

THE LOST REALM BOOK 1

Quartz Mountain

AUDREY LYNN

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Quartz
Mountain

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Author's note:

*This book contains subject matter that might be difficult for some readers,
including violence, torture, depression, and suicidal ideations.*

*It is a first in a series slow burn romance that will become spicier
as the series progresses.*

Mind the cliff.

To Allie

*Thank you for listening to all my many tangents as I wrote
Quartz Mountain.*

And for being the best sister.

Contents

[Prologue](#)

[1. Avery.](#)

[2. Avery.](#)

[3. Avery.](#)

[4. Savine](#)

[5. Avery.](#)

[6. Avery.](#)

[7. Savine](#)

[8. Kyla](#)

[9. Avery.](#)

[10. Avery.](#)

[11. Savine](#)

[12. Savine](#)

[13. Avery.](#)

[14. Savine](#)

[15. Avery.](#)

[16. Avery.](#)

17. Savine

18. Kyla

19. Avery.

20. Savine

21. Savine

22. Avery.

23. Avery.

24. Avery.

25. Avery.

26. Savine

27. Avery.

28. Savine

29. Kyla

30. Avery.

31. Avery.

32. Avery.

33. Savine

34. Savine

35. Savine

36. Avery.

37. Savine

38. Avery.

39. Savine

40. Avery.

41. Savine

42. Avery.

43. Savine

44. Avery.

[45. Kyla](#)

[46. Avery.](#)

[47. Avery.](#)

[48. Savine](#)

[49. Avery.](#)

[50. Savine](#)

[51. Avery.](#)

[52. Savine](#)

[53. Savine](#)

[54. Savine](#)

[55. Avery.](#)

[56. Savine](#)

[57. Avery.](#)

[58. Kyla](#)

[59. Avery.](#)

[60. Savine](#)

[Author's Note](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

Prologue

Twenty-five years ago

The white skeletons of aspens taking their winter rest didn't utter a word as Savine stalked through the woods. Yet something drew him deeper into the forest — something called for him.

"They're coming," whispered the firs and pines as Savine tucked his head to stop being pelted by the blinding snowfall. The snow was the least of his concerns. In all his years, he'd never heard the trees speak directly into his mind; the intonation of their voices settling in his thoughts. He had always been the one to approach the trees and speak to them. He immediately knew this was a dangerous gift for him as a Latian fae. This was the gift of the true king of Latiah. One that had been denied to the current Latian king.

The quiet chanting was so persistent that it had infiltrated his dreams. He had tried to ignore the constant chant for nearly thirty minutes before he gave in and dressed for the frigid winter night.

As he walked through the woods in his soft fur parka, fur mittens, and insulated pants, he wondered if he was the only one in Orofine who heard this bewitching whisper in the wind.

The iron blade of his sword glistened with snowflakes. It would make quick work of any enemies he encountered as he

traversed the deep forests at night. Would the woods betray him? Would these trees, many of whom were his companions, dare to lead him to harm?

“They’re coming,” the woods murmured.

Reaching out to touch a young fir tree, Savine spoke in the language only a few fae could understand. “Friend, I heard your call. What is coming?” Savine asked.

The woods spoke into the wind, yet the voice echoed distantly through Savine’s mind.

“They’re coming.”

Why wouldn’t this fir speak directly to him? Younger trees were notorious for not speaking to fae with the gift of mycilious. But hadn’t he communicated with this particular fir before?

Savine’s sure-footed steps left hardly a mark on the snow. Thank the Premier Goddess Althea for his nimble steps. With so much of the trees’ trunks under the snow, Savine knew there had to be several feet carpeting the forest floor.

The old pine before Savine was one of the few trees that shared these secrets with him when he began developing his power as an adolescent. *“They’re coming,”* the pine shook as it spoke.

“Who? Tell me why you have called me tonight, old friend.”

The pine didn’t respond to his question, but continued to quake in the driving snow. The trees themselves were in a trance. He’d need to go deeper into the woods and up the mountains to seek the ancient cedar grove that his grandfather had known so well. Those trees were nearly two-thousand years old. Surely they would not succumb to a trance like this.

Savine traipsed deeper into the snow and the tangle of branches. With each step, he could feel the trees shudder and vibrate, energy building beneath their bark. Savine took off his mitten and pressed his copper skin to the bark of a fir tree.

“THEY’RE COMING! THEY’RE COMING!” said the trees. The chanting echoed and reverberated through Savine’s mind,

making his essence respond instinctively, rippling like whirling waves under his skin. Savine's pulse of magic connected with the tree's and his body shook like the last leaf in a winter breeze. The voice continued to pound through his mind and his body. His hand felt irretrievably connected to the tree, as if a force pressed his flesh against the cold, hard bark. The snow blew harder, pelting his face as he pulled and tugged his hand from the tree.

Savine wasn't about to stay here, locked in, as the whole forest went to the damned Abyss. The pounding voice in his head was almost too much for him to take. It reminded him of those years of torment when his mind and soul were assaulted and invaded. No, he had to stop these voices now before he went back to that part of him he left buried so deep.

Savine didn't want to harm the tree. He'd never used his essence against a tree, and he wasn't ready to hurt one now. He drew a small amount of his essence out. *Let's take this slowly. See if this will get him free.*

Savine's power shot forth to his immobilized hand, shooting brambles out. The brambles and vines he formed wound around the tree, freeing the grip on him. The overwhelming chanting in his mind died down to a whisper.

He struggled to slide his chilly hand back into his mitten and drew a bit of his essence forth to warm the icy skin. The cedars weren't far now. Hopefully, he'd get some answers to these Goddess-damned strange events.

The thick underbrush was deep under the snow, but that didn't mean the tree branches themselves weren't an obstacle for Savine to navigate. With this much snowfall, the lower tree branches made navigating through the dense forest a challenge. Careful to avoid touching a branch or trunk, Savine made his way through the densest section of forest on the mountain. Soon, he knew things would open up and level out.

The clearing lined with cedars was so close. They might be as unlikely to have the answers Savine was looking for as the other trees. But there was no way in Abyss that he could ignore this unearthly summoning from the forest. One way or

another, he'd need to figure out the cause of the trees' trance-like state.

The steep terrain evened out. He could see the first of the ancient cedars rimming the edge of the forest. Suddenly, Savine heard a groan as all the trees shifted away from him. Branches bent sideways and the chanting, *they're coming*, approached a fever pitch. The incessant sound echoed off the surrounding mountains. It wasn't just in his head. It filled the entire forest as the trees joined in one voice, booming with the chant.

Savine looked up at the sky. The snow stopped falling, and the wind no longer blew. Clouds cleared from the sky as the first bit of star rocketed toward the ground. Burning bright and hot, the star landed with a hiss in the snow directly in front of Savine.

Thousands of tiny, burning particles of stardust illuminated the sky. They were all heading for Savine.

Sword in hand, Savine used his other hand to cast a tangle of vines and branches around himself. He ground his booted feet into the snow and pushed his essence to create a ditch for him to take cover in. His protective barrier of brambles and vines kept the molten stars from scorching through his fur-wrapped body. But how long would they hold?

The stars heated his makeshift shelter while the trees continued their chant. *They're coming, they're coming, they're coming*. The reverberation of the trees' chant mingled with the chaos of the star fall.

Minutes or hours seemed to pass. Savine lost all sense of time and space as he huddled under his branch and bow shelter. The cry of the woods changed to a high-pitched shriek.

Suddenly, silence crackled across the night. After such a cacophony of sounds, Savine found the silence jarring. He waited a few minutes after the sounds died before he emerged from his shelter.

All around him, where snow once laid, were delicate white flowers blooming out of stardust. Three broad petals and stick

straight leaves emerged from the glittering ground.

Then, the forest exploded into a chant that chilled him to his marrow.

“The two born of one womb shall return to take their place. Death shall follow in their footsteps, and all shall bow to their power. The fae and the witch shall be joined under the moonlight. Kin will rise against kin. Nation will destroy nation. The mother shall rise to be reunited with her other half. None shall stop her from taking back what she has lost.”

Chapter One

Avery

Breathing in the fresh scent of pine, Avery Hollis took another step along the dusty mountain trail. The warm breeze of late summer rustled against her sweat-soaked skin. Her tank top stuck uncomfortably to her body, and her hiking boots kicked dust up with every step. The mixed spruce and pine forest would go on for a few more miles before they entered the higher alpine meadows and firs that dotted Montana's peaks.

The idea of backpacking into Quartz Lake on this hot August day made a lot more sense back at home in the air-conditioned comfort of her small house in Golden, Montana. But the cozy little home she'd lived in since graduating college wouldn't be hers much longer. Between her roommate moving out of state, and her rent increasing by hundreds of dollars, she needed a new housing solution fast. As she took another steadying step on the trail, she realized what she had become: a broke woman living in a house she couldn't afford in one of the most overpriced housing markets in the West.

As Avery shifted her hips to move her heavy backpack into a new position, she snapped out of her memories. Her twin sister was getting farther ahead of her with every step, setting a pace that typically wouldn't feel so brutal. But she was distracted, and her thoughts kept her from focusing on the real

purpose of this trip: spending quality time with her sister on their annual backpacking trip.

“Morgan, hold up. I can’t keep going on like this,” Avery struggled to mutter over her rapid breathing. Sweat-soaked, golden-blond hair fell in front of her face as she leaned forward, placing her hands against her shaking knees.

“Avery, this isn’t like you. I’ve never heard you so out of breath on a hike.” Morgan eased her rapid pace, turning back to Avery. Morgan’s light skin glistened, and her dark hair rested on her shoulder. The backpack she wore was just as large as Avery’s, but she barely looked winded. Morgan took a deep breath as her green eyes met Avery’s. “Why don’t we take a break? We still have about two miles before we reach Quartz Lake.”

Avery let out an audible groan as she said, “No. If I take this backpack off now, I’ll never get it back on. Besides, the elevation is going to ease in the next mile, right? Just let me lead, okay?”

As Morgan stepped to the side of the trail, Avery took a deep gulp of water from her water bottle and trudged ahead of Morgan. The two fell back into silence as they walked through the woods. The first of the alpine firs filled the landscape. Rocky outcroppings ran to their right, showing granite formations.

The harsh elevation climb leveled off, and they left the steep mountainous landscape for an alpine meadow. The meadow teemed with wildflowers in full bloom. Indian paintbrush, penstemon, and more beargrass than Avery had ever seen covered the ground in a vibrant carpet of reds, purples, and whites.

“This is gorgeous,” Avery whispered.

“Nothing like an alpine meadow, is there?” Morgan asked.

Avery took in a deep breath and let the beauty of the meadow settle into her soul. “We’re never giving up this tradition, okay? We’re going to be old ladies with bent backs,

but we'll haul our asses into the wilderness together. Promise?" Avery said.

Morgan laughed and rolled her eyes at Avery. "Of course, Avery. Two wrinkly old ladies trudging our gear into the woods. I still can't believe you've never been here. Your mind is will be blown when we summit Quartz Mountain tomorrow morning." Morgan grinned as she spoke, and her dimples popped as she smiled through her words.

They were summiting the famed Quartz Mountain. How had she lived in Golden her whole life without climbing to the peak of the legendary mountain topped with brilliant quartz crystals? Morgan had climbed it one weekend with their dad. Avery had gotten sick, and she and her mom stayed home. Morgan and her dad couldn't stop talking about the gorgeous, quartz-laden mountain peak. But somehow, another trip never happened, and here they were at twenty-five, finally making their way to the crystals.

Avery took out her phone and snapped a few pictures of the wildflowers, her sister, and the stunning mountain in the background before getting back to the hike. This place was amazing. Avery didn't want to be anywhere else in the world, but she had this unsteady feeling at the back of her neck, like someone was watching her or she had forgotten something important at home.

"You seem off right now. Are you okay?" Morgan said.

"Oh, you know, one of those weird premonitions or something. Or else I forgot to lock the car. I'm just feeling uneasy." It was actually the fact that she didn't have next month's rent ready and couldn't secure a new roommate, but Avery wasn't ready to unload that news yet.

"That twitchy itchy feeling, huh?" Morgan asked. Avery knew what she was talking about. Ever since they were little, they both would get strange premonitions before something major happened. They started calling it their twitchy itchy.

Both sisters had always had this emotional connection and a deeper level of sensing events before they happened. Their mom, Cara Hollis, always joked that it was their twin

connection. But it felt like more. They could sense things that others didn't. Once, Avery had a rising sense of panic while skiing with her dad, Glen. She had wanted to return to the lodge and call her mom and sister, who were taking their own ski runs. On their way back to the lodge, they found Morgan and Cara being helped down the ski hill by ski patrol. Cara had pulled her ACL while trying to ski a challenging ski run.

"There's been plenty of times when one of us feels uneasy, and nothing happens. So, let's keep going. I'm sure we're fine," Morgan said as she began walking down the trail.

The feeling faded as the two crested a small incline, and they saw Quartz Lake. Brilliant cerulean blue water sparkled in the afternoon sunlight. Two other tents were already set up on the far side of the lake near the foot of Quartz Mountain. The mountain glittered as the crystals caught the sunlight. Both sisters gasped at the sight of the sparkling lake. Morgan reached for Avery's hand and gave it a squeeze as she leaned her head on her sister's shoulders. "Worth the hike, isn't it?" she said.

"It's incredible," Avery whispered. She paused for a moment before adding, "Let's set up camp on this side of the lake. This way, we can see the lake and mountain together."

At that moment, a man's voice startled both sisters as he called out, "Hey, bear!" Avery instinctively touched the bear spray attached to her hip belt and saw her sister do the same.

A man walked out of the woods, still calling out, "Hey, bear!" He was medium height and in his thirties, wearing a small backpack. He seemed to be hiking alone.

Avery called out to him to not startle him, "Hey there! Any bear action up here?"

"Yeah, I saw a large grizzly in the forest near the next lake over the ridge. It's about four miles off from here. I'm hiking on my own and want to make sure I don't startle one," the man replied.

"Ah! Thanks for the info. We're camping up here tonight, so we'll keep a lookout for him," Avery said as she looked

around her, expecting to see evidence of bears around. She had camped in grizzly country since she was a baby.

“Just keep a clean camp, practice Leave No Trace, and you should be fine. You know those things, right?” The man gave them the skeptical look they’d gotten since they began doing outdoor excursions on their own. The look suggested that women couldn’t fend for themselves in the wild without a man’s help. Just another stereotype being placed on women in the outdoors.

“Yeah, we know all about Leave No Trace. I work on a trail crew for the Forest Service and work ski patrol in the winters at Golden. My sister has just as much outdoor experience as I do,” Avery said, rolling her eyes.

“Well, good luck to you, then. Enjoy the lake too. It’s gorgeous out here,” the man said, turning his back to the sisters.

Once he was out of sight, Avery rolled her eyes as she snarked, “You little ladies know what you’re doing out in the woods without a man?”

Morgan gave her an apprehensive smile before saying, “He’s just checking to make sure we’re not idiots, but it is so irritating how men assume we can’t camp on our own. We’ve been camping in grizzly country our whole lives, and we shouldn’t have any problems.”

“I’m not worried about it. Do you know how often I’ve seen bears while working trail crew? If we were worried about encountering a bear, we should have stayed home.”

“Ave, you live, play, and work outside. Women who can handle their own gear, make trails, and build a fire intimidate men. Don’t worry about it anymore.” Morgan shook her head. Her long braid swung from side to side before resting on top of her backpack.

Avery gave her sister a relaxed smile. “You’re right. Let’s get camp set up and enjoy this view.”

Avery and Morgan walked along the trail before choosing a camping spot. They took off their heavy backpacks and leaned

them against a tree. The best feeling was dropping the pack after a long hike, and they both began stretching their sore backs.

Within a few minutes, Morgan unstrapped the tent from the outside of her backpack. They walked to a flat patch under a few larch trees where Morgan began unrolling the tent. It was a small and simple setup: a tent with just enough room for two women.

“Let’s get the gear up in case there’s a bear around, then swim in the lake,” Morgan suggested as she grabbed her bear spray. Avery unclipped her multi-tool and bear spray from her hip belt. She always liked to have them within arm’s reach.

Once their gear was safely out of a bear’s reach, they changed into their swimsuits. Avery brought a floral-print dusty pink and yellow two-piece swimsuit. The cut of the suit accentuated her fit frame. Avery spent her summers outside building trails for the Forest Service, and she was proud of her strong body and all the places it led her. Morgan pulled out a dark-green string bikini. She was also short and strong, but unlike her sister’s defined muscles from working outside, Morgan had the lean muscles of a runner.

Morgan and Avery walked down to the lake. The water was a deep shade of blue. The kind of blue that only comes from snow runoff. There was no doubt in Avery’s mind that this water was going to be icy cold. But on a hot August day after hiking up a dusty trail, this icy water was what they needed. They waded in, going up to their calves in the shockingly cold water. The dark blue water surrounded their feet and legs, but neither sister was willing to go deeper.

“You first, Ave,” Morgan suggested as she gave her sister a friendly shove into the skin-tingling cold water.

“Ah! No, you don’t!” Avery cried, grabbing her sister by the hand as they both tumbled into the frigid lake. They went under in a tangle of limbs, fully submerged.

The two women screamed and laughed as they swam into the small lake’s cold depths. “Let’s see who can stay in the longest,” Avery suggested.

“Fine by me. I’m sure your legs will cramp in this cold in no time!” Morgan challenged. As the sisters splashed and played in the water, the sun sank level with Quartz Mountain. Sunlight glistened off the quartz-topped peak. Avery took a sudden deep breath, moved by the beauty of the light shimmering off the mountain top.

“Okay, I’m getting out and getting the fire going so I can enjoy this sparkling sunset. You win, Mor,” Avery announced as she began swimming to the shore.

Once they were both back on land, they changed into their leggings and fleece jackets before building a crackling fire.

“Let’s start on dinner before the sun sets,” Morgan said. Morgan cooked, and they ate their simple backpacking meal as the sun ducked below the mountain peaks. As they ate, they heard rustling in the bushes near the edge of the lake. “What was that?” Morgan asked.

Avery yawned. “Probably just a squirrel or something.”

The bushes shook again, but they didn’t see an animal. “Sounds like a big fucking squirrel,” Morgan muttered.

“Just eat quickly, and we’ll get all our food packed away,” Avery suggested. She wasn’t actually worried. They’d be fine. After all, the man on the trail saw a grizzly miles away. It was probably nothing.

After eating and cleaning up, Morgan and Avery moved to the campfire with a flask of whiskey. Morgan passed it to Avery. Avery knew she needed to talk with her sister about her housing situation. It was awkward, but she should just get it over with.

“So I’ve had something on my mind. It’s kind of embarrassing... but I’m going to be basically homeless when my rental contract is up in two months. My roommate just left the state, and I don’t even know how I’m going to make rent for the next two months. I didn’t save enough this summer. I’m in trouble,” Avery said. Her hands shook as she thought about the financial trouble she was in.

Morgan shifted on the log, her body looking stiff. Avery knew exactly why. Morgan had encouraged her last summer to seek a full-time job. They'd even fought about it, the biggest argument of their lives. Morgan was more than willing to push Avery towards stability, but it was easy for Morgan to choose her lifestyle. She was always practical in her decisions, always the steady one. Avery knew Morgan never understood her choice to work outside for low pay. But being connected to nature and living in the elements was vital to Avery. Something she couldn't live without. It's not like she hadn't tried. College courses had nearly broken her and her need for adventure.

Morgan's furrowed brows and tight lips gave away what she was thinking. She was cautious with her words, as usual. "Have you considered looking for a full-time job?" Morgan asked as she took another sip of the whiskey and stared intently at the campfire.

"My supervisor has asked me so many times why I'm not working as a forester instead of doing trail work." Her supervisor always asked her when she'd put her forestry degree to work. She wasn't interested, though. She liked trail work. Being outside for a week straight, cutting into the mountain with an axe or sawing logs off a trail. Plus, Avery knew she was basically allergic to responsibility. "But I'm not interested. Maybe someday? And... I don't want to spend my winters in a forestry office instead of skiing every day."

Winter was the bigger issue. She couldn't give up her job on ski patrol. She lived for the early mornings on the mountain, mitigating avalanches. She even loved the busy holiday season, when she spent most of her time assisting new skiers who got in over their heads and injured themselves in the process. Working outside in the winter, testing herself in the frigid Montana conditions, made her feel most alive.

Morgan pursed her lips. "So you need a place to live? Do you want to move in with me, or are you looking for money?"

"No, Mor, I can't ask anything of you. Don't even think about it. I just wanted to let you know," Avery said. She

knocked back another swig of the whiskey before she had to hear what her sister was going to say.

“It’s fine if you need help, and I have an empty room. Plus, I’m closer to the ski hill than your house in the middle of town. It makes sense for you to move in with me,” Morgan replied.

This made Avery feel worse, like a loser. Her beautiful, successful sister purchased a condo at twenty-three. That was unheard of, but somehow, her sister chose the moment months before the housing market went insane with people flocking to Golden for a piece of the newly “discovered” mountain town.

“Morgan, I love you so much. You’re my twin. We’ve got that crazy twin connection, but you know how we do together when we’re living in the same space.” Avery acknowledged, shaking her head from under her wool beanie. “I am a mess. I have way too much gear. There’s no way you want that in your tidy little condo.”

Morgan took a drink from the flask before she said, “I’m not some heartless bitch who’s going to let my sister go homeless or move into some house with four other roommates. I have a perfectly comfortable room for you. You can stay until you figure out what’s next. Please don’t refuse me. This is why you brought it up, right?”

“Ah, okay. And thank you for agreeing,” Avery said as she shrugged. She had a queasy feeling in her belly, and she crossed her arms. This was the best scenario for her, and she’d secretly hoped Morgan would suggest it. It would save her such a huge burden. But still... It was embarrassing that she needed to rely on her sister for housing. “How can I make this up to you? And please don’t resent me when I bring over all my stuff!”

“Oh, I’ll let you know if it drives me crazy. I will not hold back on you! I think I’m set on my whiskey intake for the night. What time do you want to climb Quartz tomorrow?” Morgan asked as she stood up and stretched.

“Let’s get up at seven and head toward the peak. I don’t need a sunrise hike, but it would be nice to summit earlier in

the day before we get to our next campsite.”

“How about five-thirty? The sun will be rising, and we can pack up to move camp,” Morgan asked. Avery agreed, and the two headed to the small tent to sleep. Morgan drifted to sleep quickly. Meanwhile, Avery struggled to fall asleep. Despite her sister’s insistence that Avery move in with her, she had a gnawing sense of dread. She couldn’t shake the feeling that something was wrong, but she wasn’t sure if it was moving in with her sister, or the threat of a bear nearby.

Chapter Two

Avery

Morgan's phone alarm went off at five-thirty sharp. Avery woke to the noise of Morgan stuffing her sleeping bag into her stuff sack. The crisp air made Avery want to roll over and go back to sleep. Grudgingly, Avery changed out of her wool base layers and into her synthetic yoga pants and tank top. She layered a fleece sweater over her tank top before lacing up her hiking boots.

"Let me braid your wild hair for you, Ave," Morgan offered. Avery let her sister put her wavy hair into one long, loose braid. Avery topped her head with a trucker hat featuring the mountains outside of Golden. It was such a touristy hat, but she loved her hometown enough that she proudly wore it.

"Alright, let's get this tent down. I'll carry it today," Avery said as Morgan nodded in agreement. Morgan occupied herself by taking down the bear bags and making an oatmeal breakfast and coffee. As she poured the hot water from Avery's small backcountry teapot, Morgan looked at Avery with a thoughtful expression. Avery completed packing the tent and rearranging her sleeping gear into her backpack before she looked up to see Morgan staring at her.

"What's up?" Avery asked.

"It's nothing. Just thinking," Morgan said, returning her gaze to her now-poured cup of coffee.

“Morgan, you are never ‘just thinking.’ Tell me what’s up,” Avery stated, as she walked over to Morgan and took her cup of coffee.

“It’s just—well, it’s going to sound ridiculous,” Morgan said.

“Now you have to say it!” Avery gave her a teasing poke in the side as Morgan shook her head.

“I... uh... I’ve had the twitchy itchies since I woke up. Like a sense of impending doom. That sounded dramatic.”

Avery stared at her. Her eyes were wide, her face stricken. “I’ve had this weird feeling that I couldn’t shake all night. Do you think it means anything?”

Morgan stared back at Avery. “Maybe something happened back at home. Or maybe we should reconsider climbing the mountain?”

“Morgan, the whole point of choosing this location was to summit Quartz Mountain. We’ll be fine. But if we still have the twitchy itchies after summiting, maybe we should call it and get back in phone reception.” Avery wasn’t about to lose the chance to touch those gorgeous, clear crystals and view the lake and mountains below.

“You’re right. This is why I wasn’t going to mention it. But for both of us to have this feeling?” Morgan shook her head, and Avery felt a chill go down her spine. They should probably listen to their instincts, but here they were, ignoring them.

“Then let’s get our bags packed and continue on. It’s nothing. There’s been plenty of times we’ve sensed something... differently than others... and nothing happened. I’m sure this is the same situation,” said Avery as she wiped out her oatmeal bowl and packed the rest of her gear into her backpack. Morgan followed Avery’s lead and packed her bags without another word. The two women hefted their packs on their backs and walked down the trail that led around the sapphire blue lake.

As they turned away from the lake and headed up the trail to summit Quartz Mountain, it hit her as she watched Morgan struggle up the steep incline just how selfish she'd been. She had spent the last twenty-four hours pouting and talking only about herself. She hadn't even checked in on Morgan. Morgan's workload as a software engineer was heavy. Plus, Morgan was so driven that she would put her personal life on hold for her career. She hadn't had a serious boyfriend since her sophomore year of college, and Avery knew Morgan wasn't dating anyone now.

Avery took a long drink from her water bottle and continued following in her sister's footsteps. The terrain had already changed from an alpine meadow to stringy groups of subalpine firs and crystal-laden boulders. As they continued to climb the steep trail, their hiking boots hit more crystals. Up and up they climbed through larger and larger quartz formations. The light shone off the crystal, casting glittery hues across their leggings and boots. Neither sister spoke as they hiked higher and higher up the peak.

They were within half a mile of the summit when Morgan paused. "Let's take a break. I need a snack."

"Okay, sure, Morgan. I have some protein bars at the top of my pack. Why don't we take our bags off, eat the bars, and head to the top without them?" Avery said as she unbuckled her hip belt.

"That's not a bad idea. We're close to the summit and don't need to carry all this gear up to the final push, anyway."

They both took a few moments to stretch their aching muscles before they sat down with their water bottles and protein bars. The wind picked up around them, whipping their loose braids as they ate the bars.

"Still feeling uneasy?" Avery asked.

"Not really. I'm just tired! I haven't summited a mountain this summer. It's kind of kicking my ass," Morgan admitted. Avery hadn't thought that this could be challenging for Morgan. Yesterday, Avery struggled with the hike, weighed down with her own thoughts.

“I’m sorry; you should have said something sooner. I forget not everyone hikes for a job. Take all the time you need, sis,” Avery said. “I’ve been so selfish. I haven’t even asked you how you’ve been doing. Both here on the hike and in your life,” Avery admitted.

“It’s fine, Ave,” Morgan assured her. But Avery had a suspicion that it wasn’t fine.

“It isn’t. I haven’t even asked how your promotion is going.”

Morgan sighed. “Yeah, you’re pretty off the radar during the summer. I get it. You’re gone so much in the summer. The new job’s been a big adjustment, but I’m getting by.”

Avery was, admittedly, not always the best sister. She had spent her adult life being called a free spirit compared to Morgan’s level-headed, practical side. Eventually, she stopped keeping track of Morgan’s job growth, or even asking much about work.

“I hope you’re at least happy with it,” Avery said through a bite of her protein bar.

“Of course I am, Avery. I wouldn’t be doing it if I wasn’t. But, honestly, we can talk about my job later. Let’s climb the summit.”

Wordlessly, they climbed over sharp, jagged chunks of white quartz. Far below, Avery could see the inky water of Quartz Lake still shrouded in darkness. Finally, they reached the peak. Dagger-sharp crystal rocks came to a point. Avery and Morgan touched the top with their hands before closing into an embrace.

Morgan and Avery stared at the lake below. Quartz Lake was just a speck of cerulean blue from this height. The morning light still hadn’t made it past the shadows of the mountain. From this height, the meadow and lake seemed fast asleep. But Avery could hear and feel the world awakening. The breeze carried the sounds of life. She could hear the ravens cawing in the valley below. A marmot squeaked an

incessant “good morning,” and she could see the movement of the other campers packing up their tent.

Morgan sat down on the sharp rocks, picking up a chunk of crystal in her hand. She passed it to Avery. “Take it. We can put it in the condo. Like marking a new era together.”

Avery gave her sister a smile and slipped the quartz into the pocket of her yoga pants. They both sat in silence before taking pictures of themselves on the beautiful crystals. Twin faces with identical features in opposite colors, like two sides of the moon, Morgan, dark, and Avery, light. The shape of their small noses and full lips were almost identical. Their eyes had the same wide shape set against round cheeks. Everyone commented on how different Morgan and Avery appeared until they looked closer. Then no one could deny that they were twins.

“We should get back down to our bags before a bear gets into them!” Morgan joked.

“More likely a mountain goat at this elevation,” Avery replied.

Their pace down the mountain was quick. Nearly a run as they hurried down the jagged mountainside. As they walked down the steep path, they chatted about how they would redecorate Morgan’s condo. But they really needed to discuss how she’d contribute to the bills.

“I don’t want to be a charity case, Morgan. Please let me pay my part,” Avery said.

Morgan continued her fast pace down the mountain, quiet for a while. “That seems fair. I’ll have a contract written up,” Morgan replied.

“Thanks, Mor. And I really appreciate this.” As Avery finished her thought, she stood to strap on her backpack. “Damn! Putting on a backpack after having it off is always the worst. Why do we do this to ourselves?”

“I always start questioning my decision to backpack when I’m in the middle of a trip. But it’s always worth it, huh?”

Morgan strapped her hip belt before moving to her chest strap. "Ready to continue on?"

"You lead the way. I know what you mean. I'm always daydreaming of cheeseburgers out here," Avery replied as the wind rushed past her, making it tough to hear what Morgan said.

They walked a few more yards down the trail when they heard heavy breathing and growls behind a huge crystal block. Avery's blood froze in her veins. Immediately, she reached for her canister of bear spray.

Before either could speak, a massive grizzly bear stepped onto the path. The bear was at least five hundred pounds, with three-inch claws and dark brown fur.

Morgan gasped in shock as Avery removed the safety from her bear spray.

She whispered to her sister, "Stay calm! Don't move."

She spoke too late as Morgan made a quick jerking motion, turning toward her sister and putting her back to the bear as she attempted to run up the mountain.

The bear reacted instantly. In two bounds, it was on Morgan, tossing her forward onto the sharp rocks. Avery lunged at the bear, shooting bear spray toward the beast. But the animal didn't react as the spray wafted back toward Avery in the wind. Avery's scream was lost in the wind as the burning vapor hit her eyes. The sound of Morgan's muffled cries and the bear's grunts filled the air. The bear was bearing down on Morgan, its jaws around her skull.

Avery could only make out blurry images of what was happening in front of her. This bear would kill her sister if she didn't act quickly. The tears rushed down her face as she tried to focus her aim on the bear's body. Avery picked up a crystal boulder and threw it at the bear with all her strength. The cracking sound of the rock making contact with the bear's shoulders echoed off the surrounding rocks.

Immediately, the bear turned its attention from Morgan's still and bloody body, and began charging toward Avery.

Avery could hardly make out the features of the bear through her stinging eyes. She turned her back on the bear and stumbled over the sharp rocks. Avery's body smacked the rocks as she tripped, cracking her head on the crystals. She pressed her arms forward to push her body up, trying to think of how to save herself and her sister.

Suddenly, the bear was on Avery's back, pinning her down against the sharp rocks. It raised itself up on two legs before plunging its front paws and claws against Avery's backpack. The air escaped her lungs as the full weight of the bear crashed into her. There was no escaping this attack. She clutched onto the crystals and let out a feeble plea to anyone or anything who could hear her.

"Please! Help!" Avery cried out.

At that moment, the mountain filled with a shrill whirring sound. The bear ran, charging back toward Morgan before dragging her body down further from the site of the attack. Light exploded from the crystal that Avery clung to, and the world around her ceased to exist. As light and sound exploded from the world around her, Avery let out a shrill and gasping shout for her sister, "Morgan! Morgan! Morgan!"

Darkness engulfed her where light had once poured out, and she fell into unconsciousness on the cold rock.

Chapter Three

Avery

Muted light filtered through Avery's eyes as she tried to make out her surroundings. *Everything* hurt, but Avery's head throbbed so much it made her eyes burn. *What in the hell happened?*

Avery tried to remember the details that led her to wake up alone on a pile of sharp rocks, but the pain coursing through her body made it impossible to think of anything else. Her neck and shoulders felt like they were on fire, and she struggled to think past the pain pounding through her head.

She had to assess the situation. That's what she'd always done when she approached an injured skier as a ski patroller. It was no different now, except she was the injured one. Avery tried to lift her right hand to her head, but she couldn't move it. She had a serious injury to her right shoulder. She moved her left arm and realized she still wore her backpack.

Suddenly, the last few hours rushed back to her. She was backpacking with Morgan and an aggressive bear attacked them. She'd hit her head hard on a rock. Bringing her left hand up to her forehead, she felt the open wound running across her forehead. The fresh blood on her fingers nauseated her.

The last thing she remembered flashed into her head. Morgan's terrified screams, the crunch of her bones as the bear

took off and the blinding white light that stunned Avery into unconsciousness.

Where was Morgan?

Avery unclipped her backpack. She needed to find help *now*. Morgan's life depended on it. Avery sat up, pushing through the dizzying pain. The motion rocked through her. Her ears rang. Her stomach did a flip before the contents of her stomach roiled.

She had to get control of her body before she helped Morgan. She wasn't lost. The trail was popular, and she knew other campers and hikers were just below Quartz Mountain at the lake. If she could make it down there, she'd be okay. Then she could get Morgan some help.

She tried standing, but the dizziness hit her again, and she leaned back against her backpack. She tugged on her water bottle and took in some sips of water. Next, she needed to get out the first aid kit.

She tried to move her heavy pack over to her side. While she struggled, she heard voices on the trail. Help was already here!

"Help!" Avery tried to yell, but her voice came out so weak and scratchy. It didn't sound like her typically confident voice. She couldn't make out anyone on the trail thanks to her stinging eyes. *Think, Avery. Think this through.* Her mind felt so garbled it was challenging not to succumb to panic. But panicking would not help her right now. It would only make things much worse.

The whistle! She had a whistle attached to her chest strap on her backpack. Grabbing the backpack with her left hand, she lifted the buckle to her mouth and blew. The shrill sound echoed across the mountains. She blew again and again. Surely someone would hear her distress signal?

Panting and exhausted, Avery flipped the backpack over and leaned against it again, closing her eyes. The throbbing pain in her head and the searing pain in her shoulder wore her down. Dizziness threatened to rob her of consciousness.

The voices down the trail got louder. People were coming! She slid down so her head rested on the pack, and she could reach her chest strap. Despite the lightheadedness, Avery blew the whistle as long as she could before she repeated it. Over and over, she blew the whistle while her head and shoulder pounded in protest.

Footfalls came down the trail, and voices were much closer. *Thank God!* She would get the help she needed. Avery whistled again and opened her eyes. Shapes approached her with shocking speed. They were men. Maybe they already found Morgan? She could be getting help now.

Through blurred vision, she could see what must be a group of stacked men running toward her. Fuck, these men were enormous. But what was in their hands? The first one to reach her crouched low beside her. He spoke in a lilting language. He wore some sort of leather clothing, and his skin was covered in an intricate design that looked like it was tattooed below the surface of his skin. Avery blinked as her mind played tricks on her. The tattoo moved on its own.

Most alarming of all was the sword the man held in his right hand. "Help me!" Avery said. Her voice sounded so raspy, so quiet, she wasn't sure if he heard her. He just kept pointing a sword at her and talking in that nonsensical language.

The man yelled at her in that strange language as the others reached her. There was something inhuman about these men. Or was this a result of her head injury?

"Please, help me!" she cried. Men were all around her now, but most of them weren't paying any attention to her. She couldn't believe what she saw. They were actually fighting each other. She looked around through her blurred vision and saw them raising swords against each other. She saw one take a sword through the chest and collapse to the ground. Another shot out what appeared to be thorns through his hand. The thorns wrapped around another man, and she watched his eyes widen as the man suffocated and choked to death.

The one who made it to her first pressed the tip of the sword's blade to her throat. He shouted something at her, but

she couldn't make out a single word of what he said. He wore a hateful scowl on his face. This man was going to kill her! She closed her burning eyes, hoping that all of this terrifying experience was just a bad hallucination.

Avery felt hot liquid splatter against her face. Something heavy thudded into her lap. *No, no. This couldn't be real.* She opened her eyes and looked into her lap. The man's head was lying there, eyes looking into the void. Avery's heart raced so fast she was sure it would burst from her chest.

This is not real.

This is not real. Wake the fuck up, Avery!

Someone screamed so loud it seared through her mind. All around her, the men fought, but that screaming continued, harsh and raspy.

Avery realized the screaming came from her. She tried to move away from the head, but her legs were caught on something. The dead man's headless body was on top of her legs. It was so heavy that no amount of squirming could get the man off of her.

The man who killed somebody with a thorn bush leaned close enough for her to make eye contact. Bright blue eyes sparkled under heavy lids. A few strands of his long, black hair fell forward across his face.

He spoke in a soothing, lilting voice, but she still couldn't make out what he said. Like the first man, he somehow had tattoos under the skin. Not on his face, but across both of his exposed arms and hands. The tattoo design writhed under his skin. He brought his hand up to her face and spoke gently into her ear. His fingers brushed against the wound on her head, and he continued to whisper something that she couldn't understand. A cool breeze rushed through her senses. When she breathed in, she smelled the pungent scent of sap. A sense of calm infiltrated her mind. Her body felt comfortably warm, like she was wrapped in a cozy blanket on a couch. The pain pounding through her head diminished, and Avery succumbed to the relief, closing her eyes.

Chapter Four

Savine

Savine was almost certain the loyalists that reached Quartz Mountain before him hadn't noticed that this tiny woman carried the five stars along her forehead, the mark of the Premier Goddess Althea. He'd never even seen someone marked by the Goddess, other than the most high priestesses serving her directly. This whole thing was unheard of, and he wasn't going to take the chance of leaving this woman behind.

His team had taken out most of the enemy, but at least one had escaped and would report her existence to the King of Latiah. He'd need to get more warriors on night watch and prepare everyone for a potential skirmish. If one of those fucking torturers saw Althea's mark on the little woman's head, it was going to be a full-scale battle. There wasn't a single fae ruler who would pass up the opportunity to get their hands on someone who was Goddess-touched.

But who was this small woman? Where did she come from? He looked down at her slender sleeping frame. She was like a feather in his arms and sent a soft warmth pulsing through him where her arm draped across his shoulders. He cringed, wanting to pull her arm off his bare skin. Nothing made him want to recoil more than an unwanted touch from another person, especially a stranger. But now wasn't the time to shrink away from this strangely warm sensation between them.

He cradled her head against his shoulders as he began running down the sacred mountain.

This woman was strangely beautiful. Her features were smaller and softer than most fae, with pillowy lips and round cheeks. Her body felt surprisingly stronger, more muscular than he'd expected from such a small creature, and her bright clothing made her look like some sort of beacon on the mountain.

"Jay, run ahead to the elk and get them ready to ride. We've got to get this girl to a healer," Savine ordered to his master of elk.

"Right away, sir," Jay replied with a grin on his blood-speckled face. Before Savine replied, Jay was running with more speed than a man his size should be capable of. But that was Jay—always ready to do as Savine commanded without complaint. He was one of those eternal optimists who made Savine question how a man could go from killing his former countrymen to smiling in a matter of minutes.

Savine commanded some of his scouting party to search for the escaped loyalist and ordered others to assist with watching for potential attackers while he carried the girl down the mountain. One of his warriors carried that strange, torn sack that the woman had been leaning against.

Savine made quick time down the trail. The essence of his magic pulsed through his body as his feet moved swiftly across the rocks. The woman in his arms continued to lie limply against his firm body. His team had no trouble keeping up with the brutal pace, and they reached the base of the mountain in less than an hour. The commotion at the top of Quartz Mountain could attract various creatures, and he didn't want to risk his team being exposed in these mountains for long. Once he had this marked girl back to the safety of the summer encampment, he would be able to breathe again.

Savine checked the woman's pulse. Still strong. His essence would have her knocked out for a couple of hours. He noticed her rounded ears as soon as he began scanning her head injury.

“Abyss, damn me! This woman is a human,” Savine said as he touched the soft, rounded shell of her ear.

“How is that even possible?” Weston, one of his personal guards, asked.

“Have you ever seen someone with rounded ears? I’ve only heard of them in legends. Not even the Bayberries have them,” Savine replied.

“Of course not, sir. But how could a *human* be in Aeritis? Maybe her ears were docked? Like a new way the king is marking slaves?”

Savine knew in his soul that couldn’t be true. This woman was not from Aeritis. Her clothes were soft and stretchy. Like nothing he’d ever felt in all his life. There were also the strange shoes, and the huge, bright red bag.

“Use your discernment, Weston. Look at the woman. What escaped fae slave with docked ears would ever wear clothing that advertised herself as walking prey? What in the Abyss is that bag that is half her size and glowing like a bright red beacon? I won’t be surprised if the Nepheli sends an eagan down to investigate the thing.” Goddess alive, Weston was slow at times. But Savine trusted the man with his life every day. What did that say about *him*?

Jay waved the scouting party over to a group of trees where the elk were saddled and ready to ride.

“Jay, hold the woman, then pass her to me,” Savine said. He passed the slight, sleeping human to Jay.

“Everything about this woman is peculiar. Where is her essence? What are these strange clothes?” Jay muttered, more to himself than to Savine.

Savine climbed on his huge mount, Jari. Jari’s sable fur glistened in the midday sunlight. He would need to be careful with the young woman. Jari’s antlers were a massive rack, even for a war elk. One wrong move of his head would slice this woman to pieces.

Savine held the reins in one hand as he reached for the human. He nestled her against his chest. Her warm breath

tickled him, and his essence shuddered under his skin as he felt a tiny tug on his heart. What the fuck was that response? Savine positioned her so that her arm and head rested on his leather armor, no part of her touching him.

“We’ll have answers once she’s seen Kyla and is awake. She should be able to heal her without needing one of the Bayberry healers. Let’s ride before this place is crawling with fae,” Savine said. Pressing his heels into the elk’s flesh, Jari responded with a snort and took off at a run.



The trip through the forested mountains and down to the open valley was free of conflict with the loyalists. As the leader of the Latian rebellion, Savine walked with a target on his back wherever he went, but the summer’s battles had already begun to wind down. After over twenty-five years of civil war, he’d begun to see the predictable patterns in this war. Battles throughout the Middens in the summer, then preparations for the harsh winter when the war would cease, only to resume again in the spring. The stalemate between his rebel forces and the loyalists seemed to have no end in sight. Not until he could find allies to help him push past the pass that separated the two halves of Latiah, or until he could successfully kill the king.

With the encampment in sight, Savine drove Jari into a sprint across the open grassland. He saw who waited for him outside the protective walls of the summer encampment.

Of course, his sister was out of the encampment waiting. She took her job of securing their perimeter seriously, and with both her brother and soulmate gone, she’d be extra alert for any threat against their people.

“I saw you from the encampment riding hard down the mountain, so I got here as quickly as possible. Are there any injuries?” Kyla said. She reached for Jari’s reins and looked at the small bundle in Savine’s arms.

“Who is the child? I’ve never seen her before,” Kyla asked. Savine knew his sister had not given the woman a good

assessment yet to make the same mistake the others did on the mountain.

“This is no child. She is a woman. Did you see the light streaming off Quartz Mountain or hear the loud sound?”

Kyla reached her arms up to take the woman from Savine. “I did. I sent patrollers to circle the encampment and healers to help the injured. All non-warriors are safely behind the encampment walls. I figured with an explosion like that, we would need to be ready for anything.”

“The woman’s the only one injured. She needs healing. Her head is sliced, and she has claw marks across her neck and shoulders. Will you help me?” Savine asked as he passed the little human to his sister.

Kyla, a tall woman even by Latian standards, looked her brother in the eyes and didn’t hesitate for a moment. “Of course, brother. Let’s get her to my tent.”

Kyla gently passed the injured woman back to Savine before they began running toward the encampment. The village was full of wood and canvas structures making a circle. In the center of the circle was an enormous bonfire, always burning in an offering to the Goddesses of Aeritis. Only two priestesses had joined their cause, but after all these years of fighting against the loyalists, Mother Althea continued to bless the rebels.

When they arrived at Kyla’s tent, they opened the canvas flaps to see Kyla’s mate, Garnel, stark naked, sitting on the large bed of furs. He sat with his muscular body displayed and his obvious erection pointed like a spear at the salute.

“Hey baby, I thought you might like a little afternoon romp,” Garnel said as Kyla stepped in.

“Not the right time, Garnel.” She had hardly finished speaking before Savine walked in.

“Garnel, out!” Savine shouted. After fifty years of dealing with his sister and his closest friend as a mated pair, he was used to their near feral sex drive. Add in that twenty-five of those years were spent in close proximity, and Savine had

heard more of his sister's and friend's sex life to last the rest of his centuries-long existence.

"Goddess alive! Savine, I wasn't expecting you back so soon!" Garnel yelled as he covered himself with a nearby fur.

"I wasn't either. But something came up. Speaking of, why are you here? Shouldn't you be scouting near the river? Why weren't you alarmed by the flashing light at the top of Quartz Mountain?"

"We've been scouting for three days and have seen nothing. I missed Kyla. I thought I'd surprise her with an afternoon quickie and be back on the trail before you were down from the mountains." Garnel shrugged unapologetically. Savine knew mated fae had a hard time being apart from their other half, but this was ridiculous. Especially coming from the General of his rebellion.

"For fuck's sake! Get some clothes on and get out of here. I want you back on duty before I decide to punish your insolence."

Kyla raised an eyebrow at her mate, but didn't comment on Savine's harsh words. Thank the Goddess one of them was being rational.

He walked over to the bed, where Garnel moved off. Savine placed the woman on the pile of soft furs. He checked her pulse on her wrist again and found a slow, steady pulse. Behind him, Garnel leaned forward, examining the woman as he put on his leather pants. Savine placed the woman's bright red sack on the ground next to the bed as he stepped out of Garnel's way.

"Who is the child? What happened to her?" Garnel questioned. His red eyebrows arched in a quizzical expression.

"She's not a child, and we don't know yet," Kyla replied as she kissed Garnel's bearded cheek.

"If she's not a child, she must be a Bayberry. How would a Bayberry make it this far into Latiah without us knowing? Why does she have such strange clothing?" Garnel asked

again. Savine clenched his jaw as his shoulders tensed. He was quickly losing his patience. This woman needed healing.

“I know nothing about the woman. She appeared on the crystals while I scouted, and we made it to her at the same time as the loyalist scouts. We killed them with no problem. They were only recruits— no powerful fae in the group. I will update you when I have more information myself. Meanwhile, get out and get back to your post,” Savine said with a snarl.

Garnel glared at Savine, but did not challenge him. His hazel eyes flickered with flecks of gold. Savine’s authority outranked Garnel, despite his mating to Kyla.

Kyla walked over to Garnel and wrapped her arms around his waist. She whispered something indiscernible into Garnel’s ear. Whatever she said made Garnel grin a tantalized smile before he kissed her on her lips. Kyla reached her hand into his long red hair, deepening the kiss.

“OUT!” Savine barked. Garnel and Kyla pulled apart quickly. Reluctantly, Garnel turned toward the door of the tent.

“Fucking mates!” Savine shouted as Garnel left the tent.

Kyla shot her brother a scathing stare as she walked back toward the bed. “You know, you shouldn’t treat him that way. Garnel likes to be included, and he could have stayed out of my way while I examined the woman.”

“Kyla, if this woman wakes, she will be frightened. I don’t need a Latian warrior in the room, not to mention that you both have a job to perform. Have you been so focused on your mate that you missed the glaringly obvious features of this woman?” Savine quipped at his sister.

“Don’t throw my mate’s attraction for me in my face just because you have no love life, Savine. And no, considering you were carrying the woman like a rag doll, I haven’t had a good look at her yet. Please, enlighten me,” Kyla barked back at her brother as she looked at the sleeping woman on the bed. Savine knew she noticed what he saw right away by the surprised expression on her face. “Ah! She isn’t a fae folk? But how? How can this be?”

“Her rounded ears took me by surprise, too. I think you have a human in your bed,” Savine said as he looked at the woman.

“But that’s impossible. Humans haven’t been seen in Aeritis since...” Kyla paused as Savine spoke up.

“Since The Cleaving? Or so legend says. Although grandfather spoke of some humans appearing over the millennia. Now clean up that head wound and see if what I noticed was correct.”

Kyla did as Savine ordered without hesitation. As she washed away the blood, Savine could more clearly see what he suspected when he first looked into the woman’s brown eyes. Above her eyebrows, but below the bleeding wound on her upper forehead and temple, was the undeniable mark of Althea. Five stars wound together with a dainty vine.

“Goddess be damned! This *human* carries Althea’s mark!” Kyla said. So Savine was right. There it was, the five stars of Althea embedded on the woman’s forehead.

“Goddess be blessed, you mean. Do you understand what power we now possess in winning the rebellion?” Savine asked. He couldn’t help the grin that slid on his face. This was it. Finally, a breakthrough to end this twenty-five-year long conflict.

Kyla bit her lower lip and studied the injured woman. “She’s not a citizen of the fae, but our Premier Goddess has blessed her. Do you believe Althea put her within our reach to defeat the Latian King?”

“How could I not? Get her patched up. We need to see what sort of abilities she has. She sent a warming sensation through my skin when we touched. Also, when I held her on Jari, her breath touched my skin, and it was as if her breath called to my essence.”

Kyla’s eyes widened for a second before her face transformed into serene consideration. Her only reply was a low hmmm.

“Touch her. See if you feel her magic,” Savine insisted.

Kyla squinted her eyes at her brother and frowned as she touched the woman's pale skin. Nothing happened. The patterns and whorls under Kyla's own skin didn't respond to the woman's touch.

"Maybe your essence was responding to your own magic from when you put her to sleep?"

"Possibly. Don't mention her being marked by the Goddess to anyone. Including that mate of yours," Savine said as he slipped a piece of hair from the woman's face. Her braid had come loose and strands of her golden hair cascaded under her strange head covering. It looked like a hat, but like none that he'd ever seen. It even depicted a picture of the mountains outside his tent, but not quite. The colors were wrong, more grey than purple. And there was a city drawn in tiny details.

"I'll keep nothing from Garnel. You know better than to expect me to hold a secret from my mate. You have no idea how impossible that would be," Kyla said as she shook her long, braided hair.

Savine rolled his eyes and huffed. His body towered over the bed, and his essence stirred in annoyance. "Your loyalty is to *me*. His loyalty is to me as well, but after his behavior today, I do not know how often you both jeopardize that loyalty. Do not bring up the Goddess mark to Garnel. If it naturally happens, then fine. Tell him."

"Fine. I will place a glamour on the mark once I've stitched her head wound. Now, get out," Kyla huffed back. She turned her back on her brother and began gathering herbs and balms from the wooden shelf behind her.

"And why should I do that?" Savine said back to his sister as he scoffed at her. Despite him being forty-five years older than her, Kyla had always had a way of bossing him around.

"I would hate to have this poor human wake up and be face to face with a terrifying Latian warrior like yourself, brother. Now, go do whatever a domineering warlord does in his free time and wait for my say to return." Kyla sneered. She always wanted to get the upper hand on Savine. But she had a point. There was no reason to scare the woman. Goddess knows he'd

already done that when he plopped that loyalist's head in her lap.

“As you wish, my sister.” Savine bowed as he walked toward the tent's door.

Chapter Five

Avery

A very tried to stretch her aching arms above her head. Pain jolted through her right shoulder, and she looked down to see it immobilized to her side. As she stirred, she opened her aching eyes and struggled to comprehend her surroundings. She took in an herbal-scented breath as consciousness returned to her. Everything was fuzzy. She couldn't remember what had happened or where she should be. She was in some sort of dimly lit space with soft bedding and what appeared to be white walls.

That's when the previous events came rushing back to her with sudden clarity.

That nightmare with the enormous men fighting with swords wasn't real. Maybe the bear wasn't even real. No, the bear definitely was real. She must have blacked out and was now in the hospital. Maybe the bright light and men with swords were an adverse reaction to some medication?

Avery stumbled out of bed, falling to the ground. Her ears rang, and nausea rocked through her. She touched her forehead gently, feeling a massive bump and stitches. Below the gash, her skin felt itchy and strangely more solid than the rest of her skin.

She pulled herself off the ground, leaning on the bed as she noticed she wasn't wearing her own clothing. She wore some

sort of dress, with long, oversized sleeves and a hem that reached her ankles. It was a plain cream color and had embroidered flowers on the cuffs and collar.

Things weren't adding up. Where was her IV? What was that herbal smell wafting through the room? She touched the soft blankets on the bed and realized they were, in fact, furs.

Furs of a dead animal.

In her bed.

Avery let out a squeak of trepidation and continued her assessment of the surroundings. This room wasn't a room at all, but a canvas tent. The tent was large, with a bed at least the size of a king-size bed against the back wall of the tent. There was a dresser and shelves. The shelves were filled with glass bottles holding vials of liquid and dried herbs.

Strange, floating orbs hung on the top of the tent. They didn't appear to be wired, but floated in midair. She noticed more of the glowing orbs on top of the dresser and side tables. Floating in the air? Surely not.

The pit of Avery's stomach tensed. The men who found her were fighting. Like actually trying to kill each other. Hell, that one man, the man with the blue eyes, had killed at least two people right in front of her. Then he touched her, and she felt so calm and comfortable that she fell asleep.

Avery felt a sense of dread in the pit of her stomach. *Was I abducted? Am I being held somewhere?* A rising sense of panic washed over her. But it made no sense that she would survive the bear attack and *not* wake up in a hospital. Or wake up being transported to the hospital.

She knew she needed to see what was outside those tent doors. As she stepped off the bed again, she saw her backpack lying against the canvas wall near the bedside table.

Her phone. She needed to check her phone and try to figure out where she was. This felt like a safer way to gain information on her location than walking out that tent door. Her phone had been in the side pocket of her backpack. She

knew she had shut it off after taking pictures on top of Quartz Mountain with Morgan.

Gingerly, she walked to the backpack. Her wounds were treated and cleaned, but she still couldn't lift her right arm. She had broken her shoulder, and someone immobilized her arm against her body.

Her phone was right where she left it. *If I've been abducted, they didn't search my gear*, Avery thought. She powered on her phone and sat back in bed. She was so tired and so light-headed.

The phone buzzed and lit up the dim space. No service appeared in the upper left corner of the phone. Avery wasn't surprised. She hadn't had reception at Quartz Mountain.

She had one last hope. The Find My Phone app. She and Morgan shared their locations with their parents before they left on the trip. Avery pressed on the app, but it wouldn't load. The map on the screen was a blur. Avery felt a rising sense of panic as she let out a gasping breath.

"Oh God. Oh God. What is happening to me?" All the awful horror movies she'd seen and accounts of women being abducted or murdered in the woods flashed through her mind.

Her mind raced as she leaped to her feet, giving way to the adrenaline coursing through her body. She took several quick steps toward the door of the tent before the room began to fade. She was going to pass out. Just as the thought entered her mind, everything went black, and she collapsed to the ground.



As she opened her eyes, she saw she was once again tucked into the fur-covered bed. She heard a soothing feminine lilt coming from the other side of the tent. Footsteps approached and Avery looked up to see a woman at her side. She was not like any woman she'd ever seen. Tall and thin with a beautiful face, she could have been a runway model. But her skin made Avery's breath catch in her throat. It was covered in an intricate pattern of lines and whorls, just like the men on the

mountain. Like theirs, the pattern seemed to move slowly on its own.

The woman continued to speak in a gentle voice, but Avery couldn't understand a word of what the woman said.

“Who are you?” Avery said. “Where is my sister? Why have you taken me? Please let me go. I won't tell anyone about you.” Avery's heart skittered in her chest. She felt like a frightened animal trapped in a net, and wanted nothing more than to run for safety.

The woman continued walking toward her, all the while talking in low, soothing tones that Avery could not understand. As she approached Avery, she continued speaking, but pointed her light blue eye's gaze toward the ceiling of the tent. She then reached out and touched Avery's shoulder. The whorls on her hands shifted before she removed her hand and gave Avery a friendly smile.

“I am happy to see you are awake. I have been worried that you would not regain consciousness. Even your emotions were in a state of stasis,” the woman said.

Stunned, Avery stared at the woman. “You speak English? Where am I?” Avery stammered as she pulled back from the woman's touch. Now that she saw the woman closer, she realized the intricate pattern was under the surface of her skin. Up close, the woman was even more strikingly beautiful. Like someone who had just the right amount of plastic surgery and fillers to make her face the image of perfection without looking too fake.

“I do not speak Eeglesh. Mother Althea granted my prayer to give you the ability to speak and understand our language. You are in the nation of Latiah within the world of Aeritis. My name is Kyla.” Kyla smiled at Avery. Her smile was warm and welcoming, and seemed to go right up to her bright blue eyes. Those eyes. They were identical to those of the man on the mountain. The man who had plopped a head into her lap.

Avery's head pounded, and she once again felt light-headed. This woman claimed that she was in a different world. What the hell kind of messed up people did she end up with?

“What do you mean, the world of Aeritis? Are you trying to claim that I’m no longer on Earth? How did we leave Montana?”

Kyla responded immediately to the panic on Avery’s face. She held a tall clay cup toward Avery’s hand. Her face was close to Avery’s. As they made eye contact, Avery realized how similar they were to the last eyes she’d looked into.

“Your eyes... That man... they’re the same,” Avery whispered. She held the cup in her left hand, but didn’t drink from it. Her heartbeat pounded. Cold sweat soaked through the unfamiliar nightgown.

“What is happening to me? Why did he take me? Please, just let me go home!” Avery shouted, making Kyla flinch.

“Just rest. Drink. You have been injured, and I believe your body has experienced some shock in the... travel to our realm,” Kyla said as she looked across Avery’s shaking body.

Avery stared back at Kyla. *Her realm?* This experience was like some sort of bad fantasy movie.

“It is only water. You are safe now. Please, you need to drink and rest,” Kyla insisted as she held out the cup.

Reluctantly, Avery drank. The water tasted like pure mountain spring water. Cold and sweet. “Thank you,” Avery said as she handed the cup back to Kyla.

“I know you are feeling overwhelmed and afraid. But know that I won’t harm you. I swear on my soulmate’s life I will not hurt you. But I know you are wondering what has happened to you. My brother found you on Quartz Mountain. You appeared in a clap of light and sound. He brought you to me. Something gravely injured you when you arrived. I treated your wounds and have worked to heal you. I washed you and changed you out of your bloodied clothing. You have been asleep for three days since he found you,” Kyla explained while Avery stared at her in total shock.

“Three days?! What about my sister? Where is she?” Avery said, voice shaking.

“I do not know. You were alone when my brother found you,” Kyla replied, giving Avery a look of genuine concern.

“P-please. I must find Morgan. She could be dead!” Avery pleaded with Kyla, clasping her hands.

“I wish I could help you find Morgan. But that is in the hands of the Goddess now.” She continued to hold Avery’s hands. “Tell me, what is your name?” Kyla asked.

“My name is Avery. Avery Hollis.” Tears streamed down her face. She had been gone for three days. She was somehow in a different world. There was probably a search happening now for her. Was Morgan even alive?

“Hello, Avery. I will do everything in my power to help you. That I swear,” Kyla said, the earnestness glimmering in her dusty-blue eyes as she held Avery’s hands tightly. Tears trickled down Avery’s face as she felt a mix of emotions. She had no choice but to trust this woman and hope that she could get back home.

“Those men on Quartz Mountain were after me? Why?”

“It is complicated, and you need your strength before I tell you.”

As Kyla squeezed Avery’s hand, her strange tattoos whirled, and an immediate sense of well-being wafted over Avery. She took a deep breath and sat back on the bed. Everything would be alright somehow.

Kyla stood and took a few steps away from Avery as she said, “In the meantime, you need more rest to help your body heal. I will go to the kitchens and get you something to eat. I will also need to let my brother know you are awake.”

Avery’s eyes flashed up at Kyla. She wasn’t ready to see anyone else yet. Especially not the man who’d severed a head into her lap. What kind of place could she be in that chopping heads off solved a problem?

“Can we start with food first? My head is spinning from all this information and from what I suspect is a nasty concussion.” She paused, choosing her words carefully. “Then I’d like to ask you some questions.”

“Of course! My brother can be a lot of things, and I’m sure he will want to bombard you the moment he hears you’re awake. But he’ll respect your space, even if it isn’t what he prefers,” Kyla replied as she walked out of the tent.

As Avery sat in the tent, she noticed the sounds outside the canvas walls. People talking, work being done, footsteps going past her tent. There were a lot of people in this area. She thought about what Kyla said. Was she lying? Was this some kind of hoax?

But if this was a hoax, things weren’t adding up. The GPS on her phone couldn’t track her at all. The light at the top of the tent floated in midair. She hadn’t understood a word Kyla said until she touched her and that glistening light had entered her body. And there was Kyla’s body. It didn’t seem human. Her limbs were longer, stronger. Her features were more perfect than anyone she’d met. She had that unusual pattern beneath the surface of her skin. Avery thought she had glimpsed pointed tips at the top of Kyla’s ear, hiding behind her dark braids and earrings.

Avery’s mind flashed to the movie, *The Lord of the Rings*. Was she rescued by elves? The thought sounded so ridiculous to Avery that she let out a laugh. But these people did not seem human. She had no reference for fantasy creatures. Reading or watching anything about supernatural stuff or magic had never interested her.

Avery’s stomach grumbled as Kyla entered the tent. Kyla carried a carved wooden tray with a lidded wooden bowl, a piece of flat bread, and a glass of wine. “I got you some food. I don’t know what you eat in your realm, but I brought you forager soup and agaso bread. I also brought you a glass of wine. You probably need one after the shock I delivered to you,” Kyla cheerfully spoke as she placed the tray on Avery’s lap.

“Thank you,” Avery said before she sniffed the soup. It smelled like vegetables and mushrooms. As she stirred the spoon, she saw chunks of mushrooms, root vegetables, and leafy greens floating in a creamy spring-green broth. The bread, if you called it bread, was flat and hard. They sprinkled

it with salt and herbs on top. It seemed more like a very large cracker to Avery. Avery hesitated. Even the food seemed foreign. She still struggled to wrap her head around what was happening to her. And what if this friendly elf lady wasn't as friendly as she let on?

"Taste it. It will give you the strength you need to get well. The cook puts some of his essence in every dish he makes," Kyla said.

Avery sipped the soup. It was incredibly flavorful. The rich broth, combined with the full-bodied mushrooms, made the soup much more savory than she expected. She took a bite of the agaso bread. It was crunchy on the outside, but the inside was flaky. It reminded her of the layers of biscuit, but in cracker form. Avery dipped the bread into the soup. They complimented each other well. The wine was lush and had a hint of berry. It tasted decadent and made her aching head spin with just a sip.

Kyla busied herself at her shelves, pulling a variety of herbs and tinctures down and setting them on the table. Avery was so preoccupied with the food that she hardly noticed.

Avery put her spoon down and looked at Kyla. Her long black hair was in a loose braid down her back. Some of the dark strands fell forward as Kyla bent over the herbs at the table. Regardless of Avery's situation, this woman showed her undeniable kindness, all things considered

"When you have a moment, can I ask you some questions?" Avery asked.

"Of course. I'm preparing your tinctures and ointments to help with your healing," Kyla said. "Let me finish, and I'll sit with you in a moment." Kyla busied herself with the herbs as Avery leaned back on the pillows behind her. It was odd how this stranger made her feel a sense of calmness. She thought it must have been Kyla's soothing voice, friendly face, and calm demeanor that put Avery at ease.

Avery gazed into Kyla's blue eyes as she settled at the foot of the bed. She tried to be tactful as she said, "What are you? I mean-you're not like any human I've ever seen."

“You’re right. I am not human. You also answered my question about whether you are actually a human. I am a Latian fae. Although we often call ourselves the folk,” Kyla replied.

“Fae? Like a fairy? But you’re not tiny, and you have no wings. I thought you were some kind of elf,” Avery said. Her cheeks reddened as she felt embarrassed at questioning whether this woman was a fairy or an elf.

“Hmmm,” Kyla said, while she gave Avery a puzzled look. “I am not sure what a fairy or an elf is. No fae are small, other than the Bayberries, but they are about your height, I’d guess. There are pixies in some forests. They are tiny. Some fae have wings. Particularly the fae from Nephel. They draw their essence from the sky,” Kyla said. Like Avery should understand anything she shared.

“What is the essence?” Avery asked as she took a sip of her wine.

“It is the magic the Premier Goddess Althea gives us at birth. We draw our essence from the nature of Aeritis. As a Latian, I am connected to plants and animals. Although Althea blessed me with other gifts as well.”

“Is your magic in those lines and swirls? I’m sorry if my questions are rude. I’ve just never seen anything like this.” She wasn’t being tactful, but how could she when she was questioning a magical being?

“There’s no need to feel embarrassed. You can ask me what you like. The essence flows under my skin. I was born marked with the essence showing in the whorls and lines like bark on a tree. Others may have a pattern similar to my own, but some have a pattern of fur and even scales. Folk from other nations have different markings as well. No one’s essence is alike, and it shows itself differently for all the folk,” Kyla stated without offense or embarrassment.

“Thank you for sharing that. I’m guessing you have some sort of power over speech? I couldn’t understand you until you touched me earlier.”

“No, I have never done that before. That was Mother Althea. If the Mother did not want you to speak our language, she would not have given you our speech. The Goddess also marked you herself. Only those blessed as minor goddesses or priestesses bear the mark of Mother Althea.” Kyla pointed toward Avery’s forehead. Was she referring to the head injury? “This mark also leads me to believe that you are not a normal human, are you?” Kyla’s eyes squinted at Avery, and a wry smile appeared on her face.

“Um. No. For all my life, I’ve been nothing but a normal human. Always seeking adventures, sure. Irresponsible, probably that too. Too trustworthy? Definitely. We don’t have magic on Earth. Nothing like what you’re saying. We have stories of magic, but it’s not like anyone is casting spells or whatever,” Avery said. In her mind, she thought Kyla’s statement was silly. Something out of a bad sci-fi movie happened to her, but she did not cast some spell to send herself to Aeritis.

“I have heard of humans from long, long ago. They are in our most ancient texts. But very few of them had magic. Those who had the power to wield magic were not blessed with the essence like the fae. Rather, they manipulated it by accessing the magic in Aeritis itself through spells or potions. Although it’s said they had a natural tendency to one magic,” Kyla said. She continued to look at Avery, her eyes squinted suspiciously. “There is so much you do not yet know. I do not want to tire you out. This is enough for now. I would like to treat your wounds if you will let me, then I have a sleeping balm that can help you get restorative rest. Tomorrow, you will be feeling better. Perhaps you can meet with my brother, then?”

Avery didn’t press Kyla further. This information overload was too much. “Okay, I am tired. And my head is hurting. As for your brother... I would like to see how I’m feeling before I agree to meet the person who found me,” Avery said. She didn’t need any more surprises. She needed to rest and figure out how she was going to get home.

At that moment, a tall, dark-skinned fae man opened the tent door. His expressive blue eyes locked on hers, and Avery

shivered as she faced the man who had killed to save her.

“Hello, little flower. I see my gift is awake,” he said in a voice as smooth as silk.

Chapter Six

Avery

The large man walked confidently towards the bed. He resembled Kyla, with his dark, coppery complexion and tall, muscular body. His hair was shoulder-length and black with subtle waves. His beard was neatly trimmed, and it accentuated his strong jawline. His eyes were that same dusty blue as his sister's. It was the eyes that gave him away. There was no denying it. This was the man who saved her.

“Kyla, I told you to let me know when our guest awoke,” the man said, glaring at his sister. “I am Savine Thorne. What is your name?” Savine directed his attention to Avery. He gave her a long gaze that took in her whole body. He looked at her like he wanted to eat her alive, making Avery turn her face down from his piercing stare. A chill went down Avery's spine.

“Avery. Avery Hollis,” she whispered, trying not to meet his eyes. Something about this tall, brooding man made her uncomfortable.

“You look well. I was not sure if you would make it when I found you on Quartz Mountain,” Savine stated.

Found wasn't exactly the right word. Saved was more accurate. “Right. The vines and the sword. That was you.”

He seemed unmoved as Avery referenced his brutal killing of two people. This man was dangerous. She'd witnessed it with her own eyes.

"I heard a buzzing sound and saw a bright light up the mountain. Fortunately, I was at the base of Quartz Mountain when the light struck. I was scouting with some of my warriors, and we made it to you at the same time as some of our enemies. Had we been ten minutes later, you would be dead, or at the very least in the hands of the Latian King right now," Savine said.

"The last thing I remember from Montana was that blinding light. I still can't believe this is happening. The last memories I have are of my sister and I being attacked by a bear. I don't even know if she is alive. I don't understand why you saved me. Why bother?" Avery choked back the tears. She did not want to show her vulnerability in front of this stern-looking man. His face was unreadable. There was no softness or empathy.

"We are ruthless. I am no exception, but I'm not about to kill a stray human marked by the Goddess. You *are* a human, right?" Savine asked. His piercing stare focused on her in a way that unnerved Avery. Was he attracted to her, or did he want to hurt her? She really couldn't tell.

"Yes, of course I'm a human. What's strange is how I've ended up in a world without humans!" Avery sneered back at him. All she wanted was some rest. Why was he questioning her now?

"Only the Goddess knows, Avery Hollis," Savine said with a shrug. He turned his attention to Kyla. "Do you think she will be ready to travel soon? We'll need to move to Bayberry before long."

Before Kyla spoke, Avery jumped up out of bed. "I'm not going anywhere with you. I've got to get home. I need to return to Montana," Avery shouted. Savine and Kyla flinched, screwing their faces in discomfort.

"I'm afraid we'll need more answers before you return home. These events are highly unusual. There must be some

greater plan in place for your arrival in Aeritis. I will not risk upsetting Mother Althea when she gave me such a gift,” Savine said. A chill crept up Avery’s spine. So she was a captive, after all. Perhaps these fae used their essence to bring her here somehow.

“I’m not your gift,” Avery yelled. Her body tensed, and her head pounded as she realized the trouble she was in. She had to get out of here. Right away. But that man was well over a foot taller than her, and he was also armed. Without hesitating, Avery grabbed her backpack. She reached for the multi-tool on her backpack’s hip belt and cut a gaping hole in the canvas tent. Avery flung her body out of the tent, strapping her backpack through her working arm and across her aching shoulder.

She was in some sort of camp, just as she thought. Canvas tents stretched in a circle, but she was outside the center of the circle. Around her was tall prairie grass in brilliant, shimmering stalks of gold. The mountains were behind her. Somehow, she had to get over to the mountains and back to the summit of Quartz Mountain. Maybe if she touched the crystals again, she could get away from this place.

Avery began running on bare feet, skirting the canvas tents from behind. Her heart pounded and her head throbbed, but she picked up her pace. She had to get out of here. These creatures would not help her get home, despite what Kyla promised. She was a fool for believing that woman’s words.

Yells resonated throughout the tent circle. Savine and Kyla didn’t take long to alert the folk to her escape. She rounded the back of another tent when dozens of fae men and women, armed with spears and swords, approached her.

What was this living nightmare she found herself in?

Moments later, Savine rounded the tent in front of her. Kyla was beside him, along with a massive fae male with long, dark red hair and a thick red beard. The man towered over Savine. Were there fucking giants here too?

“That was a mistake. Do not think you can run from us,” Savine snarled. The whorls of his essence swirled in an angry

pattern before his voice became chillingly cool. “You won’t make it far. And if you escape, something will be delighted to pluck you apart like petals off a flower.”

Savine’s words gave Avery goosebumps. She looked around her and saw at least fifty fae men and women. Some wore leather armor and had swords, while others were in leather leggings and tunics. Some women were wearing beaded cropped tops and ornately decorated skirts.

All of them were tall, muscular, and intimidating. Kyla was correct when she said each essence looked different. Some had intricate bark designs. Others looked like fur under the surface of their skin. The most jarring were those with scales. All the fae’s patterns were along their arms and shoulders before disappearing into their shirts. The women whose midriffs showed seemed to have their patterns down their bellies.

Avery shuddered to think about what she would have encountered if she escaped. If these people were the safest option, what lurked beyond those tents? Someone touched her shoulder. It was Kyla. Her touch was like molten ore on Avery’s sweat-cooled skin. Avery was hit with a sudden sense of peace, but nothing about it felt right.

“Don’t touch me!” Avery said as she jerked her shoulder back. The relaxation vanished, leaving her heartbeat racing from the shock of such a different emotion than the one she’d been feeling.

“As you wish, Avery. Since you have ripped through my tent, I will bring you to a different place for you to rest. Follow me,” Kyla turned her back on Avery. Avery knew they expected her to follow Kyla, but she couldn’t make her feet move. She froze in place. Fear, anger, and doubt coursed through her veins like ice water. Trying to regain her composure, Avery took the first step and followed Kyla.

All the Latians stared at her with stern faces, strong bodies, and weapons strapped to their sides. Their eyes were harsh as they looked at Avery with a mix of disdain and disbelief.

Kyla led Avery to a smaller tent. It did not have a large, comfortable bed or Kyla’s personal touches. As Kyla entered

the room, the orbs on the ceiling came to life, casting a low glow on the space. A small cot sat in the corner. It had clean sheets and more furs. There was also a wooden chair in the other corner. Everything about this space was simple and utilitarian. The floor was not a wooden platform, like Kyla's. It was a mixture of dying grass and dirt.

“You haven't recovered from your journey here or the bear attack. You should rest. This tent is not as lavish as my own, but I hope you will find it sufficient for your needs. There will be a guard outside the door if you need anything. I suggest you not try to run again,” Kyla stated. Her voice was not the same gentle tone as earlier. Rather, it sounded like she was trying to keep her irritation down.

“I-I won't run again,” Avery stammered. “I was scared. I just want to go home.”

Once again, Avery was on the verge of crying. Her pent-up emotions needed to be released, but she stifled them back. She did not want to cry now.

Kyla softened as she looked at Avery. “I understand. And I still vow to help you. Women need to help each other, whether we're the same species or not. My brother's word is not final, but he is right that we can't stay here long. I will speak to him as you rest. Meanwhile, you need to stay in this tent.”

Avery nodded in agreement as she watched Kyla leave. Muffled conversations that she couldn't make out were going on outside the tent.

Now that she was alone, she released all the emotions she had been holding back. She dropped to the bed and wept into the pillow. Avery had never been a woman to bury her emotions. So she did the only thing in her power. She cried and cried. She didn't care if the guard heard her. Her grief was going to consume her as she thought about Morgan, probably dead, and her parents mourning both their daughters.

After her tears coursed through her, the panic and dread throughout her body faded. Instead, her tear-stained, puffy eyes just needed to be closed. Her head pounded as she

touched the knot along her hairline. She needed more rest. Avery's whole body ached with exhaustion.

Avery picked up her unceremoniously discarded bag from the dirt floor. She changed out of the long nightgown and put on her wool base layers. Then she rolled out her sleeping bag and sleeping pad. Crawling inside her sleeping bag, she snuggled down in the familiar comfort of the warm cocoon. She switched the phone to airplane mode and opened her photo app. Damn. Only 54% battery life.

Avery looked at pictures of herself and Morgan. She couldn't look at the pictures of their trip to Quartz Mountain. Those images were too raw. But she looked at past adventures, times they had dinner together, concerts, and other memories. She did the same with her parents.

If she was going to survive Latiah she needed to be braver. No more cracking like she did today, or these fae would eat her alive. It was going to take all her strength—physical, mental, and emotional to survive this place.

But how could she put on a brave face with these dangerous creatures at every turn? Who not only seemed to be warriors with weapons and keen senses, but apparently magic, too.

There was no choice but to be brave. If she let her fears persist, she would lose this fight and would never reach her home again. Avery had to take the same strength she used when facing tough situations outdoors and apply it to facing these monsters that lurked beyond the canvas tent.

Chapter Seven

Savine

Savine stalked into his tent. Pouring a glass of wine, he dropped into a comfortable linen chair. The wine was one of his favorite Bayberry vintages. Goddess above, he needed this glass of wine after he'd fucked up the whole human interaction thing.

He'd known the human was awake when he saw Kyla carrying a tray of food back to her tent. Savine had spent three days patiently waiting for the woman to awaken. As he reflected, he realized he must have scared the little human. He'd never seen someone tear through a tent and flee like that before! Even injured, she'd been unexpectedly quick.

He didn't expect Avery to talk back. Actually, he'd assumed she would be docile and frightened. Yes, she had been frightened. When he entered the tent the shocked expression on her face had captivated him. Then she seemed on the verge of tears as soon as she laid eyes on him.

But she hadn't been docile. Nothing about that woman was docile. "I am not your gift," she had yelled at Savine before she cut through the tent. The shrill sound of her voice still left his ears ringing, and that was the only reason her escape had been successful.

As he pondered his interaction with Avery, he heard familiar footsteps outside his tent. Footsteps made by someone who

wanted to be heard.

“Come in, Kyla,” Savine said.

“You fool! You arrogant, presumptuous fool!” Kyla scoffed as she walked into the tent. Savine saw her turn to the carafe on his desk and pour herself a glass of wine. “I told you to wait. I told you I would deal with the human first, then when she was ready, I would introduce you to her.” She took a swallow of her wine and glared at Savine with an intensity that he loved in his little sister. Her eyes cut like ice as she pierced him with her stare.

“I had my reasons for wanting to meet the woman. What is done is done,” Savine said, taking a drink of his own wine. “Come, sit by me. We have so much to discuss.”

She obliged him with a final scoff before she plopped herself into a comfortable armchair identical to Savine’s. “I’ll talk with you because I know we need to make plans for returning to Bayberry, and figure out how to help Avery. But, I want you to understand two things. One, I like Avery. I think she is braver and stronger than she appears. I want to help *her interests*, not yours. Two, when you barged in like that and said such stupid things, you ruined the trust I was building with her.”

“Don’t forget, as the rebel leader, my interests are in the nation’s interests. These matters have nothing to do with what *I* want with this woman, and more of what Latiah may need of her,” he said.

“Honestly, Savine, I think you’re taking this whole gift thing too far,” Kyla said as she shook her head at Savine.

Savine grunted out a bitter laugh. “That’s ironic, coming from you. The one in this camp who seems to have her prayers to the Premier Goddess answered. Tell me, how did our little human come to speak our language? Because she certainly didn’t understand me on the mountain.”

Kyla glared at him. “You know how.”

“Then I’ll ask you to not tell me what I’ll do with the first gift Althea’s given me in my life. I want to discuss our travels

to the winter encampment in Bayberry. Avery needs to be ready to travel in a few days' time. I know she's injured, but I am not willing to put our people at risk. Get her ready to travel. Get her on an elk and make sure she can ride." Savine looked into his sister's eyes.

Kyla looked back at Savine for a long moment before speaking. "I still don't think we should take her to Bayberry. The poor woman is injured and upset over the loss of her family. I think you should let her go back to Quartz Mountain and try to return home. It isn't fair to keep her here."

Savine sipped at his wine, thinking of a solution to their problem. "Actually, that's not a terrible idea. We can test her strength and let her think that returning to her realm is possible. I will take her back up to Quartz Mountain. If the portal is open and she returns to her realm, so be it. But I suspect the portal will remain closed, in which case the Goddess still has plans for her on Aeritis. Her journey to Quartz Mountain will determine if she's ready to travel to Bayberry."

"And if she is able to return home? You would sacrifice an end to your rebellion? It's not like you to choose the needs of one person over the cause."

"You misunderstand my intentions. She *will not* be returning to her home. Althea wouldn't mark Avery without giving her a purpose in Aeritis. This will test her strength," Savine said as he shook his head at Kyla.

"Regardless of your motives, I should be the one to lead her up Quartz Mountain," Kyla said.

"No. It must be me. I found her. *I* brought her off the mountain and *I* will return her to Quartz Mountain. Then, after she can't go through the portal, I will make it clear what she will do for our cause."

His tone demanded Kyla's cooperation. He allowed his sister to share opinions and even disagree with him, but his decision was final. The scowl on her face told Savine she knew this was one of those times.

“The journey to Quartz Mountain will most likely take us a day to go up and return. After all, I’ll be traveling at the speed of an injured mortal woman,” Savine said.

Kyla’s eyes twinkled at him. Oh fucking spare him! Kyla was going to change tactics just to annoy him.

“Althea brought her to you. Perhaps you are right. Perhaps there is a deeper connection you have not explored yet...” Kyla smirked at her brother. She sniffed the air. “Are you thinking of her? I believe I sense lust wafting off your body.”

“Abyss, spare me your terrible jokes. I am not interested in the woman,” Savine rolled his eyes at his sister as he spoke.

“Not that it’s any of my business, but it seems like it’s been a Goddess-damned long time since you’ve had sex. I’m sure your hand is exhausted,” Kyla said, laughing as she spoke. His sex life was none of anyone’s business. But all of his council seemed to love nothing more than to chastise him for his unintentional celibacy.

“Stop fixating on my sex life and go to Garnel,” Savine said. Every fae longed to have what Kyla and Garnel had—to find their soulmate. Someone who was made for his soul. But not this tiny creature. Not someone who didn’t even possess any essence.

Bronze feathers flashed through his mind. A soft, sensual moan escaped the lips of the woman he once loved so long ago. No, the Goddess had damned him to never have a soulmate after what happened with Lilith. Lilith, who was too good for him and never meant to be his.

Besides, he had very different plans for Avery Hollis. Sure, he’d give her the hope that she would return to wherever Montana may be. Then, after her dream failed, he would carve her into his own personal assassin against the King of Latiah.

“As you wish, brother. Now that we’ve settled our plans, I have a mate to get back to. One who has missed me very much the last few days,” Kyla said while she stood and finished her glass of wine.

Chapter Eight

Kyla

Kyla found Garnel guarding the encampment wall with other warriors. The wall around their summer home was crucial for keeping the large civilian population safe from the ongoing conflict. It had been one of the first things Savine had insisted on when they chose this location for staging battles against the crown. Not only was it a barrier against the larger city of Bayberry, but the Middens had some of the most fertile grazing lands in all of Aeritis.

Garnel looked relaxed, his long red braids bouncing as he laughed at something one of the soldiers said. She loved to catch glimpses of her soulmate when he didn't know she was looking. Seeing that he was always naturally bringing life to this community filled her with pride. It wasn't only her that found his presence magnetic. It was the whole community. Even the young children ran to their general, eager for his jokes and his hidden sweets.

Someday he would make a wonderful father. It was something she'd been wanting for some time now. To grow their family and see Garnel playing with his own children. But they both agreed that the war must reach an end first. And so she waited.

She saw the flash of recognition in Garnel's eyes the moment he noticed her. He leaped down from the towering

wall and onto a lower platform before he ran to Kyla's side. As soon as he was near enough to touch her, Kyla sunk into Garnel's arms, feeling his warmth encircle her. Joy and love coursed through their bond as Garnel tipped her chin up to meet his gaze. His lips crashed into hers as his tongue swept in to claim her.

Kyla would never get enough of Garnel. He was the best kind of addiction, and going without his touch, for even a few hours, felt like the most painful denial possible. She'd never grow tired of feeling his emotions, either. The love and desire that was ever present between them was more palpable than any of the other emotions she detected as an empath. Even when she was on the battlefield, overrun with the fear and rage of everyone around her, she still felt that bond between them like a lifeline, tethering and grounding her to what was most important.

As she pulled back from Garnel's kiss, she heard him grunt in protest. "My great bear," she whispered in his ear. "I missed you."

Garnel smiled as he wrapped her close before giving her some space. "It's only been a few hours since we last saw each other."

"It doesn't matter. Any time away from you feels like a loss."

Garnel scratched his dark red beard before he looked down at her. She resisted the urge to pull him back into another kiss. "I was wrapping up, checking on the guards. It's been a quiet day. I'll let them know I'm leaving."

Garnel ran over to the guards on duty before he returned to Kyla's side and continued walking toward their tent.

"Did you meet with Savine this afternoon?"

Kyla sighed. The meeting with her brother had gone better than she expected. At least he was giving Avery a chance to return home, even if he thought she was trapped in Aeritis. His emotions were so sure that Kyla hadn't bothered to convince

her brother to let her lead Avery up to Quartz Mountain. She knew he'd say no.

“He’s going to let Avery return to Quartz Mountain, but refused to let me be the one to do it. He thinks bringing Avery up the mountain will be a good assessment of whether she’s ready to travel, not that he actually thinks she can return to her realm. I think he’s afraid I could pray to Althea to open the portal or something. He doesn’t know that’s not how this works.”

Pride drifted down their bond as Garnel said, “Althea does answer your prayers at a much higher rate than the rest of us. You probably could get her home through prayer.”

Kyla felt a twinge of guilt. She hated keeping secrets from Garnel, but she couldn’t tell him that she doubted Avery would make it home, too. After all, Avery was marked by Althea. She’d keep that secret until Garnel asked directly, or Savine trusted the rest of his council to share that information.

“He says her job here isn’t complete. Savine is convinced Avery can kill the Latian King,” Kyla said as she took Garnel’s hand in hers. It was so much larger than hers, calloused, and slightly textured. She watched his essence flow under his skin, all those tiny lines like fur. It wasn’t lost on her that her bear shifter soulmate would probably terrify Avery if she saw him in his other form. There was a reason everyone referred to the rebel general as the Great Bear. “Try not to shift if she’s around. I don’t know how she’ll react to seeing a bear nearby.”

“I won’t shift in front of her. I’d thought about that earlier,” Garnel replied. He pulled Kyla’s arm closer to him, letting her body lean against his as they walked through the encampment.

The bustle of folk working and living their life filled Kyla’s senses. It always amazed her to see how so many fae had banded together for her brother’s cause to end the corruption in Latiah. To stand up for the oppressed and to end the violence plagued by the King’s reign. “Do you wonder if Savine sees what he’s accomplished? Even if we’ve been in a

stalemate for years. These people live normal, everyday lives thanks to him.”

Garnel’s hazel eyes sparkled with sadness. “He doesn’t see it. He’s so lost in ending Jasper that he misses out on the small victories.” Garnel let go of Kyla’s arm as he caught a stray ball flying through the air. Two young boys shouted their thanks as Garnel tossed the ball back to them.

“That right there—young folk able to have a childhood without being harmed by their king is enough to make all these years worth it. But it’s not enough for Savine. You know he won’t stop fighting until Jasper is defeated. Even if Avery is sent by Althea to end Jasper’s reign, how will he gain control over the nation? How many loyalists will we have to kill to take Orofine? I’m fucking tired of killing my own countrymen, even if it does mean a better future.” Garnel shook his head and tucked Kyla’s arm back into his.

Kyla sighed. They’d had this conversation before, many times over. “Would you rather we spend the rest of our lives migrating between the Middens and Bayberry? Never returning home to Orofine? Savine is private. I can only get the smallest read on how he’s coping with this war, and the toll he’s taken as the leader of the rebellion. I know he’s confided with Raikin about what would happen after we defeat Jasper, but I don’t know how he will rebuild what’s broken.”

“There’s no fixing this mess,” Garnel muttered. “How will we ever trust the loyalists after all these years of war?”

Kyla shrugged her shoulders. It was another worry for another time.

They approached their tent and entered into the comfortable space. The tear from Avery was already repaired. No doubt Savine put Gaelyn, the quartermaster, on it immediately. Garnel went straight to the bed, taking off his boots before he laid back with a groan. “I will be honest, Kyla. I’m happy the human is out of here. I’ve missed my bed, and I’ve missed you.”

Kyla scanned the room, looking for any remaining traces of Avery. It seemed odd to not be near her, checking on her. “I

missed you too, Garnel. Savine said something strange about Avery, and it's been bothering me since he mentioned it."

Garnel cocked his head and stared at Kyla, waiting for her to continue.

"He said that he could feel magic in Avery. But what he described didn't sound like magic, at least not what the witch stories from childhood said. He said his essence responded to her touch, and there was a warm sensation when they touched." Kyla furrowed her brows and crossed her arms.

Garnel squinted and sat up, planting his feet on the floor. He pulled Kyla between his legs, and Kyla felt the warm pulsing sensation of their soulmate's bond. It was always there, this steady beat between them, but when they touched, it became stronger, like a radiant heat between them. "Like our bond?"

"Like our bond. I didn't mention it at first, but then I teased him about it a bit to see how he'd react."

Garnel grinned as his hand wrapped around Kyla's waist. "And?"

"As you can imagine from that silly smile, this question was not well received. But it made me wonder, could a fae have a human soulmate?"

Garnel rubbed the tight muscles in Kyla's lower back. "I hardly remember history. But Bayberries were once a mixed community long ago. Were they soulmates or married? I don't actually know."

Kyla leaned into Garnel's massage. "I don't know either. I don't even know how long magical humans could live. It seems unlikely that they could be soulmates for the fae if they lived a human lifespan. But more importantly, I don't think Savine would even realize he met his soulmate, whether they were human or fae."

Kyla thought about the broken man her brother had become after she and Garnel helped rescue him from the Tower of Teeth. The torture he'd endured was enough to destroy someone.

She knew Garnel thought the same thing. “He once told me that King Rylo used a fae named Selene to torture his soul. She removed his soul and mutilated it.” Garnel shook his head, and Kyla felt the disgust and disbelief in his emotions. “Savine thinks he cannot have a soulmate. That it’s impossible after what she did to him for Lilith’s death.”

Kyla sucked in a gasp. “He never told me. I didn’t want to ask what happened in there when he was so broken. And he got more secretive as the years went by.” Their relationship had drastically changed when she became his best friend’s soulmate. It didn’t help that she and Garnel accepted their bond when Savine was imprisoned. Even sensing his emotions hadn’t fully revealed how he felt about his soul. “A few years ago, I asked him why he didn’t look for a companion, even if she wasn’t his soulmate. He said he had no desire to stain someone by making her be with him. Another time, he said if he ever wore the bough and antler crown, he’d choose an arranged marriage, just like Lilith did. I feel terrible for teasing him.”

Garnel nodded. “Don’t push him on this. Maybe what he felt was Avery’s magic, but if it’s a bond, let them figure it out together.”

“But Avery won’t—”

“*Do not* interfere. Especially with your empathic abilities,” Garnel said, face serious. He was rarely this tense with her, but she knew how protective he was of Savine.

Kyla sighed and leaned in to rest her forehead against Garnel’s. “You’re right. I won’t say anything. I just want him to be happy. I don’t know if Savine has ever truly been happy.”

Chapter Nine

Avery

Avery sat in her sleeping bag, not knowing what to do. She had been awake for a few hours. Growls, roars, and pants had kept her up all night long. She wasn't sure what sort of creatures made those sounds. They seemed like they were almost sexual, but in the most brutal way possible. Maybe some beast was mating outside of the encampment? Whatever caused that sound left her uncomfortable, especially since the fae had taken her multi-tool. She didn't have any weapon on her now.

When she worked up the courage to go to the tent door, she'd asked her guard, a man named Weston, about the sounds. He *laughed* at her and told her they were normal occurrences around the encampment.

What the hell was that supposed to mean?

Since she wasn't in mortal peril because of beasts prowling the camp, she'd asked Weston to show her where the restrooms were. The outhouse, at least, was clean and didn't stink. After returning to her tent, Avery asked for some food. Her guard returned with cornbread, eggs, and a hot cup of tea. It was comforting to eat food that were familiar. Obviously, coffee would have been preferable, but beggars couldn't be choosers.

Avery expected Kyla to come to her tent, but so far, she had not. To pass the time, she unpacked her backpack and made an inventory of everything. The air was cool outside her tent, but her sleeping bag was warm, and she'd slipped her pants off after breakfast.

If the bear had attacked them before they put their backpacks on, she would have been in this land without her gear. Being here without something from home gave her goosebumps. At least now she could sleep in a familiar space, and smell the scents of Montana that clung to her sleeping bag and clothes. As she went through her stuff, she made a note of what she had left. A small amount of toothpaste, her base layers and one outfit, hiking boots, and some other important camping supplies. Then she saw the chunk of quartz that Morgan handed her just before they were attacked. It was so clear it seemed to glow, and the heaviness of it surprised Avery. Just looking at it made her feel nauseous. Without leaving her sleeping bag, she threw it across the room. It struck the canvas tent with a thud.

If she didn't return to Montana, everyone she loved would never know she survived the bear attack. They would always think she died on that mountain. Were her parents mourning both their daughters now? What was happening in her own world to the people that she loved?

She had to convince Savine to return her to Quartz Mountain. There was no way she could run. She knew that now. At least she wasn't in serious pain any longer. Even her injured shoulder was remarkably better.

Loud voices approached her tent. Someone was talking to her guard.

"Avery, may I come in?" A low, masculine voice asked. So it was not Kyla who came to visit her, but Savine. Her chest tightened, and her stomach did a flip at having to face the intimidating man alone. Plus, she'd need to convince him *now* to let her go.

"Yes, come in," Avery said, trying to sound confident. Savine entered her tent, and his presence engulfed the space.

Avery was still tucked in her tight sleeping bag. When she tried to stand up, the bag went with her, leaving her standing like an inchworm on a stick.

Savine let out a laugh as Avery tried to wriggle out of the sleeping bag. “Well, that looks cozy. Do you humans always sleep cocooned up like that?”

Avery blushed at his words, and her cheeks turned a vivid scarlet hue. “Only when we are camping. At home we sleep in beds with blankets.”

“And you prefer this tight little bag to our beds and furs?” Savine asked. He took a step closer to Avery, getting within a few feet of her. His blue eyes gazed at Avery. Avery studied him. His face wasn’t as severe as she first thought. He was actually very attractive—the male version of his sister. High cheekbones and dusty blue eyes accented his face. His lips were plush under a groomed beard. His shoulder-length hair was pulled back—this fierce fae warrior wore a man bun.

“It makes me feel more at home. Plus, I was a little nervous by all those roars and groans I heard last night,” Avery stammered. She didn’t want to tell him it gave her a bit more control, or that she wanted to cling to any piece of home.

“Roars and groans?” Savine asked, quirking his lip into a half smile.

“Yeah, it sounded like some sort of feral beast stalked the campground,” Avery said.

“You’ll get used to that sound,” Savine said as he looked her up and down. Avery realized she was still standing with her sleeping bag wrapped around her. He had a sardonic smile on his face as he looked at her.

“Are you going to tell me what is making that sound and why I shouldn’t be worried?”

Savine’s gaze changed to a scowl. “Are you sure you want to know?”

Now Avery was more curious than ever. “Yeah, of course!”

His scowl darkened. “Those sounds were the sounds of mates fucking. There are about fifty pairs of soulmates in the encampment. They have no respect for the rest of us who have to listen to their amorous nightly activities.” Savine shrugged as he spoke.

Avery turned the color of a strawberry. “Wow, um. The sex sounds intense,” Avery said. She stood there in her sleeping bag, asking about feral fae sex to this incredibly attractive man. Why was she even considering him attractive? The man was literally holding her captive. He was supposed to be the opposite of attractive to her.

“In the capital, Orofine, we lived in wooden homes or in the castle. The sounds weren’t as noticeable there, despite there being hundreds of mated pairs. Now, I’ve had to put up with them for twenty-five years. Fucking mates, fucking day and night.” Savine let out an exasperated sigh and grasped the bridge of his nose with his forefinger and thumb. There was no hiding the irritation in his voice about his people’s amorous activities.

“So you don’t have a mate, then?” Avery asked. She should have changed the subject, but she was curious. How could a gorgeous man like him *not* have a soulmate?

“Little flower, my soul’s too tarnished for the Goddess to give me a mate,” Savine replied with that same piercingly sardonic smile.

“So you’re like the curmudgeon of love and sex amongst the fae or something?” Avery said, flashing him a flirty grin.

“If you had to listen to your friend and sister fuck like animals for twenty-five years, you would be disillusioned with love, too,” Savine said with a scowl. They needed to change the subject. She also needed to get out of this sleeping bag without looking like a complete idiot. Why was she still holding the bag up?

She let the bag slide down her body, and the rush of cool air hit her bare legs. No! She was standing in her underwear in front of this gorgeous, grumpy fae man. And they’d just been talking about rough soulmate sex.

“Oops. This is horrifying. I forgot I wasn’t wearing pants,” Avery said. This may be the most embarrassing moment of her life. She wrapped her arms around her legs, but that wasn’t helping things as she made a small circle, searching for where her pants could have gone.

Savine took in her bare flesh. His nostrils flared, and his pupils seemed to dilate as he looked her over before turning toward the door.

“Why don’t you take care of that? I can’t have a serious conversation with you in your underwear.”

“Is feral fairy sex a serious conversation?” Avery muttered as she reached for her wool leggings.

Savine let out a strangled cough. She could have sworn she heard laughing from outside the tent, too. Right. Pants. Then to convince this murderous man to let her go home.

“I did not come here to explain to you the nightly activities of mated fae pairs. I wanted to check in on you. Are you homesick, Avery?”

“Of course I am. I may never see my family or friends again. My sister is probably dead. My parents may think I’m dead now,” Avery said. Her voice quivered as she spoke her concerns.

“Tell me about your world.”

“Why do you want to know about my world?” Avery asked, nerves coursing through her body as he looked at her with that intense stare. She didn’t want to get to know this guy. He was a dangerous man, and she didn’t owe him anything.

“You will most likely be here for a very long time. I saved your life. The Goddess entrusted me with your care. I want to know more about the woman I saved and what you want to return to so badly.”

Hell no! He did not still think his alleged Goddess gifted her to him. What a load of nonsense. “I have more of a right to know about you, considering I am your captive and all. You have no right to information about my life before I came here.”

“Hmm... How about a story for a story? I will go first, and then I want to hear you tell me something honest,” Savine said as he sat down in the small wooden chair. He uncrossed his legs and leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. His frame seemed to dominate the small chair, and the wood strained under his weight. She wondered why they even had such a small chair when everyone here seemed to be huge.

“Can I prompt you?”

“Sure. What secrets do I need to keep from my gift?”

Avery’s jaw tensed as he once again laid claim to her like some sort of object that was his for the taking. What an asshole!

“Okay then. Tell me how you became a rebel warlord leader, or whatever your title is. I saw you slice a man’s head right off and stab someone with magical thorns. I think I deserve to know how you became so dangerous, since I’m stuck with you as company.”

“And you assume that I wasn’t dangerous all my life?” A sly smile smirked across his face. He was enjoying this! It was a little game for him.

“Just answer the question, asshole,” Avery said, crossing her arms.

“I rebelled against the crown twenty-five years ago.”

He didn’t look older than thirty, tops. Apparently, he considered himself dangerous for his whole life. That timeline wasn’t adding up!

“Hold up! Twenty-five years ago? Were you some sort of murderous, rebel toddler?”

Savine laughed deeply, entertainment in his voice as he spoke. “You know so little about us. I am over one hundred and fifty years old, little flower.”

Avery’s eyes went wide. “So you’re immortal?”

“Not exactly. We have long lives. Most of us live for a millennium or so, depending on the amount of essence coursing through our veins. You are asking an excessive

amount of questions for someone who does not want to share her own story. I may need to pry more information from you when it's my turn."

"Okay. No more interrupting then." Avery held up her hands in protest. He was intriguing, she had to admit. But she'd have to quell that intrigue. This guy thought he had a right to her in some way, plus she'd seen him kill two people without skipping a beat. Sure, there was a war going on here, but Savine was ruthless.

"As I was saying, I rebelled twenty-five years ago. I did it because the King of Latiah is evil. He murders his own people. He does not take care of the less fortunate, and he has at least another three hundred years of rule left in him. His heir did nothing to stop his crimes against his own people. I grew up in the capital, in the heart of the court, and when pressed, I rebelled."

"This has *never* been my answer to a problem. Ever. But why don't you just kill the king? I saw how easily you can skewer a person with thorns. Plus, you seem pretty good with a sword."

"As a Latian citizen, I will forfeit my life to the Abyss if I try to assassinate the king. All Latians are blood-bound to the king and the royal family. I hate his rule, but I am not willing to sacrifice myself to take him out, and I will not ask that of my own people. So I choose to gain a stronghold year by year through battle, of course, but also through helping the least fortunate. Gaining support."

Avery smiled at Savine. "You're like a fairy Robin Hood."

"I'm not familiar with that person, and I am not a fairy. It's my turn to ask the questions." Savine shifted his body and looked around the room. "I think we need a glass of wine before continuing."

He turned from the chair and walked to the door, speaking to Weston in hushed tones before sitting back in his seat. A few moments later, a slender fae woman with bluish hair and skim-milk-colored skin brought in a bottle and two glasses. She

asked if Savine needed anything else before revealing sharp, fishlike teeth that made Avery jump back.

Savine poured two glasses of wine and passed one to Avery. She noticed how carefully he held the glass to ensure that their hands didn't touch. Weird. Maybe he had some sort of prejudice against humans and didn't want to touch her.

Savine took a drink of his wine before he spoke to her. As he set the cup down, he said, "Tell me, Avery Hollis, what are you most ashamed of?"

"What kind of question is that? I'm not telling you that," Avery argued.

"It's the kind of question that gets to the heart of what type of person you are. I answered your questions. You answer mine." He leaned back in his chair as he brought the wine glass to his full lips. His teeth scraped his bottom lip, sucking the bit of wine that shone there. His trimmed beard accentuated those full lips and his strong jaw. Why the hell was she noticing those lips and that jaw when he was invading her privacy? There must be something wrong with her.

"It's easy to answer. I have nothing to be ashamed of. I had a great life until a few days ago."

"Are you lying, little flower? I wondered if you were capable of such a thing. Very interesting."

"Stop calling me a little flower. And no, I'm not lying." Avery gulped down a mouthful of wine. The sweet, slightly floral flavor was intoxicating. As she said the words, her chest tightened, and she was hit with a fit of uncontrollable coughing. She grasped for her water bottle and drank the water down in a few gulps, but the tightness continued.

"Hmm... It seems like that wine isn't settling right. I suspected as much. There's an old witch's tale that parents share with their children about the ancient humans' capabilities to lie. We cannot lie, but it appears you can. There is also an old legend that if you give a human the food of the fae, you can stop their lies. Looks like those old stories are true."

Avery's coughing continued. Her chest tightened as she continued to struggle to breathe without coughing. "You asshole!"

"Now, now, Avery. You are looking very uncomfortable. And I don't appreciate being lied to. Tell me the truth, and I will not ask any more invasive questions."

"Fine! I've always been ashamed of my jealousy toward my sister. She's smarter and more motivated than I am. She always has been." The pressure on her chest immediately receded. Avery stopped coughing.

"Next time we play this game, little flower, I want you to be truthful. It is unnecessary for you to be so uncomfortable. I hate to see you in pain. But, now I know those old stories are true. How fascinating!"

Avery glared at him. Well, they both learned something about each other. She couldn't trust the man, but at least he couldn't outwardly lie to her. Meanwhile, she'd be damned if she ate or drank near him again.

"You were honest with me and shared some of your story. I'll share a bit more just to help you see you can trust me and my people. Humans are unheard of in Aeritis, other than in children's stories. According to the stories, long ago, they outnumbered the fae, but were used for labor. Many humans were subject to unfair treatment by the fae. A group of magical humans separated our realm from the human realm to save the humans from mistreatment. The folk have seen very few humans since. I have never seen one return to this world until you, but my grandfather told me stories of their existence. He claimed that the worst of our kind often found the humans, and they did not survive long here. But, in the right hands, a human, particularly the right human, could be a powerful force in this land. I believe you could be that human, and the Goddess Althea entrusted your care to me," Savine finished and looked into her eyes with those dusty-blue eyes.

Avery stared at Savine, mouth agape. "Um. Wow. This whole thing keeps getting more bizarre. *You* actually think *I'm* some sort of hero?" Avery couldn't help but laugh. "Wow.

Thanks? Unfortunately, you have a hyperinflated view of who or what I am.” Avery saw a tinge of disappointment in Savine’s face. He shifted both feet to the ground. He was silent for quite a while before he sat upright and looked her in the eyes.

“I will prove it to you. You are marked by the Goddess, sent here for a purpose.” Savine lifted his hand and brushed it against Avery’s forehead. A tingling sensation caressed her skin, and Avery rubbed the area. Avery was surprised to see Savine pull a mirror out of the drawer of the small dresser in the corner. “All tents are stocked with the basics for my people’s comfort. Look at yourself and tell me what you see.”

A startled cry escaped Avery’s lips as she examined the tiny stars interconnected with a vine across her forehead. She hadn’t noticed it being there before, but didn’t have long to examine it before he brushed his hand against her forehead, hiding the mark again.

“What the hell sort of magic was that?” Surely that was some sort of illusion.

“That’s the mark of our Goddess, Althea, on your forehead. Outside of a few priestesses, nobody carries Althea’s mark on their head.”

“How do I know you didn’t just make it appear for a while, then remove it to trick me? It’s gone now.” Whatever he was trying to prove, he was playing her for a fool.

Savine swiped her forehead again as he lifted the mirror to Avery’s face. “It’s still there, just under a glamour. Kyla put one in place to keep others from knowing you’re marked. I expect you to keep it in place. I can’t begin to fathom what some of the folk would do with a human marked by the Goddess. If you value your life, keep the mark a secret.”

He brushed his hand across her face again, and the tingling sensation settled into her skin. Avery couldn’t see any remnant of the tiny stars on her forehead.

“What do you plan to do with me?” Avery asked.

“Althea allowed me to find you, so you’re mine. You are destined to be here, and I’ll make you see that leaving isn’t an option. Let’s return to Quartz Mountain. I will give you the chance to travel back to your lands, and if you cannot, then you’ll willingly come with my rebels and fight against the Latian king. But I know you won’t be returning to Montana.”

Fight against a king? He had to be kidding. But it didn’t matter. He would bring her back to Quartz Mountain, and she’d be on her way home. Avery didn’t back down from Savine’s stare. She stuck out her hand to shake his, but he only looked up at her.

“You’ve got a deal. This doesn’t change the fact that I hate you though,” she said before she placed his hand in hers and shook it. Tiny jolts went through their touching skin. A flash of something crossed Savine’s face. Was it fear? Surprise? Savine pulled his hand away from hers, balling it into a fist before he stood and walked out of her tent without another word.

Chapter Ten

Avery

A very stepped out of the tent and into the late summer sun. She fitted her backpack tightly to her body, the injured shoulder somehow nearly back to normal. She was returning home. Of course, Savine thought Avery couldn't return to Montana, and planned to force her to help a rebel band of fairies. What was even happening in her life? Now wasn't the time to dwell on it. She *had* to return home.

The mountains towered over the grasslands, casting a purple glow from high above the trees that skirted the mountain's edge. The plains where she walked shimmered yellow. It had nothing to do with the sunlight. The plant itself shimmered. She had to take a sample of this plant with her back to Montana. She tore off a few stalks of the shimmering golden grasses and stuffed them in the side pocket of her backpack.

Savine had been silent during their departure. She expected the fae to gawk at her as she left with Savine, but had seen no one, even as they exited the wall that encircled the tent city. Savine told her the plan was to climb to the top of Quartz Mountain, spend the night on the mountain, and return the next day to prepare to leave for the winter encampment near Bayberry. Avery's plan was to be back on the Montana side of Quartz Mountain by evening, and hike out to cell service by dusk.

“Which mountain is Quartz Mountain?” Avery asked after walking for thirty minutes in silence.

“Quartz Mountain is the tall peak to our left. It’s the only one that does not appear shaded in purple. The peak is made of pure, clear crystal,” Savine explained before going back to ignoring her. He quickened his pace, and the distance between them grew. She could keep up on a trail with most people, but this man was decidedly not human.

“Can I set the pace?” Avery called out, hoping he could hear her. He was at least fifty yards ahead of her at this point.

“Are your little legs having a hard time keeping up?”

“When you put it that way, no. But I was attacked by a bear a week ago, and I’d rather not pass out!” Avery shouted up to Savine.

“We may make faster time if I carried you, actually. Would you like a ride?” Savine asked.

“Just forget it! I’ll get there when I get there!” Avery yelled up to Savine.

“You know, you don’t have to shout. The folk have acutely sensitive hearing. You may injure my ear if you keep shouting,” Savine replied.

“Great!” Avery yelled at the top of her lungs. She watched Savine wince at the sound before she added, “Any other sensitive spots I should know about?”

In the blink of an eye, Savine was next to her. She did not know how he got there so quickly. “I could show you a few, if you’re interested,” Savine said with a devilish smile. A strand of hair fell in front of his eye, and she reached up on her toes to brush it to the side.

“No, thank you,” Avery replied in a tone that came out harsher than she meant it to.

“I’ll take the lead from here,” she said, sneaking past his large, hard body.

They walked in silence for a long time. As they walked, Avery soaked in the views. Wildflowers of all colors, textures,

and sizes grew near the trail. She thought back to the meadow near Crystal Lake. The wildflowers there could never compare to the variety that grew here. She recognized some of the species. Yarrow with its tiny white flowers, black-eyed Susan in shades of sunshiny yellow, and pretty stalks of violet lupine caught her eye. Typical wildflowers that she saw back at home, but they were enhanced somehow. Brighter, with a shimmer that seemed unnatural in the wildflowers at home.

“It’s gorgeous here. I don’t think I’ve ever seen such a variety of wildflower species in one place,” Avery eventually said. She never was good at keeping quiet for long.

“It is a beautiful place. There are many beautiful places in Latiah. I’ll show you them soon,” Savine replied. Avery shuddered at the thought. She ignored Savine’s comment. No, today she would be heading home.

“Some of the wildflower species look familiar. I’d love to pick a few to bring with me. Is that okay?”

“It is only appropriate for a beautiful woman so interested in flowers to have a beautiful bouquet, little flower. I’ll pick them for you while you hike up. The trail will get steep soon,” Savine replied.

“Oh, I kind of meant for scientific purposes, you know, research. I’d like to preserve them and bring them to my old university. Maybe it’ll give others proof of my experience. Otherwise, they will all think I’m crazy,” Avery added. She laughed nervously at herself.

“Regardless of your purpose for the flowers, I can pick them for you, Avery,” Savine said. Her name on his tongue made her body warm with unexpected heat. She looked back at him and saw him reach down and pick a pretty aster. In his hands were already several types of flowers. All in different shades of red, blue, purple, and pink.

A warm, sensitive feeling bubbled through her from her hair down to her toes. The man basically poisoned her with wine yesterday. Now, looking at him made her fluttery. Yeah, there was something wrong with her.

“Tell me about your family. What are your parents like?” Avery asked after another stretch of silence between them. She didn’t expect him to answer.

“You have met Kyla. She is a confident woman, a skilled warrior, and has more of the essence than any fae I’ve known. My parents were soulmates, although I do not understand why. My father is ruthless. He’s complicit in butchering the people of Latiah. My mother was gentle and kind. She did not leave Orofine often and wished her daughter had more of her gentleness than my father’s fierceness,” Savine said.

“I’m sorry for your loss. When did your mom pass away?” Avery asked as she looked back at Savine.

His face darkened, and he turned his head to look out at the surrounding landscape. “She was murdered. The Latian King did it the night of the rebellion. You are not the only one who lost the right to mourn properly for their family.”

Savine struck her as the kind of person who didn’t appreciate others asking too many questions about his private life. Even now, he puts distance between them. They drifted back into silence as Avery led the way up the rocky path.

Avery’s mind drifted to what could be lurking in the flowers. After nearly losing her life at the top of Quartz Mountain once, she had no doubt that this place was full of monsters. She turned to look back at Savine and saw the bouquet was growing in size.

“That’s a lot of flowers. Thank you,” Avery said.

They left the wildflower fields and entered a land void of plants. The rocks were huge and were a pale purple color. She thought, as she got closer to the rocks, that they would be more gray, but the shades of purple remained.

“What do you think of the folk after seeing us?” Savine asked. He became more and more talkative the higher they climbed.

“Well, I only talked to you, your sister, and Weston, so I can’t give you a good read on what I think of the whole species.” Avery shifted the weight of her backpack as she

continued climbing. She needed to talk less and concentrate on getting up this mountain. However, despite the recent attack, she felt stronger than she expected. Remarkably, even her shoulder felt normal.

“When we return down the mountain, I’ll introduce you to some of the other fae we’ll be traveling with so you can form a more thorough opinion of us,” Savine said. Avery didn’t bother replying. She would continue denying the possibility that she was stuck here.

After nearly two miles of silent hiking, Savine told her to take a left fork in the trail.

“Can we take a break here? I could use a little snack,” Avery said.

Savine stopped behind her. “I didn’t pack much for food, but we can stop and rest.”

“How about you try some human food?” Avery asked. Avery took off her backpack and dug out two energy bars. “I bet you’ve never had processed food before.” Avery tossed Savine a chocolate-chip-flavored energy bar. Savine stared at the colorful wrapper and for a moment, Avery thought he would put it in his mouth. “Tear open the wrapper. The food is inside.”

Savine tore open the wrapper and pulled out the sticky, blob-like bar. “It smells strange. Unnatural. Are you sure this is edible?”

“Yeah, just take a bite,” Avery said. She had already taken several bites of her own energy bar. As Savine hesitated, Avery added, “What are you, some kind of scaredy-fae? Just take a bite!”

At that, Savine put the bar in his mouth before grinning, with chocolate stuck between his two front teeth. “It’s very sweet. Like syrup. I’ve never tasted chocolate like this either.”

“It’s funny that you call it sweet because compared to a lot of American food and drinks, it’s considered healthy.”

“This? How strange! Is food magic in the human realm?” Savine asked with genuine interest, taking another bite of the

bar.

“Not magic. Just science. They engineer processed food to be delicious and addictive. What humans lack in magic, they make up for in technology and science. There are probably a lot of things that you would think are magic on Earth, but are just created through—”

“Avery, get down behind that rock! Quickly!” Savine hissed as he pressed his body to the ground. At that moment, Avery saw a shadow pass over her. A pair of hawks flew overhead. Avery listened to him and threw herself down, despite the threat being a pair of birds.

Finally, he relaxed his body and stood. She followed his cues, picking up her bar from the ground. It was covered in dirt, but she’d lost her appetite, anyway.

“What was that all about?” Avery asked.

“Those weren’t ordinary hawks. They are spies, most likely sent by Rylo, the King of Nephel,” Savine said as he continued to search the sky, but there was nothing there.

“Please don’t tell me you’ve got more than one evil king in this world,” Avery muttered.

“Rylo is one of them, but it will take days for his spies to get back to him.”

“Considering you’re the only person I’ve ever seen kill someone, I guess that’s saying something,” Avery said, trying to lighten the mood. If she didn’t try to make things feel more casual, she might choke on the fear that tightened in her chest.

“We need to make our way to Quartz Mountain. We are about twenty minutes from the top. There’s a temple to Althea you can rest in,” Savine said. He grabbed Avery’s flowers from the ground and began setting a brutal pace. Avery strapped her backpack on and ran to keep up.

The mountain’s elevation was becoming even more steep. Savine’s pace was even more severe, but Avery felt a sense of urgency in Savine’s reaction. She wanted to get to the portal and to safety as quickly as possible. As they climbed, her legs

burned, her back ached, and her head throbbed. She pushed herself farther than she thought her body could go.

The surrounding landscape changed from lavender rocks to sharp, jagged crystals. Some were a deep amethyst purple. As they climbed higher and higher, the rocks became clearer until they were translucent. Quartz Mountain in Montana could not compare to the purity and beauty of these perfect quartz crystals.

Her heart pounded as she used her hands and feet to climb up the slick face of a crystal. All this time, Savine had continued his fast pace. He looked at the sky and kept scanning their surroundings. Despite his search, there were no birds flying overhead. She wondered if he may have overreacted.

At the top of the mountain stood a small shelter. She hadn't noticed this on the day she was transported through the portal. What with the debilitating pain and the blurred vision, plus the battle, she hadn't had time to take in the views. It was carved out of the crystals and was no bigger than a shed. Avery took off her backpack and leaned it against the building.

"That was the toughest climb I've ever done. I'm exhausted," she said as she leaned against the building. She sat, drinking from her water bottle. Savine let her catch her breath and quench her thirst before speaking to her.

"We should be safe for now. Rest for a moment, then try to return. If you cannot, we will sleep here and leave before dawn tomorrow. Guards will join us this evening, so you're not in immediate danger here," Savine growled. He seemed irritated and restless. He did not sit or rest, but continued pacing, hand on the hilt of his sword.

Avery stood up and lifted the heavy pack onto her back. "I'm ready to go now. I'll feel better once I'm home."

"As you wish," Savine said. He handed her the flowers he had picked.

"I didn't say thank you before. For saving me. Thank you for that. And for letting me return home." Avery put out her

hand to shake Savine's. He took it, but with trepidation, and the strange warmth tightened around their touch. Savine's nostrils flared, his pupils dilated, and he pulled his hand away. The void left by his hand sent a chill across Avery. Their touch seemed to have ruffled his composure. She thought she'd seen something soften in him, but in the flash of a moment, he was back to the stoic and grumpy rebel leader.

"You are welcome, Avery Hollis. Be well," Savine said.

"Now, how do I open the portal?" she said.

Savine walked to a nearby crystal. "I found you here. Perhaps you need to touch the crystal to return home."

Avery reached out to the crystal. It was cool to the touch. She waited for a whirring sound, for a blinding light, but nothing happened.

Chapter Eleven

Savine

Savine stood frozen near the temple. He watched to see if Avery would return to Montana, but nothing happened. She looked back at him. Her face was laced with puzzlement and apprehension. Savine did not speak. He couldn't, even if he wanted to. As he watched Avery touch the rock, he sent a silent prayer to the Goddess. Not a prayer that she could stay, but that the Goddess's will would be done. That Althea would decide their fates. He knew she already would, but he could not help but pray at this moment.

Seconds passed and still nothing happened. Avery began kicking the rock and pacing around the nearby crystals. She looked back at him with an anguished face. Her chin trembled, and she turned her wide, brown eyes down to the ground. She looked like she may cry.

Without warning, she threw down the flowers Savine had picked for her and began stomping on them. Savine hadn't meant the flowers to be meaningful. He didn't know why he'd picked the flowers for Avery, anyway. Just a nice gesture, he supposed. Since they didn't mean anything, he didn't know why his heart jolted with a tiny ache to see her stomp on them.

"SHIT! FUCK! NO! NO!" she yelled. Avery unclipped her backpack and threw it across the peak. Savine watched it tumble down the jagged crystals.

She threw herself on the ground and let out a long, loud, guttural yell. It was a sound of utter anguish, yet Savine stayed back. He wanted to go to her. To pick up her body and hold her close. He wanted to take that anguish from her. The need to help her felt instinctual, and maybe it was from all the times he'd suffered alone. But he didn't go to her. It wasn't his place. Instead, he walked down the mountain to where her backpack stopped rolling. He picked the backpack up and carried it into the temple.

When Savine came back outside, Avery was no longer yelling. She was on the ground sobbing. Her blonde hair cascaded in front of her face, and her strange pants had a tear on the knee. He touched her shoulder, and she looked up at him. Her eyes were puffy from tears, her skin blotchy, and she had snot running down her face. Her arms were sliced from where she'd fallen on the jagged quartz.

Savine scooped Avery into his arms and whispered to her, "Shh, Avery, it will be okay. We'll find another way to get you home." Did he mean that? He was prepared to use her to gain a kingdom and knew that Avery would not be going back to the human realm. What part of him wanted her happiness over his own needs?

Avery looked into his eyes. Her deep brown eyes were lined with red. She did not say a word, only let out a sad moan. She leaned her head on Savine's shoulder and continued crying while Savine carried her into the small building carved of quartz. The fae used this sacred temple for supplication before the Premier Goddess. Starkly empty and small, it was a tight space for the two of them.

Savine placed Avery on the cold, crystal floor. She folded her legs under her, and she stared at the wall. She was no longer crying, but this stillness was more concerning than the emotions she showed minutes ago.

"Can I get you something from your bag?" Savine asked. He hoped she would drink some water, eat some food, or even go to sleep. Anything that showed she was still there. When she didn't respond, Savine walked outside of the room and stood on the crystals, listening to the breeze on the high mountain.

He got what he hoped for. Avery didn't leave. She did not choose to stay, but he knew she would not make that choice. It was as he suspected. This unique little woman remained in Aeritis, and their lives seemed entangled in his purpose.

Instead of feeling happiness, Savine felt a knot growing in the pit of his stomach. He needed to devise a way to keep her alive. Forces beyond him would rally to capture Avery, especially if anyone knew she was touched by the Goddess. His mind drifted to the night that he had tried to remove from his memory. The night the trees woke him from his sleep and led him to the place where starlight and tiny flowers pelted him as he huddled in fear. The prophecy that followed said the two born of one womb would return. Did that refer to Avery?

Savine had to be careful with his next move. They would need to keep her protected. She would have to be trained to fight and somehow pull the magic that lurked within her forward. Only then could he train her to defeat the Latian King.

She was so raw and broken. He never saw someone cry as much as she did. Her despair was tangible and etched on her face. Humans must be very emotional creatures to react in such a visceral way. A fae would never show such emotion. Whether for better or worse, they were not prone to great emotions, unless their mates were involved.

Savine could see her outline in the temple. She was still in the same position as when he left. The evening light dipped low, and still she did not move. At last, as darkness crept into the mountains, Savine approached the temple. "Avery, can I help you with anything?" Avery didn't move. She didn't seem to hear him. He walked closer to her and laid a large hand on her slim, but toned shoulder.

Avery's eyes locked onto his. "Leave me!" she shouted. The sound of her voice echoed through the small room. His sensitive fae hearing rang. Savine's stomach twisted, knowing that Avery was in pain and there was nothing he could do to comfort her.

“I know you are disappointed, Avery. But I will help you in our world. I will—”

“I don’t want your help! Leave me alone!” Avery shouted. She stood up, moving across the small building with such unexpected speed and grace that Savine was caught off guard when Avery flung herself against him. She pounded her small fists against his chest. It didn’t hurt Savine. More like being pummeled by an angry child. It made him think back to his sister. She’d hit him the same way once. Shortly after, she entered her adolescence and was raging at Savine for leaving her with their parents.

Just as he had with Kyla, he didn’t bother fighting back. He let her smack him around as she yelled and cried. There would be a time when he’d teach her how to make those hits count. How to use her slight frame to her advantage, but this was not that day.

With each strike, the subtle thrum of magic coursed from Avery’s skin and into him. The warm, pulsing pull of the magic was intoxicatingly sweet, like that strange human food. Did humans gifted with magic come by it naturally, like the fae? Or was it something that she’d need training in to be unleashed?

Those old fae tales always mentioned the evil human witches drawing magic from the world and its surroundings. Maybe she was manipulating him with her magic and she didn’t realize it.

Finally, Avery stopped beating Savine. Her head rested against his chest, and she let out an animalistic cry. Savine wrapped his arms around Avery and whispered soothing words to calm her.

He’d known that Avery would be devastated over not returning to Earth. But this? This was pure grief. He hadn’t expected the anguish that had overtaken her. More so, he never thought that her anguish would hurt him so much. His essence twisted uneasily. His heart pounded in his chest and he wanted to wrap his arms around this little woman and protect her from all the pains of this world.

She wasn't his to protect. He had no right to, knowing what he would do to her in the coming months. This woman was not violent. She wasn't made to be a killer, but her natural instincts would need to be suppressed. She was his only hope for a successful end to this decades-long conflict. Soon she would hate him for what he'd make her do.

Knowing that, he pulled away from her. He opened that strange bag of hers and pulled out her bedroll. He helped her into the sleeping bag, as she'd called it, then left the shelter.

The orange and pink hues of sunset filtered through the purple and clear crystals of the mountain. He needed this fresh air and cleansing light. He needed to separate himself from Avery's magic and regain his own composure. How had Kyla not felt what lurked within that little woman?

His sensitive sight noted his scouts before they made it up the crest of the mountain. Garnel led a group of a dozen warriors. There was no way in the Abyss he'd let others see Avery looking so vulnerable.

Savine met Garnel below the summit of Quartz Mountain. Garnel's wine-red hair was braided in intricate designs with beads woven throughout his braids. Kyla must have made Garnel sit still long enough to tame his wild mane.

Savine placed his hand on Garnel's shoulder, and Garnel did the same to him, gripping each other in greeting.

"Did the human go through the portal?" Garnel asked, getting straight to the point.

"She didn't. Just as I suspected."

"Do you think it's because she's still weak from her injuries?"

"No, she has a job to do here. She's strong enough to travel, and we may as well not waste any more time in the Middens. She'll bring an end to that bastard Jasper. Or, she'll die trying," Savine said. The words tasted gritty in his mouth, like he only half believed what he was willing to put this girl through.

“Damn you to the Abyss. You are a cruel man. Too much time leading this rebellion,” Garnel said as he shook his head.

“Look, this will hardly be the worst thing I’ve done in my life. Didn’t my father raise me to be a cold, cruel bastard? I’ll get what I want in the end.”

Garnel nodded. If anyone knew what he’d suffered to turn him into this kind of man, it was Garnel. He’d been there, suffering through it all with him. Or at least cleaning up the blood from the wounds inflicted by his father.

“So where is our little savior, then?” Garnel asked.

“Resting. She was upset about staying in Aeritis.” Savine glanced up the mountain toward the small temple bathed in alpenglow. She hadn’t made a sound since he left her side.

“Was that her making those howling sounds? The scouts were looking for a cave beast, just to be sure.”

“She is not in a good place right now. As she smacked me around, I could feel her magic and my essence reacting to it. She’s going to be a powerhouse once we figure out how to hone her magic.”

Garnel squinted at Savine, his expression a mix of surprise and doubt. “Kyla told me you thought so, although she couldn’t feel anything. I guess we will see soon enough. Magic would make killing the king easier.”

“Look, I think it would be best if she isn’t around anyone tonight. I’ll sleep outside the temple and bring her back to the encampment tomorrow morning. You keep a lookout for any scouts tonight and keep us protected,” Savine said as he turned back toward the peak.

“We’ve got your back. Always,” Garnel said as he gripped Savine’s shoulder in a goodbye.

Savine climbed back to the summit of Quartz Mountain and peeked into the temple. Avery appeared to sleep in the sleeping bag. Good, she would need that rest before hiking down the mountain tomorrow morning.

He ate a simple dinner of jerky and agaso bread before choosing a rock to rest on for the night. The bitter cold of the high elevation cut at Savine's skin. He wore his fighting leathers, and they gave him some coverage, but did not insulate him from the cold. He would spend a restless night devising a plan for keeping Avery alive. Tomorrow, he planned to share it with his council. Together, they would keep this human alive. Keep Avery alive, only to use her to take out their greatest enemy.

Chapter Twelve

Savine

At first light, Savine checked on Avery. She was curled into a tiny ball inside her sleeping bag. He could hardly see her in there, but for the lump in the middle of the bag.

“Avery, we must go,” Savine said, his tone harsher than he needed to be. Avery didn’t respond. He reached down and patted Avery on her back. “It’s time to leave.” She rolled over to his voice and looked up at him. Her golden hair was wildly knotted about her face and head. Her eyes were puffy and her nose was red. She looked so vulnerable and human.

“We must leave before any threats can reach us here. We will be safe back at the encampment,” Savine said with more urgency. Avery rolled her back to him without a word.

“Avery! If we do not leave, you will be killed. There are folk who are hunting you as we speak! Do you want to die?”

Avery didn’t respond for a long time. Finally she said without turning to Savine, “I am already dead. Everyone I know and love thinks I’m dead, and I can’t go home.”

“Avery, you are here for a reason! You cannot give up!” Savine shouted. He reached out and grabbed her by the shoulder. Rage boiled up in his throat. He would not allow her to stop living. She did not resist his grasp.

“Just kill me. Then this nightmare will end,” she said, looking at him with those deep brown eyes.

“Never,” Savine said. He lifted Avery from the sleeping bag and started packing it into her backpack. The backpack was tight, but he adjusted it like he saw her do. His sword was snugly pressed against his body, wedged between his leather armor and the awkwardly fitting backpack. He picked Avery up and cradled her to his chest. She did not fight him. She had no fight in her.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Carrying you down. Just as I did before,” Savine said. She did not resist, only made herself small and sniffled against the leather on his chest. A conspicuous line of wetness streaked down the armor.

How could one person cry so much? He’d never seen anything like it. Not even when Lilith faced unavoidable execution had she cried. Not even when the sword was raised against her. No, she’d stayed stoic to the bitter end. And he? Maybe he should have been more like Avery in that moment, letting all the pent-up rage, fear, and agony pour out of him in liquid streams.

As he climbed down the steep mountain, he wished that he was like the shifter fae with the ability to take on another form. He kept his eyes searching for any threats and his ears listening for unfamiliar sounds.

Avery stayed curled next to his body. Her exposed skin gave him that same warm, tingling sensation. It wasn’t unpleasant, just unusual. Close contact was something he avoided, even with those most dear to him. It brought up too many memories that he didn’t want to revisit. But right now? She needed him, and he would help her down the mountain.

When they were back at the encampment, he would put emotional distance between them again. There was no use in getting close to her. Not when he planned to use her for his own gains. But there was the matter of her safety... An idea had popped into his head last night, and she was going to hate it.

As they entered the purple boulder field, he spoke to her. “Well, at least you get to see more of Aeritis as you wished! And you’ll be forming a better opinion of the folk!” His optimistic tone sounded harsher than he planned. It was forced, and if she was awake, she would know that.

“Fuck Aeritis,” Avery replied in a harsh voice. Savine flinched at her words. He hadn’t been sure if she was awake, but her stillness hadn’t been because of sleep. “And put me down. If I have to be here, I don’t need to be carried like a toddler.”

“About time. You were killing my arms,” Savine said with a sarcastic grunt.

“Give me a break. You probably liked it. You’re getting what you wanted. Your *gift* from your precious deity. Whoever the fuck she is—I hate her.”

Savine’s eyes widened at this response. Nobody ever cursed Althea directly. Sure, they all gave out the occasional “Goddess damn you,” but never a direct insult to the Premier Goddess. He couldn’t help but look around for retribution from Althea. Nothing happened, and Avery led the way down the trail. Relief welled up in him. At least Avery was showing some fight in her.

Savine let Avery lead, setting a slower pace than he liked. But this wasn’t the time to push her. He knew he would let her take this slow, steady pace. It could clear her head and help her prepare for her new reality.

With Savine’s keen sense of hearing, he heard flapping wings. Giant, bat-like wings.

“Avery! Come here now!” His tone was commanding as he unstrapped Avery’s backpack and removed his sword. She turned and looked at him, puzzled.

“Do you know how to use a dagger?” he asked as he removed one of his own from his belt. The blade was sharp and made of Goldoth-forged ore. The hilt was made from elk bone.

“No. Why?”

“We’ll be under attack in less than a minute. Fae called the Hylax are on their way. I can hear their wings in the distance. There are at least three of them. If one tries to take you, fight with all you have in you. Stab upwards with the dagger. Otherwise, you will get your wish from earlier. You will be killed, but not before you are tortured until you beg for death. Do you understand?”

All the color drained from Avery’s face as she stared back at Savine. “Yes,” she whispered.

At that moment, the wings of four armed Hylaxes came into view. They landed near Savine and grinned, showing brown teeth below their snout noses and enormous round eyes. Their skin was the greenish-brown of mud. They tucked their wings behind them, ready for conflict. They were smaller than Savine, but what they lacked in size they made up in numbers and brutality. Each was armed with curved blades made of flint. They wore strips of old, soiled cloth around their waist, exposing large pot bellies.

“Well, what do we have here? The rebel leader of Latiah in the flesh? Is that little morsel behind you a *human*?” the leader hissed.

“Touch her and you die,” Savine said. His words were tinged with power and rage.

“It’s too bad that we take no commands from rebels. Otherwise we may be frightened,” the Hylax said in a taunting voice. The Hylax made his attack, raising his curved sword above his head as he charged at Savine. Savine engaged him in the fight. His sword sparked as it hit the polished stone weapon. “Get the girl!” the Hylax yelled.

The other three made their move toward Avery. She ran down the mountainside, quick as a rabbit outrunning a pack of ravenous wolves. As they rushed at her, Savine threw his essence at them. The three Hylax were entombed in a tangle of thorny brambles. The other Hylax charged Savine a second time. Their swords struck. Savine pushed his might against the Hylax, who released some of his own essence. An acrid scent filled the air, burning Savine’s sensitive nose and eyes.

Without a moment's hesitation, he shifted his sword and pierced the Hylax into his round stomach. A rotten stench filled the air as rancid-green blood and slime poured out of the creature. Gurgled sounds came from his throat as he slumped to the ground.

Savine turned his attention to the other three Hylaxes. One was nearly out of the bramble of thorns. He drew in his essence and pointed toward the Hylax. A necklace of briars squeezed around the Hylax's throat. Its eyes bulged, and its skin turned a sour green as it struggled with the suffocating thorns. Savine watched as the sharp thorns sliced through the Hylax's shaking form before it became still.

Another Hylax broke through the bramble prison and lifted its sword to attack Savine. Savine struck the Hylax in the throat, decapitating it in one blow. Foul-smelling, green blood spurting out of the Hylax, spraying across Savine's face and leathers.

He didn't wait for it to fall to the ground before he looked for the last Hylax. It had escaped and flew toward Avery. It swooped its clawed feet at her, lifting her off the ground by her shoulders. Avery screamed, piercing the mountains with her terror. He ran toward her and sent his essence out, lifting the ground up to Avery as she gained her footing. The abrupt change in the landscape made the Hylax stumble toward the ground, where he landed on Avery. Savine ran toward them, sword at the ready. As he reached the Hylax, he found its body slumped over Avery. He rolled the body off her. The dagger was buried into the Hylax's chest. The putrid blood coated Avery's clothing.

Avery panted furiously. Her body shook with adrenaline and fear. She tried standing. As she lifted her body, she threw up all over the corpse of the Hylax. Savine held back her hair as she vomited again and again. Finally she looked up at him, Hylax blood staining her skin and clothing.

"That's the most disgusting thing I've ever seen," she said. Savine couldn't help but chuckle at her.

Chapter Thirteen

Avery

A very took off her ruined clothing before she stepped into the hot bath. She was in an inviting, spacious tent. The floors were made of stone tiles, with soft woven rugs in subdued colors. Avery smelled the rose-scented air while the tub steamed. The copper tub felt luxuriously decadent after so many days without a proper bath or shower. A warm white robe and towel sat on a wooden rack in the corner. Near the towel was her last outfit of human clothes. A pair of leggings and a crop-top tank.

When they made it off the mountain and back to the encampment, Kyla had run out to Avery and Savine. She helped Avery to this tent and had her bath prepared. Kyla didn't question what had happened to them. It seemed like Avery's return was inevitable. She didn't mention the putrid-green blood all over their bodies.

The hot water soothed Avery's soreness, calming her aching muscles and bruised skin. Her naked body was a patchwork of bruises and scrapes. The damage from the bear attack had healed rapidly. She was left with some subtle scars across her forehead and shoulders. They would be permanent reminders of what she'd suffered. Avery also saw fresh cuts on her arms and legs where she'd landed hard on the crystals at Quartz Mountain yesterday, and she wore recent cuts on her shoulders from that terrible creature, the Hylax.

Avery sunk deep into the water, and the weight of her grief hit her like a stone sinking into the depths. There had been a possibility that she could not return to Earth, but the reality shattered her. This existence was worse than death. Her family would never know what happened to her after the bear attack. She still didn't know if Morgan was alive. She would never know what happened to her sister. Her parents may be mourning the loss of both their daughters.

On top of her grief, she thought of Savine. He'd shown her such kindness on Quartz Mountain, and saved her life again against the Hylaxes. She never would have survived that attack without Savine. It was only because of his dagger that she was lucky enough to kill the one trying to take her away.

Yet Avery was disgusted with him. He was hoping and praying that the portal would not open. She knew he had wanted her to stay—counted on it even—to fulfill whatever destiny he believed tied her to this place. He was bound to be disappointed in her when he realized she did not have the power to change Latiah. Why did he expect her to end this rebellion, anyway? He was the one who got his people into this mess. He should fix his own damn problems.

Even though she was stuck here, she had zero intention of helping his cause. In fact, she would have nothing to do with him. If she was stuck in this awful and dangerous land, she'd find the most peaceful patch of it and build a new life without Savine or his merry band of rebels.

But where was a place that wasn't filled with gruesome creatures like the Hylax? The thought of the Hylax bleeding out on her body made her cringe. She began scrubbing her body roughly with a bar of cedar-scented soap. She had never killed anything before. She'd once hit a squirrel with her car and had cried, driving away from its crushed, tiny body. But the feeling of the blade sinking into the Hylax's stinking flesh made her stomach churn. That thing was the foulest creature she'd ever seen. She was relieved that it had not taken her. Honestly, she didn't feel one bit guilty about killing that stinking creature, which was not at all like her. It probably had

to do more with the amount of trauma she had experienced in the short period that she'd been in Aeritis.

She had wanted to die there on the mountain this morning. She meant it when she asked Savine to kill her. Never in her life had she had suicidal ideations, but she had yearned for it last night.

But she realized as the Hylaxes attacked, she did not want to die. She still fought for her life, whatever that may look like now.

"Avery!" a male voice rose from the other side of the tent wall, reminding Avery of how little privacy she had in this encampment. Was that Savine? What the hell was wrong with the man? He saved her only hours ago, and here he was in that demanding tone, bothering her bath.

"I'm busy!" Avery yelled back. "I'm still in the bath."

"You have been in there for over an hour. I need to speak with you immediately," Savine said. He spoke in a way that demanded her attention, but his tone was not unkind. It was commanding and arrogant.

"Well, you'll have to wait for me to finish up," Avery argued back. She'd had it with this place and this man.

"I will give you five minutes. If you are not out, I will come in and get you."

"Go to hell!" Avery yelled and settled back into her hot bath. She heard someone outside the bathing tent. Breathing steadily and shuffling his feet. Hopefully, she was shattering that asshole's sensitive hearing.

"Three minutes, Avery!" Savine said, his voice cooler than before.

"I'm not one of your rebels at your beck and call. Use a little courtesy!" Avery yelled. Fuck him and his demanding, condescending attitude. Where had the kind, caring man who whispered calming words and picked her a bouquet gone? She'd take him over this asshole any day.

"I am coming in. You have two minutes."

“Fine! I’ll get out,” Avery shouted back. “Give me five minutes, and I’ll meet you outside. This is my first bath in a week and a half, after all!”

The water sloshed as she stepped up and worked her way over to the towel. She’d been ready to get out, anyway. She was properly pruned, but the water continued to stay hot. That didn’t seem likely to change. She hated giving in to this man, but she’d rather not find out if he was willing to walk in on her while in the bath. One thing was certain: she wasn’t going to let herself fall apart in front of him again. She’d bury her grief and mourn alone, away from his fake kindness.

Even the towel Avery wrapped around herself was mysteriously warm. This tent with a bathtub was more comfortable than her own bathroom at home. She dressed quickly, pulling on that final outfit from home. It wouldn’t last long here. Not with how quickly her other clothes had been ruined. Avery combed her long blonde hair and put it in a braid. She put her hat on, covering up the scars from the bear attack.

Savine was there, waiting outside her tent. Avery scoffed at him as he assessed her body. He always stared at her so intently. Did he find her attractive, or did he think her small, human body was an anomaly amongst these tall, muscular people? Well, at least she was muscular as well. Her body was strong, and this outfit highlighted that strength.

Savine was dressed in tight leather pants that highlighted his muscular thighs. His top was some sort of leather design, but exposed his massive biceps and some of his chest. His shoulder-length hair was in a man bun again, and he had small beads worked into his hair. Avery could see the subtle points on his ears over his bun. Her fingers itched with the desire to touch them, just to feel how sharp they were. His blue eyes sparkled at her with a touch of interest and plenty of annoyance. Why did this man have to be so damn attractive?

Stop. Thinking. That!

He was not attractive. He was a cocky, grumpy bastard and thought she was his Goddess-sent reward to end his conflict.

“Interesting choice of clothing, old man.”

“I could say the same thing. Those pants seemed to be sealed to your curves,” Savine replied.

“Leather is always such a breathable fabric on a hot summer day.” Avery couldn’t remove the smirk from her face. She was being childish, but she didn’t care.

Savine looked down at her clothing as if he wanted to peel them off her. Slowly. “And yours looks no better. Is it the human custom to show off your assets so prominently?”

“Thank you for noticing my assets. I’ve worked hard to make sure that everyone can enjoy the view of my ass in these yoga pants. Now, did you have to interrupt my bath to check out my choice of clothing?”

Avery swore her words had caught Savine off guard. Good. She wanted to make him squirm for forcing her out of the bath. Instead of speaking, Savine walked past her and entered the bathing tent. A few moments later, he emerged with her backpack in his hand.

“I’m taking you to your new tent. Since you are staying in Aeritis, I can’t have my guards overworked by keeping a constant eye on you. I don’t have the manpower to assign a guard just to you. Keep up and do not talk to any of the folk we see through the encampment.”

Without looking at her, Savine turned and walked in a different direction from her previous small tent. Maybe she’d be back with Kyla? Probably not after hearing about the nightly mating ritual.

The sun shone hot on the dry plains as they rushed through the encampment. Folk looked her way and stopped what they were doing as she followed Savine. As she looked at the fae, she noticed how unique they were. Some had intricate designs for their essence. Others had unusually colored skin and hair. Honestly, Savine looked more human than a lot of these people. Nobody was as monstrous as the Hylax, but a few had sharp teeth, and she swore she saw someone in the crowd with

a tail between their legs. That was getting a bit too strange for her.

Savine led her to a massive tent. Maybe she would stay in the barracks with some of these creatures. An uneasy feeling moved through her stomach. She did not want to share her space with anybody she hadn't met.

Avery followed Savine through the flaps of the tent to a well-decorated space. There were comfortable chairs next to a table. A curio held bottles of wine and glasses. Through another tent door, a massive bed was draped with furs and blankets. The wood floors were polished and clean. Everything had a semblance of tidy order.

Suddenly, Avery knew whose tent this belonged to. Hell no. She was not staying in this space.

"Is this some sort of joke?" Avery asked, looking at Savine as he placed her backpack inside the bedroom portion of the tent.

"Is this space not up to your standards? I believe it's more comfortable than the smaller tent you occupied," Savine said as he moved past Avery and sat in the seat in the corner.

"Sure, it's nicer, but it's also your tent, isn't it?" Avery raised an eyebrow as she spoke.

"It is. I cannot continue having Weston watch you all night and day. He has other obligations, mainly guarding me. He'll go back into regular guard duty, and we will both share protection. I'll also keep a close eye on you this way to ensure you try nothing stupid."

Avery's skin flushed. She wanted to stop her rising frustration, but she couldn't help it.

"I'd rather be taken captive by a Hylax than sleep in here with you!" Avery shouted. She couldn't help but delight in the way he flinched from her loud tone.

"That is what will happen if you choose to deny my protection. Or some other beastly creature. Worse yet, the Latian King, Jasper. He'd love to slice into that soft skin and

see what makes you scream.” His tone was so casual that now Avery was the one who flinched.

“I adore how I can read every thought on that expressive little face of yours, Avery. You can’t hide your emotions at all,” Savine said as he leaned back in his chair, crossing his long leg across the other in an arrogant male posture.

“I won’t sleep here. I’ll set up my tent outside, and your guard can watch us both that way.” Avery crossed her arms and moved farther from where Savine sat, giving herself space from the frustrating man.

“That won’t do. If your tent is as bright as your pack and sleeping bag, you will be a beacon for any enemy spying on us.”

Avery was defeated again. This stubborn man seemed to be incapable of doing things that others wanted. He only thought of himself and his own needs.

Once again, her mind drifted to the warmth and safety she’d felt as Savine scooped her off the cold, crystal-lined ground and carried her into the tiny temple on the peak of Quartz Mountain. Her mind couldn’t wrap itself around the flip-flopping personalities of this fae man. Warlord?

“I’m not sleeping in your bed. I’d rather sleep on the floor. In my sleeping bag.”

“I would never force you into my bed, little flower. Just into my tent. In fact, I’d prefer it if you stayed out of my bed.”

The damned man couldn’t lie.

“You ass!” Avery shouted. Again, she saw him flinch at her loud tone. Good. But she couldn’t help but think how ridiculous she was being, yelling at this immortal warrior. She had no power in this situation and was lashing out like an angry child.

“I am not asking you to like me. Hardly anyone does anyway. I only expect you to follow my orders to keep you safe. I don’t trust you to not do something dangerous and stupid, so you will stay near me until that changes. *If* that changes.” Savine’s face showed hard lines.

“You know, in my country, people have free will. I can make my own decisions as an adult.”

“I’m sure you have noticed that we do things differently in Latiah. Get used to it, and don’t make me regret saving your life. Twice now, by the way. Follow me. We have a meeting to attend,” Savine said. His hands looked tense as he stood. He was not the kind of person who was used to being questioned or challenged.

Well then. That was just what Avery planned to do.

Chapter Fourteen

Savine

Savine sat in a meeting with the members of his council, discussing plans to move from their summer encampment to the winter grounds near Bayberry. This was one of the most dangerous times of the year for his followers, but he couldn't focus on the conversation. He was entirely distracted by Avery. She was hidden in his tent, and he knew what he was about to do to her would drive her even further away from him.

It was fine. It was what needed to be done before she drove him mad in return. The whining yell that pierced his sensitive hearing. Her complete lack of discipline and no proclivity for taking orders. That toned body in those skin-tight pants. Yes, she was going to make him mad, especially now that they shared the same tent.

As a private man, he didn't like sharing his space with others. He hadn't even shared his room since those days when Lilith had snuck into his room in the Tower of the Moon. It had not been enough, those short-lasting nights tangled together in his room.

But here he was, against all he desired, forcing a new woman to share his space. After his imprisonment in the Tower of Teeth and Lilith's death, he'd sworn he was incapable of growing close to another woman. Not when the

Nepheli Sage had personally carved out parts of his soul and snipped the remaining bits into ribbons.

The situation with Avery couldn't be avoided. It was impossible to keep a guard on her all the time. They didn't have the people to cover her, and he'd admit to himself that he only trusted himself to keep this precious treasure safe. She needed constant protection until they could sharpen her skills. Goddess alive, she was like a child! Completely unaware of the surrounding dangers. Even her footsteps seemed to boom as she walked. It was like she'd never had a care in her life until now. When the Hylax attacked, he thought he'd lose her for sure. Somehow she'd had the dumb luck to kill that final Hylax. Otherwise, he would have lost his shot at finally winning this war.

The momentary tenderness he'd felt for Avery while on Quartz Mountain all but vanished when she had argued with him over getting out of the bath. Then her screeching in the tent had made him want to dump her out for any enemy to pick up.

But he couldn't help but think about her tight body in those pants. Those unusual stretchy pants that showed off her every curve and muscular ass. And that tight top that revealed the flat planes of her stomach and the curves of her small breasts. Goddess alive!

And her smell. It was so peculiar. She certainly didn't have the fae trait of hiding body odors. No, she smelled like the earth and salt. But underneath that, there was this hint of honeysuckle and mint. Smelling that faint scent of mint from his bed was going to drive him wild.

But these thoughts were useless. She may have an intriguing body, like no fae woman he'd been with, but she was his pawn. His tool to freedom and everything he hoped for. Not only that, she would be difficult to train. He had no interest in getting involved with this woman, or so he kept telling himself. There had been plenty of women that he'd found attractive without acting on his impulses. No need for her to be any different from the women who came before her. In fact,

he'd been doing that for over twenty-five years. It hadn't failed him, so why be tempted now?

"Savine? Care to join the conversation?" Kyla said. The beauty of the purple mountains reflected off the setting sun. Sparkles of light cascaded from the peaks down to the valley below as the sun set across the valley.

"Yes, of course. Just a bit distracted."

"I'm assuming you're thinking about Avery?"

"Beg your pardon?" Savine asked. Everyone looked at him, waiting for him to respond.

"It seems you either can't stand each other, or you're ready to jump into bed together. I guess we will all find out now that you've moved her into your tent. We all have our guesses on which. I belong to the lust category, but not if she continues to cause permanent damage to your hearing."

Savine pinched the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger. Goddess help him. He had a headache coming on already.

"All of you have nothing better to do than stand around and discuss my business?" He would not be having this conversation with his council. It was not any concern of theirs why he shared a tent with a woman who hated him. Changing the subject, Savine said, "Gaelyn, I need you to oversee the storage of the tents, furniture, and summer bedding in the storehouse."

Gaelyn nodded as she spoke, shaking a head of heavy blue hair, perfectly done in shining waves. "Of course. We began to store the herders', farmers', and soldiers' quarters. All that remains are the tents of the council, baths, and kitchens. Everyone else is in traveling tents," Gaelyn said. As the quartermaster for his encampment, she did not need him to tell her what to do.

"I appreciate your hard work," Savine said.

He turned to Garnel, the general of the army. "Keep all the guards and troops on high alert. Word is out that we are traveling with a human, and there will be many ambitious

enough to try to take her. Plus, the typical late-season skirmishes with the loyalists.”

“Everything is prepared. We have guards in the skies and the ground, as well as scouts and soldiers. We already had a powerful force ready to protect our herds and goods as we traveled back to Bayberry. I briefed them on our situation,” Garnel replied. He could be the funniest fae Savine knew, but he also took his job seriously. Garnel became a calculated and organized leader when it was time for work, and his lighter side slid away.

“Will the human know how to ride an elk?” Jay asked. He was the master of the herds and oversaw the care and training of the elk and moose.

“I believe she will not know how to ride an elk. I would like her to learn, but I can have her join me on Jari until she can manage on her own.”

Savine turned to the last person in the council. This slight man was once loyal to the king, but time and again he’d proven himself to Savine. “Raikin, I need you to get to know Avery, too. I want her to understand the political climate here. I want you to prepare her for her role in taking down Jasper.”

Savine watched his council’s reaction. Garnel didn’t seem surprised at all, so Kyla had filled him in. But everyone else looked at Savine like he had lost his mind.

Raikin spoke up before Savine could continue speaking. “Can I interject?”

“It seems you have. I would prefer if you kept your opinion on this matter to yourself, though,” Savine said.

“Right. Of course, sir. But I believe I should speak up since nobody is going to. Why should we put our trust in a human? If we know anything about their history, they lie. They are weaker than the fae, and they were the enemies of the fae folk.”

“I understand your concern. But we have been fighting this civil war for twenty-five years. We can’t continue to lose lives and harm our own folk any longer. All my attempts at hiring

assassins or at breaking Orofine have failed. But so has Jasper's. We need something different, something unexpected, to defeat Jasper. This human is not allied with another nation. She is not a subject of Latiah, and she can kill the king. She is the only one of us who can kill the king without dying in return. I am willing to use her to end the tyrant king."

Raikin frowned as he looked at Savine. He wasn't happy, Savine knew. Raikin rarely was pleased with Savine's decisions, especially if he did not take Raikin's counsel first.

"She appears to be a tiny, weak human. No more useful than a mouse. I do not understand how we can expect her to defeat a force greater than our own. It's based on luck that we will see success in ridding our world of Jasper through this woman."

"You shared your objections, Raikin. I'm still going through with this plan. We need this woman. The Goddess sent her to us to help us, and I will not deny the fate of the Goddess in all this. Do as you are told, or keep your objections to yourself. I want all of you to meet Avery formally."

Savine got up and motioned to the guards standing outside of the sitting area. They brought Avery out to the patio. Avery's hair was pulled back in a braid, revealing her elegantly curved ears. Her wide eyes and round mouth didn't hide her fear as she faced a room full of fae. Savine's fingers twitched with the desire to trace that full mouth and those rounded ears. She wore her every expression like it was a gateway into her soul.

Chapter Fifteen

Avery

A very's heart thundered as she entered the presence of the six fae around her. She reminded herself that this was her new reality. She needed to be strong and not show her fear in front of them. Fortunately, none seemed as terrifying as the Hylax. However, one female with skin the color of skimmed milk, eyes like amethyst, and tiny sharp teeth like a fish sent a shiver down her spine. She recognized her as the same woman who'd brought Savine wine to her tent.

Savine approached Avery and motioned for her to enter the sitting area. "Avery, this is my council. You know Kyla. She is my second in command." Kyla gave Avery a cheerful grin but did not rise from her seat. "Beside her is her soulmate, Garnel. He is the general of our forces." The fae man near Kyla had long, curly, flame-red hair. It was shaved on the sides and braided in long, loose braids down around his muscular shoulders and back. His dark skin rippled with a fur pattern underneath. His pointed ears were pierced all the way up, filled with tiny earrings that seemed to connect through a chain. He was a gigantic man, taller and larger than Savine. When was the folk considered a giant instead of a fae?

"I saw you once, although you were not conscious," Garnel said by way of introduction. A shiver went down her spine. All Avery could do was nod at the man.

“Beside Garnel is Gaelyn. She is my quartermaster. A tremendous task to assemble and disassemble an entire town twice a year.” The bluish-fish woman gave Avery a bored glance.

“Next to her is Jay, my master of the herd. He cares for the elk and moose. You will meet with him after this to see about a beast that will suit your needs.”

The dark-skinned and dark-haired fae gave Avery a friendly smile. At least someone here didn't look like they wanted to eat her. The essence under his skin was made of tiny, thin lines like fur.

“Lastly, we have Raikin. He is my emissary to other nations. Raikin is often gone but just returned from the southern nation of Goldoth. He and Jay are also soulmates.”

“Pleased to meet you,” the man said in a way that sounded anything but pleased. His skin was white as snow, with a few faint gray lines under his skin where his essence showed. His hair was also white, while his eyes were the color of spring-green leaves. He was classically beautiful and slight in his build. He reminded Avery of an aspen in spring.

“Now you have met my team. We all have a lot to do to prepare for our journey to the winter camp in Bayberry. Avery, I expect your full cooperation in traveling from here,” Savine said to Avery with a scowl as the group watched them interact. The look made Avery queasy in the pit of her stomach. Why was he so harsh to her? Hadn't he shown her a few moments of kindness before?

“Avery, do you have questions for everyone?” Kyla asked.

“Um. No. It is nice to meet you all. I'm sure we'll get to know each other better,” Avery said. She was ready to return to Savine's tent and hide. Everyone looked at her as she spoke. Jay, Kyla, and Garnel looked at her with kindness. Gaelyn and Raikin looked at her like she was a disgusting creature.

“Then we are ready to make our next move. Before we prepare to leave the Midden and bring Avery to Bayberry, there is one thing that remains,” Savine said.

“You do not mean for us to swear ourselves to this human, do you?” Gaelyn asked.

“It seems excessive,” Garnel agreed. “I will keep to your plans because you are my commander, and I am and have always been loyal to you.” Garnel’s words seemed extreme for the followers of a rebel leader. Avery saw Savine’s frown deepen at Garnel. His blue eyes gleamed ice cold at Garnel, and he once again pressed the bridge of his nose with his fingers. This was his go-to reaction when he was irritated.

“I have use for her yet, and I will risk none of you glamouring her, or ridding me of her for your own reasons,” Savine said with a menacing smirk. So Savine didn’t even trust his closest allies with her? Interesting. If he didn’t trust them, did he trust anyone? “Her full name is Avery Hollis.” Each member of the council muttered to themselves.

A chill went down Avery’s spine. “Wait... What does this mean? What kind of oath are you taking?”

Raikin sneered as he spoke. “An oath will bind us to you. No fae would take an oath lightly. What Savine demands is unheard of.”

“Then don’t do it,” Avery said. She didn’t need Savine’s council to swear anything to her. It would be another thing that tied her to them, which she didn’t want.

Raikin pursed his lips, and his gaze shifted to Savine. The room became uncomfortably quiet as everyone looked at Avery and Savine.

“Oh, you mean he will force you to do this?” Avery asked as she turned to look up at Savine. “You don’t have to do this. Seriously. Don’t.”

“You forget, little flower, you’re my gift. I’ll take no chances with your protection,” Savine scoffed. The hard lines on his face made Avery suspect that even *he* didn’t want to take an oath to her.

Kyla stood up. “I’ve spent several days with Avery Hollis. Our Goddess sent her to us with a purpose. You can ask Savine, and he will tell you I wanted to send her back to her

realm, for her own sake. To be a human in Aeritis is a dangerous task. I, for one, will take the oath. You know my brother. You know when he commits to something, it's for good. But Savine, I think you should tell them the whole truth. You can trust everyone in this room with our secret."

Avery watched Savine's expression grow cold, and he was quiet long enough that the silence felt awkward.

"Avery carries the mark of Althea on her forehead." Savine drew close before he touched her face, removing the glamour Avery knew was in place. The room filled with gasps, and the previously composed fae looked shocked.

"This is why you thought she wouldn't return," Garnel said as his previously golden skin paled. "The mark of the Goddess is so rare among the fae—how could a human carry her mark?"

"That is exactly why I want to keep her close. She has a purpose here. She could be the one to end this war and bring us home," Savine said. Kyla approached Avery and touched her forehead, glamouring her mark with a tingle. Avery felt calmer as Kyla withdrew her touch. Her tense muscles relaxed, and she could finally take a steady breath. Savine looked at her with that harsh expression, but there was something else there. Sympathy? Guilt? Did he actually believe what he said about using her to end this war?

Jay smiled softly. "This changes things. I've never doubted Savine's judgment, and I won't now, but seeing that she's marked by the Goddess changes why we'd vow an oath. I'll do it. Raikin will too," Jay said as he bumped his shoulder against his soulmate. Raikin's scowl looked like it could set Jay on fire, but he didn't protest.

At these words, the other members of the council murmured their agreement as they stood and joined in a circle. Savine moved Avery to the center of the circle and stood beside Garnel and Jay. They took their right hand and held them stretched out. Each of the fae's hands glowed. Their essence pulsed below their skin. Together, they said, "As a sworn member of the council of Savine Thorne, commander of the

Latian Rebellion, I swear to safeguard and protect Avery Hollis from all known harm and danger. I willingly give my life to her safekeeping.” Small orbs of light came from each of the fae’s outstretched hands and mingled together in the center of the circle before the light bobbed down to Avery’s head. The light coated her face, then seemed to sink into her, leaving her with a warm sensation throughout her body.

Avery stood speechless. She didn’t know what it meant for the folk to take an oath, but what she witnessed seemed like a big deal. These people took an oath to give up their lives to protect hers.

Savine touched Avery’s shoulder before pulling back like the touch stung. “What I just asked of them was not taken lightly. Avery, the folk cannot break a vow. We are sworn to it upon punishment by death.”

Avery’s stomach did a flip. She hadn’t asked for this, but now that she witnessed what taking an oath meant for the fae, she felt relieved to have this commitment from all these warriors to protect her.

Savine’s deep voice rose over the buzz of conversation around her. “Avery, now we need you to do something for us.”

“Of course, what?” Avery blurted the words out before she’d thought through what she was saying. Maybe she shouldn’t be so eager to volunteer for what Savine had planned.

“We need you to swear an oath to serve the rebellion. You will be required to swear your loyalty to the leadership of the rebellion and to follow the commander’s orders.”

Avery felt that same queasy sensation in the pit of her stomach again. This was a horrible idea. “What if I refuse to do it?” Avery asked. The surrounding faces looked shocked.

“Oh, dear, that would be a terrible idea, considering that we just took an oath for you,” Jay said. His eyes were kind, and he seemed to give her the most gentle warning any of these fae could give her.

“Terrible?” she asked.

“We will not need to give you protection if you are not willing to swear an oath for us. Oaths must be an equal balance,” Savine replied. His face looked disappointed.

Damn, this day kept getting worse. Her mind flashed to the creature she’d killed that morning. She felt no remorse for taking its life. But she also had no interest in facing something like that alone again.

“Okay. Fine. How do I do it?”

“The same way we did the last oath,” Kyla said. Her smiling face hid something. She looked sad, almost like she regretted what she was doing.

Avery nodded, and everyone placed their right hands back into the circle. The same golden glow pulsed out from each of the faes’ hands.

“Repeat after me, Avery,” Savine said. His essence swirled in rhythmic movements. “I, Avery Hollis, do swear...”

Avery nodded before stating, “I, Avery Hollis, do swear...”

“To serve the Latian Rebellion with loyalty and fealty to its commander, Savine Thorne...”

“To serve the Latian Rebellion with loyalty and fealty to its commander, Savine Thorne...”

“From this day forth until I am released from my oath.”

“From this day forth until I am released from my oath.” Light poured out of Avery somehow, flowing into the outreached hands and up into the chests of the council members. She felt empty as she looked at the fae surrounding her. Not only was her life protected by these creatures, but now she was bound to them. So much for her bath time dream of finding a peaceful place to live in Aeritis. Savine now had the means to use her for whatever purpose he saw fit, as long as he claimed it helped the rebellion.

“Now what?” Avery asked. All she wanted was to go back to the tent that she now had to share with Savine and go to sleep.

“Well, if we are done here, Avery, I would like you and Kyla to accompany Jay to meet the elk,” Savine said with a sly grin. “I am sure you will find them entertaining.”

With those words, Savine turned his back on her and walked over to the fish lady, leaving Avery standing there in confusion.

Chapter Sixteen

Avery

Despite growing up in Montana, Avery was not a cowgirl. She did not take horseback lessons as a kid. She'd only been on a horse a handful of times, and the experience was unnerving. Sitting on such a powerful and temperamental animal never appealed to her. She preferred action sports where she did not depend on an animal to listen to her. Riding a bike, skiing, or even whitewater rafting sounded more fun than riding on a horse.

She was not about to ride a horse. She was preparing to ride an *elk*. An animal that shouldn't be ridden by people. She hoped she would not be riding one with antlers.

The large fae named Jay led the way. He walked confidently toward a pen of elk. As he approached, they all looked up at him. He called to the elk, making a bugle sound with his lips. A few of the elk responded, bugling back to Jay. They seemed excited to see him approaching.

With a cheerful grin, Jay turned and looked at Avery. "What is the name of the realm you came from? Do humans ride elk in your realm?"

"I'm from Montana. It's a state in the United States of America. We have wild elk, but nobody rides them. It would be impossible. Some people ride horses for fun, and a few for work, like ranching. I do neither."

“I have heard of fae riding horses the way we ride elk. In Latiah, we domesticated elk over ten millennia ago, so our traditions with the elk were set long ago. What do you ride, if not elk or horses?” Jay asked with earnest curiosity.

“Well, we ride in cars. Do you have carriages here?” Maybe she should have lied and said she rode a horse. It would save her from having this tiresome conversation on what was already an exhausting day.

Kyla joined the conversation and responded before Jay had a chance. “Yes, we do. Is a car like a carriage?”

“Kind of, but they’re motorized, so humans drive them by turning a wheel and pushing on pedals to make the car stop and go. They can go very fast and allow us to travel quickly.”

“How interesting!” Jay responded as they approached the corral that held the elk. “These are all females. They’re gentler than males. Plus, it’s easier to learn to ride without the antlers in the way.”

Avery stood in front of a corral of twenty female elk. They were not like any elk she had ever encountered. They were huge. Most of the elk’s shoulders were above her head. They had strong, compact bodies. Their fur was in a variety of colors, from black to golden, like Avery’s hair. Some had soft brown eyes, while others had wild blue eyes and even green, cat-like eyes. She couldn’t believe these were the same species as the wild elk in America.

“They’re gorgeous! Elk in Montana don’t look like this. They are smaller and just brown,” Avery commented.

“Latians have bred elk for many things. From fierce war elk to gentle beauties fit for a princess, we pride ourselves in breeding the best elk in Aeritis. We also have moose that are just as striking. Although they are more temperamental,” Jay commented as he walked into the corral and harnessed a golden-furred elk. As he put the leather harness around her nose, he gave her an apple.

“This is Dandelion. She’s gentle and will be a good match for you. Many elk tend to have a mind of their own, but she

will not lead you astray. She also gets along well with Savine's bull elk, Jari. Would you like to lead her?" Jay asked as he walked Dandelion out of the corral. She followed him obediently and stopped when he gently touched her side.

"She's beautiful. I'll walk her around, but I don't know how I could ride her all day. You said there were carriages here. Can I ride in one of those?"

"Let's start with walking her and see what you think," Jay said.

Avery took the leather lead and walked Dandelion into a field of shimmering grasses. She nuzzled Avery's shoulder. It surprised her, but Jay was there with an apple slice for Dandelion. She looked around for Kyla, but she stayed behind, stroking the other elk in the corral.

"Elk are not complicated creatures," Jay said as he stroked Dandelion's thick yellow coat. "They want to be part of a herd, connected to their group. They want respect, and they will give you respect. Treat them harshly or distrust them, and they will do nothing for you. This is often why I prefer the company of elk. They are not trying to trick you or seek power over you, as many of the folk will do."

"Do the folk want to trick one another?" Avery asked. She'd been here a week, yet she still knew little about the fae.

"Has Savine told you nothing of the ways of the folk?" Jay asked, intrigued.

"About your character? No. Although, after the vows you made, I understand you take some things very seriously," Avery said as she continued to walk Dandelion through the fields. She felt strung out and exhausted, but pushed through as she walked the big, gold animal around.

"Folk rarely swear an oath to another. What Savine asked of us is unheard of, but so is finding a human on a mountain. That is why he showed us the mark. He wouldn't take the risk of one of us glamouring you or hurting you," Jay said as he walked beside Avery. He showed her a wide grin with white

teeth. His easy and calm nature made her more comfortable around him than she expected.

“Does Savine not trust you and his council?” Avery asked.

Kyla walked up, shaking her head. “Savine has been betrayed more than once in his past. Unfortunately, the scars of his past make it difficult for him to trust anyone, even those closest to him. None of his council would ever betray his trust, yet he struggles to accept this every day.”

Avery’s heart ached a little at hearing this. She looked out across the plains to the mountains jutting up in front of her. He must have been through a lot in his life to not trust the people closest to him.

Jay nodded in agreement. “As for the glamour, fae can use their essence to glamour themselves, like covering stuff up, and sometimes they can glamour weaker fae. It’s a type of enchantment. For instance, Kyla has one on herself because her essence is often overwhelming for her. I’m sure since you’re human, you could be particularly susceptible to glammers. Like in the witch stories from childhood. Savine could have glamourised your memories away or put a glamour on you that would cause you to kill yourself or others.”

“That is terrifying. How will I keep from being glamourised then?” Avery asked.

“Avery, any fae can glamour you. How you prevent it from happening is to learn magic to protect yourself,” Kyla said as she reached a hand out and stroked Dandelion.

“But that’s not possible. I’m not magical,” Avery stated. She stopped and patted Dandelion’s shoulders as she thought about these words.

“Savine believes otherwise,” Kyla said with a smirk. “I am inclined to agree with him. If you were any human woman who accidentally crossed a portal, the Goddess would not have kept you here.”

Jay looked at Avery and handed her another apple slice. Dandelion nudged Avery greedily. “Is there a name for a magical person on Earth?” he asked.

“Yes, a witch is a magical woman, and a wizard is a magical man. Another term would be a magician. But it’s all fiction. There’s no such thing as magic on Earth. Not really,” Avery said.

Kyla’s face was drawn in thought. Her eyebrows narrowed together. “Perhaps, like the legends of humans here, the legends of magic in your realm have truth to it. We have stories of magical humans. They were called witches, too. According to legend, a group of powerful witches separated our two realms, leaving the human realm without magic. They did this to save humans from the cruelty of certain fae.”

“Even if it’s true, I don’t know how to practice magic. I wasn’t born with it like you,” Avery argued. As she said this, she thought of the twitchy itchies, but that was intuition, not magic.

Jay took Dandelion’s reins from Avery. “It may come to you when you least expect it. But for now, how do you feel about riding Dandelion?”

“I like her, and she seems sweet enough. I’ll try it.” A tinge of excitement stirred within her when she thought about riding Dandelion.

“Then let’s get you on her back.” He smiled as he took Dandelion’s reins.

Jay led them to a tack room. Within moments, he was putting a leather saddle encrusted with silver pine cone decorations on Dandelion’s back.

“Can I help you up?” Jay asked. He bent over to help lift Avery onto the saddle.

Avery felt apprehensive. She didn’t know if she wanted to be riding on an elk, but what choice did she have?

“Okay. Sure. Give me a boost.”

With that, Avery found herself lifted up and onto Dandelion’s back. Kyla was beside her on a speckled gray and red female elk while Jay walked in front of Dandelion. Despite holding the reins, Avery had no control over where the elk walked. Dandelion followed Jay like a dog on a leash.

Jay tried to encourage Avery to take control, but she couldn't seem to do it. No matter what she did, the elk didn't respond to her.

"Let her feel you take control. Use the reins and steer her away from me," Jay said, stepping out of the way to give Avery more space. "No offense, but your insecurities float around you like clouds on a mountain. She can smell it and will never follow you. We all can smell it in the air."

Avery's cheeks blushed crimson. "Are you telling me I stink?"

Kyla replied, "It's not necessarily a stink. Not like the stench of some of the dark fae's death. It's a salty scent mixed with the cloying sweet scent of your doubt."

"That does not make me feel any better," Avery said to Kyla.

She told herself to be confident. She could do this. Despite trying, Avery couldn't get Dandelion to turn away from Jay's confident presence. Finally, she gave up. She hopped off the gentle elk and walked toward Kyla. Jay took Dandelion's reins and walked her back to the corral with the other female elk.

"Can I just ride in the carriage? I doubt either of you has time to teach me to ride right now."

"We have few carriages, but Savine planned to let you ride with him on Jari while you became more comfortable riding," Kyla said.

"Of course he did. That damn man can't give me any peace!"

Kyla gave Avery a concerned look. "My brother does not trust many in this world. He hates being touched and hates people arguing with him. When he allows you these kinds of protections, he does it because he wants what is best for you. He's putting aside his desire for space and privacy to help you. I hope you realize that."

Avery walked with Kyla back to Savine's tent. "Maybe I don't want his protection. Maybe I'd rather be left alone in my fear of this cruel place."

Kyla turned to Avery and took her hands in hers. “You are as strong as you let yourself be. Do not let your fear cause your death here.”

Chapter Seventeen

Savine

Savine walked back to his tent after eating dinner with his council. He'd invited Avery to join them after what sounded like an unsuccessful first attempt at riding an elk, but she'd refused and chose to eat alone. Weston stood guard outside his tent, keeping watch over Avery, who should be inside.

"Weston, thank you. Go get your own supper, and I'll see you in the morning. Kersi's on the night shift, correct?"

"Yes, sir," Weston replied before turning and walking into the dusky evening light.

Savine's tent seemed eerily quiet for containing the emotional and screechy human woman. He had volunteered to keep her in his personal space, and even her silence was bothering him. How was he supposed to relax in his home with her presence here?

Everything was in order in his front room, but a strange shape poked out of the corner of his bedroom. It was also an unmistakable bright shade of blue. Another one of Avery's human contraptions, then? Hopefully, she wore pants inside her sleeping tube tonight. He'd hated how his body had reacted with desire for Avery's bare legs—if he was being honest with himself, his body continued to desire her. Bare legs or not, Goddess save him. Even her scent made him stir

with an urge to find her and scoop her into his arms. An urge that he was not going to act on.

Savine had also clarified to his council that he did not want *any* soulmates set up near his tent. He absolutely did not want to hear mates fucking while he was in this space with Avery. No, there was no way he wanted to even consider sex with her around.

As he walked into his bedroom, he couldn't believe what he saw. A miniature tent was set up in the corner of his room. It appeared to be made of some sort of mesh and blue fabric.

"What in the Abyss is this, and why is it in my bedroom?" Savine asked. Avery popped her head out from the tiny tent.

"It's my tent. I set up my own space so I could have some privacy. It's still in your tent and you can see me until I put the rain fly on. I thought I'd give us both some space."

Space. Boundaries. Those were things he'd longed for, so he didn't have any objections to this setup. Although the little tent looked farcical and as obnoxiously bright as he suspected.

"I suppose that's reasonable, since I don't want to see you either," Savine said. His voice held more tension than he meant, but oh well. There was no point in getting her to like him, anyway.

"So you're okay with this?" Avery asked, her head still peeking out of the comically small space.

"Yes. You keep to your space, and I will keep to mine," Savine said. He turned to leave his bedroom and pour himself a drink. He needed some wine after this. As he turned, he heard Avery's laughter. It was like the lark's song on a crisp autumn morning. Light and airy. Fuck. He wanted to swallow it up.

"What now?" Savine asked.

"I think this is the first time you've ever agreed to do anything I suggest."

Savine shrugged his shoulders and walked out. He wasn't always uncompromising, only when it mattered. This

benefited both of them. It kept them apart and meant she wouldn't accidentally touch him, sending another one of those bolts of heat through his skin to his very soul. The last thing he wanted was to touch her and be reminded of how his body reacted to her touch.

Now, the oath was something he would not compromise on. He needed his council to make a full commitment to Avery's safety, and he needed her to take an oath of service. Did she know what she did when she took that oath? Most likely not, and the implications left him feeling dirty— his poor gullible little flower.

Savine poured his drink and lounged into his chair with a glass of red wine.

A few minutes later, Savine heard her climbing out of the tent with an odd zipping sound. She carried a brightly colored stick with bristles on the end. It resembled their toothbrushes, but like all her things, unusually bright and unnaturally colored. She also carried another bright package.

"Would you like a glass of wine? We could play that fun little truth-telling game again," Savine said.

"Hell no. I'll keep my truths to myself from now on. I'm going to use the restroom and then brush my teeth," Avery said as she walked past him. Fair enough. That little trick had been more for his own benefit to see if the legends about humans were true.

She was wearing those same clothes she wore the day she talked to him while standing in her sleeping case or bag or whatever she called it. The day she dropped the sleeping bag and remembered she had on no pants. How in the Goddess did she expect him to believe that she forgot she didn't have pants on?

When she came back in, Savine smelled that familiar scent of mint again. It was stronger now than it had been before.

"You smell stronger of mint now than usual," Savine commented. He immediately felt like an idiot for stating the obvious.

“I just brushed my teeth,” Avery replied, holding up the bright objects toward Savine.

“Those human devices of yours never fail to surprise me. What is that stick made of? How is it so bright?” Savine asked, curiosity getting the better of him. He should continue to be aloof. Not interested in her odd little world.

“It’s made of plastic. Do you want to feel it?” Avery asked. He noticed the trepidation in her gaze, but she still reached her hand forward, and he took the stick. It was hard, and the bristles at the end were softer than he expected.

“Is this naturally made?” Savine asked.

“Um. No, there is nothing natural about plastic, unfortunately. It doesn’t even decompose. I bet this toothbrush will be around longer than you, old man.”

Avery reached her hand toward his to take the toothbrush back. Just before Savine could stop their hands from touching, her fingers grazed his. He felt that jolt of warm energy coursing through their touch, and he couldn’t stand it. Her warmth sunk under his skin, kindling his essence like a flame to wood. He pulled back, dropping her toothbrush to the ground. They both leaned over to pick it up, bumping heads, and that energy shot through him again, causing his essence to writhe with need. Althea fuck him senseless. He could not keep touching this woman.

“Oh, sorry,” Avery said as she stood up. “I’m so sorry! I didn’t mean to touch you. Kyla warned me you were uncomfortable with other people touching you...”

Savine nodded. It wasn’t because of his past. It wasn’t like the touches that had left him scarred, hurt, and angry as an adolescent. It wasn’t even like the touches from Lilith. That perfect woman who he paid such a hard price for. Savine brushed the thoughts of her away. He knew his punishment for trying to love someone he wasn’t allowed to love.

But it was more than that. Avery’s touch sent a shockwave through his body. It made him feel uncomfortable and yet desiring so much more that it unnerved his typical steady

composure. Too much of her touch would unravel him, and he simply needed to avoid it at all costs. Of course, he wasn't about to tell Avery all this. As a fae, he couldn't lie. It was impossible. But he would omit the truth and manipulate his words.

"It wasn't her place to tell you that," Savine said, his tone coming out harsher than he intended. Even saying these words felt oily on his tongue, like his very being knew that he wasn't sharing all the information. Hopefully, she'd drop the conversation and crawl back into her bright little tent.

"I just want to understand why." Of course, she was asking for more information. The woman either yelled at him to stay out of her business and give her space, or she pried into his own life. Did she not notice the inconsistency of her actions?

"That's none of your business, especially since we are trying to give each other space, right?"

She shook her head at him. Her long, blonde hair whipped across her back and shoulders. "Yeah. Forget I asked. Good night, Savine," she said as she walked back toward the bedroom.

As she left the room and he heard that odd zipping sound, Savine leaned his head back on his chair, closing his eyes as he rubbed his throbbing temples. What was wrong with him? Every bodily urge wanted him to get closer to this woman, let her in, and bear his fucking tattered soul to her. It felt like an instinctual need that he'd never experienced before.

But opening up to this woman? That was the most dangerous thing he could do.

Chapter Eighteen

Kyla

Kyla hadn't heard from Avery all morning, and Savine was no help when she asked him how she adjusted to the idea of permanently residing in Aeritis. It had been two days since Avery returned, bruised and covered in the Hylax's blood. Kyla wasn't worried when she kept to herself the first day after her return. But two days? That seemed reason enough for her to check on Avery.

Kyla had tried to ask what Savine and Avery talked about when they shared a space together, but Savine responded with some nonsense about Avery sleeping in a small tent inside his bedroom. He said Avery kept to herself in there, and he hadn't wanted to disturb her privacy. He hadn't bothered to check if she needed anything before he left his tent in the morning, either. When Kyla questioned whether he knew if Avery was still in the small tent, Savine only responded with a cryptic reply that he could still smell her, so she was still in there. Her brother had a lot of issues that he'd never dealt with in the years after his imprisonment. But one of them had to be how to behave around women. Goddess alive! Did he even bother talking to the poor woman?

Kyla walked past Kersi, the guard on duty, and into her brother's tent, but he didn't stop her even though she knew Savine wasn't there. He and Garnel were doing military drills with a third of the troops every morning.

“Avery! Are you here?” Kyla called. She heard a small sound, almost animalistic. As she crossed from Savine’s sitting room to the bedroom, Kyla saw what Savine meant. Avery was inside a tiny, brightly colored tent in the corner of Savine’s room.

Kyla immediately sensed Avery’s emotions bubbling forth from the tent. Even with her glamour in place, the emotions reared up, ready to swallow Kyla down. Despair, regret, and fear filled the air.

Damn Savine to the Abyss! How had he not noticed that Avery hurt so terribly? Why didn’t he think she would need some help as the reality of her life settled in? Men, her brother especially, were so often concerned with their own needs that they forgot to see the pain glaring out of others.

“Would you like to walk with me to the river?” Kyla asked. The seconds ticked away as Kyla prayed to the Goddess that Avery would, at the very least, reply to her question.

“Thank you for coming by, Kyla. But I’m fine here. I need to rest,” Avery responded from inside her tiny tent.

“Come with me. If only to stretch your legs. Please,” Kyla said. To Kyla’s surprise, Avery unzipped her tent and poked her head out. Dark circles lined her eyes. Her hair was disheveled, and Kyla caught the scent that Savine mentioned.

“I can’t. I just... I just want to be left alone. *Savine* has respected that. Can you please too?”

Avery began to crawl back into the tent. Kyla wouldn’t let that happen. She reached out her hand and touched Avery’s arm, the last part of her still sticking out. The shockwave of emotions that flooded Kyla was almost overpowering, even for her. Kyla’s body shook, and her essence writhed with discomfort as she took in the weight of Avery’s emotions.

Oh, this poor girl. She was in this world against her will and mourning her family. Kyla felt her fear, pain, and surprisingly, some desire mingled with all the heartache. Yearning too. Yearning that was confusing and unwanted.

Kyla couldn't stop herself from manipulating Avery's emotions. Not when she felt so much. When she felt too much. She had to concentrate on all her essence to suppress Avery's naturally occurring emotions. But she was able to send her peace through her touch, and Avery sighed. Her body relaxed as she slid to the floor of the tiny tent.

"I can breathe again. What did you do to me?" Avery asked. Kyla had her head inside the small tent, and she saw all of Avery's possessions around her. That huge bag that she clung to looked empty.

"I am an empath, Avery. I can feel and manipulate others' emotions. I gave you a temporary reprieve from all that you were feeling."

Avery looked at her, brows creased, and a scowl was on her typically sweet face. "Wow, that is incredibly invasive."

"I didn't do it to hurt you. I simply wanted to give you relief. You are in mourning. But you don't need to suffer."

Avery scowled. This was not going the way Kyla had planned. She thought she could be a comfort for Avery. Someone that Avery could trust. She wasn't sure why, but she wanted that. She wanted this lonely woman to know that even in their cruel world, she would be a friend to her.

"I'll never see the people I love again. I've been pushed here against my will, and I can't return home. I don't think I'll survive in this place. All I feel is mourning and suffering, and I don't want you changing that."

Avery reached to zip up the tent again when Kyla spoke one last time. "Wait, Avery. All I want is to help you. I want to be a friend to you when you need one most."

Avery talked to Kyla through the tent now, not bothering to open it again. Even without looking at her, Kyla could sense that Avery was angry. Her voice shook, and despite the peace Kyla had tried to provide, rage was overriding her other emotions.

"Just get the hell out of here! Let me be! In a few days, I will have to ride on an elk and travel to yet another dangerous

place in this world. Can't you give me the next few fucking days to be alone with my hurt? I don't want it numbed. I don't want it taken away. I want to feel it all, because when I walk out of here, I will not have the luxury of being in mourning. If I am, someone will probably kill me for being weak. So just get out."

Kyla left without saying another word. She had overstepped in her desire to help Avery. Maybe her brother was right. Maybe she should have let her be as she grieved the loss of her world.

It would be best if she were honest with her brother about what she did. She wanted to help Avery, but it seemed like she made things worse by meddling with her emotions. The cool clouds in the morning light promised rain in the coming days. It was yet another sign that autumn was approaching, and they were running short on time to prepare for their winter encampment. The underbrush on the mountainside had already faded to the tired, dusky colors of late summer. Some even showed their autumnal splendor early, giving in to the need to prepare for winter.

Kyla found Garnel and Savine engaged in sword fighting. Others around them did the same, while some watched their commander and their general fight. Garnel was powerful and strong, his muscles taut as he parried against Savine's strike. Goddess help her! Just the sight of her mate made her heart leap in her chest. And it had been like this for decades now. Would this need for him ever diminish? She never wanted it to.

Garnel glanced her way, giving her a knowing smile. Of course, he'd felt her emotions through their bond. He knew *exactly* what she was thinking about. Immediately, his focus snapped back to the ring. Lifting his sword, Garnel hit Savine with a blow that would have bruised and knocked down any other warrior. Although the blow did not fell her brother, the two called their sparring session.

They both walked across the training yard to Kyla. Garnel swept her into his arms and planted a firm, and rather sweaty

kiss on her lips. His nutmeg and chestnut scent filled her nostrils, and she leaned into him.

“Good morning, my love. You look as if the sun only shines on you today,” Garnel whispered into Kyla’s ear.

Kyla giggled and pushed herself away from her soulmate. He was always telling her silly romantic lines, partly in jest, partly in truth. But to be fair, she knew she looked good this morning. She wore her favorite cropped shirt with beadwork that hit just below her navel. Her pants were loose and breezy, keeping her comfortable in her daily activities. She’d re-braided her hair last night and added some small baubles and bells that jangled as she walked.

“That is sweet of you to say, my love.” She turned to her brother, who stood off to the side. How he hated their displays of love! But she had never understood why he was so against them, even still. They were no different from any other bonded soulmate pair. Early in their soulmate bond, after they saved Savine from the Tower of Teeth, Kyla had asked him what the problem was. Even at that time, living in Orofine with more privacy, Savine had seemed to resent what she and Garnel had. He’d refused to give her an answer, and his emotions at that time were so apathetic that she couldn’t tell what really bothered him. Since then, he’d avoided talking about Kyla and Garnel’s bond.

“Savine, I need to speak to you,” Kyla confessed.

“It must be important for you to show up at our training and encourage Garnel to kick my ass like that,” Savine replied as he walked closer. He still held his sword in his hand, and there was a sheen to his skin.

Garnel reached down and squeezed Kyla close to him in a tight hug. “I adore you, beautiful temptress. I would have lost the fight had I not seen your gorgeous smile. Now, I’ll leave you to talk with our fearless commander.”

“This is why you and Garnel, or any mated pair, are not allowed to train together. What did you need to talk about?” Savine crossed his arms and looked at his sister with a hint of irritation. Kyla could feel the emotion waft off him, but unlike

what she once felt from her father—irritation, disdain, loathing—there was an undercurrent of affection and curiosity. Savine may try to put up a tough reputation, but for an empath, Kyla knew it was bluster, except for that small streak of envy. Every once in a while, it rushed forth, and Kyla had to stop her exploration of her brother’s feelings.

“It’s about Avery,” Kyla said. She tapped her leg nervously.

“I told you to leave her be.” Savine scowled as the undercurrent of frustration came forth.

“Well... I didn’t. I went to her tent and felt how hurt she was. It nearly flattened me with its intensity.”

Savine’s scowl deepened, the irritation building in his emotions. “What did you do?”

“I tried to give her a sense of peace. I just wanted to take away the pain, but she got angry at me when she realized what I was doing. It was wrong, I know. She said she wants these days to mourn because she knows she won’t have that luxury soon. And... Well, I understand that. I feel awful.”

“Goddess help you, Kyla. You can’t resist meddling. When will you learn to use your essence without being invasive?” Savine’s voice had a bite to it. The look he gave had that familiar tinge of irritation that Kyla knew well, and he rubbed his temples with one large hand. “Look, I don’t like that she’s trapped herself in that absurd tent. But she spoke to me a bit when I was with her. She knows I expect her to train soon. So give her a break. I’ll check with her at noon and bring her some food.”

“Do you think she hates me?”

“You’re the empath. How in the Abyss should I know?”

Kyla sighed. She didn’t like to hurt others. Intrinsicly, she wanted to do good with her essence and comfort people in pain. But this was also why she glamoured her power, reducing it to a trickle. Otherwise, her entire being was constantly flooded with the emotions of everyone around her.

Savine looked toward the tents in the encampment. He was just out of view, but Kyla knew he was forming a plan. “What

time do you train today?”

“I’m part of the late afternoon session today,” Kyla said, looking at her soulmate leading drills. That would be her job in a few hours.

“She’ll be here this afternoon. See what weapon she’s drawn to,” Savine said, then turned and walked back to the practice ring.

Chapter Nineteen

Avery

Getting out of the tent wasn't part of Avery's plan for the day. If truth be told, she had no plans other than wallowing in her grief. What she'd said to Kyla was true. She needed these few days to try to cope with the overwhelming pain of being trapped in the fae realm. Because once they left here? Well, when they left, she'd have to learn to be strong enough to survive in a world hell-bent on killing her.

She'd been lying in her sleeping bag, holding the chunk of quartz that Morgan had given her on top of Quartz Mountain. Avery hadn't wanted to see it again, but there it was. It was strange that the rock had ended up back in her bag after she'd thrown it across the previous tent.

Then Savine showed up with food. He insisted she come out of her tent for lunch. The idea of eating anything that he offered her sent a sickening flip through her stomach. He must have known that too, because the last few meals had been left outside her tent door.

"You won't try to coerce truths out of me like you did with the wine, will you?" Avery asked.

A crooked grin stretched across Savine's face. "That's not a bad idea. But I don't have time for that right now. I want you to eat because you've hardly taken a bite in days. I'll be back to bring you to the training ring for the afternoon session."

Avery had no interest in attempting to learn to fight in a war that she didn't give a fuck about. But here she was. If she turned down Savine's insistence that she fight, Savine might send her away. Then what would she do? She'd be some ferocious fae goblin monster's next meal.

The training area was roped off from a segment of the prairie. They approached a tent where male and female Latian warriors gathered. Kyla made eye contact with Savine, who seemed to not trust Avery enough to walk herself over to the training area.

"Savine! Avery! I'm so happy to see you," Kyla said in her lilting voice.

"I'm just making sure Avery makes it here safely. I'll be back to bring her to my tent after practice," Savine said and turned without saying another word to Avery or Kyla. Great. She was basically a four-year-old being dropped off at karate practice.

"Avery," Kyla said as she reached her hand out to touch Avery's. Avery pulled her hand away from Kyla. "I'm so sorry for tampering with your emotions. It was wrong of me, and I mishandled your grief."

"Yeah," Avery replied. There wasn't much Kyla could say to make what she did right. "What you did was a gross violation, and I still feel disgusted with how you tried to take away my grief."

"Is there anything I can do to gain back your trust?" Kyla asked. Her eyes looked sad, and her shoulders slumped slightly.

"Just get me through this training so I can go back to my tent."

"Yes, okay. Would you like to train with me today, or would you prefer someone else?"

Avery thought about it for a moment, but before she spoke, that creepy fish woman came up behind Kyla.

"Ah! The little mouse is out with the predators. Avery, are you looking for a sparring partner?" The fishy lady smiled

with her creepy sharp teeth as she assessed Avery. Her squinting purple eyes made Avery assumed she was judging her, most likely on her disheveled appearance. She hadn't done anything for her personal care in a few days now.

“What’s your name again?” Avery asked. She crossed her arms, trying to look a bit more formidable. Gaelyn. She knew what it was, but wanted to give the fishy lady a jab.

“Gaelyn. Kyla, do you object to us sparring?” Gaelyn asked as she assessed Avery.

“Not if Avery doesn’t object. You swore to her safety, so you’re a safer choice than some of the other warriors.”

Both women gave Avery a pointed look. She had been coerced into this training, so why not fight someone who could flay her open with her teeth?

“Sure. Let’s get it over with,” Avery replied with a shrug. Had she ever fought someone? No. Did she want these immortal monsters to know? Nope. Kyla was right, though. That same strange light entered her when Gaelyn and the others swore to protect her, so what harm could she cause?

“First, we’ll do some warm-up drills before we get to sparring. Come join us, Avery.” Kyla motioned toward the group of fae who were already lined up and ready to go through Kyla’s practice. The drills were basic calisthenics, not much different from what any human would do to warm up. So far, so good.

Even though her body moved stiffly and ached, and her mind was lost in her grief, Avery felt a bit more like herself as she worked through the motions with the surrounding fae.

When it came time to choose a weapon, Avery chose the one she was most familiar with. The axe. This axe’s shaft was shorter, and tighter than the one she was used to using for working trail crew, but the feel of it was right.

The axe in her hand sent her back to a hot summer day in Montana. She had been out on the trail for four days and still had two more to go. Her muscles screamed at her as she dug the Pulaski into the dusty, hard-packed ground on the side of a

steep mountain. The forest was thick with trees and underbrush. If she fell, her body would slap into a tree in seconds. As she hacked roots and tore out rocks from the new trail, Avery could see a thunderstorm approaching fast from the south. Before she knew it, she and the small team of trail builders were getting soaked. While everyone else sought cover, Avery stood directly in the downpour with her arms stretched as she let the rain wash the four days of dust off her body. The scent of the rain-drenched forest came rushing back to her.

Savine. He smelled exactly like that moment.

And this axe? It felt in some strange way, like a link between her life in Montana and her life in Latiah.

“Okay, Kyla, I’m going with an axe,” Avery said.

Kyla cocked her head, studying Avery. Reading Avery’s emotional reaction to the weapon. “Interesting choice in weapon. Have you used one before?”

“Extensively, but not for hurting someone. I built trails in the mountains over the last few summers,” Avery said with a shrug.

Kyla assessed Avery’s stance as she held the weapon. “When I was healing you, I wondered how you were so strong for such a small person, and why your hands were so calloused. You, being a manual laborer, makes sense.”

Avery never considered herself a manual laborer, but she wouldn’t argue now. Maybe that’s what she was? A woman who preferred to work hard with her hands than to be inside. Her hands had the callouses to prove it. Her sister always had been better with her brain. That and getting her stress out through yoga or running instead of hacking away at rocks and underbrush on the side of the mountain.

Morgan.

Would Avery ever know if Morgan’s steady presence still existed? Her breath caught in her throat.

Kyla’s gaze let Avery know she sensed Avery’s pain. She snapped back into the world around her.

“Yeah. I worked outside year-round. Building trails in the summer and ski patrol in the winter. You probably don’t know what skiing is, though. Basically, I’d help injured people on the snow, mitigate avalanches, and stop dumbasses from killing themselves,” Avery said. “Anyway, I want to use the axe, and I’ll spar against Gaelyn.”

Gaelyn approached, spinning two small curved swords in her hands. “Ready, little mouse?” she asked, sharp teeth bared.

Avery was covered in goosebumps as she approached the sparring ring. She didn’t know what she was doing. Just hack at the creepy fish woman until she gave up?

Kyla entered the ring with them. “Okay, Avery, we are going to see how well you can defend yourself today. Show us what you can do.”

“I think—” Avery hesitated as she looked at Gaelyn’s vicious warrior stance. “I mean. I’ve never fought anyone. I use the axe to chop wood or slice through roots. I have a Pulaski for digging up rocks. Should I use the same approach I do with those?”

“You cut through roots?” Gaelyn asked incredulously. “That is rich! Savine is going to *love* to hear you harm trees for a living.”

Kyla spoke softly, gently to Avery. “Whatever you do will be fine. I just would like to assess you.”

“Okay then,” Avery replied as she lifted the axe over her head. She charged at Gaelyn, who stood ready for the attack. With all her strength, she brought the axe down at Gaelyn. A piercing sound of metal on metal reverberated through the prairie as Gaelyn blocked Avery’s axe. The force nearly knocked Avery to the ground. Before Gaelyn could harm her, Avery blocked the twin swords with the handle of the axe, thrusting the fae back.

The pressure from Gaelyn’s two swords splintered Avery’s axe handle with a crunch, and Avery fell to the ground. Gaelyn dropped her swords to the ground, offering Avery a hand, but

Avery refused it. She stood on her own, looking at the pile of splinters from the axe handle.

Kyla's face was unreadable.

"There. I trained. Can I go back to my tent now?" Avery said. Her arms burned. Her heart still had a heavy ache in it, and she wanted to be alone again.

"You did well, Avery. Savine will take you back after training is over. For now, just sit and watch the others," Kyla said.

Avery walked to the side of the training area and sat down on the grass. She observed fae warriors training and fighting. One, a smaller fae woman with black curly hair and umber skin, fought her guard, Weston. The woman moved with such skill and grace that it was like watching an artist move. Every turn and block was done with such precision that she didn't know someone could move so fluidly.

In a quick leap, the woman knocked Weston's sword from him, unarming him and winning her sparring match. She looked happy, proud even. After she left the sparring match, the woman came over to Avery and sat down next to her.

"I saw you watching me. I'm Rue," she said with a cheerful grin.

"Avery. I've never seen anyone move like that before. You're very talented," Avery said.

Rue shrugged. "I do whatever I can to help the effort. I'm honored to use my talents to serve Savine. He's done so much for us."

That surprised Avery. So far, her interactions with the rebel leader had only highlighted his selfish and stubborn sides. Well, and that fleeting moment of something more when they were on Quartz Mountain. The caring way he'd treated her as her whole world crashed down. But that man was gone.

"Why do you say that? I don't get what this conflict is really about."

Rue brushed her dark curls away from her face. “My people are nomadic. We were persecuted for years. Honestly, I’m too young to remember the hard times, but my grandmother does. She also remembers the good times before Jasper. When Savine rebelled, most of the nomadic shifters joined Savine. Which is ironic, considering Jasper is a shifter and Savine has more of a connection to the plants. But that’s the thing about Jasper. His loyalties are self-serving, and he’s never had his people’s best interest at heart.”

Avery felt more confused as she tried to understand the politics of this world. “Why would the king treat his people like that? Savine explained that you can’t kill him without being killed, but I don’t understand why that gives him a reason to be so cruel. Or why your people couldn’t exile the king?”

“This is why Savine’s rebellion swept through the land like wildfire. Most of Latiah is loyal to Savine, not Jasper. We see him as a sort of savior. The areas he controls are safer than they were under Jasper’s rule. But he can’t get a foothold in order to defeat Jasper. The mountains that divide the Midden from Orofine are huge, and the main pass is held by Jasper’s army. It would be a suicide mission to try to take the capital city. So, we remain in constant conflict, with the loyalists attacking and fighting in the warmer months and each side retreating during our brutal winters.”

Just then, Savine approached, and Rue abruptly stood, bowed, and walked away without another word to Avery.

“What did Rue want?” Savine asked.

“She was just being friendly. She’s the first one of your people to come up and talk to me. Can she be one of our guards?” Avery asked.

Savine pursed his lips. “She’s too young.”

“Well, consider it. If I’m stuck here, I’d like to be around people who I choose to be around.”

“Perhaps. I’ll be just a moment. I want to talk with Kyla about how you did,” Savine said as he walked to his sister.

They talked for about ten minutes, both of them becoming more animated as they spoke. Savine's irritation was obvious, and Kyla looked flustered. Finally, Savine turned and started walking back to Avery.

Even she heard Kyla shout, "Just try to be nice! You know? Friendly!"

Savine and Avery walked back to their tent. Savine was a few steps ahead of Avery, and she didn't bother trying to keep up.

Once they were in the tent, Savine turned to the bottle of wine on his table. The wine he poured into two small cups was strangely green. Bright green. He handed her the cup without speaking.

Avery shook her head and turned toward the bedroom. She was not about to take another glass of wine from him.

"Little flower, take it. What I did last time when I offered you wine was a nasty trick. I shouldn't have done that to you," Savine said, holding out the glass.

Avery shook her head. "Stop calling me that. I don't trust you."

Savine looked at her like she had every right to feel that way. "Okay. Look, you are working for me. I want us to be... friendly. Friends, even. How about this? You ask me a question, and I will give you a truth."

"Fine. But I'm still not interested in your wine." Avery thought about what she wanted to know from him. "Do you hate humans? Is that why you avoid touching me?" Avery asked.

Savine tensed and drew back from her. "No. I don't hate humans. I have no reason to hate you, little flower. Humans were a witch tale or a whisper before I found you," Savine answered as he took a long drink of his wine.

"Then why do you flinch when we touch?" Avery asked, honestly puzzled now.

Savine scowled. “For the same reasons you want to be left alone. Sometimes we learn to live with our demons for so long that they bring us comfort.”

Damn. She wondered what had happened to make him so harsh. She reached for the cup on the table and took a hesitant sip. The wine burst with flavors of sour apple, basil, and a hint of honey on her tongue. The aftertaste made her want more, and she took a longer drink.

“Good, isn’t it? It’s cider from a rare apple grown in Bayberry,” Savine said as he took another drink.

“It is good. The color is so bright it looks dyed,” Avery said, relaxing a little. She took another tentative sip.

“I’ll keep my word and not force truths from you. But can we still have a conversation?”

Avery gave a tiny nod and sat down near Savine.

“I know you didn’t choose to be here, but we have to think long-term. I want you training each day. Go on your own. Whoever is guarding the tent will escort you.”

Avery shook her head and took another drink of the cider. “Can I wait? I just... I want to be left alone until we need to leave.”

Savine’s voice was softer than she expected, but his words still stung. “You have to train. Part of our oath was for you to serve the rebellion.”

Avery gave a minuscule nod.

“By the way, what is your favorite food?” Savine said with a half smile.

Avery instantly felt the tug of the question demanding her honest response. Even though the question was innocent enough, the tug of the wine demanding an answer made her panic.

“What?! My favorite food?” Avery’s heart raced as the need to answer Savine’s question was forced on her. “Oh, um. Cheeseburgers? I guess I’m a basic bitch.” The grip of the

wine on her throat eased. She took a deep breath and noticed how close Savine was to her. Did he scoot his chair closer?

“I’m not familiar with cheeseburgers. What’s in this dish?” Savine asked as he leaned in, his knees nearly touching hers.

Was this his attempt at being friendly? Asking her questions about food?

“Cheeseburgers are made of ground beef. Beef is the meat from a cow. Do you have cows here? I’m still a bit confused about whether you have animals in Aeritis that aren’t native to North America. Since you have some of the same native animals and plants as us. And with Quartz Mountain being on both sides of the realm, maybe this is some sort of twin realm?”

She was vomiting words about cheeseburgers. Why was she continuing on like this? At least thinking about the intricacies of burgers distracted her from thinking too deeply about how very blue his eyes were. Or how his eyes popped under such dark hair.

“Perhaps. That would make sense why you could cross the portals. What is a cow?” Savine asked as he leaned in closer. That familiar scent of rain-drenched forest hit Avery. His eyes brightened with interest.

Avery had a hard time concentrating on her words. “Well, they’re large animals. Sort of like a domesticated bison. They eat grass and hay and can be milked.”

“We have herds of bison that are kept by the Latians. They have also been domesticated and are milked. Perhaps they are the same thing, just diverged from the split in our worlds?”

Savine looked at her like she was the most interesting person in the whole world. Like *cows* were the most interesting topic in the world.

Avery sank deeper into the chair, and Savine gave her some space. “Not exactly, but I can see a bison is the closest thing to a cow that you’ve got. Now, back to the cheeseburger.” Avery rambled on about the inner workings of a cheeseburger before she said, “They’re delicious. I always crave a cheeseburger

after a long backpacking trip or a big hike. My sister and I would have..." Avery cut herself off. Regardless of whether they were being friendly, she wasn't interested in talking about Morgan to him. Not right now.

Avery had enough. She was tired and wanted to be alone again, despite her growling stomach and her strong desire for a cheeseburger. This friendliness was worse than his ignoring her. It made her realize that there was some sort of connection between them. Especially when he kept looking at her like he wanted to talk with her, even if it was about cheeseburgers.

"Look, I don't understand why you want to know all about cheeseburgers, but I'm exhausted. I'm going to sleep," Avery said as she stood and made her way to the bedroom and crawled into her small tent.

As she crawled into the tent, Avery heard Savine curse to himself.

Chapter Twenty

Savine

Savine told Kyla, Garnel, and Jay of his plans to surprise Avery with a cheeseburger for dinner, and they all laughed at him.

“Yesterday, I told you to be nice, and this is how you’re doing it? By feeding her meat? Savine, you really are terrible with women,” said Kyla.

Jay laughed at the meal idea, too. “You must suspect the way to befriend this woman is through her stomach. Although, I am also intrigued by the idea of a cheeseburger, so I give you permission to proceed.”

“I didn’t realize I asked your permission, Jay. Have a warrior dispatch a stock animal and procure the meat. I’ve already provided details on how to bake the bun to Cook. I don’t believe we have the same type of cheese. We’ll have to make it work. And the tomatoes are a challenge. I wish we were already in Bayberry.”

Kyla’s mouth opened and closed like she was at a loss for words. “You’re excited about making human food? Is this your way of being nice? Savine, do you actually like Avery?” Kyla’s eyes widened, and everyone grinned at Savine.

“She is attractive in her own human way,” Garnel said with a shrug. Savine caught a glimpse of a mischievous smile on

Kyla's face at Garnel's words.

Savine's body went rigid. "Look, I'm trying to do something nice for the girl. She's lonely and mourning the loss of her world. Kyla, you were the one who suggested I try being kinder to her."

Garnel looked at him like he may have lost his mind. "Butchering an animal and having the cook change the menu just so Avery can eat a meal from home seems above and beyond doing something nice for her. Haven't you been trying to ignore her these last few days, anyway? What's changed?"

Savine didn't have an answer for this. To be honest, he wasn't sure what changed for him. Only that her loneliness was rubbing on him. He thought back to the years he spent alone in a cell. If only someone had reached out to him then. So yes, the close proximity to someone who was struggling wore on him. After all, he wasn't a completely heartless bastard. Only when someone deserved it. And Avery didn't deserve his coldness.

Savine huffed as Garnel continued to stare at him. "I am trying to be nice, like Kyla insisted. That keeps her out of my tent and away from Avery's naturally occurring emotions."

Kyla's sad, sweet smile made him want to walk away. She hadn't reacted to his jab at her essence. He hated these soulmates' pity. "But you know, Savine, it is okay if you do like her. Or if you're attracted to her. Lilith was so long ago, and you've been—"

Savine raised his hands in protest, and Kyla stopped speaking immediately. "Don't even start. All I am doing is trying to give her a familiar meal. Something to comfort her. Make sure it happens," Savine said as he turned from the others and walked toward his tent.

Copper wings and hair flashed through his mind. Their bodies tangled as the early morning light streamed from the open balcony. Then iron manacles, slicing through the delicate skin of Lilith's wrists as her own family dragged her away.

Savine pushed the image from his mind. He never deserved Lilith, and after what he endured in the Tower of Teeth for causing her death, he didn't think he was capable of feeling anything beyond attraction for another woman. Not because he still loved Lilith, but because that part of his soul had been extracted by a black-winged demon. He would never deserve the love his sister and Garnel shared, or Jay and Raikin had.

As he walked into his tent, Savine heard soft whimpers coming from the bedroom. Avery was crying again. Previously, when he heard her, he'd left her alone in the tent. It had always felt unnatural and cruel for him to leave her, but he'd resisted because he didn't think she'd want his comfort.

"Avery?" he asked. He unzipped the small tent in the corner of his room. Avery's tear-stained face met his, and something in his heart clenched. Her puffy eyes and disheveled hair, trapped in a cage of her own making, made him crack. It was like looking into a mirror of his own former grief.

Before he thought of what he was doing, he climbed into the tiny space, wedging himself beside her. Avery leaned into his chest, and she let out a sad, low wail.



Avery

Avery hadn't heard Savine come into his bedroom. When he had opened the flap to her tent, she didn't have any fight in her to stop him from squeezing his broad body beside her. The scent of a rainy forest enveloped her, reminding her so much of home that she'd leaned her head on his strong, hard chest before she could think. Savine's large hand stroked her hair in gentle, comforting movements. The lump in her throat was wedged so tightly that she was beyond words. He held her without speaking for such a long time that the shadows of late afternoon danced across the exterior of her little blue tent.

Finally, she shifted herself up to look at Savine. "It's all been too much too quickly. Today was a hard day. But I trained. I did what you asked."

Savine brushed a tear from her cheek. “Don’t worry about that right now. You have every right to mourn. But remember the parts of you that don’t have to change here. From what little I know, you’re a woman who would rather be outside than trapped in a cage of your own making. Let me show you a place I go when I want to be alone.”

The earnest expression on Savine’s face caught Avery off guard. He was right, though. Hiding in the tent wasn’t her. And it would never be what Morgan would want her to do.

As they walked into the late afternoon light, Savine turned away from the mountains that jutted out over the horizon. Instead, they walked into the swaying golden stalks of late summer prairie grass. Avery picked a stalk of it. The grass was so similar to home, but with an extra sheen that enhanced the soft golden color.

“Do the plants here carry the essence, too?” Avery asked.

“Everything in Aeritis has some essence in it. The Goddess has a hand in all our realm,” Savine said. As he walked, he gathered flowers. Avery’s mind slipped back to the last time he’d gathered flowers for her— how she’d crushed those flowers when she couldn’t return to Earth.

“Is the Goddess a sentient being?” Avery asked. She also began gathering flowers in her hands as they continued to walk toward a row of trees that must follow a river.

“Of course she is. There are many who have seen her, and you are here because of her.”

Avery flinched at this. She still didn’t believe in some divine goddess controlling her fate here. But if she was real, Avery fucking hated her for ruining her life.

The only sound was Avery’s footsteps on the ground. For such a large man, Savine was silent as he walked. The slight breeze off the river ahead chilled Avery, and she wished she had her sweater.

“Are you cold?” Savine asked. Before she could reply, he pulled his own shirt off, removing his sword in the process, and handed the shirt to her. His chest and abs were more

impressive than she'd thought. The slight pattern under his skin swished in a relaxed beat. Avery had the strangest urge to trace her fingers across his muscles, following the dips and grooves that his essence took.

These gestures. These small kindnesses. What did they mean? Did he have some sort of agenda, or was Savine genuinely trying to be her friend?

"Thank you," Avery said as she slipped the shirt over her head. It threatened to swallow her up, falling above her knees.

"It looks like my shirt could eat you up," Savine joked. He plucked a small, white flower that Avery recognized from the bouquet. With a tenderness that made Avery's heart tighten, Savine tucked the flower behind her ear. As he pulled his hand back, he traced the shell of Avery's ear with his finger, making her skin tingle.

"Sego lily," Avery whispered.

Savine looked at her with curiosity.

"The flower. It's called a sego lily on Earth," Avery said.

"It reminds me of you, little flower," Savine said. His eyes were almost unreadable, as if the flower or this moment brought him to a different time entirely. The gaze vanished in an instant as he said, "The river is down here. I often come here to speak to the trees. Go and explore."

Savine walked to a cottonwood. The leaves showed the faintest hints of yellow amongst the tired, faded green of late summer. Even from a distance, Avery could see the tree stirring to life unnaturally as Savine murmured to it.

Avery walked down to the edge of the river. She took off her shoes and pulled up her pants. The cold, rushing water flowed over her feet, making them ache from the chill. Avery picked up a rock from the riverbed. The smooth stone had an intricate tapestry of purples and blues. Unlike the rocks along the lakeshores of Montana, the rich color lasted, even after it dried. She slid the rock into her pocket.

For the first time all day, her mind was blissfully calm. She didn't know how Savine sensed she needed to be outside to

find comfort, but she could hug him for convincing her to go to the river with him.

Avery stood in the river until her feet were numb. Finally, she stepped out of the crisp water and sat under the shade of a cottonwood tree. The sun sank low behind her. A distant mountain range ahead was washed in the alpenglow's light.

"Avery? Can I join you?" Savine asked.

"Sure," she said. Savine sat down next to her, close enough for Avery to feel the warmth from him. His bare torso was a work of art. A geographic map of peaks and valleys.

"Do you want another truth?" Savine asked.

Avery gave him a small smile. "If you're offering one, why not?"

Savine's face showed some unreadable emotion. "I-I need to be alone a lot. It's the only way I can clear my head. I carry a lot of responsibility for my people, and in order to make it through each day, I need this time alone. Plus, being around people who don't carry the same obligations gets... exhausting."

"Is it a secret if it's obvious that you're an introvert?" Avery teased.

"What is an introvert? Another one of your strange words, I suppose," Savine said. His eyes looked tired, despite the grin on his face.

Avery leaned in closer to Savine. Enough to make her skin prickle from his closeness. "An introvert is someone who needs time away from others to be recharged."

"Then yes, I am an introvert," Savine said with a shrug. "I have another secret waiting for you back at the encampment. Should we go back?"

Savine stood up, offering her a hand before he gave her the full bouquet of flowers.

She took them hesitantly. "Why are you doing this?" she asked, squinting at him.

“Doing what?” Savine replied. He was so close to her that the chill in the surrounding air vanished.

“Being nice to me. You don’t like me.”

Savine was quiet for such a long time that Avery wasn’t sure he would give her an answer. “I know what it is to hurt. Everyone should have a bit of kindness when they are hurt. I-I didn’t always have that luxury.”

The statement made Avery’s heart clench. He was so guarded, yet so demanding with those around him. Maybe he didn’t have anyone either. Maybe this strong, harsh rebel leader was more broken than she realized.

As they approached the rebel encampment, Avery smelled an undeniable scent of grilled meat. Was that a cheeseburger?

“Savine? Did you have cheeseburgers made for me?” she asked, gripping his biceps.

A broad smile stretched across his face. She’d never seen his face light up in such a way. “I hope you like them. The first Latian cheeseburger of many.”

Avery laughed. “Don’t say that until you try them first!”

Savine served her the cheeseburger. Something had shifted in them, and she didn’t know if she could pinpoint the moment. Maybe it was last night when he offered her a truth? It could have been today at the river. It didn’t matter when the shift happened. She knew she could trust Savine enough to eat what he served her.

It wasn’t the best cheeseburger Avery had in her life. Not even close. The bun was wonky, and the meat was seasoned with a strange spice. The ketchup was just wrong in so many ways.

But it was the kindest gesture she’d experienced in Aeritis or Earth.

Chapter Twenty-One

Savine

Savine's council prepared everything for their move, and of course, a late summer storm welcomed them as the group rode south. The deluge of rain transformed the trail into a muddy mess. Most of the fae used a bit of their essence to keep themselves as dry as possible. Jay also moved the group from the plains to the forest, skirting along the edge of the mountain, giving them coverage from the rain and protection from enemy forces.

There hadn't been a proper conflict against the loyalists since Savine found Avery. That wasn't unusual at this point in the summer. Both sides often changed their focus from attacking to preparing for the harsh winters in Latiah. But to not even see scouts? That was concerning.

Meanwhile, Avery wore some sort of strange slick jacket and pants. She called them a rain jacket and rain pants. In this weather, the slippery fabric seemed to stick to Avery's whole body, making her look like a brightly colored seal instead of a human. Her big brown eyes peeped out from the hood, and she stared at Savine with indignation as she struggled to keep pace with the other riders.

Nothing prepared Savine for just how awful Avery was on an elk. Why had she never learned to ride properly? She bounced and slid across the saddle. Dandelion was one of the

gentlest elk in the stock. Jay had picked her specifically for Avery to learn to ride, and yet Avery seemed to hold on for dear life. Even the young children held their saddles better than Avery.

“Wait! I can’t keep going like this,” Avery shouted to Savine as she bounced along the saddle on Dandelion’s back. The elk looked back at her and gave her an impatient grunt. Avery held the reins to Dandelion’s bridle, but was not in control of the animal. To add to the problem, they traveled at such a fast speed that she looked like she was going to slide off the animal at any moment.

Avery had a point. There was no way that she could keep going like this. She was liable to fall off her elk and hurt herself, slowing the entire rebel army. He’d said as much to her as they left the encampment at The Midden. But of course, Avery was so stubborn and had insisted on either riding in a carriage or riding on Dandelion. Carriages were in short supply with the rebel group, and Savine needed them for the elders and young children.

After their evening on the river, Savine took her stubbornness personally. He’d had *fun* with Avery in the relaxing calm of the river bend. And having fun was something Savine did not often get to do. So when she insisted on riding on her own, Savine felt they had erased any progress they had made in trusting each other.

Savine slowed his own powerful bull elk to a stop. When he did so, everyone around him stopped. “These are not ideal conditions to learn to ride an elk, Avery. But we must travel quickly.”

“No shit. It’s pouring down rain, and I’m trying to stay on top of an animal that I’ve always associated with being wild. Plus, she seems to live up to that reputation with all her snorting and jostling. I think she’s trying to knock me off!”

“There is a simple solution,” Savine said. “Join me on Jari’s back.”

Avery’s eyes widened. “That’s alright. I can keep plodding along here on Dandelion.” As she spoke, Savine tugged

Dandelion forward, grabbing the reins from Avery's hands. With his other arm, he wrapped Avery tight and pulled her across Dandelion and onto his lap. Avery let out a yelp and tried to push his tight grip away, but she couldn't get out of his arms. He pulled Avery's right thigh across the saddle. Did he really want this woman between his thighs? Well... maybe. Her warm, soft scent of honeysuckle and mint filled his senses, and he tried to keep himself from breathing her in. At least their skin wasn't touching, thanks to that soggy sack of clothing she called a rain jacket. He didn't need the distracting warm pulse that happened when they touched.

He also wasn't ready to share why he avoided touching others. Even grabbing her and pulling her between his legs made him fight an urge to push back and give himself space. To not let himself become too close to this warm, soft, irresistible human. Friendship alone felt like something he might manage. He was trying. He knew what mourning alone had done to him, and he didn't want her to experience any of his past pain.

Avery turned and looked at Savine. She had that familiar mischievous smirk on her face. The same one she made before she said something truly ridiculous.

"If you insist... Giddy up, Jari!" Avery yelled. Savine flinched as her voice pierced his eardrums. Jari did not move a muscle, only snorted at Avery. The elk was indignant about having another person other than him on his back, but this featherlight woman would hardly weigh the powerful animal down.

"Giddy up! What is that supposed to mean?"

"It's human talk for 'get going, elk,'" Avery replied. "But it doesn't seem to work." Jari thrashed his head, nearly hitting Avery with his sharp antlers. Avery's body slid further back until her backside was pressed against Savine's crotch. Oh, Goddess. This was going to be too much for him to stand. He should have left that woman crashing around on the back of Dandelion.

"How do I keep from getting speared?" Avery asked.

Getting speared? Suddenly, Savine wanted to rile this little woman up. He hadn't had the desire to make a woman think about his cock in... what? Decades. Goddess alive, he was more broken than he even realized. But now that Avery was rubbing against his crotch, all his concerns about his insecurities and whether she'd hate him for using her to gain a kingdom seemed to melt away.

A little shameless flirting wasn't going to hurt.

"Are you referring to Jari's antlers or my cock between your ass?" Savine growled. At that, Savine nudged his feet into Jari's side and began a fast-paced canter on the elk. Avery scooted her body deeper into Savine. The fast pace of Jari's strides made her body slide across the saddle rhythmically against Savine's growing length. He didn't want to be turned on, but damn it all. With her sliding against him like this, how could he not get hard?

"Not a lot of personal space here, huh?" she joked. Her backside continued to slide forward and back, nudging Savine's crotch. Jari seemed agitated by the motion and shook his powerful head as if to knock Avery off with his antlers.

He shifted the reins to one hand and pulled Avery in deeper between his legs. He held her body tight against his own. Jari immediately responded by lifting his head high and picking up his pace.

Savine smelled the earthy scent of Avery's own arousal. She fought this just as much as he was. She squirmed a bit more, and her ass pressed against him, sending a jolt of pleasure to his cock.

Abyss damn him. He wanted more of her. Damn his own broken soul. He wanted to fill her with his cock and ride her until the only sound she made was his name in that shrill little voice of hers.

"You can let go of me. I think we need a little space."

"With all that thrashing you are doing? Jari will appreciate the journey better this way," Savine said. "Just sit back and enjoy the ride, Avery."

“You know, old man, where I’m from, friends don’t stab friends in the back with their raging boners.” Avery’s words sounded all bluster as her body leaned deeper into Savine’s.

“If you don’t want to get stabbed with my, ahem, raging boner, then I suggest you stop sliding your ass against it,” Savine hissed.

It had been far too long since his body reacted this way to a woman. Sex had completely lost its appeal after he spent those two years being tortured in the Tower of Teeth. Even though he tried, he never was the same again. Not after Lilith, and not after the torture he’d suffered for loving her. He’d tried. Goddess damn him, he tried. But then, after he began the rebellion, he gave up any sort of attempt at finding pleasure in sex. There was no point. He was stuck with the same people year after year and didn’t want to cross any boundaries with his followers. The teasing about his celibacy had been tedious, but he had stopped caring.

To Savine’s chagrin, Avery didn’t stop wiggling. “I can’t help it,” she said. “It’s just so hard to keep still while bouncing on a fast-moving animal. It’s not like I want your dick poking me in the back. Maybe you should try to control yourself.”

Savine let out a growl. He pulled her closer, squeezing his thighs harder against Jari. “Squeeze your thighs together and move your body with Jari’s rhythm.”

“The words squeeze your thighs and rhythm aren’t really helping this situation. I should get back on Dandelion.”

Savine leaned forward. The heat of her face against his lips sent another wave of pleasure through him as he whispered into her delicately curved ear. “And break your delicate little human neck in a fall? I don’t think so.”

Avery’s breath was shallow, her desire unmistakable. And yet, this was against everything he’d been working toward all these years. She was a distraction that he didn’t need. Not in this way. Friends. They needed to be friends—he’d rather there be nothing between them, but that was out of the question. Not after he started fucking caring for her.

Avery shivered against him. She was drenched and seemed to get colder now that neither of them were as turned on. Or maybe those shivers were part of her desire for him? He still faintly smelled it in the air, just below that sweet honeysuckle and mint scent.

Just as they were getting into a rhythm that didn't include Avery rubbing her ass on his dick, Jay rode up.

“Avery! Savine! Aren't you two looking close atop Jari!” Jay teased. “I was wondering when you would get her off poor Dandelion. Clearly, humans are not as graceful on elk back as we fae are. With time, we'll have you riding on your own, and you won't have to be stabbed front and back, Avery, as I'm sure you currently are.”

“Jay...” Savine growled out. He would tolerate some teasing from his council. They were the only ones who kept him grounded, and who gave him a chance at normalcy in his life. If they couldn't be comfortable and tease him, then who could?

“Sorry, sir, of course. You're above those sorts of baser instincts. It's been, what? At least twenty-five years of celibacy.”

“Twenty-five years!” Avery screeched, turning her head to look at him. Goddess damn him to the Abyss. This woman had been alive as long as he'd been celibate. He didn't need Jay sharing those sorts of personal details.

Savine pushed his essence forward, sending a tiny tendril of vines up, wrapping slightly around Jay's neck. Jay waved his hands, grasping the vines and pulling them off his neck.

“Point taken, sir. I apologize if I crossed the line. I forgot we may not tease you in front of the human. You've spent so much time with our little mouse lately that I have considered her one of the council. But she isn't, is she?”

Savine shook his head. What was Jay getting at? “Enough of this, Jay. How are the others doing? Any word from the scouts?”

“All clear ahead. In this weather, who would bother coming to meet us in battle? The supply lines with the moose and wagons are making slow progress, and we’ll be sleeping in lean quarters tonight. Traveling tents, jerky, and agaso bread for dinner, I’m afraid.” Jay asked, turning his attention to Avery. “Avery, darling, how are you *actually* doing?”

“I’m holding up. Interested to hear more about that tidbit of gossip about our fearless fae leader.”

“Now, dear, don’t tease the poor man about that. Perhaps you can remedy that affliction. You do seem rather snug up there. And the tent you’ll be sharing tonight is tiny! Who knows what may happen?”

Avery giggled. What did that giggle mean? Was the idea of being with him that funny?

Jay gave a slight chuckle, too. What did he have to do to get some Goddess-damned respect around here? “Tell me, Avery, why hasn’t Savine stripped off your soaking wet human clothes and warmed you up with a bit of essence? You look like a wet little mouse under that silly bright cloth.”

“He hasn’t offered, but now that you mention it, he is surprisingly dry for being in this downpour. So is Jari. But these silly bright clothes are the best of the best in rain gear in our human world. Turns out fae magic can top human technology for keeping warm and dry.”

Avery turned herself so she looked at Savine. Her beautiful face peeked out from the rain jacket’s hood. “Can you really keep me warm and dry?” she asked.

“If you remove your wet pants and jacket, I will warm you and keep you dry with my touch.”

Avery gave a small nod. She seemed to understand what that would mean for them. Maybe she felt the same warm pulse when they touched? Or maybe she now understood how much he avoided touching others. But after yesterday, did it matter? Yes, she’d been upset when she leaned her head against his chest. And when she squeezed his arm? She was happy. So

happy that it had filled him with an unexpected joy to see that huge grin on her face.

“That’s okay,” she replied and turned around, leaning deeper into Savine’s chest. The wet clothing stuck to his leather armor, but he remained dry.

“Poor dear, she’s shaking with cold,” Jay muttered as Raikin rode up beside his mate. “Savine, you can be a hard ass sometimes. Avery, would you rather ride with me? I will warm you up.”

“No,” Raikin said. “If she doesn’t want Savine to warm her with his essence, why would she be taking your essence? Stop being a busybody and leave these two alone.”

“Jay has a point,” Savine said. He should warm her up. Just minutes ago, he’d gotten the hardest erection he’d had in decades. The least he could do was get over his fear of intimacy and warm the poor girl up with his essence. “We’ll pull off to the side and Avery can get out of those wet clothes.”

“That’s not necessary,” Avery argued through another shiver.

“Poor little mouse. She’s near frozen solid,” Jay protested.

“Jay, leave them be,” Raikin said as he reached for his soulmate’s hand and kissed it, pulling them and their elk away from Savine.

Savine yelled out to the crowd, “Carry on!” as he pulled off into the woods near the trail. He’d take a few moments to converse with the trees and check on where their enemies were while Avery got out of the supposed “rain gear” that seemed to do no good.

Savine slid off Jari and set the reins down against his neck. Jari wouldn’t go anywhere without him. Reaching up, he put both hands around Avery’s waist and pulled her down to the ground.

She looked up at him, and the concern on her face floored him. Was she worried about what he’d do to her? He never wanted her to fear him. He couldn’t stomach that for some reason.

“Savine, you don’t have to touch me if you don’t want to. I’m fine,” Avery said.

“It’s not an inconvenience. I want you to be safe and comfortable. Somehow, your lips are turning as blue as Gaelyn’s. We don’t need you turning cold-blooded on us.”

“Well, thank you. I am embarrassed to say that my rain gear doesn’t hold up as well as I expected after hours out in a torrential downpour,” Avery replied as she unzipped her jacket. Unzipped was one of those unfamiliar words that only existed in Avery’s language. The small teeth that held her jacket together were ingenious, and once again, made from that strange product called plastic. He had to give it to humans. They did have some interesting technology.

“Ready,” Avery called. Her clothes underneath her rain gear looked damp, but not too wet. But first, he needed to talk with the trees to make sure they kept their roots down for any enemies.

“Give me a moment,” he replied as he walked deeper into the forest. The surrounding trees were a mix of deciduous birch, aspen, mountain maple, and spruce. He approached an aspen. With their interconnected root system, they were some of the quickest trees to relay information.

“Hello friend,” he said. “What news do you have for me?”

The tree spoke slowly and lowly to him. There would be no way Avery could hear or understand what was being said as he communicated in mycillious, but she was right there behind him. Just a step away.

“We have word that there is an army massing near the pass. Most likely to return to Orofine for the winter. But beware as you pass through the valley. They will have the high ground and be able to attack.”

“That is typical this time of year. Have you heard of anything unusual?” Savine asked.

“Rumors circle that you travel with a human woman.”

“Yes, she is. How far do you believe the rumor has spread at this point?”

The tree didn't reply to Savine's question. It swayed slightly in the breeze, and Savine turned to look at Avery. She stood near him, looking transfixed by the conversation between himself and the aspen.

"You're actually talking to a tree?" Avery asked.

"I have the power to converse with them, yes. I use them as my spy network. The king destroyed acres of forests at the beginning of the war, even before I amassed a following; the trees now side with me."

"Strange..." she said. "Don't let me stop you." She gestured for him to continue.

Savine nodded and turned back toward the aspen tree.

"How far has the rumor of her existence spread? Does the king know I have a human with me?"

The tree paused again before speaking. Perhaps it was to ask through the network of trees. Perhaps it was just taking its time to reply. *"All the Kings of Aeritis know. There are stirrings in the sky and in the depths of the mountains. She is not welcome here, and you will have to fight to keep her. Beware of our enemies to the south."*

So there were to be more conflicts—wars amongst other nations. Savine would have to reunite this nation before fighting anyone else. He would need allies. But would he be willing to go to war with other nations over Avery? He wasn't sure he could answer that. The Goddess touched her, after all, and he didn't plan on losing her. He hated to admit it to anyone, but she was becoming more valuable to him than just a prize from the Goddess.

"Do you mean Jasper or the other rulers?" Savine asked.

The tree grew still. It would not reply. Abyss damn those aloof beings. He never got a straight answer. What was the purpose of his gift if they were always giving him half the information?

Turning to Avery, he said, "I found out as much as I needed to know. Let's get back to Jari."

“Good,” Avery said as she began stomping through the underbrush. “That tree was giving me the creeps. And I’m colder and wetter than ever.”

Savine looked at her and saw that her clothing was becoming drenched. If he didn’t warm her up soon, she would become hypothermic in no time.

He led her through the forest, not touching her and not speaking as they walked. He preferred this silence in the forest, hoping he could pick up a whisper of information as he crossed through the woods.

Jari waited for them on the path as other elk, moose, and riders streamed by on their journey southward. Dandelion stood next to him. Savine hadn’t expected to see her there. Someone had unsaddled her, but didn’t return her to the livestock herd. Soon they would need to make camp. Most likely, the scouts had already looked for several spots where the hundreds from his army and followers could rest.

“I’ll boost you up on Jari, then I’ll climb on behind you,” Savine said as he took Avery in his arms.

“Thank you,” she said. Maybe the colder she was, the less willful and argumentative she would become. Of course, he wasn’t going to leave her freezing cold.

Savine hopped onto Jari’s back in a smooth motion and wrapped his arm tightly around Avery. His arm touched the soft skin of her wet stomach, and that warm, tingling sensation flowed between them.

Most likely, this warm sensation had something to do with the power that nestled deep in Avery. Power that she didn’t know that she possessed. Or it could be something else entirely. Something he was so afraid to admit that he wouldn’t even let himself dwell on it.

“Do you feel that warm tingle between us?” Avery asked. So, it wasn’t just him who noticed their connection. It was hard enough for him to be close to another person, fae or not. He did not want to acknowledge this spark of warmth.

“Yes,” Savine grunted. “I’m going to push some of my essence into you and warm you up.”

“You haven’t already?” Avery asked as she leaned back into his chest. “I’m already warmer. More cozy. Is this a fae thing?”

“What?” Savine asked. He really didn’t know what she meant.

“This warm sensation. Only you and Kyla have touched me, and both of you seem to have this effect on me,” Avery replied as she nestled deeper. She pressed her cheek against his chest, and the warmth between them continued to grow. He hadn’t even willed his essence into her to stop her from getting wet and cold, but he knew what she was talking about. The closeness, the intoxicating warmth, and the subtle rhythm between their bodies threatened to make him hard again. But it just felt... wrong at that moment. She wasn’t teasing him anymore. Avery was snuggling close to him for comfort.

He thought of every boring thing possible to keep his erection at bay.

“Kyla is an empath. She can sense and manipulate emotions. I know she has touched you to calm you or give you peace when she feels your stress or pain. I don’t have that ability. This warmth we’re both feeling is...” Savine paused. He wasn’t sure what to call it. He’d never experienced this connection with another fae. “It’s something I have never felt before. I think it may have to do with your magic. I can feel it calling to me, even if you haven’t yet realized you have magic.”

Avery didn’t speak at first. She seemed to be lost in the warmth that radiated through both of them. The buzz of conversation between other fae and the raindrops falling on the forest was all the sound Savine heard. Finally, she turned, and he looked down to see her staring up at him. Her arm stretched up, and she followed the outline of his swaying essence along his exposed neck.

“You know I still hate you. Even if you’re making me feel deliciously warm and you have this secret sweet side that you

want to hide from everyone. I still hate you, friend.”

Savine couldn't help but chuckle. His laugh came out softer and more tender than he meant. “Do I need to give you a bit of wine to find out if that is a truth or a lie?”

“Oh, you know it's true,” she replied, tracing the whorls of his essence to his collarbone. The touch made him shiver with pleasure.

“You lie so pretty, little flower,” Savine said.

That made Avery laugh to herself as she nuzzled into Savine. Her breath on his collarbone was the most intoxicating thing he'd ever experienced.

Savine smiled down at her and spurred Jari to move closer to the front of the army. The quicker pace seemed to relax Avery as she slid deeper into his embrace. He held her closer, tighter to his chest. Her long blonde hair wrapped around his side and tickled his arm, but he didn't bother moving it. Before long, she was asleep against his chest.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Avery

A very laid in the traveling tent next to Savine. He slept near enough for her to notice how relaxed his breathing was. The hard lines on his face softened in a way that looked peaceful. Not that she could ever consider Savine to be a peaceful person. She tried to put up a protest against sleeping in such a small space. There was no room for her own backpacking tent to create space between them. But after snuggling up to Savine while riding on Jari, then sleeping against his chest, her protests seemed to be unwarranted. Plus, he wasn't around when she went to bed. She pretended to be sleeping when he came in later than she did.

Sleep wasn't coming because she had a bad feeling about something. It was the same twitchy itchies that she'd told Morgan about, and she'd felt this way since she'd been placed in the tent. Something bad was going to happen. She could feel it.

Avery heard a distant moan and something that sounded like a roar. Now that she knew they were some sort of fae mating ritual, Avery was less concerned about the nightly barrage of noises that filled the camp. How in the hell did these people learn to live with their close neighbors and friends' very passionate and very noisy lovemaking? The fae, as a whole, needed to learn a little tact when it came to having sex. At the

very least, to give everyone a better night's sleep. Hell, even Savine was tired of hearing his people fuck like animals.

Lightning cracked across the sky. The faint light illuminated the tent, and Savine rolled closer to her. He was so close to her now. She squirmed and rolled to her side, resisting the urge to trace those faint marks across his skin again.

Loud screams filled the night, louder than they normally subjected her to while sleeping in the encampment. Savine shot out of bed. She lifted her head up and watched him move. He wasn't wearing anything and had his back turned to her. Damn, he had some fine assets of his own. He pulled up his leather pants and strapped on his armor.

"Sir!" someone yelled outside the tent. "We're under attack. The Latian loyalists are in the camp."

"How many?" Savine seemed to growl out as he struggled to get dressed in front of his warriors.

"A small group, approximately thirty. General Garnel has men in combat now."

She was reminded once again that she lived in a war camp. "Savine?" Avery called out. Her voice sounded smaller than she meant to make it sound.

Savine turned and looked at her. His calloused hand brushed her cheek, but his face was hard as steel, a warrior preparing to battle. "Stay hidden here. I'll leave guards to keep you safe. Just keep this dagger from now on, and do not leave this tent! I had a gift made for you, too. It's near the door," Savine said as he handed her the dagger that she'd used to kill the Hylax.

"Kersi, Rue, keep Avery safe, and do not let her leave this tent!" With that, Savine strapped his sword to his back and ran out into the dark night sky.

Thunder clapped again as Savine left Avery standing there with the two guards near her. Nerves rattled through her stomach, and she was going to be sick. Not this violence again. The fear inside her grew as the threat of bloodshed approached.

The two fae whispered amongst themselves, and Avery couldn't make out what they said. Whatever they planned, she wanted to know what was going on.

“What do we do? I can't just sit here!” Avery shouted. Both fae flinched and covered their ears.

Rue replied first, “We'll stay here. It is a minor attack, an attempt to disrupt our travels and take our supplies.”

“Can I help? I have some medical experience. Maybe I could help the wounded?”

Kersi looked her up and down before he spoke. “I believe Savine is correct in suggesting that you stay put. You would only put yourself and others at risk.”

Avery nodded. Of course, she would only put everyone at risk. She should just stay out of the way. But thinking about Savine out there, fighting even a small group of the enemy, made her feel queasy.

Rue smiled slightly at Avery before speaking. “This shouldn't take long. Just sit back and try to—”

Her words were cut short with a scream as an arrow shot through the top of the tent. Before anyone could react to the arrow, three more cut through the fabric. Avery shrieked and covered her head. Because, of course, covering her head would keep an arrow from piercing her. When she opened her eyes, she saw Kersi flat on his back with an arrow through the throat.

“No!” Rue shouted as she kneeled beside Kersi. “He's fading! The arrow was tipped with helmsbane. Iron arrows too. This isn't a typical attack.”

Avery watched Rue's eyes assess the situation. To Avery's horror, Kersi's wound turned black. His furry essence began writhing and pulsing from the wound spot. It shocked Avery as she watched the wound spread quickly, the frothing, black blood spouting out of him.

“What can we do to help him?” Avery cried out.

“There’s not much we can do. Try to get the iron arrow out. A fae can occasionally survive helmsbane, but if the iron is in his blood, we cannot do anything.”

With a choke and a shake, Kersi’s body became still. Two more arrows shot into the tent, one hitting Avery’s sleeping bag and another nearly hitting Rue.

Avery saw Rue grab the arrow nearest to her. “Not all the arrows are iron. They made this one of aspen. Typical of the loyalists to cut down the tree with the most developed communication network. You said you are a healer? This isn’t some skirmish like we suspected. We’re just as much of a target here, so let’s go help any injured.”

Looking at Kersi’s still body on the floor of the tent, any previous training would be worthless against whatever was out there attacking the camp. Dealing with a battle wound was a lot different from getting someone with a torn ACL safely to the ski lodge. “No, not a healer. I’m a ski patroller. I help injured people in the snow.”

“Good enough. We need to get out there and make sure the non-warriors are not under attack. The initial estimates from General Garnel must be way off if they have breached the council’s tents,” Rue said as she grabbed the sword from Kersi’s back. “Take this. And the dagger. Do you know how to fight? I saw you with—”

Avery interrupted, “No, I don’t. I’m not the fighting type. I’d do more harm than good with a sword. Maybe an axe?”

Rue shook her head, disappointment obvious on her pale face. “If you are going to survive here, you better become the fighting type, and fast. Looks like Savine knew you preferred an axe.”

Avery looked at the axe near the door of the tent. From the head to the handle, the axe was all metal.

“That axe is pure iron. Where would Savine find such a thing?” Rue asked.

Avery had no idea as she held tight to the dagger in her left hand and reached for the axe near the door with her right. It

was long and slender, double-sided, just like the Pulaski she used on the trail. Avery lifted the axe and felt its weight in her hands. It felt right, fitting even, but she still wasn't sure if she was capable of using it in a battle.

As Avery stepped outside the tent, she saw that a full moon illuminated the dark sky. and occasional lightning strikes burst above the mountainside. But what stole her breath were the arrows flying and a pack of enormous wolves barreling down on them from the surrounding woods.

There was nothing normal about the wolves racing toward the encampment. They were as large as ponies, with fangs the size of Avery's hand. She screamed as one looked at her with amber eyes and rushed toward the tent. Rue stepped in front of her, and she made quick work of the first wolf, grunting with effort as she pierced her sword into the wolf's side.

To her horror, Avery saw two more wolves move to attack. One wolf was on her in an instant. Claws tore through her clothes, and Avery knew this was going to be her end. Suddenly, the wolf on top of her went still, flopping on top of her. Avery gasped for air, but felt unharmed. Garnel's face looked down at Avery, blood gleaming on his sword. He lifted the wolf up off Avery like it was light as a puppy as he tossed the carcass to the ground.

"Get up! Quickly!" he shouted. Garnel reached his hands down to support Avery. She grabbed onto his hands, and he pulled her up.

She felt light as a feather as Garnel pulled her up to her feet.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"I think so. What are you doing here? I thought you were fighting farther away."

"The initial attack was just a distraction. We're overrun with ___"

Before Garnel finished his words, the whirr of arrows came whistling through the air. Avery covered her head again. Why did she keep doing that? Her hands would not keep an arrow from spearing through her.

Garnel's body slammed against Avery, and they both fell to the ground. It was like being hit by a small car.

Hot, red blood streamed down onto her as she lay trapped under Garnel.

"Garnel!" she shouted, but he didn't respond. Avery pulled herself out from under his body.

"Rue! Help me!" Avery shouted. Rue was beside her in an instant, covered in blood from the wolves she'd slayed.

"The general!" Rue yelled out as she helped Avery roll Garnel onto his back.

The enemy had shot him through his stomach with a black-coated arrow. Avery tried to stifle the panic in her chest, but she let out a desperate scream. The continued sounds of combat were all around her. If she was going to survive this, she had to calm down. She had to keep her panic at bay and help save Kyla's mate.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Avery

“C over me, Rue!” Avery said as she assessed Garnel’s injury.

Rue nodded and stood, ready to take on any attackers.

He’d risked his life to get that wolf off her, and he may be dead at this moment. She felt for a pulse and found it was already so shallow. His breathing sounded ragged, but he wasn’t dead yet. The wound looked terrible. Already, black ooze was spreading.

Avery needed medical supplies if she had a chance at saving Garnel. She stood and ran to the tent where her first aid kit sat in her backpack.

“The arrow isn’t iron, but the wound is grave,” Rue replied as Avery made it back to Garnel.

She took off her backpack and pulled out her small first aid kit. She grabbed the gauze and tried to staunch the bleeding by wrapping the gauze around the arrow. The black ooze on the arrow smelled of wet leaves and dirty water.

Garnel’s breathing became more shallow as the wound continued to bleed. “Don’t die on me!” Avery said.

His breathing stopped, and Avery couldn’t find any sort of pulse. The only thing she could do was give Garnel CPR and

hope that she could get him breathing again. As she breathed into Garnel's mouth, she kept her eyes closed tight, counting breaths and concentrating on Garnel's life. "Breathe! Just breathe!" she whispered as she administered chest compressions, avoiding the arrow in his gut. "Come back, Garnel. Don't leave us," Avery said.

As she spoke the words, a light began running down Avery's arms and into Garnel's chest. She gave him two more chest compressions as light streamed into his chest. She felt her skin tingle as power streamed through somewhere deep within her, somewhere primal and raw. Was this Garnel's essence saving him, or was she somehow doing this?

Garnel gasped for breath and tried to sit up. "Lay down, Garnel. You have been shot by an arrow. I just gave you CPR. Just keep breathing. Help will be here soon."

Garnel looked at her with pain-stricken eyes. He opened his mouth to speak, but only the wheezing of his breath came out. "Rest. I've applied gauze to the wound, and we'll get it out soon. It's coated in a sticky black substance, and I'm afraid to remove it on my own without causing you more damage." As she mentioned the black coating, Garnel's eyes widened with fear. "I'll stay with you. I'm here." Avery took his hand and held it. It was cold as ice, and Garnel continued to look at her with terror in his eyes.

"Avery, what did you just do?" Rue asked. Her face was dark with confusion and fear.

"I gave Garnel CPR. His essence must have responded or something because we lit up like a candle, and he came back to us. What a miracle!" Avery's body was filled with adrenaline as she contemplated the last few minutes.

"A miracle is right," Rue replied. "That was no essence. That was a Goddess-given miracle right there." She shook her head as others approached them.

The surrounding fighting had subsided at some point, but Avery hadn't noticed when it happened. She continued to hold Garnel's icy hand. Soon she felt an imposing presence, and she knew Savine was there. His appearance shocked her. His hair

was tangled and loose. Blood splatter dotted his leather armor and face. There wasn't a scratch on him that Avery could see, which sent a shock of relief through her. She'd been so preoccupied with saving herself and Garnel that she hadn't thought about Savine's safety since he left the tent. But seeing him safe and whole made her want to run to him and hug him. She resisted, knowing he'd hate that sort of affection.

"Avery, is Garnel alive?" Savine asked. The color on his face faded to ash. Even his essence faded into nothing.

"Yes. He's critically wounded, though," Avery replied.

"Garnel, an arrow laced with helmsbane, hit you. It is still in your abdomen," Rue said to Garnel. Garnel's red hair was matted with sweat. At Rue's words, Garnel looked resolute at his fate.

Savine turned to Avery. He looked like Rue had given Garnel a death sentence. "Helmsbane is deadly to the fae. An arrow coated in helmsbane can kill a fae in minutes. It is made from the fermented and rotting roots of a rare plant. There isn't an antidote. What have you done to keep him alive?"

Avery was taken aback by Savine's words. "I used gauze to stop the bleeding. His pulse stopped, and I began CPR. While I was doing chest compressions, a light came out of my arms and into his chest. He began breathing again."

Savine's eyes widened at this. "Avery, he should be dead. You have healed him. With magic. With *your* magic."

"That's not possible. I don't have magic. It must have been the CPR, or his own essence that circled through us."

Savine took her chin in his hands. He looked into her eyes. "It was you, Avery. You saved him." A chill ran down Avery's spine. She did not know how she'd done it.

"He's not safe yet though, but it seems you've given him time. We need to remove the arrow and cut the flesh that's been exposed to the helmsbane. Then we must travel with all haste to Bayberry. A woman among them is renowned for her healing gifts."

“Okay, how do you plan to remove the arrow? Where are the other healers here?” Avery asked, fearing what his answer would be. It seemed wrong to be doing this without an ER doctor.

“They’re helping other injuries. The attack—it was worse than we anticipated. I’m going to pull it from his gut. I want you to use your dagger to cut back the rotten flesh and use some of your human tools to clean the wound.”

“Let me just clean the knife first.”

Avery wiped the blade with an alcohol wipe and removed the gauze. The blood was black and oozing at the wound. Avery needed a lot more than alcohol wipes and gauze to help Garnel.

As Savine pulled the arrow from Garnel’s body, Garnel gasped in agony. His eyes rolled back in his head, and Avery saw the gaping wound in his abdomen. The flesh around the wound was black and looked like it was already rotting. Avery worked quickly to cut the rotting skin off, but she worried what his organs were like with this type of poison in his body. She covered the wound with her remaining gauze and taped the gauze to his body.

While she worked, she heard a frantic voice approaching the tents. “Where is Garnel? Have you seen Garnel?” It was Kyla. Avery had not thought of the panic that Kyla would be feeling.

Savine called to his sister through the chaos of the post-battle sounds. “Kyla! We are here. Garnel is here.” Kyla moved with such light, quick steps that she was beside Garnel in no time.

“My soul, my Garnel.” Kyla’s voice was etched in concern and pain. She kissed Garnel’s sweaty brow. He breathed raggedly, and didn’t respond to Kyla’s kiss. As Kyla looked at the arrow on the ground, her eyes widened. “How is he still with me?” Kyla asked.

Savine pointed at Avery. “It was Avery. She used magic to bring him back.”

Kyla stepped around Garnel and Savine to where Avery crouched. She wrapped her arms around Avery and leaned her head against Avery's forehead. "I am forever in your debt. You saved my soulmate from certain death."

"You don't have to say that. I don't even know how I conjured the magic. I was performing chest compressions when it happened." She couldn't take credit for something that she hadn't consciously done. If she did somehow draw magic out of herself, it was not purposeful.

"It doesn't matter the circumstances. I owe all my happiness to you," Kyla said, with tears in her eyes.

Savine brought the two women back to the task at hand when he said, "He's alive for now, Kyla. The poison from the helmsbane still courses through his body. We must get him and the other injured Latians to Bayberry, where they can receive help from Hyacinth."

Savine called out for some warriors that Avery didn't recognize and formulated a plan for who would transport the injured fae to Bayberry. Meanwhile, Avery looked at her surroundings and took in the carnage all around her.

Scattered among the dead and injured Latians were also dead wolves and the bodies of some sort of creature. Their gaunt bodies were covered in spiny skin. They had long, insect-like noses and cruel faces. One of the injured creatures cried out in a long, wailing sound. Avery couldn't help but walk closer to the creature. Maybe she could give it peace somehow as it lay mortally wounded. As she approached, the insect creature locked eyes on her and began screaming hysterically. The sounds were overwhelming and frightening, but still she continued to move closer.

As she approached, she caught sight of something moving swiftly beside her. In the blink of an eye, Savine was past her, sword out, before he sliced into the screaming creature, killing it instantly. Blood splattered over Savine's already filthy armor.

"Why did you do that?" Avery asked, shocked by the violence in Savine's stern face. His body was rigid. So

predatory that it frightened her to see him like that.

“That thing has murdered my people. It doesn’t deserve to live,” Savine snarled before he turned from her and stalked away.

Avery ran to catch up, looking at the wounded who were being carried to the rebel leader.

“What happened after you left the tent?” Avery asked.

“This was no typical battle between the loyalists and rebels. Yes, there were loyalists attacking us. But there were others who helped in the attack. The wolveren and the Grimils were working together. We are still getting reports on how many they killed and injured. It’s not unusual for the wolveren to attempt an attack on us as we travel to Bayberry. Usually under the cover of darkness to steal our elk. What is not normal is the three of them working together. The King of Latiah must be forming some new allies. Especially strange are the Grimils this far north.”

“What are they? The Grimil?”

“A dark fae. They live far south of here in the rugged mountains of Goldoth. Sometimes their bands will migrate into Nepheli territory, but not Latiah.”

“If they are typically not here, what are they doing here now?” Avery asked, concerned about the answer she would get. A sick feeling in the pit of her stomach roiled to think these creatures could be seeking her out.

“That’s a good question. Perhaps Raikin will have the answers soon. He is, um, interviewing one of them for me. As for the wolveren, they live in the mountains around here. They do not answer to the King and have been a thorn in our side for centuries. They are shapeshifters, looking no different from I do in their fae form, but often attack in their wolf form where they can use their claws and teeth. Until now, they have refused to ally with the loyalists or the rebels.”

“But if they live in this territory, why don’t they acknowledge the King, or you, as their leader?” Avery was puzzled.

“The fae are splintered into many groups, with fluid borders and fluid alliances. This makes ruling over other factions challenging. I have known the king to hunt the wolverines like wild animals, especially when they disrupt his peace. They have never followed a Latian King, and I would not have thought that they would ally with Jasper. We have worked for years to form an alliance with them, but they refused to take sides. It seems that things have changed.”

Avery shook her head as Savine spoke. She thought all this violence and bloodshed seemed unwarranted. “You fae are so brutal. It’s still shocking to me, even after a couple of weeks here.”

“For now, violence is a way of life here. Someday, I pray to Althea that this changes. But for now, it is our reality. So yes, I will continue to cut our enemies down. Soon you will learn to do the same.”

Savine walked away from her, leaving her chilled by his harsh words. Avery curled her arms around herself and sat down on the hard ground. All around her, people cleaned up from the attack, but she couldn’t make herself move. Her body shook as the adrenaline died down from her system, leaving her empty and cold.

Avery trailed behind Savine toward the group of fae gathered near his arrow-punctured tent. She didn’t know how she would ever fall back to sleep after this night. Plus, she could use a shower, if only a shower was a thing here.

“What now?” Avery asked Savine once he noticed she was near him. Everyone was asking him questions and looking toward him for what to do next. She really should have just looked for Rue and asked for some clothes.

“We’re preparing to move out as soon as possible. We’re a day and a half of hard riding away from Bayberry. Garnel and the other injured can’t travel that fast, but we will try to move as quickly as possible. Jay and Gaelyn have agreed to stay behind and move most of our people at a normal pace. But I want you with me. Not only because I don’t want you out of

my sight, but also because I think you can help us keep the injured alive.”

At that moment, Raikin arrived. He had blood on his snow-white hands. The contrast was jarring. “Raikin, how did the discussion with our captive go?”

“Well, when I run out of diplomatic approaches, I can get the information I need very quickly.” Raikin looked Avery in the eyes with his bright green eyes. They seemed to glow as he spoke. The grin on his face gave Avery the goosebumps. Whatever he’d done to the Grimil, he seemed to enjoy doing it.

“What did you learn?” Savine asked. His brow furrowed as he waited for Raikin’s answer.

“The entire realm knows about Avery. The Grimils and the wolveren were being paid handsomely to deliver her alive to Jasper,” Raikin replied.

“They want her alive? What was the purpose of keeping her alive?” Savine looked surprised at this response. Avery knew he suspected she was being hunted.

“The Grimil did not seem to know all the details, despite my... thorough prodding. He said that Jasper wanted to see how fragile humans are.” Raikin raised one of his white eyebrows as he looked Avery up and down with delight. There was something about this fae that made Avery very uncomfortable.

“Jasper will never get his hands on Avery. If he tries, I will tear down every building in Orofine,” Savine snarled. His blue eyes blazed with rage, and Avery felt strangely relieved that she had this powerful fae vowing to protect her. What wouldn’t he do for her?

“We need to travel with haste to Bayberry. Get those joining us ready to travel immediately,” Savine said to Raikin and a group of fae warriors.

“Yes, Lord. Garnel was already being loaded into a wagon with Kyla’s close care. There are seven other injured that may

benefit from Avery's care," Raikin said through shining green eyes as he looked from Savine down to Avery.

"That was my thought as well. If she can get the others as stable as she did for Garnel, we will travel more quickly. Obviously, no one else survived the helmsbane-laced arrows, but we can get better treatment in Bayberry."

How was she expected to save all these people? She didn't know how she'd done it for Garnel! Before she could protest, Savine spoke to her. His hands wrapped around her arms in a way that could almost be mistaken as caring. "You look exhausted. Wash up and get ready to ride."

This statement did not reassure Avery in the least.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Avery

Attempting to heal the other injured fae hadn't been as successful as everyone had hoped. Avery had somehow drawn a tiny glowing light out for one person, an elderly fae woman who had been bitten on the leg by a wolverine. The light that Avery produced gave the woman much needed pain relief, but didn't seem to heal her. She couldn't recreate the healing light for anyone else, despite her strained attempts, leaving Avery drained as Savine hauled her onto Jari's back.

Avery's shoulders tensed as she thought back to the attack. Her jaw clenched, and she shuddered.

Savine responded by giving her a gentle caress with his hand on her side. It was the type of motion meant to comfort. He leaned forward and whispered, "You should be proud of the courage you showed those folk through your own exhaustion."

His breath was warm on her ear and neck as he continued to rub her side. She squeezed his arm in gratitude.

Savine was going from arrogant and unkind to protective and caring way too quickly. Avery felt the mental whiplash from his change in personality, and she needed time and space away from him to process her own feelings toward his change in attitude. Obviously, that wouldn't happen until she was no longer sharing the back of an elk with him.

They rode swiftly and silently through the night, not speaking often to keep their presence hidden. The woods were dark, and the sky was filled with clouds after the storm that had struck during the attack. Savine seemed to be quietly conversing with the trees as they rode. Or maybe he was praying to his Goddess? Whatever it was, a steady stream of incomprehensible words rolled across his lips, the sound catching in her ear. It wasn't as annoying as she would have suspected. In fact, it was soothing to hear his melodic voice in her ear.

Avery heard the approaching footfall of an elk getting out of line. As she looked over her shoulder, she could see Raikin ride up beside them. Raikin and Savine discussed the attack in low voices, and although Avery was too exhausted to acknowledge Raikin's presence, she could hear bits and pieces of what he said. Raikin seemed to give an update on the injured who traveled with them.

"Avery, did you hear me?" Raikin asked. She hadn't noticed that Raikin was addressing her. She was too far gone, too drained at this point in the night.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I wasn't paying attention," Avery admitted.

"I was asking how you summoned the light that saved Garnel," Raikin asked.

"I-I can't answer that. I don't know how I did it. If I could do it again, I'd do all I can to help the other injured fae. Hopefully, we don't have another attack, so I can have time to practice when I'm not this tired."

"Little mouse, we can guarantee another attack before we settle in the winter encampment. That is a typical occurrence in the best of years in this ongoing civil war. The only question is, who will attack next? I suggest you learn to protect yourself and figure out how to call your magic. You never know when you won't have someone there to do the protecting for you," Raikin said, his words cutting like a knife blade.

Savine growled, and Avery felt his body tense between hers. "Watch what you say, Raikin. Get back in line."

Raikin snarled something intangible as he let Savine and Avery pass.

Avery's voice shook. "I think Raikin is right. I will be hunted down and stolen. There's nothing you can do to stop it. Eventually, I will be taken."

"I promise you, I won't let anyone take you from me," Savine said as he drew her close to him.

"Something's changed between us," Avery said, her voice hardly a whisper. "What's made you grow closer to me? It seems like you don't let anybody in. So why choose me?" It had been something that had been bothering her since the night he brought her down by the river.

He moved his hand down to her thigh and rested it there. Avery also shifted her hand on top of his, lacing her fingers through his. Warmth and comfort, mingled with need and want, pulsed through her as she looked at their fingers interlaced together. She realized something in that moment. Something that made her stomach flutter and filled her with dread at the same time. The only time she felt safe in Aeritis was when she was near Savine. His protective presence was the only thing that kept her from succumbing to the grief and fear that filled her.

Savine was quiet for so long that Avery wondered if he heard her. "You don't deserve this. You were stolen from your home to a dangerous land, and yet you are willing to do what it takes to survive. Despite what you may think, you continue to amaze me with your resilience and your adaptability." He paused and stroked her hand as he cleared his throat. "That and your magic intoxicates me. I know we don't know each other well yet, but your power calls to me."

Avery turned her head and looked into his blue eyes. His essence rippled under his skin. His face looked stern, yet how he held her felt so gentle, so safe. "How do you know I have so much power in me?"

"I know because I can feel it pulsing under your skin. I can smell it when you are mad, and I can feel it in my own essence when I touch you. Do you see how my essence shifts as I

touch you? That is my power speaking to yours.” The intensity of his stare made Avery blush. She couldn’t help it. This feeling between them was obvious as she tore her eyes from his and looked at his essence swirling under her touch. It was strange how tangible of a reaction her touch had on him.

“*If* I have magic, how do I learn to use it?” she asked. She’d made up excuses for the others, but she felt something awaken deep within her. Something warm and pulsing, similar to what she felt when she and Savine touched. When she tried to call it forth for the other injured fae, it seemed resistant to her, like something that was beyond her control. But she still felt it, deep inside her like a sleeping beast ready to be awakened.

“Once we arrive in Bayberry, you will need to train your magic. I already arranged for you to learn to defend yourself with Kyla. But we’ll need to find someone else until she’s comfortable leaving Garnel’s side. The healer, Hyacinth, has strong family ties all the way back to the ancient witches. If anyone can train your magic, it will be her. I’d planned to talk with her once we arrived in Bayberry.”

Avery let out a sigh. “I don’t really have a choice if I am to survive here. After the attack, I realized I can’t keep hiding like the mouse everyone claims I am. Could Rue train me? After Kyla manipulated my emotions... I wanted to help Garnel. I don’t want to see her lose her soulmate, but I’d feel more comfortable with Rue.”

“I don’t see you as weak. A mouse has to do all it can to survive, and sometimes that involves learning that even mice have teeth that can break skin. As for my sister... I understand how you feel. Rue proved herself worthy of the task tonight, but she is untested in a real battle. I can help train you when I’m free, which isn’t often. When I’m not, Rue can step in.”

Avery yawned. “Sounds like a plan,” she said flatly.

“Rest. I can feel the exhaustion and tension throughout your body.”

“I am tired. You won’t let me fall off Jari, will you?” Avery asked.

“I will never let harm come to you. Ever,” Savine said. Her body relaxed and leaned into his powerful body, resting her head on his shoulder. She looked at the small smile on his face as she drifted to sleep.

Safe. She was safe.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Avery

Avery woke up in Savine's arms as he carried her toward a small traveling tent. The early dawn light filtered through the woods, landing on the light brown canvas tent. It looked the same as the one where Kersi was killed by the poisoned iron arrow, but this had to be a different tent. It was intact and inviting. In the small space, Savine's sleeping mat and furs were draped on one side while Avery's sleeping pad and sleeping bag were assembled next to his.

"Are we in Bayberry?" Avery asked as she stretched like a cat after a nap.

"No, my flower. We're less than a day's ride, but many of the injured needed a proper rest. You slept through us setting up camp."

"Oh. Damn, I must have been more tired than I thought." Now that she realized it, she was refreshed and energized. The pounding in the back of her head was gone, and she was ready to face another day of potential death in Aeritis. "I'm feeling a lot better now. Do you think I could go check on the injured folk? I can help. Even if it's not magically, I have some ibuprofen. It's not much, but it might help them."

"I think they would appreciate your care, whatever you offer them," Savine said. He settled Avery down on her sleeping pad before he crashed to the ground, closing his eyes.

“Savine! You look exhausted. I’ll get out of your way. Do you know where Garnel and Kyla are?”

“I am so tired. I don’t think I could have ridden much longer. Garnel and Kyla are in the tent next to us. The other injured fae are to their right, starting with the next tent and going about five tents down. Let me know if you can heal any of the others,” Savine said as he slowly sat up. He turned his back to her and began unstrapping his leather armor. Avery stared at his muscles as they rippled under his exposed flesh.

What would it feel like to trace her hands down his tight muscles and explore his carved body? Damn it. She needed to keep a rein on these thoughts until she’d had time to process her feelings for him. It seemed unfair to both of them for her to act before she thought about what she wanted from him. Things were already complicated with Savine without adding a physical relationship.

“You can watch me, Avery. I won’t stop you,” Savine said.

“How did you know I was looking at you?” Avery asked.

“There is nothing subtle about you, little flower. Your quickening breathing and the slight change in your scent give you away without me having to look and see you ogling my body.”

“Whatever. I’m not checking out your body. I was just thinking,” Avery argued as she attempted to dig her first aid kit and water bottle out of her backpack.

Savine’s eyes were on her as she dug through her bag. She made every attempt to not look up at that man, and his now shirtless chest.

“Are other humans better at lying than you, little flower? I thought humans’ ability to lie would make it more challenging for us to detect the truth, but I know exactly where your thoughts are headed.”

“My thoughts are headed nowhere, old man! Get some sleep. Your age is showing,” Avery said as she turned to walk out of the tent. Okay, that was the lamest deflection possible.

Avery walked to the tent next to theirs. It was eerily silent. Not at all filled with the typical sounds coming from Kyla and Garnel's tent.

"Kyla, Garnel? It's Avery. Can I come in?" she asked at the outside of the tent door.

"Come in, Avery!" Kyla called in her lyrical voice. Despite the growing daylight outside, the tent was shrouded from light. Avery studied Kyla's gaunt expression. All the light and beauty she usually radiated had vanished. Garnel lay on the ground under a pile of furs and blankets.

"How is he?" Avery asked as she hugged Kyla in greeting. Unlike her brother, Kyla seemed to appreciate a friendly hug. It was hard to see her so distressed, even if Avery resented Kyla's emotional manipulation.

"A fever has set in. He's burning up, but cries out if I take the blankets and furs off. Fevers are uncommon in the fae. If a fae has a fever, it means they are near the end of their life." Kyla let out a mournful sigh as she tightened her mouth. Her chin quivered slightly, and her eyes shone wet and sad. Avery could see the tension in Kyla's jaw as she looked at her injured mate. "Usually, I can feel all his emotions call to me stronger than anyone else's. But his soul is so faint, it's like a fading light in our bond. All I can feel is the pain he is in. I know everyone needs rest, but I am afraid he does not have long."

"Can I try to help?" Avery asked. If anything, she could give him some medicine for the fever. Would human medicine work on the fae? She hoped it would.

"I'll try using magic, and if that doesn't work, I'll give Garnel some of my human medicine. That is, if you would like me to give him some of my medicine. I'll be honest. I don't know what it'll do to him."

Kyla gave Avery a sad smile that didn't reach her dusty blue eyes. "I trust you, Avery."

Avery approached Garnel and looked down at the sallow skin that showed above the furs and blankets. "How's his

wound looking? Have you given him any salves like you used on me?”

“I haven’t. Hardly anyone survives a helmsbane-laced weapon. The poison infects the blood system through the wound too quickly, and folk die before they get proper care. For him to be fighting, it’s a miracle. But I don’t think I have anything that can help him. Hyacinth must be able to heal him. If not, I fear he will succumb to his injuries.”

Avery nodded in understanding. Kyla was the best healer in Savine’s army, according to Savine, and she would risk her own life to save her mate. If she was not sure what to do, then that must mean Garnel was beyond hope.

“Can I check his wound?” Avery asked.

“Please do,” Kyla said.

Avery pulled back the covers. Her stomach roiled at the scent and sight of Garnel’s putrid wound. The black ooze continued to come out from under the gauze that Avery had attached. “Do you know how I can call my magic up to heal him?”

“I’m sorry. I know little about the mechanics of witch’s magic. Some were rumored to be healers, and others had more power than even our most powerful fae. But I don’t know enough to help you,” Kyla sighed as she spoke. Her body swayed back and forth like the slightest breeze would knock her down.

“Okay. Why don’t you get some rest? I’ll see what I can do and make sure he’s comfortable before I leave you two alone.”

“That sounds good. Thank you, Avery. I’m thankful for you and for your friendship. Your kindness is uncommon here, and I don’t know how I could face this day without you.”

Avery smiled and leaned down to Kyla, who was still sitting on her mat. She hugged her closely. Their touch didn’t stir any of the strange warmth that happened when she and Savine touched, but she felt that regular stirring in her heart. The stirring in her heart was that of a friend who reached out to another friend in need of care and love.

“You patched me up, and explained this crazy world. I’m honored for you to call me a friend,” Avery said.

“Do you mean it? I know I never should have manipulated your emotions when you were vulnerable. Do you forgive me?” Kyla asked, that sadness in her eyes so near the surface.

“Of course I do. You have this uncanny way of not taking any shit from Savine, yet being the nicest person I’ve ever met. That takes some skill, and I need to learn from you!” Avery said, trying to lighten Kyla’s mood. After all, whether Kyla would want it or not, there was nobody who could change her own emotions. She was stuck feeling whatever agony she was experiencing.

She turned to Garnel and placed her hands on his chest. She didn’t think it would be a wise idea to give him CPR when he had a steady pulse, but perhaps she could reenact what made her magic appear.

Avery tried to think magical thoughts, which made her feel self-conscious. What were magical thoughts, anyway? Did she need to say some sort of spell to get her magic up from inside her? “Take away this fever,” Avery whispered. No, that felt ridiculous. Avery cleared her throat and tried pressing on Garnel’s chest again.

Nothing.

She tried speaking some random words and pressing on Garnel’s chest.

Nope. She wasn’t filled with some sort of magical healing abilities. The two times that light had conjured up were not from her. Maybe it really was those two particular fae’s essence that saved them after all?

As she pressed one last time on Garnel’s chest, Garnel stirred. He opened his hazel eyes at her and stared blankly up at Avery.

“Hi, Garnel. I was trying to work my magic on you, but it seems I’m defective. I can’t get it to call to me like I hoped. But, I have some human medicine. It’s a pain and fever reducer. Would you like to try it?”

Garnel nodded his head slightly, signaling that he wanted the medication. Some of his dark red hair fell across his face, sticking in place. Avery tucked it back behind his peaked ears.

She continued talking calmly to keep Garnel from crying out or waking Kyla. “Kyla is sleeping next to you. We’re going to get you to Bayberry as quickly as possible, but everyone needed rest before they started dropping off their elk.”

Avery took out two ibuprofen from her first aid kit. “Apparently, fae only get fevers when you’re mortally wounded, and the folk don’t treat them. Us weak humans can get a fever from the most mundane things, like the common cold or flu. This medicine also helps with pain. Drink the pills down with some water.”

Garnel nodded, not speaking. Was he unable to speak, or just conserving his energy? She would not question him now. She brought the pills to Garnel’s lips before pouring a sip of water into his mouth. “Now swallow these down. And pray to that Goddess of yours that this doesn’t make you worse. I’m pretty sure the FDA hasn’t approved this medicine for interspecies use.”

Garnel gave her a puzzled look before he closed his eyes again. Avery’s mom was a nurse and had some of the best bedside manners that she’d ever seen. She always cheered her up when she felt sick and cared for her in a way that didn’t suffocate her. Meanwhile, Avery was failing at her bedside manners. Why the hell did she mention the FDA to Garnel?

Avery stood and grabbed her first aid kit and water bottle. The next injured fae would get professional and calm Avery, not someone talking nonsense into their pointed ears.

She quietly left Kyla and Garnel to rest, hoping beyond hope that the medicine she gave Garnel would help him and not hurt him worse than he already was.

The next tent she visited was a young fae warrior who had a severed leg. That was a lot to take in, and she, once again, couldn’t draw her magic out. The man was in obvious agony. Another man sat next to him, giving him sips of pain-relieving

tea. Ibuprofen wouldn't be helping this man deal with the pain he was experiencing any better than an herbal tea. But she gave him two pills, anyway. At this rate, she'd be out of pain relievers in no time.

She had somehow managed to make the other man laugh, washing away the fear in his eyes as he nursed his companion. That alone made a difference to him as he struggled to care for the wounded fae.

She went to two other tents before she found the older woman who she somehow had conjured some faint magic into. The fae must be ancient. Her wrinkles had wrinkles. Knowing that Savine was over one-hundred and fifty years old made Avery realize it must take a very long time for one of the fae to look this old.

The older woman didn't seem to be in terrible pain and, to Avery's surprise, she saw Rue sleeping on a mat near her. "Ah, girl. You came back to check on me."

"Yes, ma'am. How are you feeling?" Avery asked.

"Your magic has helped this blasted wound. Damn those wolvens to the Abyss! Their bites hurt and are prone to slow healing. That's how I've ended up with this troop of invalids. I'm Mira, by the way."

"Nice to meet you, Mira. I'm Avery." Avery stuck out her hand to shake Mira's, but Mira didn't reciprocate. She remembered how Savine had done the same thing when she tried to shake his hand. Maybe handshaking was another one of those human things?

Avery pointed toward Rue, sleeping on the floor mat. "Is Rue caring for you?"

"Yes, child. She is my great-granddaughter. She's just come of age, and we are proud to see her serving our rightful leader of Latiah. She told me what she saw you do for our general. I think I can release the rest of my essence to Althea now. I've seen a witch in the flesh and even received your healing."

"What do you mean?" Avery asked.

“I am nearly a thousand years old. Rumors of human witches finding their way into our land have happened many times, but I’ve never witnessed their presence. You being here, healing me. It’s the stuff of legends. Have you learned how to draw that magic out for anyone else?”

The woman’s eyes were sharp and clear, despite her ancient age. She was quick-witted and engaging, and Avery had to catch herself as she realized she was speaking to someone much older than her country—older than a lot of modern human history.

“We don’t have magic on Earth. I didn’t even know I had magical capabilities until last night. And no, I haven’t been able to pull it forward since I helped you. Do you know anything about human magic?”

“It must have been The Cleaving that caused your realm to be void of magic.”

“The what? The Cleaving?” Avery asked. There was no hiding the curiosity on her face. Did this woman have more answers to how she ended up here? Everyone had been so vague.

“At The Cleaving, the witches who separated our worlds into two must have removed magic from the humans. I wonder what a world void of magic must be like?”

“I’ve realized that we have our own substitute for magic in our own way. We have technology. It’s given us things that I think you can only dream of. Flying vessels that transport hundreds of people, plenty of food instantly available within one building, and medical advances that put magical healing to shame, or at least my magical healing.”

“I’d like to see that, I think. What wonder,” Mira muttered, almost more to herself than anything.

“I can show you a glimpse of my world on my phone. I’ll do that once we’re in Bayberry,” Avery said. She liked the idea of adding wonder into the life of someone who had lived such a long existence. “You mentioned The Cleaving? What was that?”

“Savine has not shared your heritage with you? Shame on him!”

Savine would definitely get a reprimand from this precocious old woman the next time he saw her. Avery hoped she would be there to see it, too. Nothing was better than seeing his arrogance cut down by someone else, especially since his council members were the only ones who dared to question him in any meaningful way.

“What am I missing here?” Avery asked, trying to bring her mind back to the conversation.

“Legend tells it that witches grew more powerful than even the most powerful fae. Many humans were enslaved by the fae or worked as their servants. But, as witches gained power, they fought to keep their people from being enslaved. Finally, a great war broke out throughout the land. There was no end to the war between the fae and witches—until a powerful group of witches came together. Their leader, a former slave, contained more magic than the realm had ever seen. She unleashed her magic on Aeritis itself, ripping the world into two realms. The realm of the fae and the realm of the humans. Nearly all humans disappeared at that moment.”

Avery thought that in some bizarre way, this made sense. Perhaps she was a descendant of these powerful witches, and had somehow been pulled through a portal to Aeritis. “But if the witches went with humans, then why don’t we have magic on Earth? Why don’t we know more about the portals?”

“Your guess is as good as mine. The legend states that the witches came together, offering a great sacrifice to cast their magic that separated the worlds. Perhaps the sacrifice was their magic itself? As for the portals, I have not heard of a fae passing through one. Or at least returning if they did pass through one. But, I have heard whispers of humans arriving in Aeritis. Perhaps it’s not as uncommon as you may think. Do humans ever disappear in your realm?” The old woman leaned back in her bed. Her intelligent eyes sparkled, but her face looked gaunt, like she needed to get some sleep.

“It’s not common, but yeah. People become fascinated by disappearances. There are even shows and podcasts made about missing people. Who knows? Maybe I’ll become the story of a true-crime podcast someday.”

“I only caught part of what you said, but that may give you the explanation about the portals. Did you try to return to your realm?” Mira leaned back, further onto her pillow. She closed her eyes as she spoke.

Avery’s eyes stung at the memory of her collapsing on the crystals, screaming as her heart cracked into pieces when she realized she would never return to Earth. Her voice dropped as she spoke. “Yes. I couldn’t make the portal open.”

“That must have been very difficult for you, child. To be thrust into a different world. I would like to hear more about your world in Bayberry.”

“I’ll visit you as soon as we get settled, Mira. Thank you for sharing what you know about the witches.” Avery stood and walked out of the tent, leaving Mira to sleep.

Before she returned to her tent, Avery stopped by Kyla and Garnel’s tent. They were both sleeping, and Avery didn’t want to wake them. The lines of distress had faded from Garnel’s face, and Kyla looked almost peaceful. Avery checked Garnel for a fever. She pressed the back of her hand to his forehead and knew that the Ibuprofen was working. His skin was neither too hot nor too cold.

A sense of relief thrummed through Avery’s body, and she felt a small twitch deep inside her. She couldn’t help but smile. Maybe she had magic. Most likely she didn’t, but technology was always going to be more powerful, anyway.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Savine

Although he was asleep, Savine never gave up the need to be alert to his surroundings. Years of war could do that to a person. Years of fearing punishment for minor mistakes could also make a person stay alert to their surroundings.

Avery's undisciplined footsteps clopped along before she made it to the tent door. She walked like a person who had never known danger, never known a reason to tread lightly because her life may depend on it. It gave him an uneasy feeling. Jealousy, most likely. To have lived her life free of danger and caution seemed so foreign to him. It might be the most foreign thing about her.

When she entered the tent, Savine lifted his head. She had a wide smile on her face that made him think she was actually happy. Genuine happiness was something he only witnessed once from her: when he arranged the cheeseburgers for supper. Now, the look she gave him made his heart ache, and his body longed to pull her close to him. That smile wasn't for him. That smile was for herself. He didn't think she'd realized that he was looking at her yet.

"Sorry I woke you up. I was going to get a bit more rest before we got back on the road," Avery said. Her radiant face changed to a look of concern as she spoke.

“It’s okay. Fae hearing, you know. I couldn’t help but wake to your stomping feet. You know how to make a lot of noise for someone so small.”

“Pshh,” Avery replied. “Sorry to disturb your beauty sleep, old man. I’ll keep my stomping to a minimum from now on.” She took off those intricately made boots of hers and slid into her sleeping bag. Rolling onto her side, Avery looked up at him with a mischievous smile. A bit of her blonde hair slid in front of her face. Savine had to resist the urge to take that piece of hair in his hand and twirl it between his fingers. He wondered if it would feel like spun silk.

“By the look on your face, I take it that things went well this morning?” He leaned back, tucking his hands under his pillow.

“It did go well! I talked with Mira. Watch out next time you see her. I think she was a little disappointed to hear how little of Aeritis’ history you’ve shared with me. By the way, I know all about The Cleaving now. I wasn’t able to call my magic up, but I gave Garnel some human medicine, and it worked better for him than it works for humans! Once I was sure that I wouldn’t accidentally poison anyone, I gave some to the warrior who had lost his leg, and it significantly reduced his pain. It’s funny, because this medicine isn’t *that* strong for humans. I’m glad I brought them relief, even if I didn’t use my alleged magical skills.”

“I’m happy you brought them some relief, although I wonder why you would choose my closest friend to potentially poison? Seems like Kyla would never go along with something like that.”

“It wasn’t like I was trying to hurt him. He was burning up with a fever, and Kyla thought it was worth the risk. She said she felt his soul fading and that his emotions were nearly gone. Is that a thing?”

Savine paused as he thought about this. He had no reference point for what a soulmate bond felt like. If he encountered his soulmate, he’d probably reject the signs and keep up his walls.

“I think the soulmate bond is different with each mate, but knowing Kyla and her abilities to feel emotions in others, it

stands to reason that their bond would be a particularly emotional one.”

Avery furrowed her brow as she looked at him, still resting so near him he smelled the mint on her breath.

“You’ve never asked them about their bond? But you’re so close to both of them.”

Savine hesitated for a moment, and he knew she realized that she left the small-talk territory.

“Sorry if I’m prying. I never thought of myself as a nosy person, but living in a world where I know nobody and nothing has brought out my curiosity. We don’t have anything as deep or significant as a soulmate on Earth.”

“No, it’s not that. It’s fine that you asked. If anyone else had questioned me about this, I may have told them to mind their own business.” Savine sighed. He’d kept so much inside for so long. All the pressure felt like it was bottled up to the breaking point. “But you’re right. You don’t know the components of this world, of my world. And we should change that. *I* should change that. I want you to know more about my world and me, if you are willing.”

Avery nodded, but didn’t reply. She seemed to internalize what he said to her. Sharing personal information with her was the scariest thing he could do, and he didn’t know where this need to share the pains of his past with Avery came from. He wasn’t the kind of man who made himself vulnerable to just anyone. Abyss, he hadn’t even opened up to Kyla and Garnel about how their mating bond had nearly broken him all those years ago.

He hesitated. The hurt of those old wounds surfaced. He’d been through Abyss and back, only to find out his best friend was mated to his sister. Goddess help him. He would be devastated if Avery disapproved of him, or worse, thought him a monster after he shared his darkest parts with her.

“I’ve always been close to Garnel. He’s been like a brother to me all my life. Our families were so close that we were raised together since I was born, and he was two. When Kyla

was born, I'd just reached adulthood." Savine smiled as he thought about his baby sister. The infant who came into his life when he needed something to live for, something to distract him from his own precarious situation.

"Kyla was born into a challenging world. My father... He's not a good man. He finds pleasure in hurting people, especially those who threaten him. I went through a lot of pain as a child, but it became worse as I developed particular skill sets that he saw as a threat. I didn't want Kyla to experience the same thing, so I sheltered her from him as best as I could. Garnel helped, and we managed to give her a somewhat normal childhood."

Avery reached her hand over and placed it on his arm. The fur blanket between them wasn't enough space to keep Savine from feeling that warm radiance that flowed from her touch. Fuck, he could be buried in this feeling that her touch gave him. Let it consume him, and he'd still be begging for more.

She didn't speak, but her soft brown eyes told him she listened to every word he said. It felt good to share his past with her. Cleansing, like slipping under warm water.

"When I was in my nineties, I made a stupid mistake for a woman I loved. I don't want to get into the details, but Rylo, the new king of Nephel, took me captive. When the Latian king heard of my capture, he suggested Rylo punish me for my mistake. He even offered to trade Latian land that once belonged to Nephel in exchange for Rylo *keeping me* from Latiah. My own father did nothing to stop my unjust imprisonment."

Savine watched Avery's face contort in shock. "Oh, Savine, that is so horrible!"

The last thing he wanted to do was recall all the details of his prolonged confinement in the Tower of Teeth. The torturous removal of bits and pieces of his soul. Either constant exposure to sunlight or weeks on end of all-consuming darkness. And he still couldn't even say Lilith's name to Avery. But Avery would understand him better if she understood the things that had shaped him into the man he was

today. And he wanted that. He wanted to share his secrets with Avery.

“Raikin, Garnel, and Kyla saved me. I was in a prison for over two years, and when I was rescued, Kyla and Garnel had become soulmates. It hurt more than it should have, and maybe I was jealous. But when I was at my lowest, my best friend and sister replaced me. That’s why I have never asked about the mechanics of their bond. I acknowledge their bond and what that means for them. I have to deal with it constantly, and my relationship with both of them has changed because of their bond. But in the end, their bond with each other hasn’t changed their loyalty to me. Garnel and Kyla were right there with me when I led the rebellion years later. They have always acknowledged me as the leader of this rebellion, and only occasionally do they question my judgment. By occasionally, I mean constantly for Kyla.”

Avery sat up, keeping her hand on Savine’s arm. “I know you don’t like being touched, but damn, can I please just give you a hug? For what you’ve been through? I don’t know how else to express how hurt I feel for you.”

Savine sat up and gave a tiny nod. Avery wrapped her arms around him, burying her face in his neck. The feel of her close to him, acknowledging something that so few even knew about, stirred emotions he’d pushed down for decades. He felt a tightness rising in his throat as he leaned in deeper to Avery’s touch, wrapping his arms around her slight frame and pressing his face against her cheek. He closed his eyes, embracing this kind, compassionate woman. This woman whose kindness he never deserved.

Savine’s essence squirmed under his skin, calling for him to take more from this moment. He pushed down on that feeling and pulled himself back from her embrace.

“Thank you for listening to me. That is the first hug anyone has given me in a long time. Besides Kyla. She’s prone to hugging me when I least want it. Other than my sister, I haven’t had someone hug me in decades.”

Savine *felt* more vulnerable than he had in decades. Perhaps ever? This conversation had left him raw and slightly less burdened. Nobody, not even Garnel or his empath sister, listened to him how Avery just did. She listened like what he said mattered. Like his past pain was something that should be recognized. She didn't say she was sorry for the pain he'd experienced. Thank the Goddess. He hated pity from others. No, her listening was more like she would hear his truth in order to lighten his burden.

"Oh, Savine, it's because you're always trying to portray yourself as some tough old asshole. People are afraid to hug you," she said, tapping his arm lightly with her hand in a flirtatious manner. Just as she pulled her hand back, she looked him in the eyes, and reduced his entire world to those pools of warm milk chocolate.

"But I see you," she said, tilting her head slightly. "You aren't the arrogant commander that you work so hard to portray yourself as. You aren't someone who hates being touched. You carry a lot of pressure, pain, and burdens and have nobody to share that load. Let me help. Let me be your friend." As she spoke, she reached for Savine's hand, lacing her own rough fingers through his calloused fingers.

He shouldn't let her get closer to him. Not when he planned to turn her into someone fundamentally different from who she was. He should say something harsh to create some distance between them. But, Goddess damn him, he couldn't push her away.

"Friends sounds good. I would be honored to call you a friend."

Avery smiled at him, light sparking in her eyes as she leaned in and hugged him again, this time with a little more force as she threw her body against him.

Her head tilted up, and she met his eyes with a giggle. "I hope you're okay with us being friends who hug."

Savine laughed with her. A laugh that made his cheeks hurt and his eyes water.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Avery

A very soaked in every detail of her first view of Bayberry. A town of cob houses and buildings perched among a grassy meadow overlooking a sunlit lake. Rays of sunshine glittered like diamonds on the surface of the sapphire-blue water. Small boats moored on a dock, while others sailed through the shimmering water.

The roof of each house was covered in plant life, transforming it into unique gardens perched high above the ground. Some had vegetables cascading down the side of the homes. Squash, tomatoes, and sweet potato plants reached down the houses, full of the late summer harvest. Other houses boasted enchanting flower gardens, brimming with anemones, roses, and dahlias. The larger buildings had a tasteful mix of both vegetables and flowers mingling together in an ornate garden. Between the houses grew more flowers, plants, fruit trees, and vegetables. The heady scent of flowers coursed through the air, which was alive with the sounds of buzzing honeybees and tiny winged pixies. Each house looked built for a human's height. The doors would be tight for a typical fae, the windows too short.

"This place is magical," Avery whispered. None of the harsh, brutal beauty of the Middens existed here. It was pleasant. Quaint even. An idyllic country town.

“Charming, isn’t it? They don’t know how good they have it.”

Avery nodded. Even compared to modern life in America, this slow-paced, egalitarian lifestyle was inviting. “How do they live so comfortably, when so many in Latiah suffer?”

“You must understand Bayberry culture for me to answer that. The Bayberries are smaller fae. They married humans and witches long before humans were erased from this world, and they are secluded folk who choose to only live within their community. While they live in Latian territory, they are not Latians. Yet, I keep a close relationship with them. They have been staunchly loyal to my cause, and I have tried my hardest to keep them from the actual warfare. They’re also renowned for their healing powers, which have been useful during the war. Their tinctures and salves have saved many lives. It’s what Kyla used to heal you. In exchange for their healing potions, we protect them from conflict. It is why we leave in the spring and move to the Midden. We provide the buffer to keep them from the king’s wrath at choosing to ally with us,” Savine said.

“Do you think they will have more information on how I can get a handle on my magic?” Avery asked.

“I think if anyone can help you channel your magic, it will be Riggins and Po, or their daughter, Susan. Maybe Hyacinth,” Savine said.

They walked past small cob houses with arched windows. Everywhere they walked, the sweet scent of flowers trailed after them. Butterflies and bees circled overhead while hummingbirds and pixies buzzed from flower to flower.

Latians and smaller fae walked the narrow streets together. The atmosphere amongst the folk was celebratory. They passed old friends patting shoulders and embracing as Savine led her through the winding streets.

While they walked through the streets, she released the tension in her body. This was a peaceful place. A place where she could actually see herself settled and comfortable. At that thought, Avery’s guilt spiked, and she regretted her changing

feelings concerning her situation in Latiah. Shouldn't she still be mourning the loss of her old life? How could she consider a life settled in this world? She pushed the thought down. There was no way to return home, and she had her whole life to create and live here. Maybe this could be a place where she could create a safe home.

As Avery passed the homes, she noticed each door was ornately carved. The carvings seemed to tell a story.

"What do the carvings on the doors represent?" Avery asked.

"That is the story of the owner. They mark major events from their lives by carving the story into the door. Just wait until you meet Riggins and Po Meadows. They have led Bayberry for six hundred years, and are both over eight hundred years old. Their door ran out of space a long time ago, and they carved their story into every exposed piece of wood in their home."

"That's incredible." As she spoke, Savine stopped in front of a larger, three-story building. Herbs of all sorts grew on the roof and around the building. The carving at the top of the door showed a picture of an herb and a mortar and pestle. Further down the door were pictures of folk helping the sick.

"This is the healer's building. Garnel is already in there with Kyla and the healer Hyacinth. I think you should join them, if you are comfortable with that," Savine said as they walked into the building.

Avery's blush spread over her cheeks. "I don't know if I should bother them. I won't be much help."

Savine looked at her, harsh lines etched his face. "Is that another one of your lies, Avery? You are the reason Garnel is alive. Don't diminish your power before you have discovered its potential."

He was right, of course he was. But what help did she offer? Bringing Garnel some more Ibuprofen? No, that was her own self-doubt talking again. If she was stuck in this world, she'd be damned if she continued to let her self-doubt control her.

Avery would need to be made of tougher stuff if she were to survive Aeritis.

“Savine, I’ve begun to realize I’ve been diminishing my own potential my whole life. The lies I tell myself will not go away overnight. I’ll go up there, but if I’m in the way, I’ll come find you.”

As she said the words, she realized it was true. Maybe her seasonal jobs and her restlessness were just a mask to hide her own insecurities? To keep herself inside her comfort zone, even if that comfort zone made her back ache and her hands calloused.

The main room was comfortably appointed, nothing like an American hospital with stark lighting and uncomfortable chairs. Thick cob walls were whitewashed. Large flat stones made up the floor, polished and clean. A large hearth was in the corner, but no fire blazed. Rather, the windows to the building were open, sending in a cool breeze from the lake. Three spacious green couches were in the center of the room. Raikin sat on one couch.

Raikin turned to Avery and gave her a sharp scowl. “Avery, I’m bringing you to Garnel. Kyla told Hyacinth what you did for Garnel to stop the spread of the helmsbane. Hyacinth wants to get a sense of your magic.”

Avery didn’t argue with Raikin. She left Savine alone in the foyer and followed Raikin up the wide wooden staircase. The balusters were carved into the shapes of various herbs. She listed several of them as she walked up the stairs- rosemary, lavender, calendula, yarrow.

The landing of the staircase led to a narrow hallway with doors lining the hall. Each door was carved in an intricate design dedicated to a plant. As she identified the plants on the doors, she realized they were all traditionally used for healing, even on Earth. Raikin stopped at a door carved with a bitterroot flower. He knocked two quick raps on the door, and Kyla opened it. Her face was hardened in a way that Avery had never seen before. Her regal beauty had a hard, desperate edge to it, her jaw was tight, and her blue eyes nearly glowed.

Under her eyes were blue marks, and her skin looked puffy. Kyla's essence shifted sporadically under her skin.

Murmuring in her sing-song voice, Kyla looked at Raikin, who shifted behind Avery and into the hall. "Thank you for bringing her, Raikin. Avery, I appreciate your presence here. Come in."

"It's the least I can do. May the Goddess protect Garnel," Raikin replied, looking at Kyla. Avery walked forward as Raikin turned without saying another word to Avery.

As the door closed, a gentle breeze blew in off the lake, fluttering the floral print curtains that brought in a streak of light into the dark room. Two small fae lights floating overhead lit the room. After the curtains stopped fluttering, the room was shrouded in shadows. The air was heavy with the scent of herbs and magic. Avery noticed Kyla wringing her hands nervously and looked toward a bed in the center of the room. Garnel lied motionless on the bed. His eyes were closed, and his fur-lined essence was hardly visible. His typically golden skin looked sallow.

Standing over Garnel was a woman only a couple of inches taller than Avery. She had nutty brown skin and dark curly hair. Weaved into her hair was an elaborate web of leaves, herbs, and sticks. A loose blue dress with an abnormally abundant amount of pockets covered the woman's large breasts and wide hips. Each pocket brimmed with different tinctures, poultices, herbs, wraps, and various medical instruments. The woman wore no shoes on her feet, as seemed to be the custom for Bayberries. Avery wasn't at all surprised that this woman was considered the best healthcare provider in the land. The woman did not look up at Avery for nearly two minutes as Avery stood in the doorway. Instead, she continued repeating an incantation over Garnel's wound. While she spoke, she rubbed a sticky mixture across his bare stomach. Finally, she looked up at Avery.

"Come in, child, I could use your help," said the woman who must be Hyacinth. Avery noticed a flash of amber eyes and the faint sign of lines along her eyes and forehead. The

woman looked middle-aged, meaning she must be hundreds and hundreds of years old.

Avery approached without saying a word. Her body stiffened with doubt, and she began to sweat under the stifling air in the room. Avery felt self-conscious about her body odor and her disheveled appearance. These fae, with their super sense of smell, would know she was nervous, and smell all of her stinky human body odors. She wished the curtain would flutter with another breeze again, if only to give her sweaty body some relief. As she approached the table, she lost all concern for her appearance at the sight of Garnel's wound. The skin at the site where the arrow had pierced continued to look black and oozing, but with a foul-smelling pus. Avery gasped as she looked at Garnel's abdomen.

"I know, child. It is bad. But I heard you kept him alive this long. I need you to help me draw the poison out," Hyacinth said.

"Um. I don't know what to do." Avery's voice shook. Her desire to run from the room grew as Hyacinth made eye contact with her.

"Nonsense! You stopped the helmsbane from killing Garnel. That's more power than I've seen from a new healer in all my time. You have it in you to help me," Hyacinth said flatly. She turned her eyes back to Garnel and took out a small, sharp knife. "Now, wash your hands in the basin there. We have hot running water and soap for you."

Avery did as she was told, and glanced at Kyla, who was obviously distraught as she stood over Garnel's face, stroking his long, red hair. Tears welled in Kyla's eyes, and her hands shook.

Hyacinth turned to Kyla, as if sensing Kyla's growing concern for her soulmate. "Kyla, my dear, perhaps you should step out. This next part is not something a mate should have to witness."

"I will not leave him. Not for one moment," Kyla said, as her chin quivered.

Avery returned to Garnel's side and pushed down her growing nausea. The wound was putrid, like rotten flesh and decaying leaves. "How would you like me to help?" Avery asked as she kept her eyes from glancing down at Garnel's stomach.

"Avery, I hear you are a witch. I'm sure you are as green as a young elk, but I am going to use your power as a tether to my own. Together, we will draw out the poison while I also remove the harmful flesh."

"I don't know how to do any of that. I'm not even sure if I believe I have magic. I'm only a human," Avery said.

"Now is no time for doubt and human lies. No time for fear. Place your hands in a circle around the wound and repeat the phrases I say."

Avery took a deep breath and reached her shaking hands to Garnel's flesh. His skin was cold and clammy, like someone near death from infection. Her body tensed again as she settled her hands on his skin.

Hyacinth repeated a chant, steady and rhythmic, off her lips. Avery listened twice before joining in. As she spoke, Hyacinth set her hands on top of Avery's. Her hands were soft and warm, a shock compared to Garnel's cool, moist skin.

They chanted together over and over again, and as they chanted, heat began to build in her body. It began in her center and started radiating toward her arms and down into her fingers. The heat built and built, so much that Avery didn't think she could stand it for much longer. She tried to pull her hands back, but Hyacinth kept them locked in place. Despite her desire to stop the heat from building, Avery continued chanting.

Avery turned toward Kyla. Her eyes were filled with fear. Avery didn't have to be an empath to see that Kyla was scared to even breathe. Even still, Kyla reached out one of her hands and placed it on Avery's shoulder. An immediate sense of reassurance wafted through Avery. That empathic touch of Kyla's was soothing Avery's anxiety as she continued to let the heat roil out of her.

“Avery, you are doing so well. Keep going. It is working. You are saving Garnel,” Kyla said and gave Avery the smallest smile of reassurance.

Rays of green light began pouring from Hyacinth and Avery’s hands, transferring into Garnel’s wound. Avery’s power rose from deep in her body, and she embraced it as the power radiated from her to Hyacinth and Garnel. The thick, black ooze seeped out of the wound and flowed down the table. Instead of being appalled, Avery was intrigued.

She was doing this! She was pulling the poison from Garnel. She was saving his life through nothing but her own power!

Hyacinth looked at Avery and nodded as she continued chanting. She then looked at Kyla, indicating something. Kyla spoke as Hyacinth continued chanting, “Avery, the poison is drawn out now. Hyacinth is going to let go of your hands and begin removing the poisoned flesh. You need to keep your hands on Garnel and continue chanting. You are doing so well. You are so much more powerful than you think.”

Avery continued to feed Garnel’s body with her magic. Her body felt as hot as molten rock, but Avery focused on the chant.

Hyacinth released her hands and picked up a small scalpel. She worked quickly to remove the damaged flesh. Before she stitched the wound, she applied several tinctures and creams to the spot. Avery did not know what they were, but they had a strong herbal scent. Eventually, Hyacinth looked up at Avery and said, “Thank you, child. That will do.”

Avery stopped chanting and lifted her hands from Garnel. The heat coiling through her body receded, and she was light-headed. “I think I may...”

There was no time to finish her sentence before her body lightened and slid down to the ground.



Avery regained consciousness while on the floor. Her head spun, and her ears rang. Before she could move or speak,

Hyacinth said, “Avery, dear, you have used a substantial amount of magic while saving Garnel’s life. Your body is not used to exerting itself in this way. Let me get you tea and a biscuit while you rest. May I help you to the chair?” Avery nodded as Hyacinth scooped Avery into her arms and carried her to a reclining chair near the window.

Even from the chair, Avery noticed Garnel stirring on the table. Kyla let out a gasp as she saw him regain consciousness and immediately pressed her body against him. She began kissing his cheeks, forehead, and mouth ravenously. Hyacinth moved from Avery to Garnel and warned him, “Easy. You are groggy from the sleeping draught. It’s best for you to rest your body.”

Hyacinth turned back to Avery. “I’m going to brew you a fortifying tea. It will help your magic restore itself to its full potential.” After she spoke, she gathered herbs from her shelf and mixed them together before she put them to steep in the teapot. The tea smelled of cardamom, nettle, and something grassy. Hyacinth poured a cup for Avery and herself before she brought it over to Avery.

“This will make you feel better in no time, dear.” She placed the teacup and saucer in Avery’s hands and turned to Kyla. “In fact, Kyla, I think you should have a cup, too. I’ve never seen you look so weak.”

“I would appreciate that, Hyacinth. Trying to keep Garnel with me on the ride was nearly too much for me,” Kyla said, and she kissed Garnel’s cheek. “None for you yet, my bear.” Garnel gave a small nod of his head and closed his eyes.

Hyacinth checked his pulse before saying, “He will sleep more and will need to rest for at least a week. Helmsbane prevents fae’s quick healing, so his healing is nearly at a mortal pace.” She took her teacup and knocked the contents back in one quick slurp. “Now, I’m off to check on the other injured Latians. I’ll be back in a bit!”

Avery sipped her tea as her stomach rumbled. Hyacinth promised food, yet had forgotten to provide some. Kyla looked at her with a knowing glance. Of course, she’d heard Avery’s

stomach growling. “There are mushroom and green squash sandwiches in the cupboard. I’ll get you some. The Bayberries are vegetarians, so you’ll have no meat when you dine outside the encampment,”

Avery nodded. “Not a problem for me. I’m starving.” She was no longer lightheaded as she sipped the bitter tea. She felt stronger with each drink.

Avery thought about what Savine had told her about Garnel and Kyla. There was no reason to pry, but she couldn’t help her curiosity about their relationship.

“You two are soulmates. In the human world, that’s just a word for being intensely in love, like you’re meant to be together. But it seems deeper here. Did you sense Garnel was injured before you saw him?” Avery asked as Kyla gave Avery the sandwich. She was not sure if she wanted a mushroom sandwich, but found the nutty flavor of the mushroom paired perfectly with the light, fluffy bread and squash relish.

“Yes, I knew about his injury. I’ve felt that before, especially when we are fighting nearby in skirmishes. But this—this was like the most terrifying nightmare come true. It was as though our souls were being torn apart. Our very bond shredded. All my body felt ice cold, yet flaming at the same time. To add to my terror, I could not feel his emotions. I thought he was dead.” As she spoke, her typically calming voice cracked and quivered. Kyla’s skin was covered in goosebumps, and she shook like she had the chills.

Avery stood and walked across the room to give her a hug. She wrapped her arms around Kyla and held her close. Kyla rested her head on Avery’s shoulder as she continued to shake. She said through silent sobs, “I thought I lost my mate.”

“He’s safe now, Kyla. We saved him.”

Kyla nodded her head and released Avery from the hug. Avery gave Kyla a squeeze on her shoulder as she walked back to her chair.

“Can I ask you some questions about soulmates?” Avery asked.

“Yes, Avery. Ask whatever you want to know. If I were you, I would be full of questions about this world.”

“How did you know Garnel was your soulmate?” Avery asked. She rested her hands on her lap as she listened to Kyla.

“I have always felt a pull toward Garnel. Even when I was a child. He is much older than I am and always treated me like a little sister. He’s been Savine’s close friend since Savine was born, so he was always around during my childhood. Savine may have told you, but his childhood was... not what he should have experienced. He and Garnel protected me from the same fate. While I did suffer from my father’s abuses at times, it was nothing like Savine experienced.

“When I came of age, I tried to seduce him. I’d even tried when I was younger, but he always averted my advances. When he rejected me at fifty, I got mad and lashed out at him. I wanted nothing to do with him, because I thought he didn’t want me. I was a young fae who had just come of age and took other lovers. But I couldn’t deny the pull to Garnel. Our connection was magnetic, and he began pursuing me. But at the time I was working in other nations as an ambassador for the kingdom, so I was gone often. We were intimate together when I was in Orofine one evening, and our mating seal happened. It’s like nothing I’ve ever experienced. Like your very soul is being knitted together with another. Our relationship continues to deepen, but there will be nothing like that moment when we both accepted one another’s soul.” Kyla’s smile was pure joy as she talked.

“Wow. That is a beautiful story. But I’m also confused. Did you say you ‘came of age’ at fifty?” Avery asked. She remembered Savine had mentioned this term, but she hadn’t wanted to interrupt his story on those sorts of technicalities. It felt too significant that he was opening up to her.

“We fae age slowly. Very slowly compared to what I’ve heard about human existence. Most adolescents from the age of twenty to fifty are reckless and make poor judgments, so we do not consider adulthood until fifty. Our physical aging slows around twenty to a very slow pace. Most do not appear middle-aged until into their fifth century.”

Avery nodded. If you are living for a thousand years, then it makes sense that adolescence can be slower and middle age hits at five hundred. “So, your love for each other happened after you realized you were soulmates? Did you feel you had any choice but to love him?”

“I always had the choice. I knew I loved Garnel when I was an adolescent. Probably around twenty-five. There was something so dynamic about our relationship. Garnel knew later. I think because of my young age, he tried to ignore the natural tug we had toward each other. Have you ever been in love, Avery?” Kyla asked as she smiled at her sleeping soulmate.

“Back in Montana, I dated and had a few longer relationships. I was with somebody for a while before the summer, but I don’t think I loved him.” Avery shrugged her shoulders.

“Perhaps in time, you will learn to love the fae and places of Aeritis. Maybe you will find your soulmate here,” Kyla said.

Avery sighed. She didn’t want to have this conversation with Kyla. “At this point, I am more focused on my survival than looking for love, Kyla. And how could I even have a soulmate? I’m not a fae.”

“I think the Bayberries know better about soulmates between the fae and humans. I don’t think you will be incapable of finding the one for whom your soul yearns for here. Everyone deserves that.” Kyla gave Avery a knowing smile, like she sensed something about Avery that Avery hadn’t shared. Maybe Kyla knew how her feelings for Savine had been changing.

“I am once again indebted to you, Avery. When we arrived, Garnel was not well. He seemed nearly lost. If it wasn’t for you and Hyacinth, he’d be dead long before we reached this bed. I don’t think your miraculous medicine could have saved him forever.”

Avery wondered if Savine realized the extent of Garnel’s injuries. She’d told him about the fever, and she knew he

checked on Garnel before they traveled today. But why wasn't he here beside his best friend?

"Did Savine know Garnel was in such terrible shape when we arrived in Bayberry?" Avery asked, wondering if she had kept him from his best friend.

"He saw Garnel before we left our resting place, but that medicine of yours was making him seem better than he was. When we arrived here, I didn't wait for Savine to see Garnel. I should have, but I needed to get him to Hyacinth in time."

Avery nodded her head, understanding that Kyla did not want to share her grief and fear with someone else. Avery was becoming used to carrying the burden of her grief with her. She glanced at Garnel sleeping peacefully on the bed. His golden skin gleamed again. The furry texture of the essence below his skin was getting brighter. It was incredible how quickly he was healing, despite Hyacinth's claims he would heal at a mortal pace. Hyacinth had obviously never seen a mortal heal.

She needed to get out of this room. Give these two their space together. She also desperately needed a shower, bath, or whatever she could get.

"Do you know where I could bathe?" Avery asked. Kyla looked at Avery as if she was finally taking in how disgusting the human looked. To add to the layers of dirt and grime from traveling was a new stain of poison. She was going to have to burn these clothes.

"Yes, of course. Up the next flight of stairs on the left is a washroom. It has a bathtub and a shower. You turn the knob for fresh water to flow. The left is hot, and the right is cold. You can also pull a stopper to shower. The water will run over you like rain."

Avery raised an eyebrow at Kyla and laughed. "Did you just explain to me how to operate a tap and shower?"

"Oh! I wasn't sure if humans had such things," Kyla said, smiling back.

“We humans have running water, and I’m thrilled to hear Bayberry does too.”

Kyla looked at Avery’s dirty human clothes. “May I request that a healer bring you some clothing to change into? Perhaps it’s time to retire those clothes.”

“Yeah, I think that black poison has finally done my human clothes in. I’ll miss them, but they’re just clothes.” Avery shrugged as she looked at her stained yoga pants and tank top. Yet another connection with Earth severed. It shouldn’t be a big deal, but Avery couldn’t help the tiny bit of sadness at no longer having decent human clothes. Only her wool base layers and rain gear remained.

“Would you prefer pants and a tunic or a dress?”

“A dress would be lovely.” Here’s to embracing a new life in Aertis.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Savine

Savine's place wasn't in that room upstairs. He would be no help, and he would just impede Hyacinth and Avery's work. Yet, it was still difficult to think about his closest friend up there, nearly dead, as his sister wore her emotions on her sleeve, and Avery denied her magical healing abilities. The thought of Avery controlling Garnel's fate made Savine feel as if a stone settled in the pit of his stomach.

Not that he didn't trust Avery. Her caring heart was making *him* care, which was against his better judgment. That was the only explanation he had for why he told her about his time in Nephel, and why he didn't better understand the power of soulmates' bonds.

His mind drifted to her touch. The warmth that radiated from her was both a turn on and a comfort all at one time. Not to mention when he caught her staring as he removed his clothing. Damn him to the Abyss. He wanted her to touch him all over when she looked at him like that. Like she *needed* to touch and explore his body.

Wanting physical touch from someone was such a foreign thing that even though he wanted it, his mind and body rebelled against the thought of her hands feeling his invisible scars. She would ask questions about who had hurt him, and he did not want to explain the trauma he'd suffered as a child,

the mind fuck he underwent while imprisoned in Nephel, or the narrow escape that nearly cost him his life as he fled Orofine.

But Avery, with her soft smile and warm eyes, might make allowing her to touch him easy. If he let himself, he would get lost exploring her small, soft human body. He'd learn every curve and taste every angle of her.

What he really needed was to get out of the healer's center. Stop fantasizing about Avery. He needed to do his Goddess-damned job like he did every day, even when it was hard.

At that thought, Savine got his ass off the couch and walked out into the late summer sunlight. There was a touch of crispness in the air, beckoning autumn forward. In less than a month, the valley would change from late summer's harvest to the golden, orange, and red gleam of autumn. In only two months, the first frost would settle in the valley, and the mountains would be coated in inches of snow. Only after those first winter storms closed the passes would Savine rest easy, knowing that he'd protected his people through another season of warfare and bloodshed.

But now? Now he needed to speak to the forest. Get reports of where the rest of his army traveled. If he was lucky, the trees would share the loyalists' location too. Hopefully beyond the pass by now.

Nobody disturbed his long strides into the forest. They all knew better than to disturb him on his way to the forest. Generally speaking, people avoided him when he walked with purposeful strides. His people adored and revered him. It was plain to see, but rarely did they approach him or share their daily lives with him. Maybe he was as unapproachable as Avery said?

Bayberry sat at the edge of a lake. The mountains were less than half a day's ride, and their imposing peaks dwarfed the valley below. Unlike near Quartz Mountain, these mountains contained a dense forest of evergreens and aspens. Some trees grew to the lakeshore, creating a stretch of trees that cut through the otherwise open prairie. Savine trekked toward

those nearby trees, knowing that they would speak with him after several months apart.

Any typical summer, Savine would have made his way to this forest weeks ago. But thanks to Avery's arrival, the rebels were behind schedule. Would the trees wonder where he was? Did the forest care about a single fae with the ability to communicate with them? Most likely not, if Savine was honest with himself. Trees were aloof, and Savine often wondered if they were above the wars and conflicts of the folk.

As he approached the forest, Savine heard the gentle rustling of aspen leaves in the wind. A few of the trees were beginning to turn that brilliant goldenrod yellow. A few weeks is all he had left to communicate with his best network of spies in the nation. Once the aspens lost their leaves for the season, hibernation would set in soon. There was no way to wake a slumbering aspen.

Savine reached out and touched the snow-white bark of one of the older aspens. The tree stirred under his touch. This was how it had been for decades. The only contact he'd offered was his hand on a tree.

"Hello, friend," Savine said in mycilious. The whispery language slid off his tongue, like a leaf in the wind.

"The Prince of Chaos returns," the tree slowly said.

"Later than usual and without my army. Can the network of aspens detect their movements?"

The aspen did not speak right away, as it became preternaturally still. *"They creep forward. They will arrive in one day's time, if the folk stop to rest."*

"This is good news."

"You'll want to know about your enemies. There are stirrings of armies throughout the land. The king of fear does not retreat like winters past. His fae ravages the woods like wild wolves on a deer," the tree said, shuddering under its own words.

That couldn't be. Savine and Jasper had agreed that Jasper would not harm the trees. Not after he had destroyed so much

of the forest near Orofine to lure Savine back to the city. “He and his army are attacking the trees?”

“Worse than the early years. My brethren are chopped down and left behind. Evil magic infiltrates those that stand. Communications are cut down.”

“Where are they?” Savine asked. He would have to fight them. Push them back over the pass before Jasper got a stronghold on this side of the pass. Goddess damn them for attacking the forest when his army was spread thin!

“They are two day’s ride from Bayberry. They will take Bayberry if they can before winter traps them on this side of the pass.”

“Abyss damn them all!” Savine would lose the war if he lost Bayberry. He would also jeopardize the safety of hundreds of peaceful folk who had opened their homes to him. Riggins and Po, and all the Bayberries allied with him before it made sense to ally with him. He couldn’t let Jasper and his army reach the quiet, tranquil community. Savine looked out beyond the forest and toward the lake. Bits of light glittering on the lake, like diamonds glittering in a dish. A boat floated by, and two Bayberry men were on the water, enjoying a quiet afternoon.

This place gave him hope during the darkest times of this war. Knowing that there was still a land where a child laughed and played under the filtered light of a flower bed while her mother made the day’s bread in a comfortable kitchen. It was for these folks’ freedom and the freedom that he would bring to Orofine that kept him fighting.

“When will we know if they will try to breach our army and attack Bayberry?” Savine asked.

“They are seeking allies. We do not know the comings and goings of the towers, but their wings stir on our limbs. Wings that have not touched our limbs in decades. The king of fear grows weary of your rebellion. He knows you have the girl. He knows, and he wants her.”

Savine flinched, withdrawing his hands tighter into himself. He said, “He seeks Avery?”

“He knows the human is in Bayberry. He will not rest until the loyalists take her. The power you hold over him is too great.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Kyla

The hard bang on the door couldn't have been from Avery, who had just left to go clean up. There was only one fae who would interject himself in this brusque manner. "Come in, Savine," Kyla said. Her voice sounded more weary than she intended, but then again, she was bone-achingly tired.

Savine walked into Garnel's sick room. His powerful presence seemed to dwarf everything in the room, including Garnel's sleeping form. Typically, Garnel made Savine look small when they stood near each other, but not now. Not when Garnel's golden brown skin still appeared washed out in a pallid yellow. Savine meant no harm, but Kyla couldn't stop her instinctual need to protect her mate from a threat. She stepped between Savine and Garnel's sleeping body, placing her hands on Savine's shoulders.

Rage, pure and hot, poured from Savine's emotions. It took all that was in Kyla to not pull her hands back in shock. Coming in here, angry, while Garnel had just been through Abyss and back, wasn't acceptable. She washed her own emotions into him, reminding her brother that her soulmate's life had been hanging in the balance. Bittersweet joy and fear washed over Savine, and his hardened features softened.

"Oh, Kyla. Will he recover?" Savine said, low and deep.

“Thanks to Hyacinth and Avery, he will survive. Hyacinth told me he was one of the few cases of the folk surviving helmsbane. He was so near to leaving me, Savine,” Kyla said.

Tears crept into her eyes. Knowing how close she came to losing Garnel nearly broke her. She was so used to having full control of her emotions and the emotions of those around her. There was no way that she would have survived without him. It’s not uncommon, after all, for a soulmate to leave this world and join their other half in Arcadia at death.

“Leaving us, Kyla,” Savine said, wrapping her into his arms. Her brother was *hugging* her? If she hadn’t seen the changes in him over the past few weeks, she would have jumped away and demanded who hid under a glamour of her brother. He *never* touched another fae. While he had kept his experience private, Kyla knew her brother had suffered mental and emotional trauma during his imprisonment that left him forever changed. She felt it in the changing of his emotions from before his captivity to after. There was also no denying the raised scars that invisibly ran across his back.

“Savine... Of course. *We* almost lost him.” She leaned her head against her brother and let herself be more vulnerable with him than she’d been since she was a child.

Her soulmate bond with Garnel had changed all three of their relationships forever. How could it not? They forever altered his closest relationships with the only two folk he ever truly trusted. But it couldn’t be helped. Over the decades, she’d tried to share with him how the bond happened. She tried to help him see how much she and Garnel still loved and cared for him, but he wouldn’t talk about it. He never wanted to even hear about their bond and how they realized they were soulmates. She’d struggled to get through the lonely days as she thought about her brother trapped in the Tower of Teeth. The way she found comfort in Garnel’s body, only to be inextricably bound to his soul forever. It wasn’t even what she’d expected when she sought sex from Garnel that first time. If she was honest, it had been this need to bury the pain and guilt that ravaged her.

Savine pulled back and left her side, moving to Garnel. His face was tight, like he felt Garnel's pain. Which was impossible. The empathic powers that Kyla possessed weren't something within Savine's control. Rather, she had often wondered if her greater connection to others' feelings had left him somehow void of noticing others' emotions. Like she took up all the space for empathy in their group, so he had no reason to practice the skill himself. Of course, that was harsh, but her brother tended to think only of himself and the well-being of his people as a whole, not always as individuals.

"To lose one's soulmate is to lose an irretrievable part of yourself. I may never know that pain, but I would not wish it on our greatest enemy," Savine muttered as he brushed a finger against Garnel's arm.

He continued to lightly touch Garnel. It gave Kyla a strange shiver down her spine, like she wanted to pull him back and tell him not to touch her soulmate. But she didn't speak. Savine would never hurt Garnel, even if her natural need to protect her mate was screaming for her to remove Savine's perceived threat. "When we were very young, we always thought that the Goddess would not bless either of us with a soulmate. That we would be destined to be the closest bond for each other. Brothers who had no one else. How could we not? When he was always there by my side through my pain. And then you came along. The Goddess would bond my closest friend to my sister. After all, you're the prettier version of me. He loved me more than anyone until my imprisonment. It's good that she gave you to him. He needed you to help him be strong. And him to you. You, with your big heart, deserve his love and devotion."

Kyla's eyes widened at Savine's words. This was the closest he'd ever come to talking about what happened during his imprisonment and how Kyla and Garnel's bond had hurt him. Was this Avery's influence on her brother?

"Why are you saying this, Savine? You deserve his love and devotion, too. You *have* it! What do you think all these years fighting for the rebellion have been for? If not out of devotion to you?"

Savine's blue eyes turned icy. His anger grew again, and she couldn't help but place her hand on top of his and pull him away from her sleeping mate. Savine pulled her hand from his and turned his back on her. "I assumed and hoped you both fought not for me, but for the cause. For freeing the people of Latiah from a tyrant. Am I wrong? I don't want your devotion to me to be the reason for either of you to kill our kinsmen. I cannot be the only reason for you fighting this cause."

What was all this self-doubt in her brother? Her unwavering brother seemed on the edge of a crisis. Just as she struggled to pull herself back from her own crisis. "Savine... I am fighting to free the people of Latiah. We both are. But if it wasn't for your leadership, there would be no rebellion. You know that. People fight for our side because of you."

Savine nodded. She didn't change the mix of emotions that poured through him. Sometimes a person needed to feel the emotions that were naturally there. With time, Kyla had to learn when to meddle with someone's feelings and when to let them struggle with their own warring emotions. Usually, she was right about when to help someone and when not to, but Avery had been a mistake. Once, she tried to push the feelings of love into her father when she was a child. She so wanted to feel something else from him besides the cold indifference he always radiated. That choice had gotten her a punishment that not even Savine could stop. She still bore the scars, hidden from view.

"I spoke to the trees," Savine muttered, turning his back on Kyla as he moved to the open window. His voice seemed to shake as he spoke.

Good. At least he spoke to the trees upon arrival in Bayberry. Her brother wasn't being completely uncharacteristic. But there was something intrinsically different about him. She knew her brother. His unrelenting confidence and his unwillingness to stray from his goals. This man with his back turned to her, shoulders slightly slumped, was giving her cause for concern. "What did they say? Are the others near?"

“The army is a day’s ride from here.” Savine didn’t turn to look at her as he spoke. His hands gripped the windowsill, and the wood seemed to dent under his touch.

“That sounds like good news. Why are you so angry and unsure?” Kyla asked. She needed to anchor herself before he shared what he was about to say. It was nothing good. Stepping back, she placed her hands on Garnel’s still form. Under her touch, she felt an emotion that made her heart stir. Peace. Rest. Garnel would be alright. His cool skin wasn’t too hot or icy cold with death.

Savine turned and looked at her. The hard planes of his face made her need the touch of Garnel even more intense. Savine’s essence whirred. “The loyalists are still on this side of the pass. The king isn’t moving his army back to Orofine before the snow falls. Even worse, he is destroying the forest near the pass.”

Kyla’s heart quickened. The loyalists always retreated with the changing of the seasons. Autumn was a time to prepare for the harsh realities of winter in Latiah. But if he was still here, he must be planning on overwintering near the Middens. But to destroy the trees? Even after Savine and Jasper agreed to leave the trees out of their war? This was dangerous news.

“Why would he make these changes now? It makes no sense. Not after so many years of following the same pattern.” It hit her. The cause of the change in tactics. “Avery...” her voice came out cracked as she said the witch’s name.

“He must know that we plan to use her against him. Jasper is making a preemptive strike by attacking the trees. Also, there are whispers he is seeking other nations as allies. Primarily Nephel. He will attack us here in Bayberry if we do not strike first. Avery, Goddess help her, is a liability for the entire community.” He paused as he spoke. A new emotion bubbled to the surface of the room. Fear. Sheer terror and fear. “I— I cannot let her stay here when she may be the reason Jasper attacks us.” He turned his back to Kyla again as he looked out the window into the evening sun. Pain. Gut-wrenching pain mingled with panic, and he did nothing to mask it from her.

“Savine?”

He did not reply. He continued to stand with his back to her, feelings roiling out of him and hitting her like shock waves.

Kyla spoke softly, not wanting to come across as attacking him when his emotions were so unwound. “Savine, you have grown to care for Avery, haven’t you?”

The anger bubbled to the surface again, and Kyla heard the wood splinter where he held it. “It doesn’t matter what I feel for her. My duty is first and foremost to the people who have trusted me with their safety for decades now. I do not have the luxury of such feelings, sister.”

Kyla sighed. He carried such a heavy burden with this war. He refused to share the burden, even though, as his sister, she had abandoned her home in Orofine just as much as he did. Fled with him like a thief in the night. “Oh, Savine, you have every right to care for Avery. I do too! She saved my soulmate from certain death and did so with no obligation held over us. I will do anything to protect her.”

“Even if it means bringing death and war to Bayberry?”

Kyla sucked in her ragged breath. They had worked so hard to keep war from this peaceful corner of Aeritis. It would destroy these people to be involved in the conflict.

“We will take her away. We can hide her.”

Savine turned and shook his head. Pain etched in the hard planes of his face, and Kyla wanted to touch him, to soothe his pain and fear. “Jasper will still come here. He will still attack Bayberry if we do not give him proof she isn’t here.”

“Do you mean to turn her over?” Kyla couldn’t believe that he would abandon the witch. Not after this display of emotions over her wellbeing.

“Of course not! I would rather turn myself over than see her harmed by that madman.”

This gave her pause. He would do anything to avoid capture by the King of Latiah.

“Savine, what is your relationship with Avery? I know you have been sharing a...”

“She is a friend. She has been kind and easy to talk to.” The fae couldn’t lie, so Kyla knew this must be how Savine saw her in his eyes.

“Does she know about Father?”

“She knows enough. Do not speak to her about him. Ever.”

Kyla saw her brother’s cold eyes, like ice chips, and his face furrowed into a frown.

“Could she be your—” Rage, pure rage poured out of her brother. So much so that she took two steps back, bumping into Garnel’s sleeping form.

“Goddess damn you, Kyla! I have no fucking soulmate. My soul is not worthy of such a thing. Let alone, she is a *human!* Who has ever heard of a fucking human for a soulmate?!”

Kyla felt the doubt on her tongue as her words slipped out. “It could be possible? Since she is a witch? The Bayberries—”

“Do not speak to me of soulmates again. Ever,” Savine growled out and turned his back to Kyla. After what felt like an eternity, he sighed out the breath he held in. He reached up and ran his hands through the scruff of his beard. Kyla was beyond words. His rage was so similar to what she’d felt from their father all those years ago. But she didn’t dare tell her brother that.

“Call for me when Garnel is awake. I need to make battle plans with him. We will meet the loyalists near the pass, cut them off, and push them back for the winter. Avery will ride with the army, and they will see her with their own eyes. I will cut down anyone who dares take her from me.” Savine walked toward the door and had his hand on the handle as Kyla protested.

“Garnel won’t be ready for a battle before spring! Neither will Avery!” Her protest would make no difference. Savine already decided.

“Get him ready. We will meet the loyalists within a week,”
Savine said as he slammed the door on his way out.

Chapter Thirty

Avery

A very walked down the stairs of the medical center in a light pink dress that accented her sun-kissed skin and blonde waves. Little yellow flowers covered the dress, and it was made of a breezy fabric that exposed her arms. It fit a bit tight in the chest, making her breasts stick out more than she would prefer, but it hugged her small waist before expanding down her hips and stopping just above her calves. She felt feminine and fresh in the new dress.

While in the washroom, Avery had washed her hair and studied her forehead, looking for the Goddess mark. It had shocked her to see it on her forehead. When Savine claimed that she was his gift and marked by the Goddess, she had been so angry with him and hadn't believed that there was anything more than the scar from hitting her head on the quartz during the bear attack. Seeing it with her own eyes was a shock that she didn't need to see again. Nobody needed to see the crown of five stars across her hairline. *That* would just draw even more unnecessary attention to her.

Avery walked down to the main floor, where Savine rested on a couch. His beard was trimmed and neat and his hair was pulled back into a bun. He wore brown pants and a linen shirt that accented his muscular arms and chest. On his hip was a belt of knives, and his sword lay nearby. Avery touched his

shoulder and motioned for him to scoot over as she sat beside him on the couch.

“You look lovely,” Savine said as he shifted himself into a sitting position. His voice came out harsher, more restrained than normal.

“Thank you. I was pleasantly surprised that there are showers here,” Avery replied.

“Why wouldn’t we have showers?” Savine asked with a serious expression on his face.

“You know, fantasy world. No modern conveniences. You don’t have processed food, so who knows what else your world is lacking?”

Savine laughed at her response before growing serious. “I went to see Garnel. I heard all that you did to save him. You saved my friend again, and for that, I am indebted to you.”

“You’ve saved me twice, so we’re not even yet!” Avery said.

“No. I’m happy to save you anytime you need rescuing,” Savine said. “Now that you’re here, though, I have someone I want you to meet, and I would like to show you where you will stay in Bayberry.” Savine stood up and offered Avery his hand. She took it, his large hand enfolding around hers. That electric, warm connection flowed through their fingertips and up the length of Avery’s arm. Why hadn’t they talked about what this could mean in more detail?

“What, we’re not going to keep sharing a tent?”

“No, we aren’t. We’ll both stay in our own bedrooms,” Savine said with a wink. “Why? Are you disappointed?”

“I’ve grown used to your old man snores, of course. It’s like white noise.” Avery playfully tapped her side into his.

“More human lies, I presume? I don’t snore. Should we get you a glass of wine, Avery?”

Avery grinned. “No need. I’m being as truthful as you fae are.”

Together, they left the cozy waiting room and walked into the warm sunshine.

“I’d like you to meet the leaders of Bayberry. Riggins and Po Meadows. They sent a message that they would like you to stay with them. I will stay with them as well. Riggins and Po seem particularly interested in introducing you to their adopted daughter, Susan.”

Avery felt relaxed and at peace as she walked the friendly streets filled with children laughing and birds singing. Could they just stay here indefinitely? Avery pictured herself leaning into her whole witchy vibe. She could learn how to make healing salves and potions under Hyacinth. Maybe she’d even put twigs and vines in her hair and walk around barefoot.

While she was lost in this daydream, Savine looked more tense than usual. His face wore a scowl, and he seemed to avoid her gaze, even though his hand rested on hers.

“Is anything wrong, Savine?” Avery asked as they walked along a market street, teeming with fresh produce and warm bread.

Savine didn’t respond for a while. Not until they turned down a side street, free from the crowds going about their business.

“I received some news that will draw us out of Bayberry. I will explain more later. For now, I want us to be united as we meet with the Bayberry leaders,” Savine said as he pulled his hand back from hers.

“United? Is this about whatever you’re planning to use me for?” Avery asked, possibly too loud.

Savine shot her a look that chilled her flesh. “Do not speak of that outdoors. Don’t mention it to Riggins and Po or any Bayberries. Do you understand?”

Avery nodded her head and turned her attention back to the town in front of her eyes.

So we were back to grumpy, reactive Savine. Great.

Something was wrong with Savine, but he wasn't about to open up to her here. Plus, everything about this cozy town was distracting Avery. Including the many Bayberries that they passed along the road. Their unkempt hair with pieces of nature thrust in, homespun clothing and bare feet seemed to be a cultural choice, and not just Hyacinth's fashion sense. Their path took them nearer to the lake, and they stopped at a home along the water. It was larger than other homes in the area and was marked with a living fence of raspberry bushes, teeming with ripe berries. The stone path that led to the front door was tidy, and the porch teemed with baskets of petunias. Their heady scent wafted into Avery's nose.

Savine knocked on an ornately carved door showing an image of a bearded man and a small fae woman. A young woman with long red hair decorated with flowers opened the door. The woman appeared no older than Avery, but she was getting used to that. It meant nothing, really. She was a few inches taller than Avery and wore a green dress with fluttery sleeves and a low neckline. The dress, like Avery's, stopped around her calves. "Savine! Welcome! This must be Avery. I'm Susan," the woman smiled cheerfully. "Come in. I'm sure you are famished from your journey."

They walked into a foyer with a small walnut table. On it was a painting of a family of five. There were two elderly looking people, who appeared to be in their eighties, two men who were in their forties, and Susan. She was the baby of the family, and Avery remembered Susan was adopted.

Susan led Savine and Avery to a sitting room. The carpet had a bright floral design, but the couch and chairs were made of cream linen. Avery still hadn't gotten used to seeing human details in this world. This sitting room looked like something that could be in any country home in America, yet she was sitting down with the folk.

Across from Avery stood an ancient couple. Their faces were creased in deep wrinkles. They both wore their long hair loose down their backs. The woman was shorter than Avery, and the man stood eye to eye with her. If Avery saw these two in the human world, she would assume they were in their late

eighties. Nothing about their appearance was overwhelmingly fae. Rather, they looked more human than fae.

“Welcome, my dear. I’m Pomona, but you can call me Po,” the woman said as she placed her hands on Avery’s shoulders.

“We’re happy you joined us in our home. I’m Riggins,” the elderly man said, as he touched Avery’s shoulders.

“I’m honored to meet you both,” Avery said.

After greeting Avery, they both welcomed Savine into their home and invited them to sit. Susan joined them in the room, bringing out a small tea set.

“Thank you all for your hospitality,” Avery spoke as she sipped her tea. It was minty and refreshing. Just the thing for an afternoon in the late summer.

“Avery, we’re honored to have you here. Not only because a friend of Savine’s is a friend of ours, but because we stand against the injustices that have happened to humans for thousands of years here on Aeritis,” Po said without hesitation.

Riggins nodded and took his daughter’s hand in his. “Yes. We want you to feel safe here. The Bayberries would never harm a human. Our own ancestry dates back to when fae and human soulmates sought a place where they could live without prejudice and cruelty.”

Avery saw Savine’s color blanch from his face. “Fae were once soulmates with humans?”

“Yes, Savine,” Riggins responded. “I thought you understood Bayberries were a mix of witch, human, and fae?”

“Of course, every fae knows that. What I didn’t know was that soulmates crossed species.” Avery couldn’t help but see Savine’s eye flicker in her direction, ever so briefly. His essence made the tiniest of shifts under his linen sleeves.

Po smiled as she shifted her gaze from Savine to Avery. “We nearly lost this knowledge in history, but we have a vast collection of historical documents on the times dating back to before The Cleaving. The information is corroborated in more than one document. Faes with witch or magic-free human

mates. Sometimes, I wonder if the fae who live their entire lives without finding their mate are separated from their true soulmates by the splintering of our two realms. Perhaps these repercussions have carried on for thousands of years?”

Avery spoke up, thinking about human relationships and their understanding of soulmates. “Some humans claim to be with their soulmates. It’s never sounded as intense as what I’ve witnessed between Kyla and Garnel, or Raikin and Jay. Maybe there is some truth to your thought?”

Riggins nodded before he spoke. “That could be. We have gotten off topic, though. Po and I grow tired, and I would like to reassure you we are delighted to have another human in the house!”

“Another human?” Avery asked. She furrowed her brows as she looked around the room. Susan, who had sat so quietly, gave Avery a mischievous smile before she sparked with light and revealed her human features.

“We humans must be very cautious here. The fae can prey on us without our realization. I prefer to keep up a disguise to fit in,” Susan said.

Avery’s eyes widened, and her mouth dropped open. *How in the hell was there another human here?* It was a surprise for Savine, too. His jaw looked like it could hit the ground.

Avery stammered out, “Did you say ‘we humans?’”

Susan tucked her wild red hair behind her ears, revealing rounded ears, and smiled at Avery with a crooked smile. “I’ve never met another human here. When I heard you were coming, I was delighted to meet you. Only my immediate family and Hyacinth know what I really am. I’ve kept my identity hidden under a glamour for decades.”

Avery stared at Susan in disbelief. She wasn’t the only human in Aeritis after all.

“I have shocked you. Can I share my story with you?”

Avery nodded in agreement and took a sip of tea to calm her nerves. Her hands shook as she put her teacup down.

Riggins interrupted, before Susan could speak again, “Before you begin, my dear, I would like to invite Savine out to the gardens, if he does not object. He stated in a letter that arrived this afternoon that he has matters of immediate importance to discuss with us. I would like to have the news out before supper. I have no desire to spoil my appetite with pressing matters.” Riggins and Po both stood creakily. How strange it must be to live so many years in that late stage of life.

Savine glanced at Avery before he spoke. “I knew there was some reason that they wanted you to meet Susan. I was not expecting this, though. Are you comfortable being left alone?”

“Yes, of course. Go talk with Riggins and Po,” Avery said, pressing her hand on his arm to push him away.

Savine turned back, looking at Avery with that intense gaze of his before he left the room with Riggins and Po.

Susan took a delicate bite of cake and a drink of her tea.

Avery stared in disbelief at Susan. “I can’t believe there’s another living human in Aeritis! Everyone who spoke of humans made it sound like they were hunted down and killed. How have you survived here for so long?”

“Would you like the whole story?”

“If you are willing to share,” Avery said as she took a sip of her tea.

“Yes. I would like that. Like you, I went through a portal. I came to Aeritis at the age of six. It was 1966, according to the human calendar. I still remember that detail from my kindergarten classroom. My family and I were boating on Flathead Lake in Montana. As we were boating, I leaned over the side of the boat and slipped in. I sank deep into the bottom, seemingly drowning. Except I awoke in Riggins and Po’s home several days later. Riggins saw my body from the porch and ran down to Dorfaren Lake to retrieve me. Somehow, I survived the drowning, and they nursed me back to health, with the help of Hyacinth.

“I never saw my human family again. Riggins and Po adopted me and raised me as their own. They taught me how to survive in Aeritis and disguised me as one of the Bayberries. I believe I have had an advantage over other humans who arrived here because such caring and loving folk rescued me.” Susan sighed and gave Avery a sad smile. “I hope you have had a similar experience?”

Avery smiled back at Susan. Another human. She didn't think she would ever see another human again. “Somewhat. Savine and his gang of misfits have ulterior motives for me that do not involve growing flowers in an idyllic lakefront location. Somewhat bloodier plans, really.” Avery shrugged.

“Bloodier plans?” Susan blanched at the word. Now this was someone who had somehow survived life in Aeritis without experiencing its violence.

“They act as if I don't know that they have something awful planned for me.” Avery pressed her fingers to her mouth and shushed. She knew Savine told her to keep quiet, but Susan felt like an exception to that rule now. After all, she was a human too. “Do you have magic? Are you a witch too?”

“I am. As I grew older, I showed an aptitude for magic, particularly casting spells. My parents read all about ancient human magic and trained me to become a witch. As a witch, I've been able to elongate my life, slowing my aging to nearly the same speed as one of the folk. The spell I used to elongate my life tethers myself to my parents. I don't have plans for when they go to their rest and finally give up their essence to the Goddess. For now, I live with Riggins and Po here. I help take care of them as they continue to lead Bayberry in their old age. This is overwhelming, but I share my story with you because I want you to know that you can have a life here in Aeritis. It is possible.”

“So you grew up here? Never seeing your family again? Did you ever try to go through the portal again?” Avery asked. She had so many questions coursing through her mind, but foremost, she wanted to know if there was a way to leave this place.

“I tried once. I was an adolescent girl. I was so different and isolated here, with my monthly moon cycles and my struggles to grasp how to use my magic. I wanted to go to a place where I would be normal again. I wanted to just be human and to return to my former family. I have such tiny, vague memories of them now. So I took a boat out and filled my pockets with rocks. I rowed to the middle of the lake and I threw myself in the lake, but the Goddess did not send me back. It was Rollo, my brother, who saved me. I never tried again.”

“I tried to return, but I also couldn’t get back through the portal,” Avery said, despair rising in her voice.

“You must be devastated by the loss of your home. I remember the despair I felt. Although I was young, I longed for my mother and father. To have them tuck me in at bedtime. For my sisters, who played and teased me. There’s still a hollow place in my soul that longs for that former life. Yet, I’ve found joy here. If you want it, you will find it too,” Susan stated.

“I don’t know how I can survive. I’m not a secret kept for decades. Somehow, all the monsters of this world found out about my arrival,” Avery said. She tensed her hands and clenched her teeth to hold back the tears that threatened to well up.

“You will need to use a glamour. You can disguise yourself and your witch powers.”

“I don’t think that will work. I’ve already been outed as a human in this world. I might as well continue to be myself and not hide who I am.”

Susan’s eyes showed a touch of sorrow in them as she agreed. “I never knew myself as a human. I’ve lived with this disguise all my life.”

To live her whole life as a different person, without ever learning how to be who she was. It was a burden in itself.

“Perhaps I could teach you a thing or two about what you missed in our world? I’d love to share music from the decades

you missed or even food that you may have faint memories of.”

“There was something so sweet it made my teeth ache. I loved it as a child. It was rather sticky and was given to me as a treat.”

“Candy? That may be a tricky one to recreate, but we can try!” Avery said, her optimism blossoming at the thought of sharing some American food with Susan.

“How about, in return, I help you learn to use your magic? We need to get you some protection charms against the fae’s trickery. But first, we need to start with the basics. Did you know that, unlike the fae, we can draw power from the world around us? We can manipulate countless elements to our bidding. It makes us much more powerful than the fae expect. I would like to get you practicing magic before you leave Bayberry for the spring battles.”

“Maybe I won’t have to leave. Do you think I can stay here? It’s more homey in Bayberry. More humane too.” Avery heard the pleading in her voice and felt embarrassed to hear herself beg.

“Oh, Avery, I wish I could say you could stay. But I believe you are not destined for my quiet existence. The Goddess chose you for some greater purpose. I was a child with magic who fell through a portal. You, I believe, will serve a greater good. Perhaps you will be the one who reunites the realms? Or maybe the Goddess will work through you to end the king that we fear so much. Either way, your presence here cannot last. We are a peaceful people, and there are forces in Aeritis that would destroy this place to get their hands on the Goddess’s marked human.”

Avery felt a chill down her spine. She hated how everyone seemed to believe she would serve some larger purpose in Aeritis. She had done nothing significant in her life and did not think she was capable of greatness. It was simply not who she was.

As Avery and Susan finished their conversation together, Savine and the Bayberry leaders entered the room. Riggins

looked grim-faced as he held his wife's wrinkled hand. Savine's face looked characteristically stern. His expression showed that determination that Avery had grown used to seeing on him.

Susan broke the tension first as she stood and took both her frail parents by the arms, guiding them toward the couch. "Father, Mother? What's upset you?"

"Savine, tell them what you shared with us. They deserve to know," Riggins said, his weary body sinking into the couch.

"The loyalists are not returning to the other side of the pass. They are destroying the forest, and it appears they are making plans to attack Bayberry."

Susan let out an audible gasp, and Avery felt that familiar twinge of fear bubble up inside her. She willed herself to push down the fear and looked into Savine's eyes. There was concern there. Of course, he would fear for this community that had taken him in as their own.

"There was always a chance they would change their strategy. After all, we have been fighting for twenty-five years. But they seem to know about Avery. I suspect all of Aeritis has heard of her at this point."

"But what will you do? You cannot let them take her!" Susan said. Her voice sounded shrill, nearly panicked.

Savine's scowl deepened, and he moved his body protectively toward Avery. His eyes seemed to shine like cut ice. "Those loyalist pricks will have to walk over my dead body before they take Avery. If anyone dares to touch her, I will cut them down."

Susan's eyes widened, and her eyebrows raised slightly. "So you will risk bringing the battle to Bayberry, then? Forgive me, but this seems like the only outcome if they are looking for her."

"Avery cannot stay here. Not with the threat of the loyalists invading and ransacking the city. I also will not stand for them destroying the forest. The army will ride out, and push them back into the pass." Savine turned and looked at Avery, taking

her hands in his. That familiar warmth pulsed through both of them, and Avery shuddered at his touch and the intensity of his gaze. “Avery, you’re coming with me. I cannot risk you staying.”

Avery’s heart shuttered. Her stomach roiled at the thought of being on a battlefield.

“I can’t go to battle. I’ll just be in your way.” She shook her head as she spoke. No, this was too soon. She’d hardly practiced swinging that battle axe around. Even though her aim was decent, she wasn’t ready to meet the actual creatures that wanted her dead.

“You need to come. I won’t risk an attack on Bayberry because they see you are there. You will be with me and Jari the whole time.”

Po interrupted before Avery could make a counter argument. “Savine is right, dear. This is the first time the loyalists haven’t left before autumn arrived. They haven’t attacked Savine’s network of trees since the beginning of the war. It’s because of you. They will be looking to see if you are not with them, and they’ll attack Bayberry to search for you. If they see you on the battlefield, they will only try to get to you. But you’re in safe hands with the rebels. Savine, you have won how many battles?”

Savine didn’t respond right away, but he crossed his arms and thought about the question. “I’ve won more battles than I’ve lost. That’s all that matters.”

He turned back to Avery, putting his hand on her arm. “Avery, I will burn the whole loyalist army to the ground before I let them take you from me.”

Avery’s breath caught in her throat, and her heart fluttered in her chest. Savine’s firm squeeze on her arm made her whole body feel radiant. Savine looked at her like they were the only ones in the room, and for a few seconds, they were.

Beside her, someone cleared their throat. “Avery, dear, now that is cleared up, would you like to get some rest? This must

have been an exhausting day.” She didn’t stop looking at Savine to see who spoke.

“I can show her to her room,” Savine offered.

A muffled cough was the only response. But she didn’t give a damn. “I’d appreciate that,” Avery said as she slipped her hand into his.

Chapter Thirty-One

Avery

Savine led Avery to a small room. He let her pass him and leaned against the doorway while she entered the first room Avery had been in since leaving Montana. A twin bed with a fluffy white blanket was in the center of the tiny space. Exposed wood beams crossed the ceiling, and the floor featured a floral-print rug. Her backpack sat on top of a dresser.

Savine watched her with preternatural stillness as she examined the room. Finally, she heard him ask, “Do you want to talk about what was said downstairs?”

Avery raised her eyebrow. “About me joining you in battle? Or about Susan being a human? Actually, you know, I’m good for the night. I just want to chill. Today’s been a lot to process.”

“Chill, whatever that is, sounds perfect. It’s been a bad day. Except for Garnel surviving. You amaze me, Ave.”

Ave.

He called her by her sister’s nickname for her. Avery’s heart swelled as she looked at the tiny bed, made for only one Bayberry-sized person.

“This will be the first actual bedroom I’ve slept in since I left on my backpacking trip,” Avery said as she sat down on

the bed. “Come, sit by me Savine.”

Savine came into the room. The fae lights glowed softly, illuminating Savine’s coppery skin. His essence moved slowly, languidly, as he sat beside Avery on the bed.

Savine leaned his body against the pillows, hands behind his head. Avery grinned at Savine before hopping off the bed. “I want to show you something from my world.”

She went over to her backpack and pulled out her phone. Thank God someone brought her stuff to her room. “Have you ever heard of a selfie?”

“A selfie? Is that what that little black block is called? I saw you pull it out one day.”

Avery giggled at him. “No, this is a phone. Humans can communicate with each other on this little thing. We can call each other, send messages, and take pictures. As well as almost anything else you need.”

“And you claim your world doesn’t have magic. Such a way of communicating sounds more magical than all our essences together. Now, what is this magical selfie?” Savine grinned at Avery and pulled her back to the bed. She tumbled onto his chest with a laugh before she sat beside him.

Avery felt a tightness in her chest. She didn’t know what it was about this fae man, but she liked everything about him. His kindness underneath his grumpy layers, the way he protected her in this dangerous world. And the way his touch felt like an electric current between them. She wanted to sink into him and feel his lips caress hers. But knowing how hurt he’d been in the past made Avery want to let him make the first move. After all, he’d just started to let her touch him without flinching. With more willpower than she thought she had, Avery untangled herself from him, sat up, and leaned against the headboard and pillows.

“A selfie, old man, is a photo you take of yourself. And you’re going to take some with me.” Avery powered on her phone and saw it was at 32%. She opened the camera app without acknowledging that she had no bars or messages. As

their image appeared on the screen, Savine jumped with surprise to see their reflection on the screen.

“How is this not magic? Or mirrors?”

“I guess it’s a bit like a mirror, but it’s called a camera. When I push this button, it will save our image.” Avery took the picture and pulled it up for Savine to see.

In the picture, Avery gave a sweet smile, and she leaned against Savine’s shoulder. Savine’s face was pure surprise. His mouth was gaped open, showing his straight white teeth.

“I wasn’t prepared for that image. I think we should try again.” Both Avery and Savine grinned as she took a picture of the two of them.

They took picture after picture together. Sometimes Savine would stop her and scrutinize the previous pictures. Avery added filters to Savine’s laughing delight. He especially liked a deer antler filter, complete with a flower crown.

“I’m as impressive as Jari,” Savine said as he smiled back at his photo.

After they took more deer-inspired pictures and videos, Avery showed Savine images of her home. She shared photos of her family and even shared those last pictures she took with Morgan before the bear attack. It was the first time she’d allowed herself to look at those pictures.

Avery noticed the battery had dropped to 19%. Too much. She didn’t want to see it fall farther.

“I think that’s enough for tonight. I’m not ready for my phone to die yet.”

“Seeing a part of your world means so much to me, Avery. I don’t... I rarely let people get close to me. I know how hard it is to share pieces of your life that you want to keep a secret,” Savine spoke so low Avery hardly heard him. He looked at her with an intensity in his dusty blue eyes, and the seriousness in his voice caught her off guard. Avery leaned closer to Savine. Her face was close enough to him that his breath prickled her skin, and she smelled that forest and rainstorm scent of his.

“Savine, we’re friends. And friends can open up to each other.”

“Friends. Yes...” his voice was hoarse with desire.

Savine leaned in, taking a deep breath. His hand slid over to her waist. Oh, God. His touch made her melt into flowing honey.

Avery closed her eyes and let his touch be the only thing in the world. He stroked her side in slow, easy circles.

Suddenly, he pulled back. “I should let you get some sleep.”

Avery’s heart pounded in her chest. She wanted him to stay. She wanted more of him, and she did not want to deny that. As she looked at him, she saw his eyes were dilated to black orbs.

“You could stay with me, if you want,” Avery said, looking into Savine’s eyes. “We don’t have to stop sharing a space just because we’re in a house.”

His essence whirled across his skin, and Avery stroked his bare arm. His eyes glistened like sapphires as he leaned his body toward her. His breath was on her again, and it made her want to pull him closer. To never let him slip away again.

“Avery, I think it would be best if I went to my own room tonight. We’re friends, remember? It’s not like when we needed to share a tent,” Savine muttered. With difficulty that Avery could feel, Savine tore himself from the bed and walked toward the door.

“Good night, my little flower. Thank you for letting me chill with you,” Savine said as he walked from the room.

His abrupt exit left Avery reeling. Was she imagining the connection between them? She thought he was attracted to her. With the pet name, his touch, and his possessive behavior toward her. How could he act this way and yet keep denying what she knew they both felt?

But really, she was selfish to try to push him further than he wanted to go. He had a lot of trauma and had only become comfortable with her touching him over the past couple of days as they traveled to Bayberry. Obviously, he didn’t need

her pressuring him to sleep with her. He knew where to find her if he wanted to act on what they both felt.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Avery

A very woke to light streaming in through the white lace curtains. She could tell by the light that she had slept for a long time. Much of the night was filled with fitful sleep, despite Avery sleeping for longer than she had in days. She felt feverish, and her skin prickled, as if she needed the touch of another body beside her. Savine filled her dreams. His hands on her breasts, while his tongue traced her neck. Savine's fingers finding her hot and wet for him between her thighs. The throb between her legs continued as she tried to ignore her body's demands while she dressed. She'd known this man for a few tumultuous weeks, yet she felt inexplicably drawn to him. Now she was having sex dreams about him.

Last night she'd found a few clothes had been laid out for her in the room, including a nightgown that she hadn't used the night before. Avery pulled on a flax-colored top. The sleeves fluttered, and the slightly sheer material was loose on her body. They were soft and comfortable, not unlike loungewear back on Earth. She pulled out her toothbrush and went across the hall to the bathroom. After she brushed her teeth, she combed her wavy hair and put it in one thick braid down the middle of her back.

Avery made her way down the stairs to where she found the kitchen. Susan sat at the breakfast nook with a cup of tea and a

scone. “Avery, please join me for breakfast. I hoped I would see you this morning.”

“Thank you. I’d be happy to join you,” Avery said. Susan poured Avery a cup of strong black tea into a delicate teacup. Avery took a scone from a platter.

“Last night, I was thinking about your predicament in being sent to this place, but being known as a human. I wanted to warn you about accepting food or drinks from any of the fae who you don’t trust,” Susan said. Her sweet face took on a serious look.

Avery sighed as she thought back to the time Savine gave her the wine and forced her to speak truthfully to him. “Unfortunately, I’ve learned that the hard way. Is it only the person giving me the food, or can it be any fae food or drinks?”

“Oh, Avery, I am sorry they have used that against you. I would have hoped that nobody realized what power the fae have over humans when we eat their food. It’s a legend, really. But yes, only the server or the one who offers the food can force the truth from your lips,” Susan replied as she sipped at her tea.

“Savine tested that legend to see if it was true,” Avery shrugged as she spoke. “He hasn’t tried it again, except to find out that I love cheeseburgers. But I’ve been very cautious about drinking with anyone. I’m glad I didn’t have to figure out that food is included in this trick.”

Susan drummed her fingers on the table. “You seem close to Savine now. Do you think you should trust him as much as you do?”

Avery smiled at the thought of that huge fae taking selfies with her on the bed last night. “I can trust him. He said the fae can’t lie. I know he’s a hard ass and a grump, but under all that is this man with a big heart who’s never really felt cared for.”

Susan sighed, and Avery could see the worry that edged in her expression. The tapping of her nails on the table grew in tempo. “I wouldn’t pretend to say that I know Savine. I don’t.

I've heard plenty of stories about him, but he's not exactly going to open up to just anyone. Just be careful there. The fae can't lie. That's true. But they can keep things from people. They can hide truths and twist words to their will."

Avery thought about how well she knew Savine. Could she trust him? Or was his kindness toward her, his growing friendship with her a trick to get her to put down her guard? Avery and Susan drank their tea in silence. Both women seemed lost in their own thoughts. Susan finally spoke up.

"Would you be interested in practicing some magic with me this morning?" Susan asked between sips of tea.

"I think that would be a great idea. First, I want to check in with Kyla and Garnel, then another one of the injured fae. Would you like to join me?"

Susan shook her head. "I'll leave you to that business, then we can meet back here. Are you sure it's a good idea to be walking around town without a guard?"

Avery shrugged. She was carrying the dagger Savine gave her, but wouldn't carry that battle axe around town. "You would know better than me. The other fae I'm dropping in on is one of my guard's grandmother. If Rue is there, I'll ask her to walk back with me. Maybe she'd even be willing to train with me after magic lessons."

"How about I walk with you over to the healing center? It would make me feel better knowing that you arrived safely."

Avery couldn't argue with that. After all, it would be nice to hear about the town from a local's perspective. After breakfast was finished, Avery grabbed a few extra scones to share with Garnel and Kyla.

On the walk through town, Susan shared the meaning of each house's carvings. Then, she shared the meaning behind the plants on each of the buildings and how they correlated to the homeowner's jobs. Those blessed with the ability to heal planted herbs for tinctures, potions, and salves. Some Bayberry gardeners grew the famous bay berries, a small, purplish berry that famously gave these people their name.

Susan shared that the wine made from these berries led to erotic experiences with the partner or partners whom they shared it with. Savine's face flashed in her mind, and she couldn't hide her blush as they approached the healer's center.

She found Garnel sitting up in his room. His clean, white shirt contrasted against his golden-brown skin. Kyla was asleep in the bed beside him. Her hands were nestled protectively against his torso, holding him like she worried he would slip away from her, even in her sleep. Avery was astonished at how quickly he had healed. She'd heard the fae say they had rapid healing, but she didn't believe it until she saw Garnel's speedy recovery with her own eyes.

"Avery, I'm so glad you came," Garnel rasped.

"I wanted to check in on you both. I brought scones," Avery replied.

"That was thoughtful of you," Garnel stated. His voice sounded rough and dry.

"How are you feeling?" Avery asked.

"I'm feeling better, but I must admit, I'm fiercely thirsty. I didn't wish to wake Kyla. She was up most of the night checking on me."

Avery walked over to the sink and got him a glass of water. She gave it to Garnel, and he drank deeply.

"Thank you for saving my life—twice. I am indebted to you," Garnel said.

"You don't need to thank me. I'm glad you are okay. That arrow was terrifying," Avery stated. She'd awkwardly stood near Garnel, but finally sat in the reclining chair she used the day before. She hadn't talked to Garnel on her own much yet, and felt strange talking to him after saving his life. If that's what she did.

"How did you do it? How am I alive?" Garnel asked.

"Um. I don't really know. I was performing CPR, then suddenly a light was coming through me. Yesterday, it seemed

like Hyacinth was pulling heat from my body to yours. I can't tell you what happened."

"CPR? Is that witch magic?" Garnel asked curiously.

"No. It's just a lifesaving skill humans use. I think it was what got you breathing again, but I don't know where that light came from. Maybe it was your own essence?"

"Was it similar to the light that shone when you arrived in Aeritis?" Garnel asked.

"No. It wasn't as bright. That seemed to be an all-consuming light. This wasn't as intense," Avery stated. Her brows furrowed as she remembered the light that struck her during the bear attack. A flash of Morgan entered her mind. Morgan being dragged away by that bear. Fuck. She couldn't think about her sister. Not while she's trying to have a conversation.

"I guess it does not matter how you saved me. What matters is that you did. Kyla and I are eternally grateful for you," Garnel said.

Avery felt the awkwardness rise again. She didn't know how to accept his thanks for something that she didn't control. She chewed nervously on her bottom lip. Avery did not want to stay here any longer. That creeping sense of needing to be alone sneaked back up on her.

"I should let you get some rest. I'm so happy to see you recovering. I'll see you again soon," Avery replied as she stood to leave.

"I'll tell Kyla you came by," Garnel said. At that, Avery closed the door and walked down the hall.

Avery wasn't sure where Mira was at in the healing center, or if she was even still there. She needed help to find the ancient fae's room, but the building was silent. The wood floors echoed with each of Avery's steps, and she was ready to give up when she saw a Bayberry woman in the hall. Like Hyacinth, this woman had bits of twigs and leaves twisted into her hair. Her amber sackcloth dress contained pockets brimming with herbs, tinctures, and small metal devices.

“Can I help you, dear?” the woman asked in a lyrical, soothing voice.

“I am looking for the Latian woman, Mira. I thought she was brought here with the other injured Latians,” Avery said.

“Oh yes, but I should warn you. She is in the first shift towards entering her rest. Her granddaughter, or maybe great-granddaughter, is with her. I can see if they are interested in having visitors.”

“I don’t want to disturb them. But I told Mira I would visit her.”

“Why don’t you wait in our reception room downstairs, and I will see what they say,” the healer said as she directed Avery to the reception room.

The soft, plush material of the couch made Avery feel drowsy as she looked around the room. The space was made to feel welcoming, with the Bayberry’s inclination to decorate with natural elements and an emphasis on incorporating useful plants into the decor. Avery recognized several plants that could be utilized in healing, and some unusual ones that she didn’t know.

After a few minutes, the healer returned with Rue. Rue’s face brightened as she saw Avery. Her warm smile calmed any anxiety that Avery felt about bothering Rue and her grandmother.

“Avery! It’s so kind of you to call on us,” Rue said as she placed her hand on Avery’s shoulder, giving it a soft squeeze.

“I hope Mira is doing okay. I promised I would check on her once I was settled in Bayberry.”

Rue’s smile faded. “It’s a time of celebration in a fae’s life. My grandmother is entering her rest. It’s when we slowly begin to give up our essence to Althea at the end of our lives. This first shift is just her slowing down, becoming less cognizant of what is going on around her.”

Avery couldn’t help but catch her breath in the back of her throat. “I’m so sorry to hear that she is dying.”

The puzzled expression on Rue's face caught Avery by surprise. Did she say something wrong?

The healer spoke up before Rue could reply, "What Rue means is that Mira is entering the final stage of life for the fae. We go into a near-comatose state called our rest. The last part of our essence slowly drains from our bodies, and we use that as our final life force. There are periods of lucidity until eventually we do pass. It can take many years before a fae passes into Arcadia. This is when our souls leave our bodies for the afterlife. To enter our final rest is a great honor for a fae. It is what all of our kind pray for. A long life lived in fulfillment to the Goddess Althea."

Rue looked at the healer with a bittersweet gleam in her eyes. "It's a time to celebrate, but I long for the rest of our family to join grandmother and honor her passage into her rest. I pray to Althea that they arrive in Bayberry quickly."

At least Avery could reassure Rue that her family was on the way. "Don't worry. Savine told me that everyone else should arrive later today or tomorrow. Mira will have her family with her soon."

"That's good news!" Rue replied. "I was worried they would encounter more loyalists on the journey to Latiah."

The upcoming battle entered Avery's mind, but she didn't dare share that information with Rue. There was one thing, though, that Avery did need to ask. "Rue, with your grandmother resting and Kyla staying near Garnel, I was wondering if you could help me with my training? I don't want to undo the work Kyla and I have started. Plus, after the attack the other night, I feel like I need to train harder than ever," Avery said. She knew what she'd be facing next week, with Savine's crazy idea to keep her close to him in a battle. There was no way she was going to take any chances at not being prepared this time.

"Does the commander know you're asking a lowly guard to help you train? I'm so young, I don't know what he would say," Rue replied, looking down at her feet as she spoke.

The healer smiled gently at Rue and spoke, “Dear, in times like these it is often the unlikeliest of us who can make the greatest impact on a life. Look at Avery. A human sent into our realm finally helped your grandmother find the peace she searched for.”

Rue’s warm honey eyes seemed to glow a bit. “I suppose you’re right. If the commander didn’t step into his role, my people may not be here today. He’s not old for a fae, and he’s had to work so hard to gain support for his cause. But he’s changing our lives. Just look at all he has done to protect my people.”

Avery wondered what Rue meant by that, especially when she saw the pride beam in the healer’s eyes. But she didn’t question what Rue meant by her people not being here today.

“That he has. The Goddess has blessed us with his good service,” the healer replied.

Rue turned to Avery. “I would be honored to help you train. When should we begin?”

“As soon as possible! I’m working on my magic with Susan, the daughter of Riggins and Po. But maybe after that? How about before supper?”



“Just concentrate on your power and tell it what to do,” Susan said as she and Avery stood in a field of calendula, poppies, and aster.

Avery felt frustration bubble forth as she attempted yet again to control her magic tangibly. It seemed she could only manifest her powers in stressful situations. “That’s easier said than done.”

That magical pull that Avery felt when she was with Hyacinth was so much more challenging to bring to the surface now. Maybe she needed some sort of life or death situation to push the magic forward. She didn’t understand how Susan, another witch, could make calling out her own magic look so simple.

“Avery. Focus. Concentrate. Feel the power deep in your belly and let it radiate out of you. Let it listen to your command,” Susan said as she placed a hand over a calendula plant. Orange blossoms grew and stretched from the plant, blooming into large, happy orange blooms.

“I don’t see how growing a plant is going to protect me from those hunting me,” Avery quipped. She was being snappy, she knew it too. But she was exhausted. And yes, distracted. Try as she might, her mind kept drifting to Savine’s hands caressing her. Her skin prickled at the thought and a moment later she felt power rise before bursting a poppy flower into flames.

“Oh, damn!” she shouted as she stomped on the flames, crushing the plant into a sooty pile.

Susan grinned. She laughed as Avery stomped, blonde hair flying wildly around as she crushed the flames. “It’s all about control. Try using your voice to say what you want your power to do. I’ve read that we witches can dictate what we want to see happen through words.”

Avery took a deep breath. She closed her eyes as she let her other senses awaken. The breeze was soft and warm, a late summer blessing. Sunlight filtered across her face. Sweet scents of flowers in bloom were everywhere around her. She continued to concentrate on that scent as she drew herself inward. Feeling that power deep in her bones. She pulled it forward, feeling the warmth of her magic radiate to her fingertips. “Grow,” she commanded as she gently stroked the plant near her feet. Tendrils and shoots brushed against Avery, but she kept her eyes closed tight.

“Open your eyes,” Susan said in a quiet, reverent voice that was so different from her jolly laughter.

As Avery opened her eyes, she saw the poppy near the pile of ash had erupted in a medley of bright red blooms. Each one gave a cheerful nod as the breeze slipped through the flowers. “I did it!” Avery shouted with a laugh. Without thinking, she reached over and hugged Susan close to her. “I didn’t think I could make that happen, but here it is!”

“You did wonderfully, Avery. You have a lot of power in you, and you’ll learn to control it and grow it,” Susan said into Avery’s ear as they embraced. She pulled back and gave Avery a cheerful smile.

Susan spoke again before Avery could say another word. “Unlike the fae, we’re not born with a finite amount of power, what they call the essence. Rather, we humans either have the seed of magic or don’t. Then it’s up to us to grow and nurture that seed into something bigger. That is why witches can grow their magic to be substantially more powerful than fae. I believe that’s why the fae saw our ancestors as a threat.”

“How did you learn about our power? How do you even know this history?” Avery asked.

Susan shrugged and said casually, “Thanks to my father. He quietly collected and borrowed ancient texts on witch magic, claiming it was for historical research into the Bayberry origins. The Bayberries, traditionally being a bit of both, are born with a well of the essence, but also can grow it and morph their magic into something else. How other fae allow this, I don’t know. Perhaps they don’t understand the power that is in these small, simple folk.”

“If others knew, would this place be in danger?” Avery wondered. She could not imagine this pristine and peaceful community being in any sort of danger.

“Oh, certainly. There are many who would perceive us as a threat. Jasper would strike first. He is quick to jealousy and does not accept a risk to his power in Latiah. Since we are technically in Latian territory, I believe he would treat us similarly to the wolveren and other outcast groups.”

“But that is awful! All the folk should have a right to live peacefully and without fear.” Avery furrowed her brows and raised her arms. She did not understand how a society could be so ruthless toward each other.

Susan shrugged her shoulders, seemingly willing to accept Aeritis for what it was. “It’s the way of things here. Beauty with a bite. Now, back to our practice. I want you to grow one more plant.”

Avery nodded and concentrated again on the world around her. She smelled the sweet, tangy scent of calendula and focused on the smell. Calling her magic was easier this time. She felt it course toward her fingertips. “Grow,” she said as she cast her magic into the land. The ground tremored, but she continued to cast her magic toward growing the plants. She felt leaves softly brush her thighs and waist, but still she concentrated on pushing her power out.

Susan gasped with surprise, and Avery opened her eyes. What was once short, ankle-high plants were now reaching nearly to Susan and Avery’s waist. Everywhere, red, orange, and purple blooms covered the field. There were so many flowers it was hard to see the plant’s leaves. The aroma of the blooms was overwhelming, and Avery felt intoxicated by the scent.

“That is amazing. Who knew I could do that?” She felt proud. She felt like she achieved this gorgeous garden field without draining herself and without feeling frustrated.

“You seem to have a natural knack for growing and healing. I read once that witches would most likely be inclined toward something. I’ve always had great strength in calling forth water. Maybe you’re more drawn toward the healing arts,” Susan said with her cheerful smile. She reached over and picked a clump of asters, tucking them behind her glamoured ear. The purple-blue of the petals popped against Susan’s wild red hair. “We might as well decorate our hair in the Bayberry style with all your blooms.”

Avery began picking flowers and weaving them into a flower crown. She wouldn’t go to Hyacinth’s level of hair decorations, but she could at least wear flowers in her hair. Until combat practice, of course.

Rue met Avery in the meadow. The look of curiosity danced on her face as she admired Avery’s handiwork.

“Where did all these flowers come from? Once we finish training, let’s make a crown for me too,” Rue said as she gave Avery a friendly pat on the back.

“You know exactly where these flowers came from. She’s all yours. Go easy on her, Avery!” Susan said as she began trekking through the thick blooms.

Rue cast impressive glances toward Avery. A big smile grew across her face. “Who would have thought that a trail builder would have such a talent for growing flowers with magic?” Avery said.

“This gift comes to you naturally, Avery. Just like your ability to heal,” Rue replied.

Avery smiled, but didn’t acknowledge her gift. “By the way, how is your grandmother doing?”

“She seems at peace. The beginning process of going into one’s rest can be a little disorienting, and I’m relieved that the rest of the family will be here soon.”

Rue and Avery walked back with Susan toward the town, but stopped along a tree-lined field just outside of Avery’s wildflower explosion. Their training began with warm-up exercises. Avery did not complain about the sets of pushups, jumping jacks, and sit-ups. It felt good to work her body in this way. It felt natural and routine. She even taught Rue how to do burpees. Rue began moaning as they worked toward a set of fifty burpees.

“You humans have a deranged sense of what makes up a warm-up exercise,” Rue whined as she forced her body to complete the set of burpees.

“If you like this, I’d be happy to lead you in a HIIT workout. I guarantee you’ll be drenched in sweat by the end,” Avery teased.

“As long as it’s you taking the hit!” Rue teased as she bumped her hip into Avery’s side, knocking her down into the trampled flower patch. Rue reached a hand down and pulled Avery up, laughing as they stood.

This budding friendship with Rue and Susan felt so refreshing. Neither were members of Savine’s council, and it didn’t feel like Avery was being forced into a friendship with them. Rue was someone that Avery sought on her own. And

Susan was like her. A human trying to find her place in an inhuman world.

Throughout the afternoon, Rue instructed Avery on how to protect herself. She taught her how to disarm a grown man with only a swift and directed kick. She showed Avery what to listen for when a fae may prepare to attack. Rue also shared how to prevent a shifter from changing into their other form.

Rue shared that she was a shifter fae. Her people had lived semi-nomadic lives for generations, keeping loose ties to Latiah and the other nearby nations of Nephel to the south and Lothwin to the north. She showed Avery how she could shift into her animal form—a swift and cunning fox. As a fox, Rue packed a lethal bite when she combined her essence with her fangs. Avery would have never guessed that any shifter fae could kill with a bite, but Rue warned her that their essence could poison the victims of any shifter's bite.

When Avery asked how the survivors of the wolver's bite had lived, Rue explained that the fae's essence would counterattack the wound. Chances were not likely that a single shifter bite would kill a grown fae, but it was possible with the right combination of essence and force.

Avery's muscles screamed, and her hands ached after their lesson. The same feeling coursed through her in the days to come as she and Rue trained in more technical moves. Rue even trusted her to train with the battle axe.

After working throughout the afternoon, Rue and Avery sat in the field of wildflowers and made flower crowns. It was so different from what they had just been doing that it felt a bit jarring. This switch from badass warrior woman to feminine flower weaver had Avery giggling.

"I never thought a warrior like you could connect with your more feminine side, Rue." Avery smirked as she weaved more flowers into the crown.

"I have many sides, and one of those is a feminine side. Once everyone is back in Bayberry, there will be days of parties and celebrations to honor the harvest. I love dressing in

the beautiful gowns and dancing the night away. That does not diminish me as a warrior or a strong female.”

“I like that about you. I’ve always worked to fit into both my identity as an outdoors woman and my identity as a woman who enjoys looking good. Once, when I was on a two-week rafting trip, I brought a sexy dress in my dry bag. About a week into the trip, I snuck off to wash up the best I could in a nearby creek and got dressed up in the dress. I even put on makeup. Everyone was surprised when I came walking up looking ready to hit a club, but was in the middle of nowhere on a sandy spit of sand. I think you get how I feel.”

“Even though I didn’t understand everything you said, I understand the desire to have those two parts of yourself. Did you only get dressed up once in those two weeks?”

Avery blushed as she remembered what had happened to that dress. “Unfortunately, the dress only lasted the night. My boyfriend at the time and I took a dip in the river after a couple of margaritas and the dress was swiftly removed. We were, um... preoccupied, and the dress floated down the river.”

Rue let out a loud laugh. “I like you, Avery Hollis. You’re just the woman to liven up these old rebels I’ve been stuck with.”

Chapter Thirty-Three

Savine

The reports from the trees continued to be dismal. Whole hectares of forest were lost to the loyalists as Savine gathered his forces and prepared to march on his enemies. The forests called out for help before the loyalist army decimated them. Savine had to act soon, or the forest would continue to fall.

After four days of healing, Garnel was back in the training ring with Savine and gaining strength each day. His council agreed they would need to push the enemy back over the pass before winter set in. Neither side had ever risked battling through the harsh winter months, and Savine wouldn't allow them to start now. Not without sacrificing their food supply and the safety of Bayberry.

Savine called his council for a meeting at the winter encampments where the prairie met the forest, and the river flowed into Dorfaren Lake. Despite his growing unease, having his people back together and his council whole gave him a wave of relief. They all made it to the winter encampment. They had enough supplies between themselves and the Bayberry Folk to last the winter. Surely these were things to be thankful for, even with battle looming.

The early autumn sun cast out its last rays onto the plants and folk who called this place home. Savine wished he could

linger here longer. He'd prayed to the Goddess for days that news of the loyalist retreat would be heard, but it didn't come. In fact, the trees seemed to whisper of threats approaching from all directions. He would not leave his people or the Bayberries at risk in this exposed land.

As the six of them met in his personal tent, Savine had the nagging suspicion that Jay and Raikin were about to breach a sensitive subject. Savine remained quiet, knowing that they would say their peace before long.

Savine offered his council wine and some late summer fruits. Kyla took her brother's hand as she already held her soulmate's hand. Savine pulled away from her touch. He didn't need Kyla reading into his emotions more than she already sensed without touching Savine. Garnel and Kyla both looked at him with grave faces. Kyla chewed on her bottom lip while Garnel furrowed his brow.

"Alright, out with it," Savine said.

"Ah, brother, you know us too well," Garnel stated. "Since you already suspect we have something to say, I'll get to the point."

"Thank the Goddess for that!" Kyla huffed. Garnel shot her a look that was meant to intimidate, but had Kyla smirking in that teasing way she often did around him.

"Why are you so adamant about offering Avery protection? What is your goal? What are we risking our people's safety for? For this idea that the untested witch can defeat the King of Latiah? It's a fool's errand," Raikin interrupted Garnel before he had a moment to speak. Savine crossed his arms, feeling the attack by his ambassador.

"Raikin, don't be so forward!" Jay pleaded.

"I don't ask for myself. But there are forces in Aeritis who will stop at nothing to take the human for themselves, whether to use her or rid our world of her. Especially as she grows in her power. Jasper alone—"

"Don't speak of that man to me. I know bringing Avery to the battlefield could be a mistake. Especially if that man is

there. She's not ready to face him."

Kyla squeezed her brother's arm and Savine pulled away. He had no interest in her manipulating his frustration at Raikin. For the briefest moment, Kyla's face registered hurt at his distance. It was the oldest issue they had together. Her insistence on trying to touch him, his disdain for her touch, and the manipulation that she could use with her touch.

"Would it not be better to disguise her here? Hide her amongst the Bayberries?" Kyla asked.

"The very birds of the sky and the wind itself have already reported to their masters that Avery is in Bayberry. I could never put that burden on the Bayberries. Each day we linger here without action puts them more at risk of attack."

Raikin stood and pointed his finger at Savine as he let out a flurry of words. "You put your people at risk when you bring her with us to battle the loyalists. You know that. And no matter where she runs, she will be hunted. A battlefield is no place for her. She is untrained and untested in battle. You would be better off handing her over to the highest bidder. At least we will get something from the exchange," Raikin continued. He knew how to use that sharp tongue of his. Knew to ask Savine the hard questions that Savine tried to avoid.

Savine instinctually touched the dagger on his belt. Raikin was testing him, and it took all his control not to strike back physically. "Raikin, you hold your tongue if you wish to keep it. I already have the Bayberry woman, Susan, working with her on training her magic. She has the skills to work with Avery's form of magic. As for her being hunted down, it is your job to ensure that does not happen. You all vowed to protect her."

Gaelyn let out a harsh, biting laugh. "A vow that was forced upon us. Now, you want us to test that vow in battle? It makes no sense. Of course, we must push the bastards back over the pass. But to bring Avery to the battle? Do you want to make us more threatened than we already are?"

Jay spoke in his gentle tones, the same he used for an unruly elk. "We ask because we must know. What is the end goal of

this?”

Savine felt flustered. His typically decisive composure vanished. “I don’t know! All I want is to protect my people and her! I won’t allow another day to go by where all she knows of the fae is fear. I will not accept that her fate is death by our people,” Savine roared his answer, losing all semblance of the reasonable, assured man that he tried so hard to be.

Kyla spoke first. Of course she did. She was the only one willing to speak up when he lost his temper with his council. “We know you. And we are concerned for you and for Avery. About what helping her may entail, especially once we battle the king. You know, the things he’s willing to do to eliminate a threat to his domain. If you could give her binding protection. If you suspect she’s your—”

“No, I cannot do that. I won’t force our bonds on her. I cannot in good standing force anything on her,” Savine pulled away from his council and turned his back, looking out his door. He saw the mountains far in the distance. The pain that the trees experienced at the hands of his enemies was palpable, even from here. He needed to keep his calm and help his people, the forests included. But most of all, his body throbbed with the urge to keep Avery safe. To protect her at all costs.

“We’ll move forward with the plans I’ve already discussed in our previous meetings. All of us will ride out. Garnel, you will lead the charge while Avery and I head to the forests. I must go to them and assess the damage. I’ll do what I can to heal the trees before joining the rest of you on the battlefield.”

“So we’ll ride tomorrow?” Gaelyn asked. “Will Avery be capable of protecting herself? The only time I trained with her, she wouldn’t have survived a moment on the battlefield.”

“Enough of questioning my choices with Avery. All of you! I will raise the Abyss itself if anyone tries to harm her. Nothing else matters,” Savine replied, scowling at his council.

“Yes, sir,” Jay replied.

Gaelyn grinned with that sharp-toothed smile. “You speak so strongly of the lengths you would go to protect her, yet you

have not been honest with her, have you?”

“Gaelyn...” Garnel growled in warning.

Savine’s essence pulsed as thorns shot out of his hands toward Gaelyn. The thorns pressed at her wrists. “You have your secrets, Seafae, and I have mine. Do not disclose my past, or I will make sure it’s the last thing you do. You’re all dismissed. Have the troops ready to ride at dawn. I will be staying in Bayberry tonight.”

Garnel lingered as the others walked away. Savine saw him hesitate as Kyla talked to him in low tones. Eventually, she turned away from him and caught up to Jay.

“Did you not hear my instructions? You’re dismissed, Garnel.” Savine’s voice was harsh, and he meant to have the warning in it. He wasn’t in the mood for company.

“Do you know how many years it took for me to realize my attraction to Kyla went deeper than a casual interest? Nearly thirty years. Thirty years of not understanding the draw to my best friend’s sister. Goddess knows that I tried to fight it.” Garnel seemed undeterred by Savine’s gruff words as he talked in a casual voice, like this conversation was the most natural thing in the world.

Savine didn’t reply as he looked across the lake, and Garnel continued his speech. “For some, the draw to their soulmate is immediate. Like a lightning strike. That’s how Jay told me it was for him and Raikin. But, of course, Raikin was too blind to realize it for quite some time. Don’t be like Raikin.”

Savine’s eyes darted to Garnel. His closest friend, who he’d tried to keep at a distance for so many years now. “You don’t even know what you’re saying. Rylo’s Sage, Selene, wrecked any chance of me having a soulmate. Do you have any idea what she did to me in the Tower of Teeth? Took out my soul and snipped it into pieces.”

Garnel gave Savine a sad smile. “You can’t believe that she has the power to keep those bound by the Goddess apart. You have a soulmate, and you know who it is. I want you to admit it— and not just for yourself, because you deserve it. But for

Avery and the cause. Because if she's not your soulmate, then what's the purpose of guarding her so closely? You know you're not going to turn that girl into an assassin. Be honest with yourself and with all of us."

Savine shook his head. There were signs he'd been denying for weeks. The way their touch lit him on fire. The possessiveness that he felt for her only continued to grow each day. But it couldn't be true.

"I don't deserve her. She's too good, and I'm so broken. This cause is all I am, and without it, I'm a shell of a man."

Garnel stepped closer, like he wanted to touch Savine, but he didn't. "She's only human. You don't have time on your side with this. You can't wait thirty years."

Savine thought of Susan. She'd somehow slowed her aging to a Fae speed. Maybe it was possible for Avery, too? But Garnel didn't know about Susan, and it wasn't his place to share that secret.

"I care for Avery, but she hasn't shown much interest in me beyond friendship."

Garnel cocked his head. "I've hardly been around you two, and I mean this in the kindest way possible, but Savine, you are a fool if you think Avery only wants to be your friend. She's probably more confused than you are. You need to be honest with yourself and her before something bad happens to her. You'll regret it all your days if you don't admit that the bond is there and she's taken, or worse."

Savine thought about all his regrets. Chiefly being, taking another man's wife when he thought she was his soulmate, and being the reason she was now dead.

"I'm not about to make the same mistakes as last time. I can't have another woman's blood on my hands like that." Savine shuddered as he spoke. Just mentioning Lilith made him want to close himself up to this conversation.

"It's not the same, Savine. At least admit it to yourself," Garnel said as he put a hand on Savine's shoulder and turned them both back toward Bayberry.

“It’s not. But it remains that I don’t deserve her. And I’m not leaving her here tomorrow.” Savine sighed, then thought of one more thing he wanted to discuss with Garnel. “When we’re in battle, don’t shift into your bear form near Avery. I don’t know how she’ll react.”

Garnel agreed as they walked together.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Savine

In the busyness of settling his people into the winter encampment at Bayberry, and preparing for battle, Savine hardly had time to spend with Avery. They'd seen each other at meals, where she always requested that he pass her food or fill her plate. She'd spoken of training her magic with Susan and training for battle with Rue. Rue was an honorable young fae. She was not yet an adult when her clan of shifters sought his protection, and now she vowed her loyalty to him. Yet, he wished Avery was training with someone more experienced, like Kyla or Gaelyn. Maybe even his bodyguard, Weston. But Avery was insistent that she train with Rue. To prove her point, she invited him to watch one of their training sessions.

He watched Avery spar with Rue, battle axe against sword. She was learning to protect her weaknesses and look for advantages against Rue. But she had a very long way to go before she would be able to defend herself properly against fae warriors in battle.

Avery hadn't asked Savine to stay in her room again, either. He didn't want to admit how much he missed her body near his while he slept, or the soft sounds she made when she was deep asleep and the way her hair tangled its way across her face. He even missed the groggy faces she made as she woke in the morning.

He wasn't willing to tell her how he felt a tug to be near her. How his body instinctively tingled when she entered a room, and he smelled that sweet honeysuckle and mint scent of hers, even if she wasn't in sight. Savine denied his every instinct, and Garnel called him out on it. But he still didn't think he could admit what he suspected to Avery. He'd already been fooled once into thinking someone was his soulmate, and it had gotten Lilith killed. He wasn't willing to risk making that mistake again.

That draw to Avery was what kept Savine awake the night before they would ride to battle. He should be thinking about strategy. The ways to reduce the loss of life tomorrow. Instead, his distracted mind wandered to all the things he'd like to do to Avery's body.

The quiet calm of Riggins and Po's house didn't put his mind at ease. Rather, it filled him with dread as he thought about all that was on the line with this battle. Was it a mistake to bring Avery? Would he even be able to keep her safe? But if the loyalists set a trap, surely he couldn't risk leaving her in Bayberry, exposing this community and Avery to attack.

His council meeting had frustrated him more than he should have allowed. Now, all these doubts floated through his head on the eve of battle.

As Savine continued to toss on his bed, he could hear her familiar sound of footsteps in the hall. Uncautious, overtly loud footsteps. How could one small woman make such a large amount of noise just by walking? He didn't understand it, but he loved that about her. She was so completely un-fae that it was a continued surprise to see all the unique ways that made her different from him and his people.

The knock that followed made Savine's heart race. Avery was knocking on his door. In the middle of the night. His body trembled with anticipation as he silently walked across the room and to the door. Her loud knock made his ears ring as he swung the door open.

The mischievous smile that met his face made him want to grab Avery close and bury his face in her, taking in her scent,

her feel, and the warmth he knew would happen when they touched. But he didn't do it. He held himself back as he returned her smile with one of his own.

"Good. You're still awake," Avery said as she pushed her way forward. "Can I come in?" She was already halfway through the door as she spoke. But of course, Savine would let her in. He couldn't deny her anything.

"How do you know you didn't wake me? Your clapping footsteps would wake the dead," Savine teased. Avery's face lit up, and she batted her hand on his arm. Savine could never get enough of the mix of surprise and laughter on her face. Her expressive face could hide nothing, and the sight of it made his heart tug in his chest.

"I took a chance, with it being past your bedtime and all, old man." Avery shrugged, with that same smirk dotting her face. As quickly as it was there, Savine watched her face alter into a frown. "But really, I'm nervous about the battle. I know I'm playing a minor part in it. I know you will keep me from harm, but still. I can't help but worry about everyone involved in the conflict."

He watched as Avery plodded across the room, her loud human footsteps echoed on the hardwood before she climbed into his bed. He should send her back to her room. Push her away. But damn him, every part of his body wanted her here with him.

Savine's breath came in a ragged beat. "It's natural to feel this way before a battle. I question whether it's worth the risk to my people. I always ask myself the same questions before I make an attack. Can we make headway and open new territory to those still suffering under Jasper's reign? Are there any who are in immediate danger? Will this battle make a dent in this endless conflict?"

He paused, thinking about how tomorrow's battle was necessary for so many reasons. Not only to rescue the forest, but to protect Bayberry, Avery, and even keep his people from suffering through a long winter of battles. Neither side was equipped for that. "When I first started this rebellion, the

answers felt easy. The entire country suffered under Jasper's rule. But now? We've had a stalemate for nearly a decade. The rebels control this side of the mountain pass, and the loyalists are on the other side. The battle tomorrow will be to ensure that the status quo continues, and to free the forests from further destruction. But I always question my decision to bring my followers into danger. Every time the weight of battle pulls at me."

Savine walked over and sat next to Avery. He could feel the heat of her body near his as he slid down on his back, looking up at her.

Avery ran her hands through his loose hair. Savine couldn't stop his eyes from closing as he breathed in her sweet scent.

"The people who follow you, they respect you so much. I've never seen such loyalty and adoration in followers. It's because they know they can trust you to make the hard decisions," Avery said as she continued to stroke Savine's hair.

That loyalty his people gave him was hard earned, he knew that. They trusted him. And Avery? She was trusting him more every day, even though he wasn't being honest with her. Goddess alive, he needed to tell her the whole truth of what he needed her to do and how that was wrecking him inside and out with a desire to protect her—even from himself. He was fucking selfish for holding back, and yet he didn't want to tell her she would have to assassinate the king to end this conflict.

"Do you know what I like to do when I need to clear my head?" Avery asked.

"Look at your phone?" Savine teased. He still couldn't believe the images they had taken together, and how that small black brick captured and saved their likeness.

Avery gave him a sardonic smile. "That's a fading option. I like to go swimming. I used to sneak out of my house in Golden and meet friends at the lake in town as a teen. I'd always force my sister to join me, even though she hated sneaking out. Even now, I like to go swimming to clear my mind. I was swimming in Quartz Lake the night before I came

to Aeritis. But I haven't been swimming since I arrived here, so let's go swim in Dorfaren Lake."

Savine opened his eyes and cocked his head. "In the night? Right now?"

"Of course. Surely someone as ancient as you has gone swimming by moonlight?"

Savine thought back to his childhood. To times when he, Garnel, and the other boys would sneak out of the palace grounds and swim in a mountain lake together.

"Not since I was a boy," Savine replied.

Avery stood up. She seemed determined to go forward with this late night swim. That's something he was learning to adore about her. The spontaneity in which she lived her life and her willingness to do things for fun was so foreign to him. "Believe me, it will relieve our worries," Avery said as she headed towards the door. Turning back to Savine, she asked, "Suits or no suits?"

Savine wasn't sure what she meant. The word was one of those funny words in her own tongue that she slipped seamlessly into the language of the fae. "Suits?" he asked, trying to hide the confusion in his voice.

"Are you questioning using suits or agreeing? Actually, we're friends. Let's go with suits," Avery said confidently as she headed out the door.

Savine still wasn't sure what she meant by suits, but he followed her out into the hall and down to her room. Avery looked back at him with a confused look on her face. "Aren't you going to change?" she asked.

"Change?" Savine asked, puzzled. Goddess save him. He felt like he was making an ass out of himself. Try as he might, he was not good with women. There were plenty of reasons that he'd kept his distance these last twenty-five years, but if he was being honest with himself, one of them was his complete misunderstanding of females.

"Into your swimming suit? To go into the lake?" Her big, brown eyes stared back at him with a mix of mirth and

confusion. “Or would you rather we skinny dip?” Avery asked with a wink.

Abyss damn him, he was an idiot. She was getting something to wear into the water. He often wore nothing when he swam, and that was the custom with most fae. But he could probably find something to put on if she was not comfortable with what she called skinny dipping.

“Fae typically swim in the nude. I didn’t understand what you were asking. But I can find something to wear into the water if you prefer that,” Savine replied as he leaned against the doorway into Avery’s room. Thoughts of Avery’s naked body near his made his skin prickle and his essence swirl.

“Not a problem. We’ll do things the fae style,” Avery said with an easy smile. She reached her hand out and threaded her fingers in his. The feel of her hand on his made him shudder as he looked down at her.

The town was quiet as Savine led Avery through Bayberry. These cozy little homes holding peaceful people needed to see another day of peace here. Even though he was supposed to be distracting himself from the battle they would soon face, he imagined what this place would look like if he failed. If the entire community went up in flames because he could not do his duty to protect them from harm.

As if sensing his growing concern, Avery squeezed his hand and smiled up at him. “Clearing our minds, remember? There’s no point in worrying about tomorrow.”

This woman was a gift to him from the Goddess, but in more ways than he could have ever imagined. Avery wasn’t some tool for him to utilize to defeat the king. His need for her in his life was like breathing air. She picked up on his moods like she was an extension of himself.

At the water’s edge, Avery didn’t hesitate to lift her nightgown up, revealing her lithe body. She wasn’t wearing a garment on her breasts, and the sight of her small breasts brought a shiver through his body. The moonlight cascaded over her skin, and Savine was in awe at how strong her small body was.

Avery met his eyes as she slid her underwear down to her ankles and stepped out. “You’re looking a little tongue tied, old man,” Avery said, her voice filled with a passion that caught him off guard. Damn, he was in deep.

“Come here. I want to feel your perfect body,” he commanded. But Avery looked at him like a little nymph and slipped into the inky darkness of the water.

“Not so fast. If you want me, you’re going to have to catch me.” One moment Avery was standing in the water, the next all he saw were her golden locks cascading around her as she disappeared into the dark depths.

Without further hesitation, Savine stripped off his clothes and slid into the cold, late-summer water. Avery rose to the surface near him, close enough to reach out and pull her close. But before he could, she squirted a mouthful of lake water at him, hitting him in the chest. Laughter escaped from him, unencumbered, and the joy of this playfulness made him feel a little shaky. It was all too good. Too good for him.

But fuck if he didn’t dive in after her. As Savine reached through the water, he felt Avery’s ankle and grabbed hold. She kicked lightly against his hand before she turned her body and pulled herself in closer to him. Avery *wanted* to be caught. Wanted to play and tease. She wanted his touch as much as he desired hers. He could feel it in the way she pressed herself close to him.

Her eyes sparkled as she said, “You caught me. Now, what are you going to do?”

Avery’s eyes roamed over his lips, and she looked like a starving woman. He couldn’t stop himself from pressing his lips to hers, even if he’d wanted to. She kissed him back like he was giving her life itself. Her lake-cooled, naked skin was pressed against his, and he demanded more of her. He lifted her chin up as he bent lower, deepening their kiss. Avery opened herself for him so willingly it made him want more. He swept his tongue in and drank in that delicious taste of honeysuckle and mint.

And then he felt it. What he'd been denying for weeks. What Garnel had confronted him on. The tendrils of their soulmate bond worked around their bodies, sending a warm pulse between them, demanding that they get closer. It was overpowering and intoxicating. The bond demanded that he accept it, pulled and tugged at him with the need to join himself to her, weaving their souls into one.

Fuck. Fuck no. He pulled back from her as if he'd been stung.

Avery's face lost that spark of desire, and the confusion in her eyes shattered him. "Avery, I can't do this," he muttered. The hurt in her eyes tore through him like a lance.

"Why?" Her voice came out small, hurt. "Are you not attracted to me? Is it because I'm not fae?"

"Fuck no, Avery. To me, you are perfect. Everything about you, from the way you wear your emotions on your face to how you've adapted to this world, even in your grief. And your curvy human body? It's a work of art that I want to spend all my days exploring. I need you like I need air in my lungs." Goddess, he was completely failing at telling her how he couldn't have her. But he couldn't think of anything else when that pulsing beat of their bond was driving him mad with the desire to claim her, to imprint that bond on her.

"Then have me," Avery said, voice husky with desire.

Before he could make his point, Avery wrapped herself around him again. The cool splashes of the water sent a chill through him. He pulled her warm heat in closer, supporting her in the water as she wrapped her legs around his waist.

Avery kissed him like his lips on hers was the only thing keeping her anchored in the dark water.

His cock twitched, and the urge to bury himself deep in her, to give in to the pulsing need of the bond, was almost more than he could resist. Savine cupped her small breast in his hands, feeling the weight of it. He bent down and pressed his lips to her breast, taking her nipple in his mouth and sucking lightly. The moan that escaped Avery snapped him out of the

moment. If he acted on his desire, he'd fuck everything up. He pulled back, swimming deeper into the lake. The chill of their separation was like a shockwave cascading across his body.

"Avery. We can't do this," he ground the words out, like poison exiting his mouth.

"Dammit, Savine," Avery said. "I've never felt like this for anybody. You can't tell me you don't feel the chemistry between us? Like hell we can't do this."

She swam over closer. He should put more distance between them again. Not let her get close. But she closed the distance between them again. This time, looking more worried than anything.

Avery pressed her hands to his chest. Savine pulled her closer and supported her on his thigh so she wouldn't have to tread water. Avery pressed her forehead to his. The motion was gentle, like he was something breakable, something that would shatter if she wasn't careful.

Her voice caressed his ear, and she pressed a nibbling kiss on the tip of his arched ears. "Tell me what's going on in your mind. Help me understand, Savine."

Her hand made small circles on a spot on his chest. Finally, he realized she was feeling one of the many invisible scars on his skin. The ones that his father marked upon him, that left a permanent scar that could only be felt rather than seen. Nobody had touched those scars in so long, he'd forgotten that the distended scars were strange to someone not used to it.

"Can you feel one of my scars?" Savine asked. He realized it must have been the first time she'd touched his bare chest in one of his scarred places. He had a patchwork of his father's abuse across his body, but mostly in places that were not often touched by others. Savine spent years wondering how his father had chosen the specific places to punish Savine's body, and it wasn't until he was grown that he realized his father hid the wounds from his mother.

"Who did this to you? They've carved your body up!" Avery said as anger burst forward in her tone.

“It was a long time ago,” Savine said. It was the truth. What he wasn’t admitting was that the person who did this to him still haunted his dreams and made him into the cold, distant man that he was today.

“I’ve never seen scars on you, but now that I’m touching your chest, you’re covered in raised scars. How are they not visible?” Avery asked. At one time, he would have snapped at anyone else for asking him such a personal question. A month ago, he would have never allowed someone to touch him in this way. But with Avery, he wanted her to know his past, even the hard parts. Even though another part of himself was screaming to pull back, to not let her in.

Savine pulled her close into a hug. Despite their naked bodies touching in so many places, the mood had shifted, fragmented.

“Let’s get dressed. It’s time I told you some secrets I’ve been holding back.”

The need to keep her close, despite his frantic desire to pull away and not let her in, was going to tear him apart. He tucked her into his arms, so similar to the day he found her and carried her down from Quartz Mountain. She didn’t protest as they made their way out of the lake and silently dressed. After she was clothed, Avery sat down on the sandy shore. She gave him a strained smile and invited him to sit. The concern on Avery’s face ate at him, and Savine’s heart rattled inside him like a caged bird.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Savine

“The scars are from my father. He used his essence to cloak the scars, and I have never removed that certain glamour. I think they’re still able to be felt because he wanted anyone who got close enough to feel them to know that I am... that I am something used and discarded. I don’t deserve to be touched or to be close to someone.” Goddess damn him. He didn’t deserve to be loved. But saying those words he’d told himself his whole life was torture.

Avery moved her hands to his chest. Slid them under his vest as she caressed and stroked all the old wounds. She continued her exploration, down his stomach and up his arms. Her movements weren’t meant to arouse, but to heal. Soft, tentative strokes like she was erasing and embracing his burden at the same time. She swept her hands under the back of his vest and felt the deep, jagged impressions on his back. The moonlit lake stretched in front of them, and the golden wisps of her hair framed her sweet face.

The pull of the bond grew taut. Fuck. The growing hunger for her was like a bottomless hole in his soul.

He could never be worthy of her. He pulled away from her and stood up, creating some space between them. It was better this way. To not let her get closer to him.

“Savine. Please,” Avery rasped out as she stood too, reaching for his hand. The way she said his name and added that, please. Goddess, it was more than he could take. He turned to Avery, and she took his hand in hers as she pulled herself to stand next to him.

“You deserve affection. You deserve love and closeness. I don’t know all of your past, but I know your present. I see you. And everything that I see deserves all the love in this world,” Avery whispered. She leaned her body closer to Savine’s, pressing her lips to the exposed scar on his chest.

Tendrils of warmth and a tugging desire to expose all of his soul to her washed over him. He wanted to bear his hurts and his joys to her. But what if she couldn’t handle all the pain in his past?

Avery lifted her face from his chest, removing his vest, and moved to face his back. Then she pressed her lips to the straight edge scar on his upper back.

He was ten when he received those wounds. He’d spilled his milk at a meal with some foreign dignitary. His father had dismissed him from the table. The purple hue of his father’s hidden wrath was all too familiar to Savine. He knew what would await him for embarrassing his father. His mother had shot Savine a look that told him she knew he was to be punished, too. But as usual, she was incapable of helping him. Instead of being sent to his room, a servant escorted him to his father’s study. Hours passed before his father arrived. He went to his desk and pulled out the small blade that he used to punish Savine. By that age, he had learned not to cry out, or the punishment would be worse. He’d already learned to let his mind escape his body as his father sliced the blade into his skin, letting the blood pool on the antique carpet.

And now? Avery kissed the old childhood wound with more tenderness than he’d ever experienced. Oh, Mother Goddess. He didn’t deserve this affection.

“Avery, stop. Please,” Savine said, the words catching in his throat as he spoke. “I don’t deserve this. I don’t. I am a broken man, and you cannot fix me.”

Damn, this was all too much for him to take in. Suddenly, his body felt too heavy for his legs to support. He slid to the ground, feet splashing into the shores of the lake. His legs supported his head as he felt his body fold into itself. But Avery was there. Her steady presence wrapped across his back. He leaned into her, being cradled by this tiny woman.

“Savine, when I look at you, I don’t see a broken man. I see a man who has been told lies. Yes, lies even from those who should be incapable of lying. You have been told lies all your life until they became your truths. But you are more than the lies your father told you. You are more than your experience in a prison cell all those years ago.”

Savine needed to tell her all of his past. All the pain. The truth of who he really was and what he intended to use her for. Put it out there, and if she was still there after she heard it, then maybe what she said had truth to it.

“Avery, I need to tell you something. I should have told you weeks ago, but you will hate me after I tell you. I couldn’t bring myself to let you know how much I will use you. Not after. Not after we started becoming friends,” Savine said.

Avery couldn’t hide the surprise on her face as she sat down beside him, bare feet in the water. Abyss damn him. He was going to see that expressive face turn to hatred.

He pulled in a jagged breath. “I’m not just Savine Thorne. I am Savine Thorne Ralathain, Prince of Latiah, heir to the Latian throne. This civil war began when I fled my father, but I cannot dethrone him. I cannot stop what I began. Not without damning myself to death. No Latian subject can,” Savine said.

Avery looked at him with a confused expression. There wasn’t the anger that he feared, though. She didn’t speak, giving him space to tell his story.

“All the rulers of Aeritis have a protection on them. Their subjects can’t kill them. If a subject kills their ruler, they forfeit their own life. The same goes for the heirs. My father, Jasper, has tried to plot my death for nearly a century now. He’s hired assassins, bought foreign soldiers, and had me falsely imprisoned in Nepheli. But before that, he hurt me in

ways no child should ever experience. He tried to make me weak, to prevent me from inheriting what he did not receive.

“He’s never been a true king of Latiah. True kings and queens of our nation hold dominion over the flora and the fauna of Aeritis. Jasper holds control of the fauna, and I have the power to communicate with the forests. As you know, I can control plants and use them as a weapon. Jasper can communicate with animals, but that is the extent of his essence in that regard. He has the power to control minds, and can inflict pain on his victims, but that is not a typical trait of a Latian ruler.”

Avery continued to look at him with trepidation. He didn’t blame her. He was dumping a lot on her at this moment, but he couldn’t stop. Now that the words flowed, it was like a force that would not stop.

“My grandfather was like me. His essence was rooted in the natural world, and when he took the boughs and antlers, he gained the power of both the flora and fauna. When his essence finally diminished, and his soul went to Arcadia, everyone thought my father would finally inherit his true power as king. He did not. Instead, my powers only strengthened. I still cannot call on the animal world, but my communication with the forest grew stronger. They refuse to answer to Jasper and are loyal only to me. Even the ancient forests bordering Orofine will not speak to him.

“This spurred the civil war. We had a fight over events leading to my grandfather’s death. That night the forest woke me in my sleep, and I heard a prophecy about the fate of Aeritis. When I returned home, my grandfather was dead, and my father was in a rage over not wearing the cedar boughs on his crown. I knew in his anger that he would finally lose control and kill me. My only hope in that moment was knowing that he would kill himself in the process, allowing Kyla to come into power. My mother intervened, and the killing blow he intended for me struck her.” Savine sucked in his breath as he said the words. His mother, always so frail and unhappy, had been a shell of a person most of his life. Despite her lifetime of grief, she stopped the father of her children

from killing one of them. Savine looked into Avery's eyes and saw the glistening tears pouring down.

“Kyla and I fled our home with as many loyal followers who dared leave with us. Once he knew I had the full power of the forest behind me, his plans to have me murdered increased, but by that time, I saw how few allies he had. He'd spent years isolating and abusing the minority populations in our land. They were angry, and they were tired of his leadership. We banded together and began winning battles against the king and his loyalists. Despite all these years and all the bloodshed that's covered this land, we cannot defeat him. Not without an outsider willing to kill him. I've tried all that I could to get support from other nations. Raikin spends many months out of the year rallying support for our cause. Against all these efforts, we never removed him from power. Nobody would answer our call to end his life. And he hasn't succeeded in killing me yet either.”

Avery pursed her lips, as if she was processing everything Savine told her. She tossed small pebbles into the lake and didn't make eye contact with him.

“I think I understand why you didn't tell me that Jasper was your father. Who would ever want to claim him as a father, after all he's done to you? But what I don't understand is how I could physically help you defeat him. I'm no assassin. I don't understand how you found me, small and injured, on Quartz Mountain and came to the conclusion that I'd make the perfect assassin. You expect me to kill him because I'm a human? You want to use me for your own gain.” She shook her head, the hurt on her soft features. Savine tried to respond, but she raised her hand, silencing him.

“And why would you keep the secret that you're the heir to the throne? Did you hope that I'd hand you a kingdom without knowing? I mean, I guess I always assumed you would take control if you won the civil war, but it wasn't a given. For all I knew, the king had a kind-hearted prince to rule after him.” Her voice had a hint of sarcasm to it as she said this last sentence. The mirthless chuckle she let out made Savine cringe. She hated him already.

Savine paused, waiting for her to go on, but she didn't. She turned to the lake and went back to throwing pebbles into the water's edge. "At first, when I found you, I thought Althea sent you as the solution to my dilemma, since she marked you with her five stars on your forehead. That's why I made you swear fealty to me. I hoped that one day I could force you to assassinate the king of Latiah. But now? The very idea of causing you pain or placing you in harm's way makes me hate myself. You are good. You are a healer, not an assassin. You're meant to change the world by bringing people joy and kindness. There's not enough of that in our world. And I'm asking you to tear your own soul apart by killing my own father. Abyss, damn me, I don't know if I could guarantee that you would survive the assassination."

Avery's eyes sparked with light, and she pulled a tiny green orb from her hand. It floated, lapping out on the ripples, before sinking into the lake, a supernatural light casting down into the depths. She didn't speak for a while as she continued to cast little round lights into the lake, illuminating the inky water. As she worked, she chewed on her lip, deep in thought.

"I am mad that you lied to me, and just so you know, I think withholding information is lying. It's your loophole, and I think you're still keeping a lot from me. Like the whole imprisonment thing? Once you said you were imprisoned for loving a woman or something cryptic. Now you say you were falsely imprisoned because of your father. Well, which is it?"

No, that was too much. Savine would not talk about Lilith. He'd told no one about their relationship and how his mistake had cost him his freedom and Lilith her life.

But was it worth losing Avery over this secret? And the bond he felt between them. That changed everything he'd assumed about his own soul and what had happened to him in the Tower of Teeth.

"You have every right to be mad at me. And I have lied, you're right. I've been lying to myself and to you. But what you're asking me to tell you is something I've told no one. Kyla and Garnel tried to talk to me about my imprisonment after it happened, but I refused. I still do."

Avery looked at Savine, and the tight lips and frown made that growing bond feel stronger somehow, like she was sending her anger down their connection.

“Savine, I want to trust you. I thought you were one of the few people I could trust here. And I get it. You’ve been through a lot. But if your secrets are going to jeopardize my survival? Well, then we have a bigger issue,” Avery said, shaking her head.

The bond between them bucked and twisted. How could she not notice it? Surely she did? Savine was getting pressured to confess his deepest, most painful secrets by Avery *and* their bond.

Savine sighed. “So much of what happened in Nephel has ruined me. I went there as a visiting prince. I fell in love with a princess who was in a political marriage. It is rare here to marry instead of waiting for a soulmate, but it happens, especially to unmated royalty. She loved me in return, and I thought at the time we would be bonded soulmates, and she would be released from the marriage. The bond never happened, and they found us out. Her father and husband had her killed for our affair. Then they imprisoned me, tortured me — my body, mind, and soul— for two years before I escaped. I’ve told you some of that part of the story. But... Lilith... Only years later did I find out my father manipulated her mind to fall in love with me in hopes the Nepheli royalty would kill me for it.”

Tears were streaming down Avery’s face again. Savine felt drained, like he’d poured all of himself out to her.

“I’ve never told anyone that,” he said flatly.

Avery pulled him into a tight hug, wet cheeks on his shoulders. She held him so long the moon began ducking below the distant mountain on the far side of the lake. Finally, she pulled away and looked at Savine. “I’ll do it.” Her voice came out with a confidence that Savine didn’t expect. “I’ll kill the king. For what he’s done to you and your people. If I’m the only one who can do it, then I’ll step up. I’m not capable yet. Don’t expect me to do it tomorrow. But I’ll train harder and

figure out how to stop him,” Avery said. Her face hardened, resolute by what she’d decided.

But the thought of putting her in danger made bile rise into his throat. No. He’d have to find another way. Not now. She was far too precious to him to risk her life in this way.

“We’ll find another way. We have to. What if that vow you made has indirectly made you a subject of Latiah through your oath to me? I couldn’t live with myself if I caused even a hair on your head to be injured. Not now. Not now that I know you’re my... that you’re my friend.”

Avery’s eyes squinted, and her head cocked slightly. He already was keeping another secret from her. But Goddess forgive him, he couldn’t tell her about that bond. Not yet. He was pouring out too much of himself, and he still didn’t think he could deserve this woman as his soulmate.

“And that’s what we are? Friends?” Avery’s eyebrow raised. She leaned in, her breath wispy on his bare neck. “That’s why you stopped kissing me? What about how you need me like you need air in your lungs? You want to spend your days exploring my body?” She paused, pulling away and standing up, but he was too exhausted to stop her. “Are you claiming that’s how you feel about your friends? Like fuck, Savine. I don’t think you know what you want.”

Savine kneeled in the sand, looking up at Avery. He should have let her keep pulling away, but the connection to her was like life itself, and he couldn’t let her go, not even if he wanted to. He grabbed her hands and pulled her back to him, burying his head in her chest. The feel and scent of her intoxicated him.

“Goddess help me, Avery. I want you more than I’ve ever wanted anything. But not now. Not when Jasper would use you against me, and fuck knows what else he’d do if he knew how I feel about you. I have to get rid of him. Without using you to do it. I need to do that first before I can be anything more than friends with you. It’s not what I want, and I don’t know how I’ll resist you.”

Avery reached down and tipped his head up to look into her glistening eyes. The emotions of this whole evening shone on her face. But she was still there. She wasn't leaving him. How could he deserve such a woman?

“Okay. No more pushing me away, though. No more secrets. I get it. You've got a hell of a lot of things to figure out other than if you want to fuck me or love me, or whatever this could become. You're probably betrothed to some beautiful princess anyway,” Avery said before she planted a kiss on his forehead.

Savine let his face sink back into her chest. He kneeled in supplication before this woman. “Goddess alive, how could you believe I could ever be with anyone else when I know you are the only one who could fill my tattered soul?”

Avery lifted one eyebrow and smiled at him. “You can't go around saying things like that if we're going to keep this platonic, okay?”

Chapter Thirty-Six

Avery

The forest Avery found herself in was like no other forest that she'd ever seen. Cedars wider than the length of a truck grew piled tightly together. Interwoven throughout the cedars were hemlocks that Avery thought she could carve out and build a house in. Spruce and tamaracks that were growing to unnatural sizes. All her forestry education came back to her. The size of these trees was unheard of. She wanted to stop and get a better idea of how all these trees were growing to such massive sizes so tightly. But now was not the time for a forestry field trip.

Savine gave orders long before they left the prairie bordering Dorfaren Lake that the army was to ride in silence. He wouldn't speak to her, even with his warm breath tickling the curve of her ear and the pulsing ache where his arm wrapped around her waist. All these hours of riding close to Savine without speaking left Avery's head spinning over the events at the lake.

Hot damn! That kiss between them had been electrifying. She felt crazy thinking this, but it felt like she and Savine were connected on some sort of deeper level. Like she was connected to his need and his desire for her in the very depths of her being. It was the best first kiss she'd experienced. Until he'd turned so icy cold and pulled away. Even so, she sensed he couldn't get enough of her either. That was obvious when

he had her nipple in his mouth, even as he pulled himself away and tried to resist his need to kiss her.

What came next still left her reeling. She knew he had *a lot* of baggage. Hell, how couldn't he, with what she already knew of his father and his imprisonment? But to hear that his father and the king were the same? That Savine was the heir to the Latian throne? She was stunned, and honestly, pretty damn mad. This entire community, everyone she'd met and talked to, had kept that secret from her. There were plenty of clues that indicated that he wasn't being honest with who he was, but she'd missed them all. Obviously, she was an idiot to not ask more questions. Savine was in open rebellion against the king, and if she'd asked more questions about his ties to the king, she would have figured this out earlier. If she looked past her anger, she understood *why* Savine chose to not acknowledge Jasper as his father. Clearly, the father-son ties had been severed long ago.

But this whole idea that he wanted to use her as an assassin? If he'd told her from the get go, she'd have laughed in his face. How did he look at her all those weeks ago and think to himself, "Yeah, she looks like the sort of person who could kill a tyrant?"

Everything changed after hearing his story and knowing all that his father inflicted on him. Most devastating of all, the loss of the only woman who loved him. Then, to find out Lilith's mind was manipulated into loving him. All the pain he'd suffered knowing that his lover died because of him, only to find out it was all a manipulation. How could he not be devastated?

Avery had this burning need to destroy Jasper. She didn't know where it came from, but the thought of someone harming Savine filled her with such vitriol that she was sure she could take the bastard out. After months, maybe years of training, of course.

As Avery was lost in her thoughts, Savine slid his hand tighter across her stomach, pulling her in close. His entire body tensed as he drew her back, protectively holding her close.

Avery looked through the thick branches of the forest, looking for any sign of danger, but all she could see were trees. The forest was so thick that Jari narrowly squeezed his way through the pathways between massive trunks and wayward branches. Elk and riders crossed the forest in every direction possible, some cutting through paths that abruptly ended and forced them to turn around looking for an alternative path. Despite the challenging path, the warriors made their way through the woods like ghosts in the wind. Avery suspected if the enemy was near, they'd have no clue what was coming for them. Not with these silent, determined warriors stalking the woods for their enemy.

Abruptly, Savine pulled the reins back on Jari, stopping in front of a cedar that looked like the width of a small cottage. "What's going on?" Avery whispered.

Savine brought his finger to his lips, giving her a silent command to not speak. His face was a hard plane, all scowl and seriousness as he dismounted Jari. He reached for Avery, lowering her to the ground. The grip of his hand on her waist was pure possession. All day, Savine made sure they were touching in some way, like Avery could slip into the wind if he let his anchoring touch leave her. It was such a sudden change from the way he used to cringe at her touch, but she welcomed it. It was an honor, really. For him to trust her enough to be comfortable touching her, especially now that she had a better perspective on how much pain physical touch and emotional connection had brought him in the past. No wonder he thought he was unlovable.

Savine led her over to the ancient cedar tree. This tree could easily be thousands of years old, possibly even older than any trees on Earth. Avery listened as Savine spoke to the tree in hushed, barely audible tones. She couldn't understand a word he said, but the cadence in his speech was mesmerizing, and she leaned in closer to feel the rhythm of his words.

When Savine walked away from the tree, his typically copper skin was ashen. His essence was strangely still, and the look in his eyes sent fear piercing into Avery's heart. "What did the tree say?" Avery's voice was hardly audible, but

Savine leaned in close to whisper in her ear, the touch of his breath sending a chill down her spine.

“They’re near. They’re encamped in the next valley, where they’ve decimated all the trees,” Savine said.

Avery’s stomach did a flip, and she instinctively touched the ax at her side. It was made of pure iron, because Savine said he’d take no risk in arming her with anything but iron. She understood one gash from this ax would destroy a fae. It was such a rare and lethal metal in Aeritis that only a few rebels were armed with iron.

Savine kept his hand interlaced in hers as he walked over to his council, who waited near Jari. No one spoke as they looked at Savine, the seriousness of the situation etched on his face. The council formed a closely knit circle, ready to hear their commander’s orders.

He leaned forward as he whispered to Garnel about the plan. “Their numbers are huge. It seems the entire army is camped in the valley over the ridge. We will be on them by nightfall. Garnel, you lead the charge. Kyla, you will use your empath abilities to bring terror down on the loyalists like they’ve never imagined. I want Raikin to infiltrate the encampment. Jay will take the left flank with his own band of warriors and Gaelyn will lead the other side. I will try to restore any trees I can in the rear with Avery. Then we will join Garnel and Kyla in the center of the fighting to make it clear that Avery is here and we will not stand for them lingering on this side of the pass. If Jasper is on the battlefield, do not touch him. We are not ready for that fight yet. We push them back and don’t stop until we force them over the pass.”

It was one of those moments where the council didn’t dare question Savine. They may tease and prod at him mercilessly, but they all seemed to understand when to follow orders, and this was one of those moments.

The council climbed on their war elk, and the army continued like phantoms through the forest. They were in those woods to fight this battle. It was inevitable that it was coming, but she couldn’t help but feel a sense of icy dread coil

through her veins. The last time she'd had this sense of impending doom was on Quartz Mountain. Avery gripped Savine's hand around her waist. The soothing warmth of his touch was the only thing that kept her calm.

As they rode through the mountainside, Avery noticed skeletons of decimated trees. Savine's body tensed as soon as they saw the first tree. By the fifth tree, Savine stopped Jari and directed the other warriors to continue riding. Rue and Weston, who had been riding nearby, both stopped, acting as guards for their commander and prince.

Savine pulled Avery down from Jari, avoiding the massive elk's antlers. Savine's words were the faintest echo in her ear. "Draw your magic up with me, commanding life into this tree. The magic they used can be reversed. You can do it."

Avery nodded. This would be the first time she'd worked her magic with Savine, but she didn't hesitate. If she could work her magic with Hyacinth or Susan, then she could work with Savine, who she felt such a tangible connection to. Avery took Savine's hand in hers, brushing her thumb along the whorls of his essence.

Concentrating on that spot deep within her, her magic bubbled to the surface. It got easier and easier with more practice, but for whatever reason, a green light that did her bidding was still the easiest thing for her to do. This time, she needed to put all her concentration into healing the ravaged tree. While still gripping Savine's hand, Avery brought her other hand to the trunk. Savine did the same, creating a circle with the tree centered between them. Avery pushed her magic into the tree, willing it to heal. She whispered her own words of healing toward the tree. Closing her eyes, Avery transferred that magical energy deep within her forward.

A gasp came from close behind Avery, and she opened her eyes to see the skeletal remains of the damaged trunk were replaced with the dusty blue needles of a blue spruce. Avery looked behind her and saw Rue beaming with pride.

"You did it," Rue said in hushed tones.

“We did it!” Avery replied as she looked at Savine. His essence still pulsed with power as he pulled her against his chest.

“You amaze me, little flower. Look at what we did together,” Savine said into her hair.

Avery didn't let the moment of healing this tree stop her from moving on to the other trees. Together, she and Savine made quick work of the two dozen decimated trees on the ridge before they continued to follow the army down toward the valley below. Rue and Weston stayed close at hand, protecting them from any potential threat, while Avery and Savine made themselves vulnerable as they repaired the injured trees.

Avery's gasp came out in muffled shock as she crested the ridge and looked at the valley below. Thousands upon thousands of trees stood like skeletal remains. Branches were sheared off, and the exposed trunk of the trees gleamed in an incandescent light as the evening sun faded from the valley.

“Holy shit,” Avery swore. “I don't know how we can possibly save them all.”

Savine's speechless face made Avery's skin prickle. “Savine?” Avery said gently as she touched his arm with her free hand.

“There is evil magic here. Something far greater than should be possible in Aeritis. This destruction...” Savine's voice tapered off. His words were left hanging unfinished in the air as he dropped to his knees.

Rue pointed down to where the front line of warriors already battled the loyalists. “It's begun,” she said.

Weston looked down at the valley below. “There's nothing you can do for these trees. They will need us in the battle, sir,” Weston said.

Savine's face twisted into something that made Avery take a step back. Would he actually hurt Weston for what he suggested?

“I can hear their cries. I can hear the agony that is coursing through their roots,” Savine replied. His stare looked so distant that it frightened Avery.

Avery took a deep breath and dropped to her knees beside Savine. This was no time for her to let her fears overtake her. Savine needed her strength now. He needed her to hold him together as he mourned his forests and the pain they suffered. “Savine, we may not save them all right now, but we can at least relieve some of their suffering.” Then an idea came to her. She looked at the swaying remains of an aspen grove, three hundred yards down the ridge from where they stood. “If we can save one aspen, surely their connection through their roots will send some relief to all the other aspens.”

Savine looked down at her and gave her a sad smile. “We can try. We don’t give up on these trees. We don’t leave them to suffer. Let’s do what we can until the rebels can’t go on without us.” He turned and looked directly at Weston. Weston’s furry essence swirled, like a beast readying to attack. “You won’t leave your post. You will be beside Avery at all times during this conflict.” He turned his head, his features softening as he looked at Rue. “Both of you. No matter what happens in this battle, you do not leave her.”

Weston let out a disapproving grunt. He wasn’t happy about being relegated to babysitter for the entire battle. His essence continued to swirl irritably.

“I’m happy to stay with Avery,” Rue said, flashing a brilliant smile at Avery. Of course she was. Avery loved that fae for her big heart and willingness to help Avery navigate this fucked up world.

Although she couldn’t see the details of the conflict below, it sounded horrifying. Shouts rippled across the valley, echoing up to the ridgeline where they stood. Inhuman roars and screams of pain pierced Avery’s ears. The smell of blood and fire infiltrated her nose. The battle raging in the valley was enough to send a chill down her spine. Thank God she was up here with three capable warriors that had her ass if things got crazy for them. The fighting already seemed pretty damn crazy for the warriors fighting below.

Avery tried to ignore the sounds of the battle as she and the others made their way over to the blanched remains of the aspen grove.

Savine touched the trunks before he pulled back. His face looked haunted as he looked back at Avery. "It is dark magic. Jasper has tapped into something to force his control on the trees. It is beyond what the Goddess would ever give someone through their essence."

"Then let's push it out so the trees can have some relief," Avery replied.

"It is going to take a lot, Avery," Savine said. "He trapped the trees in some sort of stasis. They're screaming out in agony from the magic, destroying them from the inside. Do you have the power to push it out? I don't want to hurt you."

Avery touched Savine's chest, reassuring him that she could do this. But she wasn't really sure. She already felt a heaviness growing within her. Like she could collapse from all the effort she'd just put forth. "I can do it. I won't let you or your subjects suffer. That includes the trees."

Savine nodded before taking her hand and touching a gnarled root that surfaced from the ground. Avery did the same. She dug deeper into her magic than she'd done before, pulling up a well of herself that she didn't know was possible. It felt reckless, like she could collapse from the effort, but she didn't back down.

At the same time, she steadied herself on Savine and the bit of life that took hold in the aspen's root. With a force that she didn't know was possible, she sent the magic pulsing out of her veins. It burned her from the inside, like she was searing off a piece of herself and pouring it into the root. Again and again she forced that magic through herself and into the root.

As Avery poured herself into the trees, a deeper well of magic, completely unlike her own, overflowed into her body. This wild, volatile magic threatened to consume her, but she was powerless against stopping the well that she unintentionally tapped.

The magic seemed to be deep in the ground. Avery pulled the magic up as ribbons of different shades of green streamed into her. The strain of tapping into so much power rocked Avery's body, and she trembled like a leaf in the wind as she continued to pull the magic from the earth. Savine's strong, calloused hands held firm, his pulse quickening as Avery acted as a conduit for this strange magic. There was no controlling the flow of magic as it flowed through her and into Savine and the tree. His grip on her was so tight she thought her hand was going to break.

Suddenly, the skeletal forest burst into color as fresh green leaves the color of spring shot out of the broken trees. Whatever this magic was, it was working! Avery didn't back down from the magic that coursed through her veins.

Savine's body shuddered as his skin soaked in the magic that she pumped into him. His blue eyes transformed into a brilliant green. His essence swirled and convulsed, and his entire being took on an otherworldly form. Avery was no longer hand in hand with the great fae rebel, but with a godlike being. She tried to pull her hand from his grasp, but they seemed to be locked together as she fed this strange magic into him and the surrounding forest.

The battle below stilled, with all eyes on Avery and Savine and the growing woods of trees. Savine let out an animalistic roar that echoed off the rocks and cliffs of the mountain slope overhead. A crown of gilded cedar boughs ripped through his flesh, encircling his head in blood-soaked boughs. Avery's eyes bulged. What did she just witness?

Savine turned to Avery with a sneer on his face. Avery's stomach flipped as she realized he might hurt her without realizing what he was doing. His hand continued to grip her, tightening to the point that she worried he would crush it.

"Savine! Let go of me!" Avery shouted, but whatever power that pushed through his veins had transformed him into something that no longer heard her. His eyes, bright green orbs, shone without recognition. He pushed Avery away, and she collapsed on the hard-pack dirt. Another roar filled the

valley as Savine picked up his sword and raised it over his head.

Avery couldn't make out the warriors below, but their response to Savine's call thundered off the mountaintops.

An ear-splitting noise broke through the valley as all the previously maimed trees *uprooted* themselves and began walking toward the violence in the valley below. The elks bugled and sprinted toward Savine. As the trees continued their march into the valley, the elks formed a circle around Avery, Savine, Rue, and Weston. Avery thought the elks looked like they were dancing in a circle around them, calling as they went. What in the actual hell had she released?

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Savine

Savine looked at the world through emerald-tinted eyes. Everything in his vision was laced in green. The magic coursing through Aeritis stretched out before him like golden tendrils, connecting and illuminating. Somehow, he could see every living being's life force laid bare before him.

He turned to the woman who gave him all this power. She had taken a few steps away from him after he let her go, and she wore an expression his magic-addled mind couldn't comprehend. Did she fear him? Her shoulders looked tight, and her body shook uncontrollably. Something salty diminished her honeysuckle and mint scent. Small beads of sweat dotted her forehead.

The gap between their bodies was interconnected with dozens of small strings of brilliant, shimmering light.

Avery Hollis.

His Avery.

She was so small, so frightened. Like she feared he was beyond understanding.

But not with that bond. There it was, glistening before his eyes. With that bond between them, he would never lose that part of himself, even with his mind and body drunk on power.

He resisted the urge to reach out to those strings and pull them taut, forcing Avery to acknowledge what he now knew was between them.

She really was his soulmate, and he was hers. Here was the physical proof he'd denied for weeks, coming up with every excuse to diminish their visceral connection.

Savine's gaze shifted to the elk who encircled them. With the beat of each footstep, Savine felt the tug of their acceptance of him as king tightening. The trees' voices ululated through his senses, an unspoken chant toward war.

All of this—the power, the elk bowing before him, the trees marching under his command—all of it pointed to Savine being the true King of Latiah. He touched the cold metal of the gilded crown of cedars on his head and released another bellowing cry that bounded across the mountains. His people, rallied by his cry, lifted their weapons against the loyalists. Through the sea of green, Savine saw red splatter as Latian fought Latian.

Brother against brother, sister against sister.

The elk responded, bugling their war cry as they pulled back from encircling Savine and galloped down the valley. Only Jari and two other mounts remained. Savine mounted his elk, antlers thrashing in anticipation of entering the fray. Savine looked back at Avery. A tug of tenderness that went against this animalistic instinct rushed through him.

My soulmate.

“Ride with me, Avery,” Savine said, his voice reverberating with power.

Avery hesitated, then nodded. Her voice seemed to falter as she allowed Savine to pull her up onto Jari. Savine felt the stream of untapped magic pool between their touch. Avery looked down at the spot where Savine's hand held her waist. He willed his essence to pull that pure magic Avery carried into his body. As he did, the connecting strands of essence in all the world seemed to brighten.

Avery bit down on her lip, confusion circling her brown eyes. “What have I released?” Avery asked.

Savine pressed Jari forward and bellowed out another war cry as they galloped down the steep slope of the mountain walls.

“You have made me a king. And I will take my rightful place on the throne with you by my side.”

Avery’s body tensed at Savine’s words, and he tugged her tighter to him, possessively wanting everyone to see him with Avery sharing his saddle.

“Can you kill him now?” Avery asked. Savine grimaced at her words. The magic that tugged at his veins and pulled those bonds between them tightened. He didn’t know how she didn’t feel it, and wished in this moment that she could see the illuminated lights that marked them as soulmates.

It was Savine, not the powerful king riding into battle who answered Avery. “My sweet flower, I want nothing more than to protect you and take that burden from you. We will find a way. Now brace yourself. I am going to unleash this power on our enemies.”

Savine let go of the restraint he had on this powerful magic. His vision filled with green and the gold-tinted cords of essence across Aeritis illuminated as he rode Jari into the melee. He gripped Avery and the reins in one hand as he outstretched his sword and plunged into the battle.

Avery’s scream as he threw them into battle nearly sent him out of his bloodthirsty quest for vengeance. The urge to protect her over anything else crawled to the front of his mind. *Flee. Get your mate to safety.* He forced the errant urge away and let that feral side of him take over his mind and body.

Savine’s sword illuminated as he cut through a loyalist soldier. In another time, another place, this soldier could have been loyal to him. He could have known her and learned to value her talents. Now she was in a bloodied heap on the ground. Even in this state, driven by the need to claim what

was rightfully his, Savine's heart was tattered with regret as he sunk his blade into another fellow Latian.

Shifters from both sides were transforming into their animal selves and sinking teeth and claws into the enemy.

Avery cried out to Savine, but her words were lost in the melee of battle. Warriors tore into each other. The elk bludgeoned the loyalists with antlers and hooves. Even the loyalists' own elk had turned on them. The battle cry of the trees raged through him. The trees, moving with speed he never imagined, took their vengeance on their torturers in unspeakable ways.

Avery gasped as a group of aspen split a man in half, throwing the wasted body to the ground.

"Savine, stop them! They shouldn't do this to each other!" Avery cried out. Her muscles were rigid with unease and restlessness.

Savine ignored her cry as he focused on the magical tethers that connected everything to Aeritis. He took his sword and sliced one as easily as if he were slicing a piece of string. Immediately, a loyalist warrior crumpled to the ground. The green light in his vision grew brighter. He could end this *now*.

He would dethrone his father by obliterating his forces and placing him so far removed from the world that nobody would remember the name Jasper Ralathain.

Avery squirmed under his touch as he cut the essence from a group of loyalists.

She shouted in his ear, "Stop this! Savine! Stop!"

Savine paused, slowing Jari's pace. "This is war, Avery. What would you have me do?" Savine asked as he saw four elk trample a group of loyalist soldiers.

"Let me at least heal your own injured soldiers. Let me help them. If the loyalists see us working together, they may surrender," Avery said, her voice pained with the horror before her. No, his little flower was not a natural warrior. She was made for saving. For restoring life and bringing life forward,

not destroying it. Not like what he was shaped into from such an early age.

He might as well trample his little flower by denying her of her natural ability. No, she had a point.

“Rue! Weston! We go on foot. Guard Avery as she heals the wounded. Stay within earshot at all times.”

Savine pulled himself off Jari before helping Avery down. This could be a terrible mistake, but the battle leaned heavily toward their side. She had the right to be as useful as anyone else. Besides, his people would need to trust her and adore her like he did.

Savine pulled her close to him, tilting her delicate chin upward as he kissed her. She responded to his touch, immediately returning his kiss. The softness of her lips intoxicated him as his possessiveness pushed forward.

So much for just being friends. Now that he recognized the bond with her, not touching her felt like denying himself a vital part of his survival.

Don't leave her. Take her and flee while you can.

The deep recesses of his mind seemed to rustle through his thoughts. Not yet. He didn't dare act on that voice.

Avery let out a little whimper that rose above the chaos of the battlefield. He pulled back and looked into the dark pools of her eyes.

“Be safe, my little flower. Stay with Rue and Weston,” Savine said as he tugged her closer, stealing one last embrace before he forced his body to move forward, back into the battle.

Savine tore through the strings of his enemies, felling numbers of them like puppets in a heap. The power that surged through him was so much that he could sink into it and drown in this force.

Snap

Again, the loyalists fell to his feet.

As he scanned the battlefield, he could make out Avery nearby, leaning over a wounded rebel warrior. She cradled his head in her arms as she poured her magic into him. He ignored that pull to keep her close and turned his attention back to the battle before him.

Searching the field, he made out Garnel, transformed into that massive garnet-colored bear. Beside him, Kyla seemed to wield her daggers and her essence simultaneously. The terror on the faces of the enemy in front of him told Savine all he needed to know was the fear Kyla was conjuring in the minds of the loyalists.

That or this loyalist knew what facing The Great Bear and his mate meant.

The battle was nearly over. Already, the tides of victory were in their favor. The remaining loyalists scrambled to make an escape across the valley and up the steep, narrow path leading to the high mountain pass to Orofine.

Even the trees on the mountains across the valley had awoken to his call. Those few loyalists fleeing to the mountains would not stand a chance with the trees in an uproar.

Then Savine heard the buzz of hundreds of wings in the air.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Avery

“Who the fuck is attacking us now?” Weston shouted from where he guarded Avery.

“From what we can ascertain, we are being attacked by a large force of Hylaxes,” a warrior responded.

A chill swept through Avery’s spine. A flash of memory brought back that bloody fight on Quartz Mountain when she had to stab a Hylax to prevent it from taking her alive.

Savine looked overhead as a throng of wings deafened the sky. As soon as he heard the wings, he’d turned around and raced to Avery, pulling her close. Avery leaned into his warmth. The strange, feral magic that she inadvertently pumped into Savine seemed to be diminishing. She still didn’t know how she’d drawn that magic out of the ground or how it transformed Savine into a beast focused solely on finishing his enemies.

It had frightened Avery to see him so overcome by magic and so violently cutting down the loyalists. But strangely enough, it also aroused something instinctual in her. A need to stay close to him and let him protect her rippled through her body. She felt tethered to him, like some invisible chain kept them together. Maybe this strange magic had tied them together somehow?

Avery's first taste of battle wasn't over yet. Her magic called to her like she'd never dreamed possible. Maybe she was also filled with that strange magic? If so, it manifested itself very differently in her. She was itching to help the wounded and heal their pains. Although she hadn't admitted it, she wanted to help the wounded loyalists. Surely, if she showed them mercy, they would be more loyal to Savine in the long run?

The buzzing of wings overhead grew louder, and the sky filled with arrows. Avery couldn't stop the scream that surfaced as she ducked down to the ground. Last time she had an arrow shot at her, she'd uselessly covered her head with her hands. This time, when she brought her hands up, she pulled on the magic within her and spoke for protection for herself and the ones she cared for.

A large orb grew around herself and her friends. The arrows that struck them bounced off, without striking or harming any of them.

Now this was the power she'd been hoping to yield. Something to keep everyone safe from harm, to keep them from needing her healing touch.

"Nice trick, Avery!" Rue said. "Why in the Abyss is an entire army of Hylaxes attacking us?" She motioned to the sky, now black with wings and hideously distorted faces.

Savine responded first, "Jasper has finally found his allies. Avery, can you make that barrier bigger?"

Concentrating on keeping their small group safe was burning through her body. The magic required to keep this up wouldn't last long. The desire to rest pulled at her.

"I'm so sorry. I'm already losing control," Avery gritted the words out, and the barrier diminished. Her head throbbed, and her ears rang.

The next moment, Avery was flat on her back. Savine knelt beside her, his hands on her shoulders. The hard lines of his face were etched with concern, and his dusty blue eyes were back. He looked like her Savine again. Avery turned her

head and saw Rue beside him. Her cheerful smile still hadn't diminished.

"Breathe, Avery, breathe," Rue said as she stroked Avery's hair.

"I'm fine, really," Avery muttered as she tried to push herself up. Around her, the battle raged. The remaining loyalists were bolstered with aerial reinforcements.

"My sweet little flower is telling lies again. You are not fine. You are on the verge of burning yourself out from using too much magic," Savine said.

"No really. Just get me up, and I can go back to healing people." Avery saw Rue shaking her head and Savine's sad, sweet smile.

"What you did earlier was far beyond the fae's abilities. To draw magic directly from Aeritis, heal the *entire* forest and fill me with deep magic was nothing short of amazing. You need rest." Savine's tone didn't leave room for argument. He hesitated and looked at her like the world was collapsing under them. "Goddess knows I don't want to leave your side for a second, but I'm needed here. Rue and Weston will pull back and bring you to a safe place where you can rest."

Avery shook her head. There was no way she'd leave his side. Not with the Hylaxes here. As she turned, she saw a sight that sent sheer terror coursing through her veins.

Uncontrollably, she began screaming and shaking. Right before her was the most massive bear she'd ever seen. An enormous, red-furred beast with unnaturally long claws and huge fangs tore through the battle.

Flashbacks of the bear that attacked her at Quartz Mountain filled her mind. Her sister's limp body being dragged away by the horrible animal while she was helplessly transported to Aeritis overfilled her senses.

On her hands and knees, Avery screamed, "Morgan! Morgan!" She tried to draw her magic forward and create that barrier again, but nothing happened. Not even a flicker of magic drew forth.

Savine scooped her up like a feather and pulled her close. “Shh, Avery. I have you. It’s just Garnel. It’s Garnel in his shifted form.”

Strangled cries forced their way out of her throat. Over and over, memories of her sister being dragged away from her flashed through her mind. There was no end to this fear, as she relived that horrible moment of what must have been her sister’s death.

Savine caressed her face and stroked her hair. Other voices murmured near her, but she latched onto Savine’s soft eyes, once again blue, and his soothing words. “Hush, my flower. I won’t let anything happen to you.”

Tears soaked her face, and she couldn’t register the surrounding battle. She leaned her body into Savine’s, breathing in his scent to dull out the scent of blood and gore from the battlefield. Before she understood what was happening, she was on Jari, and they were racing up the mountainside.

She gave in to the warmth of his body and shook in relief.

Savine had her. He wouldn’t let anything harm her.

Avery looked up with disbelief at the grove of trees that bounded alongside Jari, encircling them as they made quick progress across the battlefield and back up the steep slope of the mountain.

Savine dismounted Jari and helped Avery down. Her legs felt wobbly, but she was in one piece. The pounding in her head made her gasp in pain. Through the throbbing ache, Avery saw Rue and Weston beside her and Savine. At least two dozen trees circled them, and a herd of elk stood nearby.

Savine was talking to Rue and Weston. Vaguely, she realized that Savine was going to leave her. Despite everything he said, he was not going to stay. It hurt already, knowing that he would leave her when she felt so vulnerable.

“Don’t let any harm come to Avery. Goddess damn me, I shouldn’t leave her now, but our warriors need me. The trees

and elk will work as sentinels. If there is any danger, send an elk to me immediately.”

The pounding in Avery’s head made her drop to the ground with a thud. Savine caught her before she fully collapsed and helped her lie down.

“Ave, I let you burn out. I fucking caused this by taking too much from you. Rest here, and I will be back soon to make it up to you.” Savine took the iron axe, wrapped in a cloth, from Jari’s saddle and placed it near her. “Keep this close.”

Avery nodded as Savine pressed his lips to her sweat-soaked forehead. Tears threatened to burn a trail down her face as she looked up at Savine, turning his back on her.

Before she could respond, Rue replaced him by her side. She hardly saw his back as he charged down the mountainside on Jari.

As Savine rode away, Avery felt that part of her was being torn from him. The connection she felt on such a tangible level stretched taut and burned through her whole body. Her parched throat let out a raspy gasp as she tried to cry out to him, but no words came out.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Savine

Every nerve in Savine's body fired in protest as he rode away from Avery. This was a terrible mistake. Although he no longer saw the tethers of their soulmate bond, they pulled and stretched as he rode farther and farther from his mate. It was as if the connection between them had taken on a mind of its own and was fighting his decision to leave her side.

He had to trust that Rue and Weston would keep her safe. He had to believe that getting her away from the danger of the battle and letting her rest would be the best way to keep her safe. This was the best option for her.

Dwelling on the threat of her being attacked wouldn't help him finish the job before him.

No, Savine's people needed him on the battlefield. Even without the strange, pure magic that Avery had pumped into him, he was still the rightful King of Latiah. The trees and animals still acknowledged him as the leader of Latiah, and he would be damned if he let this opportunity slip from his grasp to finally defeat his enemies. Instinctively, he touched the gilded crown on his head. Althea had done this. She saw favor on him. Blessed him with the boughs.

The Hylax numbers were immense. This was a well-planned attack. Jasper had lured him out, knowing that Savine would take the bait of hearing about the attack on the trees. But these

new allies were weak. The Hylaxes, while ruthless, were not a polished and cohesive force. In fact, they fought against the skilled Latians like a sloppy, untested band of thieves.

Overhead, Savine saw members of the Latian aerial force fighting in wing to hand combat against the Hylax attackers. Massive eagles with razor sharp talons gutted the Hylax attackers, sending them down in shreds. Smaller shifter birds worked in groups to assault the Hylaxes to the ground. Once down, the Hylaxes were no match for Garnel's warriors. Using a blade and essence, they cut the enemy down to the ground.

The weakened loyalists continued their retreat toward the pass. What they did not realize was that the trees encircling their path would never let them survive. Not after what the loyalists had done to them. Not now that Savine had awakened the trees, and they acknowledged him as the King of Latiah.

Savine rode to Kyla's side, taking out Hylaxes from the sky with strangling vines as Jari careened down the mountainside.

"Is Avery safe?" Kyla asked as she lifted her hands to the sky and unleashed her essence against the world. Her essence flowed and twisted as she poured her magic out of her body. The screams that filled the air when Kyla invaded their emotions sent a chill down Savine's spine. What emotion was she pumping into them to create such a reaction?

As the Hylaxes hit the ground, Savine wrapped the enemy in thick tendrils of thorns. The screams of the Hylaxes who survived the fall were muffled as the thorns pierced through the enemies' skin.

Savine finally replied to Kyla's question. "She's burned out and exhausted. I pray to the Goddess that she's safe with Rue, Weston, and the sentinels I sent with them."

To their right, Garnel and a pack of shifters tore into the flesh of the fallen Hylaxes. Black blood oozed from their maw.

Kyla nodded. "Her terror when she witnessed Garnel in his shifted form drowned out any other emotion on the battlefield. I'm so sorry he caused her more pain."

Savine grimaced. He'd nearly lost her in the recesses of her own mind. He'd even felt her spine tingling with fear through the small tendrils of their growing bond. And yet, he'd left her only minutes later. The selfish bastard that he was, he'd done exactly what he never planned to do — leave Avery. All for the sake of ending this damn battle.

“Again, Kyla!” Savine shouted above the chaos of the battle in front of him. On his command, Kyla released another wave of her essence against the barraging forces. The streaming light that poured from Kyla was blinding. It shot toward the sky like a dozen writhing snakes. When her essence struck the Hylaxes, they once again filled the sky with writhing terror before they fell to the ground. The Hylaxes hit the ground with a sickening crunch.

Savine knew better than to believe that crunch killed the Hylaxes. These warriors were born to withstand falls. They could splatter to the ground and rise to attack minutes later. Their essence was a gift of exceptionally fast healing, especially for healing broken bones. It rippled through them and allowed the legion to rise from hard falls from the sky. So Savine attacked with his magic. Thorns sliced through the enemy, spearing them to the hard dirt of the valley floor.

Kyla and Savine continued their assault using their essence until both of them felt the strain of using too much power at one time. Before the effects of overusing their essence could take hold, Savine ordered Kyla to switch to their swords. She made no argument as she drew her sword.

The attack seemed to be quelled in some sense. The immediate risk of danger seemed to fade as Savine and Kyla took in the surrounding carnage. Trees continued to rip, break, and smash the loyalists and grounded Hylaxes. Only a few Hylaxes buzzed in the sky above, and they seemed to be depleted on arrows.

His own warriors looked exhausted. Many worked to move the injured up the mountainside near the forest where Avery now rested. Good. The trees would provide safety for not only Avery, but also other injured and exhausted warriors.

As he glanced to the mountainside, he could make out Bayberries climbing down the ridge. Riggins and Po, despite their eight-centuries old bodies, led the charge. Savine felt his heart tighten with pride. The Bayberries, despite no experience as warriors, would risk their lives for his cause. He never asked such a thing of them, but here they were, ready to die by his side to protect their homes.

Savine let out a war cry, rallying his warriors. They responded, echoing back his cry as they began the final push to victory. All around him, his warriors dug in deep to charge forward against the dwindling enemy.

What followed the cry of his warriors turned his blood to ice. The telltale sound of the Nepheli war horn descended on the valley.

Screams of terror beat off the mountainside as Savine's worst fears came to life. Nepheli warriors descended through the cloud-heavy sky and flew directly to the sentinel of trees, guarding Avery.

At the front of their army was a golden-winged man with skin that shimmered gold. The man who destroyed him in a prison cell so long ago. Rylo, King of Nephel.

Chapter Forty

Avery

A very didn't know what was more surprising—seeing Susan crest the ridge and make her way down to Avery's side, or seeing Riggins and Po lead a charge of Bayberries to the battlefield. Hyacinth approached behind Susan, her color draining as she assessed Avery's body.

Hyacinth clucked like a mother hen over her state before she began her verbal tirade. “Child! You look like you are suffering from burning your magic out! What nonsense is this? Did Savine let you fight? I'll wring his careless neck!”

“I wasn't fighting,” Avery interrupted. “I healed the forest, using the magic within Aeritis. I can't even tell you how I conjured it up. Then I healed the wounded.” The words came out slowly, methodically, as Avery grunted with an effort to speak. Her skull felt like it was cracking in two. Her body was bone weary.

Despite her pain, she felt relieved to be surrounded by good people as she recovered. The threat of the battle was less urgent, even from above it was clear that victory was near.

Susan and Hyacinth's eyes grew wider, and both women kneeled beside her.

“Deep magic, that's what you drew upon,” Hyacinth said, shaking her head. “It's dangerous stuff. No fae can reach it

with their essence, although some have managed to do so by harnessing it through a vessel. There's even rumored to be an ancient set of vessels. Relics really from The Cleaving."

Rue kneeled beside Avery. She nodded up to Weston, a silent signal that put him on double watch. Avery didn't protest as Rue began sharing their experience. Avery was more than happy to have someone else do the speaking. "Savine used her as a vessel. I don't think he even knew he was doing it, but he did. I watched it happen. They brought the entire valley's trees back to life. Then somehow, I don't really understand it, but Savine wore the gilded cedar boughs on his head. He awoke the trees, and the elk responded to his call too. Look at the valley. They're still fighting on our side."

"That foolish boy! He used Avery as a vessel? He could have easily killed her! When I said vessel, I meant an object that was used to harness and store the deep magic. Those vessels, now mostly stolen or lost in history, are sacred to our people. Only the witches had the skill to make them. I did not mean that a vessel is a living, breathing person!" Hyacinth began shaking her head and tutting with her tongue before carrying on, "Men. Never using their brains. I'm sure he was so power-hungry he didn't even realize the danger he placed Avery in. However, returning the trees to life has come in handy in this battle."

Rue pointed down the valley to the trees that continued to battle the enemies. "And these trees are guarding Avery," Rue said, pointing to the thicket that surrounded them.

"Yes, I figured as much. We had an Abyss-damned time getting through. There's a barrier of trees along the entire ridge. It took a mighty lot of convincing from Riggins to get past," Hyacinth said. "But enough of all this jabbering. We have people to heal. We couldn't leave the rebels without our care. Although, keeping up with the elk is hard to do on bare feet!" Hyacinth raised her calloused, dirty feet into the air and wiggled her toes. Her wrinkled face lit up with an impish smirk.

Avery let out a shallow laugh. Immediately, her head hammered in a shock of agony, and the laugh died on her lips.

Her body still fought the urgent tug to be close to Savine, too. The constant tug against her bones and skin became more challenging to resist. It must have been an aftershock of the deep magic she'd funneled into him, connecting them on a physical level.

Susan reached out her hand and touched Avery's arm. "I'm so glad you are safe. When we get back to Bayberry, we're going straight to the library to find out about the deep pool of magic you accessed. I wonder if you can do it safely? Or maybe we can both draw that magic up if there are two witches working together."

Of course, Susan was always ready to turn her attention to researching a mysterious branch of magic. How else could she have become such a skilled witch on her own?

"I'm curious too. But for now, I just need to sleep. I think I could sleep for days," Avery replied. Her lightheadedness returned, and she felt the urgent need to close her eyes.

"Oh, dear child, that's the burnout. You very well might sleep for days. Even a week isn't unheard of. Let me get you a tea to help your head," Hyacinth said, fussing over Avery as she dug in her many pockets. "Susan, dear, a flame please? For the kettle."

Although Avery's eyes were half closed, she saw Susan ignite a crackling fire a safe distance from the trees. Within ten minutes, Susan helped Avery to a sitting position. Hyacinth brought Avery a cup of murky tea, brimmed full of dubious contents.

"Drink it down! I can see you've got the headache to follow using such magic, and I'll not allow you to suffer another minute," Hyacinth said.

Avery wordlessly accepted the brew and took a sip. The taste wasn't horrible, if she'd appreciated the flavor of mud. What she really wished for was her first aid kit with her last Ibuprofen instead.

The pounding in her head lessened, but the bone-tired weakness was still there. Avery needed rest to cure that. At

least she wasn't in agony any longer. As she rested, injured Latian warriors began arriving in the grove of trees. Hyacinth popped up and got to work healing the other folk who needed her help. Susan stayed close, never leaving Avery's side.

Avery took a deep breath. She was in safe hands, with Rue and Weston on guard and Susan's ministrations. She let her eyes slide closed, and her senses focused on the roar of Savine's war cry. The entire valley filled with the sounds of Latian warriors, returning his cry.

Then the sky was teeming with the sound of horns blasting and flapping wings. These wings had to be coming from huge creatures. She looked at Weston, who looked at her with stunned disbelief.

"The Nepheli," Weston whispered. His face lost all color, and his eyes widened. "We must run! We must get you out of view!" Weston shouted.

Rue and Susan both protested at once. "We aren't taking her anywhere. We'll be like sitting ducks if we leave the safety of the trees," Rue argued.

"Besides, Savine knows Avery is here. He'll be coming this way as soon as he sees Rylo," Susan said.

The others grimaced at Susan's words, and Avery understood why. This was Rylo, the King of Nephel. The same man who locked Savine away, torturing him for years. Avery shook all over. Now that she knew more details of what led to his imprisonment, she feared what would happen if Savine encountered this man. It had left such a lasting scar on his soul, Avery didn't want to know what this king would do to Savine. After all, Savine had escaped Rylo's prison. He hadn't been set free.

But they weren't flying towards the battle. Instead, these winged warriors were flying straight for their grove of trees.

There seemed to be only one reason for this man to be flying directly towards her. To take Avery from Savine.

"If he gets his hands on you, you will be gone with the wind. And I will be killed," Weston shouted.

“Who would kill you? Rylo?” Avery asked.

Other injured fae rushed for the protection of the forest. Rylo must be a terror. Getting a group of Latian warriors fleeing the fight was no small matter.

Weston looked panicked. “If I survive Rylo, Savine will kill me himself for allowing them to capture you.”

“Savine? Kill you? Never! You are helping her!” Susan argued as he reached down and scooped Avery into his arms.

Rue shook her head. “He has a point. But Weston, running isn’t the answer. We fight. We won’t let them take her!”

“He will kill us if they take her. I would kill myself before I let him torture and kill me for letting another fae have you, Avery,” Weston replied in a whisper.

Avery was left reeling by Weston’s extreme reaction. Savine seemed set on protecting her, but she doubted that he would kill one of his own warriors for letting her be taken by anyone.

Susan tugged Avery up from the ground. The wingbeat overhead had ceased, and the soft thud of fae footsteps hit the forest floor. She couldn’t make out where they came from, but a scream of terror let her know they were uphill from her and her friends. The surrounding trees began shaking, and she heard the horrific sound of flesh being torn.

More hurried voices approached. Another spine-tingling rip of flesh. Her heart beat in her throat. Her hands were so wet with perspiration she feared she may lose her grip on her iron axe.

“Avery, climb this tree!” Rue suggested. Her voice was little more than a wisp of wind.

“Brilliant plan, since they fly,” Weston spat.

Avery was too weak to argue. She couldn’t climb a tree, even now when her life may depend on it. Exhaustion caressed her like a long-lost friend, beckoning her to sleep.

Please. Please let Savine get here.

But she had no such luck. A small group of winged fae forced their way through the battling trees, blasting their essence at the trees as they ran through. They had massive feathered wings, and their skin seemed to shimmer ever so slightly in the filtered forest light. One fae male was as golden as the sun. Apollo reincarnated. It was he who made eye contact with Avery through the spruce boughs that guarded her.

Avery squeaked in panic. Her heart pounded like a mouse caught in the talons of an eagle. *Hell no*, she thought to herself. She would not be the little mouse for another second. She let that fear sink deep into her heart and replaced it with concentrating on her dwindling magic. It was nothing but a tiny ember deep inside her. Nothing like what had roiled through her earlier. Its response to her tug was slow, and she didn't know if her magic would do any good now.

As soon as the golden godlike fae saw her, he was slicing and hacking through the trees to get to her. Rays of yellow light streamed through him, like a flare from the sun itself. The spruce was in flames in a matter of seconds.

Avery tugged on her magic, pulling forth the last remaining strands within her. She blasted the man with a coiling green light that tore through the spruce's needles and struck him square in the chest. The golden man fell to the ground with a crack. *Surely* she'd killed the golden fae.

Immediately, three other fae were there, ready to attack. Susan unleashed a tidal flood of water, unlike anything Avery could have believed possible. The water put out the spruce's flames, and the three Nepheli sank deep in the wave's depth, resurfacing far down the mountainside.

They were up and airborne within seconds, sending a curse from Susan's lips.

"Weston, shift!" Rue shouted. Before Avery's eyes, Weston shed his human skin and transformed into a hissing mountain lion.

"Go!" Rue shouted. His sinewy body glided through the forest. Avery heard the crunch of bones as Weston took out

one of the winged fae.

The remaining two Nepheli warriors were through the trees with a blast of dark starlight.

A female fae with ebony skin and raven black feathers looked at her through violet eyes. Darkness, like a clear night, flowed out of her, aimed at Avery. She countered the fae's essence with all the magic she had remaining in her. The two struck in the same place. Dark starlight from the fae met Avery's brilliant green power. They burst through each other, erupting in an explosion of tree needles and bark as Avery and the woman fell to the ground from the impact, landing right next to each other. Just as she was trying to regain her balance, she felt a blade at her throat.

Avery froze, shifting her eyes to her friend. Rue's face was stunned with disbelief as she paused her fight with the other Nepheli warrior. That warrior stopped, too, watching what would happen next.

"Cooperate, and I will not harm you," the woman said in a surprisingly calm, clear voice.

Avery's mind raced. She had seconds to give in or fight back. She didn't want to die. She didn't want to watch her friends die. No, the best thing she could do was cooperate. She tried to think through everything she remembered from missing persons' stories and true crime podcasts. Wasn't she supposed to fight? Don't let them remove her, or she'd be lost forever. Right? She thought about the training Rue taught her. She'd already learned how to disarm an assailant.

"I understand," Avery rasped. "Just don't hurt me or my friends. Please." She played the mouse as she grabbed the knife with her left hand and shot a bolt of iridescent light through the fae woman with her right hand. The woman immediately dropped the knife and tumbled back, dragging Avery to the ground with her.

Suddenly, a pair of strong arms caught her. Avery kept her eyes squeezed shut, her weary body screamed in protest. She was just too tired to fight any longer.

“Down on the ground! All three of you,” Rylo said. He tossed Avery to the ground like a rag doll. “You fools! Did you think you could defeat a group of Nepheli warriors?” The voice was like honey and whiskey. Smooth and sweet, but with enough burn to know that she was not getting out of this.

Finally, she opened her eyes to see the golden man standing before her. Cold rage burned in his amber eyes. A hole was ripped through his shirt, revealing healing skin that seemed incandescent in the filtered sunlight.

“Hurt me again, and I will get a taste of that human blood of yours, witchy woman,” the man purred. “Now, what do we have here? The human we have all heard rumors that Savine captured and turned into his pet, a little shifter, and a Bayberry? What an odd group of guards!”

Avery’s eyes went wide. She was caught, but she needed to keep her friends safe.

Weston sprinted through the trees on swift cat legs. When he saw Avery was captured, he immediately shifted into his human form.

“Down on the ground, kitty cat,” the woman with the magic like night said.

“Let’s move out. Now. Savine will know where we are by now. The trees will have already reported to him. Kill the others,” the golden man commanded.

“No!” Avery rasped out the word, burning in her throat. “Please, I’ll go with you. I won’t fight again. Just don’t hurt them.”

A shriek filled the air as the sinking sun was blotted into shadows.

“Eagan!” Susan whimpered. Avery couldn’t even comprehend what next terror she’d be facing when an eagle the size of a minivan came crashing through the woods.

The golden man looked at Avery and moved to scoop her into his arms. He brought her over to the enormous eagle and pulled her up with him onto its back.

“Fine, we will bring the three others. I’m not above collecting exotic slaves,” he said as his essence wrapped around Avery. It was surprisingly pleasant. Like lying in a warm bed on a cool, rainy morning. She tried fighting the lulling essence, but it was *so* inviting, and her body was so, so tired. Before she succumbed to the enchanted sleep, she thought only of Savine. Then all was darkness.

Chapter Forty-One

Savine

Savine's lungs burned as he ran up the mountainside to the trees guarding Avery. He knew that bastard Rylo would take Avery as soon as he could get his hands on her. No doubt, this entire attack was a way to get to her. To take her from him.

Fiery hot rage burned through him as he ran, sword in hand. He would flay Rylo alive if he laid a hand on Avery. All he hoped for was that she'd stay hidden and protected by Rue and Weston. He prayed that if she was threatened, she would fight like the Abyss was opening for her.

The sun was sinking in the sky overhead by this point. He'd been fighting against the Hylaxes and Latians for hours. His own body threatened to succumb to exhaustion, but he pressed on, running at a pace he never thought possible.

Overhead, a strange cloud blocked the evening light. He turned his head to the sky. His essence squirmed under his skin, raging to be released against the eagans overhead. Flying at the front of the group on the back of a massive eagan was Rylo with Avery, seemingly unconscious, or worse, in his arms. Another monstrous eagan behind him soared overhead, carrying at least three fae. But the sight of a black-winged figure turned his body to ice. It couldn't be. Selene, the

woman who had tortured him in the Tower of Teeth, was with Rylo.

Savine's essence exploded out of him, raising the land he stood on in a jagged heap as he stretched himself up. Vines shot from his hands, reaching out to grab Avery from the air. The vines came up short and plummeted back to the upturned ground. It was too far of a stretch. There was nothing Savine could do to reach Avery.

"Avery! She's *my soulmate!*" Savine bellowed. The anguish seared through him down to his marrow. The pain of seeing her taken—of knowing that he did nothing to protect her—was going to destroy him. He continued to spend his essence, shooting useless vines after the fading figures in the air as he shouted in panic.

Latian shifters took to the skies as they saw their leader lash out against the flying Nepheli. They flew toward the enemy and began their attack with beaks and claws. But it was too little to stop the retreating enemy. In their bird form, the shifted fae was no match against the Sun King. Rylo kidnapped Avery and was leaving right before his very eyes, and he could do nothing to stop him.

The remaining Nepheli took off, flying into the fiery evening light.

Savine screamed in anguish and sank to his knees. He failed Avery. He didn't protect her when it mattered. Worst yet, he never told her the whole truth about what he knew in his soul. And now? The very people who had extracted and butchered his soul to the point he believed he wasn't worthy of a soulmate held his true soulmate.

Time seemed to cease as he pressed his face to his chest, doubling over the dirt mound he formed in his rage. His mate. They took his clever and kind Avery from him.

After what felt like an eternity, he felt a gentle hand on his shoulder. His spent essence didn't even move under the touch. Soothing calm mingled with sorrow wafted over him. Savine looked up to see his sister. She took his hand in hers and

pulled him up from the earth he had formed in desperation to save Avery.

Kyla pulled Savine to her and embraced him in a way that was all too familiar. It was the same sympathetic hug she'd given him all his life. After so many abusive encounters with his father, his sister had been there. And even though he'd pushed her away, she was there for him after he escaped Rylo's towers. Wordlessly helping him through the pain and torment in his wretched body and soul. It was no different today.

"We'll get her back, Savine," Kyla whispered as she rested her head on his shoulder. "Ride now. Ride with all haste and bring Raikin and Jay. I heard what you said. She's your soulmate. Garnel and I will take care of our people."

Savine's body shook as his drained essence crested on the edge of burnout. Abyss, no, he would not let his weary body stop him. He had a duty to check on those who were injured in the battle. He had a duty to bury their dead and see that their souls were sent on their way to Arcadia. It hurt the very fiber of his being to leave his fallen warriors. He knew it was the weight of a ruler to sacrifice his own desires for those of his people.

But he couldn't do that now. He'd sacrificed his needs to his people day in and day out for over twenty-five years. He would not do it now. His soulmate needed him now.

"Have Raikin and Jay ready with extra elk to ride hard within an hour. I need to visit where he captured Avery," Savine said as he turned toward the woods.

The air in the forest was cooler and smelled fresh compared to the charred stench remaining on the battlefield. The shaded comfort of the forest brought him peace and space to think about what he must do next. Rooted back into the ground, the trees no longer walked across Aeritis. It was as if the hours of battle had never happened. He was not in the mood to speak to the trees, yet they called to him.

"*Prince of Chaos, she was here,*" they whispered, their voices weary from effort. "*Taken, she fought for her freedom.*"

She fought...”

“Where has the King of the Wind taken her?” Savine asked. He figured if anyone would know, it would be the trees.

The trees were still for a long time. Minutes passed by as Savine rested on a log. The log was damaged, but one end was still intact. Savine stretched his long, aching body against the ground. Strangely, as he lay there, he sensed Avery. As if she too had contact with this patch of dirt.

Finally, a tree responded, “*South they fly.*”

Savine nodded. As he expected, they were going to the Towers in Nephel. Nearly impossible to breach by land, the impenetrable spires of rock formed the basis of Rylo’s kingdom. The only folk he’d ever known to breach the towers were Kyla and Garnel, led by Raikin under his camouflage. Savine’s release was the only known time anyone survived escaping from Rylo’s stronghold. The only way this would be possible was with Raikin by his side.

As he sat up from the ground, something caught his eye. He walked over to where a spruce was badly burned and drenched in water. The tree flinched under his touch, its pain from the conflict it had endured. He felt the residual essence in its branches—and something else. A different magic. A magic that could only be from a witch, or maybe two. Susan was with Avery. Maybe Rue and Weston were with her, too? At least she wasn’t alone. She had her friends beside her.

Savine picked up a teacup from the ground. Avery’s honeysuckle and mint scent, along with her distinctively human scent, lingered on the cup. Savine’s stomach clenched as he lingered over her scent. He could not wait longer. Every moment he thought of that man touching Avery made his skin slick with cold sweat. Avery needed him now more than ever.

His people would be better off with Kyla and Garnel leading them. Savine had to get to Avery before she was harmed.

As he moved to leave, the spruce near him stirred. Its voice was raspy, tired from what it endured that day. The words it spoke made Savine collapse to the ground. “The King of

Latiah is responsible for this attack. He will give the King of Nephel what he wants for the woman.”

Savine cursed. He wanted to roar against the power-hungry king. A man who had caused such pain in his life, and yet continued to hurt him. He wanted to strike that man down with all his essence.

“What the fuck does Rylo want? Avery?” Savine spat out.

“No...” the tree shuddered. *“What he has always desired.”*

“We will not ally with a king against his people,” a tall, stately larch spoke.

“We serve the true King of Latiah,” another tree said. Before long, all the trees were whispering their loyalty to Savine. Savine’s hands reached up and touched the cedar bough crown on his head. He would get Avery back. Then, he would take his rightful place as the true King of Latiah.

“Give word that I am riding south. Do all you can to slow the progress of the King of the Wind. Tell the trees to keep me informed of my father’s plans as I ride. I’ll keep to the forests,” Savine declared.

His blue eyes blazed with resolution as he stormed toward the spent and charred battlefield. Kyla, Garnel, Gaelyn, Jay, and Raikin were gathered together near a campfire as he entered the former loyalist encampment. The man mourning his lost mate would have to be buried for now. He needed to be a king.

“Raikin and Jay prepare to ride with me. Kyla, you, and Garnel will lead our people. Jasper allied with Rylo. For now, we have defeated Jasper’s army, but we do not know who else Jasper has as allies. Watch for the skies,” Savine spoke without room for question.

Raikin and Jay followed Savine. Raikin’s face was tight, a look of irritation as he stayed close to his soulmate. Raikin made a small sound, like he was about to speak, but Jay gave him a pointed look.

“We understand, Savine. I would do the same for Raikin,” Jay said as he squeezed his soulmate’s hand affectionately. The

two had always been this way. Jay, so open-hearted and understanding for a fae warrior. Raikin was always cold as ice to everyone but Jay. It is as though he saved all his love and desire for only Jay. Which was fine with Savine. The last thing he needed was tenderness right now. He needed Raikin's cold and calculating way of negotiating with the world and his ability to slip into places unnoticed.

Within the hour, Savine, Jay, and Raikin were on the trail leading south from Bayberry. The night was clear, and the stars shone brightly. But even the light of the stars didn't reach the forest floor as Savine and his companions worked over limbs and underbrush along a faintly marked trail.

He knew the Nepheli were far ahead of them. Even without the half-day lead, travel was much easier by air than by elk through deep woods. Especially with the Nepheli mounted on eagans.

He had a lot of ground to cover and feared he'd be too late.

Chapter Forty-Two

Avery

“Wake up, witchy woman.” The owner of the smooth voice shook Avery hard on her shoulder.

Avery looked around her and felt a rising sense of panic. Her hands were tied behind her back. They also had tied her ankles. The bindings around her wrists and ankles sent an icy wave through her body that dulled the small drum of her magic. She was lying on cold, hard rock in what appeared to be a cave. The space was immense, some sort of enormous cavern. She saw out into the open air with a spine of mountains in the far distance. No trees skirted the entrance of the cave, making her think they were in a cavern along a cliffside.

While the cave was tall and wide, it did not seem to be deep. The dancing warmth of a fire heated her back. Voices in the cave echoed up into the domed ceiling.

The man who woke her up wasn't in her line of sight, but she remembered those last moments of consciousness in the woods. The golden-winged fae. That was the owner of that honeyed whiskey voice. Avery rolled to her other side and looked at the fae male's legs.

“Could you at least set me upright?” Avery asked. The man obliged without saying a word, lifting her up into a seated position. It surprised Avery that he listened to her request.

“Considering I’m tied up like some captive, I didn’t expect that to work,” she said.

“Ah, well. Even captives can make requests,” replied the captor. “Acknowledging if I will fulfill the request is a different matter entirely.”

Avery’s mind shot to Susan, Rue, and Weston. Were they still with her? Fear rattled her chest, her heart beating like a trapped animal.

“Where are my friends?” she rasped out. Her throat was so dry, her mind gummy. Her raging headache and dulled senses felt like she was experiencing the worst hangover of her life. “I need a drink and some medicine.”

“Your friends are sleeping. I was a bit surprised you woke up when I shook you. That burnout you suffered should have lasted more than just two days,” the man said.

“Two days!” Avery’s heartbeat sped up again. Her palms were sweaty, and a growing sense of panic filled her body.

“Yes, your friends have all been very concerned about your safety. Although we enjoyed that little surprise of having another human join us. How lucky am I? I seemed to have gotten a two-for-one on human captives,” the man said nonchalantly.

“How did you know that Susan is a human?” Avery asked.

“That is simple. The iron shackles we placed on her did not sizzle and cut into her skin like they did on your two other companions.”

Avery looked behind her and saw Weston. His wrists and ankles were bound by iron cuffs. The skin that touched the metal bled, a puddle of blood gathered under him. How could he be sleeping? Next to him in a heap were Rue and Susan. The metal cuffs had bloodied Rue’s skin, too. Avery winced at the cold metal digging into her friend’s flesh.

Rylo grinned. The smile didn’t reach his cruel eyes. “We also found out how easy it is to coerce the truth from a human. Susan couldn’t control herself from spilling her secrets and yours while you slept.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“We know all about the control we can wield by giving you a bit of food or a drink. Susan tried as best as she could to stop herself, but thanks to her, we know all about your ability to draw on deep magic within Aeritis. I suspected it was you. After all, someone had to have helped Savine access that magic when he made his big show of strength. That thing he did with the trees and how he cut his own people down without touching them must have been delightful to behold!”

Avery’s cloudy head couldn’t keep up with all the information he dumped on her. She vaguely remembered the events that led up to her captivity, but the recesses of her mind were foggy.

“Who *are* you exactly?” she asked finally.

“How rude of me. I forgot you are the only person in Aeritis who would not recognize me. I am Rylo Finnian, King of Nephel. King of the Wind, Ruler of the Skies,” the haughty man said as he flared his golden feathered wings out like a bird showing off its plumage. Behind him, the other Nepheli glanced in his direction as he extended his wings. “This is quite refreshing... to not have my reputation precede me. Tell me, what did you notice first about me? My wit or my shockingly good looks?”

That ridiculous question was insulting. “Your vanity,” she said without hesitation.

“Ah ha!” he cackled. “No one has had the nerve to point that out in our first acquaintance. How refreshing! And I have the distinct advantage of knowing all about *you*, Avery Hollis of Montana. Including your little dalliance with the Prince of Latiah. That’s what’s gotten you into this mess. Savine may have his tree spies, but I have the birds of the sky at my disposal. And believe me, birds are much better at chatting.”

As if his mind made a seamless jump from one train of thought to another, Rylo’s grin transformed into a sinister grin. “I know! Let’s play a game. You have three friends here with you. I think that was too considerate of me to bring that many companions along. So, let’s see... Who are you choosing to

execute? Pick one. It's your choice. Sweet Susan, our new human companion? Weston, the brave, yet bull-headed guard, or Rue. What a delightful little shifter!"

Cold sweat seeped across Avery's body. What the fuck was this nutcase talking about now?

She had been taken captive by a psychopathic fairy.

"Kill? Why would I choose one of them for you to kill?" Avery asked. She needed to keep him talking, distracted, while she decided what to do next.

"What a display of loyalty they showed you! I was going to take you regardless, and they volunteered to be taken. But, I love a good hunt and did not get the delight of surprising the Latians as I had hoped. I could not see the look on Savine's face when he saw you in my arms. Only those bellows of his and the feeble attempt at shooting vines in my direction. So, I brought the faithful friends along to see what you'll choose as a sort of entertainment. You must admit, the entertainment in this cave is lacking. So let's play the game. I will let you choose which one will be executed."

"I can never make that choice," Avery's voice trembled. This man ruled a country?

"Ah, well then I will just have them all killed in front of you if you won't play my game with me!" Rylo said as he laughed to himself.

With a burst of wind, Rylo turned and grabbed Rue, startling her awake. He pulled a knife to her throat as she let out a stifled cry. Susan and Weston jolted awake, both crying out as Rylo bent Rue's body back into an unnatural angle, the blade at her throat.

"Stop! Stop! Please!" Avery shouted. Some warriors in the cave looked cautiously indifferent. Others jeered their leader on, calling Rue insults about her shifter identity.

"Now will we have a triple execution, or shall we find out what cruelty you are capable of, little witch? Or perhaps we could make you the entertainment?" Rylo said.

A gust of wind blew Avery across the cavern, drawing her closer and closer to the edge of the cavern. Avery stifled a cry. She wasn't delusional in thinking her death would save her friends. But she would at least be brave in this moment. She had spent much of her time in Aeritis in fear, she refused to let her death be dictated by fear as well. The wind whipped her and dragged her body so she dangled head first. Her body hovered in the air, and she looked down at the ground thousands of feet below. Clouded skies distilled the early autumn light. The air was crisp and damp.

Then she was plummeting, free falling on the wind toward the ground. Try as she might, she couldn't stifle the desperate cry as her body careened toward the forest floor below. Her eyes watered from the force of the wind, and her limbs flailed as she tried desperately to grasp something, anything. But the bindings on her arms and legs prevented her from doing anything but stretch and lurch as her body plummeted to the earth.

Immediately, the wind changed and blew her up, up, back into the cave, her body sliding across the sharp rocks to Rylo. With Rue still at knifepoint, he drew them both to the ground and shifted to sit next to Avery's crumpled body. His feathered wings draped across her shoulders. Nausea built as he inched closer to her.

"Little witch, you are far too valuable for me to let you go splat," Rylo whispered into her ear. With his free hand, he reached up and grazed a finger across the five hidden stars on her forehead. The bile she fought rose as she wrenched herself free from Rylo's grip, vomiting on the rocky cavern floor.

Rylo pulled her heaving body off the ground, covering her battle armor in her throw-up. "Pick up the others. Line them up," he ordered. Susan, Rue, and Weston stood before her.

"Now, choose before I grow bored of this game," Rylo commanded, picking at his nails with a bored expression. A shimmer of light rippled across his skin.

"Choose me!" Weston shouted. "I could never face Savine knowing that I failed him. You need Rue and Susan more."

“How altruistic of you! Avery, is that your choice?” Rylo asked.

Avery looked at her friends’ faces. Susan’s puffy, red-lined eyes and Rue’s shaking body nearly undid her. The tears began to flow in Avery’s eyes when she saw the look of sheer determination on Weston’s face.

She reached for the spark of magic, so faintly distant. What could she even do against these people?

Avery acted before she could think. She drew her magic up and called it forth as she kicked her bound legs at Rylo. The magic didn’t budge from within her. All Avery did was give the King of the Skies a kick. Rylo’s body looked relaxed, the continued boredom etched on his face. But he wasn’t bored. He wasn’t relaxed. His lightning-quick responses sent a shatteringly bright beam of sunlight at Avery, blinding her as she fell to the ground.

Everything went dark.

Slowly, she regained consciousness, but the world around her was grainy and shadowed. Avery tried to pull her magic forward to sense it, but nothing was there. Not a spark.

Rylo leaned his perfect, golden face so he could look Avery in the eyes. His head shook. “Now, Avery, that was foolish of you. Do not do that again. Choose. I am growing tired of you.”

“Avery, I would have been honored to die protecting you. I didn’t get that chance. Choose me so I can die with my honor intact!” Weston said.

“Don’t do this, Weston. Don’t play this game,” Susan protested.

“And leave her alone? She needs both of you more than me,” Weston replied.

“Weston, don’t,” Rue said weakly.

“King Rylo! I volunteer!” Weston shouted.

Rylo’s face transformed from boredom to a frown. “That is not how I want Avery to play the game. It’s her decision. I am not asking for volunteers. She chooses or you all die.”

Tears cascaded down Avery's face. This was beyond fucked up. How could she decide who to have murdered?

Then it came to her. If Weston made this sacrifice, perhaps she could at least bargain for her and the others' safety.

"If I do this, will you keep Rue and Susan safe? I need your oath that you or your people will not hurt us," Avery said. She knew by now that the fae took oaths seriously. If she could get an oath from him to not harm her and the others, then maybe she could gain some sort of upper hand.

"Ah, you believe you can bargain with me? I always enjoy playing a little game. So let's change the stakes. I will agree that nobody within my dominion will harm you, Rue, or Susan physically, *if* you agree to be the executioner. I will choose the method of execution."

"No magical harm either, and I will choose the method of execution," Avery replied, her voice steadier than she thought possible.

"No one within my kingdom will harm you, and the two others, physically or magically, as long as you are a cooperative captive. And no, I will choose the form of execution," Rylo countered. He sneered at her with a half smile and his amber eyes twinkled. "This is my final offer before they all die."

Chapter Forty-Three

Savine

Savine leaned against the trunk of a giant cedar tree as he chewed on a tough strip of bison jerky. The moss under his backside gave him some cushion for his weary body. Low clouds shrouded the forest, blocking Savine's view of the Jewel Mountains. Cool streams of rain pelted Savine. It had been lightly raining throughout the night and had carried into the misty morning light. Savine did not mind the rain. He wore his thick-hooded oilcloth cape and had placed some of his essence into the fabric to keep him warm and dry.

What haunted his thoughts was not the cold and wet that he faced, or the weariness that he pushed on himself, Jay, and Raikin. No, his thoughts were cursed with images of Avery cold and unprotected on the back of an eagan. Those giant birds would provide little protection from this bitter rain as they soared through the air.

Savine couldn't help but think back to the first time he and Avery rode Jari together. Her insistence on wearing her human rain clothing. The technical gear, as Avery had called it, and how after hours sitting on the back of the elk, she was leaning into him for warmth and comfort. She didn't even have that ridiculously bright and thin clothing with her now.

"Worrying over her won't help us." Raikin frowned at Savine. He was also gnawing on a tough piece of bison meat.

His pale skin glistened with the droplets of rain across his face.

“You are right. But that Abyss-damned Rylo has her.”

“We will get her back. However, we should plan *how* that is going to happen. It will be easy for me to infiltrate the space. But you. You’re going to be much more challenging to disguise,” Raikin commented.

“And me? What do you think I am going to do?” Jay asked.

“Jay, I would rather send myself to the Abyss than endanger you with the Tower of Teeth,” Raikin replied. “I’m still not sure why Savine brought you along.”

“Jay is one of my best warriors. We’ll need him at our side,” Savine said, taking another bite of the jerky. Jay leaned his body closer to his soulmate’s. At least they could keep each other warmer.

“I believe I can glamour myself enough to mask the obvious signs of being a Latian. I may not blend into walls, but I can at least create a disguise. No doubt Jay can do the same,” Savine said.

Raikin shook his head. “If you can’t, you will find yourself back in the Tower of Teeth.”

Savine flashed Raikin a look. He stepped too far. Reminded Savine too much of what he had to face in returning to this place. Raikin did not know what it meant to be trapped in those towers. And Goddess help him, Savine hoped he never would.

“You best be praying to our merciful Goddess that you never experience what the Tower of Teeth is capable of,” Savine muttered.

He returned to chewing his bison jerky. His attention drifted across the forest. Savine did not always care for Raikin’s company. He was already growing tired of listening to his opinions and wry comments. But he was a master of disguises, of blending into places and infiltrating an area without being seen. Savine would be lost without him.

“Why did you ever leave Orofine with me?” Savine asked. “The real reason.”

“Twenty-five years of living as an outlaw with you, and you still question me?” Annoyed that his loyalty was not trusted, Raikin raised an eyebrow at Savine.

Savine gritted his teeth. Once, Raikin had been his father’s closest advisor. Savine had always been unsure of his loyalty when he’d once been so close to Jasper. “You never gave me a clear answer.”

Raikin rolled his eyes. “Abyss, swallow me! If sneaking you into Nephel and stealing back a human witch doesn’t prove my loyalty, nothing will. As I already know from previous experience.”

Jay, always ready to smooth his mate’s rough edges, spoke up. “You know we have always been loyal to you, Savine. Don’t test him. Now, tell us about your mating bond. Is it in place? I *knew* that little witch was your mate! Avery will be good to you.”

Savine thought back to when he shouted to the battlefield that Avery was his soulmate. No keeping that a secret now. It was cruel that the world should know before she acknowledged the bond.

Savine shook his head. “When I finally understood that our connection was more than just my essence responding to her magic, I couldn’t tell her. I... After what happened in the Tower of Teeth, I never thought I could have a soulmate. And now she may be there. Suffering what I suffered. I don’t deserve her.” The words felt choked as he said them. It was the truth. She was too good for him.

Raikin nodded. “You will never understand how you got a good one. Over one hundred years together, and I still don’t know how the Goddess gave me such a good soulmate.” That right there was the closest Raikin had been to bearing his true feelings to Savine.

Jay took Raikin’s hand and squeezed it. His soft smile as he looked at his soulmate’s face made Savine turn away. He

couldn't stand to see their love intact. "I see you, Raikin. And I love every part of you. Althea knew exactly what she was doing when she knit our souls together."

Savine couldn't help but think about Avery. He'd missed his opportunity to be with her. This was his curse. He blurted out, "She doesn't even know. What if she rejects the bond? What if she doesn't survive for us to have that connection?"

Jay sighed and turned to Savine, placing a hand on his shoulder. Savine couldn't help but flinch at the touch. He felt too on edge to find comfort in another's touch. Jay pulled back, like he remembered Savine's disgust for others touching his body.

"It will happen. When it does, when you both accept the bonding, it will be etched in your soul for eternity. Avery is here for a purpose, and that purpose is to be your soulmate. Sure, she can kill the Latian King. But that is not why she was sent to our realm. Look at what she's already done for you. You were losing faith in the rebellion. You were becoming more disillusioned with each day, and honestly, the lack of physical contact was taking its toll on you. We all saw how you'd nearly rip someone's limbs off for accidentally touching you. Avery is good for you. She is a Goddess-given blessing."

Savine took a deep breath. It was too much to imagine—a life after this war. To be united with his soulmate and his country was something he'd dreamed of for so long that it hadn't felt real in decades.

"You never told me how you two became soulmates," said Savine. He never asked, but that was beside the point. Maybe hearing of their happiness would help keep his dream of a life with Avery alive.

Raikin shook his head and stood to leave. "Jay can tell the story. He loves to tell it, to the point where it makes me nauseous."

But as he turned to walk away, he cocked his head in a peculiar gesture. Raikin's tense face could only mean trouble.

Savine cocked his head and stood, reaching for his sword. Yes, he heard it too. The unmistakable sound of elk hoof beats. Just as the sound drew Savine's attention, Jari let out a long, loud cry. He heard the responding bugle of another male elk. War elk, most likely. *So much for the element of surprise.*

Savine, Jay, and Raikin immediately stepped into a battle stance. Whoever this was, they were Latians. Chances were, this far south they would not be loyal to Savine.

He felt the whisper of the trees rustling. *"It is him. He has come."*

"It's Jasper," Savine growled out to Raikin. Unconsciously, Savine touched the crown of boughs still planted on his head. Just what he fucking needed now.

His enemy.

His torturer.

His father.

"Stand with me," he spoke to the trees as he coursed his essence toward root and trunk. The trees responded the way he knew they would when their king called to them. Lifting their trunks from deep under the earth, the pines, cedars, spruce, and firs stood like sentinels ready for battle.

Savine couldn't deny that this moment was significant. The last time they stood with him in front of the king, he had fled his home as a man who had not yet realized his own power. The potential that coursed through his essence was always that of the true King of Latiah.

But now.

Now he knew.

He may not have Avery by his side as he hoped, and he could not finish this properly and survive. But he would unleash his power upon his father. His former abuser and his former king. Savine was done running. Done fighting to survive while waiting for his father to falter.

His father rode into the clearing, directly up to Savine and the phalanx of trees that stood guard beside Savine and Raikin.

Jasper's coppery skin, so much like Savine's own, looked unchanged after the past twenty-five years. His essence still coursed in a raging beat of fur below the surface of his skin. Jasper's golden eyes sparkled under the weight of his gilded, antlered crown. That crown, marking him as the ruler of the beasts, was clear. But did Jasper know the elk had answered Savine's call in battle?

The scowl on his father's face told Savine he had not expected to see what was now set on Savine's head. The crown of branches that had cut through his flesh as he called, and the trees answered him. The crown that marked him, not only the heir to the Latian throne, but a king in his own regard. His grandfather's own mark as the ruler of the terrestrial world.

"I see much has changed since you last dared call upon the trees against me," Jasper spoke. His tone was strangely calm, considering this was the first time they spoke in over twenty-five years. Even now, Savine was at a loss that his father thought he chose to be awakened by the trees on that cold, snowy night. The night the sky opened up and dropped stardust and flowers on him.

Jasper turned his attention to Raikin, who stood shoulder to shoulder with Savine. "And my traitorous emissary. All I did for you has been for nought when you made your loyalties clear."

"Jasper, don't deny your hand in the capture of the human I found and claimed under my protection," Savine spat. "But why have the Nepheli do your dirty work? Perhaps it is to let history repeat itself?"

Jasper let out a scathing laugh. His voice was filled with cruelty and cynicism as he spoke. "After all the interesting rumors I heard regarding you and the little witch, I thought you would have finally grown a spine and taken her as your mate. After all, the power of a witch could be unrivaled in all Aeritis. Just like her ancestors. Instead, I see you have disappointed me yet again." Jasper pursed his lips and spat at Savine's feet. "You always were such a disappointment. You have never been what a true heir to the Latian throne should

be. And now, with the little witch locked in the Tower of Teeth and you falling right into my plans, I will be rid of you and any threat to my nation.”

Savine did not reply with words. Instead, he charged at Jasper. The Rule of Progeny be damned. He would kill his father himself, even if it meant sacrificing his right to rule and forfeiting his own life.

He moved quickly, but his father did too as he leapt off his war elk and stood to meet his son. Savine’s blade crashed into his father’s with a force that momentarily knocked Jasper off a step. But before Savine could make another blow, his father retaliated with a blow that Savine blocked. They continued fighting with their steel instead of their magic. Savine knew they were just getting started. None of the other warriors dared attack. Instead, they circled the two crowned kings, bated breath as they waited to see who would come out the victor.

Well, fuck that. Savine was done with Jasper’s rule. It had gone on long enough.

With a shout to attack, Savine called his trees to move against the two dozen Latians who were with his father. Limbs swung against bodies, sending the men and women flying through the air. Some shifted into their animal form, tearing and clawing at the trees. Raikin fought with his sword near Savine, going against one of his former allies.

A mountain lion shifter leapt at Raikin’s back. Jay took up his battle axe, making quick work of her. She didn’t even have time to sink her claws into Raikin’s flesh before she was on the ground, grimacing in pain.

Savine’s essence grew restless under his skin, desiring to be let loose. But he kept it contained. He would save it for the final blow.

His father grinned as Savine stabbed his sword into his father’s leather armor before he turned, just enough to miss receiving more than a mere scratch.

“I see you have not spent your exile being idle. Good. I’d hate to have been disappointed by you yet again.” Jasper

sneered.

“The only one disappointed is me. You have grown weak in your old age, Father. I am no longer the little boy you can torture and abuse for your pleasure.” Savine felt Jasper’s mental claws scraped against his mental defenses. There was no way in the Abyss Savine would falter under his father’s mental prodding.

“We will see about torture soon enough. I believe we can bring back some of your former favorite ways to play.”

Savine bellowed as a riotous amount of thorns wrapped itself out of his hand and toward his father. The thorns caught hold of Jasper’s shoulders and wrapped tightly around his skin, cutting through his leathers. Savine panted as he looked at the captured king. Never had he ever dared to use his essence against his father, always afraid it would bow to his father’s will and be used against him. And yet, the thorns tightened and held Jasper in place.

Savine approached his father, his hands gripping his sword. Raikin must have been watching what transpired, because he was by his side immediately. Jay was close behind, his leathers a splattering of red blood.

“Think about what you have to lose if you finish him. It is not worth it,” Raikin advised.

Savine nodded. He would not give up his power and future to this man. Yet, he would be damned to the Abyss before he let his abuser free without getting some revenge.

In one swift motion, Savine lifted his sword and chopped through the antlered crown on his father’s head, marking him as King of Latiah. His father bellowed in pain as the antlers fell to the ground. His eyes burned with hate and malice.

“I am not weak. I am not that child you once abused. You hold no power over me. I want so badly to end your disgusting life. Yet, I’ll be damned if I give up my kingdom and my future by killing you, Jasper,” Savine’s voice was a false calm. He wanted to shout and curse, but he would not give his father the satisfaction of hearing his rage.

At that, he picked up his father's antlers and mounted Jari. Raikin followed as the few living warriors gathered near the injured king. They did not attack. Rather, they bent their knee to Savine and let him pass. Savine whispered to the trees to return to their resting spots and rode through the woods. With sounds of cracking wood and shifting roots, the trees returned to their resting place.

The forest went back to its quiet, misty calm. The woods near them were so thick that his bound and bleeding father was out of sight when Savine finally turned to look behind him.

Chapter Forty-Four

Avery

The wet roof of the cave dripped down on Avery's shoulder. Her flinch was less from the shock of the cold and more from the anxious energy that coursed through her blood. Avery felt trapped, but her options were limited. Either she killed Weston, or all three of her companions would die.

"Take the deal, Avery!" Weston said. His voice sounded coarse, like his throat was restricting his words.

"We have a deal." The words stuck in her throat as she said them. Her anxious mind raced at what she just agreed to do. "Now untie me so we can shake on it," Avery said.

"Not so quickly, witchy woman. We have a deal, but if I untie you, all of us will be at the mercy of that lovely green magic of yours. First, we will put a stopper on that. Then we can release you. Your current bindings are suppressing your magic, as I am sure you are aware," Rylo said with the same smugness before he called over the ebony skinned fae. Her skin gleamed silver on her cheeks, and it shone brighter as she approached Rylo.

"Selene, bring me the vial of skull shade," Rylo said. Selene did not speak as she walked to a bag in the corner. She pulled out a small vial with an inscription written in a flowy text that Avery couldn't read. Selene's brows were creased, but the

scowl on her face and serious eyes erased the tiny sense of uncertainty in her expression.

“Now, Avery, will you make this easy for us or difficult? I would prefer we not have to have another scene like we had back in the forest,” Rylo jeered at her as he toyed with the bottle in his hand.

Avery agreed to take the herb without fighting. Rylo tilted the vial into her mouth, and Avery drank it down. The bitter taste burned her tongue and throat, but she kept the vile flavored concoction down.

Rylo left her on the ground and went to speak with Weston. She couldn't make out all that he was saying, but she saw Weston was pale. His face looked pained, yet he didn't shout or make a scene.

As Avery sat on the cool floor of the cave, she felt the draining effects of the vial that she consumed. The bit of magic that she had slowed to a tiny seep before drying up completely.

Another fae male named Elio removed her restraints. There was nothing there of the magic she'd learned to call forth. Her body was as normal as the Avery Hollis she'd been back in Montana. Except that tiny bit of stretched, tightened skin that had itched since Savine rode away from her during the battle. That bit of residual deep magic. Try as she might, it didn't respond to her attempts to call it forth.

Rylo took her hand in his. The heat of it made her jerk.

“The oath then. I, Rylo Finnian, swear that neither myself nor my warriors will physically or magically harm you, Avery Holl or your companions Rue Barrow and Susan Meadows,” Rylo said. Avery paused as he said her friends' last names. She didn't even know what they were. How had he known?

Like the other fae oaths she experienced, Rylo's essence crept into her. Unlike the other times, Avery wanted to recoil from that part of him entering her body. Repulsion threatened to push itself out of her. Finally, Rylo let go of his grip on her hand.

“I’m famished! All this traveling can work up an appetite. Little witch, would you care to join me for a bite to eat before the execution?”

What in the actual hell? This man was insane.

All eyes seemed to be on her. “I’m not hungry. Weston, are you ready, or would you like to eat first?” Avery asked. There was no way in hell she could get food down, even if she hadn’t eaten in the last forty-eight hours. If anyone wanted to wait for this horrible execution, it should be Weston.

Weston nodded his head. “Let me have time to pray to Althea. I want to prepare to join my ancestors in Arcadia today.”

“Nobody will refuse you time to prepare your soul,” Rylo said. His voice held an emotion that Avery couldn’t pinpoint. The flicker in his cold, metallic golden eyes didn’t give away the same emotion in his voice.

Avery thought about her past life. Her simple, mundane life in America. She’d tried so hard to add adventure into her life — always seeking that next adrenaline rush. Never would that former Avery have considered killing someone if it meant her survival.

When she came to Aeritis she lost so much of her innocence. This world and these fae were harsh—filled with sharp edges that cut if she got too close. Despite the harshness of this place, it was also painfully beautiful and included the most painfully beautiful man that she’d ever met. There was something so strong between herself and Savine that she couldn’t even put it into words. And fuck all these fae who took her from him. She wouldn’t let herself or her friends be victims.

She was so damn tired of being the victim. Avery always had seen herself as fearless in her former life. She was called “brave” by her friends for working in harsh conditions. Avery had pushed her body and tested her limits in freezing temperatures while working on the mountain. She’d dug through rock and roots to create new trails, working through the smoke-filled Montana summers. She would not let her fear

stop her now from creating a good life here in Aeritis with the man that she chose.

None of the Nepheli talked with her or even made eye contact as they seemed to wait for Rylo's command. Even Rue and Susan didn't say a word. They leaned against each other, back to back, on the other side of the cave. The iron shackles ate into Rue's bloodied wrists. Apparently, keeping Rue bound didn't count as harming her.

"It is time," Rylo said. His voice was sweet as nectar as he offered his hand to help Avery from the ground. Avery ignored him and stood on her own. Her bare feet felt the sharp edges of the rocks under her. This place, these people, and all these sharp edges continued to cut apart pieces of her.

Avery nodded to him. Even if she was resigned to taking Weston's life, she still didn't trust her voice to sound in control.

"I heard you have been training with Rue here. She is no doubt a fierce warrior to be chosen to guard such a treasure as you. But I wonder if she has taught you how to kill a fae with a powerful essence? I think this will make an excellent training exercise for you, Avery."

All around them, fae were getting up from the ground. Standing ready to see the human kill one of their kind. Avery shivered at the looks on their faces. Beautiful, shimmering faces wore hard lines and expressions. It seemed not all agreed with Rylo's decision to kill Weston.

Avery noticed the coldness that Rylo's people regarded him with. They were so different from how Savine treated his close circle. Despite commanding respect, he welcomed his council to speak their minds. She'd seen Jay and Raikin speak up against Savine's ideas. She'd certainly seen Kyla and Garnel speak up when Savine was making a mistake. And yet, there was no one who spoke out of turn here.

"You will execute Weston by stabbing him in the heart. The weapon will be a dagger. The dagger requires you to be in closer range. I would love to see a bit of blood on those sweet

human hands,” Rylo said as he walked Avery over to a pile of weapons on the ground.

Avery picked up the dagger. At least she’d worked a bit with Rue on using a dagger. Hopefully, she could make this as quick and painless as possible.

“You look good with a dagger in your hand, Avery,” Rylo said. The way he threw her name around made her skin crawl. Hearing it roll off his poisonously sweet tongue gave her goosebumps. This man was either a monster or crazy. Or maybe just monstrously crazy. She was finally getting a taste of what Aeritis was like away from Savine’s protection and the warmth and kindness of the Bayberry Folk.

“Bring the prisoner forward!” Rylo bellowed. A Nepheli female with soft gray wings and soft gray eyes brought Weston to the center of the cave.

Weston looked stoic. The Nepheli had stripped him of his leather armor and he was exposed from the waist up. His essence moved like fur in the wind, and yet he kept his face fixed on the front of the cave. He did not speak and did not look at Avery.

“Kneel, prisoner. You are a bit too tall for our executioner,” Rylo said as Weston kneeled. Now Avery would be better able to angle the blade into Weston’s chest.

“Do you have any last words?” Rylo asked.

“I do not die a prisoner, but a guard to my rightful king, and what he holds dear. I die knowing I have protected those who could not protect themselves and kept my duty to my king and nation,” Weston stated.

He still refused to look at Avery or Rylo. His face was unreadable as he looked into the dusky evening light. Avery shook a little, knowing what he thought of her and what he was willing to do to save her and her friends.

“We will never forget you, Weston, and your sacrifice,” Rue said.

Susan’s stifled cries filled the silence in the cavern, echoing off the walls. “Thank you for giving your life for ours, Weston.

It is an honor to know you,” Susan said through muffled tears.

Avery lifted the blade with her right hand. Her hand shook slightly, and she took a steadying breath to calm the shaking. If she had to do this, she would try to make it as quick as possible.

Before she could sink the blade into Weston, Rylo spoke up. “Now, since this is not only an execution, but your first execution, let me give you some advice. You must stab the blade past the ribs and into the heart. It requires quite a powerful blow. Otherwise, the blade will bounce off the rib cage.” He pressed his long fingers into a spot on Weston’s bare chest. “Aim here. Push hard and keep pushing until you feel the blade sink between the ribs. Do you need a countdown? I have found that useful in the past,” Rylo said.

His casual manner when talking about murdering a person unnerved Avery, but she tried to ignore it. She was doing this to keep Rue and Susan alive and unharmed for another day.

Weston turned to Avery. The look on his face nearly undid her. All the stoic calm was gone and replaced with an ashen version of her guard. “Avery, I was there the day Savine found you. Even if I didn’t recognize it then, you were meant for greatness from the moment you arrived here. Don’t give up on Savine. He-he is a good man and should know love. Remember me when you enter Orofine.”

Tears threatened to blur Avery’s vision. “Thank you, Weston, for looking out for me when I needed it the most. I will never forget your kindness.”

Avery didn’t hesitate to let anyone else speak. She wanted her words to carry Weston into his afterlife. She put all her weight and strength into the blow and struck Weston directly where Rylo had pointed. She pushed hard and felt the blade slide past Weston’s rib cage and strike his heart. Hot, sticky blood covered her right hand. The sight of it made her want to crumple into a pile on the cold, sharp stone floor.

Weston let out a shallow gasp, but otherwise remained still and silent. Avery pulled the blade from his chest and stepped away. He continued to stare out into the evening sky as the

blood pooled across his chest, running down his body. That strong fae warrior's body crumpled like a wounded animal to the ground. "Very good, Avery. Your aim was impressive. I was not sure you'd have it in you," Rylo said as he turned away from Weston's still body. "Now someone clean this up! I do not want to see blood stains the next time we need this cave. We fly out in an hour. Prepare yourselves."

Rylo walked forward and touched Avery's arm. She flinched at his touch. It disgusted her to feel his skin touch hers. "Avery, I believe you will travel easier if you are unconscious."

Avery pulled away from his touch and gave him a seething look. Her mind was still spinning from killing an innocent person. And now this? Losing consciousness against her will again?

"You said I wouldn't be hurt physically or with magic," Avery protested.

"Yes, well, I'll be doing you no harm. If anything, a dreamless sleep will be a relief after your ordeal in this cave." As he spoke, Rylo reached out and touched Avery's forehead. Right where the Goddess mark was glamoured, stroking the spot with a tenderness that made Avery's anxious body roil in disgust. Despite fighting the temptation, Avery quickly succumbed to that soft, sweet draw toward sleep.

Chapter Forty-Five

Kyla

Kyla was trying to keep from leaping with joy. The sight of the intact fae encampment and Bayberry skirting the shores of the autumn dawn light caused a palpable feeling of relief and joy, one that felt so good it could very well sweep Kyla away.

With the help of the Bayberry healers, the army was ready to march home in record time. Victory, overshadowed by Avery's capture, had brought about a solemn mood amongst their warriors. But with winter tents and loved ones waiting safely near the shores of Dorfaren Lake, nothing could stop the buoyant energy that hummed in the warriors.

War elk bugled to the herd stock, signaling their joyful homecoming. Cheers from the encampment met them as soulmates, partners, and families rushed to be reunited with the ones they loved.

Kyla always dreaded this moment. It would be only a few seconds before the tangible joy and celebration in the air shifted to something more stagnant, something heavy and dark. There were soulmates waiting for the return of their loved ones who would never return. When they did not see them, they would know that knot in their soul that told them something was wrong was correct. There were mothers and fathers, grandparents and children looking for their cherished

family members, and they would not see them amongst the victorious warriors.

The first cry came from Galaf, a herder and original follower of the rebellion. “Tigah! Where is my Tigah?”

Tigah was not returning to her soulmate. Galaf’s fear and desperation hit Kyla like a wall of steam. The heaviness of it made her block out the surrounding emotions. She couldn’t take in the feeling of that much pain, not after she nearly lost Garnel. Those emotions were all too familiar, too raw for Kyla to take.

Garnel sensed the change in her demeanor and placed a comforting hand on Kyla’s back. “This is never easy. We were so close to being another bonded soulmate torn apart. But I am here now, and I’m not leaving you.”

Kyla released a steadying breath and walked over to Galaf. The man was on the ground. Cries of agony carried across the cool prairie breeze. Kyla’s skin tingled with the onslaught of emotions. This was never easy, carrying someone else’s grief, but after what she experienced with Garnel, the emotions threatened to unravel her.

Garnel kept a reassuring hand on Kyla’s back. Her fighting leathers were so tight that she struggled to keep her breath from faltering into panic.

“We do this together. We bring all of them what comfort we can together,” Garnel murmured in her ear.

Kyla opened her senses to the emotions in the field. So much joy and elation circled the edges of grief and despair, mingled with confusion. Such polar emotions shouldn’t be felt at the same time. Garnel moved beside Galaf, his long red hair sliding down his shoulders as braids and baubles tinkled when he moved.

Garnel’s voice was gravelly as he said, “Tigah fought bravely. She is in Arcadia today, brother.”

The man let out a shattered cry. Startled, desperate emotions hit Kyla like a wall. Her body shook with a jolt, her essence

swirling under her skin. Cautiously, Kyla kneeled before the grieving man.

“This pain you are feeling is something you never should have to feel. Can I give you some relief?” she asked.

“No! Don’t touch me! Tigah is gone, and I don’t want to be here without her. Where is our commander? Why is he not the one sharing in my anguish?” Galaf asked.

“He—the Nepheli took the human, Avery Hollis, in battle. He went after them,” Garnel said, shaking his head. The lines of worry were etched between his eyes.

Kyla was without words. She only wanted to help ease Galaf’s pain, but his rejection reminded her of the time she forced her essence on Avery. Even though she offered now, it still stung. Kyla only wanted to help others.

“That witch! She is the reason the loyalists stayed on our side of the pass. She is the reason this battle happened. We should have rid ourselves of her presence here. Savine and the human have my Tigah’s blood on their hands. Our leader dares to choose her over his own folk!” The man’s face was contorted into a scowl. His essence whipped angrily across his skin.

He stood, shouting to the gathering crowd, “Savine has betrayed us! He has abandoned us in our sorrow!” Galaf paused, and released an anguished shriek before he continued saying, “My soulmate is dead because of him!” As he shouted, he pulled a blade from his pocket. Garnel reached to stop him, but it was too late. Galaf pressed the blade across his own throat. Blood poured onto the golden grass at his feet, droplets dripping onto Kyla as she leaped up to catch the man.

Galaf slid into Kyla’s arms, his shallow breath wet with blood. Kyla pressed her essence into him, relieving his pain.

The man’s eyes looked beyond Kyla to the soft cluster of clouds overhead. They were relaxed, even as his breathing spluttered and he choked on his own blood. “There you are... My Tigah.”

Galaf's pulse diminished, and Kyla knew he was dead. Her hands were coated in the viscid blood. Her heart pounded as she turned and looked at the crowd gathered around her. It was not uncommon for a soulmate to end their own life when they lost their other half. In fact, many followed their other half to Arcadia.

Kyla couldn't prevent herself from remembering the moment Garnel's heart stopped during the attack on the encampment. The severed loss of their bond was the most horrifying experience of her life. In that moment, she'd reached for her own blade. Nearly took her own life right there. Then she'd felt that tiny tendril of the weakened bond between them. She had raced to his side like never before. Kyla hadn't the heart to tell her mate what she'd nearly done.

Garnel helped her up from the ground and spoke to the Latians and Bayberries growing at the scene.

"Tigah didn't die in vain. She and the others died fighting for our true king and our right to live in peace under a king who does not see his citizens as expendable. Savine, our commander, wears the crown of cedar boughs, and it is thanks to the human, Avery, that this was possible. While we battled the loyalists, King Savine called forth the flora and fauna to defeat our enemy. We had defeated the loyalists when we were attacked by Hylaxes and later an army of Nepheli. They took Avery. King Savine is riding out to free her now. He- he declared her as his soulmate!" Garnel said.

The crowd murmured at the news Garnel shared. Kyla could see loved ones who turned to their warriors, asking if what Garnel said was true. Heads were nodding and the emotion in the encampment rose to a crescendo of excitement mingled with doubt.

Someone from the crowd spoke up, "If she is his soulmate, then the Nepheli have our true queen!"

Anger shot through the crowd. "It's the loyalists! They want to destroy our future!" someone shouted. Shouts of agreement filled the air.

"We must avenge her!" a warrior shouted.

When they had ridden back to the encampment, warriors shared they should not be riding back to Bayberry. Kyla knew the loyalty to Savine was higher than ever after he called the trees and elk into battle. But their loyalty stretched beyond Savine and now reached Avery.

Shouts from the crowd came in an uproar. “Save the witch! Save our king!”

Garnel’s voice boomed above the crowd, “We will not let this attack on our folk—and our future queen stand! All who are able will ride out to save Avery from the Tower of Teeth!”

Kyla’s pride in her soulmate made her beam. But in the pit of her stomach, dread churned. This call to battle was impossible. They didn’t have the manpower to defeat the Nepheli and their high fortresses in the sky.

“Garnel...” she said in low tones.

“Kyla, we cannot let Savine go there alone. We got the injured healed. We have reunited the warriors with their families, just as Savine wanted. You know what the Tower of Teeth took from him, and I’ll be damned to the Abyss if I don’t get him out of there by any means necessary.” His essence was so still it caught Kyla’s breath. Tentatively, she let his emotions settle over her. Guilt and rage filled her soulmate.

Kyla sighed as she pressed her blood-stained hands to Garnel’s arms. Their foreheads met, and she pressed her emotions into him. Regret mingled with apprehension and hope. Always hope.

“Every day, I thank the Goddess that you are here at my side. Avery made that possible. I don’t- I can’t think of her being subjected to what Savine experienced in the towers. And for him to return there?” Kyla shook her head. “Let the troops spend one night with their families. We ride at dawn.”

Chapter Forty-Six

Avery

The warmth against Avery's back startled her awake. The last thing she remembered was Rylo's hands touching her forehead as she slipped into sleep. Was that him behind her? She was going to be sick. Her hands were bound again, and she struggled to push herself up.

Sighing with relief, Avery saw Rue sleeping next to her. It was Rue. Not that monster. Avery looked down at her hands, expecting Weston's dried and flaking blood on her skin. Instead, her skin was clean. She was no longer in her leather armor, either. Warm, soft fabric draped across her skin. She'd been changed into some sort of dress without her consent or knowledge. Her empty stomach churned, and even though she thought she'd be sick, she realized it had been possibly three days since she ate anything. Had she had any water? She couldn't remember, but her tongue felt thick in her mouth, and her throat was so dry it hurt to breathe in air.

"Water," she croaked. A Nepheli approached her. It was that same dark feathered fae, Selene. She carried a cup as she approached.

Selene tipped the cup to Avery's lips, and Avery didn't hesitate to take the water from her.

Avery couldn't get enough of the water as it soothed her parched throat. "More. Please," Avery rasped.

Selene turned her head toward Rue's sleeping form, gazing at her. Avery looked at Rue. Her clothing was changed too. Her skin scrubbed. The tight ringlets of her hair were pressed against the cold stone, yet she looked at peace. Avery hoped Rue wouldn't wake up and be reminded of the nightmare they were in.

"It's a pity that she followed you. She could have been so much more than what you will offer her. Following you is a death sentence here," Selene said. Her expression looked sad, even remorseful for Rue. "I will not look forward to destroying such a soul."

"Destroy?" Avery asked. She couldn't even make full sentences, not when all her mind could think of was the demand for her basic needs.

"That oath you took. Do you think it can stop someone like me? I don't need to use physical pain. Nor did Rylo include me in your little oath. You best learn to watch the words of the fae closely, little human."

Selene stood up from her crouching position and walked across the cavern. Avery looked at her surroundings. They were in a different cavern. This one was tighter, more compact. What little light in the cave came from the small entry. So it was day. Avery had lost track of the days since she was taken from Savine. Water dripped down from the roof of the cave, making a slight splashing sound. The stifling air made Avery sweaty, the foreign dress sticking to her skin.

Susan was next to Rue, also still sleeping. Avery noticed the golden wings of Rylo's sleeping form across the cave. Selene and another Nepheli seemed on watch.

Selene met Avery's eyes. She walked back to Avery with a small plate of food. "You must be hungry. I will unbind you, but do nothing you will regret."

No magic prickled over her as Selene took the bindings off her wrist. Avery couldn't help but stretch her tight muscles before she took the plate Selene held out. Taking food from this woman was a risk, but what other choice did she have?

“Eat. It’s safe,” Selene said. She crouched down on the floor near Avery. Avery took a bite of some sort of plain bread.

Selene looked at Avery. Her violet eyes shone as she spoke. “When Savine was in the Tower of Teeth, I extracted parts of his soul. I examined them. Did you know this is what I do?” Silver light shimmered across her perfect face.

Avery shook her head as she took another bite of food. Now that she ate, the pangs of hunger hit her harder. She wouldn’t be able to make herself stop eating if she wanted to.

“His soul is tarnished. You should be thankful that Rylo took you from him.” Selene looked at Avery like she was giving her a gift.

“I don’t need your opinion of him. You are the reason he thinks he is unworthy of kindness and love.”

Selene’s eyes narrowed. “Do you think he is your soulmate? Do you want your soul bound to such a broken soul?”

Avery felt the magic in Selene’s question immediately. She’d accepted food from this fae and was now being interrogated. It was a risk she took when she accepted Selene’s food. Selene could ask her *anything*, and Avery would be powerless.

Her voice came out forced. She didn’t want to share her personal feelings with this woman. This woman who admitted to torturing Savine’s soul. “I can’t be his soulmate. I’m not from here. But if I was, I’d be honored. He’s-he’s. Even broken souls deserve love.”

Selene quirked a brow like she was studying a rare animal. “Do you feel the magic forcing you to speak?”

“Yes,” Avery said without hesitating.

Selene cocked her head as she continued to study Avery. “Strange that such a small thing has the potential for so much power. Your soul is stronger than most. Perhaps it is a human trait.” Selene turned to Susan’s sleeping form. “Who sent you to Aeritis?”

The power in Selene's words pulled Avery to speak. "Nobody. I was attacked and went through some kind of portal."

"What does Savine plan to—"

"Enough, Selene." That honeyed whiskey voice was directly behind Selene. Rylo moved so quickly, Avery hadn't seen him stirring from his sleep.

Selene didn't respond as she walked back to the other side of the darkened cave.

Avery wanted to dart away from Rylo. Just being near him brought back visions of Weston's blood-stained body, draining out on the cold ground of the cave—of the look on his face as she pierced the dagger into his heart. Her shoulders tightened and she immediately recoiled from Rylo.

"Oh, little witch. I took an oath, remember? I won't cause you any harm." As he spoke, Rylo reached out one long finger and stroked Avery's forehead. He had to see the Goddess mark. Somehow, he was able to see past her glamour—and most likely Susan's glamour. A chill went up and down Avery's spine, and she turned her head, tucking it into her shoulder. Rylo reached for her hands and put the bindings back in place.

Fortunately, Rylo moved away from her, returning to the other side of the cave. As soon as he drifted into the darkness of the cave, Susan stirred. She wasn't asleep after all.

"Is your magic still intact?" Susan whispered.

Avery felt down, past the bindings that prevented it from rising out of her. "It's weakened. I can hardly feel it."

Susan's lips pursed. "Me too. We need to get our bindings off. I remember reading something once about the ancient witches. Their power can be heightened together. It's called a coven. When we get unbound, we can draw our power together. Even if it's weak, it may be enough. Just be ready."

Susan put her head back on the ground and closed her eyes.

Avery's mind drifted to Savine. She'd taken for granted the kindness that he offered her, even from the beginning when she thought he was nothing but an asshole. Now, she'd give anything to be back beside him in Bayberry. She wanted so much more than friendship with him. Being separated from him made the longing all the more intense.

"We leave in an hour!" Rylo shouted. It startled Rue from her sleep, and dread shadowed her face when she realized where she was.

Avery scooted her body closer to Rue and slid her bound hand into Rue's damaged hand. "We'll get free, Rue. Somehow."

Feet shuffled closer to them. Avery didn't want to let go of her friend. She needed her touch like a lifeline, but before Rue could speak, warriors pulled them apart. Rylo walked over to Avery and touched her forehead again, casting her into another dreamless sleep.

Chapter Forty-Seven

Avery

Waking in unknown places was becoming less jarring after several days of traveling. But this space felt different. Avery was warm and wrapped in soft bedding. She was on top of a comfortable mattress. Not cold, hard ground.

As she opened her eyes, she saw she was in a room basked in soft morning light. The room was simple, but tastefully decorated in creams and off whites. It felt like she was wrapped in a cloud on a bright, sunny day. This was not at all where she expected to end up when she arrived in Nephel.

She had expected to end up in the Tower of Teeth ever since Rylo captured her. But that couldn't possibly be where she was. It was too warm, too comfortable. Rylo had something else planned for her. Hopefully, it wasn't some fate worse than imprisonment.

As she stretched on the bed, she let out a long, sad sigh. She'd hoped Savine would get to her before she reached this point. Disappointment left a bitter taste in her mouth. Was Savine coming for her? She assumed he would come for her. But maybe he wouldn't come? He was partially a king now, wasn't he? Maybe he didn't need or want her after all.

She walked through the sunlit room and looked out the door that led to a small balcony. Avery gasped as she saw that she was hundreds—if not a thousand feet up in the air.

The canyon below was laid out in minuscule detail. A river carved through the deep valley. From this high up, she could see the tiny ripples that marked whitewater or a waterfall. The castle or fortress that she was held in seemed to be built on a spiral rock jutting high into the sky from the steep canyon below. All around the fortress were other tall spires built directly into the rock. There was no obvious way to connect these buildings, but if everyone living here had wings, then any bridges seemed irrelevant. The rock was a soft, buttery yellow color, and it shimmered in the sunlight. Golden for the Sun King.

She was in a stunning, architecturally astounding tower hundreds of feet in the air, with no direct way to escape.

Avery turned and saw a plate of food was on a small table. She'd eaten so little since her capture. With nobody in the room to manipulate her thoughts, Avery ate ravenously.

Her magic coursed under her skin. It felt as if it had become significantly more potent since her bindings were removed. Somehow, despite the tonic and the bindings, her power must have blossomed, and now she needed to use it. It was like an itch under her skin that she couldn't scratch. Yet, she didn't dare use her magic. Not when she knew that her behavior could be the life or death of her friends. Where were they, anyway?

The sound of locks unlocking startled her from her thoughts. She turned from the balcony, and saw *four* locks click as the door opened. Selene entered the room, her velvety black feathers tucked tight behind her back.

“King Rylo desires your presence in the throne room. I am to oversee your preparations,” Selene muttered as she came into the room. Her silver cheeks sparkled against the deep sable of her skin. Like so many fae, she had a long, willowy frame with unnatural beauty and grace. She wore an elaborate silver dress with iridescent embroidery. The bodice must have a corset built in, because her waist looked tiny in the dress. The shoulders came to a sharp point, and the sleeves were tight against her skin, tapering off at her middle finger.

Selene's closely cut hair brought attention to her many earrings, decorating her pointed ears.

Behind her, a shorter fae woman, obviously older than the stunning woman, came in. This woman's complexion and hair reminded Avery of red clay. Earthy and gritty. Her skin was the bumpy texture of sandstone. This woman had no wings. Unlike the other woman, she wore a simple dress with an apron attached. She also carried a burgundy gown, similar to the one Selene wore.

"Edet's the name. I'll be cleaning you up, madam. An honor to meet a human, it is. I ne'er thought I'd see the day. Dare I say, you smell like what I was told humans smelled like! Do you know the old saying 'you stink like a human?'" the woman said.

Avery looked down at her own appearance. She wore the same dress she woke up in on the day Selene fed her. The blood that coated her was gone. However, she wasn't clean at all. Avery's fingers couldn't make it through her hair. It was a riot of tangles, dirt, and greasy hair. She didn't want to know what these fae smelled on her. Sweaty armpits? Unwashed hair? Fae and their naturally perfect scents were so annoying.

Avery remained silent. What do you say to your captor's servants? Although Selene was probably not a servant. She hadn't acted like one when she'd put a knife to Avery's throat, and she certainly hadn't when she admitted to torturing Savine.

The two women stared at her, waiting for her to speak. Finally, Avery said, "Um. Yeah, I'd like to get cleaned up after traveling. It's been a while since I've had a shower."

"I'll draw a bath and help you wash that hair of yours," the clay skinned woman said as she opened a rounded door that Avery hadn't explored yet.

Avery turned and looked at Selene, standing ramrod straight near the door. "Where are Susan and Rue?"

"Just down the hall. They can join you later, if King Rylo approves."

Avery frowned. “Are they in shackles? Why am I not bound?”

Selene walked closer to Avery. Her towering height caused Avery to take an apprehensive step back.

“Would you prefer you and your friends be prisoners in the Tower of Teeth?” Selene asked, a snarl on her perfect face.

Avery’s eyes widened. “No. I just want to know that they are safe.”

“Then I suggest you be thankful for Rylo’s hospitality and get cleaned up.”

Avery decided it was best not to test this woman’s patience and walked into the bathroom. Edet filled the porcelain tub with water. The room smelled like lilacs.

“Come, come. The water will scrub that travel dirt off your peachy skin in no time,” Edet said.

Before she responded, the woman pulled the dress over Avery’s head.

“I’ll have that tossed,” the woman said.

Avery nodded as she quickly stepped into the warm bath, and the woman began to scrub her skin roughly. No, this was not happening.

“Okay, seriously, this isn’t necessary. Can you wait with Selene?” Avery asked.

Edet gave her a scowl, but said nothing to Avery. As she opened the door, Avery heard her mutter, “My services are not needed.”

Avery lingered in the bath. She looked down at her hands and could still feel the sticky remains of Weston’s blood, despite it being gone. Weston was dead because of her, and for what? For her to be part of more twisted games that Rylo thought up? She would forever have his blood on her hands, and she didn’t know who else she may have to kill to survive.

He was a good man, and he didn’t deserve to be killed for her sake. Avery would never forgive herself for what she did

to that man.

The bathwater stayed perfectly warm as Avery scrubbed at her clean hands. But no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't remove the feel of Weston's blood.

Eventually, Avery washed the dirt and grime from the rest of her body before she tackled her unruly hair. Finally, she tamed it as much as she could manage.

When she stepped back into the bedroom, she saw the two women waiting. Edet sat on Avery's freshly made bed, and Selene stood against the wall.

"What does King Rylo want to see me for?" Avery asked, hair dripping on the cold stone floor. Seeing him. Facing that man made her stomach clench.

"I am not subject to King Rylo's thought. I am only the messenger," Selene commented. "Now, let's get you dressed properly. I know in the Middens the folk dress very casually. Or scandalously showing off their skin. That is not how we do things here in Nephel. Here, you are expected to look put together. Polished."

Selene beckoned Edet to bring the dress over. The dress was shockingly ornate. In a dark burgundy color, the fabric was made of silk covered in beadwork and golden stitching. The top of the dress seemed to be reinforced, making it stand stiffly.

The woman slid the underlayers to the dress over Avery's squeaky clean skin. As she fastened the underlayers, Avery realized she would have to wear a corset. The woman pulled the ribbons tighter and tighter until Avery's breath escaped her. "Please, not so tight," she whined as she sucked in her breath. But the woman didn't even acknowledge Avery's complaint.

Edet and Selene worked together to slide the elaborate gown over Avery. The weight of the gown made Avery sway forward. She didn't want to look weak in front of these fae, so she stood up straighter and held her head high. If this was the game that they wanted her to play, so be it. Meanwhile, she tugged on her increasing power. The magic dug deeper into the

well of power that pooled deep within her soul. She would find a way out of this place. She would make it back to Savine.

Selene gave an assessing glance at Avery's form in the dress. "Nearly acceptable," Selene muttered as she added ruby earrings and a large ruby necklace to Avery's neck. The ruby on the golden necklace was as large as a robin's egg. The gem sat nestled between Avery's small breasts, which were forcefully pushed up from the tight corset. Edet powdered her face with shimmery makeup and brushed her hair before she stepped back for Selene to give her an appraising look.

"Edet, measure her feet. I would like to get her in some taller shoes. The dress is not tailored for such a short person," Selene spoke to Edet as if Avery wasn't in the room. Avery rolled her eyes at the quip about her height yet again. These folk could never accept that some people weren't the size of giants.

Edet returned carrying gold embellished six-inch heels. Avery's eyes widened at the shoes. They were the most beautiful shoes she'd seen, but impossibly high. She never chose shoes this high. As she stepped into the golden heels, she teetered for a moment. Adjusting to the heavy weight of the dress and the sheer height of the heels took Avery a moment.

"You are nearly the height of our shortest Nepheli now. I suppose this will have to do." Selene glared at her with an assessing gaze. "Yes, this will have to do. No slumping. Stand straight. Very few of our women are so honored to be adorned in such a way." Her dark wings flared slightly as she said to herself, "I do not understand Rylo's motives in honoring a human with such a gift."

"While it's beautiful, if this outfit has some sort of strings attached, I'd rather not be wearing it," Avery muttered.

Selene pursed her lips at Avery's insolent comment. Clearly, she was not used to someone questioning Rylo's many whims.

"Come. Do not speak to anyone as we walk." Selene walked toward the heavy oak door and opened it swiftly before

walking down a curving hall without even a glance back at Avery.

Despite the temptation to shut the door behind her, Avery stepped out the door and into the winding hallway. On her left was a series of other doors. Her right revealed ornately carved windows exposing the stunning view from the tower. At the end of the hallway, she saw a carved staircase that seemed to twist and turn up higher and higher. Each side of the staircase was open air, with passages into similar hallways on each level. Some levels seemed much taller and grander than the last, with multiple sets of stairs between levels.

The cool crispness of the autumn wind blew against her face as she climbed a tall staircase with glassless windows on both sides. Could she stop and get a better view of her location? If so, maybe she could form a plan for how she would escape this place. As she slowed her pace, she saw two armed Nepheli guards behind her.

“Can I get a peek out the window? It’s the first time I’ve been here,” Avery whispered as she came to a standstill. Looking out the window, Avery took in the view of at least a hundred flying fae moving from one towering building to another. Huge balconies acted as doors to what must be homes for the residents of Nephel.

“I see the Latians didn’t teach you to listen to orders. No surprise there when they’re ruled by a rebellious, tarnished man,” Selene said as she frowned, causing her angelically perfect face to take on a tight, sour look. A look that, no doubt, she’d been making out of disgust and disapproval for centuries.

Avery ignored the quip and continued to look out the window. “It’s an incredible view. We have nothing like this on Earth. How were these towers constructed?” Avery replied, hoping to appease the other woman with flattery. Selene wrinkled her nose at Avery as she turned and continued walking. So much for flattery. Avery had to speed walk in the heels to keep up with Selene. She heard the fae guards behind her, and she thought of the magic coursing through her veins.

Could she use enough of it to overpower these guards and run? Could she conjure her own wings and fly? She wished she knew the limits of her own magic.

As she climbed higher and higher up the tower, she noticed how empty the place felt, despite all the doors she had seen on her own floor and all the levels she'd encountered as she climbed. Her feet already ached in the towering heels, and the weight of the dress was like wearing stones around her body. Despite trying to keep up, she was feeling winded by the climb and the restraining corset around her waist.

She was about to comment on the blister that was forming on her ankle when Selene turned off the staircase and through an enormous carved rock door. Similar to the doors in Bayberry, this door seemed to be carved with a story. Avery glanced at images of winged fae battling other fae on the panels before she passed through. There was no time to take in the carvings at Selene's breakneck pace.

She quickly forgot all about the door when she walked into the massive room behind the doors. The golden carved columns holding the roof up above the room reminded her of Greek columns. The ornately carved caps depicted different images of the sky. One was obviously a night sky, with stars and a moon carved into the cap. Another showed a sunset, and Avery could almost feel the warmth of the last light in the image, the glow casting out of the shadows of the room.

The room was filled with magnificently dressed Nepheli men and women. Most of the women wore dresses similar to Avery's. All the Nepheli seemed to have impeccable taste for what went well with their unique wing color. But no one looked as striking as Rylo on his throne. Wearing a black coat embroidered with gold and black pants, he looked elegant and regal as he sat relaxed on his throne. His assessing eye caught Avery's. Rylo gave her the slightest nod that Selene must have seen, too. Before Avery could take in the rest of the room, Selene took her arm and walked beside her, leading her toward the front of the room.

"Do not speak until you are spoken to. Do not make eye contact with any of King Rylo's subjects. If you fail to listen to

instructions, I will personally make you regret it,” Selene’s voice hissed, barely audible even to Avery.

Of course, she didn’t want any of the fae hearing her instructions. Avery was almost tempted to yell, just to see these fae grimace with their sensitive hearing.

The fae they passed stared at Avery. Some scowled at her, while others looked at her like they would like to make a meal out of her. A few looked oddly sympathetic. She tried to keep her attention directed in front of her—and not trip on her teetering heels.

Selene curtsied low in front of Rylo, but Avery didn’t follow suit. She stood there, staring into the golden eyes of her captor. Avery heard the growls and hisses of the disapproving fae behind her. She didn’t dare turn to acknowledge them. Rylo smirked a half smile, only lifting one side of his face.

Chapter Forty-Eight

Savine

Savine didn't bother moving the antlers as they pressed into his back while he rode Jari through the damp forest. He wanted that stab of his father's antlers pressing into his back. Savine never planned to spend the last twenty-five years in open rebellion. If he was honest with himself, he'd spent so many years hoping the weight of the crown of Latiah would somehow pass to Kyla. As a lonely young child, he wished for an older sibling to take the burden from him. Perhaps then, his childhood could have been filled with something other than fear and pain. Unfortunately, he was the heir, and his father never once showed him anything but malice and resentment because of the powers he'd inherited from his grandfather.

Thanks to their encounter today, his father may now have a healthy sense of fear for what Savine was capable of. But it would make no difference without a way to end the Latian King.

The weight of his crown took some adjustment to get used to. What would it feel like to carry the antlers and boughs together someday? He prayed to the Goddess that he would bear the heavy weight that would come with reuniting the two sides of Latiah under one ruler.

The burden to rule had always frightened him, thanks to his father's example. As a child, he always feared that becoming

the king would mean that he would become something like his father. Or worse.

Yet, the stories of his grandfather's rule gave him hope. His grandfather was a just and kind king. He carried the antlers and boughs for nearly five hundred years, bringing peace to Latiah and beyond. A peace that had not lasted a decade after his father took his rule. What had his grandfather thought, lying in his rest, knowing that his kingdom had come to ruin?

Savine recalled a moment in his childhood, maybe at four or five, before his grandfather took to his rest. He had sensed the powers growing in Savine, and the darkness in his own son. His grandfather had secretly given him a blessing intended for a ruler to his heir. Even then, his grandfather had warned Savine of Jasper's intentions to not allow Savine to inherit the throne, despite his grandfather's beliefs that Savine was the true King of Latiah.

The night the trees woke Savine in a chant that resulted in stardust and white flowers cascading down on him, Savine had returned to pure chaos. His grandfather had passed from his rest to Arcadia, yet his father had no more capabilities of awakening the trees than ever. When his father had attacked Savine, when he killed Savine's own mother in front of him, Savine had accidentally called the trees to rise against Jasper. That was the moment that spiraled everything into rebellion and civil war.

Once he had his own following, he had sought out stories from the older generation who saw his grandfather's leadership. Riggins had shared countless stories of his grandfather's compassion and good humor. Two rare traits among the Latian fae. Two traits he knew he failed at emulating.

Raikin interrupted Savine's thoughts as they approached a clearing. "You should be proud of what you did today. Do not underestimate yourself any longer, Savine. You are worthy of carrying the boughs on your head."

"My friend, you stood against that tyrant today, too. Pray to the Goddess that we will be rid of him soon enough."

“I can feel it in my essence. The day approaches when you will take up the boughs and antlers. As a rightful ruler of Latiah should,” Raikin said. “I am honored to be at your side when we defeat Jasper.”

“Don’t get ahead of yourself. I can do nothing without Avery or another plan.”

As Savine spoke, he heard the beat of massive wings. There was no doubt they were eagans. Savine looked at Raikin. His white hair fell over his shoulder as he cocked his head to the side. Savine nodded, knowing Raikin heard the same thing. Jay had scouted ahead and crested a small hill, panic in his eyes as he galloped back to Savine and Raikin. They had to get out of this clearing if they were to remain undetected.

Their best bet was to return to the woods behind them. But they were already nearly a mile into the open grasslands between the forests. Were they still in Latiah? There was a good chance that they’d already crossed the border that divided the open country before reaching the canyon country that led to the towers of Nephel.

“Are we still in Latiah?” Savine whispered as he pulled on Jari’s reins.

“We are at the border—I don’t know if we crossed it yet,” Jay murmured. His face looked panicked.

“Jay, make for the forest. If I am caught, return to Kyla. She must know that I am captive in the towers,” Savine commanded.

Before Jay responded, Raikin spoke.

“You are not returning to the towers, Savine. I will never see you imprisoned there again,” Raikin replied as he pulled his elk into a full gallop.

Jari passed him quickly, but it was too late.

Armed Nepheli guards descended on them. Savine saw a copper blur as a guard landed directly in front of him. Behind her, an enormous eagan with the same copper feathers landed and shrieked. Its talons dug into the ground, ripping up the

grass as Jari reared. His antlers brushed Savine's face before they were both back on the ground.

Savine shot tendrils of ivy over the guard while he leaped from Jari's back. He landed hard on his feet, but was already unsheathing his sword from his side. The ivy twisted and pulled at the guard, wrapping those copper wings of hers in stifling green tangles. Savine held the blade to the guard's neck as she put her hands up in the air. Raikin was right by Savine's side. His sword was drawn, ready to protect his prince if it came to that.

"I have a message for you," the guard sputtered as the vines coiled tighter against her skin. Why wasn't she using her own power against him?

"A message? From that bastard who stole my soulmate?"

"A message from Avery," the guard said. Savine's essence curled back into itself. The vines loosened ever so slightly as Savine's heartbeat raced in his chest at Avery's name.

"How can I trust it's from her?" Savine asked. He hated that he had no control over this situation. Hated that he had to trust his enemy with Avery's life.

"What other choice do you have?" The guard looked at him as one of her bouncy copper curls slipped through his vines. So similar to Lilith's.

Savine grunted, "Share the message." She was right. What could he do? Of course, he'd listen as soon as the guard mentioned Avery.

"She says she is safe. King Rylo is treating her well and has extended his hospitality to you. I am to bring you and your companions to the towers directly for you to join in the festivities scheduled in two-days' time."

Savine shot her a look that told her what he thought of Rylo's hospitality. He'd rather be thrown into the Abyss than trust Rylo. He flashed his most arrogant grin at her.

It was all a cover up as his mind flashed to the last time he was in Nephel. The years of torture made bile rise in the back of his throat. Had he known what his father had done to him,

had he known that Jasper manipulated Lilith's mind, he would have tried to raise an uprising earlier. The devious betrayal that his father inflicted on him, and the Nepheli crown, left the invisible scars on his soul and body.

Those invisible lines only Avery felt. Only Avery knew how much they still hurt him.

"You can't expect me to trust you. Not after my last visit," Savine growled. "Is that the sort of hospitality you are showing to Avery? If so, I will inflict twice the pain on your king as your torturers inflicted on me."

"She is well cared for. Selene is seeing to all her needs. Rylo wishes to put the past behind us, and welcome you as the new king to Latiah."

Savine showed no reaction to what she said, but inside a torrent of emotions hit him. Selene was with Avery. Thinking of her touching Avery, harming her like she had him, made him want to destroy the entire kingdom to get back to Avery. Beside him, he noticed Jay shift ever so slightly, war axe still at the ready.

"Unless my father has been killed since I left Bayberry, I am no king and continue to be an outlaw in my own lands and in Nephel. Also, Rylo is still guilty of taking something precious from me."

"Yet, here you stand on Nephel soil, wearing one of the crowns of Latiah. Refusing our hospitality. It is almost as if you were trying to sneak into the towers of Nephel. An impossible task, even for your chameleon of an emissary."

"How do you believe I escaped the first time?" Savine growled out the words, showing his teeth.

A hand reached out and touched Savine on his forearm. Savine tensed at the touch and looked at Raikin's serious expression.

"As interesting as this pissing match between you two has been to watch, may I make a suggestion?" Raikin asked.

The heated anger in his blood diminished slightly by Raikin's words and touch. A touch that only months ago

would have caused his rage to cascade.

“Of course, Raikin,” Savine replied.

“Let’s go peacefully to Nephel. Perhaps this whole misunderstanding is Rylo’s way of looking to ally with you. In his own perverse way, of course.”

That was the most Goddess-damned stupid idea he’d ever heard. Savine was ready to explode in fury. Internally, he was a raging fury of tangled thorns. But he hid that rage. His voice was smoother than he expected. “Misunderstanding? You mean stealing Avery from me was a misunderstanding? Or perhaps butchering my people? Another misunderstanding?”

If Raikin raged, he kept it locked tight, too. Revealing nothing, he replied in a voice that was pure ice. “Highness, accept the unusual invitation. Bring the antlers and share your dominance over King Jasper.”

The guard looked at both Latians with a cool assessment. The other guards stood nearby, waiting for an attack.

But Raikin was right. This could absolutely be a trap. It could be the worst move he could make, but it got him to Avery. And it got him to her fast.

Savine nodded his head. “We’ll join you. Prepare two of your Nepheli to bring our elks to the river stables.”

The guard nodded her head in agreement. “We fly in five minutes. You will each ride eagans with two of our aerial warriors.”

Savine pulled his pack and Jasper’s antlers off Jari, giving him a sugared apple. Jari nuzzled his warm nose into Savine’s neck. Jari’s tension coursed through him. He was expecting a fight. He’d always been very attuned to Savine’s movements and preparations for battle. Their bond, tethering Jari to Savine’s long life, had been one of the longest relationships in his life.

It had been Jari who he rode as he fled from Nephel’s towers all those years ago. And now Savine was leaving Jari with this enemy, entrusting his elk to those who hurt him, who stole

Avery from him. If Jari were killed, he would never forgive himself.

The elk made a high-pitched bark. He knew Savine was about to leave him. He'd be bugling in protest before long. Savine stroked Jari's black coat. "I'll see you soon. If it gets ugly, use those antlers to get away."

Jari's intelligent eyes shimmered in understanding. He snorted and nudged Savine in the shoulder with his massive antlers. Then Savine turned and walked toward the eagan, waiting in the distance.

As expected, Jari bugled as Savine soared airborne on the back of the eagan. His shrill cry echoed across the open meadow. The sound of his elk's terror at seeing Savine on the back of an eagan sent a shiver down Savine's spine. He prayed to Althea that he wasn't making a terrible mistake and prayed that he could get Avery out safely. But putting his trust in the Nephel King felt like the biggest risk of his life.

As the eagan took flight, Savine felt the sense of dread in his heart. How could he trust his enemy when he'd already proven how easily he could hurt Savine?

Chapter Forty-Nine

Avery

“A very Hollis of Montana. What a pleasure to have your presence in Nephel. And how stunning you look! Like a water lily plucked from muddy waters, you have emerged from the chaos of battle with grace. We have adorned you in the finest silks and jewels, so that you may bloom again in all your beauty!” Rylo’s smirk deepened as he spoke. His words were a double-edge sword if his people were ignorant of the conditions in which he brought her here. Or maybe they expected his word games? Rylo was a master of twisting his words and meanings. Surely his people knew this by now?

“If by ‘emerged from the chaos of battle’ you mean forcibly taken from a battle you had no place at, then sure? And now I see this is the part where I am paraded around like a trophy. But you’re going to pretend that I came here willingly? What’s the point?”

Rylo’s mouth curled into a devious grin. “Oh, I look forward to the coming days. This may be the most interesting week I’ve had in a century. Come, let’s go for tea in my private rooms. Selene, see that I am not disturbed.”

Avery seethed at the reply. He was fishing for reactions, and she was not interested in giving him some sort of emotional public display beyond what she already said. Rylo was looking directly into her eyes as she rolled them in the only way she

could react without the rumbling crowd becoming positively feral.

Rylo lept from the chair and tucked her arm in his. Like all the fae, he was huge, especially next to her slight frame. She felt her arm tugged at an angle as he linked them by the elbow.

Rylo tugged her along through a door to the right of his throne. Avery pulled her arm from his clutches and fell back behind Rylo as they entered a hallway. Rylo chuckled at the gesture as he looked back at her over his shoulder. The hall was dark, carved from the golden rocks of the spires. The only light was from the dim fae light sconces on the walls, releasing a warm glow. Avery followed Rylo through the curving heart of the tower.

Where was he leading her? It couldn't be as benign as tea. But nothing about her captivity had been what she expected. After the bits and pieces that Savine shared about his own experience, Avery expected pain and torture in Nephel. Some sort of revenge against the feud between Savine and Rylo. But a comfortable bed, fancy clothes, and teatime with the King? That was not at all what Avery had expected when she was captured.

Which left Avery wondering, what was the catch?

Eventually, Rylo pressed his hand to the cold, hard stone wall. Avery gasped in surprise as the rock melted away from his touch. Rylo stepped through the space. Avery hesitated before Rylo's amber eyes caught hers. He smirked at her as he stepped farther into the room.

"You have about ten seconds before the door closes. We do have a fine tea waiting. I'd hate for you to spend our time together in the hall."

Avery shivered at the thought of being locked in this tomb of a dark hallway. She scurried through the opening in the rocks. The room she entered was formal, yet comfortable. Red damask patterned couches were placed on either side. An enormous floor-to—ceiling window revealed a cloud-filled sky and distant mountains. But what caught Avery's attention

the most were the books. Entire walls of the rectangular room were stacked with rows and rows of books.

Rylo made himself comfortable on one of the couches designed to accommodate his wings. “Welcome to my library. Come, join me. The shock of so many books can get to some folk. Especially with you living like a wild thing with the young prince.”

Avery stepped across a decadently soft rug and took a seat on the couch across from Rylo. A tray of tea appeared on the coffee table, dividing the two couches as Avery sat down. She made a small gasp at the object that had not been there seconds ago.

“Oh, don’t mind that. Just a bit of spellwork done a thousand years ago when help was difficult to come by. Comes in handy, though. Selene is always quick to relay my needs to the staff,” Rylo said, as if her shocked expression needed to be acknowledged.

“Um. Yeah, it was surprising. You rarely see teapots appear out of thin air,” Avery replied.

Rylo poured dark brown tea into two delicate cups and passed the cup to Avery. She didn’t touch it, and left it sitting on the coffee table. Avery was not about to drink anything from this man.

“I’ve been wondering... Is Selene your soulmate? She seems like the closest person to you.”

Rylo’s smile reached his golden eyes, and he laughed. “My *soulmate*? Is that how the Latian rebels treat their mates? Like glorified errand runners? I pity the fae whose soul is bound to them! No, of course she is not my soulmate. I have no mate. As my Sage, Selene runs this nation for me. She does all my bidding without question or complaint. While she is precious to me, I have felt no tug toward her.”

“My mistake. And no, the fae soulmates I’ve seen in the Middens seemed to worship each other. Even when they don’t seem to get along with anyone else.”

“You must be speaking of Jay and Raikin.”

Avery wondered how he knew Savine's council so well. She thought their identity and the inner workings of their relationship were quiet. "How do you know so much about them?" Avery asked, puzzled by the grin he gave her.

"Oh, I am well acquainted with Savine's band of misfits. We have, after all, dealt with each other for over a century."

"I guess it's not surprising, considering they helped break Savine out of your prison."

For once, the cool smirk on Rylo's face was erased. "Did anyone tell you the reason for his imprisonment? For what he did to my sister? Because of him, I lost my family."

Avery's skin prickled with goosebumps. Savine told her that Lilith was killed by her father, but for some reason, Avery hadn't connected Lilith to Rylo. It seems she still didn't know the whole story behind Savine's imprisonment, after all. "What do you mean?"

"He is the cause of my family's death." Rylo's beautiful face turned harsh and inhumane. "Oh? Your dear friend didn't share those details, did he? Well, I am a gracious man. If you play your cards right, you can ask him about his sins yourself. Now, I have an actual reason for inviting you here for tea," Rylo said. He took a sip of his cup, long fingers holding the tiny cup in his hand.

"Of course," Avery replied. She sat up straighter to relieve the tension from the corset around her waist. "I have some questions for you, too. About my imprisonment and where my friends are being held."

"Imprisonment? Is that what we are calling this? I thought I clarified that you are a guest in my home."

"Do you kidnap all your guests and force them to murder their friend? Is that some sort of qualification for your hospitality?"

"Are all humans as mouthy as you are?" Rylo retorted.

Avery shook her head as she lifted the teacup to her lips and pretended to sip the tea. Her mind flashed to her vibrant sister.

She would give anything to know if Morgan survived the bear attack.

“I wonder if my dear old friend Savine and I have the same plans for you. That would be an interesting twist, wouldn’t it, little witch?” Rylo gave her another one of his wicked grins, and Avery felt a twinge of discomfort in the pit of her stomach. What Savine had planned for Avery had been so much—hardship in overthrowing Jasper, but after that would come the joy and devotion that she’d been searching for her whole life. She knew it. Despite being captured by Rylo, she still believed in that dream.

Rylo continued, “As for the unfortunate events with the late Weston, I needed to see if you were capable of getting blood on your hands when it mattered. You passed that test, and I cannot wait to see what you’re capable of next.”

“Whatever plans you have for me, I won’t go along with them. Lock me in that despicable tower of yours before you use me. Now, tell me where my friends are.”

“I think not, little witch. For the next two days, you will be treated as the honored guest that you are. After that, we will have an even more illustrious guest. As for your friends, they are not being harmed.”

“So you intend to keep them from me? Do you plan on keeping me here permanently?” Avery reeled. She needed to know that they were safe.

“I have no intention of keeping you for myself. I have the largest collection of recorded history dating back to before The Cleaving. From what I’ve read about your kind, the last thing I need in my small kingdom is a witch. Your kind has a long history of causing trouble for the fae. Susan must not stay either. Rue, if she behaves, should come to no permanent harm here.”

“Then let me see them.”

Rylo’s lips smirked into a half smile as he eyed Avery. “I don’t think I will. But I am going to let you in on a little secret. I am sure you know by now that we fae cannot lie. For that

reason, we hold our secrets close. This little secret of mine should interest a human like yourself.” Rylo paused, a mocking smile on his face. “I have killed dozens of humans over the years. Most were already half drowned when they reached my land. But it seems my Sapphire Falls is quite the gateway for your kind. Never has one been Goddess touched.”

Avery jolted at his words. She felt her eyes grow large before she picked up her teacup and pretended to sip the tea to cover up her expressions. So he could see past her glamour. She’d known it, but still hoped it wasn’t true. To everyone else, it looked like the scars woven through the mark.

“I do love the way humans can never hide their expressions. It’s so quaint. The look they make before they see me take their lives is most entertaining. Yes, I can see right through Kyla’s glamour on your forehead. Did they believe that the mark she placed on you would hold up against a king?” Rylo shook his head, tsking. “Savine has so much to learn before he makes a decent ruler. At least he’s getting this practice run with his rebellion. But to the point, not even I would ever dream of killing someone touched by Althea. Althea marked you herself, and I will not play a game with the Premier Goddess.”

Avery took a deep breath, trying to calm the fluttering nerves in her stomach. Not only did Rylo know about the Goddess mark, but there may be a way for her to return to Earth from here. The Sapphire Falls was a portal. If only she could get there, she might be able to return home.

Then what? Abandon Savine and the undeniable draw that she felt for him? Leave him when they had just begun exploring something stronger than she’d ever experienced in her life? For the first time since being in Aeritis, she thought, if given the choice, she would choose to stay in Aeritis. To carve a life here with Savine, even if it meant fighting, surviving, and overthrowing kings for it to happen.

“Okay then. You’re going to give me over to the King of Latiah? Is that your purpose in taking me?”

“You foolish girl, what would be the purpose of me taking you only to give you to Jasper? No, I plan to get much more out of this little arrangement than that. But first, I want to see your magic.” Rylo stood and walked around the coffee table, offering Avery his hand. “Come, let’s walk onto the terrace. I’d hate to have one of my books destroyed in the process.”

Avery tried to hide her surprise again. She pulled back from his hand and looked at him, her brow furrowing as she looked at his deceptive face. Didn’t he think that he’d put a stopper on her power? If he knew that her power wasn’t suppressed, then why hadn’t he taken some action to stop her?

“But I don’t have power right now. You’ve been stopping it,” Avery said.

“Don’t be silly, girl. I know my potion did not stop your power. If I had wanted to suppress your growing strength, I would have used mugwort. What I gave you grew your powers slowly. The bindings disguised the lack of power, leaving you feeling drained for up to three hours after contact. Now, please demonstrate what you can produce. Would you like to display your magical capabilities using one of my slaves, or will the potted plants on the terrace suffice?”

Rylo turned his back on Avery and began walking toward the terrace. Avery followed him, realizing how much he’d played her in the last few days.

“Why trust me not to attack in the caves?”

“I believe the better question is, why didn’t you attack us? Or at least try to escape. You squandered your time when you could have escaped, and now you are trapped in one of the most securely guarded buildings in Aeritis. I hoped for a bit of a fight from you, but you are as docile as a sheep to slaughter. Once you killed that guard, and felt secure, you played right into what I expected. Potted plant or fae?”

“I-I wasn’t sure how I’d escape those caves. I don’t know,” Avery said, exasperated. She followed Rylo outside. The blisters on her ankles rubbed as she teetered out onto a spacious terrace. Comfortable furniture made for lounging sat

in the sun. Potted bonsai trees filled the deck. Miniature cedars, maples, and cherry trees lined the space.

The tiny maple and cherry leaves were changing from green to yellow and red. Fall was already here. Her time in Aeritis was already marked by the changing of seasons.

Her mind momentarily drifted to Montana. Friends and family would wonder if they would ever find her. She thought of them pointlessly searching the high country as the first bite of winter arrived in the mountains. Dressed in puffy jackets and gloves, knowing that soon they could not access the area that she disappeared to on a warm summer morning.

“Avery? Am I going to have to spell out what I expect of you?”

Avery snapped back to the present—to Rylo, looking at her with a twitch of irritation in his otherwise-still body. He was so unnaturally still that Avery could have mistaken him for some sort of statue.

“Sorry. Just admiring your plants,” Avery replied.

“You are disappointing me with your lack of discernment. I hate to be bored or troubled by explaining myself. Now your magic, please. I will not ask again so nicely.”

Rylo leaned into a low-backed chair. The shimmer of his golden feathers gleamed in the midday light. His body looked relaxed and at ease as he pointed his long fingers at a small cedar tree in a blue pot.

“Destroy that tree by whatever means you have.”

Avery nodded. She could tell he grew tired of her and thought it best to get this display over with. She channeled her thoughts into herself and concentrated on her magic. Pulling a seed of it from deep inside of her, she pulled it toward her fingers and willed it out of her. Green light coursed through her fingertips, and her body glowed with the magic. She hit the plant and pot, feeling the shattering buzz up inside her and flow back into her magic. The green light continued to pour out of her, but she struggled to pull it back, to shut it down. The light shot through the rock terrace like a laser. With a

resounding crack and boom, the far end of the terrace split apart and fell. The impact of the rock hitting the terrace below echoed across the towers. She could hear the screams of the fae below as rocks continued to collapse on impact.

The green light continued to pour out of her, but she fought to suck it back into her body. Building panic grew in her mind. She couldn't stop this. She was going to destroy this entire building and kill innocent fae while she was at it if she didn't rein in her power. Sucking in a deep breath, she cleared her mind of the panic, pushing it down. She pulled the green strands flowing from her fingertips until they relented and calmed back into her skin.

Avery collapsed to the ground. She panted and could feel sweat glisten against her skin. A shadow fell over her as she looked up. Rylo stood over her with the same cool smirk he so often wore.

“Sloppy. Ill trained. Luck alone will be the determinant of how you do in two-days time. I hate leaving important matters up to luck,” Rylo said.

“What are you planning to have me do in two days?” Was Jasper coming here, then? That seemed to be what Rylo suggested. Avery didn't dare assume he wanted her to attack Jasper with this growing power. But what if he did? He hinted at it. It was unlikely for Rylo to turn his back on such a powerful ally.

“Nothing of consequence. Just fight for your survival and end my greatest enemy.” At that, Rylo walked past her and leaped off the broken terrace. His golden wings stretched out as he soared through the skies, like some magnificent bird of prey soaring through the open skies.

Chapter Fifty

Savine

Savine saw the towers from miles away as they rose through the afternoon light. A day that had started out in pouring rain had turned into a bright, cheerful autumn day. The wind chilled Savine's skin, despite his fighting leathers. They protected him from an enemy blow, but not from the blowing wind a thousand feet above the canyon landscape below. It gave him some protection from the elements, but nothing like the down insulated armor worn by the Nephel warriors.

The eagans and flying fae descended through the sparse clouds toward the tower that haunted him below. The Tower of Teeth. Its golden facade was a ruse. Blood red coated the walls of that damned place. Savine's body flinched as the eagan angled toward the Tower of Teeth.

Here it comes.

The place that haunted his nightmares.

But the eagan banked, heading for the royal residence and the shimmering golden rock tower that gleamed in the afternoon sunlight. Savine exhaled like he'd forgotten how to breathe. Perhaps Rylo was up to some trick that would favor Savine?

The golden prick himself stood on the top of his royal residence. Golden wings spread wide, and his light-blond hair

shone in the sunlight. The sparkle of his essence on his cheek glistened all the way from up here, like the gaudy peacock had angled himself to catch the light just so. The sun crown glistened on Rylo's head.

Savine's heart clenched in his chest as he saw the slight figure next to Rylo. Wingless, but dressed in one of those frilly Nepheli dresses. *Avery*. His Avery was here—alive and standing far too close to his enemy. Rylo's massive wings shadowed Avery and seemed to brush against her back. Rylo stretched his arm toward Avery and put his hand on her back as he leaned in to say something to her. Avery's eyes shot up and looked at Savine.

She was alive. She was waiting for him.

But all Savine could think about was how that monster had his hands on Avery. He shook with frustration, trying to rein in that growing urge to protect Avery. To pull her to him and keep any other male from touching her ever again. His jaw ached as he ground his teeth together.

Savine was going to kill that golden asshole for touching Avery. For taking his soulmate from him.

He took steadying breaths to temper that urge to protect Avery. This was not the time. His actions would either damn them or save them both, and he planned on getting both of them out of here as soon as possible.

The eagan soared down and landed with grace and precision on the enormous roof. Savine didn't wait for the eagan to tuck its enormous wings in before he jumped down to the ground. With the antlers of the King in his hands, he took powerful strides toward Rylo and Avery. Avery didn't hesitate to tear her body away from Rylo's touch. She was running at him.

Rylo didn't even try to stop her. What fucked up game was he trying to play? Savine tossed the antlers at Rylo's feet as he scooped Avery into his arms.

His little flower. She was alive, and she looked unharmed.

Despite the full dress, Avery wrapped herself around him. Goddess alive. The scent of her alone was enough to make the

blood coursing through his body heat. His essence shuddered under his skin from her touch. The electric feel of her touch rippled through him, intoxicating him. The bond between them flared alive with a pulsing beat. Avery nuzzled her face against his neck as she whispered, “You came for me.”

He pulled back to look at her. Her rich brown eyes shimmered as a single tear ran down her cheek. “I’ll never leave you, Avery. Never will I let another take you.” He wiped that single tear from her perfect cheek.

Pressing his lips to hers, he kissed her. His kiss was gentle at first as he communicated his relief to be back with her. She responded to his kiss with a desperation they both felt. Pulling her chin up, he deepened the angle as she opened her mouth to him. Her slick, soft tongue touched his, and his world felt like it had been reduced to this moment. The touch of her tongue inside his mouth made him feel like a man unleashed. His essence bucked like it was going to burst out of his skin. He could die from the taste of her alone. His mind rattled as he thought, *never again*.

Never again will I leave her. Never will I let anyone harm her.

“Always heartwarming to see lovers reunited. Although I was under the impression you were just friends?” Rylo’s deadpan voice was a harsh crash back to reality. Savine and Avery pulled their lips apart and looked at Rylo, who held the antlers in his hands. “Now, tell me these antlers are not from any typical elk.”

“What do you think, Rylo?” Savine tried to hide the sneer from his tone as he spoke. But it was beyond him. With Avery in his arms, the thought of Rylo touching her made him want to rip the other male from limb to limb, starting with those golden feathers.

Avery leaned into him, her mouth leaving a trail of kisses up the column of his neck to the line of his beard, where she pressed her face into the rough curls in his beard.

Rylo studied them both with those predator’s eyes. Savine was going to rip him to pieces if he didn’t get his eyes off

Avery. Savine growled at Rylo, and Rylo's gaze shifted to Savine. To the crown of boughs on his head. Understanding registered on Rylo's face. A faint grin lifted in the corner of his lips. He heard Raikin or Jay make a restrained sound in his throat. He'd forgotten all about them in his rush to have Avery in his arms.

Still holding her as she pressed herself against him, Savine turned to see Raikin's warning stare looking at him. Savine nodded. He understood he was not acting rationally. The feral side of his fae nature was rearing its ugly head. With Avery's lips on his jaw, he did not think that the animalistic side, the side demanding he claim his mate, was going to fade anytime soon.

"Ave, you need to stand, my sweet flower," Savine murmured into Avery's rounded ear. She very abruptly stopped kissing Savine. Avery pushed her hand against Savine as she slid down his body to stand next to him. His skin prickled at the loss of her warm mouth on him. He could feel her gaze shift to Rylo as she waited for his reply, but he did not speak.

Raikin said, "Yes, they are the antlers of the King of Latiah. Savine has claimed the boughs. The trees answer to him alone. The elk fought against the loyalist and we believe soon our rightful king will take his throne. My prince and I appreciate your hospitality, however unconventionally you sought it by taking our witch."

"Well, Savine, at least one of you has not disappointed me today. I believe I underestimated your capabilities to take action when necessary," Rylo said. What in the Abyss was that supposed to mean?

Avery looked at the antlers in Rylo's hands. Recognition took form on her face as she realized what those antlers meant.

"You did this?" Her voice was soft, like she meant for only him to hear her. She pressed against his body in a tight hug. Savine knew she understood the significance of him removing his father's antlers. It was a power play that would be his making or his undoing.

Savine felt Avery's small hand reach out for him. She intertwined her fingers with his. Her arm pressed against his. Safe. She was here, and she was safe.

"What do you want with us?" Avery asked, looking at Rylo as she spat the words out.

"It's more about what I want from him, but it will all come down to you in the end," Rylo said. The smirk on Rylo's face was enough to make Savine see red. Savine squeezed Avery's hand harder.

"You expect me to believe you want the ruling King of Latiah out of power?" Savine asked.

Rylo crossed his arms and squinted at the fading evening light. "Standing here in the sun is becoming fatiguing. I will let you freshen up, and then we will reconvene in the morning."

"You realize you're the Sun King? Becoming fatigued by the sun seems ironic," Avery couldn't help but say. Savine's mouth ticked up in the smallest hint of a smile.

"Yes, but Savine will be more willing to talk about matters between our nations after some private time with you, little witch. And after how you locked onto him, I believe it would be wise for you to have that time too. Maybe it will help you better understand what is at stake for you in two days."

Avery blushed. Savine loved that innocently wicked expression that she wore. Honestly? He loved all her human expressions that hid nothing about her emotions.

She looked up at him, and it felt like the rest of the world didn't matter one damn bit. But then she turned and looked at her captor. "Why do any of this? Why take me in the first place? You could have come to him and talked," Avery asked.

"What's the fun in that?" Rylo asked. Before either of them could reply, he tucked his wings tightly beside him and walked past them to the edge of the tower, diving from the building.

"Does he always make such dramatic exits?" Avery asked.

Savine shrugged his shoulders. He couldn't care less where Rylo flapped off to. Avery was here. It was her hand intertwined in his. Avery was safe and unharmed, thank Althea. He squeezed her hand to remind himself that this was real. *She* was real.

"Let's go to our room," Savine said. Avery cocked her head up at Savine. Her smile reached all the way up to her eyes.

"Our room? Don't you think that's a little presumptuous? Aren't we supposed to just be friends?" Avery teased through her smile.

"Fuck no. There is no way in Abyss that I'm letting you go now, my flower."

Chapter Fifty-One

Avery

Avery's hand intertwined with Savine's, and she leaned her head against his arm as they walked toward her room. She didn't lean against him because of aching blisters caused by these ridiculous heels, or from walking thousands of stairs. No, she simply leaned her head against him because he was here, and she couldn't get enough of the solid strength of his body against hers. His forest and rain scent wafted over her as she leaned into his body.

Ever since Rylo took her, she'd been dreading the torment that she expected to come. She anticipated never touching Savine's hard body again. But against all odds, he was here. He was safe. And he was all hers.

Avery realized they had reached the floor to her room. She pulled him along the hallway, giddy to get him alone. When they reached the door to her room, she let go of his hand to unlock the door.

"Can you believe we are back together? It was so much easier than I expected things to go!" Avery said as she smiled up at Savine.

"You can't know how much I've worried about you in the last few days. I don't know what game Rylo is playing, but we need to be ready for a trick."

Avery tugged on the door to her room as she looked back at Savine. “He’s planning on displaying my powers in two nights. I don’t know who his guest is, but I suspect it’s Jasper. He never comes out and says what he means, and that drives me crazy.”

“Ah well, maybe we will have a better idea later. I battled Jasper in the forest. By what Rylo said, I suspect he has the same reasoning I once had. But right now, I don’t want to talk about them. I just want you.”

Savine pulled Avery against his hard body before he swept her into his arms. His mouth was on hers as they crossed the threshold of the door and into the room. The taste of him, the feel of his muscles pressed against her, was intoxicating. She pulled back from his kiss and looked into his soft blue eyes.

Avery pushed herself away from Savine, and panted out, “Hold on a minute. You are doing a one-eighty from the night at the lake. Is this actually what you want?”

“Fuck yes, I do. I came so close to losing you forever, my flower. All I could think was I never had the chance to worship your body like you deserve,” Savine said into Avery’s ear as he pressed her body against his.

“But what about all your... um... insecurities? I don’t want you to be in a position—”

“Shut up and let me kiss you,” Savine growled.

Savine pressed her back into the bed and leaned over her body to kiss her. His kiss was urgent and hurried, like he was afraid she may slip away from him. The tension in him was palpable. The need to claim her as his, and she wanted him to. She wanted him to take her, body and soul. She’d never felt this taut, like strings ran through them both, drawing them closer and closer to melding the two of them into one and never unraveling.

Savine flipped her over onto her belly and straddled his body above her ass. He began working the ties on her dress. He unfastened the dress quicker than Avery expected and pulled her up to her knees. His hard arousal pressed into her

back. He cupped her breasts through the thin slip she wore and said in a deep voice that reverberated off her taut skin, “I prefer your breasts free from those bindings.”

Savine held both her breasts in his hands as he caressed them. His mouth worked up and down her neck and over her collarbone.

Based on where this was going, they were definitely going to have sex. *Finally!* But she had to know. She needed him to say what he wanted with her. The aching between her legs was enough to drive her insane, and the need to feel him, all of his hard length in her, was insatiable. Avery pulled away from his body and rolled onto her back. The groan from him as she drew herself back was enough to make her want to ignore this need to ask him this question. But not quite enough.

“I want to feel your cock in me. Is that what you want too?” Avery asked. He stilled with the look of a predator before its next meal.

“I want nothing more than to bury my cock in you, my little witch. But there is still something we have to see through to the end before I can do that,” Savine said. His reply was like a bucket of cold water was dumped on Avery. Avery sat up and gave herself a little space to read his expression. The look on his face was pure desire.

“Please. I need you. I’ve never needed anyone like this before. It feels like I’ll snap in two if you’re not inside me.” She couldn’t believe she was begging him like this. She’d never begged anyone. Ever. And yet, she really would snap into pieces without him inside of her, melding her back into herself.

“That feeling. I feel it too, little flower.” Savine crawled toward her, pressing his body against hers as he began kissing her outer ear. In a low, seductive whisper he said, “Have I ever told you how much I adore these round little ears of yours?”

“No! And what is stopping us? What could be so—” She said the words before she realized what was bubbling between them. A current built between them. It felt like a magnetic pull to be with him, to have all of him fill her and spill into her.

This need. This urge—it was primal and instinctual and like *nothing* she'd ever felt with another person.

Her voice didn't sound like her own as she spoke. It sounded hoarse with desire and need. "Oh, my God. We're soulmates."

Savine pulled his lips from the crook of her neck and looked at her. For the first time, she saw it. She saw him. All of him. Her other half. It was so obvious to her now. How could she not have realized they were soulmates? From the moment they touched, Avery had felt something different about him. And that undeniable chemistry just grew and grew, even when she tried to ignore it.

Savine's hands shook as he took her hands in his. His face was washed in a mixture of relief and guilt. "You feel our bond, don't you?"

All Avery could do was nod as she stared back at her other half.

"Do you hate it? Having someone so broken for a soulmate?" Savine asked. His face was nothing but pure anguish at the thought of her rejecting him. But she couldn't reject him. It would be like rejecting a part of herself.

"No. I don't hate it." Avery shook her head as a little laugh burst forth. "I'm relieved, actually. I've been feeling confused about why I feel so much for you, so fast. But this? This is like on a whole other level. It's this magnetism that we can't help. Nothing has felt so natural as what I feel for you. And yeah, that's terrifying. But it's also good to put a name to what I've been feeling. Savine, you're my soulmate." Avery paused as she looked at Savine. The raw emotion on his face was enough to make Avery's breath catch. Tears glistened in his eyes, and he had an apprehensive smile on his face. "I'm honored to be your mate, Savine Ralathian." Avery leaned in and gently kissed the two tears that marked his cheeks. Then she kissed him on his lips. He kissed her back, gently, hesitantly, as the pulsing need to bind themselves together pushed around them.

Savine pulled back from her and looked into her eyes like he was looking right into her, to the very depths of her being. "I

am yours until my dying breath. The forest may crumble, and the stars may fall, but you will have my love for eternity.”

He loved her? Of course he did. Honestly, all those weeks of being friends had left his true feelings bubbling below the surface. She’d seen how he looked at her and knew that his feelings for her grew deeper every day. She’d felt it when they touched and felt it just by him looking at her.

Avery was never more confident as she said, “Complete the soulmate bond with me.” There would be no turning back after that. No finding a way back to Montana. Her life would be bound to Savine’s, and she would no longer be the woman who landed here. Granted, she didn’t know what completing the soulmate bond even meant. Nobody had bothered to tell her.

“I want so fucking bad to complete the soulmate bond with you. I’ve been fighting this urge to bond with you since that night at the lake. But we have to wait. We cannot consummate our bond until you are safe.”

Avery was dumbstruck. Confusion wafted over her as she sat up to better understand what he said. Avery was back with Savine, and this was the most natural thing in the world.

“But I’m safe with you now. The bond may give me more protection from being Rylo’s captive.”

Savine shook his head as he spoke. “Everyone already knows you’re my soulmate. I shouted it as Rylo stole you away. Jasper knows too. Once you are my bonded soulmate, you will be a subject of Jasper’s. I’m looking for a way to defeat him without using you, but I’m afraid Rylo is going to force the issue in two days.”

Damn.

“So the soulmate bonding... What exactly is it then? Like when we have sex, we’re going to have some sort of magic bond that binds us together for all eternity?”

Savine stroked her exposed skin, making the warm, pulling sensation between them stronger. “Do you feel that tug between us when we touch?” Avery nodded. Wherever his

caress skimmed her skin, it felt like she'd catch flame. "I should have known right away what it was, but I was in denial. First, I thought our connection was because of your human magic. Then I couldn't believe the Goddess would give you to me. I don't deserve you."

"Please stop saying that," Avery said, but he brushed his fingers to her lips, stopping her words.

"When two soulmates acknowledge there is a bond there, our bodies will try everything to get us to seal that bond. That can happen through sex of any kind, but our body will be demanding what it craves to seal our bond in place. Every soulmates' bonds form differently, depending on the couple. But I think it's clear what both of our bodies want to seal the bond."

Avery glanced down at the bulge in Savine's pants. Her hot core felt needy and empty just looking at him. Yeah, she knew exactly what her body craved.

Savine looked at her as if he knew just what was on her mind. "We cannot seal the soulmate bond tonight. But that will not stop me from licking and tasting between your legs until you are screaming my name in pleasure."

Avery shuddered, and her skin prickled at his words. Slowly, she lifted her arms over her head. Savine didn't hesitate to pull the slip from her body, exposing all of her to him. The soft evening light illuminated her skin. The look on Savine's face made her feel like a queen.

"You are so beautiful. The most uniquely and beautifully made creature I've laid my eyes on. And I want to savor your pleasure until you are limp with ecstasy."

His words made her shudder with desire. She had never heard such sensual words from a partner. Never expected to hear them from Savine.

"Do your best, Savine," she said with false bravado. She looked into those dusty blue eyes that seemed to look straight into her and see her for all that she was.

He kneeled to her breast and took it into his mouth. His tongue against her taut nipple made her buck on the bed, and he pinned her hips down as he sucked her. She could feel the heat rising from her body as the *need* to have her melting into him grew.

Avery had to touch him, had to feel some part of him as he explored her body. She sank her hands into his long black hair, loosening his bun. She stroked the cool crown on his head before he paused and lifted himself up onto his knees.

“I forgot all about that thing. We don’t need the boughs getting in our way right now,” Savine said, tapping the crown of cedar boughs on his head. His essence stirred under his skin as the crown seemed to sink back into him. Avery gasped, but Savine looked relieved. “I’m glad to know I can control the crown like a true king.”

“I’m not going to lie—that was pretty freaky. Where did it go?” Avery asked, leaning on her elbows as she studied his head. No trace of the crown remained.

Savine shrugged. “I have more important matters than to wonder where the boughs disappeared to.”

At that, he leaned back down to Avery’s breasts. She felt him blow a tantalizingly cool breath against her hard nipple. The cool air made her cry out. Savine squeezed one of her breasts in his hand while he kissed and played with her nipple.

Avery needed to feel more of him. She reached up and pulled his light linen undershirt off him. Freeing his upper body, she kneaded his back and his sides with her hands. Her hands worked to smooth those hateful scars that ran all across his skin. She would heal these wounds if it took her a lifetime with him.

Savine shuddered above her as she touched those old wounds. He sat up, straddling her naked body, and he pinned both her arms over her head.

“Not now, my flower. All I want is to worship you.”

Avery looked into his eyes and saw the need in them. He wanted to make this about her. It was, she knew, the first time

he wanted to be with a woman in a very, very long time. Why would she deny him?

“Okay. I can do that,” Avery replied.

“Good girl,” his husky voice murmured in her ear. “Let me make my soulmate moan.” Savine captured her mouth with his. His kiss was seeking, like he needed her to let him know she hadn’t changed her mind.

She pulled back, panting a little as she said, “I want this. I want you and only you.”

Savine let out a growl, and his face looked incredulous, but he didn’t argue with her. Instead, he began licking and tasting his way down her side and across her stomach.

Avery smelled the forest musk of him as he worked his way down her body. She wondered how the hell fae smelled so damn good? It must be some sort of biological thing—she was jealous of it. She probably smelled like sweat and sex right now.

He pulled his mouth from her hips, and it left her feeling empty without that direct connection to their bond. “Savine,” she moaned. She was already losing control over herself, and he hadn’t even touched between her thighs yet.

Savine settled himself between her legs, spreading her apart. He looked down at her, fully bared to him, and she had never felt so vulnerable. The cold air of the room hit the center of her and made her gasp.

“Please. Please,” she cried, and she honestly did not know where her voice came from. Her need to have him touch her overwhelmed her.

“Patience, my little flower,” he muttered, his voice guttural with desire. As he drew her knees up, angling her to be more open for him, she heard him whisper, “So beautiful.” He brought a finger down, slicking through her wetness. He took his finger into his mouth and sucked her taste from his lips, letting out a deep groan that shuttered through him.

Avery couldn’t breathe as Savine lowered his mouth down to her mound and breathed her in. Savine squeezed and

caressed the inside of both her thighs.

Savine lowered himself further down until she felt the heat of his breath at the very center of her. She felt the slick heat of his tongue separate her sensitive folds, so tentatively, so sweetly it made her heart ache. Never. Never had she ever had someone approach her with such tenderness and desire.

She could feel the moan vibrate off his mouth as he tasted her. Suddenly, it was as if something unleashed in Savine, and he began licking and sucking her in a way that made Avery feel like she would come undone already.

She reached down and pressed her fingers into his hair, and as she did, Savine slid his mouth onto her clit. A pulse of pleasure rocked through her as his tongue teased her most sensitive part. Avery ground against Savine's face as he pushed a finger deep into her heated center. This felt sublime. It was all she could think as she rode him shamelessly. The pressure deep within her grew and grew as Savine pumped two fingers through her wet center. His mouth continued to suck and tease her sensitive nerves until the sounds coming from Avery were not at all within her control.

Deeper and deeper the pressure built as he rang her desire out of her. Tendrils of heat felt like they were sliding off her and into him. With every intimate touch of his fingers, Avery felt herself near her breaking point.

Savine circled and sucked on her clit. And with it, she felt her climax shatter through her as Savine pumped his finger into her, lapping up her pleasure as she drove her hips deeper into his face, pushing him deeper and harder into her core.

Avery panted Savine's name as her inner muscles pulsed around his finger. Savine licked and stroked her through every pulse and ripple, and when her climax ended, he lifted his head from between her thighs and met her gaze.

"You are my paradise," he said. Savine slowly raised himself up on his knees before he moved beside her.

"You made me feel like I was in paradise. Ah, Savine. Never have I felt that consumed." As she spoke, she pressed her lips

to Savine's, tasting herself on his lips. Savine caressed her gently, pulling her body near his.

Chapter Fifty-Two

Savine

Savine still tasted Avery's pleasure on his lips. It was like tasting a bit of Arcadia. Divine pleasure. He still could not believe that she was his, and that they were here together in Nephel, of all places. Her sweet body felt molded into his as they lay on the pillows of the soft, creamy bed.

It had been so, so long since he'd given a woman that kind of pleasure. Even before he'd stopped trying to be intimate with other women, sex had become something he did to fill an urge within himself, not to share with others. Giving pleasure hadn't mattered. It was a base need he'd fulfilled. When the rebellion began, he knew he couldn't use his own people to fulfill that need, and had never wanted anything deeper with any of them. So he'd become celibate.

But Avery? He'd wanted—no, needed—to bring her pleasure. To know that he could worship his soulmate's body and have sex once again be about the intimacy of sharing that moment together, not some perfunctory action to fill his own needs. He needed that more than fulfilling his own desires, even with his cock hard and throbbing.

"Now I get to blow you," Avery said as she pulled away from him. She sat up and brought her hands up to cup her exposed breasts, squeezing them while Savine closed the

distance between them. “No touching,” she said as she pushed her hand to his chest before returning it to her breast.

Well, maybe he could have his own needs met, too. Who was he to deny Avery’s own desire to touch and explore his body?

She rolled her nipples between her fingers, and Savine felt nothing but pure, feral desire for this woman. A growl came from him as he watched Avery kneel on the bed. She touched that spot between her legs. “I’m still drenched for you. I will never get enough of you.”

Seeing her touch herself like that sent a jolt through him as the bond tightened between them.

“Let me touch you again,” he growled as he reached to pull Avery close to him. She crawled to the edge of the bed before he could grab her. No, she wanted her turn to touch and explore his body.

“Not until I’ve had my fill of you,” she said. A sly smile rose on her face as she undid the laces of Savine’s pants. He helped her shimmy the leather pants down and to the floor.

Savine chuckled when he saw the wide doe eyes and round mouth as Avery stared at his naked body. He quirked a little half smile at her as she crawled across the bed, reducing the distance between them.

“You’re not going to start feeling shy now, are you, my mate? I was enjoying seeing you take control.”

“Fuck no. You’re mine,” Avery said. Avery pressed Savine’s body back as she straddled his rigid abs. Savine bucked his hips up as her slick heat hit him. She pressed her lips to Savine’s, and he nibbled on the cushiony softness of her kiss-swollen lips.

Avery pulled back from his kiss and started nibbling and kissing her way down Savine’s body. His skin was scorching hot as she followed the pattern of his essence with her tongue. It writhed under his skin as she touched him. It was mesmerizing, seeing his body respond to her touch like that. Avery dragged her nails across the pattern on his chest. “I’ve

been hesitant to ask, but how does your essence move like that?”

Savine didn't respond at first. He was beyond talking already. “It moves with my emotions. Especially when aroused.”

She followed the essence as it dipped and curved into the natural grooves of his muscles.

“Do you know how often I've dreamed of kissing and licking the path your essence follows? Right through all the curves and grooves of your hard muscles.” She let out a delighted little moan as her lips made a path along his abs, following the ripples.

As Avery made her way down his body, he could tell she was avoiding tracing the damaged skin from his years of torture. Thank the Goddess, she wasn't touching that part of him. He wasn't ready to face that kind of healing yet. Someday, he knew, he would expose even his ugliest parts to his soulmate.

Pushing Savine's thighs apart, Avery nestled in between his legs as she looked at what she was working with. She stroked him with a slow, steady grip.

“Well, aren't you a big boy?” she teased.

“Stop teasing me, Avery, before I forget all the caution I have about the mating bond and take you right now.”

“Well, let's just say humans have nothing on my fae mate,” Avery said as she held his cock in her hands. She pumped him hard twice before she brought her tongue to his tip. The pull of their connection shot through Savine as Avery began swirling her tongue across his broad head. Savine bucked at her touch. She was going to unravel him. Completely destroy him.

Avery withdrew and then slid her mouth further onto him. She took him until he was pushing on her throat and drew him back out. Again and again. She sucked him hard enough that he couldn't stop himself from groaning, dizzy with pleasure. He pushed himself deeper into her mouth, and Savine looked up to see her looking up at him. Their eyes met, and it felt like

Savine was looking into a mirror of his soul. The feel and the connection of him inside her—even if he was only inside her mouth—sent a jolt down his spine. Was this connection, this energy, what people meant when they said they found their soulmate? There had never been anything like this.

Savine couldn't take another second of not touching her.

Before she could react, Savine reached up and grabbed her by the waist, flipping her body over his stomach, his chest, until he had her ass in the air right in front of his face. He propped himself up on the pile of pillows behind him to better access her glistening folds.

Avery whimpered and let his length slide out of her mouth as she turned to look back at Savine. Desire and need were all over her face. He wanted to capture that look on her face forever.

“I want to feel you coming on my mouth when I spill into yours,” Savine murmured in a voice that was laced with desire.

Savine didn't even let her reply before he plunged his tongue into her folds. The wet pressure of his tongue made her writhe on his face. His essence swirled and twined as she took him deeper, with more pressure. Using her mouth and one hand, he felt her take all of him deeper—deeper. They were driving one another to the edge. He could feel it. Their bodies naturally synced together in a tantalizing rhythm that had both of them quivering. Nobody had ever felt like this.

Savine slid his tongue up to her clit. Licking and caressing, he sunk two fingers into her and him pumping in and out of her while she sucked his cock was enough to send her over the edge.

He felt her inner muscles clench on him, and she let out a moan on his cock. The sound reverberated around his erection, and he lost all control. He came into her mouth as she rode the pleasure of her own orgasm. She swallowed him down as he continued to devour her through her climax.

Finally, Savine helped rotate Avery and nestled her into his arms.

“Oh, my flower, I am never letting you go again,” Savine muttered as he caressed Avery’s ear and jaw.

“Can we stay here forever? Forget about Jasper, Rylo, and all the drama waiting for us?” Avery nestled herself deeper beside him, pulling her leg across his as she followed the patterns on Savine’s chest. His whorls had slowed in a sated rhythm.

“If only. Once we are out of here. Once we find a way to dispatch Jasper, we will make love for days on end without interruption. As true soulmates, I promise.”

Avery nodded, and Savine knew she doubted something. He prayed it wasn’t their bond.

“I’m afraid that we won’t get that happy ending,” Avery admitted as her soft brown eyes met his. So close, he thought they would melt into one another and cease having a separate body. The pull to be enmeshed with her was always there, always below the surface of his consciousness.

He’d been a fool to not see it sooner.

Avery’s hand languidly stroked his beard.

“When I’m with you, I feel like I’m home. Even when we said we were just friends. I knew something bigger was coming between us. Like everything in my life was leading me to this moment—to being with you and realizing you’re mine. You’re the one made for me. I don’t want to let that go, and I’m afraid of what will happen if I fail and never experience the depth of our connection.” Avery gave Savine a sad smile.

Savine pressed his lips to hers. The kiss was gentle and soothing. He felt her open to him so easily, and he stroked her mouth with his tongue. Finally, he pulled back and gazed into her eyes.

“We will have that happy ending. I promise. I will do everything in my power to give you—to give us—the happy ending we deserve. But first we have to meet with Rylo. Find out what game he’s playing and play along to get out of here.

Then we'll take care of Jasper. I've already weakened him. He knows Althea is playing with our fate, and I have the upper hand. We'll find a way to end him together."

Avery nodded. "Fine. But before we face Rylo, can you do that thing with your tongue again? I'd like to live in suspended disbelief that this is our reality for just a bit longer."

Savine winked and let out a growl. "Let's see how long we can stay in here before someone comes looking for us."

Nobody dared knock on the door until early the next morning.

Chapter Fifty-Three

Savine

The long staircase of the Tower of the Moon wound endlessly upward as Savine and Avery followed Rylo's guards. Savine was back in his fighting leathers, choosing that over the Nepheli wardrobe offered to him. But he wasn't concerned about his clothing. He wasn't concerned about anything at that moment but the woman whose small hand was in his.

He'd been so worried that Avery would reject him. It had been a mistake to not tell her that night at the lake. But the pains of his past still haunted him. Last night, the need to touch her, to give her pleasure, outweighed his own insecurities and fears of intimacy. But what if he continued to struggle with his past? She'd been through so much that he didn't want to complicate her adjustment to Aeritis anymore than it'd already been. He didn't want his trauma to hurt her more than she'd already suffered. Savine still was in denial that he deserved this woman.

And yet—she hadn't rejected him. She felt the threads of their souls tugging and pulling to join. That moment that Avery realized they were soulmates would be the sweetest moment of his life. A long life that he had every intention of spending with his little flower.

But first, they had two major obstacles to get through before they were free to bind their souls as one. The first was underway already, with this visit to talk with Rylo in his private library. The second? Well, that would be more complicated.

As they passed through the throne room, Savine had a flash of memory of the last time he'd been in this room. Beaten. Bleeding out on the floor and humiliated as his father chastised him for the torture and torment that had been pushed upon him for three terrible months. Then his father left him there for *years*. Years of mental and soul-destroying torture in the confines of the Tower of Teeth.

His essence swirled, and a chill prickled his skin. Avery gently squeezed his hand, as if she sensed where his thoughts were going.

“You’re safe. I’m here,” she whispered low into his side—the only place she could reach as he stood stick straight and marched to meet his former tormentor.

And there he was. The arrogant prick was dressed all in gold to match his golden wings and his golden hair.

“Ah, Savine. Avery. I see your tryst has satiated your needs for the time being. I do hope you are ready to have an actual conversation without subjecting me to your public affection,” Rylo said.

Savine’s fist clenched at his side. He took a few steadying breaths to face this man. Rylo could lock them in the Tower of Teeth and never let them touch the ground again. There was no way in the Abyss that he was going to put Avery at risk of being locked away and separated from him.

“Your generous offer to give us time alone is appreciated, Your Majesty,” Savine said, loud enough for the entire throne room to hear. The crowd murmured around him. As heir to Latiah, he had no reason to show deference to Rylo’s title. Goddess knows he didn’t do that last time he was in this throne room. Not when he heard that his love for Lilith had gotten her killed. In a strange twist, passing the throne to Rylo.

Yet, he wanted to show his respect to Rylo now. If anything, to keep Avery safe, but more so to get them out of here.

Rylo nodded. He wore a smug smile on his face as he rose from his throne and signaled for Savine and Avery to follow him.

Avery slipped her hand into his as they walked through the wall and into the depths of the tower. The dark, cramped space made Savine uneasy, but he continued on, keeping Avery behind him as he kept her hand laced in his.

Finally, they entered the airy library. Rylo's pride and joy. Even before he was king, he'd squirreled away rare books across Aeritis and now had accrued the largest private library collection in the realm. Savine knew this was only a fraction of his treasures. He wondered what books Rylo kept on humans and witches. Surely he had plenty of ancient texts on them? Maybe even books that explained their powers and more.

"Come, make yourself comfortable," Rylo insisted as he sat on a damask couch made for wings.

The wing adapted couches were uncomfortable for Savine and his large frame. Avery seemed to sink so deep into the adapted back that he worried she'd be lost inside the couch.

"Your unexpected hospitality has been appreciated, but Rylo, what's the game you're playing this time?" Savine asked. The words cut through him. Savine didn't want to say this. He wanted to fucking punch the pompous bird in the throat.

"I have always been a gracious host. Savine, it has been a long time since I have had the honor of your presence in Nephel. Why can't we enjoy one another's company? And I had to meet this beautiful young human I've heard so many rumors about."

Savine tried not to grind his teeth at Rylo's words. "Although the visit was unplanned, perhaps it was overdue. But you could have done it in a more diplomatic way. Without

allying with my enemy. By the way, what does Jasper think of this scheme of yours?”

Rylo laughed a strange, manic laugh, almost like a choking sound. “Oh! I cannot wait to see what he thinks of my scheme!”

Savine’s jaw tightened. He couldn’t keep his body relaxed around this man. Avery sat beside him, unspeaking. He wasn’t sure why she held silent. He never wanted her to feel like his own voice stifled her voice. Sensing his unease, she scooted over close enough that their legs grazed each other. Hers under the thick layers of a Nepheli dress felt a distance away. He couldn’t wait to get her home and dress her in Latian splendor.

Suddenly, Rylo’s shrill laughter stopped, and he contained his composure. “Would you care for tea? Perhaps some other refreshments. You must be famished after your amorous night together.”

Avery spoke before Savine got the words out. “You are, and have been, evading the question as to why you took me hostage. While I am thankful that you didn’t subject me to the torture that you’re famous for, I can’t thank you for the hospitality that you’ve forced on us. What will it take to get us out of here?”

Rylo chuckled at Avery and gave her a cold, cruel grin. “My dear, I have already told you. Everything depends on how you act in one day. We have some very special guests arriving this evening. Tomorrow, you will perform your magic for all. If your performance is satisfactory, I will release you into the arms of your heart’s desire. Now about that tea? If you will not have any, I see no reason to deny myself. Perhaps you drank in your fill during your rendezvous last night?” Rylo raised an eyebrow as Savine scowled at him. These innuendos were getting old.

“Who are the guests joining us this evening?” Savine asked, although he suspected who it was. It could be anyone, but more likely, it was Jasper. Why would he want Avery to display her magic? Would he have to fight for her? He’d fight

anything Rylo threw at him, even if it was an Abyss damned demon.

“Oh, someone you are *very* familiar with. Although, like myself, you have not been on the best of speaking terms.”

The color drained from Savine’s face. It was as he expected. *Jasper*. He was bringing Jasper here. Savine kept the turmoil buried inside him. That monster would be near Avery, and Savine may not be able to protect her.

Not even his essence twitched as he said, “You are referring to the King of Latiah?”

“Yes, of course. After all, he was the one who put me up to capture her. We’ve made a trade. He, for some reason, thought I had a need for a human girl, and in return, I am supplying him with the protection he needs to prevent said little witch from ending him.”

Avery’s eyes glittered as she looked at Savine. A smug little smile was etched on her face. “You want me to kill him here? You know that as a witch I can kill him without dying?”

Rylo’s golden eyes sparkled back at Savine’s mate’s eyes. “At last! We are getting somewhere. Of course I want you to kill him!”

Savine creased his brows as he spoke, “But you were working with Jasper when you attacked us.”

“Well, I’m not stupid enough to tip your father off about my betrayal. And besides, I needed to know you and Avery are strong enough to succeed before I make any final plans. Avery, the execution particularly impressed me.” Rylo flashed his gaze to Savine. What fucking execution was Rylo talking about? Savine looked at Avery, her ashen face gazing down at the ground.

Before Savine could speak, Rylo continued, “But if Avery fails, Jasper will either kill her during her attack on him, or he will execute her to save face. I will be happy to do the honors for you, Savine. That whole law of progeny and not killing one’s children will get in Jasper’s way.”

“So you admit to playing both sides? Either Jasper is dead, or we’re dead, but you come out with what you want either way,” Avery stated, shaking her head with disgust.

“I am doing what is best for myself and best for my people.”

“What will your people get from this?” Savine asked, curious to see how Rylo’s insane thought process functioned.

“What your people have denied us for centuries. Our land back. You see, I will give Jasper what he wants in exchange for our land. If he survives and refuses to return our stolen land, I will not give him what he desires most. Avery, if you are successful, I will exchange your freedom to the new king, and will gain my land in the exchange. I have no use for a human. What would I do with a human, after all!” Rylo leaned his head back and laughed at his own joke. As if the balance of his and Avery’s life was some sort of flippant game for him.

“What if I don’t attack Jasper tomorrow night? He won’t have a reason to execute me,” Avery replied. Savine tensed as she said this. No, he knew her words were not true.

“How little you know of our world! As the King, he does not need a reason to execute someone. And if he wanted a reason, your very existence, as Savine’s openly professed soulmate, would be reason enough.”

“But you said you wouldn’t kill me because I am Goddess marked.”

“No! I would not dare upset our Mother Goddess Althea. But Jasper will not know about that Goddess mark. I have just the thing to hide it from even the most discerning eyes. Much stronger than a simple essence glamour. Made from deep magic. The same little talisman that Jasper wants so badly.”

Savine’s eyes widened. He understood then that there was only one way Avery could come out of this alive. If she killed Jasper tomorrow night. But how would an untested human be successful in killing one of the most powerful fae in all the world?

He needed Rylo to know the truth about what happened all those years ago. Perhaps it could make him angry enough to

do the job himself.

“Rylo, you do realize my father played both me and the Nepheli court all those years ago? It was Jasper all along. Jasper who manipulated Lilith into loving me in order to get you to kill me. He is the reason your whole family is dead.”

The Nepheli King looked like he'd seen a ghost. “No! That was your fault. You took a woman who wasn't yours. She was married, and only a soulmate can override a marriage. You caused her death, and as a direct result, my mother's and father's death. While we are at it, you should still be rotting in the Tower of Teeth. After all, you never finished your sentence.”

“It was him. He told me shortly before I rebelled. I would have rebelled sooner had I known what he was capable of. I cannot lie about this, and you know it.”

Rylo's body shook. Pure rage blazed in his golden eyes. He turned and pointed to Avery.

“Tomorrow you will kill Jasper. You will end his life,” Rylo hissed.

Avery, Savine was surprised to see, didn't back down from the Nepheli King. “Why don't you kill him? You're not his citizen.”

Rylo took a long sip of his tea and scowled as he said, “I may not die if I killed Jasper, but I would never threaten my country's peace. A king killer, even another king, would face retribution from other nations. Why do you think nobody has ever allied with the noble young Savine here? Everyone hates Jasper. That doesn't mean his death is worth sacrificing our nation.”

Avery frowned. She scooted closer to Savine, but he could see the fire in her as she spoke. “You're fucking planning an assassination through me! You're involved! Word will get out regardless when Jasper dies!”

Rylo let out a shrill laugh, reminding Savine that the man was insane. “You're in my house! Why do you think I actually bothered stealing you and inviting all you fools here? I control

the narrative here. There will be no repercussions from me when the man who has openly rebelled against the King of Latiah was unexpectedly here, and his soulmate is the one to deliver the killing blow!”

Savine shook his head. There was only one way to survive this test, and it would be to make sure that Avery killed his father in two days.

Chapter Fifty-Four

Savine

“Again. Try to knock me down with even more force,” Savine said. He and Avery had been practicing her magic for hours. Savine was exhausted from the strain of the last twenty-four hours and the mounting pressure, but he was trying not to get testy with her. Her life depended on how she did when she faced Jasper. Yet, he wondered if this was all she had in her. Her magic was nothing like the powerful force that consumed him when they healed the forest together. Was her fear of killing Jasper holding her back?

“Savine, this has to be the last time. I’m exhausted. I need to sleep and let my magic restore itself before tomorrow night,” Avery panted as she leaned against the wall.

“Show me what you got then, my little witch.”

Savine watched as Avery’s legs wobbled a little, pushing herself off the wall. She was worn out. He could see the look of determination on her face as she dug into the reserves of her magic. That look, like nothing in the world could stop her, made him chuckle. “That’s my girl,” he whispered as her eyes seared into him.

There was so little they knew about a witch’s magic. He didn’t know if he was correctly teaching her how to best harness her power. There were so many unknowns to training a witch that it made his need for order and control creep up. If

they made it through the next night alive, Savine would graciously request to peruse Rylo's bookshelves for manuscripts on witches.

While Savine thought about the unknowns within Avery's powers, she blasted him with a force that knocked him to the ground. Okay, admittedly, he didn't expect her to attack. But damn. She knocked a good hit that time.

"Now, that's what I want to see more of!" Savine said as he brushed himself off. Thank the Goddess for his fighting leathers. Otherwise, he would have been ripped to shreds by that illuminating green light. If she could hit with that kind of force, she may do some damage.

Avery didn't look back at him with triumph, but with a weariness that tugged at Savine's heart. She looked at him like she was defeated before she'd even tried. Dropping her gaze from Savine and shrugging her shoulders, Avery sank into Savine's chest. She let out a shaky breath that tore Savine's heart into pieces before she spoke.

"That's all I've got. That's it, and there's no chance that it's going to be enough." Hot, wet tears slicked off Savine's leathers. Oh, this woman. This beautiful, kind-hearted woman should never have been pushed into this world. She should not have to suffer to make him a king. She shouldn't even be in this world. She should be back in Montana, blissfully unaware of Aeritis and all its pain and terrors.

Even if that made her unaware of him. If he knew what horrors he'd be pushing his mate towards, he'd never wished she had come. He would rather suffer the loss of never uniting with his soulmate if it meant taking away her suffering.

But that wasn't an option. Avery couldn't go back to Earth. And it was impossible to live without her as his. Not now that he'd felt her, tasted her. The need for her to be near him was like a madness coursing through his veins. The only way to have her would be through Jasper's death.

"That last hit could do him in if you combine it with iron and if he is dressed in formal attire. Abyss, it nearly knocked me out flat with my leathers on."

“I don’t know how I will possibly defeat such a powerful man on my own.” The weariness on her face cracked through her strong facade. He would be breaking her by allowing her to do this. Her soul wasn’t meant for causing pain. It was meant for healing, for being a light to this broken world.

“I will be there. Every step of the Goddess-forsaken way. I cannot make the killing blow, but I will make it easy for you to do it. Now let’s get some rest.”

Avery looked at him with the most mournful expression, sending Savine back to when she’d first arrived. To the sad, scared woman hiding in a little tent.

“Savine, I have to tell you something. Something I did.” Her voice shook with emotion, and she sank to the floor.

Savine kneeled down beside her, their foreheads touching as he wrapped his arms around her. Savine feared where this was going. He knew Weston, Rue, and Susan came with her when they were taken, but he had seen none of them since he arrived in Nephel. Rylo mentioned how “well” she did during an execution. His heart raced in anticipation of what she was about to say.

Tears stained Avery’s cheeks. “I killed him. I killed Weston just to save myself and my friends. He begged me to choose him, and I did. I did it.”

The words choked out of her. The anguish in her voice was enough for Savine to want to rip Rylo apart for causing her so much pain. He drew her into his arms, close enough that her heartbroken and weary head nestled into his neck. The wet tears continued to fall down his leather armor.

“Avery, what you did saved not only your life, but Rue’s and Susan’s, too. Weston was a good man. He would have wanted to honor you by dying to protect you.”

Avery’s face turned to anguish. “But he didn’t protect me. I killed him for nothing. I fed right into Rylo’s sick game, and I plunged a knife into an innocent man’s heart.” Avery’s words diminished into sobs as Savine stroked her hair.

Savine was beyond words. The need to protect Avery was going to make him do something he regretted. If he spoke now, he'd scare Avery from the unfettered rage that danced in him.

Eventually, she spoke again. "I feel like part of myself died with Weston. Like a part of me that was a good person is dead now. His blood spilled all over my hands. I can still feel it there. No matter how many times I wash my hands, I can't get it off. And now I'm going to have to kill Jasper if I want to survive. But I don't know if I have it in me. What will this death going to cost my humanity? Even though he is a bad man."

Avery didn't need his vengeance or his rage now. She needed comfort and compassion. These two things were... challenging for him. He'd spent his whole life being denied these things. He breathed in Avery's sweet scent. Savine stroked her head and the loosely braided golden strands.

Finally, he said, "A wicked man forced you into a situation that you should have never been in. You are not that action. That action does not define who you are. Just like tomorrow won't either. I promise you, after tomorrow, your hands will only be used for healing. I will never let someone hurt you like this again."

Avery's body still shook against his. "I just don't know if I can do it," she mumbled into his tear-stained chest.

"Abyss, damn me, Avery. I will die for you if it means keeping you from feeling this pain again." Savine lifted her up from the ground and carried her back to their room.

Tomorrow, he'd take the killing blow for Avery. It was worth forfeiting his life to keep his soulmate from forfeiting pieces of her soul.

"No, Savine!" Avery gasped. Her big human eyes were puffy from crying as she looked up at him. "I won't live in Aeritis without you. I would rather kill him than lose you. Jasper has hurt you all your life. I will stop him from ever doing it again. I'm just... I feel scared. That's all."

The guilt that scraped through Savine made him want to tear this Abyss damned world to shreds for hurting her. Rylo had tied both their hands on what would have to be done tomorrow.

“I won’t let you face this alone, Avery. We’re going to get through tomorrow,” Savine said.

Savine scooped Avery into his arms. Her bone weary body sunk into his without protest. They both grew quiet as he carried her down the spiraling staircases of Nephel.

Chapter Fifty-Five

Avery

A very tried to stay as still as possible. Maybe if she didn't move, she could pretend like this day wasn't already here. Savine's warm breath caressed against her neck. His solid form next to her was something that she'd relished in the last two nights. Just these last two nights of bliss as he touched her, caressed her, and held her close. Souls laid bare to each other. Souls yearning to the point of agony to be bound as one. It wasn't enough. Not even a lifetime with Savine would be enough.

But it could be cut so short after tonight. She wouldn't be able to defeat Savine's father. Maybe if she'd had a year of training or at least the winter like she'd planned. Maybe if they were not in this spider's web of deceit by Rylo. But not like this. Not with only two days to prepare herself. Not after the guilt from Weston's death hung over her.

Her fear, always rattling the edges of her mind, pulsed through her thoughts. She wasn't ready to die. She'd just started her life with Savine and needed more time with him. Avery turned her gaze to him sleeping quietly beside her. For him, she'd swallow her fear. How could she let it control her in what were possibly her last moments with him? No, this fear that had become such a part of her life in Aeritis had no bearing here. She wouldn't let it consume her. Avery scooted

deeper under the covers and buried her face into the warmth of this man who'd given her a life worth fighting for.

Savine stirred next to her as someone pounded on the door. Again, a heavy banging on the door brought Avery out of her thoughts as the sound became unavoidable.

"Abyss, curse it all! I'm coming," Savine growled as he climbed out of bed, groggy with sleep. He wore nothing but the bedsheet that he'd pulled off as he climbed out of the bed. Avery shivered when her bare skin was exposed to the surrounding air, but Savine turned back to her and gently tucked the remaining covers around her body. He placed a silk robe on the end of the bed, and she leaned over to wrap it around herself.

Edet entered carrying a tray with a pot of tea, eggs, and thick slices of bread. "You never cease to surprise me, girl. First time I saw you I ne'er smelled something so pungent. Now I see you in a compromising position with a prince, no less. O' course all the towers been talkin' about the prince returning. And your time locked with him, but I ne'er been one to believe gossip. Now I saw it with my own eyes."

Her ruddy skin scraped Avery's arm like sandpaper as Edet placed the tray of food on Avery's lap. "Thank you for breakfast, Edet," Avery replied. What else was she supposed to say to Edet's speech? Savine stood on with the slightest smirk on his face. Those solid abs of his were on full display all the way down to the V where the sheet was held up.

"I brought you some too, Your Highness. It's just outside. I thought it would be rude of me to assume you would be in here. But I'll get your plate," Edet said as she kept her eyes lowered to Savine's gaze.

"That would be appreciated," Savine replied. "Give me a moment before you reenter."

"Of course, Your Highness," Edet said as she bowed low, exiting the room.

Savine's grin had Avery chuckling into her tea as he looked up at her.

“Our first time being caught in bed together. How do you like that?” he asked. Savine’s boyish grin made Avery’s heart tug. For so long, he’d been so serious. Seeing his playful side was something that Avery never wanted to miss out on.

“I hope she tells all the towers what she saw. It should be clear to everyone who we both belong to.” Avery meant it, too. She didn’t want to spend another day with people not knowing that Savine Rathalian, the true King of Latiah, was hers and hers alone.

Savine chuckled as he said, “She’s probably telling anyone who is passing in the hall that we are naked in bed in the middle of the morning.”

“If only they knew the games their king played. They may be more understanding that this may be our last morning spent this way. Now, climb back into bed with me.”

Savine dressed in a light shirt and comfortable pants before he got back into bed with Avery. Savine crawled under the covers and tugged Avery’s chin toward him. “Oh, Avery, I have no doubt that we will have hundreds of thousands of days spent this way. So many that you will grow tired of people walking in on us naked in the mornings.”

Shadows of doubt crossed her face. She wanted to keep up this cheerful attitude, but she didn’t have as much faith in herself as Savine seemed to have. Chewing her lip, she nodded her head as her words came out in barely a whisper. “I hope you’re right.” The unease stirred in the pit of Avery’s stomach.

He took her cup of tea and sipped it before pouring more for her. She heard him make a faint mmm sound as the tea went down his throat.

“Your tea addiction rivals my former coffee addiction. But to be fair, tea never tastes as good as coffee for me.”

“One of my first orders as king will be to locate and import coffee for you, my flower. I believe living without tea would be like living without breathing, so I understand your pain.”

Edet knocked lightly and quickly on the door before she entered their room this time. “Here you are, Your Highness. I

recall you enjoy tea, so I brought you a separate pot. I know your last visit did not end well. Right shame, that whole thing. What with our king killing his daughter and our queen killing him, then causing her own life to end? But it all worked out for you, what with your execution on hold.”

Avery’s eyes shot to Savine as his body tensed. His essence shook under his skin before he took a calming breath. She wanted so badly to know all the details about what happened the last time Savine visited Nephel, but she didn’t want to push him. Fae kept their secrets like currency. And despite the soulmate bond and his declaration of love, Savine was still keeping those secrets close.

Edet seemed to sense the tension caused by her words, and she turned away from them momentarily.

“I am here for more than bringing breakfast. You are to be dressed and primped in three hours to prepare for the guests of honor this evening. I will return then wi’ the dress. Highness, you are to dress in another room. Will you need assistance?”

“I will manage on my own,” Savine said.

“I assumed so. A warrior like yourself don’t need another man to dress you.”

Savine’s face took on that hard, unwavering look that Avery had grown so used to. “I also will not be leaving Avery while she prepares for the... festivities.”

“Ah, I do not know if that will be acceptable. The orders for you to leave the room were from high up,” Edet said as she shrugged her shoulders.

“Selene, I assume? Yes, well, I will deal with her if she has a problem with me being here.”

“Very well, do you need anything else this morning?” Edet asked as she looked at him in disbelief. Avery already knew most of the folk seemed to have a healthy fear of Selene.

“Not yet. We will train after breakfast, so I’ll need a bath,” Avery said.

Edet curtsied as she began backing toward the door. “No problem with that, me lady.”

As she left the room, Avery wondered about Edet’s origins. Were there wingless Nepheli?

“Savine, is Edet a typical Nepheli? She doesn’t have wings, and she’s the color and texture of sand.”

“I would assume she is either full Goldoth or half Goldoth. She seems to draw her essence from minerals.”

“How would she end up here, then?”

“Like my people, most folk are free to travel and live in other nations. Or she may be indentured to Rylo’s kingdom.”

“Like a servant? Or a slave?”

“Yes, my flower. Most likely a slave that can buy back her freedom after a certain period of time.”

“Are there slaves in Orofine?”

“We called them the indentured, for they can gain their freedom after years of service, but yes. Giving the indentured their freedom is something I plan to do as king. I have lived my life under the control of another, and I know how it can weigh on someone. I will not allow it any longer.”

Avery sighed as she leaned against Savine’s strong body. “There’s so much riding on today, isn’t there? It’s not only about us and our future. But the future of all those without a voice or a home, isn’t it?”

Savine nodded. He had dealt with the pressure of his role as heir his whole life. He’d give anything for his people, even sacrificing his own needs. He’d already done it when he began the rebellion.

Avery felt the scrape of calluses run against her smooth skin. “Don’t let doubt or fear pressure you, Avery. We will do this. Together.” He took her hand gently and pressed his lips to her fingertips. His touch alone made the tensions between them go taut. “But first, we’ll train. Only two hours of combat training. I do not want your magic wearing down before tonight. Then we will prepare for tonight.”

Chapter Fifty-Six

Savine

Savine stood near Raikin on the small balcony outside Avery's room. His spring green eyes looked at Savine with a spark that could only mean that Raikin had something to share. Savine had been so entirely focused on Avery for the last two days that he had only briefly checked in on Raikin or Jay. Savine had no doubt Raikin used his time wisely, though. Whether that was seamlessly blending into his surroundings to gather intel, or socializing with the Nephel Court, Savine looked forward to hearing what Raikin had to say in their situation.

"I hope you have not spoiled your chances of bringing down Jasper," Raikin said.

Savine crossed his arms. The last thing he wanted was to inform his council members of any part of his sex life. "I made it clear the disaster we would cause if we consummated our bond."

Raikin glanced past Savine toward the room where Avery bathed. "And how did our little witch take that news?"

"She felt the bond. Avery knows what is at stake here. But she's afraid."

Raikin pursed his lips and placed a hand on his chin. "Afraid of the bond or of killing Jasper?"

“Killing Jasper, of course. Why would she fear me?”

Raikin’s eyebrows arched. “You are about to be crowned king. From what I’ve heard, she was a manual laborer in her world. I don’t see how she wouldn’t be afraid of bonding with a king.”

Savine pressed his fingers against the bridge of his nose. He hadn’t given much thought to how he’d turn Avery into his queen, or if she really understood what that would mean.

“She’ll be fine!” Savine protested halfheartedly. What if she didn’t want to help him rule?

“I think you should wait longer than Jasper’s demise to secure your soulmate bond. You cannot take her as your soulmate or your consort before you are on the throne. You need to be prepared to make a show of strength when we arrive in Orofine, and you must think of your alliances and enemies. We will only incense the loyalists if you show up with your father’s killer as your mate.”

Frustration coursed through Savine’s veins. He could feel his essence streaking through his body, ready to fight an unseen foe. “I will do no such thing. I will not be separated from her for one more moment.”

“Ah, foolish man, think with your brain, not your cock! I am not telling you to set her aside permanently. Just wait to bond with her until you are settled on the throne. Keep her by your side and out of sight for all I care!”

Savine released his fisted hand. “I’ll make no promises, but I’ll consider what you say.”

Raikin sighed and looked out over the balcony to the North. To home. “This has been a long conflict. Twenty-five years away from our home. Yet, it is nearly over,” Raikin said with a wry grin. “I will never sleep in a tent again.”

Savine couldn’t help but shake his head at Raikin. Not with Jay as a soulmate, he won’t. “I know she can do it. I won’t take the chance of this going awry and I’ll help her. But her same old fears surface so easily. She’s not a fighter. And asking her to do this... To kill for me and my country? It’s

taking a toll on her. Yet, I am pushing her toward this without looking for another option. I do not deserve her.”

Raikin nodded and continued to look north. He knew what it was to be loved by someone kinder than himself. Jay had a heart of gold. He gave others his good humor and kindness so effortlessly. “Althea has a way of choosing not the person we deserve, but the person we need. Don’t see Avery’s affection as something you’re unworthy of. See it as something you need. I know I doubted she could be your soulmate, but if she feels the tug of your bond too, then Goddess bless you both.”

“Thank you, Raikin. You don’t know how good it is to hear that we have your support.”

“It’s the least I can do. Now, onto what I’ve heard. Jasper is here. He is in the guest towers across the ravine. It seems he and Rylo do not trust each other enough to stay under the same roof. According to the rumors around the towers, he was brought here under the cover of night. He was injured from the fight with you and has been resting and healing since he arrived. I found a maid who served the Latians, and she claims the King is antlerless. Does Rylo still have the antlers?”

Fuck. How could Savine have forgotten about the antlers? Of course Rylo had them.

He didn’t want to let on that he was so swept up with Avery that he completely lost track of the antlers.

“Yes. They are in his possession.”

“It does not matter. If all goes well tonight, you will wear your own boughs and antlers by the end of the evening.” Raikin gestured to the crown already adorning Savine’s head. He’d gotten decent at calling it forth over the last few days, but it still hurt like the Abyss to do so. Savine hadn’t bothered to share that bit of information with anyone. Some sufferings a king must do alone.

“Any word on if my father knows we’re here?”

“He knows you were nearby and knows Avery is here. I think he believes we are planning some sort of infiltration. Ironically, that was our first plan.”

“Thank the Goddess we didn’t have to go through that.”

Raikin’s eyes became little more than slits. “Thank the Goddess after we are out of this mess. You of all people shouldn’t put your trust in Rylo. He is as slippery as a serpent and more mad than your previous stay.”

“I believe for once in our lives, Rylo and I have the same goal. He won’t stay loyal to me if Avery fails, but I will not let that happen. Do you have what I need?”

“Yes, it was challenging to procure. Especially without raising questions in the towers. I disguised myself enough that no one could recognize me as a Latian. I also got my hands on a Latian gown. Not in the same disguise, of course.”

Raikin handed over a small bundle to Savine. At least Avery would be armed with iron. He wouldn’t take any chances against their future.



Avery slipped out of the tub and wrapped herself in the silk robe. Peeking out of the room, she noticed Savine and Raikin talking on the balcony outside.

Only a few more hours remained until she would come face to face with Jasper. Her stomach flipped, and she tried to calm the shaking in her hands. She’d been struggling all day with keeping herself calm. Even during training, Avery had fumbled so many times as Savine tried to take her through some simple maneuvers.

She’d need pure luck tonight to succeed. Either that or help from that Goddess.

A knock brought her back to reality, and she opened the door to find Susan and Rue standing in the hallway.

A shriek escaped Avery’s mouth as she pulled her friends in close for a hug. All three women laughed as they held each other. Her heart thudded in her chest as she pulled back and looked them over. They were alive and safe.

“How did you get to my room?” Avery asked.

Savine came running into the room from the balcony. “Avery! I heard you—Oh! Susan, Rue. You’re here.”

“We are. We finally escaped our room,” Rue said. Savine and Raikin both cocked their heads and stared, like Susan and Rue performed something impossible.

Susan smiled. “It was Rue. Somehow, she convinced Selene to bring us to you. We’d heard rumors that something big was happening tonight, and we wanted to see you before this evening.”

Savine’s eyes widened. “That seems very out of character for her. Doing something just to be nice.”

“You convinced Selene? How? She wouldn’t budge when I tried to get you here earlier,” Avery said, looking at the shrewd smile on Rue’s face.

“She kept stopping by to check on us. So I just continued to sweet talk my way into letting us visit. Today, she walked into our room and told us to follow her quickly. I wasn’t sure what we were being led to, but she stopped at your door and told us you were in here. She said she would be back in thirty minutes,” Rue said as she turned her head to Avery, curls bouncing.

“Yes, well, we don’t have long,” Susan said. “We have been fed, clothed, and, relatively speaking, treated like guests. Guests that had no freedom or ability to leave our rooms. But still, I expected to end up in the Tower of Teeth. What does Rylo want with you?”

Avery wanted her friends to know all the details. “The King of Latiah is here. Rylo wants me to kill him tonight. Apparently, he hates Jasper as much as Savine does, but isn’t going to be as patient with me while I learn how to actually kill a powerful fae.”

Susan lifted a hand to her mouth. Her freckles starkly contrasted with her pale skin. “You have to kill Jasper tonight? Oh, Avery! What are you going to do?”

Savine crossed the room, sliding his hand around Avery’s waist. “I’ll make sure she doesn’t fail. I would like both of you

to be there too. Raikin and Jay are here to help as well.”

Rue tilted her head, studying Savine and Avery. “Something’s happened between you two. I mean, something was obviously going on before we were taken, but what are we missing here?”

“I’m Savine’s soulmate!” Avery said. She flashed Savine a big grin, and he reciprocated with a smile that warmed Avery’s heart.

“Congratulations!” Susan and Rue said.

Susan turned her attention to Savine. Her jaw tightened, and a frown erased her smile. “Savine, I’ll fight with Avery.” Susan looked at Avery as she spoke, “I know about as much as you do when it comes to defending myself, Avery. But I’ve been practicing magic for years now. I mentioned the ancient witches formed a coven. I don’t know how it works, but I’ll help you tonight. We’ll get through this together.”

Rue gave Avery a sad, slight smile. “I can’t kill him. Goddess knows I wish I could. For all he did to my people and to our true king. But I won’t let him harm you.”

Savine nodded. “Alright then, let’s get ready to dethrone a king.”

Chapter Fifty-Seven

Avery

Despite the faint butterflies in her stomach, Avery entered the banquet room, standing straight and walking confidently. Wearing a forest green gown in the Latian style, she knew that her clothing would be an immediate insult to the King. Not only was she wearing clothing in his nation's style, but she also wore the color of Latian royalty.

With a low cut front and back, the dress showed way more skin than what seemed to be acceptable by Nepheli standards. The fabric fit like a glove to her small frame. Long sleeves of lace had images of different plants in the fabric. Raikin had obviously gotten the dress tailored to her shorter stature, as it hit at her ankles. The right leg had a cut up to mid thigh that gave her more movement than the stifling Nepheli dresses. She felt like a sexy badass in the dress, and that definitely wasn't hurting her confidence as she prepared to take down a king.

On her neck sat a citrine stone attached to a golden chain. The stone was encircled by a golden sun. This stone, Selene claimed, was a gift from Rylo. Created by an ancient witch, and holding deep magic, it would hide whatever the bearer wished. Erasing it completely from even the most powerful fae. Selene herself had helped Avery hide her Goddess mark. Savine tested the stone to see through the ward, but it was

impossible. No chance would Jasper find out she was Goddess-touched.

But what assured her was the iron blade hidden on her left thigh. She'd have to be very careful not to expose it thanks to the slit in her dress. Getting his hands on iron was incredibly risky for Raikin. He'd never shown her any kindness, but this gesture alone was enough for her to see where his true loyalty lay.

Avery had felt tiny next to the Nepheli guards who escorted her through the maze of stairs. Flat shoes weren't going to make her the size of the shortest Nepheli, but at least she'd be able to move quickly when she attempted to bring down a centuries-old fae king.

The only thing that gnawed at her was Rylo's insistence that Savine stay away until she demonstrated her power to the crowd. While she knew that Savine's presence would alert the Latians to the betrayal, she still felt like a piece of her was missing in the crucial moment. The compromise they settled on gave Avery a little reassurance. Raikin was disguised as a Nepheli server, complete with wings somehow. He would be the one at her side the whole evening. Savine waited in the antechamber with Jay, Rue, and Susan.

The banquet room was decorated with ornate gold and silver drapery. The open air room had a slight chill from the autumn winds whipping into the space. Above her head, tiny fae lights twinkled like stars trapped under the ceiling. It was a breathtaking sight, and she wished she could enjoy the atmosphere with Savine instead of facing the most challenging moment of her life yet.

The Nepheli guards led her past revelers dressed in their finest. Like her last presentation to the Nepheli court, everyone she passed whispered and commented. But she didn't care. They weren't her concern tonight. Tonight, she was saving a nation and claiming her soulmate. At least that's what she hoped she'd accomplish.

Finally, she was seated to Rylo's left. He turned and gave her a half smile before directing his attention to the next guests

to arrive. His smile wasn't the least bit encouraging. She would never forget that she was in this mess because of him and that she'd been forced to take Weston's life because of him. Even now, she could see the light drain from his eyes as his blood splattered her hands. Now she was about to take another life. The life of a man who'd not only harmed his own people, but Savine. Even still, knowing that she was about to end someone made her shake slightly. She would never get used to taking someone's life.

The Latian King frowned as he walked forward. Even though she knew he was nearly five hundred years old, he looked no older than a man in his late forties. His body was muscular, yet slim. So unlike his son's large, strong body. His long, black hair was interspersed with gray and braided in many long braids, decorated with beads and jewels down to his hips. His beard was salt and pepper. He wore a crown of woven antlers on his head. It wasn't gilded like the cedar boughs Savine now wore, and seemed to lack authenticity. His striking blue eyes were the exact shade of Savine and Kyla's, but his faded essence was nothing like Savine's. His exposed flesh was slightly patterned in tiny brushstrokes, like the short fur of a deer under copper skin. His eyes gleamed as he glared at Avery.

He wore the same shade of forest green that Avery wore. As he looked at Avery, she knew he noticed her Latian clothing and royal color. His scowl pierced through Avery, and she felt her throat and chest contract. Breathing became more painful by the second. *Oh God*. He was going to kill her before she could even make any sort of move. As her breath sputtered, she reached for her magic. Pulling at the coiling magic deep within her, she shot a ray of green light out at the King. The tiny ember of power that she produced made Jasper flinch enough that he let go of his own essence.

Rylo drawled in a bored tone, "Jasper, can you please refrain from killing the human until after the soup course?"

Jasper's face looked crimson with anger. His essence writhed under his skin. Avery fought the urge to turn and run, stealing her face into a bored mask.

“How dare she dress like Latian royalty!” Jasper spat. “I refuse to stay in this room and be insulted by this filthy human scum. The very idea that you would taint this room with someone like this is an insult to the fae and Althea herself!”

“I’m sure King Rylo would be happy to have you eat somewhere else if you can’t stand to be near a little human,” Avery said. She knew she should watch her tongue, but really. How many insults could she take?

Jasper stared at her with his mouth wide open. Clearly, he wasn’t used to being talked back to.

“Sit, Jasper,” Rylo drawled. “She means no harm and will display her abilities for our entertainment.”

“I will not see any displays of her abilities until after I have what you promised me,” Jasper sputtered. This hundreds-of-year-old fae had such a weak grasp on his emotions. The man was turning purple with rage.

Rylo continued to keep up his mask of boredom. More likely, he was actually that bored. Avery wouldn’t be at all surprised if Rylo found this entire display dull.

“Don’t fear, the power of what I promised is well in place and you won’t be disappointed with what I have planned this evening.”

For being a creature unable to lie, Rylo could twist his words to have so many double meanings that his words caught Avery by surprise. Was this another one of his traps?

“As a guest of your hospitality, I shall not insult you by leaving the supper. But if I have one inkling of treachery, I will not hesitate to take action.” As Jasper spoke, he placed his hand on an ornately decorated sword covered in emeralds and rubies. The hilt was in the shape of a pine, ending in an egg-sized emerald at the pommel. She couldn’t see the blade, and hoped she wouldn’t have to.

Avery looked to see Rylo’s reaction. To her shock, Rylo *literally* yawned. With the smallest movement of his finger, the room was filled with fae warriors, wearing midnight black fighting leathers that seemed to be dusted by the stars

themselves. Each warrior spread their wings, making shadows across the room.

“You always have a way of reminding me why I do not host other rulers in my home. Now, if you are finished with your bluster, I would like to enjoy this supper,” Rylo said. Avery heard him mutter under his breath, “Goddess forbid, it’s the only enjoyable part of this evening.”

Raikin’s disguise was so good that Avery would have never known it was him, other than the subtle wink he gave Avery as he brought her food. Rylo suggested he be the one to serve Avery, but they all knew better than to take that risk. His betrayal would be so swift if he were the one to give Avery food.

The meal tasted like ash in Avery’s mouth. She tried to be polite, but it was all so unappealing that even the small bites she took had to be forced down. It didn’t help that all the food was rich, coated in decadent sauces, and heavy on the meat.

While trying to eat roasted lamb coated with a poached raven’s egg, Avery heard Jasper address her for the first time since his outburst. “It is a pity that you took an interest in my rebellious son. I could have found use for such an exotic specimen in Orofine. But now you will never know genuine appreciation.” As he spoke, spittle formed at the corners of his lips. She shouldn’t have leaned forward to look at him while he spoke. She should have ignored this cruel man who failed to learn to eat properly, despite his centuries old age.

Avery placed her fork down on her plate and looked past Rylo to where Jasper sat. “With all due respect, Your Highness, but before dinner started, you called me filthy human scum. What is it then? Am I exotic or scum? Surely I can’t be both.”

“Arrogant girl! How dare you speak to me in such a manner? I can see you have learned a few things about impropriety from that unfortunate heir of mine. Hold your tongue before you lose it.”

“I say this with all neutrality in mind, but she has a point, Jasper,” Rylo said. Jasper spit out a mouthful of his egg.

Greasy yolk trickled down his chin as he looked at Rylo with ice-blue eyes that could shoot daggers. For a moment, Avery felt a twinge of pity for Rylo being seated next to the incensed king.

“Rylo! You do not know the consequences I shall take against you if you insult me in such a manner. Hold your tongue!”

A golden gleam flowed off Rylo’s exposed skin, masking his tanned complexion into something shimmering, nearly otherworldly. “You, of all people, should understand that I hold your fate in my hands. You willingly have placed yourself in this position. Now stop spitting on my meal and raging at my guest.”

He must have been doing something to Jasper that Avery couldn’t detect. Jasper was sweating profusely, and his skin was the color of a red plum. Would he kill this man just out of irritation before Avery had the chance? Maybe his own hatred would get the better of him?

After what seemed like an eternity, the golden glow on Rylo’s skin faded back to a shimmer, and Jasper looked less near to croaking into his dinner. The rest of their meal was consumed in silence. Avery didn’t interrupt the silence. She sat quietly, looking down at her plate as she tried to concentrate, channeling her magic.

The crowds throughout the banquet room did not keep their gossiping quiet. Many spoke loudly about how disgusting it was to have a human dine with them. She truly hated these fae. She hated how they talked down to her. How they looked at her with a mix of amusement and disdain.

But most of all, she hated them for judging her based on a historical event that happened thousands of years ago. She wasn’t judged for her own actions or mistakes. She’d hardly interacted with the Nepheli fae. No, these fae make cruel and crass comments in front of her without even bothering to get to know her.

She missed her sister and thought about how Morgan would handle the situation. Morgan wouldn’t be a pushover. She’d

tell all these puffed up pigeons just what she thought of them and not lose a moment of worrying over her actions. If only she were with her. Everything—this entire world would be easier if she were with her.

Bayberry kept drifting into her mind, too. The warmth and the acceptance she'd experienced were more than she'd ever had in her life, even on Earth. Funny how suddenly Bayberry felt like a second home to her, with the kind and cheerful folk, vegetarian cuisine, and cozy homes.

But most of all, her mind drifted to Savine. They were just getting started, and she feared their budding relationship would end before it even began. He was the man she never would have imagined on Earth, and yet here he was, her own personal prince charming, wrapped up in a grumpy package. She couldn't let this end with him yet.

She was so deeply lost in a combination of thoughts that she didn't hear Rylo's words. As she glanced up, she saw his hard stare meet her eyes.

"I'm sorry. Did I miss something?"

"Everyone is ready to see you demonstrate your powers as a witch, Avery." Rylo's golden eyes glistened as he spoke. His skin took on that same shimmering glow that he'd had earlier in the meal. Avery's stomach roiled, and she immediately regretted the few small bites she'd eaten.

"Alright," she croaked. That voice. It sounded nothing like her own voice. So distant. So raspy. She took a swallow of wine to help calm her nerves before she left the table.

All eyes were on her as she left the banquet table and approached the cleared space between the king and his guests. She wasn't sure what she should do to begin. Actually show some magic? Or take him by surprise and go for the attack? And where was Savine? She assumed he'd be with her by now.

Before she could make a move, Rylo spoke to the crowd. "We are honored tonight to host Avery Hollis. A witch from the realm called Montana. With diligent efforts from both the

Latian and Nepheli nations, we were able to recover her from the rebel forces. To show her gratitude, Avery has agreed to show her magical abilities. This will be an entertaining display. Music!” As he shouted, strings and drums began immediately.

Did Rylo set them up? Most likely, Savine was locked away, waiting for retribution for his actions.

“Avery, we’re all waiting...” Rylo drawled. How did this man’s voice sound bored even when he knew what she was prepared to do?

Avery began growing tiny white flowers in the remaining dishes. She got a few polite claps. Chuckles and hisses rose from the obviously unimpressed crowd. Why would they be impressed when Savine could raise whole forests? When he could kill someone with a choking thorny vine. But one person’s face looked stunned. Surprisingly so, considering he always kept such a bored look on his face. Rylo looked at Avery as if he had seen a ghost.

“Child’s play!” Jasper shouted. “Give us a proper show!”

“If you insist, Your Majesty,” Avery muttered.

She reached for the knife on her thigh, hiking up her skirt as she grasped the blade. With more speed than she ever thought she could manage, Avery threw the iron knife toward the King of Latiah. She propelled it forward with her green light and watched as it soared through the air, striking Jasper on his left shoulder.

So she was a little off. A lot off. She was aiming for his heart, but hit him on the shoulder. Regardless, the iron went to work right away.

Chapter Fifty-Eight

Kyla

Kyla, Garnel, and the rebels raced through the canyon trail along the edge of the Sapphire River. Sapphire Falls was ahead, then they would be at the base of the towers. From the rumors Kyla heard, Savine was already at the towers as a guest. All Nepheli warriors they encountered on their way to this point did nothing to stop them from crossing through the Nepheli lands. It was as if their presence was welcomed. In fact, one commander of a small group even suggested that they should make it to the towers with all haste.

That the Nepheli King was going to give her brother his crown.

How could this be?

Avery was taken captive by the Nepheli King. Surely he meant harm to her and Savine, not destroy Jasper.

As she was pondering this, she saw a small, dark figure plunge down into the waterfall. What in the Abyss was that? It nearly looked like a child going over the falls.

Kyla turned to her mate, noticing how he also looked at the sparkling blue waters of Sapphire Falls. “Garnel, I think someone just went over the falls. I’m going to check on them.”

Garnel nodded his head, pointing his elk toward the first tower. “I saw them too. I’ll bring the warriors to the towers

and see if the Nepheli are actually going to just let us enter.”

Kyla pulled the reins on her elk, leading him down a steep and narrow path to a deep blue pool below the waterfall. The cool breeze of the falls chilled and dampened Kyla’s exposed skin. The moonlight only gave the dimmest light to the night sky, but still she saw what she was looking for. A small woman was crawling out of the water, dark hair stuck to her face and neck.

Kyla leaped off her elk and ran to the girl’s side. Then she yelled something that made Kyla’s essence freeze and her blood turn to ice.

“Avery! Avery!” the girl shouted in a faint, raspy voice.

Chapter Fifty-Nine

Avery

“**Y**ou bitch! I will eviscerate you!” Jasper gasped in agony as a Nepheli guard ran to his side to pull the knife out with gloved hands. As he drew out the weapon, blood spurted out with a hiss. The iron was doing its work better than Avery realized. Jasper screamed in pain as his blood boiled forth. A guard pressed a napkin to the wound, but it was doing nothing to stop the bleeding.

Guards rushed Avery on all sides. She whispered an incantation that burned through her entire being before blasting from her fingertips. Everything in her shook as the power—*so much power*—shot out of her, illuminating the room in a neon green light before knocking down half a dozen fae warriors.

Rylo motioned for the guards to stand down as he continued to relax at the table. What a prick. He couldn't even be bothered to lift a finger to help. And where in the hell was Savine? He and the others should be here by now. The Nepheli guards obeyed without question, but that didn't stop the few Latians from running toward Jasper.

“Do not let them near their king. I want to see what she can do,” Rylo drawled. His guards jumped into action, drawing swords. The Nepheli guards lifted their swords in preparation for attack.

Raikin, still dressed as a server, stood between Avery and the guards. His disguise melted away, and the Latians gasped in surprise. Avery felt a shift in the room as Raikin released some sort of sticky liquid from his hands.

Was that sap?

Raikin hit three Latian guards with shocking precision. The targets of his sap screamed as the hot, sticky liquid spread across their bodies and faces. Avery watched in horror as the victims flopped to the polished stone floor, pinned in an amber viscous liquid as they writhed for breath.

Magic hummed in the air as other fae guests prepared to wield their essence against Avery. Being in a room filled with hundreds of powerful fae gave her little chance of getting out of here alive. She thought of the protective bubble she'd created during the Hylax attack. Nobody was going to take her out before she had a chance to kill Jasper. She'd trap them together until one of them died.

Just as she was about to create a ward around them, Avery heard the tremble of the doors as thorny vines burst through the room.

Savine. Savine was here!

Screams filled the chamber, but Avery smiled. Savine ran into the room, and she'd never seen such a beautiful sight. His hair was pulled back in a bun. In one strong arm, he wielded his sword, while thorns blasted out his other hand at anyone who stepped in his path. On his head sat the gilded boughs.

A king triumphant. That's what he was. A king conquering what was rightfully his.

Behind him ran Jay. She'd never seen him move so quickly, so fluidly. Avery hadn't seen him in battle and never realized that he could transport himself across a room, like stepping through the folds of space and time. As he worked his way forward into the room, he made swift work of the Latian warriors that stood in his way. Avery flinched. He was killing his own people without a second thought. How did kind,

cheerful Jay deal with the guilt associated with taking lives with such ease?

A wave of cool water hit the remaining loyalists, flushing them across the room. Susan. If Susan could make it to her, they may be able to stop this together. Avery shouted for her friend, and Susan made eye contact as she ran at a typical human pace through the chaotic room.

Jasper bounded over the table—heading straight for Avery with his sword drawn. His injured left arm continued to bleed, but that wasn't stopping him from exerting his fae speed as he raced toward Avery.

She had to act *now*. If not now, then she'd never have another chance. Avery spoke the words in her heart as she heard Savine shout her name. Just one last look at him. That's all she needed before she let her magic ripple out of her.

As she turned her head, she saw Savine's brilliant blue eyes sparkle. He was right there by her side, bloodied sword lifted and ready to take out his own father. His essence rippled under his skin as she took her eyes from her soulmate.

With a flick of her wrist, she released all she had in her.

The green light flowed out of her like lightning, forming a dome around the three rulers and Avery. For a moment, it stunned Avery. This was coming from *her*. She was the conductor of all that power. All that light. She didn't know she had this much in her, especially without tapping into the deep magic. It rippled through her, a never-ending flow of pure magic until it hit her target true and strong.

Jasper collapsed on the floor and shuddered before he stilled. Everything around Avery rang. Her vision blurred as she tried to focus on the heap on the floor. Avery fell toward the floor like a feather drifting down. But there he was. Savine. She was in his arms and would never leave them, ever.

"Avery!" Savine shouted. "Avery, answer me. Sweet powerful witch." Words were beyond her as she tried her hardest to return his caress.

“Well, that was disappointingly easy,” Rylo said. Although her eyes were closed, she heard his voice close by. It was over. How had killing one of the most powerful fae been that simple?

Just as she thought that, she felt a constriction in her throat. She couldn't get a breath in. Her eyes flew open as Savine tightened his arms around her. His pupils darkened so much that the blue all but disappeared from Savine's eyes. A mixture of shock and pain was etched on his face.

Jasper wasn't dead after all.

“You think you can kill me with a bit of green light, girl?” Jasper roared. “Me? The most powerful fae in the land. And you, my traitorous son. I cannot kill you myself, but I will ensure all the rest of your life is spent in agony. Rylo, you are just as traitorous. I will delight in watching your downfall. Then this little sky kingdom will be mine for the taking.”

Power rippled off Jasper as he cast out his essence, wrapping around Avery's body. The dome she'd created dissolved into nothing. She was being yanked away from Savine, and she couldn't hang on. Her body and his were no longer under their control. Avery tumbled forward before being set on her feet. She was so lightheaded. There was no way she was going to last much longer. Beside her stood Savine and Rylo. Both of them were also losing their oxygen supply.

The fae lights were growing softer. She wouldn't be conscious much longer. She had to fight this. Had to stop him from killing her.

As her vision blurred, Avery saw Savine push out a tangled web of vines that coiled around Jasper. He distracted Jasper enough to loosen his grip on them. Avery collapsed to the floor, choking as she tried to push air into her lungs. Her throat burned with the effort, but she knew she had to complete this task before Jasper overpowered her again.

“Avery! I need you. I can't do this without you,” Savine said.

Her legs shook as she stood. Jasper's weakened essence grasped at her. But she would not let him in. Savine passed his sword over. Its weight felt so similar to the weight of her axe back at home. Why hadn't she taken up a sword sooner?

Avery looked this bitter, horrible fae male in the eyes. She wanted to see the fear. She wanted to see the look in his eyes when he realized he was going to die at the hands of a young human woman.

To know that she was taking out her soulmate's tormentor and putting a kind and just man into power. A man who deserved to rule. She looked at Savine. His face was hard, nearly unreadable, as he looked into her eyes.

"You are our only hope, Avery," he said.

Avery nodded. She'd take this life. She'd kill this man and do it in the name of love and justice. "This is for all those you have ever hurt, Jasper!" she screamed. Her voice was shrill as she lifted the blade above her head.

Pain exploded through her mind in agonizing waves. Through the shock of pain, Avery saw Savine convulse and fall to the ground.

In a shriek of horror, Avery collapsed to the cold stone floor. She clutched the sword to her body and tried to pull herself up, but it was like she was no longer in the throne room at Nephel. What flashed before her eyes pulled her away from this realm and back to Quartz Mountain.

Visions of her sister and the bear shot through her mind unchecked. Morgan, a rag doll in the bear's maw. Avery couldn't stop the desperate scream from tearing through. She turned her head to Savine, but he was gone. All that remained was the terrifying final moments on Quartz Mountain.

Avery dropped the sword to the ground. The pain was pulsing through her body as she watched her sister die in front of her eyes over and over again. She let out a piercing scream and fell to the floor. "Morgan! Morgan!" she screamed again and again, as if she had any way of stopping Morgan's death.

Faintly, so distantly, as if it were no longer real, Avery heard Jasper's dark laughter mingled with Savine's frantic shouts that the visions were not real. If it wasn't real, then why couldn't she let it go? Why wouldn't it stop?

The suffocating choking returned, and Avery had nothing left in her to fight as she listened to Morgan's screams.

Just as her vision blurred, and she prepared to lose consciousness, a familiar voice shouted, "Avery!"

A voice she only thought would visit her in her dreams.

Oblivion set in when she made out Morgan's face there before hers. Her hair and clothes were dripping on Avery's chilled body. Tears stained her sister's cheeks. But they weren't how Avery remembered them. Scars traced down Morgan's face. Across her forehead, Avery saw the twin Goddess mark to hers. But what made Avery convinced that she was still seeing visions were the black shadows wrapped around Morgan, like dark guardians.

"Morgan... Is that you?" Avery rasped. She wasn't sure the words made it out as her breathing continued to be strangled out of her.

As Avery's vision blurred, she watched Morgan's eyes move from Avery's to the fae king.

Avery watched in shock as her sister pulled out a handgun from a holster on her hips. Her sister held the gun, pointed in Jasper's direction.

The last thing Avery heard was the sound of a gunshot as the world collapsed into dark, writhing shadows.

Chapter Sixty

Savine

Pain seared through Savine's head as antlers twisted into shape, mingling with the crown of cedar boughs. He reached his hand to his head, feeling the crown of the true King of Latiah on him. His father was finally dead, and the civil war was over. But none of that mattered. He only needed to know that Avery was alright.

The pressure on Savine's throat had vanished moments ago. His mind cleared from all the terrible visions of Avery being tortured in the same ways he'd been tortured throughout his past. As he stood on weakened legs, he saw a small, dark-haired woman leaning over Avery's body. Shadows drew themselves tight around them.

The woman still held the small object that had shot an explosive sound at Jasper. To Avery's side, Jasper was lying in a puddle of his own blood, ashen skin, and empty eyes stared up at the ornate ceiling of the Towers. His father was dead. It was over, and this shadow-wielding woman had killed the Latian King.

"Avery!" the woman screamed. Her wet hair fell in strands across Avery's still body.

No. No, Avery couldn't be gone. Savine rushed to Avery's side. His own body shook as he regained control after his father's essence had infiltrated his mind. He felt the faintest

tug through their bond. She wasn't dead. She couldn't die. Not now, not after all he'd put his mate through to end Jasper.

"Let me have her," Savine said, and the words came out like a stifled growl as he reached for Avery.

"Don't fucking touch us!" the woman shouted, raising the small object at Savine. Her face was scarred and broken, thick pink scars twisted across her face with features so similar to Avery's that it made him startle back. On her forehead were the five stars of Althea. *Morgan*. Inexplicably, this had to be Avery's sister. Shadows danced and jumped around the space between them. Morgan had already called forth her magic, and Savine bet she didn't even know it was her wielding those dark specters.

Savine stepped back, and his heart thumped in his chest like it was going to leap out and join Avery. "I would never hurt Avery," Savine said. "I want to help her."

Savine concentrated on that bond between them. It was still there, thrumming and tugging at them. "Please, just let me hold her. I need her."

Rylo walked forward, golden light shining off his feathered wings and tanned skin. "Your Highness." He nodded as he approached Avery and the woman on the floor.

Savine growled as Rylo inched closer to Avery's side. Rylo had nearly gotten all of them killed with his little scheme. He would have, had Morgan not arrived at that moment, to kill Jasper with her human technology.

Rylo bent down, a wing barely brushed against Morgan's back. "Let her go. She is safe now," Rylo said in a honeyed voice, commanding yet sticky sweet. He took the small weapon from the woman's hand and helped her stand.

The shadows that wrapped around Morgan thinned until she was glowing in Rylo's golden essence. She looked at him like she was looking at a god, but Savine didn't care about them. All he cared about was holding Avery.

Savine rushed in to scoop Avery into his arms. She was breathing and warm, and he never wanted to let her face

danger again. As he held her close to him, he could feel their bond strengthening, tugging them closer to each other.

“You heard the prophecy that night. Over twenty-five years ago. *The two born of one womb shall return to take their place,*” Rylo said. There was nothing questioning in his tone. So Rylo had witnessed the prophecy too. His face was hard and unreadable, but that voice remained honeyed as Morgan stood shivering near Rylo.

All Savine could do was nod his head as he thought back to that night in the woods. The prophecy had felt like a minor thing compared to losing his grandfather, mother, and home in the same night.

“I have often wondered if the stardust and white flowers fell to your feet. If that is what caused the civil war. Now I know. And now the witches have both returned.”

Savine felt his chest tighten. He’d often wondered what the prophecy had meant. He’d even wondered if it could be Avery, but it was only her who’d made it to Aeritis, and he’d hoped it was only a coincidence. That she’d arrived to be his. The way Rylo’s eyes shifted between the two sisters told Savine that he’d taken the prophecy seriously and tried to solve its meaning. Had he known that it foretold Avery and Morgan’s arrival?

At that moment, Avery stirred in his arms. As she opened her eyes, she looked at the intermingled crown of boughs and antlers.

“We did it. But...” her face was puzzled, like she was trying to sort out what had happened in the last few hours.

Savine gave Avery a faint smile. “Morgan is here. She killed Jasper.”

Avery turned in his arms, looking across the room at her sister, and Savine helped steady Avery’s feet on the ground. Immediately, the two sisters ran to each other, wrapping themselves in a hug.

Rylo was beside him, his glowing essence reduced to a faint light. “Do you remember the next line in the prophecy?”

“Yes,” Savine replied. “*Death shall follow their footsteps, and all shall bow to their power.*” He looked at the woman who had become his world and he shuddered at what was to come.

Author's Note

Thank you so much for reading *Quartz Mountain*! I hope you loved reading it as much as I loved writing it!

As a bonus for my readers, I've got the prologue to Book 2: *Sapphire Falls* available at my [website](#). You will get Morgan's perspective of the bear attack, and how she survived the experience. When you receive your copy of her side of the story, you'll also be signed up for sneak peeks on upcoming releases, and some bonus content.

If you enjoyed this book, please consider leaving a review on [Amazon](#) or [Goodreads](#). As a new indie author, every review helps my book get into the hands of other readers! Your review means so much to me.

Finally, if you're excited about finding out what's next for Savine, Avery, and the others, consider preordering [Sapphire Falls](#).

Acknowledgements

First and most importantly, thank you to Richie, who helped give me the time to write this book, and make my dream of becoming a published author possible! Without you, this book wouldn't be possible. I love you each and every day!

To my alpha and beta readers who helped me fix plot holes, hilarious spelling errors, and easing the cliff on that cliffhanger. Thank you for all your help in making *Quartz Mountain* better!

For all the help from my editors, Melanie and Valerie. Thanks for all your feedback.

To my readers: Thank you for joining me on this journey! I appreciate you so, so much!

With love,

Audrey