



C.A. WORLEY

SHADOW'S RAVEN

A CROSSING DAGGERS NOVEL

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For my husband, who encourages me every day. Who celebrates my wins more than I do. Thank you.

And to Elaine. I owe you a beer. Or twenty.

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“I suspect most males tend to lose their heads over you.”

~Casimir, Shadow Assassin

“I don’t know about most, but several literally have.”

~Raven, Unimpressed Halfling



~ GLOSSARY ~

Adrestians: winged beings with strong healing magic that can open portals; often mistaken for angels

Ansley Keep: castle where the ruler of the Faelands resides

Borderlands: strip of treacherous territory on the northwest border of the Shadowlands; also known as the wilds; home to small pockets of Others who do not wish to live under the rule of a sovereign or who are in hiding

crossing: a portal between realms

Dominus: leader of the Fortis demons

Earth Realm: realm where humans live, as well as some factions of Other

Embour: the Shadow demons' stronghold, where the Shadow Lord resides and his army is based

Dianic witch: faction of witches known for raw power and control who do not believe in fate

Fortis demon: class of demons known for their immense strength, dark hair, dark eyes, and sexual prowess

furatus: demon word for stealing a soul from an unwilling body; the magic of the act allows the demon the opportunity to issue a directive that his victim will be compelled to obey or else risk death

gargoyle: small stealthy creature with wings that resembles a grey pig with beady red eyes; Shadow demons believe it is good luck to be marked by its urine

Gatekeeper: guardian who monitors a crossing between realms and ensures there are no unsanctioned crossings; only the fiercest of beings can be Gatekeepers

ghosting: when a Shadow demon shifts and travels in shadow form

Other: non-human magical being, such as a demon, witch, fae, shifter, etc.

Otherland: perilous realm where magic was birthed; home to a variety of Others

Pale River: river in the Otherland that flows from the Faelands and through the Shadowlands

Primus Crossing: one of the portals connecting Earth Realm to the Otherland, located on the Fortis demon's compound in Earth Realm and connected to the Shadowlands

Shadow demon: class of demons known for their savagery and unique appearance—tall, olive complexion, silver hair of various shades, and grey eyes; can shift into shadow form

Shadow form: the form a Shadow demon can shift into; literally looks like a shadow and allows them to move quickly and safely, as well as to travel through places difficult to traverse in corporal form

Shadow Heart: magical weapon capable of opening portals to almost anywhere

Shadow Lord: title for the leader of the Shadow demons

Shadowlands: a region of the Otherland connected to the Primus Crossing, controlled by the Shadow demons and ruled by Draven, the Shadow Lord

~ NOTABLE CHARACTERS ~

Brokk Ulrik: infamous mercenary known as The Navita; father to Raven and Kol; ally to the Shadow demons

Casimir: Draven's cousin of similar height and build; Head of Security for Embour; master swordsman

Chimmie: a mischievous gargoyle pup being trained to track; has a knack for escaping his pen

Circe: Dianic witch; callous and ambitious, she betrayed her family and was banished to Earth Realm

Draven: the current Shadow Lord; ruler of the Shadowlands who took power by killing the previous ruler, Samael

Emile: Talia's brother; Shadow demon; close friend and Second Advisor to Draven; has a weak gift of Sight

Gabrian: Lyric's father; Dominus of the Fortis demon clan in Earth Realm

Gregor: Lyric's uncle; second in charge of the Fortis demon clan under his brother, Gabrian

Hugo: Shadow demon and Embour's resident healer; close friend to Draven

Kol Ulrik: Brokk's 12-year-old son and Raven's younger brother; half witch, half fae, both powerful and smart

Kree: half Adrestian, half Fortis demon; Lyric's older sister who was once mated to the former Shadow Lord, a terrible male who Draven killed; possesses strong healing magic and a sweet nature

Lyric: half Adrestian, half Fortis demon; Kree's younger sister; Draven's soulbonded mate; talented fighter partial to blades with an interesting sense of humor

Malcolm: Consort to the Fae Queen with a wandering eye for other females

Niklaus: Shifter who works for The Navita as a spy; Raven's former flame

Phalen: Commander of the Shadow Army with a penchant for wearing silly t-shirts; close friend to Draven

Raven Ulrik: Brokk's daughter and Casimir's fated mate; half Seelie fae and half Dianic witch

Sersha: Queen of the Fae, cold-hearted; mated to Malcolm

Talia: Emile's sister; female Shadow demon; close friend and First Advisor to Draven; has a weak gift of Sight



Chapter 1

Raven

“He’s very handsome, you know.”

“How nice for him.”

Another blow from the riding crop landed, this time across the middle of my face. My bottom lip split and I spat blood onto the floor, barely a foot from my aching knees. If I could have managed it, I’d have directed it to hit the bitch right between the eyes.

Alas, I’d not spent my youth practicing the art of launching expectorate past my lips.

I blamed my mother for many things, I may as well blame her for my lack of phlegm control. While some races of witches believed sputum brought good fortune, Dianic witches did not believe in groundless fortuity.

We do not rely upon luck, Raveena. We blaze our own paths, the memory of her sultry voice chastised. Goddess knew the only thing blazing in my world at the moment was my skin.

The nerves in my face were going haywire. Tingling had started a while ago, after a dozen or so rapid-succession strikes. I suspected the whip had traces of iron dusted upon the leather.

Iron was bad news, even for a half-breed like me.

A swipe of my tongue caught the tangy trace of copper. The motion sent a drop of liquid trickling down the front of my chin. Holding my captor’s sharp stare, I calmly wiped my mouth on the sleeve covering my shoulder.

The view in my peripheral wasn’t pretty. The Otherland’s natural light, streaming in through the keep’s slender windows,

highlighted the rust-colored stains on my once pristine white shirt.

The material across my back was torn, the large ribbons spread apart far enough I could feel a slight draft upon my skin. Thankfully, I'd been afforded some semblance of modesty and my most vulnerable parts remained covered.

I waited for the Queen's next move, ineffectively ignoring the soft scoring of the bottom of her satin slipper sliding across stone. It grated against my ears.

It wasn't surprising she slithered around fluidly. It was, after all, how snakes navigated the world.

Unlike the vipers she imitated, Queen Sersha lacked the ability to effectively subdue. Today's efforts at torture were unimpressive. The unimaginative queen was trying to break me as one might try to break a timid horse—with a stern voice and a riding crop.

As if.

My biggest complaints had nothing to do with her direct hits. The skin at my wrists burned from the iron shackles, the ferric bonds weakening me to near exhaustion.

My body was beginning to feel the toll of my internment. There was a heavy ache in my arms, the result of being chained to the large metal grommet with my arms above my head.

At least I was kneeling and able to conserve some degree of energy. I think Sersha preferred me on my knees, anyway, so she could pretend I was bowing at her feet.

Conveniently, it also made it easier for her to reach my face, something she seemed fixated on today.

The riding crop smacked lightly against her palm in tandem with her unhurried movements. It wasn't the worst of the Fae Queen's tools, but it seemed to be her favorite.

When Sersha was once more facing me directly, her expression shifted into one a mother might give to her youngling throwing a fit.

“There really is no need for all of this,” she said with faux conciliation. “You can easily change your situation. A few words from you and we can be done with this nonsense.”

The Queen’s eyes probed my own. Searching. Waiting. I gave nothing more than a blank face.

Eyes flashing, her knuckles whitened around the handle of the whip. It was a lot like Sersha. Precise. Mordant.

Unable to finish the job on its own, I sneered internally.

“Must you be so difficult?” she whined sullenly, dropping the pretense she’d held for not even a full minute. “Lying with him is no hardship, I can assure you.”

Gag.

Mutely, I watched Sersha circle the empty chamber twirling the black leather instrument in her elegant hands, looking every bit the queen she was. Ruler of the Faelands, of both sects of fae, the Seelie and the Unseelie. A descendant of royal bloodlines who carried her frame with poise and grace.

I’d seen fae from both groups throw themselves at her feet. The Seelie were supposed to be more inclined to lightness, to naturally feel a sense of righteousness, while the Unseelie had to fight the darkness within. Here, no one could tell the difference amongst the Queen’s handpicked court where every soul held some degree of taint.

The covetous eyes of the members of her court watched intently whenever she was near. She loved every second of their vulgar attention as much as she loved calling out those who did not meet her standard of envious regard.

The Queen’s countenance turned thoughtful, a virtuous face in contemplation as she inspected my silhouette before settling upon my bloodied lip. It would be so very gratifying to wipe that contrived look off her face.

Sersha was so much worse than my father had warned. She was an imposter, wearing her beauty like a cloak to hide the ugliness underneath. How could the fae of this land stand by and do nothing?

A true queen would love her subjects, not tolerate their existence. Not play with their lives. Not steal one away from the kitchens solely because she'd taken note of the looks given by her consort—a consort who likely had a roaming eye because his Queen hadn't respected him enough to name him King.

Sersha sighed. "Is it money you desire? Land? A job to get you out of the kitchens? I can give you all three."

I communicated nothing in return. Little by little, lines appeared on her face until she looked like someone had used purse string sutures to close her mouth.

I hadn't come to Ansley Keep to find wealth, much less to humor this lunatic. I wished I'd never left Father and Kol, even though I'd hated that place. No, that wasn't completely accurate. I hated watching a male of worth live with the ghost of the shrew that was my mother.

A nameless feeling had compelled me to leave home less than a year back, one so pressing and persistent it nearly drove me mad. Father had preached my entire life to never ignore the little voice screaming from within. So I listened, and it pointed me towards Ansley Keep.

Confessedly, much to my own chagrin, I'd also been morbidly curious about the Fae Queen. Curious if either of us would feel the connection few, not even the vile despot herself, knew we shared.

She'd never given any indication she knew who I was. Not even now, as she walked the room mumbling and hissing to herself. It was the first hint Sersha had shown of mania. I was uneasy but I hadn't folded. At least I hadn't let my family down in this one regard.

It should never have come to this, my inner witch admonished.

Father was hesitant to support my journey to the keep. He was even more hesitant to repeat the mistakes he'd made with my mother, who'd accused him of trying to cage her. Circe was his only blind spot and we'd fought over it often.

We'd agreed a lowly job outside Ansley's walls would keep me out of Sersha's notice. If my spelling magic hadn't been potent enough to mute the strength of my power, or if he'd known I would purposefully end up inside the Keep, he'd have done his best to force me to stay home.

How pompous and assuming I'd been.

What would my father and brother think if they could see me like this, bound and kneeling in Sersha's secret room? I could almost hear my father's lecture, reminding me that Ulriks did not get taken prisoner. He'd taught me better than to get caught in yet another spider's trap. If he found out, he'd do something foolish to save me, probably dragging my twelve-year-old brother into it.

Thank Hecate I'd had the sense not to share my past with anyone here. No one knew I was from Terek.

I'd gladly take my father's lecture once I freed myself, something I needed to figure out soon. I should have figured a way out already. Unfortunately, I was never left alone when brought to this space. My cell, down in the lower levels, was escape-proof, covered in iron and spelled by someone powerful. My best bet to get away was when they transported me to or from the Queen.

Or, preferably, if I could get Sersha to touch me. She was always careful, only coming close enough to strike with her weapon. It was smart of her. I did have a few tricks up my sleeve, but in my weakened state, our skin would have to touch for me to use them.

As she paced with growing agitation, I allowed my eyes to roam. Maybe I'd missed something I could use to my advantage. The room was small and devoid of furniture aside from a single chair in the center and a sturdy table in the corner. Four small window slits, too narrow to fit a body, lined the wall to my right. A variety of loops, secured to the stone floors, walls, and ceilings in various spots, were used to secure prisoners.

That was it. No tools. No weapons rack. Nothing. This wasn't the real torture chamber. It was the watered-down

version.

There was only one purpose to the room. It was where Sersha did her best to coerce her victims and mete out what she thought of as justifiable punishment when they didn't bow to her whims. She got off on feeling like she had a hand in such things, as though she were the one breaking her captives' spirits.

She wasn't. The serious pain came courtesy of her minion, Dolan, deep in the bowels of Ansley Keep. The Queen didn't have the stomach to do the real dirty work.

Sersha had yet to realize most of the servants knew of this room's existence, just as they knew of what happened in the dungeon. They ran around with their heads down so as to never call attention to themselves. It was shameful to use fear as a way to control others.

Her fingers snapped in triumph.

"Do you have a mate? Or are you under terms of a betrothal?" Sersha's sing-song voice scaled higher, sounding like she'd stumbled upon the answer to the world's greatest riddle. "I can assure you it won't be an issue. Malcolm and I are nothing, if not discreet. Your male will never know."

I thought my opinion of her couldn't possibly sink any lower. I was wrong.

"No," I answered honestly.

The fae races were incapable of lying and used word games to circumvent the issue. Being a halfling, I'd not fully inherited this inconvenient trait. It pained me greatly to tell a falsehood, but I could manage it. Though, I saw no point in playing at any pretense.

"I do not have a mate, nor am I living under the terms of a betrothal," I continued, choosing to make it crystal clear my refusal came because it was my right to do so, not because I'd made a promise to some male.

"Then why?" she asked, clearly baffled by my continued refusal.

I didn't answer this question. I never answered it. She should know why. If the Queen couldn't grasp the concept of respecting fidelity between mated pairs, then she certainly wouldn't understand why I would never allow my body to be used in such a way.

Sersha had asked this question at least a dozen times since taking me prisoner. This was usually the point in our conversations where she'd call in her guard to choke me unconscious so he could move me back to my cell. It was the only way they could get my cooperation.

That first day, she'd said she would have done it herself but she didn't want to risk getting blood on her new dress. Her words had been so adamant I wasn't sure who she was trying to convince. Sersha wasn't the badass she so obviously wanted to be.

Though hidden, she had cracks. We all did. If I pressed, would she fall apart? Those who succumbed to emotions became careless. A careless Sersha might be negligent enough for me to get free; and she was definitely more frustrated than normal today.

When she circled back around into my field of vision, I lifted my head defiantly. "Why would you want me to willingly lie with your mate?"

Something sparked in her eyes. Velvet-soft, she brushed the crop down the side of my neck and across my clavicle.

"You are unique, Raveena."

I didn't correct her use of my birth name. It was the name I went by here. Only my mother had ever called me Raveena. My father shortened it to Raven, calling me by the name of his favorite ship.

The leather tongue tapped lightly, high on my cheekbone. "I've never seen a fae with eyes of violet."

My eyes had likely been my downfall. I rarely glamourous them because it never held. Windows to the soul could not be dressed in a lie for long.

I'd naively thought little of it after my arrival. Forest green may have been the primary eye color of most fae, but it wasn't a guaranteed outcome. There were variations within the gene pools. The head cook's were a peculiar shade of faint amber and at least three of the maids had various shades of sky blue. My own father's irises had often been mistaken for red when they held more dark magenta than anything.

Granted, Brokk Ulrik's coloring was one of a kind. Most species of Other knew who he was on sight. When his enemies saw his purple-red orbs headed in their direction, they ran for their lives. Rightfully so. I wondered if Queen Sersha knew of their ties. I could imagine what she would do if she saw him coming, even without that knowledge.

"Nor are you of the same build of a true fae."

The leather tip skated down the fabric of my top, then lightly tapped on the sides of each of my breasts. It didn't feel sexual, more like an appraisal. I thought she might be envious of my ample chest compared to her own diminutive bosom.

Most fae females looked like Sersha, waif thin and dainty. Though I was petite in stature, I'd never been waiflike and I refused to allow my body to hold onto the skinny physique valued by so many courtiers. I'd worked for years to build muscle tone, to gain physical strength. My mother had put me in the position where it had been necessary.

"Perhaps you are of mixed blood?" The last two words came out like she had a bad taste in her mouth.

I didn't fall for the bait. I'd never tell her of my heritage. It would be too easy for her to track down my kin and attempt to use them against me.

"I see why he covets you. He would never act on it without my permission, of course. Malcolm has always been most loyal to me."

"Then why push me towards him?" I threw back.

"Because he is loyal and I like to reward him for it. By denying himself what he wants, he will slowly grow obsessed. You will occupy his thoughts more and more, become a

forbidden fruit, if you will. He would never take you against your will. But if I sent you to his bed, and you willingly went, he could slake his thirst and be done with it.”

“He’s your *mate*,” I stressed. It should have been explanation enough.

Sersha lifted one shoulder. “Don’t be so naive. Malcolm and I aren’t soulmates, and a soldier needs to be well-fed in all aspects of life to remain content. It’s worked before and it will work again.”

My lip curled.

The leather tip dipped below my belly button. My hips jerked away, halting her progression. Sersha took a few quick steps back. If she wanted a reaction, I had just given her one. I was done with this game. It was time to poke the viper’s nest.

“You want to feel like you have control over the situation, like you’re doing him a favor and he owes you something in return. No self-respecting female would ever tolerate her mate’s wandering eye—and she would *never* allow her mate to lay a finger on another. You’re pathetic.”

I spit again, as far as I could manage. It fell short, landing a palm’s width from the tip of her satin-covered toes. Sersha’s pale skin heated. Her green eyes glowed. I might not have been able to hit her with my projectile but I’d clearly been able to miff the harpy.

Good.

“Dolan!” she screeched.

The door opened and the echo of heavy feet thumped across the stone floor. “My lady.”

The large male loomed menacingly. Aside from his size and the color of his dark green irises, I had no idea what he looked like. He was dressed in the Queen’s royal guard attire of black leather pants and boots, blood red tunic, and a thick, dark brown vest stamped with the Fae Queen’s standard—a thorned red rose twined around the blade of a sword.

Unlike the other guards, he also constantly wore gloves and an executioner's black leather helmet. The head covering revealed only the eyes. Three small holes marked where his mouth should be. Surely it was hard to breathe inside such a thing.

"Take her back to her cell," Sersha ordered, a slight shake in her voice. "I want her stripped and flogged. Use the rattan cane first. If she doesn't cry after 40 lashes, switch to the cat o'nine."

"Cry, my lady?"

"Yes, cry. Sob. Scream. Something!"

Dolan's head turned to me, leaning his head thoughtfully. "How many lashes after I switch to the cat o'nine, my lady?"

I smirked. Dolan was smarter than he let on. Unlike his employer, he knew exactly how this would play out.

"As many as it takes."

Dolan bowed then moved towards me, eyeing my throat. As his meaty hands cut off my oxygen, I held Sersha's glare.

"I'll break you, Raveena. One way or another, I'll break you," she promised, her voice pitched with the notes of her rage.

You first, I mouthed, just as my body lost its fight.



Chapter 2

Casimir

Six months later ...

“You look like shit, Cas.”

I frowned at Draven’s First Advisor, one of my oldest friends who had long ago become like a sister to me. Only family could get away with saying such things to my face.

“Thank you, Talia. As always, you are most eloquent.”

“She’s right,” Draven seconded. “You’re not sleeping.”

I reinforced my mental shields against my cousin, the Shadow Lord, ruler of everything within the borders of the Shadowlands. His mindreading capabilities were problematic. Usually, I was good at safeguarding my thoughts. Burnout was making me sloppy.

“Draven, it’s not polite to dip into others’ heads whenever you feel like it,” his mate chastised. I could always count on Lyric to call him out on his bullshit.

“What?” he asked innocently as his palms lifted into the air. “I’m concerned. I get protective when I’m concerned.”

“No. Really? I had no idea,” she replied acerbically, rubbing her growing bump. Overprotective was putting it mildly.

Lyric was only six months along, about halfway through a normal demon pregnancy. She wasn’t fully demon, so we weren’t exactly sure if it would shorten or lengthen the gestation period. Her asshole of a father, Gabrian, had said her mother’s pregnancies lasted about eleven, so that was what we were going with.

Gabrian was a Fortis demon, a branch of Other known for their physical strength. Like Draven, he was also a Gatekeeper.

He and Draven had to work together because they guarded opposite ends of the Primus Crossing. We had developed a grudging respect for the bastard after our most recent battle when he finally demonstrated he wasn't a complete waste of flesh as a sire.

Gabrian lived in Earth Realm and prevented humans from entering the gateway while Draven was charged with guarding this side, making sure no unauthorized species of Other attempted to cross. There were a number of crossings throughout the Otherland, but only one in the Shadowlands. Most magical beings were too dangerous to be turned loose in the human world and Gatekeepers had been around since the dawn of mankind.

Lyric's other half—her better half, if anyone asked me—came from her late mother, who was Adrestian. Like her deceased mother, Lyric sometimes sprouted wings of pure energy. Her sister, Kree, could do the same.

Kree, my inner voice bemoaned. I needed to put that female out of my head. She'd made it quite clear she wasn't interested in me and I'd respected the space she'd requested. Despite my acceptance of her disinterest, life had started weighing on me ever since, though not because of her. The coincidental timing of my problems was not ideal and I'd not been handling things as well as I'd thought.

Hence, the current intervention.

I'd been called to the Council Room under false pretenses, thinking we'd be going over the new rotation of security at Embour, the Shadowlands' stronghold where the Shadow Lord made his home. Since I was in charge of such things I'd made a schedule and came prepared to discuss the changes.

This room was where we always convened to discuss Shadow demon business, or anything else of importance affecting the Shadowlands. Problems were presented and dealt with here. I'd spent many an hour in this room, in this same chair, at this same large wooden table, with the same Council members, hammering out solutions.

Today, apparently *I* was the problem. To be fair, I wasn't sure I had a legitimate counterargument to whatever they were getting ready to unload on me.

As soon as we'd taken our seats, Lyric started the meeting with a little speech about how much they all loved me and how this was a safe space. Kree was noticeably absent.

I waited patiently for the next attack.

Phalen leaned over the table, resting on his forearms. A tendril of his Shadow demon trademark hair fell forward, the dark silver catching on his short beard. The rest of his longish mane was pulled back for once. His rose-colored tee had "Real men wear pink" splashed across the front in a squiggly font. The jokester of our group was looking rather grim.

"It's like this, Cas. You're not sleeping. We know you're not because the bags under your eyes are bigger than Lyric's ass cheeks, which, despite her best efforts, no longer fit in her fighting leathers."

"Hey!" she protested, tugging down her top to cover the elastic panel she'd had sewn into said leathers.

Phalen winked at Lyric and continued his indictment. "It's affecting your reaction time. Everyone sees it during our sparring sessions. It's also affecting your decisions. You've never been slow with an order."

He was right. Indecision was not something I experienced. Well, not until recently.

"Your personality is different, too," Lyric said softly. "You're moody. Usually, you're quite charming and sweet."

Phalen snorted. Draven scowled at his mate but held his tongue. I let the comment go, unwilling to shatter her view of me. If Lyric thought I was sweet, so be it. I worked hard to maintain an affable persona. It made life easier.

I could walk around now without those in my presence scattering to get out of my way or dropping their eyes out of fear. Panicked whispers no longer reached my ears and females didn't refuse to lay with me in the dark. Lyric had no idea who I once was, what wounds still marked both my skin

and my psyche. Sometimes I suspected Draven forgot. Hell, they all did.

“Aaannnd,” Talia drawled, “it has to be mentioned that your beard is out of control. It’s crooked, for fuck’s sake. And matted. I fear something might crawl out of it any second.”

Lyric gagged dramatically. Everything made her nauseous these days.

My sword hand self-consciously ran over the length of the bushy growth, mildly offended. I typically kept my beard trimmed short and impeccably neat. Admittedly, I had been neglecting its care. I had more important things occupying my mind.

Phalen nodded his agreement. “Your old buzz cut has grown out and is turning into a mullet. Normally I wouldn’t mind the change, but your tired face doesn’t match the party in the back and your soured expressions are getting on my last damned nerve. You can’t even sit through a Council meeting without obviously wishing you were anywhere else but here, especially when we’re *all* in attendance.”

Wonderful. Now they were bringing Kree into it.

I looked at Draven. “Am I off the Council?”

“No.”

“Am I no longer the head of Embour’s security?”

Draven hesitated. Lyric’s hand fell upon her mate’s, squeezing.

“Not yet,” he finally stated.

“So, this is you putting me on notice then.”

“We’re just concerned,” Lyric insisted. “This thing with you and Kree—”

“There is no *thing* with me and Kree.”

“—has affected you deeply in a negative manner, which is now affecting Embour in a negative manner.”

I shifted my chair, squaring my shoulders with my cousin-in-law. “You think I’m hanging on to some unrequited love for your sister? That it’s wrecked me to the point I can no longer do my job?”

Her eyebrows lifted. “Hasn’t it?”

“No, godsdamnit!” My fist hit the table.

“I don’t buy it,” Talia said.

“Me either,” Phalen added.

“I don’t give a fuck what any of you buy,” I snapped.

“Watch. Your. Tone,” Draven warned. “This is what family does. We call each other out on our bullshit and we have each other’s backs. No matter what.”

Well didn’t that just take the tempestuous winds right out of my indignant sails. My posture sagged, the anger waning. I was tired. So damned tired. A slow leak was draining me from the inside.

“You don’t tell us anything, Cas, when you used to be an open book. This whole I-am-an-island garbage is over. Got it?”

Lyric squeezed her mate’s hand again, this time her knuckles whitened. “What I think Draven is trying to say is that you need to lean on us. Whatever this burden is, we’ll carry it with you.”

My head dropped into my hands. They all thought I was moping over Kree. Maybe, at one time, I had been, but that was done months and months ago, longer if I really thought about it. It wasn’t the root of the darkness eating away at my soul.

I couldn’t protect them from this. Keeping it to myself wouldn’t protect them. As much as I wanted to lock them all up in the lower level’s spelled rooms and place a thousand soldiers in front of the door, it wasn’t a solution.

I’d been within a hair of coming clean for weeks, walking an emotional tightrope, trying to balance the weight pressing upon my shoulders with protecting my family from my

problems. Truthfully, it was a miracle Talia, who occasionally caught glimpses of the future with her Sight, hadn't been alerted to anything.

I wasn't leaving this room without mollifying Draven with answers I did not want to give. It was time to fess up. Way past, as far as they were concerned. Lifting my head, I met each of their eyes before I spoke.

"Ravens."

"What do you mean *ravens*?" Draven asked.

"It's not that I'm not sleeping. It's that I can't stop dreaming. Every night I dream of them. I dream of ravens."

There. I'd said it. It was out. No one so much as blinked, their collective breaths held.

Night after night they came to me, ravens with varying shades of eye color. Some were green, some were pinkish-purple. Occasionally it was just one watching me, following me wherever I went in the dreamworld.

More recently, a shapely, dark-haired female started joining these dreams. The first night she appeared, and every night since, she stood with her back to me on a dirt path leading out of a wooded area and down to the river while an unkindness of ravens circled above her head.

They swooped and pecked at her long, silky, jet-black hair. I'd tried to warn her but she merely laughed. The sound was a sensual melody, a siren's song drawing me in and sparking a yearning arousal. I'd run after her, needing to see her face, to watch her mouth produce that enchanting sound.

She disappeared when I was close enough to touch her, leaving me sick with want. The ravens still circled above, emitting gurgling croaks, and I suspected they, too, were laughing.

Nothing about the female had felt nefarious, yet the encounter had shaken my very foundation. My soul had been affected, clawing at me from the inside; howling, screaming for her return as though it were its own entity and I merely its host.

I decided not to relay this piece of my overnight experiences. I hid my craving for that entrancing female, convincing myself the stranger wasn't what was most important right now.

The fact I was dreaming of ravens took precedence. For a demon, dreams were more than mere fantasy, especially ones that repeated. I'd be a fool to ignore the portents of danger.

Draven's big hand splayed on Lyric's belly, as if the act alone could protect the babe inside. "How long has this been going on?"

"Six months."

A variety of curses erupted around the table. Even Emile, who was usually the quiet one, got very creative with his f-bombs. We all knew what it meant. Dreaming of ravens was a bad omen. It foreshadowed betrayal, death, or, at the very least, misfortune.

"You should have said something," Draven gently scolded.

"And what would I have said? Hey, cousin, the night after we found out your mate was pregnant, I started having visions of the harbingers of bad luck?"

"He has a point, Mr. Overlord. You're smothering enough as it is."

The look Draven gave Lyric screamed, *Deal with it*.

They were good for each other, evenly matched in opposing temperaments. Try as I might to stop it, the teeniest tiniest morsel of envy attacked my conscience.

I squelched the slip immediately. I was happy for Draven and I would never begrudge him the joy he'd found with Lyric.

Unlike me, Draven deserved it.

"What have you done about it?" Talia cut in, scowling when I didn't reply. "I know you, Cas. Even if you've not been forthcoming, you wouldn't just let it go."

I crossed my arms atop the table, resting on them.

“I’ve been periodically calling in extra units. You probably haven’t noticed the growing presence because I had them set up camps five clicks out in all directions. We have plenty of soldiers stationed here but it never hurts to have more. Outside of added personnel, I only made a few adjustments to increase response time if someone were able to breach the outer wall.”

After Lyric and Kree were both taken hostage, less than two years ago, Draven had agreed with my extended protective measures. We steadily added new defenses and safeguards, especially now that Lyric was pregnant. Because the added force didn’t happen overnight, no one batted an eye.

“I also sent a missive to Vera, asking her to visit Embour to reinforce the wards and add new ones where needed. She’ll be here within the week. When she arrives, I plan to ask her if it would be possible for her or her coven to scry on my behalf, see if she can find anything amiss in the Otherland.”

We did business with Vera quite often. Her magic was strong and her intellect even stronger. She might be able to read my aura or know something about fending off bad omens. I hadn’t gotten a chance to speak directly to her yet, but I was confident she would assist, especially considering our history.

Phalen crossed his arms. “You should have come to me. I would have put feelers out.”

My mouth twisted.

“You already did it, didn’t you? Damn it, Casimir.”

“I have access to the same intel you do, to the same soldiers. I was trying to get a handle on things without alarming anyone.”

“Yeah, and how’s that working out for you?” Draven mocked.

“The omen is meant for the one who dreams it. It’s my own ill fortune coming this way. Not yours. You feel responsible enough for everyone as it is. I refuse to add to your worries. If something comes for me, I’m as ready as I can be.”

“Something terrible befalling you *is* ill fortune to me,” he retorted.

“I am the one who will be hurt by this. You guys are bystanders. I’ve worked to ensure that’s all you have to be.” I would not allow them to come to harm.

“So we’re all just collateral damage?!” he bellowed. “You think what happens in your life doesn’t affect us, when you know damn well when one of us bleeds, we all bleed?”

“I was trying to protect you! I know you, all of you, would fight for me, but I can’t bear the thought of something happening to any one of you. If things get bad enough, I’ll leave. I would never knowingly endanger any of you, never drag you down with me. I’ll take my own life before it comes to that.”

Draven and I were both breathing hard, staring one another down. We were always taking digs, like brothers might. This time, I knew under all that anger was something far more dangerous. It shone in his pale silver eyes—fear.

Draven didn’t handle the emotion well, not that I was much better.

“You talk of taking your own life again and I’ll fucking kill you myself, understood?”

“Yes, Lord Draven. I understand. If I want to commit suicide all I have to do is tell you and you’ll kill me. Thank you for the idea. Also, I’m pretty sure you stole that line from your mate somewhere along the way. Very unoriginal, but points for trying.”

His mouth twitched. Then he launched his big body out of his chair and had me in a bear hug before I could blink.

This is new.

“If it were me,” he spoke softly, “or any of the others, you would be all up in our business. Don’t pretend otherwise. You’re not alone in this, Cas. Let us help. Please.”

My lungs constricted and not because Draven had a death lock around my torso. He was right. I wouldn’t have allowed any of them to push me away, no matter the consequences.

“Holy fuck,” Lyric wailed. “That was so fucking beautiful. And you’re hugging. The big boys are hugging.”

My cousin and I both turned to look at his mate, the female who had been labeled as the *Shadow Blade*. The master swordsman and ass-kicking warrior was crying like a baby.

“Don’t look at me like that! It’s these stupid hormones. If you don’t like it, you can both go fuck yourselves.”

“That’s three fucks in less than ten seconds, Angel,” Draven censured mildly, adding in the nickname he’d given his mate the day they met. “Maybe try to space them out a little further, practice using your filter before the babe arrives.”

I shifted a step back awaiting her attack. Instead, Lyric flipped him off and we all laughed. It had been a number of months since I used those particular muscles.

For a moment, I allowed myself to lean on the others. I feared a mere moment was all I could afford.



Chapter 3

Raven

“Open your eyes, for me, pet.”

The whispered words floated across my temple, passing through a stranger’s lips.

Lately I fought the waking hours, clinging to slumber, clinging to that place I went where there wasn’t any pain. I was too vulnerable, tied facedown to the table where Sersha had ordered Dolan to leave me.

Alarm spiked my blood. I willed myself out of sleep, cracking my eyes. I saw sunlight and knew Sersha hadn’t bothered taking me back down to the dungeons. What was the point? I wasn’t a threat to anyone in this state.

My eyelids slammed shut as the floodgates of pain opened and my teeth clenched. Cool air touched my flayed skin. My stomach rolled, recalling how Dolan had broken my left leg, just below the knee, then did the same to the right—all because I didn’t cry.

That was always his master’s instruction, to keep going until I cried. I was ashamed of the times he’d successfully forced me to produce sound just to make him go away so I could rest. Yesterday was different. Sersha had watched, manically shouting orders to her lackey, growing more and more irate. She didn’t realize that crying took energy and I had none left.

It had been the worst session yet. Sersha finally reached her wit’s end, ordering my wounds to be salted. She’d said she wanted me scarred. I thought she was bluffing, believing I’d cave at the idea of living with the marks of my torture for the rest of my life.

When Dolan brought the halite granules over to the table, it was the first time I'd felt actual fear. Not because of the effects the rock salt would have on my skin. Rather, I knew if she marred my body beyond healing, she'd no longer have use for me to become Malcolm's pretty little toy.

Broken toys got thrown away.

Liquid poured over my mutilated flesh and I gasped. My eyelids fluttered open. I was met with sharp green eyes under a canopy of wavy blonde hair.

Malcolm.

"There you are, pet," he purred, stroking my head.

I recoiled instinctively, agony shooting down my spine. "I'm no one's pet," I croaked.

He grinned. "I like your spirit, Raveena. It's very attractive."

I failed to come up with an appropriate response. Malcolm returned to his task, humming quietly as he continued applying some sort of numbing balm to every place the whip had touched. His tune was peaceful, his touch gentle. Both were unwelcome.

I was completely nude and totally defenseless. Malcolm was the last person I wanted to be naked with. Though he'd been born Seelie, he'd corrupted his spirit over his many years of life. I didn't want to know what he'd done to contaminate his soul.

I licked my lips, trying in vain to wet the cracked skin. "What are you doing?"

"Helping with the pain. Here, drink this."

I eyed the cup he was offering.

"It's only water. Nothing else."

Awkwardly, I strained my neck to catch the water he carefully poured into my mouth. Streams dribbled down the side of my face and onto the table. He patted the spill with the cloth he was using to apply the medicine.

“Why are you helping me? Does ... does the Queen know you’re here?” I asked hoarsely.

“Sersha was unexpectedly called away to deal with realm business. She has no need to know exactly where I am at the moment. I’ve taken care of the guards that were outside the door so don’t worry about them coming to move you back to your cell. As for the why, I see no sense in your continued suffering.”

His hand moved to the crease where my thigh met my buttocks. I tensed. The male’s face creased, his eyes filled with mirth. Yes, because this was such a humorous situation.

“That’s not all of it. Why are you really here?” I tried again.

“Can’t I be helping you out of the goodness of my heart?”

Malcolm’s tone was off. There was a bite to it. Tricky fae. The race couldn’t tell untruths but they could twist words and did so masterfully.

“No.”

“I see now why you frustrate her so much. Why not just give in?” he asked, sounding exactly like his mate.

My fingers attempted to clench into fists. “You knew.”

Malcolm’s hand pressed hard, right below the break in my tibia. I grimaced but held in the sound. I would not break. I might empty the meager contents of my stomach all over the table, but I would not break. The pressure eased and I exhaled slowly.

“Sersha likes to give me presents. I enjoy them immensely ... and I ensure they enjoy me, as well.”

Nausea continued to sweep through me. *No way*. No way in hell would I ever willingly let that happen to me.

“She’s never gone this far. Usually, females like me. Very much.”

Gag.

“So you’re here because you’re curious over my refusal?”

“I’m here because you must have a will forged in iron. You must also have a great deal of power to have lived this long, especially with those shackles around your wrists. She’s drained you as much as she can, and yet you live. You’re weak right now, which is probably why I can finally sense the glamour you’re holding onto. Unconscious, starved, bleeding, fractured all to hell, and you’re able to maintain a spell. It’s unheard of.”

It wasn’t unheard of. It just wasn’t heard of in the Faelands. The fae were notoriously good at glamour. They just weren’t good at holding onto it for extended periods of time.

Lucky for me, I wasn’t wholly fae. Also lucky for me, the Queen’s Consort mistook my spell for one of glamour and not one of suppression, something only witches could do. My efforts to hide my heritage were still working, praise Hecate.

The witches of Earth Realm, like my mother, were forced to suppress their powers to avoid issues with humans. I’d done it for so long, it no longer took energy or effort to maintain. It lingered and would only dissipate if I consciously forced it to leave my body.

If it could have helped me, I’d have released the magic to free myself; but the power that fueled this particular spell couldn’t be used for anything else. Releasing it would only push the energies back into nature.

“You want something from me.”

“I do,” he admitted, trickling more of the liquid over the small of my back and down my tailbone.

I held very still as the cloth dipped and rose over the swell of my backside. He could do anything he wanted right now and I wouldn’t be able to stop him. I didn’t breathe again until he spoke.

“I’d like to see the power you’re hiding. I’d like even more for you to show it to my mate.”

What was he talking about? It wasn’t a norm of the fae to reveal secrets, especially about the tricks we knew. A long history of war, backstabbing, and power-stealing leadership

created a culture of mistrust. I'd never reveal my full strength to him, much less that whore he called mate.

Malcolm finished rubbing over the last of my lacerations. His face drew next to mine, speaking low. "Tell me, pet, if I set you free, would you be able to kill her?"

Icicles stabbed my veins. "Dignifying that with a response would be tantamount to treason."

His eyes gleamed. "So you could. Good to know."

I stared, his handsome face far too pleased with his conclusion. He was appealing, I supposed, but lacked that sort of rugged, virile quality that could make a female weak in the knees.

I used to think his jawline was strong, but after watching him from afar, I'd concluded it wasn't. He simply held it in a perpetual state of determination. Today it was clean shaven, giving him a more effeminate appearance. He was made of clean lines and perfect angles. In a word, he was pretty.

Like Sersha, it was a cruel beauty, the coldness of it amplified by his complicity in his mate's atrocities. If she would go this far to get me into his bed, what would she do to someone who'd actually committed a crime?

"Despite appearances, Sersha doesn't have all that much power," he said, tossing the rag he'd used on me into a bowl I hadn't noticed. "How did she manage to take you without a fight?"

My embarrassment over missing the signs of danger that day, all those months ago, was readily replaced by my anger. "By surprise. Dolan knocked me out from behind as I served Sersha her morning tea."

I'd first been suspicious when I was tasked with tending to the Queen's morning breakfast routine. Months passed and she showed no sign of anything untoward. She never even spoke to me, scarcely acknowledging my limited presence. Like a naive fool, I'd let my guard down.

"With his magic?"

“With a silver candlestick to the temple.”

Mystery solved! It was the Fae Guard, in the Queen's Chambers, with the candlestick.

It made me think of Kol and all the board games we'd played to allay our winter boredom. At least Mother left behind most of the toys and games from Earth Realm when she'd abandoned us. We were children at the time, after all, Kol a mere babe.

I yawned. All this talking was draining my scant reserves and fighting the fatigue was becoming a losing battle. My body needed healing sleep. The iron on my wrists slowed my curative magic. It could eventually repair the damage, it just took much longer. With very little time between Dolan's attentions, I hardly healed at all.

Malcolm tapped my cheek. “No sleeping, little pet. We only have a week before Sersha's return. You have to be ready.”

He pulled out a pair of thick, dark grey gloves from a leather pocket attached to his utility belt. Most fae wore such items as a warning. One could tuck away quite a few potions and herbs under the flaps of their belt.

“What are you doing?”

“Freeing you. In exchange, you'll divest me of the red-headed albatross around my neck.”

“Can't do it ... yourself?” I exhaled, finding it increasingly difficult to breathe.

“No. Though our souls never bonded, we're blood bound. Neither of us can touch the other in any manner that might cause harm.”

“Funny, I figured harm was the cornerstone of Sersha's sex life.” I tried to laugh. It came out as a wet cough. I'd almost forgotten about the damage to my ribs and abdomen.

“You have no idea.”

“I think I might have some.”

“Hmm. Yes, you might.”

Malcolm cut his finger with the tip of a knife I hadn't seen him retrieve. He held the digit inches from my lips.

“If you want free, you will accept my bargain. I will free you. In exchange, you will kill Sersha.”

I pressed my lips together. It was a deal with the devil and I had serious trust issues.

“Raveena. Trust me.”

This time I did manage to laugh.

“I vow no harm will come to you once the bargain is fulfilled,” Malcolm insisted.

“Great. I could live an eternity in a cell, completely unharmed. No thank you.”

“She is rarely away from Ansley Keep. We're lucky she had to leave in a hurry. This is most likely your one chance. She's not going to go on with this much longer. There's no way she'll let you walk free. How, exactly, did you expect this to end once she finally accepted you'd never submit?”

I hadn't given it much thought. I'd thought only of my family and protecting them. I'd focused my energy on my refusal to give in, of breaking the Queen without betraying myself or those I loved. I'd rather have died than allow Sersha to force me to become Malcolm's fucktoy.

He was right. There would be no release back to the kitchens. She would have Dolan kill me. My family would never have a body to place upon the funeral pyre.

I was only supposed to be here one year, due back in Terek before the spring solstice. I didn't even know for sure what month it was. Father would come to the Keep to look for me soon if he hadn't already. I couldn't let that happen.

“Vow there will be no repercussions whatsoever. Not against me, not against anyone related to me or anyone who may render aid unto me. Also, Dolan's fate is the same as your mate's, whether by my hand or someone else's of my

choosing.” I was out of breath and coughing by the time I got all the words out.

“I can live with that.”

“I’m not finished. I also need you to promise not to mention the details of this discussion, that I exchanged my freedom for this. To anyone. Ever. You take it with you to the grave.”

I wouldn’t be able to hide any of this from my family for long, but it was important that Brokk Ulrik not hear the truth of things from anyone other than me. Malcolm’s silence would at least buy me some time to get my head sorted enough to deal with my father.

Malcolm pursed his lips. For a second I wasn’t sure he’d agree.

“Very well. I vow to free you and give you access to a healer. I already have a location to hide you while you recover. In exchange, should you succeed in killing Sersha, there will be no repercussions from me towards anyone involved. I cannot control others who might inadvertently witness or discover whatever you may do to uphold your end of things, but I will order the guards or any other fae under my command to stand down if they attempt to intervene or seek retribution in the aftermath. Do what you will with Dolan. I’ve no use for him. And, of course, you’ll have my silence on every little detail for as long as I have yours. It’s in neither of our interests for any specifics to come to light. Now vow to me you will end Sersha’s life.”

I stared at the bead of blood quivering atop his finger, running through any other conditions I might need from him. My head was foggy and I couldn’t come up with anything. It would come back to bite me, I was sure, but what choice did I have?

Malcolm misunderstood my hesitation. “This is the only way you’re getting out of here, Raveena. Give me this blood oath and you can be free.”

The gravity of the pledge I was about to take sat heavily upon my heart. I'd be setting forth a chain of events that couldn't be stopped. Futures would be altered. Fortunes would shift. Father would freak.

Sersha had no heirs and the crown followed royal bloodlines. Malcolm was not a royal by birth, but he was mated to the Queen and may very well have been named privately as her successor.

Does it really matter?

As my bloodstream filled with heat at the thought of setting things right, I quickly decided it didn't matter in the least. Father would simply have to deal with the knowledge his daughter was going to burn the entire debased Fae Court to the ground, Malcolm included.

Talk about blazing a path.

Clearing my throat, I took the deal. "In exchange for you freeing me, I vow to take Queen Sersha's life ... because it is the only way I know to end her perverted reign and protect the Faelands from her corrupted influence—but it will be through an official challenge. I'll not act so dishonorably as she, sneaking an attack against someone I've ensured is defenseless."

"And when you are asked for the grounds of your challenge?"

"If asked ... I'll challenge her on the grounds of a blood-debt."

"Blood-debt?"

"Yes."

"Against whom?"

I lifted my chin as much as I was able, drawing in air. "Against *me*. She'll never admit why I was taken and tortured. And, since fae cannot lie, my claim cannot be disputed. She does, in fact, owe me a blood-debt."

Malcolm crossed his arms. "Blood-debts are usually an even exchange. Blood for blood. Not blood for death. The

exchange must be as equal as one can manage.”

“In a duel, if I inflict upon her all that has been done to me, she won’t survive it.”

While fae were like most species of Other, nearly immortal, their bodies weren’t quite as resilient in comparison. Some physical traumas could not be overcome. They could be killed more easily than, say, a demon or a shifter, because demons and shifters had the fastest natural healing abilities.

That didn’t mean fae were weak. Far from it. But inflicting every break, every bloodletting, every ounce of what I’d endured these past months upon Sersha—all at once—should be more than enough to kill her.

“Tell me I’m wrong, Malcolm.”

His gaze traveled up and down my battered body, then he nodded. “No, you’re right. If by chance you aren’t, she’ll come after you and you’ll have the argument of self-defense to end her. As smart as you are beautiful, aren’t you? I look forward to getting to know you. *All* of you. Now open for me.”

There was no denying the innuendo in his tone, yet my lips parted and Malcolm placed the drop of blood upon my tongue. The coppery tang buzzed my system, like a king-sized dose of static shock.

I barely noticed when he opened a tiny cut into the tip of my finger. He knelt in front of my left hand. My arms couldn’t be lifted. Not only were they chained, they’d been broken and tied down in such a way they could not mend correctly. I knew both of my upper arms were misshapen.

Leaning forward, he closed his lips around my index finger. He suckled a second, then used his tongue to lick the wound. The magic of our deal crackled, then snapped into place, an unbreakable bond. My vision wavered.

Malcolm slipped his hands into his gloves and released the chain attached to the shackles on my wrists and ankles. Nothing held me to the table other than my own inability to move.

“I’ll have a healer come up after I figure out how to get this iron off. Your arms might be the worst of it, but you’ll need attention everywhere.”

Just wait until you see the frontside.

He was reaching for my wrists when a huge release of energy rocked the castle. The sound of water hitting rock echoed through the room. I had to pop my ears to get relief from the pressurized wave.

“Arturo!” he yelled.

The door burst open, slamming against the wall. Malcolm’s dark-haired personal guard ran inside. “Sir, we have a problem.”

Malcolm hesitated. “I’ll be right back, pet,” he assured, peeling off his gloves and tossing them onto the table.

Another wave of magic punched through the air, covering me like a blanket. It tasted like the sea.

Oh, hell.

“We’re under attack, Sir. A wall of water hit us from the north.”

“Is that ...” Malcolm’s nose wrinkled. “Am I smelling brackish water?”

“Yes!” the guard answered frantically. “It’s from the mouth of the river.”

“The river is a half mile away.”

“It’s from the river, Sir. The scouts reported seeing a wall of water lift from the shoreline, some 200 yards wide. It, ah, it flew here.”

“And no one sounded the alarm?” Malcolm growled.

As though he’d conjured it, the deep blows of the warning horns reverberated through the atmosphere. His jaw ticked.

“The water was faster than the scouts, Sir. Someone obscenely powerful did this. I’ve never seen anything like it

and I've only ever heard of one who could manage moving water on this scale."

Silent seconds ticked. I waited for Malcolm's brain to catch up. Before he was Consort to the Queen, he served in her navy. He would know the stories.

"The Navita," he whispered, practically in awe.

"I—I thought so. Only ..."

"Only what?"

"He's small. The body behind the wall of water appears to be that of a child."

Great Annan's ass. My father had brought Kol.

Face contorting into a mixture of anger and fear, Malcolm's eyes met mine. "Don't move, Raveena. I'll be back as soon as I can."

Where did he think I could go on my two broken legs? Though, maybe I could sit up. There was a window to my right. I needed to see what was happening.

I tried to roll, no longer caring about my nudity. My limbs protested, but I made it to my side. The fluid in my lungs sloshed and I started choking and hacking. Red splattered across the table, tiny droplets painting my sallow skin.

The room spun. I was going to blackout. Not wanting to drown in my own blood, I rolled my upper body towards the table.

Screams erupted in the distance. I sunk deeper into that pitch black hole where I felt nothing but peace ... and swore I heard my father ordering me to stop shaking so damned much so he could get his cloak around me.



Chapter 4

Casimir

Winded, I came to an abrupt stop. I'd lost the trace of sound. My head tilted, ears searching for the call which had so easily lured me into chase, sprinting in desperation for reasons unknown. A call so faint and elusive my mind had difficulty identifying it. I only knew I had to follow where it led.

Ten yards ahead was the edge of the closest grove of trees growing between Embour and the river. My limbs held stock still as I waited for the thud of my racing heart to slow enough for my hearing to catch up to my eyes.

I scanned the thin tree lines to the left, then to the right. At this time of night it would be easy to hide in the shadowy vegetation but no souls lingered close enough to detect. My attention drew to the dirt path I'd traversed countless times since the last full moon.

After so many nights ending up at or near this same spot, the short journey was irksomely familiar. Only, tonight felt different. It looked different. It even *sounded* different. The combined changes gave me pause.

The ever-present lunar glow was substantially dimmed by dark clouds above, roiling and churning, an angry ocean in the sky. There were no sounds outside the rustling of leaves. No birds chittering. No vexing female. At least, not that I could sense.

Each night, she'd appear on this path, always facing away. She would move further south and I would follow, chasing but never catching my quarry. I'd tried and tried to get her to turn around, to show me her smiling face, to share her perplexing merriment with me.

I needed to know why she would laugh in spite of the ravens who constantly circled. They swooped and dove and

pecked. Three nights ago, they'd escalated their attacks, swarming en masse, tearing and bloodying her skin. She'd laughed haughtily, undaunted.

I'd screamed at the female to fight back, unable to reach her. She held still, simply taking their assault. She showed not an ounce of fear and reminded me of predators who lulled their prey into a false sense of security.

A light burned from within her soul so hot and so bright I wanted to reach inside and touch it with my own.

There was usually only one reason a Shadow demon dreamed of a female. The fact this one came to me accompanied by accursed ebony avians suggested I wasn't the only one in trouble. I had to find her. Not here, in the dreamworld, but in real life. If only I could see her face so I could—

The temperature instantly dropped, chilling me to the bone. A gust of wind barreled up the path carrying a screaming message. *Help me!* it shrieked, weaving unnaturally around my form.

Suddenly I was moving fast towards the river, straight into the howling wind. Down the slope I hastened, past the last of the trees and slowing at the edge of the wharf. Frantic, I scoured the riverbank.

A stream of moonlight broke through the clouds, illuminating the glassy surface of the river. My search took me further out onto the large dock. Nothing was here. The few boats belonging to Draven were at the small marina. Either that or my subconscious hadn't deemed them important enough to be present.

I kept alert, looking for anything in the water. When I reached the edge my heart stopped. Out in the middle of the Pale River, silver moonlight reflected off pallid, wet skin.

Fuck! I reacted without thought and dove into the water below.

Propelled by adrenaline, it took only eight strokes to reach my destination. An electric current stunned me momentarily

when my skin contacted hers. I shook it off and rolled the female so she was faceup. Keeping her head above water, I took us to the shore as fast as I could.

So many thoughts rushed through me. I knew I was dreaming, but it had to mean something—and it scared the shit out of me. Somehow, this beautiful creature had been dumped in a river, nude, and left for dead. A demon's dreams didn't equate exactly to life, but it was surely a sign of something terrible. I only hoped I wasn't too late to figure it out.

Once I felt the sandy river bottom, I stood with her secured in my arms until we were completely on dry land. I got my precious cargo onto her back and began chest compressions counting in my head.

28 ... 29 ... 30. It was only then, when I was about to administer two rescue breaths into her mouth, that my brain truly took in her face. The world stopped moving.

Mine! my soul growled.

Not if she dies! I growled back, praying this was all part of a divine message and not her current reality.

My fingers lifted her chin to better push breath into her airway. When I leaned forward, a piercing pain exploded inside my chest. Her eyelids popped open and I fell instantly into a brilliant sea of purple. I held her stare for another heartbeat before tearing myself away to look down.

Frozen in agony, I watched with morbid fascination as the dark-haired beauty twisted, pulled, then slowly withdrew my beating heart from the hole she'd made in my chest cavity. When I met her eyes once more, they'd turned a dark green. Her face blurred, repulsively contorting. Maxilla and mandible morphed into a razor-sharp beak.

Her dark head jerked forward. I remained immobile, caught in the spell of this hellish nightmare. The tip of a curved beak stabbed into my eye and I awoke screaming silently, the air long gone from my lungs.

‡ ‡ ‡

“Again!” Lyric shouted from her spot near the outer wall of Embour. “You almost had it, buddy!”

Lyson lifted the bokken with focused determination despite the red blooming across his cheeks. The teen was doing well with the wooden sword and he was humble enough to be embarrassed by Lyric’s excited praise.

He was an orphan and probably forgot what it was like to be mothered. Images of my own mother’s face arose in my mind. I ignored the bite of pain under my sternum. Once again, my focus was divided. I lifted my matching weapon and motioned Lyson forward.

Officially, Phalen, our Shadow Army’s commander, ran the soldiers’ training. Lyson got put through his paces with the rest of them, but was eager to learn more.

After he had been grievously injured attempting to thwart Lyric’s abduction two years back, she had taken to the lad and went out of her way to be involved with him. When he’d shown interest in swordplay, the Shadow Blade leapt at the chance to train him. When Lyric realized a baby bump might present a problem when sparring, she asked me to step in and I accepted as graciously as I could.

I had been known as the best swordsman this side of the Shadowlands until her arrival. There were no hard feelings on my end, but I did enjoy teasing her from time to time that I was back on top thanks to the tiny freeloader in her belly. It usually earned me a punch to the solar plexus on the days I was lucky and a blow to the kidney on the days I was not.

What could I say? Draven’s mate was a fighter at heart and none of us could hit back until after their bairn’s arrival. Until then, I’d spar with her verbally and take her hits as payback.

Unable to train and fight at the level she was accustomed to, Lyric obviously needed something to fill her time. Each day of Lyson’s private sessions she stood on the sidelines shouting while we both tried to ignore her.

I almost always held my tongue at her pseudo-mothering. The kid deserved to have someone in his corner, even if it was a crazy little blonde with a dirty mouth.

“Duck!” she yelled.

I halted the arc of my fake sword. “You’re not helping him,” I chastised. My spine straightened and my weapon lowered. Lyson mimicked my stance.

“Sure I was. Right, Ly?”

“Um, yes?” he answered, completely unsure how to handle his master’s mate.

“Don’t encourage her, Lyson. If you feed a wild animal, it will continue to come back for more. And sometimes they bite.”

“Apologies, sir,” he said while Lyric stomped her foot and glared daggers at us both.

“No need to apologize.”

I handed him my wooden sword and nodded to the weapons stand. Obediently, Lyson returned the bokkens to the rack. I respected how he handled everything with care, even the practice swords.

“Why don’t we end our sword training for the day? I know some of your friends have planned an archery challenge with one of the all-female tracking units. Go enjoy an hour of free time for once. You can resume your duties when you return.”

“Thank you, sir!” he shouted, already halfway to the gate.

I almost grinned at the speed his long frame managed as he tore out of the courtyard. Oh, to be so young again. *Was I ever that young?* I could hardly remember.

I’d grown up fast under the fog of oppression and war. I could only thank whatever gods remained that we had managed to end Samael’s rule. Until Draven took over as Shadow Lord, over two decades back, life in these lands had been brutal.

Lyric's shoulder bumped mine, though not enough to knock me off balance. She was losing her touch. I told her as much.

"Where are they going?" she asked, ignoring the dig.

"Well, mother hen, they're going to play war games in the woods."

"War games?"

"Think of it as a more intense game of hide-and-seek where being found is far from fun. Bragging rights are important around here and we're all sore losers."

Lyric grinned brightly. "Those females are going to eat him alive."

"They are. I'm thinking some already have."

Lyric frowned. "He needs to meet someone his own age."

"What makes you say that?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. It just seems right. He's young and awkward. He should be with someone who isn't expecting something suave to come out of his piehole. I mean, his first time should be—"

I barked out a laugh, a hand over my stomach. "Ah, gods, Lyric. I sometimes forget your demon DNA is broken. That male that you insist on seeing as a child, who is only a handful of years younger than yourself, is no virgin."

Lyric slapped my arm. "My DNA is not broken, dickhead! And what do you mean he's not a virgin? He's the youngest one here and he acts it. His immaturity makes him seem like a toddler on steroids. And all the female warriors are at least twice his age."

"Ok, maybe it's not broken. But your Adrestian half is dominant and you never had the teenage sex drive of a demon. Plus, Lyson is nearly 18 and looks much older than he is. The females here might view him as too young, but there's a reason he and his peers spend so much time in the neighboring towns when they have downtime."

She said nothing, so, because I could, I added, “Might I also remind you that Draven is quite a number of years older than you?”

“*Oof!*” I grunted, spinning away in case Lyric decided to land another blow to my abdominals.

“He looks less than 30 and you know it!”

She was right. Most species of Other didn’t look their age, and Shadow demons were practically immortal. If I’d had enough oxygen, I’d have laughed again at how offended she looked. Lyric took an aggressive step towards me before thinking better of it. Slowly, her index finger lifted and tapped the skin on my cheekbone.

“You shaved off your beard. It makes you look more like Draven.”

“Is that why you hit me?”

“Yes. I wanted to wipe his look off your face.”

I couldn’t help stretching my lips. Lyric was quick-witted. She fit well with our merry little band of misfits. She also made it easier to get along with my cousin, softening his moods in subtle ways.

Though she’d been joking, she was right. On the surface, Draven and I did bear a striking resemblance, enough that we’d often been mistaken as brothers. We had the same pale silver eyes that hurt to look at sometimes. They were our mothers’ eyes, sisters who’d passed shortly after their mates had met tragic ends. I, at least, had had my mother and father until well into adulthood. Draven had been a youngling when his parents perished.

Like our grandfather, Draven and I were two of the largest male Shadows around, at least in height. While we’d both preferred shorter hair than most of our fellow warriors, I’d always kept a beard where Draven had not. I only cut it because I’d let it go for so long and Talia made me realize it had gotten hideously out of control.

I flashed teeth, shaking my head. I’d cut off my shaggy mane and shaved my face clean a week ago. Stubble was

already forming a thin layer and I looked forward to looking like myself again. This time, I'd be careful not to let it get out of control. No sense in looking like I felt.

"Your smile never reaches your eyes anymore," Lyric commented softly.

My grin faded. "I know," I agreed, unsure if my voice was loud enough for her to hear.

"Treading water while holding a heavy weight will grow tiresome real fast, Cas. Eventually, you'll drown." The Shadow Blade crossed her arms, scrutinizing my face. "You promised us."

"To what?"

"To let us lighten your load."

"I already told you about the ravens."

"There's more to it and you bloody well know it, Cas."

"Picking up new ways to curse, are you?"

"Don't deflect."

"Don't push me, Lyric."

"Too late."

She was goading me and I was letting her. I knew I was letting her and still I did nothing to stop myself from reacting. These last few months I was always a hair trigger away from cracking under the pressure. Knowing it did nothing to modulate it.

I spread my arms. "What do you want me to say? I've still been dreaming of ravens since I first told you a week ago? Fine. They're still there every time I drift into slumber. I don't know what else you want me to tell you."

The wind picked up, lifting the stray golden strands that had fallen loose from her haphazard ponytail. Sometimes she looked so young and innocent ... until she opened her mouth.

"I want you to fucking tell me why you sent out 30 trackers this morning and why half of them were headed

outside of the Shadowlands.”

“How in the hell do you know that?” I’d been discreet. I was always discreet. It’s what made me Draven’s best assassin back when we were battling for control of these lands. I did things quickly and quietly and so did the Shadow demons under my command.

“My mate is a mind reader, remember? He happened to pass by one of the Shadows who was projecting because he was panicked after being ordered to keep his mouth shut, even if asked, even if it was by the Shadow Lord himself. You know that’s a huge no-no, dude.”

“I told them to send any inquiries of their actions directly to me.”

“I’m sure you did. And I’m sure you know how Draven felt about it anyway.”

“*Fuck.*” My palms scrubbed my face.

The trackers only knew I was looking for someone. They had a description and my suspicions of which species of Other she might be. It was barely enough to go on, but I had to start somewhere.

“Why didn’t he say anything?” I asked.

“Because—”

“*Because,*” Draven rumbled, walking up behind me, “my beloved cousin, who is like a brother to me, who has been towing a very thin line lately, was obviously worried enough about something that he felt the need to deploy more than two dozen soldiers to go looking for something.”

Ah hell.



Casimir



Chapter 5

Casimir

I opened my mouth then clamped it shut when I saw Draven's darkened expression. The courtyard was no place to argue with the leader of all Shadow demons.

"And," he continued, "my cousin did this after he told his Shadow Lord he'd been dreaming of ravens and *knew* the level of concern his family had, the family who begged him to open up and let us in. Yet he said nothing about his newest plans and I was left wondering if a plague of epic proportions was headed for him here, at Embour, where my *pregnant* mate resides, and so I needed a minute to calm my shit before I ended up hitting first and asking questions later."

Lyric nodded enthusiastically pointing at her mate. "Yes, that's why. Well-put, Big Guy."

Draven palmed her belly affectionately as he bent to kiss the corner of her mouth in greeting. "Okay, Angel?"

"Yes, my love. Mommy and baby are good."

His face softened, morphing back to barely contained wrath when he gave me his full attention again. "Talk."

"Try full sentences," Lyric suggested with pretend helpfulness. "Maybe add in a please here and there."

"You didn't say please when you were grilling me for answers," I remarked.

"I'm preppers. I can get away with it."

I had nothing to say about that. It was true.

"So?" Draven prodded. "What is my army out hunting?"

I was having déjà vu. Hadn't I already been confronted by these two? I didn't want to answer him. I'd held onto this little

piece, something I'd felt was only for me.

If I spoke the thought aloud, it would be out there and they would know the implications. For creatures born of magic, words had power and could tug at our realities, pulling them to us. Did I want that tug?

Draven and Lyric stood wrapped around one another, waiting for my explanation. Touching was so instinctive to them. I don't even think they noticed how many caresses they shared, how they naturally gravitated to one another no matter who was around.

I wanted that. I wanted those grounding touches between lovers. I felt sick all of a sudden, wanting such a thing. That female from my nightmare had ripped my heart out and I'd let it happen. I didn't know what the dream was communicating, but I knew I needed to find her in order to figure it out.

To find her, I needed help—something my muddled brain did not want me to admit. Warring with myself, I relented. Keeping secrets had done me no favors.

“It's not a *what*. It's a *who*.”

“Then *who* are they hunting?” he impatiently asked.

“Tracking,” I corrected.

My mind started to shuffle thoughts like a deck of cards, too fast to follow.

“They have instructions not to engage. I just need to find ... you see, in the dreams ... really the odds of even finding her ... I should have gone to an artist, I suppose, to capture ...”

I stumbled through my words, still so very reluctant to voice what I'd been holding inside. This wasn't me. I didn't stumble like an idiot.

“For the love of all that is holy, spit it out, Cas! I'll have this baby by the time your story begins.”

“This isn't easy for me. I—”

Slap!

My head jerked to the side, my cheek stinging. “What the fuck, Lyric?!” I was only a few inches under seven feet tall. The pregnant little hellcat shouldn’t have been able to reach my face so fast.

“You’re practically hysterical.”

“I am not. You just wanted a reason to hit me again.”

She ignored the accusation, talking right over me, the little shrew. “Take a breath, lower your shields, and let Draven see what you saw in your dream. It will save us months of time.”

“*Lyric*,” her mate warned.

Now that his Council was solely filled by those he considered his family–chosen or otherwise–Draven usually avoided reading us, especially after Lyric had told him how invasive it could feel.

“No, Draven. This is easier. He’s a jumbled mess and I’m hungry and tired. Please let him Cas. He’ll only look at what you show him, right?”

“Of course,” he insisted.

Rubbing the skin where Lyric had slapped me, I realized seeing might be more impactful than hearing. Grudgingly, I lowered my shields and waited for him to cycle through the recollections of my dreams, of the female, starting with the first time she appeared.

I didn’t fully understand why I’d kept it secret. Something in me didn’t want to share her, not until I had a handle on whatever was going on.

Draven’s brow furrowed. “You failed to mention what else was in your dream.”

“Keep going.” He obviously hadn’t gotten to last night’s events.

Swiftly, the Shadow Lord’s hand clutched his chest. “What the hell?” he whispered, letting go of my mind.

“My thoughts exactly.”

Lyric looked between us both. “What? What did you see?”

“He’s been dreaming of a female.”

Her navy gaze sharpened on my face. For a second, I thought she might try to hit me again.

“I cannot believe you didn’t tell me,” she chastened. “I’m, like, your best friend, Cas.”

“You’re more like a little sister,” I corrected. “An annoying one.”

“Exactly! So why didn’t you tell me? Wait, is it someone we know? Is she at Embour? Have I kicked her ass?! Will we need family therapy already?” she shrilled, sounding slightly panicked that she’d done something to harm someone who could be important to me.

“No. She’s not a Shadow. I’ll show you,” Draven said, presumably playing my nightmares for her.

Sharing thoughts and images was something mates could do. Well, mates who shared soulbonds. Not everyone wanted such an intense connection, especially because when one soul died, the other typically died with it.

Lyric gasped. “Your mate is seriously hot, dude, but her face turned into a pecker and that’s gotta be a real turnoff.”

“*Gods*, Lyric,” I coughed.

I shouldn’t have been surprised she just threw it all out there like that. I hadn’t even whispered the word *mate* to myself, even knowing Shadow demons who dreamt of the same female night after night were usually about to meet their soulmate in real life.

Only a fraction of Shadows found their predestined mate within their first century of life. Many ended up refusing to wait and mated once they found a suitable match. It was considered a gift to find your soulmate at my age, still a number of decades from that century mark. Though, I’d been second-guessing this assessment since the moment I’d had my heart ripped out.

“I’m thinking the removal of his heart might be a more pressing detail,” Draven told her.

“Maybe. I was more focused on the change in her face because I get the feeling she’s not a bird shifter.”

“How do you know?” I asked.

“Every bird shifter in every faction has a red tinge to their eyes. Hers were purplish, which could hint at red, but they changed to solid green when her face went wonky. Shifters typically don’t have the magic that would alter eye color. Very few Others can alter their eyes. I would assume she’s fae, but I know the slight point of her ears doesn’t guarantee it. There are at least three factions within traveling distance that have that trait.”

“Or,” Draven said, “it could be that the change was simply part of the dream, and not something she can do in reality. The ears are the biggest clue.”

I considered both their takes. “Possibly, but none of that changes anything. I need to find her. I don’t know her name. I don’t know for certain what kind of Other she is, though I’ve narrowed it down. I only really know that she comes to me every night, I think she could be my mate, and I think she might be in trouble.”

“Or, instead of being your mate, she might be the trouble coming for you,” Draven countered.

Lyric slapped his abs. “Don’t say things like that.”

“Did you just hit—” Draven’s words were cut short by the blare of Embour’s alarm.

Lyric and I drew our blades—our real ones—simultaneously. Mine was the claymore my father died holding. Rarely was it ever located anywhere other than the sheath upon my back. Lyric’s were her two katanas she’d lovingly, if not a bit disturbingly, named Phobos and Deimos.

I scanned the perimeter of the courtyard, sensing nothing amiss. When I pushed out my magic, I felt for unfamiliar souls. Any out of place, or worse, those that were tainted, would be easy to detect. I felt nothing.

“Are you sensing anything?” I asked.

“No,” he replied, taking a quick step towards Lyric.

She spun away from him gracefully in a move that would make the masters weep, swollen belly and all. “You are *not* picking me up, Big Guy.”

“Fine, then hurry your ass up to our chambers.”

Their quarters were the safest place to be because so many spells and wards had been placed around them.

“No way.”

“Lyric, my love, my very reason for existing, please take our child to safety and I promise to send for you the second I know what’s going on.”

“That’s not playing fair,” she whined, sheathing her katanas. “But you said please and I know how much it hurts you to do that.”

Standing on her tiptoes, she brushed his lips with her own then cupped him intimately, hard enough he flinched. “However, if you continue using my reproductive parts as a way to control me, I’ll be forced to do the same. Only I’ll use the dagger you gave me.”

Draven’s eyes twinkled. “I look forward to it, Angel. Now go,” he ordered, swatting her ass as she jogged off.

We circled back-to-back, searching, waiting. All of 30 seconds had passed since the first alarm sounded. It reminded me of Earth Realm’s fire truck sirens.

I could feel members of the Shadow Army moving around outside the outer walls, forming a protective circle around all of Embour. Many others would be hidden out of sight. No one but the Council was allowed in the courtyard without invitation, so Draven and I remained alone.

“Your relationship with your mate is rather disturbing,” I voiced, not looking at him.

“Says the male whose mate tried to kill him in a dream.”

“Touché. Though, you might be right. She could be the bad omen and not my mate.”

“Could be.”

“I don’t like this,” I said. The timing was too coincidental. “What do you think is happening?”

“No clue. None of the warriors nearby know what’s going on.”

They also didn’t know their Shadow Lord could pull thoughts from their skulls. It was a secret he’d guarded all his life. Only his Council knew of this talent. As useful as it could sometimes be, I had no desire to have Draven’s mind reading abilities.

A familiar soul flew into the courtyard in shadow form. Phalen’s body fluidly transformed out of the phantasmic shape that gave our caste of demons its name. He solidified to my right, between us and the wall. His typical jovial countenance was nowhere to be found.

“Tell me,” Draven commanded.

“Huge fog bank on the river, moving fast.”

I looked to the sky. “It’s sunny and clear.”

“It’s not real fog. There’s a lot of power within it. I sent two scouts in. They didn’t come out.”

Without warning, Draven ghosted and took off towards the docks. I shifted into shadow form, as well, and followed behind with Phalen. We flew beyond the fortress walls and down the worn path. Flashbacks from the dreamworld poked at my mind. The lack of screams upon the wind did nothing to lessen my disquiet.

The Shadow Lord was already standing at the edge of the empty dock when Phalen and I shifted back. Goosebumps broke out across my skin. We were standing in the same spot I’d been when I dove in to save the female. I glanced at Draven the same time he glanced at me.

“Where is the fishing boat that was docked here earlier?” Draven inquired.

“I sent it downstream hours ago.” I’d had a niggling suspicion I would need to keep the dock clear. I’d assumed it

was my paranoia but acted on it anyway.

“Why?”

“New protocol I set in place.”

“When did you change protocols?”

“This morning.” Right after I awoke, I refused to add.

“Damn it, Cas.”

“You say that a lot, you know.”

An ominous mechanical whine drew our attention back to the aquatic phenomenon.

“What the hell is inside that thing?” Phalen voiced what we all were thinking.

Draven’s shoulders tensed. “Send extra guards to my mate.”

“I already tripled the amount in the event of an alarm.”

Draven eyed me. “Let me guess, a new protocol you just came up with this morning?”

I pressed my lips tight. He already knew the answer.

Phalen watched us closely. “Anyone want to tell me what’s going on with you two?”

“No,” we answered in unison.

Two whistles rang from up the shoreline, a common alert from our scouts. Phalen whistled back.

“Look alive, gents. Here it comes,” he whispered.



Chapter 6

Casimir

A turbulent mass of clouds and mist slid around the bend, racing like some self-contained freakish storm gliding atop the water. No one with half a brain would ever mistake this impenetrable-looking haze for naturally occurring fog.

“That smoke is moving faster than a freight train. Someone should have noticed it miles upriver,” I reproved, running through guesses of where the breakdown in communication had occurred. We had protocols in place for such things. Lots of them.

Draven nodded, his mouth set dourly. “Why did the alert take so long, Phalen?”

“Because that,” he answered, pointing sharply to the swirling anomaly, “didn’t exist miles upstream.”

I shook my head. “You’re saying it appeared out of nowhere?”

“No. Warm mornings after a cool night always produce some degree of mist. It coalesced into whatever that is, less than three minutes ago.”

“Did it now,” was Draven’s cool reply.

Phalen and I shared a look. Calm Draven was a scary Draven.

Hundreds of Shadows took up posts along the banks on either side and directly behind us. I could feel even more souls dotting the roof of Embour, which stood hundreds of yards behind us, beyond the trees. More Shadows would be hidden at their stations by now, fanning out in all directions.

The barometric pressure rose, popping my ears. The traveling plume swung wide across the river, closer to the

opposite shore. Just as it would have passed beyond the length of the dock, it altered direction, swinging in a wide U-shape to circle back towards us.

Definitely not your average fog.

I lifted a fist and signaled for the security forces to maintain position. There was nothing to fight. At least, not yet. Worry tightened its hold, wondering what had become of the two Shadows Phalen sent inside the damned thing.

As soon as the thought formed, the bowsprit of a ship emerged. Wisps of the grey and white vapors rolled back and dissipated into the air revealing a vessel of shiny obsidian, creeping menacingly closer.

Once the vapors vanished, I could see what was a sleek ebony caravel, a boat built for speed and maneuverability, often used to explore shallow waters. I estimated this one to be around 60 feet in length, which was smaller than many seafaring craft but a good size for our end of the river.

Silently, it glided to the dock in front of us, portside. No wind puffed the triangular sails. It moved hauntingly, powered by supernatural forces, reminding me of something from a child's tale of ghost ships.

Phalen drew in a breath. "You've got to be shitting me."

"What?" Draven and I both demanded.

"Look at the flag."

My eyes flew up the main mast and landed on the limp black fabric. Despite the folds of the eerily motionless pennant, I could make out the distinct features of the profile of the head of a bird with one dark pink eye. No, not just a bird.

A raven.

Every hair on my body stood on end. Now I knew why its sails needed no wind. This was Il Corvo Negro—The Black Raven—and it belonged to The Navita.

"Well, that explains the fog," Phalen muttered for our ears only.

The fae had a long running habit of downplaying their powers. Not many knew how The Navita traveled with near invisibility. He'd worked relentlessly to keep many of his abilities a secret. And because we were such staunch allies, we'd kept his secrets—the ones we knew, anyway.

We were aware he had some unnamed power that allowed him to travel virtually undetected. That he could poof into existence in this manner wasn't knowledge we possessed. It was ballsy of the infamous male to parade this magic in front of so many Shadow demons. Many an enemy would pay heartily for such information.

"It doesn't explain why he's here," I said, crossing my arms so I wasn't tempted to draw my weapon. We'd seen neither hide nor hair of The Navita in over a decade. Something had drawn him here, something serious enough for him to pay no heed to hiding his capabilities.

"Or why our soldiers never came out of that blasted fog," Phalen grumbled. As head of the Shadow Army, our fighters were his first priority.

The Navita, or to us, Captain Brokk Ulrik, would normally be a welcomed sight. He'd assisted us in overthrowing the tyrant who used to be Shadow Lord, decades ago. That his insignia bore the symbol from my continuing nightmares made me more than wary. I could sense my comrades felt the same.

"He's a friend, but I don't like this," Draven spoke.

"Shall I tell him to give us our Shadows and then be on his way?" Phalen inquired. The Navita was powerful, but Phalen would confront him alone if asked, friend or not.

Draven's muscles were locked, though outwardly he held a neutral pose. Whatever my feelings, I'd take my cues from my cousin. The Shadow Lord was law, plain and simple, especially in front of outsiders. Pushbacks only happened in private.

Draven looked back up to the flag, then at me, lifting an eyebrow.

Despite the pulse now roaring through my veins, I shrugged a shoulder. “Your call, but I’d prefer to get it over with, if it’s all the same.”

Draven’s hand lifted and squeezed my bicep. “Together, then.”

My face tightened as my chest warmed. “Together,” I agreed resolutely, finding I wasn’t quite as afraid as I probably should have been. It had everything to do with the males standing with me.

Phalen shouted orders for several Shadows to assist in securing the mooring lines. Two heads cropped up along the ship’s rail, one much taller and older than the other. Together, the newcomers adjusted the gangplank into position while four of our soldiers assisted from the dock.

“New crew,” Phalen gibed. “Wonder who else he has aboard.”

The three of us pushed out our magics, seeking any other living creatures who might be on the craft. I easily felt the two Shadow demons on deck, just out of sight and presumably unharmed. Skimming over the boy and the captain, I continued.

My abdominals cramped severely when my powers felt a fifth soul, one below deck. Muscles constricted unmercifully and I had to fight to keep myself upright. The soul held a familiarity I couldn’t identify. *Unnerved* didn’t even begin to cover what I was feeling.

“Casimir?” Draven checked.

“F-fine,” I waved him off. “I’m fine.” I called upon my years of training and fighting battles to center myself. A good soldier had to be able to go numb from time to time.

“You’re not fine. Phalen, tell Brokk—”

“No,” I gritted out quietly. “Let this play out. The Black Raven docking today is far too coincidental. My dreams have been building towards something. This has to be it. At least hear why Brokk’s come to us. Grant me that much.”

For a second I didn't think Draven would agree.

"Very well. But he's gone the second I sense any danger."

Phalen laughed humorously. "Brokk Ulrik *is* danger. He's either in trouble or has brought trouble for us to deal with. Did you not feel the soul he's got stowed away? Wonder what the poor bastard did. Whoever it is, he's near death, I can tell you that."

Creaking wood signaled one of our visitors debarking the ship. Brokk's head was no longer in sight. Reaching out again, I felt him moving towards the being we couldn't see.

Draven exhaled in disappointment. "I can't get a read on their minds. The unconscious one is blank. The others' shields are strong."

"Even this one?" Phalen inquired, referring to the nearing figure.

"Especially this one."

Venturing down the walkway, approaching on steady legs, came a shaggy mop of dark hair sitting atop a boy dressed in a wrinkled black shirt and trousers. His pants were rolled, exposing tanned bare feet and ankles. The lad's bright-violet eyes held a knowing too old for his years.

He stopped in front of Draven, bowing his head. "Greetings, Shadow Lord. I am Kol. Permission to deboard and come ashore."

"You already deboarded, son."

The juvenile held a breath then slightly deflated. "Right. Of course. My apologies, Lord Draven. Permission to, uh, come further ashore. All the way ashore ... and stay ashore. And for my father to do the same."

Father? I knew Brokk had offspring, but this child with hair of night and warm-beige skin did not look like his father. Well, maybe a little in the eyes. And the set of his jaw. There was also the strong mental shield ... and the ballsy part, too, marching down that bridge to speak to the Lord of Shadows

alone like it was no big deal. Okay, perhaps there was a resemblance.

“Kol, I told you to stay put and wait for me,” Brokk’s baritone voice overtook whatever Kol was going to say, causing the boy’s spine to straighten.

The young male’s lips pressed into a thin line, but he held his tongue. He slid to the side, offering an unobscured view of The Navita standing at the opening in his ship’s rail, looking down at his son. Six plus feet of broad muscle, developed over countless years of self-imposed manual labor, the male was formidable, to say the least.

Like most breeds of Other, he carried his centuries of age like a creature in its prime. Only the faintest hint of lines marred his forehead and eyes, forever suspended in what a human would assume was his mid-thirties.

The sun would never weather The Navita’s skin. Immortals healed too fast for such annoyances. No, deep wrinkles upon the flesh of an Other signified something wretched had occurred, such as the siphoning of one’s lifeforce in order to call upon dark magic.

Unlike his son, Brokk’s wind-swept locks were dark auburn and long enough to be tied back at his nape. His complexion, a couple shades darker than most of the ivory-skinned fae, reminded me of the sandy beaches lining the Pacific Coast Highway in Earth Realm’s California.

As was his custom, he, too, was dressed in head-to-toe black. Only, he donned a pair of black boots. I knew from experience he’d only put them on because shoes were expected in civilized cultures.

He slung a large canvas bag over one shoulder then scooped something up from the deck. When he turned, the cramping in my stomach returned. Cradled in his arms was an unconscious female wrapped in a charcoal cloak. Long midnight hair hung loosely over his arm.

The moment both feet were steady on the dock, Brokk went to his knees, head bowed. I was dumbfounded. It was a

sight I'd have sworn no one would ever see. The unbreakable sea captain had never knelt for another, not even for Keane, the former King of the Fae.

And what a mess that had been.

The Navita's downward motion altered the position of the female's face, giving us a better view. Adrenaline mixed with nausea. For the second time in less than twelve hours, my world stopped spinning.

It was *her*.

Her skin was crusted in blood. Angry red welts criss crossed the side of her face and continued down her neck. The edge of an open wound started at her collarbone and disappeared under the cloak. Her legs hung at odd angles and gods only knew what else I'd find if I peeled back the material.

Someone had harmed her. Badly. Molten hot fury burned away every morsel of anxiety I'd had over Brokk's arrival.

I took a step forward, pushed by my soul's desire to get close to the injured female. Draven's arm cut across my chest while Kol stepped in front of his father and sister. The boy was either incredibly stupid or incredibly brave to face off with the Shadow Lord.

No one moved an inch. Draven's arm was still blocking my path when he asked, "Why are you here, Brokk?" He didn't acknowledge any recognition of the face from my dreams.

"Sanctuary," the male solemnly requested.

"Sanctuary? Bullshit. You're the most powerful fae in existence. Others come to *you* for sanctuary."

Brokk lifted his face, his magenta stare hardening on Draven. "You would deny me?"

"Of course not. I'm just wondering what I'm getting myself and my Shadows into."

"It's my daughter. She's not healing. The iron shackles on her wrists are spelled with something I've never seen and I

can't get them off. The sanctuary I seek is for her. And ... and I've heard your mate has magic that can bring back those who are near death."

"What happened?" Draven asked.

Rage ruddied the Fae's complexion. "Sersha happened."

Shit. Not good. Not good at all.

Draven quietly cursed. "Is the Fae Queen still alive?"

"For now."

"She wasn't at the Keep when we arrived," Kol clarified.

The female made a faint choking sound. Droplets of blood landed on Brokk's arm. No longer able to control my actions, I stepped forward once more. This time Draven moved his whole body and I walked straight into his back. Phalen took a hint and grabbed my arm with both hands.

"I'll thank you to keep your aggression away from my family, Casimir," Brokk's even voice warned, heating the air between us.

"She needs medical attention," I responded curtly before Draven could say anything. "I only meant to take her directly to our healer."

Brokk finally stood. "If the Shadow Lord is granting my request, I'll gladly follow."

I could practically feel the wheels spinning inside Draven's head. Brokk wasn't a threat to us, but we were about to grant sanctuary to someone who'd apparently angered the Queen of the Fae. There could be consequences, the kind diplomacy alone couldn't fix.

If this female was my mate, Draven would help me keep her safe. It didn't mean he was crazy about increasing the risk of danger at Embour. I was confident we could figure out an angle for dealing with Sersha later. I'd take Brokk's daughter away from here, hide her if necessary.

"Then let us hurry," Draven answered after a brief hesitation. "Phalen, go ahead and inform Hugo he's getting a

new patient who will need special attention and have him send someone onto the ship for the two Shadows aboard. Then please inform my mate of what's happening and meet us in the infirmary."

Draven glanced at me before adding, "Go ahead and call back the Shadows Cas sent out this morning. And find Kree. I have a feeling we'll need her."

Yes, Kree could help. She and Lyric both had incredible healing powers. I was confident they could fix almost anything.

So why did it feel like the world had just grabbed me by the throat and was about to end me?



Brokk Ulrik and his son, Kol



Chapter 7

Casimir

As we hustled up the path to Embour, soldiers closed in and lined up on both sides. Brokk stiffened beside me but said nothing, his focus intent on his daughter. Kol was on his other side, alert. And still shoeless.

When we skirted the outer wall instead of entering through the south gate, I frowned. Draven wasn't taking us into the citadel's medical space, where the Shadow Lord's family and Council were tended. He was leading us to the Shadow Army's infirmary, a small building outside of the protective wall, closer to the barracks.

It was the right call. It was the right procedure. It was pissing me right off. I jogged up to Draven who was a few steps ahead.

I glanced back at the female before saying, "We'll have more privacy inside Embour."

"Not your call, Cas."

I bristled. As head of Embour's security, it absolutely *was* my call. Unwilling to argue with him in front of the Ulriks, I dropped my mental shield and projected loudly.

Draven shook his head. "I don't think we have anything inside there that can cut through iron, much less spelled iron. Hugo will have more appropriate tools and medicines in the main medical ward and more space to work."

If I'd been thinking clearly, I'd have come to the same decision. I didn't bother with a reply. Our destination was now in sight.

Compared to the surrounding structures, the infirmary was small. Externally, like many buildings in the Otherland, it

looked like a compact medieval stone manor. Inside was a different story.

“We’re going in there?” Kol inquired, disbelief lacing his tone. “I don’t feel any springs near here. No way there’s a healing pool inside. It doesn’t even look like a real hospital.”

“Hush,” Brokk reprimanded. “Their magic is not the same as ours. And when did you ever see an actual hospital? That’s a human term.”

“I read,” the lad replied, lifting one shoulder.

Brokk muttered something about teaching his children to read being a huge mistake. If the situation wasn’t so grave I would have laughed.

Hugo, Phalen, Lyric, and Kree were waiting at the entrance. I studiously ignored looking at anyone but Hugo as I dropped back, closer to Brokk, my arms consciously pinned to my sides.

I will not reach for her. I will not steal her from her father’s arms. Not yet.

The large wooden doors opened up to an empty sick bay of a dozen or so beds. The Shadows training under Hugo must have been ordered out before our arrival. Luckily there were no patients needing treatment today. Either that or they had been relocated. Phalen would have known to keep everyone away.

Private rooms and offices were upstairs, but we bypassed the staircase and headed straight for the back, to the operating rooms. Our healers rarely had to perform the types of surgeries conducted in Earth Realm, but all sorts of terrible injuries could require a sound-proofed space, restraints, and drains in the floor.

Hugo quickly started barking orders. Kree and Phalen moved about the room, grabbing this and moving that while Draven drifted closer to Lyric. Brokk reluctantly laid his daughter upon the large OR table. Once the supplies were in order, Phalen conspicuously stood at my back.

Hugo reached to remove the cloak. “No!” I shouted, feeling strong hands clamp down on my arms from behind. Reaching back, I tapped Phalen’s flank twice. The commander loosened his hold, but didn’t let go entirely.

“We’ll not look upon her as though she’s an animal. Afford her some sense of modesty. Please.”

Hugo was not only an Otherland healer, he was also a physician trained in Earth Realm. He had seen and treated thousands of bodies. Nudity was nothing to him. Hell, nudity was nothing to most species of demon. But she was more than naked under that cloak. Parts were broken, possibly mutilated. There might be injuries that ...

I couldn’t even voice the thought and had to use what little mental faculties I had working to lock down my rioting emotions. The fact I had complete faith in Hugo and Kree helped keep me in check.

The Navita’s shrewd regard examined me from across the bed. I returned his stare, daring an argument. Magenta sparked to blood red then black then back to magenta. Most who experienced this cycle didn’t live long enough to see what happened after his eyes turned black. Or so the stories went. I was inclined to believe them.

Brokk had no reason to quarrel with me and he knew it. Because he was having a gods-awful day, I remained silent. Something passed between us and his shoulders relaxed. His chin tipped to Hugo.

“Lyric, hand me that sheet,” the healer said, ignoring the brief tension in the room.

The warriors all took a step back so Hugo and Lyric could deal with situating the sheet and removing the cloak. Looking elsewhere, I saw Kree quietly speaking to Kol near the corner of the room, his hands clasped firmly in hers. His eyes took on a dreamy quality. I couldn’t blame the kid. She had that effect on everyone.

The purity of her aura was catnip to anyone who was hurting. It was likely why I’d been so drawn to her for years,

why I'd so easily mistaken comfort and affection for something deeper. In Kree's presence, troubles faded.

Lyric's gasp snapped my head back to the bed. She released the sheet, expeditiously settling it across the female's shoulders. One trembling hand lifted to smooth the hair back from the patient's face.

"What is your daughter's name?" she asked Brokk.

"Raveena, but we call her Raven."

Acid scorched through my stomach. Draven's mind brushed my own and I slammed down my shields, my muscles locking. Phalen's fingers flexed on my biceps.

Lyric didn't react at first. Then she bobbed her head slowly. "Raven. Yes. I think it fits."

Her blonde head lowered close to Raven's and whispered, "We'll find the fuckers who did this to you, Raven. We'll find them and we'll rain down hell."

When Lyric righted, she looked at Hugo. "What first?"

Hugo's face had gone flush. His mild-mannered, sometimes teasing persona was nowhere to be found. He glared at the iron cuffs locked onto Raven's wrists then to her abdomen.

What did they see under the sheet?

"Cuffs first. I'm afraid anything we repair won't last if those shackles continue to drain her. I'll go ahead and start an IV in the right arm and at the very least get her hydrated."

Kree and Kol joined the protective circle around the table. We watched as Lyric's fingers slipped under Raven's left forearm, presumably to get a closer look at the cuff. She jerked back, clutching her hands to her chest. Draven was in her face instantly while Phalen and I both took a step closer.

"Did you feel the spell?" Brokk asked.

"No." She shook her head. "I mean, yes, but it doesn't feel dangerous to me. I'm sorry I reacted. But when I grasped her arm. I could feel—" she clamped a hand over her mouth.

“What?” I asked. “What did you feel?”

“The breaks. Her forearm isn’t ... it isn’t ... the pieces aren’t connected. I—I think I’m going to be sick.”

Draven had his pregnant mate in his arms and out the door in a blink. I doubted we’d be seeing Lyric for some time.

The air thickened with magic; it smelled similar to fae magic, but something about it was sharper. Darker. Canisters and medical instruments vibrated around the room. Phalen inched even closer to me when he should have been more concerned for Kree, who was neither Shadow demon nor battle-hardened.

I wondered if Brokk’s current state was simply too much for a father and considered asking Phalen to ghost him away from Embour. He could drop Brokk into the river to cool off. Only, it was shortly evident that it wasn’t The Navita who needed to chill.

“Get ahold of yourself, Kol,” Brokk ordered.

The boy’s eyes were glassy when he looked up at his father. His prepubescent frame quaked as pressured power leaked into the room.

“Kol!” Brokk snapped, kneeling at eye level and grabbing both of his small shoulders. “She is safe. We rescued her and she is safe. If you lose control you’ll kill us all.”

Phalen tensed just as fast as I did. Hugo angled his body towards the youngling, placing himself between Kol and his sister. A soft, warm breeze blew from Hugo’s aura, coating both Ulriks in a soothing balm. It was one of his most impressive gifts. He could literally cover the hysterical in a casing of calm. He’d done it to me once and I’d felt like I’d downed a vat of whiskey—warm, relaxed, and high as a fucking kite.

Kol’s stiff body let go of the physical manifestation of its overwhelming emotions, collapsing into his father’s arms. Blinking dreamily, he looked up at Brokk with a cheeky grin.

“Imma be a sailor just like you,” he slurred. “Only way better looking ... with a crew of females. Tall ones. With

boobies.”

Phalen snickered and Brokk rolled his eyes. “Great, Hugo, my son is drunk.”

“Better drunk on my magic than all of us dead,” Hugo rebutted.

“True,” Brokk sighed.

Kree placed a hand on The Navita’s shoulder. “He possesses great power, doesn’t he? Possibly more than you?”

“Yes. Both he and Raven are exponential products of their parentage. Especially Kol.”

I chanced a furtive glance at the supine figure under the sheet. *Good.* She’d need to be powerful to come back from whatever was done to her.

“Would you be comfortable with putting him in one of the beds out in the sick bay? Or, if you like, there are private rooms upstairs with their own bathrooms. I’m happy to sit with him,” Kree offered.

Hugo shook his head. “No, I need your healing power on hand.”

“I came here for Lyric’s gift. It’s hers I want,” Brokk demanded.

“I am sorry, but Lyric cannot help Raven in that way,” Kree softly apologized. “It would not be good for the baby. But we are sisters and have the same magic. I can help just as easily and I’ve been doing it for longer. I promise I’m just as strong, if not more so in terms of healing.”

Brokk, who showed no signs of the intoxicating effects of Hugo’s magic, stared at Kree, then at his daughter. “I’m not inclined to leave her.”

“We won’t leave her side. *I* won’t leave her side,” I vowed. “Kree will come get you once Raven is stable.”

Brokk considered me coolly. Finally, he took a deep breath and adjusted Kol’s weight. “Alright. I’ll be upstairs. Notify me the second Raven is out of danger, understood?”

It was only after Kree assured him she would that he walked out the doors.

“I can’t believe he actually left without a fight,” Kree said.

“If I hadn’t dosed them with my power,” Hugo told her, “he wouldn’t have. Brokk wasn’t acting it, but no way is he immune to the after effects of a healer’s spell. It not only calms, it opens you up to influence. Cooperative patients are easier to treat.”

The clanking of metal startled and I spun toward the sound. Phalen was standing on the opposite side of the bed fiddling with the cuff on Raven’s right wrist. The left one was already off and on the floor.

“How in the hell did you do that?” I asked.

“They’re spelled to amplify the effect of the iron—you can feel it when you touch them. I’m sure they’re not fun to wear if one is sensitive to iron. Since I’m not, I picked the locks easily. I assume there’s also another component that affects those who are fae, probably messes with their minds so they can’t figure out how to break the lock or something along those lines. Don’t know. Don’t care. Here ...” *Clink*. “Second one’s off. Do your thing, doc.”

‡ ‡ ‡

Once Hugo finished his initial exam, he allowed Kree to heal Raven only enough to stop the internal bleeding, which was beyond extensive. While our resident doctor had the magic to do the same kind of healing, it didn’t work quite as fast. Also, Kree’s healing magic never seemed to wipe her out the way Hugo’s sometimes did.

If she expended too much, she simply called forth her wings. The ornaments that would appear upon her back were made of pure energy and acted like a battery that could recharge her body.

Apparently, it didn't work that way for Lyric because she lacked the experience and control that Kree had. She hadn't grown up knowing she had such powers and living in Earth Realm had suppressed them. Her sister had been the one to help her realize her potential, but Lyric was years behind in training to regulate what she expended.

While her wings could still recharge her, the amount of healing magic necessary in this case would risk taking energy from the fetus. No one, especially Lyric and her mate, would allow that to happen. Briefly, I wondered how my cousin-in-law was faring.

Watching Hugo break and reset Raven's bones was one of the worst experiences of my life. Every cell in my body had rattled with fury while my soul wept, demanding I make it better for Raven. I held no such power and could only stand by and watch. Luckily, Hugo's sedatives and calming magics had worked. She'd not regained consciousness during any of the ordeal.

"What about the lines?" I asked, still standing close, as I'd promised her father I would. I'd scarcely moved an inch other than to get out of Hugo or Kree's way.

"Lines?" Hugo replied.

"These." I pointed to the thin scars visible above the sheet, starting at the sides of her face, continuing down her throat and under the white material.

"Those are scars. A scar means the wound is healed. I can't heal something that's already been mended. Kree's power *might* have an effect, but I highly doubt it."

"She's fae. Or half-fae at the very least. Even halflings don't get scarred like that."

"No, they don't. Not unless they've been packed with salt."

Revulsion punched me square in the solar plexus. "Someone intentionally scarred her? After torturing her?"

"It would appear so."

“Fucking hell,” Phalen murmured from the foot of the table giving voice to all of our thoughts. I hated that she was still on this slab, but there was nothing to be done until it was safe to move her to a proper bed.

“Kree, I think we can try going with more power now. Cas and Phalen, be ready in case she wakes. She’ll be startled, I’m sure.”

I frowned. “What do you mean? She’s sedated.”

“Yes, and it allowed us to repair soft tissue and reset her bones without pain. But what Kree is getting ready to do will send an enormous jolt through Raven’s system. We’re opening up the tap. It’s the most expedient way to get Raven completely stable. Think of it like administering a hundred-thousand-volt dose of electricity at once. Possibly greater. Kree’s full power doesn’t have to creep like mine. It can fire like lightning when needed.”

“Then maybe we should do multiple sessions, a little at a time,” I worriedly suggested.

“Oh, it’s going to have to be multiple sessions. This won’t be the cure-all, but it will be close. Raven’s lifeforce has been drained. While Kree and I can repair the bulk of internal damage to tissue and bones, lifeforce is tougher to repair. And wipe that look off your face. It’s healing magic, not actual electricity. We didn’t do all this work just to fry her organs.”

“What about the external damage?” Phalen asked. “While scars don’t normally bother me, I’m not sure I’d want the reminders staring back at me in the mirror if I were her.”

Hugo inhaled deeply through his nose and back out. “That’s a conversation I’ll be having with Raven in private.” He held up his hand when I started to speak. “We’re not discussing it right now. Kree, where do you want to place your hands?”

Kree’s mouth thinned as she looked at the lines I’d pointed out. “Her head. I’m not inclined to touch anywhere the psychic marks from a blade or whip still live in her flesh. Her scalp seems to be the only place without injury.”

Raven had been chained and tortured and I couldn't stop picturing it. I forced my fists to relax. There was no one within reach to kill. Brokk would surely seek vengeance though my soul was insisting it was ours to deliver. *Soon*, I promised myself. All would be made right soon. Even if she wasn't my mate, someone needed to answer for such malefaction.

"Understood. Phalen, stay by her feet. Cas, get close enough to grab her arms should she flail. I'd use the restraints on her but I *really* don't want to, not after what she's been through. The last thing she needs is to wake up fettered like some prisoner."

Everyone stood at the ready. Kree and Phalen at opposite ends and Hugo across from me, removing the IV. Once it was out, Kree lifted her palms to the top of Raven's head.

"Here we go, dearling," she whispered compassionately.

Kree's body slowly took on a soft glow. Harmless sparks jumped from her hands, byproducts of pushing out curative energies. Time slowed as I watched the golden flares dance along Raven's form. Her back bowed once, then twice. Suddenly, her eyes shot open, limbs thrashed, and I hesitated, reliving the moment from my nightmare.

"Cas!" Hugo shouted. "Grab her arms, damnit!"

Cursing myself, I jumped into action. Just like in the dream, currents shot through my body when my skin touched hers. Leaning over, I clasped her, palm to palm. As gently as I could manage, I pinned Raven's hands to either side of her head.

A groundswell of power coursed under my hold. Torrid and violent, it built rapidly. The air grew thick and hot, making it hard to breathe. At first I thought it was Kree's magic, but she was no longer touching Raven. Fire sizzled into the palm of my right hand, searing my flesh. My soul shuddered, sliding against Raven's.

"Phalen, get Kree out of here," Hugo ordered. "Cas back away."

"What?" I looked up. "You said—"

“Get the fuck back!” he yelled.

I didn't have time. A blinding cluster of heat and light exploded below me. I was thrown across the room, my skull crashing into the magically reinforced stone wall.

Mate.

Our souls had touched. There was no questioning it now. The female was mine. It was the last thought I had before my brain shorted out.



Chapter 8

Raven

Gasping, I panned all directions, looking for the threat. I was standing on a sizable stainless-steel table. A large, olive-skinned male was rising to his feet down to my right, dressed in the kind of medical garb one would see in the human world. I readied to attack and his hands lifted in surrender. No, not surrender. He was trying to pacify and appear unthreatening.

Where in the Underworld am I?

My mind fired up, memories came back. Ansley Keep. Sersha. Malcolm. Had my father actually come for me?

The male cleared his throat. I threw up a shield, the spell forming a transparent barrier between us. Wait, where were the shackles? Magic flowed freely inside my veins. Oh, how I'd missed it!

"You're safe," the male told me.

"Safe's a relative word, don't you think?"

"I promise no one here means you any harm."

"And where, exactly, is *here*?"

"Embour. Your father and brother brought you. The Shadow Lord has granted you sanctuary."

Holy Hecate. I was in the Shadowlands? I searched his dark silver eyes, brushed him with my power, seeking signs of falsehood. I found none.

"Where is my father?"

"Ramming the doors behind you. I assume the others who were assisting me went to notify him you were waking up. The room is soundproof from the outside and I've locked us in. He won't enter until I allow it—or until he blows the roof off."

“I am done with being locked up. Open the doors.” I let my power pulse, pushing him back a step. “Now!”

“Not until you calm down. You’ve already harmed one of us.”

His head indicated something over my shoulder. Quickly, I glanced back. Another male of similar coloring was crumpled on the ground, face down. Blood was seeping from his ear. My power instinctively brushed his.

My skin heated as my soul pushed towards the felled Shadow. Tiny hairs upon my flesh quilled.

I couldn’t be sure if these males were threats or not, no matter what my body and soul were communicating. My thoughts were still cloudy and I was having trouble reconciling the situation. Still, I hadn’t knowingly harmed the stranger.

“I didn’t mean to hurt anyone.”

“I know it wasn’t on purpose. You’ve had quite the shock and aren’t completely with it yet. Give it a few minutes and you’ll be thinking more clearly. Plus, I imagine you won’t want your father looking upon you in such a state.”

His pointed look was unsettling. I glanced down at my body. My very *naked* body. Another remembrance stabbed behind my eyes. Bile bubbled up my esophagus. No, I most certainly did not want my father to see my torso. My eyes burned, trying to shake the memory that didn’t want to let go.

I focused on the fact I was standing, feeling no evidence of the breaks I’d suffered in each limb. My palm ran down my thigh then up my opposite arm. Some of my muscle tone had been miraculously restored.

“My name is Hugo. I’m a healer. You’re at least part fae and can sense the truth, correct?”

“Yes.”

“Good. I have a robe for you, if you’ll allow me to reach for it?”

“Okay,” I whispered, despising my inability to hold back the onslaught of emotions threatening to pull me under.

Hold it together, Raven.

“We can discuss your ... treatment options later, when Brokk has calmed down.”

“Has—has he seen this?” I indicated the present Dolan had gifted me with his favorite bone knife.

“I don’t know. He brought you here wrapped in only a cloak. which I assume he put on you. I can’t imagine he didn’t see.”

Shit. Okay, I could handle this. I was my father’s daughter. I just had to remember how to act like it.

“On the off chance he didn’t, I don’t want him to know. Or anyone else for that matter. Promise me you’ll not mention it.”

“I would never betray a patient’s confidence, Raven. Therefore, I must be honest and tell you that I know for sure that Lyric, one of the females assisting me, saw your abdomen. She said nothing to the others and I trust her to keep her silence, but I’ll speak to her if it will put you at ease.”

Relief loosened my stiff muscles. “Thank you.”

“No thanks necessary. I’m a healer. I’ve kept many things to myself out of respect for my patients. I’m sorry for what happened to you and will do what I can to help make those marks disappear. Now catch.”

Hugo tossed the fluffy white garment. I dropped the shield as I reached for it, making quick work of putting it on. Once I was covered, I sank down, sitting on my bottom atop what appeared to be a metal examination table. I was in a medical facility of some sort.

I pointed to the double doors. “You can let him in now.”

“Are you sure?” Hugo checked. “There’s no rush. I can give you as much time as you need. I’ll have to step out there to calm him. I’ll do it if you need that from me.”

My facial muscles tightened. Kindness wasn’t something I’d experienced in what felt like forever. I appreciated the offer, but I wasn’t about to let my father cause problems for

the Shadows who were risking much by granting me sanctuary.

While I didn't want to share the extent of my experiences with strangers, it wasn't fair to let them endanger themselves. I'd have to either warn them or leave as soon as possible.

"Thank you, but I'm sure. I'd hate for him to kill anyone or topple the building. Or both."

"Yes, that would not be ideal," he agreed, winking.

Since when did Shadows wink? The doors burst open and my father had me in his arms in a blink. I shook in relief. *Safe*. I was safe. No one would do more to keep me safe than my father.

My soul buzzed in disagreement, pulling like a magnet towards the unconscious male Hugo was now kneeling next to, carefully touching and assessing his head. Guilt, something I rarely encountered, lapped at me.

"Is he okay?"

"Is *who* okay?" my father questioned, releasing me from his embrace. Prolonged hugs weren't our thing.

"He's fine," Hugo pronounced. "Probably just a smidge of brain damage that will be all better in a few hours. No worries."

Father grimaced. "What happened?"

The healer waved his hand airily, like the damage to his friend's head was nothing. "Raven came to with a start. No big deal."

Magenta irises glowed in my face merrily. "Congratulations, Raven. You're the first being I know of who's ever bested Casimir."

Casimir. He was called Casimir. It felt important, this name, as though I should have already known it.

Hugo laughed. "I know you won't believe it, but it was actually Lyric who first bested him. No magic involved, just a

wooden training weapon. You should have been there. It was glorious.”

My inner witch sneered, foaming at the mouth with jealousy. I closed my eyes and rubbed my temples. *Get control of yourself, witch.*

Father laughed outright, ignorant to my internal struggle. “Good for her. Now the pompous ass has been bested by not one but *two* non-Shadows, both young and female, I might add. Glorious, indeed.”

While the healer and my father laughed and made jokes I didn’t understand about the male on the ground, I paid close attention to the drawing force between us. Calling upon my witch’s eye, I explored his form, only partially hidden by Hugo.

Casimir was a large male. Even lying down I could tell he was extremely tall. Dark clothing stretched over defined muscles. A hint of a tattoo peeked out from the neck of his shirt. His short silver hair was dark, much darker than Hugo’s.

When I noticed the fine ethereal thread connecting us, I didn’t react. I merely stared at the flaxen string, watching the glimmering light travel rhythmically back and forth from my chest to his.

I felt no surprise in what I was seeing. Some part of me, the deepest core of my spirit, must have been whispering the truth and I was too messed up to consciously process the message.

On the other hand, it was also possible my lack of reaction was because I had been made insane courtesy of prolonged torture. I didn’t believe so, but I doubted those who’d gone mad ever thought of themselves as anything but sane.

Breathe, Raven.

The temptation to tug on that thread, to test and reinforce the fledgling bond, was too great. The last thing I needed was to start emitting pheromones in front of my father and Hugo. I might have preferred being whipped.

Oddly, I wasn't at all tempted to sever it. Aside from my father, no one knew I had this ability, one I'd discovered by accident. I'd always thought I'd use it when necessary, but over the years I'd found that many soulbonded couples simply didn't want to live without their mate.

Fate or destiny or some tricky god or goddess had deemed it a good idea for me to have a few strange abilities—abilities I'd often wished I could return. Severing a mating bond wouldn't kill anyone, but it would save a mate if the other died.

I wasn't in a rational frame of mind to make such a life-altering decision, to disconnect myself from my fated mate. I needed a little time to think. As subtly as I could, I coated the fibers in a spell, subduing the link. Then, out of habit, I reinforced the spell I used to hide my magic from others.

My father's shoulders stiffened and he turned to inspect my face. He wasn't a witch, so he couldn't see the strands that connected beings to others, but he likely sensed I'd done something with my powers.

I shut down that part of me, putting my witch's eye to sleep. The golden strand disappeared from sight. I wasn't ready to deal with the implications of that link. Not yet.

Father looked at me questioningly. Unprepared to answer his silent inquiry, I closed my eyes. I needed a minute, which was probably more than he'd give.

‡ ‡ ‡

“Out with it,” Father ordered.

So much for our happy little family reunion. I cleared my throat, glancing at Kol from my seat on the bed.

Father, who stood leaning against the wall, shook his head. “Oh, no. Too late, Raven. Kol's knee deep in it already and I won't insult him by treating him like a child. I'd never have gotten you out of there without his help.”

Anyone else might have laughed at the absurdity of treating a child as anything other than a child. Kol was only twelve, after all. But Brokk Ulrik had rarely treated us like children.

Even when Kol was an infant and Mother was long gone, he spoke to us like adults. It was a running joke amongst his coterie of maverick mariners that Kol and I were The Navita's hired crew members, not his offspring.

Not that he wasn't ever affectionate. He was. He was just different in his parenting than what I'd seen from other fae. Never babying us. Never coddling or soft—and we were more than okay with that.

Kol shifted, crossing his arms with an annoyed harrumph. His chair was right next to my spot on the small bed, so close I could feel his disapproval. This private room above the infirmary where I'd been treated was too small for my liking.

“Is it safe to speak freely here?” I asked.

“It is.”

I knew Father had strong ties to Draven and a handful of other Shadow demons. I didn't know all the sordid details of their history, but he'd more than once told me Embour was a safe place and if I ever ran into serious trouble and he wasn't around, I could seek help from the Shadow Lord.

Trouble? my inner witch laughed. *Ha! Such a tame word for the shitstorm you've created.*

“And start from the beginning. From the day you left Terek and decided to deviate from the plan.”

“Very well,” I ceded, explaining quickly and succinctly.

When I admitted to disregarding Father's warning of keeping outside of the castle, his eyes flamed. I talked faster wanting it to be over. My hands fisted when I got to the part about Malcolm's notice and how, now that I thought about it, Sersha had probably asked for me specifically to serve her morning tea as soon as she'd become aware of her consort's interest. Though he'd never spoken directly to me before I'd been imprisoned, I'd often felt him watching.

“And you thought it was a good idea to serve the Queen? Continuously? That you’d remain *unnoticed*?”

Bristling at the accusation in Father’s tone I chose my words carefully. “I served her for months without incident.”

“You should know better,” my young sibling criticized.

I glared. “Thank you, Kol. Very helpful.”

His adolescent shoulders rose. “Well, you should. It’s your own fault they got you.”

“I’m aware.”

“Did you at least put up a fight?”

My glare turned to daggers. “What do you think?”

The little brat shook his head. “I think you didn’t. Or couldn’t is more likely.”

Father’s head tilted. “What makes you say that?”

“Because Sersha’s still breathing.”

“Excellent point, my son.”

Well then. At least they hadn’t lost total faith in my abilities.

My imagination produced a vision of Sersha gasping for air. I waited for the feeling of satisfaction or a triumphant anticipation of my future vengeance. Something. Despite having every right to the death fantasy, I only felt a sad resignation.

My lips twisted, recalling the blood oath I’d pledged. Strangely, I felt no compulsion to follow through, but there was no escape from such a promise. I was sure I’d feel it once I was fully recovered.

Even if the oath didn’t drive me, Sersha’s breaths were still numbered. It may have been my own fault for being taken prisoner, but I couldn’t say the same for the other fae she’d tortured or manipulated to get what she wanted.

Many would probably feel conflicted about signing up to act as executioner. The old me would have. New me

understood the only way to stop Sersha was to end her. Fae were virtually immortal—there was no such thing as life in prison.

After the brief pause, I continued, speaking honestly about what Sersha wanted from me and why. I left out the bulk of the details of their torture, especially of Dolan’s last session with me. Father and Kol had seen what I’d been reduced to. Revisiting it with words would only churn the emotional waters. We needed to be logical right now.

“Malcolm was with you when I entered the Keep.” Menace laced Father’s words.

“Yes.”

“He knew.”

“He knew Sersha had me. I don’t think he really knew how bad it had gotten.”

“Irrelevant. He was complicit. You said he admitted to knowing about the others. He’s been a player in Sersha’s games all along.”

He started pacing, “And it’s not just in this—this twisted thing they do with females. Sersha has slowly depleted the treasury. She’s started strong-arming the smaller communities. Little things at first. Increased taxes to cover her poor decisions. Reduced protections. Harsher punishments for mild infractions. Lately, she’s been visiting the cities and making threats over not being paid the respect she deserves. She’s grown more and more unstable. Last week Niklaus came to me with tales of missing fae.”

The internal pang at the mention of Nik’s name wasn’t new. I hoped he was faring better than the last time I’d seen him. The shifter, my father’s most adept spy, had wanted more from me than I could give.

Kol clapped his hands together, and then rubbed them back and forth. “Seems we all agree our Queen is a monster who needs to go. So what are we going to do about it?”

I didn’t like the sanguine glint in his eyes. Warning bells rang in my head. No way was Kol going back to Ansley Keep.

Surely Father wouldn't put him in danger like that twice.

"Kol—" A knock at the door cut off whatever Father was going to say. Opening it, he stepped out into the hall, returning shortly with a stack of garments in his hands.

"We've been summoned to appear before the Council in thirty minutes. Here's a change of clothes, Raven. Wash up in the bathroom. Kol and I will wait downstairs."

As he led my brother through the doorway I lost control of my mouth. "I have to go back. I have to stop her."

Kol's mouth tightened, but my father sighed dispassionately. "Let us speak with Draven and his Council before making any rash decisions. Killing Sersha will have major consequences for more than just you."

"You think telling them any of this is a wise decision?"

"They granted you sanctuary, daughter mine. An explanation is the least we can give them in return."

"Then it's not really sanctuary, is it?"

"Call it what you want. Either way, they healed you and are willing to protect you. You'd be wise to show some degree of appreciation. I trust the Shadow Council implicitly. They've more than earned my confidence so be careful how you speak to them."

My power pulsed and I cursed silently for letting my emotions affect my magic.

As if sensing my distress, he tempered his tone. "I have friends on the Council, Raven. I don't have many in my life that I can call true friends, yet I count several here at Embour. If you trust nothing else, trust me when I say they'll help if at all possible."

The ruler of the Shadowlands could not assist me in taking down Sersha. It would start a war between the fae and the Shadow demons. Besides, I was bloodbound to the deal with Malcolm. I'd be the one issuing the challenge.

It was on the tip of my tongue to confess the pact with Malcolm to my family. My jaw clicked shut before I did

something stupid. If I wanted the Fae Queen's Consort to keep his silence, I'd have to watch what I said. Though I'd explained things, I wasn't ready to admit what I'd readily agreed to bind myself to.

"Fine," I snipped, walking towards the bathroom. "I'll be down as soon as I can."

Kol took off and my father lingered. "Raven."

"What?"

When he didn't answer I turned around.

"It will be better for everyone, especially for you, if you ditch the chip on your shoulder."

"Forgive me if being held prisoner and broken into pieces has made me cranky."

"I wasn't talking about the torture. Torture you can apparently handle. I'm disturbed by it, though not surprised. I'm also tempted to praise you but what kind of father would that make me?"

"The kind who raised me to be able to handle anything."

Father clicked his teeth as he always did when he wasn't sure what to say to me. I decided to move the conversation beyond his parenting skills.

"If you weren't speaking of torture, what were you talking about?"

"Wounds borne of hate never cut as deep as wounds borne of love."

"You would know."

Father's melancholy smile gutted me. I hated myself for saying it. My mother had broken something inside of him. As far as I knew, he'd never so much as looked at another female since she left us. For years I'd been tempted to cut that bond.

I'd once asked him if, assuming it was possible, he'd choose to sever it. He'd smiled ruefully and told me he doubted it would change much for him, which only increased the temptation.

To go against his wishes would be an unforgivable act, but I sometimes thought it might just be worth it. It wasn't right the way he held on to the pain.

“True. But I'm not the one who's been trying to prove myself for half my life. I know my strength. I know the worth of my soul. Can you say the same?”

That was my sire, striking right at the heart of things as candidly as he pleased. Logically, I knew what my mother had done to me all those years ago had altered me on a fundamental level.

As a child, I'd already been brazen. The fallout from my mother's actions had made me reckless with my own safety, driven to prove to myself that I was strong enough to handle anything. It hadn't been a serious problem until now.

“The risks you've been taking in search of whatever it is you're seeking? The cost is high. You think you're prepared to pay the price. Maybe you are. But you're forgetting what it's costing those around you. You didn't see what Nik was like when you ended it and left without so much as a goodbye to him. You didn't see how Kol reacted when I carried you out of Ansley Keep. He thought you were dead and nearly destroyed the castle. He reacted the same way once you were on Hugo's table and had to be magically drugged.”

I lowered my eyes to his boots.

“I'm not saying you can't live your own life. What I'm saying is that you're making poor choices and hurting those around you. In Terek, you've managed to get yourself out of every scrape. I've always trusted you to handle yourself, especially within the borders of our territory where we are surrounded by allies. When you chose to seek employment and knowingly put yourself within Sersha's reach, after my repetitive warnings and our agreement that you would stay out of the Keep, what did you think would happen?”

“I didn't think. I can't explain it, but the moment I saw the Keep, I had to be within those walls. It wasn't planned.”

“Had to or wanted to? I understand you were drawn there. Fate and magic often set us on paths we can’t explain. But you damned well know blood calls to blood. All I asked was that you keep your distance from the Queen. She could have sensed your relations had you not muted your powers.”

“Rest assured she never figured it out. The muting spell never failed and she has no idea we’re related by blood.”

“So you think.”

“She’d have asked if there were more of us. Then she would have removed my head before coming for yours.”

“Possibly. But how many hours did you spend unconscious? Can you guarantee there was never a time when she tried to figure you out? You caught her attention in a bad way. She would want to know everything she could so she could use it against you. Did she have someone at the Keep with the power to probe your mind when you were at your most vulnerable?”

There was no way my spell had failed. I would have known because it simply couldn’t turn on and off like that. But Sersha could have brought in someone with strong abilities to pick apart my brain. I had strong mental shields, but who knows what happened to them when I was out of it.

“Even if she didn’t sense you were kin while you were her captive, you know what would have happened if she’d killed you.”

My heart ached at the morsel of emotion he let slip. I’d not only endangered myself, I’d endangered my family. If Sersha had Dolan kill me, my suppressing spell would have died with me. In close enough proximity to my corpse, she could recognize some of the residual magics in my blood were a match to hers. Then she would have searched to see if there were any others with a possible claim to the throne.

“I’m sorry. I should have informed you my plans had changed.”

“Yes, you should have.”

“You know why I didn’t. You’d have tried to stop me.”

“Possibly.”

I scoffed. “Definitely. But as for the rest of the fallout, I’m sorry for freaking out Kol. I’ll apologize to him. I already apologized to Nik for letting things get as far as he thought they were. I didn’t realize he was so serious about us until it was too late. That’s on me. However, I cannot regret what happened at the Keep.”

“How can you say that, Raven?”

“I think I was supposed to end up here. At Embour.”

“You think or you know?”

Damn him and his perceptive brain.

“I know,” I admitted. I didn’t elaborate. Didn’t say something had settled inside me the second I’d felt the connection to Casimir. While witches didn’t put much stock in destiny or fate, the fae did. My soul knew the truth of things even if I refused to let my head articulate the thought.

Father’s penetrating gaze bore into mine. “So says your gut?”

“So says my gut.”

“We’ll know for certain soon enough. You’d better hurry,” Father suggested before closing the door and leaving me alone to shower and change.



Chapter 9

Raven

I showered quickly without looking at my image in any reflective surfaces. I was well aware of what marred my skin and hoped Hugo would be able to make the scars disappear.

When I stepped out of the bathroom, wrapped in a giant fluffy towel, I was greeted with a tray of broth and bread on the small table in the corner. I ate what I could, fastened my long hair in a braid, and got dressed in borrowed clothes.

The soft green tunic was a tad big, as were the even softer dark leather pants that I'd had to belt and roll up. The boots were loose on my feet, but I didn't mind. I was thankful to be clean and have clothing on my back. I was even more thankful the bra and panty set fit.

Not wanting to be late, I hustled down the stairs to find Father and Kol. Hugo did a quick check of my vitals and confirmed I was in good enough shape to face the Council. He then introduced me to a genial male named Phalen. The newcomer gave me a brief overview of the Council and that he would be the one to escort us into the main building.

While I tamped down the urge to ask about Casimir, who Phalen said would be unable to join us, I noticed he wore a navy tee with a picture of a bone across the chest. Under it were the words, *I found this humerus*.

“Nice shirt.”

“Thank you,” he beamed. “Hardly anyone around here notices my efforts anymore.”

“Yes, heavens forbid no one laugh at your lame attempts,” Hugo scolded sarcastically. “The gods only know how you rose to be Commander of the Shadow Army.”

Leader of the Shadow Army? Interesting.

Phalen grinned. “I am what I am. Now,” he rubbed his palms together, “I’ll be your tour guide this morning. If the three of you would please follow me, I shall escort you to the Council Room.”

“You’re not coming?” I asked Hugo.

“I’m not on the Council. By choice. It would be worse than babysitting a group of toddlers who can’t stay focused.”

“Too right,” Phalen laughed.

“But don’t worry, you’ll be in good hands. I’ll check in with you later, alright?”

“Alright,” I replied then trailed Phalen out the door, Father and Kol close behind.

The sun blazed high in the sky. My eyes blinked rapidly. I’d been indoors for so long I forgot how unforgiving the Otherland’s sun could be if you weren’t used to it. I barely remembered the last time I’d walked around outdoors.

Our group walked along a well-worn path across a small meadow of low grass. Clusters of trees blocked the view of what might lie beyond to our right and left.

From my father’s stories, I knew the basic layout of the Shadowlands’ stronghold. Somewhere beyond my line of vision were training grounds and barracks for the Shadow Army members stationed here.

Embour was infamous for not only its size and simplistic, rectangular shape, but also its coloring. Most Others didn’t purposefully build black castles. Though, I wouldn’t call the building ahead a castle. It looked nothing like Ansley Keep. It had a militant air about it, lacking the artistic flare of the fae.

We approached the imposing dark-stoned structure which was surrounded by a wall, some fifteen feet in height, made of the same shadowy material. Unlike the keep, nothing abutted the perimeter. No townhomes, no markets, no shops—and most notably, no civilians shuffling about. It was quiet. Unnervingly so.

Father had told us everyone at Embour was a trained killer and operated more like a wartime base than a civilian community. I could only assume the trained killers had other talents. Killers or not, how could anyone live without baked goods?

Get it together. Here I was marching into the unknown while fantasizing about pastries.

The creak of hinges ahead killed my appetite. The sound came from a narrow iron gate, guarded by two stolid Shadows clad in black warriors' gear. I passed through the opening carefully, taking note of the weapons attached to their belts. Four blades each of varying lengths.

Then I noticed the pocket knife on the one to my left. Not wanting to throw up the broth I'd consumed, I breathed through my mouth, avoiding the scent of the toxic metal bars.

We entered a large courtyard. A bulky, bronze-colored fountain sat halfway between the outer wall and the main building. Another Shadow stood at the edge of the fountain's pool, laughing at a small gargoyle. Its hairless grey body wiggled and hopped playfully, splashing water in all directions.

The male caught our movement and lifted his head. The gargoyle took advantage of the distraction and used its wings to slosh water onto the Shadow's crotch. Some creative phrases were muttered and Phalen barked out a laugh.

The scene was as unexpected as Phalen's shirt. Embour wasn't what I'd pictured. Wait, no, technically it was. It was those who lived here that weren't.

"Training the gargoyle pups is still going well, then, Lyson?"

The soldiers' skin flushed at Phalen's words. "Yes, sir. Truffles here did well today so some fountain time was her reward."

"Truffles," Kol snickered.

"Many of our gargoyles are named after foods," Lyson told him.

“Why?” Kol asked.

“It makes odd-looking critters more endearing, I suppose. Gargoyles work harder and obey better if they like their trainer. It’s hard to get mad or frustrated with a little mongrel named Peaches and it sounds nutty to shout the name in anger. Less yelling makes training easier for everyone.”

Phalen tapped Kol on the side of his shoulder. “We’ve a dozen pups at the moment. I’ll take you to play with them later, if you’d like.”

Kol looked up at Father who nodded once in return. “I’d like that,” my brother grinned. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. They might look like demented little piglets, but Lyson has a knack for getting them to obey commands. They’ve turned out to be excellent trackers.”

“Really?” my father said, surveying the pup with curiosity.

“Really. You can join Kol and I, talk to Lyson, too, if you’d like. But I’d better get you to Draven before he comes searching.”

Phalen took us up a set of stairs that led to a large terrace. Heavy wooden doors opened with our approach, a line of security forces stepping out on either side.

“Expecting trouble, Phalen?” Father asked.

“I suspect trouble has already arrived,” the Shadow alleged.

My abdominals flexed though my father and Kol laughed. I failed to see the humor.

I took in my surroundings as we entered the Shadow demons’ seat of power, marking turns so I could find my way back out. Father already knew the layout, but Kol and I had never been here.

At the end of a wide hall, another set of doors was propped open. A golden-haired female marched through them, one hand on the underside of her rounded belly. A giant male walked close behind. She wasn’t a Shadow demon so I

assumed she was Draven's mate, Lyric. Phalen hadn't mentioned she was with child.

"Stop hovering, Draven. I'm just going to the bathroom."

The Shadow Lord said nothing, though he kept close to his female anyway. The pair simultaneously acknowledged us with nods of the head, but didn't stop.

"So sorry, but I have to piss like a racehorse," the female apologized, looking pained.

I wasn't familiar with the urination habits of racehorses, but she seemed adamant something bad would happen if she didn't go right then.

"Take your time," Father responded.

As she passed by she smiled and waved. "I'm Lyric, this is Draven. It's nice to meet you, Brokk, Kol, and Raven—oh my goodness! That rhymes! Isn't that funny, Big Guy? Draven and Raven! Ha!"

Draven scratched his beard. "Mmmhmm. Hilarious." Nodding at Phalen he told his commander to go ahead and get seated. They'd be back as soon as possible.

Inside the Council Room, we were greeted by the tall and voluptuous Talia, her brother Emile, and Kree, who I learned was Lyric's sister. Anyone who saw Lyric and Kree together would know they were related. They had the same golden locks and dark blue eyes.

Phalen recapped the gist of what Kree had done to help and I did my best to sound appreciative. When I'd thanked her, complementing her gift, she blushed profusely.

Before leaving the infirmary, Phalen had given a brief background of each Councilmember. I thought he'd exaggerated the benevolent nature of Lyric's sister. He hadn't. I knew his assessment had been accurate when, during our introductions, I stood mutely as Kree patted my cheek and said words like *dearling* and *heart of a dragon* and *beautiful soul* and none of my senses detected a single falsehood.

Standing before her felt like basking in the sun, warm and soothing. I felt indebted to this female. I felt the same towards Hugo, as well, but it was Kree's power that had abated my soul's suffering and infused my lifeforce enough to pull me back to the land of the living.

Once we were seated, Father made small talk with the group. I kept my attention on my hands, folded upon the table in front of me, focusing on my breathing so I wouldn't fidget.

From around the table, I felt occasional inspective glances. I was thankful no one attempted to engage me in conversation. Although I was feeling more like myself, my head was still a little foggy.

Hugo said that it wasn't all that unusual because the damage to my body had been so extensive. Though most of me was mended, I still required healing sessions to fully recharge my lifeforce if I wanted it back in fighting shape quickly.

He also said torture was likely a contributing factor to the muddling of my mind. I didn't exactly agree. It was more likely that I could hardly focus on anything because of that ill-timed thread showing up.

Fingers drummed on the table. I tapped Kol's knuckles and he rolled his eyes, dropping his hands back into his lap. During my time away from home I had almost missed that eye roll. Almost.

Another minute ticked by. No one was speaking any longer. Kree poured each of us a glass of water from one of the pitchers on the table.

I sat as patiently as I could. My mind wandered to the Shadow I'd thrown into the wall. Knowing Lyric was mated to Draven, my inner witch dropped the weird jealousy from when Hugo had mentioned she'd bested Casimir.

Footsteps neared and the rulers of the Shadowlands entered, closing the doors behind them. The Council rose and the Ulriks followed suit. We waited for the pair to take their seats before we did the same. I found their observation of

formality at odds with what I was learning of their personalities.

To the left of me, Father leaned forward, resting his forearms on the table. Kol mimicked his pose, to my right. The three of us were at the end of the long table. I was opposite from Draven, who sat at the head, his mate within touching distance.

I kept my eyes on Draven. Father trusted him, but I didn't trust that the Shadow Lord wouldn't turn me away once he knew the truth of things. I was still debating how much truth to share.

"Alrighty then," Lyric spoke. "Apologies for the delay. I trust you've met everyone?"

My father inclined his head. "We have, my lady."

"Just Lyric, please, especially in this room."

"As you wish."

"Now, I must admit, Brokk, I'm not up to speed on the nature of your relationship with my family."

"Your family?"

"Everyone in this room I consider family." Her eyes hardened on each of them. "Yet my *family* hasn't told me jack shit about you. They said they couldn't."

"That would be my fault. They're bloodbound not to speak of me to anyone outside of, well, the *group* we'd formed for lack of a better word. Not without my permission."

"Ugh," she groaned. "Stupid blood oaths. When will people learn to stop making them? They always lead to trouble."

I caught myself flinching. Draven's eyes narrowed and the faintest hint of magic brushed me. My breath caught.

"So maybe you could grant them permission?" Lyric asked.

"Just for today," Father smiled, "if you promise to keep things to yourself. There are many who would pay good coin

for information about me so I try to keep a low profile. No blood oath necessary, of course.” No one with half a conscience would put an expectant mother in such a position.

Lyric agreed and Father launched into a brief history of how he’d met Draven traveling along the Pale River back when the male was trying to gather an army to challenge the previous Shadow Lord. Father, who believed in their cause, had joined them and helped turn the tide with his added forces. I didn’t know all the details, but I knew they’d grown close during that time in the way brothers in arms so often do.

“You, uh, have your own army?” Lyric queried.

“No. I have a territory in the northern Faelands where I take in what you might call strays. Most of them are fae and have been decommissioned from the Queen’s service. Some are simply outcasts who have nowhere to go. They all work for me.”

“Doing what?”

“Hired guns,” Draven answered for him.

“Hired security,” Father corrected. “Mainly, we escort seabound trading ships who wish to arrive at their destination without incident. We can do the same on land, but water is my specialty.”

“And don’t forget the hired recon you do,” Phalen added.

“Not for anyone with nefarious intentions or that could do serious harm with the information.”

Draven’s grin was knowing when he asked, “And what of The Navita’s intentions with that information?”

Father’s shrug was casual. “Information is a powerful weapon.”

“The Navita?” Lyric puzzled, picking up her glass and taking a drink.

“That’s my father’s nickname,” Kol stated proudly. “It means *The Seaman*.”

Lyric spat her drink out across the table, coughing and sputtering. Phalen and Talia cackled gleefully. Emile covered his face. I didn't dare look at Kree, fearing the kindhearted female might have been scandalized.

"Every godsdamned time! Shit like this is said out loud only when I'm the one taking a drink!" Lyric blustered between coughs, earning a humored look and some pats on the back from her mate.

I leaned closer to Kol. "You should start translating that to mean The Sailor or Seafarer. Maybe The Captain."

"The Sailor and The Seafarer sound like they're weaklings. The *Seaman* is powerful."

"Oh my god," Lyric cried, knuckles wiping under her eyes. "Please stop. I'll either die or go into labor right now if you keep saying that word."

"Why?" Kol inquired innocently. "Are you allergic or something?"

Phalen slapped his hands on the table. "Ha! Allergic!"

Talia, who was obviously beyond entertained by the spectacle, said, "I'd say not, considering she managed to get pregnant."

The entire table, minus Kol, erupted, including the Shadow Lord. Father smiled goodnaturedly. He was rarely ever phased. Even I found I had to bite the insides of my cheeks. Kol opened his mouth and I shook my head.

"Later," I mouthed and watched him sullenly lean back in his seat.

Kol wasn't stupid. He knew all the appropriate words for the fae anatomy. He was just too young to come up with those dirty-minded links on the fly. Really, I should have Father explain things. It was his fault for not nixing the nickname in the first place.

Once the hooting petered out, Lyric got back to business. "So, you assisted Draven's rise to Shadow Lord, but you didn't want it known. I can understand that. Then you went

back to your home, carried on with your business, raised two kids, yada yada yada, and then Raven ended up in Sersha's clutches."

"There was a little more to all that, but yes," Father confirmed.

"Alright, so, Raven, what in the hell did you do to piss off the Fae Queen?"

Wow. Lyric was more blunt than The Navita and that was saying a lot. Steeling myself, I inhaled, ready to give them my story. Most of it, at least.

"I—"

The doors crashed open, cracking loudly against the stone walls. In a nanosecond I was on my feet, my chair overturned behind me.

The intruder stalked across the threshold. His wild eyes searched, constricting when they found mine. Casimir halted, a herculean tower of lean masculinity demanding my attention.

And, oh, did he have it!

Outwardly I was as cold and smooth as granite. Inside I was a live volcano, reacting to the force of his remarkable bearing. Surely he was descended directly from the gods of lust.

The fabric of his black shirt hugged him tight. I could see almost every dip and valley of his chiseled frame—a frame that was expanding and contracting like a runner who'd just finished a race.

I'd known he was attractive when I'd seen him lying on the floor earlier, even with the blood. Seeing him animated, feeling his dominant presence and palpable virility, set me afire.

The low growl in his chest was one of possession. He tugged on the bond and the spell sputtered. It held but felt somewhat unstable.

Adrenaline flooded my system and heat grew between my legs. If he kept up that sound, he might be able to convince me

to rut like an animal with him right here on the stone floor.

Even muted, the cord connecting us was an overwhelming lure. Or was it simply him?



Raven Ulrik



Chapter 10

Raven

Casimir loomed just inside the entryway, a barbaric beast blocking our exit. He held his long, sinewy arms in stiff arcs a few inches out from his sides. They flexed when his fists clenched and I imagined how it would feel to be wrapped in all that strength.

“What did you do?” The timbre of his voice echoed through the room like approaching thunder.

Kol tried to step in front of me and my Father jerked him away. The rest of the adults remained in their seats observing the scene with humored interest. I didn’t have time to dissect why.

“I didn’t intentionally harm you. My apologies for breaking your skull,” I replied with well-practiced indifference.

“I’m not talking about my head. I’m talking about what you did to the soulbond you attempted.”

Kol gasped. Father remained silent. It wasn’t his usual style to intervene where I was concerned, not unless I was in actual danger.

“What did you do?” he asked once more.

“Perhaps you could be more specific?”

A muscle in his jaw ticked. “I felt the burn of the mark forming when my hand touched yours. Your soul called to mine and mine responded. The next thing I knew your magic exploded and I hit the wall. Then, when I awoke in the infirmary—*alone*—I could neither see nor feel anything more than a slight itch on my palm. Yet I can feel the draw to you, only it’s ... weaker than when our skin first touched. Distorted even.”

He was upset and probably had every right to be. I still didn't care for the accusatory tone of his voice, despite whatever I was sensing between my legs.

"While I cannot speak to what you're feeling, I can say you did hit your head awfully hard."

Someone belly-laughed deeply.

"This isn't a fucking joke!" Casimir shouted.

The Shadow Lord stood. "Cas, calm down."

"Not until she explains what she did. Something doesn't feel right. And I *know* a mark was forming."

"What mark?" Kol interrupted.

Kree, who'd positioned herself closer to my brother, wrapped her fingers around his. "Sometimes when fated mates meet and they soulbond, the mark of the double daggers will appear on their palm."

"It looks like this," Draven said, showing his palm.

My brother looked up at my father. "You don't have that."

Father shook his head. "I don't. It typically only appears on soulmates with some degree of demon blood or who are mated to a demon. For some reason, it's most prevalent in Shadow demons."

He didn't mention that he'd never soulbonded to his mate. Not every couple chose to bind their spirits. There were consequences to it that many were not prepared to risk. Though, I'd heard some fated mates truly struggled to deny the bond.

"Raven," my father said, lowering his voice. "Is this how you knew you were where you were supposed to be?"

I was on the edge of a cliff about to jump off into the abyss. There would be no turning back.

"Raven?" he pushed.

Lying to him wasn't an option. "Yes. This is why."

"You're certain?"

“Yes.”

I glanced at Father, whose solicitous attention was now on Casimir. “We should give them a few minutes alone,” he stated.

“Brokk,” Lyric cautioned, “I’m not sure that’s a good idea quite yet.”

Casimir’s fists opened. “Actually, it’s a great idea. Leave us.”

I waited for Draven to step in, thinking—hoping—he’d be far more interested in getting back to questioning me. Interrogation seemed far less daunting than facing the male at the other end of my soul’s thread.

“Ten minutes, Cas,” he said as he took Lyric’s hand.

“Twenty,” Casimir countered.

“Fifteen, then I’m coming back to this spot no matter what’s happening in here, got it?”

Casimir’s reply was to move away from the door and further into the Council room, keeping me in his sights. Everyone was filing out, leaving me to face the Shadow alone. My mouth suddenly felt dry.

“Apparently, your gut was right. Keep trusting it,” Father advised, patting my arm then continuing towards the exit with Kol in tow. Once he was shoulder to shoulder with Casimir, he paused, whispering something I couldn’t catch.

Casimir jerked his head, glaring at my father. “Over my dead fucking body,” he growled.

“Then I suggest you calm down before you destroy the chance you’ve been given,” Father warned and swiftly made his exit.

Wonderful. Father was handing out mating advice. Kol gave me one last worried look over his shoulder then was gone.

The doors closed behind them with an ominous click. I could hear the turbulent whoosh of blood pulsating in my ears,

something I hadn't experienced since my early teens. It wasn't panic, exactly, but it felt pretty damn close.

"I think your father just gave me his blessing," Casimir mused.

"Noticed that, did you?"

"Should I be concerned?" His eyes brightened teasingly. He'd managed to alter his persona so fast I wasn't sure I was speaking to the same demon.

"He understands how it feels." I didn't elaborate.

"So he left his only daughter alone with a Shadow, knowing how hard the urge to mate would be riding us?"

"I can handle it."

"Can you?" Casimir murmured as he prowled closer.

As much as I wanted to step back, I held my ground. When I caught his scent I groaned. He smelled earthy and real, with an undercurrent of excitement seeping from his pores. My nipples hardened in response, the fae half of my body readying to meet her mate.

The witch half? She was drooling for a taste of the approaching demon, looking forward to savoring the flavor of his skin, possibly taking a bite of his pectoral. Both halves were problematic. This was not the time to explore my desires.

He didn't halt until we were toe to toe and he was towering over me. "You're tiny," he remarked.

I nearly laughed. I wasn't tiny, not by fae standards. But Casimir was a Shadow demon, a race whose females were usually around six-feet tall. I was a little over five-foot-seven so I could see why he'd see it that way. Still, I found the comment insulting.

My chin lifted challengingly, daring him to do or say something more about my stature. The corner of that sinful mouth lifted. His feral eyes glowed. Casimir's earlier fury had bled away completely, replaced by what looked like hunger.

He was jaw-dropping. All that size and intensity and rugged appearance amplified my craving for the unmistakably alpha male. Jumping him right now was a bad idea.

I didn't fully comprehend this level of attraction. I'd dulled our connection, yet I still wanted to tear off his clothes and wrap myself around his body, skin to skin. I wanted to discover all of him, to know his secrets, and to feel safe enough to share mine.

That I was thinking such things was a testament to the profound sway of the soul's desire to join with another. It was both terrifying and intoxicating.

Slowly, he leaned down, his nose close to the column of my throat, a hair's breadth away from touching. I didn't move an inch. He inhaled deeply and his body shuddered. When he drew back, his eyes were half-lidded.

If he didn't touch me soon I'd have to take things into my own hands. I'd start with his shirt first. I'd rip it right in half. Then I'd—

Casimir's deep rumbling purr brought me back from my fantasy. He sounded like he could be part shifter.

"There'll be enough time for that later, Little Bird. Unfortunately we're under a time limit at the moment."

"How do you know what I'm thinking? We aren't linked in that way." Or, I was relatively sure we weren't.

"I know the look of desire when I see it, Raveena."

The use of my given name was a cold bucket of water to the face. "Don't call me that."

"Why not?"

"Because my name is Raven."

He looked like he was going to argue. He didn't, and some of the chill slipped away.

"Very well. Raven, then. I sense there's more to it than a simple preference, but we can discuss it another time."

"How magnanimous of you."

Ignoring my sarcasm, Casimir righted my chair, pushing it closer to the table. He gestured to the seat, which I reluctantly took. Then he carefully scooted it forward.

He took the chair my father had occupied, poured himself some water, leaned back, and said, “Tell me what happened after you broke my head.”

I cleared my throat. The teeniest amount of guilt was poking at me. “I actually am sorry about that. I wasn’t aware of what I’d done until Hugo told me.”

“Think nothing of it. You were unconscious. Besides,” he purred, “what’s a little foreplay between soulmates?”

I blinked. My mind began flipping through all sorts of naughty scenarios. The flex of long-neglected muscles took me by surprise.

Casimir took a long drink. I watched his throat swallow and I wanted to press my lips against his neck. I wanted ... *argh!* I wanted. Plain and simple. I had no idea how to handle it. The confounding male seemed to be handling it fine, which only irritated me. Not two minutes ago he charged in here like an enraged bull and now he was acting smooth as silk.

Focus, Raven. I reached for that detached place I went whenever I was overwhelmed or in pain. The two halves of me silenced and I was wholly functional again. Logical. How I tried to be most of the time. I prayed I could remain so.

“I used a spell to dull the feel of the thread.”

“Thread?”

“I suppose you would call it a bond. When I use my witch’s eye, I can see the threads that connect mates. I saw it, after I got my bearings, I could see it connecting us.”

All mated pairs were connected in such a way. The difference between the string connecting me to Casimir was color and size. Soulmates had an automatic soft gold connection that altered in size and texture if they both willingly committed to the soulbond, linking their life forces. Chosen mates were joined by a dark red weave as if bound in blood.

“So you tried to hide it?”

“There’s no hiding it. I only lessened the feeling. It was ...”

“Too much too soon.”

“Yes.”

“So you aren’t going to deny it?”

I had the feeling he was really asking if I was going to accept my place at his side. I wasn’t prepared to answer so instead I said, “The fae cannot lie.”

“I’m thinking you could work your way around it given that you’re not wholly fae.”

In reality, I could, but only barely. He didn’t need to know that quite yet.

Casimir flipped his hand over. “There’s a faint sensation here. Do you have the same? Or a mark?”

Lifting my hand, I held it out. “No mark. And I don’t feel anything specific. Though, most of my skin feels like it just got scrubbed raw thanks to the power boost from Kree.”

“If you remove the spell, will I see the double daggers on mine?”

“Threads don’t mean our souls have bonded. They simply mean we’re connected as mates. Soulbonds look different, anyway.”

“How so?”

“They’re thicker and have a pattern, almost like a chain or series of infinity loops. Our connection did not look like that.”

Leaning on his forearms, he asked, “You’re certain?”

“Absolutely. A soulbond is an unbreakable covenant, stronger because it is a *choice* mated pairs make in addition to being destined mates. What’s connecting us is nothing more than a fine thread. It signifies compatibility. It’s basically a suggestion of something we might choose. Or not.”

A light burgundy hue quickly advanced up the sides of his neck. “Bonds between soulmates are *not* mere suggestions, Raven.”

His unyielding intonation scratched at my heart. There was no mistaking his disapproval. Telling him I could possibly break an unbreakable bond would not be prudent at this juncture.

Part of me—the fae part—wanted him to desire me beyond reason, to rejoice in finding someone who could potentially be everything I needed. The other part wanted to make sure he knew I didn’t have to bow to the Fates.

“To a witch they are,” I countered. Mother’s teachings were hard to shake.

“You’re half Seelie fae.”

“I’m half Dianic witch.”

“And I’m nearly all Shadow demon and I know I felt the burn of the double daggers. Remove the spell.”

“That’s not a good idea.”

“I won’t ask again. Remove. The. Spell.”

“You didn’t ask at all,” I snapped. *So much for keeping my cool.*

“Please.”

The request still sounded like an order. “Or what? I’ll be tied down and tortured?” I baited. “Been there, done that. In case you didn’t notice, it doesn’t work on me.”

“Stop being so damned obstinate.”

My arms crossed. “Why do you want it removed?”

“You say the thread didn’t look like a soulbond, but I definitely felt something on my palm. It won’t serve either of us to not know for certain if the bond has started to form. If I’m marked, we’ll have evidence.”

He was right. I didn’t want to admit it but he was. The odds were probably slim, but if the soulbond had somehow

partially begun my lifeforce could be at risk, as would his if he marked my palm in turn. It was a significant thing to know.

Also, in fairness, though I had severed one soulbond in my life, I didn't actually know if I could sever one attached to me, or if he would be harmed in the process. I'd only ever done it after the being's mate had died, and only ever once at that.

"Well," I started, "I suspect it's you and this unexpected link that have brought out some of my combativeness. I'm usually quite controlled with my speech."

The self-satisfied stretch of Casimir's lips had my eyes rolling. "It wasn't a compliment," I insisted.

"Whatever you say, Little Bird."

"I told you to call me Raven. Now," I shifted my chair over, so I could better see the string uniting us. "Sit still and don't distract me."

I didn't actually need to see the bond to remove the spell, but I could concentrate better if I wasn't looking at the prodigious demon. My Sight shifted and the lambent filament became my focus. Was it me or was it slightly thicker than the first time I saw it?

Slowly, I absorbed the spell back into my aura. The last of my magics left the thread and a deluge of power swept between us. I jolted forward. Strong hands clasped onto my biceps and pushed me upright.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

The burst of magic quickly reduced to faint palpitations. It wasn't the pull of a soulbond but it was more than I'd anticipated. At least it felt manageable at the moment.

"I'm fine. Let's see your palm."

Without thinking, I grabbed his right hand. Electricity zinged up my arms when our skin touched. I held on, keeping my face down, pretending it was nothing. Casimir called no attention to it so neither did I.

The only marking upon his skin was a dark silver pattern tracing his lifeline. Most members of each faction's army were

marked similarly. “No double daggers,” I pronounced. “On either of us.”

He sagged in relief and I was appalled at the level of offense I took over his reaction. We were strangers. Neither of us should be pledging our lives to the other when we’d only had a handful of minutes together.

“Do you feel anything at all?” I questioned, intently focused on his palm.

“I do.”

“Where?”

I lifted my face when he didn’t reply. The ferocity of his excited engrossment pierced straight through my soul. I dropped his hand and sat ramrod straight.

“Under the skin,” he eventually replied. “Draven experienced something similar with Lyric. Like the soulbond began but didn’t finish.”

“Oh.” I’d never heard of such a thing but demons were different from both fae and witches.

Muffled voices came through the door and I glanced over, suddenly nervous. They all knew I was Casimir’s mate. I wasn’t sure how I felt about it. Plus, we hadn’t worked out much of anything in the fifteen minutes of privacy they’d granted. At least we’d determined I hadn’t accidentally formed a full soulbond.

“Raven?”

My head swiveled to Casimir, his demeanor altering once again. I was glad it wasn’t just me struggling to maintain composure.

“Just so there are no misunderstandings between us, I don’t care that we only officially met today. You will *never* entertain a single one of those offers sitting on your father’s desk. I’ll kill any male who would be stupid enough to get in the way of my claim.”

With his shocking assertion, Casimir rose and moved down to the empty seat next to Lyric’s, leaving me in stunned

silence.

Offers? What offers?



Chapter 11

Casimir

Steam was coming out of my ears. Why Brokk felt the need to disclose that he had six different proposals to be mated to his daughter from males of various factions was anyone's guess. I had two eyeballs. I could see exactly how desirable she was.

More importantly, when our spirits first touched, I'd sensed the principled character of her soul, so incorruptible and true I felt unworthy. Having me for a mate, well, I knew which of the two of us was lucky and it sure as hell wasn't Raven.

Not that it mattered enough for me to alter my course. Nothing short of death would prevent me from claiming her, not even her infuriating statement that our tie was a *basic suggestion*. I had plans to fuck that nonsense right out of her.

Ignoring the Council's concerned looks, I tracked Brokk as he walked behind Raven's chair to his. He said nothing though his face wasn't a happy one.

Draven waited for everyone to get situated before saying, "I'm assuming you didn't have enough time to properly sort yourselves out, but we're good to move on for now, yes?"

"That's up to Raven," I deferred.

"I'm good," she said.

Lyric smiled. "Great. Please continue from where we were before Sir Psycho interrupted."

If Raven or her kin had thoughts about Lyric's name calling, they didn't show any. No, Raven went straight into her story and the entire room listened intently.

She sounded like a soldier reporting back to her commander. Succinct, all facts and no emotion, not even when she explained why she'd been taken.

Neither Brokk nor Kol reacted and I knew this wasn't the first they were hearing of what occurred. When Raven finished, the room remained silent, its occupants digesting the tale.

What they'd done to my mate ... she didn't disclose the details but she hadn't needed to. I'd seen most of her injuries. It didn't matter that I hardly knew her. I would right the wrong and relish doing it.

Falling back onto old ways, I let myself feel, allowing the mania to bubble and simmer. I welcomed it. Shaped it. Pressed it into a cold ball of fury before tucking it away. I'd call upon it when it was needed, preferably on my way to separate Sersha's head from her shoulders while Malcolm watched.

"... and then I woke up in the infirmary," Raven concluded.

"The Fae Queen is one twisted bitch," Lyric proclaimed. "She'll have to be dealt with. The question is how."

Raven shook her head. "Not by the Shadows."

"You're family now," Draven said. "We take care of our own."

"I'm a stranger. You owe me nothing."

I pressed my tongue to the back of my teeth, thinking I'd need to bite it off to keep quiet. This wasn't the time to insult her conclusions. I'd make sure she felt differently soon enough.

Raven looked around the table, then at her father, likely looking for an ally in her argument. When she found none, she set her jaw in determination.

"I will return to Ansley Keep and deal with Sersha personally," she pronounced.

"No, you won't," I growled.

“If the Shadows help, you’ll start a war. I won’t let you risk such a thing.”

“Fine,” Lyric grouched. “Be selfish.”

“I—what?” Raven asked, her eyebrows slanting.

Draven patted Lyric’s hand and gave Raven a conciliatory smile. “My mate can be a little bloodthirsty. It’s gotten worse during the pregnancy.”

“Right,” Phalen drawled satirically. “Let’s blame the pregnancy.”

“The pregnancy is exactly why you shouldn’t involve yourselves, why you shouldn’t risk it,” Raven argued. “I appreciate your ... support. But it has to be me. It *will* be me.”

“Not alone it won’t.”

Raven glared at me. I didn’t care. “You’re no longer alone,” I told her.

At last, Brokk, who’d been annoyingly quiet, joined in. “She’s never been alone.”

I scoffed. “You let her go to the Keep.”

“She’s not a child.”

“It wasn’t safe and you know it.”

The Council was well aware of The Navita’s secret, that Sersha was his half-sister. Their brute of a father, Keane, had coerced a mating bond onto Brokk’s mother, Olette, who was not Keane’s true mate. When Brokk was young, she’d managed to escape Keane, temporarily, and hide Brokk away with trusted allies. Eventually Keane caught up and took her life. Brokk was raised in secret.

Years later, Keane mated with Sersha’s mother, who disappeared early in Sersha’s life. Keane never publicly addressed the disappearance and none of the fae made a fuss—to speak against the King was to forfeit your life. He never managed to find his son, not until Brokk decided they should meet. That meeting hadn’t ended well for Keane.

If Sersha knew of Brokk and his children, she would kill them—or try to, anyway. Unlike in the Shadowlands, where the ruler had to earn his place, the fae throne followed the bloodline. Her kin were her competition.

Raven cleared her throat. “He couldn’t have stopped me.”

“Couldn’t?” her father challenged.

“Alright, *shouldn’t* have stopped me.”

“And why is that?” I asked.

She licked her plush lips and my brain malfunctioned for a second.

“I was having dreams and a pressing instinct I had to go to the Keep. I think I was supposed to be there. If I hadn’t, I wouldn’t have ended up here.” Raven glanced in my direction, then back to Lyric. “I believe Fate set me on this path.”

The path to me! I wanted to roar the words aloud, lest there be any misunderstanding that I was her fate.

“Well, shit. That sounds almost romantic,” Lyric stated. “I mean, without the whips and scars and broken bones and such.”

My skin heated. “Getting captured and tortured because she wouldn’t fall on her back for a dishonorable male is not romantic, Lyric.”

“Of course it isn’t, Cas, but if not for her severe injuries Brokk wouldn’t have brought her here. And she had *dreams!* Raven, did you dream of Cas, specifically?”

“No.”

“Huh. Well, he dreamt of you.”

Violet sparked to bright lavender when Raven cocked her head at me. “You did?”

“Aye.”

“Though, we were concerned at first because the dreams were initially only of ravens—the birds, not you. We thought the worst was coming for him. Turns out it was just you, or

maybe it was the universe communicating you were in trouble? Anyway ...”

I lost track of Lyric’s retelling of what I’d dreamt. Instead, I watched Brokk and Raven, neither of whom visibly reacted to any of it, not until Lyric spoke of my heart being removed after I’d pulled Raven from the river. If I hadn’t been looking for a response, I wouldn’t have noticed Brokk had stopped breathing.

Once storytime was over, Brokk closed his eyes and bowed his head. He lifted on a slow, cleansing inhale, exposing the ebony that had overtaken his orbs. He looked more demonic than an actual demon. As far as I knew, he had no demon blood and the altering colors were a side effect of his powers.

“Father?” Kol whispered in concern as Brokk slowly rose, his palms remaining on the table.

“I’m taking Kol and leaving. You’ll keep Raven here.”

“What are you talking about?” Raven asked.

Brokk ignored her.

Draven looked at me then responded, “You know we’ll keep her safe.”

“No, I mean you will *keep* her *here*. Forcefully, if necessary.”

“No. No way,” she argued, hopping up to her feet.

Brokk sliced his hand through the air angrily, cutting her off. I felt a low growl rumbling in my throat when I saw the flash of pain in her eyes.

“Casimir? I’ll have your word on this. As her mate, she is your responsibility.”

Magic rolled off of Raven, hot and angry. “I sincerely hope those words are in jest,” her voice shook. “I won’t be held against my will here or anywhere else for that matter. Not ever again. I don’t care who you task with it.”

“Your answer, Casimir.” Brokk demanded, totally disregarding his daughter.

I didn’t respond. How could I? As much as I might have wanted to, agreeing to keep Raven here by force would ruin anything between us before it even had a chance to begin.

“Brokk, think about what you’re doing,” Draven advised.

“I am. My family is in a target-rich environment. Sersha will be searching for Raven. I cannot hide the call of blood like Raven can and neither can Kol, not yet. If Sersha gets close enough to one of us, she’ll know we are related. I need to take him somewhere safe then figure out what to do about the Queen.”

“You didn’t seem too concerned with any of that when you first arrived,” Phalen commented.

“I was more concerned with saving Raven’s life.”

“No,” I refuted. “There’s more to it. Something about my dreams. When Lyric described my most recent dream, something bothered you. What was it?”

When he didn’t answer, Kree touched his arm. Brokk covered her hand with his own, but didn’t remove her caress. A year ago, I’d have been sick with envy over someone sharing such obvious affection with the female.

Once again, I was more than thankful she’d turned me away. The warm pull of the fondness I experienced with Kree paled in comparison to the blazing need I’d instantly experienced with Raven.

My mate caught me watching the interaction between her father and Kree then quickly looked away. The cool energy seeping into our bond pissed me off. She’d muted it once more, something I’d have to correct—again—in private.

“Brokk?” Kree whispered encouragingly.

“The night before I lost my mate, I dreamt of her. I dreamt that she’d removed my heart.”

A block of ice formed in my chest. It wasn’t common for Others to dream of their mates. Demons typically only did this

when the universe wanted to give a portent that they'd soon be united with their other half.

Soulmates were rare but not so rare that they never found one another. Dreams were usually the first clue of what was to come. It had been the case with Draven, as well as his parents and my own.

However, dreaming of a mate outside of a foreshadowed meeting typically signaled trouble.

“Your mate is dead? I’m so sorry,” Lyric offered kindly.

“Oh, our mother’s not dead,” Kol corrected nonchalantly. “She’s hiding out in Earth Realm.”

I’d known Brokk had a mate, I hadn’t known they were no longer together. “Hiding? From what?”

“From her mate,” Raven imparted tiredly, dropping back to her seat like she couldn’t stand any longer.

“Hiding is a stretch. I banished her from the Faelands.”

“Why?” several voices asked simultaneously. Purposefully separating from one’s mate, especially once younglings were brought into the world, was unimaginable.

“She did something unforgivable,” Raven answered for Brokk, “and if I ever see her again it will be too soon. I wanted to end her existence but Father thought killing my own mother would scar me for life.”

“And I was right to do so, Raven. But that’s not the point. The point is both you and Casimir had dreams along with some deep-rooted drive pushing you towards this moment, towards each other. The universe is communicating with you and is proving to be right. I know ravens are a sign of doom and gloom, and I’m guessing they have everything to do with warning you of Raven’s life being in danger. The removal of the heart, in my opinion, communicates something else. I can only speak to my own experience, but my dream was a warning. I know it was.”

“A warning that you’d lose your mate or a warning of whatever she did?” Lyric inquired.

Before Brokk could reply, Talia lifted her finger. “If I may be so bold to ask, what exactly did your mate do?”

He didn’t answer.

“They’re your friends,” Raven replied airily to Brokk’s questioning look, a contradiction to the annoyance on her face.

“But the trespass was against you, my daughter. It’s not my tale to tell.”

Raven worried at her bottom lip, presumably thinking it over. “Casimir?”

Gods, the sound of my name on her lips ... “Yes?”

“Tell me I can trust everyone in this room.”

That she put her faith in my response, that she sought my assurance over her father’s, meant more than she could possibly know. “You can. I’d stake my life on it. However, we can lower the numbers currently present if it will make you more comfortable.”

Talia, my sister in all things but blood, took the hint. “We understand if you’re not comfortable sharing with all of us. We’re strangers and can be a little overwhelming to those who don’t know us very well. Emile? Phalen? Would you be so kind as to join me in vacating the Council Room once more?”

“Of course,” Emile agreed. “Raven, I know I speak for all of us when I say we are glad you are here, no matter the circumstances.”

Raven’s rigid posture eased slightly. “Thank you.”

“Come on, Kol,” Phalen clapped the lad on the back. “Let’s go play with the gargoyle pups. Unless your father has an objection?”

“I think that would be a good idea. I’ll join you shortly.”

Kree squeezed my hand and a trace of heat rolled through the bond. If I didn’t know better, I’d think Raven was jealous—and I found that I liked it. If she hadn’t muted the link again, she may have very well brought me to my knees. Draven had

never mentioned anything of this sort and I'd need to ask him for more information.

"I'll go with them, unless you'd like me to stay," Kree offered.

"Thank you, but I'm fine."

"That's good."

I stood when she did and she grinned. "I can see myself out, Cas."

"Right." Lowering myself, I watched Kree walk away.

"Ugh," Lyric said as she shifted in her chair, grunting. "Sorry. I can't seem to stay comfortable these days."

Draven patted his lap and she rolled her eyes.

"Then I'll make this fast," Raven assured.

I addressed her before she could get going. "I'm sure this is a deeply personal family matter. If you're not ready to share it, Raven, you don't have to, regardless of what your father believes about omens."

"If it's all the same, I'd rather get it over with."

Draven delivered a meaningful look in my direction. *Yes, I recall saying the same thing on the dock, asshole,* I thought at him. He didn't bother to cover his immensely smug countenance. He'd warned me enough times to stop teasing him about Lyric.

"Do any of you know my mother, by chance?"

"I don't," Lyric answered.

"We never met but I know her name," Draven stated. "I believe Brokk said it was Gilda."

"Yes, that was a name she went by for a time," Raven affirmed. "Her true name is Circe de Orum."

"You gotta be shittin' me," Lyric twanged.

"Do you know her?" Draven asked.

“Not personally. She’s not hiding very well, by the way. Circe’s head of the most powerful coven in Earth Realm. She took over several and combined them. She’s a Dianic witch, right?”

“Yes,” Raven nodded. “And hiding wasn’t the right word. We know she’s in Earth Realm. As long as she doesn’t return to the Faelands, we don’t care where she is.”

“Asshole parents suck,” Lyric lamented. “Trust me, I’ve got one. Tell us what the she-devil did and we can compare notes later.”

“When I was thirteen my mother hired three Anuban witches to kidnap me.”

The Anuban clans had a fondness for dark magic. Circe may as well have thrown Raven into a tank of hungry sharks.

“They took me into the Borderlands and held me captive for almost a week.”

My jaw tightened. “To what purpose?”

“They were instructed to draw out my powers.”

Brokk rolled his shoulders, as if he could force his muscles to relax. When Raven didn’t elaborate, he took over.

“Raven hid her powers from her mother. At first, Circe had difficulty accepting that her daughter would likely grow to be more powerful than her. Raven sensed it and, from a young age, suppressed her magic to appease her mother. I didn’t notice the suppression, not for a long time. Neither did Circe. But as Raven got older, Circe began to suspect. She pushed Raven to use both sides of her magics, testing her. She told me she was worried and that Raven needed to reveal all she could do so she could learn to control it—all of which were truthful statements, they just weren’t the entire truth. Raven never did as Circe asked. She could see what I could not.”

Lyric shifted in her chair again. “And what was that?”

“That Circe was a danger to her own daughter. That she would either end up siphoning magic from Raven to harness as her own, or she’d use her as a tool to gain what she wanted.”

“What did she want?” I feared I knew the answer already.

“The wench wanted the fae throne,” Raven’s voice cut bitterly. “I think she thought if one of her children held the seat, she could rule vicariously. She’d never been quiet about Terek not being enough for such a powerful family and how Father was a fool because, after he’d killed Keane, he didn’t even attempt to take the throne.”

“Okay,” Lyric lifted her hands in surrender. “You win. Mommy Circe is far worse than Daddy Gabrian. My father never planned to use me to topple a sovereign so he could rule indirectly.”

“It’s not a contest I enjoy winning, but thank you for your disgust. Luckily, Mother’s plan didn’t work. The monsters who took me figured out pretty fast how much power I’d inherited and they decided they’d keep me for themselves. When the first one had some time alone with me, he tried to siphon my magic. I used his knife to cut his throat then to remove his head. It takes forever with a small blade, in case you were wondering.”

“Girl, don’t I know it.” The two females shared a solemn look of solidarity.

Draven side-eyed his mate and I wondered if Raven had the same merciless flair for violence as Lyric. I should have been disturbed at the notion. Instead, it made her all the more attractive to me.

“They thought because I was only thirteen and female I was harmless, when no being with offensive magic is ever truly harmless. I’m also guessing my mother didn’t bother to tell them who my father was.”

Brokk looked at Raven with pride. It was a little messed up, but if I had a daughter in the same situation I’d want her to fight like hell, too, and to kill if necessary.

“After that, the other two tied me up, thinking if my hands were bound I wouldn’t be able to wield a spell. Idiot Number Two attempted to forge a mating bond.”

The arms of my chair splintered under the pressure of my hands. Raven didn't look at me, she kept talking.

"I was too young and my soul rejected it forcefully. He didn't survive the blast. I can't claim to know what I was doing. It was simply how my spirit reacted."

It sounded eerily similar to what happened in the infirmary. Could my soul have been the one forging the soulbond? And hers rejected it? I didn't think so, but I didn't like the parallelism.

"Did he ..." I couldn't finish the sentence.

"No," she shook her head. "He didn't touch anything other than my hands."

Memories of her broken body attacked my mind. "What about at the Keep?" It was incredibly intrusive and the question was out of my mouth before I could stop myself. My face heated and I cursed my tongue.

"I apologize," I quickly rectified. "I shouldn't have asked you such a thing."

"I was never violated in such a manner, even at the Keep," Raven stated placidly.

Though thankful my mate had been spared that particular horror, I felt no relief.

Raven took a drink of her water before continuing. "Idiot Number Three decided to take a different approach. First, he beat me with branches and sticks he'd found in the forest. When that didn't work, he left me without food and water for a few days, wrapped in iron chains. When he returned, I killed him."

I added another layer to that cold fury buried inside me.

"Good for you," Lyric said. "How did you get free of the chains?"

"I dislocated my shoulder and wiggled out of my bindings."

“Badass,” the Shadow Blade lauded. “But how did you take him on with a dislocated shoulder?”

Raven clasped her hands together, as tightly as her lips.

“You’ve told them this much, daughter. You may as well finish it.”

She brought her clasped hands up and rested her chin on her knuckles. “If I can touch someone for long enough, skin to skin, I can remove their lifeforce, pulling it into my own.”

“Completely remove it?” Draven checked.

“Yes.”

I did my best to pick my jaw up off the floor. Draven cursed under his breath. Lyric, for once, said nothing, though her eyes were close to popping out of her head.

This was a dangerous talent to possess. Others would either want to harness it or to eliminate it. Raven sharing what she could do spoke volumes of the sway Brokk had with her, something that gave me mixed emotions.

“If certain factions knew I could do this, I would be captured and killed or turned into a weapon,” she stated, mirroring my thoughts.

“Can you lie?”

Lyric slapped my arm. “What a thing to ask your mate! She’s fae.”

“Half fae,” I corrected and turned back to Raven. “Can you lie?” I repeated sternly.

“It’s painful and will drain much from me, but I could manage it if necessary. Why? Do you think I’m being untruthful, *mate*?”

Her sassy lip was going to get bitten. “No. I need to make sure you can deny it if someone finds out.”

I must have knocked off some of her bluster because all she came up with was a quiet, “Oh.”

“I’m confused why you didn’t kill Circe yourself, Brokk.”

Brokk looked at Draven in annoyance. “Really? You could strike against Lyric so easily?”

The Shadow Lord shook his head. “I didn’t say that. But Lyric would never harm our younglings.”

“I thought the same of Circe. Sure, she was ambitious, but she’d never led me to believe she was a danger to Kol or Raven. Her soul was not tarnished in the same manner of those who are gravely corrupted and she never lied to me.”

“You never asked the right questions,” Raven quietly contested .

Brokk ignored the dig.

“I can only guess that my mate’s ambition got the best of her in a moment of weakness. Of course, love can blind you from many things. But to address your concern, I was at sea when all of this went down. By the time I returned, Circe was gone. I had trackers hunt her down and hand deliver a message. She knows she lives only because I allow it. I doubt she’ll ever return to the Otherland. Even if she does, if she crosses into the Faelands, I’ll end her. While I want to believe she didn’t truly understand the harm that could have been done to our daughter, I’m not so naive that I’ll allow my heart to overtake my head ever again.”

Lyric sniffed. “That’s so fucking sad.”

“It is,” Brokk agreed without emotion. “Now, the reason I shared all of this is because the night before Circe ran and was lost to me, I dreamt she’d removed my heart.”

Raven gawped, clearly offended. “You actually think I’m getting ready to betray Casimir?”

Brokk shook his head. “Of course not. It’s not in your nature to be underhanded with those who mean something to you. No, I’m afraid the dream is a message he’s going to lose you, which means you’d lose your mate, as well. Something will tear you two apart. I assume it will be by force or by some martyr-like decision you make to take on your aunt. Knowing the damage that will cause you both, I simply cannot allow it to happen.”

She looked at a loss for words. Pain sliced through me thinking of losing Raven when I'd only just found her. I don't know how Brokk had ever managed to pull himself together after Circe ran, especially knowing what she'd done.

"I'm off to find Kol and then we'll be on our way. Raven, you will remain here."

"No. You're not just turning tail and running. You're planning something. I told you, I'll be the one going after Sersha."

"I'm not going to argue with you. Here is where you are safest. I trust you not to do something stupid. Again."

Raven blanched and I wanted to sit her upon my lap and hold her tight. After throat-punching her father, of course.

"And furthermore, if you can't learn from your mistakes, you will never—"

I was suddenly between them, facing off with Brokk. "I believe your message has been received. Unless you have some parting words that don't involve berating my mate, I suggest you be on your way."

A small hand pressed lightly to my lower back. Tingles shot up my spine. "It's okay."

I looked over my shoulder. "I assure you it's not."

"He's not used to feeling fear for my safety. Now he has to worry about Kol, as well."

Brokk grunted. "Raven, if you want to tell Kol goodbye you have ten minutes."

"What do you plan to do about Sersha?" she questioned.

"When I know the answer to that, I'll send word to you."

The Navita strode past his daughter without a backwards glance.



Chapter 12

Raven

“Do you think Father will let me get one?”

I squinted at the squirming creature Kol was holding up. The gargoyle pup licked his face and Kol giggled buoyantly. “Probably. I just wouldn’t bank on it happening today. He has a lot on his mind.”

“I’ll wait until we’re on the ship to ask. He’s always happier on the water.”

“Good plan.”

“Kol,” Father called from across the meadow, “it’s time.”

My brother placed the creature back into its pen then turned to me with a serious face. “You’re going to do something stupid again, aren’t you?”

“What? No.” I was over being called stupid. I really was.

“Promise me you won’t do something that *Father* thinks is stupid.”

Ha! Clever boy. “I’m sure Father thinks me being involved in anything having to do with Sersha is stupid.”

“That’s true. Okay, then promise me you’ll listen to your mate. When you make your decision, tell him, and listen carefully to his response.”

“Trust him already, do you?”

“When it comes to you? Yes. You’re his. Nothing in all the realms will be more important to him than you. Plus, if you get caught—or get him caught because you’re dumb—you won’t bring war upon the Shadows. Casimir is your mate. Any actions on his part could be blamed on your bond.”

Impressed with Kol's insight, I let the *dumb* insult go. I ruffled his hair and he jerked away. "You're pretty smart for a youngling."

"Yeah, yeah. And you're pretty smart for a dummy. I'm still not hearing your promise, Raven."

"I promise I'll talk things through with Casimir and to listen to his opinion. Good enough?"

"Not really, but I'm sure that's all you'll give me."

"Kol!" Father called a second time.

"You'd better go," I urged.

"You're not coming to see us off?"

"I don't think Father wants a sendoff."

His gangly arms came around me and squeezed before he bound off to where Father waited with some of the Council. I'd already wished him safe travels and really had no desire to watch him sail away, something I'd been forced to do since the day I was born.

I closed my eyes and lifted my face to the sun, making a silent vow to never take the feel of its warm caress for granted again.

"Feels nice, doesn't it?"

I peeked over at Lyric, who was mimicking my pose. I admired her ability to approach silently.

"Took me a bit of time to get used to it. I was raised in Earth Realm and its sun is far less intense. Everything looked pink to me the first few days after my arrival."

"And now?"

"Light pink," she winked.

"Funny."

Lyric grinned. "I try to be. But enough about me. Let's talk about you and whose bed you'll be sleeping in tonight."

I made an odd coughing noise that sounded close to a nervous laugh. "Excuse me?"

“I’m kidding. Sort of. I don’t need the dirty details of what you and Cas may or may not be doing come nightfall. But I thought you’d maybe like a tour of Embour and to see your room.”

“That would be great, but are you sure you should be walking around? Is it safe?”

“I’m pregnant, Raven, not disabled.”

“I wasn’t implying you were. I was thinking more along the lines of you harboring an escaped prisoner from the Faelands and the fact that the Queen’s trackers have likely been dispatched to find me.”

“Oh. Well, that’s nice of you to think of me before yourself. But you shouldn’t. She’s not after me. If she’s already sent fae out to search, you had a huge head start considering she wasn’t at the Keep when Brokk grabbed you. Plus you guys made it here in record time on an invisible ship so it’s unlikely she has any clue of your location.”

She had a point.

“Draven thinks she wouldn’t be so stupid as to march on Embour to try to take you by force. I don’t know her, so you tell me if she’s that stupid.”

“She can’t afford a war. Literally. Father has intel that she’s raided the coffers and things are in bad shape. But I think her ego will demand I pay in some way. No, something sneaky would be more her style so she could deny her involvement.”

Lyric shook her head as she patted her rounded belly. “She’s adding to the archaic Otherland argument that females shouldn’t be allowed to rule. We’ll have to kill her for that alone. Oh well.”

Oh well?

With a casual wave of her hand, she said, “Let’s forget about Queen Bitchface for now. If it makes you feel better, Draven’s got four Shadows following us in shadow form and Casimir has called in a ridiculous amount of extra warriors to have on hand, most of whom have formed perimeters out of

sight. No one will get close to us and we won't venture too far."

"And your mate is fine with this?"

"Ha! Hell no. My mate is one of the four Shadows following us around in case there's trouble."

"Well in that case, lead the way."

"Awesome. Oh, and don't be too nice to the gargoyles. They have a thing for pissing on those they like best. The Shadows will tell you it's good luck but I think they made that shit up to make me feel better."

My eyes slid to the cages housing the little beasts, then back to Lyric who was eying the pups. Her upper lip lifted in a silent snarl.

"Alright," I agreed slowly, deciding to hold off on the questions I had.

We strolled to the far side of the meadow, discussing some of her favorite things about Embour, one of which being that the Shadows had gotten some of Earth Realm's technologies to work. There was a field of solar panels not far from the Primus Crossing producing actual electricity, a true novelty in the Otherland. There were magical means everywhere that could help Others maintain creature comforts, but no other factions had solar panels.

Lyric was surprisingly easy to talk to. There was a raw honesty to her candor and it encouraged me to find the nerve to ask her where Casimir had gone.

"Oh, he decided he needed a private moment with your father before he departed. He also mentioned he wanted you to have everything you needed so he's scrambling to make sure you'll have things to be comfortable here."

"Hmm."

"Hmm? Is that a good hmm or a bad hmm?"

"Neither, I suppose. I don't want him to pick a fight with my father, but I appreciated Casimir trying to step in earlier."

“Despite you not needing him to,” she deduced. “Trust me, I understand. I’m mated to the Shadow Lord. He’d carry me around everywhere if I allowed it. Cas can sometimes be a lot like Draven but he’s a little more, I don’t know, smooth around the edges? Charming, I guess. Unless he’s angry. Then they’re almost identical twins as opposed to cousins.”

Draven and Casimir did bear a remarkable likeness, especially when they scowled.

“I think I made him angry earlier. He called me obstinate.”

Lyric snorted. “I’m sure he did. You’ve gotten under his skin. It’s what mates do. It will get easier once you two settle. I’ve found that lots of naked time soothes the Shadow Lord and makes him more agreeable.”

I looked around. “He can probably hear you.”

“I’m sure he can.”

“Well, I don’t think Cas and I are ready for ... naked time.” Were these the words really coming from my mouth? I didn’t talk about my sex life with anyone, especially a stranger.

Lyric stopped walking, planting her hands on her hips. “What do you mean you’re not ready? You’re soulmates. All the parts will fit.”

The parts will fit?!

“I’ve known him for five seconds.”

“So? I’ve heard stories of fated mates who felt the pull so fiercely they were playing hide the carrot before introductions were even made. It happens. I was practically a virgin and made out with Draven the day we met, and I didn’t even know we were soulmates at the time. If I recall correctly, we were shaking the sheets in a matter of days.”

“Why in Neptune’s name would you share that with me?” Not only was that private information, I didn’t need the visuals. I really didn’t.

“Because you shouldn’t feel bad about wanting to jump his bones. Cas is an amazing male and deserves to be happy. He’ll

be good to you. The universe will put you both through the ringer if you resist for too long. The emotional stuff will come faster than you think if you're open to it. Quality sex pun intended!" she laughed.

"I'm not sure that was a quality pun."

"You think? Huh. Whatever. I'm just saying don't be afraid. If I could go back and be brave those first few days, if I'd known what Draven was to me, I think I would have embraced it, especially knowing now what I didn't know then. I'm not saying you should go from zero to pregnant in 40 seconds flat. I'm saying trust what you feel. Unless you feel like running away. Don't trust that at all. In fact, forget I mentioned it in case it's giving you ideas."

"You're quick with wit, Lyric. I appreciate your humor," I told her with complete sincerity. The haughtiness of the fae at Ansley Keep had been tiresome. It wasn't their nature to constantly act in such formal and pretentious manners. Sersha had greatly damaged the atmosphere of the court.

"Thanks. I couldn't tell because you don't show much emotion on your face."

I gazed off into the nearby woods. "I know."

"But, hey, you've rallied like a champ considering what happened to you. If you think you need time, take it. I'm not exactly an expert on relationships considering the one I'm in is the only one I've ever had."

"Really?"

"Yep. So, ignore what pops out of my mouth, if you need to. I don't have a great filter."

"I hardly noticed."

"Hey, she made a joke!"

That one finally drew a smile from me and Lyric clapped her hands elatedly. "Okay, enough girl talk. There are still things I want to show you. I think you'll like it here."

Lyric took me around the grounds not far beyond the protective wall that circled the primary building. I finally got a

look at the multiple barracks scattered strategically with large training areas between them. Shadow warriors moved about carrying on with their daily routines.

I spotted Phalen and returned his friendly wave. He was working with several groups practicing swordplay. Closeby was the archery range crawling with a line of marksmen taking turns.

Several Shadows stopped to greet Lyric. She introduced me as Raven, not as Casimir's mate, which was important to me. I didn't fully know what it meant to be his mate yet. If this was to be my home someday ...

Great goddess above, am I really willing to live away from Terek? Forever? My subconscious was acting like I'd already decided to commit to Casimir. I had a choice, damnit. I would choose my path, not have it chosen for me.

When we got to the armory, Lyric's face lit up. The large rectangular structure was made of the same black stone as the fortress. I couldn't recall the name, but I did remember Father saying it was fireproof and virtually indestructible.

Lights came on automatically when we stepped through the doorway. Rows and rows of blades, tactical axes, bows, and other weaponry lined the walls. Hundreds, if not thousands of wooden boxes were neatly arranged on shelves that ran parallel to the walls of the long building. I scented explosives and felt the slight tingle of iron somewhere further inside.

"Gorgeous, isn't it?" Lyric sighed dreamily.

"It's ... something."

Weapons must have been to her what magic and spells were to me. While I could wield a sword, I preferred my offensive powers. Still, I pretended to be impressed and ignored the itch of the poisonous alloy I'd come to hate so much.

As if sensing my discomfort, Lyric tugged on my sleeve. "Come on," she said as she brushed by, heading towards the

main entrance. “There’s a lot of metal in here and I don’t want to hear Cas bitch at me if you get close to it.”

“Being in the same room with iron for a few minutes won’t harm me.”

“Yeah, well I’m not interested in fighting him.”

My skin buzzed unexpectedly and I inhaled swiftly. It had been a while since I’d heard an outright lie.

“What?” Lyric asked suspiciously.

I tapped my ear. “That was a patently false statement.”

“Shit. I’m going to have to work on that.”

“On wanting to fight Casimir?”

“Uh, no,” she snorted. “I need to work on lying about it.”

“A sensible thing to work on, indeed,” I replied sagely, unable to stop the smirk from forming.

Lyric chuckled. “Does it hurt when you hear a lie or when someone stretches the truth?”

Touched by the concern in her voice I quickly shook my head. “No, it’s more of a buzz or electric prickle under the skin. What the speaker actually believes matters, but so does intent. Jokes can be tough to decipher. They’re more of a grey area and don’t usually affect me much. It’s been a while since I’ve been around Others who aren’t fae so I wasn’t prepared. Extreme sarcasm is usually a safe bet for all parties.”

“I’ll try to keep that in mind.”

“I appreciate the thought, but really it’s not a big deal.”

“Thank the gods!,” she cheered. “I’m not great at watching what I say.”

“I hardly noticed.”

“Ha! She made another joke!”

Lyric elbowed me gently and went back to playing tour guide. Soon we circled around to an elegantly detailed gate on the other side of Embour. Vines and leaves were carved into

the black wood panels, which were reinforced with thick metal strips between each panel.

Not iron.

It was an exit I could put my hands on easily, unlike the first one I'd entered with Phalen and my family. Thus far, I'd found six doors and gates I should avoid. One touch wouldn't do much, but the very thought of my skin coming in contact with the substance was enough to constrict my throat.

Enough.

I shook it off and found myself in a garden of sorts. Rows and rows of white trellises held bright green climbing plants covered in blooms of assorted colors. Blues and reds and pinks abounded.

In between the trellises were large clay pots holding small trees. I walked over to one, peering up at the small yellow fruit hanging between lush green leaves.

"Lemons?" I asked.

"You're familiar with Earth Realm fruits?"

"Circe did actually teach me things in my early years. She'd lived a long time in Earth Realm and thought it best I was prepared in case we visited or wanted to live there at some point." It didn't hurt to admit she'd done something for my benefit. Much.

Many beings from the Otherland took time to experience Earth Realm. Growing up, I thought I might like to attend a human university, as my mother had. It was a right of passage in her clan. That dream died when she'd betrayed us.

"Pretty, aren't they?" Lyric reached up and touched one. "No one eats them, but Kree loves the scent so they got planted. The gardener picks them sometimes for the cooks so the lemons don't go to waste. I like to put them in tea."

"It was thoughtful of the gardener to plant these for Kree."

"Oh, the gardener didn't plant these. Cas did. This is his garden. It's where he goes when he needs to think or work

something out. It's a special place for him. Personally, I think hitting things super hard works better, but to each their own."

My mind blanked momentarily, then narrowed in on a single train of thought. This was Casimir's special place. He grew these flowers. Planted these lemon trees. For Kree.

My tongue pressed to the roof of my mouth as my torso flooded with heat. I needed to get away from this place. "Can you show me to my room, please?"

Lyric scanned my face. "You okay?"

"I'm fine. I think I've just had a lot to digest for one day." *And to choke on*, I fumed, remembering how his eyes had softened in the Council Room while talking to Kree, how he rose when she stood to leave and then tracked her exit.

"Yes, I'm sure you have." She slid her arm through mine, linking us, something only Kol had ever done to me. "Come on. Let's go see your accommodations at Hotel Embour."

‡ ‡ ‡

"This isn't a room. It's a small house."

Lyric grinned. "Like it?"

"What's not to like?" I approved, moving around and taking it all in. Our invisible escorts had left us once we were safely inside the protected fortress and I felt the tiniest bit more relaxed.

The living quarters were decorated smartly, and took organization to an extreme. A large built-in bookcase lined half of an entire wall, filled with books and journals of varying color and sizes. It was arranged in the order of the color spectrum, where the warmer shades, like red and orange were to the far left, and the cooler shades of indigo and violet on the far right.

In front of the shelves sat an ornate desk, painted with soft cream, gold, and silver. The combination made the artist's

strokes look like threads woven into fabric. The top of the desk was sparse, a single notebook and writing utensil the only evidence the piece was more than decoration.

To my left was a comfortable-looking sitting area with a couch and two chairs, covered in fabric with the same color patterns from the desk. Luxurious, steel-colored rugs covered the chilled stone floor. Tiny glints of gold caught the light as I walked over top of each one.

In the corner was a small dark-stained bar with a half-dozen liquor options and several unopened bottles of wine. Atop the bar was a small glass bowl of fruit—oranges, limes, lemons.

No. I am not thinking about lemons right now.

The four-poster bed was enormous. Thick, dark grey curtains hung along the bed's canopy, held open by heavy velvet ropes of the same color. The plush blue-grey bedding was inviting and I looked forward to sleeping through the night for the first time in ...

Gods, half a year? Longer?

I pressed my fingernails into my palms to hide the tremble. It would pass. I'd rest, recuperate, and plot my next steps. The princely bed was the perfect place to do such a thing.

“Just wait until you see the bathroom. It's a dream. Better than mine which is a little annoying.”

I opened the bathroom door and flipped the light switch. “Holy Hecate,” I whispered in awe.

“I know, right?”

To the left were double vanity sinks set inside white quartz countertops. Various lotions and grooming supplies were laid out neatly around one of the sinks. The other was practically bare, with only a holder containing a single toothbrush and a soap pump.

The far right corner of the room was covered in pebbled tile, looking more like a creek bed than a wall. Water ran down the rocks into a long, rectangular pool, already filled. The

bubbling brook set a soothing tune while steam rose invitingly off the surface of the water.

“Is that a pool?” I asked.

“Allegedly it’s a tub, but I bet you could fit twenty Shadows in there if you tried. The shower is nearly as big.”

It, too, had pebbled tile, but no flowing water. There was also no glass enclosure, just open space that took up the opposite corner from the tub. Four different shower heads sprouted from different heights, the largest hung directly above from the ceiling.

Between the two bathing areas was a door. Curious, I walked across to inspect it. The back of my hand came in contact with a spell and I yanked my arm away.

“What happened?” Lyric hurried over.

“I’m not hurt, just startled. I didn’t expect to feel a witch’s spell.” Lifting my palm, I located the barrier. “There’s a spell around the shower. Probably to keep the water from escaping and making a mess.”

“Or the sound from escaping,” Lyric offered conspiratorially.

“Why would—” I stopped myself. “Nevermind.”

“Sorry. I shouldn’t be spilling Cas’s business.”

My arm fell to my side. “His *business*?”

“Um ...” Lyric grimaced.

“These are Casimir’s living quarters?”

“Mmmhmm. Oh, look! It’s the closet! Such a nice closet. That we should look at and admire. Immediately. Yes, right away!” Lyric exclaimed with false enthusiasm, spinning me towards my original destination and dragging me into the walkin.

With my thoughts spinning, it took a minute to realize the closet was nearly as big as the bathroom, with two distinct sides. The right side was masculine, containing racks of fighting leathers, denim, dress slacks, and collared shirts.

Beyond the hanging racks were shelves of folded shirts, sorted by color, then cubbies of shoes sorted by theme, moving from dingy boots at the bottom to dressy leather slip-ons at the top.

Someone has an organization fetish.

The left wall had the same setup, only the items were decidedly feminine and not Casimir's—unless the male also wore dresses and shoes too small for his feet.

I walked the length of the closet, fingers trailing across the variety of fabrics. No one needed a wardrobe of this size. A pair of satiny slippers caught my eye and I spun away from the collection.

A substantial black-lacquered island with drawers on both sides separated the his-and-her spaces. Curiosity demanded I investigate. Inching open the top drawer, I peeked inside. My teeth clicked.

“Whose are these?” I demanded, fisting my fingers around the tiniest pair of panties I'd ever seen and waving them in Lyric's face. The hot pink strings poked out from between my fingers.

“Whose underthings? Whose clothing and shoes? Does Casimir keep spares of everything for the guests he keeps quiet in the shower?!”

I could hear my words dripping with scores of suspicion, underscored with a dose of hysteria. If he meant to dress me in another female's underwear I'd melt off his testicles.

Lyric's eyes rounded. “Uh, well—”

“They're yours,” Casimir answered, striding through the doorway, Kree close on his heels holding a canvas bag over her shoulder.

I had a sudden case of claustrophobia and took an audible breath. I threw the offending garment down and slammed the drawer shut, hating the performance I was giving. I was never dramatic, not until today.

“Kree, Lyric, would you mind leaving us?” he requested, eyeing me like one might eye a rabid animal.

“Of course,” Lyric replied.

“I’ll just put this here,” Kree said to me, setting the bag on top of the island. “It’s for you, Raven.”

I nodded, fearful of speech. I didn’t have control of my mouth’s impulses and couldn’t guarantee I wouldn’t sound snide or hurtful. Kree had not wronged me and I didn’t want to make the situation any worse for myself or anyone else.

Lyric affectionately punched Casimir’s arm on her way out and Kree patted his opposite shoulder. I didn’t envision inside my mind that I shot her with a bolt of magic. Imagining a gaping wound across her gorgeous face would be wrong.

Casimir drew near, leaning one hip against the shiny black furniture harboring the offending unmentionables. His arms crossed and I suspected it was a common pose for him.

“You had some questions, Little Bird?”

“Heard that, did you?”

“I did.”

“Are you going to clarify?”

“Yours. All of it.”

“Ah. You’re gifting me with the collection of conquests you’ve accumulated. How touching.”

The sensual curve of his lips besought my fae tongue as sure as his *gifts* courted my witch’s ire.

“You find this humorous?” An image of Phalen’s shirt popped into my head and ruined my ability to seethe. I rubbed my temples.

“Not particularly.”

Casimir moved in, caging me against the island. His palms landed on either side of my hips. “But I find that I like your jealousy very much.”

Caving to impulse, I killed the dampening spell on the bond. I regretted it immediately as it had me arching into him.
Too fast!

Casimir jolted a half inch closer. His face looked pained. The connection shouldn't have been this strong already. Though, it would help make my point.

“This is a fraction of what I'm feeling,” I threw at him, pushing as much as I could across the bond. Though the connection was in its infancy, it was sturdy and I could communicate some of my emotions through it. Maybe I really had started the soulbond and we were bound more closely than I realized.

“I'm edgy and hot headed and so jealous that I'm tempted to set fire to your wardrobe. Is this how you want me to remain? Because I loathe this feeling. I haven't decided if I want to be mated and you're not presenting a good argument for me to choose to be. In fact, it's a compelling reason for me to be on my way—”

His mouth crashed into mine before I could finish my threat. My body roared to life. My arms flew around his neck as his own came around to pick me up. When he sat my bottom down on the cool flat surface, I shamelessly spread my legs, lifting my thighs over his hips. A subtle rock of his pelvis and I was moaning.

Sweet blessed Baccus!

Casimir devoured. Consumed. Stole the angst and set it aflame. Nothing else existed outside of this kiss. *More*, my body demanded. I needed more. I locked my ankles behind him, squeezing tight.

His hands slid up my sides and around to my spine. One grabbed my braid, pulling my head back. He deepened the kiss for a long, languid moment. I had no air left and I hardly cared. Who needed oxygen when they had the lips of this male upon their flesh? I was convinced it was worth dying for.

Casimir slowed the pace and the world around us gradually crept back. No one had ever affected me in such a way—and it was only a kiss. A crushingly carnal kiss, the likes of which I'd never experienced.

Large, warm palms cupped my head. Lips skimmed over mine, across my cheek, and lingered at my temple. Casimir inhaled with pleasure and I felt his muscles relax.

He pulled back, looking into my eyes with fierce determination. I swallowed.

“No more talk of denying our bond or of leaving. You just got here. In fact, each time you make such a threat, I’ll kiss you senseless, no matter where we are or what we’re doing.”

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me and you heard the truth of my words. I want a chance and you’re going to give us one. We won’t live our lives wondering what could have been.”

I was about to give him a snappy comeback when I saw a flicker of something in his expression, something that gave me pause. The alphaness I’d expected from the Shadow warrior. What I hadn’t expected was the brief visage of vulnerability. He must have taken my silence for compliance because he exhaled the breath he’d been holding.

“Now, I think we’ll clear up a couple of misunderstandings, as I do so hate them,” he declared, opening up the top left drawer and retrieving the thong I’d handled minutes earlier.

Holding them up, he said, “First, I would never keep a drawer full of former dalliances’ used panties and then hand them off to my mate to wear. Even the words sound wrong. *Used pan-ties*,” rolled off his tongue distastefully, emphasizing the *t*.

“Say it, Raven. You’ll feel how wrong it is and that no male worth anything would dare to do such a thing to his mate.”

I stared at him. Casimir arched his brow.

“You’re serious.”

“Used panties. Say it.”

“You’re crazy.”

“Debatable. The sooner you say it the sooner I’ll move on to another topic.”

“Fine. Used panties.”

I couldn’t prevent the small chuckle that escaped. It sounded completely ridiculous.

“See?” he chirped gaily. “Sounds wrong.”

“Yes, I think you’re right. But what about the rest of the clothes?”

“It’s not a collection from my past. We bring in quite a few things from Earth Realm through the crossing and store them here until merchants can retrieve them. Goods are taken and sold all over the Shadowlands and beyond, which is lucky for us because I actually found some things short enough for your legs—that wasn’t an insult,” he quickly added. “You’re probably a good two or three inches shorter than Lyric, so we went off of that.”

“I noticed there weren’t any fighting leathers.”

“Of course you did,” he smirked. “The ones I picked out for you are currently being hemmed. We can meet with the seamstress anytime you’d like if you don’t trust what I told her. If what’s here isn’t to your liking, I’ll take you shopping. Oh, and I procured shoes and boots in a variety of sizes. Whatever doesn’t fit we’ll give away.”

“This is a lot, Casimir, and I don’t need to go shopping.”

“It’s not that much. I didn’t know what you preferred so I got a little bit of everything.”

It *was* that much. My wardrobe at home was a fraction of this and it wasn’t because we couldn’t afford anything more. He obviously was trying to please me so I decided I wouldn’t complain about the overindulgence. If I decided against this mating, I’d leave it all behind anyway.

I ignored my soul’s peeved rattle at the thought of walking away. “You didn’t have to.”

“Yes, I did.”

“No, you didn’t, but thank you anyway.”

“You’re welcome.” He dipped his head and brushed his lips against mine, skimming to my ear to whisper, “Did I clarify enough for you?”

“Mmm,” I hummed, enjoying the affectionate way he nuzzled my neck. “Wait, no.” I gently pushed at his chest.

Casimir straightened.

“The shower. Why is there a spell around the shower?”



Chapter 13

Casimir

Of course she would have picked up on the barrier surrounding the shower. She was part witch. Spells were her forte.

“It holds in whatever is within its boundary. Not living beings, but things one wouldn’t want escaping.”

“Like the sound?”

“And water.”

Her eyes darted to the open door. She’d be able to see at least part of the shower from where she sat.

“Why not put up walls or glass?”

“Do you really want me to answer that right now?” I whispered, leaning to nip at her earlobe.

Her palms pressed at my chest once more. A red flush crept up her neck. The skin at the corners of her eyes tightened.

“I wouldn’t have asked if I didn’t want to know,” she responded.

“I had a feeling you’d say that. Come on,” I said, picking her up and placing her back on her feet. I took her hand in mine, pleased and a wee bit surprised when she didn’t jerk it away.

Leading her to the edge of the shower, I released my hold. “Stay here.”

I stepped into the shower and turned to face my mate who was looking at me expectantly. As I’d done a million times, I opened my diaphragm and freed the song within.

“You’re ... singing?”

Though Raven could see me, not a sound would pass through the barrier to her. I continued to let the tune flow uninterrupted, a compulsion I'd inherited through my lineage. Once I began, it was difficult to stop.

Shortly after the final note, she stepped into the shower with me. "I didn't hear a single thing," she marveled. "You had a spell cast so you could sing?"

"No. It's more than just singing. My paternal great grandmother was a Molpean siren."

"So it's possible for you to enslave someone with your song?"

I laughed. "No, nothing quite so drastic. I've been told it has a lulling effect."

"By whom?" she demanded, making me want to kiss her again.

"Draven. It's not something I've done much in front of others. Once the song begins, I have to finish it. It can be quite annoying. Also, depending on what I'm feeling, it can have some other ... let's say consequences."

"Such as?"

"Shattered glass. If the notes hit too high I can also shatter an eardrum. Though, I've never attempted a siren's song while truly upset. My parents warned me to never sing unless I had control over my emotions. The family lore is that my great grandmother, aside from being able to enthrall others, could call forth one's blood when provoked. Control it even."

"I can see why you have the spell," she said, biting her lip.

"What's that look for?"

Raven's fingertips skimmed the barrier, triggering an opaque ripple that disappeared when she lowered her arms. "I thought the spell was so no one would hear you in here."

"It is."

"When you're not alone," she supplemented.

"Yes, well, it works for that, too."

Her face fell, but her words came out sharp. “Why not include that little piece as part of your presentation?”

I released a shallow sigh. “Because it wasn’t the reason why I had the spell added.”

“So you didn’t think of it just now? Of the females you’ve ...” she motioned towards the shower.

“I won’t insult you by lying or, gods forbid, stretching the truth to the point your fae ears pick it up as a lie. But no, I wasn’t thinking of any other females.”

Her adorable frown made me want to kiss her again.

“You’re ... telling the truth.”

“Then why do you look both confused and pissed off?”

“Because I just am, okay?” she threw her hands up. “If we’re to get to know one another, complete honesty is important. I understand it. I accept it. And I hate it. Though I appreciate your truthfulness, the idea of you enjoying a female in this shower makes me want to hurt someone. It’s ridiculous.”

“No, it’s not.”

“It is! You’re a demon. Of course you’ve had many females in your bed. It’s normal. The fae and witches are also sensual creatures. We don’t wait to explore that side of ourselves until we have a mate because it could take centuries to find one.”

“You make a fair point, but I think it’s completely natural to want to murder someone who knows your mate intimately, even someone who merely wants to.”

“Murder’s a bit of a stretch. I was thinking more along the lines of ruining someone’s pretty face or cutting off the fingers that had touched you.”

Her possessiveness kindled my own. “Then tell me why I want to barge into your father’s office in Terek, write down the names of every male seeking to be mated to you, and hunt them down so I can remove their hearts with my bare hands? And that’s not hyperbole. I have truly had those thoughts.”

Raven's pert nose scrunched. "What are you talking about?"

"You don't know?"

"Know *what*?"

Brokk must have kept the proposals to himself. I doubted he would ever agree to any of them because he wasn't the sort of male to force his daughter into something she didn't want. Why keep it secret, though?

"Can we go into the other room?" I asked. "Your scent in this enclosed space is making it difficult for me to remain clear headed."

Raven moved quickly out of the stall and into the main quarters, taking a seat in the sitting area. I took the one opposite.

"Brokk has six offers he's been sitting on for the past year."

"Offers? To be *mated* to me?"

"Yes."

Raven ran both palms over her face. "I had no idea."

"I gathered."

"He should have told me. Not that he'd dare to broker a match, but it isn't something I thought he'd hide. There's no reason to hide it."

"Perhaps they came in after you left for Ansley Keep and he planned to sit on them until you returned?"

She lifted a shoulder. "I still don't understand. He should know I'd have laughed at them and then instructed him to tell the males to piss off. I would never want to be with someone who only wants me in order to form an alliance with my father."

"I doubt an alliance would be the only reason, Little Bird."

Her dubious look spoke volumes.

"I'm serious."

“I know you are.” Raven tapped her ear. “Lie detector, remember? But just because you believe something doesn’t make it true. It’s lying only if you say something against what you know or believe to be true. Plus, you have to think I’m attractive and that others would desire me. It’s a mating rule of the universe, I’m sure.”

Dropping down to the floor, I knelt, gently pushing her legs apart so I could take up the space between. My hands fell onto the arms of the chair because they needed something to do other than remove her clothing.

“Yes, I am attracted to the beauty of your face and the curves of your figure. But I’m also seduced by the integrity of your soul—and that, above all else, is what I find most attractive.”

She inhaled deeply. “I am not without flaws, Casimir. My soul has not survived this life unblemished.”

“It makes you all the more attractive. It makes you real. However, I’m perfectly content not trying to convince you all those males want you for you, but because they would gain an alliance with your father. I really should have let it lie, make sure you thought I was the only one in pursuit,” I teased.

“Well, the point is moot because I would never consider one of them. I don’t know what Father was thinking by not denying each and every offer.”

“Maybe he thought there was one you’d entertain.” My throat seared around the suggestion.

“Why? Are they males that I know?”

“Brokk knew better than to list them by name to me. He only said he had the offers and gave me a second warning not to fuck this up. He understood I wouldn’t hide this from you so I have to assume he wanted you to know.”

“He’s never played games before or hid information from me. We’re very direct. Always.”

“I can see you’re frustrated. The only conclusion I can draw is that he wanted me to know you had options.”

She didn't. She really didn't. I was her fated mate. Period. The only option she was going to choose. I would do all that was in my power to make sure she had no need to seek a mate elsewhere.

Raven rested her head on the back of the chair, looking up at the ceiling. Her neck was long and elegant. The V of her tunic showcased her delicate collar bone. She wore no jewelry, but the dip of her clavicle was perfect for a sparkly stone, something to give her in the future.

“What are you thinking?” I asked.

“I'm thinking ... I'm thinking I'm a little lost right now.”

She lifted her head, her fingernails lightly scratching the scruff of my jaw. I held very still, letting her explore. I was afraid of doing anything to discourage the ease with which she was starting to show familiarity and affection.

“I'm also thinking whatever magic was used to heal me broke any command I had over speaking my mind. I've never been much of a talker, not around strangers, anyway, and today I've been sharing practically every thought bouncing around my head.”

I covered her hand with my own, holding it to my face. “But you and I, Raven? We're not strangers, not really. Without the dampening spell, I can feel some of your emotions as you can feel mine. Our souls are linked, at least in part, and that's a closeness many never have the fortune of experiencing, even after months or years together. That we can immediately have a knowing of one another in this way is a gift and I intend to treat it as such.”

Raven inhaled slow and deep. A thousand thoughts played in her eyes as she blinked each one away. There wasn't an argument to be made against mine.

My mate wasn't ready to be pushed, so I directed things away from our bond. “As for the oversharing, don't overthink it. You'll find our little family here is quite open. It's what holds us together.”

“*Open* might be an understatement. Lyric? She’s ... I don’t know that I have a word.”

Our hands lowered, both of us laughing. “Yes, she tends to be a little crude. Honest, but crude.”

“Crude? She cusses like a sailor. I would know. My father is The Seaman.”

I barked out a laugh and she smiled. I didn’t want to leave this moment. I wanted to live in it as long as possible. Raven’s stomach had other ideas. It rumbled and I grudgingly stood, offering her my hand.

“Come on. Dinner is soon.”

“Oh, good. I’m starving.”

“Fair warning, we’re eating in the family dining room.”

“With the Council?”

“Not tonight. It will just be me, you, Lyric, and Draven. Talia told me to not overwhelm you.”

“I appreciate that.”

I escorted her out of the room, still holding her hand. She let me keep hers clasped in mine the entire way. I was beginning to understand why Draven wanted to carry Lyric around all the time.

“Can I ask something of you?” I queried on our way down the stairs.

“What?”

“Can you not mute the bond again?”

Her mouth twisted. “Doesn’t it make you feel overwhelmed?”

“Not really. But it packs quite the punch when you release the spell. I think if you leave it be, we’ll grow more accustomed faster and it won’t feel so overpowering.”

She didn’t speak until we stepped onto the landing for the next set of stairs. “We can try it, I suppose.”

I pulled our joined hands up to my lips and kissed the back of her hand. “Thank you.”

“I wouldn’t thank me yet. It’s probably a bad idea.”

“I disagree, but I promise if it starts to overtake your mind and you try to have your wicked way with me at the family dinner table, I’ll ask you to put the spell back in place, hopefully before you get my pants off. Good enough?”

Raven let out a sound, like she was trying to form a sentence and couldn’t.

“Great, I’m glad we have a plan.”

As we exited the stairwell onto the main floor, she muttered something about Embour being cursed because everyone living here was insane.

My smile widened. She had no idea.



Chapter 14

Raven

“Did you enjoy dinner?” Casimir asked, leading me out into one of the courtyards for an after-dinner stroll.

“I did,” I replied, grinning to myself. Dinner had been a welcome distraction, preventing me from dwelling on what I’d soon be facing and the decisions I’d have to make.

Lyric and Draven were entertaining to watch. His overbearing tendencies were endearing and I respected how Lyric handled the powerful demon. Despite their banter and quips, their love was still obvious. Draven was constantly reaching for his mate, even if only to graze her fingers with his own.

Casimir hadn’t touched me since he’d released my hand when I took my seat at the table for dinner. I’d thought he would reach for me after we said goodnight to his family, but he didn’t. I ignored the preposterous twinge of disappointment.

“I forgot to tell you that Hugo cleared his morning schedule for you. I’ll take you to him after breakfast tomorrow.”

I felt my muscles begin to knot. “Did he say why? Specifically?”

His head shook. “No, just that you would require some more sessions to speed up your lifeforce’s recovery. And I assume you’ll want to speak to him about your scars.”

I stopped. Casimir did, as well, when he noticed I was no longer walking beside him.

“You spoke to him about my scars?”

“No.”

“Do they bother you?” I asked, doing my best not to hold my breath.

Hugo had assured me only he and Lyric had seen the full extent of damage. Casimir might not know about my stomach, but he could easily see what had been done to the sides of my face and neck. The thin lines weren't grotesque or puckered, but they were impossible to miss.

“Of course they bother me.”

I had to call on every ounce of strength I had not to recoil from him. “I see.”

I resumed walking, not knowing what else to do. Did they sicken him? If they did, he would really have a hard time with the ones he couldn't see.

Warm fingers wrapped around my upper arm and spun me around smoothly, more like a dance move than an act of aggression. His hands settled on my hips while mine instinctively went to his chest.

“They bother me because I know how they got there and how much pain you endured. My concern is not because they make you any less desirable.”

My face heated at the adurance in his voice. His hips tilted, the bulge behind his zipper pressing into my belly.

“If you can't hear the truth in my words, you can feel the evidence for yourself. Do you have any idea how hard ... how difficult it is to walk around in this state? I fear nothing I do or think of will make it go away.”

My arousal spiked and I cleared my throat nervously. “Well. It sounds like you might have a medical condition. Maybe you should see a healer.”

His fingers flexed. “I think there's only one cure for this.”

“Cas—”

“Don't. I'm not pushing for everything, not yet. I can be patient if you need me to be.”

I didn't know how to respond. I feared if I opened my mouth I would demand he take me upstairs and strip me down. The image of him seeing my naked body lessened some of my need.

“Come on, I want to show you something.”

Casimir took my hand and a shock of electricity sizzled up my arm. I didn't say anything, but Cas squeezed my fingers with his and I knew he'd felt it, too.

“Where are we going?”

“Just around the corner.”

I knew what was around the corner.

“I've seen your trellises and your trees,” I informed him in a monotone voice. “Lyric took me here earlier.”

“That's not what we're looking at.”

Oh, thank goodness. I didn't want to have to force him to choke on those lemons—but I would.

Casimir took us to the edge of the rows of trellises, closest to the protective wall. Lyric and I hadn't walked to the back side of the garden so I didn't know what to expect to be shown.

When we reached the stone wall and turned to look down the path running between the wall and the garden, I gasped. Growing up the side and overtop the path, creating a lush, leafy tunnel, was a tangle of *flore nocti*, otherwise known as nightblooms.

The bluish-green stems were thick and curvy and reminded me of a nest of snakes. At the tips of the clusters of greenery were very large white flower blooms, some as big as a foot across. Nightblooms only opened for a few hours, and never when the sun was up. They hung loosely overtop the path, the openings parallel to the ground.

Few flowers could survive facing down, much less without sunlight. It was one of the reasons I loved this species.

“Lyric said she didn’t bring you to this part. The nightblooms freak her out. She thinks they look like alien plants that might attack, though these evolved directly from an Earth Realm species and are completely harmless. For some reason, they grow much larger here.”

“They’re magnificent,” I complimented. “How did you know they were my favorite?”

“I didn’t. I mean, I do know some factions of witches use them medicinally, but I brought you here because I wanted you to see them. They weren’t due to bloom for a few more weeks.”

“They came in early?”

“The power that surged through you when Kree pushed her magic into your life force did more than explode across the OR. Some of it escaped the infirmary, despite the containment spells we had in place. Diluted, but still powerful enough for this.”

“Like a ripple effect?”

“I assume so. Everything growing in the courtyard got an instant boost. My garden’s never looked so alive. And these,” he gestured above us, “opened up.”

“It was daylight when that happened.”

“It was.”

The Otherland’s moon was high in the sky, bright enough to cast shadows across the courtyard. Moonbeams streaked through the canopy making it look like the blooms were glowing. Torches were lit all along the wall, orange flames flickering, giving the illusion the greenery was moving. There was profound beauty in the ghostly ambiance of this part of the garden.

I looked away from the scenery and up into the luster of Casimir’s silver eyes. It was like getting hit with an arrow. My pulse sped under the intensity of his gaze. My soul stretched towards him and I did nothing to stop it. When my spirit touched his, he exhaled harshly.

“I’m sorry,” I apologized, reeling it back quickly.

“Don’t be.” Casimir’s hand lifted, his knuckles brushing the side of my face. “What do you feel when you touch my soul like that?”

“I feel you. The essence of you.”

His hand dropped. “Do you sense darkness?”

“No.” My head canted. “Why would you think that?”

Casimir’s smile was sad. “Because I hold onto my sins tightly. I hold them so I never forget.”

“Never forget what?”

“How easy it is to become something I don’t want to be. To be corrupted by circumstances beyond my control, despite my best intentions.”

Emotions swirled through me and I thought some of them were his, coming through the bond. It shouldn’t be this advanced. It scared me, but I couldn’t say I regretted it.

My father’s experience with my mother had turned me off to Fate knowing anything about what was right for Others. Circe was a piece of work and Father deserved better. But if I really thought about it, my father had been utterly and totally devoted to my mother. Sadly, she hadn’t realized how lucky she was.

I could tell myself I wanted the choice, but I really wanted what Circe had thrown away. I could choose what Fate had set before me or I could run from it. I knew then and there I was actually considering this, of giving it a real chance.

Casimir had said he’d felt the character of my soul. He had to know I would have been able to feel the same in him. It wasn’t dark. It was strong and righteous. Whatever stained his past hadn’t destroyed his soul in the ways he assumed.

“I don’t feel darkness, Casimir. I feel your decentness. That you worry so much over things you’ve done in the past should tell you that you’re not dark inside.”

He pulled me into a tight embrace. For long minutes we stood under the moonlit canopy of otherworldly flowers. Something inside my chest settled and the nearby lemon trees didn't feel like such a big deal.

I yawned and Casimir sighed. "How easily I've forgotten you were comatose only this morning. Come on, let's get you upstairs and settled."

I didn't protest as he led me back inside and up the stairs. It had been a long day and I'd had a lot to process. I still had a lot to plan and think through ... and worry about, especially not knowing what my father was up to.

Tonight, though, I'd let my mind rest. I could worry about it all tomorrow. In fact, I was looking forward to the soft bed, having gone so long without one.

When we entered his quarters, he suggested I use the bathroom first and I could find sleeping attire in the closet. After brushing my teeth and undoing my braid, I went in search of something suitable to sleep in.

I heard the sink faucet running as I opened and closed drawers. I found a soft pair of leggings and a matching tank top, both in a very dark blue. After putting them on, I looked at my chest, debating if I should wear a more supportive top.

I decided to put a tee shirt over it, which would help cover the scars as well as my hardened nipples. Like Casimir, it seemed I was to live in a state of perpetual arousal.

When I came back into the living space, he had turned down the bed linens on one side and was standing, pointing a finger. "Get in."

"Are you tucking me in?"

"Of course."

I passed by and had to hop up onto the enormous mattress. He frowned.

"What?"

"I think I have to lower the bed for you."

“It’s fine.”

Casimir didn’t reply. He left the room through the bathroom door. I could hear him moving around in the closet. When he came back, he was in a grey short sleeved shirt with a blue stripe across the chest and matching blue and grey plaid pajama bottoms.

“You have a thing about colors and organization, don’t you?”

“Is it that obvious?”

“Your closet is sorted by color and function.”

“It helps to find things faster.”

“Mmhmm.”

“It does,” he insisted, scratching the side of his head as he approached the other side of the bed, closest to the door.

“Where are you going to sleep?” I asked.

“Next to you.”

I sat up. “Next to me?”

“Yes,” he replied, sliding under the sheets.

“But ...”

“But what?”

“I don’t know!” I slapped my palms down on either side of my hips. “We’re mates but we just met.”

“I know. And I’m feeling totally insecure. You’ll probably run away in the middle of the night to have your revenge against the evil Queen and I’ll have to hunt you down, crying the whole way, foiling your plans for stealth because the fae will be able to hear my sobs from miles away.”

My eyes rolled. I wasn’t an eye roller, damnit, but now I was doing it repetitively! “I told you I’d give this a chance.”

Casimir tucked his hands behind his head looking completely relaxed. “Actually, you didn’t. I said I wanted a chance and you were going to give us one. To that you said nothing. So here we are.”

Shit. He was right. My head must have still been fuzzy if my memory was false. I didn't like it. "So this is my fault?"

"Absolutely."

"I'm not having sex with you tonight."

Despite my declaration, excitement at the thought of taking him deep inside had me squeezing my thighs together. My mouth was not communicating the same message as my body.

"Did I ask for sex?"

"No." My face must have been bright red by now. Horny and embarrassed at the same time could not be a good look. "Why aren't you asking for sex?"

His scent sharpened and mine reacted. Physically, we were totally in tune.

"I told you I could be patient, Raven."

He turned to his side, facing me. "I'm not sure I'm capable of leaving you alone for the night, not after knowing you've been in harm's way for so long. You're a very capable female, but my protective instincts are riding me hard. I will move to the couch if you need the space."

That unexpected vulnerability he'd shown earlier crept back onto his face. *Hecate, help me*. I found myself lowering back down to the pillow, mimicking his position. I wouldn't be able to fight this need for long.

"No," I admitted. "It's not so bad. It's just a lot. I'm completely on edge in a way I've never been before."

A hint of self-satisfaction bloomed across his face. "Isn't that how it usually works with fated mates?"

It was. I knew it was. I wanted to explore this, I truly did. However, I'd spent my whole life living by my mother's mantra. *We blaze our own paths*. Yes, Circe was a deplorable mother, but it's hard to completely undo something I had heard preached since birth.

It didn't help that I still had some reservations, afraid to make the same mistake my father had. Circe was his fated

mate and look how that turned out. Maybe if she'd felt the bond as strongly as Father had she would have adjusted better to life with him.

I was half witch. Witches in general didn't feel the pull to fated mates with the same intensity as most Others. I'd always suspected it was because of all the spells they'd cast over the millennia trying to buck Fate, that it lessened through the generations.

Perhaps if Father had waited before deciding he would keep Circe he wouldn't have been so easily fooled by her. *But then there'd be no me and no Kol.* Not that it mattered now. What was done was done and like it or not, my brother and I existed because my mother said yes despite her insistence no unseen force would ever decide for her.

On the other hand, I was also half Seelie fae and the fae did feel the pull. In fact, I worried I was feeling it twice as strongly. If I wasn't, and this was the watered down version, I had no idea how Casimir was able to handle it. I almost felt sorry for him.

I was committed to giving this a shot, it just wasn't going to be easy for me.

"Are you really not interested in sex right now?" My thighs squeezed again. Why was I asking him such a thing? I knew I was a terrible tease, saying one thing while my body was shouting another.

The truth was, I wasn't opposed to sleeping with him, not if I was going to explore this mating bond. And if I was going to be completely honest with myself, my hesitancy went beyond whatever Circe had done to me.

There were things under my clothes I didn't feel like explaining. I'd never been shy about my body, but Dolan had taken to writing words in my skin, laughing and taunting me as he did it. Telling Casimir would only infuriate him, raising questions I didn't want to answer.

"I didn't say that. I am totally and unequivocally ready, willing, and able. Check for yourself, if you feel so inclined."

The temptation to lift the sheet, remove his garments, and see him in all his masculine glory was too much. I licked my lips and Casimir rumbled deep in his throat.

“You would tempt a saint,” he whispered, tucking my hair over my shoulder. “So turn over and go to sleep because I can assure you I am no saint.”

Relenting, I did as he said, giving him my back and adjusting the pillow. “Goodnight, Casimir.”

“Goodnight, Little Bird.”

My lips tugged at the corners, hating the endearment just a little less than I did before. Casimir turned out the lamp and I closed my eyes. This wasn't so bad.

✧ ✧ ✧

This was a nightmare. Try as I might, I could not fall asleep. How much time had passed? Two hours? Three? More? My mind wouldn't shut off any more than my heated body. If I had been alone I would have taken care of this flustered situation myself.

My typically dueling halves were having a fit. Relief was lying less than two feet behind me in the form of a sexy Shadow in plaid pajamas. My inner witch was agreeing with my fae half and I blamed them both for my current state. And I blamed Casimir. And the bond. And my self-imposed sexual abstinence over the past year. I was a mess.

“Are you alright?” he asked quietly.

“I'm alright.” The lie tore through me and I bore down through the pain. Strong hands rolled me to my back.

“What is it? What's happening?” he demanded, worriedly peering down at my face.

“My fault,” I whispered, regaining control as the fallout from the lie dissipated. “I know better than to be flippant with

a response.” The last of the pain ebbed and I took a deep breath.

Stupid, Raven. Very, very stupid. I hadn’t made such a mistake in years.

“That’s what happens when you lie?”

“Yes.”

“Fuck.” Casimir ran a hand through his hair. “Don’t do that again. Lying to me is unnecessary.”

“I know. It was stupid.”

“Then why did you do it over something so dumb?”

“I didn’t want to tell you I wasn’t alright.”

“Why not?”

“It’s not something I usually admit to. Plus, I was lost in my head and spoke before thinking. I’m not kidding when I say Kree’s magic altered my brain. I’ve never been this way.”

“I like you speaking openly.”

“Of course you do.”

Casimir’s index finger traced my brow, then the side of my face and neck, lingering at my collar bone. “What do you need?”

“I can’t shut off my brain.”

“Understandable.”

His fingertips drifted down my arm and back up, more comforting than sexual. “How can I help?” he asked.

The pressing force of need was crashing against my sound judgment. My gut was screaming that a naked Shadow on top of me would calm this storm.

My hand shot up into his hair, dragging his face to mine. Our lips met and a maelstrom of sexual energy zapped between us. Casimir groaned and I felt it in my core.

His hand left my arm and cupped my breast overtop my clothing, kneading and rubbing. My right leg tried to hook

over his hip to pull him further on top of my body. Casimir's talented hand left my chest and put my wandering leg back down on the bed.

"No sex," he murmured between kisses.

"Yes sex," I growled, making his shoulders shake. "It's not funny," I complained.

"You didn't seem ready just a few hours ago. In fact, you were very clear sex was off the table, so I'll not be taking you tonight, Raven."

Frustration and embarrassment only made me more angry. I'd practically thrown myself at him and he shot me down. *He* was the one insisting we share a bed!

"Fine," I sulked, rolling to my side so he couldn't see my face.

His wickedly dark, masculine chuckle gave me goosebumps. "Oh, Little Bird. You misunderstand me."

Casimir scooted closer, aligning his body to mine from behind. His arm came around my waist as his face buried in my neck, inhaling my scent. "I mean to ease you, so there's no need to pout."

"I'm not pout—" I gasped when his hand cupped me intimately without any preamble. The heel of his palm applied the most delicious pressure and I could no longer think enough to speak.

His teeth bit down on the tendon in my neck and his impossibly hard cock pressed into my backside. My hips found a rhythm with his hand. Moments passed as he worked me into a frenzy.

Then the bastard's hand disappeared. Before I could complain, he grabbed my inner thigh and lifted it, widening my legs. Sure fingers lightly smacked my mound and I huffed indignantly.

"Shhh," he soothed. "I have you."

Casimir's hand slipped slowly under the waistband of my pajamas and finally under the smooth fabric of my panties. I

bucked when he made contact with my clit and again when he ventured further between my folds.

“Already wet for me,” he praised. “I fucking love that.”

He didn’t tease with his touch. No, he fondled my sex with intent, somehow knowing exactly what my body needed. My breaths turned into shallow pants under his masterful strokes.

“Give me your mouth,” he commanded.

My head turned towards his and our lips met fervently, the stroke of his tongue matching the stroke of his hand. Over and over and suddenly I was flying apart, crying out as the climax wracked through my body. He had to be a sorcerer, making me come like that so quickly.

Soon my breathing slowed and Casimir’s caresses eased. He withdrew from under my clothing but kept his arm around me, tucking me in close.

“Better?” he asked, resting his head on the pillow behind me.

“Mmm.” Though I couldn’t see him, I knew he was grinning.

“I’ll take that as a yes.”

“What about you?” I asked sleepily, my hand drifting behind me to his erection. He’d taken the edge off but I was willing to do more.

Casimir hissed when my fingers grazed his front and he quickly put my hand back where it had been, keeping his own on top of mine. “Not tonight, Little Bird.”

“It hardly seems fair.”

“I’ll not have a score kept between us. You will never owe me for a single thing I choose to give, no matter the circumstances. As far as I’m concerned, being able to have you this close is a gift, especially when I was certain you’d kick me out as soon as I slid into bed.”

My heart thumped. “Casimir ...”

He pressed a soft kiss behind my ear. “Do you think you can sleep now?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Now close your eyes and go to sleep. I’ll be here when you wake.”

I was tempted to argue but refrained. Both mind and body were relaxing finally, so I allowed myself to drift off.



Chapter 15

Raven

The first thing I noticed when I awoke was the lack of heat at my back. My arm patted the bed behind me, finding cool linens and no Casimir.

“I’m here.”

Prying open my eyes, his visage came into focus in the morning light. Dressed and seated in a chair beside the bed, he greeted me with a warm smile.

“Good morning, Little Bird.”

I sat up and rubbed the sleep away from my eyes. “What time is it?”

“After ten. We missed breakfast so I had something brought up.”

Looking on the other side of the room, I saw a small table set for two. One of the plates held the remains of someone’s breakfast. I hoped he hadn’t waited long to eat.

“How long have you been sitting there?”

“Not long. I showered first, then ate and did some work at my desk for a while.”

“And I slept through that?”

“You were exhausted. Rightfully so. You started stirring about half an hour ago.”

“So you decided to sit and watch?”

“Yes.”

“Is that normal behavior for you?”

“What? Sitting and watching a female sleep?”

“Yes.”

“No. It sounds creepy when said aloud. I was trying to keep quiet so you could sleep as long as possible. I had just started reading this,” he held up a book, “when you frantically began searching for my body. Don’t worry, it’s right here and at your service.”

Despite myself, my lips twitched.

Casimir closed the book and set it behind him. “Why don’t you freshen up and eat while I go and check to see if Hugo is still downstairs? I assume he’ll tend to you inside Embour instead of at the army’s infirmary.”

“I missed our appointment?”

“There wasn’t a set time, so there’s no rush.”

He stood and approached the bed. Once close enough, he bent forward, slow enough for me to know his intent. His kiss was soft and slow and sweet—and over far too fast.

When my eyes opened, he was already back at the chair to retrieve his book. Dazedly, I watched him drop it on his desk and head to the door. “I’ll be back soon. Feel free to remain naked in the shower for as long as it takes me to return.”

I forced a smile, feeling ill at the thought of him walking in and seeing the skin hidden under my clothing.

Casimir frowned. “What’s wrong?”

Not in the mood for the punishment that followed my lies, I shook my head. “Nothing that I want to discuss quite yet.”

His head canted, studying me. He didn’t like my answer, yet he didn’t press.

“It has to do with my scars,” I supplied truthfully.

“I see.” His hand dropped from the door knob. “Tell me you know that no part of you could ever repulse me.”

Sometimes being able to hear the difference between the truth and a lie was a handy tool. Sometimes it was everything.

“I know.”

“Would you prefer I stay? All joking aside, I can sit in here while you get ready. I promise not to enter the bathroom.”

“No. Thank you, but no. I’ll be fine. I’ll freshen up and eat while you run downstairs.”

“If you’re sure.”

“I’m sure.”

“Very well. There are already some toiletries in the shower, but Kree was able to find various herbs and oils that we’d heard witches prefer. She said they had healing properties. They’re in the canvas bag in the closet.”

I didn’t speak, but I nodded so he knew I’d heard him.

“I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

Casimir left and I hurried off into the bathroom, going nowhere near the bag. It was a hangup I’d need to get over, but I’d worry about that another day. When I emerged, the room was empty, so I sat and ate the food he’d brought in.

By the time I was finished, he was back and we were headed downstairs to the in-house infirmary. En route, he explained that it was set up similar to the army’s facility, but smaller. Only those who lived inside the fortress’s walls were treated here.

“Who lives inside the main building, aside from you and Draven and Lyric?” I asked as we neared a door marked Medical in bright red letters.

“Most of the Council. Emile has recently built a cottage near the river and prefers to stay there. Hugo has rooms here but often stays in the army’s med center, especially if someone under his care is bad enough for an overnight stay. Though, Draven has suggested Hugo remain near Lyric just in case.”

The door opened and Lyric stomped out, looking annoyed. A scowling Draven exited, as well, followed by Hugo.

Her face altered when she saw us. “Hey, you two!”

“Problems?” Casimir asked.

“No,” she replied at the same time Draven said, “Yes.”

She rounded on her mate. “This is not a big deal. This happens sometimes in pregnancy. Hugo said so.”

“What is it?” Casimir prodded with concern.

“Her blood pressure is high,” Draven told him. “She needs bed rest.”

Hugo pinched the bridge of his nose. “That’s not what I said. What I said was her blood pressure is a little higher than I would like and we will monitor it. If it gets worse, we’ll explore more serious avenues to bring it down. Bed rest is one of the options if it continues to climb. I was speaking in the future tense and you know it.”

Lyric nodded in agreement, glaring at her mate. “Future tense. *If* things get worse.”

“I’m trying to be proactive and prevent it from happening.”

“If you’re so proactive, maybe you should consider getting off my nuts! Have you considered that all your damned hovering all the damned time is making my damned blood pressure spike?”

Draven’s face lost both color and expression. It made him look a little lost. Quickly, he recovered and I felt a little sorry for him.

“Oh, hell,” she sighed, wrapping her arms around his waist. “I love you and I know why you do it. But you have to have a little faith in me. I’m not being reckless. I’m not.”

“Angel,” Draven murmured, lowering his forehead to hers.

Lyric sniffled and I felt like a voyeur. If the couple wasn’t blocking the door, I’d have tried to slip inside unnoticed. Casimir took my hand and squeezed.

“Alright, why don’t you two go relax in your quarters before lunch so I can get back to doing my job. I’ll make sure the kitchen gets the message to reduce the sodium in your meals. And stop drinking those sports drinks, Lyric. Water only from now on.”

“Not even lemonade??” she whined. “I already had to give up the bourbon!”

“Fine. You can put lemon in the water.”

Ignoring the three of us, Draven picked up his distressed mate and continued murmuring to her as they took off down the hall. Their devotion was enviable.

“Come on in,” Hugo said and we followed him inside to a private exam room.

“Please sit up here,” he requested, patting the exam table.

I looked at Casimir then back to Hugo, who must have been a mind reader.

“Cas, please go tell Kree we’re ready for her.”

My mate opened his mouth and Hugo cut him off. “Frown all you like, but I’m not doing an exam in front of you. Any ailment, treatment, or general question of Raven’s health is confidential. Should she choose to include you, I’ll let you know.”

Casimir’s mouth flattened before turning to me in question

“I’d prefer to speak to Hugo in private.”

He inhaled but didn’t argue. “Alright. I’ll go find Kree.”

After he was gone I thanked Hugo.

“Shadow males can be overbearing, especially once they’ve found their soulmate. While this is totally confidential, I do recommend talking about it to him eventually.”

My nose wrinkled.

“If the roles were reversed you’d want to know. Just think about it.”

The thought of someone tearing into his flesh and salting it brought forth a surge of incensed energy. I tamped it back down and nodded in silent agreement.

“Now,” he said, “let’s discuss your options before Kree gets here.”

“Should I remove my shirt?”

“Not yet. I know what’s there.”

My spine relaxed. I hadn’t even realized I’d been so tense.
“What do you plan to do?”

“Well, both Kree and I can heal. The scars are healed tissue, as crude as they are, so I’m going to have to do some damage to them first, then Kree and I can mend the flesh.”

“How will you damage them?”

“I can either burn them or slice them off.”

“Which will hurt the least?”

“A sharp blade hurts less than a deep burn. But I can give you something for the pain.”

“Drugs don’t work very well on Others.”

Hugo grinned. “No, they don’t. But I’ve figured out how to extract some of my magics and infuse them with the IV sedation drip. You won’t feel anything if I give you a strong enough dose.”

The thought of being put under wasn’t appealing in the least. I’d be vulnerable. While I logically knew I would be safe here, some part of my makeup refused to let me put myself in that position.

“How long will I be out?”

“However long it takes. I’ll get them cleared up in one session, if you’d like. And I’ll have Kree do what she did before. Your lifeforce isn’t completely back and she can help with that.”

“Can that be fixed in a single session, too?” I asked hopefully. Lifeforce, the very heart of an Other’s existence, was notoriously difficult to replenish quickly without help.

“That, I don’t know. I assume not, since she did it once already and you’re not 100%.”

As a healer, he’d be able to sense my lifeforce much more strongly than anyone else aside from a bonded mate.

“How have you felt today and yesterday?” he asked.

“Fine. I mean, I’m not sleepy or anything.”

“Could you manage your most complicated spell?”

I had to think about that. The more complicated the magic, the more it took from you. Just like running a race, the further the distance the more in shape you needed to be. Could I go out and run a marathon right now? The answer was a resounding no. I probably needed two or three jolts from Kree.

“No, I don’t think I could.”

“Okay. So let’s deal with the scars, have Kree juice you up, and see where we are. Sound good?”

“Sounds good.”

‡ ‡ ‡

By the time Cas returned with Kree, I was in a small OR with an IV drip going. We didn’t bother with a hospital gown since Hugo would need access to my entire body. But he did have me under a sheet with a warm blanket on top.

Kree smiled warmly, coming to the left side of the bed. “How are you feeling?”

“I’m good.”

“I’m glad.” Her warm hand covered mine and patted a couple of times. “Now, where would you like me, Hugo? At the top of the bed again?”

“That works.”

Casimir took the spot Kree vacated as she moved into position. His large hand took mine.

“Should I hold her down from here?” he asked Hugo.

“Hold me down?” I interjected.

“That’s what I did before. You were flailing and we needed you to be still.”

“No,” I told him.

His mouth tightened. “What do you mean no?”

“She means you won’t be staying in the room,” Hugo argued as he stepped up to the IV pole and adjusted something on the tube under the bag.

“I’m not leaving.”

“Yes, you are,” Hugo coolly disagreed. “This won’t be pleasant and you don’t need to watch.”

Casimir’s jaw clenched. “Like watching you reset her bones was pleasant?”

“That was fixing things inside her, things you couldn’t see. I’m going to have to cut her, do you understand? I’ll literally be shaving off her skin, possibly more depending on how deep the damage is.”

“I can handle it.”

“That’s what everyone says, right up until the moment I’m getting choked to death by an angry mate whose soul is screaming for blood. So, no, Casimir, you’re not going to be in here for this.”

Casimir growled at his friend.

“Thank you for proving my case,” Hugo shot back.

My mate’s worried eyes landed on mine. “I don’t want to leave you,” he said quietly.

I rubbed my free palm over my sternum. Unexpected emotion punched me from within. “I’ll be okay. I won’t even feel anything.”

“You don’t want me here.”

For the love of Ladonis!

I felt like I’d kicked a gargoyle pup. “I don’t want you to watch. But I’d like you to be here when I wake.”

Casimir’s chest rose and fell once, then he bent down and kissed my forehead. “I can do that. Hugo, I’ll be right outside. I want to be in here when she wakes.”

Hugo, who was busy preparing several instruments, didn't bother looking up. "Sure thing," he said.

One more squeeze on my hand and Casimir was gone. Ten seconds later, I was dead to the world.



Hugo



Chapter 16

Casimir

The door opened and Kree popped her head out. “Raven’s going to wake up soon.”

I stood and stretched, having been seated in the same position the entire time. Hours had passed. I’d wanted so badly to be in there for her. I’d nearly pushed back, demanding a place by her side, but it wasn’t about me. It was about Raven and what she needed.

I passed through the doorway and had a flashback of her under the sheet the day before. *Gods, was that only yesterday?* It felt like I’d known her so much longer.

Hugo was removing the IV and Kree was standing at Raven’s head. I searched his face for signs of concern but he looked to be his usual self.

“I don’t think you’ll have to pin her this time, but stay close just in case. I’ll grab this arm and you can get the other if necessary.”

The sides of the bed were lowered, so I had easy access. Hugo and I both waited for Kree’s signal. As they had before, her hands went to Raven’s head.

I examined the skin I could see on Raven’s face and neck. The thin white lines were completely gone. It wouldn’t erase the past, but I hoped it would lessen her internal pain. She didn’t want to talk about the scars earlier, but they obviously bothered her.

“On the count of three,” Kree whispered. “Three ... two ... one.”

A surge of power ran through Raven, filling the room before disappearing into the ether. This time, her body didn’t

bow and her limbs barely moved. I had a moment of panic that it didn't work.

“Don't,” Hugo ordered. “We won't restrain her unless necessary.”

I looked down at my hands, nearly touching Raven's. I pulled them back and waited. Her eyelids fluttered open and one corner of her mouth lifted.

“Wow. You should bottle that up and sell it. I feel amazing.”

Kree giggled. “I'm so happy to help, Raven. Your energies are brimming but I'm thinking one or two more of these sessions and your lifeforce will be back at normal levels. Right, Hugo?”

“Right.”

“Why was her reaction so different this time?” I asked.

“Because her body only absorbed a fraction of what it absorbed the last time,” Hugo explained. “It isn't an exact science and Kree has to try to tailor her dosage to give just enough but never too much. She's replenishing both lifeforce and magic stores, the latter being the easiest to refill. A little at a time will prevent us from total overload on both fronts. Magic and energy reserves are easy to expel, so we aren't gauging anything other than the lifeforce. I think she'll be back to normal by the end of the week.”

Raven's violet eyes sparkled. She sat up, holding onto the sheet saying she'd like to get dressed. We left the room and closed the door.

“I know you're both anxious to get this over with, but I would like to space out her sessions a day or two apart to make sure she's not having any adverse side effects. Sometimes Kree's magic can cause Shadows to get a little overwhelmed or feel overly energized.”

Kree bit her lip. “I'm not sure the overwhelmed part can be avoided, not when she's a stranger here and thrown into a new reality like she was. Even if my magic worked perfectly, she's still going through a lot.”

“You think I’m overwhelming her?” I asked.

“No, but I think the situation could. A lot has happened in her life in recent months, more than most beings experience over the course of years. Or ever, really. I mean, how many beings have ever been taken hostage and tortured?”

“Three of the four beings in this infirmary have,” Hugo reminded.

“Yes, but that’s not normal.”

I laughed. “What do any of us know about normal? Our lives have never been normal, not even yours, Kree.”

The golden-haired female sighed. “Forget I said anything.”

Shit. I hadn’t meant to insult her. Kree had been mated once and the fucker had abused her ruthlessly. Loathing that I’d made her feel bad, I clasped her hand between both of mine. “I appreciate you worrying on Raven’s behalf.”

“I worry for you, as well, Cas.”

“I wish you wouldn’t.”

Her shoulders lifted. “I fear it cannot be helped.”

Kree patted my cheek with her free hand and I knew she wasn’t upset. A throat cleared behind me and I twisted to see Raven standing at the door I hadn’t heard open.

The sparkle was gone from her eyes. They looked darker as she eyed me critically. Our delicate bond flared and I felt like my soul had been scalded. Gently, I lowered Kree’s hand back to her side.

“Raven—”

“Hugo,” she cut me off, “could you direct me to an available training area, one where a guest such as I would be allowed to spar or maybe release some magic? I think expending some of this ... energy is just what I need right now.”

“You want to fight?” I asked.

“Or just hit something,” she answered coolly.
“Repetitively.”

Was she upset that Kree had touched my face? Possessiveness between mates was common, but Raven had to know that I would never cross that line.

“I’ll take you outside,” I pronounced.

“Hugo?” she said, ignoring my offer.

“It would be my pleasure to escort you outdoors,” he answered smoothly with a cheshire grin. Raven took his extended arm and I watched my friend walk away with my mate.

What the fuck just happened?

I made to follow and Kree tugged on my sleeve.

“You might want to consider giving her a minute.”

“My mate is upset.” I tamped down the mild panic skittering through my innards.

“Then give her space to let off some of that steam.”

“I need to talk to her.”

Kree crossed her arms, something she’d only started doing after Lyric came into our lives. “It’s not about what you need, Cas.”

“But—”

“Would you prefer to talk to her before or after she starts blowing things up? You might want to think long and hard about what target is set in front of her before she’s cooled off.”

“Fuck.” My body dropped into the closest chair.

Kree sat beside me and patted my knee. “It will be an adjustment, but I think you’ll both find your way.”

“She’s half Dianic witch. You know how much they buck at the idea that Fate has any sway over them.”

“You want her to let Fate decide for her, then? To accept you as her mate simply because of a predetermined connection?”

“Yes,” I spoke without thinking.

My soul knew hers in a way it didn't know anyone else's. When the spirits of destined mates touched, they learned the very essence of who the other person was. Not the details of likes and dislikes or quirks, but the true ethos of their deepest self. Yes, one could sense general evil or goodness in another, but a veritable *knowing* happened instantly between mates.

The rest would come, I had total and complete faith. I already knew I liked her personality. She was feisty and funny, even if she insisted she was usually reticent. I admired her toughness and strength. She'd never let me steamroll her. I didn't think I could ever be with someone who would simply go along with whatever I wanted.

“Oh, Cas,” Kree breathed out. “It doesn't always work out like a fairytale. Just look how it turned out for me.”

I really was a complete idiot. The former Shadow Lord, Samael, was cruel to Kree, despite being her soulmate. It only proved that Fate didn't work in everyone's best interest. If anyone deserved a male who would be kind and true, it was Kree.

“I'm sorry. I should know better than to talk like that.”

“It's okay.”

“No, it's not. You were dealt a shit hand.”

“True, but I didn't know it was a ... shit hand until it was too late.”

I grinned at her use of profanity. Kree had been changing slowly since Lyric's arrival at Embour. After Lyric's birth, their father had kept them apart, something both of the females lamented. But over the course of the past year and a half, Kree was starting to sound more and more like what her father described as “her old self.” Samael had damaged her mind and it had taken Lyric to jumpstart the healing process, both physically and emotionally.

“There's something to be said for choices, or at least feeling like you have the freedom to make one. I never felt that,” she confessed.

A few silent moments passed between us. “Can I ask you a question?” I’d never pried, but something had always bothered me.

“Of course.”

“How did your soul accept that it belonged to a male like Samael?”

“It didn’t. Not really. He marked me, forging half of the soulbond. My soul never did the same. It wouldn’t. It refused to even reach for his after that first brush, even when he demanded it or I tried to force it. I was naive enough to think he would eventually be the male I needed him to be, that things would change. If I could just get my soul to bond with his, I thought I could fix him. He was my fated mate, after all.”

Kree gave a humorless laugh. “Fate did not choose well for me. So now, someday, I will choose for myself.”

Her palms slapped the top of her thighs. “But this isn’t about me. It’s about you and Raven. I’m thinking your mate has had so much thrown at her, she needs to feel like she has some control over her life. She wants the choice. Give her a reason to choose you.”

“I’m trying. She’s only been here for barely two days.”

“True, but sometimes when you know someone is the one, it happens fast. Look at Lyric and Draven.”

“I try not to,” I grumbled. “They’re sickeningly happy.”

Kree smiled. “They are, aren’t they?”

“Unfortunately,” I responded sarcastically.

“What will Raven do after her lifeforce is fully replenished?” Kree changed the subject.

“What do you mean?”

“Cas, she has the heart of a warrior. How long do you think she’ll sit around this castle before she decides it’s time to deal with Sersha? A female like that will never leave it up to her father to face those who wronged her.”

It was true. Raven had already insisted she would be the one to handle it.

“We haven’t discussed it, but I’ll make it a point to bring it up. She can’t simply walk into Ansley Keep and take the Queen’s head.”

A twinkle sparked in Kree’s eye. “Oh, I think maybe she could.”

One corner of my mouth lifted. “You may be right. I better go check to see what sort of damage she’s done outside.”

I rose and crossed to the exit of the infirmary.

“Cas?”

I looked over my shoulder.

“You should be completely honest with her.”

“I am honest with her. She can hear a lie, anyway.”

“That’s not what I mean. She only hears the lie if you say the words. Sometimes what goes unsaid can be just as painful.”

“I’m not following.”

“You need to tell her that you and I are nothing more than friends, that we have never been more than friends, despite the confusion you were having last year. I think she was upset because I touched you. I’ll be more careful in the future.”

My gaze fell to the floor. Kree and I hadn’t spoken about that night. We’d both avoided it completely. I’d confessed to having feelings for her and she let me down in her gentle way.

It had hurt like a son of a bitch, but it hadn’t wrecked me. I’d questioned many a time since then if what I’d felt was simply comfort from a pure soul who had shown me nothing but kindness.

“I think clearing the air with her will help tremendously,” she added.

“I’ll take it under advisement,” I replied. “I’ll see you later.”

I didn't hear what she said in reply, hastening my steps to get outside where I'd hoped the air was more breathable.

‡ ‡ ‡

My journey was a short one. Once I'd passed beyond the outer wall of the fortress all I had to do was follow my instincts.

The bond was solid enough it allowed me to feel Raven's location. I should have found it worrisome since the thought of a soulbond filled me with panic.

I'd lost my mother because of one, just as Draven had lost his mother when his father was murdered. That my death could ever drag my mate into the grave with me was more than I could stomach at the moment.

About a mile northwest, I found Phalen standing beside Hugo, facing a wall of fire. The vegetation wasn't scorched nor was there any smoke. These flames were magic-made.

My mate was close by but I couldn't pinpoint her exact location. Neither of my friends were alarmed so I didn't react, though I felt a fierce need to set eyes on Raven and see that she was alright. The further into the forest, the more likely we were to encounter predators.

"It's a little eerie, isn't it?"

Hugo and I both looked at Phalen.

"There's no sound to it," he continued. "No crackle or spark. Nothing scorched. It's not real."

"An illusion?" I inquired.

"You want to touch it and find out?" he laughed.

I stepped closer to the barrier. A small amount of heat was emanating, strong enough to give me pause, but faint enough to determine it wasn't a real fire.

"Is Raven on the other side of this?"

“Yes,” Hugo replied. “She’s got walls up all around so we wouldn’t see her.”

“Why?”

Phalen’s pursed lips had my hackles rising. “Why did she not want you to see her?” I demanded more forcefully.

“We believe she’s sparring, hand to hand,” Hugo stated.

Phalen crossed his arms. “Really? Sparring hand to hand? That’s what she’s doing?”

Hugo tugged at his earlobe. “Ok, then what would you call it?”

“Hand to paw. No, talon. Claw? Something like that. It doesn’t have hands.”

Blood froze in my veins and I suddenly had both their shirts in my fists, pulling our faces into an awkward triangle. “What is in there with my mate?” I hissed.

“She’s fine. I would never let her come to harm, Cas.”

My arms jerked them both inches away from my face. “*What* is in there?” I fumed, ignoring Hugo’s certitude.

“Oh, just fucking tell him,” Phalen cursed. “This is a new shirt.”

“A wyvern,” the healer finally answered.

“A small one,” Phalen added emphatically. “Hardly bigger than the three of us put together. A baby, really. She stopped it in its tracks with a flick of her wrist.”

They were dead. I would kill them both. They’d left my mate inside a ring of fake fire with one of the most bloodthirsty creatures in existence. I released my so-called friends, pivoted, and ran headfirst into the magical barrier.

My body slowed when I got one step into the flames. It felt like I was pushing through mud. Correction—*hot* mud filled with shards of glass that scraped across my skin.

Enough of this shit.

I shifted into shadow form and rose up with the flames. Moving in their natural direction was much easier than trying to move through them.

Once I broke free of the top, I had an unobstructed view of what was happening within the ring of fire. Without thought, I flew down into the open space, noting the wyvern lying on its side in the center of the clearing.

Raven was kneeling in a meditative pose near the dragon-like creature's head. Her eyes were closed. Her face serene. I landed close by, solidifying, ready with my sword to remove the beast's head.

"Touch him and I'll remove your kidney the hard way," she warned without opening her eyes.

"The hard way?"

Raven nodded. "I'll freeze you and Blaze here will get to have a tasty snack."

"You named it?"

"*Him*. Not *it*. He seems to like it."

I shifted to get a better view of the scaled monster. His large, green, snakelike jaw gaped open, a triangular black tongue hanging out the side. His cupcake-sized eyes were slitted, so he wasn't asleep, yet the yellow irises weren't tracking me or my mate.

"You knocked him unconscious?"

"Not exactly."

The space filled with energy and I tasted ozone in the air. "What's happening?"

"Not much since you're ruining my concentration. Just be quiet for a minute and I'll deal with you next."

Her threatening tone sent all the blood in my head straight to my cock. There was a good chance I'd fuck her in this meadow if she kept it up.

"There. All done." Raven lifted her arms to stretch before rising to her feet.

Blaze slow-blinked a few times, then rolled quickly onto his large paws, stretching out his massive bat-like wings. I made to step between them. A burst of power blocked my movement.

“You can go now, Blaze.”

“He understands you?”

She ignored me, her attention on the wyvern currently glaring at her. I was close to ghosting again and taking Raven with me. Draven could pull Lyric into shadow form with him and I was reasonably sure I could do the same with Raven.

“I’m sorry, but I’m not ready for that kind of commitment,” she said softly. “You’re still so young. A toddler, really, and I’m not sure you understand what you tried to do. So take some time and think about it. I undid what you started, but if you come at me like that again, I’ll be forced to do something you won’t like. Do you understand?”

Blaze snorted and Raven grinned. *Holy shit*. They really did understand one another.

“I’ll tell you what. I’ll come back here, to this exact spot, in one year exactly,” she pointed up to the sky, “when the sun and moon are in these positions, and we’ll discuss it further. I think you’ll still be too young, but if you can approach me without aggression, I’ll know you’ve learned something.”

He lowered his head and Raven patted the bridge of his nose. “Go on. One cycle around the sun. Don’t forget.”

The wyvern’s body lowered, then abruptly pushed off the ground, its wings lifting it up into the air and over the flames. We watched it fly off until it was out of sight.

“Explain,” I commanded, putting my sword back in its scabbard.

Raven turned, facing me. “Do not presume you have permission to order me to do a godsdamned thing. You never will.”

My lips twitched and her face flushed. “It’s not any fun ordering you about if I have your permission, Little Bird.” I

shouldn't have been taunting her like this.

Her weight shifted, her body angling in the way soldiers are taught when they were about to engage. A slight breeze slid over my skin, bringing with it a sweet and pungent scent. The molecules between us quivered with electricity.

Raven's palms and fingers undulated as she pulled the loose power into her. Her body gave off a slight glow, and her incandescent eyes zeroed in on my own. She was brimming with magic. It seemed she hadn't had a chance to work off all the excess and I was the new target.

"I'm guessing you didn't get a chance to spar?" I asked, taking a step back.

She stepped with me. "Blaze attacked but I didn't have the heart to hurt him."

"But he attacked you."

"Not to hurt me."

"What was he doing?"

"He was seeking to fuse."

Another step away, this one at an angle. "Pardon?"

"Fuse. He sensed I was a witch and thought it would be a good idea to become my familiar. I resisted the connection and he tried to strong arm me. I don't take kindly to anyone forcing anything on me, especially not a permanent bond, so I put him on the ground."

If that wasn't parallelism I didn't know what was. She was smart—she knew exactly how I'd take those words. I didn't rise to the bait.

"And you didn't kill him?"

Raven lifted on shoulder, still matching me step for step as I circled around her. "He's young. He'll learn."

"Oh, I don't know. I suspect most males tend to lose their heads over you."

"I don't know about most, but several literally have."

I hadn't been referring to Raven's experience with the Anuban witches but she clearly was. I'd been hinting at those offers Brokk had thrown in my face, of all the other males I imagined crossing her path who wanted to possess her.

I wouldn't wonder about how many broken hearts she'd left in her wake. I didn't care. I only cared about getting this right with her.

"Spar or talk it out?" I offered, recalling how Draven and Lyric used to fight to burn off their physical and emotional energy. He insisted it worked.

"What?"

"Spar or talk it out? We can work off some of your anger or we can talk. Or both. Whatever you need we'll do."

"Whatever I need?"

"Yes. Whatev—"

Zap!

I dove to the side, rolling and popping back up with my jaw agape. The little hellcat had shot a torrent of white-hot magic at me. The side of my shirt was on fire and I frantically slapped at the flames to put them out. I'd be engulfed if I hadn't moved so quickly.

"What the hell was that for?"

"You said whatever I needed. This is what I need."

"I—fuck!"

I dove in the opposite direction narrowly avoiding a second bolt. On my way up to my feet I had to change direction again as a current of energy singed the hairs over my ear. Once I was clear and back on my feet, I lifted my hands in surrender. "I don't have offensive magic."

"Yet you offered to fight me."

"I thought we would grapple or use swords, Raven. I didn't think you'd attempt to blow my head off."

I should have been angry. I wasn't. If anything, I was in awe of my tiny mate. She was pissed yet held herself with a cool, regal air, contempt oozing from her eyes while a powder keg of magic sparked at her fingertips. She was dangerous, and I was glad of it, thinking of the battles ahead.

Though I didn't want her to hurt, it told me much that she was so upset over seeing another female touch me. I would be more careful in my future interactions with Kree. I was an ass for not having realized the issue already.

"If I'd actually wanted to blow off your head, you wouldn't be capable of speech right now."

"I'm sure." I kept my tone soft, gliding to my left, keeping her in front of me. "I'd hoped you'd want to talk and clear things up."

"What things?" she asked with false innocence. "Those pesky little misunderstandings you hate so much?"

"Yes, actually."

"Very well. But I think I'll take you up on the fighting part of your offer first. I'll even ground this excess energy since you seem so terrified of a little magic."

I loved how she gave me lip. No one, outside of the Council and Hugo, spoke back to me. I had no doubt if I told her it was a turn-on she'd zap me right in the balls.

Holding my gaze, she lowered herself until her hands flattened on the grass. I watched in astonishment as she fed the oversupply of power into the land. I'd wrongly assumed the energy would come out as electricity, which would char or kill whatever it touched.

Instead, the blades of grass brightened to a brilliant green and small white flowers blossomed instantly, at least twenty feet in every direction. It was like watching an Earth Realm's spring in fast forward.

When she rose, her hands twisted and pulled at invisible forces as she murmured something quietly. I blinked and she was holding a crystal sword.

No, not crystal. The buzz coming off of it reminded me of Lyric's wings. Raven had ingeniously fashioned a sword made out of energy.

"Impressive," I praised.

"Thank you."

The little imp didn't even give me a chance to draw my weapon before she charged. *Gods, how I loved her tenacity.*



Chapter 17

Raven

Lightning quick, Casimir's sword came up to block my downward swing. I altered the direction to come at him from the side and he blocked again. I tried another angle, then another, meeting steel every time.

Swords were not my greatest strength, but I could wield one when necessary. Casimir, however, handled his blade expertly, effortlessly impeding each and every one of my attacks. I was no match for him, not without my powers.

Much to my disappointment, he didn't strike at me at all. He held back, choosing to remain on the defensive.

I was well aware he was letting me work out my emotions by using him as a target. I didn't like how that made me feel. That he was being the bigger person only infuriated me further. Casimir being the good guy here left me with little justification to make him bleed.

Yet, I continued. Arms aching, I swung and spun and swung again, trusting I'd never make contact with his body unless he allowed it. Seconds turned into minutes and I lost track of time.

At some point Casimir altered his movements so my strikes glanced down the length of this blade, effectively lessening the jar of impact.

Considerate ass!

I advanced and he backed away, permitting my perpetual attacks. Perspiration beaded along my forehead. My breaths grew into pants and my lungs burned. I hadn't exerted myself in physical combat since I'd left Terek. I wouldn't be able to keep this up for much longer.

My next strike was so slow and sloppy I decided to stop before I really embarrassed myself. He'd defeated me without once going onto the offensive. I let go of the spell and my sword turned to smoke, drifting off into the air.

Casimir straightened out of his fighting stance and returned his blade to his back. He watched carefully as I breathed in through my nose and out through my mouth, getting my pulse under control.

"Better?" he asked.

I nodded then flicked my wrist to bring down the wall of flames revealing the two Shadows who'd escorted me to this area.

"Ah," Phalen clapped his hands once, "so she let you live after all."

"Go home," Casimir ordered. "Both of you."

Phalen blew a raspberry and Hugo shook his head. "We saw the wyvern fly away. Any injuries I should be aware of?"

"He never touched me."

"Good. You seem to be in control so I'm going back. Send for me if you need a healer." With that he turned and left.

"Guess that's my cue to leave, as well." Phalen gave a two-finger salute. "Send for *me* if you desire new accommodations."

Casimir growled and Phalen hurried off after Hugo. Once I was sure they were out of earshot, I spoke.

"I can't stay."

The big Shadow's body went stock-still. Red crept up his neck and I felt a burning sensation through the bond.

"What did I say would happen if you spoke of leaving?"

He stepped forward and I remained rooted, needing to get this off my chest. "You love her ... you're in love with Kree. If Father hadn't brought me here, you would never have known I was your mate. You would have had a chance. She's a kind female and—"

“I don’t love her.”

My skin buzzed.

“Careful,” I warned, “that was dangerously close to an untruth.”

He took another step. “Then hear this, Little Bird. I am not *in* love with Kree. I’m just not. What’s your lie detector say about that?”

“But—”

“No buts. She and I are not in love.”

“But you’re something of that nature, aren’t you?” I mocked.

“No, we’re not.”

His words were truthful. Still, I had trouble trusting them. I knew I was being irrationally territorial, sickened with jealousy, but I wasn’t blind.

“Were you, though? At one time?”

“Does it matter?”

“Of course it matters. How would you handle being around me and a male I’ve been in love with for who knows how long?”

His irises blackened, bleeding into the sclera. A slight tremor took over his limbs. I took a step back, half-ashamed of the little thrill zipping up and down my spine.

“You believe yourself to be in love with another?” Casimir’s voice came out layered, though the tone was unnervingly calm.

Stand strong, Raven.

“This isn’t about me.”

He took another step, only a foot of space between us now.

“Answer me,” he said between clenched teeth.

“No, I don’t think I will,” I responded. I wasn’t afraid of Casimir, only of caving to his irrational alphaness.

Regardless of the insane witch inside me loving every minute of poking at the demon, I wasn't trying to toy with his emotions. I needed to continue to set the precedent I would never roll over simply because he demanded it of me. Watching him become unhinged made me feel better about my own reaction, which wasn't exactly a good thing.

"*Raven*," he exhaled on his next breath.

My arms crossed. "No."

Shadows suddenly burst forth from his body. They twisted and twirled, flying around and between us. Tiny currents of power leapt from my skin to touch the snake-like phantoms. I was shocked to feel their solidness, like they were actual appendages.

Casimir lifted his face and released a single anguished note into the forest. Holding it for long seconds, the enchanted sound settled over us like a warm blanket. My skin immediately felt less taut, my jaw relaxed. Both our heartbeats returned to normal paces.

As his head fell forward, I caught Casimir's pained look of misery. Both hands slid to the back of his head, locking fingers. Moments slid by before he finally looked up. His eyes were fading back to normal.

"I apologize," he said.

"It worked, though. Singing that note calmed us both. Maybe it's a more handy talent than you realize."

"No," his head shook. "Not for the sound. I'm sorry for going full demon on you."

"That was full demon?"

"The eyes, at least. And unwittingly releasing shadows like that. It usually only happens in battle or when ... when we feel something deeply."

The temperature of my core rose a degree. Or ten. I ignored it. "Like rage?" I pushed.

Though his irises were still mostly hidden, a thin ring of silver brightened as he looked me over. "Among other things."

Hecate help me.

“Did I scare you?” he asked softly.

“No.”

Casimir nodded. “Good. It was not my intention.”

“I know.”

Silence descended and held us in place. Tension was mounting once more, but for an entirely different reason. I swallowed, feeling suddenly parched.

“I’ve never been in love before,” I blurted, inexplicably offering him the words he’d attempted to force from me. Apparently my mouth still had a mind of its own.

His eyes widened and some of the strain drained from his face. What I didn’t tell him was that I’d tried, but my heart had always remained my own.

If anyone would have had a chance, it would have been Nik, the one male I’d trusted to want me for me and not for what my father could do for him. But you couldn’t force yourself to love another.

“Were you and Kree together? Ever?”

His head shook. “No.”

“Did you want to be?”

More of the darkness faded and once more I could see the full grey of his eyes. “There was a time,” he paused, putting his hands on his hips and looking off to the side.

“There was a time ... ?” I prompted him to keep going.

“That I thought I was in love with her. I now know I wasn’t.”

“How can you be certain?”

“Because the feeling went away. Fast. And it didn’t hurt like it should have if I’d truly been in love with her. It was my pride that bore the brunt.”

“Then why did you think it was love?”

Casimir snorted with false humor. “Because I’m an idiot. You’ve met her. She makes everyone she encounters feel special and worthy. I’m dark on the inside. I liked how she made me feel as though I wasn’t tainted. It’s probably something to do with her healing magic. Wounded animals are drawn to both her and Lyric. Of course I would be, as well. There was never any sort of sexual pull or driving need to possess her. Not like there is with ...”

His words trailed off. Or I thought they did. I might have lost some of my senses under the weight of his stare.

Casimir cleared his throat. “I wanted to feel worthy. Sometimes, she helped me believe I was, at least for a few moments in her presence. I sought her out because of it.”

Some of the sourness in my stomach receded. “I think I can understand that,” I told him.

“With you, it’s different.”

“I don’t make you feel worthy?” I challenged, not meaning for it to come out quite so harsh.

He grimaced. “You make me want to be worthy. Of you. I want to be who you need, not just to make myself feel better, but because it’s what you deserve. I vow to do whatever is in my power to be ... to make myself better.”

His pain, the belief he wasn’t good enough, made my heart hurt. The ache blunted the teeth gnawing at my jealous soul.

Oh, Casimir. What did you do to make yourself believe you could ever be unworthy?

“Kree has never felt anything for me other than the love one would have for a sibling,” he added.

I didn’t like the self-image he had. Lyric was right about him being a charmer, but sometimes it felt a little forced. Outwardly, no one would ever know he thought of himself as some sort of monster or that he carried such guilt over his past.

I wanted to know what was so horrendous in his history that he thought such things. This probably wasn’t the best time to ask.

“I already told you, Casimir. You’re not dark inside. If you were, I’d feel it. Your aura might have some marks, but so does mine. I haven’t known you long, but nothing about you or your spirit feels tainted or unworthy. If I thought otherwise, I wouldn’t be here. Either Father would have taken me with him or I’d have left on my own.”

I took a breath. “I only said I couldn’t stay because I thought there was someone else, that finding me only complicated things for you.”

“You’re not a complication, Raven. Though the circumstances that led you here were horrendous, I’ll never be sorry you were brought to Embour.”

We stood there, caught in the spell of our bond, of what we could be for one another. My pulse kicked when his gaze dropped to my lips.

One second I was seized by his blatant adulation, the next I was trapped with my back to a tree and my front plastered to a giant Shadow. My feet dangled uselessly above the ground.

“Let’s revisit what you said earlier, shall we?” he purred crossly, his hands on my hips and climbing higher.

“What?” I couldn’t think straight with his hands on me. I couldn’t even remember why I’d been upset.

More importantly, why was he still talking?

“You said, and I quote, ‘I can’t stay.’ What did I say would happen if you said something like that again?”

I felt feverish, my mouth watering for him to make good on his threat. No longer feeling resentful or unsure, confident that he was just as irrational as I was, I grew emboldened. My hands slid around his neck and I pulled him closer, my breasts flattening into his chest.

“I don’t remember,” I whispered against his mouth. “Why don’t you remind me?”

The low snarl in Casimir’s throat vibrated as his lips came down to mine, hard and hungry. He took and I willingly gave, letting him have complete control.

One of his hands slid under the back of my right thigh, lifting, giving him a little more space to press into me. I gasped and he pulled back. “Still have your senses, Little Bird?”

I nodded.

“Well, I’ll just have to try harder then.”

His lips returned, his tongue exploring rhythmically. I had to have it on other parts of me. I wanted to feel it everywhere. I wanted his hands holding me down as his cock slid in and out.

On and on it went, this kiss from my demon mate, stoking a fire inside that I feared I’d never be able to put out. No male had ever kissed me like this, like he’d die without it, like I would, too. If he didn’t move things along, I just might.

Recalling how he’d brought me to climax last night made my core throb. I wanted so much more than a kiss. I wanted to make him feel like he’d made me feel. I squirmed against him, trying for friction, seeking that place I wanted us both to go.

Merciful Mercury!

My limbs moved frantically, trying to gain leverage. Magic sparked and his muscles twitched as little bolts of energy jumped out of me and into him. Casimir groaned against my mouth.

“You’re going to do that while I’m inside you,” he swore.

“*Ung.*”

The Shadow laughed, kissing me once more. His mouth retreated and I felt his loss immediately. “That’s not a word. I think you’ve lost your senses.”

Why is he still speaking? My lips chased his, still confused why his face wasn’t glued to mine, why we weren’t naked already, why he wasn’t—

“Raven,” he hummed. “Look at me.”

I opened my eyes. “What?”

“We should stop.”

“Why?”

Casimir took a breath. “Well, I don’t think you actually want me to fuck you against this tree, where any number of creatures, including my fellow Shadow demons, might stumble upon us. I’m all for a good frolicking in the woods, but we’re not in an area where we’d have total privacy.”

“Oh,” I murmured, taking a good look at our surroundings. We were in a wooded area but we weren’t far from Embour’s main grounds. “Yes. I see your point.”

“Do you? Because you look awfully flustered.”

I squeezed my legs around him, increasing the pressure of his erection against my heated center. “Oh, I don’t think it’s just me that’s gotten flustered.”

“I proudly admit that it’s not, Little Bird.”

I grinned and Casimir’s eyes came alive. His thumb swiped under my bottom lip.

“I like this,” he said.

“My mouth?”

“Definitely. And your smile. In my dreams I was desperate to see it. You have the sexiest laugh I’ve ever heard.”

My cheeks reddened with enough heat to travel south and go to work melting my heart. He’d been very clear about wanting a chance to make this work.

My family was open and honest, but we weren’t emotionally unguarded. We didn’t profess our love for one another often. It was understood. Could I be open and unguarded with Casimir as he was with me? Or, more specifically, did I want to be?

Gently, he lowered me back to my feet. “Come on,” he said, taking my hand and tugging me along.

“Where are we going?”

“Well, earlier you expressed a desire to expend some energy. I thought I’d take you to our fun training section.”

“The Shadow Army has a fun section?”

He nodded enthusiastically.

“What do we do in the fun section?”

“We blow shit up. The commander who runs that particular area has the best job at Embour.”

“Hmm.” I could see how that would be enticing.

“Interested?”

“You had me at blow ... and job.”

His steps faltered. Then he shook his head, lips twitching as his shoulders shook.

“Alright there, Casimir?”

“I’m good,” he said, giving my fingers a squeeze. “Quite fantastic, actually.”

‡ ‡ ‡

Hours after nightfall, we were back in the family dining room feasting after a long day of activity. Again, only Lyric and Draven were present.

My body was tired, yet I still felt stronger than I had in a long time. It was good that I was taking a little time to flex my muscles and be physical. I needed to be prepared when I went after Sersha. I also desperately needed a bath.

I felt a wisp of power brush my mind. Setting down my glass of wine, I met the Shadow Lord’s critical stare.

He’d been looking at me like he wanted to say something since the moment Casimir and I entered the room. Not with hostility, but with the look of someone who had something on his mind. Being the ruler of an entire race of beings, I assumed he often wore such a face.

Draven set his napkin on the table. He glanced at his cousin, who was listening to Lyric complain that he hadn’t invited her to play with the explosives earlier. Though patience

hadn't been my strongpoint the past couple of days, I waited quietly for my mate's cousin to make his decision.

Casimir's hand landed atop mine, drawing my attention away from Draven. "Everything okay?"

I nodded assuringly.

"How are you feeling, Raven?" Draven's baritone voice cut in.

"Much better, thank you. I'm tired after our exertions today, but it's a good sort of tired, if that makes any sense."

"Makes total sense," Lyric replied. "I love getting a nice endorphin rush during a good workout or sparring session. You're winded and sore and depleted afterwards, but it feels great."

"Exactly."

"I miss that feeling," she whined, rubbing her belly. "I'm not allowed to push myself much. Rightfully so, but I miss the feeling."

"I'm sure." I didn't know what else to say. While I'd never carried young, I understood the frustration of limited mobility.

"And your lifeforce?" Draven further probed. He probably had gotten this information from his healer already, but I appreciated the courtesy.

"Hugo suggested another session or two with Kree would put me back at full power."

"So just a few more days then."

"Probably."

"Then what?"

Casimir's fingers tightened their hold on mine. "Then she's healed. Completely."

"That's not what I meant. I'm asking your mate what she intends to do about the Fae Queen."

All three heads turned to me. I sat up a little straighter, thinking of how to reply. "If you're asking if I have a well-

thought-out plan, I don't."

"None at all?" Lyric cocked her head.

"Nothing specific."

Draven's fingertips thrummed on the wood of the table. Again, I felt like I was waiting for him to decide something.

"Would you like help?" he eventually asked.

My head shook. "You'll start a war."

His hand lifted airily. "Unimportant. But I see it matters to you. So would you like help with formulating a plan? I do have experience with this sort of thing, as does the rest of the Council."

"Only a fool would turn you down."

"You'd be surprised."

I smiled grimly. "No, the realms are in no short supply of fools. I'd like to not count myself as one. So, yes, your advice would be greatly appreciated. But really, I'm thinking I only need help getting back to the Keep."

Casimir stiffened beside me.

Draven's knuckles rapped on the table. "Yesterday you were adamant it was to be you who dealt with Sersha. Tell me, Raven, how do you expect to get close enough to her once you're at her gate?"

"I'll issue a formal challenge. I'll call in a blood-debt."

"Ooh, smart," Lyric praised. "Do you think she'll actually fight you? That's how it works, right? You call in the debt but she can defend herself?"

I nodded. "Striking at someone who can't or won't defend themselves is a little too cold-blooded for most fae, Queen and Consort excluded."

"And after you kill her?" Draven asked, looking not at me but at the male beside me. "What then?"

"Then I'll take my leave."

"You'll return to Embour?"

“I suppose ... yes, I’ll return to Embour.” The large hand holding mine tightened even further.

Draven glanced at Casimir’s hand overtop mine. “What of the power vacuum you’ll be creating?”

“What of it?”

“Who will step in to rule? By removing Sersha, you leave only Malcolm.”

“Ah. Yes, well I thought I’d take care of him, too.”

Draven rested his chin on his fist. “Only him?”

The male was poking holes in my already flimsy plot. Really, I’d barely given thought to it while Malcolm was offering to free me. I assumed I’d wipe out the depraved fae and be on my way. If Draven was going to offer me sound advice, honesty was imperative.

“I was also thinking of Sersha’s court,” I disclosed.

Casimir withdrew his hand and angled his body towards mine. Angry waves of heat rolled off him. “You intend to walk into Ansley Keep and take on not only the Queen and her Consort, but the entire court, as well?”

“Well ... just the truly corrupted ones. So maybe half?”

“There are over a hundred fae in Sersha’s court,” Casimir’s voice rose an octave. “Plus the soldiers who are loyal to Sersha. They’ll pounce on you the second you’ve eliminated her.”

“No. Malcolm assured me I could walk away.”

“What do you mean he assured you?”

Stupid, Raven! I rubbed my temples with my fingers. “I can’t speak of it. I have his silence as long as he has mine.”

“No,” Casimir pushed. “He might not have been able to flat out lie to you, but he’d feel no strong compulsion to keep you safe in the aftermath. You have no guarantee. Not unless you’d sealed it with a blood oath.”

My mouth tightened and Casimir cursed, running both hands through his short hair.

“Take a breath, Cas.”

Casimir glared at Draven, crossing his arms. The Shadow Lord seemed unmoved.

“A few things. First,” Draven lifted his index finger up, “if you kill Malcolm right after you kill Sersha, there will be no such thing as simply walking away from the scene. Anyone nearby will attempt to apprehend you. You understand this, yes?”

“Yes. Like I said, I don’t have an exact plan.”

Casimir harrumphed and I bit my tongue. Heat crawled up my neck then bled past my jaw and into my cheeks.

“Second,” Draven lifted his middle finger to join the other, “if you take out both leaders of the Faelands, there is no one to take over. Historically, in your land, when there has been no one in the bloodline to rise to the throne, what has happened?”

I grimaced. “They fight for it.”

“Who’s next in line for the throne?”

Damn demon. “My father is older than Sersha. Her claim is secondary to his. If she’s gone, it falls on him.”

“Will Brokk allow the Faelands to fall into chaos?”

“No,” I sighed.

“Does he want to rule?”

“Of course not.”

“And what will you do, Raven, when you see that your father has been chained to a role he wants nothing to do with?”

I bowed my head.

“Well?” Draven’s curt tone cut through the thick mesh of my naivety.

“I’ll take his place.”

It would have to be me. Kol was only twelve. Father was a mariner—anchoring him to the Keep would slowly kill his spirit. He never wanted the throne, even when it was his for the taking.

“Wait,” Lyric said. “If you take over, you’ll have to stay at Ansley Keep. That means Cas would have to leave Embour in order to live with you.”

Guilt joined my sad resignation. Had I really thought things would be so simple? In my defense, I’d only been thinking of escaping and healing my broken body. Now that Draven had laid it all out for me, nothing was simple.

I was bloodbound. I would be mystically compelled to go after Sersha, but I could leave Malcolm be. It would pain me, but I could then avoid sentencing my father and my mate to lives they didn’t want.

“And one last thing,” Draven tacked on.

“Only one?” Cas jeered.

“An important one,” he insisted. “Raven, I can only guess that you agreed to a blood oath with Malcolm because you were desperate for your freedom.”

I held my tongue, upholding the words I’d spoken to the Fae Queen’s Consort.

“If his half of the bargain was to give you your freedom, and in doing so you agreed to challenge his mate, then I would propose that your agreement has been rendered null and void.”

My head shot up. “What do you mean?”

“Who freed you, Raven?”

“Malcolm.”

“Are you sure about that?”

I rifled through what I could remember of those minutes with the Consort. “He unlocked the chain anchoring me to the table.”

“But who was it that got you away from the Keep?”

I leaned forward on my elbows, suddenly feeling very alert. “My father.”

Stupid, stupid, Raven.

Malcolm had unlocked the chains securing me, but technically, he hadn't set me free. I was still locked inside Sersha's sad little room when Father found me and took me away from that hell.

I looked around the table at each of them. “Then I guess I'm not actually bloodbound.” My eyes rose to the ceiling, as though the gods might take pity on me. “I swear I'm not always this dimwitted.”

Lyric said something that my head didn't register. I was too busy considering the merits of poking myself in the eyeball with a fork as punishment for my stupidity. I paid no mind to how in Nyx's name Draven was able to draw all the right conclusions, too focused on my idiocy.

Cas slumped back in his chair, patting my knee. I wished I felt the same sense of relief. Without the blood oath, Malcolm was under no obligation to do anything on my behalf.

But still ...

“The fact remains that I have to do *something*. Things cannot continue as they have. I don't have it in me to let it go.”

“True,” Draven agreed, taking a sip of wine. “But at least now you shouldn't feel compelled to follow through with anything in the short term. It will give everyone, your father included, time to think about it. I would advise you to take your time. Between all of us, I'm sure we can come up with something. You'll see.”

I nodded so he knew I'd heard him. Though Draven's intonation was meant to be reassuring, my worries had not been allayed. In fact, I was starting to question my ability to reason. Kol had been right. I really was a dummy.



Chapter 18

Casimir

My mate and I returned to our quarters, neither of us saying a word. I couldn't speak for Raven, but my mind was a conflicted mess.

As much as I wanted to rail at her, she'd already admitted to her folly as we wrapped up dinner. I couldn't hold against her the desperation she must have felt to escape captivity. She hadn't been in a position to make sound decisions.

Blood oaths had a tendency to backfire. I'd only be telling her something she already knew if I spoke such a thing aloud. No, this wasn't something we'd be addressing tonight.

I opened the door and let her enter ahead of me, her mouth set in a firm line. I didn't care for the slight lift in her shoulders or how she was holding herself so stiffly. We had a major problem to deal with, but that didn't mean we couldn't figure it out.

"I'm going to go draw a bath. You should take some time and try to relax tonight. A bath will help."

"But—"

"No buts," I countered, putting my hands on her biceps and sliding them down slowly to her hands. "You've had more physical activity today than you've probably had in months. Plus you have a lot to process right now, which is only making your recently-healed muscles more tense. Let me take care of you, for at least a little while, okay?"

Raven's incisors gnawed at her bottom lip but she didn't argue. Gently, I brought her hands up and kissed each of her palms. Her breath deepened. I had plans to see just how out of breath I could get her. But first I needed to tend to my mate's

more pressing needs. I kissed her lips chastely and released her hands.

“There’s a new robe hanging on the back of the closet door,” I informed her on my way into the bathroom.

Raven followed and disappeared inside the closet. I readied the water, pouring a special mixture I kept on hand for days that had been especially tiring. The whirlpool bubbled and hissed as the ingredients rapidly dissolved.

I watched the frothy suds spread across the enormous bath. Lyric called it my party pool and often made fun of its size. Though it was ten feet by six feet, and a good four feet in depth at its center, it wasn’t big enough for me to swim in. Because it remained mostly full at all times, it didn’t take long for it to be just right.

“Mmm. Is that rosemary and mint I’m smelling?” Raven asked, approaching from behind.

“It is,” I nodded, turning to her. “I use this blend when—”

Plunk! I dropped the jar of magical herbs. It sank heavily, a dull thud announcing when it hit the bottom. Thankfully, I’d already secured the lid back onto the waterproof canister.

Raven’s violet eyes swirled with bright lavender. “Problem?” she asked, tossing the robe she wasn’t wearing on top of the large ledge to the left of the tub. She lifted a single eyebrow, standing before me wearing nothing more than a soft blush spread across her skin.

My eyes drank her in. My fingers flexed, itching with want as my gaze followed every line of her form. Tan skin covered toned muscles on her arms and legs, yet she’d maintained her feminine curves.

Her heavy breasts were set high and firm, holding my regard hostage for long seconds before I managed to notice her ribs as they expanded and contracted with her quickening heartbeat.

Further down, a narrow patch of dark hair hid some of her mound from sight. No matter. I’d see what was hidden soon enough.

I sent a silent thanks to the gods that healing magics existed. It was a wondrous thing to be able to mend in such a way that Raven likely looked very close to the way she had before she'd been imprisoned.

"I'm not sure you understand the purpose of a robe, Little Bird."

Raven rolled her eyes and attempted to brush past me, clearly not getting the reaction she'd wanted. My arm shot out and pulled her into my frame. I held her from behind, one arm secured across her abdomen while the other came around to cup her breast possessively. My thumb rubbed across her hardened nipple.

"Cold?" I asked.

"Freezing," she sassed, making my cock pulse painfully.

"Well, we can't have that."

I picked her up, cradling her like a bridegroom about to carry his new wife across the threshold. I moved forward until my knees touched the side of the tub. Our mouths were a hairsbreadth apart. I nipped her bottom lip and she sucked in a quiet gasp.

Then I tossed her into the water.

Raven's startled squeal was cut off when she disappeared under the bubbles. I made quick work of ridding myself of my attire, watching for her head to pop up. I couldn't see past the dense foam sitting atop the water.

"Raven?" I called. It had only been some 10 or 15 seconds, but still worry seeped into my chest.

I swung myself into the pool, feeling around for her body. She popped up behind me. I spun and she spit a mouthful of water into my face.

I growled, squeezing shut my stinging eyes and reaching out blindly. She giggled bounding away from my clutches. My fingertips slid across the wet skin of her back.

I wiped my eyes, narrowing them when I saw her cheeks storing another mouthful of water. "Don't you dare."

Raven's eyes filled with mirth and a playful challenge.

"If you spit that in my face I'm going to—"

Splat!

"Damn it, Raven! You've blinded me!" I roared, smiling broadly. "Now I'll never know what you look like naked from behind!"

This time she laughed delightedly and my heart thumped with each joyful note. Wiping the water from my eyes once again, I watched her make that sweet, melodic sound—something I'd wanted to behold since the moment she'd produced the sound in my dreams.

"Truce?" I offered, lowering my arms.

"Truce," she replied from the far corner. "For now."

With that, I eased further down into the water, doing my best to ignore my aching shaft. I glided to the corner nearest Raven, settling my rear on the underwater ledge just as she had. The seat was just high enough to keep her chin above the suds. I made a mental note to figure out how to raise the bench for her.

"So," she said, tilting her head.

"So."

"This is how you take care of me? By tossing me into a pool?"

"Did it help?"

"I'm still sore."

"No, with your emotional state. Did it help?"

"It appears that way."

"Good. Now, try to relax and let the healing water do its job."

Raven leaned back, resting her head in the groove designed for just that. "I don't know why you'd ever leave this tub," she stated.

"Nice, isn't it?"

“Very. Do you soak in here often?”

“I do. Now you can, as well. It’s big enough to seat us both comfortably.”

“It’s big enough to seat ten of us.”

“True enough,” I agreed, closing my eyes, concentrating on the loosening of my muscles. Or, I tried to. The weight of my mate’s stare couldn’t be ignored for long.

I opened an eye. “Everything alright over there?”

“Are we not going to talk about it?”

“It?”

“What we discussed at dinner.”

“Do you want to talk about it right now?”

“No. Yes. I mean, we probably should.”

I sat up, giving Raven my full attention. “Alright, but first answer a question for me.”

She sat up straight, as well. “Okay.”

“What were you thinking when you approached me earlier?”

“When I came out of the closet?”

“Yes. When you decided to carry the robe instead of covering yourself with it.”

“Are you complaining?” she challenged.

“Not in the least. Things have been rather volatile, especially the fluctuations we’re having emotionally thanks to the bond. I’m just trying to gauge where your head is.”

Raven twisted her lips. “I was thinking I’d really like to get you into the bath with me.”

“Why?”

She gave me a withering look.

“Obviously we’re extremely attracted to one another, Raven. The bond is tugging hard on that front. I’m trying to

get at what changed. What brought this boldness out at this particular moment?”

Her fingers rubbed across her clavicle. I held my tongue, giving her time.

“Distraction,” she finally replied. “I think I needed a distraction.”

I pushed away from the wall, placing my hands on either side of her head. She was cornered but we weren't touching. “Is that what I am? A distraction?”

She shook her head.

“Are you really going to give this mating a chance, even after the discussion we had over dinner? Or did your answers to Draven's questions change things for you?”

“Wow. You just get right to the heart of it, don't you?”

I pressed in closer. She readily adjusted her legs, allowing me between them.

“Not always. Not when a slow hand is far more important.” My fingertips ran up and down her outer thighs. I refrained from touching anything else, holding myself in check while I waited for her to answer my question.

Raven blew out a puff of air. “I won't ask you to leave Embour. I would never do that to you. This is where your family is, why would you ever want to leave them? I know that I'll likely have to be the one to hold the Faelands together. Kol's too young and Father would be miserable. I know ruling over the fae isn't something you want. It's not something I truly want, either, but I'll do it because I don't want the Faelands to fall into a state of chaos.”

She took a breath. “I'm also terribly and unjustly selfish because there's a high probability I'll have to leave Embour and face Sersha. There's no guarantee I'll come out on top, especially since she has no honor and will stoop to deceptive tactics that could get me killed. Knowing the odds weren't great didn't stop me from trying to seduce you, to have you for at least for one night.”

“It seems you know an awful lot. I didn’t realize you were both a mind reader and a martyr.”

Her pupils constricted. “I’m not wrong.”

“Perhaps, but you’re also not right.”

Grabbing her hand, I lifted it out of the water and placed her palm over my heart. My own landed just above her left breast. I stared intently into her eyes, feeling our heartbeats sync and settle into a single, steady rhythm.

It was something only mated pairs could do. Though we weren’t soulbonded and marked with the double daggers, our predestined link indicated we were already joined to some degree.

“This is what I want. You and I, in sync. Nothing exists outside of this. Nothing else matters. Now, I suggest you clear the cobwebs out of your skull and listen to me carefully.”

Raven’s eyes narrowed.

“We will figure it out. I have faith we will figure it out. You are now my first priority. Not Embour. Not Draven. Not the fucking Faelands. You.”

Her mouth fell open and I took advantage, swooping down to kiss her long and hard. She matched the strokes of my tongue, tasting and lingering in ardent exploration.

My soul cried out for hers while my cock demanded its perfect fit. I lifted my head before going any further. “Are you still listening?”

“Mmmhmm,” she nodded with a half-lidded look. I needed to wrap this up before I lost her to the wave of lust getting ready to crash into us both.

“Good. If you feel like you have to ascend, we’ll figure it out. If you take over as Queen and despise it, we’ll figure it out. If you want to live with me here at Embour, we’ll figure it out. If either of your family members decides it should be one of them who rules, guess what? We’ll figure it the fuck out. There is no situation, no future, where we are not together figuring it out. Not for me, at least.”

I wanted to pressure her to say the same in return but I feared she wasn't ready for that. I was all in and she'd only agreed to give this a shot. A couple of days might not have been enough to fall head over heels in love with someone, but our souls had touched. It was enough for me. More than enough.

Something inside me had shifted right before she'd broken my head. I'd had a moment of rightness, of feeling whole. I'd fight anyone and anything to keep it, even her.

"You'd give up your position here for me?"

"In a heartbeat." I would never let my mate face the future alone.

Her head shook, an argument brewed behind her eyes.

"I know you don't have complete faith in the preordained. I get it. Sometimes a person meets their soulmate and it is ugly and nothing like it should be. Kree's mate beat her mercilessly."

Raven blanched.

"I wish she hadn't endured what she did. But her meeting that monster, in coming to live here, set forth a chain of events that changed the lives of every Shadow demon in the Otherland, ending with Draven as the Shadow Lord and bringing Lyric to the Otherland. And before that, it put Draven and I in the path of The Navita and forging a bond with him. A bond strong enough that when his daughter needed help, he brought her to us. So, maybe things aren't always as they seem in the beginning, but know this, Little Bird. Where you lead, I will follow. I have enough faith for the both of us."

"But your family—"

"Will support me in whatever I decide to do. You've seen how Draven looks at Lyric. He understands exactly how I feel."

"Casimir," she whispered.

The way she said my name as her eyes glistened, a spark of hope ignited deep inside me. Maybe she was more in sync

with me than I'd allowed myself to believe.

“We will worry about the specifics later. Right now, I think my mate needs a distraction.”

“No, I don't want you to think I'm using you like that. It wasn't right of me. It was stupid, really, and terribly unfair to you.”

Bending, I licked a trickle of water running down her neck, humming with satisfaction when she trembled. “Do you want me, Raven?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“Then it can be as simple as that.” I bit down on her earlobe and gooseflesh broke out upon her skin. “Besides, it is my job to see to your every need. Is a distraction what you need right now?”

Raven shook her head. “I don't want a distraction.”

I halted my sexual advances. Small hands grabbed my hair on the sides, lifting my face.

“I don't want a *distraction*, Casimir,” she spoke slowly with force.

“Then what is it you want?”

“You.”

An animalistic rumble started deep in my chest. “Only me? Your *mate*?”

I didn't give Raven time to answer. I jerked her to me, the water splashing between us before the sound of our wet skin slapped together. Greedily, I took her mouth, my hands roaming across her slippery curves. Her fists pulled my hair to the point of pain as her legs came around, locking behind my back.

Raven rocked her core against my throbbing flesh and I hissed. She bit my lip and I hissed again. My little mate was trying to gain control.

Grabbing her ribcage, I lifted her out of the water, licking and sucking at the burgeoning swell of her magnificent

breasts. I pulled one of her taut nipples into my mouth, sucking hard. Raven jolted. Her legs kicked wildly in the water.

The sounds she was making would surely unman me before I had a chance to slide into her wet heat. The scent of her arousal permeated the air, adding to the dizzying spell she'd put me under.

I maneuvered us to the side of the tub where the towels and robe were. I sat her bottom atop the fabric, but kept my mouth attached, obsessed with my mate's breasts.

I let go with a loud pop. The male satisfaction I felt over the reddened flesh surrounding her darkened nipple was short-lived as my mate yanked my head to the other side.

I chuckled, loving her gusto. I paid the other globe of creamy flesh an equal amount of devotion. Raven's hips began lifting, as she pushed up on her heels, searching for friction.

My lips slid over her dampened skin, moving further down her body. Wet curls met my chin and I rubbed the scruff of my face up and down either side of her thin strip. I then did the same to the creases of her thighs, abrading just enough to sensitize her skin.

My hands went to the inside of her knees, spreading her legs wide. I indulged myself for a moment, inhaling the sweet aroma of her sex.

Raven's head lifted just long enough to watch me lick the length of her seam. She arched her back, a low moan humming in her throat. So I did it again. I licked and teased as her body writhed. Tiny sparks of magic jumped between us.

Her sighs soon turned to sounds of frustration and she bit out a curse. Hands slid onto my scalp and she urged me forward.

"Problem?" I asked, mimicking her earlier comment.

"Stop teasing me."

"You like it."

Raven's eyes darkened. The sultry goddess was even more beautiful when she was pissed off. I wouldn't be able to resist the call to claim her for much longer.

Her pink tongue darted out, licking her top lip. "I want you inside me."

"Well then," I hummed, sliding a finger inside her tight sheath. Her inner walls stretched and flexed. "Like this?" I asked innocently.

Raven shook her head, but her body rocked in time with the movements of my hand. "Hmm, I think you do want me inside you like this."

I kissed the top of her mound and added a second finger. Her breath came in pants. Her movements quickened. I worked her faster, relishing the feel of her slick core, imagining it was my cock pushing her towards release.

My thumb circled her swollen nub. Slow at first, then faster, increasing pressure until she detonated on a loud cry. I watched in fascination as the white glow of her power heated her flesh in time with her climax.

Strong currents of electricity shot into me, fusing with my skin until I, too, took on a dim gleam. I slowed my movements as she came down from her high, cautiously withdrawing my fingers once the light faded from us both.

Raven's head snapped up. Wet strands of hair hit her face and chest with a soft slap. On a feminine growl, she pounced. The unexpected impact nearly took me off my feet. She wrapped herself around my body like an octopus, her mouth kissing mine eagerly.

When her hand slid between our bodies and gripped my aching cock I groaned. Raven took advantage and lowered her legs, spinning and pushing me back to the side of the tub. The dark-haired beauty nipped my chin, then bit playfully into my throat as her hand pumped my erection.

I lifted my arms and rested my elbows on the ledge, watching raptly as she made her way down my chest. She

nuzzled and licked the ridges of my pectorals before tracing the line of the swirling tattoo I bore from neck to waist.

I tensed when her fingertips gently touched the moon glyphs hidden within the design. Without pause, my mate continued her path lower and I exhaled.

When her chin touched the surface, Raven looked up at me expectantly. The bulk of my lower half was still under the water so I rose onto the balls of my feet.

My abdominals flexed when her fingernails gently scraped all around my groin, while her other hand increased its pace. I gripped the ledge tight, resisting the urge to take control. I wanted to see what my little halfling would do next.

Her plump lips encircled the head, sucking forcefully then swirling her tongue around. One hand cupped my sac then tugged.

“Fuck, Raven. Keep doing that.”

The enchanting female teased me like this for long minutes before sliding further down, taking more of me into her mouth. I fought off the beginning of an orgasm when I felt the back of her throat constrict as she swallowed around me. One hand stroked where her lips could not reach and the other fondled.

Her mouth was heaven. Hot and wet like I knew she would be once I was fully seated between her legs. Raven increased both speed and pressure and I knew I wouldn't be able to hold out.

“I'm close,” I grunted, giving her fair warning.

My mate hummed around my hardened flesh, pulling at my testicles more forcefully. Unable to resist, I fisted her hair, jerking my hips. Tingling built at the base of my spine once more. I didn't fight it this time, needing to come, to watch my mate swallow down every drop of what I gave her.

She gave no sign of discomfort so I continued chasing the powerful release I knew she would bring forth. My neck strained and I shouted her name as the first spasm hit like a godsdamned tidal wave.

I erupted down her throat, my vision blurring momentarily. Raven swallowed each pulse until I'd spent the last of my seed.

Once she released me from her swollen lips, I lifted her into my arms, stroking her back and nestling my face into the crook of her neck as I tried to catch my breath.

Raven shivered and I lowered a little further into the hot water. My legs bent so she could straddle them and more easily keep her face above the water line.

On a sigh, I closed my eyes, content to simply be in the moment and indulge in the feeling of holding my mate. Cuddling wasn't something I ever subscribed to, yet I liked this.

Gods, I more than liked it. The sensation of her very warm, very *naked*, body pressed against mine felt so right I knew it had to be. It didn't take long for my thoughts to turn dirty as I pictured what I would do to her once I got her into bed.

Lifting my head, I was about to suggest we wrap up our bath when I heard a noise from behind. Instantly, I shifted into shadow form and created a barrier between Raven and the being who had startled us.

Burnt ozone hit my nostrils at the same time I realized Raven had already shot out a spell, one that had been met with the other's own protective magic. Quickly, I solidified, hooking my arm behind me to pull Raven closer to my back.

"Tsk, ts, lover," Vera clucked from the doorway. "This is not the welcome I was expecting. It seems you forgot I was coming while you were busy ... coming." She laughed mischievously, radiating a bright smile between painted red lips. "Let me guess, it won't be me who's sleeping in your bed tonight."

Raven stiffened against my back, then slid to angle her position, presumably to get a look at our visitor. My brain couldn't come up with words fast enough and the three of us remained frozen, silent aside from the crackling of the spells still pushing against one another.

Fuck. This bomb needed to be diffused. Fast.



Chapter 19

Raven

Not ready to lower my spell, despite Casimir's obvious familiarity with the witch, I used my other powers to scan her soul. The female's electric blue irises glittered as she eyed me critically before scanning me in response.

I found nothing foul or corrupt so I erected a shield around the tub and dropped my attacking spell. It wouldn't have killed her but it would have paralyzed the intruder for a short time. Having dropped it without warning, the other witch's magic slammed into my shield and was inaudibly absorbed instead of repelled.

Her eyes widened a fraction. "How very, *very* interesting," she spoke slowly as her hands petted the long chestnut braid hanging over her right shoulder. "Tell me, Cas, where in the heavens did you find a Dianic witch? They're so rare in the Otherland, even one of mixed blood."

Witches could feel witch blood in others. I wasn't certain if she could tell what else comprised my makeup.

"You're a Dianic witch. One who lives in the Otherland with hundreds of others of your kind," he replied coolly.

"Yes, and my coven is the only one within a thousand miles of the Shadowlands. The witch behind you is not one I know."

That response piqued my interest. "You're from Eastbourne?" I questioned.

My mother had been in Eastbourne, a small neutral territory northeast of the Faelands, when she met my father. It sat beside a small glacial lake said to hold magical energies.

The coven there was the only Dianic coven Circe had ever spoken of, outside of the one she was born into in Earth

Realm. A group of witches settled in Eastbourne long ago because it was a wealthy trading post of sorts with thriving markets and towns where they could sell their potions, medicines, and spellcasting services at a premium.

“I am,” she answered proudly. “Allow me to introduce myself since my darling Casimir here seems to be woefully out of sorts at the moment.”

My darling Casimir? I mentally snarled. That was almost worse than *lover*.

“I am Vera of the Mirror Lake Coven. And you are?”

“Raven.”

“Of the ... ?”

“No coven.”

On a gasp, Vera’s hand flew to her chest. “No coven?!” she cried dramatically. “What do you mean no coven? How is that possible? Who protects you and your interests?”

“I do,” Casimir answered.

“I protect myself,” I corrected irritably.

He looked down his shoulder at me, meeting my lifted brow. “And now you have me to help,” he amended with a wink.

I bit the inside of my cheeks.

“Obviously the two of you are ... a new development. What about before you met? How did you learn control? Who ensured you were thriving? Young witches are often so vulnerable.” Vera actually looked pained.

Control could be more dangerous than raw power alone. It was easy to make a small dagger fly across the room. With good control, it landed precisely where you meant it to land, without an ounce more power required.

Dianic witches were well known for having both. They were also notorious for having little respect for creatures of lesser powers. There was only one way to deal with a witch like Vera.

“I can assure you,” I stated as I pulled a swirling sphere of water out of the tub and elevated it a few feet off the surface, “I came into maturity with few issues. Control included.”

“A youngling could hold a ball of water,” she mocked.

Instead of launching the liquid at her head, I morphed the shape into an exact replica of Vera’s face. Last second buck teeth were added for my own amusement. And then a giant wart for good measure.

Was it petty? Yes. Did I care? No.

I pulled more water from the tub and created a feminine hand and wrist. Creating detailed sculptures from a natural element took a tremendous amount of command without requiring much power. Admittedly, it did help that my father’s primary talent was control over water, something both Kol and I had inherited.

When the replica blew a kiss at its twin, the real Vera applauded.

“Impressive! What a treasure you’ve found, Cas. I can’t wait to see what else she can do.”

My lips parted. She was being truthful. No longer feeling quite so smug, I lowered the water back into the tub.

“But first, handsome, perhaps you can help me figure out where to put my things?”

“Where are your things?” he asked.

“In the entrance hall with my traveling companion.”

“How were you able to get onto this floor?” I interrogated. There were security measures everywhere, as well as protective spells. Lyric had pointed them out when she gave me the tour.

“I am well known at Embour,” Vera assured instead of answering my question.

Did that mean she had been granted free rein to roam? I assumed everyone inside Embour would have known by now that Casimir had found his mate and was staying with him in

his quarters. Why would they allow Vera to traipse about one of the Council's private floors?

"I thought these levels were spelled to keep out uninvited guests." I was also certain that the main door to these rooms had been locked, not that it took much to undo an actual lock.

"Deary, who do you think created most of the protection spells all around this place?" Vera walked over to the shower and skimmed her fingers across the invisible barrier like she was strumming a harp. "This one was one of the first, free of charge, of course. Cas was worried about the noise level and I told him I could—"

"That's enough, Vera," Casimir barked. "Why don't you head back downstairs. I'm sure one of the Council members is down there and will place you in an appropriate space. Someone will deliver your things. We can meet for a night cap in the drawing room. I'll be there in twenty minutes."

"As you wish, darling."

I was contemplating hitting her with a spell or perhaps some of my fae magic when she blurred out of existence. Her rose-scented perfume was the only trace she'd been here.

"Well, that explains how she got in," I murmured before I dipped my body under the water. When I surfaced I hastily began washing up, contemplating this new complication.

"She can only do that for short distances and not very often," Casimir explained, rubbing soap haphazardly up and down his arms.

"How far, exactly?"

"Maybe fifty to a hundred yards. Not enough to use effectively to travel between lands."

"Hmm," I acknowledged.

A minute of silence later and I was climbing out of the bath. I snatched a towel and briskly patted myself down.

Casimir rose out of the water and grabbed his own towel. "It's sort of like teleporting but I don't really understand the magic behind it."

“I’m half Dianic witch. I know exactly what she just did,” I threw back, tying the soft grey robe with a little more force than necessary. It was called jumping, but I didn’t feel like quizzing him to see if he knew any witch vocabulary at the moment.

“Raven, I didn’t mean to insult your knowledge of witch powers.”

“Trust me, that’s not what you’ve insulted.”

“Oh? Care to elaborate?”

“Are you being serious?”

“Yes.”

I blinked.

His eyebrows drew close together. “You believe I’ve wronged you in some way?”

“Yes.”

Did he, though? It certainly felt like he had, despite my inner voice’s attempt to be reasonable.

“Then by all means, explain the trespasses against you.”

“Alright. One,” I held up my hand and started counting off on my fingers, “you spaced the fact that your *lover* was arriving and expecting to stay in your rooms. Two, there is no security measure to keep said lover out of your private quarters. Three, you failed to mention you have a lover. Four, you failed to mention that your lover is extremely powerful. Five, you failed to mention that your lover is a Dianic witch, from Eastbourne, no less. My mother lived in Eastbourne for a time. Vera could very well figure out my parentage since I’m positive she knows my mother.”

I made a fist because I’d run out of fingers. “Six, refer back to offense number three. ... and five.”

“Is that all?”

“No. When she called you *lover* you said nothing. Not a word to correct it.” Showing he already had the power to hurt me might cost me in the end, but I was on a roll.

Casimir nodded grimly. “You’re right, I should have nipped that one in the bud. I was more focused on keeping you two from harming one another. Apologies.”

He tied his towel around his waist and I fought to keep my eyes up. Damned sexy male. This was not the time to think about sex. To imagine our damp bodies sliding against one another. No, not the time at all.

The Shadow’s nostrils flared. *Mighty Minerva! Kill these naughty thoughts!* I couldn’t go downstairs smelling like I needed a good shagging, true as it may have been.

“I concede you have a point—or five—but please allow me to address each. One, I did forget Vera was coming here. My only excuse is the Universe suddenly threw my soulmate into the forefront of my life, brought her here badly broken, and showed me a formidable being with a beautiful soul for whom I would move mountains to keep safe and close to me forever. I’ve thought of little else since. You consume my every thought, Little Bird.”

The big Shadow looked like he was going to come towards me then thought better of it. I waited, wanting to hear what else he had to say.

“Two,” he continued, “yes, Vera has set many wards at Embour. She is powerful and trustworthy. She’s worked for and with us for decades. Even so, her magical services have been bound in blood to protect our interests. She cannot harm us. She cannot work against us. Every loophole has been addressed.”

“Aside from her moving about the citadel freely.”

“No, she can only get into these rooms.”

“Where she can cast spells, throw them at someone who is not a Shadow demon.” And because this was where she stayed during her visits.

“Vera has to be able to cast some of her spells to create and reinforce the wards. But she has limits and cannot kill anyone within these walls. She reacted to your magic defensively.”

My face felt tight. Nerves fired outward from my gut, attacking me from head to toe.

“Her ability to enter these rooms is a recent oversight that will be corrected immediately,” he insisted. “In fact, I welcome you to place a ward, allowing only those who you choose to pass through into our space.”

It was hard to ignore his use of the word *our*. It implied a permanent *us* after only a matter of days. My fae half wanted to hear more use of such pronouns. The witch in me was waiting for the go-ahead to rip off his towel. She would wind it up and choke him with it right after she rode him like a human cowgirl. Or possibly at the same time.

Freaky witch.

“Three, and most importantly, Vera and I are not lovers.”

“So she doesn’t visit, stay in your rooms, and sleep in your bed while she’s here?”

Casimir took a breath. “In recent years she has, but—”

“*Years?* How often does she visit you?”

Infernal Isis! I sounded like a jealous witch. Justified, but still. I missed the cooler version of myself and I had no idea how to get her back.

“Vera doesn’t come to Embour to visit *me*. Typically, she arrives once a year to check on the wards, as we pay her to do. Others from her coven pop in from time to time to reinforce her work or add something we need. Vera is the strongest so it is her services we typically seek when we feel we have reason for something more substantial. Since Lyric has arrived, we’ve invited her more often than normal. However, I haven’t personally seen her in months because I’m not always here when she’s working. She’s slept in there,” he pointed a thumb over his shoulder towards the bedspace, “five, maybe six times total. That’s it.”

My imagination took off and I wanted to burn the bed to ash. Or jab that part of my brain with a dagger. Or hers. Yes, stabbing her in the skull would be quite satisfying. Right after I cut off that sublime rope of hair ... and removed her tongue.

Yes, maim her!

My inner witch cheered as some of my resentment died away. I really needed to get this jealousy thing under control. My emotions were on a pendulum swinging far and wide. I shouldn't be so judgemental of his history. It wasn't like I didn't have one.

Casimir reached for my hands and I allowed it. "Are you still upset?"

"Is it going to continue happening?"

"Of course not. Despite appearances to the contrary, I have not been involved with many females since we've taken over."

"Why not? I'm sure you could have your pick."

"You'd be surprised." Casimir ran his thumbs across my wrists. "It would be too great of an ask for you to be nice or pleasant to her. I understand. The gods know I couldn't do it if the situation were reversed. But I am asking that you not kill her. I need her to do her job and then she'll be on her way."

"I wasn't planning on killing her, not unless she proves to be a threat. And I'm not sure I could ever be pleasant to someone who walks around calling you, what was it?" I batted my eyelashes and lowered my voice, "My darling lover Cas?"

One corner of his mouth lifted. "That's how she talks to everyone. There's no way for you to have known that, but she does." My left hand was lifted and he kissed the back of it. "She is nothing more than a friend."

"That you had sex with. Multiple times."

"I'm sorry for how this happened. I hope you believe me when I say I would never purposefully hurt you. After all of my dreams about ravens, I dispatched Vera to come and reinforce the wards. She was already on her way when you arrived. I didn't know I would meet you when I did."

Casimir's chest expanded. "The shock to my system buried nearly everything else in my mind outside of you. Still, I should have had enough wits about me to instruct the guards to direct Vera and her companion to the guest quarters when they

arrived. I would have broached it with you before meeting her. I would have taken measures had my head been on straight. That's on me. Nevertheless, you're here and I am feeling more protective than ever. I'll risk your displeasure to keep Vera here long enough to ensure your safety while you are inside of these walls. In addition, I'm in charge of Embour's security and Lyric is pregnant. I am not the only member of the Council who wants added measures."

What could I say to that?

"As for your parentage, Vera has always been discreet when involved in our affairs. Not that I trust blindly, but I see no reason for her to make waves."

"That may be true, but she would never choose the Shadow demons over the Dianic witches. If she thought my mother needed to know where I was and what I was doing, or if it would benefit the coven to share this information, she would act. Circe wanted me on the fae throne, remember? Plus, I'm a fugitive from the Faelands. That sort of knowledge is dangerous, especially if it is something the Mirror Lake Coven values."

Casimir tucked a strand of hair behind my ear and said, "How would she even know?"

‡ ‡ ‡

"So you're the little hybrid everyone's making such a fuss about?" Vera casually declared, picking up her glass of wine from the coffee table and leaning back in her plush chair.

"Excuse me?" I looked up, meeting her inquisitive eyes.

How in the Underworld had she caught wind of it? Sersha and Malcolm were deviant, but surely they wouldn't have been so careless, knowing they were in the wrong.

Albeit, power did corrupt. Perhaps they were crazy enough to think they were untouchable. They'd gotten away with their abhorrent actions long enough to believe it.

From beside me on the love seat, Casimir squeezed the inside of my knee, pulling Vera's attention to my lap. Her gaze lingered on us over the top of her glass until the Shadow Lord spoke.

"Who is *everyone*?" he asked.

"And what sort of fuss is being made?" my mate tacked on.

They should have asked if she liked breathing. Though I didn't catch a threatening vibe, and had assured Casimir I didn't intend to kill her, I would do what I had to if I thought she was going to sell me out. Or would selling out a Shadow demon's mate be considered as Vera working against their interests? I should have asked for more details of their pact.

"So sorry I'm late," Lyric announced, marching into the room.

"My gorgeous Lyric, there you are!" Vera greeted in return, rising from her chair.

"Vera, you have to stop coming onto me. I told you already, the results are in and you are not the father."

Both females laughed as they exchanged kisses on each cheek, exactly how my mother used to do. I took another swig of the bourbon Casimir had poured for me, appreciating the slow burn traveling down my throat.

Draven stood and kissed his mate before settling her beside him on the couch. "I thought you were going to bed."

"Well, Mr. Overlord, I was going to bed but you weren't there and the little demon inside me wouldn't stop doing somersaults."

"And you didn't want to miss out on anything, did you, Angel?"

"That, too," she smiled good-humoredly. Then she gave me a knowing look. "You good?"

"Yes," I affirmed, almost surprised when no pain hit my system.

Huh.

Despite Vera's sudden appearance this evening and her startling question a few seconds ago, I bizarrely felt somewhat settled. Sitting here with this group, with Casimir's hand on my leg, I felt accepted as one of their own. My mood had taken another drastic swing, my earlier annoyance in the bathroom forgotten.

Must be the alcohol. Or a newly fractured personality.

"So, back to the question at hand. Whose ass needs kicking for making a fuss about our Raven?"

My cheeks warmed. Lyric probably would pick up a sword and fight on my behalf. I felt protective of her, as well.

Vera's tan linen pants rustled as she crossed her legs. "Let's see ... five or six weeks ago, a Seelie fae named Jerrin came to Eastbourne and approached our coven. He asked if we knew of a dark-haired beauty with violet eyes. He thought she might be part witch. We, of course, did not know anyone with violet eyes. Then he told us he needed to locate her kin but he wasn't sure where they lived. He asked us to scry for them."

"I thought you could only scry for someone if you had something of theirs with their essence," Lyric stated.

"He had a vial of blood."

A heavy stone sank in my stomach.

"Theoretically, anyone of shared blood can be located," Vera added, "as long as they are in this realm and the witch scrying is powerful and has a long enough reach."

My mind raced. I'd been captive for months by then. I was sure my spell had held and I refused to believe Sersha knew we were related. She had been more than fed up with my resistance by then. Perhaps she wanted assurance I could vanish without anyone coming to look for me.

Additionally, the Queen had already guessed I was not pure fae because of my coloring. Not long before my rescue, she started asking what blood had tainted my fae line. Most of

Vera's coven had similar skin to mine and darker shades of hair so it made sense to send someone to investigate.

I swallowed. "Did you do what he asked?"

"For a price, along with his assurance that he would not harm anyone we found. He couldn't lie so we agreed."

"Well," Draven said, "that's an easy workaround. He could send someone else to harm them."

"Oh ye of little faith. You know how I work, darling. It's never that simple."

I glanced at Lyric to see if she reacted to the endearment. Her face didn't alter in the slightest.

"Something about Jerrin was a little too earnest and struck me as odd. So, instead of having Henderson scry, I did it myself."

"Henderson?" I queried.

"One of our newer coven members. He came to us after he lost his mate and needed a fresh start. He's a more subdued personality. Very professional. Very good at locating things. *Very* good looking. He's actually upstairs resting. I thought I might introduce him to Talia."

"She left last night to attend to some diplomatic duties on my behalf," Draven informed the witch. "I'm not sure if she'll be back before you and Henderson depart."

"Oh? The poor male hasn't shown interest in a single female since his mate passed. It hurts my heart. Oh well. You all can meet him tomorrow. It might do Raven well to meet more of our kind."

Doubtful I wanted to say.

Vera took another sip of wine. "Where was I? Oh, yes. I took over the situation. When the vial was pulled from its magically-protected packing and handed to me, I knew something was off. There was witch blood in that vial. Dianic witch blood. Not pure, but definitely steeped with strong and varied magics."

Her mouth tightened. “As you know, I don’t trust anyone’s motives for hunting a Dianic witch or their kin—our numbers are too few already. Mirror Lake is the only coven anywhere close to the Faelands, assuming that’s where he came from, so there was a high likelihood that I either knew the witch or I knew their family in some capacity. The fact this male was in possession of such a thing was highly suspicious. No witch would willingly give up their blood, not with all the ways it could be used against them.”

Vera zeroed in on me. “I assume it was your blood, my thistle-eyed beauty, taken and not given.”

I maintained a blank stare. She grinned.

“You remind me of Henderson. I bet no one ever wants to play card games with you.”

“Perhaps,” Draven offered, “it would help Raven to know that any information used against her would be considered as a strike against the Shadows.”

I turned my gaze to his.

“She’s bound, Raven. *Neither* party can do anything to harm the other, directly or indirectly. Every loophole has been accounted for. I don’t enter into such agreements lightly. We put a lot of time into thinking through every possible angle. I can say the same for Vera.”

Why did it feel like the Shadow Lord was giving me a warning?

Vera nodded. “Even without the oath I would be outcast if I contributed to the demise of one of our own without cause.”

Everyone stared at me expectantly. Both my fae and witch halves were quiet. Casimir squeezed my leg again and I found my voice. “There is a high probability the blood was mine.”

Her stare grew sharp. “Taken against your will?”

“Yes.”

“Were you held prisoner by the fae?”

“I was.”

“What did you do?”

“I had the great misfortune of catching the eye of the Queen’s Consort. I wasn’t interested and they took offense.”

“Bah!” she swiped at the air. “Stupid royals think they are entitled to whatever they want. What a mess they make whenever they want something they can’t have. Or shouldn’t have. I’m glad I didn’t locate anyone.”

I leaned forward. “You tried?”

“I used a fake spell and the crystal hung uselessly over the map. I told him it appeared as though there weren’t any who had the same blood in the Otherland.”

“Really?” Lyric asked. “He didn’t catch onto your lie?”

Vera chuckled. “Word games, my sweet. It *did* appear to be that way.”

“Oh, you sly shrew,” Lyric clucked.

“Thank you, my pretty,” Vera preened. “Despite not picking up on my deceptive wording, he grew agitated. Then he demanded I find the one whose blood was in the vial. He said he didn’t trust the results and wanted proof I could scry. Can you believe the nerve of him?”

“Inconceivable!” Lyric played along. “How dare he think he was being played when he was, in fact, being played.”

“I know! The gall of him!” her head shook. “Anyway, I asked if he knew where the donor was. He said he did and if I didn’t produce proof of my ability I would regret it.”

I knocked back my tumbler. The ice clinked against the glass as I pondered the significance of this information. “What happened next?”

Vera’s eyes twinkled. “Well, I debated killing him but I wanted to know his motives. So instead I hexed the imbecile and forced information out of him.”

I swallowed. My pulse began beating erratically. Casimir’s hand enfolded mine.

“And the truth was what?” he urged.

“He’d been sent by one of the Queen’s guards to find any trace of relations to one of her prisoners. He was not to return until he had investigated all avenues and was to bring proof of whatever he found. The Queen would be displeased if he failed, but he was more than happy to do whatever he needed to in order to earn her favor, including cutting off my head or anyone else’s who got in the way. Jerrin didn’t know anything else of value so I erased the memories of our encounter outside of the unsuccessful scrying. Then I strongly *encouraged* him to approach the Fomorians. Without the vial.”

Draven laughed darkly. “Nice touch. The giants won’t react well once he crosses into their lands. I heard they like to keep Seelie fae as pets.”

“Seemed more fitting that gutting him. Anyway, he set off on his way and I attempted to actually locate Raven’s family.”

My muscles tightened. “Were you successful?”

“No. The crystal spun in a circle, which of course meant there were protections in place.”

My shoulders relaxed. Vera likely wasn’t a threat to my family, but I didn’t need any more complications.

“It was very perplexing,” she continued. “I was bothered that a witch was in the dungeons of Ansley Keep. Being that I’m a nosy bitch—”

“More like a vengeful bitch,” Lyric corrected.

“That, too, darling. So being that I’m a nosy *and* vengeful bitch, I decided I wasn’t going to let it go. I spoke with some of our coven who would be traveling in the Faelands for some contracted work to keep their ears open. We heard nothing. It wasn’t all that surprising, but I still scried from time to time and made some discreet inquiries. Nothing turned up.

Two weeks ago a triad of fae arrived at Eastbourne looking for a fair-haired male fae named Jerrin who had been traveling around on a mission from Queen Sersha. I informed them he had come and gone weeks ago, continuing on his quest. They didn’t ask anything else so I let them be. Then, this very morning, the finest broad-shouldered and tawny-haired

specimen of male shifter that I have ever had the pleasure of gazing upon came sauntering through my door.”

My ears perked.

“He was nearly perfect, outside of the jagged scars here,” the tip of one long nail touched the peak of her forehead and skimmed down over one brow, across the eye and cheek before moving to the other side. “And here.”

The switch flipped on my adrenal glands. I’d only ever seen such a scoring on one being, an unjust disfigurement imparted by his father’s claws.

Shifters healed faster than most beings, but they could definitely cause permanent damage to flesh if their wrath was great enough. It was a savage trait of the primitive magic housed within their soul, one they shared with their animal. They called it *znak zviru*—the mark of the beast.

“Sadly,” Vera lamented, pulling me back to the present, “he wasn’t looking for companionship. He wanted to know if we had seen a *raven*-haired female. One with violet eyes. I told him I had not. Then he asked if a large male fae with dark auburn hair had come to us. I answered that a number of male fae had been in and out of Eastbourne in recent weeks, but no one matching that description. He didn’t seem convinced but walked away without incident. I was left even more intrigued by whatever was going on with this purple-eyed female. So imagine my surprise when I walked into Embour and found myself staring at long black hair framing violet eyes.”

My throat ran dry and I licked my lips. “What was the shifter’s name?”

“He didn’t share it.”

Eastbourne wasn’t far from Terek. Nothing in Vera’s account could be a simple coincidence. Something was off. It felt like Fate was giving hints and my head was too cloudy to figure it out. A riddle was forming, its pieces circling around in my brain. I needed to be patient. It would come.

I just hoped it didn’t come when it was already too late.

Then something else the witch said struck me. “You said this morning? How did you get here so fast?”

“Henderson is also a very talented jumper. While I can only go in short spurts, he can travel far and wide. I recently decided he should start accompanying me on these journeys and broaden his horizons.”

“Bonus that it gets you there faster, right?” Lyric solicited sarcastically. “Maybe it also allows you to introduce him to some hot chicks outside of the coven?”

“Too right, my friend,” Vera smirked. “The extent of his talents is not something we typically speak of, by the way. Henderson likes keeping a low profile.”

Though she was likely speaking to me, Draven assured her no one would dare to divulge Henderson’s talents. He added that he knew she wouldn’t dare to divulge what she learned about Casimir’s mate. For beings who held secrets so close to the chest, they sure shared easily amongst one another.

Blood oath, I reminded myself. It was impossible to break.

“Soo,” Lyric yawned around her words. “Serasha sent some fae dudes to check if you had any family, which means she either knew of your connection and was planning to clean house or she wanted to make sure she could get rid of you without anyone to gripe about it.”

Vera’s head jerked towards me. Lyric’s words in front of the witch made me antsy, magical oath or not.

“Or both,” Casimir guessed before Vera could speak. “Though, I do think she would have reacted differently if she knew for certain she and Raven were of shared blood. It would have rattled her and I doubt Serasha would have kept Raven alive for so long. She’s always been power-hungry and would want to eliminate anyone who threatened her claim to the throne.”

“That’s what I’m now thinking, as well. What about the shifter?” Draven asked me.

I took a breath and thought of how to best phrase my words. “My father has a handful of shifters working for him.

It's possible he didn't give much notice before he departed to rescue me or that he had decided to bring me to Embour. They're an overprotective bunch, the shifters. They're hardwired that way. It could have been one who left the compound to find his leader."

"Your father got you out?" Vera inquired. "Do I know him?"

I shrugged, feeling more and more weary.

Casimir stood abruptly and held out his hand. Instinctively I took it. "I think we should continue this conversation tomorrow. It's late and everyone is tired, Raven and I especially."

"Goodnight," I bid and was pulled out of the room in a rush. I heard a few snickers behind us.

When we entered his quarters, I stopped short. "Where is the bed?"

"Right in front of you."

"That wasn't here when we left." I pointed at the colossal mattress sitting on the ground where the former bed used to sit. Covered in new bedding, a fluffy mix of soft blues interwoven with white and grey, it looked like a cloudy sky. Gone was his elevated frame. Gone was any frame.

"The other one was too high for you," Casimir said as he casually walked into the bathroom.

I followed, watching as he picked up my toothbrush, applied toothpaste, and set it on the counter. He then did the same to his own.

"I assumed you wouldn't be opposed." He turned to the sink and began the mundane task of cleaning his teeth.

"Did you think I would throw a fit because I found out Vera had slept in that bed?" I called back the searing flames of jealousy before they could slide down the bond. Or, I tried to.

He spit into the sink and rinsed his mouth. "A fit? No. I don't think you're the type to throw fits. Zap off my balls? Absolutely. But definitely not a tantrum."

Casimir strode into the closet as he spoke. “The bed was supposed to be traded out earlier in the day. They were running behind, so it got here late. The new mattress is a much better one, anyway.”

I could hear him opening and closing drawers. Turning back to the sink, I inspected my face. I looked as tired as I felt.

My hand paused on its way to pick up my toothbrush. It was such a small thing to get it out and ready for me to use. Very few beings in my life had ever done small things on my behalf. Shaking off the thought, I brushed my teeth.

Casimir returned dressed in loose-fitting black sweats. I ogled his sculpted upper half until he moved to stand at my back, watching as I spit and rinsed. We stared at each other in the mirror. He inched closer and I reveled in the heat he gave off. His large hands squeezed my hips and he leaned forward, kissing the top of my head.

Normally his hands on me would invoke a surge of desire. My physical need for him was always there, under the surface, but his attentions were tender and affectionate. It was like being wrapped in a warm blanket.

Of course, I wanted him sexually; but I found that I wanted him like this, as well. I’d never needed, nor wanted, to be taken care of. How so many witches were able to deny the pull of their soulmates was beyond me. I was beginning to wonder why they tried so hard in the first place, especially if there were mates out there like Casimir.

“I set out some pajamas for you. I think we’re both tired and a good rest will do us good.” He squeezed again and left me to finish up.

In the closet was a similar pair of loose-fit black sweats and matching tank. I smiled and put them on quickly. When I finally slid between the sheets, he pulled me into the curve of his body.

“Goodnight, Little Bird.”

“Goodnight, Casimir.”

His thumb ran across my knuckles. “You know, you could just call me Cas.”

“Everyone else calls you Cas.”

“Just those I’m closest to.”

“I suppose that’s true, now that I think about it. Yet it still feels ... it doesn’t feel right. Not that it feels *wrong*,” I amended quickly. “I don’t know what I’m saying. Ignore me.”

I didn’t hear him breathe for a few seconds. Then he kissed the back of my neck and relaxed against me. My eyes didn’t close until his breathing slowed and I was sure he was asleep.

If only I could have drifted off as easily.



Chapter 20

Casimir

The table stared as Lyric gluttonously gulped down her mug of hot chocolate. Gregor, her uncle, had sent a case of her favorite mix through the crossing after hearing of her chocolate cravings. No longer allowed to drink coffee, she'd been working her way through the supply like a starved wendigo.

Surprisingly, Hugo had given her permission to drink the mixture at breakfast time. All that sugar wasn't good for an expectant mother. Or so I'd read—about humans, anyway. She loathed when I treated her like one.

“Maybe you should slow down on the breakfast treats, Lyric,” I suggested. “I think you're about to run out of your stash ... and room in your pants. There's no shame in maternity wear, you know.”

Phalen choked on his eggs.

Lyric smacked her lips and slammed her mug down on the family dining table. “And maybe you should shut your piehole and mind your own fucking business.”

Draven sighed. “It's basically just cocoa powder. Hardly any sugar at all, not that it really matters. Hugo said it was only sodium she had to watch. I'm not sure why you continuously antagonize her.”

“Like you don't do the same?” I poked lightly.

“It's because I rang his bell the other day,” Lyric explained to her mate. “This is the only way he can hit back at me successfully.”

“Ah, yes, I nearly forgot. It was a solid strike, Angel. Well done.”

“Thank you.” She blew a kiss to Draven and shoved a piece of bacon past her lips moaning like she hadn’t eaten in days. “I love bacon. I can’t seem to stop eating it.”

“I’m sure it’s the pregnancy. And this is the low-sodium kind so nothing to worry over,” the Shadow Lord patted her hand and reached for a piece of his own.

What he didn’t say was Hugo had put a limit on the number of pieces she could have. I’d bet good money my cousin knew exactly how many strips Lyric had chewed up and swallowed and he was eating more than normal to limit the likelihood she’d go over.

I weighed the risk of calling him out on it when I noticed my own mate had stopped eating.

Raven looked from me to Lyric then back to me. Lines appeared between her eyebrows. “You fought a pregnant female?”

“Ha! No way!” Lyric exclaimed. “He knows I’d kick his ass. Well, with a sword, anyway. No, he was incoherently talking in circles and I basically smacked him to knock his wits back into place. I’ll try not to do it again since it is now your right to beat him into submission.”

Raven stared at Lyric.

Lyric continued shoveling food into her mouth. Her eyes widened once she finally noticed Raven’s face.

“Shit. I swear it’s all in good fun. We would never actually harm one another and Cas has refused to spar with me since the day he found out I was pregnant. I promised I wouldn’t make us all come across as a bunch of psychos. That’s my bad, Cas.”

“It’s fine,” I assured, unfazed.

Raven lifted a shoulder. “It may be my right, but I’m not opposed to you giving him a smack or two whenever it’s deserved.”

Lyric beamed. “I knew we were going to be friends!”

Raven's mouth quirked as she cut into her omelet and the group continued eating in companionable silence.

Phalen finished first. He wiped his mouth and asked, "Any word from Brokk?"

Draven shook his head. "I sent Talia to Terek. She should have reached her destination by now, as fast as she is in shadow form. She'll stay long enough to pick Brokk's brain, possibly help strategize. I also told her to sniff around if she found anything of interest, so we might not see her for a while."

"My father didn't make it back to Terek," Raven flatly announced.

My knife paused in mid spread. "What?"

"He didn't make it back. Either that or he took off shortly after arriving without telling anyone."

Draven placed his elbows on the table. "Explain. And be sure to include why this is the first I'm hearing of it."

Raven's bright irises were a stark contrast to the circles forming under her eyes. She'd had a fitful sleep and I hadn't been able to do more than hold her through it. Sex might have settled her energies but I hadn't wanted to risk exhausting her further, not after her day yesterday and the complications of meeting Vera last night.

"The shifter who came to see Vera. I'm sure I know who it was."

"How sure?" I asked.

"Positive. There's a male shifter who works for—and is close with—The Navita. He has tawny hair and a scar down one side of his face. It couldn't be anyone else, not if he was asking about both me and my father. Too much of Vera's story fits with my situation to chalk up to happenstance."

The Shadow Lord's forearms dropped to the table and he leaned forward. The coloring of his face darkened. "I cannot make informed decisions, Raven, if I haven't been fully *informed*. In a timely fashion," he tacked on the last part with

a growl. “Tell me more about this shifter and what he has to do with you and your father.”

My mate appeared to be unfazed. I knew otherwise because I could feel a hint of her irritation through the bond.

“His name is Niklaus. We call him Nik. My father saved his life once and Nik has worked for him ever since, says he is forever indebted.”

My mind clamped down on the shifter’s name, rabidly chewing it with distaste. Raven referred to him as Nik, not Niklaus. She would only refer to me as Casimir. Not Cas. Using a shortened name implied a certain closeness. It clawed at my insides.

“Nik is basically Father’s go-to male and is often left in charge of Terek when Father’s gone. If Nik’s traveling with him or away from home, there’s an Unseelie fae who steps up. They follow a chain of command to ensure Terek remains safe and under their complete control.”

Home? Did she still think of Terek as home? My molars pressed together uncomfortably.

“Nik’s main job is recon,” she continued. “He’s also an excellent tracker. It’s not like him to actually approach a being directly. He’s usually extremely stealthy. He would only go searching for my father like that if he thought something was wrong.”

“And you didn’t think to mention this last night?” I admonished.

“You have a pact with Vera. I do not. Truthfully, I wasn’t prepared for her to be informed I had a connection to the Fae Queen. I didn’t bring it up last night because I didn’t want to cause a scene.”

Lyric dropped her bacon, frowning. Her puppy dog eyes were too much.

“It’s fine, Lyric. I’m not upset with you. Truly, I’m not,” Raven assured. “However, I’m sure there is a grey area in there somewhere Vera could exploit. I don’t want to accidentally jeopardize my brother and father or those who

work for him so I decided to limit what I shared. Also, I needed some time to think it through. I was up half the night mulling it over. A witch's coven comes first. Always. If there is a loophole, she'll find it. If she brings my mother into it, it will be catastrophic. I'm sure you understand this."

I had ushered her away the second Vera asked about Brokk. He wasn't a subject the Council would be discussing with outsiders, but Raven could have shared the info with me once we were alone.

It stung. Was it wrong to expect trust from my mate so soon?

Shadows rolled across Draven's eyes then were gone. A blink and I'd have missed it. An unmistakable stream of magic floated past me. Inexplicably, my cousin was making no effort to hide his inspection. Raven released energies and pushed the stream back to the Shadow Lord.

Lyric made a sound and Phalen murmured something under his breath. My body tensed.

"Draven," I warned, nearly rising out of my chair.

"You've done that to me before," Raven accused.

Draven pushed his plate away and interlaced his fingers in front of him. "I have," he confirmed with no hint of regret.

"Why?"

"I'm scanning you."

"Scanning my soul? It doesn't feel like that kind of magic."

"Your thoughts."

Raven inhaled sharply. "I didn't realize Shadows could do that."

"Most can't."

She jerked her face to look at me. "And you didn't think this was something I should know?"

Oh, the little fire Drake.

“It’s not my secret to share.”

I glared at my cousin. “Nor did I realize he’d been doing it, outside of when you arrived. He hasn’t been so obvious about it until today.”

“Don’t panic, Raven,” the Shadow Lord softened his tone. “I don’t get much from you. Your shield was flawless while unconscious. Though, you should know that when your adrenaline spikes, the barrier expands enough for me to take a peek. It’s why I suspected you’d made a blood oath.”

“And just what else have you suspected while *taking a peek?*” she grounded out, teeth clenched.

“Only that you’re extremely pissed. But I don’t need to read your mind to know that.”

“You won’t be doing it again,” I declared firmly.

Draven leaned back in his chair, studying me, then my mate. “I won’t intrude again without cause.”

“Big cause,” Lyric stressed. “Giant. Humongous, like someone is in clear and present danger kind of cause, right Big Guy?”

“Very well,” he accepted. “Although, I would like it noted that I probe every single newcomer. I’d stopped doing it before Lyric arrived and we were betrayed by someone we trusted. We nearly lost both Lyric and Kree as a result. Now I take extra steps to prevent such a thing. Though, I no longer do it as often as I’d like because my mate has helped me see how my Council would view it as intrusive. But I refuse to be caught totally unawares again. I spotcheck or I dig if something feels amiss or if I suspect someone knows something that would put my Shadows at risk. I won’t apologize for it.”

Raven’s posture relaxed just a bit.

“It wasn’t personal,” he told her. “I have a long list of lives for which I am responsible.”

Her throat cleared. “I know. I would never knowingly do anything to put any of your Shadows in danger.”

“I believe you, Raven. So please believe me when I say I include you on the list of those under my protection. If anything, I’m concerned you’ll do something reckless and get yourself killed. I don’t want that for you and I definitely don’t want that for my cousin.”

Raven looked away, her hands fell to her lap. “Yes, well, I’m sure Father had a lot to share with you about my recklessness. You sound exactly like him.”

“Only a little,” he smirked. “And I’m more of a protective big brother type.”

Draven tossed his napkin onto his plate. “What does your gut say about Brokk? Do you feel like he’s in trouble?”

“My gut isn’t being very helpful at the moment. I’m inclined to say no, but Nik showing up in Eastbourne is problematic. Being of mixed parentage, I don’t have the same connection to my father most fae offspring have to theirs.”

“Maybe Brokk wasn’t heading back to Terek,” Lyric speculated. Then she belched daintily and Phalen patted her on the back.

“Good girl, get it all out,” he cooed and she elbowed him in the pectoral.

Raven gave her head a little shake, momentarily distracted by what the rest of us considered typical behavior.

“Did my father mention anything before he left?” she asked. “Such as traveling to Terek or anyplace else, specifically?”

“Now that I think about it, he didn’t give any specifics when he departed. He’d mentioned going home so we all assumed he was going straight to his territory, that Kol was safest there,” Phalen answered as his palm rubbed over the place where Lyric’s elbow had made contact.

“Phalen’s right,” I agreed. “We all assumed he was going to sail up the river to Terek and return to his home. With his powers, the trip wouldn’t have taken long. Really, he could have made it anywhere along the river within hours. Is there

anyplace else you could think of? Someplace he would take Kol?"

"No. Terek is the safest place for them," she insisted. "There are innumerable wards and protections there. Plus all of those beings Father has taken in. They would protect Kol with their lives, no matter who came looking. It is possible Father could have changed his mind about staying in the Faelands and ventured out into the sea, but I still find it hard to believe he wouldn't have communicated with Nik."

Phalen rapped his knuckles on the table. "What do you want to do, Draven?"

"Give Emile an update and send him after his sister. He can take a guard or two if he wishes, though they may slow him down. Let him decide. If Brokk's in Terek, Emile will simply stay with Talia until she's ready to return. Brokk should trust them enough to share his intentions. Give Emile permission to offer assistance. If Brokk's not in Terek, he and Talia can investigate, though I'm not sure how helpful Brokk's crew will be."

Raven opened her mouth and I nudged her leg with mine. A slow burn crawled across our bond then gradually faded.

"Then send out a handful of teams. See if they can pick up any chatter from our contacts."

"Done," Phalen bowed and hurried off.

"What about me?" Raven asked.

"You are going to your session with Hugo and Kree. Then you're going back out into the training fields again to see how your body will handle things. I won't be turning you loose until I'm satisfied you're completely healed and your strength and stamina are back, in both body and soul. As Brokk's offspring, I assume you've had combat training?"

"I have but I usually fight with my magic," she answered.

"Not if someone shackles you again. Or, worse, somehow sneaks iron into your system, something any sharp object could manage. Hugo said it had been in your bloodstream. If

your powers aren't accessible, you need to be confident you have other options."

My mate slid her tongue between her teeth and upper lip. Her fingers turned to fists and her knee bounced.

"Come on, Little Bird. I'll go with you to Hugo. After your session we'll go outside and get some exercise in."

Without speaking, Raven rose from her chair and I followed her out of the dining room.



Chapter 21

Raven

The rest of the morning and afternoon passed by in a blessed blur of activities. Thankfully, keeping my body occupied had the same effect on my mind.

The session with Hugo had gone extraordinarily well. The healer said I might not need another one, that Kree had outdone herself.

Apparently she had stayed up most of the night with her wings out which allowed her to store extra power to push into me. We did it slowly and she gradually increased until she could no longer sense even the smallest of abnormalities.

I didn't know how to pay her back. When I asked what I could do in return, Kree said her healing magics were freely given. Her honest and giving personality was a ray of sunlight in a world that could be terribly dark. I was determined to reciprocate in some way in the future.

Despite the incident with the Shadow Lord at breakfast, I was growing more and more fond of the residents of Embour with each interaction. Allies were aplenty for me in Terek. While we did have trust and respect for one another, it was mainly because I was The Navita's offspring. I'd never had this easy camaraderie with them, not like I'd instantly found here.

Of course, no one on the Shadow Council was afraid of Brokk Ulrik as most others were. The scary Shadows of legend weren't what I'd imagined. They were astonishingly playful, though I had no doubt they could lay waste to those they deemed an enemy.

Before I'd departed from the infirmary, Hugo instructed me to truly push my body and my powers today, then see how I felt. Though physical exercise wouldn't affect my lifeforce,

if it wasn't at full power I wouldn't be able to do some of my most complicated magic. He also mentioned Draven would be more likely to discuss a concrete plan with me once he had evidence I was cleared by my *handsome doctor*.

I did as Hugo advised and pushed myself through every obstacle. Climbing, sprinting, jumping, sometimes even crawling. Cuts and bruises appeared en masse, healing and disappearing only to be replaced by new ones.

After being put through a grinder of obstacles, I practiced with a real sword, one Casimir had procured for me. It was similar to the claymore he carried, only smaller and without a crest on the handle. He said it was one his father had gifted to him when he first learned to sword fight.

We didn't actually spar, though. He walked me through technique and tested my style and balance. My mate had virtually memorized every move I'd made when I attacked him in the forest and gave me specific feedback on little changes I could make to improve.

Then we did exercises and practiced swings and foot placement. It was swordplay in slow motion, but it was the best instruction I had ever received. His knowledge was vast and I listened carefully, even when he was going over things I already knew.

It was now late afternoon and we were in one of the more hidden areas, to the northeast of Embour. We'd been warned by Lyric to keep sharp and listen for predators. Her and her sister's magic occasionally attracted beasts who'd been injured, even from miles away.

Casimir and I were standing at the bottom of a small valley nestled by thick woods all along the outer edge. We'd followed a narrow and well-maintained trail through the forest. Luckily the mouth of the gulley wasn't very steep and it was easy to reach the bottom.

"I think this is a good place for you to test yourself," he said. "Hugo wants you to do something that would require a lot of your power. I don't know what that would be, but I

figured you'd want to be away from the general population when you did it."

"How much damage can I do here?"

"How much do you want to do?"

I coughed. "No, I'm asking what's the threshold for the land? I can feel a natural spring under us. I don't want to mess with it if the valley needs to stay intact. I assume it connects to the river. It could be a water source for Embour or other towns and cities."

"You're right, we don't want to disrupt its flow. Would that tax you, though? To manipulate it?"

"Not really. I have some of my father's affinity for water. I was thinking more along the lines of causing a landquake or fissures and accidentally ruining some of the infrastructure somewhere down the line."

Casimir's posture straightened. "You could cause a landquake?"

"Yes. I'm half Seelie fae, remember? I can use my witch magics to enhance my fae affinities and vice versa. Shaking the ground using underground water isn't difficult. But there are things that might take a lot out of me. It just depends on what I'm attempting to do. Honestly, I'm not comfortable jumping straight to something that might take more out of me than I'm willing to give at this point."

He eyed me. "Is there something you can do that would seriously harm you or your lifeforce?"

"Only dark magic would be so dangerous to where I could bleed my soul's well dry. I'm not a dark practitioner so I doubt I'd be able to kill myself by pushing too far, if that's what you're asking. I can exhaust myself, maybe drain some of my lifeforce, but I'd most likely lose consciousness before I ever got close to death."

"How sure are you of this?"

"Pretty sure."

“Pretty sure? Oh, good. Great. Thank you for clarifying. I suppose there’s no need for me freak the fuck out since you’re so confident,” Casimir said sarcastically, turning his head away.

A jolt of panic slid through our bond and I felt bad for him. He really didn’t know enough about witches and how mixed magics worked.

Tugging on his sleeve, I waited until I had his attention again. “I didn’t mean to sound casual about it. I believe I won’t be able to kill myself like that. When a witch exhausts her energies, they almost always pass out from the fatigue of it.”

“And if you don’t pass out? How will you stop if you lose control?”

“I trust you to stop me. I don’t feel like I’m in extreme danger because you’re here. Whether through the bond or screaming in my face, you’ll reach me. You can even knock me out and I won’t be upset about it.”

Casimir’s face softened. His lips tilted the tiniest bit, like he was going to smirk. Great, I’d handed his ego a snack.

“Alright,” he said, tugging on the tip of the braid hanging over my shoulder. “If it’s not extremely dangerous because I’m here to stop you, what’s the issue?”

My hands slid into my back pockets. “I think I might not have enough in me to do what I used to be able to do.”

“So you’re afraid to even try?”

I allowed myself to take a deep, cleansing breath, staring down the length of the bottomland. “If I’m not actually fully healed, not strong enough to conjure the power necessary to do something I once could ...”

I blinked away the burning behind my eyes. It would do nothing to help if I wallowed.

“I’ve been drained for so long,” I continued. “—or had been, at least—I don’t want to feel anything like that again, to feel so weak. Too weak to cast a simple spell, to heal myself,

to even open my eyes at times. No. I don't want even a hint of that weakness inside me. Not ever again. I have a feeling I won't react well to it."

Casimir shifted closer, shoulder to shoulder to my right, following my stare down to the twisted lone acer tree at the other end of the ravine. Its thin pale branches were covered in bright orange-red leaves. It looked out of place, the only growth at the bottom of this rockbed and I briefly wondered how it had gotten here.

His left hand found my right, sliding it out of my pocket and clasping it in his. My skin hummed and our spirits brushed. It wasn't as jarring as it had been previously, but it was so very intoxicating. I felt like I'd taken several shots of Lyric's bourbon.

"You were never weak, Raven. Vulnerable in those moments, yes, but not weak. You never gave in to Sersha's demands. Knowing what the punishment would be for defiance, you held on to who you were. You protected the deepest marrow of your character and it nearly cost you your life. Weak? No. You were strong and brave and I am honored to know you. I wouldn't want you like I do if I thought you were spineless. Even when drained, you were never weak. I forbid you from thinking such a thing."

I laughed, reaching for the back of his neck. I pulled him down and pressed my lips to his. "Thank you," I whispered against his mouth.

"Yes, well, it was entirely selfish. I knew if I praised you enough I could get you to make out with me again."

I bonked him on the side of the head and pushed him away. His cheeks dimpled and I was momentarily distracted by how adorable he looked when he smiled. I could almost picture him as a youngling.

"So, what you're saying is a makeout session is now off the table?" he assessed.

I battled the smile threatening to take over my face. "Off the table? I'd say it's been thrown far across the Pale River

and has likely reached the Desertlands by now.”

He returned to my personal space, peering intently right into my very soul. The constant sexual pull would drown us soon enough.

“Well that’s unfortunate. But you can’t blame a demon for trying,” he teased as he tugged once more on a piece of my hair. “Still afraid?”

“Terrified,” I breathed. “But I’ll get around it.”

“That’s my female.”

My cheeks warmed. Nik had said those words to me once and I’d hated them. He’d made me feel like he was taking credit for what I’d done. With Casimir it felt different, like he was proud of me. Maybe it was because he didn’t come across as overly macho.

Sometimes Nik made me feel like he didn’t believe I was capable of taking care of myself, like I needed someone stronger to take care of me. Shifters had an inborn sense of duty to others, especially those they believed needed protection. It was part of their pack mentality.

This overly protective side came out a thousand times stronger towards any female a shifter male wanted to claim. It had been worse with me because I wasn’t as physically strong as the females Nik had grown up around.

The day he’d confessed this thought was the beginning of the end for us. I didn’t want to be claimed.

I looked at my Shadow demon. Casimir was protective, but I didn’t feel smothered by his actions.

“Just start simple,” Casimir suggested, likely mistaking my silence for nerves.

Shaking my hands out, I searched for something appropriate to manipulate or destroy. Some fifty yards down the way was a collection of light grey boulders, a few taller than myself. They weren’t supporting anything; they looked like they had rolled down the shallow canyon and came to rest where they were.

Perfect.

I pulled on my fae powers and slowly lifted one of the smaller stones. It hovered for a moment then shot up into the sky.

“Holy shit,” Casimir breathed, searching the clouds. “It’s so high I’ve lost track of it.”

“Turn around.”

He spun and shouted another curse, jumping back and crouching low. The rock, which was roughly four feet in diameter, was floating inches behind where he had been standing.

“I didn’t hear a fucking sound, Raven. Nor can I sense any of your magic around it. This is *simple* for you?”

“More or less. I’ve done this hundreds of times. It got easier with practice. Many fae can move objects like this using the elements.”

“Perhaps, but I’ve never seen something like this,” he claimed, ogling the object with both awe and confusion. “An object moving that fast would displace the air, creating sound.”

“Not if I manipulated the air to prevent it.”

“Ah-ha. Well, it may not be challenging for someone who is fae, but I find it impressive as hell. Is it wrong that I’m totally turned on?”

I snickered. “Hot and bothered over a large cluster of minerals fused together? Totally wrong.”

“Smartass,” he grinned. “Is it similar to what Brokk does when his ship is incognito?”

“In preventing the sound, yes. It also helps with speed of travel.”

“Handy talent. What would make this more complicated?”

I came around to stand beside him again. “Do you trust me?” I asked.

“Implicitly,” he replied without hesitation, making my insides feel all tingly and warm.

I hoped I wasn't turning into one of those pathetic females who could be reduced to a pile of mush with a single word from a seductive male. Nik's face popped into my head and I suddenly felt the need to push back, even if only to see Casimir's reaction.

“Well,” I said offhandedly, “here's to you not regretting those words.”

I reached for my inner witch, swiftly weaving a spell around us. He held still.

“I can sense magic this time,” he commented.

“Just wait.”

In front of us, hairline fissures formed and spread across the boulder. Pieces fell to the ground, shed to reveal a hidden mouth with blunted teeth, crudely formed. Divots appeared where eyes might have been.

“Good morning,” the stone rasped. “Aren't you a tasty-looking morsel?”

Casimir's eyes widened. “Um, yes. She definitely is.”

“I wasn't talking to her, you useless bag of flesh.”

Casimir sniffed, then narrowed his eyes at me. “That's not nice, Little Bird.”

“Neither is this,” I braved. Before he could react, the fake face had Casimir's torso in its mouth, launching upwards at break-neck speed.

Through my connection to the stone, I could feel Casimir's powers pushing out. My magic locked onto him, halting his efforts. The force pushing back at mine stalled momentarily.

Too easy, I thought. It shouldn't be this—

A sudden explosion of Casimir's power crashed into my spell. I stumbled a step forward. My muscles seized as I fought to keep his magic under my control.

Holy Hecate!

This was the strength I'd expected from the warrior. It felt like my abdominals were about to rip apart from the strain. Our bond blazed, interrupting my focus.

Steadying myself, I drew Casimir and the boulder back to the ground, gradually slowing enough so he could get his bearings. The rock released him and he landed gracefully on his feet in front of me. His pupils had all but taken over his irises, leaving a thin silver ring.

Fascinated, I watched as he got control of his breath. The black slowly receded, but his eyes remained bright.

"Are you angry?" my voice managed to escape evenly, hiding the knotted pain slowly receding from within.

"No. That's not the word I would use."

I bit my lip, intuitively reaching for the bond to get a better sense of any drastic emotion. It felt tangled, like conflicting energies were moving through it.

"What word would you use, then?"

He scratched at the stubble on his chin. "I don't have one."

Glancing over his shoulder at the faux monster I'd created, he asked, "How did you stop me from ghosting? I've never ... I mean, how did you even know I was going to try?"

"My magics are covering the stone. I felt your power through my connection to it. Maybe it was an assumption, but I thought you were trying to shift. I can also feel you through our bond, so maybe I picked up on it subconsciously. Really, it was the most logical thing for you to do that far off the ground."

Casimir ran one hand through his hair. "Did you know that some Shadows can carry others while ghosting? Like cover them in their shadow form and travel with them?"

"Yes."

"Do you know what happens when it's with someone who isn't a Shadow demon?"

“No.”

Casimir disappeared, and I found myself staring through a dark filmy presence—a literal shadow. It flew in a circle around me.

“Let me tell you what happens,” his disembodied voice brushed past my ear. My skin erupted in goosebumps. “The moment the non-Shadow is released, both the Shadow and his passenger are inundated with a need so strong it is almost impossible to ignore.”

“Need?” I whispered. My feminine muscles flexed.

“Yes. Need.”

“For what?”

“Oh, I think you know, Little Bird,” his voice lowered. “I have been remiss not to mention it prior to today. If another Shadow tries to ghost you, I’ll have to kill him if that’s the result of your transport.”

“You wouldn’t.”

“I most certainly would,” he growled. “But my reason for sharing this right now is two-fold. The second reason is because I believe you can prevent it.”

“What do you mean?”

“You stopped me from shifting into shadow form. Why not one who attempts to ... take you?”

“You’re more concerned about the after effect than the abduction part,” I evaluated. “This is more about the prevention of feeling sexual need with someone else, as though I’m incapable of stopping myself from acting on it?”

His dark chuckle pressed all the right buttons. Or were they the wrong ones? *Gah!*

“No, Little Bird. I’m sharing because you need the information. It’s something important you should know when living and interacting with Shadow demons. I’m also sharing it as a safety precaution. Both Kree and Lyric were taken from

Embour, only a couple of years ago. Lyric was ghosted away by one of our own soldiers.”

I swallowed. “Did ...”

“No. By then she’d figured out how to control the effect, it’s part of her and Kree’s Adestrian magic. Neither of them were abused or manipulated in that manner. But the fact remains we were betrayed by one of our own.”

Relief filled my heart. Lyric was a headcase, but I now considered both her and her sister as friends. The realization you are powerless to stop someone from harming you is another sort of torture itself.

“Few things cut as deep as betrayal from those you trust,” he added.

“That wasn’t the first betrayal you’ve experienced, was it?”

He solidified, storms brewing in his eyes. “It’s a hard lesson I’ve had to learn more than once. I don’t want to take chances with you, especially not if there is any possibility Sersha or Malcolm has gotten to one of our own. Everyone has pressure points. Money. Power. Threats. I wouldn’t put it past the Fae Queen to hold a loved-one’s life over someone’s head to get what she wants. Even if the odds of one of our own Shadows assisting Sersha are miniscule, I want you to be prepared.”

He was absolutely right about the royal couple’s nefariousness. They would indeed stoop to such levels.

Casimir wrapped both arms around me and I gripped his hips. “I’ll make a list of anything else you should know. Protocols, safety measures, chain of command, all of the things here that I should have been going over with you already.”

“I understand,” I assured. We were suffering similarly in terms of clarity of mind.

He pivoted around to face the stone, still in the same place. “Can we be done with him?”

“Of course.” I crumbled it to dust and spread the debris over one of the more rocky areas. “Do you want to try to ghost me so I can practice?”

“No. We can try that later. Perhaps on our return to Embour?” he tested.

“Yes,” passed my lips without thought. The bond simmered in the best of ways, seemingly connected to the juncture of my thighs instead of my soul. Neither of us were thinking about the prevention of the shift. The carnal pull was so intense I couldn’t imagine it being any stronger.

Casimir shook himself slightly, breaking our spell. “We still need to push your magic. What’s the most complicated thing you can do? Was what you just did with me difficult?”

Burying my disappointment at the turn of conversation, I cleared my throat. “Lifting you was relatively easy but locking down your power was not.”

“Yet you still managed it.”

“I did,” I agreed, “but I didn’t expend myself for very long. I need to push harder.”

“So what are you thinking of trying?”

“Originally, I thought of creating a storm.”

“I thought the elements were easy for you?”

I lifted my palms, one face up and one face down, like I was holding a ball between them. I conjured a tiny cloud, the power tickling my skin. The cloud darkened, tiny raindrops fell onto my waiting hand below. It picked up in intensity.

“Elements like this aren’t complicated. This is very small, though. I’ve never made something like this on a grand scale. I originally thought that’s what I’d do, then try to control the sound, control the damage, and control its visibility to anyone close enough to see it.”

“I’m sensing a but.”

My palms came together, extinguishing what I’d created. “While doing that would potentially take a lot of energy and

control, I don't think it would be very useful. I'm almost positive I could manage it, but why bother when going up against fae who likely have similar powers? I'm thinking I may as well try something that could prove more practical and beneficial, something I'm not confident in doing. Something most would consider crossing a line."

"Why do I have a feeling I'm not going to like what you're about to say?"

"Because you're not."

‡ ‡ ‡

"You want to do *what*?"

Draven's face was nonplussed, which I supposed was better than infuriated. Casimir had ghosted back to Embour to ask for some assistance and returned with the Shadow Lord, Lyric, and Phalen.

"Control you. Actually, first I'd like to prevent you from shifting into shadow form. All of you. I was able to do it without touching Casimir and it gave me the idea that I could contain an Other's magic, at least for a short time. Then I want to see if you can be controlled. If I can do both, especially with multiple beings, dealing with Sersha and Malcolm might be far easier than we thought. I'll just march the royals straight into a containment trap and give us time to sort things out."

"You mean control them like puppets?" Lyric asked.

"Yes."

"*Ermahgerd! Yass!*" she screeched in a strange accent while clapping and looking directly at her mate. "Do-it-do-it-do-it!"

Phalen played with the beard at his chin. "Perhaps you should try one of us at a time. What if you lose yourself like some witches do when they push too far? I'm not keen on the three highest ranking Shadows being restrained at once without a guarantee you're in total control. No offense."

“None taken,” I replied.

Lyric blew a raspberry. “I’m right here, dumbass. I’m second in command in these parts. And as the best number two your ass has ever seen—”

Phalen snorted. Casimir looked away, hiding his face from Draven, who was pinching the bridge of his nose.

“—I can stab her if necessary. That would break the spell, right?” Lyric looked at me questioningly.

“Most likely. It would definitely break my concentration. I don’t typically lose control of myself, but I’ve never mixed both of magics at this level. Just be sure to cut someplace where I’d lose a lot of blood fast. That would be the thing to guarantee I release my hold. Or hit me in the head hard enough I black out.”

Lyric’s nose scrunched. “I’d probably have to kick you in the head to do that and my belly won’t allow for such a maneuver.”

“Then use the knife.”

“Okay, I’ll just nick an artery or something.” She withdrew a dagger from the belt around her waist.

“Perfect,” I commended. “Maybe go for the carotid and not the brachial or femoral. These leathers seem to be too tough to slice through easily in a single swipe.”

“No problem.”

We turned back to the fearsome wall of male demons who were all staring at us with guarded expressions. Well, two of them were. Casimir looked like he’d sucked on something overly sour.

“What?” Lyric and I asked simultaneously.

“There are two of them!” Phalen squawked as he emphatically gestured towards us with both hands, palms up. “Sure, one is more reserved and curses a lot less than the pregnant one, but there are *two* of them now! Gods help us all.”

“Oh grow up, you chickenshit,” Lyric insulted. “Are we good now, Big Guy?”

Draven looked at Casimir who returned a resolute dip of his head. Then he pointed at Phalen. “Stop him from ghosting, Raven. I want to see what happens.”

Phalen grumbled something under his breath. I waited to feel the change in his energy. The second I did, my power sprung, latching onto his, squeezing. His arms jerked out to his sides, his body rigid. Taut muscles shook as he strained against my hold.

It wasn't quite as difficult as it had been with Casimir, probably because I wasn't also maintaining a stone monster and flying them both around in the air. That didn't mean it didn't hurt like a son of a bitch. Thankfully, I didn't have to speak.

The Shadow Lord circled his friend, inspecting, feeling the air around him. He paid no mind to his friend's suffering, seemingly more interested in the mechanics of what was happening. “You can release him now.”

I discharged the spell and relaxed my pose.

“Damn,” Phalen panted, hunched over with his hands on his knees. “As much as I love being dominated by a gorgeous female, that was *not* pleasant. I couldn't shake your hold.”

“Do the same to me now,” Draven ordered.

The Shadow Lord didn't give me any time to feel for the altering energies of his shift. The male was mostly translucent by the time I got a handle on him. He fought, caught in mid transformation. My powers held on, my limbs straining. Sweat broke out across my brow.

It took a lot out of me to press against his resistance as I spun and wrapped cords of energy around him. Looking through my witch's eye, I studied our warring magic. Golds and silvers vibrated, struggling for dominance. The silver was outpacing the white gold. Draven was about to get the upper hand.

I threw more at him. My legs felt like jelly and shook to the point I was forced to lock my knees to remain upright. I called forth more powers, weaving my witch and fae electric vitality together. The thickened ropes added another layer overtop the initial, reminding me of the binding used to secure grave cloths.

Once I was sure I had him encased fully, I was forced to alter my strategy or else I'd be on the ground soon. Theorizing I didn't have to continuously push back—I only needed to hold—I pictured the shell I created as a balloon, one that would expand and contract with what it was housing.

Yes! I silently celebrated. It was working. The outflow of my power drain slowed. I felt the muscles of my neck and jaw loosen enough to where I could move my mouth once more.

“I'm going to let go now,” I called out in between mouthfuls of air. “You should ... stop exerting yourself.”

When Draven backed down I pulled the energies that I could back into my body. Only some of the powers could be reabsorbed. The rest faded away into oblivion. Quickly, I had the magical shroud unraveled and the demon was free.

Draven appeared before us, fully solid. With his mouth tight, he rolled his shoulders and shook out his limbs. Though, his expression was more thoughtful than angry.

“How was the ride?” Lyric pressed.

Looking directly at me, he answered, “Bumpy. How long do you think you could have held that?”

“Not long. A minute, maybe a little more, if I really had to. Would you have been able to break free?”

Draven lifted his palms. “Possibly. Your hold was strong. I was almost through the barrier and then you added that secondary spell. I'd like to practice that again in the near future. You should try to hold for longer next time.”

“I can do that.”

A pinch of excitement built in my gut. After my mother left, no one in my life encouraged me to push my limits with

both sides of magic. Father was an excellent teacher, but his lessons were always about keeping a level head and besting our foes with our cunningness, not relying solely on brute force. I hadn't truly pushed myself past what I thought I was capable of in years.

"Also," Draven added, "I'd prefer to keep this quiet."

"That I was able to stop your transition?"

"Anything pertaining to your powers, outside of things the general population would already know about a Dianic witch or a Seelie fae. Who knows what Sersha is willing to promise in exchange for your return? Someone somewhere would be tempted, I'm sure. While I have scanned the minds of those residing in Embour, I can't possibly know the inner workings of every mind in the Shadowlands. Let's keep the element of surprise on our side, shall we?"

"That's fair."

Draven wiped his mouth. "I can't believe we have two females at Embour who can control our shifts."

Lyric's hands went to her hips. "My sister has the same ability I have, Big Guy."

"Yes, but we all trust Kree to not do it for sport. That leaves you two, who are of questionable temperament." Draven winked in our direction.

"Just like I said!" Phalen exclaimed theatrically. "The gods are punishing us. I just know it."

"For what?" Lyric threw back.

"For being so incredibly handsome and strong and irresistible to all creatures. It's terribly unfair to the rest of the population. This is our penance."

"We really need to work on your self-esteem," Lyric deadpanned. "Besides, neither of us are your soulmate. I hope you find yours and she kicks your ass."

"Me too, Lyric," he sighed dreamily. "Me, too."

Casimir brought his fist to his lips, but I could still see the stretch in the corners. When it came to my mate, Phalen was spot-on in his assessment. Incredibly handsome and totally irresistible.

The information Casimir had disclosed earlier about ghosting non Shadows was suddenly in the forefront of my mind. “Have you ever experimented with ghosting other non Shadows to see if their magic counteracts your shift the same way?” I inquired.

“Yes,” Draven nodded. “Though, not many. Only my mate and her sister succeeded.”

“Maybe the answer lies in their genetics,” Casimir guessed. “Beings like Lyric, Kree, and Raven have a broader gene pool. The answer could lie somewhere in the fact that there are different powers from different factions in their makeup. Something about the combination makes it stronger in some ways. Or maybe they carry a similar genetic trait. We should have Hugo investigate.”

Draven’s chin jutted slightly in consideration. “You might be onto something. I’ll speak to him later.”

“Great plan. So we’re finished here?” Phalen tested hopefully.

“No,” Draven shook his head. “Raven, earlier you said something about control?”



Chapter 22

Raven

“I did,” I replied to the Shadow Lord. “Taking control of another’s mind is extremely difficult. It’s also an abominable practice, so please know my intention is not to become some sort of dark witch looking to enslave others to do my bidding.”

“I’m not worried about you turning on us like that, if that’s your concern. Delete that thought from your mind,” Draven emphasized, “and attend to what’s critical. You could be onto something with this. What are the main obstacles? Pushing commands into another?”

“I think giving commands themselves isn’t the challenging part. Practically speaking, getting close enough and being powerful enough to use the magic to infiltrate and subjugate another definitely is.”

“Like performing a demon’s furatus?” Phalen guessed.

“Mmm, no, I don’t think so. A furatus is like giving the soul of another an unavoidable directive, right?”

“It is,” Phalen confirmed. “The demon performing it has to physically touch the other being’s soul. They can do all sorts of nasty things once they have a hold of it.”

“But the being on the receiving end of the furatus could still have access to their own mind?”

“They could,” Casimir chimed in. “Maybe it’s more like a witch’s compulsion spell. Would that be easier for you? Less of a risk?”

“Compulsions aren’t what I would call easy, but they don’t require so much power as they do finesse. They’re sort of like erasing a memory, only in reverse. You plant something and the person acts on it, yet they still have their full sense of self. If done correctly, they will believe the compulsion is an

original thought or act. For it to have the best chance of success, the compulsion can't be too far out of the spelled-one's character. The caster isn't usually involved for more than the time it takes to place the compulsion. They have no control over how things go after that. I could use one, but I would have no guarantee of how and when the compulsion would be acted upon, only a general range of time."

"So I was right?" Lyric declared more than asked. "This magic goes beyond mere influence and into literal puppet master territory."

"Yes. It's something I've never personally attempted because I've always believed it to be an appalling violation. Also, I might not even be capable of it. I'm working off of several conversations I overheard and—"

"And you trust in something you randomly overheard?" Phalen criticized without any real bite in his tone. "I know you're a walking lie detector but surely you have more to go on than that."

Absently, I wondered what it took to truly upset the comedic Shadow. The head of the Shadow Army had to have a ruthless streak in him somewhere to hold his position.

It would be heedful to give him some degree of confidence.

"I eavesdropped on a conversation between my mother and a younger witch whose grandmother was fae-Unseelie, if I recall correctly. Her grandfather was a Dianic witch. Apparently the witch's mother, whose ancestry was obviously similar to my own, had done something terrible and paid the ultimate price for it. I don't know the specifics of the crime, but I do know it involved her mixing her dyadic powers, which tend to fuel one another, to completely control someone powerful. Circe tried to get me to attempt it once, just to see if I could."

"I hope karma kicks her right in the va-jay-jay," Lyric muttered. "How did that great parenting decision go?"

“It didn’t. I staunchly refused and Father backed me up so it was dropped.”

Lyric placed her hand over her heart. “I cannot believe the universe paired Brokk with that female. I suppose it had to happen so you could be born, but still. She sounds like such a manipulative opportunist.”

“That’s because she is. And of course she wrote down the witch’s sad account for her own gain.” Many witches were like that, seeking and hoarding every bit of knowledge and power they could get their hands on, just in case it was ever needed.

“One day, she gave me her notes to read. I should have burned the cursed pages instead of throwing them back in her face after I’d poured over them. I thought it wise to at least know as much as she did. I know enough to give it a go, but that’s about it.”

Phalen stepped forward. “Well, there’s only one way to find out.” He spread his arms wide, grimacing. “Go ahead, Raven. Cast your woeful spell and make me your bitch.”

“Oh, I like that better than puppet,” Lyric approved. “We’ll call it the Bitch Spell. No. The Little Bitch Spell—LBS! Phalen is gonna get the LBS! It sounds like an acronym for a venereal disease. Ha! Wait,” she turned to me, “is there already a term for it?”

“Uh, *Violare Alium*. It literally means to violate another.”

“*Lame*. LBS is way better.”

“I—”

“Just go with it,” Draven interrupted. “It’s for the best.”

“I ... alright.”

Circe would die if she heard Lyric’s suggestion. I could picture her pompous face of contempt. I’d been on the receiving end of it enough the image was tattooed on my brain. Maybe I would call it LBS, after all.

“Phalen, are you sure you want to volunteer for this?” I asked. He was already wincing like he was braced for impact.

This may have been my awful idea, but I would never attempt it against his wishes.

“Yup. Let’s get this over with.”

I checked the Shadow Lord’s face for any sign of hesitation. Phalen was the commander of his army, after all, as well as his close friend.

“Give it a go,” Draven supported. “We’ll intervene if necessary”

I shoved past the last of my apprehension and closed my eyes. My mind reached for the memories holding what I needed, thumbing through them like pages in a book.

The hitch in the witch’s voice. Circe’s glib-tongued replies. The smell of the leather-bound book in my hands. Circe’s face when I launched it at her head.

Too far. I latched onto the scent of the notebook.

The soft texture of the cover. Yellowed pages rustling under my fingertips. The familiar slant of my mother’s script. Letters forming words ... Details came flooding back.

There!

Less than a page in length, the innocuous-looking paragraphs revealed their heinous secret. Now all I had to do was follow the instructions, and preferably not lose all self-respect in the process.

I imagined the source of both sides of my magics pouring into a single deep well, filling with white and gold liquids. I touched the surface, telling the supply what I needed—to be able to surround Phalen, to inundate his senses and his nervous system so they could both be bent to my will.

It bubbled in response. I pulled on that well of compounded power, just a little, until I was confident I had a firm grip.

My palms came up, directed at my target. Power swelled, flying out of the well and building as it traveled into my hands. I held it there, steadily pulling more and more from the source.

With each passing second, it became more difficult to draw. My head swam and left behind a wake of nausea. I needed to get my balance and bearings back.

I forced my eyes to open, right away seeing Phalen bathed in a soft light. Confused, I looked between us, confirming that I had not released anything into him.

“It’s your eyes,” Casimir explained, sounding like he was speaking through a tunnel. “They’re glowing. You’re emitting a lot of light all over.”

I accepted his observation and continued with the extraction. The well fought my hold and I yanked, shaking with the strain of it, hauling more. My hands became balls of white fire. I quaked from head to toe. Wetness trickled from my eyes and nose. Then my ears.

Unable to remain upright, I dropped to one knee. Scuffling arose in the background of my awareness. I fell down into a deep hole, down to the bottom of the well, picking up only echoes of my surroundings. I looked down. An inch of that gilded fluid was all that remained.

Hmm ...

“Stab her,” a deep voice ordered.

“Not yet. Release it, Raven. Quickly!” another shouted.

A flood of impassioned emotion coursed through the mate bond, busting through the false reality I’d created inside my head.

“Fucking release it now!” my mate roared.

I unleashed the concentrated reserve and collapsed to all fours, coughing and fighting for air. Someone lightly touched the center of my back.

“Just breathe,” Lyric whispered. “Draven won’t release Cas until he calms down, which will happen sooner if he sees you’re not dying on him.”

“Not dying,” I rasped on the next exhale. “I depleted ... too fast.”

“Oh, really? You didn’t tap into your life force at all? Just some energy?” Lyric pushed, cynicism coating every word. The female kept her hand on my back while she continued berating me.

“You can’t bullshit a bullshitter, Raven. Every hole on your head is bleeding, including your eyes. It’s freaky as shit. You’re lucky it’s not blood that makes me gag during this pregnancy or I’d be hurling my lunch all over the place, probably aiming for you as payback.”

Lowering to sit my rear end upon my heels, I wiped across the tender skin under my lashes. Dark red smears stained my fingers.

That’s a first.

Lyric’s fingers moved to the artery in my neck. “Your pulse seems okay and I don’t sense anything to panic over. You look pale and puny, but you’re not in any danger. Do you want Casimir?”

My eyes widened and she laughed.

“To come closer, you freak.”

It was then I saw the two demons across the way. Draven was on his back in the pebbled dirt. Casimir was also on his back, but instead of lying on the ground, his back was on top of Draven’s chest. The Shadow Lord had Casimir’s arms in a full-nelson hold and his legs wrapped tightly around his waist.

The look-alike cousins were glaring up at the sky, mouths pinched tight and faces red. They looked like two younglings who got caught fighting by their mother. Or maybe a stercus beetle stuck on its back.

A startled laugh escaped my throat. Then another. Then an outbreak. Two male heads lifted in my direction.

“No offense, girl,” Lyric grimaced, “but you look creepy as shit braying like that with all that blood on you. Have you ever seen one of those horror movies they have in Earth Realm? Or even know what a movie is? Or maybe heard of a psychologist?”

Laughing even harder, my obliques cramped. *Accursed Aether!* Did someone suck all the oxygen out of the atmosphere?

I snorted, surprising myself, which made me snort again. My cheeks started to hurt and I fell over to the side, holding my ribs. Luckily, I soon felt the cathartic release of endorphins merging with the magic in my bloodstream.

“Shit. Mr. Overlord?,” Lyric called out to Draven. “I think she’s lost it. Or maybe she’s having a seizure. Let her mate come over here and fix it. I’m crazy but this is starting to weird me out.”

Casimir tapped his cousin’s arm and was immediately released. He was at my side in an instant, checking me over, wiping away what he could. My guffaws melted, reduced to random tremors under his inspection.

Thankfully Casimir didn’t try to get me to stand. He sat on the ground and pulled me onto his lap, situating me sideways.

“Whatever that was,” he softly spoke against my temple, “I didn’t like it. I don’t want you to do it again.”

“The maniacal laughing or the other thing?”

My joke fell flat. The concern on his face remained.

“Is that an order?” I asked.

“If I recall correctly, giving you orders results in me being on the receiving end of your firepower. So no, it’s not an order. I’d very much like my balls to remain as they are. I’m simply making my opinion known.”

“Are you listening to your cousin, Big Guy? You should take some notes,” smirked Lyric. Draven rumbled something in reply and she blew him a kiss.

I leaned into Casimir’s chest, tucking my head under his chin. “If I do it again, I know where to stop. It got a little away from me.”

“You think?” he huffed.

“Lyric wouldn’t have let me keep going.”

His embrace tightened. “I know but it isn’t making me feel better. At least you didn’t have to get stabbed, even though you look like you did.”

Draven walked over and squatted in front of us. “You look like shit warmed over. Worse, actually, but since lying is quite a challenge for you, we’ll trust you really do know where to stop next time.”

Casimir growled but I didn’t have the energy to be offended. I knew I looked exactly like the mess Draven described and my mate had every right to be rattled. Luckily, I didn’t feel any alarm or anger through the bond.

The Shadow Lord held out a dark cloth he must have had hidden away in a pocket.

I readily accepted the offering. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Do you have enough in you to finish?”

“Finish?” I wiped at my face.

“You still have to do something with that.”

One more swipe at my eyes and I looked up to see the Shadow Lord pointing at Phalen. I dropped the bloody rag.

Dearest Danaus, what had I done?

‡ ‡ ‡

Kree removed her hands from my shoulders. “Better?” she asked.

“Much. Thank you.”

“Anytime.”

Draven had returned to Embour to find Kree so she could tend to my supposed injuries. They both arrived here via a Kree-made portal. She’d walked through the magical passage offering me a smile and a canteen full of water.

More importantly, she brought a soft towel and helped me clean off most of the blood that had begun crusting on my skin

and hairline. My clothes, however, were a lost cause and something to be dealt with later.

Kree could feel that my energies and their reserves were nearly depleted. She shot me up with her remarkable powers and offered to stay close by.

“Okay now that Ray-Ray is all better, what do we do with Robot Boy here?”

Cringe.

“Ray-Ray, Lyric?” I was learning that Lyric handed out nicknames almost as often as insults. Most of them I liked.

“Give it time,” she grinned, “and try to focus on Robot Boy.”

“Right. Robot Boy.”

I approached Phalen, both concerned and fascinated by his listless face. The others moved with me, forming a semicircle around the Shadow Army Commander.

The unblinking lifeless doll made it difficult to believe it was the same demon who told me to make him my bitch. The ever present twinkle in his eye was gone, as was the nearly permanent stretch of the corners of his mouth.

Troubled, I placed two fingers under the side of his jaw to make sure the most critical part of him was functioning. A strong, steady beat pulsed through his veins.

“I already checked his vitals, Raven. Everything’s good. Strong even,” Kree stated with confidence. “I’ll monitor him so you don’t have to split your attention.”

“Smart,” Lyric commended and I gave an appreciative smile.

Draven poked at Phalen’s arm. “Are you expending any energy holding him in this state?”

“Some. Nothing like earlier, though. It’s ... it’s like I’ve connected to him. Once I was able to subdue his magic I somehow formed a link or bridge, maybe?”

“Like a bond?” Casimir asked.

“No. This feels nothing like a bond. This will sound odd, but it feels more like I’ve tethered him to me. Or maybe collared and leashed him is a better description? I can’t read Phalen at all, but I feel the urge to maneuver the leash, like he’s—”

“A dog?” Lyric threw out.

The Otherland didn’t have the same domesticated animals that other realms had, but we did have canine breeds of similar origin as Earth Realm. Though, the analogy was wrong.

“Ah, no, like he’s an extension. Sorry, I’m not articulating this well. Essentially, I have the urge to move the leash.”

“Well,” Draven started, taking a big step back, closer to Lyric, “let’s see what happens when you tug on it.”

My palms dampened and I absently rubbed them on the front of my pants. I let my witch’s eye out assuming I’d see some sort of link extending from me to Phalen.

The only line of connection in front of me was the one that led to Casimir. I blinked. Shallow, but distinct grooves appeared every few inches—like the outline of a chain.

That shouldn’t be possible.

Quickly, I shut off that part of my sight. We weren’t here for that, warm and tingly as it made me feel inside to see.

I sank back into my mind. Not into the well, but on its periphery. All around was a dark fog. A subtle light winked beyond the haze.

Pursing my lips, I blew what air I had in my lungs out towards the light. The murky fog split and a faint, ashen trail of magic was revealed. It stretched from my feet across to the twinkling light which no longer looked quite so far away.

There you are.

Concentrating on the imaginary tether of power, I pulled. Phalen, stiff as a board, fell forward. Casimir caught him before he hit the ground and set him upright.

“Not a problem. Keep trying,” he encouraged.

Tugging on the leash wasn't the way. So what was? Circe's notes weren't specific on this piece of the spell.

Bind the will, command the vessel.

Maybe it wasn't a leash at all. *Command* was a one-way directive, from the spellcaster *to* the vessel. A push without touch. A rod or stick to prod. I imagined several options until settling on one that felt right.

The connection would be more of a flexible, hollow tube instead of a leash, one I could send information and magic through in a single direction. Like a hose. The invisible magics adjusted to the mental image. On an exhale, my eyes opened. I dispatched a "message."

Phalen blew a raspberry at Lyric who gasped in offense.

"That was you?" Casimir questioned.

"It was. Should I try something else?"

"Yes," the entire group answered mechanically, donning identical enthralled expressions as they gawked at Phalen.

And I was the freak?

I repeated the process and watched as the Commander of the Shadow Army curtsied and batted his eyelashes. Then he twirled and lifted up a phantom skirt. Despite the comical movements matching his personality, I didn't feel good about forcing them upon him.

"I am *so* jealous of you right now," Lyric whispered. "Make him say something."

My mouth opened without sound thanks to the dithering organ inside my skull.

"Never fear your own powers," Kree advised sagely. "You have them for a reason."

Teeth pressing down onto my bottom lip, my brain finally got back in the game. "Forcing words out of him bothers me more than the physical movements."

"He understood what he was doing when he volunteered," Draven quietly argued. "Whatever happens, he will never hold

it against you. None of us will.”

My cheeks warmed. *What to do with said volunteer?*

When Phalen began hopping on both feet and singing an old Seelie tune about the mating habits of pooka rabbits, Lyric bounced on her toes in delight.

“Best magic ever!” she cheered.

“Well, at least I can entertain you with it.”

Unexpectedly, my skin prickled. A foreign presence was at the edge of the gulley to the west. A male solidified, too far away to see his face, close enough to tell he was in full Shadow Army tactical gear.

“Something’s happened,” Casimir assumed. “They were ordered to stay away from this area.” He shifted into shadow form and jetted off towards the visitor.

“Damn it. Stay here, all of you,” Draven ordered, flying after his cousin.

Lyric came closer. “Release him,” she urged in a low tone. “I think he’s here for Phalen.”

Kree put a hand on Phalen’s arm. “What’s going on?”

“I don’t know but that’s one of our veteran army scouts who rarely shows himself.”

Ignoring the dread making itself at home inside my gut, I cut the pipeline to my captive. The magic snapped like a rubber band and crashed into my chest, knocking me off my feet.

For the love of Leucetius!

I sat up, only a few feet from where I’d been, rubbing the back of my head. I blinked at the sight of Phalen sagging to the ground, tears streaming down his face.

“Not good,” I blurted.

“Yeah, no shit,” Lyric laughed, holding out her hand to me as Kree began inspecting my skull.

“Just a goose egg,” she declared. “You’ll heal in a few minutes.”

I pushed myself up to my feet, careful not to allow Lyric to pull much of my weight. “Yeah, my head isn’t what I was worried about,” I panted. My damned adrenaline was spiking.

“Oh?” Kree looked at me with concern.

Lyric leaned closer. “What is it?”

I pointed and the sisters turned.

“Oh shit!” Lyric yelled.

Kree was beside Phalen in an instant with Lyric only two waddles behind. Both were speaking in low murmurs, gently rubbing his back. I approached slowly, careful not to startle him.

I didn’t know what to do. *Did I break his mind?*

Draven and Casimir appeared behind Phalen. A hint of the Shadow Lord’s magic released. His mouth tightened. “We need to get him to the infirmary.”

“I’ll take him,” Casimir said and bent to help his friend up from the ground.

“I’ll come with you,” I offered, knowing it was my fault Phalen was in this state.

“No, you won’t,” Casimir contended.

“Why not?”

“You just aren’t.”

“Because of the, ah, *issue* with ghosting a non-Shadow? I most likely can handle it since my magic can counter the shift.”

“I’m not ghosting anywhere, but that’s the least of our problems, Little Bird.”

“And why is that?”

“Because,” Draven answered before Casimir, “there’s a group of royal emissaries at our border, seeking an audience with the Shadow Lord as soon as possible.”

Oxygen depleted from the space around me. Anxiety wrapped itself around my throat. I unconsciously pooled power into my palms.

“Which border?” Lyric questioned, scowling at my hands.

“The one with the Faelands.”



Chapter 23

Raven

“Neither Sersha nor Malcolm are in the traveling party,” Draven relayed, “though the emissaries are all wearing the Queen’s royal emblem and look more like soldiers than diplomats.”

Lyric punched a fist into her palm. “It’s too bad Queen Sucks-a-lot and her Ass-wart aren’t with them. I would really like to meet the lovely couple.”

“I would prefer it if you never came in contact with either of them,” I voiced, fortunate my anxiety had dialed back. “She’s a conniving snake who is not only unworthy of being in your presence, she simply can’t be trusted in any capacity.”

“But Ray-Ray, don’t you know the best part of playing with snakes is when you get to cut off their heads?”

Kree’s temporary portal crackled and Casimir stepped through. I caught a glimpse of Hugo leaning over Phalen before the portal closed behind him. My mate came to my side, tension bulging his muscles.

“Is Phalen okay?” I asked.

“Hugo assured me he’ll be fine. He’s resting, but we can visit and talk with him later.”

The boulder sitting on my chest shrank but failed to disappear completely. I wasn’t looking forward to apologizing. How does one make up for taking away another’s free will anyway?

Draven uncrossed his arms. “I’m going to leisurely walk Lyric and Kree back to Embour and enjoy delaying the assholes even further. As far as anyone knows, the three of us went for a long stroll so Lyric could get some fresh air and stretch her legs. Once we get settled, I’ll have Kree open a

small portal so we can speak to the fae without having them inside our walls.”

Lyric’s brow furrowed. “You’re not letting the shitstains inside Embour?”

“No. Not unless they have an *extremely* compelling reason like legitimately needing access to the Primus Crossing for an emergency. Even then, I’ll probably decline. It’s too coincidental. Besides, I’m not known for being kind to visitors when they attempt to cross our border unannounced.”

“Those dickturds tried to sneak into our territory?” her voice climbed, dagger hand on the hilt of the blade sheathed at her hip.

The front of the weapons belt was partially hidden by her belly, but she’d figured out how to make everything accessible on it. Her Shadow Blade nickname seemed apt.

“Almost. They anchored their boat just past Broad Bend, right at the boundary. They sat for a couple of hours on the upper deck, watching the river and the woods. When they began extending the gangway, Cash made himself visible.”

“Who’s Cash?” I inquired.

“The Shadow who came here to tell us what happened. He’s on one of our few cloaking teams. They were watching the boat in case it decided to cross. Cash had orders to secure the river and report any activity from the Faelands directly to Phalen as quickly and quietly as possible.”

Casimir took my hand. “They won’t get anywhere near you.”

“We won’t allow that to happen,” Draven seconded. “As an added precaution, I don’t want either of you anywhere near Embour until we’ve dealt with them.”

“So what should we do?” I asked the Shadow Lord.

“You two are going to Solar House.”

“Solar House?”

“You’ll love it,” Lyric insisted. “It’s a safe place away from Embour where no one will be able to sense you. Bonus is the fact it’s extremely well-protected and hardly anyone knows about it. You can’t reach it on foot, anyway, not once you get within a mile of it.”

“You want me to hide while you run interference?”

“Duh,” she ribbed.

“Trust us to handle the fae, at least for tonight,” Draven insisted. “We’ll send extra teams out to keep an eye on things in the area surrounding Solar House so you can relax. Can you agree to that much?”

The ingrained tendency to refuse assistance would be a hard habit to break. I didn’t want to be the fool who constantly fought the offer of a helping hand at every turn, not when I knew I would offer the same in return if given the chance. Besides, I wasn’t ready to face my enemies quite yet.

“It’s probably for the best if I’m nowhere near any fae at this point in time. I’ll go with Casimir and let you handle it.”

“I know that wasn’t easy for you to agree to,” Draven recognized. “Thank you for remembering we’re on your side and will always be on your side.”

It was perturbing how difficult it was to simply accept what they so readily offered. Not one of them had expressed any degree of falsity since my arrival. Surely I’d be over this reaction soon.

“It takes strength to accept support,” Lyric supplied. “Even badass bitches need a hand sometimes, right Kree?”

Kree nodded resolutely. “Unquestionably. Badass bitches can do hard things, even if that hard thing is relying on others.”

The curse words coming from Kree were forced and incredibly endearing. Lyric winked, erasing the awkwardness.

“Now that’s settled,” Draven lowered and drew out his intonation, “would you two prefer for Kree to open a portal to Solar House or are you two ghosting there?”

A vivid image of option two planted itself front and center in my brain. Skin. Hands. The weight of Casimir's body. Suddenly, avoiding Embour seemed like the greatest idea ever.

For the love of Lyssa. Mercurial may as well have been my new nickname. Though, it was better than Ray-Ray.

I needed to deal with this lusty bond. Some naked time, as Lyric had so baldly put it, might be the best way to calm it down.

Casimir lifted an eyebrow. I mirrored his expression in challenge, pretending my entire head wasn't turning bright red for everyone to see. Hopefully they'd walk away before scenting my arousal.

"Good choice. You two go spend some quality time alone together and we'll see you at breakfast." Draven took Lyric's hand, drawing her towards the path.

"Or maybe you two will need to sleep in late," she wagged her eyebrows at us over her shoulder.

Neither of us responded.

"I'll check on Phalen and make sure he's right as rain before you return," Kree pledged, squeezing my shoulder on her way to catch up with her sister.

We watched quietly until the three of them made it out of the basin. As soon as the last of them disappeared into the forest, Casimir spun me around, pulling me close.

My forehead rested at the center of his sternum and I impulsively inhaled. The tantalizing scent filled my lungs and infiltrated my very cells.

Warm fingers lifted my chin. Immovable under the inspection of such desirous eyes, my soul nearly lept out of my chest.

Knowing hands slid down my sides and over my hips, resting a moment. Then he bent and hoisted me up into his arms.

"Ready, Little Bird?" he hummed, rubbing his nose against mine.

“Ready,” I echoed breathily.

“I’m going to ghost us the entire way to Solar House. It will take too long to walk and, as Lyric said, we can’t finish the last leg on foot anyway.”

“Sounds like a great plan,” I murmured against his ear, nibbling on the lobe.

I licked the rim of his ear and his torso vibrated. I needed more of that. More of him. I kissed him hard.

“Raven—”

“Shh. Less talking.”

His chest shook against mine. When his lips parted to form more words, I went for his tongue. Casimir met my strokes, kissing me like I was his sole supply of oxygen.

A hand near the crease of my backside furred closer to my heated center. Fingertips flexed. The erotic pressure on the seam covering my slit was a dark promise of things to come.

“I’m going to fuck you as soon as we get there.”

Oh, yes, please! I tightened my limbs around him.

“Raven?”

“Mmm?” My tongue traversed the column of his throat and his fingers dug in further.

“Did you hear me?”

“I heard you and I think you’d better get moving.”

Preoccupied, I hardly noticed when his power altered us both into murky apparitions, nearly undetectable in the fading light.

We sped out of the valley and into the forest in the opposite direction of Embour. Enormous trees whizzed by and I stopped trying to kiss his mouth so he could see where he was going.

The novelty of being nothing more than shadow hardly interested me. I could marvel at it some other time.

I couldn't keep my hands from exploring. Nothing would distract me from my task. I needed to touch him everywhere, to feel his heavy erection in my hand, to guide it to where I needed it most.

Holding onto his neck with my left arm, I let my right wander down his chest and over his stomach. Taut muscles under my touch reminded me how strong and powerful this male was.

When I hit the buckle of his belt, I pulled on the strap and worked the accursed contraption until it was open. I managed to get the button of his pants undone with one hand. The zipper was more of a struggle.

His voice came out low and rumbly when he asked, "What are you doing, Little Bird?"

"Unwrapping a gift," I quipped, carelessly tugging at his fly.

Casimir chuckled darkly. Invisible powers pressed against my legs, sliding under my clothing and against my skin. Like hot coils come to life, they slithered across my chest, around my back, and down to my center.

My eyes closed, embracing the sensations, anticipating where this was headed. His pleasure-inducing powers brought me to life, turning me into a wanton creature.

I bucked. I pleaded. I demanded friction, release, anything to feed this ravenous craving. Casimir had other ideas.

The Shadow rotated my body so my back was to his front. I might not be able to see him, but I could feel every inch of his soul sliding against mine, feel his strong body doing the same. The coils wrapped like vines, securing us together.

His chin rested on my shoulder, putting his mouth right at my ear. "You have no idea," he whispered, hands deftly undoing the front of my leathers, "how hard it is to keep my hands off of you, every second I'm with you, to refrain from pleasuring you just to watch you fall apart and ensure you're prepared for the fucking I'm going to give you."

The fabric of my tunic twisted and then tore in half. My bra met the same fate. Casimir's shadowy magic coated my breasts, rubbing and kneading erotically, keeping away the chill of the air as we flew.

"You consume my thoughts." His teeth bit the tendon at my lower neck causing me to moan. "I'm going to act out every dirty fantasy my mind has been torturing me with. Starting now."

His dark pledge rang in my ears sparking my own imagination. Coils pulled my legs further apart while the brawny male ripped my leathers in half down the seam between my legs. He left the small slip of silky underwear intact. Talented fingers slid over the soft fabric in long, leisurely strokes.

"These are deliciously wet," he praised, "but, sadly, in the way."

Hooking his fingers around the fabric of the crotch, he yanked, popping the threads holding the garment together. A finger pressed firmly down on my clit at the same time a hot ghostly limb entered my channel and held tortuously still.

Casimir had me impossibly secured, prohibiting movement. My blood pressure skyrocketed with frustration. I made sure he felt my exasperation through the bond.

He ground his cock into my backside. "More?"

"Gods, yes," I all but begged.

The magical phallus slowly glided in and out. The phantoms attending to my torso pulled at my nipples while their master kissed and scraped his teeth on my neck.

It was indecent and naughty and better than anything I'd ever experienced. I felt an awakening while in his invisible embrace—a proliferation of passion that would change me forever.

"I want so badly to lower my zipper and slip inside your tight heat right now."

"Do it," I encouraged.

“Not yet.”

“Why not?” I mewled.

“Because the first time I’m inside you I need to see your face,” he told me, increasing the speed and pressure of everything he had touching me.

Arms and hands and fingers. Teeth and lips. Those wonderfully aggressive magic appendages.

He was elevating every sensation, winding me up so tight I would surely explode any second. My eyes began to water and I realized I had been holding my breath.

When Casimir pinched my engorged flesh, I gasped. Masterful fingers held me between pleasure and pain while his coating of magics rubbed and massaged every ounce of skin.

It was too much and not enough at the same time.

With zero awareness of the world speeding by, I rode the wave of mindless pleasure he was extracting from my body. My eyes fluttered as I was consumed by a release so powerful I couldn’t even scream. Instead, I sobbed as my muscles convulsed, insides straining.

The magical limb vanished and soft, firm hands replaced it with a soothing touch. He was still kissing and sucking on the pulse point at the base of my neck. I could feel the fierce length of his erection against my backside.

I didn’t care if we reached Solar House right now. I was ready to pull him back into the woods and let him make good on that promise he’d made while I was pinned to a tree.

Casimir ended my fantasy abruptly by shifting us in a stutter of speed. We were flying up, not forward. My vision came back into focus only to be greeted by a wall of onyx within an arm’s length.

If I’d had more air, I might have screamed.

We were racing up the side of a mountain. Despite our speed, I could make out the varied striations branching through the rock. It had to be the stone used to build Embour.

Casimir's hips rocked into me in sync with his hands' frantic pace. I forgot about the mountain and twisted enough to kiss the flesh under his jaw.

Suddenly the world became pitch black as we were compressed and stretched, but not uncomfortably so. We passed through the wall of a spell. Before I could panic, we emerged through a small opening into a dimly lit room.

I caught a glimpse of an enormous bed right before we entered the bathroom. We passed through another spell then came to a halt. As soon as we landed, water shot out from the shower head.

Instinctively, I tensed, waiting to be hit with an icy spray. Casimir chuckled and moved us under the stream. We solidified under the already heated water.

When my feet hit the shower floor, I looked down. The water was a disturbing shade of dark pink. I gulped.

I'd forgotten about the blood.

Casimir brought me back to the present. His fingers and shadows made short work of ridding me of what was left of my clothing. The garments fell away and landed with a wet thud. I turned in his arms and watched in fascination as he did the same to himself.

He kept his hands on my body the entire time. At no point did some part of his skin not touch mine. We stood completely bare, palms on one another but nothing else in contact.

"Remove your hands from my chest, Raven."

"Why?"

"Because as soon as you do, I'm going to lift mine from your waist. The moment we break our connection is the moment the haze will be strongest."

Leaning forward, I kissed one of the glyphs on his tattooed flesh. The muscle under the ink tensed.

"Are we not already feeling the haze from ghosting?"

"No. That's just the mutual attraction between us."

I found that hard to believe. This was so far beyond mutual attraction I couldn't come up with a name for it. Whatever it was called, it was burning me from the inside out.

“Why are you warning me? I seem to recall a promise from you regarding our arrival. Or have you already forgotten?”

His gaze was like molten silver, lustrous and glittering. Shadow magic danced around, dimming the room and skirting our skin. I doubted I could be turned on any more than I already was.

Casimir pushed gently until I was flat against the stone wall. I dropped my arms, holding my palms to the wall near each hip. The next move was up to him.

Time seemed to slow down as we stood there, gazes locked, our connection palpable. The temperature rose from the heat of our lust.

I trembled, ready to demand he take the leap to claim me in the most primitive of ways. The anticipation was going to bring me to my knees.

The witch inside unfurled from her slumber, contemplating the merits of taking control of things to get what she wanted.

His eyes narrowed slightly and a birring scraped down our bond warning me of exactly who was in control. Amazingly, nothing in me bristled at the notion.

I must have subconsciously communicated whatever Casimir was waiting on because his hands squeezed then released in a flash. His arms lifted out to his sides like he was an offering.

An offering for me and me alone.

A delicious flame ignited instantly, burning its way through my veins. My heart thundered causing my chest to heave. My channel swelled in carnal anticipation. It was the sweetest of tortures.

I looked down to his jutting erection, hard and purpleing from the amount of blood feeding his desire. He took himself

in hand and confidently stroked his length once. Twice. On the third a bead of liquid bubbled at the tip.

Groaning, I licked my lips and widened my stance.

He inhaled sharply, still stroking himself as he stared intently between my legs. My hips thrust forward into the space between us, seeking relief.

“Casimir,” I whispered. “*Please.*”

He inched closer. Slowly. Far too slowly.

I needed him to close the distance, to join us as one. I was empty and needed him to fill me up. Approaching the point of desperation, I sent all the licentious cravings I was feeling across our bond.

Casimir grunted, slapping both palms against the wall on either side of my head. I considered reaching for the enlarged shaft bobbing between us.

“Who am I?” he growled, arms shaking with restraint.

“Casimir,” I whispered.

“Try again.”

My lungs filled with a deep inhale. I could taste the sexual need exuding from both our bodies. The heady combination torched any hesitancy I may have had left.

“My mate.”

Featherlight, knuckles skimmed my mound. “Who does this wet little quim belong to?”

“You.”

Dragging his arm higher, he settled his palm on my breast. “And this?”

“You.”

Fingernails carefully scraped up my chest until his palm settled over my heart. “And you? Who do you belong to?” he demanded.

My pulse thundered. His fingernails pressed into my chest without breaking the skin, silently demanding an answer. I was

suffocating. Not from his hold but from my own agony that we had yet to join.

I didn't need air. I need him.

"Raven."

"You," I rasped. "I belong to you."

"Don't ever forget it."

Shadows jerked me off the ground, lifting my body to align with his. Casimir lowered his hand and swiped a thumb down my slit. Shoots of magic sprouted forth from the very heart of me, something I had no idea was possible.

I might have been embarrassed but his guttural groan coaxed more slickness onto his fingertips. He was killing me, burning me to ashes, and I was going to let him.

Paralyzed with want, I waited. Never breaking eye contact, his hand rose to his lips, sucking on the fingers covered in my essence. A deep hum of male satisfaction reverberated from his throat.

He swallowed. I watched in awe as my mate's control snapped. Urgently, Casimir positioned himself at my entrance and slammed deep in one sure, powerful stroke.

I cried out and his lips slammed into mine, brazenly taking. He distracted me with his mouth, allowing me a moment to adjust to the fullness. Strong arms slid around my back, holding tight.

"Mine," he snarled, ending the kiss.

Something about all his alpha possessiveness got to me in a way I'd never admit aloud.

"More," I ordered.

Fingers pressed into my bottom and held me in place as he began driving into my heat. I swung my arms around his neck, grabbing at his short hair to help me hold on for dear life.

His thrusts hit all the right places, like he was perfectly designed for my pleasure. The slapping sounds of our bodies echoed off stone accompanied by our winded heaving.

Teeth bit into my shoulder. My walls tightened and flexed, my nails dug into his back.

“*Raven*,” Casimir grunted, my name a seductive benediction on his tongue.

Soon he was hammering relentlessly into my core. There were no words to describe how good he felt inside of me.

“Please!” I begged, hoping he’d have mercy on me.

No mercy was bestowed.

He slammed into me again and again, giving me all he had. I would have fallen to the floor and broken apart into a million pieces if not for the strength of his arms around me.

Incoherent sounds escaped my mouth, matching the fervent intensity of our chaotic coupling. We were rapidly hurtling towards the sublime, so close I could nearly touch it.

I cursed aloud and raked my nails down his gorgeous chest.

My demon mate grunted again, then slowed the pace. I whined and a wicked smile spread across his face causing me to groan in frustration.

“Tell me what you need,” he ordered, holding me on the edge of oblivion.

“You know *exactly* what I need,” I hissed.

“I can do this all night,” he taunted with shallow pumps to prove his point. “Say it, Raven.”

“Damn you!”

“Wrong. Answer.” He punctuated each word with a teasing thrust.

Sparks of magic sizzled between us, tiny taunts of the inferno wanting to break free. His masculine laugh tightened my belly, reigniting my hunger. I was so close. So very, very close.

Thrust.

“*Casimir*,” I pleaded, upset over this new leisurely pace.

Thrust.

“Give me more.” This time it was a demand. It didn’t work.

Thrust.

“More what?” he asked.

Thrust. Thrust.

“Of that,” I sighed.

“More cock?”

Thrust. Pause. Thrust.

“Is that all you need, Little Bird?”

The thrusts stopped completely and my dual sides both lost their patience. Electric crackles popped around the confined space, lighting us up in the dark like a comet in the night sky.

Gripping the sides of his head, I held us nose-to-nose.

“I need more of *your* cock, more of *your* hands, more of *your* kisses, more of whatever of yours in the goddess’s name you will give me—and I need it now!”

“You need my body or—”

I slapped him none-too-lightly then kissed the shocked look right off his face. I was done with this game. “*You*, you idiot! I need *you*.”

My mate bellowed a low, sonorous note up to the heavens and the world faded away. I felt his erection swell and my feminine muscles responded in kind.

Magic flickered around our bodies, a soft breeze cycling into a raging storm. The enchanting song hid our surroundings in a twirling black shroud. The only light was the incandescent glow of our skin as my power glinted and arced from me into him.

Casimir left no space between our bodies, pushing into me as though he could burrow under my skin. We clung to one another like the world might try to tear us apart.

Our souls entwined in a loving embrace, juxtaposed with the feral behavior of our bodies. As savagely as he was taking me, it was just as beautiful and emotive.

Casimir adjusted the angle of his pelvis, hitting the exact right spot. I gasped and he lifted his head.

“Look at me, Raven.”

I looked. And I saw raw emotion shining back at me.

The back of my eyes burned. I blinked rapidly and then squeezed them shut. I channeled everything I was feeling into that brewing storm, pushing it down to where it could be released.

“Give me your eyes, love.”

Unable to ignore the heartfelt bidding of his voice, I did as the demon commanded. I watched in fascination as he read me—my body—like an open book. He miraculously figured out exactly what I needed.

Then he gave it to me.

Collaring my throat gently, Casimir held me with only the tiniest hint of pressure. If he'd squeezed—no, those memories would not ruin this for us.

The front of his pubic bone rocked and ground exquisitely into the bundle of nerves of my sex. The fluttering built exponentially fast. My entire body tensed, muscles clamped down forcefully as I hurled towards climax.

Heavenly Hedone!

A heavy feeling settled in my groin as I clenched and released. He ground in deeper, each thrust long and drawn out. His cock grew impossibly harder, the base bulging.

I convulsed, moaning and pleading with him to let go. “Come with me,” I demanded.

I'd never felt as powerful as I did at that moment. Never felt so cherished or wanted. I reveled in the skill of the male who took me to such a high place.

Casimir growled, shifted his angle, and fucked me harder. He surged inside of me with a roar. The room filled with our cries as he filled my sex with his seed repeatedly.

I clung to him as he came, reveling in the feel of his body as it reacted to mine. On a final grunt, his jerks finally halted. Slowly, our muscles relaxed and our breaths evened out.

Eventually, Casimir pulled out and steadied me on my feet. I felt the absence almost as acutely as I felt his presence. I tried to reach for him again, but he denied me.

Soft, full lips brushed mine before he said, “I will wash you, then take you to bed.”

I considered arguing but then rational thought returned. I let him wash me thoroughly, from head to toe. When I returned the favor, toying impishly with my touches, I found myself up against the shower wall once again.

Which was exactly where I wanted to be.



Chapter 24

Casimir

Fractured beams from the sun came in through the skylight directly above, reflecting off Raven's dark silky strands. Even in sleep, with her mouth parted adorably, she was beautiful.

I'd been watching her sleep peacefully in my arms for a short time when she began to stir. Sleepily, her eyes fluttered, finding mine right away.

"Good morning," she greeted hoarsely, then cleared her throat. "I seem to be losing my voice. I wonder why that is."

I smiled, unrepentant. "I can't say I'm sorry for that because I'm not."

I'd kept her up most of the night, neither of us able to slake our thirst. Eventually, exhaustion took over and we crashed in a heap of tangled limbs on the bed.

"It wasn't a complaint," she teased. Her fingertips traced my tattoo, something my mate seemed to like doing.

I tensed reflexively when she touched one of the moon glyphs woven into the design. It was the one closest to my heart.

"Why do you have these?" she asked.

"The tattoo or the specific glyph?"

"I know many Shadow demons who have gone into battle have their skin marked from the neck down, but I'm not aware of any of them incorporating symbols like these."

Taking a breath, I debated what I would tell her. I didn't talk about my past. Though, if I couldn't be open with my mate then I could hardly expect the same from her.

Raven lifted up to her elbow, tapping on one of the marks on the front of my shoulder. “I don’t know much, but I know this is the mark for death. Why is it on you?”

“Because that’s what I am.”

“What does that mean?”

My chest rose, oxygen filling my system. “I was the Shadow Lord’s assassin. For many years as we clawed our way out from under an oppressive ruler, I was who Draven sent out to secretly eliminate enemies.”

“Why you?”

“Because I was good at it. We rationalized it would save lives to take out the worst of them without having to meet on the battlefield.”

Raven searched my face. I couldn’t hold her eyes for long, so I looked up to the ceiling, waiting for her judgment.

“That’s smart. I’m sure you saved many lives, on both sides.”

My eyes flew to hers. “Raven, I *murdered* beings at their most vulnerable. Do not make it sound noble when it is so very far from it.”

Raven’s expression remained steady, her eyes softening with understanding. “I’m not trying to make it sound noble. But you did what you thought was necessary at the time, and I’m sure it weighed heavily on you. I don’t judge you for what you had to do.”

I let out a long breath, feeling a weight lift off my shoulders. “Thank you,” I whispered, pulling her closer to me.

We lay in silence for a while, the only sounds being our breathing. I ran my fingers through Raven’s hair, feeling her relax against me.

“Can I ask you something?” she murmured, breaking the silence.

“Of course.”

Her voice was barely above a whisper. “Do you still carry out those orders for Draven?”

The question hit me like a punch to the gut. “Draven hasn’t ordered me to take a life since well before the war ended. In fact, even during that time, he’d made it very clear he would send someone else. I refused each time he offered. Draven didn’t make those decisions lightly or on his own. The Council all chose to bear the responsibility. I was just the one to carry them out. As I performed my duties, I added glyphs to represent each life I’d taken.”

Raven inspected the tattoo from the tip at my neck to the branches down my arm and side. There were seventy-two glyphs in all.

“What do the others mean?” she asked.

I took her hand and brought it to my hip, pushing her fingertip down on the symbol there. “Blood.”

With my hand over hers, I moved to each and stated their meaning. “Power. Sword. Righteousness. Revenge ...”

One by one, I shared the words I’d marked upon my flesh so I would never forget what I’d done. When I stopped, Raven’s warm hand hovered over my heart, above the only glyph I didn’t name.

“What does this one mean?”

“Hope.”

She moved to get a better look at it. “This one was added last?” she assumed.

I shook my head. “No. Hope came first. Without it I wouldn’t have the rest.”

The way she looked at me, with such understanding and compassion, made me feel like I could share more.

“I didn’t just kill our enemies,” I continued. “I killed some of our own soldiers, too. The ones who betrayed us or did things to make it easy for the former Shadow Lord to carry out his atrocities. And a few whose only crime was their inability to keep their mouths shut and continuously put our army in

harm's way because of it. Draven trusted me to make many of those decisions for our own demons. And I did."

I could feel Raven's hand shaking slightly against my skin, but she didn't pull away. "Casimir," she whispered. "That's a heavy burden to carry."

"Someone had to."

Raven's sad smile made my skin prickle.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"That's how I feel about this mess with Sersha. Someone has to be the one to do something."

Gripping the back of her head, I brought her lips to mine. "I know, Little Bird. But now you have me to share in that burden."

"Why do you look so happy about that?"

My shoulders lifted. "I'm happy to share anything and everything with you. Burdens. Hopes. Dreams."

I leaned up again and nipped her lip. "Naked time."

Raven smirked then bit my pectoral flirtatiously and my cock twitched. "Careful, mate, or I'll think it's an invitation."

One of her eyebrows lifted. "For what?"

"For whatever it is I think you need."

Ever so slowly, Raven lowered her mouth down to my skin and bared her teeth. It was a dare, one I'd never back down from. Before she could sink them into my skin I had her flipped face down and underneath me.

She laughed throatily in that sexy way of hers. It did something to me every time I heard the sound. I'd never grow tired of it.

From the feel of things, neither would my dick.

"Is this what I need?" she chuffed.

Twisting, I delivered three rapid-succession spankings to one perfectly round asscheek. She jolted and stiffened, then sighed when I rubbed away the sting.

Feeling between her legs, I groaned. My mate was drenched. I didn't have the willpower to drag things out with her in this state.

Kneeling between her legs, I pulled her hips up into the air. When she tried to lift her head off of the mattress I flattened my hand between her shoulder blades to keep her angled down.

"No. I want you just like this."

The scent of her arousal, sweet and pungent, hit and my nostrils flared. When she wiggled her hips invitingly, I impaled her from behind. The little imp began gyrating and I grabbed her hips, holding her in place.

"Stop that."

"But—"

"This is going to be hard and fast," I warned.

"I—"

She didn't finish her reply as I began pistoning in and out. Then I made the mistake of looking down where our bodies were joined. My cock was painfully hard and on full display for me as it moved within her cleft.

I wasn't going to last long looking at that.

I focused on Raven, instead. Watched her spine grow slick with sweat. Watched her hands claw and fist at the sheets. Watched as she arched her back, but kept her head low as I'd ordered.

Energy built at the base of my spine. My balls tightened.

Fuck.

Knowing I wasn't going to be able to hold off, I pitched forward, reaching around to pinch her clit. Hard. She went off immediately.

I kept up the long, deep thrusts that had her crying out. She was tensing, her muscles clenched around me. I held it in check as I steadily pumped faster, wanting my mate to finish before me.

When I released her, she bucked against me, and I was done for. My thrusts became erratic and I came hard in a rush of heat and euphoria.

I had to lock my knees, not sure if I could keep myself upright for much longer.

Gods, would the talons of lust always pierce so deep? Being that I felt far more than mere lust for this female, I believed the answer was a firm *yes*.

Replete, I slumped forward, careful not to crush her, and lowered my head to her shoulder. Raven sighed, then leaned her head into mine.

We fell to the side and let sleep pull us under. I drifted off, thankful my soul hadn't pushed to mark her hand and tie our life forces together. Maybe it would cooperate and leave us as we were.

After our much-needed nap, we got up to find sustenance. Raven also spent a little time looking around Solar House, named for the panels that kept electricity up and going inside the retreat.

It was nestled within the curve of Crescent Peak, named for its hooked shape. It was a place special to Draven and he'd built a safe haven for his mate and future offspring here.

"Who built all this?" Raven asked, looking around the main room.

I was in the kitchen area cleaning up after our small meal. She was perched in one of the chairs near the main windows looking out over the Austral Mountains.

She was beautiful, sitting there in the glow of the late afternoon light. I nearly wished there hadn't been spare clothing in the bedroom for her to put on.

"A handful of select Shadow demons that Draven trusts. Few know it's here. One would have to be at an extremely high elevation to notice the solar panels and cuts made in the stone. Even then they'd have a hard time seeing it with the amount of wards surrounding it."

“Vera’s wards?”

I was drying off a plate, thankful my back was to her. I couldn’t help the lift of the corners of my mouth. It wasn’t fair of me, but I loved her jealousy.

“Yes,” confirmed, putting up the last of our dishware and turning around. “But she’s never been in here as a guest, if that’s what you’re fishing for.”

Her face pinched and this time she saw my unrepentant grin. “Come here, Little Bird.”

“Cas—”

The air crackled and I was a wall of shadows between my mate and the sound before I recognized the intrusion for what it was. I reformed and pulled my power back into me.

“Sorry!” Kree squeaked from the other side of the portal she’d made. Her hands were covering her eyes and her body was braced.

“You can lower your hands, Kree. Casimir and I are fully clothed.”

“Oh, good.” The golden-haired female relaxed her stance, but tension remained in her face.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“We have a situation.”

Raven stepped closer. “With the fae from last night?”

“No. It’s ... well, Draven sent me to get you both. No one’s in danger. Well, he might be once Casimir meets him.”

“*Him?*” I pressed. “Him who?”

She looked at Raven apologetically. “He says he’s your betrothed and is demanding we produce you immediately.”

White hot fury shot through my veins. “Raven will not be around any fae, especially one claiming to be engaged to her. Draven knows better than to summon us for something like that.”

Kree ran her hands over her braid nervously. “Well, that’s just it. He’s not fae. He’s a shifter. He says he works for Brokk. Draven can’t get past his shields so he needs to verify who the male is.”

I looked down at my mate who had become very still. “What’s this shifter’s name?” I demanded, having a feeling I knew it already.

“Nik,” Raven answered before Kree could. “It’s Nik.”

‡ ‡ ‡

Kree created a portal directly to our closet so we could change into more appropriate clothing. The rigidity hadn’t left my body since Kree had said the word *betrothed*.

Granted, it had only been some seven or eight minutes, but it surely had to be a record for biting my tongue when I wanted to rage at something. Preferably the shifter. While holding my sword.

Finished lacing my boots, I stood straight, watching Raven slide her feet into her own pair. “Who is he?”

“I told you, he works for my father.”

“To you, Raven.”

She stilled, only a moment, then went back to tightening her laces. “A friend.”

Not a lie since it slid smoothly past her lips, but her tone was off. “What kind of friend claims to be betrothed to someone when they are not?”

Raven stood and faced me. “I assume the kind who is trying to get to the bottom of something and needs to know I’m alright.”

I moved close, towering over her. “Have you fucked him?”

Her violet eyes clouded, mouth tightening. “Don’t.”

Her answer left her tongue and speared through my heart. I followed her out of the closet. “Don’t what? You obviously have.”

“So? You’ve fucked Vera and acted like it was no big deal,” she shrugged and walked past me.

I followed her out of the closet. “I was never set to marry her. Can you say the same?”

Raven turned. “I can, in fact, say the same. I never once had any intention of marrying him. He was a close friend, one I cared about deeply. It grew into something else, but I never wanted it to be more than a short term relationship.”

“Did he want more? Want it enough to come here for you?”

“Nik would never come here unless he thought it was absolutely necessary, that something was terribly wrong.”

Raven didn’t realize it, but she was answering my questions with her evasive replies. A sliver of hurt snaked its way around my lungs, but I pushed past it.

Everyone had a past. I wouldn’t allow it to destroy our future. To do that, I had to know the details and come to terms with them before I came face to face with the male.

“He’s a shifter, Raven. If he wanted more than a short fling, he would have been clear about it. They’re different with their partners. Once they find one they want to mate, it’s just like a demon finding their soulmate.”

“I’ve accepted the bond between us, Casimir. What else do you need?”

“I need to know if I’ll have to kill him or not.”

She blinked, lips parting. “You jest.”

“I do *not*. Your fae side should have told you I’m serious.”

Her eyes narrowed. “You wouldn’t.”

“I would. But only because nothing else would stop him from trying to take you away from me. It’s their nature.”

Raven rubbed her temples, muttering to herself. Then suddenly she was plastered around me, holding me tight around my middle. I embraced her in return, allowing her to soothe the beast craving the blood of anyone daring to make a claim upon her.

“Nik wanted more. I didn’t, so I ended it. I was never in love with him. I think I broke him a little and I’m not proud of it.”

Her guilt, cold and cruel, slithered its way along our connection. Even more heinous was the fact her guilt gave me a twisted sense of relief.

It only made me feel worse that her own guilt was so oppressive, so full of self-loathing. I was a wretched prick for feeling soothed by her suffering—but it was a relief nonetheless to know for certain she didn’t want the male.

I might not be redeemable, but I could at least attempt to ease my mate’s conscience.

“Shifters are built differently. Never feel guilty for doing what was best for you both. In the long run, he’ll be better off.”

Her face lifted to mine. “I was hoping he’d find his true mate, as I have found mine. Then he’d realize that nothing else in life could ever compare.”

A white hot plume of possessiveness bled through me, consuming the jealousy and injecting a heavy dose of male satisfaction.

“I love it when you say things like that,” I whispered, kissing her gently. “As much as I want to bend you over the bed, it will have to wait.”

I clasped her hand and led her to the door. “Let’s get this over with.”

“Don’t kill him.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.”

Raven flinched. “Lie. A big one. Definitely not a joke.”

“Fine. I won’t kill him unless it’s necessary.”

“I worry what you might deem necessary,” she said dryly. “And I didn’t hear anything about you not harming him.”

“That I cannot promise. Though I do find it endearing you don’t consider him a threat to your mate.”

Her mouth twisted. “Well, he is ruthless. But I truly believe he’s using the guise of a betrothal to leverage a meeting with me to find my father. I’d like to confirm that’s what brought him here. I can’t do that if he’s dead.”

I chuckled darkly. “Not killing him is as much as I can concede right now, Little Bird. I’m getting ready to meet a male who has been inside you, who is likely still very much in love with you, and who walked into my home and declared you his betrothed. Consider the shifter lucky I didn’t go straight to him and remove his organs one by one.”

“I suppose you want a thank you for showing such restraint,” she side-eyed me.

“Hmm. I hadn’t thought of it like that. I can’t ask for a thank you until I make it through this meeting. If we walk out and he’s still breathing, I think I’ll take it in the form of your lips wrapped around my cock.”

Raven stopped and tugged on my hand. Facing me, she grabbed my shirt and pulled me closer. Her plush mouth skimmed my jaw until her lips were at my ear.

“Impress me in there and I’ll make it worth your while,” she promised.

Blood flowed to my groin as I imagined her sucking on my length. “Make it clear to him you’re mine and I’ll make it worth *your* while,” I countered.

She laughed. “We’re exchanging sexual favors for good behavior. I’m sure it breaks some rule of matehood.”

“Fuck the rules. We make this what we want. If you want to take me into your mouth because I refrained from killing someone I already detest but is likely a decent person, I might just be the luckiest male alive. And in case I never said it,

thank you for not killing Vera. I'll show you proper appreciation later.”

I cupped her cheeks, and leaned down, brushing my lips to hers. “Good?”

“Yes.”

“Then let's go get this over with.”

I escorted her the rest of the way, compacting every morsel of bloodlust I was feeling towards *Nik* and burying it deep. In all likelihood, my entombed feelings would break free some day.

I hoped I was standing in the middle of Sersha's court when they did.



Niklaus



Chapter 25

Raven

Casimir and I approached the formal sitting room where Draven and Lyric were waiting with Nik. Apprehensive and uncertain of what I would feel when I entered, I took a calming breath.

As a guard opened the door, a familiar figure stood directly across the room, his silhouette glowing in front of the light of the late sun behind him.

Tawny hair, longer than it had been in years, radiated a halo of golden copper around the edges, complementing his tan complexion. Nik was still as handsome as I remembered, even with the scars, but now there was a certain maturity to him that hadn't been there before.

Because I'd hurt him?

My heart squeezed. Hurting him had never been my intention. Surely the past year had given him perspective. I was never meant to be his—and he was about to discover why.

“Finally,” Nik smiled in relief and hurried towards me.

Casimir stepped forward. Hostility radiated off his frame like steam coming off a hot dish. He stared at Nik, his eyes icy and hard. The shifter returned the same look.

“You're in my way,” Nik growled.

“And you're a stranger coming at my mate.”

The aggression drained from Nik's face and posture as he stood in frozen silence.

“Mate?” His voice was barely above a whisper.

“Soulmate,” Casimir amended.

I moved closer to my Shadow demon's shoulder, to show support and to better inspect my friend. *Former friend?* Whatever we were or had been in the past, I had to believe we could still be friendly.

"Is that true, gorgeous?" he asked, earning a growl from Casimir.

"Yes," I replied, "and I intend to keep him. I won't be returning to Terek other than to visit."

My words were blunt, but blunt was the best way to deal with a shifter.

His jaw ticked. "Does Brokk know about this?"

"He knows. And he approves. More importantly, I approve, which is really all that matters." I didn't need Brokk's permission to keep Casimir as my own.

It was somehow freeing to proclaim it aloud, like a piece of my life's puzzle was firmly in place. I also needed to clearly send a message to my visitor.

"I'm going to assume you claimed to be my betrothed because you felt it was necessary."

Nik nodded slowly, the honey glow of his beast's eyes rising to just below the surface, observant as ever. The coloring marked him as feline, though not many knew exactly what kind.

Nik didn't shift often, but his inner animal was always on guard. It scanned me over before finally settling on the demon I'd just very clearly claimed.

"So," he appraised, "you're the one who's taken my place."

Casimir held very still. A hot blast of emotion shot across our bond. "The place was never yours. It was always mine."

Nik held up his hands in a placating gesture. "As a shifter, I know not to fight you on that point. Nothing comes between twin souls. I won't be a problem unless I find you unworthy of her."

I felt Casimir tense beside me.

“That’s not for you to determine, Nik,” I stated firmly. “I care nothing of anyone else’s opinion. My life is my own. If you interfere in any way, you won’t like my reaction. My bond is not up for discussion with you.”

Nik’s eyes flickered between us, his expression a mixture of hurt and resignation. I hadn’t chosen him. Wounds like that were never easy to repair.

“I’m happy you found someone, Raven,” Nik said quietly. “Truly, I am. You deserve to be happy, even if that means it’s not with me.”

Truth.

Casimir’s grip on my hand tightened.

Nik glanced at where our hands were joined. “I didn’t come here to cause trouble. I just needed to see you, to know that you were okay.”

Despite our history, he meant it. He really was an honorable male, even if he had trouble restraining his animal instincts when his emotions were strong. He deserved to find a mate.

Nik held out his hand to Casimir. “My name is Nik. I’m an old friend of Raven’s.”

My mate’s eyes narrowed. “An old friend, huh?”

“It’s a more appropriate way to introduce myself,” Nik replied. “I’m not looking to disrespect you.”

Casimir’s expression softened ever so slightly and he took the offered hand. “Casimir.”

“Cousin to Lord Draven. You’re famous in Terek.”

“You probably meant to say *infamous*,” Lyric threw out.

Nik’s lips twitched. “Both, I believe.”

“Not to interrupt,” Draven cut in, “but I’d like you to finish what you were telling me about the two Shadows I sent to Terek.”

Nik's expression altered. "Of course, Lord Draven."

As we settled down onto the nearby furniture, the Shadow Lord didn't tell Nik to address him informally, which I suspected was more for his cousin's benefit than his own.

"As I was saying, I haven't been anywhere near Grifton's Bluff. If that was their destination, I wouldn't have come across them. I've been out of Terek for weeks."

Draven and Casimir shared a look.

Lines formed between Lyrics eyes, her lips pursed. "I bet they're incognito. They both have limited Sight and could have been clued-in to something. Plus, Talia is as much a badass as she is intelligent."

Draven brought his mate's hand to his lips. "I'm not overly concerned, Angel. Let's revisit after Niklaus explains why he's come all this way."

Nik's dark honey eyes took on a soft glow. "I came here because Brokk and Kol are missing."

The room was silent as Nik's words sank in. Missing? My stomach rolled in reaction, despite the suspicions I'd already had that they hadn't made it home.

It was still possible Father had come up with a plan along their journey and rerouted somewhere. He simply hadn't communicated with anyone yet. Though, he'd assured me he'd send word.

"They took off ... maybe two weeks ago?" Nik continued. "Without leaving any details, which is out of character for Brokk to do when he leaves. It didn't sit right with me and I tried to track them down. I also tried to track you, hoping the three of you were together. I came up empty handed. Then, out of the blue, his ship docked in the middle of the night."

My stomach tightened. "They made it back to Terek?"

Nik's fingers tapped the armrest. "Technically, I suppose. Il Corvo Negro was seen docked at Dunbar."

"Dunbar? Father never takes that ship there."

Dunbar was nowhere near the family residence, which was just beyond Grifton's Bluff. It was The Navita's seat of power and only his most trusted lived closeby.

Casimir's thumb rubbed my knuckles soothingly. "Is docking at Dunbar a concern?" he asked. "I've never heard of it."

"Dunbar," I explained, "is a town with a cove just over the border as you cross into Terek. It's hidden behind dozens of spells and wards."

"It's not so much a town as it is a small naval base," Nik appended. "Those that Brokk has stationed there, well, let's just say they work extremely hard guarding the river and our interests."

"Sounds awesome! Can we visit?" Lyric asked hopefully.

Nik's head jerked towards her and I held back my grin.

"No traveling for a while longer," Draven answered his mate, patting her belly affectionately and earning a disappointed huff.

"The crews stationed at Dunbar act first and ask questions later and have no qualms doing so," I said to Lyric. "They also partake in a variety of vices that no child should witness. It's not a place Father would take Kol. Not at his age, anyway."

"Exactly," Nik agreed. "Brokk sent word to his primary crew, which all reside closer to Grifton's Bluff, to report to Dunbar at first light. By the time they got there, the ship was gone. Brokk left a message nailed to a post. I was nowhere near either location, so Melecio ported to the safehouse on our border to find me. It's a home base of sorts when I'm going in and out of Terek and trying to do so quietly."

"Melecio?" Casimir inquired.

"He's a djinn who works on the dock in Dunbar," Nik answered. "He kindly brought me to the edge of the Shadowlands early this morning."

"What else?" I pushed. Something was missing from his story.

Nik's teeth clicked, something he did when he'd rather not speak. "Don't freak out."

"I don't freak out and you know it."

"There's a first time for everything."

"Just spit it out," I demanded.

"It seems Kol ran off sometime before they crossed into our territory. Your father was able to track him to the edge of Salvia. Once he stepped foot onto the sacred forest's land, the trail was gone. Brokk apparently came to Terek only to get word to me and his crew that he was taking off to find Kol and that he'd left you at Embour with allies."

Salvia was an entry point into the Borderlands. Kol knew his way around it, but, as far as I knew, he'd never ventured beyond.

"Kol ran off," I repeated, my voice barely above a whisper. "And Father went after him."

"I'm sorry to be the bearer of bad news," Nik said quietly, his gaze landing on me. "I don't have any other information. Only that Brokk was going to retrieve his son."

I had a feeling I knew what he was planning. *He*, being Kol, not my father.

"Raven?"

Casimir tugged on my arm, catching my attention when I didn't respond to his cousin's calling of my name.

"I'm sorry."

Draven ignored my apology. "Is it likely for Kol to take matters into his own hands?"

"All the time," Nik spoke up.

I nodded in agreement. "True, but he's never run off. And he knows better than to return to Ansley Keep to take on—" I stopped myself, glancing at the shifter.

Nik lowered his elbows to his knees, giving me his full focus. "Does this have something to do with Brokk's half-

sister?”

A pump of adrenaline restarted my heart.

“I already know about your family tree, Raven.”

“How?”

“It’s my job to know these things, the threats to Terek and those under Brokk’s protection. I’m a shifter who seeks intel and who hears more than he wants at times. You know I can scent familial relations through blood. I scented Sersha once on a mission near the keep. She’d pricked her hand on something in the market. It wasn’t a lot of blood, but it was enough. Brokk wasn’t surprised when I returned home and asked.”

Why was my mouth so dry? “Did he confirm it?” I managed.

“He assured me he’d kill me if I ever used it against his family. I told him I would count on it, should I ever betray any of you. I’d promised to keep quiet because it wasn’t my secret to share, not because he was threatening me. But primarily I did it because—”

“Stop,” I cut him off.

Nik leaned back in the chair, rings of dark harvest gold and flaxen yellow overtook his irises. “Lipáme,” he apologized gutterally in his native tongue.

Before my mate could ask what were surely burning questions, or tear into Nik’s chest cavity to remove his organs, I turned to the Shadow Lord.

“To answer your question, Lord Draven, it’s possible Kol decided to do something, especially considering how easy it was for him to use his magic to carry a wall of water 200 yards in length all the way from the river to the keep. He usually accepts his family’s council, but he is of an age where males believe themselves invincible.”

Lyric cursed under her breath.

“I don’t know what else he did, but it was enough for Father to get me free. Kol is quite aware of his abilities. He

wouldn't have made a rash decision to run off. It would have been planned. He's not reckless."

"I'm surprised Circe didn't try to harness his magic, too," Lyric shook her head.

"Circe spent too much time focusing on me so she missed the seeds of power sprouting within her son. Many in Terek think of me as powerful, but I'm not."

"Uh, you totally *are*," Lyric argued emphatically.

"I simply learned to use both sides of my magic together. It gives me an advantage in some areas. But I would argue that, on power level alone, I'm on par with my parents. Kol is the one with truly immense power. Few notice because of his age. I've rarely felt anyone scan him. Of course, he lets off energy constantly to keep his power levels down."

I turned my sharp stare to Nik. "Sersha doesn't know who I am. She and her consort took an interest in me and locked me up when I wouldn't comply with their requests. When Father hadn't heard from me, he and Kol came and got me out of there. They brought me here for safekeeping."

I scarcely registered Nik's reaction. My thoughts were ramping up, quickly approaching a million miles a minute. What was Kol thinking?

My brother was smart. He was also far too powerful for his age. He would understand the steps that would need to be taken to keep our family safe and likely believe he was strong enough to take them.

Now that I was really thinking, cataloging our exchanges before his departure, I realized he'd purposefully gotten me to agree to listen to Casimir, knowing my mate would never want me anywhere Sersha.

The little brat was trying to ensure I wouldn't get in the way. I'd be impressed if I weren't so pissed at him.

Kol left here with a plan to fix this mess for me. I'd bet money on it. Though he was a force to be reckoned with, he was an army of one on his own. I needed to find him before he got himself killed.

I stood without answering. “I need a minute.”

Draven nodded in understanding. “Take your time.”

I rose to my feet. The room stirred as I walked out, my mind spinning in a million different directions. Casimir followed silently.

Neither of us spoke as we made our way out of the fortress and beyond the outer wall. I let my fae half guide me, drawing on the peacefulness of the surrounding nature.

The sun was creeping towards the horizon, the sky awash with brilliant oranges, pinks and purples. The air was heavy with the scent of wildflowers, and the grass beneath my feet was soft and damp.

We eventually reached a stream that sparkled like diamonds in the fading light of day. Mesmerized, I got lost in the light and soothing sound of water running over rock and missed the fact we weren't alone.

“Henderson, look who it is,” Vera's trill voice stabbed and killed my short-lived moment of peace.

At least she was providing a distraction.

Casimir got in my personal space before I could turn enough to see her. “You don't have to be social right now.”

I patted his chest affectionately, adoring him for trying to be my shield. “I know,” I assured, “but retreating is always taken as a sign of weakness among the Dianics. It's nothing I can't handle.”

Plastering a smile on my face, I stepped around my mate to greet the gorgeous witch. “Hello, Ver—”

I stutter-stepped when my eyes fell upon her companion.

“*Nash?*” I'd never imagined coming face to face with this male again.

“*Nash?*” both Vera and Casimir asked in confusion.

He awarded me with the tiniest lift of one side of his mouth. He glanced at Casimir then back to me, his dark eyebrows rising in silent inquiry.

While both my mate and the annoying witch were looking at Nash, I gave him a subtle shake of my head. I didn't think he'd give me away. I had saved his life, after all.

The male bowed. His movements were sure and his demeanor calm. He was a far cry from how he looked when we'd met.

Gaunt. Disheveled. Nash's mating bond had been sucking out the very marrow of his soul as his deceased mate crossed over into the underworld.

I'd acted on instinct, too young to truly think it through.

"Henderson. Explain."

Vera's order whipped across the stream. She wasn't compelling him, but as a higher-ranking witch in his coven, she could demand it.

Nash—or Henderson, it seemed—swiveled his head to look at his superior.

The sides of his long white-blond hair were pulled back and secured neatly, the unusual color a stark contrast to his eyebrows. His dark leathers and a burgundy tunic were accented with various clips and pouches.

My heart warmed. He looked healthy and, dare I hoped, whole?

"My surname in Earth Realm was Nash," he explained. "My full name there was Milton Henderson Nash. I loathed Milton and the name Henderson felt too formal in my younger years, so I went by Nash. When I met Raven," he lifted a palm in my direction, "that's the name I told her. By the time I'd made it to Eastbourne, I'd decided I needed a change. Going by Henderson was a good start."

"And how did the two of you meet?" Casimir asked suspiciously.

Henderson's sad smile brought the memory close to the surface. I maintained a neutral expression, waiting to see what he would tell them.

“I met her on my journey to Eastbourne. I’d recently crossed into the Otherland. My mate had just died. I was ... well, you can imagine.”

Casimir looked stricken. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you,” Henderson accepted gracefully. “It’s nothing I’d wish upon anyone.”

Vera opened her mouth but her companion kept talking.

“I was in such pain. I remember resting under a tree near the Borderlands and not far from my destination, contemplating what would become of me. I didn’t want to go on.”

He took a deep slow breath, shaking off the cloak of grief and conveniently leaving out one major part of the story.

“I was sitting there, willing myself out of existence when out of nowhere came this girl. Young and determined and looking half feral,” he chuckled to himself, shaking his head.

“On her way home, she’d said. I was too deep in my own grief to truly contemplate the situation of someone her age traveling alone. When I’d asked if she needed help, she looked me in the eye and said, ‘No, but you surely do.’ Though she looked like she’d been caught in a tornado, she made sure I was healthy enough to continue on. She even showed me a shortcut to Eastbourne.”

Casimir looked down at me. “How young?”

“Before my teen years. I was walking from the Borderlands back to my family. The trek was tiring and I thought to rest a bit under the canopy of a large tree. Someone was already there.

My mate’s lips thinned, knowing full well why I’d been anywhere near those wretched lands and how young I’d been.

Vera’s hand touched the base of her throat. “Traveling alone? My dear, I’m going to have a stern talk with whomever was in charge of raising you.”

Casimir coughed behind his fist. I was sure he was imagining the same thing I was: Vera trying to lecture Brokk

Ulrik. Or even Circe, the latter of which I would pay to watch.

“It looks like we both got to where we needed to go in the end,” Henderson stated. “I’m glad to see you again, Raven.”

“And I you, Na–Henderson.”

He huffed congenially. “I’ll answer to anything other than Milton. Now,” he rubbed his palms together, “what has you staring into the water like you’ve already been pulled under?”

Swallowing, I told him, “Nothing I’m at liberty to share, I’m afraid. But thank you for your concern.”

“Anytime.”

I looked around the area, noticing a healer’s satchel and several small canisters sitting near it. “What are *you* doing out here?”

“Oh, a little of this and a lot of that.”

“Cute,” Vera shook her head teasingly. “We’re setting up some extra wards and collecting supplies for medicines. Draven made a deal allowing us to hunt for some small plants that grow well here and are hard for us to come by in Eastbourne.”

I thought Henderson was a tracker and his job was jumping Vera to wherever she wanted to go. “Medicines?” I asked.

“Hen’s a master at them,” Vera praised. “His brews are some of our most popular.”

I nearly laughed when *Hen* wrinkled his nose at the nickname.

“So humble, too,” she continued. “He’d never tell you his talent is so great that we have him teaching others how to not only make new medicines, but to improve on the ones they already create. Very useful for the coven and very lucrative to sell.”

I nodded, understanding how much Vera would value his talent. “I think it’s wonderful you found your way to

Eastbourne. I hope you think so, as well,” I told him, hoping he could read my meaning.

Henderson inclined his head. He looked like he wanted to say more but I bid the pair farewell and headed away from the stream. I could have a private conversation with him another time.

Too much of my past was hitting me in the face today. Not paying attention to where I was going, Casimir gently steered me by the elbow in the right direction.

I thought walking would settle my mind. I thought wrong. I’d been in constant flux both physically and emotionally for so long I was forgetting what normal felt like.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Casimir asked.

I was surprised he hadn’t asked sooner. He probably should have. Ten minutes was ample time to take the clutter clanking around inside my skull and forge it into something sharp.

“It?” I sniffed. “Are you referring to Kol running off and my father giving chase so my brother doesn’t get himself killed? Or do you mean Nik showing up here claiming to be my betrothed? Or perhaps running into someone I’d thought had lost the will to live and would be miserable the rest of his days? Or maybe you’re alluding to the group of fae that showed up yesterday that I completely forgot all about until this very second?”

Though my voice remained steady, I was rambling. Clamping my mouth shut, I took in a deep breath through my nose.

Someday I’d get around to asking Hugo about the possibility of healing magics altering a personality ... or causing brain damage.

Casimir was quiet, keeping his strides short to match my own as we ambled closer to Embour. His silence was unnerving.

“No response?” I prodded.

The big demon chuffed, scratching the back of his head. “Being quiet was my response. You need to process. I’m good with that.”

I appreciated Casimir’s quiet understanding, but I needed to talk or do something to get my inner witch to calm down.

“I don’t know what to do,” I confessed.

He could have no idea how vulnerable I felt admitting it. “Just as I was starting to feel settled I received a clear reminder that things are actually spiraling out of control.”

Tempting as it was, I didn’t look at him. He gave me silence to process. I could do the same for him. Luckily, he didn’t need as much time.

“You’re not spiraling. I can see why you feel that way, but really, none of this should be all that surprising.”

I stopped walking.

Casimir turned, coming back to where I stood. “You saved a male years ago. He’s part of the coven that we contract to set wards. Being here with me, as my mate, odds are that you would run into someone who knows him. You just happened to be here one of the times he joined Vera.”

“And Nik?” I pushed, assuming he’d get a little riled.

“The shifter works for Brokk and is one of his most trusted males. Being mated to you means I’d meet him eventually. Circumstances made that meeting come sooner rather than later.”

Stupid rational demon.

Speaking of circumstances ... “And my family?” The words came out harsher than intended.

“Are you concerned Brokk Ulrik cannot take care of himself while searching for his son?”

I blinked. “Well, no.”

“Are you worried Kol will do something dumb but incredibly honorable? And some form of harm may come to him as a result?”

That one made my eyes burn. Swallowing, I nodded.

Strong arms enveloped my body. “Then that’s the thing we should concentrate on. The rest is nothing to obsess over. I would come to know the pieces of your past at some point anyway, and you mine.”

I rested my forehead on his chest, taking strength in his embrace and his words. Only he forgot something.

“You forgot about the fae from yesterday.”

“Actually, I didn’t. We’re going to let the Shadow Lord handle that situation.”

“But—”

“We’ll ask for the recap, but for now we’ll let him handle it,” he repeated, this time more firmly.

“Fine.”

Casimir jerked slightly. “Fine? That’s it? No argument?”

“I don’t have an army. He does.”

It was true. Though, having an army of my own sounded rather appealing at the moment. It was also a terrible thought. I would never take the mantle of queen just to have an army at my back.

“Ah. How very reasonable.”

“I know,” I agreed, not trying to be funny. Despite the tightness in my jaw, I wasn’t going to fight every battle on my own, not when Kol would likely end up needing help.

“I’m learning to accept help,” I told him. “Or trying to, at least. “Besides, I doubt I’ll ever be able to stop your cousin from doing as he pleases, not when he thinks his family’s safety is in question. Draven has every right to be involved since your mate has brought him trouble. So it’s more logical to work with him than against him. Same with you.”

“None of this is your fault, Little Bird. But we protect our own, regardless.”

“And I’ll do my best to protect you all in return.”

The reward for my proclamation was a blazing kiss that seared down to my toes. I nearly commanded Casimir to ghost us back to bed but decided it was more important to let Draven update us on his meeting with the fae.

As long as any meetings they requested didn't involve the fae stepping foot into the Shadowlands, I figured Draven really should be the one to handle things.

What I didn't say was that if things escalated beyond a meeting taking place through a small portal, I'd probably feel the need to take matters into my own hands.

Must be a family trait, I thought, picturing Kol's face.

Hopefully this whole mess would be resolved before it ever got that far.



Vera



Henderson



Chapter 26

Casimir

The Council Room was quiet as we stood around the small wooden box sitting on the table. Plain, inconspicuous, and no bigger than Raven's forearm, we all eyed it warily.

"You accepted a gift from the fae?" Raven asked.

Phalen quietly let out a string of curses on his next exhale. He looked much better than when we'd last seen him and seemed no worse for wear.

Raven had hugged him fiercely when he entered, apologizing profusely. Phalen, as was his talent and nature, laughed it off and eased her concerns. It was exactly what she'd needed.

"Not exactly," Lyric imparted when Draven didn't answer.

"Then why exactly is this sitting here?" I asked.

"They said it had been commissioned by a Shadow Lord long ago—a gift for the babe his mate was carrying. Something happened and neither mother nor child survived. So stricken with grief, he refused to accept the delivery of the item. He wouldn't even take back the gold he'd paid with."

"So it's an unfulfilled bargain, then," Raven assessed. "Whoever handled the transaction would be compelled to see it through, though the timing is extremely suspicious."

Draven hooked an arm around his mate and palmed her belly with the opposite hand. "Lyric is allegedly the first to carry an heir since then."

"Allegedly? Was that the word they used?" I asked.

"No," Draven's head shook. "That's my word. I found it hard to believe."

“If the words came from a fae mouth, it would have to be true, at least as far as they knew.” Sure, the fae excelled at word games, but stating it was a gift for an infant, ordered and paid for by a past Shadow Lord, was pretty clear.

Draven, who was still regarding the box as though it might jump up and bite one of us, absently dipped his chin up and down. “I scanned them. Their mental shields were shit.”

“And?” I urged.

“And all they knew was what they told me. Not one of them had any knowledge of it being dangerous or some sort of trick.”

“It doesn’t mean we trust them,” Lyric interjected, her hands rubbing circles overtop her mate’s where it rested on her swollen belly.

“Exactly,” Draven agreed. “We need to be cautious. We don’t know what this box contains or what it could do. For all I know, that was all they were told, just that it was a commissioned gift and they’d been waiting to uphold their end of the deal. Now was the first opportunity. An omission of any tampering wouldn’t be a lie. To them, at least.”

Phalen shifted closer to the table, his eyes never leaving the brown lacquered box. “I say we open it.”

The Shadow Lord shot him a glare. “And risk whatever curse or trap that could be inside? No.”

“Do you feel any sort of dangerous magic coming from within?” I asked my mate.

Her brow furrowed. “No, but that doesn’t mean there isn’t anything hidden underneath some complicated nulling spell.”

“So what do we do with it?” Phalen quizzed. “Stare at it until it does a trick?”

“No,” Lyric grinned mischievously. “We blow it the fuck up.”

Ten minutes later we were in what Lyric had dubbed as the fun section of our training grounds. If anything needed to be blown to smithereens, this was where it was done.

Our small group was stationed inside a protective walled-off bunker built with enchanted stone. It ensured no debris or spells would reach us.

“Can I press the button?” Lyric begged Phalen. “Pretty please?”

The Shadow Army Commander patted the top of her head. “You are adorable. Of course you can.”

Smiling somewhat maniacally, she snatched the detonator from Phalen. I threw a cursory glance at Draven who was watching his mate intently.

“Everyone ready?” Phalen checked, his attention moving from the small device in Lyric’s hand and following the wire connected to it. The thin cable touched the ground, exited through a small hole in the front wall, and fed all the way out to the explosives underneath the box.

Thanks to the width of the pit we used for testing explosives, we had just enough of an angle to see.

“I was born ready!” Lyric yelled, eliciting a sigh from her mate.

Raven’s eyes widened as my shoulders shook. She covered her mouth but I could see the corners of her mouth lifting.

“Three!” Lyric began counting down excitedly on her own. “Two! One! Blastoff!”

The click of the button made me tense. No one breathed as we stood soundlessly, peering out the thin viewing slats in the wall.

Nothing happened.

Lyric clicked furiously. “It’s broken, Phalen.”

“It’s not bro—”

BOOM!

The ground shook. Dirt and debris flew everywhere, temporarily obscuring our view. When the dust started settling, we saw that the box was completely obliterated. The explosion left behind a crater where the box once sat.

We watched in awe as the smoke cleared to reveal a small, shimmering object in the center of the crater.

“What is that?” Lyric whispered, her eyes fixed on the object.

“I don’t know,” Draven murmured, his hand reaching out to steady her.

Phalen was the first to move, stepping out of the bunker. He moved cautiously to get a closer look from a safe distance. “It looks like a crystal,” he called out from the edge of the pit.

“Stay here,” Draven ordered.

The Shadow Lord joined Phalen, who then shifted into shadow form and safely inspected the thing more closely. When he became flesh again, the duo spoke animatedly, too low for us to hear.

Draven looked back over his shoulder to the bunker. “Come out, but don’t get too close and don’t touch it.”

Soon we were all in the pit, crowding around the crater, staring at the crystal. It was about the size and length of a soup spoon, and sparkled a bright turquoise blue in the sunlight.

“It’s beautiful,” Lyric breathed. “But what the hell is it?”

As we gazed down, something strange began to happen. The crystal’s glow burned brighter and brighter until it was almost blinding.

“Get back!” Draven shouted, pulling his mate into Shadow form with him.

I reached for Raven, intending to do the same when a male’s voice projected up from the object and said, “Hello, little one.”

Within the steady beam of light emitting skyward, there stood a male with all the markings of a Shadow demon. Though his silver hair was much lighter than mine and Draven’s, the coloring against olive skin was what we Shadow demons were known for.

Well, that, and our penchant for violence. It wasn't that we sought it, it was more that we were good at it. Few factions caused issues for us these days.

"If you can see me," the stranger's dreamlike timbre vibrated through the air, "then I am no longer of this world, and for that I am very sorry. I would never willingly leave you."

Lyric made a quiet, distressed sound.

"I had this aisen stone created for you so that you would have access to memories I'm not around to share. It is my hope you may learn from them, and, if necessary, have no doubt how much you and your mother meant to me. I hope you find me worthy."

Someone sniffled. Lyric. I didn't look over. She wouldn't want anyone gawking and I wasn't in a teasing mood.

More words came from the male but they were electrified and distorted, on waves of static. The light flickered.

"Maybe it's running out of power," Phalen guessed. "It is pretty old."

Raven took a single step closer. "That's not how fae magic works, not with an object like this."

"How—"

Draven never got out his question. A current of power discharged, skating my skin and all around the perimeter of our circle. My hair stood on end.

"Lyric?" my cousin barked at his mate.

"Raven!" she shouted in response.

I whipped around, my gaze finding my mate. She stood in arm's reach, her face a mask of terror. Her hands shook as she tried to take a step forward.

That's when I saw the blood.

Dark red seeped into her shirt from the skin underneath. Her eyes were wide with shock and panic, but there was

something else there too. Resignation, like someone who knew what was coming next and couldn't run away from it.

Horror seized my mind.

My hand clasped her arm and suddenly I was tumbling through the dark until I found myself standing in a dimly lit room surrounded by rock and filled with dank air.

A menacing chuckle drew my attention to the corner behind me. An enormous male in dark leathers stood over a table, blocking my view of the face of the female strapped to it.

I didn't have to see her face to know who it was. Silent fury pulsed through my veins as I charged him, intent on removing his helmeted head from his thick neck.

I met air and stumbled through his mass, like he was an apparition. I passed through Raven and the table and came to a stop on the other side. Bracing for the image that would surely scar itself upon my psyche for all of time, I turned.

Raven's gaze was on the ceiling. She didn't scream as her torturer used her skin as his canvas. Though her expression remained stoic, tears ran down her cheeks like blades and sliced my heart in two.

The male hummed merrily as he brandished a shallowly curved blade, likely made of iron from the near-black look of it. Upon his chest was the Queen's standard.

Raven's blood wept in rivulets down the sides of the table and pooled on the ground. A scream rose from my chest as he continued his work, slicing deep into her delicate skin and then slowly pushing granules of salt into the oozing gashes.

His face lowered close to her ear. "You'll wear my name in your skin the rest of your days, Raveena."

Raven's eyes darted to his.

"Oh, yes," he purred, tracing the letters he'd chiseled into flesh with his gloved hand. "I was allowed to mark you however I chose. The Queen promised I could have you. I

can't wait to feel the ridges of this particular scar against my abdomen once I'm allowed between your legs."

Raven blinked rapidly, clearing her eyes of moisture and revealing the dim fire behind them.

"I just have to be patient and wait until Sersha has figured out you'll never accept her offer. Should only be a matter of days, I think."

My heart slammed against my chest as I reeled backwards, rage and fear consuming me in one powerful wave. I'd kill them all. I'd—

As quickly as I was pulled into the nightmare, I was jerked out of it.

"Don't touch her," Draven ordered. "Casimir is coming around."

Once my vision returned, I realized how close the others were to Raven and I. No one touched either of us, but they all looked like they were ready to pounce.

Raven gasped, coming back to the present. Frantically, she began tearing at her shirt, shredding it and using the material to wipe away the blood.

Her hands shook as she dropped the soiled scraps while staring down at her stomach. A primal cry broke through her clenched teeth.

Trembling, her face lifted to mine. Raven's eyelashes fluttered. I managed to catch her before she collapsed.

"That word was in her skin when she arrived. Hugo fixed it," Lyric sputtered rapidly. "How in the hell did it come back?"

I snarled in response. "It's not a word. It's a name."

"A name? Whose?" the little hellion demanded, violence rolling off her enraged tongue.

"A dead male walking," I spat out with venomous contempt as I quickly ushered my mate away.

The next time I saw the fae, this *Dolan*, I would follow through on what I couldn't in Raven's memory. I didn't care that he wore the Queen's standard upon his chest.

It wouldn't protect him from my wrath.

The monster should hope with every fiber of his being that someone else reached him first. For if I got my hands on him, I'd dig through his chest, straight down to his beating heart. Then I'd carve off slices of the abominable organ and feed it to him, bit by agonizing bit.

Then I'd let him heal and do it again.



Chapter 27

Raven

I came to, jackknifing upright, propelled by a familiar blast of power exploding through my system. Aware and alert, I waited for the blinding white light in my vision to clear.

“Welcome back,” Hugo greeted from the foot of the bed.

Blinking, I realized I was in the same room I was in when Hugo and Kree healed my scars. Why was I here again?

Images pummeled my consciousness. The gift. The pit. Dolan. My palms immediately reached for my abdomen.

“Shh,” warm hands delicately pressed upon mine as their owner leaned closer.

“My stomach,” I croaked through a parched throat.

“Hugo and I repaired your stomach. That barbarian’s name is no longer on your flesh.”

Kree’s words soothed away the panic trying to shred its way through me. My spine lost some of its rigidity. The pressure in my veins diminished and my blood flowed freely once more.

“Thank you.”

Kree’s mouth tightened. “No thanks necessary, Raven. Casimir told us what he saw. I’m sorry you had to experience such a thing. Again.”

I looked around for my mate. “Where is he?”

“I kicked him out,” Hugo replied distractedly as he balled up soiled towels and threw them into a black container in the corner. “You want him to come in? Draven and Lyric also wanted to see you immediately. I’ll allow it if you’re up to it.”

Clad only in a thin gown they must have put on me before shooting me up with healing magic, I pulled the blanket on my lap higher.

“Here,” Kree said, placing an oversized charcoal-colored sweater over my shoulders and helping me put my arms through the sleeves. “Cas retrieved it just in case you were cold.”

Wrapping it around my body, I inhaled the scent of my mate lingering within the threads. The small gesture, like his other small gestures, did more to warm me than the thick wool ever could.

“I’ll let Draven and Lyric know you’re awake,” Kree announced on her way out.

“Casimir first, then?” Hugo drew my attention. “He’s close by.”

I nodded at the healer. “Let him in. Please.”

“Give me a second.” With that Hugo exited and left me alone with my thoughts.

Casimir saw what Dolan had done. He’d seen what I’d been reduced to down in that torture chamber under Ansley Keep. I loathed feeling so weak and exposed, but not as much as I loathed reliving it with my mate there, helplessly watching.

Would he treat me like glass now?

My heart leapt as the heavy wooden door creaked open and Casimir stepped inside, his gaze drinking me in from head to toe as if he was only just now believing I was alive. Without delay, he rushed to my side and dropped onto the bed next to me.

The moment our bodies touched, I felt my soul soar out to brush his, as though they’d been apart for more than the short hour or so I’d been in the med bay. I inhaled his scent deeply as the tears began to flow freely from my eyes. I had no idea why I was crying.

Casimir didn't hesitate before pulling me into his lap and holding me tight against him, as if I might disappear if he let go.

"Are you alright?" I asked.

His huff of breath came out harsh. "I'm not the one ... the one ..."

I pressed my fingertips onto his lips. "It's over."

Large hands shifted my weight back slightly, then cupped the back of my head. Rings of black and silver undulated in my demon's eyes.

"It's not over, Raven. They were able to sneak a spell onto a fucking baby gift and we played right into their hands."

"They couldn't have known I was here. And why would they risk harming any of the Shadows? Sersha and Malcolm both know Draven would respond."

The door opened and the Shadow Lord and his mate walked inside. No, not walked. Marched. Lyric's eyes were shiny and excited while Draven's were nearly completely black.

Lyric pounded her fist into her palm. "Those assholes fucked around and now they're gonna find out! Also, are you okay?" she warily tiptoed closer, grimacing. "Sorry! I should have led with that. That's the priority. Raven is healthy and awake and then we plan to annihilate the fae scum who dared to—"

Draven bent and spun the female around so fast her ponytail hit him in the face. She giggled. He didn't.

"We agreed, Angel. Calm. Focused. Steady blood pressure. Let go of the rage and let me carry it. Let Cas carry it. And Raven. Let anyone not carrying an infant inside their belly carry the rage."

Lyric's angelic face blanked, navy eyes focused in concentration. She adjusted her breaths to match his slower ones.

“Calm,” she repeated in a slow cadence. “Focused. Steady blood pressure. No rage or killing for me. Only Draven. No fun for Lyric. Only fun for everyone else.”

“Right,” he nodded, some of the black receding from his sclera. “And in exchange we’ll try to keep one prisoner for you to deal with after our youngling is safely delivered and you are healed.”

Lyric’s eyes widened. “Yes, fun for me later. Maybe two or three prisoners. Or six. Whatever we can manage.”

I looked up at Casimir when his chest started shaking. He muttered something about trying to stay pissed off being impossible when Draven’s little psycho was near.

“I heard that,” Lyric grumbled. “But I am calm and will not seek retribution until a later date. You’ve been warned.”

She smiled broadly. “See, Big Guy? I can do it. I just need a calendar to keep track of when I’m allowed to go cray.”

“Now,” she turned back to me, rubbing her hands. “You good?”

“I’m much better than I was,” I answered.

Draven moved a chair closer to the bed and Lyric sat down. “Cas allowed Draven to see what you two experienced. Did you tell her yet?”

My fingernails dug into my palms. “I entered the room a minute before you did, Lyric. I haven’t had enough time to tell her anything.”

“That’s actually good since I’m faster at relaying information. Here’s what you missed while you were out of it—”

“Wait,” I interrupted. “How long was I out?”

“A couple of hours.” Casimir kissed the top of my head and began rubbing circles on my back.

“A little less, even,” Lyric added, “so not long. As soon as Cas took off, we immediately secured the pit then came here to check on you. Cas showed us what happened, we all agreed

Dolan is a fuckboy who must die. Your mate called dibs but I spoke up on your behalf so he doesn't take that joy from you if you want it."

The blood-thirsty blonde looked at me like she'd asked a question and needed a response.

"Thank you." It was the only thing to say, really.

"I have your back, Ray-Ray. Next, we agreed, as a Council minus Talia and Emile, to allow the two witches we have on the grounds to take a look at the super thoughtful gift the fae-fucks gave us. I mean, can you believe the audacity? Balls of steel, I tell you. Or iron. Or—"

"And who else, Angel?"

Lyric looked up at her mate. She sighed. "And the shifter."

"You let Nik touch the stone?" I blurted incredulously, knowing the memory he'd be pulled into would probably be the one where his own father tried to kill him.

"No, we didn't let anyone touch it just in case it had some other bad juju in it. He sniffed it. The hope was he could pick up on who'd touched it, and maybe how many."

Nik was familiar with a lot of fae, but I didn't know how many of the court he'd ever come into contact with. "Did he pick up someone he knew?"

"Oh yeah. There were two distinct fae scents. The evil queen's, of course, and one other he couldn't identify. Though, that's not all that surprising compared to what Vera told us."

A chill scuttled down my neck. "What did Vera have to say about it?"

"You tell her, Draven. I need water."

Draven watched his mate retrieve one of the stored jars of water from inside a cabinet, as though he were waiting for something to jump out and attack. Though subtle, the action sparked a heavy dose of guilt to burgeon and settle heavily upon my chest, far more cutting than Dolan's knife.

What the hell was I doing, allowing them to take any sort of risks when this was my problem? I couldn't allow that to happen again.

“Cousin?” Casimir prompted when Draven had let the silence settle for a beat too long.

Draven's regard reluctantly left his mate. “Vera recognized the spell.”

I sat up straighter. “As in, the fae who created it?”

“No. As in the Dianic witch who created it.”

Blood rushed to my head. “Did Sersha pay one of them for a spell that would harm me?”

Draven looked at Casimir, whose arms tightened around me.

“Tell me, Draven. Delaying won't make it any easier.”

“Circe. It was Circe's spell.”

My pulse hammered, pushing blood through my body and heating my skin. My mouth went dry.

“Circe.” The name tasted like ash on my tongue.

“I don't understand. My mother lives in Earth Realm. The closest crossing is here in the Shadowlands. How did she get it through?”

“She didn't get anything through the crossing,” he answered. “It was a tracking spell she was well-known for. It's most likely one of the ones she brewed into potions and sold during her time in Eastbourne. Someone, probably one of the royal spellcasters she is so fond of, purchased it, added your blood to the vial, and then soaked the crystal in it.”

Casimir squeezed my hip. “If it were only a tracking spell, why was she thrown into a memory? One strong enough to cause harm?”

Draven lifted his hands to his mate's shoulders as he shifted behind her chair. “It was meant to be a tracking spell, yes. But when mixed with the original memory spell on the

crystal, it amplified the power and created something dangerous.”

He shook his head. “The spellcasters underestimated the result. Sersha, most definitely did.”

“How so?” I asked.

“She had to know that if you were here and you were marked, she’d have to figure out how to get you away from the Shadowlands without incurring my wrath. But because it also harmed you, my wrath is now guaranteed. She committed an act of war on the grounds of my home. She won’t like the outcome.”

The Shadow Lord’s eyes screamed vengeance. This was exactly what I’d wanted to avoid. I would not bring war upon these demons. Innocents on both sides would be caught up in the crossfire.

Too late, my inner witch taunted.

Then I thought of something else. “How did Sersha even know I was here?”

Lyric absently popped her knuckles against her palm. “We don’t think Queen Bitchface actually knows where you are. Henderson jumped back to Eastbourne to check the records on how many of those spells were sold and when. Apparently they sat on a shelf collecting dust until a few days ago when a fae came and purchased a handful. We’re assuming they found a way to gift most of the surrounding leaders with something innocuous enough to not be suspicious. We were only suspicious because you’re here. And the spell only paints a mark on you, so it’s unlikely anyone else was hit with a dose.”

Closing my eyes, I scanned my body, searching for any trace of an enchanted brand within. Normally these spells leave behind a concentrated morsel somewhere under the skin. I’d cut it out as soon as I found it.

There ... no ... I scanned again, calling on both sides and ignoring the voices around me. I kept finding traces, but they were everywhere. Faint and elusive. I followed one down my arm and back to my heart. Every muscle in my body tensed.

“What is it?” my mate demanded, searching my face.

My mouth moved to form words yet no sound came out. How was I to tell him I needed to get as far away from Embour as possible?

“Hugo!” he roared.

The healer came through the door immediately with Kree in tow. “You rang?”

“She can’t speak.”

The congenial demon cocked his head. “There’s nothing wrong with her speech. From the looks of her aura she’s majorly stressed.”

Hexing Hades!

“I’m ...” I couldn’t say I was fine because it was a lie. “I, ah, felt something in my bloodstream. Residual magic.” I left out the details.

“What your mate is trying to tell you,” Hugo stated without emotion, “is that the tracking spell resides in her blood, still. Kree and I flushed out most of it.”

A quick bloom of red overtook Casimir’s face. “Why not all of it?”

Hugo and Kree shared a complicit glance.

“It’s okay,” she said. “I’m not scared.”

My eyebrows came together. “Scared? Why would you be scared?”

Her angelic face scrunched. “I don’t want to upset anyone so please remain calm.”

Lyric shot to her feet. “You cannot start with a statement like that and expect us to remain calm, Kree! So say it fast before I’m no longer calm!”

As though compelled, Kree parted her lips. “The spell couldn’t be dissolved and adhered to the closest being. Since I was touching Raven, I was closest.”

“I made her let go,” Hugo added. “Hence, some of it is still attached to Raven’s cells and the rest is in Kree’s. It looks like it’s clinging to blood cells. I’m not sure how to obliterate it.”

“Get Vera,” I said, all eyes falling to me. “It’s a Dianic witch’s spell.”

“I already consulted with her,” Hugo’s soft tone actually nettled this time. “She took a quick look at Kree before we came back in. The spell morphed with whatever fae magic was used and your blood was involved, so it’s no longer something she can simply banish. But she and Henderson are setting some spells around the fortress to block the fae from sensing it.”

“Push it into me,” Casimir commanded.

I fisted his shirt. “No.”

“Yes,” he glowered.

“We can’t. I have to touch her to push my power through her.” Kree held up her hands, wiggling her fingers. “The only place it has to go is back and forth between us.”

“What if I were touching her, as well?”

I didn’t let Kree respond to my mate’s question. “It doesn’t solve the problem of the spell remaining inside Kree.”

I felt terrible about it and extremely guilty. I couldn’t handle being the reason everyone was in danger. I needed to find a solution, and fast.

Only, I knew the solution. It had been the solution the entire time.

I knew what needed to be done, but I couldn’t bring myself to say the words out loud. Casimir would fight me on it. But if I didn’t do it, who knew what could happen?

Besides, now that Kol was running loose, it seemed the best course of action.

I took a deep breath and spoke up. “There’s one surefire way to get rid of a spell completely.”

Everyone's attention turned to me again, waiting for me to continue.

"The original caster can undo it. Unfortunately, that doesn't seem to be an option since the spell has been altered into something else. Which really only leaves me with one option."

My mate's fingers dug into the flesh of my waist. "Absolutely not."

"So I just stay locked inside Embour forever?"

"Yes." He sounded almost petulant.

"My sister, too?" Lyric petitioned quietly. "You'd be okay locking her up alongside Raven? You think it's acceptable to keep them both shackled to Embour, even knowing their histories?"

Kree's face hardened, navy eyes turning dark as ink.

Casimir had told me a little bit of her past, how she'd been kept under lock and key and bled to stabilize her powers after the horrors inflicted upon her by her mate, the former Shadow Lord.

It had been necessary, but far from ideal. Luckily, Draven and his army had ended that monster's reign decades ago.

The demon in question hooked his arm around his much smaller mate. "We'll sleep on it."

My teeth clenched, not wanting to postpone the inevitable.

His grey eyes flashed and remained on my face when he said, "Everyone needs a clear head before making any rash decisions. I'm waiting on a few messengers to return. We'll convene tomorrow once I hear from them. Hugo, as much as you loathe these meetings, I'd like you there, especially since we now have a blood spell to contend with."

"Of course," the healer agreed.

Draven nodded stiffly and disappeared with Lyric, wrapped in shadows. Just as I was about to bid a goodnight, Casimir did the same with me.

It seemed my mate needed a lesson on boundaries.



Chapter 28

Casimir

Once we were inside our quarters, Raven released a small spark of power. Instantly, we solidified and I nearly dropped her.

She extricated herself from my arms with a swift, fluid motion and backed away. Her body language was stiff.

The usual sexual haze typically brought on by ghosting with a non-Shadow was noticeably absent, leaving me in a state of confusion. Was I relieved or disappointed?

Uncertainty clouded my mind as I watched her retreat even further away. There was something distant about her gaze, perhaps a hint of sadness or regret. Either way, it left me feeling unsettled and unsure of what to do next.

“I will not remain a prisoner, Casimir.”

“I know. I promise it’s temporary.”

“No!” her voice cracked like thunder. “Temporary or not, I will not be locked inside any room ever again!”

“You’ll have run of the fortress, Little Bird.”

She scoffed. “A bigger cage is still a cage.”

Flames of frustration licked across my chest. “Then what do you propose?”

“Well, I was going to propose I help retrieve Kol before he causes some major problems.”

“No fucking way.”

Her pillowy lips tightened. “I agree but not because my mate thinks he can order me to stay put. I agree because, though diminished, that damned tracking spell still resides

inside my veins. I'd never lead Sersha to Kol, no matter what he's up to."

I scrubbed at my jaw.

Raven's tone remained cool and crisp. "You might be my mate, Casimir, but that doesn't make you an alpha that I'll allow to govern me."

I let the alpha comment go, presuming it stemmed from somewhere in her history with Nik. He couldn't hold onto her. He likely lost her the first time he treated her like she was a pack animal to be ruled, a mistake I would not repeat.

I reached out to smooth a wrinkle marring her golden-bronze skin. Her delicate fingers clasped around my wrist, halting my progress.

"Forgive me, Little Bird. The last thing I want is for you to ever feel like you're trapped, not with me."

I inched closer, slowly, praying she wouldn't force me to stop. "Please, allow me a moment to adjust to witnessing my mate being sliced open by a depraved monster. I'm not handling it well. Nor am I handling the fact I wasn't informed of that particular scar."

"Cas—"

"No, don't explain. You don't have to explain."

I studied her face and noticed a change in her brow, in how she held her shoulders and relaxed her neck—a slight crack in the façade she usually donned so well.

Lowering my forehead to hers, I made her a vow. "I would do anything to protect you, Raven. Anything. It's dangerous for others, the lengths I would go to for you."

Her scent changed, no longer the scent of righteous fury. It was the irresistible scent of her arousal. The weight holding me down lightened, replaced with a different sort of tightening.

The air between us was electrified with heat and magic. I found myself leaning closer, wishing to taste her. I wanted to make sure she knew it was true, that I'd do anything for her.

Raven seemed to understand my intent, for she leaned forward and closed the gap between us. Our lips touched and electric sparks danced across my body. She moaned softly into the kiss and I felt as if all of the world had dropped away around us. It was just me and my mate in this moment.

I moved my mouth along her neck, gently tracing circles with my tongue and feeling shivers ripple up and down her body as I did so. She moaned in response, my name on her lips like a prayer that begged to be answered.

Our clothes fell away easily until there was nothing between us but skin and desire, both of which were illuminated by the gentle glow of moonlight streaming through the windows.

I carried her to our giant bed and laid her down. Our mouths remained fused, our hands clenching one another tightly as if we were afraid to break the spell around us.

Something felt different this time. Unlike our earlier interludes, which were hurried and desperate, this was slow and deliberate, and all the more intense. For me, at least.

My tongue darted out and I tasted the thin skin along her collarbone, something she seemed to enjoy judging by her moan of approval.

I cupped one of her breasts, appreciating its weight. A rigid nipple pressed into my palm, pointing outward and proud, inviting me to taste. Bending, I teased both peaks with my tongue, back and forth. Raven's body arched up.

The sneaky vixen's hand found my shaft and slowly stroked it, exploring the texture of my cock. I hissed at the almost painful contact.

I grabbed her wrist, guiding her hand away from my length and she opened her eyes.

“Not yet. I won't last if you keep touching me.”

Amethyst sparkled in her eyes. Holding her stare, I moved my hand down the length of her torso, finding her center.

“My mate is so wet,” I praised, gliding a finger through her slick folds then smearing the silky essence across her clit with my thumb.

Raven whimpered when I moved my hand away, teasing her as I worked my way down her body. I took as much time as I could, exploring the small curves and valleys, giving attention to every part.

Finally, I settled between her legs.

I nuzzled the soft curls at the juncture of her thighs and inhaled deeply, memorizing her perfume in case I ever forgot. I couldn't risk ever forgetting the sound of her voice or the feel of her hands upon my flesh. I never wanted to forget any of this, ever.

I teased with my breath, causing her to shudder. My mouth lowered and kissed the sensitive skin between her thighs, then nipped at her. She gasped, a sound that made my shaft harder.

Finally, I slowly separated her folds and ran my tongue over her clit, probing gently. Raven cried out. Another shudder wracked her body.

Gods, she was going to go off so fast. Wanting her to have that release before I entered her, I licked and teased relentlessly, never stopping until she was writhing under me.

Her small hands fisted the bed sheets when I inserted a finger, her thighs quaked as she began to clench around it.

She moved her hips against my mouth and I slowly pushed in further, keeping the pressure even while she worked her own rhythm. Her cries and moans fell on my ears like music, until she came apart with a shout.

I held her there like that, until her hips stopped bucking, my name a sigh on her lips.

My tongue methodically traced up the center of her torso, torturing us both. By the time I'd reached her throat she had my cock in her hand and positioned at her opening.

Her hot, wet center grasped the head of my length, holding me there, begging for entrance. I thrust in slowly at first, so

slowly it felt as if my body was being pulled by an invisible force. The pleasure was dizzying.

Looking down, I watched as inch by inch disappeared inside my mate. I wanted to go slow, to make it last.

My mate didn't want to go slow.

"Faster," she ordered, wrapping her legs around my hips.

Raven's hands moved to my ass, pulling me in deeper. It was like she was trying to burrow into me. Her inner walls contracted.

"Don't move." It came out more like a growl.

Our eyes locked. My face was so close to hers, I could taste her breath mixing with mine. She was so beautiful. So precious and pure of heart.

That she was mine was truly a miracle.

My muscles quivered, desperate to move, to fill her, to remind her she was mine forever. Our bond flared between us at the thought.

I nibbled at her lips, gently at first, then more urgently. Raven bowed and I pressed in deeper. She sucked in a breath.

The fire in my body threatened to swell out of control. I needed more. I withdrew, then drove back inside her viselike sheath. Hard enough she gasped, her ribs pressing into my chest.

"Yes!" she cried out.

I did it again. Then again.

In and out at a slow and steady pace.

Hard.

Languid.

I showed her with my body what I hadn't said with my words.

I clasped my hands with hers, holding them above her head. The places our palms connected pulsed and sparked. Our souls tangled restlessly.

My body ached in burning ecstasy as I moved inside Raven. The euphoria fissured all my jagged pieces before putting me back together. I felt a new kind of strength, a new level of purpose.

It wasn't so much that she was mine, it was that I was hers. Her shield. Her dagger. Her acolyte, existing to worship at her feet.

Raven held tight, squeezing my hands. Her hips lifted each time I plunged deep, taking everything I offered.

My balls drew up and I fought my release.

Raven whispered pleas for me to let her come. I obliged, lifting my torso slightly to grind against her heated core.

Her body went rigid under me, momentarily suspended in the first wave of her climax. She cried out, abruptly moving with urgency.

Her moans filled the room, the walls, and my head. Her face twisted in sweet agony, her mouth opened, but I couldn't hear the words. The deep, satisfied moan as I brought her over the edge was the only sound I recognized, the only mentation my mind could process.

With one last, powerful thrust, I held my shaft still while she continued to spasm around me. Powerless to this siren's call, I emptied myself into the wet heat constricting around my cock.

The rapturous moment was directly ruined by the painful sting under my right palm. I froze, my brain catching up to my body. With a wild bellow, I ghosted across the room.

Raven flew upright, wide eyes seeking me in the dim room. "Casimir?" she called with trepidation.

Shaking so hard I had trouble becoming corporeal, I didn't answer immediately. For a moment I worried I'd never be able to shift back, so stricken with what had almost happened.

My female grabbed the sheet and tried to lift it up, but she quickly released it, looking down at her open palm. Her face turned towards me but I was still merely a shadow in the dark.

“Is this what spooked you?” Her worried note staked me in the chest.

“It’s okay,” she soothed, sliding to the side of the bed.

“No, stay there.”

“It’s okay,” she repeated, inching a foot towards the ground. “I want you. I want this.”

“No,” I snapped, loathing myself for speaking to her as though she’d done something wrong.

Yet I was unable to stop my lips from forming the words. “Don’t get up. Don’t come over here. Don’t say it’s okay. It’s not okay.”

“I’m not upset with you, Casimir. We’re soulmates and committed to being together. I—I feel so much for you, more than I ever thought I could. This was going to happen sooner or later.”

That last declaration exterminated the shakes of anxiety and roused the embers of bitterness rooted in my soul. Not at her, never at my mate, but with the consequences.

“You’re wrong,” I retorted grimly, emotions getting the better of me. “Are you marked?”

Unblinking, Raven studied the space I was occupying. “Are you?” she countered.

I shifted out of shadow form and held my palm up to my face. A tiny muted line could be seen above my lifeline. It extended no further.

“Halle-fucking-luiah,” I sagged in relief. “Not a full mark. The gods have finally taken pity on me.”

Eagerly, I strode towards Raven to look at hers. She recoiled at my approach. Confusion and hurt marred her beautiful face and halted me in my tracks.

I softened my features and my voice. “Are you marked with the full brand, Little Bird?”

Raven stared so intently I thought she might be seeing through me again. Her eyes changed, swirling from bright

violet into a purple so dark it was almost black.

“Raven?”

Without so much as blinking, she lifted her palm and showed me my nightmare come to life.

There, clear and bright and unmistakably real, was the mark of the Double Daggers.



My lungs ceased working. My heart arrested.

What had I fucking done?!

My mate accepted the soulbinding and tied her life to mine. I could never die or she would die with me.

How could I have been so reckless? So unclear with my desire to never tie ourselves in such a manner?

The pressure of grief and agony swelled and distended inside my chest, bloating like a corpse. I was about to erupt. I couldn't be here.

Gods help me, I couldn't be here.

Shifting, I flew away from my mate and into the dark of night where I belonged.



Chapter 29

Raven

“You might want to tell the shifter to stop staring at you so fixedly.”

Phalen’s suggestion caught me off guard and his bokken tapped the sensitive place under my armpit. The Shadow demon wasn’t even looking over to where Nik and Draven were speaking in low voices.

“Point to Mr. Big Mouth,” Lyric announced from the edge of our sparring circle in the main courtyard. The outer wall was as far as I was allowed to venture and we were just inside it.

“Raven,” she huffed, “don’t let him distract you. I’m here to be entertained and Phalen not getting a beat down is not entertaining.”

Glancing at the female lounging nearby, I wondered how long she’d last sitting still. She was a little ball of energy and idleness would have been torture to someone like her.

Draven had carried down one of the comfy outdoor chairs from the terrace so she could rest and keep her blood pressure steady. The little blonde didn’t complain at all, surprisingly.

In fact, she’d flashed him a saucy grin and asked if he’d bring her a stool so she could prop up her feet. And he did.

Wiping the sweat from my brow, I adjusted my grip on the wooden sword. “Nik can take care of himself.”

One of Phalen’s brows arched.

“He’s not doing anything wrong. Besides, it’s not my job to manage him,” I disputed.

I knew exactly why he was watching so intently and I wasn’t going to open my mouth about it. I hadn’t wanted to

involve Nik in my plan, but his skills were necessary.

The conversation I'd had with Vera and Henderson over breakfast this morning had been a productive one. They'd found Nik and spoken to him on my behalf since he wasn't staying inside the walls of Embour—and I wasn't about to walk outside of the protective barrier.

Not yet, at least.

Phalen lazily twirled his weapon. "Cas is going to skin that male and turn his pelt into a rug."

My lips rolled between my teeth.

"Speaking of that charming mate of yours, where is he?" Lyric sought as she scanned the area expecting to locate him.

The vice encasing my heart tightened another notch. "I'm sure he's around somewhere."

I couldn't say the words around *here* somewhere because I wasn't sure about that particular statement. He hadn't returned after he basically forsook me and the marking I was studiously hiding from the world.

So I'd muted the bond before falling into a fitful slumber.

I'd considered trying to slice it in half, the new addition to the bond that had woven itself around, and reinforced, our fated chain. Regrettably, I wasn't exactly sure what would happen if I did.

I'd hold off for now. I had more pressing concerns at the moment, anyway.

"Trouble in paradise?" Phalen teased.

I swallowed past the lump in my throat.

Phalen's gaze narrowed. Instead of attacking, he approached leisurely, leaning against his bokken once he was close enough to keep the conversation private.

"You're worried," he assessed in a low murmur.

There was much to worry about, but I wasn't feeling overly anxious. More like mildly on edge. I was putting my

focus where it was needed.

To do so, I needed to shove my emotions into the little box I housed deep down inside. Though this trick usually worked in the past, now I had trouble keeping the lid locked tight and sealed.

Lyric vacated her cushioned seat and shuffled over. “Hey, I can whisper, too! What are you whispering about?”

The commander’s attention never left my face. He couldn’t read minds, but I was sure he was an expert at reading reactions. It was what made him an excellent fighter.

“Raven and I were just discussing what crawled up her ass and put that look on her face.”

I opened my mouth to retort but Lyric spoke first.

“Was it Casimir’s dick?” she whisper-hissed.

Gelos, help me. The god of laughter was surely using Lyric as his mouthpiece.

I couldn’t help it; a belly-laugh burst out of me. An even heartier one came from Phalen. Despite the absurdity of her question she seemed quite proud of herself.

Phalen reached out and ruffled her hair. She smiled back at him contentedly. “I adore you, sweet Lyric.”

“Ditto,” she winked, before turning towards me with a mischievous glint in her eye. “So?”

I could feel my cheeks flush and I silently cursed at my reaction. “No, Lyric. That’s not ... just, no.”

“Hey, I’m not judging.”

My soul hummed in awareness and I turned. Through the open gate, near the tree line, Casimir’s dark figure lurked in the shadows.

His eyes were fixed on me with such a fierce intensity I swore I could feel his scrutiny as surely as I’d felt his hands upon my body last night.

My heart rate quickened, and I felt my palms grow clammy. I wasn't sure whether to approach him or turn and run.

Neither, I scolded myself. Remember the plan.

“If you'll excuse me, I need to have a word with Casimir.”

When Phalen and Lyric looked over to where Casimir had finally shown himself, I calmly strode to the weapons rack and returned the bokken.

Pausing long enough for him to see my intent, I moved away from the small group and towards the stone steps. Through our link, I felt him following.

My strides were steady as I entered the fortress. Not too fast, not too slow. Timing was important when relying upon others.

It wasn't until I entered Casimir's rooms and felt him cross over the ward that I finally spoke. “Back so soon?”

I couldn't keep the contempt out of my tone. He'd made me feel wretched. Unwanted. Like I'd done something wrong and he was the injured party.

Casimir didn't answer, but continued to stare. His eyes were ablaze with a dark fire. His jaw was clenched as he looked at me, as if he were trying to hold back a flood of emotions.

He took a step closer. I stepped back.

I felt my own body responding to his, a strange heat building in my gut. Yearning and something else. Something weighty and painful.

Something that felt an awful lot like guilt.

Casimir stalked me, his steps deliberate and purposeful. I kept retreating until I reached the bathing area. He followed me in, still wordless.

Until he finally spoke.

“I'm scared,” he said quietly, his voice full of anguish.

My heart lurched. This male had been a ruthless assassin once upon a time. “Scared of what?”

“I fear what will happen if we fully form the soulbond.”

All the self-assurance I’d been cultivating since last night faded in the face of his need. He stepped closer again, where I needed him to be.

He shook his head as if trying to clear away unseen cobwebs. “It is relatively common knowledge that my mother died when my father was killed in battle. The bond took her as surely as the sword that took my father.”

The words hung between us like a cloud of smoke, doing nothing to fill the void of his despair. There were so many things I wanted to say, but none of them seemed appropriate or helpful.

So instead I just listened and nodded for him to continue. I could allow him this much, to hear him out and try to understand.

Casimir looked away from me and started pacing back and forth across the room. “The same fate felled my aunt,” he said softly, “Draven’s mother. He was a youngling at the time. He lost both parents because of that fucking bond before he’d made it to ten years of age. I vowed I’d never follow any of them down that tragic path.”

Casimir glared at my left hand, which hung loosely at my side. “A soulbond is a death sentence, Raven, and I fear I’ve just become your eventual executioner.”

He looked away then, as if ashamed of what he’d revealed. There was no need for shame. I understood the fear behind his words.

Yes, he’d hurt me last night, but I understood why he felt that way. I could even imagine myself forgiving him and working through the issue together.

It made what I was about to do all the more costly. Would he be able to forgive me?

Not if you're dead, my inner witch slighted. Though, if I were killed, at least he would live.

Without warning Casimir closed the gap between us and grabbed hold of my arms gently but firmly, pulling me into him until our foreheads were touching and we were breathing as one entity.

I let myself fall into the moment, imagining a future I might never see.

A warning tickled the back of my neck from the ward I'd reset this morning. I had roughly half a minute left before we had visitors.

I took a step to the side, entering the shower. Casimir's furrowed brow soon rose with interest.

I had to hurry. Conjuring a dagger, I lifted my arm and sliced across the skin just below my elbow. Blood flowed down my arm, dripping onto the tile below.

"What in the hell are you doing?" he shouted hoarsely, grabbing a hand towel off the sink and stepping into the shower.

As soon as his body came through the barrier at the end of the stall, I stepped out, careful to make sure I felt the spell absorb some of what I'd offered it.

"Was it enough?"

"Was what enough?" he demanded, trying to follow me out.

"Shit!" he cursed when the spell repelled him backwards. He shook the wrist he'd just injured and used the other to test the hold.

"She was speaking to me, darling."

Casimir turned his darkening eyes to Vera. "Someone had better start explaining."

He slapped his palms onto the invisible wall holding him inside. "Right. Fucking. Now!"

Vera's electric blue gaze met mine. "To answer your question, that was more than enough blood, my dear."

Casimir slammed his shoulder against the enchantment. It held, yet did nothing to deter him.

Relief, likely fleeting and undoubtedly bittersweet, accompanied the air I pushed out on my next exhale.

Then puzzlement replaced it when I drew a breath. "Why can I hear him?"

The witch spread her fingers over my arm and the burning of the cut cooled as the blood on my skin disappeared. "Thank you, Vera, but please answer the question."

"It's from altering the spell," Vera paused. "Casimir, would you be a gem and keep it down for a moment? I can hardly hear myself think with all your caterwauling."

A litany of expletives hurled from his tongue. Vera regally rolled her wrists and suddenly his voice was muted.

I didn't look at him. I didn't want to see the betrayal I knew I'd find in his eyes.

"Better," she smiled serenely. "Now, go into the closet and put this on."

I took the fabric tote from her manicured hands. "Everything you need should be inside. I put some supplies in the pockets and a little something extra in the pouches attached to the belt."

I hurried into the closet, changing out of the camel-colored top and leggings I'd been wearing since morning. What to replace them with?

I made the pragmatic choice of one of the sets of black fighting leathers and matching boots that Casimir had gifted to me. They'd lessen the kiss of a blade should I run into trouble.

Who was I kidding? I was running headfirst into trouble. The question was: how much?

Emptying the bag onto the floor, I quickly took inventory. I checked the velvety pouches first, impressed with some of the

herbs I scented.

I didn't have time to check what was in the vials. I'd just have to trust that they were useful or necessary and check them once I'd made my escape.

I rose to my feet, securing the belt the Dianic witch had prepared for me. She'd even included two small daggers with dark crimson handles.

Though Vera had freely offered assistance, I didn't like feeling that I owed her. It was something to think on later.

Lastly, I picked up the opalescent cloak and wrapped it around my shoulders, securing it with the bronze pin that looked suspiciously like the witchcraft symbol for chaos. The static of magic crackled then settled quietly.

"Raven!" Vera called. "Your ride is here. Or rides, should I say? Extremely handsome rides?" she cackled in that annoying way of hers.

Hurrying, I double checked that the belt and cloak were secure then returned to the bathroom where Henderson waited with my third accomplice.

I could feel Casimir's glower sweep across the side of my face. Even though he'd bailed on me after his freakout, I could give him better than disappearing without a backwards glance.

I paused for a moment and forced myself to look him in the eye. The hurt and confusion written there nearly made me stumble in my conviction.

"Can you hear me?" I asked.

Crossing his arms, he nodded curtly.

"I'm sorry," I whispered. "I have to go. Vera tried scrying this morning, but it didn't work. It never really works with my family, but I want you to know I did try another avenue to locate Kol and my father."

He motioned to Vera who seemed to understand what he wanted. "There you go, darling. We'll be able to hear you now."

“There are other avenues, Raven. You don’t *have* to go anywhere,” his voice was a gentle rumble, like the approach of a summer squall before it turned into a hurricane.

“In fact, you shouldn’t be going anywhere. They can find you. Easier than ever now. Did you conveniently forget about what you absorbed?”

“No, Vera has helped me with that. I can hold off the spell for a few days, possibly a week.”

“And how far do you think you can get on foot in a few days? I’ll find you before then and drag your ass right back here, Little Bird. I’ll chain you to that bed if I have to.”

A low growl vibrated from Nik’s throat. The hate-filled glare Casimir tossed at him only made the sound louder.

“Stop it,” I ordered. “That’s not helping anything, Nik.”

My mate chuffed in irritation. “Speaking of helping,” he said hostilely, “how are you managing to do this, Vera? You took a blood oath to not work against the Shadow demons.”

Vera’s painted lips tilted. “I can manage this because I’m not acting against you, Casimir.”

“Oh, but you are.”

The witch glided closer. She took my left wrist and lifted, pressing my palm against the barrier in front of the confined demon, displaying the mark.

“I’m not. I am both blood and honor bound to do nothing to put you in peril,” Vera solemnly argued. “If you are killed, this mark means your mate shall perish, as well. By keeping you in here, I’m keeping both you and your mate safe.”

The lines in Casimir’s face deepened as his expression hardened into stone. “She’s going after Sersha. She’s not the slightest bit safe.”

“I’m going after my brother,” I corrected.

“And if he’s at the keep?”

Nik took a step forward to flank my right side, speaking earnestly. “We don’t believe he’s there. He may have planned

something, but Kol's too smart to simply stroll into that castle and announce his presence and bloodline. I'd never allow Kol or Raven to run headfirst at the Queen, not if I could stop it."

Nik put his palm on my shoulder. Casimir's guttural growl had the shifter dropping it.

"So that's it, then? You're taking off with your shifter? Leaving behind your mate?"

The words hit their target. I clenched my fists and bowed my head, forcing back the burn behind my eyes.

"Don't be cruel," Nik reproved. "I can track Kol's scent faster than she can. My loyalty is to The Navita. If I can help find his son, especially since his daughter is hellbent on trying, then that's what I'm going to do."

Growing more agitated, Casimir located Henderson looming silently over by the door. "What's in it for you? Or are you blindly following Vera's orders to take my mate away from the safety of Embour?"

Henderson smiled sadly. "I owe both Raven and the Triple Goddess my life, Sir. This is me trying to make payment towards those debts."

"Simply because she helped you on your way to Eastbourne?" he sneered.

Things were turning ugly. My mate's embitterment was getting the best of him. Not that I blamed him. Someday I'd make it up to him, assuming it was even a possibility.

I turned away from Casimir, ready to depart, when the male witch's words froze me in place.

"Your mate cut the soulbond anchoring me to Helene."

Vera gasped, the only audible reaction to reach my ears.

"You see, Sir, Helene was my soulmate, fully bonded. Crossing into the Otherland had weakened her. I'd been weakened some, as well, and jumping wasn't possible. On our journey to get to the coven, I left her resting under a tree to seek natural remedies I knew had to be growing in the forest. She was attacked while I was making my way back to her."

“Attacked by what?” Nik quietly inquired.

Henderson’s chest expanded. “By the Queen’s guard as they traveled back to Ansley Keep. Helene was able to communicate that much. They’d bled her, and her magic, and went on their way, leaving her there like roadside trash.”

I wiped my cheek on my shoulder, erasing the few tears that managed to escape.

“I sat there with her, feeling my soul wither, praying to the Triple Goddess for a chance to avenge my mate before I died. She answered my invocation.”

Henderson took my hand and squeezed it. “She answered in the most unexpected way. A child, half Dianic witch, half Seelie fae of all things, did the impossible, and severed the cord dragging me into Death’s embrace.”

I returned the squeeze.

“Now I have the opportunity to act. The Fates must have arranged for us to cross paths at this time. I’ll help find the youngling, then I’ll meet with Brokk Ulrik and see if we can come to some sort of agreement. At the very least I owe Raven enough to assist with locating Kol.”

The kind male looked down at me. “Are you ready?”

I nodded.

“Then let us be gone.”

“Do try to keep them both alive, dear Henderson.”

“Of course, Vera,” he bowed.

Casimir slammed into the wall of the spell again. I cast a worried glance over my shoulder.

“Raven! *Look at me, godsdamnit!*”

“Darling, you’re only wearing yourself out,” Vera purred.

He cursed again, turning his vitriol onto his former lover. “How can you be so fucking cavalier about this?” he demanded vehemently.

She smirked. “Please, I’m almost a thousand years old. There’s no other way to be at this point.”

The ward down the hall buzzed in warning. Someone was coming.

“Better hurry, dears.”

“Thank you, Vera. You’ll be alright?”

Her tinkling laugh didn’t bother me for once. Instead, it bolstered me ahead.

The crafty witch would be fine. Casimir would be ... well, he’d be safe. If I found myself in mortal peril, I’d cut our connection, just in case.

Casimir was bellowing as Henderson grabbed onto both Nik and I, jumping us far away from Embour. I swore I could still hear my mate’s shouts when we landed in the Faelands.



Chapter 30

Raven

“One would think the goddesses above would throw us a bone. A dry one, I hope,” Henderson quipped as we trekked through the wet, lush forest of the Borderlands.

My boot squished into the mud of a shallow puddle. “Yes, dry sounds good right about now.”

We’d been on foot in the woods for just over a day, entering where Nik believed Kol had last been seen by Father.

It was an area of lawlessness and danger, not just from Others, but from the plants and animals roaming within the shadows created by the thick canopy above. If one wanted to hide, this was where you went.

Most Others were too afraid to spend much time in the Borderlands. Over time, its lore had grown into great exaggerations, but it was by no means safe. Luckily, I was well-versed in the hazards here.

Nik had gone ahead, scouting and hoping to pick up a trace of my brother’s scent. The rain wasn’t helping. It covered tracks and diluted odors. We wouldn’t be able to keep wandering much longer.

Nik’s ability to guide us and navigate the terrain was a blessing. But no matter how skilled and knowledgeable he was, if Kol wasn’t here, his efforts would be wasted. All of our efforts.

Leaving Casimir for a fruitless search wasn’t something I wanted to dwell on. Henderson’s commentary helped.

As we journeyed further, however, he spoke less and less. He seemed almost distant where he’d been chatty when we first arrived, and I wondered if he’d picked up on something I hadn’t.

I released a burst of power, feeling for any living creatures nearby. Nothing bigger than a vulture was within earshot.

“Henderson?”

“Hmm?” he answered distractedly.

“May I ask you a question?”

“Of course.”

“Why did you tell Casimir about me severing your soulbond with Helene?”

It wasn't easy, ignoring the icy stab of heartache my mate's sudden departure had inflicted. It was there, just under the surface, no matter what I was doing or thinking.

He'd had his reasons to deny the soulbond. Unfortunately, my heart didn't seem to care.

“Why indeed,” Henderson chuckled.

I didn't get the joke. His small smile seemed at odds with the alertness of his eyes.

Henderson was a reliable male. He was also an accomplished witch. Not much would get by his notice.

It made me feel better about including him in this mess. I'd needed a ride, as Vera had put it, and Henderson was motivated for his own reasons.

“I shared my tale with your mate because I respect the power of the bond. Too many run in head first, fully embracing the connection. And just as many staunchly avoid it, as though it is the curse of all curses.”

I hadn't consciously made the decision to accept the mark until it was happening. I'd been thinking of him, and how I'd come to accept him as my mate. And how he felt moving on top of me. Inside me—

This was not the time or the place.

“Once I knew your soulbond went only one way, I suspected Casimir of being bullheaded and you of growing jaded.”

He glanced down at me. “Possibly both of you were a little of each.”

“Definitely,” I muttered, no less confused as to why he’d shared our secret.

“Plus you had that awful tracking spell that Sersha used against you and it only added insult that your mother had been the one to brew it. All of these things combined to create a terribly stressful environment for you both, yes?”

“Yes.” Very stressful, but not unbearable.

Well, the whole running out on me post-coital bliss had felt like a blade buried between my ribs, but I never felt that he wanted me out of his life. If I’d thought he did, I would have been long gone with no intention of ever returning.

“Raven, what does an animal do when it feels trapped?”

“It attacks. Or it will try to flee.”

“Exactly,” he hummed merrily.

He didn’t speak again. I ran his words back through my head.

“Henderson, forgive me, but are you saying it was inevitable I’d flee?”

“Or attack. Just as he did, though it was only with words.”

“But that was all before you told him what I did for you.”

Henderson stopped and gave me his full attention. “It is so very easy to ruin what could be a good thing. It is also very easy to fix it. You were upset, but you knew you had an out. It makes it easier to accept the bond, I think.”

I lifted a finger. “Possible out. I’m not sure what will happen if I do it to a bond of my own.”

“It’s no different, Raven. The magic would be the same. And knowing this as I do, because I am wise,” he winked, “Casimir needed to know there was an out. Not an out from being your mate—he is obviously gone for you.”

Not enough, apparently. I was being unfair and I wasn't sure I cared. The wounds were fresh.

"But rather," he continued, "an out from feeling like he could ever become your ruin, considering his past."

I chewed on the inside of my cheeks, mulling over his words. "How do you even know about his past?"

He wiggled his fingers. "Magic."

I snorted at his ridiculous statement. "You spied on us?"

Henderson's chin jerked into his neck, eyes wide. "Absolutely not! The shifter overheard some words exchanged."

"In our bedroom?" I accused earning another chuckle.

"No, no, no! Of course not. Draven and Lyric exchanged some words on the situation. She's not the quietest of beings, you know, but she does have a heart. They both were worried. She'd seen your mark but didn't say anything. Draven knew Casimir had left Embour because of the extra wards signaling his departure. It wasn't hard to piece together."

The Shadow Lord could also read minds, but that wasn't Henderson's business. We fell into an alert silence, covering ground as efficiently as we could manage.

Soon, Nik came running through the trees ahead of us. "I found something."

"Kol?" My pulse quickened.

"A trace of him. I lost it to the wind, but it was definitely Kol's scent. Come, I'll show you where."

It was a sign we were on the right track. I rushed forward with a new hope only to be pulled back by Henderson's long arm.

"I can get us there faster."

Oh, right.

Nik grabbed onto Henderson's arm. "Three clicks in that," he pointed, "direction. Be mindful of where you land. There

are a lot of small cave openings.”

Magic constricted then shot us forward. A blink and we were there, tottering atop the edge of a craggily fissure.

My foot slid and both males grabbed ahold of me. I could hear every single pebble clattering down into the narrow cavern.

“Steady,” Henderson warned as we took in our new surroundings.

Vines and moss stretched across the jagged landscape. Thin trees and tall reeds grew out of the uneven topography.

The air was cooler here, a slight humidity to it. A breeze blew past, rustling the plants and raising goose flesh along my spine.

I swallowed and licked my lips. The aftertaste of the hare we’d had for dinner lingered and I thought of the way Casimir would put toothpaste on my toothbrush each night.

A craving for mint came out of nowhere. I was hopeless.

Nik’s beast rolled over his eyes. He leaped across a shallow ravine. Crouching, he sniffed the air, bobbing and sliding until he seized onto Kol’s lingering trail.

“This way.”

Henderson and I fanned out, giving Nik space to work and staying downwind as best we could. We traversed the irregular ground, even crawling in and out of the cave system.

Night had fallen and we decided not to use our magic for light, lowering the risk of catching unwanted attention. Especially the attention of any Shadow demons who were likely hunting us down.

We tracked until the trail ran cold atop a ridge overlooking a small ramshackle village below. It looked abandoned, but that was likely by design.

“Where would Kol have gone from here?” Henderson thought aloud. “The ungoverned villages in the Borderlands aren’t exactly friendly to outsiders.”

Nik pursed his lips. “You’d be surprised. I’ve been through this one before. It was kind enough until some of the residents started disappearing.”

I squinted to see what I could make out from this high up. “Which village is this?”

“Cragstedt.”

Henderson chortled. “Original.”

“Yet fitting,” I remarked, skirting the edge to see if there was a path Kol may have taken down to the settlement.

The wind shifted and Nik went rigid. “Don’t move,” he ordered.

I held still, sparing Henderson a worried glance. He was a good fifteen yards from Nik and even further from me.

“Turn around slowly,” Nik murmured.

Cautiously, I rotated to face whatever threat Nik had scented. We were met by two yellow-green orbs peering at us from within a cluster of foliage.

Henderson could jump us out of here, but he’d have to make two small jumps to get to each of us. We should have remained within arm’s reach.

I pulled power into my hands.

Nik’s head swiveled slightly towards me, eyes remaining on whatever was watching us. “No.”

“What, it’s a friend of yours?” I whispered.

“Lindwurm.”

Nik’s clipped reply wasn’t one I wanted to hear. I absorbed the magic back into my body as quickly as I could.

The poisonous serpent was not only one of the few creatures impervious to magic, it was attracted to it. It would sense any shield I created and plow right through it.

Something rattled underneath us.

“That’s its tail,” Nik warned.

I knew lindwyrms were big, but its head was at least thirty yards away. “Or there’s more than one,” I guessed.

Nik started to remove his shirt.

“Are you insane? Even if you shift it can still poison you.”

“I’ll distract it while Henderson gets you out of here.”

I knew he had a built-in mechanism demanding he shield others from danger; painting himself as the primary target was hardly the answer.

“Henderson? A little help, please?” I requested.

The male witch was eyeing the serpent intently. Another rattle came up through the porous ground, this time closer to Nik.

“The tail has a barb,” I said, taking a sluggish step closer to Nik. “It’s poison is concentrated in the tail.”

“Stay back,” he ordered.

“Henderson can get us both in one jump if we’re a little closer together.”

The shifter growled in frustration.

“Let’s at least try to get all of us out of here,” I coaxed. “Otherwise I’ll just come back to find you.”

He didn’t say anything but the stubborn cat did take a step closer to me.

The rattle grew louder.

“We’re out of time,” Henderson said. “I’m going to land between the two of you so keep an arm out for me. In three—”

His countdown was cut short.

Next to my left foot, something shot up out of the rocks. I leapt away as it struck, missing me by an inch.

Henderson appeared but I was now out of reach. Nik’s face contorted as his shift began.

Henderson yanked Nik in my direction, reaching for me. I sprung to close the distance, arm out.

A deathly hiss emanated from the creature's mouth, still hidden in the foliage.

Right before our fingers touched, my lower leg screamed in agony, a horrendous snap reverberating in my ears. I almost passed out from the pain.

The venom was hot and thick, like tar on a hot summer day. It burned its way into my cells, filling the channels of my veins.

The taste of bile filled my mouth. Delirium made it difficult to focus, but I could still make out my traveling partners, who were arguing.

I was vaguely aware of the contorting feel of the jumps we were making. Why so many? We needed to rest.

Visions of Casimir danced in my mind. Tall and muscular and so ruggedly handsome it was a wonder he hadn't already mated some other female long ago.

Mated.

There was something I was supposed to remember about that, something important to keep my mate safe. The mark on my palm burned.

The bond. Something about the half-formed soulbond.

I reached for my witch's eye. I couldn't find it. Why was it hiding from me?

My thoughts scattered as I began hallucinating. I saw Casimir looking down at me, mouth moving but no words coming out. It felt real.

I tried to call out his name, but my voice wouldn't work. He was so close. No, I'd left him at Embour. He'd hurt me and I ...

More voices came through the tunnel I'd fallen into. Distorted shouts and curses flew around.

The web of poison began a second attack. My body grew colder and heavier, inching towards the black abyss until it

threw me over, into a sea of electricity. A female with wings sang a mesmerizing tune.

How strange it was, thinking about electric shocks and angels as I plunged further down, until I had no thoughts at all.



Chapter 31

Casimir

An hour ago ...

“Shit,” I blurted, pulling my hand back from the rolled out parchment.

“What?” Draven asked.

“I don’t know. My palm felt like it was burning for a second.”

Draven watched me like a hawk. “Open your hand, Cas.”

Turning it over, I inspected the incomplete brand, expecting it to be red or angry.

“It looks the same,” I told him.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

I dropped my attention back to the map between us, spread across the desk in my private quarters. My private *cell* would have been a more apt name.

“No.”

I’d already been lectured by him. And his mate. And even Phalen, the one male I’d never thought would deign to hand out relationship advice.

None, however, had been harder on me than I’d been on myself. Two days shut up in here had been plenty to reflect on all the ways I’d fucked up.

After Vera had dissolved the spell and I’d lost my mind, she’d hit me with something that made me lethargic right before Draven and his mate ghosted into the room.

The witch had been honest with Draven about what she’d done. He shockingly didn’t lose his shit, nor did his cut-throat mate. In fact, neither had been all that surprised.

While I was out of it, Draven decided it was a good idea to hold me inside these walls until I had a handle on myself. Vera had been more than happy to help him with that.

I supposed I should've been thankful that my cousin had assured me he was taking action and continuously giving me updates and advice. He'd spent most of his hours here with me, pouring over intel and maps, then sending out groups for recon.

A mere two hours ago, he'd barged in waving a piece of paper around and insisted we needed a new plan, immediately.

"Do you think your mate will be pissed that I opened the missive her father sent with her name on it?"

I shrugged. "Doubtful. Besides, if you hadn't opened it I would have."

"Not if Lyric got to it first," he smirked. "I can count on her to never be well-behaved."

"True."

I'd been as well-behaved as I could manage, but refraining from reading anything Raven's father had sent would have been impossible. Not in these current circumstances.

The letter hadn't held what we'd expected. Raven wasn't going to react well once she read it.

"My Lord!" a guard's voice echoed down the hallway along with his racing footsteps.

We rose to our feet.

"What is it, Yael?" Draven asked.

"Hugo ordered me to bring you to the infirmary, Sire."

My cousin strode to the door, unable to shift to shadow form on this side of the ward.

"Lyric?" he demanded as he crossed the boundary. "Is something wrong with my mate?"

My stomach coiled with concern for Lyric and the life growing inside her. My favorite sword master was still having

some mild issues with her blood pressure.

“No, not yours, My Lord.” Yael’s owlsh eyes darted to mine.

I bolted over, slamming my hands on the doorframe in frustration. Draven’s scowl reflected my own. I was trapped until he decided I could come out.

“Yael, is Raven here?” Draven questioned.

“Yes, My Lord. Hugo sent Lyric to ask Vera to undo the enchantment up here. He said it was urgent.”

“Thank you, Yael. Go tell Hugo we’ll be down momentarily.”

“To the main infirmary, Sire. He’s already locked himself inside the OR with Raven and Kree.”

The guard disappeared as Draven closed the distance between us. “Don’t lose your shit, Cas.”

Too fucking late.

A quick gust of air signaled the falling ward and I was airborne. I reached the stone building in seconds.

Leaning up against the corner with a forlorn look upon his face was Henderson. Him, I already forgave. Raven played a card he couldn’t ignore.

The fucker next to him, however? That male was going to feel my wrath.

Nik moved to stand in front of the double doors, blocking my path. He showed no fear as I marched closer. He didn’t even brace for the right hook I landed on his firm jaw.

Impressively, the shifter didn’t go down. So I hit him again. And again.

Still, he neither fell nor did he defend himself.

Panting, I shook out my hand, looking for some sort of reaction. His beast was staring back at me with a sort of calm acceptance.

Nik had to believe he deserved the punishment because there was no way an Alpha shifter would stand there and take it otherwise.

His tongue licked the blood trickling from the corner of his mouth. “Are we done?”

“For now.”

Shouldering past him, I flung open the doors and walked inside.

‡ ‡ ‡

“You sure about this, Cas-i-o?”

“Lyric, I love you and I don’t want this to stress you out. Blood pressure, remember?”

I wasn’t being manipulative. It was the first thing I thought of when Yael had called Draven to the infirmary.

Navy eyes narrowed in scrutiny, then rolled in annoyance.

“Fine,” she threw up her hands and stepped away from the door. “I guess they’re your rooms, anyway.”

Once Raven had stabilized, Hugo granted my request to have her brought to a more comfortable space. He and Kree had remained with her until she awoke.

Thirty minutes ago, they’d both exited, announcing she was up and moving, good as new. A lucky bonus was the fact the venom burned away the tracking spell. Also fortunate, the parts that had been transferred to Kree were dissolved by yesterday afternoon.

“She’s *his* mate, Angel,” Draven mused.

“Whatever.”

“Thank you,” I bowed, something I knew she both hated and ate up. “Now go relax somewhere else. I’d prefer not to have anyone eavesdropping.”

Draven tucked his mate into his side, bending to kiss her pouty lips. “Cheer up, my love. I heard Phalen mention something about a new delivery of hot chocolate arriving.”

“Don’t think I don’t know you’re bribing me. Good thing I love chocolate.” Lyric patted my arm. “Good luck, Cas.”

I watched them leave before closing my fingers around the door handle. I stood there a minute, settling both my capricious mind and hammering pulse.

I’d messed up in a major way and had to fix it before she charged out of here again, like she couldn’t leave me fast enough.

Sure, she was heading out to find Kol, but the way she did it stemmed from her need to get away from me. And look how that turned out.

My friends had been able to undo all the damage. The physical damage, at least. If I had anything to do with it, she’d never have to go through another traumatic event ever again.

I was still deep in thought when the handle was ripped away.

“Are you just going to stand there or are you coming in?” Raven’s voice was a mix of anger and weariness.

My hands lifted in surrender as she glared at me. “I’m coming in,” I said hesitantly, waiting to be invited.

Raven made no effort to move. I stepped in front of her but no further, giving her time to decide. We were silent for a few moments before she let out an irritated sigh and finally moved aside.

I passed by, picking up rosemary and mint from the soap she’d used.

“About time,” she grumbled as she walked away and into the bathroom.

Fully dressed in her favorite dark green colors, Raven stood in front of the mirror plaiting her long locks. Her hair was still damp.

Despite her unsmiling expression, there was something about her that screamed vitality. From her glowing skin to her straight posture, and even the delicate movements of her limbs as she finished tying off her hair.

She was light to my dark. A spark of hope in a life I had once despised.

Raven looked up at me with those piercing violet eyes of hers, eyes that were equal parts storm and seduction.

“Are you going to say anything?” she asked.

“Somehow *I’m sorry* doesn’t seem enough.”

“It’s more than I got from you the last time I was here.”

“I know. I didn’t handle it well.”

“Grossly understated, Casmir.”

Shame, regret, and guilt welled up inside me. “I’m disgusted with myself for leaving you that night. You didn’t deserve it.”

I wondered how she felt about leaving me in turn.

“Do you regret it?” Her voice was steady, giving me nothing.

“More than I can possibly say.”

Raven shook her head. “The mark. Do you regret your soul offering it to me, whether or not it was done consciously? Do you regret my willing acceptance of it?”

There was nothing I regretted more than not being able to protect her, especially from me and my mistakes. I couldn’t get the words out.

She swallowed. “Do you even want to form a soulbond with me? Ever?”

“It’s complicated.”

“It’s complicated?” she repeated incredulously. “No, Casimir. It’s actually very simple. You either regret me being tied to you or you don’t.”

I scratched at my jaw. “I never wanted my past to touch you like this, to hurt you.”

“That part of your past isn’t what hurt me!” she yelled, shedding her unaffected veneer.

Her finger jabbed my chest. “You are what hurt me! I understand your reluctance. Goddess above, I’m reluctant, too, but I’m willing to talk about it. Instead of talking to me, you left. You ran away, leaving me naked in your bed.”

“*Our* bed.”

“Ha! There is no *our* anything.”

The air between us was palpable, electricity dancing on our skin like static. My entire frame shook with pressured heat bubbling from the bottom of my feet to the top of my head.

“You made me feel like an idiot,” she continued, “like I’d wronged you in some way when all I’d done was accept you. Then, when I told you I was leaving to find Kol, you threatened to haul my ass back and chain me up.”

“Because I was freaking the fuck out, Raven!”

“So was I. But I didn’t take it out on you, did I? Did you stop for one second to think how threatening to chain me down would make me feel?”

“Obviously not! I’m a male demon. We’re stupid like that.”

Raven opened her mouth, then closed it. Seconds ticked by. Some of the oppressive strain surrounding us weakened.

Her throat cleared. “If you’ll excuse me,” she gave leave, sliding around and heading back into the living area.

I watched from the doorway as she sat in the chair nearest the bed, sliding on her boots.

“What are you doing?”

“Leaving.”

“To go where?”

Standing, she reached for the cloak hanging on the back of the chair. Moving faster, I snagged it away.

She held her hand out, expectantly. “Give me the cloak.”

“No.”

Raven’s neck and face were flooding with red. “You are going to hand me that cloak, Casimir. Then, I am going to walk downstairs, give my thanks, and be on my way.”

“That’s your final decision?”

Her mouth pressed so tight her entire head shook. “Yes.”

“I don’t like that decision,” I declared, throwing the cloak into the bathroom behind me. “Make a different one.”

“I’m going!” she seethed, magic flickering down her arms.

“No you’re not. I’ll go. You’ll stay here.”

“Fuck you, clown boy!”

I recoiled. She sounded just like Lyric. Clearly, I’d pushed too far.

“Joke’s on you, Casimir, because you don’t get to order me to stay put. You think you can control me? I will never be controlled by you or anyone else.”

I pressed into her personal space, our powers growing into a live current, coiling around our bodies, fueling our responses.

“You don’t get it, Raven. I will die if I lose you.”

“No you won’t. You refused the soulbond, remember?”

“Emotionally, Raven! It will fucking kill me if you were taken from me. What would be the point in living if you were dead?!”

With each word my voice got louder. The rubber band I had wrapped around me and my emotions stretched and pulled, growing taut and thin. It strained and strained.

Until it broke.

Sudden, bright, blaring clarity hit me with the blinding force of a thousand burning stars.

If I lost my mate, what would be the point of carrying on? We had no offspring, no one who needed us the way we needed each other. Advantageously, we'd each gain in strength if we soulbonded. Raven would be better protected.

I hadn't been willing to even entertain the thought before. Why was I suddenly so open to it? Because she seemed to want the connection?

No. It's because I can't live without her. And maybe, just maybe, she feels the same.

I clutched her face in my palms and crashed my mouth into hers. Desperately. Madly. I was suffocating and she was air. I tossed her onto the bed and ripped off my shirt.

"What are you doing?" she shrieked.

"We're completing the bond. Get naked."

"No!"

"Do it or those clothes are toast."

"I don't think so," she hissed, scrambling further up the bed.

"Yes." I pounced, landing on top.

My knees shoved her legs wide and I captured her lips once more. Her hands fisted my hair angrily, pushing me away, even as she ground her core against my erection.

"You're only doing this because now you know I can sever it," she accused.

"No. I'm doing this because I love you. I love you so fucking much, Raven. You're the only thing in this life that I need. There is no life without you. I get it now."

Her jaw dropped and I took advantage, sweeping in my tongue and kissing her soundly. Once I'd stolen all the air from her lungs, I lifted my head.

What I found looking back at me had my shadows disintegrating every thread of fabric separating Raven's skin from mine.

My little mate had no idea what was in store for her.



Chapter 32

Raven

Floundering to get my head around Casimir's devastating declaration, I let my body lead, surrendering to his insatiable kiss. I clung to the moment until he broke the spell, allowing me to regain the breath I'd lost.

I love you, he'd said.

Those words. The weight of his body. The feel of his desire throbbing against the seam of my pants.

There is no life without you.

I looked up into his storm cloud eyes. Any surviving resistance was eradicated and replaced by a fierce wave of possessiveness.

This male was mine.

Yes, my inner halves hummed in unison.

A wolfish grin lifted the corners of his mouth. Shadows skated over us and consumed the fabric of our clothing.

The warmth of his skin sank into mine. His hands ran across my back. His touch was fire and I wanted to go up in flames.

I ran my hands over his sculpted muscles, feeling his heartbeat quicken under my touch. I pressed my lips against his chest, tracing a wet path with my tongue.

It wasn't enough room for me to maneuver and attend to him as I desired.

Bucking, I caught him off guard and rolled us. Casimir's eyes glittered, darkening as I bent and took his mouth.

I reached down, fisting his thick shaft, pumping it once from root to tip. He moaned into my mouth as I worked him, feeling him grow impossibly hard in my hand.

The urge to taste him was overwhelming.

Slowly, I crawled down his body, savoring every inch of his skin. When I reached my destination, I ran my tongue along the length of him, swirling and sucking as I explored.

He grunted when I nipped his swollen head. I lifted my face and smiled wickedly.

“Don’t stop,” he rumbled.

I lapped at the velvety knob then closed my lips around it. With each bob of my head I took him further into my mouth. The sounds of wetness and suction enveloped the air accompanied by his heavy respiration.

Hands found their way to the back of my head, tangling in my hair, altering to a leisurely tempo. Sure and steady, like the last time he’d been inside me.

Giving him control, I relaxed and let him show me exactly how he wanted to take his pleasure. With every tug of my hair, every buck of his hips, he was communicating what he wanted.

I savored it, my own arousal growing with each passing second. When I hummed, sending vibrations around his girth, he yanked me away.

“Too much?” I purred seductively.

Releasing my braided hair, he grabbed ahold of his cock, holding it upright. “Ride me,” he commanded.

Casimir’s carnal gaze was a sinful promise. Eagerly, I straddled his hips, raising up enough for him to enter me easily.

With agonizing deliberation I lowered, taking him in inch by glorious inch, until I was seated on his lap. My channel clenched.

“Gods, Raven, you undo me.”

His admission spurred me on. I rocked back and forth. Already my thighs quivered from the exquisite sensations.

Casimir cupped my breasts, rolling my nipples between his fingers. I threw my head back, pushing down harder with each thrust.

Heat built in my belly as I undulated on top of him. His touch moved lower, skimming over my stomach and digging into my waist.

Our eyes locked and held as his hips moved in time with mine, perfectly in sync. My head spun and my heart raced as the world fell away.

Our souls caressed. Shadows and light arced and spun in a cyclone around us.

My mate slid his thumb across my sensitive nub. I moaned when he began rubbing with more pressure.

The stimulation was such a sweet agony. My body was alive and singing under his touch.

I felt my climax approaching, its torrent crashing against me until I was overtaken, screaming out his name as I crested and broke.

Casimir sat up and held my body to his as the last of the contractions abated. Cradling my head he forced my face to his.

“You’re mine, Little Bird.”

“And you’re mine, Mo Chroí.”

“Mo Chroí?”

He’d given me sweet words, backed by a vehement truth my fae magic couldn’t deny. I would give him the same.

“My heart. Mo Chroí means my heart.”

His heart thudded, vibrating against my chest. The emotions swirling in his eyes pulled me in deeper.

Once we joined souls, I’d unerringly know his feelings and the nature of his thoughts. In turn, he would know mine.

I released the spell muting our bond. His cock twitched and I realized he hadn’t come with me. I’d rectify that soon

enough.

“Have you ever been in love before?” I asked.

We were fated mates, but my experience with my parents taught me a harsh lesson about fate and love.

Warm hands rubbed up and down my spine soothingly. “No. Not until now.”

He kissed the corner of my mouth. “Not until I met this ravishing female with ebony hair and a golden soul.”

Another kiss, nearly chaste, landed on the other corner. “Not until she sassed me and showed me her wit, then her inner strength and her spine of steel. When I saw the lengths she would go to in order to protect those she loved, I knew I wanted to be on that list and provide the same in return.”

He paused. Searching my face. “And you, Raven? Have you ever been in love?”

“No. Not until now.”

Casimir went eerily still. A turbulence of emotion flew up and down the bond.

“You love me?”

“I do.”

“Say it.”

Eyes burning, throat tight, I wet my lips and placed my lips next to his ear. Then I gave him back the words he’d so emphatically given to me.

“I love you. So fucking much. There is no life without you.”

A shiver wracked through his big body. A sonorous and virile sound reverberated from his throat, unlike any I’d heard from him before.

A demon’s call to mate.

Silvery eyes darkened to coal. Sure hands deftly lifted me aloft and spun me face down, sideways over his lap. His giant mitt roved one globe of my backside, then pinched.

“What are you doing?” I laughed over my shoulder.

Casimir wasn't laughing. “Teaching my mate a lesson before I fuck her into submission.”

“Oh really?” My abdominals tightened, curious where this was going.

“Really.”

Slap!

Air expelled harshly out of my lungs as the sting of blood rose to the palmprint that surely marked my ass. “Cas—”

Slap!

“You will never run away from me again,” he ordered.

My skin was afire, igniting my indignation. “I was coming back!”

Slap! Slap! He alternated sides.

“Never again, Raven. Vow it.”

“I ...”

Slap!

“Borvo's ballsack! I won't run away from you!” I promised quickly.

A masculine chuckle came from above and he massaged my sensitive skin. The pain quickly morphed into something else. My center grew slick.

“Gods, I can smell your need.”

Suddenly I was on my back with a lusty demon shoving inside me. We groaned in unison.

His solid body pressed down on mine, hands pinning mine to the bed. The mark on my palm sizzled and triggered the unpleasant memory from just a few nights ago.

His teeth bit into my bottom lip and demanded my attention. “Stay with me, love.”

“Casimir,” I gruffly whispered.

“I won’t leave you,” he vowed. “Ever.”

His lips pressed to mine, softly. Completely at odds with the punishing drive of his hips.

“Mark me, Raven.”

I wanted to, gods how I wanted to. Why wasn’t it working?

“Mark. Me.”

He pistoned frantically, a wild beast rutting his mate. Faster and harder, pushing us both up the mattress. His soul clutched mine and I felt him in a way I could never have possibly imagined.

Mine!

The magic responded to my claim. White hot energy surged and established a connection between our souls overtop the initial thread.

Tears filled my eyes the moment our souls finished weaving their chain. We were tethered, securely bound for life.

Casimir swelled between the walls of my sex. Grunting, his seed flooded my depths. My muscles contracted, gripping the contours of his pulsating shaft as we peaked in unison.

Our collective powers cracked and yowled. Magic folded in, swathing our spirits in a luxurious embrace.

The demon collapsed onto me, chest heaving against mine. His heavy breath caressed my skin, bathing me in warmth and security.

His lips brushed a gentle kiss against my forehead before pulling away to lie beside me, eyes still wide with wonderment from our experience. Rolling to my side, I ran my knuckles along his jaw.

“You spanked me.” Apparently, instead of basking in the afterglow I was going to make obvious statements.

“You liked it,” he replied with the arrogance of a male who knew exactly what he was doing.

My lips twitched. “How do you know I liked it?”

“Aside from the way you glistened upon my fingers?”

“Aside from that.” Why was my face warm?

He lifted his palm and wiggled his fingers. “I feel it here.”

Then he reached for my hand and placed it over his heart. “And here.”

Adjusting his hold, he forced my hand lower. “And most definitely here.”

I squeezed the semi-hard organ, watching in amazement as his abs rippled.

“Again?” I tested.

“Again,” he agreed and hopped out of bed, swinging me over his shoulder.

“Where are we going?” I squealed.

“Shower. I don’t think you’ve fully learned your lesson yet.”

I swatted at his behind. “I don’t think you’ve learned your lesson, either.”

“I didn’t have to, Little Bird. You’re chained to me forever, with or without the bond.”

Oddly satisfied with his response, I didn’t say another word. Well, not until he had me screaming his name again against the shower wall.



Chapter 33

Raven

“You know,” Phalen blithely mused, “I’m almost proud of the little guy. I mean,” his arm swept out, “look at all he’s accomplished.”

“Bloody hell,” Father muttered, taking in the view of Ansley Keep.

Five of us were gathered under the trees, behind a concealment spell atop Saboteur’s Hill. It wasn’t the official name, of course. It was the name Brokk Ulrik had given one of hundreds of locations he made Kol and I memorize so we could speak in code.

Standing there, I almost couldn’t believe what I was witnessing. The castle was under siege. Common fae, Seelie and Unseelie alike, were taking down royal guards left and right.

“I still don’t understand how he managed it,” Casmir stated. “He’s a toddler.”

“He’s twelve,” Phalen rolled his eyes. “And Brokk told us exactly how he did it. I thought you read the letter?”

“I did,” my mate retorted. “It was vague as hell.”

As we waited for Henderson, Nik, and Cash, the Shadow scout who’d unexpectedly volunteered, to return from recon, I thought of the missive Casimir had placed in my hand shortly after we’d cemented our bond.

R. -

It seems the hatchling has been working on a project for half a cycle. Successfully, right under my nose.

What I told you in the private room above the infirmary where you were brought back to life? It's not a secret amongst those affected.

In fact, they've chosen a leader who has pledged to help rid them of their affliction. The hatchling.

I haven't pinpointed K's exact location yet, but the promised remedy will arrive fifteen days before your aunt's next birthday, just before dawn. You'll know where to find me.

-B.

Always suspicious, Father penned his correspondence in riddle-like sentences. This one was more obvious to me than normal, but I supposed a random fae wouldn't understand it.

Unlike Phalen's assertion, we didn't know exactly how Kol had been able to unite the towns and villages that the crown had been robbing blind. It wasn't like he had freedom to roam the Faelands.

However he got their attention, persuading them likely wasn't too difficult. Not when considering the level of frustration over the irrational taxation. Which, of course, wasn't as appalling as the pockets of fae disappearing from their villages. Whatever Sersha was up to, many fae were fed up.

At this point, sadly, it was immaterial.

Father turned to Phalen. “Are you sure you want to get involved?”

“Friend, we’re already involved. Though Draven and Lyric aren’t here, you have their full support.”

“And ours,” Kree stepped forward. “Draven isn’t forcing us to be here. We volunteered.”

Neither Casimir nor Draven had been crazy about the sweet-tempered female joining the mission, but her ability to create portals and heal injuries were invaluable. We wanted to get in and out and she was key to that plan.

It also helped that Kree threatened to castrate anyone who continued to treat her like she was a helpless youngling. Lyric actually got choked up that her older sister was finally making meaningful threats. It helped allay her frustration over her inability to participate.

“Also,” Kree continued, “this is a search and rescue mission. We’re not launching a full-scale invasion.”

A loud explosion shook the ground, quickly followed by screams and shouts.

“Someone needs to tell that to my son,” Father responded drolly.

Phalen laughed then jerked his head to the left. “Finally.”

A shadowy figure landed beside the commander and morphed into a massive demon with a shock of silver-white hair.

Cash.

Henderson appeared two seconds behind. The male witch’s locks were even lighter than Cash’s. It took real talent to hide yourself when your head was covered in a shimmering veil that caught notice easily.

Unease slithered across my belly. Casimir took my hand and sent soothing emotions across the bond.

“Sir,” Cash tilted his head respectfully. “The shifter has located the hatchling.”

Kol would loath the codename we were using. It would likely stick with him forever, and it only served him right.

Father stepped forward. “Where?”

“The bailey. It’s safe to travel directly there, but you should land near the baily’s northeast corner.”

Phalen’s brow dropped. “What do you mean it’s safe?”

“The only combat is occurring outside of the outer wall. The hatchling has secured the bailey and most of the castle. Nik is with him.”

The Navita’s eyes glittered like rubies. He might be ticked off, but a part of him secretly loved Kol’s gumption.

“Well,” he looked over, “let’s go and see what your brother has to say for himself.”

As previously planned, Henderson jumped with Casimir and I, while the others went through one of Kree’s portals. When we landed, I was facing the corner of the upper bailey.

On one stone wall, flowers bloomed in lilac and plum, their petals stretching to soak up the morning sun. On the corner’s other wall, the plants were shriveled and charred. Only the barest hint of red rose blooms could be seen.

Roses were the Queen’s favorite. I hated roses.

“Raven!”

My heart pounded as I spun around just in time to catch my brother as he plowed into me. “Kol.”

I hugged him fiercely, relieved to see his boyish face alive and well. Grabbing both sides of his head, I lowered to his level. “You are in so much trouble,” I whispered.

“I know,” he sighed and stepped back.

“But look,” he pointed to the center of the courtyard to an intricate structure keening at a low volume.

Large enough to hold two adult wyvern, it looked like it had been constructed out of metallic trees and painted in honey.

Encased inside, hovering inches off the ground, were the Queen and her consort. Their rigid bodies and blank expressions were disturbing. The pair looked like they'd been frozen in time, unable to move or speak.

“Kol, what did you do?” I asked, pushing past him.

He shrugged. “Kept them from escaping.”

Father's face was ashen. “How in the Faelands were you able to—”

“It wasn't hard,” Kol interrupted, overly confident.

I recognized the brash tone and inwardly cringed. Father was going to rip him apart with whatever diatribe he had been composing in his head since my baby brother decided to go on the lamb.

Luckily, Kol had me to diffuse things. In the short term, that was.

“Father, I think we can expect a full debriefing from the hatchling later.”

“Hatchling?” my brother groaned. “I thought we stopped using that dumb name?”

My father loomed threateningly over Kol. “If you would ever like to see the light of day again once this is over, I suggest you drop the attitude and accept whatever you have coming. You will own the mayhem you've parked at our feet.”

Kol's slim shoulders slouched inward. “Yes, Sir.”

The Navita's darkened eyes altered to something close to his normal magenta. Shaking his head, he ruffled Kol's hair.

My brother's posture improved slightly.

“Kol, what was your plan, once you had them subdued?” Casimir asked.

“I was going to cut off their heads.”

Phalen made a choking sound. Kree gasped. The bond between my mate and I sputtered with stunned horror from both of us.

Kol twisted his mouth. “Well, initially. Once I had them trapped and enthralled, it no longer felt like a good idea. Honestly, it made me feel bad.”

“Thank you, goddess above,” I hailed under my breath. I’d feared for a second he’d lost his conscience.

Father walked up to the cage. “Wake them, Kol. I want them to hear me.”

“They can hear you. They just don’t look like they can.”

“Then give them control of their bodies, please.”

Kol snapped a finger and the couple dropped to the grass. Malcolm scrambled to his feet, leaving Sersha to rise on her own. Some consort he turned out to be.

With an indignant wail, the Queen threw up her hands. I erected a shield around us, but nothing happened.

“They can’t use magic in there,” Kol explained.

Phalen saddled up to my left. “You think The Navita would let us keep Kol?”

Casimir chuckled. “I doubt he’d allow Kol in the Shadow Army, Phalen.”

“No, like a pet. He’s my favorite—hey!” he whined, rubbing his shoulder where Casimir had reached around me to punch him.

“Shh,” I hushed them. I needed to hear what Father said.

“Do you know who overran your keep?” he asked the Queen.

“The Navita,” Malcolm whispered, staring with an open mouth.

Father neither confirmed nor denied the assumption. He stood there, arms crossed, staring at Sersha.

“Yes,” she said through a pinched mouth.

“Who?”

Her green eyes landed on Kol and I fought the urge to hide him. She scanned the rest of our crew.

“You!” she shouted when she got to me.

“Miss me?”

“I’ll kill you!” she seethed. “I’ll ... I’ll ...”

Casimir and Phalen moved forward. “Threaten her again and I’ll carve out your tongue with a dull blade,” my mate warned.

She flinched, yelping when she accidentally touched the bars. Kol snickered.

“Him,” she pointed her shaking finger. “He took the keep.”

“The youngling?” Malcolm’s high-pitched disbelief was priceless.

“His name is Kol. He’s my son. And that,” he nodded over to me, “is my daughter.”

Malcolm moved the side of the cage closest to me. “Raveena, tell him it wasn’t me. I was going to free you, remember? I helped! We agreed!”

“Traitor!” Sersha kicked the back of his knee. Hard.

“Bitch!” he panted.

“Enough.” The fearsome voice of The Navita came out to play. The royals trembled together.

“Focus. Both of you. Sersha, you feel the call of blood, don’t you?”

She sniffed haughtily.

“What are you talking about?” Malcolm demanded.

“Tell your consort what this is about, Sersha. Or should I say, *sister*?”

“Droppin’ bombs!” Phalen whisper-yelled and Cas punched him again.

“Kol,” my father said.

“Yes, Father?”

“Open the cage.”

‡ ‡ ‡

“I’ll be fine, Raven.”

“You’d better be.”

It wasn’t that I doubted Henderson’s desire to avenge Helene. It was the idea of her inflicting any more damage upon him. She’d taken enough.

After I’d read the letter, Draven’s Council convened. Henderson, Nik, and I were all included. Draven wouldn’t leave his mate to go after Sersha, but he wanted her to pay for her crimes.

She’d crossed too many lines. The spelled gift for the Shadowlands’ ruling couple was just the icing on the cake.

I had argued that I was better suited to call a blood debt against the Queen. Casimir made me see it wasn’t about who was better suited.

He’d asked me to weigh our situations, then compare again if they were reversed. What if it had been Henderson that Sersha tortured, and my mate who she’d murdered? Who would have the stronger claim?

I would, but our situation was the opposite of that. Henderson’s loss was greater than mine.

“Are you sure?” I asked him once more.

“Go,” the buoyant witch told me. “Stop worrying so much. It’s only life, after all.”

His wry smile did not amuse.

“Such a serious face for such a young female,” he lamented. “Sersha can’t leave unless Kol allows it. If I fall, she’ll still be stuck thanks to the spell he used to tether her to the keep.”

“If you fall, I’ll have to kill her.”

His arms raised and his hands settled on the sides of my shoulders. “If I fall, my lady, I *expect* you to kill her.”

“I can do that.”

“That’s the spirit.”

He left me there on the small challenger’s platform, just big enough for four or five adults to stand on. It was a single step up from the dirt floor of the dueling arena.

Clad in her red and black ceremonial dress uniform, Sersha stood on the far end, leering at Henderson as he took his place.

We’d allowed the Queen to change into something more suitable for combat. She chose something she’d only worn during stately gatherings that included the Fae Army.

She’d been trained, but had she ever been tested?

The keep had been constructed just to the east of this small coliseum and connected by a covered walkway. I’d never been inside here before. Duels were by the Queen’s invite only and she reserved those for her favorite courtiers.

Oval-shaped and encircled by large slabs of earthly travertine marble, the arena was as old as the Faelands. It wasn’t a space one would ever want to be forced into.

The dirt floor had absorbed the blood of thousands. The gore fed the ancient magic rooted in the soil, magic that would demand adversaries remain under its invisible dome until one either yielded or was dead.

There was no way in or out of the dueling area until it was over. *Please be over fast.*

I took the short staircase up to the viewing level where the others were waiting. Casimir opened his arms and I readily went into them.

“Things finally calm down outside?” I checked, hoping their brief interaction with the common fae had been productive.

“I would say contained, not calm. Apparently they actually see Kol as their leader and they weren’t pleased Brokk came out with me instead.”

I groaned. “Wonderful. Now we’ll have to deal with the fae who attacked, those who got attacked, if there are any left, and my twelve-year-old brother whose head didn’t need to get any bigger.

“Something to figure out later, my daughter.”

I turned my head to my father who was intently focused on the scene below.

“Your friend and your aunt are starting. Best take what you can from this moment.”

“Perhaps if you stop referring to her as my aunt I’ll be able to.”

Some things never changed, I supposed. Or perhaps it was just Father who remained forever unchanging.

It dawned on me I was no longer the same female who had confidently marched away from Terek last year. Even more jarring was the realization that I didn’t want to be.



Chapter 34

Casimir

The air was electric as the two opponents stood for what felt like an eternity, sizing each other up. I led Raven closer to the balustrade for a better view, aware that her breath was coming shallow and fast.

Henderson flicked his wrist and a spear of fire erupted from his fingertips. He held the lance like he knew what he was doing, relaxed in his grip and angled to attack.

Sersha rolled her shoulders and called magic to her palms. She spared a fleeting look of contempt up to where our small group was watching, two stories above. Then she turned her scorn on Henderson.

The tension was palpable. It got worse with each passing second.

“What are they waiting for?” Kol asked.

When no one answered, he flicked the nail of his thumb across his index finger. Malcolm, who was bound and seated on the bench closest to Nik, jolted. Nik eyed the fae male warily.

“There’s an obstruction spell in the middle of the arena. It won’t drop until both parties have called forth their magic.”

Kol pursed his lips. “Interesting.”

Malcolm glared daggers with his abnormally bloodshot eyes. The Navita put his hand on Kol’s shoulder and met the smarmy consort’s expression with cold indifference. Malcolm shrunk back, making himself small.

Suddenly, Henderson used his jumping magic. Blinking out of existence then reappearing, he launched his fiery weapon. Sersha blocked it with a well-timed spell.

As she did, he unsheathed the sword Phalen had loaned him. Sersha pulled her own. Her eyes darted around the spectators' seats, which were empty save for us.

What was she looking for? Did she believe she'd find anyone up here willing to save her?

Henderson materialized a few feet from the Queen. He lunged with lightning speed, striking an arc of sparks against the shield she'd rapidly erected.

They clashed against each other in a flurry of steel and spells. A surprised squawk of alarm and disbelief flew out from between the redheaded fae's pink lips.

Kol leaned over the concrete railing. "Why is she reacting like that? It's not like it hurts."

"She's lost her tongue of flames," Raven answered with a gleam in her eye. "I'm sure that particular injury hurts her greatly."

My mate sounded like she was relishing the very thought.

Phalen tilted into my peripheral. "She's lost her what?"

"He cut off her braid," Kol explained. "It's from the story of Dali, a goddess with tongues of flaming hair. Raven is a fae-witch with a tongue of lame jokes. Maybe you can help her with that?"

"Why, Sir Kol, I would be most honored to assist your sister with her tongue in any way—ouch! Stop frogging my arm, Cas!"

"You're lucky you didn't get my boot up your ass."

"As if it would fit."

I tuned out Phalen's antics and paid close attention to Raven's reactions. My Little Bird might have been enjoying Sersha's slow demise, but she was still on edge.

The way it was going, Henderson would emerge the victor. I suspected the male was drawing it out, giving his enemy hope she might be able to beat him. It was a hope he would crush.

It was both brilliant and black-hearted. I hoped it would bring him some sense of recompense. The scales would never be even so he was entitled to play it as he saw fit.

As the fighting went on, the enclosed space filled with vapors and mists from the use of their varied powers and spells. Smoke drifted up and curled in on itself when it reached the rounded invisible barrier above the duelers' heads.

Even from our spot higher up, looking down into the ring through the shallow enchanted dome, it was getting difficult to see them clearly. We should have moved down to the small platform so Raven could see the end of the Queen and know for certain the second it was over.

I was about to suggest it when Nik sprung to his feet, sniffing the air. His beast released a low grumble.

Brokk pulled his son into his body as he searched for whatever danger the shifter had scented. Nik covered the other side of Kol with his nose still up in the air.

Phalen and I sandwiched Raven, our heads swiveling around, trying to locate whatever made Nik react. I couldn't sense anyone.

"What did you pick up?" I called to Nik, whose shifter sense of smell was far superior to most races of Other.

"Iron," Nik rasped, his eyes narrowing as he inhaled again.

A chill ran through me, tightening my chest. Nik, Phalen, and I wouldn't be weakened by the substance. Kree was immune to it, as well.

We were in the Faelands, though. Iron could mean death to its inhabitants. To my mate and her family.

"We need to get out of here," I stressed with urgency. "Kree, make a portal back to Embour."

Raven's head snapped to attention, her eyes wide and alert. The bottom of her plaited rope of hair fell off her shoulder as she looked at me with an expression that was both determined and fearful. "We can't just leave."

“Kree,” I barked, ignoring the heated wave of magic rolling off of my mate’s petite frame.

Kree flattened her hands together and spread them wide. They didn’t so much as flicker.

Her pupils dilated. “It’s not working.”

“You can’t leave,” Malcolm taunted. “The magic won’t let you.”

“Kree, ignore that asshole. Keep trying,” I encouraged, then turned to Cash. “Check the exits and make sure we can get out.”

Cash flew away without question. There were only two ways in and out so he was back in under a minute.

Jaw tight, the Shadow shook his head. “It’s like there’s a layer of power now covering the walls. I couldn’t even get close enough to try to ghost through cracks.”

Fuck! “Find a way out, Cash.”

He was gone in a blink.

Malcolm laughed and then started coughing. He laughed between each fit, a perverse and crazed noise.

“No way out,” he giggled. “It’s over. For all of us. Well, the fae inside here. But don’t worry, one of the blood will live to rise to the throne.”

Shoving Kol up close to Nik, Brokk grabbed Malcolm by his shirt and drug him to his feet. “Explain,” he ordered.

The consort coughed again, blinked sleepily, and said, “The end draws near, for land and king, when the sovereign dies in the Faelands’ ring.”

The nut job giggled again, then choked, hacking dramatically. Sputum and blood landed on Brokk’s face. His lip curled in a disgusted snarl and his skin sizzled. Brokk wiped his cheek and studied the smear on his fingers.

“Why is there iron in your blood, Consort?”

Raven cringed. I extended a protective arm around her.

Malcolm leaned close to The Navita's face and whispered, "Because this is how we die. Sersha's almost dead. Any moment now. Since you'll likely perish with me, I'll tell you a secret. You shouldn't kill a sovereign in the ring who hasn't chosen a successor."

We knew there was a ceremony performed when an heir was either born or chosen. We also knew Sersha had neither selected her successor nor did she have any offspring.

Ignoring Malcolm, I tried to locate Sersha. The fog furling under the transparent dome was too thick. "Does anyone see her?"

"Shit, Raven. Here." Phalen handed her the handkerchief from his pocket.

She wiped her nose. It came away bloody. A river of ice numbed my muscles and slowed my pulse. A glacier sat on top of me, freezing me to the bone.

"Father?" Kol cried.

Brokk threw Malcolm to the ground and went to his son, kneeling before him. He dipped his finger into the blood dripping from Kol's nose.

"Fucking iron," he denigrated, wiping it off on his leg.

The Consort cackled. Red was now spilling from his eyes and ears. "The male witch has ousted the Queen! Now we get to die!"

Malcolm cackled again, silenced instantly by Brokk's dagger buried in his eye socket.

A mercy killing, really. More than the piece of shit deserved.

Raven's legs gave out and I pulled her up into my arms. "Kree?" I urged. "Can you help?"

The female was trembling. "Nothing is working. It's like my power well is empty. I—I'm trying to call my wings to recharge so I can heal them and it's not working!"

Phalen hugged Lyric's sister and looked at me overtop her golden head. Fear and uncertainty etched onto his face. We needed to act fast.

An electric crackle came from below. The barrier vanished and the haze was sucked into the ground by an unnamed force.

Sersha's body lay crumpled with Henderson standing over it. His clothing was torn, skin covered in burns and bruises. A nasty cut was hanging open over his left eye.

"The Ulriks need to get down here before we all die," he shouted.

Brokk scooped Kol into his arms and ran down to the dirt oval. I carried Raven, the others rushing close behind.

Henderson held out his hand. A spark of electricity jumped from his palm and a strange, white light encased us. I felt Sersha's thoughts flood into my brain as though they were part of my own.

From the look on everyone else's faces, they were experiencing the same.

"Memories," Henderson explained. "I used a spell to grab what I could before her lifeforce expired. I thought you'd want to know what she was doing with those who were disappearing."

The ground rumbled and he looked down then back up. "More pressingly, I learned that someone in the bloodline has to volunteer to rule before her body turns cold."

It was basically the same thing Malcolm had communicated. The heir ceremony had always been a big deal and production in the Faelands. Until now, no one had known or cared why.

Raven coughed. "If one of us doesn't?"

"The magic here will choose the heir and the remaining fae will die. Though cruel, it's been effective. The ancients created strong enchantments in this space to ensure there was always a successor. Insurance, should the ruler not make it out of the ring alive. It was a well-guarded secret."

It was diabolical.

We each shared troubled glances. Uncomfortably, I thumbed through what I could of the handful of memories forced into my head, trying not to react to the misdeeds I was being shown.

Good riddance, bitch.

It was then I noticed the only fae unaffected by the ancients' iron spell was Brokk. The frosty hands of fear and dread reached into my chest and stole my breath.

My teeth gnashed. "The successor has already been chosen."

Raven's sound of distress hung in the air among the silent tension. I could feel my heartbeat swishing in my ears. If I could force her to volunteer, she'd live. Her family might live, too, if it wasn't too late.

Raven lifted her hand, clenching her fists in frustration.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"C-cut ..." she croaked.

Cut the bond? No fucking way. Where she went, I followed.

"Someone better volunteer before I get violent." I would not lose her. Not like this.

Brokk made a noise of mild annoyance. "I take it neither of my children are going to volunteer?"

His unconcerned tone was going to push me straight into a murderous rampage. "Neither of your children are coherent enough to make decisions, much less speak!"

"Very well." He handed Kol off to Nik. "Perhaps they'll both consider the consequences of their actions moving forward."

The Navita was going to take his sister's spot. It had been his plan all along. If his children weren't here I would have strangled the bastard.

I could tell Raven wanted to say something but couldn't. Instead, her head fell back in a heave of exhaustion.

No matter. I intended to have words with Brokk once we were away from this death pit and Raven was safe.

The dragonbone handle of The Navita's blade shone as he sliced across his palm. Squatting down, he spoke words in a language I didn't understand.

The spell shattered and a surge of energy expelled outward from the ring, gone as fast as it came. I surveyed our group, relieved everyone was still alive.

The solution had been a simple one, and blessedly anticlimactic, yet Brokk had been angling for a life lesson to come out of it. Strangling him wouldn't be enough.

"How did you know to do that?" Phalen sought accusingly.

"Secrets are currency, my friend, and I am a very rich male."

Weakened, Kol still managed to groan in childlike annoyance. "You knew," he accused with labored words. "You let me think ... I was go-going to die."

"You were never going to die, Kol. Your punishment for this stunt you've pulled, however? You better hope someone steps in to save your hide."

"Don't kill him," Raven requested in a hushed breath.

"He's safe. For tonight."

She puckered her lips and I brushed mine across them. Her color was already much better. The noose around my heart slackened.

Kree advanced on Brokk like she was going to run him through with a javelin. "Are you insane?! He is twelve years old!"

Her midnight eyes narrowed and she poked him in the chest. "Twelve!"

Brokk stood there in entranced disbelief.

“I cannot believe ... I ...” her voice wavered and her eyes closed. “Deep breaths, Kree.”

She inhaled deeply, then released the air through her mouth. She did it again, but the rigidity in her muscles failed to abate. Kree’s eyes popped open, burning with light as they never had before.

I made eyes at Phalen to do something. The asshole firmly shook his head no. Kree was soft, but her magic was incredibly powerful. She’d clearly been pushed past her limit.

“Fuck it,” she spat, moving without warning with an incredibly fast kick that landed between Brokk’s legs.

A chorus of gasps flew around. Our soft and once-broken friend had not only dropped an f-bomb, she’d nailed one of the most cunning mercenaries in all the realms right in the balls.

Brokk, unflappable male that he was, made the tiniest of sounds and slowly dropped to one knee.

Kree ignored everyone’s reaction. She opened a portal and stepped into the infirmary back at Embour.

“Kol and Raven need medical attention,” she harrumphed. “Everyone is welcome through *except* for The Navita. I’m closing this in thirty seconds.”

Nik, still holding Kol, looked to his leader. Brokk’s head angled to the portal and the shifter went through.

Phalen pushed Cash towards the opening. “Let Draven and Lyric know what’s happened.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“I’ll stay close to Kree until she ... settles,” Phalen said to me as he passed.

When I entered behind him, I looked for Henderson. He’d backed away and was standing next to Brokk.

“I’m staying,” he said. “I think I can be of better service here for now. Please let Vera know.”

“I will,” I assured.

Brokk was already on his feet again, focused on something over my shoulder. A slow and determined smile stretched his lips.

Oh, hell.



Chapter 35

Raven

One month later ...

The moment felt surreal. I once thought it would have felt depressing. Father had never wanted this and I'd never wanted it for him.

Once I'd recovered from our little family adventure last month, I considered offering to change places with him. Casimir said he'd support any decision I made and I loved him even more for it.

Kol wasn't quite as open to the idea. He'd sagely reminded me our father knew exactly what he was doing and that, "The snollygoster made his bed so now he can rot in it."

While I was severely disappointed with Father's actions that night, Kol was outraged, unable to reconcile the sacrifice that had been made so we could be free. He hung onto his resentment.

I couldn't blame my brother for the bitterness created by that vicious lesson. His hero had allowed him to believe he was going to die. Angry, Kol refused to return to live with our father, and Father hadn't objected.

Shockingly, he also didn't object to Nik's insistence he remain with Kol. My brother needed to feel safe and I hoped that was Father's reasoning to allow it.

I had faith that Brokk Ulrik, no matter what he'd done, would never allow the gulf between him and his son to last for long. He, at least, hadn't tried to use us to get his hands on the throne.

Speaking of the sovereign's chair, I realized Father had yet to sit down on the thing. He stood in front of it and looked upon the crowd. Near his hip, suspended upon a red pillow

held aloft by magic, sat the crown no male had worn since the last king died.

Rather, since the last king had tried to kill my father, the king's own son, and paid for it with his life. I discarded the thought immediately. It had no place here today.

I was also on the dais, to the right of the throne. Kol was to the left of it, flanked by Nik who'd become a bodyguard of sorts. My brother was annoyed by his new shadow, but Nik would keep him out of trouble.

Casimir was positioned behind me, a steady and secure presence. Since the night Sersha died, my soulbonded mate was rarely out of arm's reach.

Guests were gathered in the throne room, noble and common fae alike. They mingled, chattering with anticipation for the coronation. It was a radical change from Sersha's former court.

They had no idea what other drastic overhauls were about to rock their world. They were about to be tested and I wasn't sure most could handle it.

My father reached out and unceremoniously grasped the golden crown with one fist. A collective gasp filled the air as he raised it above his head. He fixed the crowd with a steely gaze, his eyes burning with determination.

"Let it be known that I, Brokk Ulrik, son of Keane and Olette, do not wish to be King of the Faelands."

You could hear a pin drop as his voice rang out across the crowd. He tossed the crown onto the pillow like it was a useless hunk of metal. Several genteel folk looked like they were going to faint.

"What I *do* wish is for everyone, regardless of station, to have a voice. I wish for a cooperative and functional government, created for and by the subjects of this land. Devoid of corruption. Devoid of *I* before *we*. Rooted in the belief that a governing body exists to serve its citizens. Not the other way around."

A wave of murmurs rippled through the gathered fae.

This wasn't only going to be a change in laws or a transition away from Sersha's disgraceful acts and ideologies. There was to be a reconditioning of the Faelands' tacit culture.

The murmurs continued and he allowed it, patient as always and patently indomitable.

Casimir lowered his face to just behind my shoulder and whispered, "Look at your brother."

I did as he said, my heart warming at the sight. Perhaps the gulf wasn't so big, afterall.

Kol, who hadn't been part of today's planning, was staring at our sire like he was the greatest hero the world had ever seen. Father was even dressed like the ones we used to read about.

His tunic and cloak were dyed a deep sapphire, with intricate embroidery on the chest and arms. A golden torque of power glinted around his neck, proclaiming him to be King despite the wishes he'd spoken.

Father was a born leader. We'd seen him take charge and dish out orders thousands of times. Watched him storm out into the night to risk his life for his crew. To put others before himself.

Maybe it was because he wasn't dressed in black for the first time in years that made him look different from the male who'd been wrecked by a heartless witch. Wreckage he carried in his soul. Wreckage we occasionally saw in his eyes when he thought we weren't looking.

Whatever it was, I hoped it lasted. Maybe not the sapphire cloak, but the rest of it.

"With these as my wishes, I will not be taking this crown upon my head, but instead declaring a new era, one of parliamentary rule. One that works with the crown, not for it."

His words sent a wave of shock through the room, one we could feel. Some of the nobles shifted uncomfortably. A few cast worried glances at one another.

I, too, had concerns when Father first mentioned his plans to me. Ancient magic had demanded one of us take to the helm and he had volunteered. He couldn't simply avoid the land's demand.

Good thing he only planned to manipulate it.

I had seen the determination in his eyes in the days leading up to the coronation. He understood the mysterious power that had chosen him, and he was determined to make it work with his ideas.

He was also determined to undo all the damage that had been caused by his half-sister. He'd already freed all those she had abducted.

Henderson's crafty spell revealed she'd taken beings she thought no one would go searching for. She'd put them to work in the mines, desperate to build up her coffers—coffers she'd been draining at an alarming rate.

I glanced over at my mate and saw admiration in his eyes. I couldn't help but feel the same.

My father stepped down from the dais and approached the crowd. Many more were outside. Thousands had come to the keep to see him.

He raised his hands to calm the rumbles, and the room fell silent. He looked around then, meeting eyes with each individual within his sight.

“There is much to do. It is my hope, as much as it is my expectation, that each of you will do your part.”

The crowd erupted into cheers and applause. Father bowed deeply then returned to the top of the dais.

His new castle guards, some of whom had been in his crew in Terek, intercepted the throng as they attempted to follow. He bowed to them once again when he reached the top.

“Come,” he ordered, turning on his heel and striding to the door behind us.

“He might not want to be king,” Kol grumbled, “but he sure acts like one.”

“I’m not sure that’s something he can ever change, buddy,” Nik commented then clamped a hand on Kol’s shoulder. “Wait for your sister to go first. You’re at court now.”

“Yeah yeah,” he grumbled some more.

Smiling, I slipped my hand into Casimir’s. “And here I thought Father had softened around the edges.”

He chuckled, bringing my knuckles to his lips and escorting me through the door. “Brokk will never be soft. I’d say it’s more like he took off his sword for a minute. Now he needs to put it back on.”

“I’d like to put your sword back inside my scabbard,” I teased.

My mate stutter-stepped and I bit my lip innocently.

“Congratulations, Little Bird. I’m hard as a fucking rock.”

“Good. It will give me motivation to keep this meeting short.”

“And don’t say scabbard. Say sheath.”

“Noted.”

Love, mixed with mirth and a heavy dose of lust, trickled through our connection. Usually we left the bond wide open but the lust part never seemed to lessen. We’d agreed to constrict the flow today but it wasn’t easy to completely block.

“Please wait and tease me once I have you in a room where I can rip off that dress. You look beautiful, by the way, but gods you’re distracting.”

I looked down to the simple ice blue gown I’d selected. It reminded me of the Grecian goddess dresses I’d seen in books.

Soft, flowy fabric connected over one shoulder and cinched at the waist. The slit, much to my mate’s dismay, went all the way to my upper thigh and showed the entire expanse of my leg as I walked.

Casimir discreetly adjusted himself before we entered my father’s new office. Instead of a celebration for his coronation,

he wanted a private chat with his children and then to return to work.

Father was seated at his desk, writing something down. Once Kol and Nik entered, he finally acknowledged us.

“I have something for you,” he said before he lowered the pen.

He reached into his desk drawer and pulled out a blade inside a dark grey sheath. Then another one that matched. And a third. Then a fourth.

“How many of those do you have in there?” I couldn’t see into the drawer very well, but it looked like there were more.

“Worry about the ones I selected. I had them made for today. These are for you and Kol.” He looked up at my mate. “And Casimir, if he chooses.”

He pushed three towards the opposite side of his desk. Nik inhaled deeply then cleared his throat.

“Raven, you may pick first.”

I grabbed the first one, feeling my father’s eyes watch intently. I clasped the handle and pulled.

My mouth was a desert. I struggled to gather enough saliva to speak. “This isn’t ivory, is it?”

“No.”

Casimir’s chest touched my back, leaning over my head to get a better look.

Kol stepped closer, as well. “What is it?” he asked.

“Bone,” Father stated coolly.

“Bone?” Kol took a second to process. “Whose bone?”

Father reclined back into his chair. “Someone who died far too quickly. Someone who liked carving things in places he shouldn’t.”

I dropped the blade onto the desk. The clatter rattled in my skull.

A glacial storm of power blasted from Casimir and into me. His arm fastened around my middle.

“Did you kill him?” I questioned my father.

“No.”

“Who did?”

Those dark magenta orbs left my face and zeroed in on Kol.

Kol, who still sucked his thumb at night when he was having a bad dream. Who still pulled on his ear like he did when he was a toddler whenever he got anxious.

Like he was doing now.

“Brokk,” Casimir said crisply. “Are you telling us that Kol killed Dolan?”

“It was an accident!” Kol insisted. “Sersha used her magic on him. She tried to make him take the blame, to confess to the crimes she had committed. Only, she couldn’t maintain the kind of power needed to force a fae to lie. When she lost her hold, he went nuts.”

“So it was self defense?” I relaxed. Self-defense wouldn’t be as traumatizing. I hoped.

“Uh, no. He didn’t go nuts on me. He went nuts on her. Then Malcolm got involved and it got ugly. I wasn’t sure what to do so I tried to separate them. Unfortunately, my spell hit Dolan the same time as Sersha’s. Which also happened to be the same time as the Consort’s sword. It just happened. Pure coincidence.”

Nonplussed, I opened my mouth. Closed it. Then opened.

“See,” Kol’s palm lifted in my direction. “What did I say? I said we shouldn’t tell her until many many years had passed and she was old enough to handle it.”

Until *I* was old enough? Kol was twelve!

Father crossed his arms. “And what did I say to that?”

“That hiding something I’d done that could have a profound impact on others was never a good idea and that even *you* had to learn that lesson yourself.”

I pulled a Kree and talked myself through a deep breath in and a slow breath out. Then once more just in case.

They knew Casimir and I had been quietly looking for Dolan—and neither had given so much as a hint of the truth.

My baby brother’s big eyes blinked up at me as his mouth twisted. “Are you upset with me?”

“No, Kol.” I hugged him and rested my cheek on the untamed mop attached to his head. “I’m worried about you, not upset with you.”

“Worried? I’m good. I even have those two idiots to blame. Or should I thank them?”

“Not funny, hatchling. But I love you anyway.”

“*Loveyou too,*” he mumbled as fast as he could.

The desk drawer shut, breaking the moment. I didn’t see the bone blades. “You put them away?”

“Aye,” Father replied. “We’ll figure them out another day. I have more being made.”

I was unsure what to say. Dolan was the only fae, aside from the Queen, who I’d sincerely wanted dead and gone. Thinking about his bones being carved into blades? I wasn’t sure how I felt about it.

But I hadn’t wanted blood on Kol’s hands. He was still so young. I worried about him—I’d probably always worry, if I were being honest with myself.

I reached my hand to my mate, who readily accepted it. “I’m suddenly very tired. I think I’d like to go lie down for a bit.”

Casimir tucked me into his side and steered us to the door.

“Raven?”

The tone of Father’s voice tugged at me. “Yes?”

He got up and walked around the desk, coming all the way over to the door. “I am proud to be your father.”

Tears, unexpected and unbidden, welled up in my eyes. It was not often he expressed his emotions so openly.

“And I am proud to be your daughter.”

Uncaring his arms weren't out for it, I hugged him around his waist. He returned my affection and a lump formed in my throat.

When we separated, he awarded me with a small smile. “Go rest. We can talk more at dinner.”

Casimir and I walked out and headed to the room Father had said would be ours whenever we visited.

As soon as we were out of earshot, I let out a deep sigh. “That was intense,” I said, leaning into my mate's embrace.

He kissed the top of my head. “Are you okay?”

“I am. It's Kol I'm worried about.”

“I think Kol will be able to handle just about anything this life throws at him.”

“You mean that.”

“I do. And you should trust me. I'm very wise.”

I laughed.

“I fucking love that sound.”

I promised myself I would live a life that brought more laughter into it. For him.

As we reached our bedchamber, Casimir turned to face me. “Shall I leave you to rest, Little Bird?”

I shook my head, a mischievous glint in my eye. “No, I don't think I'll be able to sleep just yet.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Oh really? Anything I can do to help?”

I pressed up against his body, wrapping my arms around his neck. “I was thinking we could ... explore some things

inside this room a bit more. Maybe *sheath* your sword.”

His eyes darkened with desire. “I like the way you think.”

I released the dam preventing the open flow from my half of the bond. Casimir did the same.

Our lips met in a fiery kiss as he lifted me up and carried me towards the large bed in the center of the room. We tumbled onto the soft mattress, hands exploring each other’s bodies eagerly.

We tugged and tore at each other’s clothing with desperate urgency, our ardor heightening when skin met skin.

Moans and sighs floated in the air, mixing into a lingering chorus that seemed to wrap around us as he moved within me.

Our breathless pleasure was a living entity. Lost to the moment, it shut out the rest of the world and cradled us in its embrace.

We came together, tethered souls and tangled limbs, until our energy slowly dissolved into a blissful exhaustion.

Casimir rolled onto his side and pulled me close, our hearts still racing in tandem. I looked up into his eyes and smiled, feeling more content than I ever had before.

“You know,” I said, tracing a finger down his chest. “We should explore this room more often.”

One side of his mouth lifted. “I think that’s a great idea. We’ll explore more as soon as you wake from your nap.”

I nestled against his chest, feeling peaceful and content, until sleep claimed us both.



Epilogue

Raven

“I don’t like this.”

I’d known he wouldn’t, but I was more than safe and Casimir would realize it soon enough. I just needed him to be quiet.

“Shh. I’m concentrating.”

The sun’s rays shining down on us were heavenly. The air was calm and the trees were full of life. Birds sang merrily from the branches above.

Face to the sky, I enjoyed the warmth on my skin and the sounds in my ears. My senses loved being immersed in nature, which appealed to both my fae and witch halves.

Suddenly, there was a sound like a thunderclap and a rush of air. Casimir pressed into my side as the winged creature came tumbling out of the sky and landed in the clearing.

He was huge, twice as big as the last time we’d met. The dark green scales covering him were even darker, nearly black.

“Hello, Blaze.”

Slitted yellow eyes fixed me with a penetrating gaze. I felt myself being drawn in, my mind filled with images and sensations. Blaze was showing me his life.

I stepped forward and he retracted his wings. His tail swayed, reminding me of the gargoyle pups when they wiggled with delight.

“Yes, I’m happy to see you, as well.”

I touched his scaly hide and he shivered.

“Should I be concerned he’s going to steal you away from me and take you to live in his lair, Little Bird?”

“Of course not. But if he did, would you come with me?”

“Always.” His palm flattened beside mine, petting the wyvern.

Casimir’s awestruck expression and careful touch were surprising. Pleasantly so.

“What?” he grouched. “I can’t be impressed by it?”

“Him, Mo Chroí, and his name is Blaze.”

The wyvern chuffed and I smiled.

My strokes moved to his head. I looked deep into his eyes, listening to his story. When he finished, Blaze looked at both of us for a moment, then bowed his head and shuffled backwards.

“What’s he doing?” Casimir asked.

“Waiting for our decision.”

“Our?”

“He senses our soulbond. A connection to me will also be a connection to you.”

The Shadow’s head jerked to me, then to Blaze, then back to me.

I laughed. “Oh, so now you’re thinking a familiar might be a good idea.”

“Well, I’m thinking it might not be a bad idea.”

“Hmm. Well, since this is now our decision, you should know Blaze is nervous.”

“Why?”

“He found his mate. They’re a package deal.”

Casimir cocked his head, studying Blaze. “They’ll both be protective of you, yes?”

“Very.”

“And they’ll both be able to sense you?”

“Yes. You, as well, Casimir.”

“Alright. My decision is made.”

“Which is?”

He shrugged. “My decision is that you know more about this than I do. I trust you to decide.”

My mate’s faith was everything. It had been challenging to not only accept, but to get used to, over the past year.

I couldn’t love him any more than I already did. I also couldn’t deny what I was picking up from him.

His youthful fascination with being connected to such powerful animals was adorable. And that, more than anything else, told me I was doing the right thing.

“Blaze, go get your mate. We accept your offer.”

His powerful wings expanded excitedly and he took to the sky. We watched his shape grow smaller as he moved further away.

I jumped and locked my arms around Casimir’s neck, kissing him giddily. His masculine laugh made me happy. His sexy hum turned my insides molten.

“What happens when they produce offspring?”

Animals didn’t have a means to prevent pregnancy. Wyvern didn’t have a high birth rate, but they still produced multiple offspring over time.

“It depends,” I answered.

“On?”

“How many of our own we’ve produced.”

“Babes?”

“Yes.”

He was so still I wasn’t sure he was breathing.

“Cas?”

He blinked. “You’ve never called me that before.”

“I haven’t?”

“Never.”

“Oh. Well, maybe I’ll do it again.”

His head buried into the crook of my shoulder. Too much was rippling through our soulbond. I was having trouble keeping up. “Is everything okay?”

“No. Everything is perfect except ...”

“Except what?”

“Except now I’m imagining you pregnant with my child and I’m contemplating fucking you against that tree.”

Oh. *Oh my.*

My arousal permeated the air. Was my future flashing signals at me? Words had power and Others sometimes set things in motion simply by speaking them.

I knew as a mated female who was ravished daily, often multiple times a day, there was always a chance of conception. The Fates held power, but so did I.

Destiny be damned. I *blazed* my own path and today I decided my path ended with me screaming his name as splinters dug into my back.

Placing my lips to the shell of his ear, I whispered, “Then I suggest you hurry before Blaze returns.”

Casimir did as I bade and my world was perfect.

Minus a couple of those splinters.

~ The End ~

Continue Reading for an excerpt from my next book, a note to my readers, and ways to connect with me!

Excerpt from Book 1 of *Fae Brides of Falcondale Series*

Series title subject to change...

Book Title TBD – releasing early 2024

Lorne caught my eye and motioned to the door. Good. Sofiya would go after me, and this scene of the nightmare would be over.

I took a steadying breath and walked forward with measured steps. The door was wide open, and I finally saw what was inside.

Behind a bronzed, ornately carved desk, sat the King of Falcondale. His gaze sharpened as I approached, a hungry gleam entering those fathomless grey eyes.

He was impeccably dressed, in black leather and silk. Several rings adorned his long, elegant fingers, one of them a heavy silver signet ring bearing the royal crest. His eyes were hooded, revealing little of his thoughts. Yet there was a slight tension in the set of his shoulders and mouth.

Good. I hoped he was tense. More than. He meant to choose a bride as one might select a prized horse.

The door clicked shut, ominous despite the quiet of the sound.

King Nox leaned back in his chair. His gaze slid over me, a muscle in his jaw twitched. Interesting.

Unfolding his long frame, he met me on the nearest side of the desk. I offered a curtsy and kept my expression carefully neutral. “Your Grace.”

“Lady Aeryn.” His voice was like velvet, soft and sinuous. “You may sit.” He waved a hand toward the small sitting area off to the left, in front of an unlit fireplace.

There was only a love seat and a coffee table. I eyed the grey and black fabric, envisioning what he’d gotten up to on it.

“Problem?”

“No, Sire,” I answered and took the spot closest to the door.

Nox didn't sit, thankfully. Instead he poured me a glass of some fruit-scented drink and sat it in front of me. I didn't reach for it.

“You caused quite a stir this morning.” His voice was a low purr, sending unwelcome heat curling through my veins. I stiffened my spine and met his stare with unveiled defiance.

“I'm not sure what you mean, Your Majesty.”

A slow smile spread across his face, revealing the tips of elongated canines. My heart stuttered at the sight. Some fae drew blood from bites, usually during battle or ... sex.

He casually leaned against the stone of the hearth. “Faulty memory?”

“My memory is sound. Sire,” I quickly tacked on.

“You have permission to drop the formality of title for now,” he said, surprising me. “It can just be us in here, so please call me Nox.”

His voice was sex and decadence and I worried he was using magic on me. I didn't scent it, but how else could I explain my reaction?

Nox reached behind him and retrieved a blade from the back of his belt.

“Recognize me yet, little hellion?”

His dark grey eyes lit teasingly. My lips formed an O-shape. I locked onto the dagger he was carelessly tossing.

That was my dagger. My blood heated. King Nox had been the one under the helmet.

“A female of your ... spirit is hard to find. I've been looking forward to this moment all day.”

He wanted to drop the formalities? Fine. I could do that.

“Have you?” I arched a brow, fighting to keep my expression aloof. “I’m afraid I can’t say the same.”

Nox chuckled, the sound dark and sinful. “So contrary. It’s one of the things I admire about you.”

“Doubtful. You don’t know the first thing about me.”

“I know you’d sacrifice your life for sweet Sofiya out there.”

My pulse took off. Was that a threat?

“Offering up yourself took courage and a heavy dose of recklessness. I know you’re mouthy and fickle and you wear your feelings on your sleeve. I also know you prefer comfort and simplicity.”

“What?”

He pointed the blade at my feet. “You’re wearing the boots you came in with.”

“Why are you telling me all this?” Fae couldn’t lie but I was having trouble accepting his words.

“Because I liked it. Was insanely attracted to it. I intend to explore that attraction,” he vowed, putting the dagger back in its new sheath.

“You don’t have my permission to touch me.”

“I don’t need it, little hellion. I’m the fucking king.”

I jumped to my feet. “No.”

He pushed off the wall in one single fluid motion and prowled toward me, eyes gleaming. “Shall we see if I can change your mind?”

I held still as he approached, refusing to be cowed. Nox might be king, but I would never bend to his will—not for this. Not even if it meant losing my life.

“You’re welcome to try,” I said softly, meeting his gaze without flinching. “But you’ll find I’m not so easily swayed.”

Nox’s smile turned predatory. “All the more enjoyable when I convince you.”

He reached out to caress my cheek, but I turned my head away. His hand dropped, and anger flashed in his eyes. I had offended his pride.

Good.

I crossed my arms over my chest, refusing to give him an inch. “Are we done here, King?”

“Careful,” Nox warned, voice dropping to a dangerous purr.

When his eyes dropped to the cleavage of my chest I dropped my arms. He growled and grabbed my arm, jerking me against him.

I stiffened, heart pounding as Nox leaned in close. His scent enveloped me, dark and enticing, and I clenched my jaw to stop from inhaling deeper.

“You try my patience,” he said softly. “Perhaps I should teach you a lesson.”

I bared my teeth.

Rage boiled in my veins at his arrogance. I wrenched my arm from his grasp. “The only way you’ll have me,” I said, fingers tight around the hilt of my dagger, “is over my dead body.”

“Clever little minx,” Nox praised as he stared down at the weapon pressed to his manhood. He made no move to stop me.

My heart pounded as I stared him down, ready to draw blood if he so much as twitched.

“Touch me again without permission,” I said softly, “and you’ll lose more than your pride.”

Nox’s jaw clenched, but he didn’t retaliate.

“Lower the blade,” he growled, “or you will pay dearly for this insult.”

I pressed the dagger harder. “I wish to bargain.”

Nox’s eyes flashed with surprise, but he remained still. After a long moment, he inclined his head.

“I will not harm you,” he said stiffly. “Now remove your dagger and ask me properly for a bargain before I truly lose my patience.”

I hesitated, searching his gaze for any sign of deception. But his expression had shuttered closed, revealing nothing of his thoughts.

Cursing under my breath, I pulled back my dagger and took a wary step away from the king.

“I cannot decide if you’re incredibly foolish or incredibly brave,” he said softly.

“Probably both,” I retorted.

Nox’s lips curled. “Sit and tell me what it is you think you want.”

As though nothing had happened, we both sat on the loveseat.

“Sofiya is the last contestant you’re meeting today. I don’t want you to touch her.”

“Not even to take her hand?” he teased.

“Not even that.”

“Why?”

“She’s not like me. Or any of the other fae. Her heart is ... too soft.”

“I think you misjudge your friend, Aeryn.”

“I’ve known her most of my life. She’s not the type to handle the trials and come out unharmed. I wouldn’t have attempted to trade places with her if she were.”

“And what are you offering in return?”

“In return? I just released your family jewels from harm.”

Nox chuckled. “My jewels, as you say, were never in harm’s way.”

With a flick of his wrist, the dagger disappeared from my grip. “Give it back,” I seethed.

“You can have it back once I’m confident you won’t use it on me. And don’t bother searching my belt. You won’t find it there.”

My molars ground. I reached for calm.

“Now,” he put one arm on the back of the couch and leaned closer, “answer the question.”

I had nothing with which to bargain, nothing of value other than my dagger and the small plot in Greenhollow. I offered him both and he shook his head slowly.

“I have nothing else to offer,” I told him.

“That’s not true. In fact, I know what I want and only you have it.”

Nox shifted closer, his arm behind me now. Not touching, but close.

“Oh?”

“Oh yes. If you don’t want my mouth on her body, then I’ll have it on yours instead.”

Muscles I didn’t know I had clenched between my legs. Butterflies grew in my belly. My body was betraying me in the worst of ways.

“Just your mouth?” I asked.

“Unless you ask for more.”

“And just kissing? On my mouth?”

The tilt of his lips was a wicked, wicked thing. “Again, unless you ask for more.”

“Fine,” I agreed, closing my eyes. “Get it over with.”

“I have to say, this is a first for me,” Nox mused.

“Same.”

“You’ve not bargained for a mouth-only kisses?” he jested.

My eyes popped open. “No. I’ve never had to bargain my body to get something I want.”

Nox stilled, something feral stared out at me from deep within his eyes. A beast come to life in his psyche.

Uh oh.

“Spread your legs, Aeryn.” The pitch of his voice had lowered.

“But—”

“I agreed not to touch you. Now spread your fucking legs.”

Tentatively I pulled my knees wider. Nox lowered to the floor, kneeling between them without touching. Bending closer to the juncture of my thighs, he inhaled deeply.

Goosebumps broke out across my skin.

A low rumble vibrated from his chest as his spine straightened, his face close to mine. The King’s hands landed on the back of the couch, on either side of my head.

Unable to look away, I watched his mouth descend. Soft and oh so gentle, his lips brushed mine. Electricity sparked between our flesh. I gasped and his tongue probed carefully. My abdominals tightened, breasts turned heavy.

Then he was gone. Confused, I looked up and found him twenty feet across the room.

Nox waved a dismissive hand. “Go,” he said, “and pray I’m in a forgiving mood when next we meet.”

My face burned. “But—”

“Sofiya is safe from me. Now get out.”

I stared at him for a long moment before turning on my heel and stalking from the room.

Dear Reader,

Thank you so much for taking the time to read *Shadow's Raven*! I hope you enjoyed it. This book was a labor of love, paused repeatedly thanks to the stress the pandemic brought to our world. It took a long time to get back on track, but I got there and hope to continue writing steadily.

Cheers!

C.A Worley

p.s. I loathe typos. *Loathe* them. If you ever want to tell me where those little fuckers are hiding, I'm all ears.

‡ ‡ ‡

Works by C.A. Worley:

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Shadow's Lyric

Shadow's Raven

Fate of Imperium Series

The Wolf King's Bride

The Vampire King's Mate

The Demon King's Destiny

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Bastien's Bite

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Coming Soon: *Fae Brides of Falcondale Series*

C.A. Worley writing as Cass Alexander:

The Persimmon Series (New Adult Romcom).

Working On It

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The Shadow, Inc. Novellas (Paranormal Erotic Romance).

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