him anymore.

Things between Kaelan and I were too far gone for that.

"I'll prove I'm *worthy*. But I will never love you," I told him, but the words weren't even for him.

As I turned to leave, those words' promise was heavy and slick, a weight I could barely carry.

A promise to myself.

## CHAPTER 19



*H*anna

There is never a time that I doubt myself more than two o'clock in the morning. Apparently, my demons are nocturnal.

I laid awake that night. Azora had insisted she needed to sleep in my room so she could assist me.

I had very much declined.

One of the worst parts of being royalty was how difficult it is to be truly left alone. It's nice to have servants. For an introvert like me, it was better still to have solitude.

I couldn't stand being tormented by thoughts of the unfinished sculpture I left behind. Dare had said we could work on it as late as we wanted.

I didn't want Kaelan. But I didn't want to lose him to any of these girls.

Finally, grumbling, I got up and threw on the simplest clothes I could find, checking that I had my knives ... and my scale, tucked into my pocket.

I wasn't going to lose myself just because I gave up a trinket. I wasn't going to lose myself just because Kaelan had played my body like I played the harp.

I knew who I was. I could not be easily swept away.

To my surprise, when I opened the door, I found my mousy little maid sleeping outside it. I stared at her, perplexed.

If I had known Azora didn't have a bed to sleep in, of course I would have let her sleep in my room. But I couldn't help wondering if she had a perfectly fine bed, and was choosing to sleep on a marble floor. She was curled up in a quilt, on her side. Her lips moved.

She was talking in her sleep. I crouched down, bracing my knees on my elbows, driven by curiosity even though I knew I shouldn't eavesdrop.

She was muttering to herself as if she were lost in nightmares. I wanted to rouse her from whatever troubled her, but I also really didn't want company.

Kaelan would not appreciate me wandering the gardens after midnight, when they were abandoned. But he didn't know what I was capable of ... as long as I yanked off the cuff.

It seemed like I passed dozens of closed doors and hallways on my way. The walls felt cluttered with a jumble of art and gilded mirrors, extending from the floor to the ceiling, despite just how many walls there must be.

When I pushed open the doors, I breathed in humid, flower-scented air that felt welcome after the stale scent of the castle.

Two guards stood just inside. My heart spiked, but they looked at me without particular interest.

They had no idea who I was. The moment of anonymity made me smile.

"It's late to walk in the garden." The first guard's small eyes swept over me. "Do you want company?"

"Very much no," I said, suddenly realizing there were negatives to not being recognized—and to having dressed quickly in a plain sweater and trousers.

He frowned, and his eyes almost disappeared altogether behind his brows. When he and his friend walked toward me, I

had to back up into the hallway.

“Do you want something?” I asked coolly.

“You seem uppity,” he said.

“Very much so,” I promised him. “I’ve never met a man I can tolerate.”

Kaelan and Thorne and even Dare rose into my mind then, with their smirks and long looks. But it was still true.

I desired them, but I could barely tolerate them most of the time.

“Is that so? I bet I could change your mind.”

He and his friend edged closer, surrounding me.

“And I bet you could have your heart ripped out through your throat by an angry Ice Fae prince.” I smiled at them sweetly. I could do my own violence, but I didn’t want to tonight; I wanted them out of my way.

The threat took a while to work through their minds. The moment they realized, they exchanged looks, turning pale even for Ice Fae.

“Beg your pardon, miss,” the second one said, suddenly deciding he didn’t want to follow his friend blindly.

I didn’t bother to answer them. They fled down the hall as I pushed open the doors, and this time, I made it all the way out into the tranquil greenery.

Snow blanketed the top of the dome, making it feel dark and oppressive inside. The lake was still and eerie, and the towering sculptures the girls had created—of bears and birds—seemed as if they might come to life and attack.

As I looked toward my own sad sculpture, I was glad I’d come back. Those girls would titter at me and try to make me feel less than them in the morning, no matter what I did. But at least I could know I had made something beautiful.

Reluctantly, I leaned out over the dark water and tucked the dragon scale into the greenery surrounding my column.

I knew who I really was. I didn't need a scale to remind me. I didn't even need anyone else to see me.

This time when I sat down to play, the music seemed to fill the night air. I closed my eyes, feeling carried away by the song. My fingers moved lightly across the strings, and I gave in to the temptation to sing along.

The song that rose was purely me, filled with my longing to be seen and ... to be loved. It was everything I wouldn't, couldn't, admit in the daylight.

When the last note hung in the night air, tears were wet across my cheeks. I usually didn't even admit to myself when I truly wanted. I thought about my dreams so little that I had almost forgotten.

I wanted to protect my family. That was the most important thing. But there were other desires that beat in my heart. Things that mattered ... but not as much as the lives of my little nibblings. Briden, Lysander, Xera, the twins, the babies: their mischievous little faces flashed through my mind.

I'd never forget the way Briden had clung to me, his face buried in my shoulder, as I stood over the monster's body. It was a moment that had stretched forward to define my entire life, though I hadn't realized it then when I was shuddering with adrenaline, soaked in blood.

I turned toward my creation, eager to see what I had made. It hurt to have all my feelings dragged to the surface. But at least my pain had a purpose.

But I got only the briefest glimpse of the floral sculpture before something slammed into my ankles.

I slammed into the ground. Whatever had swept my feet away wrapped around my ankles.

Then it yanked me mercilessly toward the lake.

I dug my fingers desperately into the muddy ground, tearing out grass as I tried to stop myself.

The dark water rippled like an opening to hell.

And then the breathless cold swallowed me.

I scabble desperately upward, trying to kick, but the tentacles kept dragging me down.

More of them, ropy and slick, curled around my legs and my arms.

I yanked desperately at them. My hands tore, the pain barely breaking through my panic. Thorns. So many thorns.

I was being drowned by plants.

Noxy's face as she cupped that seed, then dropped it into the water, rose in my mind.

This was her curse killing me.

The vines wrapped around my throat, tightening steadily.

Well, this seemed like overkill. The plant was already drowning me. It didn't need to suffocate me too.

I managed to get my fingers under the plant, but curled against my throat, but I couldn't shirk it far enough away to get space to breathe.

My ears popped. I was being pulled down deeper and deeper. As if I would soon reach the muddy bottom of the lake.

It took everything I had to take my hands off the vine, to try to wrench off my bracelet. The vine tightened around my throat as if it would pop my head off.

Instinct made me abandon the bracelet.

I reached with both hands to tug the vine away, desperately fighting for survival. Thorns ripped deep into my arms and legs, and a cloud of red blossomed through the water.

I was in a dangerous line of work and it might kill me one day, but I'd be damned if I was going to be murdered by a mere plant.

Some crazy, giddy part of myself thought, even as I tried to yank the vines away: *this is the vengeance of all those house plants I've killed.*

*The seed.*

*The dark magic this plant had grown from.*

If I couldn't free myself, maybe I could destroy the plant. Desperately, with my vision going black at the edges from lack of oxygen, I swam desperately into the vines. I had been trying to pull away from them, trying to escape, and they had only drawn tighter. So now, instead of trying to escape, I dove toward my doom.

The vines tangled in my hair and the thorns cut my face. But I kept swimming.

The vines had loosened as I swam toward them, and so I could reach and get my hand on my blades. I struck out at the heart of the vines.

They twisted around me, tightening.

I only had seconds before the freedom that I had won by swimming toward the vines was gone. Then I'd be back in the same desperate fight for my life.

I stabbed and gouged at the heart of the vines, trying desperately to destroy the seed it had grown from.

Tentacles whipped around me. Thorns slapped my face, and I squeezed my eyes shut but kept going despite the pain.

And then suddenly, with one last gouge and twist, the vines relaxed. They fell away from me.

I swam desperately, striking up for the surface.

I broke the surface and pulled in a desperate gasp of air.

The garden looked still and beautiful as it had been before.

As far as I knew, I was alone. But was the person who had tried to murder me watching from the shadows?

I was very eager to find Noxy.

But not right now.

Not when I was dying.

I needed land.

And I needed...



The thought of an intense blue-eyed gaze and a handsome face rose in my mind as if he were pulling me into shore.

No. Fuck him.

I just needed land.

I sheathed my blades and struck out for shore. My arms and legs seem so heavy. The cloud of red was following me. I was scared of how much blood I was losing. I couldn't pass out here in the garden where I was unprotected.

I wasn't sure I dared go to my room, where I might bleed out before I could heal myself.

So, stumbling, I made my way with great effort to the one place I knew I would survive.

Even though I might regret it.

When I was in Kaelan's room, I'd seen that his windows overlooked the gardens. Now, I threw myself toward him.

Kaelan opened the window, just in time for me to fall into his arms.

## CHAPTER 20



*K*aelan

As I swung open the window, Hanna swayed dangerously, then fell toward me.

I caught her in my arms, though I frowned at her. “What game is this now?”

There was blood streaking her face. My chest tightened as I realized she was hurt.

Those luminous eyes of hers blinked as if she were barely clinging to consciousness. “I couldn’t think of anywhere else to go.”

Her hand fisted in my shirt, pulling herself toward me.

“Who did this to you?” I demanded.

Someone was going to die tonight.

“I don’t know for sure,” she murmured. “I didn’t want to come here—but I didn’t have anywhere else to go—”

“Shut up.” The fury spiking through my chest made it hard to be calm. A wild drumbeat pulsed through my blood. “Come to me. You always come to me.”

I didn’t want to put her down, but I needed to examine her wounds, so I sat down on my bed, cradling her on my lap.

Finnias, my cat, offered a worried meow as he jumped up onto the bed beside us.

“You’re not helpful, I don’t need you right now,” I told him, which was the wrong thing to say to a cat; it always convinces them that they *are* helpful and that you *do* need them.

I swept Hanna’s wet, tangled hair back from her face. Her dress was heavy and sopping, clinging to her lithe body, which was etched with deep cuts. Blood seeped everywhere, covering her skin so completely that I couldn’t even gauge her wounds.

Guilt and fear and fury all warred in my body, driving a restless need to destroy ... and an even stronger need to protect. But she was hurt.

I’d been a soldier. I knew how to take care of someone wounded.

Her eyelashes fluttered.

“Hanna. Stay with me.”

“I didn’t know you cared, princeling.”

Those words were a brutal, quick stab into my gut. But the guilt was tempered with relief she had called me *princeling*.

Would she use the nickname I despised if she was going to die?

“You’re going to be my wife. I’d be a pretty poor husband if I didn’t kill whoever did this to you.”

She didn’t respond. Her face was slack.

She’d slipped out of consciousness.

She wasn’t allowed to die. She was especially not allowed to die thinking that I despised her.

I leapt up, cradling her still form against my chest. Her damp cheek pressed my throat. I could have called the guards, but it would have wasted time.

I needed Thorne and Dare’s help. Now.

I ran down the marble corridor. The lanterns on the walls flickered with my movement as I passed, casting shadows on

the enormous painting and embroidered tapestries. Drops of blood and water fell behind us like a trail, and Finnias followed at a cat's usual leisurely stroll.

I burst into Thorne's room. He was out of the bed in a second, his sword flashing as he drew it from his scabbard. For a moment, perhaps he was back on the front. Then he saw me, and he froze.

"You could knock," he told me, his face relaxing into exasperation, "or I might—"

He broke off as he saw Hanna. "What happened?"

"I don't know. She stumbled in my window."

"Thank the gods she came to you," he said, frowning as he pulled her eyelid up so he could look into her pupil.

I didn't need him to remind me that she might not have. Hanna was far too proud, and if she weren't also pragmatic, she might be lying in the garden now, bleeding out alone. The thought of her collapsing when she was so close, on the other side of the window, as I wrote in my journal and petted Finnias—the thought was maddening.

"She needs healing," I said. "I think she lost too much blood ..."

She couldn't even shift now, if she were conscious, judging from the amount of blood soaking her clothes, mine, the bed.

"Then she needs Dare." Thorne was already gone.

She shivered in my arms. I laid her on the bed and undressed her with quick, tender hands, pulling off the sopping wet and bloodied clothes. I couldn't heal the gouges—my magic was destructive, not healing—but I pulled one of Thorne's drawers out, dumping his clothes out, and then began to cover her wounds, applying pressure to each wound to stop the bleeding before I moved to the next.

Lost in my work, I could almost, almost stop imagining the way she had swayed in the window. Those words. *I couldn't think of anywhere else to go.*

She should always come to me.

Nagging guilt followed me as I moved from one wound to another.

I'd given her good reason not to come to me.

A piece of thick, thorny vine was wrapped around her leg, working from her calf up across her thigh. I didn't dare move it yet; the thorns were deeply embedded in her flesh, especially in her thigh, dangerously near arteries.

I left the wounds oozing blood around the thorns. She'd bleed more when we pulled them loose, and she couldn't afford to lose any more blood.

She let out a moan. I pressed down on another wound, this one on her bare stomach where the vines had ripped through her dress.

Her eyes fluttered open. Those deep, luminous eyes lit an answering spark in my soul.

"There you are," I told her, relief flooding my voice. "Stay with me, sweet girl."

She murmured words that sounded like gibberish. Maybe she'd said, "I knew you'd come back to me."

Was she dreaming? Was it another man she was thinking of? The thoughts swarmed through my mind like bees, only for me to silence them as I would have on the battlefield.

"You're alright. Keep talking."

This whisper was a little more coherent. "If I were alright, you wouldn't tell me to keep talking."

She was probably right.

"How are you such a smartass when you're half dead?" I glanced from the wound I covered back to her face. Her eyes were only open a crack, but her lips smiled just faintly.

"I'm pretty incredible."

"You are," I admitted.

She might not remember that I had said as much in the morning light.

“Compliments?” She let out a wet sputter of a cough. “That might be worth almost getting murdered by a plant. They want their revenge, you know.”

I had to keep her talking. Even if she was speaking nonsense. “I’ll give you more compliments if you keep talking and don’t pass out on me again.”

She shivered. Shock setting in. Fuck.

“Okay,” she whispered, her teeth beginning to chatter. “Tell me nice things about myself, Kaelan. It’ll be a nice break from how you hate me when I’m alive.”

“I wish I hated you. I *should* hate you.”

The faintest smile crossed her lips, even as her teeth kept chattering. “Oh, same, same, princeling. But I told you. *Nice things.*”

“You’re pretty.”

“It’s not hard to be pretty when you’re rich. I don’t care about being pretty.”

I hesitated. Pretty had been a lie, anyway. She was so much more than that. She was striking. She stole the breath from my lungs every time I saw her.

The wave of longing that overwhelmed me, the need to touch her ... it felt like spinning out of control in a way a prince never should. “You aren’t ... pretty.”

She blinked at me sleepily, and her words were slurred as she managed, “I said nice things. If you’re going to insult me, I’m going back into the lake.”

As if she’d ever care that much if I insulted her. She gave as few fucks about me as I was supposed to give about her.

“You don’t care about being pretty.” I cast around for something to tell her that didn’t give too much away. But ah, fuck it. She wouldn’t remember. “Do you care that my heart stops every time I see you? My breath stops. My *mind* stops.

All I can think about is how I want to possess you. Before I remember ...”

Everything else. All the reasons we couldn't be together, truly.

“I'm not a toy to be possessed.”

“You would like being my toy. You would like being possessed.”

“You're so—”

Thorne and Dare came through the door.

Dare stopped and ran his hand through his hair, a horrified look coming over his face. “Great. I didn't want to run this goddamned contest in the first place, but if the contestants are going to start killing each—”

“Shut up,” I said for the second time this night. “Get over here and heal her. She's lost a lot of blood.”

“Fine, get out of my way.” Dare shouldered me aside in a way he would only do in private. His hands began to move over her skin.

Irritation scratched at my chest, but it only covered the helplessness. He could take care of her in a way that I couldn't.

Hanna let out a thin moan as the warm glow of his magic diffused across her skin.

“Where's Azora?” I demanded. “She should have been taking care of Hanna.”

Thorne gave me a skeptical look.

“What?” Of course *I* should have been the one taking care of Hanna. She should have been safe at my side.

But did he dare say what we were both thinking?

This was my fault.

When he didn't answer, I ordered, “I want Jaia home.”

Thorne had a familiar look on his face. He thought I was unreasonable. “Jaia's been on this mission for three months,

and she's going to be pissed—”

“Then let her be pissed. But she can be pissed *here*. As I ordered.”

Thorne sighed under his breath, but nodded.

He always followed my lead when it counted.

“What happened to your girl, Kaelan?” Dare said, and it was the one time I wouldn't chide him for using that phrase, *your girl*.

“Not ... his ...” she managed.

Those words felt like a challenge.

“I don't know who attacked her. Yet.” I wouldn't have brought her to my kingdom if I thought she'd be in direct danger here. I'd thought I could protect her.

The wounds on her face and neck and body were healing now. He was working on her arms; which had been ripped into deeply. “Gods, the cuts on her throat almost went to the artery. You could have lost her.”

“I'm aware,” I gritted.

“Then you'd have to marry one of those other dreadful noble girls—”

“There are no other girls.” The words were a dangerous growl, cutting him off from daring to mention another fucking woman to me while Hanna was still bleeding in front of me.

Thorne and Dare exchanged the briefest of glances. Dare put his head down and kept working.

“This is nasty,” he said when he finally reached her leg, which was streaked with blood, thorns twining deep into her skin. “But I guess she was wrapped with thorns like this all over.”

My hands flexed into fists as my side. It was ridiculous to be able to do nothing to heal her and nothing to protect her. There was no one to kill until I had a direction.



Whoever did this to her was going to bleed out slowly, the way she almost had.

“You pull out the thorns and I’ll heal as you go,” Dare told Thorne.

“I’ll do it.” I stepped to her side.

Dare’s deep green eyes flickered up to Hanna’s. “I should enchant her for the pain.”

“No, I don’t want to ...” she grabbed my shirt, her thin fingers weaker than usual. “I don’t want to pass out again.”

“Of course not, we’re talking about you, you wouldn’t want to miss anything,” I said, though my heart wasn’t in it. I was just hating her by habit.

“Then Thorne, hold her,” Dare said. “We need to work fast once the thorns come out.”

Thorne nodded and moved to the head of the bed, wrapping his arms around her. I pinned her thigh down to the sheets with one big hand, before moving to grip the thorns.

“Go,” Dare said.

I pulled the first thorn loose from her thigh, beginning to unwind the vine. Blood pumped from the wound, but Dare was there, covering it with his hands and golden magic.

She let out a cry, her body writhing at the pain.

The two of us moved in tandem. I steeled my heart against the sound she made, focused only on pulling each thorn loose and freeing her.

Dare healed the last wound on her ankle. She looked exhausted, sweat across her face, still shivering desperately.

“She’ll be fine,” Dare said.

I grunted. I didn’t appreciate any blasé response right now. “She’ll sleep in my bed tonight.” *Forever*. “Come to breakfast in the morning. Bring Azora.”

“I thought you hated her,” Dare said as I reached the door.

Not Azora. Hanna. I knew what he meant.

“I do. But I need her.”

It was a lie.

What lay between Hanna and me was far more dark and complicated and twisted than mere hatred.



**T**horne

**K**aelan and Dare and I had found a use for the castle’s insane quantity of mirrors. It seemed as if the king before Edric hadn’t been able to tolerate a minute without seeing himself.

Now I paced down the empty halls with Hanna’s blood still on my hands, tracing my way back to the gardens.

There was a mirror hanging right outside the hall. Anyone who entered those doors would have to pass by it.

But too many people had entered the gardens at some point or another since the trial began. It was a favorite place for lovers’ trysts and nasty fights and everything in between. No one had crept in that night, looking furtive and murderous.

However...

I watched the guards’ body language as they walked toward Hanna, feeling my hands knit into fists. I couldn’t hear what they said, but the sneers on their faces were not hard to translate.

Whatever she’d said to them had left them hurrying off, abandoning their posts. They should have been there to protect her.

By now, had they returned? I played the spell over and memorized their faces; I couldn’t make a mistake.

Then I stepped out into the gardens to find them.

The first one came with me, too eager to please, not noticing the blood on my hands. But when the mirror came to life, replaying what it had reflected earlier in the morning, he began to back away.

The second one seemed more wary. I showed him how he had treated Hanna, and then I let the mirror play, revealing what had happened to his companion.

He ran for the doors back to the garden, slamming through them in a wild panic.

As if the garden would be a safe haven. I followed, strolling behind him as he plunged madly through flower beds.

As if someone who hurt my queen could escape me.

## CHAPTER 21



Hanna

I woke slowly the next morning, groggy and confused. I hurt all over, as if I had been ripped apart and sewn together again, like a doll rescued from a dog's jaws. I rolled over, through cool sheets and into a huge warm spot that must have been left by a big body. I curled up with my knees pulled into my chest, ready to fall back to sleep. The bed was warm and cozy, and a pleasant scent clung to the sheets.

A familiar clean, masculine scent.

And I was in an unfamiliar bed.

I almost sank back into sleep, but the lush, masculine surroundings and the distant sound of voices roused me.

The door was half open. There was a deep voice, soaked in sex even when he was angry. Maybe *especially* when he was angry.

Angry Kaelan did something for me, fucked up as that was.

I couldn't quite make out his words. I got out of bed, swaying dangerously and gripping his bedpost for a second as my vision went black around the edges. I felt terrible.

But sunshine streamed through the windows, the bride trials were on, and I needed to know why the hell I was sleeping in Kaelan's bed.

The night before felt foggy and dim. The last thing I remembered was tucking my dragon scale into the greenery for my sculpture. Would I get it back?

“What the hell happened last night? You were supposed to take care of her.” Kaelan’s voice was low, vibrating with fury.

“Your princess is sneaky.” It was a feminine voice. Azora? I frowned, not sure if I’d really heard her or just someone who sounded similar. She sounded cooler, more confident, than usual. I needed to hear more to place the voice.

“Then be sneakier.”

They were definitely talking about me. Was it Azora? Did he have her spying on me?

I supposed I should’ve expected that. Gods. The bastard was going to make me absolutely miserable.

“Don’t disappoint me again. You’re dismissed.”

She didn’t answer. I headed toward the door, reeling slightly, eager to catch a glimpse of the speaker.

But the door was already closing.

Kaelan turned and when he saw me, emotions chased across his face, too quick for me to read any of them. Concern? Regret? Guilt?

“Who was that?”

“None of your concern.” The emotions were gone now, locked back up behind Kaelan’s stern and beautiful mask.

“Why was I in your—” I decided not to say *bed*. “Room?”

“Because you were attacked last night. Do you remember it?”

“I ...” I frowned, trying to remember. Bits and pieces of the night before were floating back to me.

He reached me in a few strides, pulling a chair alongside me. He guided me toward it, his hands gentle on my body. “Sit. You look as if thinking *and* standing is too much for you.”

He knelt in front of me, searching my face, then gripped my wrists and turned them over, looking at the healing pink wounds across my arms. I hadn't seen them before, and as I stared at them, last night's struggle began to surface in my mind.

His thumbs gently caressed the inside of my wrists, and a flare of desire shot between my thighs. Then he added, "Usually, it's just thinking and *walking* you struggle with."

"You're not as clever as you think." But my heart wasn't in it, and his insult had sounded half-hearted too.

"Probably not," he admitted.

It was strange to have him kneeling between my thighs, touching me so gently, looking at me with concern.

"Are you alright?" He skimmed his thumb across my cheekbone, and the tender gesture made him feel like a ghost from the past he didn't remember. "Honestly. After last night ..."

"I'm tough, Kaelan." I had to be, to deal with losing him.

He nodded. His lips parted, but whatever he was going to say was lost.

The door swung open, and Dare and Thorne entered, apparently having an argument. "—never going to keep any kind of staff," Dare was saying.

"Good." Kaelan rose to his feet abruptly. "You need to be competent today for the contest, no matter what happened last night."

Kaelan had reminded me of the way he'd treated me before, and now I was reeling from his sudden shift.

How did Kaelan make me feel fresh waves of loss, over and over?

The scent of fresh bread, bacon and hot chocolate mingled in the air. I headed toward the sumptuous buffet set up in one corner of his living space. I might be trapped, but at least I could have toast.

Kaelan followed me, standing too close when I was trying to hate him and he smelled so delicious.

“She’s on her feet,” Dare observed. He found the back of the sofa to lean on, just in time.

“She’s doing better.” Kaelan loomed over me, with distinctly angry energy vibrating around him.

“And here I expected to find her on her back.” Dare added.

“Why are you hovering, Kaelan?” I turned to face him, but I found him looking toward Dare with an expression I could only describe as *meaningful glare*.

“I’m not hovering,” Kaelan said, turning back to me with the blank mask firmly back in place.

Dare raised his hands as if in apology, though the look on his face wasn’t apologetic at all. “I’m sorry, Princess. That was crude of me.”

“She is my fiancée.” Kaelan growled.

“She’s one of twelve,” I reminded him.

He looked at me as if I were speaking nonsense. “You’ll win.”

“Why? Because it’s rigged?”

“Because each round builds in more of your kind of skills,” Dare said.

“Such as?”

“Trickery. Deceit. Theft. Manipulation.”

“Oh, good. If it was all singing and gardening, I was going to get bored.” I tore apart a roll and popped a piece of bread into my mouth. Kaelan started to say something, but since he was still standing so close, I popped a piece of bread into his mouth.

He stared at me, frowning, but he chewed. Swallowed.

“There’s hot chocolate.” I didn’t try to hide my delight. I glanced over my shoulder at Kaelan as I poured a cup for

myself. “I wouldn’t have expected you to drink hot chocolate!”

“He doesn’t,” Thorne said dryly.

There was icy silence behind me. I spun around, sure I’d catch Kaelan glaring at Thorne. Instead, I found Thorne heading to my side. He poured his own cup. “I do.”

“How thoughtful. Do you always breakfast together?” I took a sip of my chocolate. “Are you three sleeping together?”

Thorne had been mid-sip, and he paused, his eyes widening.

“No,” Kaelan said.

“That’s a pity,” I said. “There’s a real charged energy around here, and it would be fun—”

Before I could finish my thought, Kaelan stuck an apple into my mouth. My teeth sank into the crisp skin and sweet, cool white flesh. I pulled it away. “You’re rude.”

“And you talk too much.” Kaelan looked pointedly at the table by the windows. “Sit. There’s only one thing we need to discuss: last night.”

But despite ordering me to sit, he didn’t wait for me to respond. He took my mug out of my hands and handed it to Thorne, who looked as perplexed by becoming a servant as I felt by this entire affair. Then Kaelan swept me off my feet and into his arms.

“What are you doing?” I demanded as he settled me against his chest.

“You’re still weak.”

“I’m fine, Kaelan. I don’t need ... whatever this is.” I didn’t need to be this close to Kaelan. It was hard for me to control my feelings when he was being ... caring.

Kind Kaelan was harder for me to handle than standard-issue-asshole Kaelan.

He settled into a chair, his arm circling my waist firmly. “Dare, make her a plate.”



“No,” I said, struggling to get out of his arms. It was ineffective. His arm just tightened, his muscles rippling against my skin.

Then a beautiful gray, white and orange cat leapt up into my lap.

“Ooh, who’s a pretty kitty?” I crooned, suddenly forgetting Kaelan. The cat meowed and bumped his head meaningfully against my fingers, so I started to pet him.

“I think my cat likes you,” Kaelan said, frowning.

“More than you?” I asked lightly.

He grunted in a way that might mean I was right.

Dare set the plate in front of me.

I glanced at the plate he’d piled with food. “More bacon.”

Dare gave me a dark look. “Maybe we should’ve let you get murdered last night.”

But he went and got my bacon anyway. He started toward the table as if he were going to drop the plate in front of me, but both Kaelan and Thorne’s gazes snapped toward him. His pace slowed and he set the plate in front of me with a dramatic flourish.

Thorne set my hot chocolate in front of me and took the seat across from me, wrapping his big, scarred hands around his own cup. “That’s no way to speak to our future queen.”

“Please,” I said. “I prefer being insulted to being reminded.”

“Happy to oblige whenever you like,” Dare drawled.

Sudden pressure built against my temples. I must have winced, because Kaelan murmured, “It’s alright.”

Kaelan brushed my hair off the back of my neck. The feeling of the back of his fingers brushing over my skin sent sparks shooting through me that were just as intense as the sudden ache in my head.

“Eyes on me, sweet girl,” Kaelan murmured. “Not the cat.”

When I looked up at him, he brushed his lips against mine. It was a brief kiss, healing the vows.

Or so it should've been.

But once Kaelan kissed me once, his hand rose to cup my cheek. Something bright sparked in his icy blue eyes, and then his lips were on mine again. The two of us traded soft, slow kisses as if we couldn't resist, before I finally pulled myself away.

I resisted the temptation to wriggle in his lap and instead just snuggled his cat.

"Dare, if you aren't nice to her, she's going to hurt you," Kaelan chided.

Delight spread through my chest at Kaelan's warning. Dare might be a tall, dangerous Ice Fae, but he looked slightly pouty.

"She's going to need to get cleaned up," Dare said. "She once again looks like a wreck while the other girls will be perfect."

"We have time."

"So we're a team?" I demanded.

"We're always a team," Kaelan said. "The magic ensures that we are good allies to each other. That we have to take care of you."

His gaze flickered to Dare. "You can speak openly in front of Dare without breaking your oath. He and Thorne will do anything to protect and help you, just as they would for me."

Dare attempted a smile that lacked any enthusiasm. I knew him well enough already to know it was a deliberate provocation. I smiled back at him. "To help. That's quite the broad category. I can't imagine what kind of things I might ask for."

Kaelan's hand slid slightly down my stomach as I shifted to grab a pastry. I was far too conscious of his hands on my body.

“Tell us everything about what happened last night,” Thorne looked exasperated, as if he’d have more luck having a conversation with Finneas.

“I went out to the garden in the middle of the night.” My head ached. It felt like the memories were jagged, that pulling them out came at a cost. “To finish my sculpture.”

Kaelan’s grip tightened, so subtly that I wasn’t sure I’d really felt it by the time I glanced at his face.

“I’m sure you’ve noticed now that was incredibly stupid,” he said dryly.

“It has occurred to me, yes. Silly me, I didn’t realize your kingdom was so unsafe.” They were all staring at me, waiting expectantly for me to speak. But the pastry was really fluffy, sweet and delicious. They could wait. I swallowed and explained. “I was attacked by vines that dragged me into the water.”

“Who did this to you?” Kaelan demanded.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I thought at first it must be Noxy. The vines came from her sculpture. But I’ve been thinking about it and ... anyone who found my body would suspect her, right? And she might think you would care—”

Kaelan snorted at my little barb.

“So she would have to be very stupid to have targeted me so directly,” I finished.

“She is pretty stupid,” Thorne said.

“But someone might well have twisted Noxy’s enchantment to set her up.” Dare glanced at Kaelan sympathetically. “You’ll have to wait to kill someone. Unlike Thorne.”

Thorne attempted an innocent look.

I pointed my finger at him “First of all, I have questions.”

“The guards failed you,” Thorne said, as if *of course* that meant they had to become corpses.

“You can’t kill everyone who disappoints me!” I closed my eyes and blew out a breath. The rapey guards were not a loss to the world, but these men still worried me. “Kaelan doesn’t need to kill anyone. I’m going to find whoever did that to me, and I’m going to kill them.”

“No.” Kaelan’s voice was a growl, so forbidding that something inside me cringed to obey for a second. The next second, of course, I was just pissed off. “You will focus on winning the trials. I’ll keep you safe. I’ll find whoever hurt you. And I’ll kill them.”

“Not if I kill them first,” Thorne muttered.

“You’ve done a shit job of it so far, haven’t you?” I only said the words to goad him. It was not his fault.

“Yes,” he gritted. “But not again. You will be with Dare, Thorne or myself. Constantly.”

A rise of alarm whirled through my stomach. “No, no, that’s not necessary—”

“It is.” He threaded his fingers through my hair, pulling my head back until our eyes met. His touch was gentle, but still sent a tingle down my spine. “I will be obeyed, Hanna. Doing so is in your best interest, and you’re stubborn, not stupid. We don’t know who attacked you.”

“Gods.” I tried to squirm away, and his grip tightened. “You talk way too much about obedience.”

“Because it seems like you’re unfamiliar with the concept,” he said dryly. “I’m hoping eventually, you’ll develop a new vocabulary ... and a new attitude.”

“I wouldn’t hold my breath.”

His hand circled my throat, caressing it gently. It took me a second to realize he wasn’t going to choke me. With the realization came a rogue rush of disappointment. He was running his fingers over the half-healed wounds where the thorns had torn my skin.

“Azora should have some ideas on how to cover the damage,” Thorne said.

Kaelan's gaze was intent on the marks, and the look on his face might've been ... pain.

"Kaelan." I gripped his wrist. "Let me up."

His eyes searched my throat, then my face, one more time. Then he pushed my head back up, his fingers still twined in my hair, and settled me back on his lap.

"All the way," I told him, pushing away from his lap.

I almost made it. But his arm circled my waist and drew me against him, my legs straddling his thigh.

"After you've eaten," he said. "In the meantime, Thorne, have Azora bring her wardrobe here. The princess can take her bath in the next room."

"I'm not moving into your bedroom. I'm not playing house \_\_\_"

"Consider it playing prisoner, then." He cut in. "You will sleep in my bed. No one would expect me to let you sleep anywhere else after an attack on your life. It would destroy the ruse."

"Right. The ruse." I couldn't keep the irony out of my voice when I was planted in his lap, encircled by his thick arms, and apparently not allowed a chair of my very own. "We wouldn't want to ruin the ruse."

"Dare, you'll go on with the trials as usual," Kaelan said. "Thorne, you find out who entered the gardens."

"And what am I going to do?" I asked lightly.

"Not die." Kaelan said. Then he was picking me up again, carrying me like a child toward his bathroom. "And for now, take a bath."

"I don't need you," I told him, trying to writhe out of his arms.

But no matter what the two of us said to each other, he held me close.

## CHAPTER 22



*K*aelan

“I’m very curious about your cat,” Hanna said as I carried her into the bathroom. “Also, about your failure to remember that I have working legs.”

I scoffed. “I’ve seen you almost fall eight times this morning. Dare healed you, including trying to restore your blood loss, but clearly ... you are still a mess.”

She felt so light in my arms. So fragile. I wanted to be careful with her ... but my kingdom wouldn’t be so tender.

“Thanks,” she said drily.

“So I will help you bathe.”

“Absolutely not.”

“I’ve seen you naked before, Hanna. Many times.”

“Yes, I’d almost forgotten our lurid past, so good of you to remind me.”

Finnias twined around my ankles, meowing.

“I’ll tell you about the cat,” I said, because everything was a negotiation with her. She was maddening. “But I’m not going to leave you alone.”

“Fine.” She glanced toward the water, and there was something in her eyes for a second that made me think she was afraid to be alone.

Well, she didn't need to be afraid. She was never going to be alone again, until I had annihilated every potential threat.

Maybe not even then.

Her fingers fell on the top of her shirt. *My* shirt. "Did you dress me last night?"

"Yes. As I said ... I've seen your body before."

It hadn't driven me mad to remove the last of her wet, blood-soiled clothes that clung to her body. It hadn't driven me mad to touch her carefully, delicately, knowing she wouldn't want my hands on her breasts even though she swayed toward me. It hadn't driven me mad when she, half-loopy and out of it, had pressed her lips to my cheek.

It definitely hadn't driven me mad when she draped her arm over my chest in the darkness, nuzzling her face into my throat.

I needed her because of the people and their belief in the prophecy. That was all.

She nodded, her perfectly sculpted pink lips pressed together tightly. I couldn't read her right now. She was usually so light and glittering, but right now there was an edge of fear.

I'd almost forgotten that look. The way cowardice had painted over the face I loved that night so many years ago, before I said goodbye to her.

Now it made me want to pull away. Even as some other traitorous impulse wanted to kiss her. No matter what she had done, or how unsuitable she was to be queen.

My selfish side wanted nothing in life except Hanna.

But my kingdom needed me to take the throne.

I had to distract myself. I stepped down with her into the water, my tunic billowing up around her slender body. She let out a gasp of surprise.

"I'm right here," I said gruffly. "I won't let you drown again."

“I don’t need you,” she said, even as her fingers clung to my shoulders.

“The evil plants won’t get you again.”

“Are you mocking me?” The spark of life glittered in her eyes again. “After I almost died?”

“Perhaps you’ll learn to stay where you’re supposed to be.”

“I wasn’t going to be eliminated from the trials over my bad gardening.”

“You could have finished your work yesterday instead of running away.”

“You could have kept your hands to yourself and not fingered me in front of half your court.”

“You’re cruder than Dare.”

“You’re the one who’s crude! I’m just describing what you did.” She stared up at me. I should let her go, but I liked the weight of her body against my arms, the feel of the warm water ebbing around us both. “Why did you want to hear me sing so badly?”

I considered the real answers and rejected them for one that was also true, but less ... dangerous. “Whenever you rebel, I want to make you submit.”

“How did I not notice that you were fucked in the head all those years ago?” she muttered.

“Maybe you *made* me fucked in the head. Have you considered that, princess?”

“How many women have you played those kind of games with?” she demanded. “Making them submit?”

*None.* There had been no women for me after Hanna. But if she knew that, it would be too much of a window into just how vulnerable I was for her. “Do you get some kind of bizarre rush from jealousy?”

“I’m not jealous.”



“Mm.” I transferred her to my side, my arm wrapped around her waist. Her legs automatically circled my waist before she realized what she was doing, then she froze. “I can wash your hair. Since Azora isn’t here. Take off your shirt.”

“Take off yours.”

“Fine. If you’re that eager to stare at me.” I set her gently on the tile ledge at the edge of the tub, then pulled my shirt off over my head. “Happy now?”

Her eyes skimmed over my skin as if she was looking for something. What was the evil little goddess up to now?

“You never stop plotting, do you?”

“I almost did last night.”

I didn’t care to be reminded.

She rubbed her temple with one delicate, scarred hand. Her eyes were shadowed. She was weak and exhausted, even if she wouldn’t admit it. She needed to be cared for.

“Your shirt, Hanna.”

Her fingers fell to the wet cloth. “Right.”

But her gaze flickered to me, and she licked her lips. As if I hadn’t seen her naked body a thousand times before.

Impatiently, I stalked toward her through the water. She put out a hand to push me away, but I was already dragging the shirt off, over her head.

“Come,” I told her, grabbing her thighs and pulling her off the ledge. She slipped into the water with a splash, putting her arms around my neck to keep herself from falling further. The feel of her body against mine was magnetic.

“You can’t just manhandle me.”

“It seems I can.”

I rested her head against my shoulder so she could float while I washed her hair. Her long strands were tangled from the lake and caked with blood, and despite herself, her body relaxed against mine.

Then I picked up the washcloth and began to wipe away the blood and dirt. I catalogued every almost-healed pink wound as I went, feeling a stir of anger; I was going to slash apart whoever had done this to her until the thorns seemed like a mercy.

But my anger wasn't the strongest emotion right now.

"I wanted to do this when we came back from the isle," I told her, washing her shoulder. There were little freckles across her shoulder, and I was tempted to kiss them. "I hated that you were cold and dirty and I couldn't ... fix you."

It was the nastiest way to say what I meant. I'd longed to care for her and protect her, but those words would've exposed how much I cared. Then I added a lie: "Before they all saw you."

My hand dipped lower, caressing her chest. When I brushed the cloth over her nipple, she shuddered.

Her chin rose. She was trying to pretend to be unaffected. But it was impossible for her to hide the way her body responded to my touch.

There were soft noises in the next room. Azora. I wrapped my hands around Hanna's hips and set her on the edge of the pool. It gave me the perfect view of her narrow waist, her small breasts that fit so well in the palm of my hand, her nipples that seemed like they were made for my mouth.

Gods, I wanted to drag her into the pool and fuck her until the water turned to waves.

"The trials are beginning soon," Azora called. "If the princess is ready."

Hanna had tilted her head to one side, listening intently, as if she were trying to tease out something about Azora.

"Make yourself presentable," I told her, wrapping her in a towel. It was a tender gesture accompanied by rude words, and she raised her brows in a way that made me feel as if she could see right through me.

I put my hands on the side of the pool and easily heaved myself out. I was keenly aware of her watching me as I pulled my robe on.

When we went into the next room, I closed the door to the bath firmly behind me. I wanted her to feel safe from the water. It might be an irrational fear, but it was understandable after last night's magical attack.

I'd given up Hanna as my queen because of her fear. When I'd needed her most, she'd run from danger. That had been understandable, too.

I hoped I wouldn't lose her again.

But I should harden my heart and hope she proved herself worthy to be more than my fake bride.

I ached for her to be my queen.

## CHAPTER 23



Hanna

When I came out of his room in my dress, Kaelan's gaze caught on me the way it so often did. As if, despite his best intentions, he couldn't help staring at me.

I had a vague wisp of Kaelan's voice in my mind. *When I see you ... my heart stops. My breath stops. My mind stops.* Was that a dream conjured up by my blood deprived brain? Or was it an actual memory?

Watching him closely, I did a little spin. "Do you think I'm pretty, Kaelan?"

"You're adequate, as always."

"Adequate," I murmured. "That's what I'm going to tell you that you are when we have sex."

Too late, I pressed my lips closed. I'd spoken of sex as if it were sure to happen. But I shouldn't want him to touch me.

"Hanna, we've done it already. I know that you find me more than adequate." His eyes sparkled. "I know exactly how wet and greedy you are for me."

"Maybe I was being polite."

He scoffed. "You're not terribly polite to begin with, but your pussy is definitely not polite. It knows what it wants."

He offered me his arm.

“Careful,” I warned him. “You wouldn’t want people to think the game was rigged.”

“Everyone knows that I want you as my bride. Everyone knows the game is rigged.” He gave me a wicked smile. “Everyone knows that Royals don’t fight fair.”

As if I needed to be reminded. I laid my hand on his corded forearm, feeling his muscles flex through his fine jacket. Gods, why did my body ache for him so endlessly?

“Why are we going through with this farce, then? Why these trials if we’ll end up together at the end?”

His jaw flexed. “You’d have to ask my father. I can’t tell which of us he’s more dedicated to tormenting.”

“You can tell him he doesn’t have to torment me. I have to spend every day with you. That’s torment enough.”

“Every night, as well,” he said, nodding along.

“I’m not sleeping in your bed every night.”

“Well you aren’t sleeping anywhere else. I guess you’re going to be rather sleep deprived.”

“Has anyone told you lately that you’re insane?”

“I take it as a compliment.”

“You shouldn’t.”

When we stepped out of the castle and into the garden, his posture straightened, pulling him away from me. We were still touching, but I felt a sudden distance between us.

I followed his gaze to King Edric. He was making us dance for him like his little puppets. How much had he made Kaelan dance during his life?

“Unusual,” I told him. “You look even more tense than usual. Which is really saying something.”

Kaelan gave me a look that felt like the old teasing way he had looked at me, just for a second. “If anything, I look annoyed.”

“You love the way I annoy you.”

“Well, we’re in public. So let’s pretend that’s true.”

Edric strolled the perimeter of the lake, stopping to study each statue. Sudden anxiety gripped my gut.

I didn’t know what my statue looked like. I wasn’t sure I had even come close enough to finishing it before I was dragged into the lake.

What if I had to go home?

What if I left behind Kaelan, and my chance to open the doors to our shared past?

And Thorne, who had covered his hands in blood for me and who terrified the court ... but who gave me such tender looks?

And Dare, with his barbs, who looked at me as if he saw through my smiles to the raging fire I felt inside, who felt like a more interesting challenge than the trials themselves?

I’d be welcomed home with smiles and hugs and so much love. But this was where I wanted to be. In the midst of the cruelty, and the chaos, and the heat between these men and me.

This kingdom was dark, but never dull.

My fatal flaw was a deep distaste for boredom, when a nice life is often a bit boring.

I strained my gaze toward sculpture, but it looked like nothing more than a massive blur of flowers from this distance. Suddenly my mouth felt dry. Beyond the sculpture was the sparkling, tranquil blue water.

The memory of being trapped below the smooth surface, fighting desperately for my life, was unshakable. I could imagine myself dragged down to the bottom, screaming and choking beneath the waves while these nobles continued to stroll around the lake.

I fixed a smile on my face, but I wasn’t entirely sure it was convincing.

Dare leaned over to Thorne and whispered something into his ear. I narrowed my eyes, hating the way I felt bared in front of him, as if he knew my feelings were a roiled panic.

He held my eye contact without any sign of being uncomfortable. For once, he didn't smirk at me; I couldn't read his face.

Then Thorne turned and looked at me too. They were speaking quietly, and I had no doubt that they were speaking about me.

I've taken a lot of etiquette classes at the Posselbaum Academy, and I still barely kept myself from making rude gestures.

Edric noticed us and came toward us. "My son. And ... Hanna."

He knew my name, but he had paused as if he had to remember which potential bride I was.

I still wondered why the Snake Queen had attacked Kaelan's ship. Did the Snake Queen want to kill Kaelan before he took over their kingdom?

Or had the Snake Queen merely been trying to kill me?

Was she working with this king?

"I enjoyed your sculpture." Edric's tone was uncomfortably neutral. I wanted to know what he thought. I wanted to know that I had successfully passed this stupid test.

"Thank you."

"Though it's not about the flowers themselves," he said dismissively. "We don't need a creative queen. We need a powerful queen to make powerful heirs."

"Of course. Why else would anyone want a powerful queen?"

Kaelan didn't even look at me, but his aura said: *shut up*.

Edric looked me over as if he were really seeing me for the first time. I didn't enjoy it.

“Dare will eliminate the two weakest candidates today,” Edric mused. “But soon, I believe some of the brides will choose to leave the competition.”

“Sounds delightful. Any chance of some spoilers?”

Kaelan’s aura remained stuck on *shut up*.

“It would ruin the fun, don’t bother,” I said with a dismissive wave.

Edric laughed, though it didn’t seem sincere. “At least your turn is coming. You will be judged today, but tomorrow night you have your opportunity to judge our prince.”

Kaelan shook his head. “I’m not participating in the games. I have too much to do.”

“Nonsense,” Edric said. “You’re the kingdom’s favorite hero. They want to see you.”

“I’m not a hero.” Kaelan seemed insulted by the idea. “And I won’t be one in the arena, no matter how well I fight. They just want to see me playing warrior.”

“They do. And you will.” Edric sounded easygoing, but the look he leveled on Kaelan was steely and threatening. “The people look forward to seeing you fight. You can’t disappoint us.”

Kaelan was silent. Then, with the same easy grace with which he bowed, he said, “You’re right, Father. I had thought the bride trials would be more important. But I won’t disappoint my people.”

He wasn’t going to tell his father about the attempt on my life. That was interesting.

“You’re barely involved in the bride trials. Though perhaps you should be more so.” Edric gave him a severe look. “People are talking about how dedicated you seem to a singular candidate.”

Kaelan inclined his head. “I admit, I wish to choose myself the wife who will share my life.”

“But will she?”



I didn't like being part of some grand political game that I didn't fully understand.

Dare was gathering the would-be queens around him, down at the edge of the lake. Kaelan touched the small of my back, pushing me toward Dare ... and out of this conversation.

I quickly curtsied goodbye to the king and headed toward Dare. My stomach sank, plummeting like a rock would through that damned lake. My first chance to see my sculpture would be as my power was judged by the royal court.

I glanced back toward Kaelan. His moments of warmth last night had felt like they reached from the past. Those scraps of leftover affection made me feel weak, just when I needed to care the least.

My sculpture had been knit from my song, from my feelings. I'd never felt so exposed.

Dare made a speech that I ignored, and Edric and Kaelan joined us a moment later as we began to move around the lake. Dare chose the route that would bring us to my sculpture last. Was he doing this to me on purpose?

To me, every sculpture looked the same: castles and mountains and bears.

Kaelan complimented each one.

We reached Noxy's, a towering explosion of coral-colored flowers peeking between thick, spiny blue vines. I stiffened at the sight.

Kaelan looked at it for a long time, then nodded and walked on. Hurt flashed over Noxy's face, and then she looked at me with pure, unadulterated spite.

But Kaelan was already moving on, and I made myself follow.

We walked along the path toward my own sculpture. The other girls followed in our wake, and so did many other nobles. I quickened my pace, feeling a desperate pounding ache in my chest to see Kaelan respond.

On the column, rising from the greenery were two dragons formed of blooming flowers. One blue and one red. The dragons twined together, their claws sinking into each other's shoulders, their mouths meeting in what might have been a kiss or two figures locked together in a fight to the death.

"It's exquisite," Edric said, looking toward me as if he saw me for the first time.

"It's adequate," Kaelan said.

I didn't understand why he was so hot and then so cold. I deserve better. Still, I held my breath as Dare stepped up to announce the results.

"Giana, Corra, you are both dismissed from the competition."

I exhaled.

Kaelan wasn't looking at me, or at any of us. He studied the lake as Edric strode away. Giana and Corra moved stiffly away toward the castle, unacknowledged by the other girls, who focused on Kaelan.

The girls surrounded Kaelan, trying to draw him into conversation, but my cold prince was curt.

I bit my lip as I stared at that dark, tranquil water.

I was closer to its depths than I wanted to be.

The memory of being trapped below the smooth surface, fighting desperately for my life, was unshakable. I could imagine myself being dragged down to the bottom now, drowning beneath the waves while these nobles continued to stroll around the lake.

I shook off the fear. I needed to distract myself with something cheerful, and I could think of one thing that would improve my mood.

Punishing Kaelan.

He had fucked me against the cold wall of the labyrinth knowing damn well who I was, tricked me into chains, forced me into this fake marriage.

Most of all, being so close to this man who had rejected me, who I still loved, felt like an unending punishment.

It was only fair to return the favor.

And as I thought about the tournament tomorrow, my mind was already churning with ideas to punish my future husband.

## CHAPTER 24



*H*anna

That evening, there was supposed to be a ball. I didn't want to face Kaelan, pretending that I loved him and hung on his every word. Kaelan was obviously reluctant to leave me alone, though it was hard to understand why after the way he had acted.

He waited with me. Kaelan had to make an appearance, and Dare had to tell the contestants about the next trial. He wouldn't give any spoilers about the specifics of what it entailed though. He just told me, "You'll enjoy it," with a barb in his tone that told me that I wouldn't.

Thorne paced the room, looking as relaxed as I felt.

"What's wrong with you?" I asked.

"How much training do you have in hand-to-hand combat?"

"Is this your idea of flirting, Thorne?"

"I don't need to flirt with you," he said. "You're already helplessly smitten, that's already been decided."

I scratched the cat between the ears. "Has it?"

This was the only place there were only three men I could be myself with, and talk about the situation with. No matter how strange it was to have the conversation with them.

“Come and train with me. You’ll need to fight for the last trial.”

“That is delightful,” I said. “I cannot wait to punch some spoiled noble girls in the throat.”

“If you continue to lounge on the chaise and pet the cat, you are the one who’s going to end up punched in the throat. These girls may look soft, but every child in our kingdom trains for invasion from the time their hands could form fists.”

Well, this was interesting information. I sat up. “Tell me more.”

Thorne held out his hand to me. “How about I show you, Princess?”

With all apologies to the cat, I chose to go with Thorne. But I did kiss Finneas goodbye.

Thorne led me through the castle and I wondered where the training space was. Was it in his room? The thought was strangely exciting, though it shouldn’t be. I was already promised to one asshole Fae royal. I didn’t really need more.

Still, I couldn’t deny how much I felt drawn to Thorne.

“I liked your art,” he told me.

“The sculpture?” I asked and then winced internally. It wasn’t as if he had ever been in my room to see my artwork, which hung on the walls, taunting me with the skill I used to have.

He nodded. “Why did you choose two dragons?”

“I don’t know.”

Thorne grunted. Disbelief, I was pretty sure.

He turned to face me. I caught a glimpse of the two of us reflected in the mirror: the towering, terrifying-looking Fae warrior and the narrow-boned girl who looked ordinary, especially now when I had changed into a tunic and pants to spar. I always looked smaller than I felt inside.

“You know the common people believe you can shift into a dragon.”

“Yes.” That was the entire reason Kaelan had dragged me back into his life.

“But stories have drifted over from the isle.” His eyes were direct, as if he could read my secrets written on my face as easily as turning the pages in a book. “Most everyone in the palace believes that you can’t shift into a dragon.”

“Dragons are overrated,” I said archly, ignoring the stab of guilt in my chest. “Though it seems like a real shame not to be able to breathe fire on those who deserved it.”

I mentally apologized to my dragon. Flying as a dragon was not overrated. When I stood somewhere high, a longing ran through my body to let myself fall, and to let myself soar.

Did Thorne suspect that I really could shift into a dragon? Why were we having this conversation?

He opened a door, and light spilled in. The garden. And in the distance, I saw the lake, and my stomach clenched.

I would have said no. I would have walked away. But right now, I needed to know what Thorne believed.

“You’re stronger than the girl they see.” Thorne looked at me intently, taking a step forward. “Strong enough to be our queen.”

My heart took an unexpected tumble.

Thorne thought I was worthy.

I felt his approval through my body, a whirl of sudden joy lifting me up. But I shouldn’t care if these men approved of me. “Did you bring me out here to fight or to flirt?”

He grunted. “You find being punched more comfortable than compliments.”

“If I know they’re not sincere.”

“Who made you the way that you are?” He was studying me as if he really wanted to know. “You act like sweetness and light, but really, you’ve got your shield up and sword at the ready behind that smile, don’t you?”

Who made me the way I was?

Dead parents.

Incredible older sister.

Heroes to live up to everywhere I turned at home.

Fake friends.

And an asshole Fae Prince who had made me feel seen and loved anyway for a season, then broke my heart.

There was no way I would tell him all that. I would never tell anyone all of that.

Instead, I asked, “Do you want to fight or not?”

“Always.” He faced me, his powerful body shifting into a warrior’s stance.

He towered above me, intimidating even when he stood still.

I stepped back into my own fighting stance, raising my fists.

It always felt awkward starting to spar with a new opponent. How would we signal the start of the fight, who would attack first—

Thorne charged at me. I dove to one side, dropping to the ground and lashing out my leg, hoping his momentum would work to my advantage. But Thorne easily leapt over my leg and threw a punch at my face that turned into nothing at the last moment, softening as his knuckles just brushed my skin.

I threw myself backward, landing on my hands and doing a flip to come up and face him.

“You know, I’m glad that you’re on my side?”

His lips quirked. Not quite a smile. More a release of his usual tension. “I’m glad you realize it.”

Then he came at me again, and I couldn’t talk, couldn’t think, could barely breathe.

Usually my speed made up for the fact I was smaller than my opponents and it was harder for me to take a hit and keep moving. But he was fast too.

I aimed a punch for his stomach, but he dove toward me, and my fist drove into his nose instead. He caught me anyway, and the two of us slammed into the ground. I was driven under the force of his powerful body, knowing if I didn't scramble out now, I'd never escape him.

His hand wrapped my throat, forcing my head down into the grass. Gods, I shouldn't like that the way I did.

I stared up into those dark eyes. Maybe it was the lack of oxygen to my brain, but he looked at me as if he were going to kiss me.

Then his fingers relaxed and he pushed away from me with a frown. "You're not giving me your best."

I popped my hips and managed to get him loose enough to twine my legs through his, trying to lock him into place. Breathlessly, I managed, "I almost died yesterday, give a girl a break."

He escaped my lock, and I frantically scrambled up and away from him, trying to get myself space to get to my feet. The two of us faced each other, both of us breathing hard, fists up and ready.

"The fact that you almost died because you have enemies means you should be doing your best."

"Maybe I don't have enemies. Maybe Kaelan has enemies, and I'm just collateral damage."

He gave me a look. "You have enemies."

"How do you know?"

"I've met you."

He used magic first, adding a magical oomph when he threw me that sent me flying halfway across the green lawn, only to float softly down.

I was pissed when I stormed back toward him. I aimed a blast of magic at him that he easily deflected, raising a shield that shimmered in the air. My magic exploded against it in a shower of harmless sparks.



Our sparring went on. Thorne was careful of me.

And I hated it.

I'd practiced what felt like endlessly with Honor's men and with the other girls at the Posselbaum Academy, learning to make the most of the thin magic that escaped the enchantment.

But with Thorne, I longed to yank off the bracelet and let him see my true power.

I spent the last of my magic on a blast that knocked him onto his ass.

I grinned and charged for him, but before I could pin him, he swept my legs. He was on top of me in seconds, his big body pinning mine down. He grabbed my wrists and pinned them to either side of my head.

I was keenly aware of his body against mine. His cock against my thigh. His chest heaving against mine.

His lips looked soft above that hard jaw.

"When you kissed me at that party," I said, "you kissed me like you had been waiting for me all night."

"I had."

He said the words so simply, as if saying something so vulnerable carried no weight for him.

"Why?" Something soared in my chest, as if my dragon were trying to take flight.

"I'll tell you why if you go into the water."

I tried to scramble up at that, but he still had me pinned. "Why?"

"Because you're afraid. And I don't want you to stay afraid."

"No," I scoffed.

"It's not shameful to be afraid."

"Are you, of all people, really telling me it's fine to be afraid?"

He scoffed. “Do you think I don’t feel afraid? That Kaelan isn’t driven by fear? That Dare isn’t a wreck deep inside?”

I stared at him, stunned by the series of admissions. I’m not sure Kaelan and Dare would have appreciated that he’d confessed on their behalf. “No one talks about being afraid. I don’t think my sister ever feels fear.”

“I’ll talk about being afraid.”

I could barely breathe.

No matter how much I walked over rooftops or made smart remarks, there was always a weight that seemed to be pulling me back down into fear.

Into weakness.

Into cowardice.

Blood rushed through my ears as if I were in danger. That frightened version of myself was the one that Kaelan saw, but she was also the one who haunted my mirror.

More quietly, his voice intimate, he asked, “Do you think I’ve never been afraid?”

His skin, usually cool to the touch, was heated against mine now.

“Tell me.” I challenged him. My voice came out strong, even though I felt like I was shaking inside. “Tell me what you’re afraid of.”

“I’m afraid of a lot of things. Losing Dare. Losing Kaelan. Losing my family.”

Those were things anyone would be afraid of. Disappointment settled like I’d swallowed a stone.

“And less ... honorable things. Not being the man I am meant to be. Not being loyal. Not living up to the image of myself in my mind.”

*Not living up to the image in my mind.*

That was my exact fear. Hearing it spoken out loud made me feel for the first time in my life, as if I weren’t alone in that

one way.

“But you always do, don’t you?”

He climbed off me and offered me his hand. He pulled me up so we were both sitting side by side, and as I rubbed my shoulder, he said, “If you promise to swim with me, I’ll tell you about my worst moment.”

He told me a story about a time when he was in a battle with Kaelan, one of their first battles. They had been fighting the forces of the Snake Queen before the tentative treaty between them, when she became focused on the Grey Kingdom.

He’d gone running to help a house full of people being attacked by the Snake Queen’s soldiers. He cut them down—only to find himself pinned down, far away from his friends.

And then he’d been attacked by the Snake Queen’s monsters.

And he’d had the chance to flee, leaving the civilians behind.

“I started to run.” His eyes met mine evenly. “I went back. I don’t think I made it more than a few steps. But I ran, Hanna.”

“You went back. That’s what matters.”

“Mm. But I had my moment of cowardice. Before the urge to live up to that image in my mind was so powerful that it pulled me back.”

“I can tell you’re the same, Hanna. You have a vision of yourself, and you wield it like a shield, and it’s strong that it changes you. It doesn’t matter if you have your weak moments. What matters is what you do in the long run.”

“But eventually ...” he added. “You have to be able to drop your shield.”

“Like you just did with me?”

“Yes.”

I shook my head. “I don’t understand you, Thorne. Why would you trust me? We barely know each other.”

He shrugged. “Someday you’ll see the answer.”

“You could just tell me.”

“It doesn’t matter. You wouldn’t believe me.”

“Talking to you is maddening.”

“But talking to you is a constant well of delight,” he returned. “Now, let’s go for a swim in the lake.”

“I’ve spent enough time in that particular lake for a lifetime.” Even sitting in the grass talking to Thorne now, I was keenly aware of it in the distance. It looked so still and tranquil

“You can’t stay afraid when you have to be out here every day. The nobles will sense it like the predators they are.”

“Aren’t you a noble?”

“Yes. I’m a predator ... but I’m on your side.”

I frowned at him. I couldn’t make sense of him, and it made me mad.

“Tell you what,” he said, looking around the dark garden. We were alone. “We’ll play a game. You hide, and I’ll try to catch you. If you make it back to the castle, I’ll assume you can take care of your fear without my help.”

“I don’t need your help,” I promised him. “I managed the last twenty-three years fine without you.”

“I doubt that very much.”

But when he reached for me, I ran.

He chased me through the garden. I hid in the bushes, watching him as he hunted in the wrong direction. But when I streaked for the castle, he was right on my heels.

Then I leapt into the water.

It was the best way to get away from him. I was fast in the water, even in my human form.

He jumped in, and I could feel him just behind me as I raced through the water.

The wild thought that he could be the one who tried to kill me dashed through my mind, and disappeared just as quickly. I trusted my instincts, and I didn't understand Thorne, but somehow I knew he was no danger to me.

We reached the bank, and I scrambled out of the water. He caught me around the waist, and the two of us slammed into the ground.

And I was laughing when I rolled over to face him.

He pinned me down on the ground with his body braced above mine, a hand on either side of me.

And when he heard me laugh, Thorne smiled for the first time I'd ever seen.

"I get tired of your smiles," he told me. "You don't always mean them. But your laugh ..."

He trailed off, his tone oddly reverent.

And then Thorne bent his head toward mine. His dark eyes were intent, but soft.

As if he was going to kiss me.

And I wanted Thorne to kiss me.

Then abruptly, he scrambled up and away. He offered me his hand, kind as always, but suddenly distant. The change in his demeanor was complete.

I planted my hands on either side of my head and easily leapt to my feet.

"I don't need anyone's hand," I told him lightly.

"I know you don't. But you could take mine anyway."

"I don't think you really want me to do that, Thorne." I wasn't going to dance around what had just happened.

"You're the Prince's fiancée. My future queen. My best friend's love."

“He doesn’t love me.” When it was only the two of us, I could say those words. Maybe if I said them often enough, they would lose their power.

For now, they still stung bitterly.

Thorne said, “He should.”

“We agree there,” I said lightly.

But his words clung to my skin.

*He should.*

## CHAPTER 25



*H*anna

The next morning, I woke to find Kaelan dressing beside the bed. I watched him shamelessly, the way he pulled his tunic over his powerful body. There was the faint rune tattoo, the color of his skin, on his shoulder; it was enchanted so that even he shouldn't know it was there. But the sight of it comforted me.

"Are you coming to breakfast?" he asked, turning away from me as he buckled his belt. The lean taper of his waist was sharp.

It was a shame such a beautiful form had to hold Kaelan's personality.

"Of course." It was so much fun to watch girls throw themselves at him. How could I miss it?

"Did you know you snore?"

"Good. I hope I drool on your pillow."

He turned back to give me an affronted look. The Ice Fae probably never talked about drool. They were such cold, dignified people.

But they still drooled.

As I dressed, the door closed behind Kaelan. Of course he would pretend that we weren't sleeping in the same room, and people would pretend to go along, but they all knew.

By the time I walked in, Kaelan sat at the head of the table, holding court. The women hung on his every word so intensely they didn't even notice me come in.

One of them laid her hand on Kaelan's hand. His gaze flickered down to hers, then to me—just for a fraction of a second, as if it were an involuntary movement. He didn't move away. Any other time, I was sure he would have yanked away as if her touch was an insult.

*You're hard to punish, brazen as you are. But your body is under my control...*

That went both ways, didn't it?

He didn't desire anyone else the way he desired me.

And no one else was watching me. Only him, no matter how much he pretended otherwise.

Kaelan had peeled my panties off my body more than once, only to slip them into his pocket with a mischievous smile. I had loved that smile, and I had loved the way he wanted to keep something so intimate and so *mine*.

He was a filthy bastard sometimes, but I hadn't minded when he was *my* filthy bastard.

I pulled the opposite head chair away from the table. Empty seats stretched between us before the girls clustered around him, so he had a fine view as I sat down at the head of the chair and fixed him with my own smile.

He was trying so hard not to look at me. He was trying so hard to focus on them.

But I could feel his energy radiating toward me as if the two of us were connected.

I leaned back in the chair, slowly raising my dress, inch by inch, up my legs, up my thighs. I hooked my fingers in the top of my panties and began to roll them down.

Kaelan took a sip of his tea. Set it back down on the saucer. Missed.

Tea spilled across the table.



The girls rushed to mop it up, never looking away from him, though I was pretty sure they normally never cleaned a thing in their lives.

Kaelan finally gave up and locked eyes with me.

I worked the panties down my thighs until they reached my knees, then let them drop. I spread my legs, giving him a view, just for a second, of the pussy he had once worshipped.

He hadn't just called me *goddess* as a nickname. He had made me feel like one.

Heat seemed to buzz between the two of us as I adjusted my skirts with a flick of my wrists. By the time a few of the girls followed his gaze, I was sitting there demurely. None of them could see from here that my panties had fallen to the floor, looped around one ankle.

But he knew damn well what I was doing when I rose to my feet and walked over to him. His adam's apple bobbed, and I knew even before I slipped my arm around his shoulders and could see his lap that he would be hard. His cock strained against his trousers as if the leather might just not hold him.

"Good morning," I whispered into his ear, my voice low and throaty, before I tucked my panties into his jacket pocket.

He almost, almost managed to hold himself back as I straightened.

But then abruptly, his arms latched around my waist. He hauled me into his lap, my ass landing firmly against the hardness that jutted against my cheeks.

"Good morning," he said into my ear, his voice warm and strained with need. "You haven't eaten."

"I've been busy."

"I've noticed." He lifted his half-eaten toast, dripping with butter, to my lips.

The girls watched with hate-filled eyes as he fed me.

I was definitely going to be murdered.

But right now, feeling Kaelan's arms around me, his hunger, and seeing him acknowledge that I owned him ...

I wasn't sorry.



**B**ut no matter what Kaelan wanted—even if he didn't admit it—I still had to follow the flock of potential brides out into the garden.

Almost as soon as we stepped out into the greenhouse scent and warmth, a servant ran up for Kaelan.

Kaelan looked toward me as the servant spoke to him. Reluctance wrote itself over his face, he nodded and turned away.

Somehow I felt alone without Kaelan, not that he was a comforting presence.

The morning sun shone down brightly on us as we gathered around Dare. Then I smelled a familiar scent of snow and mint, and Thorne's big arm brushed my shoulder. When I looked up at him, he gave me a wink.

"The next trial will take you into darkness," Dare told us all.

"Does he always talk like this?" I muttered to Thorne.

"Pretty much. He was the natural choice for this nonsense."

"For the next trial, you will confront your darkest side," Dare explained. "You can turn back at any time, and the pain will be behind you. But anyone who does not reach the other side of the enchanted forest will be eliminated from the trials."

"A queen must be strong—even strong enough to confront her deepest fears." Dare said.

The girls smiled and nodded at him. Meanwhile, cold rage clutched my gut.

Kaelan had pretended as if he were an unknowing victim of his father's machinations with the Bride Trials. But he had a hand in this trial now; I was sure of it.

He thought I wasn't strong enough to be his queen.

"Did you know this was coming?" I breathed to Thorne, my gaze still fixed on Dare.

Was that why Thorne had lectured me about fear and forced me to confront my fear in the lake?

Dare turned, his gaze seeking mine, as if he had known I was the one boring holes in his back.

"I wasn't sure." Thorne's gaze was troubled. "But I had a feeling. It's a common test for our best warriors."

And that was what Kaelan wanted in a queen.

"Kaelan ..." The words died on my lips. We were in too public a place, and even if the magic hadn't clutched my mind, common sense would've shut my mouth. My voice came out tart. "Well. Thank you so much, Thorne. I appreciate the information."

I had sudden, vivid fantasies of murdering all three of these men.

"He's my prince. I'm loyal to him." The words were the right ones, but he looked at me with a flare of heat in his gaze that made me question how much he meant that claim.

"What are you going to do when I'm your queen, Thorne?"

"Worship you, of course." Thorne said, so matter-of-factly that I choked.

But I had no time to process those words and come up with any kind of response.

Dare had joined us, and he smiled down at me, cool and arrogant as ever. "Will you make it through the forest, Hanna?"

He looked at me so knowingly. I had the sudden feeling Kaelan had told him all about our past—of course he had—and it made me want to slap Dare even more than I usually did.

“I wouldn’t bother if I knew you were waiting for me on the other side,” I told him. “But I will for Kaelan.”

He raised his hand in an indolent gesture, shooing me away. “Join the other girls.”

And yet ... there was the faintest frown dimpling the space between his eyes. He was always so sure of himself.

But I’d gotten under his skin just a little.

“You’d never go into the forest you’ll send me into,” I told him, planting a kiss on two of my fingers and brushing it over his cheek. He jerked away as if my touch had burned him, and I grinned. “Bye, Dare. See you on the other side.”

I sauntered toward the forest.

We had dressed in gowns as if we were going to the ball, and I wasn’t exactly excited about walking into the snowy Fae forest with my beautifully trimmed coat and gloves. They would both be slashed by the stark branches that cast long shadows over the snow.

“Hanna.” Thorne’s called gruffly behind me.

I turned back to see him shrugging off his cloak. He must have been cold when the icy air brushed his tunic, but he slung it over my shoulders before he stripped off his gloves. “The other girls had warning. I think Edric had word sent to their maids.”

I glanced around and realized he was right, but I let the cloak slip off my shoulders and pool in the snow. I was so angry right now that I wasn’t sure I wanted anything from him. I could use a spell to keep myself warm. “I don’t need your help.”

He stared down at me, looking as if I were a puzzle he couldn’t solve. “No. You don’t. But you’re pissed at me right

now, so why not take my cloak and make me stand out here in the snow without one?"

He knew exactly how to get me.

I held out my hand for his gloves.

He gave them to me, then knelt to pick up the cloak. His dark hair shone under the brilliant sun, which cast blinding glitter across the surface of the snow.

The Ice Kingdom was beautiful.

It was hard to appreciate it at the moment.

I turned my back to Thorne, brushing my hair off my neck so I could drape it over the cloak once I was wearing it.

Dare gave us both a look of disdain, let out a soft curse.

Thorne's cloak was soft and warm as he placed it around my shoulders. Then I ran a bare hand over the outside, touching linked, flexing tiny scales.

The cloak was also armor.

"What's wrong with you?" Dare asked Thorne.

"Kaelan should be here to give her his cloak." Thorne took the gloves from me and held one out, the opening stretched between his big hands so it was easy for me to slip my hands in. "Since he's not here, I'm helping."

"He wouldn't bother." Dare said. "He knows she won't be in there long enough to catch a chill."

"Fuck off, Dare." Thorne held the other glove out for me, and I slipped my hand into it.

I almost wanted to smile at Thorne, to thank him, but I was still pissed off at all the men that had dragged me into this mess.

Then I walked toward the forest, trailing the other girls.

At the edge of the forest, I turned back and I saw Kaelan join the others. He was watching me, and I wondered if he doubted I would enter the forest.

The two of us stared at each other across the snowy expanse.

From my peripheral vision, I could see the other girls in their beautiful gowns walking into the forest. I lingered there for a few long seconds, Kaelan and I staring at each other as if we couldn't tear our eyes away.

He had done this to me, I was sure of it.

Because I would never be good enough for him, no matter what I did, because of one moment planted in his memory. One moment that wasn't even real. One moment that meant more to him than any of the other moments we had shared.

Thorne was right. Kaelan should love me better.

I raised my hand in a wave goodbye.

Then I turned and walked into the forest, imagining my longings being shed behind me along with my footprints as I walked away through the snow.

## CHAPTER 26



*H*anna

The other girls should have been just inside the trees, but it felt as if I was alone the second I stepped inside. The trees, long and slender conifers with short branches as if they had been broken by the wind, towered above us. For a second, I could imagine us from a god's eye. Girls in their brilliant colored gowns, looking so small, tiny spots of vivid pink or purple, blue or red, winding their way through this grim, foreboding forest.

From a god's eye ... or a dragon's eye. These men probably thought they were one and the same, anyway.

Dark shapes soared overhead, casting quick-moving pools of shadow over us.

As if my day wasn't already wonderful enough, Kaelan and the others were watching.

I hated that these men were flying above me while I was in their trap, playing their game.

Kaelan had brought me here because he needed my help. But he acted as if he were the one in the position of power. I would play this game a little longer, but I was going to punish him for what he'd done.

And then I was going to make him beg on his knees if he wanted my help.

I wondered what I was going to see. How this was going to the place where my fears manifested. I heard a scream go up to my side, closer than I had expected from the deadly silence that had proceeded. Then, desperate footsteps. Running through the snow. A girl burst into view, tears streaming down her face, her hands extended in front of her as if she were blinded by her fear.

The concern I felt for her overwhelmed my common sense. She was my competitor. But she was also scared, and so ...

I leapt in front of her, raising my hands. "You're alright! It's not real!"

"I have to get out of here." Her breathing was ragged and she pushed me aside.

"If you don't stop," I grabbed her arm, wondering why I was even talking like this when every contestant eliminated was a win for me. "you'll be out of the trials. It's not real. You don't have to turn back."

She turned toward me with wide, tear stained eyes. "They're not worth it."

Her voice came out hushed.

I released her arm. "You're right."

She glanced behind her, before letting out a desperate cry, but there was nothing there. Then she ran out of the woods.

Another scream echoed through the woods. I moved as quickly as I could without breaking into a run.

Once we got to the end, it was over. How deep did the woods go before it finished?

If I'd known, I would have counted my steps so I could know how much further until I escaped, and it would have been a good diversion from my mind.

Despite my best intentions, my heart was beating fast. The screaming had settled into my bones, as chilling as the air itself.



What would I see? That was the question that haunted me. The Scourge that had haunted my childhood? The evil stepmother that had tortured my sister and me?

Then I wound around a tree, and on the other side, I caught the flicker of a dress.

Instantly, I was on high alert. Whoever it was disappeared behind a tree, I felt a sudden shock of horror as I realized that after all his bold talk about protecting me, Kaelan had sent me into the woods alone with the girls that might very well want to kill me. So much for his promises.

His promises were always lies.

My blades were in my hands, comforting weight as I gripped the smooth handles. The cloak hanging around me was a shield. Had Thorne thought of this danger?

Then the girl stepped out in front of me.

I stopped abruptly, poised to attack.

But she wasn't looking at me. I took in her size in a second, she was smaller than me. Strawberry blonde hair was braided and hung over her shoulder. Freckles dotted her nose and her eyes were wide.

I was looking at myself.

Not myself, exactly. My childhood self. When I was twelve.

And she wasn't looking at me, because my stepmother and stepfather were suddenly resolving in the forest too.

"So you would let Honor take your punishment," my stepfather said, his voice mocking. "and she will ... because she knows you're too weak."

"No," I said stepping forward. But no one heard me. My voice seemed to die in the snow dampened air.

I didn't have a voice here.

Other-Hanna said nothing, just shook her head, her sculpted lips pressed together tightly, her eyes wide with fear.

*Was this it?* I would have asked the question aloud if not for the way my voice didn't seem to exist here. It was unsettling. But was I really just going to see a series of unpleasant moments I'd already lived through?

These unpleasant moments hadn't killed me the first time. I wasn't afraid of them the second.

I continued past them into the woods, wincing despite myself at the sound as Other-Hanna began to weep weakly.

I hadn't even quite remembered until now exactly the way that had felt, the mingled fear and guilt, the desire to escape no matter what it costs my sister.

Feeling sick, I plunged deeper into the forest. The only way out was through.

I would never turn back. I wasn't a coward. Anymore.

Then I came across the moment when Scourge had attacked the Posselbaum Academy. All around me, the other girls had seemed so fearless.

One minute, we had been having tea, sipping our hot, sweet tea with impeccable manners, dressed in our beautiful gowns. Aurelia had been playing the harp in the corner, light music drifting across the beautiful room, and the murmur of our voices had been soft as we conversed pleasantly. Occasionally, someone would be pickpocketed, and of course, there was specific information we tried to ferret out as part of our spycraft practice. But overall, it had been a lovely and tranquil scene.

The next second, there had been scratching sound outside the house. Aurelia had paused, her fingers still touching the strings. We glanced at each other, trying to make sense of it.

The next heartbeat after that, there was a crashing sound upstairs.

Something had just come through the roof.

A scream in the street.

"Scourge!" Jona had screamed, and maybe there was a hysterical edge to her voice, but she also had already been

running for her sword.

All around me, the room had erupted into chaos. Everyone else seemed so sure of themselves. They raced for their weapons, took up stations. But I had felt slow, as if I were rooted in deep mud. I'd gone for my weapon, but for a second, I couldn't remember where it was. The thought of actually using it overwhelmed me.

Then finally, I had it, and everyone was organizing, and I had just kind of milled around, following.

The memory made me cringe. It was even worse to see it play out amongst the trees, to see myself slack jawed and stupid, gripping my sword with no clue where to go next.

I wasn't tempted to scream like some of the other girls had, but I was tempted to turn and run out of the forest rather than have to see this. It wasn't as if these memories ever entirely faded. I still woke up sometimes at night, and squeezed my eyes shut, trying to block them out, but knowing they would play no matter what I did. But they had softened over time.

Now, it felt as if these humiliating moments had played out yesterday. I'd barely been able to face the other girls afterward.

Branok, who had seen me at my worst, had told me that I didn't have to be ashamed of being afraid.

I'd pretended for his sake that I believed him. Unlike Thorne, he hadn't tried to convince me that he felt that fear too.

I sheathed one of my knives, realizing I probably didn't need it, and used my other hand to draw the cloak closer around my throat. I wished I could shield myself from my own weakness.

Instead, I soldiered on through the forest. What else could I possibly see?

These were the worst moments for me. They weren't the worst moments of my life. Those were other moments: Honor, face drawn, walking into the garden to join me as I was

swinging; I'd known from her face that our father was dead, and I'd been crying before she even wrapped her arms around me. Or hearing Honor scream with pain and being powerless to stop anyone from hurting her. Or discovering that my little circle of friends was meeting without me whenever they could; their friendship had been subterfuge, and they'd only welcomed me into their circle to use my proximity to the throne.

But the worst moments when I had been so much less than I hoped to be ... those were the moments that haunted me more than anything else. Pain and grief are bad enough, but betraying ourselves ... maybe that's the worst pain.

A deer darted between two trees, bounding quickly. Its fur was snowy white, so it almost blended in, except for the dark eyes and faint fawn-colored speckles of color across its back and flanks. It was beautiful, and I paused as it froze, turning frightened eyes toward me.

"It's alright," I whispered. I'd always loved animals, although I'd grown up without horses or hounds—they were all terrified of dragons. I held my hand out toward the deer, making soothing sounds.

The deer bounded away.

And leapt straight into the path of an arrow.

I let out a brief, curt scream, startled by the sight as the arrow went through the deer's throat. The deer crumpled to the ground, blood staining its fur and the snow.

My heart beat wildly as I searched for where the arrow had come from, but it felt as if I were as alone in the forest as before. Eerie silence hung in the air.

Far in the distance, another girl screamed, the sound desperate before it was cut off.

We were being tested out in this forest?

Or murdered?

The dark shape of a dragon passed over me. Going to check on the girl? To make sure she was merely being

tortured, not murdered? I turned my head up, searching to follow its path.

“Are you doing this to us, Dare?” I murmured. Was the arrow—and the deer—real? Or apparitions of my deepest fears?

Was I like that deer—terrified and skittish and jumping into ever worse danger?

No. I was controlled, calm. A Posselbaum girl. Quick-witted and sharp like my sister.

I made myself approach the deer, keeping an eye out for any potential threat. When I knelt, the icy ground sunk up through my gown, freezing my knee. I bit the finger and pulled off one glove, but when I touched the blood-soaked snow, my fingers came away wet. I wiped the blood off on Thorne’s cloak.

This felt too real. Was the arrow meant for me?

I stood with my heart pounding, and immediately began moving through the trees. When I turned and looked back, the bright sun shining outside the forest was a golden glow in the distance, and the spires of the castle reached up toward the sky. I could see my way out. Had I really covered so little ground?

How much icy wasteland—and how many nightmares—lay between me and freedom?

I started to run.

When I heard the rasp of my breath, loud in that silence, my lungs began to burn from running in the deep cold. Worse than the pain, I was acting like a frightened child.

Movement in the trees to my right. I whirled, ready to fight.

But it was myself and Honor, sitting next to a fire that was a mere ripple of orange against the white-washed forest.

“You were a child!” Honor said. “Of course you were afraid. You’re not a child anymore, Hanna.”

Then she turned, as a small child ran to her. She swept up Briden and snuggled him into her lap, so distracted that she didn't see the stricken look on my face.

I'd been trying to ask her if she was ever afraid. I'd even managed to confess—with my heart pounding, afraid she'd realize she shouldn't be proud of me—that I was afraid of fear itself. I hadn't dared to admit how badly I wanted to be like her. Instead, I'd just said that I thought sometimes of how scared I'd been when the Scourge attacked.

She'd said I was a child then.

But I was the same person now, just taller, more practiced. I was still afraid. I hadn't grown out of it.

I was glib and quick, just like Honor and her men. But it seemed like their cool confidence went deeper than their skin. It was who they truly were.

Beneath my act, I was a roil of insecurity and anxiety.

And I was alone.

I'd hoped, in that moment by the fire, that Honor would tell me that everyone else was just like me. But she hadn't.

The only person who'd ever said such a thing to me was ... Thorne.

I kept going. Honor's voice behind me was still cheerful and laughing, talking to Briden and that past version of myself. She sounded as if everything was alright, but it had the opposite effect, making me feel more unnerved. I moved faster, until the sound faded.

But when I turned back to make sure I couldn't see her anymore, curious if the dream had faded or if it was substantial as the deer had seemed, the edge of the forest, the beckoning escape, seemed as near as it ever had before.

I let out a groan of frustration. It had to be some kind of magic that made it seem as if we were never making true progress.

No wonder some girls gave up and turned back. The way forward seemed endless, and escape was always so near.

The ground became softer under my boots. I found myself sinking into the mud, which made no sense when the forest should be frozen. I put my head down and trudged, trying to trek desperately through what suddenly seemed impassable. I was barely hanging on to hope myself. No wonder other girls had fled back to freedom.

Was this test impossible to pass? Was it rigged? Was Kaelan laughing at me now?

Had Kaelan brought me all this way to let me fail ... or to *make* me fail? That kind of game made no sense to me, but Kaelan could be difficult to predict. Maybe he had some kind of master plan where humiliating me helped him move forward.

I took another step forward and this time when I stepped into the mud, my foot sank deeper than ever before, so deep that water rushed in over the top of my boot. I let out a yelp as icy cold water ran down my ankle and my boot was suddenly squishy.

Just like the deer's blood, that felt very real.

As I tried to yank myself free of the mud, I realized I'd come to the edge of a lake. The trees gave way in front of me, and I was standing at the edge of a small, crystal blue lake that reflected the sky above.

I turned to skirt the lake, straying further than I intended back. My feet led me away from the water, desperate to avoid being too near the place where I had almost died so recently.

"Get over it," I muttered to myself. "There's no reason to believe murderous plants are going to attack you today. That was *yesterday*."

My life was ridiculous.

A dragon swooped overhead—was it my imagination that it dipped lower, as if it were watching me? It came so low that it almost touched the crystal blue lake. Then it was gone, racing over the trees.

I hadn't seen its shadow crossing the lake.

The realization made me frown, and I turned back toward the lake. Which was, I was suddenly sure, yet another manifestation of magic.

I'd prefer my magic to be a little less muddy.

As I looked over the water's edge, it no longer reflected the sky.

Instead, it reflected various scenes from throughout the years, where I had run away or ... where I had been brave, but now the water reflected the opposite. The cowardice I had come so close to choosing instead.

I wasn't sure how long I stood rooted there, watching it. When I roused myself, the night sky was growing dark. Tears had frozen onto my cheeks. I tried to brush them away, but they had frozen onto my skin, and I couldn't make them go away. Little crystals of tears clung to my eyelashes.

Anyone who saw me would know that I had been weeping in the forest. Nothing I did would make the tears go away.

How long had I been frozen and helpless? Anyone could have struck me down as I stood transfixed by the water. I started to move again, my stomach a tight knot.

Now night was falling. Had all the other girls reached the other side? Had the dragons circled around and seen me standing there—and worse, seen the humiliating moments that had played in the lake? Did Kaelan see even more proof of what he believed about me?

When I turned this time, it was too dark to see anything beyond the woods. It felt as if the darkness was moving swiftly toward me, sweeping through the trees like magic itself.

I started to run. But even when I reached the far side of the lake and began to move through the trees again, the mud seemed to pull at my boots. It even reached the hem of my cloak, miring me down so that for a second, the cloak pulled painfully at my throat, almost bringing me up short and making me fall. I yanked it loose and was moving again.



My breath was that terrible, desperate rasp again, no matter how much I tried to get it under control. I made myself breathe more slowly, trying to ignore the panic that tightened my chest, and slowly began to get myself under control.

The ground beneath my feet seemed to harden again. I was making progress now. I kept moving.

Then I came to a statue that stood in the forest. It was myself, frozen in that slack-jawed, wide-eyed expression. I hated seeing myself like that.

I tried to raise my magic to push the statue off its dais and break it, even knowing it was stupid and wasteful, but my magic seemed to sputter and die. Gods, I would die if Kaelan saw this statue. I looked up, desperate to avoid a dragon's shadow.

And I was sinking again.

And then I understood.

Every time I doubted myself, every time I became lost in my fear, I began to sink again.

It seemed as if the ground would swallow me this time.

“You know what, fuck you, Kaelan,” I said to the forest. I yanked at my cloak, the hem of my dress, trying to free myself from the muck. “And as much as I love you, Honor—fuck you too! You're too much to live up to! I can't do it!”

My voice had been rising. I should be quiet, I shouldn't let anyone hear, but I couldn't stop myself.

I screamed the words.

“I'm afraid!”

And then, thinking of Thorne's words...

“And it doesn't fucking matter! I can be afraid!”

I didn't need to keep proving myself to Kaelan. I couldn't control how he saw me. If he wanted to see that cursed statue version of me, he would.

But I wouldn't let the statue define me, either.

“I’ll be afraid, and I’ll do whatever I have to do anyway!”

This time when I threw my hands up toward the statue, supernatural strength flowed through my limbs. My magic. Finally.

“Really fucking late,” I muttered to myself, but the statue was slipping off the dais, and crashed to the ground.

It splintered into a hundred pieces. My marble head rolled toward me, my face still fixed in that stupid expression.

I hadn’t want anyone to see me running from the nightmares, but I was cold and muddy and I didn’t care anymore.

I ran, and ran, and ran.

And then I was bursting out between the trees, into the waiting crowd of nobles, who were assembled with their cold, judgmental smiles.

But I barely saw them, when Kaelan was watching me.

## CHAPTER 27



Kaelan

Hanna burst out of the forest as if she were being pursued, her long blond hair streaming behind her and a wild look on her face.

I leapt forward to defend her before common sense rushed in, like cold water filling my chest. She was fine. Just frightened. Which was, after all, the entire point of the test.

Her eyes met mine, her gaze dark across the distance. The two of us stared at each other for a long beat before I tore myself away to face Jaia, who had just arrived, Thorne and Dare.

But my reaction hadn't gone unnoticed by my friends.

Jaia, who was fully capable of hiding her grin, didn't bother to try. She adjusted her hood over her dark curls. "You were saying, Kaelan? About how important it is for me to protect her—as if I couldn't tell?"

"Yes," I gritted. "I need her. For our plans."

She laid her hand on my shoulder. "Of course, my friend. For our plans."

She couldn't keep the laughter out of her voice.

Hanna was headed straight toward me. Murder seemed to be in her eyes.

Then Hanna saw another woman touching me. There was a split-second flicker of pain across her face before she looked as if she might spit on me.

She veered to one side, trying to get away from us.

“I must speak to her.” I barely remembered to say anything to my friends. I’d already been moving.

“I’m sure you must.” Jaia still sounded as if she were laughing.

I turned my head over my shoulder to throw back at Thorne, “I notice she’s wearing your cloak!”

“I notice she should be wearing yours,” Thorne said, not sounding remotely mortified.

My friends were impossible. But they were the only people I truly trusted.

Jaia had been as angry as Thorne had predicted to be recalled to the castle, but whatever Thorne had told her about my concerns for Hanna had turned her fury into amusement. Apparently I was safe now and would not be murdered in my sleep.

I stalked toward Hanna. She headed steadily toward the castle, finding new energy to rush through the snow after the long, arduous trek through the forest.

I shifted, flew over her—she ducked, throwing up an arm to protect herself—and landed in front of her. I stepped down from my dragon form as easily as stepping down from a stair. Most women would have been awe-struck.

Hanna just popped her hands on her hips. “What do you want, Kaelan?”

I’d found the one woman who was unimpressed by me. There was a part of me that always wanted to win her.

“You can’t run away. The other surviving contestants are celebrating.” I swept my arm toward the four other women who had made it through the forest.

She looked over her shoulder, verifying we were far enough from anyone who could eavesdrop, before she started to say, “Well, at least someone is happy they still might get to marry you—”

With her face in profile, the crystal tears that glittered on her lashes were caught by the sun.

I took a step forward, gripping her shoulder. “Are you alright?”

Her gaze flashed to mine, and when she blinked, the tears didn’t fall. Up this close, I could see blood on her dress, and I traced it down to her sleeve.

My heart was suddenly beating so quickly I could barely hear her smart mouth.

She could be hurt.

I grabbed her chin, moving her head to one side to examine her for wounds. “Where are you hurt? Who hurt you?”

She grabbed my wrist and yanked my hand away. “You did.”

I scoffed. She wasn’t actually wounded, or if she was, it hadn’t slowed her down. But my heart was still hammering. The blood ... I couldn’t stop staring at the blood on her dress. “What happened in the forest?”

She shook her head.

“You’ve been crying.” I caught her chin again, no matter how much she tried to escape me. Her flashing eyes met mine. I hated to see that she had been crying. This was a traditional test, though for soldiers, not for brides. But my bride would have to be both. “Why?”

She scrubbed at her eyes impatiently. “I don’t owe you that part of myself, Kaelan. It wasn’t part of our deal.”

“I need to know if you’re falling apart on me.”

She let out a laugh through her tears. “I’m Hanna Hannaby, sister to the Queen of the Dragon Isle, graduate of

the Posselbaum Academy for Young Ladies Who Can Kick Your Ass, and member of the Guild of Spies. I'm not going to fall apart."

"I've seen you fall apart before."

"Yes, and now I know you're not worthy to see me at my weakest. So you never will again."

"Bold words coming from someone who almost died outside my window."

"The only reason I almost died is because I came to your kingdom to save your ass, Kaelan."

I stared into her eyes. "The only reason you came is because I forced you."

She let out a hard, bitter laugh. "Do you really think I wouldn't have come anyway? If you had come to me and said, *Hanna, no matter how much it hurts ... I need you.* Do you really think I wouldn't have come?"

The thought squeezed my chest.

"Why?" My voice came out a low growl.

"You think you have all the answers, Kaelan." Her voice had turned mocking, and she was back to her usual self, all sharp smiles and bright eyes. "You figure it out."

If only I could make sense of this girl, or worse, my feelings for her, which were stronger than sense.

"Trapping you was fun." That was true. I skimmed her cheek, my thumb slipping over those hard crystal beads in her lashes. Those tears were the forest's fear spell, marking her. "If I had told you I needed you, you would have laughed in my face."

She looked exhausted. "If that's what you truly believe."

"It is."

"I suppose it should've been my answer. You don't deserve me."

True, perhaps. I shouldn't care what she thought. The words still carved into my chest. "I want you to meet Jaia."

"Your friend?" Her brows arched. Her perfectly sculpted lips formed around the word *friend* as if it were the foulest curse. "Do you really want me to meet your 'friend' right now? Because I am tired, and *sad*, and I don't—"

"Sad?" I interrupted.

She gave me another of those closed-off looks, the ones that said there was a riot of feelings under the smooth surface of her face, but that I would never be entitled to her secrets. It was an expression that made me want to force her to open up to me. I couldn't stand the thought of not knowing every part of her. Of not *owning* every part of her.

"Sad, yes. I'm usually sad around you, because you're such a stupid prick—"

"Enough. We both know that's not why you're truly sad. But you're right, you're in no condition to meet anyone, especially not someone important to me."

She shook her head. "I can't believe I went through that forest for you."

"I've been through the forest too, Hanna."

Her lips parted in surprise.

"What did you see?" she demanded.

*You.*

"You're exhausted. I am as well." I took her arm. "Let's get you back to the castle."

"I should be there when Dare announces how the contest ended."

"Not with those tears still glittering in your lashes. You can't look weak ... not if you're going to look like you're mine."

"I don't want to be yours."

Another stab to the chest. She'd been hurt by the forest, and now she was lashing out at me just as brutally.

"Then why are you so jealous since seeing Jaia?"

"Because I have to pretend to be yours."

"No, you're a complicated little pie, held together by pride, stubbornness, and a bit of pure bitchiness. But you're jealous for reasons that are more complicated than that."

"Don't touch me." She might be reeling in the snow, but she still yanked her arm away.

I'd felt too much emotion in the past few moments, thinking she was hurt, and I couldn't tolerate one more bit of her nonsense. "Don't pull away from me."

I swept her up into my arms, cradling her against my chest.

She went for my artery in my throat, sliding her hand under the armored tunic I wore to pinch at the artery. Isle tricks, trying to cut off the blood flow to my brain.

"If you want to play breath games, Hanna, all you have to do is ask." I wrapped my free hand around her throat in return, pressing hard enough to cut off her airflow. Her eyes widened, the two of us fighting each other, close as a kiss. My lips dropped close to hers, as the world went dark around the edges. "But when we play, I'll always win."

I shifted into a dragon. Her hand slipped away from my throat as it grew scales, and then she was desperately fighting me as I caught her in my claws and carried her with me. No matter how angry I was, I carried her gently, always.

The two of us landed in the window of my room and tumbled inside together as I shifted back.

She was unbelievably fast, going from stumbling one second to locking her grip around my throat once again. She smiled up into my face as she pinched the artery, cutting off blood flow so hard that my knees went weak and vision faded dark around the edges.

"Gods, I could love you," I gritted, as I grabbed her and threw her down on the bed.



She flashed to one side as I leapt on top of her, and the two of us scrabbled for purchase.

Then her lips were on mine, in a hard, wild kiss, and I was kissing her back.

And then she bit me.

“I hate you,” she hissed, and for the first time, I could believe she meant it. “I’m not weak. You take that one moment, Kaelan, and you make it *everything*—”

Her pain twisted my heart. But it didn’t matter. She’d come through the forest; I hoped she was ready to be my queen.

Still... “Sometimes one moment is all that matters.”

I wished that wasn’t true.

I wanted her. Even with her weaknesses.

She shook her head, and the little tears in her eyelashes finally fell. They slid across my pillow like little crystals.

“You don’t see me,” she whispered, “and that means you don’t deserve me.”

## CHAPTER 28



*H*anna

That night, Kaelan and I pretended as if we never had that conversation. Instead, we went to the tournament.

I was looking forward to seeing him punched in the face, though I would've rather have done it myself. I wasn't sure I would see it though. He was good at fighting. Maybe even better than he was at driving me crazy. The man was pure, lethal grace.

We walked together in silence through the endless labyrinth of halls, until we emerged at the arena. A handful of columns rose high in the air on the other side of the enormous auditorium. Dragons' perches. But we were in the comfort of a large balcony overlooking the arena, and it had snacks. I'd choose the space with the snacks any day.

Dare clapped his shoulder. "Against Mattias today?"

The two of them exchanged a look full of meaning.

"Should I leave him for you?" Kaelan asked.

"No. I'm surprised he keeps coming back here though. You keep kicking his ass."

"Maybe he secretly enjoys it."

Dare scoffed. But looking at Kaelan now, with his broad shoulders and his tightly fitted tunic, clinging to his narrow torso, it wasn't that hard to imagine someone might enjoy fighting him. I sure as hell did.

There were other fights first. I went over to the tables laden with snacks, not terribly interested in watching men bash each other for fun.

As I was eating my snacks, a tall man came up to me. “So, so you’re Kaelan’s favorite candidate.”

I didn’t want to be his candidate and I was definitely not his favorite. But I just smiled. “I’ll be his wife.”

It should be a testament to my acting skills that I was able to say those words without choking.

I couldn’t wait to get through the trials and get back to the work that really mattered. I couldn’t believe I had to jump through these hoops in order to get Kaelan on the throne, and be able to take down the Snake Queen.

“Is he worthy of you?”

“Probably not.” The magic let me get away with it for once.

“It’s hard to imagine anyone would be.” He fixed me with a smile.

He was obviously flirting with me.

Once Kaelan came charging toward us, I realized exactly who he was. “Matthias?”

His grin was dazzling. His teeth are a little sharp and feral. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Princess.”

“I wish I could say the same,” I said.

Kaelan loomed over him. “What do you want, Matthias?”

I knew exactly what Matthias wanted. And as amused as I was watching Kaelan become slightly unhinged in jealousy, I was more interested in the magical item Matthias was palming.

Was he talking to me just because he wanted a scuffle with Kaelan? An excuse to slip something into Kaelan’s clothing?

“Kaelan, don’t be tiresome,” I chided him.

I wanted to see the two of them scuffle, and I wanted to verify that Matthias was indeed going to plant something on Kaelan. And then I wanted it, for myself.

No one was going to fuck with Kaelan but me.

Kaelan stepped between us, and Mattias had been so close to me that the three of us were intimately close. Close enough to pickpocket. “Stay away from her.”

Mattias grinned at him. “When I beat you, can I kiss your fiancée as my prize?”

Kaelan let out a laugh. “That would be up to her. If she doesn’t want it, nothing I could say would matter. She would knife you in the ass if you tried.”

But Matthias sneered, clearly not convinced. “It’s not an uncommon wager.”

I shrugged. “Oh, Kaelan. I will let you choose. Is there anything you actually want from this fool though, when you win?”

Kaelan held his gaze. “Nothing.”

But his tone suggested he wouldn’t object to Mattias’s head on his tea tray at bedtime.

Once Mattias was gone, Kaelan turned to me, crossing his arms. “I would remind you that you are supposed to be madly in love with me.”

“And you with me, but that doesn’t keep you from making conversation with plenty of women.”

Kaelan’s jaw was tight, and his eyes sparked with flint. “No, Hanna. You have to pretend to be enthralled by *me*. But no one has to believe that I love *you*.”

My gut tightened. “I see.”

He was staring down at me with the faintest triumphant smirk, as if he were punishing me for flirting with Mattias.

But I would teach him who had the power.

I leaned up onto my toes, my hands sweeping up his chest. His hands wrapped around my wrists as if he thought I was going to attack him, but when I swayed against his chest and offered him my lips, his head still ducked to meet mine.

Kaelan's lips brushed against mine in a kiss that was perfunctory at first—the kiss of two people who had to be in love—and then he released my wrists to grab my waist. He pulled me close to him, his lips softening against mine.

He kissed me as if he had forgotten himself.

And all the while I was kissing him back, my hands roamed the hard muscle of his body ... and stole the curse.

By the time he let me go, I had the scrap of enchanted fabric that Matthias had tucked into his pocket, folded into my palm. He looked down at me with searching eyes.

I gave Kaelan a mocking smile.

He was so determined not to love me, and he was so terrible at keeping the illusion intact.

I sashayed off to identify the curse.

I was tempted myself by the idea of making Kaelan lose to this asshole. It would drive Kaelan insane, and since Kaelan made me insane, it only seemed fair. But I didn't trust Matthias.

I'd always protect Kaelan's life.

His dignity, on the other hand?

I headed into the bathroom and wriggled my bracelet off my wrist before tucking it into my pocket. I might need more magic for this spell.

Figuring out someone's intent wasn't always the exact same thing as figuring out their spell. Magic comes out as flawed as the humans who make it. Sometimes their intent is very different from the actual thing that they have created.

Cupping the strip of dark blue fabric, I murmured the words of my spell. Mist formed in my palms and shifted into

two shadowy figures. This was the image Mattias had formed when he created his magic.

The two figures fought, and Kaelan's knee went out from underneath him. Mattias reared back and kicked him in the chest, and Kaelan slammed into the ground.

I could stand to see Kaelan take a bit of a beating after he had set me up and humiliated me in front of my family. But I didn't trust Matthias's magic. What if he really hurt Kaelan?

I stripped the magic off the fabric, letting the toxic magic drift away into the night air.

Then I re-shaped the spell, whistling while I worked. It was a cheerful moment, especially when I added a fun little extra bit of enchantment. Kaelan would imagine my face in that moment when he was being pummeled.

When I came out of the bathroom, Kaelan was stripping off his belt and tunic to prepare to go into the ring. For a second, the sight of him—rippling muscles, dark curls, the easy confidence he exuded—made my heart stop.

Then Kaelan saw me, and his lips parted—just for a fraction of a second, as if he was struck when he saw me—before he gave me a cocky grin. Kaelan quirked his finger, summoning me closer.

I crossed to him, kissed his cheek. He lowered his head so I could reach, his arm circling my waist. Then I whispered into his ear, "You're lucky I don't break that finger."

He let out a low laugh. Kaelan seemed like he had a rise of sharp, jubilant energy right now, preparing for a fight.

"I wanted a kiss good luck from my fiancée. Won't you give me one?"

But before I could answer, his lips were on mine. Kaelan's kiss felt more like a claiming, his lips searing to mine, his hands pressing against my body as if he would never let me go.

I'd have loved that kiss, if it hadn't been a lie. But at least it gave me the chance to sweep my hands over his trousers and

tuck the little enchantment back in his pocket.

When he finally pulled away from the kiss, his already-perfect lips were red and beestung from kissing me, and I wanted to yank him back down to me and kiss him again. I wanted it almost as much as I wanted to punish him.

“Good luck,” I told him sweetly.

He raised his eyebrows. “I thought you were mad at me.”

“Furious.” I told him with a broad smile. “But I don’t particularly want to kiss that arrogant asshole.”

Kaelan’s face tightened with jealousy and rage at the thought of Mattias touching me. As I’d hoped.

I was a spy. I’d tolerated worse kisses for worse causes. I just wanted it to hurt Kaelan when he lost.

“I won’t lose,” he promised me.

And I just smiled at him before he left me.

Kaelan and Mattias met in the ring. I watched Mattias curiously, wondering when he planned to activate the spell to beat Kaelan.

Then I noticed the woman in the crowd watching them both intently, her hand in her pocket. Everyone around her was cheering wildly, intent on the fight, but she was focused in a different way.

I’d bet anything she was in league with Mattias.

Fury tightened my chest. I wasn’t going to let anyone fuck up Kaelan besides me.

I leaned on the railing, watching her more carefully than I watched Kaelan, though I made sure no one could see where I was genuinely looking.

Kaelan and Mattias circled each other.

Mattias danced in toward Kaelan, trying to take him down. Kaelan batted his attempts away, looking almost desultory about the entire process.

Mattias was fast and sharp despite his size. He seemed like a good opponent.

Then abruptly, Kaelan moved in toward Mattias.

The crowd surged forward, the energy spiking in the arena.

They looked at Kaelan as if he was a god.

And as he beat Mattias bloody, it looked like he was.

The other woman's expression sharpened. She was trying to take Kaelan down.

*Time to let Kaelan fall.*

I tweaked my fingers inside my pocket, and Kaelan's left knee gave out on him entirely.

He crashed to the ground. Mattias didn't hesitate; he was well-trained and quick and he didn't miss a beat as he pressed the attack on Kaelan.

Blood was streaming down Mattias' face. He managed to launch a blow across Kaelan's face; Kaelan didn't manage to block it from the ground. Kaelan's head jerked back hard.

Edric had come to stand beside me. He made a disgusted noise and walked away.

From the arena, I caught Kaelan's gaze flicker up to his father, just for a second. He saw his father turn his back. Then he was up and launching himself at Mattias. He let out a roar of pain as his knee buckled, but he slammed into Mattias before the pain took him down. The two of them fought across the ground, a fierce battle. Mattias kicked out brutally at Kaelan's knee.

The crowd cheered wildly. The Fae act as if we've come so far from our wilder days, but that love of blood and pain, puzzles and lies, is always just beneath the surface.

Kaelan slammed his fist into Mattias's torso over and over, seeming driven by the pain Mattias had inflicted. Mattias let out a cry, but he managed to get to his feet—and he stomped down brutally on Kaelan's knee.



Suddenly, Dare was behind me, his hands on either side of the railing, pinning me there.

“Did you do this?” he hissed in my ear.

Before I could answer, Kaelan and Mattias collapsed to the ground once again, but Kaelan had made it on top of Mattias. Blood ran down Kaelan’s face from a cut across his cheekbone. But a triumphant grin split his face as he started to pin Mattias.

And he might’ve won, if he hadn’t looked up and seen Dare, standing so intimately close, his lips against my ear.

Kaelan’s gaze sharpened with sudden jealousy. His attention dropped.

“No,” I told Dare sweetly, putting my hand against his hard bicep as if we were sharing a tender moment, pressing myself back against him. “You did.”

It took a second for Dare to understand, then he saw Kaelan’s face and jerked away from me.

“You are evil,” he whispered to me.

“And don’t forget it, Dare, we’ll both be much happier,” I promised.

“Do you know who Mattias is?” he asked, his voice so soft in the roar of the crowd, speaking right into my ear. “He’s the son of the lord of my parent’s village.”

I jerked back, turning to look into his face. Dare was a commoner? How had he ended up alongside Kaelan?

“Horried by having a peasant stand so close, Princess?” he whispered.

“No,” I said. “Just confused at how you could do such a stunning impersonation of an asshole noble. Despite not being one of them.”

“One of *you*,” he corrected.

He wasn’t wrong, so I shrugged. Fine. He had me. “What happened to your parents?”

“Mattias’s father had them hung.” He ground out the words, then abruptly pulled away. “Kaelan has faced him for me as a mercy. I can’t think straight ...”

I turned back. Kaelan and Mattias were locked together now, and I wasn’t sure which of them was winning or losing. There was a lot of blood, either way.

I reached inside my pocket and released the spell on Kaelan.

Kaelan surged up, grabbing Mattias’s throat, and raised him into the air. The girl across from me was frantically mouthing the words of her spell now, not that it mattered.

I turned back to Dare.

“My apologies, Princess.” He sounded cold now, calm and controlled. “My behavior was inappropriate. I shouldn’t have accused you.”

“You should say what you think, Dare, even if you can’t help thinking stupid things.” I smiled at him, pointing to the girl across the way. “Look closely at who placed a spell on your princeling.”

Dare’s gaze followed the track I’d laid through the air, then his eyes went wide.

“I’m sorry,” he said, and he sounded as if he meant it, and then he was wending his way through the crowd.

I chased after him. I didn’t intend to let her get away with trying to hurt my fiancé. What if Kaelan had been truly, badly hurt?

“Hey there.” Dare leaned in beside her, offering her a predatory smile.

She looked up at him, all wide-eyed and horrified. For a split second. Then she smiled. “Hello there, peasant.”

Dare’s predatory smile just widened. “Make this easy for me, why don’t you, Amerly?”

“What do you want?”

Kaelan, bleeding heavily, was being announced as the winner, even though he looked as if he was reeling on his feet. He headed toward Dare and me, looking as if he didn't give a damn about the win.

The King was making his way out, looking disgusted. Behind Kaelan, Mattias appeared to be too concussed to find his way out of the ring. But apparently, that didn't matter to the King. Kaelan had come too close to losing.

I'd wanted to embarrass him. Just as he had embarrassed me. Now I hesitated as I debated whether or not to yank the talisman from his pocket and reveal the truth to the crowd, including his father. My revenge wasn't nearly as sweet anymore.

Though Kaelan did deserve to bleed.

"I want you to tell the Prince what you did to him," Dare told her.

He made the smallest hand gesture. Even I could've almost missed it.

The next thing, guards converged.

They grabbed Amerly and Mattias and disappeared into the crowd with them.

Kaelan stumbled toward us. He looked as if he were about to go down.

I grabbed him around the waist just as his knees buckled. His eyes were slightly unfocused. He'd taken quite the beating even if he ultimately won.

Kaelan's arm was heavy around my shoulders, but he tried to pull away. "You can't carry my weight."

"You'd be surprised what I can carry, princeling." *Like five years of being misunderstood and underestimated and despised.*

"Let's get you out of here," Dare said.

But Kaelan only had eyes for me. He looked down at me, his eyes wild.

And then he pressed his bloodied lips to mine as if he needed me.

Thorne was waiting to go into the pit, but he was frowning, heading toward us.

Dare made a small gesture to him, and Thorne nodded.

Dare hooked his arm on the other side of Prince Kaelan, and smiling as if everything was fine, the two of us helped the Prince reel his way into the privacy of the castle.

## CHAPTER 29



Hanna

We made our way up to the perch that overlooked the arena. Here was a throne and not much else; we were at dizzying heights. No one would be comfortable here without wings.

“Look at you.” Kaelan’s words were slightly slurred as he cupped his hands around my face. Dare wrapped his arms more tightly around Kaelan’s waist, holding him up while Kaelan was focused just on me, and whispered a curse. Meanwhile, Kaelan added, “Taking such good care of me.”

Dare scoffed. “I’m the one taking care of you. She would’ve been as likely to murder you as Mattias.”

“She’s so vicious.” Kaelan chucked me under the chin. “It’s adorable.”

“Can you please put some of this energy into holding your own body up?” Dare sounded exasperated.

Exasperated Dare was my favorite version of Dare, not that this was saying much.

Kaelan collapsed into his throne. Dare let out a breath of relief, which faded as Kaelan demanded, “Why were you all over my fiancée?”

“I was trying to protect you.”

“You don’t need to protect me from her.” Kaelan crooked a finger at me, gesturing me over. “I find it amusing when she

tries to hurt me.”

“Did you find it amusing getting your ass kicked by Mattias?”

Kaelan raised his brows.

“Mattias planted a talisman in your pocket.” I straddled Kaelan’s lap so I could fish it out of his pocket. He was rock-hard when my fingers brushed against him in the search. So he might be barely conscious, but he was still aroused. I dangled the talisman in front of his face. “Then the girl, Amerly? She was working a spell.”

*Ineffectively.*

“The only way he could have a chance of winning,” Kaelan said dismissively. He took my hands and cupped them to the hard angles of his cheeks. “Heal me, little onion.”

“Onion?”

“You don’t like being called princess, do you?”

“Not particularly, but *onion* is suddenly making me far more content. Why, Kaelan? And I can’t heal you. That’s not my kind of magic.”

He tsked. “You’ll have to find your full power, sooner or later.”

“Is that another trial?”

“Women usually have tender magic,” Kaelan said.

“There’s no part of me that’s tender. Not when it comes to you.”

Kaelan let out a laugh. “I saw your face when I was getting pummeled.”

“It was a delight.” The thought he had seen me—and could read me so well—made me nervous.

I didn’t like how well Kaelan seemed to see me, when he chose to. Even though he was wrong about the most fundamental part of who I was.

“What do you want done with them?” Dare demanded.

Kaelan shrugged. “Leave them in the dungeons for now. I’ll chat with Mattias later.”

Dare swiped his hand through his hair, looking infuriated. “They were using dangerous magic to weaken you. They could have killed you.”

“They could not,” Kaelan corrected.

I shouldn’t have liked Cocky Kaelan as much as I did. His arrogance could be attractive when it wasn’t directed toward me.

“You can’t let their insolence go—”

“Let’s watch Thorne fight,” Kaelan said, gripping my waist. He whirled me around his lap so easily it seemed as if I weighed nothing, and then I was straddling his lap, facing out toward the arena. “Are you waiting to see him get bashed up too?”

“He doesn’t piss me off like you do.”

“Mm.” Kaelan’s tone was hard to read. “I’ve noticed he likes to give you gifts.”

“I don’t need any gifts.”

“You can go,” Kaelan told Dare.

Dare gave me a long look that said he didn’t trust me.

I waved my fingers at him to say goodbye. Too bad for him that his princeling didn’t care much what he thought.

Dare sighed and strode off the edge of the platform.

I started to rush after him, afraid he’d just strode to his doom, but the next second, the form of a gorgeous emerald-green dragon rose and flew over the castle.

Kaelan’s big hands gripped my waist. His breath was teasing against my throat. “Dare won’t trust you if he knows what you did.”

My stomach suddenly filled with ice. “Excuse me?”

“You were the one who cursed me.” His lips traced my throat, his touch soft even though my heart was suddenly

racing. “Was it because I hurt your feelings after the forest? Or because I hurt your feelings when I outsmarted you and brought you here? Or because I hurt your feelings when I rejected you years ago?”

“You can’t hurt my feelings, Kaelan.”

“Liar.” He sounded amused. His hands caressed up my legs, and I started to pull away, trying to launch myself off his lap.

As soon as I tried, he grabbed my ankles and hauled them back. My momentum launched me forward as he pulled back, so I found myself suddenly sprawling onto the ground, my ass in the air and my hands slapping the fine marble.

“So you don’t feel anything, Hanna? Do you feel this?”

I started to roll, to kick him in the face. But something cold latched around my ankles, and I couldn’t escape him.

He had my ankles pinioned to either side of his throne. His magic had secured me.

The temptation to remove the bracelet and show him who he was really playing with was so powerful.

Instead, I pressed down on my knees, still braced to either side of his muscular thighs, and pulled myself up so I was sitting on his lap. I looked over my shoulder at that handsome, arrogant, impossible face.

“No one can see us,” he said, as if *that* was my concern. I followed his gaze to the wall of ice he had raised in front of us, which was opaque at the bottom. The upper part was transparent, allowing me a view of Thorne in the distance, facing two Fae.

“Is he going to be alright?”

“Thorne? He can hold his own.”

I looked back at the fight. The two of them rushed at Thorne, who threw up an ice shield to block one, then slammed the shield across the other’s face. He had removed his shirt for the fight, and the muscles in his back and shoulders rippled.



Kaelan's hand slipped up my décolletage to wrap my throat. "Focus on me, my naughty little onion."

That nickname. That might be the reason I finally slipped and murdered him.

"But I like Thorne so much better."

The blood flow to my brain was suddenly all gone as Kaelan's big hand squeezed my throat. I grinned.

Kaelan's jealousy felt so good.

And so did the sudden floating feeling.

"I know you're the one who really took me down in the ring," he murmured. "But tell me how."

The pressure on my throat released. "Why? Are you going to release me if I do?"

"No. But you'll like your punishment a lot better." His fingers skated down the back of my neck. "I do remember what you like and don't like, Hanna."

I shrugged, as if my body weren't melting into warmth under his touch. Fuck Kaelan, I was done trying to impress him, but I'd take the orgasms.

"Mattias did slip the talisman into your pocket. But since I'm far more competent than the guards that are supposed to protect you, I slipped it back out."

"And you didn't think it was worth mentioning it to me?"

"No. I didn't trust Mattias, so I took off his spell and substituted a similar one of my own."

"So that Mattias wouldn't know what you had done?"

"For my own entertainment, really."

"I see." His lips nuzzled just below my ear. "You are so vicious, you even scare me a little. And I love it."

"You love me." I said those three little words that he would never say to me, my tone mocking.

"But that won't stop me from punishing you."

His hands slid across my silky dress. Then he grabbed the bodice and pulled, so fiercely he tore it in two. His hands slid across my breasts, his big palms enveloping them before he began to play with my nipples.

I ground down on him, eager to take what I wanted.

Then suddenly, his hands were on my back, pushing me down. My body fell between his knees, and he closed his thighs, holding me there.

“Kaelan, let me up!”

The sound of ripping fabric rent the air.

Cool air caressed my ass and thighs, which were suddenly exposed.

He laughed. “Not a chance.”

His hands roamed my flesh, kneading my ass. Then he moved lower, to the backs of my thighs and calves, before coming back up to caress the curves of my ass and hips. With each touch he sent a shiver through me.

“Look at this greedy pussy,” he said, sliding this thumb through my wetness, and I jerked. “But you don’t deserve to come.”

“I always deserve an orgasm, actually,” I disagreed.

His fingers trailed down my back, tracing the curves of my spine and teasing me with sensation. His hands moved lower, until they rested on the top of my buttocks. I felt his heat through the fabric of my dress, and I shivered in anticipation.

“I’m not sure how hard I want to beat this beautiful ass,” he told me, slipping his palms beneath the ruins of my silky dress to palm my curves. “Tell me. Are you sorry?”

“Not in the slightest.”

“No sense, as usual.” He sounded amused.

He followed the words with a stinging slap on one cheek, then the other. His hands were hard, and my hair flew as I pushed myself up, trying to jerk away from him. But the pinions held my ankles in place.

He began to caress my ass again. “Why didn’t you let Mattias just use his spell on me?”

“Because he seems like an idiot, and I didn’t trust his magic.”

“Didn’t trust his magic ... not to hurt me?”

I wasn’t going to answer that. He was looking for confirmation I still cared for him.

“Mm. Silence.” Two more stinging slaps. “That will work well for you.” Another pair, one on each cheek. “I’ll have to find a way to make you more vocal.”

He continued, alternating between caresses and smacks, each one stinging more than the last. I felt my skin heat under his touch, my body growing more aroused with each passing moment. His hands were strong and sure as they spanked me, and soon I was lost in a haze.

“You’re not embarrassed to be naked in front of me like this?” he murmured, his hands caressing and parting my ass cheeks. His thumb brushed between them, teasing against my second hole.

Then the fingers of his other hand teased down, circling my clit.

“It’s not any more embarrassing than your weak spanking game,” I said. Because I have no sense of self preservation.

Or because I liked it.

He laughed. “We’ll see about that.”

And he started to spank me harder, faster. I gasped and squirmed against him as the pleasure built up inside of me, my clit pulsing with each swat of his hand. He kept up the steady rhythm, pushing me further and further until I thought I would burst from it all.

Finally, when the pleasure was too much for me to bear, he stopped and let his hands rest on my sore ass cheeks. His fingers were gentle now, massaging away some of the pain and filling it with warmth.

“Now,” he said softly in my ear. “Call me weak again.”

I shook my head slowly in response, not at all able to find words in that moment. All I could do was lay there and feel the waves of pleasure radiating through my body, knowing I had been thoroughly taken by this infuriating man.

But I didn't mind at the moment.

“You're not embarrassed in front of me because you're mine,” he told me. “No matter what games you play. You'll always be mine, Hanna.” He caressed between my thighs again. “This will always be mine.”

“Not Thorne's? Not Dare's?” I teased him.

He chuckled. “You don't want to sit down again, do you?”

He ran his hands up and down my body, exploring as he went. He caressed my breasts, tracing circles around the nipples before pinching them lightly. Then he moved lower, teasing between my legs with sure fingers that sent sparks of pleasure through me.

The spankings continued, alternating between light taps and hard slaps. I was panting now, trying to keep up with what he was doing to me. The sensations were overwhelming—the intense heat of each slap against my skin followed by the gentle caresses that immediately followed it, and the way he teased my clit in between each slap—all combining to create an explosive pleasure that had me shaking against his lap.

“Come for me,” he commanded softly.

My body obeyed, every muscle tensing as orgasm hit me like a wave of pleasure so intense I could scarcely bear it. I bit back my scream.

“Oh no,” he said. “*Scream*. I want Dare and Thorne to know you're mine.”

“I'm my own,” I panted, and then his hands were working my clit, my asshole, touching me mercilessly, driving me over the edge into another orgasm.

And this time, I couldn't help but scream.

“No,” he told me as I lay shaking and quivering over his lap, spent and exhausted. “You’ll always be mine. Mine to punish, mine to adore.”

He undid the pinions on my ankles and gathered me into his arms.

“Except you don’t adore me,” I reminded him, palming his cheek, the way he had put my hands on his face earlier.

He touched my face tenderly. “Of course not.”

“And I hate you.”

“Still mine.”

“Only if you’re mine, Kaelan.”

Things he would never answer.

He wrapped me in his cloak and carried me down to his room.

## CHAPTER 30



*H*anna

Kaelan set me down on his sofa with the tenderness he only showed when he was carrying me. He leaned over me, his lips parting to kiss me.

And then there was a knock on the door.

“Fuck,” Kaelan ground out, and seeing his frustration made me smile. He swung the door open and harshly demanded, “What?”

“Be nice to the servants!” I called. Gods. I’d get him trained eventually.

I didn’t hear their quiet conversation, only Kaelan’s clipped, “Yes.”

He turned back with exasperation written across his face. “My father wants me. But Azora will come sit with you.”

“No, thank you,” I scoffed.

“You’re not going to be alone.”

“If you leave Azora with me, I’ll just have to protect her if I get into trouble. You’re making it twice as hard.”

Kaelan’s lips twisted slightly as if he knew something I didn’t. It was a grating expression when I too always knew something he didn’t.

He pressed a kiss to the top of my head and as he moved toward the door, he added, “Be in my bed when I get back.”

“I’d rather be in Thorne’s.”

Kaelan stopped in the door and met my gaze. “He’s my best friend and my cousin, Hanna, don’t make me murder him.”

I heard him greet someone as he stepped outside. “Don’t disappoint me again.”

When Azora stepped inside, her lips were tight with anger.

I turned my back, studying the books on Kaelan’s shelf. I didn’t want to give away my reaction.

*Again.*

Azora was the poor girl he’d chided—unfairly—for not protecting me from the monsters.

Who was she really?

“Good evening, your highness,” Azora said.

“Good evening. Do you have nightmares?”

She stared at me for a second as if she couldn’t believe I had just greeted her with that question.

“Sometimes I have nightmares that I have to be the maid to some—” she bit off her words and offered me the world’s least convincing smile. “Do you have nightmares, your highness? I can have the physician make something to help you sleep.”

“No, I don’t dream. It’s a waste of time for a princess. Our dreams don’t matter.”

Azora didn’t seem to know how to respond. She gave me a wide-eyed, lost look.

But now I was sure it was a lie.

There was a knock on Kaelan’s door. Azora checked it carefully, then let Jaia in.

Jaia strolled in and made her way immediately to the bar cart. She seemed to know her way around Kaelan’s room a bit too well.

“I’ll be your bodyguard,” she told me as she poured herself a glass of wine, which didn’t impress me with how seriously

she took her duties.

“No thank you.”

She smiled. “Prince Kaelan’s orders.”

“He is so thoughtful and careful with me,” I lied. “Fine. I’m going to bed.”



Kaelan came in later that night.

I couldn’t sleep until I heard him, undressing in the dark.

“What did your father want?”

He sat on the side of the bed, and it dipped under his weight.

Surely he was going to push me away yet again. But then instead he said quietly, “The Snake Queen sent an emissary. She’s here for a visit that seems ... unending.”

“Does she want to marry you?” I teased. “Like everyone else in this castle?”

Kaelan’s silence seemed deep.

“She does, doesn’t she?” I sat up.

“I don’t know. Perhaps. The trials were already set in motion when she arrived. However, if the trials were to come to an end ...”

“If all your potential queens are unworthy.” The word *unworthy* still made my stomach twist every time.

“If all my potential queens are *dead*.” He rolled onto his back, settling in beside me. His hard bicep brushed my arm. “When it comes to your safety, humor me. Please. Hanna.”

He said *Hanna* the way he used to.

As if my name were the most sacred prayer.



“I don’t intend to die,” I promised him. “Not when things are so very interesting in the Ice Kingdom. Not when you need me so very much.”

He didn’t argue.

That night, Kaelan stalked through my dreams. He pushed me down onto his throne and spread my legs to dip his head between them. He pulled me into his lap and had me ride him, taking my breast into his mouth. He called my name when he came.

And I woke up in the deep darkness, with his soft breathing beside me.

He had rolled away from me in the night, and his broad back faced me. I ached so much I was tempted to wake him up. For all his faults, he’d always been generous in bed.

But no. It already felt as if I could never win the game between us of *who could care less*.

So thinking of him, my hands delved between my thighs. I was teasing myself when his soft breathing hitched, and he stirred.

I froze, my fingers pausing against my slick folds. Then I began to work my clit again shamelessly. Let him listen if he wanted.

He rolled over. “Hanna—”

“No. Call me an onion and go back to sleep. You don’t deserve an invitation to my party.”

He chuckled softly.

It was a disarming sound.

“Nothing counts this late at night,” he whispered to me. “It’s just a dream, Hanna. You’re just dreaming.”

His hand slid over my thighs, and I bit my lower lip at the thrill of his palm against my skin. His fingers found my aching need, teased through my wetness, and he let out a breath. “Gods. You are so ...”

He broke off, raising his big body to lean over mine carefully. His lips brushed against my cheek in the dark, and then he found my mouth. The two of us traded slow, gentle kisses that turned hungry as his hand cupped my cheek.

His tongue teased into mine, then thrust inside as if he was losing control. His cock brushed against my thigh, erect and enormous. I reached for him, gripping his considerable bulk through the thin layer of his clothes.

“It’s just a dream,” I whispered against his lips.

“Neither of us will care in the morning,” he whispered back.

I knew we were both lying and I kissed him anyway.

His lips brushed mine, over and over, and then I gripped his curls and pushed his head down. He had loved to eat my pussy when we were younger; I wasn’t worried I’d offend him. “This is what I was dreaming of.”

“Not getting revenge on me?” His tone was arch.

“The best revenge is that you need me. You need me to save your kingdom—and *yourself*—from the Snake Queen.”

He paused. Had I brought the peace of our night world with too much of our daylight despair?

“Then I guess I’d better do an excellent job making you come on my tongue,” he told me, pushing up my sleep shirt to press a kiss to my stomach.

My hips jerked just faintly, my aching need eager for his mouth, but Kaelan was a prince and he would not be hurried. He took his time, kissing his way down my stomach, then my thighs.

“You have no idea how much I wanted to fuck you when you were tied onto my throne.” His breath fluttered against my pussy, and my hips rocked needily again. “I loved having the perfect view of this beautiful wet pussy.”

He skated his thumb through my folds, teased my clit, and my hips jerked.

“It sounds like you have a weird throne fetish.”

“I have a *Hanna* fetish,” he disagreed. “Though I am going to tie you to my throne in every position and fuck every one of your holes. Sooner or later.”

Maybe in the daylight, I would’ve taken those words as degrading.

Tonight, he just sounded hungry. Longing. Lost.

Then his tongue plunged into my pussy, his mouth beginning to work against my clit, and my hips rose and I didn’t give a fuck what he said.

He wrapped his powerful arms around my thighs, locking me still against his mouth. I let out a moan as my body rose higher and higher, closer to orgasm. My fingers tore his sheets loose. I let out a scream as I came, and he kept going as my body shook and writhed until my legs fell still. I felt tired and spent.

He pressed a kiss to my inner thigh and rose. His big hands moved across the bed, brushing me occasionally as he righted the sheets, as he found the pillow I’d sent flying and put it back under my head.

“What are you doing, Kaelan?” I whispered.

“What I always want to do,” he said, as he got back into bed and pulled me into his arms. I didn’t resist; I felt boneless and tired and it was all just a dream anyway. “What I don’t do very well.”

“And what is that?” I yawned, nestling my head against his shoulder. I never needed that pillow anyway. I threw one leg over his, my still-throbbing clit pressed against the hard muscle of his thigh.

He didn’t answer. I was almost asleep, and it really might have been a dream, when I thought he said quietly, “Take care of you.”

## CHAPTER 31



*H*anna

“Another day, another trial.”

Jaia’s voice was taunting.

I groaned, rolling onto Kaelan’s side of the bed. It was still warm from his body. And it smelled vaguely of cinnamon and ... well, cum. The citrusy tang of last night clung to the sheets.

“What is it today?”

Jaia sat down on the edge of the bed. “Have you noticed how little Dare says? It’s not just you. He doesn’t tell me anything either.”

“He talks a lot.”

“But he doesn’t say much.”

Jaia’s mockery of Dare had to be intended to win me over. I’d seen how comfortable Kaelan, Dare, Thorne and Jaia had looked together. How far would she go to win me over? Could I tease information I needed from her?

“How did Dare end up here?” I rolled out of bed.

Jaia whistled, and Azora came in, looking anxious. “Yes?”

“The princess needs your help.”

“I doubt that very much,” I said.

“Lord Dare’s missive last night to the maids was that you’ll need a formal gown today, your highness. We won’t be

leaving the castle grounds.”

Jaia smirked at me. “It seems you did need her.”

“I have to wear a dress and uncomfortable shoes. This is not shocking information.” I began to go through the handful of gowns in my closet. “Azora, could you move Prince Kaelan’s clothes please? He said he wanted me here. I’m going to need more closet space.”

Azora’s eyes widened in terror. Jaia grinned.

“Anyway ... how did Dare become Lord Dare, exactly?” I asked. “I heard he gambled his way here—won a bet?”

I’d heard no such thing. But I knew people talked most when they could correct someone.

Dare had claimed he was a peasant.

I wasn’t aware of a peasant-to-obnoxious-lord pathway.

“Dare came to the castle as a boy.”

“Because ...”

“His parents were killed.”

“By Mattias’s father?” My stomach ached at the thought. I’d interfered in Kaelan’s revenge on behalf of Dare. Kaelan deserved to be humbled, but I wouldn’t have chosen Mattias as the instrument of that humbling.

Jaia nodded, looking as if she regretted telling me anything about them.

“And Kaelan lets him live?”

“Mattias was just a boy then too, although his attitude is ...” Jaia’s lips pressed together tightly.

“What happened to his father?”

“Nothing.” Jaia gave me a look of wide-eyed innocence.

“But he’s not around anymore.”

“There was an illness.”

I was pretty sure that illness was actually Kaelan’s wrath. “An illness, hm? That’s a terrible way to describe yourself,

Jaia. You seem lovely.”

A flash of emotion that might have been surprise, pride, even delight was on Jaia’s face and then gone. I wondered if she had let me see it. I had a feeling she was too well practiced otherwise. “I would never do such a thing, Princess.”

“Kaelan’s gone?” I didn’t have to ask. I could feel the absence of him, even in the apartment beyond. Kaelan’s commanding presence filled up every space he entered.

“Yes. He won’t be at today’s trial.”

“Why?”

“If he wanted you to know, he would’ve told you.” She said, then smiled. “It’s your turn in the arena.”

While I was finishing getting dressed, I could overhear the soft murmur of Azora and Jaia’s voices in the next room. As I slipped my earrings into my ears, I padded over the door, eavesdropping shamelessly.

“You let Kaelan down.”

“I didn’t mean to.”

“I’m surprised he didn’t have you punished for failing him,” Jaia said. “Though perhaps it’s not too late, Azora ... should I punish you?”

I threw the door before I’d even decided how I was going to respond. On the other side, the two of them looked startled, but I felt the same way.

“Jaia, you are done as my bodyguard.” I pointed toward the door. “Get out.”

Jaia recovered quickly and smiled at me. “That’s up to Kaelan, not you, Princess.”

I shook my head. “Kaelan will understand.” Would he? “I will not tolerate someone bullying my servants.”

Jaia scoffed. “Really, you’re going to come to the defense of shy, mousy little Azora?”

The two of them exchanged a look I couldn't read. It seemed as if Jaia and Azora had history. Everyone in the Ice Kingdom seemed to, and there were so many tangled threads to try to unravel.

"Yes, I am." I pointed at the door. "Get out. You're not the only girl in this room who has a predisposition to violence and low impulse control."

Jaia gave us both an amused look, then offered me a curtsy. "I'll be outside, Princess. Not far."

"Certainly not far enough," I snapped back.

Jaia rolled her eyes on her way out the door, but at least the elaborately carved wooden door closed behind her.

I turned to Azora. "Are you alright?"

"Fine, your highness."

"You're not at fault for my injuries the other day." I frowned at the memory of stepping over her while she was sleeping. "I left the castle at night, it was my choice, and I'll make sure Prince Kaelan knows not to hold you responsible."

"That's not necessary, your highness." Azora's eyes were wide, and she pressed her hand over her mouth.

"Azora ..." I didn't know what to do with her. "Are you afraid of something? Did someone hurt you?"

Was that why she had nightmares?

"The Ice Fae court is a dangerous place, your highness."

Azora turned away from me, busying herself picking up my clothes. I'd dropped them a little too wantonly everywhere in the room when I was undressing at times, purposefully taunting Kaelan. It was fun for both of us, but mostly me.

Then she added, "And you ... you seem a little good to be safe among the Ice Fae royals."

"Oh, I'm aware," I said. "But don't worry. I can be kind or I can be vicious, as the situation demands. And I'll protect you."

A faint tingling swept down my arms, reminding me of the lightning feeling in the air when we made oaths. I was making promises, and I shouldn't. Not unless I was sure I could keep them.

"Thank you," Azora still had her back to me, and her voice came out a whisper. I was afraid she was close to crying.

Jaia banged on the door, hard. "You're late, Princess."

I desperately wanted to talk to Azora, but I didn't want to be late for the next trial. Not when it mattered so much.

With one last look at Azora, I gave up and went out, stepping into the hall. Jaia still had an amused smirk written across her face.

I took a good look at this woman who seemed so close to Kaelan. She was taller than I was by a full head, which always annoyed me. I was smaller than my spirit felt I should be. Her dark curls were long and wild, framing a heart-shaped, delicate face and mischievous almond-shaped eyes. She was beautiful. It was easy to imagine her on Kaelan's arms ... and hard to imagine her hurting Azora. But then, I learned from my stepmother that just because someone seems beautiful and charming doesn't mean they aren't rotten at the core.

"You're going to stay away from her," I told her.

"Am I, Princess?"

I'd heard the word *princess* in many disrespectful tones, but she certainly managed to introduce all kinds of new inflections.

I walked away from her toward the garden dome where the trials were usually held. When I walked outside, a blizzard was obviously blowing outside, and the top of the dome was washed white with its fury. Here, it was warm and smelled of wet greenery. A breeze seemed to come from somewhere, moving the surface of the lake in a gentle ripple.

"So kind of you to join us, once again, Princess." Dare looked as if he were genuinely exasperated by my late arrival. He clapped his hands as he turned to the handful of other princesses who had made it through the trials so far.



“What new misery do you have for us today, Dare?”

“Today we will simply be summoning magical beasts for a parade to delight the children of the nobles,” he said. “You’ll call forth an animal of your choosing from the dream-taiga and bind them to your service.”

Lovely. My fingers skimmed the cold edge of the bracelet I wore that muted my magical powers.

I was not an expert on the magical beasts of the taiga. I’d never even *seen* the taiga, though I knew the word: the forest that covered so much of the Ice Kingdom. It was the wildest of places, traveled by paw and wing and not by foot; no one who couldn’t shift stepped inside.

And the dream-taiga was a different, magical version of that place altogether.

“In case you need a reminder,” Dare was staring at me. “You’ll need to form a strong mental image of one of the creatures as you summon it. You should be able to pull it into the garden. You will be judged both by how well you control it and how impressive we find your creature.”

Finally, Dare looked around at all five of us. “Please make sure that none of the Royal Court are eaten by your magical creature. Of course, you do win more points and acclaim by summoning something impressive like a bear or a tiger. But if you aren’t sure you can remain unscathed, summon something you can handle.”

Now, Dare definitely lifted his eyes to me. “Like a nice bunny rabbit.”

The temptation to summon a bear and set it on Dare was strong.

I closed my eyes and tried to imagine the creatures of the taiga. I had only read about them in books. Honor and her men had always been afraid of what kind of danger I would be in if I left the isle, and Kaelan had certainly implied their fears were well justified. But right now, it seemed I’d be safer if I hadn’t stayed in the warmth of my own kingdom.

“Easy work today,” Noxy said with a smile that seemed directed my way. She raised her hands, closed her eyes, and the ground seemed to shudder beneath our feet.

It was the sound of thundering hooves.

Then a unicorn burst through the trees and raced up to Noxy. It was beautiful and she did not deserve it.

Fine. My turn.

I raised my hands and focused my magic. It felt as if it took a lot longer than Noxy.

But suddenly, an image rose in my mind as if I were flying over the forest, over the deep green pines that littered the wild icy countryside. And then I saw unicorns in the field below.

Horses of all kinds are afraid of dragons. They whinnied wildly and scattered as I dove down.

But then, I was opening my eyes back in the garden.

The unicorn popped into existence amongst us—eyes flashing, absolutely terrified.

“Easy, girl,” I told the unicorn encouragingly.

She was not encouraged. She reared back on her hind legs as if she was going to strike me down, and I dodged to one side. Then it started to gallop.

Noxy’s unicorn was still nuzzling Noxy adoringly—apparently unicorns had no sense—and then it noticed the fear of the other one and they both took off.

“Oh, well done,” Dare clapped his hands. “That was spectacular.”

“Just imitating my choice of animal?” Noxy sounded genuinely offended.

“Just imitating my choice of *husband*?” Kaelan had been mine first. He would always be mine.

Kaelan and I belonged to each other, no matter how much we both hated it at times.

Noxy tossed her head as if she couldn't believe I had dared to speak to her.

Thorne sauntered in then. His knuckles were scabbed over, but he walked easily as if he hadn't been hurt in yesterday's fight. Regret rushed over me that I hadn't seen him afterward.

Thorne's gaze met mine, dark and warm. He winked at me, so quickly I wasn't entirely sure I'd really seen it, before he turned to look at the others.

Evara, a girl with long silvery-blond hair and a pretty but perpetually smug expression, raised her hands. "I can summon something more interesting than a horned horse."

White mist floated out from the trees, apparently drawn to her, floating across the ground. Then the mist exploded as a white tiger leapt into our midst.

Adrenaline rushed through me at the sight of a beast that could so easily kill me—in a place where almost everyone wanted me dead—but the giant cat stumbled around, its eyes flashing different colors—first purple, then blue, then red.

"Kill it!" some nobles shouted at the other girl. "So you can try again!"

"Don't kill it!" The thought yanked at my heart. "Take my unicorn. I'll take the tiger."

"She's too tender-hearted," Dare muttered to Thorne. "She's not going to survive."

"You don't understand her," Thorne returned.

"I sure as fuck don't."

A smile spread across the girl's face as she realized she'd be at an advantage in the parade, when my animal would be wild. "Fine, then."

"Let's not let our animals eat any kids today, can we agree on that?" Dare paced back and forth. "Gods, I hate this job."

She was able to calm the unicorn. Meanwhile, I crept up to my tiger, who paced around with wild eyes, and tried to exert my healing force—what I had of it—on the beast.

That meant I was distracted when the last girl summoned the enormous white bear.

I only noticed when the screaming began.



**K**aelan

**E**dric and I strolled out into the gardens, though I didn't feel particularly relaxed when he was so eager to send me back to the Snake Kingdom with Seraphine.

"I despised watching you twist yourself into knots to convince yourself to be with Hanna," he said.

That was an odd statement, since he'd gleefully watched me twist myself into knots, into fragments, to try to please him.

"I'll do whatever I need to do for our kingdom," I reminded him.

"I understand that. I just don't want to see you marry a woman unworthy of you." He shook his head. "The Isle Queen is ridiculous. And look at her sister ... she's even worse. She has almost no magic. But paired with her inability to fight and defend herself, she has a foolishly sentimental sense. If you keep her here in the Ice Kingdom a ... she'll never be a worthy queen. She'll always be a hazard to herself ... and to you."

I'd told her the same thing before. She wouldn't be a worthy queen and she wouldn't be able to keep herself safe at my side—or protect our children. Just like my mother, who had failed to protect me.

But even though I'd said it myself, it still pissed me off when Edric said those words.

I was the hazard to her. I was the one who had brought her here.

“Take her back to the isle,” my father suggested. “Whether she wins or not. Be kind to both her, and to yourself, Kaelan. You deserve better ... and she deserves a home.”

“Hm.”

My father smiled thinly, annoyed no doubt by my reply, but he nodded and left. “I have more important work than this silly business of marriage.”

Jaia sauntered to my side once he was gone. She gave me a sympathetic look, which annoyed me, but she knew better than to ask me about my father.

“She is so sweet,” Jaia began.

“What?”

“You two are such opposites.”

“I’m aware.”

“I like her,” Jaia said.

I turned to her, crossing my arms, expecting that she was mocking me.

But Jaia looked as sincere as Jaia ever did, which was not very.

“Do you?”

“I really do. She thought I was being mean to Azora.”

“*Were* you being mean to Azora?”

Jaia hand waved the question away. “My version of flirting. You know how rough it is ... I used to practice on you.”

I snorted. “Before you realized I was *intensely* not your type.”

“If I were going to find any man tolerable, it would be you. But...” she crinkled her nose, gesturing at me vaguely. I was not offended. “You should prepare yourself. She intends to have you fire me.”

“Oh, because she doesn’t like you? Little does she know, *I* don’t like you, but here we are.” It wasn’t true. Jaia and I had

been friends since we were children, we had been warriors together fighting the Snake Queen, and now we were both soldiers in a secret battle.

She aggravated me. I hoped she aggravated Hanna. Hanna deserved to be tormented a little. But Jaia would protect Hanna with her life, just as she had always protected me.

“She won’t allow me to be rude to Azora anymore.” Jaia let out the unexpected cackle that was her real laugh—one that hardly anyone ever heard, a complete surprise when she always seemed so sophisticated and cool.

“Mm.” Jaia and Azora could hardly explain to Hanna that Azora generally didn’t mind Jaia’s rudeness.

Azora’s identity had to be completely hidden for the moment. It was the only way I could guarantee keeping a ‘servant’ close enough to Hanna without my father knowing she was always protected.

To what extent I could, given Hanna’s apparent reluctance to be protected. The thought made me think about how I’d smacked her ass on my throne yesterday—and how badly I wanted to do it again. All I wanted was to protect her and to punish her.

And to marry her.

Not as a game, but to make her mine.

“The feelings I have for her go beyond sense,” I admitted quietly.

Jaia looked at me quickly. It wasn’t like me to admit any kind of feelings.

“Well,” she said. “Perhaps she was a coward in a physical fight. But that does that mean she can’t stand behind you in another kind of fight?”

I shook my head. “The people need her, and I need them. That has to be all this is.”

“Alright,” she said bluntly, “But obviously, that isn’t all *this* is.”

“I can’t love someone who will never be worthy to be my queen.”

Jaia wisely didn’t point out that I already loved her. But she gave me that look that said she wasn’t saying something, which was twice as bad.

“For the second part of the trial,” Dare began, but before he could finish, the bear broke free of the girl’s limited control.

The bear reared back on its hind legs, letting out a fearsome roar. Then the beast raced toward Hanna.

Jail swore and ran toward the bear.

Guards were converging to kill it, drawing their swords, fear written across their faces even as they moved in.

It was such unnecessary violence against one of my creatures. I pushed Jaia to one side and leapt forward. The bear simply belonged on the taiga and not here. It never should have been brought somewhere it couldn’t thrive.

I had to grip the bear in order to be able to transport it back to the taiga.

But when I reached for the bear, it was about to attack Hanna. The girl who had raised the bear couldn’t control it, but some part of the bear was still trying to serve her purposes.

To maul Hanna.

Was the girl who had summoned the bear the same one who had attacked Hanna already?

Even as the question flooded through my mind I grabbed the bear.

But as my magic sizzled through it, the bear was already striking at Hanna. I let out a roar as loud as the bear’s as I shoved it away from her, and she fell backward.

I was shocked to find myself out in the deep forest with Hanna. She was on the ground in the snow, bleeding from a cut in her side that seeped red across the snow. The bear flew across the clearing and landed in the snow.

We must have all been in contact in that one fraction of a moment when I traveled us.

As soon as it had its paws beneath it, the enormous white bear whirled to attack me. Then the enchantment overrode its initial rage, and its head swiveled back to Hanna as it began to growl.

Hanna was still on the ground, looking frozen in shock—either from terror or from being abruptly moved by the magic.

I slowly moved toward the bear, trying not to make any sudden movements that might provoke it. Adrenaline pumped through my veins. I had brought the bear here so I wouldn't have to kill it. But I would if that was the only way to protect Hanna.

The bear growled, rising to its hind legs—then abruptly dropping forward. Its enormous paws crashed into the ground, cracking the ice. For a second, I couldn't see Hanna.

I leapt forward, afraid she had been crushed.

Then the bear shifted slightly. Hanna was between its paws. The bear dwarfed her.

She murmured soothing words of magic, and the bear seemed to freeze. She reached up and touched its nose gently.

The bear was soothed. For now.

It wouldn't last. The enchantment would wear off, but it would take days for the other girl's control—and her orders of murder—to fade completely.

“You're going to get yourself eaten,” I warned Hanna as I shoved the bear away from her. It let out a roar of surprise, thundering to find itself pushed onto its back.

We only had a split second. I caught her up in my arms and brought her back to the garden.

The garden felt too hot, too green, after being out in the icy brilliance of the taiga.

For once, Hanna and I were alone in the garden. Everyone had scattered with the attack of the bear. Dare and Thorne



were running back toward us now that they had gotten everyone else out, but for now, no one could hear our conversation.

“I can’t believe you.” She pushed me away, though it didn’t work well for her since I was still holding her. I was very tempted to just drop her on the ground, since that was what she seemed to desire. But I would never let her fall.

“Are you angry at me? For saving you yet again?”

“For pretending to save me! I had everything under control!”

“You had temporarily lulled the bear, but you were about to get mauled.”

“You are so arrogant!”

“I don’t want to see you get hurt!”

“No one hurts me like you do, Kaelan.”

I hadn’t expected her to say something so raw. She wrenched out of my arms and I finally set her down on her feet.

“Keep Jaia away from me,” she told me. “You want me to have a bodyguard? You do it.”

“Seems impractical. I’m usually the one in danger.”

“Then send Thorne or Dare with me. You trust them. But I don’t want Jaia near me.”

“You’ll come to like her.” I didn’t doubt that Jaia would win Hanna over eventually. They both pretended to be so different than they really were.

“I doubt that very much.” Her eyes suddenly went wide. “If you accidentally brought me along with the bear, where’s my tiger?”

Her tiger? The tiger was a mistake.

“Did you want to hurt someone like that girl must have wanted to hurt you?” I scanned the garden, thinking Jaia must be in deadly danger.

But Hanna's tiger just limped over to us, looking harmless.

"You summoned a broken beast?"

She leapt in front of it. "You're not going to hurt her. And you can't send her to the taiga. I think she's wounded from traveling."

"Mm." Hanna was correct, but I didn't like the way she'd begun to speak of the creature as *she*. Hanna would probably name the thing before supper. "I think it deformed when it was summoned."

"I can take care of her," she said. "She'll die in the taiga."

"You're going to take care of her? You can't even take care of yourself."

Her jaw hardened, her eyes flashing.

"Watch me," she said. "Because I won't be sleeping in your bed. And I won't have your nasty bodyguard chasing at my heels, either."

I stared at her as she walked away, clucking at the beast, which limped along beside her. Hanna's first few steps with quick and jerky with anger, but then she slowed her walk, so her broken beast could keep up with her.

"You are sleeping in my bed," I told her, "and that thing is not."

She turned to face me. "Only if you let me keep her."

I swore. "You are a brat."

The smile that swept over her face made my heart rise in my chest despite myself.

"You wouldn't have me any other way, Kaelan."

## CHAPTER 32



Hanna

We had another one of those dreadful dinners and dances that evening. I didn't know what was worse: dancing with Kaelan myself, or *not* dancing with Kaelan and watching other girls dance with him.

The absolute worst was when Jaia stepped into his arms and the two of them swept across the dance floor. She was so much taller than me. The two of them looked as if they fit together perfectly.

"I never thought it was possible to die of jealousy," Dare said quietly into my ear, "but for the first time, looking at you, I can believe it. You look as if you're actually running a fever."

He touched the back of his hand to my forehead as if he were testing for a temperature.

"I could set my tiger on you," I told him balefully.

He scoffed. "Unlikely, for three reasons. Your tiger is caged up, just like you should be. Two, also just like you, your tiger is a completely broken beast. I'm pretty sure it moves more slowly than my grandmother. So I think that's the end of your fighting chance."

"And what's the third reason?"

"You'll find out eventually," he promised me. "Or rather, you probably already know, if you thought about it. But I

wouldn't want to ruin the surprise.”

“You are absolutely maddening,” I told him.

“Possibly. You know what else I am? Not likely to die by tiger bite.”

He started to walk away and then turned back. “I would like to point out that if Kaelan was this big a bastard as you think he is, your tiger would already be buried in one of the rocks flues outside the castle grounds.”

“So touching,” I mocked him, though I did actually find it charming how protective the three of them were of each other. If only they weren't such a bunch of assholes to everyone outside their small circle.

“And deep down, you must know it.” Dare offered me that feral smile. “It's the only reason you would be so sassy when you are so very much not the one in control of this situation.”

“It's interesting that it matters so much to you that I have no power, Dare. Is that because your only power is borrowed from Kaelan?”

Dare's eyes narrowed as if he were about to attempt to verbally eviscerate me. But I wasn't going to let him undercut my insult. I blew him a kiss and began to make my way through the crowd, winding slowly toward the door.

When Kaelan and Jaia let go of each other, Jaia noticed me watching her and suddenly smiled widely. She said something softly to Kaelan, who turned to look.

“It's clear who was eliminated in this most recent round,” Dare's voice floated over the crowd, and I paused in the doorway to listen. “Though I feel like we're setting a rather low bar for Kaelan's bride.”

Fantastic. I remained in the running for the husband I didn't even want.

I made my way out and was heading down the castle halls back to my room, or Kaelan's room, wherever I was going to go now. I stopped and frowned. I was never an amazing navigator and I was afraid I'd taken a wrong turn.

Then I heard a strange sound behind me.

A woman's intuition is keen. It was something I've been taught to rely upon at the Posselbaum Academy. When it comes to a choice between being polite or being safe, damn good manners.

And there was something about that sound that spurred my every instinct, so I took off running. The goal of running was just to get some space between me and whatever else was there, so I could raise my weapons.

I expected another attack from the Snake Queen. I expected to see her emissary who was so determined to steal my husband. Or I expected to see one of the other would-be brides or someone working for their purposes.

My magic was already crackling at my fingertips. It sparkled in the dim light of the long corridor.

But there was no one in the long hallway that stretched behind me.

I hesitated, my chest heaving. Had I just run like a lunatic through the halls of the castle? It was such a labyrinth, so vast, that I felt alone.

“Guard!” I called. Forget my pride. This place was creepy and unsettling.

I caught movement out of the corner of my eye.

I whirled, ready to attack.

But I was still alone in the hallway.

Then I saw the movement in the long, framed mirror alongside me.

My own reflection stared back at me—white faced, blond hair polished, eyes wide with fear—and then behind my reflection, the shadows moved.

The shadows were alive.

I turned, aiming a blast of magic at the place behind me. But there was nothing there.

The monster was in the reflection.

I whirled back to face it just before the shadows leapt out of the mirror.

For a split second, I was frozen, my feet rooted to the ground.

The bracelet. I needed all my magic.

I grabbed the cuff to yank it off my wrist.

It burned against my wrist. I didn't dare take my gaze off the monsters, but I kept trying to yank at it.

My reflection self smiled, her gaze falling to the bracelet.

Whoever had created this monster had somehow enchanted the bracelet, sealing it to my wrist.

I turned and ran.

The shadows undulated against the floors, the walls, the ceiling, almost overtaking me. Tentacles of darkness turned solid when they wrapped around my ankles. I tripped, aimed a blast of magic that didn't matter because the tentacles became smoke and shadow. I plunged onward.

I burst through a doorway, expecting to find myself back in the hall that led to the crowded ballroom.

Now, I wanted to be close to Kaelan. For all its faults, he did have his uses. He was very good at killing things besides my hopes and dreams.

I came through the door knowing I was wild-eyed and embarrassing myself and not caring. I just wanted Kaelan and Thorne and Dare.

Instead, I found myself in a dark hallway.

My chest heaved from exertion and fear.

There was only one way ahead of me. Down. A long, twisting dark series of stairs lying in front of me, and in all my explorations of the castle, I had never seen them before.

I couldn't let myself be driven down here. The monster—or whoever was driving the monster— might very well be

purposefully herding me down here.

But then suddenly, the monster was right behind me, and I had no choice but to keep moving or die right there. Or shift into a dragon. Suddenly, I realized that my best chance might be to go down the stairs and to get to the most abandoned place possible. Either I needed to go where people could save me—like Kaelan—or I needed to save myself.

One of the monster's tentacles wrapped my ankle. I sent a blast of magic toward it, and it just tightened, but I managed to shake it loose and then plunged down the stairs.

I was keenly aware that if I missed one step, I would plummet down the stairs. If I hit my head, it was all over. The thing would be on top of me, and if I lost consciousness, I would never even get the chance to shift. The image of myself, legs splayed at terrible angles, bleeding out at the bottom of the dark stairs rose in my mind, strong as a premonition.

I raced desperately down the stairs. The stairs turned and turned and turned, so I couldn't even see an end to them. Finally, out of the blackness rose the floor itself.

I raced across the darkness, raising one hand to palm the light. My other hand gripped my dagger. It was too dangerous for me to keep running full force in darkness, especially when the monster never seemed to falter. I raced on, realizing that I was in a dungeon.

And I wasn't alone. Now I realize there are people in the dungeon, throwing themselves against the bars, screaming for me to let them free. I glimpsed Mattias, his hand extended through the bars.

“Free me!” he screamed at me. “You did this to me!”

Then his eyes went wide as he saw the thing behind me.

Then he was just *screaming*.

The desperate, wretched cries were doing nothing to calm my nerves, which were already ragged.

The memory of that damn statue rose up in my mind too. Apparently I would never be free of the image I had of myself

at my worst. The forest had brought it all into such vivid, stark relief.

I looked frantically for a weapon, then realized the hall behind me had gone silent. It was the deep silence far underground, far from the sounds of life.

I turned knowing that they would be gone.

The people in the cells lay sprawled on the floor. Mattias still stretched out an arm from the cell, but his eyes stared unseeing down the hall toward me.

How had the monster killed them all so quickly?

The shadows slithered out of the cells and formed into a monster, and this monster had a dozen mouths.

Suddenly I saw Jaia behind the monster.

Our eyes met.

“I’m your bodyguard whether you like it or not, Princess,” she called, and before the shadows could turn on her, she aimed a blast of magic its way.

The shadows opened its many mouths and then raced toward her. She aimed her blasts of magic at it, purple and blue streaks that exploded from her raised palm. More magic crackled along the blade of her sword.

Now the monster was completely focused on Jaia. While I might be the target, it saw Jaia as the real threat.

Did that mean someone was riding the monster from inside its mind? Controlling it? After all, everyone saw me as nothing but a spoiled princess who needed to be saved.

She aimed yet another blast of magic at the thing.

The monster exploded into a thousand blades of shadow flying across the dungeons.

She grinned at me, her sword carried low in her hand. Her dark curls were wild around her triumphant face.

“Don’t celebrate yet. It came out of the mirrors.”



“Ah,” she said. “An illusion demon. Get ready to close your eyes.”

“Why?”

“It moves in the reflections. But that’s not its real power.”

“How do you fight it, Jaia?”

She looked at me as if she didn’t like my tone, but at least she focused. “It will turn corporeal when it takes shape. There are no mirrors for it to flee back to down here, so it won’t be able to escape us.”

“Yes, that’s what I was worried about. I was afraid it would escape us.”

“It might take more than one form, though. It might take some killing. And of course, it’s hard because of what it looks like. At least,” she added, “if what I read is true.”

“You’ve just read about it?”

“Why do you sound so contemptuous?” she demanded. “You’ve never even read about it.”

“What’s it going to look like?”

“It’s going to look like whatever’s going to make it hard for you to kill it.” Her voice came out flat. She was staring over my shoulder.

As I turned, Jaia called, “What are you seeing?”

In the shadows, the faintest light glinted off deep red hair. Lips parted in a cocky smile.

“My sister.”

“It’s not real. It’s in your head. I just see the shadows.”

Honor carried her sword at the ready as she took a step forward, and she grinned at me, tossing her long red hair. “I came for your wedding, but it looks like I arrived just in time to save your life. Again.”

It wasn’t my sister.

It couldn’t be.

But what if it was?

“Fight, Hanna!” Jaia shouted.

It wasn't Honor. But my stomach was a knot, my heart beating wildly.

I blasted my magic toward my sister and winced.

She stumbled back, then fell. Her sword hit the ground. Her wide, shocked gaze met mine as her hands pressed her bleeding chest.

“It's not her!” Jaia pushed me aside roughly as she raised her own hand, aiming a blast of magic at the thing, then leapt forward. I tried to grab Jaia, just in case, but she was already slamming her sword home.

Honor's lips parted in a scream of pain.

And shadows streamed out, curling across the ceiling.

Honor's body fell, though, turned into a stump of monster flesh. The scent of decay was sickly sweet in the air.

“How many more ... pieces?” I asked, fighting the rise of bile in the back of my throat at the stench ... and at the fear I'd just felt that I'd watched my sister die.

“I don't know,” Jaia said.

“I have a big family.”

I'd said the words bluntly, feeling shocked and horrified by the thought of watching Branok and Lynx and Zehr and all my other brothers-in-law, and all my nieces and nephews, take their turn. But Jaia laughed as if I'd just made a wisecrack. Some of my sense started to knit back together again.

But the monsters formed again behind Jaia, into something quite small.

Pain swept over Jaia's face. “You're not real.”

“What are you seeing?”

She shook her head.

“Jaia, we have to help each other! It's still the monster!” I called to her urgently. “Tell me what you're seeing!”

“My daughter!” she shouted back at me.

“She’s not real!”

The shadows exploded out, a dozen tentacles wrapping around her arms and legs. Jaia was yanked down to the ground.

I blasted my magic at the thing. Her own magic flared from her sword, and the sword levitated and drove toward the monster. Jaia let out a scream as the sword launched into the small shadow figure. “Viza!”

At the last second, the enchanted sword jerked aside, slamming into the stone wall, sending off a shower of sparks.

Then the sword was swept up by shadows and launched back toward Jaia.

I leapt between Jaia and the monster, throwing up my magic as a shield. The shield deflected the sword, which slammed into the wooden beams of the ceiling. The ceiling seemed to shake, bits of dust settling over us both, as if the dungeons were going to cave in on us.

I rushed forward with my knives, hacking at the shadow tentacles that bound Jaia to the ground.

“Where’s Kaelan?” I shouted at her as I hacked away at them.

One of the tentacles ripped across her stomach, another across her throat, opening up bloody lines.

“Behind you!” she screamed.

I whirled.

It wasn’t Kaelan behind me.

It was the monster.

I had to get it away from her for her to have the chance to heal herself. The monster would keep returning to her, sure that she was the danger, and she looked as if she were on the verge of succumbing to her wounds. She needed to heal herself.

“Take my light!” I called to her, throwing the ball of magic that had been my light up into the air. She could draw on it for her own healing power if her magic was almost spent.

Then I raced up the stairs. I prayed to the gods the monster would follow me and not stay to finish her. I didn’t want to run and leave her alone, but I thought drawing up the monster was the best chance she had. And while the monster might have wanted to destroy her as a threat, what the beast was truly after was me.

I took the stairs two at a time, my heart pounding so desperately that it hurt, my breathing rough and ragged in my ears.

The sounds of my own body and my fear were so loud that I almost didn’t hear the slither of the monster coming up the stairs behind me. But it was.

It said a lot for how well my life was going that I’d smiled in triumph while being chased by the most terrifying monster I’d ever seen.

But at least Jaia would be safe now.

## CHAPTER 33



Kaelan

The ball was beautiful and sparkling and absolutely pointless without Hanna.

Jaia had followed her when she stormed out, promising me in a really insolent tone that she would keep my precious bride safe.

But I couldn't shake the feeling there was something wrong. As soon as I headed for the door, Dare and Thorne began to thread their way through the celebrants. We didn't need to communicate telepathically for them to understand and predict me in a way that was at once comforting and unsettling.

Dare frowned in the hallway. "Do you feel the faint residual ... dark magic?"

"What does that feel like?" I demanded, feeling exasperated just when I was so worried about Hanna. "The only things I know about are facts. Real things."

"Which is why you miss half the world," Dare returned.

"Jaia was following Hanna," I said. "Find her."

Thorne nodded. He raised his hand, summoning the magic spell that connected Thorne, Dare, Jaia, Azora and myself. I should've put the spell on Hanna.

"The dungeons," Thorne said levelly, but he was already moving fast.

The three of us ran down into the dungeons.

The cells were full of the dead. Mattias and Amely both sprawled on the floor of their cells. Their deaths would lead to some messy politics, but I didn't care.

“Over here!” Dare called.

I burst after him expecting to see Hanna.

But Jaia lay on the ground, covered in blood, her healing magic sparking weakly against her torn throat as her fingers pressed her skin. She wasn't good at healing, just like the rest of us. But she had managed enough magic to seal the worst of her wounds, to keep herself from bleeding out.

My heart quickened with panic.

“Where's Hanna?” I demanded.

She raised a single finger pointing up. “She ... ran ...”

But despite her best efforts, those few words seemed to be all she could summon.

Just those few words caused her to collapse.

“I have her,” Dare promised. He was already lifting her off the ground. “I'll heal her, and I'll make sure no one gets the chance to hurt her.”

“Hanna ran,” I repeated, the need to protect her mixed with rage. She had abandoned Jaia when she was so wounded she might die.

Dare cupped Jaia's face, his own face a mask of pain. The two of them had become so close. Thorne and I loved Dare, but Jaia understood him in a way we never could, since they both came from the same hellscape.

“We have to find her,” Thorne urged.

I nodded. Leaving Dare and Jaia behind, we ran up the stairs, trying to retrace Hanna's steps.

All the way, fear and fury beat wildly through my heart.



Hanna

I raced through what seemed like endless halls. The shadows raced along the ceiling, hanging low over my head as if they would swallow me.

I turned another corner into a long desolate hall. Into a mistake.

Stretching far down the hall, an elaborate gilt-framed mirror hung between every wooden door.

It seemed as if there was nothing behind me now. I paused, chest heaving from that desperate run. My vision was narrow from the adrenaline and I blinked, trying to clear my head.

Had the monster doubled back to kill Jaia?

I turned, looking around the hall. I felt eerily alone.

I turned to face myself in the mirror.

There was nothing there.

Then, abruptly, Thorne came crashing around the corner. He reached one bloodied hand out to steady himself as he plunged forward. His arm was low against his stomach, trying to hold his guts inside.

He looked up at me with dark, desperate eyes. "Hanna..."

My heart twisted. Panic swam through my blood. Thorne? Or the monster?

I took a step back. "You're not real."

"It's the Snake Queen's monster," he managed with effort. "She attacked us all. Help me..."

He stumbled toward me. "Heal me."

I stared at him as he came closer.

“Thorne would tell me to run,” I said, and I turned and did just that, plunging for the nearest door.

As I moved, my reflection in the nearest mirror lunged to one side too, revealing the shadows creeping behind me. I threw one last desperate look at Thorne as suddenly, tentacles lashed out of the shadows and wrapped around my legs.

I threw myself through the door, landing on my stomach in a huge, near-empty, dusty room. On the far side were heavy curtains and another door. I rolled onto my back as the tentacles tightened, then sat up to slash them away.

I leapt up. There were fewer shadows billowing from the mirror than there had been before, and Thorne stumbled toward me, reaching out his hand. “We have to get away from them.”

It wasn't him.

It couldn't be him. Could it?

I turned and ran for the door at the far side, unbolted the locks with shaking fingers, threw it open.

The wind caught the door and flung it open. Bitter cold washed over me.

I turned back just in time to see the last shadows disappear into Thorne's form.

Then an enormous white thing burst through the door.

My tiger.

Thorne shoved me through the door with him as he tried to escape the tiger. All three of us landed in the snow. The shock of cold rushed through me.

The tiger leapt onto Thorne's back and attacked him. Its jaws were terrifying as it growled and ripped into Thorne, who called out for my help.

Then abruptly, one of Thorne's arms lashed out and cut me deeply.

I aimed a blast of magic at Thorne, full of all my power.



Between my tiger and I, we fought together.

Thorne fell apart in shadows that flickered across the snow and died.

Had we killed the last pieces of the monster when it was in its corporeal form?

“Thank you,” I murmured to my tiger, petting its face. “You are the most beautiful kitty.”

Don’t tell Finneas.

Shivering, my teeth chattering already in my silky dress and dancing shoes, I reached for the door.

It wouldn’t open.

It had locked behind us.

I looked up at the enormous stone wall of the castle that stretched above us. We were on the outside, from the beautiful, warm domed courtyard; from here it was all darkness and ice broken by flumes of rock. Somewhere on another side of the castle was the village, but that might as well have been miles away.

I reached for my warming spell. My magic was growing exhausted, and so was I. I needed to heal myself, and that took up so much of my magic. It wasn’t my strength.

But I was bleeding out against the snow.

I wrenched again at the bracelet. Who had figured out they could mute my powers?

My shaking hands cupped my wounds as my tiger tried to help, sticking her head into my magic.

I was able to heal the wounds enough to get moving, to stop the bleeding. Now I had to raise what was left of my magic to warm myself.

Together the two of us began the trudge through the deep snow and driving wind, trying to escape the biting cold before my magic failed me completely.



With every step through the snow, my muscles contracted so tightly from the cold they felt as if they would snap. It was hard to raise my head to look at anything with the driving wind, which made my eyes water, and when I did look, the snowfall was so thick and blinding that I could barely see the stone wall of the castle.

As I walked, I kept one hand hovering against the icy surface. If I accidentally took a few steps away from the castle wall, I might be lost in the snowfall forever.

My tiger butted my legs with her head as if she could push me toward safety. I rubbed my fingers into the warmth of her fur, petting her but also warming myself.

My magic was failing me. I'd used almost all of it to heal myself.

The last of my magic radiated from my fingertips, warming them, but I couldn't feel my feet. I took another wooden step, my feet dragging through the deep snow. I had to keep moving. And I had to use my magic the best I could to keep myself alive.

Would Dare be able to heal me when I finally reached Kaelan and the real Thorne? Soon, I wouldn't be able to stave off frostbite anymore.

I took another step, struggling through snow that rose to my mid-thighs.

And then I fell.

My beast nudged me up. First she was gentle; then she gave me a warning growl, her teeth grating against my skin as she tried to pull me up by my clothing.

"You're something special, aren't you, girl?" I whispered, although the wind and the snow seemed to steal my voice

away. “Way better than a unicorn.”

I made it to my feet, but I couldn't take another step. I let myself fall onto her back, trying to draw all the warmth I could from her. I didn't have the strength anymore to use my magic to keep myself warm. The fight had drained me, and so had my wounds, and now I didn't have anything left.

So I let my tiger carry me, knowing she might very well be trying to take me home to her own world, and that every step away from the castle was a step toward my death.

Then suddenly, I saw lights, a dim glow through the constantly falling snow.

The city beyond the castle walls?

I'd never visited the city. They had kept so busy with our damn trials that I hadn't seen the kingdom where I would be queen.

Should I leave the lonely path that would eventually bring me to another door? Should I strike out toward the city where hopefully, I would find shelter and warmth?

It was hard to think. My body's last efforts were keeping me alive, not intelligent.

“Carry me toward the lights,” I whispered, trying to summon what little magic I had to control her.

Her smooth muscles flexed under mine as she turned and began to carry me deeper into the snow.

I dug my fingers into the scruff of her neck, trying to hold on as they began to turn clumsy and unpredictable too. I couldn't raise my head anymore, and there was no magic left to summon any warmth.

I just had to hang on.

Then, I felt a jolt as my tiger abruptly came to a stop. My body was flung forward, and I landed in the snow with a soft thud. I tried to rise, my body too exhausted to move despite my best efforts.

My tiger growled, low and menacing. She stalked between me and whatever was nearby.

Streetlights glowed softly around us. The lines of the buildings were low, the roofs sloping almost down to the ground and mantled in snow. I couldn't see beyond the glow of the streetlamps and my tiger's pacing form to see who else was there.

"Get Bron." It was a young woman's soft voice. "This tiger does not belong here."

"He's meeting with—" a boy's voice.

She shushed him harshly.

"Take it easy," she told the tiger, but there was a note of fear in my voice.

I'd made it this far, but now my tiger didn't understand this was the help I needed, not a threat.

"Take it easy, girl," I told her, holding out my shaking hand with the last of my strength. "Don't hurt our friends."

"Friends, huh?" It was a man's voice, low and deep. Bron?

"Let's hope she's our friend." That quiet voice sounded like Azora, but she didn't belong here. "Send the tiger to sleep. We'll need to get her back to her cage in the castle."

"We could kill it," Bron said dryly.

"No!" I managed the word, panic giving me a rush of adrenaline that let me stagger to my feet, one last time. I raised my hand, my fingers blue and lifeless, and a few harmless sparks of my magic fluttered to life, then died.

"We could not," Azora told him dryly. Then she held her arms out to me. "Let me help you, Princess."

I'd thought she was useless so many times, but as I swayed on my feet, Azora caught me.

My tiger growled, and Azora said, "Shut up. You don't scare me anymore than Finneas does."

Bron was murmuring the words of a spell. As Azora helped me stagger forward, there was a deep thump, as if my tiger had just sprawled into the snow asleep.

“Now we’re going to have to move the thing,” Bron muttered.

Azora caught me with an arm around my waist as I swayed. “We’re going to get you warmed up, Princess. You’re going to be alright.”

And for the first time in a long time, I didn’t mind the word *princess*.

“We need to get her inside,” Azora said.

One minute I was dying. The next, I was being rescued.

The next few minutes were a blur. I found myself half-carried into a nearby house. It was small, with a ceiling so low it brushed my hair, and the scent of smoke was acrid at the back of my throat from the fire.

Azora helped me into the stuffed chair in front of the fire. “Bron, let the castle know we have their princess.”

I would’ve scoffed, but instead I let out a groan of pain as she pulled off my slippers.

“This is going to hurt,” she warned me, cupping my bare, frozen feet with her hands. Then she added, “It’s going to hurt both of us. Ice Fae don’t make warmth very easily.”

“Thank you,” I whispered.

Her wide, surprised brown eyes jerked up to meet mine. Kaelan will be looking for you. I’ll get word to him that he can stop panicking.”

“Let him look.” I hissed at the intense pain that swept through my foot from my palm, like pins and needles but ten times worse. My fingernails dug into the arms of the chair, through the fabric and thin stuffing into the woods. Holding myself still was almost impossible.

“It’s alright,” Azora told me quietly. “Bron’s gone. Em’s out there tending to your tiger. It’s just us. You don’t have to

be all stoic and royal.”

“I always have—” I cut myself off as she moved to the other foot. I let out a ragged gasp of pain. My eyes were still watering from the brutal wind; that was why tears spilled down my cheeks.

I scrubbed at my face with my cold hands, but I wasn’t afraid of Azora seeing.

“Do you really want Kaelan to be wild with worry about you?” she asked me curiously.

I scoffed. “The last I saw him, he was dancing with another girl.”

Azora set both my feet, which were thawed but still cold and tingling, against her own thighs before tucking a thick fur blanket over them. The warmth felt deep and safe.

Then as she took my hands in hers, she gave me an exasperated look. “Do the two of you ever stop sparring long enough to actually see each other?”

“What’s there to see?”

“What’s there to see,” she repeated. “Let’s see. There’s the strapping, powerful prince who loves his kingdom and loves his princess, broken though he may be. And there’s the princess, clever and tricky, beautiful and bold, the only one who can satisfy him and save his kingdom.”

Bold? Clever? Her kind words struck me deeply, and I didn’t know what to do with the way she saw me. I swallowed her compliments and soldiered on. “He says he doesn’t need me.”

“He says a lot of things. You both say a lot of things.” She sounded unexpectedly stern and scolding all of a sudden, for a peasant. “But as someone standing by, needing you both because this kingdom is my *home*, it’s quite painful.”

Her head was down as she focused her magic on my hands, so that all I could see was her dark curls.

“Azora.” My throat felt raw from the cold, and my voice sounded hoarse and unfamiliar. “I will protect your kingdom,

you know. I will marry Kaelan. I just wish ...”

I let my wishes trail off, knowing I shouldn't speak them out loud to anyone.

“You just wish he would love you the way you deserve instead of being a broken asshole?” she asked. “Well yes. I admire you both, but having your future hinge on the two of you getting your shit together ...” She blew out an exasperated breath.

The pins and needles racing through my hands hurt. I yanked away.

“I guess we shouldn't be talking like this,” she muttered. “You're still a princess, and I'm still a peasant.”

“We both know you're more than a peasant.”

She shook her head. “No. I'm more than you think, that's true ... but I'm just a peasant.”

She rose to her feet then, holding out her hands to me. “Can you walk? I need you to see something.”

“What is it?”

“It's a secret Prince Kaelan has hidden from you.”

I took her hands, and let her pull me to my feet. I wobbled, but I gave her a nod. I could walk even though every step hurt, my toes and feet still throbbing painfully.

She added dryly, “I thought that would get you out of the chair.”

But she kept a watchful eye on me as she guided me across the room to a small door.

“I'm not going to pretend to understand Prince Kaelan,” she told me.

“That makes two of us.”

“But it's the reason you're here,” she finished.

“Of course.”

“Besides the obvious, of course.”

I frowned. “The obvious? What are you talking about?”

Her lips parted in a smile. “Nothing. You’re only here because we simple people need you nobles to save us with your superiority.”

I laughed out loud in surprise. I liked saucy Azora. “The only one I’m convinced I’m superior to is Kaelan and his little friends.”

“Is that so?”

It was a deep male voice.

For a second, the sight of Thorne in the doorway sent a shockwave of fear through me. The shadows had found me.

Bron stood beside him, but I couldn’t look anywhere but at Thorne. My gaze roamed his face, trying to figure out if it was really, truly Thorne.

Azora asked Bron casually, “Are we letting any noble riffraff drifting through the door now, then?”

“You brought in this riffraff.” Although Thorne was speaking to Azora, his gaze was focused on me.

His eyes roamed across my face and my body as if he were searching to make sure I was alright as he crossed to me in a few quick strides.

It was Thorne. The real Thorne. It was only Thorne who looked at me that way, the same way he had when he gave me his cloak and gloves—as if anything I needed or desired was already mine, if it was his to give.

“It’s you,” I said in relief, throwing my arms around his neck. His body was so solid, real and comforting. The thought that I could’ve been afraid of him after what happened in the tunnels felt like I’d almost lost something, like that swooping feeling of fear after a missed step.

Thorne hugged me back tightly, burying his face in my hair. “I was afraid of what happened to you,” he admitted, his breath against my throat. “But I should’ve known you would find a way.”



“The monster appeared as my sister and Jaia’s—” I cut myself off. I had a feeling what Jaia saw might be a secret of hers, and I didn’t want to inadvertently reveal it. “And as you.”

He pulled back. “You saw me?”

The air between us felt charged, as heavy with magic as when I had made my vows.

I nodded. It felt like I had accidentally admitted too much. The memory of an injured Thorne staggering toward me would haunt me, even though it hadn’t been real.

I couldn’t stand to lose him.

“What I thought you said then wasn’t real,” I said, “You weren’t all attacked by the Snake Queen’s monster? Everyone is safe?”

He shook his head. “No one was attacked but you. And Jaia.”

“Is she alright?” Running away from her had been a desperate attempt to save her life, and between my tiger and I, we had finished the monster... unless we hadn’t.

“She’s fine,” Thorne promised me. He tilted his head curiously. “How did you end up separated?”

“I tried to lead the monster off. It wouldn’t stop attacking her, but I was the real target. Whoever controlled it thought that *she* was the threat and I would be harmless.”

“Foolish monster.” Thorne sounded so fond and confident of me that my heart melted.

I kept my arms around his waist, and he rested his chin lightly on the top of my head, holding me to his side as if he never wanted to let me go.

“Did the others come down to the village with you?” Azora asked.

“**N**o.” Thorne shook his head. “We split up to search for Hanna. Kaelan was quite convinced she was dead. He’s frantic.”

I would've muttered that I doubted that very much, but Thorne and Azora knew Kaelan so well ... and they thought it was ridiculous that I doubted Kaelan's desire.

Well. I didn't doubt Kaelan's desire, exactly.

I doubted his sense.

"My messenger will get to Jaia, and Jaia will get to Kaelan," Azora promised.

"I'm sure she will," I muttered.

Thorne's lips pressed together as if he were trying to keep himself from smiling. "You are so clever, except for when you're not."

I pulled back so I could get a better view of his handsome, amused face. "Are you really going to insult me when I almost died?"

Apparently he was. He was already looking at Azora instead. "What were you going to show her?"

"I want Hanna to see just how many friends she has once she gets outside that cursed palace." Azora said the words with bite, as if she were challenging Thorne.

"That would be nice, given how dedicated people seem to be to killing me," I said lightly, but I wasn't sure how to process the silent communication passing between Azora and Thorne as they stared each other down.

Then Thorne inclined his head. "You're right."

Azora's lips parted in a surprised smile. To me, she said, "This is why he's my favorite."

"Mine too," I said, then when Thorne started to grin, I reminded him, "It's a low bar, my friend."

Azora pushed open the door.

Narrow stairs led down into the darkness. I'd have to hunch; I wasn't sure how Thorne was going to navigate the stairs bent over.

“Most of the city is underground,” she told me. “And the royals know ... but there are secret places as well.”

Thorne and Kaelan obviously relied on Azora. She’d just been playing the part of the mousy maid, and I was so curious who she really was. “Azora, I have a feeling that I have really misunderstood who you are.”

Her answering smile transformed her usually dour face.

Then as she stepped into the stairs, she tripped, almost tumbling headfirst into the darkness.

Thorne’s hand darted out and caught the back of her hood. He reeled her back up easily, as if she weighed nothing.

For a second, she seemed to be focused just on breathing after her near-death experience. Then she brushed herself off with dignity. “Thank you.”

“Azora’s usefulness to us has never been defined by her grace.” Thorne told me.

“Always so rude,” Azora muttered, before she began to descend into the darkness.

“I’d like to know more about Azora’s usefulness,” I said as I stepped into the entrance. “And all the other secrets you’ve been keeping from me.”

“It’s always a survivable temperature once you get far enough below the surface,” Azora said brightly. “Of course we can’t dig down into the permafrost without magic.”

That fact in no way answered any question I’d actually asked—interesting though it was—and I was pretty sure she was just trying to save Thorne from my questions.

We descended into a second small house, tucked below. A magical lantern glowed on the table, illuminating a windowless room. I couldn’t imagine how anyone could live down here away from the sun and not go mad. But even without a fire—an enchanted one, giving the lack of a chimney—the room was cool but bearably so.

“This seems bleak,” I said, “but I can see how it would help you survive.”

“Does it seem bleak?” Azora asked, pushing open the door.

I followed her down a stone hallway that seemed claustrophobic to me; it reminded me of a rabbit warren, with dozens of doors and passageways that sprouted off to the sides. We were headed ever so slightly downward, and when I thought about the layers of snow and ice and earth above our heads, something ached in my spine.

Then we turned a corner, and she looked over her shoulder at me mischievously.

Beyond her, the tunnel opened up into a cavernous room. Shimmering magical lights hung in the air—like a replica of their northern lights—casting pink and purple over her brown hair. Children ran about calling to each other as they played games, there was a market with a dozen vendors, and on a dance floor surrounded by tables, couples turned while a fiddler played merrily.

“What’s the festival for?” I asked.

“Not freezing to death today,” Azora told me, and I wasn’t sure if she was teasing me or if that was something the Ice Fae celebrated.

Because I had thought the Ice Fae people were cold and joyless.

But maybe it was just their leaders who didn’t know how to have fun.

“Careful, Azora,” Thorne warned her as she waved at someone, calling them over. “They don’t all need to know about Hanna. Let’s not start a rebellion today.”

She frowned over her shoulder. “That happened one time in one village, and it was your fault as much as mine.”

“Was it?” Thorne asked, though it had the air of a rhetorical question, since Azora grabbed my wrist and plunged ahead.

“Torin, I want you to meet our future queen!”

Thorne’s answering sigh was pointed.

Before I knew it, though, I was being greeted by the people who lived down here as Thorne was jostled further and further away from me. They all seemed so excited to meet me.

I looked at Azora curiously. How did they all know my name?

“My children will want to meet you!” One woman said, throwing up her arm in a wave to summon them.

Two dark-haired children ran toward us, around the same age as Lysander and Briden. Bright blue and red fabric fluttered behind their backs as they ran.

Dragon’s wings.

I greeted the children only to find myself swarmed by more of them, seemingly as excited to meet me as my own nieces and nephews were when I came home with a pocketful of candy.

“Tell me about your dragon wings,” I asked them.

“My mommy made mine,” a serious-faced little girl with black braids told me, then raised her arms so I could better see the fabric that hung from the bracelet around her wrists. “They’re purple!”

“They’re such a pretty purple,” I told her. “Are there purple dragons in your kingdom? I’ve only ever read about black ones and blue and white.”

“I have red ones!” another girl told me, twirling so I could see the wings that rose from her back when she spun. She finally came to a stop, her face almost as red as her face.

“There are red dragons,” an older boy said. “Aren’t *you* a red dragon?”

*Oh, shit.*

I’d spent years lying and pretending that I was not a dragon. But Kaelan believed I wasn’t, and had to continue believing. But his people were supposed to believe I *was*.

I needed notes to keep track of our lies.

“Where did you hear that?” I asked lightly, curious why they’d know anything about me.

“Because you’re the queen.” He looked at me as if I were a little thick, which sometimes felt like the default Ice Fae expression.

“Almost,” I said with a smile. *Gods help me.*

“Born on wings of flame and smoke,” a few of the children intoned, tripping over their words in a race to say them first, as if they were in a competition. “The dragon queen comes across the sea, to break the curse on the enchanted prince and ignite the Ice Fae destiny!”

I stared at them.

I was totally lost.

The rhyme scheme wasn’t helping.

“What?” I asked.

Then Thorne plowed through the children and arrived at my side to give them a smile. “The queen’s had a long day. Let’s give her a break.”

“What are you going to give me?” one of the kids asked.

Thorne frowned down at him, drawing himself to his full height, and the kid took a step back. “Well, if you’re lucky, I won’t give you—”

“Thorne,” I laid my hand on his corded forearm to still him. I’d felt my magic start to heal as my body grew warmer, and I raised my hand to give them a simple bit of magic.

Thorne gripped my hand in his. His palm was warm against mine, and as his fingers laced through mine, I realized he was lending me his power.

Their wings billowed without them having to move. They quickly realized what that meant and began to race around the room, throwing themselves forward and gliding on their fabric wings for a few steps before they had to catch themselves to keep from hitting the flagstone.

Then I turned to Thorne. “We need to talk.”

Thorne led me to a table next to a stall where the scent of sugared nuts rose in the air. He came back to me with sugar—finally—and two cups of tea.

“Kaelan and I have been sneaking down here since—”

“No.” I held up my hand. “The poem. Explain.”

I couldn’t bring myself to say *prophecy*.

“Oh,” he said. “Well, Kaelan *did* tell you that he needed you to save the kingdom.”

“Yes, he told me that I’d inspire his people, which meant he’d endure how much I annoy him.” I certainly hadn’t forgotten that line. Mattias hadn’t punched him in the face enough for me to consider forgiving him. “He didn’t mention a prophecy.”

He glanced around before he leaned in toward me and whispered, “It’s not real.”

“Where did it come from?”

“Where does any prophecy come from? People have lively imaginations.”

“And terrible rhyme schemes.”

He raised an eyebrow. “It’s not that terrible.”

A wild thought struck me, and I leaned forward. “Thorne. Did *you* write that poem?”

He gave me an affronted look that in no way soothed my feelings. “What matters is that you’re here. I believe in you, not in prophecy.”

“I’m not accepting flattery at the moment.”

“It’s not flattery. It’s true.” Thorne’s gaze met mine. “Kaelan is too stubborn to admit it. But he needs you.”

As if we had summoned a certain angry Ice Fae prince, Kaelan burst into the room.

His eyes were wild at first until they met mine, and then it was like a mask draped over his face. His eyes shuddered, and

that cold, handsome, infuriating expression dropped like curtains as he stalked toward me.

The crowd went hushed. The people bowed to one knee.

“Rise,” Kaelan said impatiently as he reached me, jerking his fingers upward to gesture them to move on.

The room had sunk into deep silence.

I didn’t see Azora’s signal, but I was sure she made one. Then suddenly, the music began to play.

Kaelan leaned over the table, his hands braced to either side. “So you are alright. I’m sure you’ll be glad to learn that Jaia should recover ...” Kaelan raised his brows. “If you care?”

“Why are you being an asshole?” I demanded. My heart had swooped up when he burst into the room, looking as if he was desperate to reach me. And then it had plummeted again.

“This is not a conversation to have in front of the peasants.” Thorne said quietly. “The people who are supposed to believe in us.”

“Let’s go,” Kaelan gave Thorne a withering look. “She was almost murdered, and you took her to a party.”

“You’ve taken her to far more parties,” Thorne pointed out. “And all of yours are miserable.”

I quickly hugged some of my new friends goodbye. The children all wanted to show off their dragon wings, making me watch them soar. Kaelan grumbled but waited, knitting his arms over his chest.

Kaelan watched them dance off, the brightly colored fabric fluttering behind them. “Where did that bit of magic come from?”

He sounded so judgmental.

“From me,” Thorne said bluntly.

“It’s a waste of magic when I need you to protect Hanna.”



“No, it’s a way of keeping the people focused on the rebellion. Full of hope.”

Thorne was covering for me. Clearly, Kaelan thought it was ridiculous, and he already thought that I was ridiculous enough.

Azora escorted us grimly back up to the house, though Kaelan plunged into the tunnels with his quick, angry stride as if he knew his way through this labyrinth.

“You take Hannah back,” Kaelan told Thorne as the four of us filed outside. The biting cold stung as soon as it touched my skin, as if my body feared it now.

Then Kaelan shifted. Azora stepped onto one of his paws, clinging to his arm as if they had practiced this many times before, and the two of them soared off into the night sky.

Kaelan would have wanted to be the one to carry me if he weren’t overtaken by rage.

“I’d rather fly with you,” I told Thorne.

“You can still be hurt that he’s an asshole,” Thorne assured me, which surprised me. He gave me a wink right before his black wings sprouted from his back, then shifted completely.

When we landed back in that courtyard, Kaelan turned to Azora angrily. “You’re dismissed.”

His tone made it unclear what exactly she was dismissed from. She gave me a sympathetic look, as if she was wishing me luck. “I’ll check on your tiger.”

“Thank you.”

Thorne, Kaelan and I headed back to his apartments. As soon as we arrived, Kaelan shut the door firmly behind us.

Jaia was on the couch, lying still, her beautiful face slack. My heart bottomed out at the sight.

Dare, who had been sitting beside her, rose. He looked as if he were going to say something sarcastic, but then he saw my face and amended, “She’s in a healing sleep. She’ll wake, Hanna.”

“No thanks to you,” Kaelan said with quiet fury. “What happened, Hanna?”

He was so angry. It instantly made me furious too.

“Some monster in your court tried to kill me,” I snarled at him.

“We didn’t find anything left of it,” Thorne said. “Nothing to use to trace the magic back to where it came from.”

Kaelan held up his hand to stop Thorne. “Obviously, in the end, we will find this person and kill them, but what is the point of having a wife who is as generally difficult and murderous as you are if you can’t *protect yourself*?”

His voice seemed to rise on every word.

“She’s alive,” Thorne disagreed. “And so is Jaia.”

Kaelan scoffed. “You can go,” he told Thorne.

Thorne shook his head.

“That was an order, not a request.”

“Not while you’re shouting at her.” Thorne said. “You’re scaring her.”

The reality of those words jolted me. I hadn’t even realized that was the truth until Thorne said the words, which seemed to hang so baldly in the air.

“Another thing our little Princess is afraid of?” Kaelan demanded with a sneer that stabbed straight into my heart.

“It’s alright, Thorne. I can handle the princeling. His tantrums aren’t that scary. More embarrassing, really.”

A cruel, purposeful look settled over Kaelan’s beautiful features. Whatever he was going to say next, he intended to cut, and to cut deep.

I didn’t want to hear it.

If I had to harden my heart against him too many more times, I was afraid it would never thaw.

Nothing ever seemed to thaw in the Ice Fae kingdom.

I turned on my heel and walked out into that cold labyrinth of a castle.

I didn't make it far before Throne swept behind me and swept me off my feet.

"I don't need to be carried," I told him. "I need to be alone."

"You need me," he told me confidently. "You just don't know it yet."

He carried me down a hallway and into an apartment.

"Yours?" I asked, trying to blink away the blur of tears. I was so curious what his room would be like.

"Yes." He settled onto the sofa, holding me gently, and pressed a kiss to my forehead. "And yours. Like everything else I own."

"Oh, Thorne," I whispered, knowing my voice would break. How could he seem to love me so much, so easily, when he barely knew me? How did I believe that was real?

But I wanted it to be real so badly. I wanted someone to hold onto.

I couldn't break down in front of Thorne. I couldn't break down in front of any Ice Fae.

I was reeling though.

"I wanted to be alone," I told him, pushing off his lap. I had to get away or he was going to see me fall apart.

But Thorne cupped his hands over my shoulders, his big, hard body pressing against my back. His scent that already smelled like home washed over me, along with his warmth. He dipped his head to my ear to tell me, "I don't care."

He was so blunt and unyielding.

"Can you please just give me some space? You're not exactly the kind of man to hold a woman while she cries. If you don't get out of here, I am going to cry!"

“Are you really threatening me like I’m afraid to see you cry?” Thorne asked. “One, I have four sisters. I am not terrified of tears. Two, you have carried this long enough on your own. I’m not going anywhere, Hanna.”

I was surprised to find him suddenly kneeling in front of me, his hands gently caressing my arms. He touched me in a way that reminded me of how Azora had tried to warm me up, although she had been trying to save my life when my body was freezing, and Thorne was trying to help me thaw emotionally.

I was so startled that I blinked away some of the tears in my eyes to stare at him. “You have sisters?”

“Far too many sisters,” Thorne told me.

“You don’t seem like someone with sisters,” I said. “You’re not very emotional.”

“I’ve been the King’s ward since I was seven years old,” he said. “But I do still see my sisters. And every time I see them, and every time we say goodbye, there are so many tears.”

“Yours?” I quipped, finding myself smiling a little.

“Sometimes.”

As was typical with Thorne, I couldn’t tell if he was totally deadpan or if he was serious.

Thorne lifted me into his arms and set me on his lap once more, and this time, I let him. I leaned into him.

He was what I wanted. Even if it felt reckless to let myself want him.

“Let me take care of you,” he said. “I don’t think anyone’s taking care of you like they should in a long time.”

I shook my head. “I have the best family. I’ve been too taken care of. Spoilt.”

“I know how good your family is,” he told me gently. “And I know how complicated family is, too.”

There was a heavy knock at the door, but the knocking barely ceased before the door was thrown open. Kaelan barged in, looking far too large and far too furious.

“Neither of you get to just run away from me.”

“She wasn’t running away,” Thorne said. “She was giving you time and space to tend your wounds.”

Kaelan stared at him, looking affronted, then folded his arms over his powerful chest. “I have no wounds.”

Thorne scoffed. “Really? I assumed it would hurt, trying to extract your head from your ass. Or did you leave it in there?”

“I think you’ve forgotten with whom your loyalty lies,” Kaelan told him, taking a step forward as if he were about to demolish Thorne.

“I am always clear on where my loyalty lies,” Thorne promised him, giving him a hard look. “But the gift of my loyalty has never been in unthinking allegiance.”

“Actually, I think a little unthinking obedience would look good on you.” Kaelan disagreed. He held out his hand to me. “Come, Hanna. Clearly, someone is quite intent on killing you. Until we have the answer, I won’t let you out of my sight.”

“Why?” I demanded.

“What do you mean, why? You know why I need you. I’ve been clear about that. You’ve even seen it for yourself with Azora.”

“No.” I shook my head. Kaelan should have been the one to show me his people, not Azora. “You continue to think the worst of me. And yet, you keep coming back to me. I don’t understand, Kaelan. If you think I’m so weak, if you think I’m unworthy, then why did you bring me to the Ice Kingdom?”

“Because I can’t get you out of my mind!” he exploded. “No matter how hard I’ve tried. And so I keep hoping you’ll be worthy. But that doesn’t change who you are.”

As much as I had wanted to cry earlier, now I felt as cold as ice. “And what am I, Kaelan?”

He looked away, shaking his head. “You’re the woman I want,” he told me. “And the woman that I shouldn’t.”

How did those words rip through me all over again?

Thorne stood abruptly, planting his body between Kaelan and me.

“Bullshit,” Thorne said, sounding even more rough around the edges than he had when he was speaking to me. “Tell her the truth, Kaelan. Tell her why you are struggling so much to be worthy of her.”

Kaelan looked taken aback. “Worthy of her?”

“Or I will,” Thorne threatened.

“You have lost your mind,” Kaelan told him. “We’ve always been closer than brothers. And now you’re willing to throw that away ... why, Thorne?”

Even though Kaelan sounded as cold as ever, I was sure he was really hurt. There was so much true pain underlying his words.

“I do love you like a brother, Kaelan,” Thorne burst out. “I just love her more.”

All three of us looked at each other, stunned. Thorne looked as if he might be just as stunned as any of the rest of us.

“Maybe it’s for the best that you hardly ever talk, Thorne.” Kaelan told him. “Because when you do talk, whatever comes out of your mouth is always a complete fucking surprise. To you, as well, from the looks of it.”

He headed toward the door, then turned back. “And how did you fall in love with her? You barely spent a minute alone with her?”

“And yet,” Thorne told him quietly, “If you ever really looked at her, you would see how worthy she is of love. You’d see that she is already a queen.”

Kaelan kept staring at him. “I’m not sure if I’m more eager to get out of this conversation or beat some sense through your

thick skull.”

“You’re more than welcome to do both. Or try.” Thorne stepped forward.

These two men cared so much for each other. I couldn’t stand to be the reason that relationship fractured. “Please, stop. Don’t throw your friendship away over some stupid fight.”

“Don’t worry,” Thorne told me. “Even after I beat the shit out of him, he’ll still need me.”

Kaelan’s brows arched. “That’s an interesting way to talk to the heir to the throne. Your future king.”

“You’ll only be my king if I help you onto that throne.”

They were having the kind of conversation that people never come back from. I didn’t know how to make it stop.

“I won’t ask again,” Kaelan ground out, his icy gaze sweeping to mine. “Come with me, Hanna. Now.”

I wanted to stay with Thorne. But I needed to protect these two idiots from themselves.

I lifted my chin.

I was a Princess.

Duty first, and a fucking smile always.

But before I had to choose between them, someone knocked on the door. “Prince Kaelan? Your father requests your presence, your highness.”



Kaelan

“Your father said to bring the Princess,” the servant told me.

“She’s irrelevant,” I said, my voice harsh. I couldn’t stand the thought of bringing Hanna into the danger I knew it was

coming.

“You can’t disobey him,” Hanna told me. High color still covered her cheekbones, her face otherwise pale. “We’re so close, Kaelan. Almost to the final trial.”

When I said she was irrelevant, she’d looked at me as if she wanted to kill me, which I didn’t doubt.

She also wanted to win.

“It doesn’t matter. You’re not going to be my queen.”

“Kaelan, listen to me—”

“I can’t imagine what you would say to me that would make a difference.”

“Thank you, we will be along directly,” Thorne told the servant in a friendly voice that didn’t sound like him at all.

He closed the door firmly behind the servant. He was still smiling politely when he turned away from the door, and that smile dropped away.

“You need to listen to her,” Thorne told me. “Don’t be stupid. You’re a lot of things, Kaelan, but you aren’t stupid. *Listen.*”



Hanna

Kaelan crossed his arms over his chest. “Fine. But we have got to move. My father will not appreciate waiting.”

His tone was clipped. He was anxious about the conversation with his father, even if he wouldn’t admit to his feelings.

We moved out into the hallway.



“I didn’t abandon Jaia,” I whispered. “I was trying to lead the monster away. To protect her.”

As we turned the corner into the main hallway, some nobles ambled toward us. Kaelan shot me a look as he reached out for my hand.

The two of us gripped each others hands, smiling away.

Kaelan leaned in to me as if he had an intimate whisper. But his tone was jagged. “And that was the best plan you could come up with?”

He made me so furious that I couldn’t even find words at first. “You were just mad at me because you thought I ran away to abandon her, and now you’re mad at me because I ran away to rescue her?”

“It didn’t look like it was much of a rescue.”

It felt crazy to hold his hand as the two of us rushed along to meet his father, while having this argument. The urgency of it all pressed against my chest like another damned corset.

“You will find any reason to be angry at me, won’t you?” I said through my smile, speaking softly so no one would hear. “You unreasonable bastard.”

“Someone seems very intent on killing you, and you don’t seem very intent on keeping yourself alive,” Kaelan told me in a clipped voice.

“I’m quite committed to keeping myself alive, thank you very much. I can’t help it that you have a cruel kingdom.”

“You’re right about that,” he said, “and I need a queen who can rule a cruel kingdom. Or I need to stand alone.”

I had so much I wanted to say to him, but we were reaching the doors to the throne room. My lips pressed together tightly trying to hold back everything I wanted to say.

Thorne stopped, but gave me an encouraging wink.

We went into the throne room. The Snake Queen’s daughter, Seraphine, stood beside Edric, who was on his throne, towering above us on the dais.

“Father,” Kaelan greeted Edric, giving him one of the bows that I’d found so charming when we first met. Kaelan bowed as if it meant nothing to him, as if nothing could diminish him. As if he were king even when he bowed.

Beside him, I sank into curtsy. We both had a role to play.

“I’ll be direct,” Edric said. “Seraphine was attacked tonight.”

My gaze startled to the girl, though she looked as smug and beautiful as ever. Had the monster left Jaia and gone after Seraphine? Had I not succeeded in killing the monster?

And if so, why would the monster have found its way to Seraphine?

Because she was my competitor to be his bride?

“Are you all right?” Kaelan asked her, but he shifted closer to me. His body was tense, the way it always was near his father.

“I’ll be fine, Prince Kaelan,” she said with a smile in her voice. “Thank you for your concern.”

“What happened?” Kaelan demanded.

“After the party, once her servants left her alone for the night, she was attacked by something that came out of the mirror.”

I stayed silent. Kaelan knew Edric and his court and the Snake Queen far better than I did.

Even though it always hurt to let Kaelan do the talking. He was not great at it.

“Hanna was also attacked,” Kaelan said. “I’m glad you both came to no lasting harm, frightening as it must have been.”

He gave Seraphine a warm smile that made me want to slap him across the face. Why did she get the better side of Kaelan? Why did I get the angry version that hated me for any weakness?

“The attack could have been staged,” Seraphine gave me a sickly smile. “Of course I am not accusing the princess.”

It sounded like she was very much accusing the princess.

“It certainly could have been staged,” I said tartly. Jaia and I had certainly come to far more harm than Seraphine.

“It was old isle magic,” Edric told Kaelan.

“And the isle is full of spies,” I said. “For the Snake Queen.”

No one seemed to be listening to me. Except perhaps Kaelan, who was once again emitting his *shut up shut up shut up* aura.

I shut up. There were times to recreationally aggravate Kaelan and times to follow his lead.

“Kaelan,” Edric said quietly. “Do you know anything about whether or not Hanna was involved? Do you have any suspicions?”

Kaelan’s jaw was so tight it looked like it might shatter. “I *suspect* that Hanna wouldn’t be involved in such a thing. Why would she distract herself from a contest she’s sure to win?”

“Because she hates my mother, just like her sister? Because they are determined to kill my mother and her heirs so they can take over the Snake Kingdom?”

Well, that seemed like projection.

“I wish I could trust that Hanna wasn’t involved,” Edric told Kaelan.

Seraphine and I both seemed like unnecessary additions to this conversation, because Edric and Kaelan seemed focused on each other, tension crackling between them like lightning.

Then Edric added, “And I wish I could trust that you would tell me if you knew she were.”

“I would,” Kaelan said firmly. It was the first time Edric and I had something in common: I had no idea what Kaelan would really do. “My loyalty is to my kingdom, not this girl.”

“And yet it seems you’ve lost your mind since you met her.” Edric shook his head. “If what you know doesn’t prove her innocence—and might very well prove her guilt—then I suppose I will have to hand Hanna over to the Snake Queen for interrogation.”

My stomach dropped out.

I was in another kingdom, far from home and the people who loved me. If Edric and Seraphine kidnapped me to the Snake Kingdom, it would take time for the information to find its way back to the isle. Once it did, war would erupt between our three kingdoms.

Most likely, the Snake Kingdom and the Ice Kingdom would unite. My precious isle would sink under the weight of their soldiers storming our beaches, spreading across our kingdom, and I would be the cause.

“There’s no need of that,” Kaelan’s voice was cold and hard and controlled. It was the voice of a man that would do whatever was necessary. “Please, walk through my mind, Father. See for yourself that Hanna must be innocent.”

“Thank you for the invitation,” Edric said with a broad smile that Kaelan did not return.

And even though Kaelan was perfectly respectful and composed, the lines of tension in his body made me think that one day, he would kill Edric.

Edric and Kaelan faced each other. They looked so alike, with their dark hair and icy eyes and perfect features.

They closed their eyes simultaneously.

Seraphine gave me a searching look.

Maybe she was the one who had tried to kill me. Maybe it was Noxy. Maybe it was Kuria.

“I see the party tonight.” Edric said, and my heart sank as I realized he was going to narrate what he saw in Kaelan’s mind.

Of course I was wildly curious about what went on in Kaelan’s mind, which seemed to be a singularly twisted place.

But I wanted Kaelan to finally tell me himself. I didn't want to hear it from Edric in his amused, contemptuous tone of voice, while Seraphine watched.

“And I see you dancing with all these lovely girls, and yet somehow always watching Hanna.” Edric clucked. “I think it is for the best I can only see what you saw, and not what you *thought*.”

“How is this relevant to her innocence?”

“Merely an observation. After all, Seraphine has a pressing interest in finding her attacker. I simply wanted to narrate for her so that she understands what I am seeing and can be confident that the Princess is no threat.”

There was the faintest barb in his voice on the words *no threat*, implying a second meaning: that there was no threat I would be the one who stood by Kaelan as queen.

Seraphine smiled slightly, giving me the quick, dismissive glance I had seen on the faces of so many girls over the years.

“Then you discovered Jaia was hurt and ... ah, you were in a rage. It looks like you thought Hanna had returned to her old ways and was running from danger. Just as she once abandoned you.”

My gaze flew to Kaelan's face, but of course he was unreadable as always. But was that the story that he believed from the magic that had altered his memories? Was that why he had been so harsh?

“But she was not,” Kaelan said. “She was trying to protect Jaia.”

“If that is true,” Edric said, “then that is admirable. I suppose we'll see when Jaia wakes up, if she does.”

“She will.”

“You should keep a protective eye on her,” Edric said. “In case someone should want to silence her.”

I was beginning to miss the old noble passive-aggressiveness when I wasn't accused that I might murder Jaia in her sleep.

“Jaia is safe.” Kaelan answered.

“If she does turn up dead, it will look most suspicious,” Edric warned, casually, as if he weren’t speaking of one of Kaelan’s best friends. “Hmm. You were so quick to rage and despise the Princess. Such strong feelings.”

“This is necessary?” Kaelan gritted.

“It is. I would certainly see it if you suspected she had unleashed the horror inflicted upon Jaia. You would have told Thorne and Dare. But you thought Hanna was in genuine danger.”

“She was. She almost died.”

“And if she had, you would have been shattered.” Edric shook his head. “I’m not sure if you are more stupid for falling in love with the Princess. Or for how stupid you’ve acted trying to show her love.”

I glanced at Seraphine, but she didn’t seem annoyed Edric had declared Kaelan’s love for me.

Maybe it didn’t matter. It wasn’t as if royals often married for love, anyway.

“Well,” Edric told Seraphine, his eyes still closed. “There is no evidence here that Hanna was involved. I believe she is most likely innocent.”

Kaelan said nothing, but his relief was evident in the way his shoulders relaxed slightly, his fingers twitching at his side as if to shake off the violence he’d been prepared to deal.

Kaelan would have fought to keep me out of the Snake Queen’s clutches.

After all this time, I believed in him.

In some ways.

“But let’s go back farther,” Edric added, and my heart plummeted.

“Why?” Kaelan demanded. “You’ve seen what you entered my mind to see.”

“Have I?” Edric said. “There’s still a larger question of whether you would hide the truth about Hanna. Whether you are so desperate for her to win and take her place by your side that you would allow her, or even help her, to sabotage your competition.”

“Seraphine is not her competition,” Kaelan said tightly.

“If none of your brides are worthy, we might have to begin again to find you a suitable queen,” Edric disagreed. “In the end, what I saw in your mind did not prove Hanna’s innocence. It simply did not prove her guilt.”

“And you’d rather go to war with the isle than assume her innocence?”

“Let’s be frank, Kaelan,” Edric said. “I would always rather go to war with the isle than with the Snake Kingdom.”

“It was the most interesting thing, Seraphine. I first sent him to the isle to meet Hanna with every intention of arranging a useful marriage. I wanted heirs who were dragons—for the sake of the people. They expect so much from their royals.”

“The first time he visited the isle, he and Hanna were so young. Children, really. And he’d thrown a child’s tantrum beforehand, trying to fight my will, telling me he would choose his own bride. But then he met her.”

I closed my eyes, remembering the way I’d once stood on the palace steps with Honor and watched the dark-haired boy in his black tunic bow to her. And even as he bowed, he couldn’t take his eyes off me.

Gods, how did that memory never stop hurting?

I’d been so young and clumsy. Once we went into the ball, Damyn had captured me into his arms for a dance. He’d told me gently to remember I was Kaelan’s equal. I didn’t need to impress him.

“For once, Kaelan admitted that I was right. He visited her every year until she came of age, and when she turned eighteen and she would begin to shift ... he came home and told me she wasn’t a dragon.”

“And for the first time since his mother died, I saw him heartbroken.”

“Gods, Father,” Kaelan said. “So dramatic.”

“I walked through what happened, of course. There was something he wasn’t telling me.”

“Father.”

“Someday you will learn that tone never leads anywhere you want to go, Kaelan.” Edric rested his hands on Kaelan’s shoulders, and Kaelan stiffened. “Hanna and Kaelan were pursuing attackers that came after Hanna’s family, trying to unravel who exactly was at fault.”

“They thought they’d found the attacker. They went to kill them—but found themselves surrounded by monsters. Kaelan fell. He called out for Hanna to help him—and she ran.” Edric shook his head. “Thankfully, my son fought his way out. Alone.”

My hand pressed my chest as if I could hold my heart together. That was what he remembered? He’d seen me scramble away from him desperately when he needed me most?

“Before he came home, he found her to say goodbye.” Edric’s lips tilted. “My son can be quite cruel when he feels betrayed. I can see her now, weeping on the palace steps.”

My heart twisted. Humiliation opened a fresh pit in my stomach.

I’d tried to hold onto what was real, but when Kaelan told me I was unworthy, I was a coward, it sank into my skin. He’d looked down at me with an expression I couldn’t read. Disgust? Regret? It had been complicated.

*“I could never bring such a weak queen home to my kingdom.”*

“Enough, Father.” Kaelan’s voice broke through my memories. It was harsh. Guttured. While Edric told us his story, Kaelan had seen each of those memories. “She was young. It was a long time ago.”



“Is that what you believe?” Edric’s voice was mocking. “Then why have you put her through hell to prove herself?”

“I didn’t choose these trials,” Kaelan said firmly.

Seraphine smiled widely as if she’d enjoyed this bedtime story. I wished I could have the chance to send her a monster.

“No,” Edric said. “But she doesn’t care about anyone else’s judgment but yours, does she?”

Edric stepped back, and from the way they both gasped, he had released Kaelan’s mind. Both of them seemed to slump.

Kaelan swung toward me immediately, his gaze meeting mine.

But there was nothing to say to each other. Not here.

Keelan looked exhausted. Edric seemed to have collapsed into his throne, as if the effort of walking through someone’s mind when they were unwilling to open those doors was terrible.

“You are dismissed,” Edric told Kaelan.

He must hate me even more when that fake betrayal was fresh in his mind.

But however Kaelan and I felt about each other, we walked back out side-by-side.

United, always.

Whether we liked it or not.

## CHAPTER 34



*H*anna

Thorne strode toward us as soon as we walked out. Once we had turned the corner away from prying eyes, he gripped Kaelan's shoulder as if he were preparing for Kaelan's legs to go out from under him.

"It wasn't that bad," Kaelan said curtly. "There wasn't much I had to try to hide, as long as I let..."

His lips pressed together tightly.

"As long as you let him see how you felt?" I asked. "He thought you weren't holding anything else back?"

"Yes." Kaelan's voice was clipped. "It's exhausting, focusing on hiding things from him that I can allow him to see ... but at least it exhausts us both."

"I'll take the Princess back to my room and make sure she's watched over," Thorne said.

"No. We're all going to my room."

"And here I thought you were the jealous type." Things felt bleak right now, and I'd almost been kidnapped to the Snake Kingdom where I'd probably have been sliced apart in the gladiatorial pits my sister had once escaped. I felt entitled to be a little blasé.

Even though Kaelan obviously finds my blasé attitude a bit irksome.

“I’m not.” Kaelan gritted out. “I don’t care if you want to fuck Thorne or hell, Dare, there’s got to be *some* reason the woman fucking queue up for him.”

“I think it’s the knot-tying,” Thorne said in that deadpan way of his that I could never read.

“I’m allowed to fuck who I like ... but am I allowed to love them?” My voice was light and teasing.

But I didn’t feel that way at all.

Kaelan stopped abruptly and pushed me against the marble wall, caging me with his arms. Thorne took a step forward as if he were going to throw a punch at Kaelan, but my gaze flickered to his and he stopped. Thorne’s expression was frustrated, as if it killed him to let this play out, but he stopped. For me.

Kaelan’s big hand wrapped my throat. “Hanna. Eyes on me.”

He so rarely used my name instead of those stupid nicknames. But when he did, it sounded rich, like it melted in his mouth. Paired with the command and his hand pressing my throat, Kaelan took up all my senses, and my gaze met his.

“Good girl,” he said softly. “Listen to me for once.”

“I am,” I said, my voice breathless from his grip.

“Do what you want. Love who you want,” he told me. “But you are *mine*. No matter where you go, what you do, who you fuck ... you’re always mine.”

His lips met mine in a hard, punishing kiss.

“I’m not going anywhere,” I reminded him. “I’ve got a trial to win. An oath to complete.” I smiled up at him, the world turning heady and dark with his hand on my throat. “A husband to torment for the rest of my days.”

He abruptly pushed away from the wall, grabbing the nape of my neck and steering me ahead of him into his apartment.

Dare leapt up from the couch. Jaia was awake beside him, curled up in a thick blanket.

“What happened?” Dare demanded. His gaze took in Kaelan and his worried frown intensified.

“Seraphine claims she was also attacked by the monster. She accused Hanna.” Kaelan said, his voice clipped.

“Your father—”

“Learned nothing of real importance,” Kaelan said. “Nothing that endangers the kingdom.”

“Does your father know Hanna is innocent?” Thorne demanded.

Dare scoffed. “The one and only time I’d use that word to describe her.”

“Does it matter?” Kaelan demanded. “Seraphine wants to marry me, and my father wants an alliance with the Snake Queen. He almost handed her over to the Snake Kingdom tonight.”

Kaelan raked his fingers through his hair. It was one of the few times I’d ever seen him let it show when he was distressed.

But then, he was different with the people he trusted. Thorne, Dare, Jaia.

“Thorne,” he said quietly. “Take Azora. I need you to get down to the village. Make an escape plan for Hanna.”

“Of course.” Thorne touched my arm as he went past me, pausing to look down at me with an expression that was a promise. “You’ll be safe.”

“You will be,” Kaelan said. “I will find a way to keep you safe.”

Thorne leaned in and pressed his lips to my forehead in a tender kiss goodbye. I wrapped my arms around him. Thorne was warm and solid when he hugged me, and he felt like safety—like home in a human form.

Then he was gone.

Once the door closed, Kaelan let out a curse as he paced across the room.

“We’re almost to the last trial,” I reminded him.

“Which you will not survive,” Kaelan said. “If my father didn’t set that trap himself, Seraphine did. I’m not keeping you in this castle if I can’t control the threat.”

“I can take care of myself, Kaelan.” I met his gaze steadily. “Despite what you remember ... I am capable of protecting myself. Of protecting *you*. I can stand by your side.”

He gave me a long, aching look. Then he said, “I release you from your vows.”

My heart bottomed out.

“No,” I said. “No, I’m not interested in being released.”

“This is over,” Kaelan said. “Dare, you’ll bring her back to her isle.”

“No! You absolute asshole, you sent Thorne away because you knew—”

“He’d take your side. I’m not sure how you stole my best friend—” he frowned as Finnias, who was rubbing against my calves. “Or my cat.”

“I’m not going anywhere. Not until this is finished. I made a promise to you for the sake of your kingdom.” The memories of the children fluttering in their brightly colored dragons’ wings, gripping a fragile hope, rose in my mind. “Not just to you. I made promises.”

“Then I’m breaking them for you.” He might be exhausted, but he launched himself to his feet.

I wasn’t going to leave. Not like this.

But I knew Kaelan well enough to know he was not above forcing me to follow his commands, one way or another.

I headed for the door, but Kaelan got there first. He blocked the door, tall and imposing. “Leave us,” he ordered Dare and Jaia. “But don’t go far. The Princess will need help with her travels.”

“Yes, we’re going to find somewhere else to be,” Dare said, helping Jaia up from the couch. “Just... shout if you need

help.”

“Which one of us are you talking to?” I asked.

“I don’t know. You both need help.”

Dare helped Jaia into another room off Kaelan’s apartment, leaving the two of us alone. Jaia gave me a look over her shoulder that was of deep amusement, paired with a *good luck* tilt of her eyebrows.

“You are going back to your own kingdom, and that’s the end of it,” Kaelan told me.

“Kaelan. Do you remember an hour ago?” My voice was sweet, soft, and Kaelan’s brows arched as if he’d been prepared for me to punch him in the face, but wasn’t expecting kindness. “You thought I abandoned Jaia. You were wrong about me. You underestimated me. As always.”

His jaw worked briefly, as if he were flickering through different options on how to answer me. He crossed his arms over his chest, and I expected him to say something barbed and cruel.

“I have,” he admitted.

Something that had been tighter than a corset around my chest relaxed at his unexpected words. “When you thought I just left her ... it reminded you of what happened back on the isle? Before we ended things? And that reminded you of your mother.”

I was beginning to unwind the twisted knots of Kaelan’s mind.

“She’s not really dead. It’s a lie. She ran to another man in another kingdom, and she abandoned me to Edric.”

“Do you ever get to see her?”

He shook his head curtly. He looked pissed—though Angry Kaelan was always attractive to me—but I had the feeling anger was the only way he could bear such a vulnerable conversation.

“No. The last time I saw my mother was the night before she disappeared. She told me she loved me, and she left me this.” He reached into his jacket, then held out his big hand toward me. The ring that had caused all this trouble glinted in his palm. “It is a family heirloom. But not his.”

“Have you ever tried to visit her?”

“I don’t care to.” Kaelan’s voice was clipped. He put the ring into his inside pocket with a casual air, as if he could slip his feelings away just as easily. “The official story is that she died of a fever. It looks awkward when your queen runs away from home.”

“Kaelan—”

“I underestimated you, it’s true,” he interrupted. “But that should make it easy for you to leave me. Find someone who deserves you.”

I scoffed. “I don’t want someone who deserves me. I want *you*. I just want you to stop being an arrogant, stubborn ass.”

“Well, that seems unlikely.” One of his hands cupped my face, his thumb caressing my cheek. “You’re sunshine. My kingdom is a nightmare, and it will be a nightmare until I fix it, and you don’t belong here. I need to know you’ll survive.”

If he just remembered our past, he would know that I could help him. “We can protect each other, Kae. You just have to believe in me.”

“This is for your own good,” he told me.

“Oh no,” I said. “Don’t you dare—”

He leaned in and kissed me, his lips brushing against mine. There was fevered urgency in his kiss, as if he thought it might be the last time.

I wasn’t done fighting, but I would also never be done kissing Kaelan.

His arm slid against my waist, pulling me close to him. Then he let out a groan that vibrated against my lips as if that still wasn’t good enough. He grabbed my hips and lifted me up against his body. My thighs wrapped his waist to steady

myself as he kept kissing me, while he carried me across the room as easily as if I weighed nothing.

He sank onto the couch, and I straddled his lap, trading urgent, needy kisses with him.

My lips parted against his, and his tongue teased against mine. The heat between my thighs throbbed, and his cool skin felt good against my own.

He moved to my throat, his lips caressing behind my ear before he whispered, “Strip for me. I want to see what’s mine.”

*One last time.*

He didn’t say it, but I heard it.

The Ice Fae Prince wanted to send me away because he loved me too much. I intended to remind him tonight of how much he needed me.

I rose up onto my knees, still straddling his lap, and drew my dress over my head. My breasts swung in his face, and he captured one in his hand, drawing my nipple into his mouth as he met my gaze. My body sang.

How could I hate him so much sometimes and still love the way he touched me?

Hell, how could I hate him so much sometimes and still love *him*?

Then the Prince’s hands and lips were on my body, hard and punishing and wild with need. I helped him strip off his shirt. This body, all broad shoulders and hard ridged abs and light, almost sparkling, almost unmarked skin was all mine. But there was the tiny tattoo on his shoulder.

His father had just walked through his mind. Surely he wouldn’t do so again soon—and if he did, it was most important that I stay here, even if it meant the mask concealing my real powers was burnt away.

I couldn’t leave Kaelan to face Edric and Seraphine and the Snake Queen alone.



I leaned forward again, kissing his mouth over and over as I drew his long, thick cock from his trousers. I stroked my thumb over its tip, feeling how it beaded with precum.

Kaelan's fingers hooked in my panties and he ripped them away from my body. My hips jerked, and then they were gone.

I frowned down at him. "Did you just waste your magic on disintegrating my favorite panties?"

"They were in my way."

"They were my favorite."

"No," he disagreed. "I'm your favorite."

Then he captured my mouth with his, his fingers teasing between my thighs. I ground down on his hand, feeling his tongue dominate my mouth, and I found I could forgive him for his casual mistreatment of my underwear.

I rubbed the tip of Kaelan's cock against my aching need.

"I need to feel you around my cock." He gripped my hips and drew me down, settling me onto his cock in one hard, swift movement.

I let out a cry at the feeling of him filling me utterly. As I rode Kaelan, grinding down against him, feeling his big cock slam against my inner spot over and over, he watched me as if he was memorizing the way I felt.

The two of us came together, my body shuddering against his. He pressed his face against my breasts, his lips parting as he came, as if he wanted me as close to him as possible.

He kissed me again, this time slow and tender. A kiss goodbye.

Not today.

He needed to remember.

My fingers traced the tiny rune tattoo on his shoulder that had been hidden for so long, even from his own sight. I'd marked it myself, the same way Lynx had made my tattoo that protected me from oaths until Setti burnt through it.

And I murmured the words of my spell.

“What was that?” Kaelan murmured against my throat.

“Nothing.” I tried to smile, even as my fingers slid over the skin on his shoulder again, helplessly, needlessly.

I’d never felt naked and vulnerable like I did in this moment, straddling his lap, murmuring the words of my spell against his hair so he wouldn’t see me.

But nothing happened.

I pulled back to look at him.

The mark on his shoulder was gone.

“Kaelan,” I whispered urgently. “Do you remember what happened on the isle? When we ended things?”

“Of course I do.”

Relief ripped through me like I’d just swum up from almost drowning.

“But it’s alright,” he told me. “You were young. We both were. I can forget it. You can forgive yourself.”

He didn’t remember.

It felt as if a stone had dropped into my stomach.

I scrambled off his lap, looking for my clothes—or what was left of them. Not that it would change how I felt: naked, hopeless, and lost.

Were those memories even real if I was the only one who remembered them?

“Do you have any idea where my panties are?” I muttered. “Did you send them to an entirely different dimension? Are they floating through another world?”

“Hanna.”

My dress was already over my head. I pulled it the rest of the way into place and looked at him. He was off the sofa, crossing to me urgently as if he needed me to hear him.

“I don’t want to send you away. But I love you too much to let you stay.”

I’d told him once that I would tell him *I love you* back when his memories were returned to him.

I had clung to that thought all these long years. One day, Kaelan would have his memories; one day, I would have Kaelan.

The most persistent daydream of my life had been when he would remember our shared past, and this time when he said he loved me, I would say it back.

“I love you,” he told me, as if I had missed what he meant the first time.

But I was reeling in my grief of the lost memories. I couldn’t catch up in time with the destruction of that daydream. I couldn’t figure out how to say *I love you* back when everything about this moment was so wrong.

So I watched his eyes cloud, but he nodded his head. “I thought I could protect you ... and my kingdom. I thought I could have the woman I desired and duty, too.”

“Don’t do this,” I whispered, already knowing what was coming.

He touched my cheek, looking down at me kindly. “You’re sunshine. And you belong someplace you can shine. That’ll never be this dark kingdom. I won’t let you stay here and be ruined.”

“Kaelan.”

But he was already looking over my head, toward the room where Jaia and Dare had disappeared. He raised his voice, pitched deep and magical, to be heard through walls.

“Take her home.”

## CHAPTER 35



*H*anna

I woke up in one of those blurry fogs of sleep, feeling like the morning after Solstice when I'd consumed too much spiced wine. The room seemed to be moving, the bed pitching side to side, and my stomach clamped with nausea.

Wait. The room was moving. Slowly, side to side.

I was on a ship.

I sat up, with vague memories of the past beginning to drift back to me as if they might be real or dreams.

Had Kaelan thrown me over his shoulder?

Had I punched Dare across the face?

Had they used magic to subdue me?

The door opened, and Dare came in. He was nursing a rather large, vivid bruise across one chiseled cheekbone. Since he had the power to heal himself, I'd wager *that* memory was real. He wanted me to see it and feel sorry for hitting him.

It was as if he didn't know me at all.

"So the sleeping princess wakes." He sounded mocking, but then, mockery was his default.

I was in a large, wood-paneled room with light blue silk curtains; though the windows, I could see the sun glittering off the ocean. The royal quarters.

But when I tried to sit up, my wrist jerked.

I was chained to the bed in the royal quarters.

“How far have we gone?” My voice was a rasp after sleep.

“Far enough.”

“Dare. Be reasonable.”

He leaned against the door, crossing his arms. His blond hair was disheveled above the hard lines of his face and his pouty lips; it was a good look for him. The smirk was the only thing that ruined it.

“If I were looking for advice on *being reasonable*—and I’m not—I wouldn’t come to you, Princess.”

“Kaelan needs me!”

He shook his head. “You are a distraction.”

“You don’t know anything.”

“I know that Kaelan loses his mind when he even thinks about you, forget when you’re drifting around the Ice Kingdom, smiling mysteriously, like a mischievous brat with too many secrets he needs to unravel.”

I cocked my head at him. “Dare ... I need you to stop and think about whether that’s how Kaelan sees me, or how you \_\_\_”

“I’m not betraying him for you,” Dare cut me off. “He needs you safe. So you’re going to be safe.”

I blew out a slow breath. Arguing with Dare was just going to make him more obstinate. I needed to find another way.

“Are you going to keep me chained to the bed all the way to the isle? Because I’m hungry.”

“Yes.”

My brows arched. “Yes, you’re going to keep me chained? What am I going to do, steal a rowboat and row my way back across the ocean?”

“It sounds to me like you already have a plan.” He opened the door and leaned out. When he turned back, he was carrying

a plate. “Luckily, so do I.”

“Dare. I’m going to need to pee.”

“Jaia will help you.”

I scoffed. “No.”

“Then wet the bed,” he told me. “I don’t give a fuck. It’s Kaelan’s bed.”

He came and sat down on the edge of the bed, then gave me a baleful look. “I don’t trust you with a fork.”

“Are you kidding me right now, Dare?”

“Not at all. I know you’ll try to find a way to escape, because someone told you *no* for once in your life and Gods forbid you let that stand. So no, I’m not releasing you so you can pee—and knock me unconscious—or giving you a fork—so you can stab me.”

Those were my top two plans at the moment, more or less. Though I wouldn’t stab him in anything that would kill him, and we *did* have healers. It wasn’t that cruel.

It was annoying that he could see right through me.

He speared some eggs and held up the fork. “So, you can open your mouth like a sweet little bird and I’ll feed you, or you can starve. You won’t die going hungry for two days crossing the ocean.”

“I hate you,” I told him, boiling inside.

“I know.” He smiled at me. “It’s delightful.”

I opened my mouth. I was hungry. I could plan better ways to escape—and possibly torture Dare along the way—on a full stomach.

Dare, for all his carelessness when he talked, fed me carefully. He picked up a pastry and looked at it, then at me. “If you bite me, there will be consequences.”

“Is that a cherry tart? I’m not going to bite you.”

“Mm. Because cherry tarts are sacred to you? Because you don’t want to miss your other meals? Or because you know I

can slap you across the face now and Kaelan will never know?”

“I might not mind,” I told him, and his eyes darkened.

I parted my lips for the tart, suddenly sure that Dare wished I’d open my mouth for something else.

I was on my best manners, eating the tart as he gripped it in his long fingers. There was icing on his fingers when he was done, and he held them out toward me. There was a challenge in his deep green eyes.

“You really do want to tempt me so you can slap me, don’t you?” But before he could pull away, I wrapped my mouth around his first two fingers and sucked on them, swirling my tongue around the sweetness of the icing.

He looked at me as if he wanted to eat *me* for breakfast. Then, as if he were rousing himself from a dream, he rose from the bed.

“Dare,” I called after him.

He must’ve had the distinct impression I would try to seduce my way out of the chains—which was absolutely correct—because he didn’t respond.

The door shut, unnecessarily firmly, behind him.

Gods. I had highly problematic taste in men. Show me a dominating dragon shifter with a toxic personality and a cocky smile, and I forget that I’m supposed to be a normal, healthy woman who likes normal, healthy men.

I guess the normal-and-healthy ship sailed a while ago,

I looked at that damned cuff still locked to my wrist. That was the real chain binding my power.

Without the cuff, I could burst off these chains. If only I could shift into my dragon form, I could fly back to Kaelan. I could be fully myself, and I could fight through the last trial and claim my husband.

Sure, I’d have the rulers of two kingdoms trying to murder me. But still.

The cuff blocked my magic to just a trickle so I didn't inadvertently give myself away. I'd never had the best impulse control. But what happened if I kept exerting my power? Could I overwhelm the enchantment and make the bracelet fail?

It was worth trying. I was chained to the bed. Did Dare really think he could chain me up and I'd stay out of trouble?

I was at my worst—or best, depending on your perspective—when I was bored.

I concentrated all my magic on making the cuff explode off my wrist. My magic strained. The cuff burnt against my skin. I sealed my lips but a muffled sound of pain still escaped as the cuff felt as if it were searing into my skin. I dug my head back into the pillow, trying to ride out the pain as agony lanced through my body.

The door flew open.

Dare charged in with sword drawn, clearly intent on killing whoever hurt me.

My magic flared from the cuff, and I let out a scream as the pain ripped through my skin, burning through my flesh.

Then with my concentration broken, my magic flickered into nothingness. I fell back on the bed, exhausted.

“What, may I ask, the fuck,” he began as he started toward me.

His gaze fell on the deeply singed burn around the cuff, and he leaned toward me before he realized he was within arm's reach with a weapon. He retreated to put the sword on the table, then returned, sitting on the side of the bed. His gaze was intent on the wound as he took my arm in his hands gently.

“You're hurting yourself,” he scolded me.

“It doesn't matter,” I said.

He scoffed, but his face was pale. “It matters to me. This room smells like burnt flesh and deranged princess.”



“Don’t you understand?” I exploded. “Nothing matters to me except winning the trials! If Kaelan marries Seraphine—if the Snake Kingdom invades our isle—then everything I’ve done in my life is pointless!”

“If Kaelan marries Seraphine, it will be to keep the Snake Kingdom from invading your isle.”

Those words, *if Kaelan marries Seraphine*, were a dagger to my heart every time I spoke or heard them. They burnt worse than the open flesh across my arm.

“What do you mean?”

“That’s what he said. He intends to protect your kingdom as well as ours, though ...” The tightness of his jaw told me he thought Kaelan was playing a losing game.

For once, Dare and I agreed. It was a losing game ... unless Kaelan had me at his side.

“So what you were doing here, exactly?” Dare asked with a tilt of his brows. “You thought you would just cause major injuries to yourself, then row home to Kaelan and win—if you don’t succumb to your burns first?”

“The injuries were not part of my plan.”

“Well, thank the gods for that. If you want someone to hurt you a little, you can always call me. There’s no need for all this drama.”

He laid his cool hands over the burn. His magic was an icy blue shimmer under his palm, and the pain went numb. Then my skin began to heal. Pink, new skin formed from the edges of the wound, healing over; the worst of the deep open red wounds slowly began to heal.

“I’ll do whatever it takes to save Kaelan, and to save your kingdom,” I told him.

His gaze flickered up from the wounds to my face. “Yes. I can see that.”

The last of the wounds healed, but Dare was still holding my arm. “You’re never going to get the cuff off like that,” he told me. “Don’t try it again.”

“Do you know what enchantment bound it to my wrist?”

“I have a good idea. And no, I’m not going to tell you.”

“Have I told you lately that I hate you?”

“Every time you do, it sounds so sweet to my ears.” He rose from the bed. “I’ll send Jaia in to help you. Try not to hurt yourself while you’re—briefly—unsupervised.”

I had the suspicion that now, either Jaia or Dare would stay with me until we reached the isle.

It’s what I would have done.

“I can help him,” I called after him as he reached the door. “I can save your kingdom.”

He turned back with a sigh. “At what cost, Hanna?”

It was the most serious I’d ever heard him sound.

“Why do you care?” I demanded.

“Sometimes, I think you must be stupid.” His lips quirked on one side, but it was different from his usual smirk. “And other times, I know you are.”

Then he was gone.

I threw myself back into my pillows, feeling overwhelmed by despair.

Kaelan would never remember our true past. Was what we shared even real when I was the only one who remembered it? I’d be welcomed back home, but... the memory of a beautiful, shining ice palace and the darkness it contained rose in my mind. Of people living deep underground to hide from the cold, and children dancing with their pretend wings.

And I longed to go home, but not to the one I had known.

Tears spilled down my cheeks, and with my hands chained, I couldn’t wipe them away.

Jaia came in, and I turned my face, embarrassed to be caught crying by the girl who seemed to face everything with a wink... and perhaps some socially awkward snark.

“Dare sent me to help you.”

“Yes.” I blinked hard, but I couldn’t make the tears disappear. “My apologies. I realize you’re quite the warrior, and now you’re being demoted to—”

“I’m going to help you,” she said, with an edge in her voice. She held up a key on a thread of leather. I would guess that key had once hung around Dare’s throat.

I sat up as much as I could, struggling against the pillows.

“Did Dare tell you that this cuff blocks my powers?” I asked. “I think someone enchanted it so I can’t take it off.”

“No, he didn’t tell me,” she said, and offered me a beatific smile. “I don’t need to hear anything from Dare.”

“Jaia—” I didn’t know how to convince her to help me. She and Azora and Dare were all sworn to be loyal to Kaelan. It was obvious they all loved him, in their own ways.

She came and sat beside me. “I know Kaelan.”

“Mm.” The memory of how she had danced with him rose in my mind, accompanied with sudden bitterness that tasted like iron. “I’ve noticed.”

She gave me a long look. “I doubt that very much. Because I know him so well, I know a few things. One, he has the power to defeat his father and to be the king our kingdom needs.”

“He needs me to protect his kingdom.”

She shook her head. “I don’t believe in prophecy, and I especially don’t believe in that prophecy. There’s nothing about you that is special.”

“Thanks.”

“Except that you make Kaelan ... complete,” she went on. “Our kingdom doesn’t need you. But our king does.”

She gripped my forearm. Her wrist pressed against the cuff.

“There’s no easy way of removing one of these cuffs after the enchantment’s in place, without visiting one of the temples

where their enchantments were sealed,” she said. “It can only be transferred.”

An electric tingle ran through my arm, radiating up from the cuff. Then it turned so bright and intense I had to muffle a sudden cry of pain.

Jaia bit out a curse, even though she must have known it was coming.

Then the two of us were sitting across from each other, and the cuff glinted around her wrist.

“I believe in you,” she told me. “But don’t make me regret this. If you get yourself killed, Kaelan will have me exiled.”

“I won’t let you down.”

“Just don’t let *him* down,” she said. “I’ll take care of myself.”

She rose and looked down at the cuff around her wrist, as if it were heavy. “Now, shall we launch a small mutiny and turn this ship around?”

“No. Sailing will take too long, and I need to get back before the last trial. But thanks to you and Thorne and even Dare and Kaelan ... I think I’m finally finding my wings.”

## CHAPTER 36



*H*anna

The Ice Fae Kingdom looked beautiful from the sky.

I landed out of sight of the castle. As my wings folded into my back and I shifted back, I stepped down into the snow—and stumbled. It had been a long time since I had flown.

But no one was around to watch me except an awe-struck little girl carrying an armful of firewood. I held up a finger to my lips, then began trekking toward the castle.

As I walked, I gathered the thin threads of magic and heat from the frosty air and spun them into a thick fiery red coat and a pair of boots that warmed my toes. I breathed out my magic, and my hair spun itself into a smooth, shiny bun at the base of my head. Thick black gloves, embroidered with bits of diamond, covered my hands.

I should look like a queen.

I strolled into the open courtyard and the servants there gawked at me.

Azora came running—she must have been summoned from somewhere—and she ran toward me as if she wanted to hug me. It made me smile, even though she stopped herself.

Then I saw Seraphine, stepping out of Edric's throne room. She froze as if she were going to turn to stone.

“There you are, your highness,” Azora said brightly, for the sake of the servants and royals who stood around listening. “The last trial is about to begin. They must be waiting on you.”

“I’m sure they are.” I aimed a smile at Seraphine, like a bright throwing blade. “We all know who Kaelan wants to be his queen.”

Azora and I walked together rapidly through the halls toward the garden. My wrist felt bare—I couldn’t shake the feeling that something was missing, even though the truth was everything had been added.

I would face the last trial with all my power.

These other royal girls had been trained too, though, according to Thorne. I couldn’t be cocky.

“Prince Kaelan will be surprised to see you arrive,” Azora said very softly.

“I know how much the Ice Fae love surprises.” I could add surprises to the list alongside desserts and sunshine and joy.

When we burst out the doors, King Edric was standing in front of a fountain, which seemed to frame him; the other two final girls stood in front of him. Kaelan and Thorne waited beside Edric.

Kaelan raised his gaze as soon as I stepped outside, as if he were attuned to me. His eyes widened, giving him away, before he folded his arms over his chest. He’d almost managed to school his reaction completely.

Thorne, on the other hand, gave me a grin. There was no surprise on his face, as if he had known I’d come strolling into the garden for the final test.

I loved that man.

Edric’s eyes flickered to me. But his face didn’t change.

“It’s time to call on all your powers,” Edric told us. “In this final test. Only one bride will be left at the end.”

“So you mean the others will be eliminated?” I asked as I joined the crowd. “because I have to be honest, it kind of sounds like you’re talking about all the other brides being murdered by the end.”

No one answered my question. Noxy turned and gave me a nasty look. I wasn’t convinced she was the one behind the attempts on my life anymore, but I also wouldn’t be inviting her to any hair-braiding parties anytime soon.

“It’s only you now,” Edric told us. “No one can help you. You’ll have to stand on your own feet.” His gaze met mine. “A rare challenge for a royal.”

“What exactly are we supposed to do?” I demanded.

“You’ll need to find the crown,” Edric told me. “The crown you’ll wear is somewhere out there in the snow.”

When Edric moved away, he raised a hand, signaling.

Kaelan didn’t waste any time stalking toward me with fury written on his face.

“You can’t blame a girl for escaping,” I told him, and clucked my tongue in disapproval. “You didn’t even have the courtesy to kidnap me yourself.”

He rested one hand on my shoulder and leaned in to whisper. His breath was soft against my ear, unlike his words. “In the unlikely event you survive, I’m going to teach you that when I chain you up, I expect you to *stay*.”

“That sounds fun but ultimately fruitless for you,” I promised with a smile.

His jaw worked as he straightened. No matter how cold he sounded, his gaze on mine was on fire.

Kaelan wanted to protect me, and he wanted to kiss me—and he definitely, at the moment, wanted to punish me. And his mask was off when he looked at me now. I could feel all his emotions radiating from his body.

And it was the only thing that made Kaelan warm.

“Tell me you didn’t do any permanent damage to Dare in your escape.”

“Just his pride.”

He nodded. “I’m sure he’ll recover. He’s always had a surplus of pride.”

It felt like such a normal conversation, but there was anxiety threaded through the tense lines of his body.

“Relax,” I told him, stepping close, running my hands up his chest. “I promise to survive. So take some deep breaths, count to ten, imagine yourself in your happy place punishing me.”

Kaelan’s gaze met mine, startled. Then his lips quirked. “You know me well. Behave out there.”

“What does that mean in this context?”

“It means kill anyone you have to kill and come home to me.” As if he couldn’t resist, he suddenly grabbed my waist and dragged my body against his. His lips plundered mine in a hard kiss goodbye.

“Ladies! It’s time to go!” Edric called.

Kaelan’s lips grazed my cheek as he gently cupped my neck with his hand. “I wish you wouldn’t play these stupid royal games. I wish you were home and safe. But if you must ... come back my queen.”

“Queen is fine, but I like it better when you call me goddess,” I told him as I stepped back.

“You’re always my goddess,” he said, his palm lingering against the curve of my throat. His brows arched suggestively. “No matter what I do to you.”

Lust throbbed between my thighs.

But the last trial that stood between us was waiting, so I turned and walked across the garden toward Edric. Thorne fell in beside me, looking as if he had secrets to tell me about what I would face.

Edric snapped his fingers.



From the look of the nobles around us, his actions were unexpected.

The ground shifted beneath my feet.

The world went cold and dark and for a moment, I thought I was dying.

Suddenly, I was sliding down a slick, snowy slope. My arms windmilled as I tried to catch myself.

I finally came to a stop, my heart in my chest, my heels dug into the snowy bank. I stood at the side of an enormous, snow-swept hill. Almost nothing broke the landscape: it was an endless series of snowy peaks, and the late morning sun reflecting off the snow was so intense, it turned the snow to diamonds and made it almost impossible not to close my eyes.

As I began my trek, an enormous shadow darkened the landscape. Dragons circled overhead, always watching us, dwarfing us, judging us.

When I thrust my hands into my pockets, I touched something hard and cold.

A dagger.

Who had slipped a dagger into my pocket? Thorne? Kaelan himself?

My next step was finding shelter. I searched for a cave or a hollowed out tree, somewhere I could heat with minimal magic and wait out the deathly cold of the night.

The cold was already seeping into my bones, and I was curious how the other girls fared. Thorne had said even Ice Fae royals were stronger than they looked, and these other potential brides were less susceptible to the cold than I was.

Somewhere out here was the old Ice Fae palace. Was it buried under too many layers of ice and snow in this frozen hellscape for me to reach? Were there rooms, warm and safe, buried beneath our feet just like when I had stumbled through the Fae village?

My eyes scanned the icy surface, panning left and right. As I stepped forward, my boot caught on something hard

protruding from the snow. A spot of gold winked up at me like a secret. Crouching down, my fingers brushed against a jagged edge of cold metal—the tip of a buried crown.

Maybe for once, luck was on my side. What would happen once I had the crown? Would this hellish scavenger hunt end and we would all be snapped back to the garden?

Or... would only the winner return to the garden? Would everyone else perish out here?

But for now, I had to get the crown out, and snow and ice seemed to be packed around it.

I muttered a spell under my breath to melt the ice and snow around the crown, but then the gold began to sweat and blister too.

“Ah, fuck, no.” Do not melt your own crown.

It was safer to dig it out.

I used my gloved hands to scoop out the snow around it. My fingers stung with cold, even through the fabric, and they were turning numb and heavy. It might have just been in my head; I was traumatized by the cold when I'd been trapped outside the castle walls.

Would another storm come on soon, like the one where I'd almost been lost?

As I dug deeper, I started to feel a strange sense of unease. It was like someone was watching me, or maybe something. I looked up, but the dragons were still circling overhead.

Was Kaelan watching me in approval?

Just in case it was him, I made a crude gesture. He might not understand it in his dragon form, but I hoped he did.

Finally, I unearthed enough of the crown to use one last spell to melt the rest of the ice away.

I yanked the crown out of the ice with a satisfying cracking sound.

As my fingers wrapped around the metal, which seemed to be so cold it burnt even through the gloves, I knew I'd just

made a mistake.

I'd found the hidden crowd in this miserable scavenger hunt so quickly? It was too easy.

This had to be a trap.

Everything in the Ice Fae Kingdom felt like a trap.

I clutched the crown tightly in my hands as the ice and snow began to tremble beneath me.

A crack seemed to race down the hillside toward me, and I leapt aside. The snow began to rush beneath my feet like the sand going out at tide.

I struggled to keep my balance, beginning to slide down the hill.

Something white and terrible rose from the crack.

It took me a second to realize it was a thing, not snow itself.

But a monster.

An imposing figure made from rippling snow and ice was emerging from the ground.

My heart raced as I stumbled back. The monster roared, its giant jaws open wide. Its eyes were like two icy pools of hatred that seemed to be looking straight at me.

Just as with the reflection monster, I was sure this monster was piloted. I was seeing the hatred someone felt for me through the monster.

"I'm still going to win," I said, raising my hands and aiming a blast of magic at the monster.

Snow plumed off its body but the force of the magic made me fall backward.

The monster began to move across the snow toward me, gaining size as it picked up snow like the world's worst snowball.

As the monster took form, the mountain seemed to shake.

The avalanche swept me away, and the ice monster with it.

I rolled desperately onto my stomach and tried to stay on top of the sliding snow, acting as if I were swimming.

I caught a glimpse in the distance of Kuria watching me, her mouth hanging open. I screamed out to her for help, but I didn't get the time to see her respond before my head went under into the deep white. Snow filled my mouth and for a second I couldn't breathe. That I managed to go on, fighting my way up.

I slammed into a hole in the ice and fell through it.

Snow filled up the space above me, and I almost panicked and tried to struggle up and break through the snow. Then I realized I was sheltered. for now. I could breathe.

The snow over my head felt so oppressive, and the ground still seemed to be shaking around to me. Slowly, the light above me that was blowing through the snow faded, until I was in darkness.

Panic almost overwhelmed me. The more I thought about how much air was trapped beneath the snow with me, the more panic tightened my chest until it felt as if I couldn't breathe.

I raised my light, forming a little glowing ball on the palm of my hand. It glittered off the snow surrounding me, eerily beautiful. My breathing was too loud in the confined space, and I bit my lip, trying to find something else to focus on.

Slowly, I realized that the lip that jutted out and had blocked the snow wasn't a natural sheet of ice.

The ice formed across it glinted when my light hit it in just the same way the castle walls cast an ethereal glow when the light hit them.

Was it possible I'd found the old, lost castle?

I moved to explore, but the snow around me shifted, and I stopped. Not now. But maybe this would be the shelter I could come back to later.

For now, I needed air, and I needed to make the most of the daylight hours.

When everything had come to a stop and was still and quiet, I began to dig my way up. I could have used my magic to explode a hole through that snow up and out. But I was afraid that if I did that I would trigger another avalanche. So instead, I dug my way out. My muscles strained and ached.

Finally, I broke through and breathed in loud greedy grasps of air. I had been drowning.

It was growing dark out here too. Night was coming. The sky above felt dark and heavy. Where were Kuria and Noxy?

The ice monster was still out here somewhere. Would he hunt them? Or had one of them sent it after me?

I wished I could feel the sun on my face. I stared at the setting sun, casting its long reddish spires across the snow as it died, as if it had betrayed me.

Had I really spent so long on nothing but surviving the avalanche and the monster? My bones ached as if the cold were etching itself into them.

A blood curdling scream made my heart freeze.

For a second, I was silent and still as the deer the second before it leapt in front of the arrow. My blood rushing through my ears was almost as loud as the scream, which had faded now into the endless expanse.

Was one of the girls in danger?

Or trying to lure me to my death?

There could be only one winner. I didn't need to go running to the defense of some girl like Noxy who would kill me in a heartbeat

But no matter how much I told myself that, I couldn't convince myself to believe it.

Instead I found myself running forward through this snow that seemed to suck at my boots as if it had become a malevolent force.

I could happily spend the rest of my life in the sun and never see another snowfall. Winter was overrated. It was only

cozy and beautiful if you're inside.

I rose over the side of the enormous hill and could see Noxy in the half-twilight.

The ice monster backhanded her and Noxy flew across the snow. She landed heavily and began to try to crawl away as the ice monster strode toward her.

She turned onto her back, reaching for a weapon—but she didn't have one.

“Aim for its heart!” I shouted at her as I drew the dagger and charged toward her.

I threw it toward her. She jerked to one side instinctively; the dagger was sheathed but she must not have realized. It fell in the snow a few feet from her.

Despair flashed across her face.

The monster turned its head over its shoulder, saw me, let out a cry—and then turned back to attacking Noxy.

So she wasn't the one controlling it?

“Hey!” I shouted, flinging my magic at the beast. Blasts of my magic left dents in the creature's snow, and water trickled down from the dents like blood.

My magic was far warmer than any of the Ice Fae. Most of the time, that seemed like a weakness; my magic was weaker here without the sun and I suffered more in the cold.

But my magic was hot, and that was a good thing.

The monster let out a roar and swiped at me, sending me flying. I landed next to Noxy. Then the creature turned back to Noxy.

She hadn't wasted the moment of distraction. She crawled the last few feet and grabbed the dagger, swinging around with it. The sheath flew across the snow as the monster leapt at her.

She drove the blade up into the ice heart in its chest.

The ice shattered around the blade and snow rained around us both.

Our breathing was loud and ragged. Then slowly, I realized that she was armed, and I was not.

I had put the weapon in her hand that she could now turn on me.

I started to gather the threads of my magic, drawing it around my fingers, imagining how I would blast her halfway across the ice.

For a few long heartbeats, the two of us breathed heavily, staring at each other from across the monster we just defeated.

To my surprise, Noxy flipped the knife around, catching it by the blade and offered it to me hilt first.

There was a wary look in her eyes. She didn't trust me not to try to kill her either.

I slid my dagger into my pocket.

Darkness was beginning to creep across the endless snow as the last of the sun died. The temperature was dropping.

"Thank you," Noxy said, sounding as if the words are being ripped from her chest. "You didn't have to save me."

I didn't bother to say that she would have done the same for me. I was pretty sure Noxy would have watched me apart by a nice monster and the nicest thing that she would have done would be not to smile about it.

"I did." I climbed to my feet. "Did you try to kill me, Noxy? In the garden?"

"What?" she looked so perplexed that I believed she meant it; I was good at reading people. The next heartbeat, she was back to her usual smug expression. "If I ever try to kill you, you'll know it, believe me. When you wake up in the next life."

No one knew what had happened in the garden, and Noxy didn't either.

"What was in the seed you threw into the water?"

She glanced away. Then she held up her gloved hand and yanked one glove off.

She was missing her left thumb.

How had I not noticed before?

“I’ve been using magic to make sure no one can see,” she said. “I don’t want Kaelan to reject me for being imperfect.”

Oh, I definitely did not think being imperfect was an eliminating factor for Kaelan. I made imperfect into an art form.

“Are you happy now?” She frowned as she pulled the glove back on, looking disgusted to have revealed anything to me.

“Why?”

“You have to give up a piece of yourself for the magic.”

The memory of my scale, tucked into the greenery, rose into my mind. Something cold settled into my gut. What if I hadn’t understood the magic when I placed the scale... and I had accidentally given up my dragon?

I would have been panicked if I hadn’t just flown.

“I have to find some shelter for the night.”

“I do too.” she hesitated. “We could work together.”

I’d thought Noxy was trying to kill me.

But if she was ... why had the ice monster tried to kill *her*?

And if we spent more time together, I’d be able to suss out her secrets.

I was more and more sure it was the Snake Queen who was hunting us both down.

“Just for the night,” I said.

“Just for the night,” she agreed.

The two of us began our trek across the snow. We had slid down the hill as we struggled with the monster and now we had to climb back up. My eyes watered from the cold and I pulled my scarf up to cover my nose and mouth, which were beginning to freeze.



“This must be hard on you, Sunshine,” she said.

“Sunshine, really?”

“Isn’t that what Prince Kaelan calls you?”

“No,” I said stiffly, wondering why she would think that ... or if she was just mocking me.

She threw me a look I couldn’t read. Then we heard a cry of pain and saw someone tumbling down the hillside.

Kuria.

I ran to help her.

“What are you doing?”

“She’s in trouble.”

Behind me, Noxy said, “I don’t think we can be friends.”

“We’re never going to be friends, Noxy,” I called back.

Kuria’s small, dark figure sat up with a cry.

“Are you alright?”

She shook her head. “I was attacked by this monster. I managed to hide, but I think I broke my ankle ...”

It was hard to tell with her boots, but she let out a real sob of pain as she tried to rise.

“I found shelter,” she told me. “If you help me get to it, I’ll make sure you find your way inside.”

“Of course,” I said. “We were never going to leave you.”

“I don’t think you understand the nature of the game,” Noxy said dryly behind me. “Or the nature of the Ice Fae.”

But the allure of shelter was promising, and Kuria claimed she had found an entrance to the lost castle. So Noxy also looped an arm under the other girl’s shoulders and together the three of us half-staggered, half-dragged Kuria across the ice... to a door half-buried in the snow.

She’d obviously found shelter here, huddled in the doorway in an overhang from the snow, because it was stained with blood.

I hated to use my magic in front of them, but there was no choice.

I raised my magic to blast in the door.

Then the three of us stumbled into a cold hallway. A servant's entrance.

It was bitterly cold in here too, but sheltered. We dared to blow the gathered snow from the chimney and built a fire.

It felt strange to strip off our cold wet clothes and hang them up to dry, the three of us extremely vulnerable with each other.

"If my parents could see me now..." Noxy muttered. "Consorting with the enemy."

"I am so very curious about the kind of parents who made you, you," I told her.

She raised her eyebrows. "Hanna, I am a lovely person. I just want to win."

I gave her a skeptical look, and she added, "Fine. And also, I find you incredibly annoying. Is that what you wanted to hear?"

"Not particularly."

"Kaelan obviously wants you to win." She didn't try to hide her jealousy. "And you act like the whole game is beneath you. What does that say about the rest of us? Trying so hard, risking our lives, taking every challenge seriously ... for a man who doesn't even want us? Who only looks at you?"

I didn't know how to answer.

"She's too honest when she's hungry," Kuria said. "Don't mind her."

Noxy sighed.

The warmth from the fire lulled me to sleep, though it was fitful.

When I woke later, the room was dark; the fire had burned down to nothing but embers.

The room had the deep still of a place where one is alone.

But Kuria lay close by the fire, her arm extended. Her fingers loosely gripped a poker, as if she had just been reaching for it when she fell asleep.

But the silence was so deep.

I was alone.

I knew it even before I scrambled over to her, my heart beating furiously, and pressed my fingers into her throat to find her pulse.

Despite how close she was to the fire, her body felt cold, the way it does when life had fled.

Kuria was dead.

Noxy was gone.

So was my cloak, my boots, my gloves ... and my blade.

## CHAPTER 37



*H*anna

I headed to explore the castle first. It felt eerie and haunted as I moved from room to room, prepared to find another trap around any corner. But I also might find something that would help me survive the coming day.

Why had the Fae abandoned their first castle?

All the while, I was keenly aware that somewhere behind me, Kuria's body sprawled in front of the fire. There was an unsettling prickling down my spine, as if she might come back to life and crawl behind me.

I kept checking behind me, but no one was ever there.

Finally, I came out on the battlements which protruded from the side of a massive hill. What had once been with the railing just now filled with hard packed snow and a layer of ice, so I found myself standing on the slick ledge.

I balanced carefully, looking out over the vast white plains.

Then I saw Noxy, trekking across the snow... in my coat.

When she saw me, she raised her hand in a wave.

I suppose if you make a truce with someone for a night, you had better wake up first.

I couldn't even be entirely angry that she betrayed me. Noxy had always made it clear to me who she was. But I hated that she had killed Kuria.

Then, as I walked back through the room where we had slept, I glanced at Kuria's body. Then I stopped, with the sense of something wrong, and took a longer look at Kuria's body.

A towel lay spread over her face. A chill spread through my stomach and I glanced around, sure someone must be behind me, poised to strike.

But I was alone. In the eerie silence, with the blood rushing through my ears, I crouched and pulled the towel off Kuria's face.

I half expected her to lunge up at me, for this to be some elaborate trap.

White-blond hair fell loose around her shoulders, and crystal blue eyes stared up at the ceiling.

Noxy.

Someone had placed the enchanted towel over her face to mask her, but the magic had burnt off. They must not have expected me to stay this long.

Had Kuria killed Noxy, then walked away, pretending to be innocent?

I straightened, suddenly feeling an urgent need to get out of this lonely castle. But there was nowhere else to go, either.

I hurried down the halls, my hands up in front of me and magic sparking around my fingers, ready for a fight. But no one leapt out at me.

I finally opened the door and stepped out cautiously.

Some enormous shadow crossed over me, and I ducked involuntarily.

A dragon soared overhead.

How long were they going to leave us out here?

Until we completed the last trial. If there even *was* one survivor.

*No mercy for a future queen.*

Unless she was Seraphine, of course.

As I was scrabbling up a slick white hill, something gold glinted ahead of me. My pace slowed, and I straightened, looking around for any threat.

It felt as if I were alone as ever.

I didn't approach it. Instead, I began searching for any magical symbols. I checked the area around the crown, then got down on my hands and knees, examining the crown. I had triggered a spell when I touched the first trap crown.

This might be the real one. But I wasn't going to touch it without checking for any enchantment.

This time, I used the same magic I had to detect Mattias's magic, checking to see what enchantments were on the crown.

It wasn't enchanted at all.

Carefully, I lifted the crown out of the snow.

Something bit into my hand with the sudden sharp intensity of a pair of fangs. I tried to drop the crown, but the spike was lodged deeply into my skin. I let out a cry of pain as I tried to pull it loose.

Blood pumped from my palm, spilling over the snow.

But the blood didn't matter.

I'd dropped the crown at my feet, and now I could see the spike that had released from it, sinking into my skin. The spike was covered in my blood, but a last drop of the potion it had injected into my body dripped from the end.

This trap was a syringe.

What kind of potion or poison had been injected into my body?

What would that do to me?

I had to get somewhere safe, somewhere I could defend. Maybe one of the rooms back in the castle.

I rose, holding pressure on my hand to try to keep it from bleeding too quickly. I had a decision to make between healing

myself and holding my magic ready for an attack as I started through the snow.

Blood dripped between my fingers, casting red dots over the snow. Could I heal myself of whatever was coursing through my bloodstream now? If it was poison, perhaps. If it was a potion, I needed to use a countering spell. If there was one.

“Here goes nothing,” I said to absolutely no one.

I wasn't good at healing spells. It wasn't my kind of magic. But I was at full power now, and my sister had always told me in exasperation not to believe in those superstitious limits.

I focused on the wound in my hand, imagining my magic slipping through it, racing through my blood, overtaking the poison.

My magic glimmered across my arm.

It was working. I could feel a tingling through my veins as if my body were beginning to heal.

Then my legs went out from underneath me. I suddenly found myself sprawled in the snow.

I tried to get up. I made it onto my hands and knees, and then when I started to push myself up, I went down heavily.

I tried to summon my magic, but it sputtered and died when I couldn't form any words.

I could heal myself. But it was too late to matter.

They were going to find me.

I looked up toward the sky, hoping to see a dragon's shadow cross over me. Hoping for help.

But the sky was bright and clear, and the white slopes stretched out endlessly.

Both Noxy and Kuria never would have been good enough to be the queen of the peasant city Azora had shown me.

For all Kaelan had questioned my worthiness, I was the one who was worthy.

I had to fight and survive so I had the chance to tell him that I knew that now. I didn't need his approval.

I'd take a little groveling, though. That would be worth surviving for.

There was a crunching sound coming through the snow toward me. Footsteps.

I tried to turn toward the sound, but I couldn't force my neck to turn no matter how I tried. My eyes turned toward the sound, and slowly, a blur headed toward me.

Then Kuria's face resolved into its smug smirk.

She leaned over me. "Look at you, more helpless than ever."

Gods, if I weren't paralyzed, if I could access my magic, I could've blasted her across the snow into the mountain.

"I see you fell for my little trap. My mother found the real one and replaced it with these," Carefully, she picked up the crown, smiling down at me.

I tried to speak the words of my spell, but my lips moved just faintly, clumsily. I couldn't form the words.

"Now I will be queen." She turned the crown in her hands. "But not the way you think."

She smiled down at me. "I don't need to win the trials. I don't want your precious Ice Fae Prince. The trials were all a distraction."

She crouched down to my eye level. "You're welcome to have him... in the grave."

What had she done? Was Kaelan already dead? Thorne? Dare? Was that why there were no dragons flying? Panic rushed through me.

"I never planned to marry a prince but to kill a king. To leave him without an heir. While I deal with you ... my family is dealing with the king."



They were attacking the castle? Were Azora and Jaia, Dare and Thorne safe?

Where was Kaelan?

“Kaelan?” Her voice was full of laughter. Had I spoken his name out loud, though I could barely form words? “Well, he won’t be in the castle, will he? He’ll come to find you. And he’ll find me.”

She gave me a mocking look.

“It won’t be long before you can’t even call his name out to warn him.” She seemed so amused. “How will you feel when you see him running to save you, running straight into our trap?”

A woman walked up beside her, her features sharp and beautiful under a thick fur hood. She looked like Kuria. Her mother.

“We couldn’t kill the Prince when he was always protected by Dare and Thorne and his little female guard,” the mother said. “But he’ll come now, won’t he? He’ll come for you.”

“Thank you for visiting the Ice Kingdom,” Kuria said with a laugh in her voice. “Keeping you alive and fighting for his bride has distracted Kaelan so perfectly. You’ve been our very best ally.”

“And now you’ll die side-by-side,” her mother added. “It’s very romantic.”

They walked away and left me dying in the snow.

## CHAPTER 38



Kaelan

I paced the ice. I couldn't bring myself to return to the warmth of the castle when Hanna was out here in the cold; I couldn't bear to leave her alone. But I was powerless to help her now and it was too painful to watch.

Magic and oaths bound me as heir. Otherwise, I'd never have let her play this game. No one could have stopped me from making her my queen.

Then Thorne reached out for my mind.

"You need to see what's happening with Hanna's tiger."

"What is it?"

He opened his mind, letting me see. The tiger had escaped her cage, though she was bloodied from battering her way through the bars, red seeping across her white fur. She was racing away from the castle, away from the population.

Toward these desolate snow plains.

Thorne started to speak, but I was already shifting.

If Hanna's tiger was still bound to her in some way... it might be answering her call.

I soared through the sky, searching the ice frantically for a sign of Hanna.

Hanna's still form lay in the snow. She just looked like a spot of darkness across the bright glowing expanse. It seemed

so wrong for the girl who had always been sunshine.

I'd promised my father that I wouldn't interfere. But then, I'd made him a lot of promises that he had no idea I was no longer enchanted to obey.

I couldn't leave her there to die. Disappointment shot through me; I'd tried to send her home, but when she strolled back into the trials with a smile, I'd felt a wild lift of joy alongside my frustration and worry.

Sometimes she seemed unstoppable. As tender hearted as she was, she was also the most clever woman I'd ever met.

But the Ice Kingdom was brutal, and it had bested her.

I landed roughly, my talons sliding across the ice, and shifted back as I ran toward her.

Her wide, terrified eyes met mine.

“What happened?”

Her lips parted, just faintly, but she couldn't speak.

An enchantment.

And she had so little magic of her own to protect herself.

I scooped her up off the ice and cradled her in my arms. “You aren't going to die today, Sunshine.”

She was icy cold. I muttered my spell, which prickled across my skin like a rash, trying to draw my own warmth out for her. Frostbite and hypothermia might overwhelm her.

It had been so selfish of me to bring her here. I should have realized this would never be any place for her. “It's time you went home where you belonged.”

Her blue lips moved. She seemed desperate to try to tell me something.

I raised her hand to my cheek, holding her icy-cold fingers against my jaw.

She kept trying desperately to say something.

Rest,” I chided her. “The fight is over. You failed. But it's alright. You'll live for another day, and you'll be happier than

you could ever be here, with me.”

The words tore at my heart.

I would never be happy with her across the sea instead of in my bed.

Her fingers flexed against my cheek. If she hadn't been so close to death, I'd have thought that was a weak attempt to slap me.

“And I will always love you,” I told her, the words feeling ripped from my chest. “But there's a reason you can't say it back to me, Hanna. You know this can never work.”

She tried again to speak.

Her mouth formed around one short word.

“What is it?” I asked her.

“Fly,” she managed.

The next second, something hurtled into me.

I flew a dozen feet before I slammed into the snow. I rolled up to my feet, my head reeling and confusion reigning as I tried to figure out what was happening.

My magic flared around my fingers.

I was too far from Hanna, who lay helpless on the ice where I had dropped her.

My attacker. was nowhere to be seen.

I charged toward Hanna, my feet slipping over the ice.

Just as I almost reached her, I slammed into an invisible wall.

A shadowy figure shimmered behind the wall, and I paced alongside it, trying to get in.

Kuria turned and smiled at me. “Hello, your highness.”

What good did it do to her to win if I would always hate her? If she hurt Hanna, my father and the magic would force our wedding.

But it wouldn't save her life.

“This is no way to win, Kuria,” I warned her. “You can have your victory. But don’t hurt her.”

“Oh, I will have my victory,” she told me. “*And* I’ll hurt her. But don’t worry. You won’t care. You’ll be too deep in your own hurt.”

I prowled around the edges of the shield she’d raised, trying to find my way in.

Gods, Hanna had known what was coming. She had tried to warn me.

Kuria nudged Hanna’s body with her boot dismissively. “I’ll never understand what you saw in this worthless islander.”

Past tense.

“She’s not dead.” I slammed into the wall.

“Good as.” Kuria’s smile was cold and practiced.

How had I never seen this snake in my court?

“You want to be queen,” I said, hoping to open negotiations.

“Yes, but I don’t want to be *your* queen.” She tilted her head to one side. “Your father stole the throne just like he stole your mother’s life.”

Stole my mother’s life? How had we gotten here?

“She chose to run away.”

Her lips parted in a bitter smile. “You fool. You’ve been telling your father’s lies to yourself like a bedtime story.”

“What are you talking about, Kuria?”

“Your mother isn’t alive.” Her voice was filled with scorn. “She tried to take back her throne, her power, from him, and when that failed, she ran. But he killed her.”

“No.” I shook my head. I couldn’t even begin to process this story or gauge its truth.

“Have you really spent all these years thinking she wanted to leave you? You spent all these years hating her?” She let out

a laugh. “If I were your mother, I would haunt you. You played right into Edric’s hands.”

“I’ll listen to whatever you have to say,” I promised her. “I don’t want to see my father on the throne anymore either. We can work together—”

“Why would I work with you? You were too stupid to see the truth. And you’re too stupid to be king, Kaelan. My family will rule far better than you ever will.”

“Just let her go, Kuria. What’s the point of hurting her?”

“Because I enjoy it. Watching you two dance around each other has been unbearable.” Kuria knelt and picked up one of Hanna’s hands; her arm hung limply. Kuria smiled at me. “What should we do to her, your highness?”

“Kuria. I’ll give you whatever you want—”

“You’ll have no power to give me anything,” she said. “As it should be. I don’t want anything from your family.”

“Kuria—”

She put her booted foot against Hanna’s forearm, driving down as she held Hanna’s wrist. The sickening crunch split the air. I felt it through my body, and Hanna let out a ragged gasp of pain, too weak to even scream. She seized with the pain.

I could barely breathe. My magic rocketed out from me, blasting against the shield, but it held.

Kuria laughed at me as magic blasted across the barrier over and over without accomplishing anything. Its icy blue sparks flew across the snow.

“What’s the point of all this cruelty, Kuria?”

“Mostly my only amusement.” she told me, “And of course, I was also distracting you.”

The snow shifted under my feet, rising up into a monster.

“Really?” I asked Kuria. I didn’t know how to get inside to Hanna, but I did know how to deal with an ice monster.

But all I wanted was to protect her.

More monsters were rising from the snow.

I rose, spreading my wings as I shifted. As the ice monsters attacked me, I tore apart their bodies until I could crunch down on their icy hearts. When their hearts splintered between my teeth, they exploded, showering snow and ice across the landscape.

I turned back to Kuria and blasted ice across the shield. It crackled and turned opaque with the frost, but when I slammed into it, it didn't give.

Hanna's gaze met mine through the shield. Her lips moved faintly, trying to work the words of a spell.

"Not a fan of this arm, are you?" Kuria mocked her, gripping her hand. Hanna's face twisted in a breathless scream. This time, she placed her boot further down Hanna's arm.

Hanna's rasped spell cut off in pain as another sickening snap fractured the air. Hanna let out a desperate scream.

She was so brave.

She'd risked so much for my sake.

And I had repaid her for the last five years with disdain.

I'd despised my mother while she lay in some unmarked grave and thought Hanna carried the same faults she did. Meanwhile, I'd been the one who fucked up everything.

I slammed my hands against the shield. "Kuria! What did you do to her? Just give me her life, and you can have anything you want from me!"

Kuria's brows arched. "Anything?"

"Anything."

"There's nothing you have, Kaelan, that I can't take off your corpse."

She was just stalling me. I reached out to Thorne's mind. The impression that came back was all smoke and adrenaline. A desperate battle.

I couldn't leave Hanna.

And judging from the way Kuria smiled, she knew it. She stepped, slowly and deliberately, onto Hanna's broken arm. Hanna could barely move, but pain was etched through her face, through her taut, useless muscles.

I couldn't reach Hanna to save her.

How did I help her save herself?

"What did you use on her?" I asked. Kuria was eager to keep me talking to keep me from flying to the castle. Maybe I could use that to my advantage. Whatever it was, it was obviously fading; Hanna must be fighting it off with her own magic, slowly breaking through the enchantment.

But not fast enough.

"The same thing your father used on our rightful queen." She tilted her head to one side. "You dragons are poisonous in every way. It took us a long time to get access to a little bit of his blood—but it was worth it to let him poison his own reign."

Kuria had used a dragon's blood enchantment.

When it came to magic, my blood was the same as my father's.

"Kuria, please." I let desperation leak into my voice. "Take my life for hers. Just spare her."

Kuria's lips parted in a delighted smile. "I never thought I'd see the day Prince Kaelan actually... fell in love. Is it possible?"

"I'll give myself up for her."

"Right. And once I drop the barrier between us, you'll have a sudden change of heart, blast me with your magic, and I'll become an ice sculpture."

"I'll do whatever you want," I told her. "Just don't hurt her."

Hanna mouthed frantically to me. "Fly."

"We don't abandon each other, Princess. Despite what common sense would suggest." I told her.



Honor's gaze flickered behind me urgently. When her lips moved, I knew something else was coming.

I whirled in time to see Kuria's mother, Nerise, as she lunged toward me, her spell crackling around her hands.

I dodged to one side, and a sudden crater was blasted into the snow where I had just been standing.

"Clumsy, Nerise," I mocked her. "Just like your trap. And you all thought you were so clever."

"Your reign is over." She aimed a blast of magic at me, which I countered, raising a sudden shield that flew up from the ground with a plume of white. Her magic sparked off of it.

Shades of ice rained down around us both.

"My reign hasn't even begun." I dropped the shield to aim my own blast of magic at her, then before she could recover, I drew my sword and raced toward her.

Kuria had used a dragon's blood enchantment.

My father could walk through my mind because we shared the same blood.

But it also meant I could counter his enchantments.

Kuria's mother let out a scream as I swung my sword toward her. It landed, cutting her across the middle, but she wasn't human anymore.

She'd shifted, and now she lashed out at me with her claws extended. She wasn't as large as a dragon, but she was finally appearing as she truly was: a monster.

Kuria's family had a lot of magical power; that was why they were nobles. And they had used it to become monsters.

I barely managed to duck out of the way, narrowly escaping her clutches. She screeched as she plunged toward me again, and I raised my ice magic into a shield; she slammed into me and fell back.

The two of us parried back and forth.

And then at just the right moment, as she flew toward me...

I let my shields fall.

She slammed into me, carrying me halfway across the frozen ice, her talons raking across my skin. I tumbled over and over until I slammed into the invisible wall of the shield. My head cracked against the ice and I felt a wet trickle of blood.

I clutched my chest, feeling the hot blood pumping through my fingers.

She landed triumphantly, shifting back into the noble woman I had known.

“Your reign ends before it even begins, Prince Kaelan,” she told me.

My blood was spreading across the ice, slowly leaking along the edge of the shield.

Hanna was so close to me. I could see her face through the ice, and her palm was up toward me, her fingers twitching just faintly as she fought to regain her power.

Kuria, smiling, strolled to greet her mother.

She finally dropped the shield.

“Goodbye, your highness,” Kuria said, her voice mocking, as she drew her sword.

My blood touched Hanna’s outstretched fingers.

They twitched more insistently.

I’d put all my faith in her to save us both.

“I love you,” I told her quietly, one last time. Whatever happened. Even knowing she couldn’t say it back, and perhaps wouldn’t anyway. “I need you to know.”

Hanna’s perfect, sculpted lips twitched in a faint smile. The crunch of Kuria’s footfalls came closer, her shadow falling over me.

At least if I died, I would die looking at the most beautiful, perfect face I'd ever known, with her faint freckles, her vivid eyes.

Hanna's fingers twitched again. They folded into her palm, as if she were testing them out.

Kuria's sword was a bright flash arching down toward me.

And then Kuria was blasted halfway across the ice.

Hanna was on her feet, her good arm still raised after her flash of brilliant, powerful magic.

"He's mine," she said.

She turned toward Kuria's mother, who hastily tried to shift. Once she became a monster again, she'd be far harder to kill.

But Hanna was already diving to straddle me. She pulled the dagger from my belt and threw it with deadly aim into the mother's chest.

Hanna didn't hesitate. She was up and running, checking on the mother.

I pulled myself up to my feet and staggered across the ice.

Kuria was bleeding from a skull fracture.

"Mercy," she whispered, looking up at me weakly.

"All the mercy you showed my queen," I promised her, as my boot came down.

## CHAPTER 39



*H*anna

Kaelan wrapped his arm around my shoulders, though it was unclear at this point which of us was holding up the other. We were both covered in blood; some of it was splashed across his usually perfect face.

“We’ve got to get back to the castle and the rest of the fight,” he told me. “If I shift, can you make it onto my back?”

“Yes. Get me to Dare... since he’s useful and can heal me.”

“Always snarky, aren’t you, Princess? We’ll talk about that later.” He backed away, grinning at me. That grin on Kaelan’s face was like sunshine warming my soul, more powerful than the darkness that covered the Ice Kingdom.

Then he shifted into the sleek, terrifying ice blue dragon.

I booped his nose once before I climbed up onto his back. It was hard for me without the use of one arm, and I hissed in pain. His scales shifted under my feet as he turned, obviously distressed by my suffering.

I could have shifted into the dragon, healing myself, and flown. But I had the chance to preserve my secrets, and I didn’t want to give them up unless I must. Not until we had knocked Edric off his throne.

I gripped him tightly with my one good arm. “Let’s fly.”

He took a few steps and launched into the air.

I had never flown on his back. I'd been my own dragon, using my own wings, and then I had rode Thorne. But it felt right, feeling his muscles ripple between my thighs. I leaned forward to get out of the harsh, icy wind that tugged at my hair and burnt my face, resting my cheek against his back.

Maybe we'd get lucky and Kuria's family would have killed Edric for us before we landed.

But as we soared in toward the castle, chaos and bloodshed spilled into the courtyard. A desperate fight raged.

The doors stood open. We'd have to fight our way through that labyrinth to take out all of Kaelan's enemies.

I squeezed my thighs tight to grip Kaelan's back as he dove and fought, his icy breath freezing all his enemies.

They shattered into pieces, one by one. The battle came to a halt as his own soldiers found themselves with no one left to fight. Then one of their officers shouted and then they ran for the castle, where combat still raged.

Kaelan and I were alone, except for the corpses.

He shifted back, and I started to fall, but he whirled and caught me in his arms.

"Are you ready to fight for your throne, my queen?"

"Haven't I been doing just that since we met?"

He grinned and set me down on my feet. He stopped and pulled a sword off a corpse, handing it to me. "Let's fight our way to Thorne. Dare's with him."

I nodded, feeling a rush of relief that they were both alive.

Carrying my sword with just one hand was awkward, but I was glad to have a weapon—though Kaelan's broad shoulders in front of me as we entered the cavernous castle made me feel safe enough. Our footfalls seemed to echo across the marble. The room was empty except for more dead bodies, both ours and theirs.

Kaelan led me with certainty through the labyrinth of halls that I found so confusing, stopping to kill a few enemies who

rushed at us. I didn't get the chance to use my sword or magic because he was so determined to keep his body between me and danger.

Then we turned a corner, and Thorne and Dare were in front of us.

Thorne grinned when he saw me.

Dare's gaze fell to my arm. "What did you do to yourself now?"

Before I could answer, a monster rose behind my men in the mirrors.

I shouted an alarm.

"They've got this," Dare said, and indeed, the two of us were shielded by Thorne on one side and Kaelan on the other as they fought the monster. *Now* we knew how to fight it; that must be the only reason it seemed so much easier for them.

"This will hurt," Dare warned me. "Sit on the floor."

He sank to the floor himself, his back against the marble wall. He looked so relaxed as the battle raged around us, but then, he knew his friends.

I sank to the floor too, sitting beside him and swinging my legs over his lap so the two of us were close together. His hands were gentle when gripped my arm, shaking his head over the breaks.

As his magic glowed under his palms, he asked me, "How exactly did you get away, Hanna?"

"My secret."

He scoffed. "Next time, I'll handcuff you to my side."

"Next time?"

"Somehow, I am sure there will be another time when I have to tie you up for your own good."

My brows arched. These men. "You can try, but I doubt you'll succeed."

Dare's gaze flickered to my lips. "You might find you want to stay put, Hanna."

"Let's move!" Kaelan called, giving me no time to process Dare's words.

I looked up to find the battle was coming to an end.

Dare helped me to my feet, his hands careful. But I was healed now.

Thorne, Dare, Kaelan and I went from room to room, but there were few enemies left. They enchanted the mirrors so no more monsters could haunt us.

Azora came around the corner, and her face brightened when she saw us.

"I'm sorry," Kaelan told her quietly, gripping her shoulder. "I was unfair to you... I realize it's very hard to keep Hanna out of trouble. I fail at it too. She's... very insistent at being in trouble."

"Hey!" I protested, though I was happy to hear this conversation.

"It's alright, Kaelan." Azora smiled up at him. "I didn't take it personally. I know she makes you into a mad man."

His lips curled up, and he patted her shoulder before he released her. "Fair."

When Jaia came around the corner, I let out a breath of relief.

She pushed back her hood, looking around at us as her dark curls sprang out. "Good news," she said, in a tone that meant anything but. "King Edric lives. And no one can find Seraphine."

## CHAPTER 40



*H*anna

By that evening, the corpses had been cleared out of the castle, and it had been readied for a wedding.

Kaelan had told his father he had to marry me before anyone else threatened my life, and Edric agreed, with all the enthusiasm he probably would've summoned for eating dead leaves.

When Kaelan and I stood at the altar together on the dais in the ballroom, the sea of faces looking out at us seemed as infinite and overwhelming as when I first walked into this room. I knew they were watching and judging me, but I didn't care anymore.

All that matters was Kaelan, who looked down at me fondly as we stood together, and the two men who flanked him. We had to be watched by a thousand nobles to try to give legitimacy to our marriage, so there was no denying that when the time came, Kaelan had a rightful claim on the throne.

The urgency made me ache. I wished my sister was by my side now. But my love story with Kaelan was always going to be bittersweet.

And if this wedding wasn't the one I'd dreamt of... I'd live through those trials all over again. It was worth the way Kaelan smiled when he slid the ring onto my finger.

It was a very familiar ring.



His voice was soft, intimate, no matter how many eyes were on us. “It was always yours,” he told me, his eyes twinkling with amusement. “You didn’t need to steal it.”

“I hate you, princeling.”

“And I love you, goddess.” His hand cupped the back of my head and he dragged me to him, sealing my lips against his in a fervent kiss.

He didn’t care who was watching, either.

After our wedding was the first party in this castle that I actually enjoyed. Kaelan and I danced, and then I held out my hand to Thorne.

Kaelan kissed my cheek and asked, “Can I still make you jealous? Now that you know I adore you?”

“You enjoyed yourself, didn’t you? Tormenting me?”

“Very much.”

“I’m going to dance with Thorne,” I told him, “and you can watch, I hope jealousy eats you alive.”

Kaelan’s lips ducked toward my ear. “You can do a lot more than just dance with Thorne, and I’ll happily watch.”

He smiled, satisfied with himself for leaving me in shock—and hope—as he handed me over to Thorne.

As Thorne and I danced, I could see Kaelan turn Jaia on the dance floor, but it didn’t bother me. She was laughing. My icy prince looked happy for once, dashing and tall in his dark tunic, smiling.

And I saw the way she looked at Azora sometime, with her eyes shining in a way they never did with anyone else.

The music shifted, turned soft and slow. I rested my head on Thorne’s chest, feeling safe and warm and home when his arms were around me.

“I have a gift for you,” Thorne told me.

“What is it?” I asked.

He drew a bracelet out of his pocket. “Have I ever told you how ugly I thought that old bracelet was?”

“Did you guess what it was?”

“I’ve known for a long time.”

“You always watch me too closely,” I chided, even though I loved it.

“But you love being seen,” he told me.

And he was right.



That night, when Kaelan and I were alone in front of the fire in his apartment, he told me, “How long have you been waiting for me to grovel?”

“Roughly five years.”

“Do you want me to apologize?”

“Very much so.”

His lips quirked. Finneas jumped onto the back of the sofa and head-butted first Kaelan, then me, and Kaelan raised his eyebrows. “I’m not sure the cat can be present for the things I want to do to you.”

“Groveling first.”

“I got my ring on your finger without apologizing.” A playful smile touched his lips as he toyed with the ring around my finger.

“Just because we’re married doesn’t mean it has to be a happy marriage,” I chided.

He laughed. “Alright. In the Ice Fae custom?”

“It seems only fair.”

“Does it?” he disagreed. “You seem to have a very questionable grasp on how to kneel.”

“Why don’t you model it for me?”

Kaelan slid to his knees in front of the sofa. “Hanna.”

“Yes?”

He paused, his smile dropping away.

“I’ve seen you apologize,” I teased him. “I know you’re capable.”

“I am,” he said, with his usual confidence. “I’m fantastic at apologizing. I just rarely find cause.”

Gods help me. I’d married the most arrogant Fae on the face of the earth.

He took my hands in his. “I’m sorry for leaving you.” Then, with a question in his voice, “I made you cry.”

I pulled a face. But he was watching me intently, and so I gave in. “Yes. You made me cry.”

I felt as if I’d cried a thousand tears losing him.

“And I made you feel unworthy.”

That word, unworthy, brought an old ache into my chest. “Yes,” I whispered.

“But you are worthy,” his hands cupped my face tenderly. He was so tall that when he knelt in front of me, we were still face to face. “I’m sorry I didn’t see it. I’m sorry I ever made you feel like less than a goddess.”

“I’ll spend the rest of my life making up for hurting you,” he promised. “I love you.”

He didn’t have his memories, and he never would.

But our love had conquered those shadows.

“I love you too, Kaelan,” I whispered.

He kissed me, gentle and sweet. A promise of what was to come. I felt my heart swell with love for him as his lips pressed against mine. His hands moved down my body, exploring every curve, every inch of me as if he were discovering me for the first time. His hands slid up my legs, raising my wedding dress inch by inch.

“I’ve dreamed for a long time of seeing you in a wedding dress,” he murmured. “And then stripping it off your body.”

A thrill of pleasure shot through me as Kaelan’s hands explored my hips, then dipped lower, teasingly tracing circles around my thighs with his fingertips before sliding his hands between them.

“I’m already on my knees,” he reminded me.

My breath caught in anticipation as he slowly traced a line along the outside of my thigh before traveling slowly back up again until he reached the juncture between my legs. The heat from our bodies mingled together as I moaned into his mouth and pressed myself even closer to him.

Kaelan’s fingers expertly stroked and teased until I was trembling all over with pleasure. He smiled at me wickedly before lowering himself between my legs and replacing his fingers with his tongue.

My body shuddered and I could feel my toes curling in pleasure as wave after wave of ecstasy coursed through me. I was lost in the sensation, barely aware of anything beyond Kaelan and the pleasure he was giving me. My breathing came faster and faster as I got closer to my climax, until finally, with one last stroke of his tongue, I tumbled over the edge into blissful oblivion. I gasped out his name. His eyes darkened in satisfaction.

Kaelan rose up from between my legs, a satisfied smirk on his face that made me blush even more than before. His lips found mine again and we kissed deeply as he pulled me off the couch and on top of his body as he sprawled back in front of the fire.

I straddled his waist, hardly able to believe how lucky we were to find our way back together.

Kaelan’s hands slid my wedding dress back up my body, and I raised my arms so he could pull it off completely.

I leaned forward to kiss his chest and slowly make my way down, taking his shirt with me as I went. His hand tangled in

my hair, and when I reached his belt, he slid his hand around the back of my neck and pulled me up to him for another kiss.

“You rode me yesterday,” he told me, “but I found it rather unsatisfying.”

“Do you like this better?” I teased him, gripping his cock and pressing him against me.

“I want to feel you around me,” he said, “and then I want to fuck you so hard you never forget you’re mine.” He rolled with me, gripping me so he was on top. His big biceps rippled on either side of my head as he braced himself over me.

“I never have, Kaelan,” I told him. “You’re the one who forgot you were mine.”

I wrapped my thighs around his waist and rolled with him, landing on top. I grinned down at him, loving the way he watched my body as if it were the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen. “I’m glad you finally remembered who you belong to.”

“You’ve been very insistent about it,” he teased me, threading his fingers through my hair. “Beating those poor nymphs—

“Those nymphs were going to eat you!”

I could fight with Kaelan all day, but he dragged my head down to his and kissed me passionately.

And that was even better.

His hands cupped my ass and pulled me closer. “I’m going to fill you, are you ready?”

“Oh, yes,” I told him. Everything about being with him felt so right. So natural. Like I’d been made for him and he had been made for me.

Kaelan pushed his cock inside of me, and I gasped as I felt him fill me completely.

He stroked hard and deep for a moment, then pulled back before thrusting again.

“Kaelan,” I gasped, sinking down, rolling my hips against his to take every inch of him.

I ground my hips down into him, hard, and he groaned. His hands grabbed my ass, lifting me and changing the rhythm. He was controlling even from beneath me, dominating me, slapping my ass, caressing my breasts.

And I loved every bit of it.

He squeezed my ass hard and pulled me down. The pleasure was so intense I almost came instantly.

“Oh, God, Kaelan, I’m going to—

And then we both tumbled over that edge. I arched my back, toes pressing into the hardwood. My nails dug into his thighs as my orgasm overwhelmed me.

The two of us fell together, my head cushioned on his shoulder as he wrapped his arms around me.

“Now that I have you again,” he murmured against my hair, “I’m never going to let you go.”

“You’d better not,” I whispered back.

I’d always deserved my place at his side.

His voice was always deep and sexy, but never more than now. “I must have always known you should be my queen. No matter what lies I told myself... that’s why I came for you.”

Even without his memories, he’d desired me. Chosen me. Loved me.

He gathered my hair in his hand, fisting it tightly, drawing my head back so his lips could plunder my throat. But as he kissed me, he whispered, “I’m sorry it took me so long to see it. The crown was always yours.”

But before I could lose myself again in his kisses...

Someone banged on the door.

## CHAPTER 41



*H*anna

Thorne stood in the doorway.

When Kaelan answered the door, he told him, “I love you like a brother, but at the moment—”

“I need to talk to you both,” he said.

“What?” Kaelan asked, leaning in the doorway.

“In the garden. We can’t talk here.”

Kaelan’s jaw was tight in exasperation, but we both trusted Thorne.

We dressed quickly and went out with Thorne to the garden.

“What is it?” Kaelan demanded.

Thorne faced me. “I need you to know all the sweet things Kaelan has told you... are bullshit.”

An automatic faint, polite smile came to my lips to cover my shock. Princess reflexes.

“What the fuck—” Kaelan began, his hands knitting into fists. He had very different reflexes.

But Thorne’s gaze was fixed on me, as if I were the only one who mattered. “He needed you to take his throne.”

“She’s aware,” Kaelan said.

“But he’s been lying about everything else.”

Kaelan shook his head in disbelief. “Hanna knows I love her. I haven’t been worthy of her, but I’ve loved her.”

Thorne’s gaze met mine. “I have his memories. I was watching through his eyes when he fell in love with you. When you saved his life. When you changed his memories to protect your family, and when he said the ugliest things—when he left you—”

The memory of all those wounds rushed toward me like angry ghosts.

“That’s why I fell in love with you.” Thorne told me. “That’s why I’ve always seen you. And it’s why I know you have to come with me now.”

I believe Kaelan meant every word he said to me.

And I believed Thorne meant every word he said to me now.

Thorne held out his hand. “Just take my hand, and we’ll be gone, somewhere safe.”

His other hand gripped something—some kind of charm. A way for us to travel.

Thorne said, “Trust me.”

He was still holding out his hand as I looked between him and Kaelan.

Kaelan thrust his hand out too, agony written across his face. He had been betrayed by his best friend. “Hanna...”

When he said my name, it sounded like a prayer. But never more so than it did today.

I stretched out my own hand to choose...

[Who would you choose? Find out in Heart of Deceit...](#)



## A NOTE FROM MAY

I hope you enjoyed Hanna's story! Are you ready to find out whose hand she takes, and what unfolds, in Heart of Deceit? Don't worry. I promise I remain committed, just like Hanna, to not choosing.



Join my Facebook readers' group, [May Dawson's Wild Angels](#), for exclusive excerpts, giveaways and discussion!



ALSO BY MAY



**Dragon shifters are always male. Always royals. Always assholes. So when I grow wings and breathe fire, I throw the kingdom into chaos... *Mulan meets Cinderella in this reverse harem series***



*All I care about is saving my little sister from the mansion of horrors where we've been raised. Enter four alluring men, who seem to be determined to protect me... if I can trust them. But they're hiding secrets of their own.*



*Five years ago, I was found wandering in the woods with a sword, a note, and no memories. Now four Fae kings have come to find me... but these ex-lovers of mine are determined to punish me for sins I don't remember.*