



THE  
DARK  
RISING

THE HIDDEN OF VROHKARIA  
BOOK TWO

KELLY COVE

# The Dark Rising

**The Hidden of Vrohkaria Book Two**



# Kelly Cove

Copyright © 2023 by Kelly Cove

All rights reserved.

No portion of this book may be reproduced in any form without written permission from the author, except as permitted by U.S. copyright law.

No portion of this book may be reproduced, used or copied in any form into Artificial intelligence programs, software or files.

Brief quotations are allowed for reviews.

For permission contact [kellycoveauthor@gmail.com](mailto:kellycoveauthor@gmail.com)

Cover Design by Incognito Designs

Edited by Magnolia Author Services

Map by [@Saumyasvision/Inkarnate](#)

# Contents

[Series Warning](#)

[Map of Vrohkaria](#)

[Dedication](#)

[One](#)

[Two](#)

[Three](#)

[Four](#)

[Five](#)

[Six](#)

[Seven](#)

[Eight](#)

[Nine](#)

[Ten](#)

[Eleven](#)

[Twelve](#)

Thirteen

Fourteen

Fifteen

Sixteen

Seventeen

Eighteen

Nineteen

Twenty

Twenty One

Twenty Two

Twenty Three

Twenty Four

Twenty Five

Twenty Six

Twenty Seven

Thirty Eight

Twenty Nine

Thirty

Thirty One

Thirty Two

Thirty Three

Thirty Four

Thirty Five

[Thirty Six](#)

[Thirty Seven](#)

[Thirty Eight](#)

[Thirty Nine](#)

[Forty](#)

[Forty One](#)

[Forty Two](#)

[Forty Three](#)

[Forty Four](#)

[Forty Five](#)

[Forty Six](#)

[Forty Seven](#)

[Forty Eight](#)

[Forty Nine](#)

[Fifty](#)

[Fifty One](#)

[Fifty Two](#)

[Fifty Three](#)

[Language](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Come Stalk Me](#)



## Series Warning

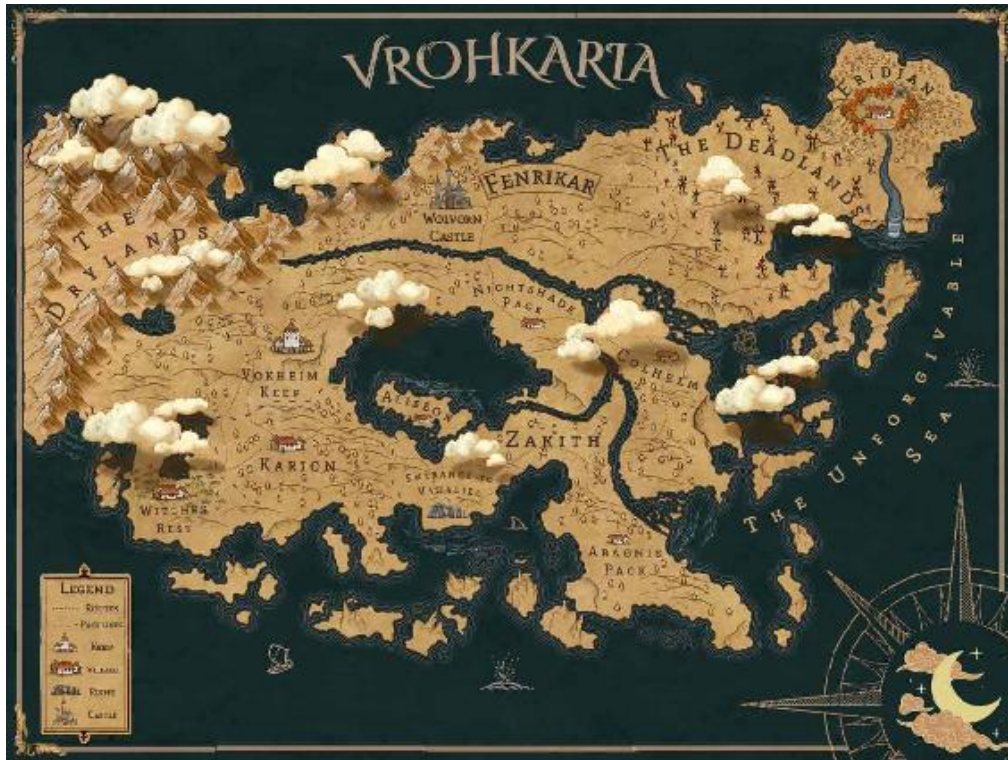
This series is only suitable for those 18+ and contains matters that can be triggering. This is a dark fantasy romance. The world is not kind, nor can be its people, or the main male character. He's an alpha-hole. This is an enemies to lovers story. This series is rough going, but they will have their HEA.... eventually.

**For those that would like to go in blind, skip this page.** If you have any triggers read the following below. Please note – More may be added with every book.

This series contains, but is not limited to the following below either on page/memories/flashbacks or references. Abuse including child abuse, child sexual assault, murder, graphic violence, torture, death, child death, rape, explicit sex, kidnapping, dubious consent. Harm of the Main female character by the Main male character (Whipping).

**Added Book Two** - child sexual assault by family member, self inflicted injury, death by hanging, unpleasant/gruesome scenes. Flashbacks/memories of sexual assault/torture.

If you have a specific trigger and would like to check if it is in this book, please feel free to contact me by email at [Kellycoveauthor@gmail.com](mailto:Kellycoveauthor@gmail.com)





*For those that feel too much and pretend everything is fine.*

# One

RHEA

I've never embraced the power of an Heir before, always kept it hidden from those that wish to do harm to me. Now though, my secret is out, and my promise to my mother is over as she granted me the release from it. Power swells within, warming me from the inside and flowing through my limbs. It's nothing I have ever felt before, nothing I could have ever imagined. I look down at my hands, feeling tingles in my palm. Runa, as weary as she is, stretches inside of me, her heavy head lifting as she feels what I can.

My magic moves toward the wounds over my body, trying to start up the healing process with no luck. The cuffs of my wrists glow, stopping a lot of my power from helping as I try to move the focus of my magic to my wrists. *This is more important than my wounds right now.* I pull hard on my chains that are attached to the floor, needing to get free, needing to get to Kade. Letting out a growl, I yank as hard as I can, and it snaps. I feel strength course through me as I pull my hands apart, shattering the chain links connecting my wrists together.

“Impossible,” Darius breathes as he gathers back to his feet, eyes wide with confusion as he looks at me, at my hair still floating around me. It is possible, I’m proof of that.

I look him over, feeling his betrayal more than ever. The wounds on my back still burn, still scream in pain after what he did to me. I ignore the way his own Heir marks show at his neck, ignore who he is to me... what he doesn’t deserve to be.

Shouts echo around the hall as people start to flee for the doors, from the power and the dominance I’m expelling as they scream in fear. They scramble over each other, standing on those that get knocked to the ground, uncaring that their feet are injuring others. I move toward Josh and hold a hand out against his barrier, grunting at the effort to break it. Josh’s eyes are wide as they look at me, staring at me like he doesn’t know me. I ignore it and keep concentrating on the barrier. After one final push, his barrier breaks, and I rush forward, grabbing his chained hands. I put my hand on the links and pull until they break.

“Get the others,” I order him as he snaps out of his shock and we rush forward, regretfully stepping over Josie and Danny as Josh goes to our pack, and I head for Kade.

I can’t think of them right now.

“Stop her,” Charles roars, and I bare my teeth at him as I make my way to the steps. Guards rush the room and come at me, their swords drawn. Feeling the power coursing through me, I fling out a hand as a wave of magic pushes them back.

My body feels lit from within, my power pulsing and raw.  
Wild.

Charles grabs Kade off the floor, and my heart pounds as he shoves him down besides his seat on the dais, the Highers gathering around him. The Elites come next, and I stop and lift my hand again, making them fly through the air and straight into the hall's walls. I continue and hit the first step of the dais, watching as Charles and the Highers begin to chant. They speak a language I don't understand until a violet and black barrier forms around them, the colors swishing in and out of view in a circular motion.

Charles sneers at me, his face full of fury that makes me pause for a second, memories rushing through my mind of all the times he's looked at me like that before.

Movement to my left has me coming out of my fear, and I come face to face with Darius. He growls, blade in hand as he looks at Charles and then reaches out for me. I dodge back, throwing my leg out and aiming for his torso which he knocks away easily in my state. Using the momentum, as soon as my foot lands on the floor, I bring my other leg around, spinning through the movement until my foot connects with his face. My back screams in agony as I waver on my feet before righting myself, but I feel the pleasure of hitting him.

Darius grunts, jaw clenching as he wipes blood from the corner of his mouth. He comes at me again, and I lift my fist, ready to spill more of his blood and get to Kade as fast as



possible. He dodges my throw, and quickly drops his blade before his strong hands are gripping the tops of my arms.

“Rhea,” he barks, his fingers digging into my skin as I struggle in his grasp.

“Fuck you,” I breathe, my eyes alight with anger as I bring my hands up, ready to gouge his eyes out, but that’s not what happens.

My hands move toward his temples and my fingers press in. I feel my magic moving toward my fingertips as I’m frozen to the spot, unable to move. His eyes lock with mine, confusion and trepidation swimming in those green orbs as my power from within reaches his skin. The cuffs that are still on my wrists glow, sensing the power and trying to block it, but the power doesn’t stop, moving at a steady pace into him.

The markings on my skin fill with warmth, flowing through them like a gentle river as Darius and I are still locked in each other’s gaze. His pupils dilate, black leaking at the edges of his whites as those silver, glass-like specks float through his pupils. The light green of his eyes glow as my power rushes into him and I connect with... something.

I suck in a sharp breath as I feel my power floating through a thick mist, moving sluggishly, searching for something I don’t know of. Darius’s eyes tighten as if in pain, and my magic moves faster, rushing around inside of him, searching, until a pair of eyes show in my mind. I gasp as Darius jolts, a pained groan coming from his lips as he moves his hands down my arms, then gripping my waist.

His scent hits me harder than before. At one point, I wanted it wrapped around me, I wanted to bathe in it. Now... Now I want it far away from me, never to be near me after what he has done. Runa's growl echo's my thoughts.

My power becomes visible in my mind, like I'm watching what's happening from inside of him as it's surrounded by darkness. A small ball of ice-blue tendrils float toward those pitch-black eyes, hovering just out of their reach. Strands of my power float around themselves as the eyes get closer and fear courses through me as my magic doesn't stop. I try to remove my hands from Darius's head, wanting to let go, but I'm stuck.

The tendrils float from side to side, but don't move forward as a muzzle and sharp teeth come into view, followed by a huge, black head. The wolf's green eyes now glow in my power's light as its nose stays inches from it. A cord of my power reaches out and caresses the wolf's nose, and it lets out a low rumble as Darius grunts, but otherwise stays still, letting my power explore him. Runa is silent within me, her head cocked to the side curiously.

The wolf's eyes close briefly before they reopen, looking directly at me as Runa lets out a small, confused sound. My breath catches as Runa comes to my eyes and we stare at each other. My strands stroke across the wolf's head, so bright against the black, flowing behind its ears before it moves toward its mouth. My body sags forward against Darius's chest, feeling the power within me suddenly draining. His fingers tighten at my waist as my forehead rests under his chin

as we both stay frozen to the spot, just our chests rising and falling with every breath we take. The wolf nods his head at me once, a purr coming from him before he opens his mouth and swallows my power, pitching us in darkness.

Darius growls low, a gritted, pained sound mixed in with it as his fingers release my waist and he crashes to his knees, his hands immediately going to his head. I stumble back as I become unstuck, my breaths uneven as most of my power within me was absorbed by the wolf. As quick as it came, my power is fizzling out. I feel every bruise, every wound, every ache and every bite of pain running through my body. My vision wavers.

I take a stumbling step toward Darius as he peels his glowing eyes open. “You asshole,” I rasp. “I was too young to have caused the rogures, I was a child when they came to the lands.” I cough, and pain ignites my chest. “It’s impossible for me to have caused them, and it’s impossible that what you saw was the truth in that crystal.” He removes his hands from his head as he gets a foot under him, his eyes showing some kind of emotion that I don’t understand as he shakes his head. “You broke our vow, and I will make sure to break—“

“Rhea, now! We have to go.” My head snaps in Josh’s direction. He’s got the guys huddled together and starts removing the cloths from around their mouths. I look back to Darius one last time to see him mouthing something to me. No sound comes out, but I know exactly what he’s saying. My eyes widen at the one word. He mouths it again, his eyes fiercely on mine as confusion swirls inside of me. He growls

low, repeating the word before his eyes scrunch shut in pain. I turn and aim for Kade.

I haul up the dais steps, holding back tears from the burning in my body, and bang against the Highers barrier, trying to push power into it. But there is hardly anything left. I call for more, beg for more, but nothing comes.

“Kade,” I shout. He’s still on the floor at the Highers’ feet. “Come to me Kade, now! We have to leave.”

“He’s not going anywhere, Lasandrhea.” Charles’s cruel voice pierces my ears. He moves forward and stops in front of me on the other side of the barrier. He looks me over, hunger in his gaze as he tracks my markings. “You are pretty, my dear,”

I grunt as I push what little power I have into his barrier, and though it wavers slightly, it still stays strong. “Let him go!”

“Your power is dwindling, Heir of Zahariss. I just have to wait a little longer until you’re all dried up,” he smirks. “I know better than to challenge an Heir with its counterpart in the same room.” He lets out a low laugh, and it’s cold, filled with malice. “When you are in my grasp again very soon, shall I make you watch as Kade runs off to his family, turning his back on you?”

“He’s not going anywhere near them,” I snarl, looking down at Kade sprawled on the ground beside his feet.

“Why ever not? You enjoyed your training, didn’t you?” Charles murmurs quietly, and the other Highers standing

behind him don't react to his words, his confession, letting me know they already knew and are involved.

My power falters at the reminder of his training, with how often he would come to my cage to deliver his pain, to deliver his evilness. I slump into the barrier, feeling pinpricks of pain from it as more shouts scream around the room.

"No," I gasp, my heartbeat echoing in my ears. Is that what he wants to do with Kade? "I didn't, and you know that, you sick bastard. Now let Kade go." Digging my fingers into the shimmering violet and black, I whimper from the pain, refusing to let go.

Charles tilts his head at me before turning and walking over to Kade on the floor. He roughly grabs him by the back of his t-shirt, hauls him up, and stands him in front of me. Kade wavers on his feet, his eyes unfocused as he looks through me.

"Carzan," I whimper, digging in harder.

"Kaden," Charles purrs, and I tense, my heart hammering. "Do you want to go with Lasandrhea? Even though there is no way out of here for a traitor? It is a fool's game to even try and attempt it, no?"

Kade shakes his head back and forth, eyes still bleary. "No, don't make me go with her." My stomach drops at his words.

"See, he wants nothing more to do with you and your twisted ways. Haven't you done enough?" Charles sneers, then he smiles at me over Kade's head and tears fill my eyes.

“Carzan, please,” I try. “You know me, your memories aren’t right, they did something to you, I vow it. What they are saying and what your memories are showing you aren’t true.” A roar comes behind me, and I turn my head to see Darius on the floor, hunched over as black mist coats his whole body. My eyes go wide with the feel of his power as he stumbles to his feet. The Elites circle him, speaking all at once, confusion in their voices. “Carzan, quickly, we’re running out of time,” I plead, desperation making the words come out in a rush.

“Stay away from me!” he cries, and then brings his hands up to his head and clutches his hair.

“Rhea, there is no time.” Josh grabs me from behind and starts to drag me back down the steps. People are still running and scrambling to exit the great hall, pushing, and shoving each other and downright fighting to escape the room.

I try to shrug Josh off, shouting for Kade to come to me, to fight, to run. He doesn’t hear me. My hands leave the barrier and the last of the power I held within me dwindles away. “No!” I scream, flailing in Josh’s arms, trying to get him to release me, but his arms hold firm. “We have to get him; he can’t stay here.” Taylor appears beside me and helps Josh take me away as I wriggle, and hit, and kick at them, trying to get them off me.

“There is no time, Rhea, if we want to get out of here alive, we need to go now!” Taylor grabs the leg I was kicking out at him as we reach the bottom of the steps. The rest of the guys

huddle around me, and Anna fiddles with something in the pocket of her pants.

“Don’t you dare!” Charles bellows, and I look up and see him push Kade to the side. He falls to the floor, his head smashing off the stone, and I yell out to him, still trying to get my tired body to get them off me. Charles waves a hand, and the black and violet barrier drops. He charges straight for us, for me, his hand glowing violet.

I swallow roughly as the other Highers rush after Charles, paying no mind to Kade who is now bleeding from his head. He doesn’t move, but his eyelids twitch and I try even harder to get Taylor off me, biting into his arm as he maneuvers me to restrain me better. Shouts bellow around us, and I turn in Josh’s arms as the Elites come for us. Darius growls a menacing sound, his eyes boring into mine.

“Quickly,” Hudson rushes out as he grabs a hold of Colten and touches a hand to Josh.

“Kade!” I shout, squirming in Taylor and Josh’s hold on me to try and see him. Charles bellows orders to his guards who are picking themselves off of the floor. Taylor grabs my hands and holds them against my chest, pinning them. I need to move; I need to get to Kade. We can’t leave him here.

My eyes fill with anger as Maize saunters over to Kade and leans down, touching a hand to his head. Azure light shines from her palm as she rubs his temples, and Kade yells out in pain, his body tensing before he slumps to the floor. I see the

smile on Maize's face as she pats his head, and I want nothing more than to remove hers.

"No," I call out, and Maize turns to me, her smirk chilling me as she moves her black hair over her shoulder, not a care in the world.

I'm suddenly closed in on all sides by my pack. Anna briefly catches my eyes before she grabs a hold of my shoulder and I tense, noticing how we are all connected. No. No, no, no. She brings her hand up and I see the square gray stone in her palm.

"Wait," I plead, "don't." But Anna rubs her thumb over the stone with her free hand and closes her eyes. "We need to get Kade, just wait. We can't leave him," I cry.

Anna opens her eyes, sad and watery as I start to feel the port stone working. "I'm sorry," she whispers.

My eyes go to Darius just as my body compresses and we port out of the hall.

Leaving them all behind.

Leaving Josie and Danny's bodies behind.

Leaving Kade behind.



## Two

RHEA

I land in a clearing, my head spinning as I collapse on the grassy ground. I wretch, pain and exhaustion rattling through me so intensely that a whine escapes me. My body trembles, my shoulders shaking as I hold onto the ground, the only solid thing I feel as I squeeze my eyes shut. I tilt to the side, dizziness overcoming me before I catch myself, shaking my head to clear it. Breathing through my nose, I dig my fingers into the earth, feeling its coolness in the dark of night to ground me.

Hearing a snuffle, I turn my head and open my tear-filled eyes to see Anna's reflecting the same anguish I feel. Her eyes stream tears over her swollen and bloody face as she scans our surroundings. Her hair is a mess of red curls as she gets to her feet, her body shaking like mine. Betrayal runs through me, and I dig deeper into the dirt beneath me.

She had a port stone, she took us away from Kade, they all did.

“Rhea,” Josh whispers, and I turn my head to him as he crawls toward me, his face twisted.

A sob escapes me, unable to hold it in as I see the heartbreak in his gray eyes. He reaches out with both hands to cup my face, but I slap them away, seeing him flinch at my refusal, but he comes back again, pressing our foreheads together.

“You took me away from there,” I growl.

“We didn’t have any other choice,” he says gruffly. “We were surrounded and the Highers were coming for us.”

“We could have fought, we could have tried harder, we could have—“

“Shhh, Milal, there was nothing we could have done.” I know this, deep down I know, but we just left him there to those monsters.

“Kade,” I hiccup, bringing my hands up and gripping his wrist, my fingers digging into his skin.

“I know.” His voice cracks, and he gently guides my head to his shoulder. Bringing his arms around me, he holds me against him, careful of the injuries on my back.

I shake like a leaf against him, remembering Kade’s hurtful words, him severing our links and his refusal to come with me. “He hates me,” I cry. “He hates us, Josh, he wouldn’t come to me. I begged him, and he wouldn’t come.”

“He’s not himself,” he says soothingly. Saying nothing else but just holding me as I break. I hear shuffling as another body

sits next to us, followed by another as their hands gently touch me, trying to comfort me.

“You all took me away from him,” I blubber. “You all did.” My head is a mess of emotions. I don’t know how to rein them in, who to point my anger at.

“We had to go, Milal, please understand,” Josh whispers. “We would have died if we didn’t.” But what of Kade?

“Oh Gods,” I croak, “Josie... Danny.” They’re dead. Murdered, gone. A muffled scream comes from me as I press tightly against Josh’s shoulder, Runa whining inside of me. I won’t ever see them again, see Josie teasing Danny and how they looked at each other with so much love.

Someone touches my forehead softly, and I open my wet eyes, gasping between my cries. Colten’s crouched behind Josh, his brown eyes so full of sorrow, and it makes me cry even harder, a horrible keening sound coming from me for all that we have lost. All that has happened.

“Shhh, Milal.” Josh rocks me from side to side, his voice gruff, and I feel wetness drip into my hairline where he rests his face.

I cry. Cry and scream and wail as I grip onto Josh tightly, trying to make this pain stop. To make it all go away. They shouldn’t have died, they should have been here with us, should have been in Eridian. Kade should have been in Eridian. They all should have stayed in Eridian.

It was supposed to be me, only me.

My cries and the others' are the only thing to be heard into the dead of night. Not a rustle of leaves or a scurry of an animal can be heard over our pain. We stay like this for a long time. My pack surrounds me as we grieve together, being close as we try to comfort each other the best we can. My sobs eventually lessen, my breathing steadier as I peel my eyes open and move back. Josh squeezes me one more time before he lets go, wiping his own eyes with the back of his hand.

Taylor and Sebastian stand, looking around the clearing, searching for any danger. Anna joins them next, her own cheeks wet as they speak and point in a direction as Taylor nods.

“You okay, pup?” I hear Hudson murmur, and I look toward him speaking to Colten. He pulls Colten toward him, holding the back of his dark head as his shoulders shake, his hands gripping the side of his waist tightly. I swallow the lump in my throat as Hudson's blue eyes meet mine over Colten's head, his jaw tight as he grips him even tighter.

Gone are the bickering pair, only heartache is left.

I breathe in deep before standing slowly, Josh holding my arm to keep me steady. My vision wavers from the pain and I shake my head to clear it. Burning in my wrist draws a hiss of agony from me, and both Josh and I look down at the cuffs on my wrists to see them glowing, lighting up with runes.

“We need to get these off you,” Josh murmurs, tracing the runes with a finger.

I nod, willing some of the power I had before to try and break the cuffs on my wrists, but none comes. It's all gone. I grunt, bringing a hand up to try and pull at them, trying to get them off, but it's useless. I sag forward against Josh, heaving through ragged breaths and he holds on to me.

"It's terbium," I sniffle, and he sucks in a sharp breath.

"Fuck," he whispers. "You won't heal as quickly with them on." *I'm not healing at all.*

"I know," I say, leaning back and reaching out to look at the cuffs on Josh's wrists. No runes, no glow. "These are normal. I guess I was the only one given them."

"Assholes," Josh mutters.

"Yeah," I agree, taking a step back from Josh to look around us. "The clearing is wide with a few small, grassy hills and what looks like a village in the distance. The trees surrounding us aren't thick, their size much smaller than the ones inside Eridian, but will provide some shelter. "Where in the Gods are we?" I croak out, my voice rough from screaming, crying. From my heart fucking breaking.

"We're southwest of Fenrikar," Anna says as she hobbles over to me. "I haven't been here in a long time, but we're not far from Witches Rest."

My eyes sharpen at her words. "Witches Rest? Why are we here?" I ask her as the rest of the guys come over. Witches Rest is where a coven of witches who are not loyal to the Highers, reside. They're dangerous, powerful, and scary

according to what Edward told me. They keep to themselves and go under no one's rule but their own.

“We needed somewhere to go.” Anna shuffles on her feet. “We can't go back to Eridian, and this is the closest and safest place I thought to bring us to if we decide to go to Witches Rest.”

“Is it safe to go to the witches?” Taylor grunts, running a hand over short, coffee hair, an anxious move as he looks toward Colten.

“It's safer than being out in the open,” Sebastian chimes in, tawny eyes looking around us.

“We need to get Kade, he can't stay with them.” I shake my head. “They have done enough damage; I can't let our family take him.”

“Rhea,” Josh says gently, putting his hands on my shoulders and I shake my head again. We can't leave him. “We can't do anything right now.” My eyes well with more tears, and I bite my lip as another sob wants to escape me. “How are we going to go back to Wolvorn Castle, get inside unnoticed, convince Kade to come with us willingly, and then get out of there with our lives?”

“We have to try, I can't lose him too.” I just can't. It would be even more unbearable than it is now.

His gray eyes soften. “I don't want him with them anymore than you do, but we have to be realistic. Walking back in there is a death sentence.”

“And the Elites will be hunting us now,” Colten murmurs, his shoulder brushing against Hudson’s side as he stands beside him. “They will have their orders and we escaped them; they won’t just let that go.”

“How did you even get a port stone?” I sniffle, eyeing Anna.

“I’m unsure,” she says softly, and my brows furrow. “I woke up and it was already in my pocket, but I don’t know how it got there. I didn’t really have any time to think about it when the next thing I heard were footsteps and guards dragged me out of my cell.”

“It must have been Edward. He came to me when I was in a cell, telling me he would find a way to get you guys out,” I tell them and they all nod. We all stand in silence, lost in thought as I rub my chest, still half-naked and covered in blood. I shiver.

Josh notices my shivering and grabs the back of his bloodstained t-shirt, pulling it over his head. “You showed your markings,” he says gently, gathering his t-shirt in his hands to help me put it on.

I look down, feeling oddly uncomfortable. I take a peek at Anna, knowing she had no idea I was an Heir. The only one here who didn’t know. “Yeah,” I tell Josh as he gently maneuvers me into his t-shirt, and I rub my bloody cheek against his in thanks. The t-shirt is full of bloodstains and some rips and tears, but it’s warmer.

“So you are an Heir? You said so in the hall, but I didn’t think...” Anna’s voice wavers as she trails off. “How is that

possible?”

“The Heirs never went away,” I tell her, running a hand down my face. “They have always been in Vrohkaria, just in hiding.”

Her brows furrow. “But how?” she asks. “They were all hunted down, they were all long gone. Like the Old Gods”

“In our history, the Heirs were put on a pedestal, revered by all, welcomed by all. But that changed after the King of Vrohkaria died, and the Highers were formed to fill the void of power that was left by his death. With the Highers in power, changes were brought to the lands with new laws, and the Heirs became something to fear by all. Hated and despised for simply being a descendent of Zahariss or Cazier after it was told they went mad across the lands.”

“But Heirs are dangerous.” She takes a step back, and I look away from her, feeling dejected and hurt that she moved back from me in fear. “The Gods went crazy, destroying the lands. Then the Heirs came, and they were unstable, violent, just as the Old Gods were.”

“Anna!” Josh snaps at her, and I hold a hand out to stop him from saying anymore. I understand her fear, understand that the Highers’ views of the Gods and Heirs have probably been ingrained in her for many years. But she should know better with being a blood witch what it’s like to be told you are something when you are not.

“The Heirs are passed down, so the previous Heirs of Zahariss are my ancestors and they did what they had to do to



defend themselves. There is so much you don't know, so much kept hidden from the people of Vrohkaria. It was safer for everyone that we were kept hidden. That way innocents didn't get caught in battles that were not their own, and even though people's minds were poisoned with lies, and they would attack or tell an authority of sightings of an Heir, they kept their lives if we stayed away. Why else do you think I have also been hiding in Eridian? Look at the mess we are in now." I look away briefly and take a breath. "The Heirs of the Gods have sacrificed over and over again for their people, to keep some sort of peace in the lands, to save the spilling of innocent blood," I tell her, gritting my teeth, getting angrier over the injustice of it all. "Believe what you will, Anna, but I am Heir to Zahariss, that title doesn't change who I am and I'm not a threat to innocents. I've spent years helping people by bringing them to Eridian, you know this, so tell me, am I dangerous? Are you dangerous being a blood witch? The law states you are to be killed on sight, yet you have done nothing but help me care for those who need it."

Silence falls around us as Anna looks at me, then to my bloody body until she lets out a quiet sigh. "No, you're not dangerous, Rhea."

I nod and let out a breath. "I'm an Heir, that title alone puts a target on my back and I'm also branded as a traitor. If you don't want to stay with me, I understand. I would never ask you to stay with me and help me for what comes next."

"I will always help you," Anna murmurs, coming forward and gripping my hand. "I'm sorry for questioning you, I

should know better.” I lean forward and rub against her cheek, accepting her apology.

“Darius is an Heir, isn’t he?” Sebastian eventually says out loud what we all didn’t want to voice.

A pang goes through me at the mention of him. “Yes, he’s the Heir of Cazier, but he seemed shocked that I was an Heir too, so I don’t think he knew I was. I could sense something similar to me in him, but it didn’t click into place until we went in search of Solvier after Sam told us about the man in Eridian. It was just confirmed in the hall when his markings appeared, reacting to mine.”

Darius was shocked when he took in my markings. Which makes me think that the Heir to Cazier before him hadn’t shown him his own markings, or was he even around Darius? I hadn’t ever met Cazier’s Heir, all Mom told me was that he was probably hiding too.

Then there was me being locked inside Darius’s mind, seeing his wolf. Watching as his wolf drained and consumed a large amount of my power. It drained a lot from me, and I have no idea how and why that even happened. Either way, he’s an Heir, and the problem is, he knows I am too. We have more than a simple connection, one that is as old as the creation of the lands.

And he betrayed me.

I should have known better. He’s the Alpha of the Elites, and Elites were specifically made to hunt and capture Heirs. Does

he know that? Do the Elites and the Highers know he is an Heir?

I rub my temples. “We need to move; we need to find somewhere to rest before deciding where we go from here. It may be best if you guys continue on without me and find somewhere safe. They are going to hunt me, and I’ve been accused of treason. Everything and everyone will be on the lookout for me, word will spread fast.”

“One,” Josh growls, coming to stand in front of me, anger spreading across his features. “You haven’t done anything wrong, never mind causing a curse for the rogues to plague the lands, and two.” He pauses, giving me a hard look. “We are not splitting up, no way. We stick together, as always.”

“You know we stand with you,” Taylor says, arms folded.

“We’re going to get Kade back, going to get our pack back, no matter how long it takes,” Hudson tells me.

“Of course we are,” Seb says, and they all nod.

“We are a pack, a family. We don’t turn our backs on family,” Colten murmurs, and more tears spring to my eyes at his words, as Anna nods her head.

“Arbiel canna,” Josh whispers and I close my eyes, letting the words sink into my bones.

We made our own family, our own life and home. I will get it all back, I swear it on Zahariss herself.

Everyone murmurs the words back, and I can’t help but sag in relief. I wouldn’t blame them for leaving me, it’s too

dangerous, too deadly. I can't say I'm not glad they won't leave me though; I don't want to be on my own. I wouldn't know where to go or what to do. Edward could help me, but I don't know how I would contact him now.

"Let's head southwest to Witches Rest. They have no alliance with the Highers, and I know someone there," Anna says.

"You do? I thought you lived with a small coven in Aliseon?" I ask, my brows creasing.

"I did until they turned on me," she mutters and shakes her head. "My grandmother is at Witches Rest. She was still there before I left for Eridian anyway." She clears her throat and I blink at her words. Grandmother?

"I don't see any other option and we can't stay out in the open like this." Taylor looks up at the night sky, tracking the stars. "Southwest is that way." He points behind us.

"How long will it take to reach them?" Colten asks Anna.

She looks in the direction we need to go. "About ten days, with rest."

I nod. "I guess we're going to see some witches and hope they don't boil our blood then," I mumble and head off in the right direction, feeling the numbness start to trickle its way back inside of me.

Josh slings his arm around my waist, supporting me as we walk in the silence of the night. We enter the trees, our pace as fast as we can go with our injuries, and I run my hand over the

light brown bark as I pass them. I feel a small tingle of warmth through my palm, and I can't help but sigh at the feeling.

Being able to still feel life around me brings me a small comfort. I just wish I was back in Eridian, next to the ilk trees as Solvier tells me one of his many stories through the night, knowing Kade is asleep at home. Safe.

I tentatively reach out down the blood link for him, but it's not there, my silly heart hoping there is a thread to be felt. I block it out and press on.

I dread to think what's become of Eridian, but I have to go back one day. If nothing else, to honor Solvier and the people we lost at our graveyard.

Then, I'll rebuild our home with the Highers blood on my hands.

Nothing less will satisfy me now. War will come now between me and those who did wrong, I just hope to find allies and pray not everyone is fearful of an Heir that has a thirst for blood and destruction.

Maybe I should have been Cazier's Heir instead.

# Three

RHEA

Mist curls along damp blades of grass as we walk through the woods. Sounds of creatures' squawking and chuffing can be heard in the distance as we continue forward toward Witches Rest. Thirteen long days it has taken us to reach here, and since we left Wolvorn Castle and left Kade behind, along with Josie and Danny's bodies.

I try not to dwell on leaving them, try to block it from my mind. The pain is too much to bear, so I push it down and keep it placed in a bubble of agony so I can keep going.

Our survival is what matters now.

Four days ago, we saw rogures in the distance, heard their terrifying howls that sent chills down my spine. It was a reminder that those creatures are plaguing the lands and tear anything to shreds in its path. We aren't equipped to fight off a pack of them, shit, not even one. Only Anna and her magic, and our bare hands as our weapons. Even then, I'm no use to anyone in my current state.

I hobble forward, the pain wracking through my body becomes a welcomed feeling. It shows I'm alive through the current numbness of my emotions, it shows that I can still fight. I just need these damn terbium cuffs off.

My blonde hair sticks to my face as sweat dampens my body with exertion, but still, I keep going, we keep going. I've slowed them all down, but not once have any of them complained. Runa sleeps within me, gathering her rest as much as she can. She's been extremely quiet, as have I since we set off to look for sanctuary. What is there to say? We are beaten and bruised, but still, we keep moving on.

Eerie lights appear sparingly up ahead, their blurry glow barely seen through the mist as it thickens and rises to our waist. My bloody, bare feet sink into the soggy earth, cold moisture threatening to make them freeze. Sagging trees take over the wood, its dark green vines hanging from them, move in a snake-like manner, swaying to an unknown breeze. At the base of the trees, tall, purple flowers wrap around each other, opening and closing their petals as we pass them by, their stems moving to reach out to us as we move away from them, not knowing what they would do.

I shiver. I have no idea what they are, having never seen them before, but I don't think touching them would be a good idea.

"Just up ahead, keep going straight," Anna whispers from in front of us. Josh puts his arm around me, keeping me steady as

my injuries still haven't healed. Sebastian, Taylor, Hudson, and Colten are at my back, following closely behind.

It's strange to be out in the open in the lands having spent so much time in Eridian. It feels like I don't even know Vrohkaria anymore, even though Edward has always updated me as best as he can.

I feel like I don't belong anywhere. Not my home in Zakith, not Eridian as it's lost, and no one will harbor a traitor of the lands. Where do I fit?

We enter the white, curling mist, trusting Anna as we follow her blindly. I'm barely able to see my hand in front of me. Josh holds me tighter, his body as tense as mine. Lights appear, the orange and red dots floating in and out around us and I watch them in awe. They disappear ahead of me, only to come back and hover around us again and I follow each one, wanting to hold my hand out and touch them.

"Because that's not creepy," Colten mutters. If I had the energy, I would try and scare him, I'm sure Sebastian would get a kick out of that.

"Hush, pup," I hear Hudson tell him. "Keep alert."

"You do know I was going to be an Elite, right?" Colten whispers back. "I can scan for danger—"

"Quiet," Hudson commands, his voice a small growl and I hear a small whimper in response. I peek up at Josh and he gives me a tired smile at Hudson silencing him.

"Finally," Taylor huffs. "Blessed silence."



We carry on forward, alert and careful until my foot hits a hard surface. I stumble, holding my breath and waiting for the pain as I fall forward. Josh grabs my arm roughly and spins me around, tightly pinning me against his chest to keep me from eating wood. I hiss as the movement sends burning pain to the open wounds on my back.

“Sorry,” he rushes out, looking me over until his gaze lifts over my shoulder. His eyes widen, his fingers tightening on my arm before I turn.

The mist has thinned out now, and I see we’re on a wooden bridge. The planks are worn but not rotted, full of leaves and dirt. A wooden railing sits on either side with running water under it. I look down, seeing yellow flowers floating on top of the surface. They don’t move with the current, just bobbing from side to side. A pink fish pops its head out, its mouth opening and closing as it looks directly at me, like it’s come to see who’s on the bridge before it sinks back under the water.

I blink at all the new things I’m seeing. When I was a child, I stayed at home or went to the woods to play. Mom and Dad never took me anywhere else. When I left with Josh and Kade and roamed the lands for a few years. I had never come across anything like this before, and I’ve been in Eridian ever since.

It’s like a whole other land just opened up.

Josh nudges me, and I move my eyes from the water as we trudge forward along the bridge. Two wooden poles are at the end on either side, that orange and red light atop of them, lighting the way. We step off the bridge and walk along a dirt

path, looking ahead at the wooden homes raised on stilts above the soggy ground. Crudely built steps lead up to them, composed of all mismatched wood. Bridges appear everywhere as the glow of the lights illuminate them, going from home to home, over the swamp water to other paths and areas. A light, barely visible mist clings above our heads, making the place feel gloomy and dull, but with the home and the twinkling lights, it's hauntingly beautiful.

Anna stands still ahead of us, and I hobble up next to her, wincing as the dirt seeps into the wounds on my feet. I look at Anna and follow her gaze to the people walking around, carrying items in their woven baskets or putting wooden crates outside their homes. Their clothes look thin, but clean with their cloaks made of animal fur resting on their backs. I take it all in.

Children play on the paths, their laughter echoing through the air, and the innocence of it warms me. A woman with light hair twirls her fingers and lights appear around her home's structure, dancing where they have been placed by their maker. The woman suddenly stills, her back straightens and her eyes turn to land on us. They widen for a second before she puts the small crate down, and begins to walk toward us.

Anna tenses, my hackles rise as she approaches, and the guys stand ready at our backs. We are in new territory here and with the rumors of these witches, we could be taking our last breaths. Stopping in front of us, the woman's dark, moss-colored eyes narrow on me, then to Josh at my side before

looking over our shoulder. Her gaze eventually comes back to Anna and she sneers, causing my pulse to rise.

I haven't met any blood witches other than Anna, and Witches Rest is apparently full of them.

Maybe this was a mistake. Have we just gotten ourselves killed?

"Sister, why are you here?" Sister? My eyes widen in surprise as I look at Anna and this other witch. I didn't know Anna had a sister, and they look nothing alike. The witch crosses her arms, her small nose twitching in distaste as she looks directly at Anna.

"Janette," Anna replies coldly, and I can tell there is no love lost between these two. "Where is Grandmother?"

"Why are you here?" Janette snaps, her fingers producing a red-like tendril of magic as she stares down Anna. "And who are these people? You all look like you have been dragged out of a hole."

"Just tell me where Grandmother is," Anna grinds out, not flinching at the sight of her sister's magic.

"No way, turn around and go back to whatever cave you came from, we don't want you here," Janette spits out, and I resist the urge to growl at the tone she uses with Anna as I sense the guys stiffen at my back.

"Now girl, is that any way to talk to your sister?" a voice says from behind us, and we all spin, startled by the presence,

having not sensed it. I waver on my feet and Josh pulls me closer, letting me rest against his side.

An older woman trails along the bridge, her steps unhurried. Her gray hair is long and hanging to the front of her chest, the tips taking on a burned, red hue. A leather strap hangs down from her neck, small bones and dried herbs adorning it. She has a wooden branch as tall as her in her hand. The sound of it hitting the wood of the bridge with her every step makes my temples pound with the same rhythm as my pulse. The same light around the swamp rests at the top of the stick, but it's encased in a circular, clear ball with branches curving around it. The smell of lavender and something old hits me as she walks by, but it's not an uncomfortable smell. She reaches Janette, turning to look over at Anna and her wrinkled face moves as she smiles before bringing her into a hug.

“Oh how I have missed you, granddaughter,” the woman murmurs, pulling away from Anna as Janette huffs and folds her arms, her magic nowhere to be seen.

“I've missed you too, Grandmother,” Anna chokes out, and the sound of sadness is clear in her voice as I watch them both.

“I see you have brought friends. Come, let us go to the family home. You can eat, wash, and rest, then we will discuss what brings you here. Though I am very glad you have arrived. I didn't think you would all make it.” My gaze snaps to her and she looks my way, her light, violet eyes full of knowledge and power. I can sense it, feel it. “You are safe here, and we have much to talk about.”

That's it? No interrogation or threats or boiling blood?

She turns and we follow Anna at her side, looking around at the other residents as they watch us. I peek at Josh, and he looks back at me, giving me a reassuring smile that I don't feel. He draws me closer to him as I shiver, feeling cold more than ever. I sigh into his skin, feeling his warmth, but my body won't stop shaking. My teeth chatter, my legs growing weak beneath me as my vision wavers. I taper forward.

Josh grabs me, his hands going to the back of my thighs as he lifts me. My legs go around his waist, my arms around his neck as I tuck my head under his chin, a muffled scream coming from me as pain rips up my body. "I've got you, Milal," he murmurs. I close my eyes and relax in his hold, knowing he won't let me fall. I breathe deeply, my body still shaking but not as much, and I let myself sink deeper into my exhaustion after holding on for so long.



I wake with a start, shooting upright into a sitting position. I cry out, my back burning as I gasp for breath. "Gods, Rhea!" Josh rushes to my side, propping pillows up behind me before gently easing my back so I can sit comfortably. "Careful."

I squint at him, looking him over and noting how refreshed he looks. He's wearing a light-colored tunic and dark linen pants. His face and arms are clear of blood and grime, and no longer littered with bruises.

“Where are we?” I ask, my voice hoarse as I look around the room nervously.

Dimly lit lanterns are scattered around the room. A fireplace crackles in front of me, two well-worn chairs facing it. A dresser is to my right with a variety of flowers in a tall vase on the top with a window behind it, letting the darkness of night peer through. A small table and chairs are on the other side of the room against the wall, some dried foods on a plate and the other looks like half-eaten meat. I look down and run my hand through the dark fur covering me on the bed, feeling its softness before I clench my fingers into it. I look back to Josh, waiting for an answer.

He sits on the bed next to me, his hip resting against my knee. “We are in Belldame’s home, Anna’s grandmother, you’re in one of her spare rooms.”

My heartbeat kicks up a notch. “Are we safe?”

“We are.” A sigh of relief escapes me and he frowns, a crease forming between his eyebrows. “Are you okay?”

Am I okay? I’m tired, exhausted really, and my back is still on fire. I wiggle a little, stopping immediately as pain spreads up my back. I’m filthy, still covered in dried blood and my head feels like it’s about to explode.

On a whim, I try to reach out to Kade through the link, knowing it’s not there but do it anyway. Again I find nothing.

“I’m okay,” I tell him, not wanting to worry him or put more stress on him. I know he’s feeling the loss of so many things

too. “My back really hurts but with these on.” I lift my wrists and look down at the cuffs there. “I don’t think my back will be okay for a while.”

If at all.

“We managed to get ours off.” He shows me his now-bare wrists. “And we’re looking into how we can get yours off. Belladame thinks she might be able to with the help of Anna.”

I nod, not letting myself hope just yet. These cuffs are infused with terbium, once on, they don’t come off from what I have been told. Did Darius put these on me or someone else?

I wince at the thought of him, or the assumption that he would have some good inside of him. After we made the vow in my cave, I was sure we were getting somewhere. I even thought that maybe after we built some trust, I would tell him all about how Eridian became what it is today, and that maybe he could help me and keep it safe. Yet he was quick to go back on our vow that was sealed before the Gods. All over a fucking crystal that showed him bullshit. Over the lies the Highers and my family told.

I was stupid to think differently. I’m a stranger to him, so why would he believe me? Even at Wolvorn Castle, I still had some hope he would help me escape, that he would realize that something isn’t right. The connection I thought we had was a lie, nothing in what I had begun to feel for him meant anything, even with the words he uttered to me before we left, it doesn’t mean anything. Yet, a stupid part of me thought he would see me; that he could see my truth. It’s that thought that

makes it hurt more and I rub my chest, the ache there intensifying.

There is no hope in these lands, no mercy.

Just like I told him, just like he told me.

I watch Josh as he gets up and goes to the table with the dried food on it. He picks up the plate then brings it back and shoves it at me. "Eat, it's been a while since you have." My stomach reacts to the food in front of me, growling in hunger, and my mouth waters. We had barely eaten since escaping, trying to get to Witches Rest as quickly as possible as the hunt for us was no doubt underway.

I pick up a piece of what looks like some kind of dried meat, uncaring of my filthy hands, and take a bite. I moan as the taste fills my mouth, savoring the juices before I swallow. Josh chuckles, shaking his head at me and picks up a little piece of his own. "We ate some berries just yesterday, I don't understand why I'm so hungry," I mumble around another piece of meat. I've gone without food for a long time before, but I've never felt this much hunger in a long time.

He pauses, the strip of meat halfway to his mouth, "Rhea, you've been out for nearly two weeks now." I choke on a bit of food, coughing and banging my chest even though it hurts. Josh rushes off back to the table and brings me a wooden cup. I take a sip of the cool water, washing my food down as he watches me carefully.

"What!" I stare at Josh with wide eyes as I get the words out.



“You were exhausted, your body decided enough was enough, so we just let you rest. We were getting worried the last couple of days because you still hadn’t woken yet, but Belldame said it was normal for how much you’ve been through, and when we told her about you using your power from being an Heir, she determined that you were so depleted from it that sleep was the best thing.”

“They all know I’m an Heir?” I ask carefully, knowing the reputation we have.

“They do, you’re safe here, Milal, I vow it.” I nod, and then his eyes turn sad. “Belldame gave you some tonics and we helped wrap your back in bandages with some healing salve. Anna just changed it yesterday, and it’s looking a little better. You had an infection, but it cleared up after six days.” He sighs, taking one of my hands in his. “I’m just glad you’re awake now, you scared me.” He says it so quietly, like he didn’t want to tell me his worries.

I lean forward and reach for the back of his neck, ignoring the pain in my back, and pull him closer. Our foreheads touch and I close my eyes, trying to reassure him that I’m okay. “I’m sorry I worried you, I’m feeling better, apart from my back, but I’m glad you’re all healed up.”

He lets out a breath and rubs his forehead against mine before moving back. “Now that you’re awake, how about a bath after you’ve eaten? I’m sure the rest of the guys want to see you as soon as they know you’re awake, so now would be the time to sneak away first.” I moan at the thought of a bath

and he snickers. “Eat up, I’ll run a bath and grab you some clothes.”

I smile up at him as he ruffles my hair and leaves the room, closing the door gently behind him. My face drops when he’s no longer in sight, feeling everything crashing around inside of me from everything that has happened. Pinpricks of pain at my wrists have me looking at the cuffs as they glow slightly with the runes on there. I frown down at them, running a finger against the cool metal.

The sooner I get these off of me the better. Let’s hope this Belldame has found a way to do so, because I can’t be sitting around waiting to heal. I need to get Kade, and I need to get Sarah.

And I need to kill some Highers.

After I finally tell Josh where Sarah has been taken.

# Four

RHEA

Dressed in my own light tunic and linen pants, I take the steps one at a time, slowly to the ground floor of Belldame's home. I tense at the tightness in my body as I move, but I'm feeling much better after my soak in the bath and Anna wrapping my back again with more salve.

The rustic feel to the home brings me a small sense of comfort, the wooden walls and thick beams reminding me of the cabins in Eridian. Paintings of unknown places fill the walls, all different sizes with mismatched frames, I scan them as I pass them by. One specifically catches my attention as I near the bottom of the stairs, and I turn to look at it closely. A meadow of lesia flowers bloom under a moonlit sky, their blue petals glowing majestically from the silvery light shining down on them. A pang goes through my heart at the sight. I've always loved those flowers, reminding me of my mother and how Dad and I would always collect them for her. Her favorite became mine, and I haven't seen a single one in over ten years. I reach a finger to the painting, tracing them as the feeling of

sadness drowns me. I wish I was back in time with my mom, where she would tell me stories as we played behind our home in our own field of lesia flowers, and how she would pick them carefully and laugh as I tried to make crowns of blue and place them on our heads.

How life was so simple then, so loving, whole and... innocent.

Trying to shake the emotion off, I move back from the painting and take the last step of the stairs and turn right, heading down the hallway. The scent of herbs around the home reminds me of Anna's healer cabin, so much so that I forget for a second that's not where we are. It's a welcoming smell though, making me feel at ease, even though it brings my already low mood down further. I quickly shove it aside and follow the voices coming from what I assume is the back of the home, and I enter an open doorway into a sitting room of sorts.

Small bones dangle on some sort of strong leather strips from the walls, their shapes vary in size, while different plant life is scattered around the spacious room along with dried herbs hanging from the ceiling. Josh is sitting on a wooden bench with Sebastian next to him, talking quietly as they gaze toward the fireplace in front of them. Taylor stands next to it, throwing bits of bark onto it thoughtlessly. Hudson and Colten are seated next to the window, a small table full of food between them. Colten shuffles some berries around on a plate as Hudson stares at him intently, brows furrowed as he leans on his clenched hands beneath his chin.

I look at them silently, wondering if they hold any resentment toward me for putting us in this position, wondering if they blame me. It's my fault after all. I caused us to lose our home with whatever was in the memory crystal, and I wonder if I hadn't escaped my old pack, if I just stayed and became their prisoner for the rest of my life, doing what they told me, would they be living their life now? Would Josie and Danny still be with us? I clench my eyes shut as grief hits me. They didn't deserve that, they didn't deserve their life to be taken away from them, just like my parents.

I shake myself internally. I have no right to wallow in sadness after all the pain I have caused, no right to wallow in self-pity.

I take some deep, quiet breaths and enter the room. They all look up as one, soft smiles on their faces which I return gently, picking the side of my fingernail where my hands rest in front of me.

Then they all rush toward me at once apart from Josh. Seb's first, holding me close and rubbing his cheek against mine. "I'm glad you're awake." He kisses my cheek and winks, moving out of the way for Colten.

I can see how tired his brown eyes are, but he gives me a small grin before doing the same as Sebastian, his cheek is warm against mine as he nuzzles into me. "Welcome back. Now you can tell Hudson to get off my ass."

Hudson grabs his arm, yanking him away with a scowl, but the move is gentle. "You like me being on your ass, pup," he

murmurs, and I raise an eyebrow at him. He shrugs, pulling me close by my shoulders for a quick hug.

“Feeling okay?” I turn to the sound of Taylor’s voice and nod, letting him pull me into a hug. He squeezes me once before he lets go and moves back to the fireplace, a deep sigh of relief leaving him.

“Finally, the Heir awakes,” Sebastian says, clapping his hands as the rest take their seats. I roll my eyes and sit next to the fireplace in a high-back chair, sinking into its softness, mindful of my aching body.

“I don’t think clapping your hands is the way to go,” Josh grumbles, hitting Seb’s hands to get him to stop.

“Where is Anna?” I ask, fidgeting nervously.

“She’s with her grandmother,” Taylor says. “Something about seeing her sister and brother-in-law.” It’s strange being here with Anna’s family and coven. Though I’m not really sure it’s her coven anymore with how long she has been away. I’m still shocked over the fact that she has family here.

“Did Kade really break your blood link?” Colten winces as he asks, and I can’t help doing the same.

My eyes flick to Josh, sharing the pain together of Kade breaking our connection.. “He did, but he’s not in his right mind. They did something to him.” I shake my head, my eyes going to the fire as I watch the flames. “I know he never would have done that if he had true memories as they claim he has. They abused him.” I swallow roughly, clearing my throat

of the memories of how his own parents treated him as a child. “They were cruel, and would use him against me to get me to do what they wanted. No parent should do that to a child, and Kade would remember all of that if he had truly gotten his memories back. I know that because he used to have nightmares about it all the time before I asked Edward to block them.”

The sound of the fire crackling is the only sound in the room for a moment. Thoughts of all Kade has been through, that Josh and I have been through, swirl through my mind. Only Josh knows the extent of what we both went through, the others have had bits and pieces over the years, but it’s not easy for the words to come and tell others your horrors.

“Rhea’s right. The way he was talking...” Josh sighs, running a hand down his face. “If he had his memories from when he was a child, there is no way he would have sided with the Highers. He would have never destroyed the blood link between us.”

Taylor grunts and moves to take a seat next to Josh. I look over to him, his eyes are hard and fierce. “They all need to go. It’s time.”

“I know,” I agree softly, knowing he’s referring to the Highers. “They have been in power for too long, have lied and cheated and caused so much pain to so many. The issue is, only those affected by them know, the people of the lands are blindly living with wool over their eyes. I just don’t know how to end them once and for all. The Highers are powerful, but

with Elites at their back? It's impossible to take them out. Edward and I have spoken about taking out Charles for years and we have come up with nothing that wouldn't get us killed in the process. And that's just one Higher, alone. They're strong, and we... aren't."

"But you're an Heir, that's powerful in itself," Hudson chimes in.

"When I accepted and unleashed my Heir power at Wolvorn Castle, I was able to destroy the barrier around me and Josh, and then push others back. With every second I used it though, it was also draining out of me, and it's not there anymore. I know I don't have my markings visible either, I would feel them. It's just not there." What use am I to anyone like this?

"But it did come to you, so it will again," Taylor reassures me. "It probably doesn't help having those cuffs on you and not being fully healed."

"Probably," I agree, "but I don't know how to call upon it again." I flex my fingers, feeling nothing coming from within me.

Josh tilts his head at me, leaning forward on the bench and resting his arms on his knees. "How did it come out in the first place?"

"My mom," I whisper, and all their gazes sharpen. I sigh and lean further back into the chair, carefully. "My mom always told me to keep it locked down, you all know this. I have kept that promise ever since I made it to her. It was locked so deep inside of me that I just thought I would never feel it again. The



first time I did was when I was about six, and I haven't since and was okay with that. Then Josie and Danny were killed." I pause, willing the tears in my eyes back, taking a shuddering breath. "When they died and Kade broke our link, it was all too much. The pain, anger, loss, helplessness, it overwhelmed me, and I felt a flicker of my power. It was there, ready to be called upon and I did. I promised I would never reveal it and that promise had always held me back as it was the last one I made to my mom, but then I felt her." Their eyes widen in shock and I sniffle, wiping a tear that falls from my eye.

Shaking my head, I sigh. "It's crazy, right? Over the years, I've felt odd phantom-like touches. I thought it was just me, or maybe the land was greeting me, as I feel like it does that at times. When we went into The Deadlands, that was the first time I felt it so strongly and accepted it. It was strange, but I felt the need to welcome it. Then it kept happening again and again, that it just became normal and a comfort. There was no malice in those touches. It wasn't until we were in Wolvorn's great hall that she came to me, telling me it was okay and I needed to let go. She told me that she was giving me the last piece of her and she released me from the promise, telling me to be strong. I was so scared." I laugh, but it's hollow. "I was so scared of what would happen if I revealed it, but also because I knew it would reveal Darius as well. Stupid, I know," I grind out, watching the flames eat away at the wood in the fireplace as the others tense. "Why would Darius being the Heir of Cazier worry me? But two Heirs under the same roof speaks of disaster from historical texts, even Charles

knows that. But I had no choice, and I told Darius that, and that I couldn't let them take anyone else. So I let go and it was like the shackles I put around myself fell away, and I felt my markings appear as my power came to me." I clench my hands on my lap. "But even doing all that was for nothing." They still have Kade.

"It was meant to be, child of Zahariss." Belldame's voice startles the room, and our heads turn toward the door. She stands there with Anna at her side, looking at me with something like sympathy in her violet eyes.

I swallow roughly as she comes forward, her steps slow as she takes a seat on the chair opposite me. She leans her stick against the fireplace, the light still glowing at its top as Anna sits next to Sebastian on the bench. I look at Belldame, scanning the bones that hang from her neck as I wonder who they came from. She also wears a tunic, dark linen pants and a light fur shawl draped across her shoulders. She gets comfortable in her seat and looks at me, wrinkled hands resting in her lap. We stare at one another for a time, wary, assessing, but strangely, it's not uncomfortable.

Then she shocks the shit out of me.

"I knew your mother." I jolt, sitting upright, hissing at the burning sensation racing up my back.

"Careful," Anna chastises, but my eyes are only for the old witch in front of me.

"W-what?" I stutter, my hands gripping the armrests tightly.

“I knew your mother,” she repeats softly. “She visited me many times, especially in her youth.” She chuckles, and I just stare at her, my mouth open. Mom came here when she was younger? She knew the blood witches?

I shake my head, trying to process what she’s telling me. “How?” I ask eventually.

She smiles, the wrinkles on her face more prominent as she does. “Do you know why us blood witches here have no alliance with the Highers and never have?” I shake my head. “It’s because our only alliance is with the Gods.”

I blink.

“What the fuck,” Josh says, and the rest agree with him, including me.

I turn to Anna. “Did you know?” Her eyes are guarded but she eventually nods.

“We have always followed the wolf Gods, even though we are witches. It’s said in our history that your Gods and the Bielsorcias, Blood Witches, have been in a pact throughout thousands of generations.” She shifts uncomfortably, picking a strand of her red hair and twirling it around her fingers.

“When we spoke about me being an Heir, you were scared of me, wary of what I was capable of,” I accuse, and she hangs her head.

“I may stand with your Gods, but the Heirs?” Anna sighs. “You hear things out in the lands, scary tales of them roaming the lands and devouring your soul if you wrong them. Before I

came to Eridian, I would hear it all the time in Aliseon, people would say, ‘Should you cross an Heir, you will live in despair.’ I guess after hearing it so much I thought it to be true, but I know you’re not like that,” she rushes out. “It was just a shock, finding out you’re an Heir of Zahariss. I’m sorry.”

“Silly girl,” Belldame tuts at her, but I can understand why she may have thought the way she did, even though I bristle at what the people of Vrohkaria think of Heirs.

I knew the Heir’s reputation was bad, thanks to the Highers spewing their poison on the minds of their followers. Hearing it from Anna hurts more though, but I accept her apology, nonetheless.

I turn to Belldame. “How did I not know about this alliance between blood witches and the Gods?”

“It’s been kept a secret, child,” she answers. “Only we, the Highers, and your Gods know. Until now.”

“Why keep it a secret? I thought Mom taught me all I had to know about our Gods and the Heirs?” How much do I not know?

She shakes her head, sadness spreading across her features. “You were young, and time was running out to tell you all you needed to know.” Chills skate down my spine at her words.

“What do you mean?” My words are quiet, not sure if I want to know or not.

Sadness flashes in her eyes as she looks at me. “Your mom knew her time would come, knew the Highers would reach her

eventually. She was a seer of sorts, which was her unique power gifted by Zahariss. She knew her time was running out, she had seen one night that her and your father's lives were coming to an end. She came to see me just before your seventh birthday."

My heart pounds violently in my chest. "She knew that her and Dad would die before my birthday?" Belldame nods, and the memory of dad giving me my knife and giving Mom her favorite flowers a few days before my birthday flashes through my mind. "But they were happy," I choke out. "We laughed and danced the days leading up to my birthday."

"They both didn't want your final days with them to be full of sadness and sorrow, child. Both of them didn't want that for you." A tear tracks down my face and I wipe it away angrily, hating that my parents knew but had the strength to give me a few last happy moments.

"Why didn't we all leave if she knew, why didn't we escape?"

"She told me that no matter the path she took, the outcome would be the same for her and your father. But she had told her sister to watch over you, to make sure you were taken care of."

Aunt Selena was supposed to take care of me? Anger whirls around inside of me at the thought. She didn't do what my mom asked, she left me to rot in the basement.

"She left you a letter with me, would you like it?"

I choke out a breath and nod my head, unable to believe this is even real right now. She waves a hand, and a rolled-up piece of parchment appears in her fingers. She stands, bringing the paper over to me and I take it in my shaking hands, holding it close to my chest as I try to gather myself.

“I knew your mother for a very long time, child, as I have with every Heir before her, offering them sanctuary here when they needed it. I saw her swell with you in her belly, saw how happy she was when you would kick and wriggle.” Her eyes shimmer as she speaks. “Your mother never complained, she would laugh and rub her belly, letting you know she was there.” I nod, unable to speak, taking those words about my mom and burrowing them deep in my heart. “Your mother never wanted any of this for you. She was a dear friend of mine, a great Heir and an even greater mother.” She wipes a tear from my cheek with a wrinkled hand, a soft smile on her face. “This is a gift not many can have. I promised to get this to you when I could. I knew there would be a time that you would come to Witches Rest, your mother said so herself. I have waited a long time for this moment. For me to deliver my final promise to your mother.” Her smile trembles. “You look so much like her.”

“I do?” I was young when I last saw Mom, and when I felt her in the great hall, I didn’t see her, I just felt and heard her.

“You do, child, you have her nose, hair and eyes. Your chin definitely comes from your father.” I let out a wet laugh and close my eyes, the onslaught of emotion making my body tremble.

She stands and looks around the room at everyone. “Come, let’s give her some privacy.”

Everyone leaves, squeezing my shoulders or touching their cheek to mine before the door is gently closed behind them. Now alone, I take a deep breath and run my shaky fingers over the paper, trying to make sense of everything Belldame just told me. Sniffing, I untie the string and roll the paper out between my fingers. The tears fall harder as soon as I see mom’s handwriting for the first time in so many years.

*Lasandrhea.*

*Happy birthday sweetheart, I’m sorry I missed it, and the many others that have come after it. I wished to the Gods to be present for many birthdays, but I knew it wouldn’t come to be.*

*My beautiful girl, I never wanted to be writing this letter to you as you sleep upstairs, dreaming of running through blooming meadows and playing in the rivers. For nearly seven years I have watched you grow, watched you smile, wiped your tears and held your laughter close. I miss you now even though you are just above me, and I will miss you even more when I’m gone. I wish I could be there with you now, holding you close and taking walks through the lesia flowers as we always did.*

*I’m so sorry, Milal, for leaving you. Your father and I both are. We love you so very, very much. Our hearts beat with yours and you will walk the earth while we have joined with it. Your father and I are grateful for the time we were able to*

*have with you, you are a joy to our hearts and the love of our souls.*

I squeeze the edges of the paper as tears form in my heart with grief all over again.

*Don't be sad for too long about our passing, sweetheart, we have accepted it and knew it would come one day. Don't be too hard on yourself with grief and the blame I know you will put on yourself for what you overheard that night in the woods. I know you will, it's the kindness within you, but know that it was always meant to happen this way, how Zahariss saw it happening. The Gods have had enough of their Heirs being in the shadows, and it's time for them to come out and reclaim what is theirs. For that, we could no longer be with you as you take this path.*

*I hope the life you are leading is gentle and kind to you, but I'm afraid that hasn't been the case, has it? You are so strong my darling girl, so so strong. I wished for a different life for you, wished you could be free of the invisible chains that come with being an Heir and the way our people see us. Zahariss chooses the ones fit for her power, and our bloodline was who she chose. Trust in her decision, sweetheart, for you are worthy. Also trust in mine for the decision to begin passing on my markings of an Heir to you early. When you reach the age of eighteen, your full markings will be complete, and you will become who you are supposed to be.*

*We didn't reach your eighteenth birthday, we weren't there when your markings fully adorned your skin. Again, I'm sorry,*



*we've missed so much in your life, especially when you received your wolf. I would have loved to have seen her, I bet she is beautiful.*

I failed, Mom, she won't come out anymore.

*Before I left this world, I asked for Belldame's help in transferring some of my essence to you. When the time is right, I will guide you into your full powers, help you bring it forward. I have seen that you will struggle with that, holding on to the promise you made me about keeping it a secret. I knew you wouldn't break that promise since I asked it of you when you were six without me allowing it. That was the only solution for me to release you from that promise, and I hope when you are receiving this letter, I have spoken to you again for the last time and you know how much I love you.*

*Vrohkaria hasn't been kind to you, to any Heirs for a very long time, and I'm afraid it may not be for a little while longer. I trust you to right the wrongs of the lands, this is the path Zahariss has put you on. She knew what would happen when I passed, knew that the lands would fight back and try to push the Highers out of their power. Vrohkaria will perish if they continue to do so.*

*When you find your Bloodmate, believe that the Gods choose wisely for you both, believe in their decision. As I once said to you Milal, he will protect you more than most.*

*For now, my brave girl. I must go.*

*Look to the earth and listen to their sounds. Every sway of a branch, every rustle of leaves, the first frost, the first gentle*

*rainfall of spring., Know it is us. We are always there, with you, around you.*

*We love you.*

*Until we meet again.*

*Mom.*

My sobs shake my whole body as I clutch the paper to my chest and grieve all over again for the parents I've lost, the parents who were stolen from me. That this is the path that Zahariss has put me on but has cost too much.

It's too much to burden alone.

But I will do it. I will carry the weight that was given to me, even if I have to crawl.

As my tears fall like streams down my cheeks, I silently vow that those who have done wrong will pay.

Vrohkaria will be bathed in blood and given back to the lands.

And I will right the wrong that has been done.

# Five

RHEA

I smile softly as the children run their hands on Bane's, Colten's wolf, head. He tilts to the side, enjoying the scratch. I chuckle as his back legs lift and begin to scratch at air. Hudson is off to the side, leaning on a crudely made fence, watching them intently. I never thought I would be standing in Witches Rest while children pat a wolf's head, I'm still trying to wrap my head around it.

I walk past them with Belldame, smiling at the children as they giggle with Colten's licks. Patting his head as I pass, sadness fills me as I wonder if Runa would have loved the attention had we not gone through what we did.

Crossing a bridge to stroll along the dirt path, I take in the gloomy beauty of the witches home. It may be waterlogged, and the ground soggy in places, but the bright, purple flowers of the plants wrapping around the trees and the small sounds of the bugs make me feel close to the lands. The white mist floats high above us, which I now know is the barrier around

the home for protection, doesn't stop the warmth of the sun hitting my cheeks.

“How are you with your wolf, child?” Belldame asks, taking a turn to another path. We're searching for the last ingredient needed for a spell that will hopefully get these damn cuffs off my wrists. I've been helping to gather the last items while I process over the last week with everything Belldame had told me. I have read my mom's letter multiple times a day, just wanting to feel closer to her whilst everything swirls around inside my head that has happened. It's a gift I will treasure for as long as I live, not only hearing her last words to me, but also seeing them.

I've been somewhat in a state of shock about the knowledge I have learned. Barely speaking and being generally quiet around everyone, even when they try to engage with me in conversations. My mind has been a mess of grief and anger over everything that has happened and all we have lost, but I'm determined to press on, to do what I vowed to the Gods.

“My wolf?” I glance over at her. “Runa is fine, she can be a bit grumpy, but we're okay, most of the time.” She perks her ears up within me, huffing before rolling onto her back, her eyes falling shut.

Using her tall stick to help her, Belldame trudges up a small hill as I follow behind her, ready to catch her if she slips. She may be an older woman who can move easily if she wants to, but I don't want to see her hurt. She has told me so much about my mom, stories and mischief they used to get up to. I

feel closer to her than I have in a long time, and I love hearing Belldame talk about her, it feels like she is still with us.

“I don’t mean inside,” she tuts at me. “I mean when you call her out.”

Oh. “She’s only been out once.”

Belldame comes to an abrupt stop and turns toward me sharply, her violet eyes filled with shock. “Once?” she repeats, and I nod, looking down as shame washes over me. “Why has she only been out once?”

I pinch my lower lip and continue to walk down the other side of the small hill. It’s just about the beginning of summer now, and the slight, warm breeze that gently caresses me is a testament to that. The trees are droopy over here, swaying to their own breeze. I reach the bottom and wait for Belldame before she leads me to a bridge to cross the murky water below.

“I was fourteen,” I start, looking over the wooden railing to the water. “She came earlier than normal. I was shocked, but I welcomed her. I think she came when I needed her the most.” I watch the water rush underneath the bridge, concentrating on the ripples as fish pop their heads out.

A hand on my arm makes me pause as she brings me to a stop. Her eyes are soft and full of concern. “Why did she come when you needed her most?” I look away from her prying eyes and lean against the railing, my eyes scanning the lily pads and reeds that grow along the bank. Small, winged insects float above the water as I wonder how to answer. “Tell me, child.”

I squeeze the wood beneath my hands and blow out a slow breath, my eyes unseeing. “They took me,” I eventually whisper, and I hear her suck in a sharp breath, coming to stand next to me. “They came to our house. Dad was missing, Mom and I were alone. She tried to fight them off, trying to help me so I could run. But they got us anyway, there were too many of them.” My grip tightens at the memory. “It was my fault.”

“How could it possibly be your fault?” I feel her gaze on me, but I continue to look out over the water.

“I was playing in the woods a few days before. I overheard something.” Memories flash before my eyes, hearing them, running, the wolf, telling my parents what I heard.

“What?”

“They said it was time to move things forward, they had waited long enough, and Mom wasn’t going to accept his offer. I don’t know what he offered Mom, but I didn’t like this man. He was.... dangerous, and had an air about him that you knew was just wrong. He said it was now or never and he needed to get Mom. I turned to go home and I stepped on a branch, crunching it. They heard, both of them looking at me but I couldn’t see their faces because of their hooded cloaks. I ran. They chased me, shouting at me to stop.”

“Did you manage to get home?”

“Yeah, a dark wolf with two tails came out of nowhere from the trees and there was a person there.” I laugh. “I’m not sure if I just imagined it, but neither the wolf, nor the other person

came for me, instead they went in the direction of those hooded men.”

“A wolf with two tails? That’s interesting.” She brings the tall stick in front of her as we both watch a yellow cilo bird lands on the bank on its long legs, its black beak dipping into the water.

“It is, I think I must have imagined it in my panic. I was so scared.”

“What happened when you got home, did you tell your mom?” she asks.

“I did, she said everything was going to be okay and hugged me so tightly. She made dinner, we ate as a family, and I went to bed. I heard Mom and Dad speaking though, but I don’t know what about. It was like that for a few days and then one day, Dad didn’t come back, and *they* came.”

“Who?” she questions.

“The Highers.”

She curses under her breath. “Rat bastards.” I nod.

“Charles had been around since I was little, but when I saw him grab Mom by her hair and start to drag her away, I knew right then what a horrible man he was. Afterward, I learned even more of just how sick and twisted Charles’s mind really was.

“Where did they take you?”

“Our basement. They knocked me out and when I woke up, I was in a cage.” She goes to grab my hand quickly and I can’t suppress the little flinch I make with the memories rushing through me.

“Oh, child.” I shake my hand out and open my palm to her, apologizing with my gaze. Her weathered hand falls into mine and she squeezes gently, her warmth calming me, and I give her a small smile.

I don’t speak about my time in the basement with anyone, only Josh, as he saw the state I was in when he helped me escape, but with Belldame it comes out a little, like I’ve known her forever. I guess I feel close to her because she was close to my mom. We have formed a bond quickly from that. So much so, that I have told her about Eridian, the people that lived there and what our life had been like.

“They hurt me a lot, especially when Runa came out. She hasn’t been out since. I’ve gotten much better with being touched now, and I need it at times. At first, I would scream when anyone came near me apart from Josh or Kade, folding in on myself wanting to hide. Over the years, Josh, Kade and Josie,” I choke out her name, tears stinging the back of my eyes. I push them back. “Josie helped me so much with it. I could never repay her, and now I never can.”

Belldame turns me toward her, bringing her hands to my cheeks. “You strong, brave girl.” A tear escapes and she wipes it away with a soft touch. “They will pay for what they did,” she swears vehemently, and I squeeze my eyes shut and nod.



“Now is the time, child. Show them the Heir of Zahariss and The Bielsorcia will be right behind you. It’s time the Highers were disbanded, and their heads stuck on a pike.” Her small growl makes me chuckle.

“So bloodthirsty,” I whisper through a smile.

She grins, all teeth. “I am a Blood Witch after all, child. What do you expect?” We continue walking across the bridge and further into the droopy trees. Light shines through the canopy of leaves above, making the dew on the ground sparkle.

“Why do the Highers want to kill Blood Witches on sight?” I wonder.

“Many believe it’s because we are dangerous, which we can be of course, but can’t anyone?” I nod. “The real reason is because we have an alliance with the wolf Gods and they know that, and we have refused to align ourselves with the Highers. They don’t like that of course, and therefore decided to kill any that they see out in the lands and not protected here.” Of course they did. Dickheads. “They don’t like the fact they can’t control us, use us as they see fit like their own witches, and their Elites.”

At the mention of the Elites my stomach turns, my mind instantly going to Darius. The male who can give me a boyish smile, and then harden his eyes as he holds a whip. The male that made me confused by the look in his eye as he mouthed a single word to me.

He's the Heir of Cazier, my counterpart. Are the Highers going to start training him in some way? I doubt they could control him if he didn't want to do something, but he was in The Deadlands on their order. Now that both of our Heir status is out in the open, I wonder what he will do, apart from hunting me that is. I assumed he kept hidden for the same reason I had, survival. But did I get it all wrong if the Highers knew?

"The Elites will be a problem for me and mine," I tell her. "I need to get Kade, Sarah, and the rest of my pack, but I'm not strong enough. If I had my Heir power, I feel I could stand a chance, but it's not there." I kick a booted foot through the blades of grass.

"Those cuffs of yours are suppressing your power. I was amazed you even managed to use any power at all with them on. It must have been because it was the first time it came through in a long time, and you got a huge surge of it. When we get those cuffs off, the real test will come in taming it. We also need to get that wolf of yours out."

Runa stirs inside of me again, rolling on her belly and cocking her head. Will she come out? She hasn't in years so I doubt she will. "I don't think she will ever come out again. Her first experience was awful."

"She just needs a little nudge, or a forceful shove. You need to be fully connected to your wolf to reach your full potential, whatever that may be. You cannot be of use to anyone without

doing so, and I say that kindly. It will take time of course, but time is not on our side.”

“It is not.” I feel like life hangs in the balance, it’s like I can sense it in the very air I breathe.

“What do you know of the Vahaliel?”

“The plane of the Gods?” I ask, startled. She nods. “It is a myth, just stories my mom used to tell me as a child to go to sleep.” She would tell me of wolves running freely through blossoms, chasing them before resting under a large tree that was as big as the sky.

“It is very real.”

“How do you know?” I wonder.

“Heirs before you have told me of it, but not of its location.” I wonder if Mom went there.

“It’s strange they had their own place?”

“I don’t think that, even Gods need their rest. It is said to be that which is between these lands and the ones below, and that Cazier and Zahariss used to spend a lot of time in there, as that was the only place they could be together for longer periods of time.”

“It’s sad that Cazier couldn’t be with his mate, I imagine it would have been difficult.”

“You would be correct.” I follow behind her, watching my step. “Though I suspect they wouldn’t change it, regardless of their circumstances. Nothing worth fighting for is an easy

battle, an easy route to take. If you have to crawl and scratch and bite to get there, then so be it.” She looks over her shoulder at me and I swallow, looking away. I feel her words are meant for me, but I’m not ready to digest them yet.

She shuffles forward and looks below a hollowed-out tree trunk. “Ahh, here it is.”

I look over her shoulder and see a small bunch of yellow flowers with drops of black, like water flowing from them. “What are they?”

“These, child.” She plucks three stems and puts them gently in her satchel. “Are the Crying Forever flower. Rare, but full of properties that break bindings.” She nods to my cuffs. “Now let’s get back and prepare, and hope we can get those cuffs off of you.”

## Six

RHEA

“Will this work?” Josh murmurs next to me as we watch Anna and Belldame prepare the ground.

We are in a place called Da Bier Dall in Witches Rest. Belldame told us the ground here is magically infused by the moon’s power, and helps enhance spells. Four tall, stone pillars surround the small clearing that’s scattered with wildflowers, resting north, south, east and west. Anna sprinkles a liquid concoction of mixed ingredients in a circle, connecting each of the pillars as Belldame writes incantations on them with the same potion. The yellow-brown color gleams off them in the moonlight as she uses her fingers, dipping them into the wooden bowl she is carrying as she whispers words.

“I don’t know, but it’s worth a try right?” I shrug, trying not to hope for too much. I look down at the cuffs, the redness of my skin around them itches and burns. I just want them off, I want to heal properly. No matter how much Anna covers my wounds, they won’t heal fully.

“You got this,” Colten says as he watches them, Hudson at his side as usual.

“Yeah, and don’t worry about you being naked.” Sebastian winks. “I promise to not look.” He puts his hand to his chest as his tawny eyes fill with amusement. “Much.”

“Knock it off Seb,” Taylor grunts, running a hand through his slightly longer coffee hair. I’m sure it’s annoying him, but he hasn’t mentioned cutting it.

Being naked for this spell wasn’t exactly something I thought was needed. But apparently I have to show my naked flesh to the moon, no boundaries between us as she ponders my worth as we ask her for help. I haven’t been naked around anyone apart from Josh, or Darius, so having new eyes on me is making me feel uncomfortable.

This is my pack, though, I have seen them naked many times when they brought their wolves out, and I have known them for years. Belldame is the closest person I have to my mom, apart from Edward, and we are only growing closer since we had to wait for the potion to rest for it to be complete. So them seeing me naked shouldn’t make me feel queasy, but it does.

It’s vulnerable, bare.

The last time I was naked, Darius cut me with his words whilst his cum ran down my thigh.

“Not long now, child, come, disrobe and kneel in the center,” Belldame calls, and I take a breath before I loosen the linen

robe. My hands shake as I try to untie the knot as Josh steps in front of me, halting my movements with a hand on my own.

My eyes flick up to his light gray ones and we pause, my breaths turning ragged. “You’re good, it’s just us.” I nod and he pulls me forward into his chest. He holds me close for a second before pulling back and undoing the knot for me. The robe falls open and he slides the fabric off my shoulders before it drops to the ground.

The warm air of the night hits my bare body and I shiver despite it, goosebumps peppering my skin. Josh’s eyes hold mine, never once looking down at my body, and I can’t be any more than grateful for him not making a big deal of it. It’s why we are as close as siblings, he’s got me and I him. He’s my brother without blood. As soon as these cuffs are off, I can tell him about where Sarah is, knowing he will try and rush off on his own, but I’ll be strong enough to stop him. Then we can work on a plan to get her together, after he’s done being furious with me, and he will be. I dread it.

He slowly unwraps the bandage around my breasts and waist, mindful of it sticking to my still-open wounds on my back with careful movements. I hiss when the last of the material is peeled off, and then breathe a sigh of relief. I know it’s there to help me heal, filled with healing salve, but I don’t like feeling restricted.

Josh rubs my cheek with his own and then steps around me. I move forward, feeling the wildflowers caress my bare feet as I walk to the center of the Da Bier Dall. The closer I get, the

more I feel the thrumming of its power beneath my feet. I stop when I reach the middle and look back over my shoulder. My guys all give me small smiles, never once looking at the mess of wounds on my back as I turn around, lowering myself to the ground. I sit on my knees, palms resting lightly on them as I watch the gentle sway of flowers around me. My hair flows freely around my face, coming just below my waist now, the hairs tickling me as the breeze moves them.

I breathe in the scent of wildflowers, earth and the subtle hint of power flowing through here. I raise my face to the moon, letting her glow caress me as I silently pray to her for help.

Anna comes forward and draws an inner circle around me with the jug containing the potion, her brows furrowed in concentration before she stops in front of me. "I will help as much as I can," she whispers, and I reach forward and squeeze her free hand in thanks before she moves away.

Belldame comes over next, careful not to slosh the concoction around in the bowl she holds as she crouches in front of me. She dips two fingers and gathers the mixture before she reaches forward and paints a line from the top of my head, all the way down to just below my throat. She then draws lines from the tops of my shoulders, down and along my arms until she reaches the cuffs on my wrists. The concoction sizzles as it paints the metal, but Belldame pays no mind as she covers them.



That done, she holds out a small knife to me. “Remember what you have to do?”

“Yes.” She told me earlier and made sure I remembered everything.

“Good.” She looks up to the moon and then back to me. “It’s time.”

She gets up and moves out of the circle. I can only be in here when she and Anna do the spell. I wait until their quiet chanting starts, and I look at the moon one last time before I take the knife and slice my palm open. Blood instantly rushes to the surface, and I hiss, but quickly swap the knife to my other hand so I can slice the other palm.

I bring a bloody palm to each wrist and squeeze, making sure my blood drips on the metal, ignoring the burn before I bring my hands up and follow the lines Belldame made, covering them over with my own blood. Once I’m done, I put my palms flat on the ground, letting the earth have some of my life force as I feel its response in the slight warming of my palms. I lean back and sit up straight, bloody hands facing up to the moon as I close my eyes and listen as Belldame and Anna chant in another language.

*Help me, Zahariss, I silently pray to her. Help me be free of the metal binding that’s damaging me and restricting these powers you gave to me. I have many tasks to do, many things to learn and discover and get back. I need these to be off to be the Heir you intended for me to be.*

Coldness suddenly spreads through me, in the exact same place as my markings. It spreads down my face from my forehead to below my neck, then to my shoulders, arms, fingers. I look down, gasping for breath as it hits the center of my chest, and I squeeze my hands into fists. Blue, lightning-like marks spread along the cuffs, the lines pulsing. I grunt, feeling tightness at my wrists, squeezing me so hard I feel like they will snap bones. The ground beneath me gently quakes, the flowers beginning to sway wildly around me. Belldame and Anna's chanting gets louder, and my head spins as I sway where I'm seated. I lean forward on my palms, hunching over as I watch the circle of liquid Anna poured around me illuminate to a pale yellow, then it begins to get smaller and smaller, rushing toward me before it stills tightly around me. I cry out as pain hits my wrists, the lines on the cuffs pulsing rapidly until a defined crack shows on the metal.

Sweat coats my skin and I shiver, my hair sticking to my body. I look up toward the moon as I pant, basking in its glow. I close my eyes, breathing in the very magic-fueled air around me as I hear another crack.

Then another.

And another.

I don't dare look down. I don't dare hope as the tightness of my wrists slowly eases and they begin to feel lighter. Pain comes from my back, and I bite back a scream as I grit my teeth, my back arching with the sensation of being burned. I claw at the ground, my nails digging in the dirt, pulling at

grass and flowers as the burning sharply spreads across the whole of my back.

Fuck, that hurts.

The coolness fades from me, leaving me panting heavily as I lean forward and rest my forehead onto the ground, the smell of magic and wildflowers filling me. When Belldame and Anna's chanting stops, I stay still, not daring to move as the pain slowly fades. Unclenching my fingers from the earth, I push myself back and slowly open my eyes.

Looking down at my wrists, a jagged laugh leaves me. The metal around my wrists are now in pieces on the ground, charred and cracked. I run my hands over my wrists, over the red marking there from the cuffs and smile, breathing out a relieved sigh. Looking to the moon, I give my silent thanks and then stand on shaky legs.

Power fills me slowly as I stare at my freed wrists, ecstasy rushing through my limbs as I feel my markings appear. I feel tingles in my back, feel the healing already starting. I turn sharply, facing the others and see matching grins before they rush me.

Josh reaches me first, picking me up by the waist and spinning me around as I laugh, even through the pain in my back. "Thank the Gods," he breathes, touching his cheek to mine.

"Fuck yes!" Seb cheers, giving me a kiss on the cheek as Taylor grins. Colten bounces on his feet and Hudson squeezes my shoulder. All full of smiles.

When Josh puts me down, I look toward Belldame and rush to her, still fully naked but not caring. “Thank you, thank you both,” I say as I squeeze her tightly and look toward Anna.

Belldame hands me my robe and I put it on, tying the knot, thankful my body is covered again. “How is your back?”

“Slowly healing, but it’s finally healing.” I sigh, happy that it will only take a few days for my back to return to normal, but the pain is more of just a dull ache now.

Belldame smiles. “Come, let’s go back, I’m sure you would like to clean up.” She gestures to the blood and the potion all over my body and I nod.

Josh walks beside me, his happiness contagious as he throws an arm around my shoulder as we walk back to Belldame’s home.

I lean into him, keeping this little feeling of happiness for as long as possible, because now that the cuffs are off, I need to tell him about Sarah.

I know it won’t go well, especially with me keeping it from him. We need time to prepare though, we need a plan and I need to be able to have some control over my powers if we have any chances of getting Sarah.

He will understand when he’s calmed down, I know he will. I just hate the thought of having kept this from him and how hurt he will be over it. It would have been suicide if I had told him sooner, and he would have rushed off to get her.

For now, I smile through the lightness of not being shackled and my body being able to do what it should.

I look for the power within me and feel a flicker of it, gently stretching out within me as Runa stands and shakes her fur out, feeling lighter as well.

I won't ever be shackled again, I refuse.

# Seven

DARIUS

Two Months Later

*The whip slices through the air, the impact of it against her feeling like it's attacking my own. Her flesh tears, blood dripping down the sides painting her tanned skin red. I swallow the bile rising in my stomach and hold Drax back from coming out.*

*I have to do what I must.*

*I raise the whip again and...*

My blade slices through the rogure from jaw to neck, its dark blood leaking from the wound as its mouth drops open, its skin drooping. I bring my blade back up and aim it straight through the top off its head. It pierces its gray flesh, slicing through with ease, mindful of the black foam dripping from its gaping mouth. Not that it can do anything to me. Its black eyes turn clear before it collapses to the ground.

Dead. No essence released from it as it goes to the below.

“Heads up,” Leo shouts as an arrow flies past me to land in between the eyes of another rojure, dropping it dead before it reaches me.

I turn as another comes for me, and I lift my hand toward it. Black tendrils spear out of my palm, aiming directly for the rojure. They fly through the air and attack the rojure in different places before it forms together as one, then wraps itself around its neck. The *snap* sounds around us, and the head twists at an awkward angle before it drops to the floor like the others.

I spin and assess the situation. We’re in a small farming village just outside of the Nightshade pack. This village was overrun by rogures when we got here, the Highers’ witches notifying us of a power surge when they scryed. We got here too late though.

Dead bodies litter the floor, blood and organs scattered everywhere. Small children’s bodies lie close to half-eaten women, some have their child in their dead arms. Vultures circle the skies above, their squarks calling to others upon spotting the dead below to feast on. There will be none left, they will be burned to ash soon. A body convulses ahead of me, black foam coming out of the mouth as the rogures’ poison has taken hold of them. He can’t be saved, we have no cure for their poison, we have failed each time we have tried to save them. Screams can be heard around us as the rogures

continue to claw and bite their way through anything and everything, causing rage to fill me.

What did we do to deserve this punishment of these beasts that only bring death?

An axe spins in the air before it lands in a rogures's side, Jerrod soon upon it, taking the axe out of its flesh before he brings it down, cleaving it in two. Zaide takes on two rogures, both blades slice them as he dodges their attempt to attack him. Damian puts his blade through another's legs before slicing its neck, quickly moving onto the next. The rest of my Elites make quick work with others, cutting every one of them down.

I let them deal with the rogures left as the last one drops. I step over to the male convulsing on the floor, my strike quick as I pierce the skin directly above his heart, sinking the blade in. His eyes hold mine for a second, before they go dull, dead, *free*. His essence starts to float from his body as I turn from him and make my way toward the larger storage building, where some villagers had managed to hide inside.

Banging on the door three times, I check over my shoulder to see no more rogures as the door creaks open. An older man peeks out, his body shaking with fear as he grips the door for dear life.

“They’re dead, you can come out now.” He doesn’t move, and I resist the urge to snarl. “Burn the rogures’s bodies and burn your dead.” I turn and walk away from them and gather with my brothers and some of my Elites.



“It’s strange seeing your Heir powers,” Leo says as he wipes his brow and puts his bow on his back. “Is it still strange for you?” I grunt. It’s not, it feels like the most natural thing in the lands. “Ready to go?”

I look around, knowing I won’t find her, but do it anyway. “Gather the others and go back to Vokheim Keep,” I tell Maverick, one of my higher ranking Elites. He nods before trudging off to do what I have ordered.

“To Wolvorn?” asks Damian, and I nod, rolling my shoulders as pain lances up my back. I welcome it.

Leo eyes me with concern. “Brother…” I ignore him and pull out the port stone, connecting with them all.

My body compresses, the pressure squeezing my chest until it feels like it’s caving in, then we’re standing inside the castle courtyard. We make our way forward toward the castle doors, once again, people steer clear of us. More so than ever now that it has been revealed that I’m an Heir to Cazier.

Something I didn’t truly remember but instinctively knew.

When Rhea had her hands on either side of my head two months ago in the great hall, I saw her. She was inside my mind, standing there, arms open as her power flowed from her into me. Drax held steady, waiting for her floating power to come forward. He was relaxed but eager and I had no idea why. Then he inhaled her power, and it was like a black fog was lifted from my mind.

It was unexpected, but everything became clear. Clearer than anything else in my entire life.

My father wasn't an Heir, but somehow the role was passed on to me. I remember he was as shocked as I was when I showed signs at sixteen years old. I wasn't born a pup like Heirs are usually said to be. Then Drax came soon after. My father seemed proud, even though the Heirs were deemed unsafe, he couldn't believe the gift I had received from Cazier. It was the first time he was warmest toward me. After a month of hiding it under my father's orders, I was being taken to an office at Wolvorn Castle. We stepped inside to find Aldus going over papers.

I remember sitting in a chair as my father and Aldus briefly spoke about the rogures. Then Aldus pressed a palm to my father's forehead and his eyes clouded. I got up from the chair, asking him what he had done, when his palm connected with my head. I remember power running through me to my mind, wrapping it up in some sort of bubble, instinctively protecting myself and unknowingly making it so that only one person could clear it.

I don't know how I knew to do that, I couldn't control it, but Aldus seemed satisfied when he dropped his hand from my forehead and continued to speak to my father about the rogures. I sat back down in the chair and waited for them to be done so we could go home.

My memories from there are normal. I didn't know I was an Heir, and it was never mentioned again by me or my father.

My mom and my little sister, Isabell, never spoke about me being an Heir again before they died. Why didn't they? My only answer is that Aldus must have done what he did to my father, and what he tried to do with me.

Now I know everything, and I remember why I hid my own mind, and why Rhea was the only one able to clear it.

It's also the reason what Rhea said about Kade's memories not being true is not sitting right with me. I have had time since she and her pack escaped to be at one with my thoughts and go over and over again in my mind with what happened to know I'm missing something.

Rhea hasn't been seen since. We have been searching Vrohkaria for her, even going back to Eridian, but she wasn't there. Charles had posters put up around towns and villages, declaring her dangerous, and has asked people to contact their closest authority if they ever caught a glimpse of her. Her picture is everywhere, so how is she still not within my grasp?

Heir of Zahariss. How can an Heir cause so much death and bring the rogues upon us when she is meant to be protector to the lands? It doesn't make sense, I don't think any of this makes sense, and I've spent the last two months trying to find out the truth, but no one will give me a straight answer. I even asked Charles to see the memory crystal again, just to make sure that what I saw was true, now that I can look at it more clearly and not be blinded by rage.

He refused, and I'm still not sure of anything anymore.

Especially after she mentioned that she was too young to have caused the curse. Those last words to me still haunt me. Taunt me with memories of everything I have done since we collided, and everything that I didn't do.

I need to find her, I need to get answers.

I growl in frustration, causing my brothers to look at me questionably, which I ignore as we open the castle door and step inside. We head straight to Charles's office, having been summoned by him earlier in the day.

Opening the door without knocking, Charles's head turns away from the large window he's standing in front of. His face breaks out into a scowl as he looks over us. My men stay outside as I close the door.

Covered in blood and rogures's flesh, I take a seat in front of his desk, not giving a shit about dirtying it up. Charles's lips curl he himself takes a seat.

"Have the rogures been dealt with?" he asks, his dark eyes looking me over.

"I wouldn't be here if they hadn't been," I reply, eyeing him where he sits.

He nods. "Any sign of Lasandrhea?"

"Nothing."

"She needs to be found, she's a danger to my people and she can cure us of this dreadful curse," he snarls. "She needs to pay for her crimes."

“She’s disappeared. I have no idea where she could be, no one has seen anyone matching her description.” He knows this, I give him the same answer every time he summons me.

“The people are unhappy. We let a woman, a *woman*,” he spits like he tasted something rotten, and I’m the one to scowl now. “Who was sentenced with treason and is the cause of the rogues to escape us.”

“Any idea how they got a port stone?” I ask, flicking dried blood from my leather pants.

“None,” he growls, slamming his hand down on the desk. “I have personally investigated the guards and anyone who entered her and her pack’s cells. None have come forward with any information, nor has anyone admitted to supplying them with a port stone. After many interrogations, they are still all claiming they don’t know anything.”

“We will keep searching Vrohkaria, she can’t stay hidden forever.” Especially not from me, I know her scent. I just need to be close enough. A twinge goes through my back as I adjust in the seat.

“She was hidden away for years inside The Deadlands. Unfortunately, she is good at staying hidden,” Charles growls, anger flashing in his eyes. “She is needed, the people are rebelling even more so after this farce. I have lost many alliances over her disappearance, and the people are losing their faith in me, rapidly. Rebels are gathering to take me out of power and are constantly at the gates making demands for

new authority, or begging for supplies that we are running out of.”

He’s acting like he doesn’t have a basement full of stock. I know how much food and materials are stored beneath this castle. He takes crops as tax from each territory, more than necessary, hoarding them below like a fucking dragon. I didn’t care either way, but that was when the people weren’t suffering and now they are, they have been for years. He has no reason to keep them locked up for himself.

He’s still droning on as I come out of my thoughts. “And then Higher Aiden is missing, he hasn’t been seen for weeks now.” I raise an eyebrow at that. “I also need to invoke stricter laws to get the people under control, show them that even in panic they cannot act so uncivilized when we have more important things to take care of. I’ll be making an announcement that taxes will be increased tomorrow.”

He has to be joking. People are starving as it is because of the fear of coming across any rogues while they hunt or even gather wood.

“Getting rid of the rogues is more important than politics.” I couldn’t give a shit about his alliances with other packs or rebels. Feeding people who need it, however, is a different matter. I need to talk to my men when we get home. “And raising taxes will do you no good.”

“Stay out of Highers business, Darius, unless you have decided to become one.” I grind my back teeth. Charles looks

at me, his dark eyes boring into mine as he scoffs. “Have you thought more about you being an Heir of Cazier?”

“Why would I think any more about being an Heir to the mad wolf? It changes nothing.”

It changes everything.

“You are more powerful now,” he grits out, and I can tell this bothers him.

True, but I always was. We both just didn’t know it until now.

“Did you know I was an Heir?” I’ve wondered, but this has been the only time I’ve managed to get him alone to talk with him properly for longer than a few moments. After Rhea and her pack members escaped, I gave orders to my Elites and we searched for her immediately. Charles’s outrage damn-near took the hall down when she escaped, when it was revealed I was an Heir. Apart from now, he’s only barked out orders to me to find the traitor of Vrohkaria, while he does fuck knows what with his time. I’ve been busy searching for Rhea and taking down rogues ever since.

“I did not know, and your father never mentioned it to me. I would be lying if I said I wasn’t disappointed that he never told me. You were surprised when your Heir markings appeared, I suspect you didn’t know either?” I stay silent. “How did you forget you were an Heir? Did you know the bitch was one too?”

I hold back a growl. “I did not know she was an Heir, and Father brought me here and took me into an office further down the hall with Aldus in there. I was sixteen.” That was the day I shadowed my own mind with my power.

He tilts his head in thought. “Hmm, sixteen?”

“Yes, Aldus and Father were talking, but I can’t remember what they were talking about. Next thing I know, I remember nothing.”

Charles’s eyes darken, his hands fisting on top of his desk. “I see. I shall speak to Aldus and get his account of that day. It is very strange that you have no memory of it. I will inform you when I have spoken to him to see if he can shed some light on the matter. He has been leaving the castle more often than not, appeasing the people, so he is extremely busy.”

Or I can find Aldus myself, choke him, and ask him why he tried to fuck with my memories. He underestimated the power of an Heir, and he thought it had worked. I need to know why he attempted to do what he did.

“I didn’t know Lasandrhea was an Heir either,” Charles murmurs, hands clasped in front of him. “Though I shouldn’t be surprised really, her mother was also an Heir.”

I sit up straighter. “Her mother was an Heir of Zahariss? Why the fuck was she left alive then?” According to law, *his* law, all Heirs are killed on sight, like blood witches, but he left her mother alive?



“I had known her for many, many years, she was a dear friend along with her chosen mate. When I found out she was an Heir, I cared too deeply to expose her. The only ones who knew of her being an Heir were her family, along with some Highers and I. We agreed to keep it a secret. She was stable, a kind and loving woman, death took her too soon.” His words do not match his bored tone or the way his dark eyes flare, like he’s remembering a fond memory.

I study him more closely, noticing how his fingers tap along the wooden desk in a slow rhythm, the way he looks off to the side as if he’s stuck in a memory, and the way his lips curve just a little before a mask comes over his face. I bristle.

He’s lying. Why is he lying?

“It makes things more difficult now that you have been revealed to be an Heir. As you know, Heirs are dangerous and said to have taken the mad wolf’s traits. It is why they haven’t been seen in so long, thought to have stopped appearing as the madness was too much for the lands. It made any Heirs unwelcome, their fetus never reaching completion if they were Heir-marked.”

“Heirs don’t come into their powers fully until they reach eighteen, as our history states, so how would anyone know they are Heir-marked in the womb?” How could anything possibly know that?

He shrugs. “You just said you were sixteen when you knew you were an Heir, so I’m not sure, but that is what’s known in our history. Alas, the problem is that now you are an Heir of

Cazier, the people are talking and fearful of you now more so than ever. I think you need to consider producing offspring.”

I still. “Why?” I grind out, taking in a measured breath. “The fuck would I consider that?”

“You will need an offspring eventually, to pass on your line. Also, an arranged mating could easily be put forward if you have no desire to find a suitable mate of your own, or consider taking Lasandrea when we find her.” He tilts his head thoughtfully. “Your father is not here so I feel it’s my duty to speak to you about this. Maize could be a good candidate.”

My jaw ticks as I glare at him. “I’m not mating or producing a child, especially with Maize. Just because I am an Heir, it changes nothing about my outlook on this.”

“You need to produce a line and it will be just as powerful as you are.” His eyes gleam, and I clench my hands into fists. “We need stronger wolves if we are to have any chance of defeating the rogues. Who knows when we will find Lasandrhea if you decide to mate with her. For the time being, you can produce some pups with an arrangement and when we capture Lasandrea, you can produce some pups with her also, powerful ones.”

“I don’t give a fuck, I have no intention of having pups, with her or with anyone, end of discussion.” Why does he want this so badly? “Producing more pups is just more mouths to feed, and the people are suffering enough.”

Charles glares at me. “I am Lord Higher of Vrohkaria, this is my one request to you. I can easily invoke the right to put you

on the seat of a Higher. You will be stuck in this castle, doing paperwork and sitting in meetings whilst someone else becomes the Alpha of the Elites and is killing the rogues that you swore revenge upon for the death of your family. Don't make me have to push this matter, or do you want your men to be punished?" His dominance pours out of him and slams straight into me, and I grit my teeth as he stares at me.

My gaze stays locked with his as my own comes to the surface, holding his back from affecting me. "Stop putting this 'Higher' bullshit over my head." I've had enough of this shit.

"You are leaving me no choice. You know I can force you to become a Higher." He leans back in his chair, an air of smugness surrounding him.

My stare is deadly on him, Drax coming to my eyes. Who the fuck does he think he is? "If you try and force me to," I growl, the sound coming from deep in my chest. "You will regret what happens. I am *only* here for the promise I made to my father, that is the *only* reason I accept your requests. I don't want to be a Higher, so I became useful in other ways to you, so much more useful. But I am done with you holding that shit over my head." I feel my Heir markings appear, pulsing with my fury as they crawl up my neck. He eyes them with curiosity and a shine in his eyes. "Do not ever threaten me with this bullshit again. I do not want, or care to be a Higher, there are more important things I need to be doing."

"You will do as you have been asked!" he roars, losing his calmness, and I just continue to stare unaffected by his

outburst. He's become unhinged since Rhea escaped, more quickly to anger, his obsession with finding her taking over his daily life by bellowing orders to bring her back to Wolvorn. "The situation is dire in Vrohkaria, we have a traitorous Heir on the run, people are rebelling more forcefully, rogues are on a rampage and growing in numbers, killing more of my people. You," he snarls at me, and I lean further back in the chair. "Being the Heir of Cazier added to these problems, you are to rectify it. Why will you not do a simple task of creating a powerful line that will help ensure the safety of Vrohkaria in the future? Lasandrhea is a pretty girl, it will be no chore lying with her again, no?" I stiffen. Again? How does he know about the first time? "Maize told me she was quite taken with you the times she saw you together, she couldn't keep her hands to herself." It was me who couldn't keep my hands to myself. "It was a good tactic to get her to fall to your charms to pry into her life."

"Maize has been talkative I see." She will be lucky if the next time I see her, I don't snap her neck. "I doubt Rhea will lay with me either way, so it doesn't matter whether I want to or not."

"That's no matter. She will have no choice, she will be captured, and she will be bred. It's the least she can do for what she has done." He says it so casually, without doubt in his voice.

I pause and tilt my head before going deathly still. "I will not rape her, no matter what she has done." Disgust rolls through me at the thought.

He scoffs, looking me dead in the eyes, a crazed look in them flashing. “Nonsense, she would want it anyway. Females like that always do and then cry wolf. Either you produce an Heir with her to help to secure a safe future for Vrohkaria or I will.”

“You would rape her?” I stand slowly, growling low in my chest as Drax bares his teeth within me. He will not fucking touch her.

“I will do what needs to be done for Vrohkaria,” he says, hands clasped on the desk in front of him. “Now, shall I arrange for your men to be punished, or will you do as you are told? I have another meeting shortly with Alpha Christopher that cannot wait.”

I turn violently, wrenching the door open and getting out the room, before I tear his fucking head off and cause a war. I can barely control the rage boiling within me at the very thought of him touching her that way, taking her body like he has a fucking right to do so, be inside of her the same way I have. Snarling, I storm down the hallway in fury as my brothers take in my markings crawling up my neck, pulsing with my anger. I shouldn't care. I should wish all the pain down on her, even though something about this whole situation doesn't feel right, but I can't help the possessiveness I feel building up at the thought of someone touching her.

Someone other than me.

We may be enemies, but we both can't deny this pull we have to each other either. I felt it and so did she, and It's been

stronger since I recovered my memories. We're tethered as Heirs, and some instinctual part of me wants to remember that she's the only other person like me in all of Vrohkaria, to calm my anger toward her. Then I remember my parents and my little sister and that rage boils over, wanting to rip her apart, but still knowing that I couldn't.

I've done enough.

Drax soon reminded me of how I felt for her after I whipped her. After she was dragged away, still bleeding and dripping red. I ported out of there and bellowed my rage to the lands, remembering the look on her face when she realized that I wouldn't listen to her, that she wouldn't get through to me. Her eyes turned dead, resignation and sadness in them. And when Charles ordered Danny and Josie to be killed? I felt her grief as my own. I felt like she was inside of me, and I felt everything she was feeling.

I shake myself. I'll find her and get my answers. She doesn't deserve any leeway after what she has done with cursing the lands, but I can't help it. And I won't stand for her being raped. Not. A. Fucking. Chance. Everything within me rallies against it, and Drax is so close to coming out I can't barely speak, barely contain him. I will cut off Charles's hands and bleed him dry and then feed him to the rogures piece by piece.

Leo takes one look at me as do the others. Taking in my rage, they soon become alert. "Vokheim?" he asks, and I grunt. He pulls out a port stone, ready to go home.

“Hey!” a castle guard shouts, rushing over to us. “You can’t use that in—“ I grab him by the throat and slam him against the wall, headbutting him again and again, unable to stop until blood trickles down my face and he slumps to the floor.

“Well shit,” Damian mutters as I move back to them. “We better get going before he has two hundred castle guards on his ass.”

“Would be good exercise,” Jerrod says, resting his hand on Leo’s shoulder.

“Or a death sentence if the Highers intervene,” Zaide mumbles.

“Darius can just use his black tentacles and wipe them out,” Damian wiggles his eyebrows at me.

“They are not fucking tentacles,” I growl at him, staring him down. The fucker just grins. Leo shoves the port stone in my hand.

“Might be useful in the bedroom,” Damian smirks, and just before I’m about to lift my fist, we port out.

# Eight

RHEA

“Is this the town?” I ask Anna, peeking out from behind a tree and looking at the people mulling around.

“Yeah, we just need to go to the market and then we can port out,” she replies, her hair covered by the hood of her cloak. We are all wearing them, Josh, Taylor, and I. We can’t be spotted, especially with the Elites hunting us.

I look out toward the town, the sun high in the sky as I take in the farm animals out in their enclosures. Children in rugged clothes feed them, their skinny frames carrying buckets of water. Glancing toward the pathway that will lead us to the center, the homes look well built, their thatched roofs and stone walls seemingly in good condition. Unlike its inhabitants.

“Will there be guards here?” I ask her and she shrugs.

“I can’t see any, but you can never know. The Highers usually have some guards posted at every town, making sure



no one steals or smuggles. They also collect taxes for the Highers, but that is on any given day they see fit.”

I nod and look over to Josh, his eyes hard as he scans the town. He doesn't look at me, he hasn't done so since I finally told him about Sarah. It took a while for him to calm down, he was angry, rightfully so, because I kept it hidden from him in fear of him running off without thinking. Josh wanted to leave straight away. He did try to, just like I knew he would, but Belldame managed to convince him that I needed to heal fully and try to get at least some grasp on my Heir magic. He agreed, but he wasn't happy about it, he's still not happy about it.

“Do you want to see if we can get some clothes while we are here?” I ask him. Belldame gave us coins that have the Highers symbol on them, a howling wolf face with two daggers resting on either side of it. Josh shakes his head. I reach out a hand to him. “We could get some thicker pants—“ He shrugs off my hand, a growl coming from him.

“I want what you can't give me,” he replies harshly, moving out of the tree line and making his way toward the town.

I swallow roughly, feeling a stab of pain in my chest at his rejection. I reach out through the link in my desperation, but it's like I'm hitting a brick wall. A whimper escapes me.

It's okay, Rhea, it will take time, shove it down.

Kade is with the Highers or his family, your pack is Gods knows where, Josie and Danny were killed and your brother,

the only one that is left of your little family, barely even speaks to you. But it's fine, you will be okay.

Shove it down.

I clear my throat, ignoring the pitiful looks from Taylor and Anna and follow him to the town.

I pull my hood further down on my face, making sure all of my hair is hidden, placing the mask I have on the bottom half of my face, so only my eyes are visible. We walk down the dirt path toward the center, our booted feet sinking slightly with every step. People scatter around, busy with their day, and the closer we get to the stalls I can't help but marvel over all that they are selling. Wares, jewelry, furs, and clothes. Fruit and vegetables. I bump into someone, a hard-faced man with a few teeth missing.

"Watch it, bitch," he mumbles as he stumbles away, and I pull my cloak tighter around me.

"There is the stall I need," Anna says under her breath, and I look toward the long line that stands in front of it. Crystals and herbs dangle on straps from the top of the wooden plank that runs over the stall. A woman with graying hair shuffles around, grabbing items and wrapping them in some sort of paper as she talks to her customer.

"I'll wait here, you and Taylor go and get what you need."

"Is that wise?" Taylor grunts, and I nod.

"You're more out in the open there, so stay with her just in case anyone recognizes her. I'll stay over here." I tilt my head

toward one of the homes.

They agree and move to get in line. I make my way over to the stone walls, leaning back against it, just on the cusp of the alleyway that runs through it. The line moves slowly, and I wait, observing the people around. Witches, wolves, children. This town seems to be busy at this time of day. I look around, wondering if by chance I will see Edward like I did all those years ago. I haven't seen him since Wolvorn Castle, and I wonder if I ever will. Knowing Edward, he will find a way.

“By the wolf of the high, take my prayer and save the night.” I look over at two women praying near the Highers's symbol carved into a tall, wooden totem. “Clear the madness and take our thoughts, take the grace of Vrohkaria's hopes.”

*The Highers are the madness, the Highers are taking away your hope,* I want to scream at them, but I don't.

I look away. A board across from me catches my attention and I glance both ways before I make my way across to it. Requests for help are pinned there, notices for the crops they need to harvest for tax. That's not what gets my attention though, no, it's the drawing that's there.

My face stares back at me, my features defined and true and my heart hammers into my chest.

“She's a looker, isn't she,” a male says as he slides up beside me, and I tense. “Do you wonder what she's doing now?” He points to my face, his finger tracing my nose. “The reward is a big deal, shame no one has seen her. Could use that homestead.”

He's right, the reward is a good one. The title of lord or lady, a homestead and acres of land. Plus a hefty deposit of coins.

I move away subtly from him, and he places a large arm on my shoulder. I move to the blade I have on my hip beneath the cloak.

“Well, if you see her, let me know and I'll help, we can split the rewards.” With that he walks off, whistling to himself and a shaky sigh of relief leaves me. I should have stayed where I was.

I turn to head back, but I pause, feeling eyes on me. I look around subtly, seeing if anyone is looking at me, but there is none. I move back over to my spot against the stone walls, shivers racing up my spine with every step. Once I reach it, I turn and lean back, looking around beneath my lashes for any sign of someone recognizing me. All there is are people going on about their day and I shake my head. There is no one there, Rhea, calm down.

I'm on edge until Taylor and Anna appear at my side, a pack over her shoulder. “All set,” she says, and she nods her head toward the other end of the town. “We will go out the opposite way,” she whispers. “I overheard talks of guards coming to collect taxes, it's better to not risk it with the way we came.”

We move behind the stalls, staying closer to each other and avoiding anyone the best we can. All the while, I still feel eyes on me, feel them following me. I don't dare look back.

When we reach the end of the stalls, we follow Anna down an alleyway, the dirt turning into mud. We move down small

walkways and hop over people slumped against the walls. I swallow as I look at their dirtied bodies, their hollow faces as we pass.

It shouldn't be like this. It shouldn't be this cruel.

We round a corner to a small courtyard, a well in the center, as people gather water. We skirt the edges, trying not to draw attention to ourselves when a young girl appears in my sight. She's holding a dented bucket, her face covered in dirt, but I can see streaks in it from where she has been crying. I look at her hands, the bloodied fingernails and something sinks in my chest. Breaking away from Anna and Taylor, their hushed protest following me, I go to the girl.

I crouch down, and dull, blue eyes look at me, holding the bucket to her chest protectively.

"It's mine," she says, and I nod at her. Reaching into my cloak I feel the coins in my pocket. She moves back suddenly, and I reach out, grasping her gently by the shoulder and bringing a single finger to my mask-covered mouth to ask her to keep quiet.

She looks at me with wide eyes and I rub her shoulder in reassurance. Reaching back into my pocket, I take out the coins, subtly looking around to see if anyone is paying attention. They're not. I lift my hand and go to her pocket. She flinches, her body trembling.

"Get some water, and go get some food, okay?" I whisper, and she looks at me with wide eyes. I'm sure Belldame won't mind me spending the coin how I want.

Her eyes fill with tears, and she nods rapidly. Shouting comes from the front of the line of the well and I look to it, seeing a larger man shouting at a woman, pointing at a bucket on the floor. I stand, giving the girl's shoulder one last squeeze.

“Don't worry, Zahariss will eat all the bad men. Excuse me while I teach someone some manners on her behalf,” I wink at her, and she gives me a wobbly smile.

Walking toward the front of the line, the woman begins to cower under the man's threats of punishment, and my own anger rises to the surface. Seeing her shrink back, hearing her pleas, apologies. I sneer under my mask at the male.

“Stupid bitch, I asked you to get water and you can't even do that! Do you want me to take you home and show you, again, what you are?”

Coming up in front of him as he raises his hand toward her, he pauses, looking down at me. “What do you want, mutt, out of the way.” His hand lands on my shoulder and I move.

I grab his wrist in my palm and twist, putting some of my power into my hand until I hear bones break. He lets out a yelp, his other hand coming for me, but it's already too late. I lift a foot and push him back. He crashes into the waist-high wall of the well, and with an extra push from my hand to his chest, he goes toppling over.

A shout and then a splash is heard as he hits the water, and the courtyard is now silent.

Oops.

Looking around, I see nervous eyes all on me, on what I just did. My gaze goes to Taylor and Anna before they go to the woman. “You are a wolf,” I say softly. “You hunt, you protect, you defend. That includes yourself.”

She blinks, shaking her head in confusion. “What?” she whispers.

“No male, no matter how much larger, no matter how much taller, no matter how much stronger, can take the will of the wolf out of you. He may be able to quiet it down, he may be able to soften it, but he can never *take* it. Understand?” She blinks, her hands fisting at her sides, but she nods. I return it, moving closer to her, feeling the need to. I hesitate for a moment before my forehead rests against hers. I grip her shaky hand in mine, ignoring the male in the well that is cursing and calling for help. “Zahariss is within us all,” I tell her, and her eyes widen in shock. “She is all we embody to be. Kind, graceful, a giver, a survivor. But most of all,” I tell her, my eyes bouncing between hers. “She is a fighter. Let her will guide you to fight for yourself, and take the balls of the next male who tries to put a hand on you.”

With that, I turn and walk away, back over to Anna and Taylor who are looking around nervously. We rush down the walkway at the sound of guards being called. We don’t stop until we come out of the town and we run across the open field, aiming for the trees on the other side. All the while, I

feel eyes on me. I spot Josh leaning up against one of them, scowling in our direction and my feet stutter in their pace.

“That was stupid,” Josh barks at me when we reach him, and I tense at his harsh words. He finally talks to me, initiating the conversation for the first time in days and *this* is what he says? “You could have brought down the guards on us!”

“I wasn’t just going to let that male hurt her,” I hiss at him, and he shakes his head.

“We cannot be caught, we need to get Sarah,” he growls, fists clenching at his side.

“I know that,” I say between clenched teeth, before taking a deep breath. “Josh-”

“Then think about what you’re fucking doing.”

“I can’t just stand there and watch that happen when I can help!”

“You can help by getting Sar-”

“Okay, lets go and cool off,” Taylor says, coming to stand next to me and taking out a port stone.”

I hold my tongue and nod, gripping Anna’s hand and ignoring the daggers that are coming my way from Josh.

I couldn’t just let that woman be hurt, not when I saw other pack members in her place, coming from a home of those who would put their hands on them.

I not only saw that woman there, but I saw Katy, I saw Sybil, I saw Sarah.



So no, Josh can be pissed at me, he already is anyway, but I don't regret what I did, not if my words could save her.

Because no one is saving me right now.

# Nine

RHEA

We stalk through the long grass, Josh on my right with Anna, Taylor, and Sebastian a bit behind to my left. Hudson and Colten bring up the rear. The dull, green stalks come up to my shoulders, our heads peeking out so we can see ahead of us in the dark night, the moon lighting our way.

It's been a long two months since the cuffs on my wrists were removed, but the thin, red scars haven't faded, no matter how much I try to hide them like the others. They are a constant reminder though, to never be shackled again. I vow to keep that promise to myself.

I glance at Josh and notice the tension lining his body, eager to reach our old home in Zakith. He's bristling under the surface with anger, his desperation to get to Sarah. We have to be careful though, there are only a few of us and a lot of them in the pack at our old home. If we are going to be successful will come down to if she is even still here, all of us knowing how much time has passed with what Patrick told me. How he would have her tied to his bed. I swallow at the thought and

pray that he hasn't touched her. She had gone through enough, and even though she agreed with her father, Alpha Christopher, in the great hall about us kidnapping her, I know deep down she must have felt she had no choice.

It's the only explanation. The only one I want to think about, otherwise the betrayal will cut deep. Some deeper for others.

My power flows inside of me, free but somewhat controlled, only flaring up and becoming an issue when my emotions run high. I imagine it like a ball, twining and thriving inside, its tendrils whipping around sporadically. I've managed to do a few things with my magic, and I learned I have a knack for a little healing, also growing plant life occasionally, along with a few other things that I'm still trying to wrap my head around. My control is good with some things, others? My power is volatile, wild, and I never really know what I'm going to get when I use it. It's like you suddenly have another limb you need to learn to move as you see fit, only it doesn't always do as you say.

I'm still new to this, and Belldame has helped me as much as she can. But she's not exactly equipped to help an Heir, she only has some knowledge from the Heir's before me and my mother.

But like she told me, every Heir is different and each one has had some sort of difference with their power.

Belldame thinks that I can't fully grasp my power in a very controlled manner because I'm still not wholly connected to Runa, who still refuses to come out. She thinks once Runa and

I can completely be in sync with each other, the rest will fall into place. For that to happen, we need time together as a wolf. Runa seems a little more settled now that I have my power running within me, but it's disconnected of sorts from her. She feels it around her, just not with her, together.

We're about an hour away from my old home deep inside Zakith, the territory of the Aragnis pack. It's strange being inside my home lands, recognizing areas and remembering my childhood when I was free, innocent. I'm sure Josh feels the same, seeing the familiar scenery. We used to play in these fields as kids, trying to sneak up on each other and tackling each other to the ground. I instinctively move closer to him at the memory, wanting to feel him close. He glances over at me, his eyes guarded, tension lining his whole body. He moves away from me, pain entering his eyes, and I look down, hating what we have become but knowing it had to be done or he would have been killed.

I move my hand against the grass, wishing times were easier and more simple, but knowing it could never have been that way. I had so much love for Zakith. Then all of a sudden, it changed so quickly and it was filled with so much darkness. Pain, sorrow, and heartbreak. Am I ready to face this? Probably not, but Sarah may be in there, and we need to save her. I don't know if my whole family is back in Zakith, if Kade is, but I hope he is so we can grab him too.

I reach out again for his blood link, and once again feel a sharp knife to the heart when it's not there. I don't know why I keep trying, knowing it will hurt me every time. I look ahead

and push it to the back of my mind. Not now, Rhea, don't go there.

The Aragnis pack was eighty-seven strong when I was younger, it's probably a lot more now, and the chances of us trying to get Sarah out silently are slim. We were the largest pack in the lands of Vrohkaria when I was younger, well-respected and loved. I'm not sure if that's changed. I never asked Edward to update me on my old home, the pain was too much.

"Not long now," Josh whispers so we can all hear. "We will stake-out at the top." He points to a hill I know all too well ahead of us, it looks over the whole village. "It's better to take a couple of days to learn their routine, but the scouts will probably come across us."

I nod. "We have to be quick and take the opportunity. We can't risk being seen before we have even gotten close to the Alpha home." Josh ignores me.

"Are you sure that's where Sarah will be?" Anna asks, and I look over at her.

"I hope she isn't, but I know Patrick, he will have her there." I try not to shiver at the thought but fail. Josh growls low, but I don't look at him. I don't want to see the look on his face, it would break me. "Are you all sure you want to be here, the risk is high."

"Sarah is pack, and we will get them all back, no matter how long it takes," Sebastian snarls, and I could hug him for his loyalty.

He's right, we will get them back, I won't stop until they are all safe with us back at Witches Rest and until we find a new home and start again.

I have no idea where we will go, but I'm sure we will find somewhere. Eridian isn't an option anymore, but there has to be a safe place for us to live. We can't stay with the witches forever.

"I can try and scry when we get to the top of the hill, but it won't be a powerful one. Other witches may pick up on the power surge otherwise, and send a direct link to the Highers's witches."

We don't want that. "If you can be subtle about it, I don't see why you can't—"

A howl behind us cuts me off, and we all quiet down, ducking low in the long grass. Then another howl joins the first, until there is a chorus of them ringing in my ears, their sound sending chills down my spine. "*Rogures?*" I ask Josh through the link.

"*Fuck, sounds like it,*" he hisses, and I try to hide my surprise that he has spoken to me.

Shit, not good. They might run through here and find us. I point to the hill and Josh nods, putting his anger behind him for a moment and taps the others to get their attention. We start shuffling forward slowly, our heads low as we aim for the hill. If we can hide from the rogures, we can continue on with the plan. The other problem is that if the Aragnis pack also heard

the howls, they will be coming in our direction to take them out.

Gods, what if there is a horde of them? Do we stay and help or port out of here? There are still innocents in that pack.

I've not taken seven more steps before I feel it.

Power.

Heady, strong, and accompanied by a scent I know too well. My eyes go wide as I stop in my tracks, my head turning behind me while my heart pounds within my chest. Runa sits up, her eyes alert to the newcomers.

*Fuck, fuck, fuck.*

*“Go to the hill, I’ll stay back and distract them if I need to,”* I say frantically to Josh. *“They might not sense us here after taking Belldame’s potion to mask our scent, but he’s strong. You all need to get to the hill and stake-out as planned.”* Josh’s eyes flicker for a moment, and I growl at him down the link. Now he chooses to care? *“This isn’t about me, it’s about Sarah, and if he finds us, we’re completely fucked and have no chance. It’s me that has a target on my back. Just go, quickly for fuck’s sake.”*

What are they even doing here?

I watch as Josh and the others move forward, Colten giving me a nervous look before he disappears through the tall blades of grass like the others. I take a deep breath and gently open my senses, keeping my dominance and power locked low to not give away my presence.

I listen intently, hearing feet shuffle, and then someone coughs, then gags. “Fucking Gods, I didn’t know I would be deep-throating grass,” Damian splutters. They must have ported in.

Leo laughs. “Get some practice in, I’ve seen the way you look at my ass sometimes.”

“The fuck I do, the only interest I have in your ass is kicking it,” Damian snarls and then the sound of flesh hitting flesh reaches me.

A low growl surrounds me, sounding like it’s right next to me and my heart rate speeds up. *Darius*. “Will you two fucking stop it, let’s hurry up and get rid of the rogues and leave.” I shiver at the sound of his voice, the deep cadence of it, my heart and mind warring within me in his presence.

It has been so long since I’ve heard it, since he spoke those words full of anger and coldness.

My hands press into the earth as Runa rallies inside of me, snarling and growling at the sounds of his voice.

At least I’m not the only one pissed at him. Hurt.

“It shouldn’t take long,” Zaide grunts, and I hear them moving from somewhere behind me, coming closer.

Too close. Gods.

I turn, facing their direction blindly, and looking at the stalks in front of me. They’re heading straight for us, and there is no way they won’t find me and then the others.



How can I be so unlucky, do the Gods really hate me?

Sweat beads at the back of my neck from the summer air, it clings to my t-shirt as I figure out a way to handle this. I'm not ready to see him, not ready to face him. My thoughts are conflicted with Darius, as are my feelings. I'm hurt, betrayal and anger running deep under my skin for what he did. Yet he mouthed *sion* to me, I'm sure of it. Why? Why did he have to do that and mess with my head? And how the fuck does he know that word?

Decision made, I send a little power into the earth when I hear them come even closer to my position, just enough to do what I need to, but hopefully not enough to suspect I'm here.

I hear a squeak, then the sound of a blade being drawn. "Shit, something just touched me," Damian whines. Another squeak. "Get it off, get it off!"

"There's nothing there, brother," Leo laughs.

"Here," Jerrod says as I hear grass being sliced. "There's nothing. Stop being a pup."

"Something touched me, I swear!" Damian practically cries as the others laugh, even as another howl pierces the air.

I hear them move forward again, and I send more power into the ground, feeling the vibration of their footsteps above my magic. I breathe deep and keep a tight grip on it, slowly directing my power to the moisture in the dirt. Collecting it, I raise it to the surface directly under their feet to soften the

ground. I can hear their footsteps more clearly now with sludge-like dirt beneath their feet.

“The fuck?” Damian grumbles, as I send more and more moisture underneath them, causing them to sink.

“Why are we sinking?” Leo asks, confusion evident in his voice.

I move my power to enter the grass stalks around them, traveling to the top as I bite my lip to keep control, my arms shaking from the effort. I feel their body heat against the stalks like it’s against my own, like I’m within the grass itself. With them occupied in trying to move around the sludgy ground, I strike, moving the stalks around them, wrapping them up in a cocoon.

“Whdafush,” a muffle comes from one of them, and I lift my palms off the ground. Carefully moving forward to not make the grass move unnaturally, I creep and hold my power around them, needing to escape toward the others and get away from them.

I move about twenty steps before a low growl and a blast of power flattens the tall grass in the area. Instinctively, I hunch down, losing my grip on my power and hold my hands to my face to not get whipped by the stalks. Shit, I do not want to see him, I don’t want to be near him. It looks like I have no choice now.

I plant my hands on the floor to rise, watching as they shake on the ground before looking ahead to see if the others have reached the hill. Darius has completely exposed the field,

every stalk of grass now flat, and I see my pack's heads peeking over the top of the hill.

"Go," I command Josh down the link, and I watch as they move out of sight. Then, I turn slowly and face the Alpha of assholes. Who has gone silent.

They are all so silent.

My face is carefully blank, and I casually wipe the dirt from my palms on my leathers as I stand tall, refusing to cower or move from in between them and my pack. I don't know if they saw them, but I won't risk it. I may not be ready for this, but my pack comes before me.

I raise my eyes and look at Zaide first, still all dark hair and dark eyes, to the large red-haired male next to him, Jerrod. His hair is still long and in a plaited mohawk. I skip the male at the center and scan over Leo's face, his wheat blond hair a little longer than I last saw him months ago, his blue eyes narrowed as he looks at me. I give him a hard look before I move my gaze to Damian. His brown hair is shorter, his blade out, hanging loosely by his side as he looks at me in surprise.

Another howl rents the air and we all tense until it stops.

Composing myself, my eyes finally move to the last male of the group, who hasn't moved a single inch. His black boots are muddy as I scan up his dark, armored legs, stopping briefly at his thick thighs and then up his tapered waist. I swallow, and then continue up his torso, noting again his difference in the colors of the leather strap on his Elite armor, red and gold. My eyes trail up to the tattoos on his neck, knowing his Heir

markings are hidden within them, and my own markings pulse gently with warmth, just underneath my skin at the thought.

I keep them at bay.

My hands fist at my sides as my gaze roams across the stubble on his face, his jaw more defined as I move up until I see the dark circles under his eyes. Then our eyes clash, ice blue to light green. My heart works overtime as we freeze in each other's stare, locked in and unable to look away. It's been so long since I've looked into eyes that remind me of newly sprouted grass after winter, so long since we have been in each other's presence that it feels that even the air stills around us.

So many emotions blaze in his eyes, more than I thought possible for him, and I swallow roughly, my stomach dropping. Anger shines through the most, then lust next, he can't hide that from me. I shuffle on my feet under his weighted stare, unable to help it and his eyes go to the movement briefly, a little concern bleeding through that I'm sure I imagined. He doesn't break his gaze for long though, he's unable to.

Both being Heirs, I'm sure we will always feel this connection to each other. If it were visible, I imagine it would be tendrils of our power flowing out and intertwining between us, tying themselves in a knot, tethering us together. If he was just an Heir, we could maybe loosen that knot, forever free from each other, just coexisting in the same space.

It isn't that simple. The Gods didn't want that for us, and their decision making needs to be reassessed as far as I'm

concerned.

Darius tilts his head at me and I tilt mine right back, waiting for... something. But we just stare at each other in silence. It feels like so many unsaid words hang between us, invisible to the eye, but what is there that we can say? The asshole did what he did, and now he and his Elites have been hunting me along with the Highers. I'm enemy number one.

A traitor.

A Liar.

A manipulator.

I'm no one to him, and what I am, he doesn't want. And neither do I.

How could I after what he has done to me?

Life can be cruel and unkind, I have known that first hand, but for the Gods to tether me to him in more ways than one? It's borderline evil.

Darius suddenly straightens, and I tense. The soft glow of his black Heir markings appears on his neck, and I brace myself for whatever will come next. Prepare to escape him from capturing me and taking me back to the Highers. Black strands of power form out of his hand as he lifts it, and I watch on in awe of it, wondering how he has so easily harnessed his power before it shoots forward suddenly, splitting off into six pieces. I plant my feet more firmly on the ground before I bring my hands up to chest-height, then spread them out. A near

transparent blue and silver barrier forms before me, stretching as wide as I can make it. Making a wall of my power.

Darius's power crashes into my barrier, and I hold steady, adding more power into it as my own markings appear. His power collides with mine and it feels so intense that I nearly drop to my knees. I lock them, but fuck, he's strong. It's more than that though, it's the feeling of rightness wrongness that makes a balance as neither my wall drops and his doesn't penetrate it.

I chance a glance over my shoulder, making sure they can't see my pack. That's all it took for Darius, though, because when I turn back he's right there, in front of me. Just on the other side of my barrier. I flinch. I didn't even hear him move. I *never* hear him fucking move.

He presses his hand against it, spreading more of that dark smoke-like mist along it like a spider's web. I inhale sharply as his eyes flare, feeling his power against mine so closely, colliding, crashing. Like a wave meeting the sand, coexisting together. Like meeting like for the first time.

I sink into that feeling, letting it wash over me. Its euphoric, intoxication tinged with darkness. It's... home. One I never thought I would feel, one I had buried so deep down within that now I just feel...lost. So fucking lost in how I'm supposed to handle this.

He moves a little closer, his face inches from the barrier and I press more power into it to hold him off. "Found you, little

wolf.” I shiver at the same words he told me in The Deadlands. Where the lands and the below first met.

I can’t help but think how different things would have been under different circumstances. How I’m unable to help wish for it in the dark of night, under the moonlight where no one is watching, where no one can feel my pain.

Too much has happened though, too much has been done and can’t be forgiven.

“What do you want?” I whisper, a torrent of emotions swimming through my head. “What are you even doing here?” I bring my arms down to my sides, sweat coating the back of my neck as I still hold the barrier, stopping Darius and his men from getting any closer.

The latter just stands back watching, letting their Alpha deal with the traitor.

“Rhea,” he rasps, looking me over and taking me in greedily. He examines every inch of me, his ravenous gaze roaming over my body, peppering my skin with goosebumps.

He pauses at my wrists, noticing the pale, red scars wrapped around them from the terbium cuffs. I see a flicker of something in his gaze before he reaches back up to my face and takes in my markings. His eyes flash with possessiveness as he traces the delicate swirls, curves and strands, starting from the middle of my forehead then out to my temples, gently caressing my cheekbones before his gaze connects with mine, bringing a snarl to my lips.

He has no right to look at me like that, like I'm *something* to him.

He cocks his head to the side, looking over my shoulder briefly, causing me to tense. "What are you doing back in your homeland, Lasandrhea?" That name spills from his lips and I flinch, hating that name and hating him for saying it. The name that was given by my parents has forever been tainted with pain and suffering.

"That's none of your business," I spit out.

"I told you once that you are my business." He lied, everything he said to me and told me in Eridian is a lie. "Kade's not here you know," he murmurs, and I hold back from asking where he is, locking down the emotions threatening to rise within me. "But Sarah is."

I narrow my eyes, ignoring him. "Again, what are you doing here?"

"Rogures have been scryed here, as you have heard. They will have to wait as I have come across the traitor of Vrohkaria though." His eyes bounce between mine when he says the word *traitor*.

I look away, grinding my teeth. I'm not a fucking traitor. I've done nothing to these lands, yet my blood has been spilled again and again in the name of what? A crazed, obsessed Higher who, for some reason, thinks he can take what is mine from me.



“Nothing to say?” Darius asks impatiently, “Not going to deny it?”

I look back at him, eyes cold. “What would be the point? I tried to talk with you once, remember? I tried to get you to see that I wasn’t the bad guy.” I shake my head and back up a step. His fingers twitch on the barrier. “What I say means nothing, to anyone. You whipping me is proof of that.” His hands turn into fists. “No mercy. Just like you told me you have none, and just like I acknowledged that Vrohkaria doesn’t either.”

“Don’t move another step,” he says, his tone low.

“Why?” I shrug. “So you can take me back to the Highers?” He growls and I scoff. “So you can whip me some more?”

His jaw ticks. “Tell me what you know of the curse? People are suffering, it cannot continue, or is that what you want?”

I laugh at his words, but it’s sad, tired. Bone fucking tired. “All I want is for people to live, to thrive. That’s what Eridian is.... was. I took in people who were hurt from those that are the real monsters. They are worse than the rogues roaming these lands, you know what you are getting with them. The real monsters?” I shake my head. “They stand in front of you and offer fake kindness, fake comfort, only to grab your throat the next second and squeeze, just to see how long it takes for you to pass out without air, how much you can scratch and kick them before you go unconscious. They are the real monsters, Darius. Not me. I told you about those monsters back in Eridian. You haven’t been listening!”

His men approach the barrier as Darius vibrates with tension. They spread out, eyeing it for weakness. It's there, it's slowly appearing as my power wanes and the barrier flickers. The ripples start slowly as Darius's power spreads along it, and panic rushes through me. I'm untrained in my powers, mere basics are all I know and more of an instinct, yet I know Darius probably has a full grip on his Heir powers, on his wolf. Though I haven't seen it, I've seen them both connected together at once, in total synchronicity. Runa? She won't even come out.

My barrier is weakening rapidly, and enough is enough, time to go. We will have to come back for Sarah, there is no way we can get to her now.

Another failure. I'm not surprised by it anymore.

"Heir of Cazier," I say to Darius, and his eyes sharpen, his markings pulsing with mine and my words. I give him a wake-up call with my next words. I hope they eat him alive. "I told you I was a child when the curse was supposedly done at Wolvorn. I would have been around seven when the rogues first appeared in the lands. Instead of jumping the fucking beast and letting anger rule you, you would have figured that out." His brows furrow, and he leans his palms on my barrier. "You would have noticed that it doesn't add up, that it's impossible." I look at them all. "You all would have, and needless deaths wouldn't have happened."

Darius's fingers dig into my barrier and I shiver as his raw power flows into it. His face looks pained and in thought, his

nostrils flaring, and his eyes start to bleed black. They roam over my face, cataloging every detail.

“The crystal showed—“ he begins, but I cut him off.

“What it shows is a lie, it is impossible. How could a child do such a thing?” I shake my head angrily and grind my teeth at my emotions threatening to surface. “I lost *everything* when I was a child. I told you my parents were stolen from me, unjustly, but my childhood was also stolen, my innocence of youth was stolen,” I snarl, and my barrier begins to waver in and out, the ripples becoming larger and larger. Darius’s stare never leaves my face, his eyes conflicted. “I thought we were the same, you and I,” I whisper to him, swallowing thickly. “I thought...” I stop myself from saying anything more and I see those flecks begin to appear in his eyes. “It doesn’t matter what I think,” I sigh, my shoulders slumping.

“Rhea—“

“No,” I whisper, my voice cracking and I fucking *hate* it. Hate how he can bring all these emotions to the surface. He doesn’t deserve anything from me. I can still feel the whip on my back, feel it slicing through my skin, feel my blood flowing from my body.

He did that.

*He. Did. That.*

Even though I find it hard to move, find it hard to step away from the pull that is him, I turn and run to the others who I know will be waiting for me, needing to get away from his

presence and be able to fucking breathe freely again. I keep my hold on the barrier as long as possible, keeping them at bay as more of his power crashes against it.

My pack waits on the hill, all in position to be ported out. Calling on Runa for help, she wastes no time giving it to me, and I sprint toward Taylor who's holding the port stone. Finally reaching them, the barrier breaks and I clap a hand on his shoulder. We are whisked into nothingness, landing just outside Witches Rest.

“Shit,” Josh shouts, hands in his hair as he pulls at it, pacing back and forth.

“We can try again soon, there is no way we could have done anything with them there.” I pant, reaching a hand out to him, to try and soothe him in some way. “We will get her, Jos—“

“Don't,” he snarls at me, and I recoil back when he slaps my hand away.

“Hey!” Taylor snaps at him, coming toward me and glaring at Josh.

Josh shakes his head, his eyes full of rage as his blond hair comes loose from his bun. He gives me one last look before he turns and walks through the fog that leads inside the protected home of the blood witches.

A hand lands on my shoulder and I flinch, whipping around and only relaxing when I see its Colten. He eyes me with concern, but I just shake my head and follow Josh's lead, heading to Belldame's home and to the room I'm staying in.

My mind spins with too many thoughts and feelings, and I don't want eyes on me right now, don't want any conversations. I just want to wallow in misery for another failure. To ignore how Darius looked at me, how everything in me right now is screaming to go back, to be near him.

The tether pulls harder now toward him, and I need to ignore it. I have to.

Shove it down.

I enter my room and slump face-down on the bed, not even bothering to take off my clothes as Runa whines inside of me. I just need rest, then maybe I will have the strength to get up the next day and pretend I have my shit together, when really, I'm coming apart at the seams, bit by bit.

It feels like there is nothing to hold me together anymore, nothing to help patch up the invisible wounds and it's all flowing out of me.

Danny and Josie's lifeless eyes flash through my mind, then Kade's words, Josh's behavior.

I feel so alone I feel like I'm drowning.

Suffocating.

I whimper into my pillow before I bite my lip.

Keep it down, Rhea.

Just keep it down.

# Ten

DARIUS

She's gone.

I felt it as soon as she left, the... emptiness around me even though my men are with me. She's lost weight. Her face is gaunt, her cheekbones more defined, and she looks exhausted. Angry. So fucking angry and resigned that the hard thing in my chest gave an extra beat at the sight. I couldn't take my eyes off her nonetheless. Her fucking blue eyes that look like ice, penetrating mine in a way only she can. Only she ever could.

And when her Heir power touched mine... I clench my hands into fists.

A howl comes from behind me again and I can't seem to move, can't get my feet to lift, and turn and fight as her words run through my mind.

*I was a child when they came to the lands.*

That's what she said at Wolvorn Castle.

She's right. The rogures appeared more than twenty years ago, she would have been around seven.

"Brother," Leo says, coming to stand in front of me. I see him, but not really. "Shit," he curses harshly and looks toward the others. "What she said," he trails off, and that gets me out of my frozen state.

"Fuck," I growl, rolling my shoulder and feeling the pain through my back. I do it again, just to make it worse as I look in the direction she went.

"We have to follow her," Damian says, already moving.

I grab his arm. "She's gone." He goes to open his mouth, but then he frowns, scrubbing a hand down his face.

I spin and face my men, their faces saying it all. Confusion, realization, and then worry.

"We fucked up, didn't we?" Damian mutters, putting his hands on his hips. "I can't believe it." He shakes his head. "I can't..." he trails off, not knowing what to say.

Zaide looks behind him, no doubt watching for rogures. "But you saw her in the memory crystal," he says before looking back at me. "They cannot be altered. She could be lying, now, like she could have been at the castle."

"She said it was wrong," I murmur, looking down to the ground, my thoughts running rampant in my mind. "The memory crystal showed her plain as day, performing a ritual and the rogures clawing out of the ground. How can I see her do that but yet she was a child at the time? Where did that

crystal even come from? Aldus gave it to me the first time, but he never mentioned how he came to have it other than it was in Eridian, and I also didn't ask."

"None of us asked anything," Leo sighs.

"We knew something didn't add up, that something wasn't right, we just didn't know what." The feeling of wrongness when Charles was asking her questions, the things he said in the great hall. I just thought it was more lies, more bullshit. At the back of my mind, I did have some doubts, but now? What if what she said was true?

The pain she went through, the pain that I felt as my own, was caused for nothing.

"We didn't know anything," Leo agrees. "But I think now we do."

I nod. "It doesn't make sense. Why would Aldus give me that crystal, and why would it show Rhea?"

"She still could be lying," Jerrod questions and I shake my head.

"She can't lie about her age. We have all seen her." There is no way to lie about that. "For all the lies she told me, us. That is true, she's twenty-eight."

We've all seen her dragged into the great hall, interrogated by the Highers, watched as two of her pack members were slain, the pup breaking the blood link, and... being whipped by me.



“She didn’t cause the curse,” Damian whispers aloud what I don’t dare to. What I don’t want to think about. “She didn’t do it.” His eyes are wide, shock filling them.

“Fuck,” I snarl, pacing back and forth. “Fuck!” I roar, my power slithering over my skin. Drax growls low inside of me, feeling the turmoil.

“Brother,” Leo starts, but I shake my head and continue to pace, my hands clenching with fury.

What have we done. What have *I* done?

I look down at my fists and realize Rhea was right about one thing. My own anger caused me not to ask questions, and when she tried to talk to me back at Wolvorn Castle, I refused to listen.

“The memory stone wasn’t right, how the fuck is that possible?” Leo asks, his brow pinched together in confusion.

My jaw ticks. “I don’t know.” I’m not sure I know anything anymore.

We were told memory stones couldn’t be altered, Charles and the other Highers were adamant about it, especially Aldus, who can infiltrate memories himself. He said it was impossible. Memory stones are hard to come by, they take years to charge before they can be used because once they are, they can’t be changed.

Aldus already tried to erase my memories of being an Heir, but the question is, why? And does he have the power to change a memory stone? He’s nowhere to be found though to

ask these questions, too busy with the people, as Charles said. He wasn't happy when I mentioned that Aldus was there before my memory of being an Heir was gone. I need to find him to speak with him myself.

With all this information churning in my mind, I know we fucked up.

I fucked up.

Charles is another one I need to be wary of. Something's not right, he lied to me when we spoke in his office about Rhea's mother. There was a glint in his eye that I didn't like, and now I'm questioning what he's hiding, what he knows. He hid the fact that Rhea's mother was an Heir and they kept her alive, yet he upheld the law all the time he has been in power, to capture all Heirs on sight. That, along with him all of a sudden wanting me to produce some powerful pups, to rape Rhea?

I'm missing something, and considering I didn't even connect that Rhea would be too young for the curse, I need to speak to Rhea about Charles. Right fucking now.

"It could have been Rhea when she was an adult performing the ritual," Leo says, scratching his chin. "It could be why their numbers are growing? But then, who performed the ritual originally?"

I wipe my hands down my face, hearing the rogues in the distance getting closer. "We need to find Rhea and take her back to Vokheim. We need to talk to her, ask her directly if she performed a ritual when she was older and if she did, then who did she learn it from. She did erase Kade's memories, she did

take people into Eridian against their will, Sarah said so herself. I need the full story. No more lies, no fucking bullshit. Then we will take her back to Wolvorn to have her sentenced if she deserves to be.”

“How are you going to make sure she tells the truth?”  
Damian asks, looking behind him as another howl sounds.

“Any way I can. I need answers and I need them now.”

“And what if the truth is that she’s innocent in all of this?”  
Zaide asks, his eyes on me as he voices something I refuse to believe. I can’t believe it, because that means what I did...

I look over at him, glaring. “Not possible.”

She killed some of my Elites’ trainees, and wanted to kill us all in The Deadlands. She lied repeatedly to my fucking face. She held Sarah in Eridian against her will. She threatened anyone that wanted to leave and not be under her paw. Innocent, she’s so fucking far from that...but maybe in this, she is.

“How do we find her?” Jerrod asks, throwing his braid over his shoulder.

“I don’t know, but I will.”

“The blood witch was with her when they escaped,” Zaide says, and my eyes snap to him. “I saw her on the hill.” He nods at the hill at my back.

I spin this information over in my mind until it clicks.  
“Where is the one place we haven’t looked?” I ask aloud.

“Oh fuck, were going to get boiled alive,” Damian mutters.

“No,” I tell him. “We’re going to get a little wolf.”

At my words, a pack of rogues break through the tree line and I unsheathe my blade, preparing to make quick work of them.

Run, little wolf, your time is up and it won’t be long until I clamp my teeth down, and drag you with me back to Vokheim with me.

# Eleven

RHEA

Something is wrong.

That's my first thought as I open my eyes, sitting up and clutching the furs in my hands. The air is... tense, shadowed. It feels like something is prodding against it, looking, searching. A sharp pain in my chest has me looking down, and I gasp at my Heir markings appearing in a flash. Strong and pulsing with an aggressiveness I haven't felt before. Runa snarls within me, restless as she paces and her hackles rise. I try to calm her, mentally stroking a hand down her muzzle, but it's no use, she's still agitated.

I pull the furs back and step out of bed, padding on bare feet to the window. The witches' homes glow in the dim light from the candles within, no sign of a single person on the dirt pathways or bridges around, the murky waters silent. It's the middle of the night, so that's normal, but still, it feels like someone is out there within Witches Rest, dangerous and foreboding.

I grab some linen pants and shove my legs through them before checking to make sure the soft shirt I'm wearing has all the buttons done up. Opening the bedroom door, I peek out, listening before moving down the hallway on silent feet. The house is quiet, only the smell of herbs assaulting my senses. I head down the stairs, one step at a time, my bare feet cooling on the wood. I pause at the bottom, tilting my head and listening.

Nothing, but something is wrong.

I round the corner, heading for the kitchen, and nearly scream the home down as Belldame stands in the archway, a concerned look on her face. "What's wrong?" I ask breathlessly, rubbing my chest as my heartbeat calms from her nearly making me drop-dead in fright.

"It's time, child," she tells me, concern so easily seen on her face.

My heartbeat speeds up. "Time for what?"

"To right the wrong, well, the start of it."

I freeze, memories of Solvier and my mom telling me it's time to right the wrong. "Why would you say that?"

"It is the truth." She grabs the bones hanging off the strap around her neck, murmuring softly and then she snaps the strap, taking a bone from it and handing it to me.

I take it tentatively. "I, um, why are you giving me this... bone?" I question, feeling its smoothness.

“Crow’s rib bone. It will be useful when I’m needed, put some of your blood on the bone and I’ll come, in some form or another. It can only be once.”

“I don’t understand, why give this to me now?” I turn over the small bone in my palm, running my finger over the ivory color and feeling the magic sleeping within it.

“He has found you, child.” I stumble back on my feet, panic flowing through me at the thought.

He’s going to take me. He’s going to take me and lock me in a room again, and then the pain will come again and again. Not stopping until my blood coats the floor, the walls, his face. An endless river, never stopping, always flowing, always—

Hands appear on my cheeks, and my eyes blink rapidly as Belladame tilts my face toward her. “Breathe, child, breathe.”

I do, breathing in from my nose and out through my mouth as slowly as I can, trying to catch my breath. “That’s it, keep going.” I do, my eyes stinging as my lungs burn with the need for air. She stays with me, and I copy her breathing until I can take a breath without struggling.

“Sorry,” I wheeze through my tight throat and I step back, her hands dropping from my face.

“There is no need, we all have fears that creep up on us. Our own wounds taunt us out of nowhere sometimes, so much so that it doesn’t give us time to have that control before you’re trapped in a whirlwind, spinning round and round. Sometimes

you can ground yourself, sometimes it takes another to help. But there is no need to apologize.”

I clear my throat, nodding. “How did he find me?” I thought we were safe here. I can’t face him yet, I’m not strong enough.

“Darius is a resourceful wolf,” she hums, hands clasping in front of her.

“Darius?” I breathe a sigh of relief, even though that’s not what I feel with him being here, but it’s better than the alternative.

“Who did you think, child?” she asks curiously.

“Charles, or my family maybe. I don’t know, just someone not... good.”

She looks at me intently. “And Darius is good?”

I jolt, shifting on my feet. “He’s not *good*, he... hurt me,” I mumble. “I knew his reasons for doing it, so I... I understand why he thinks I’m a traitor, that I caused the rogues. He’s an asshole, but...” I trail off, trying to find the words to explain, but just can’t.

My feelings are confusing toward Darius. Anger, so much fucking anger and sadness, betrayal, disappointment, understanding, want, need and that stupid, small hope for a hopeless future. There is no coming back from what he did. None.

Belladame gives me a confusing, knowing smile. “It will all be as it should be. Wake the others, he’s huffing and puffing at my protection barrier around Witches Rest, and he will wake



the other witches up. He needs to leave. Come, child. Let us go.”

“Can’t we just wait it out?” I don’t want to face him so soon, it was just three nights before I last saw him. “He can’t get in, can he?”

“He could if he really wanted to, and I would rather not risk the children within our home.”

I swallow roughly. I know she’s right, but it feels like she’s throwing me to the wolves, literally, even though it’s the right thing to do. I would never risk the children that live here, and if Darius can get inside here, he would do it to get to me, I have no doubt. How did he even know?

“He would get to you eventually,” Belldame tells me, squeezing my hand. “I am not sacrificing you for others, and I say that with kindness. This was always supposed to be. It is time.”

I nod, even though I don’t really understand, but rush upstairs anyway and wake everyone. I make sure to put the bone Belldame gave me on the table beside my bed.

I bang on everyone’s doors, hearing them grumble and moan about being woken up, but as soon as they see the panic on my face, they are up, dressed and following me downstairs.

“What’s going on?” Taylor asks, his eyes hard and alert.

“Darius is here,” I tell them, refusing to show them the panic I feel. “He’s outside the barrier Belldame has around Witches Rest.”

“What!” Seb says. “How is he here, how did he know?” The others all begin talking at once and I hold up a hand to stop them.

“I don’t know, but he is, and I can’t have the people living here be put in danger.” I look at their concerned faces, and lastly to Josh, who’s still ignoring me. He’s been ignoring me since we came back after failing to get Sarah, or if we do talk, his tone is harsh with me, full of anger. I would be lying if my already bloody and beaten heart didn’t hurt much more with how he now treats me. He treats me like someone he hates. “You don’t have to come with me,” I tell them all.

“You know we wouldn’t let you go on your own,” Hudson growls, and Colten nods next to him.

“Never,” Seb agrees while Josh stays silent.

I nod, my throat tightening, and then we make our way to the bridge with Anna and Belldame.

As soon as my feet hit the wood of the first bridge we crossed to get into Witches Rest, I can’t help but feel that maybe this is the last time I will be walking over it. A sense of foreboding washes through me, and I shiver. Walking through the mist to head in Darius’s direction, I rub my arms, looking over at Josh who stands the furthest away from me. I wish he would say something.

I look toward Ann, whose hair is a nest on top of her head, as is mine, and she has dark circles under her eyes as she walks next to me, Seb at her side. Colten grumbles whilst Hudson chastises him, and Taylor on my right scans the mist,

like he can see everything, when we can barely see our hand in front of us. Belldame walks on the other side of me, her stick in her grip, moving with every step I take as her bones rattle around her neck.

The mist begins to clear, and I rub the back of my neck, my hands shaking when I see figures just out of reach of the mist. They're not moving, just watching as we approach, the moon lighting our path and once we are in clear view, we stand, waiting.

We eye each other across the small distance, Darius and his men, against me with Belldame and mine. They're dressed casually this time, no armor in sight. Just t-shirts and combat pants, and I wonder why they chose not to have their armor on. It's Belldame who speaks first.

“Hello, Alpha Darius.”

“Belldame,” he says, and there is no menace in his tone toward her. “Bring Rhea over here, or I will have to use force.” Okay, maybe a little.

“Would you do such a thing, child of Cazier?”

“I can assure you, I would,” Darius growls, and dark tendrils of power come from his palms, waiting, ready to strike. I watch the black as it floats around. It calls to me, this yearning to feel it again, yet I don't want to be called. I want to be left alone to bleed the monsters dry.

I step in front of everyone, not wanting to cause Belldame any trouble after all the help she has given to me. I'm not sure

if he could do it, but Belldame said he could and I don't want to test it. He's an Heir, after all, who knows what he can do now, I don't even know what I'm fully capable of. I'm running blind in all of this, whereas he seems to have it all figured out.

"How did you find me?" I ask Darius, my eyes still on those black, misty tendrils, before my eyes move to his.

"Lucky guess." His power trails up his forearms as he looks me over in the loose shirt I have on, his eyes dropping slightly to my chest. His nostrils flare before his eyes flash black. I scoff. "Come with us and we will leave the blood witches alone."

"I'm not going to the Highers." I fold my arm over my chests, he's not taking me to them, no fucking way. Why would he think I would be willing to go anyway?

He tilts his head. "I'm not taking you to the Highers, but to Vokheim."

My lips part. "The Elite's keep? Why?" Why does he want me to go there?

Darius looks at his other men and I watch them, wary of what they are going to do. Darius steps toward me, just a few steps but I hold my ground, refusing to back away. There is a decent amount of space between us, but I still have to be alert.

"What you said, about you being a child." His jaw ticks like it hurts him to say the words. "That it would have been impossible for you to have caused it."

So he actually listened to me. It's a little too late now though, and I get over my shock at his words, and anger comes swiftly. If he had just listened to me when I needed him to, if he let his anger go for a second and used his head, he could have helped me. He could have helped my pack, Kade, Josie, Danny...

"Of course it fucking impossible, you asshole," I fume, my anger rising to the surface fast, and so fierce it feels like it will spill out of me at any moment. "And if you all, the fucking Elites, protector of the lands," I spit in disgust. "Took a step back and thought for one second, using your brains, it would have been clear to you straight away, and you would know I was innocent," I snarl, my hands fist at my sides, shaking with rage and admittedly a lot of hurt.

Darius flexes his hands. "It's impossible for you to have caused it then, but what about when you were an adult?"

"An adult." I laugh hysterically, my emotions riding me hard, so many at once. I laugh and laugh, but it's full of wrath, *fury*. "You have got to be kidding me?!" He just stares at me, waiting for my answer. "I didn't perform any ritual, I didn't do anything but try and *survive* the lands that wanted to break me." He looks at his Elites and they watch me warily, brows furrowed, and I've had enough of them. Of him. Of every fucking cruel test the Gods throw at me, because this must be a punishment of sorts?

I must have done something so bad to have the life I have lived, and all the blood that has been spilled out of me. Of the

pain that I'm *always* feeling. When will I be free of it?

"I did not bring the rogures upon us." I shake my head.

"Then who did?" Leo asks, hands on his hips.

"How am I supposed to know that?" I shout.

"You lied about a lot of things, you lied about many fucking things," Darius says. "How do we know you're telling the truth?"

"I was a child!" I practically scream, rage pouring off me in waves. "I have never done a ritual to bring rogures into the lands, I don't know anyone who has done a ritual to bring rogures into the lands, and I don't know how to bring the rogures into the lands!"

My chest is heaving, my vision narrowing down on Darius as the pain he has caused flows through me, making me believe for one second that I could have something I never thought I could ever have. For making me fucking hope, when hope is nothing but a lie at the bottom of the darkest depths of a pit.

Darius's eyes turn concerned, and that's enough. How dare he look at me that way. Like he cares!

My fury reaches a new height, and I want nothing more than to walk up to him and smack him in his stupid face. To hurt him the way he's hurt me. So that's exactly what I do, because apparently I didn't realize I was even moving, and the next second, my fist is connecting with his jaw. Again and again. His head swings to the side with my hits but I just keep going,

him unmoving from my blows. That makes me more angry, why isn't he fighting back? I get another shot in and he finally grabs my wrist in a painful hold. My fury-filled stare stays on him as I call my power to my other hand, flattening it against his chest before releasing it. He gets pushed back, caught off guard, but he calls on his own power, stopping himself from going further.

His Elites stiffen as they watch, but strangely, they don't interfere. I can hear my pack calling for me to come back to them, but I'm not done yet. Far from it.

My chest heaves, my markings raw on my body as Darius straightens himself, spitting blood from his mouth. "That was your only free shot, hit me again and you will regret it. You know how I like to play, little wolf."

"Don't call me that," I say harshly. "You fucking deserve it, all of you deserve to rot in a hole and have the earth swallow you." I point at Damian. "Where is your fucking honor that you spoke of being an Elite now? Huh? Dead in the fucking ground just like Eridian is. Did you enjoy it?"

"That's enough," Darius growls. It's not enough, it's never enough. This rage that's boiling up inside of me is just waiting to be released. On them.

Strands of hair start to float around my face, the wind picking up and caressing me. "No," I tell him. I can't hold back my words, they pour out of me. "Do you feel better that you whipped an innocent woman while the monsters of the

lands sat back and watched?” Darius grinds his jaw, his eyes hard.

“Enough,” he repeats quietly.

“Do you think justice has been dealt as I was cuffed and unable to heal after you slashed bits of flesh from my body?”

He growls.

“Are the Elites proud of capturing innocent men, women, and children from the only safe place they have ever known? For standing witness to killing two innocent beings for questions I had no answers to?!”

“I said enough” he roars, punching his power against me and I step back as black surrounds me, encasing me inside.

I lift my hands, my magic rushing through me as I push it out of my body and force my power against his, my anger enabling me to have the upper hand. My rage, pain, heartbreak, suffering, all of it, I put into his barrier. Blue collides against black, sparks fly and the fight for dominance suddenly ends, our power vanishing into mist.

My shoulders slump “It won’t be enough,” I pant, my breaths ragged. “It won’t be enough until every last one of you is fucking dead.” I growl, Runa surfacing, and I feel our eyes change, locking on Darius. On the one who hurt us, who whipped us, who betrayed our vow.

Darius pauses, his chest rising and falling with his rapid breaths as his eyes turn black, those fucking silver flecks that I’m always mesmerized by, floating through them, and I feel



myself unwillingly calming, feel my lungs gently take in air, mirroring Darius, breath for breath, until we're both just... done.

My markings fade, my hair drops and my hands fall to my sides as we just stare at each other. Like something else forced us to stop, to now allow this to continue. Our eyes speak for ourselves until I look away, feeling strangely... vulnerable.

“What is it you want, Rhea?” Belldame asks. I stare off into the distance, watching the moon, glistening the treetops as I squeeze my eyes shut and regain some composure.

I don't want to do this now, I don't want to be here. I don't want to see him.

“I want to take her back to Vokheim to answer some questions. Truthfully,” Darius replies, and I scoff.

I turn to look back at him. “I'm a liar and a manipulator, how would you ever believe a word I say? And better yet, why the fuck would I explain anything to you now?”

Leo steps forward and my eyes move to him, my body tensing. Darius releases a low rumbling sound, and Leo eyes him as he stays where he is. “Information isn't adding up between what's been said since our time at the hall and before. We need to figure out what really happened. We now know you didn't cause the rogures, you were a child, but maybe if you told the truth, your truth, it may help us get rid of the rogures. I don't know how but.” He shrugs. “It's worth a shot.” For him to say this after not being my biggest fan before the events at Wolvorn Castle gives me pause.

What would they gain from this? What do they want to know exactly?

“And if you still don’t believe me?” I ask them.

“We take you to the Highers,” Zaide says, and I’m already shaking my head.

“It’s a lose-lose situation for me, you won’t believe anything I say either way.” I’m not going back there unless it’s to kill them all and get Kade.

“Will you help us get Sarah? If we tell you what we know?” Josh asks out of nowhere, as he walks to stand next to me as I gape at him.

“Josh, what the fuck?” I whisper-hiss. The guys behind me also questioning what he’s doing.

He ignores me. “Well?” he asks the Elites and I grind my teeth, my eyes going back and forth between them.

“Why do you want Sarah?” Jerrod asks, looking at him curiously.

“She’s in danger, whether you believe that or not, but answer my question. Will you help me get her?” he asks again, and I have no idea what he’s playing at.

What is wrong with him? Why would he suggest this?

“Josh.” I go to grab his arm, but he steps away from me.

A pause, then. “If she’s in danger, which I do not believe,” Darius says, “then we will help her get away from that danger.”

Josh's shoulders loosen, and I just stare at him, shocked. The fuck? He can't possibly be okay with that?

He turns, finally looking at me. "Show them," he demands.

"What?" My brows furrow. Show them?

"*Show* them," he repeats, looking over my body. I stumble away from him, already shaking my head when I realize what he's asking. No, no way, who even is he right now to ask me that? What right does he think he has? "Show them, they will believe you, me, us." He throws a hand out to us all, but I'm still shaking my head at him, still backing away as the Elites watch on curiously. "Rhea, show them!" he shouts, and I flinch away from him, my eyes wide in shock. I can't control my reaction quick enough which causes a growl from Darius, which I ignore.

"Now, child," Belldame calls Josh. "Just calm down."

"No," he refuses. "Show them, Rhea." He storms over to me, closing the distance as I stagger back from the look in his eyes. It's determination and anger.

"J...Josh, w...wait." He grips the front of my shirt and rips it down the middle while I stand there in utter shock. I don't want to hurt him, he's Josh. My Josh, the brother I've never had. But he's ripping my shirt off and starts undoing the ties on my pants, and I can't move...

I see Darius storm our way and I act without thought, finally able to move and push power into Josh, sending him flying

away from me and Darius as I look at him, tears stinging my eyes.

“What the hell, Josh,” I croak out a whisper as I try to close my now-tattered shirt around my front, trying to hide my naked chest. How could he do that to me?

Josh gets to his feet, his face hard as he looks at me. “Show them, I’ve never asked you for anything, I’m asking you now. You said you would repay me somehow for getting you out of our pack, I’ve always refused. But now, Rhea, I’m asking you this one thing. Show them.”

His eyes plead with me as Darius comes to a halt a few feet away, watching our interaction closely.

“I...I,” I stammer, unable to get words out, unable to think or feel or know what to say.

“You asshole,” Colten shouts at Josh as Hudson hauls him back by the neck when he tries to storm his way over here. The rest of my pack is looking at Josh with the same shocked and angry look as Colten as Belldame halts them from coming closer.

I stand there, shaking, feeling the guilt rise in me at his words. Josh hasn’t ever asked anything of me, he risked his life to get me out of that basement, he could have died, but he did it anyway. He has never asked for anything for saving my life, and I did say I would repay him. This is a small ask, right? This isn’t a big deal. This is the least I could do, isn’t it? If it’s what he really wants? I should repay him, shouldn’t I?

So why do I feel vomit crawling up my throat that's slowly tightening, why do I feel the air around me squeezing me so tightly, why do I feel so hurt after what Josh has just done?

"This is what you want?" I ask him, my voice wobbly.  
"What you truly want and what you have decided?"

He swallows, and I swear I see guilt in his eyes before it clears. "Yes."

"What's going on?" The confusion is noticeable in Darius's tone but I ignore him as I keep my eyes on Josh. He's not wavering. Will he forgive me for not telling him about Sarah if I do this?

I step away so I have a little room, not wanting anyone near me. No one to get too close.

No one near me means they're not there, right? They won't see me, won't look at me. It will just be me on my own if I don't look at them.

*If I can't see them, they can't see me.*

*If I can't see them, they can't see me.*

Runa whines inside of me as I repeat this to myself. I ignore her as I shakily shrug off my tattered shirt from my shoulders, throwing it to the grassy ground. Cool air hits my naked skin and I shiver as it sinks into my bones.

"Rhea," Seb murmurs, and I hear his shuffled footsteps before they stop, my pack talking in hushed whispers.

I look at Josh one more time, hoping he's changed his mind, to tell me he didn't mean it, but he just watches and waits. I squeeze my eyes shut briefly, then loosen the rest of the ties on my pants before dropping them, pulling them down my leg and off my feet, kicking them to the side.

I step away from my clothing and breathe deep, closing my eyes and ignoring the shake that is rattling my whole body.

*If I can't see them, they can't see me.*

"Little wolf?" Darius growls. I tense at his words that are filled with something like *care*, with an undertone of possessiveness. It's all a lie.

Moving a little further away, not looking at anyone, I lift my head to the night sky and will my body to loosen, to ignore the eyes on me and the quiet growl that doesn't seem to stop. The breeze welcomes my naked flesh, bare to feel it all. Just me, the grass beneath my feet and the moon looking down upon me.

But even as coolness spreads over my body, even as my skin is revealed, inch by inch to the earth around me, I'm fully vulnerable once again, though this time it is much, much worse. Tears still spill from my closed eyes, I'm unable to stop them as they drip down my chin and onto the dirt.

I can't stop them because I'm not alone, and everyone is seeing my body without its glamor for the very first time, apart from Josh. I can feel their gaze on me, all of them on something they shouldn't be seeing.

A body that should always be hidden along with the story  
marked upon its skin.

My story. My horrors.

They see it all.

# Twelve

DARIUS

Her body shimmers gently, an ethereal glow that coats her skin. It washes over her, raining down her body like water as it uncovers what's hidden beneath it. What she kept hidden when I saw her naked for the first time. I freeze, my shocked eyes tracing over every inch of her, and all I can do is stare, not believing what I'm seeing, not able to focus on one spot.

I hear my brothers inhaling sharply, muttering curse words while her pack and Belldame look distraught, staring at her with horrified eyes, indicating they haven't seen her like this either. Josh, her *brother*, looks just as horrified but not surprised, and I snarl at him. I can't help the protectiveness that rises within me as I feel her hurt. He forced her to do this and now he thinks he has the right to look like he's devastated?

I growl, hearing Drax echo it within me as my heartbeat pounds in my ears as I look at Rhea's skin.

Skin that is scarred beyond belief.



She's covered in them. How the fuck is she covered in them?

She doesn't open her eyes, letting everyone gaze upon her, upon what she's hidden from the lands. I step closer unconsciously, unable to help myself.

It feels wrong as I trace the small, white lines over her collarbones with my eyes, as if I'm witnessing something I have no right to. My eyes rove nonetheless at the deep, raised scar that starts from the side of her ribcage, curving down to her hip on the left side. Then I look at her right side that's littered in burn marks, deeper in some places and lighter in others, the skin a mottle of red. A crater-shaped scar is at the top of her thighs, more jagged, red lines run on the insides of her thighs, more white lines traveling down her legs. Even her feet have scars on them, trailing up to her ankles as if she stepped on something sharp. Her arms have more burn marks, dotted here and there, and a thick, jagged line runs the whole length of her right arm on the outside.

Line, after line, after line. Thin, white, red, thick, jagged.

What the fuck?

"Do you want to see the ones you added?" Rhea whispers, not even opening her eyes and I flinch, unable to stop the reaction to her words.

Me, the Alpha of the fucking Elites, flinches.

I swallow roughly, still looking at the scars on her body and I know I don't want to see the ones I placed on her skin. I can't. My own back itches at the thought.

She hasn't opened her eyes, but she knows I'm there, now right in front of her as my body moves on instinct, blocking the others from seeing her. Needing to be closer to her, to *see* her. To just be fucking close in any way I can. I can't take my eyes off her.

“Who the fuck did this?” My words are all wolf, rage at the forefront of my mind. I can't control it, can't stop the feeling of wanting to tear everything down at the sight before me, and hurt the ones that did this to her. “Rhea,” I growl when she doesn't answer. “Who. The fuck. Did this to you?”

These are not scars from fighting, from building cabins or cutting wood.

These are...torture.

She finally opens her eyes, dead, but full of hurt. Dull but full of betrayal, vulnerable but filled with pain and the instinct of wanting to shield her, nearly brings me to my knees. To hide her away and make it better, to stop the next tear that falls from her eyes. I told her the only time she would shed tears is because of me, and me alone, and I fucking meant it. I still do.

Some fire comes back in her eyes at my words. At my demand. “Why do you care who did this to me?”

“Little wolf, tell me.” My words are rough, gravel and barely contained as I fist my hands at my sides to stop myself from touching her. That makes her pause for a second. Her eyes fill with confusion before it fades away.

“Which ones?” she whispers mockingly. “Take your pick, I remember every single one of them. My first one?” She lifts a hand and moves it to a raised scar on the outside of her leg. “I kicked out when they tried to get me out of my cage, this was my first punishment. I was seven and a half. This one?” She moves her hand to the hole in her thigh as my body stills. “Another punishment for trying to run, I was nine. These ones?” She moves them over the burn marks. “To see how much pain I could endure, how long I could hold out before passing out. And then to see how quickly I would heal. I was fourteen. And these.” She moves her leg to the side to show me the lines running down the insides of her thighs, starting at the top and running down to below her knees. “I wouldn’t keep them open, so they sliced them open instead so I couldn’t close them, because the pain was too much to have them pressed together. I was seventeen.”

My vision tinges black. I’m shaking now with every word, my body vibrating, my blood pounding. The ground quakes beneath my feet, black mist appearing around me as the darkness rises within me. I sense the others taking a step back, not wanting to be close, but Rhea? She stands still, looking at me dead in the eye. Unafraid, unconcerned as her eyes shift to my power, watching as it floats around violently as she tilts her head at it.

Her hand moves, palm up, and I instinctively guide a tendril of my power toward her, offering it and calming it the best I can until it rests on her hand. The connection is instant, pulsing through me as she takes in a deep breath, more than

likely feeling what I am. Her fingers move slowly, letting the mist fall between her fingers as she plays a symphony only she knows. Yet, I can feel it all and it shocks me to my core. Pain, so much of it, and shame. Shame that her body is bare, shame that everyone can see it, shame of how it looks.

When I look at her body, I don't see something shameful, I see strength, endurance, bravery. I see a woman who has been through unimaginable horrors and survived. She still stands and I... I think I was wrong. No, I know I was wrong about her, and I don't know what to do about that. What to feel. All of this is unnatural to me, the way my body reacts to her.

The marks on her body don't lie about what she has been through as a child and teenager, what she wanted to keep hidden from me even during her heat when she doesn't have full control. How did I not sense the glamor she placed upon herself?

She strokes over my power with her fingers one last time before she drops her hand, and I grab the back of my t-shirt, pulling it over my head. Everyone is silent as they watch on, watch me pull the shirt over Rhea's head and pull her arms through it as she stares at me with confusion. I'm confused by my own actions too, but the need to cover her, to hide her from prying eyes overwhelms me, and I can't hold back. Once she's covered, my t-shirt reaching the top of her thighs, I turn, giving her my back whilst also shielding her from others.

Josh steps forward tentatively, his eyes on the Elites. "Do you see now? We have done nothing but try to survive and

help others.”

That’s the first thing he says? After what he has done?

I stalk him, my steps heavy and steady. I don’t recognize who I am, it’s like someone else has taken control but I know it’s all me. Once I’m within reach, my arm pulls back and then my fist connects with his face, again and again, disgusted he made her do this, to reveal herself this way. He falls to the floor and I’m on him instantly, hands around his neck as my power spills from me, wrapping around his arms and legs to hold him still. His eyes bulge, his mouth open, gasping for breath, but I don’t care. I lean down, wanting these words to be for him and him only, for him to recognize my words for what they are.

A fucking vow.

“You ever, and I mean fucking *ever*, make her do that again, guilt her into showing her body when she isn’t ready, when she doesn’t want to, I will gut you for weeks. I will peel your skin inch-by-inch from your bones, I will pull every tendon in your body out slowly as I force you to watch. I will take your fingers and make you swallow them to silence your screams, I will grab your intestines and hang you from them, only to cut you down, and then start taking your ribs, sticking them into you like pins to hold you down, so I can start showing you your own organs. Then,“ I breathe out a growl, the rage inside of me making every muscle in my body shake over what he has done. “I’ll take your heart and make you watch as I squeeze, crushing it in my hand as your life fades before your

eyes. It will be the last thing you see.” I lift my head higher and look down at him, his face turning a shade of blue. “Do you understand me?”

It’s not lost on me that I have no right to be angry at him for making her do this, he didn’t cause physical pain to her like I did, he didn’t whip her like I did. But he *hurt* her, and that is something I won’t tolerate. Everything inside of me won’t let me.

“Let him up, Darius.” I glance up at Rhea’s words, her body now unmarred apart from her markings, which are faint. Her eyes are only on me, not once looking at Josh. “Now isn’t the time.” I look at her and see the exhaustion clear on her face, the pain lingering in her eyes with anger brimming under the surface. That’s the only reason I listen, not wanting to cause her more pain, not after witnessing what marks her skin. I give Josh one last squeeze before I get up off of him and step away.

Josh sputters and coughs, rubbing his neck as he stumbles to his feet. Rhea turns and walks back to Belldame, not once looking back. Belldame tries to give her a hug, but Rhea sidesteps it. Belldame says something and Rhea shakes her head before her shoulders slump slightly, her pack stepping closer to her while Josh remains in front of me. Rhea walks away when her pack is near, and I know she doesn’t want them close right now, I can feel it. She turns and heads back over to me and stops a few feet away, ignoring Josh who looks at the ground in shame, still rubbing his neck.

“Will you help us get Sarah or not?” she asks, her tone dull.

Josh steps closer to her, guilt filling his eyes. “Rhea—“

She ignores him, still looking at me. “Will you?”

I look back at my brothers, their faces somber, but they nod at my silent question. Josh got what he wanted after all. “You will come to Vokheim, answer my questions, and then we will help get Sarah if she’s in danger.” She tilts her head. “I want the whole truth. No lying, no secrets, no bullshit.”

“And how will you know I’m telling the truth and how do I know this isn’t some sort of trap, a way for you to take me back to the Highers?”

“This has nothing to do with the Highers right now.”

“It has everything to do with them.” I wait for her to say more, but she doesn’t.

“If you’re not guilty, you have no need to go to the Highers. You did create a pack and home without declaring to them, but I think right now there are bigger things at play, and you know about it, don’t you?”

She nods. “I don’t trust you.”

“I don’t trust you either, however, as much as I don’t want it to fucking be, you might have some insight with the rogues.” Her brows furrow. “I’m not sure how, but the memory crystal Aldus found in Eridian, it might not be real. But it was found there, and if I show it to you, you may have some insight and you may be able to make sense of it. I will get the memory crystal to Vokheim for you to see.”

“If I look at this crystal, tell you about Eridian, you will get Sarah?”

“If she is in danger, yes.”

“Rhea, lets go,” Taylor calls, looking at Rhea in concern.

Rhea looks at him and blows out a breath. She then glares at me, standing taller. “I would say let’s make a deal before the Gods to keep your word, but we know that means shit to you.” She turns without another word and storms back through the fog. Her pack follows close behind her as Josh takes up the back, shuffling behind them.

Where the fuck is she going?

I go to open my mouth but Belldame steps forward. “She’s collecting her things.” She holds her tall stick in front of her, resting on it. “Be careful, Heir of Cazier,” she warns. “For she is our only hope. On her own it’s a struggle, but together, there is more of a chance you can overcome these rogures and restore the lands as they once were.”

“What the fuck do you know of the lands, witch?” I have met Belldame a few times, usually on the Highers orders to persuade her to have an alliance with them. As always, she threatens to boil my balls and refuses the Highers bidding.

“The Gods are still with us, just not seen.”

“The Gods went mad,” I spit.

“Did they?” she questions, and I pause.

“History states it.”



“With what I’m sure you’re about to find out, Alpha Darius, you’re about to learn what is true and what was fabricated.”  
What is she on about? The woman is senile. “Your Heir powers are coming along, I can sense it with the amount of power you have in you. It’s not complete though, and won’t be, not yet. I have told Rhea about the Plane of the Gods, the Vahaliel.”

“It is a myth.” It’s the apparent home of the Old Gods, no one has ever been there or entered.

“It is real, and I know you and Rhea must go there. If you have any chance against the rogures and the monster in plain hiding. You need to go there and learn the history of the Gods.”

“We know the history, we have records dating back thousands of years. Why not just tell me if you think it’s wrong?”

“All I know is when two Heirs walk the earth at the same time, and their powers collide and reunite, it is time to go visit the Plane of the Gods. You must go.”

She’s talking out of her ass. “And where did you get that information?”

She smiles. “From the Gods, of course.” I roll my eyes.

“If the Gods were still around, why haven’t they appeared and stopped the rogures?”

“I do not know the answer to that, but if the Gods weren’t around, how did you become an Heir?” With that, she turns

and walks to the boundary of Witches Rest and waits.

“You good, brother?” Leo asks quietly, coming to stand next to me as the others follow.

“I think we have missed something very important, something that as Elites we shouldn’t have. Whatever comes next, it will definitely change our course, and after seeing Rhea’s body? I think the worst is yet to come.”

Because if the reason she didn’t want to go to the Highers has anything to do with the marks on her body, the way we operate will forever change. We will no longer be in an alliance with the Highers, and a war will break out.

Because as much as I feel anger toward Rhea for her lies, no one touches my little wolf.

# Thirteen

RHEA

I pack the little things I have collected here at Belldame's home, shoving everything in a single rucksack with a lump stuck in my throat. I feel sick to my stomach, my body trembling with what I just did. With what everyone saw.

I quickly change, throwing on some leather pants and keeping Darius's t-shirt on. I don't want to think about the reasons why I leave it on, but having not had his scent around me in months, I can't bring myself to take it off. I lift the collar, taking in a deep breath of cedarwood and earth, along with his scent of power that is solely his before I drop it, my brows furrowing at the comfort of it.

And it is a comfort. He shielded my body after everyone saw it for what it was. A horror, a mess, disgusting. Worthless.

But Darius had no disgust in his eyes, only anger. I wonder if he saw the ones on my back from his whipping, would he feel disgusted then? Disgusted in himself.

He wouldn't even care, he just wants answers that I don't want to give him, but now I don't really have a choice. Not with Sarah being involved and them helping to get her back.

The bedroom door opens, but I ignore the presence at my back, picking up the letter my mom left me and carefully putting it inside my rucksack between my clothes, making sure it stays safe. I do the same with the bone Belldame gave me.

"Milal," Josh whispers behind me, and I tense, not wanting to talk to him. I don't even want him near me right now.

Keep it down, Rhea.

"Let's get ready to go, if we have a chance of getting their help with Sarah, we will have her back in no time, and then maybe we can get the rest of our pack and then Kade."

I know Josh wants to talk about what just happened, I can feel his anxiousness, his remorse, but I can't right now. His betrayal of guiltting me into doing what I just did, exposing myself like that. No one has seen my body but Josh and Kade when he first got me out of the Aragnis pack, and I don't even think Kade remembers it after I had his memories blocked.

It wasn't until a few moons later, after escaping, that I'd learned to cover my scars. The marks on my body that were a daily reminder of what they did to me, and I wanted them gone. Somehow, I managed to cover them, and I have ever since.

And he wanted me to show them, hitting me right where he knew he could to get me to do it. He used my desire to repay

him against me, and I felt I had no choice. He saved my life. I could never repay that, but I feel I just did.

But at what cost?

I understand his need to get to Sarah, even in my anger and hurt, I understand it's driving him crazy, just like my need to get to Kade. I would have never asked him to do something like he just did to me though, not the way he did it. It's why I didn't try and stop Darius sooner when he was hitting him, some part of me knew he deserved it, wanting him to hurt like I am. I will come to regret not trying to stop him sooner, but right now I don't. Though I have no idea why Darius did what he did, it's probably just an excuse to hit him, he hasn't liked Josh since he first saw him, so it wouldn't surprise me.

"Can we talk for a second?" he asks, but I pick up my pack and walk by him.

"We need to go, Josh, make sure you have everything we need." I walk down the steps without another word to him, rucksack over my shoulder as the others gather near the front door.

"All good?" Hudson asks, eyeing me with concern. Don't break now, Rhea.

"As I'll ever be, got everything?"

Colten lifts his own pack. "Yeah, as much as we can carry anyway."

"I've taken some extra things I think we might need." Anna shows me her bulging rucksack and a smaller one she has in

her other hand. “You never know what we may need.” She smiles, her curls now in twin braids, but I can’t muster up a smile in return.

“Are you sure about this?” Taylor asks me, and I shrug. I’m not sure about this at all. It has been months since we were last in Eridian, since we were at Wolvorn Castle, and nothing has changed. We don’t have our pack, we don’t have Sarah and we don’t have Kade. We need help, and Gods dammit, trust it to be the Elites who could be that help. If we have to begrudgingly try and seek help from the Elites, then so be it. I just don’t trust them, I don’t trust Darius, but I can’t wait any longer.

“I don’t think we have a choice,” Seb murmurs, tightening his own rucksack and throwing it over his shoulder.

I hear Josh come down the steps behind me. “Time to go then. Are you all sure about coming?”

They nod and we leave Belldame’s home. The paths are silent as we walk over wooden bridges, the only sign of life is ourselves as everyone at Witches Rest sleeps. I hope to come back here soon, but I have no idea what awaits us at Vokheim. The thought has chills trickling down my spine. Are we making a mistake? This could be a trap, a guise to get me to the Highers.

We soon reach the mist and we make our way through it, my heart rate kicking up a notch at what we are about to do. After over two months here at Witches Rest, we are no closer to getting our pack back on our own.

And I want my pack back, I want blood to be spilled, and I want to be free.

I pat my pocket and feel the port stone there, making sure we have a means to escape if we need to.

Belldame waits for us just outside of the mist as the Elites stay further away from the entrance, eyes on us all as we approach her. I can feel Darius's stare on me, his gaze roaming and searching and I hate it. Hate that he can even look at me, and that I can *feel* it.

"Come here, child," Belldame calls, opening her arms for me. I go to her, and let her wrap her arms around me this time. I squeeze her gently. I'll miss the woman for sure. Her stories about my mom and her knowledge about all things have kept me somewhat sane since we arrived. "Be careful." I nod. "You have what I gave you?" Another nod. "Good, when you need to, don't hesitate to use it."

"I won't," I assure her.

She reaches for my face, wrinkled hands on each cheek. "Your mother would be so proud of you." I swallow hard as my eyes sting, but I keep the tears at bay. "Do not fret. I have no doubt this is the path you must now take."

"I'll miss you," I whisper, and I will. She's become like a grandmother to me in the short time we have known each other.

"Dear child, it's not forever, but for now." She releases me, and I give her one last hesitant smile before I turn and walk

toward the Elites, letting the others say their goodbyes.

I keep my head high as I reach them, but I can't look any of them in the eye, feeling ashamed of them seeing the marks on my body. I notice Darius's fingers twitch at his side, the sound of his teeth gnashing, but I still don't look at him. We don't speak, just stay silent as the rest of my pack trickles forward.

"Ready?" Leo asks us.

"Sure," Colten mutters, staying close to Hudson.

Damian pulls out a port stone and we gather around. I step up to Anna, resting my hand on her shoulder lightly, and she gives me a nod just before the feeling of being squeezed tightly, goes through me.

Now or never.

We land on hard stone, the flickering lights of torches bringing light dots to my vision before it clears. Glancing around quickly in a defensive stance, I see that we are in some type of hallway. I shiver at its coldness. It's bare, there's nothing on the walls apart from the torch holders.

"This way," Zaide grunts, and we follow as the Elites head down the long hallway and my nerves start to settle in.

What if they are taking us to a dungeon? I feel for the port stone in my pocket, making sure it's still there.

"We are in the west wing, no other Elites, apart from us and a few others, are allowed this way. The less they know about your presence for now, the better," Damian says.



Because that's comforting, being all alone here with just these guys. Runa bristles inside of me and I don't feel the need to calm her. I'm not calm myself.

Darius opens a door at the end, not saying a word, the hinges creaking as he does. We follow through, entering a spacious room with a large table at the center. A lit fireplace adds warmth to the room with three sofas surrounding it. Large, red rugs with patterns are placed on the floor, and paintings of what looks like Elites are hung on the walls, making my lips curl at the sight. I move closer to one of them, scanning their faces as I feel the weight of others on me. Landing on a male I recognize, my face instantly pales. I suck in a sharp breath, my body tensing as I stare into dark eyes.

Memories threaten to rise, then swallow me whole. Seeing his face up on the wall like he's something to be revered when he did nothing, makes my stomach turn.

I turn away from it, turn away from the memories and halt in my step as I connect with light, green eyes. Darius looks between me and the painting, his brows furrowing, trying to work out what my issue is. I walk by him and take a seat at the large table in here, following the rest of my pack. Taking the pack from my shoulder, I place it down next to me, shuffling forward in my chair and resting my hands on my thighs.

The Elites sit on the other side, Darius taking a seat directly across from me, a mirror image of the last time we sat down together in Eridian. My pack on one side, the Elites on the others.

“Speak,” Darius says. One word. One command.

I try to get comfortable in my seat. “What do you want to know first?”

“Everything.” Asshole.

“Eridian,” Leo finally says. “Let’s start there.”

“No.” Not happening, not yet.

“Then start somewhere,” Darius demands, his fists clenching on top of the table as he rolls his shoulders.

“What do you know about The Elites and the Highers?” I eventually ask after a tense silence. I feel like I’m about to come out of my skin, eyeing the room like something will jump out at any moment. I don’t feel safe here, but then, I haven’t ever really felt truly safe, for even a moment.

My mind wanders back to how it felt to wake up next to Darius, and I quickly put a stop to that thought.

“What does this have anything to do with us?” Damian’s brows furrow, slumping back in his seat. “We were created by the Highers to protect Vrohkaria.”

I shake my head. “The Elites were created to capture Heirs,” I tell them.

“That’s bullshit,” Leo shouts, and I barely suppress a flinch. I’m too on-edge, too mottled-up inside with today’s events.

I stare at him. “Is it?”

“Talk. Now,” Darius grits out, his body tense.

I take a deep breath. “We had one king of Vrohkaria at one time, as I’m sure you all know. My mother used to tell me stories of our Heir history, how we came to be. It’s how the Canaric wolves were made, us Heirs.” I look at Darius. “When the king died, no not died, was murdered, that’s when the Highers came into power. It was the Highers that killed the king and his mate.”

“The Highers at that time came to power because Vrohkaria was in chaos over their deaths, not because they killed them,” Darius says. “The lands needed balance, an authority to help people stabilize and to keep them safe.”

Yeah? And look where that bullshit got us.

“No, they became Highers because a small group of people decided to murder them in cold blood, to become the authority over Vrohkaria, acting like saviors,” I explain. “They were jealous, they wanted what the king and his mate had, the power, the control, but more specifically, they wanted their child, an Heir. They felt injustice that some received special treatment, while others did not. They thought it unfair. So they plotted, bribed, and threatened anyone they could to get close to the king and his mate, to where they stayed for years with them in Wolvorn Castle. They spent all that time earning their trust, only for them to kill them one night and say it was an assassination attempt by their child, an Heir of Zahariss. They made up some bullshit about their child wanting to become sole ruler of the lands and becoming crazed before she killed her parents. That made their child a target, but more importantly, made the Heir of Zahariss a target.” I look

between them as I make sure they are listening to the truth, to what has been passed down along the Zahariss line for as long as anyone can recall.

“The lands were shocked, they loved their king and his mate, but also their Heir to Vrohkaria and Zahariss. But that soon turned into a hunt when she escaped, and the Highers formed the Elites when they couldn’t capture her, and she was nowhere to be found. Years later, after coming out of hiding and being chased across the lands, she’d had enough, she couldn’t hold her anger and grief anymore at what they had done. She returned to Wolvorn Castle to take her revenge on them all, all that hunted her and believed the lies that were told. She went on a rampage to avenge her parents, and innocent lives were lost in her attempt. With killing many innocents who were not guilty, the lands believed what was told of her, of an unstable and dangerous Heir to everyone.”

“Or she went mad with power as it’s said with Heirs.” I give Damian a flat look at his words.

“Be careful with your words, you’re in the presence of two Heirs and if we are so unstable, you might find a knife in your throat.” Damian says nothing to that, but I catch Darius’s small smirk before his shoulders stiffen. I continue. “The daughter managed to kill three Highers in her rage at the time, but ultimately she was captured and taken. Where? No one knew. Cazier’s Heir had already been hunted and subdued. It wasn’t until forty-three years later that the next Heir of Zahariss arrived. In a small village, a female gave birth to a pup, and the Elites tried to drag them away, but she managed to escape

them with her child. A few years later, Cazier's Heir was born to an Alpha's mate. The Alpha helped them escape and he was killed for his refusal to cooperate as to where his mate and son were. The Elites were growing in numbers, and at the Highers' decree, continued to hunt them down whenever a new Heir appeared. Heirs had no choice but to hide."

"How did they capture them if they are so powerful?" Jerrod asks. He leans forward on his arms on the table, his focus solely on me as Zaide sits silently next to him.

"Terbium."

"It's just a metal," Damian scoffs.

"It's a metal that affects Heirs, no one knows why though. They were forbidden to be used by the king and his mate. But when the Highers took over, they allowed it."

"And this metal is the only thing that can hold an Heir?" That was from Leo.

"The metal stops your wolf from coming out, and slows down your healing dramatically." They all tense and look toward Darius, whose eyes haven't left me.

"That can't be right," Damian mutters.

"What Rhea said is true. She wasn't healing from her wounds from Wolvorn Castle, she was going to die if we didn't get them off her. They were infused within the iron cuffs."

"Sebastian," I hiss at him as Darius's whole body stiffens. They don't need to know that.

He shrugs. “They need to fucking know. They need to know how close they were to killing you.”

“The Highers decided, Seb,” I correct, even though I don’t really believe that, but I also don’t think Darius knew that terbium was infused within the iron.

“No,” Taylor disagrees, his eyes hard. “Him.” He nods toward Darius, and I hesitantly look over at him, not sure what I’ll see.

There’s a storm behind his eyes, his fists clenching on top of the table as his nostrils flare. The other Elites look over at him warily as we look at each other, and something flashes in his eyes, something painful. Regret maybe? But I can’t see Darius feeling that sort of thing. It’s kind of too fucking late though, if that is what it was. But Taylor is right, the wounds inflicted by him whipping me, did nearly kill me.

I clear my throat and look away, he doesn’t deserve my attention. “Like I said, the metal slows healing and you’re unable to call your wolf. All you have is your strength, but when that goes, you have nothing.”

“But you managed to use your power in the hall at Wolvorn Castle.” Jerrod tilts his head, resting his elbows on the table.

“I had felt my Heir power since before I was seven, but I suppressed it. With everything that happened at the hall...” I blow out a small breath, refusing to show them any more of the emotions I’m feeling, even though they are right under the surface. Waiting to explode. My magic swirls at the thought and I try to settle it. “I let go of what held me back. That

sudden rush of power, at its fullest was strong enough for me to wield it for a time.” I don’t tell them how it rapidly drained from me, or that I couldn’t control it, they don’t need to know that.

“What did you do to me?” Darius asks, his head tilting in question. My brows furrow. “At the castle.”

“I have no fucking idea, other than my power went into you and your wolf ate it.” I shrug as everyone around the table looks at us with wide eyes.

“Darius’s wolf ate your power? What the fuck?” Leo gasps out.

“I have no idea how she did it, but when my wolf inhaled her power, it was like everything was unlocked. That’s when things became clearer,” Darius murmurs, eyeing me closely.

“Wait.” I sit up straighter. “What do you mean clearer?”

“I couldn’t remember that I was an Heir.” What? “Your powers cleared my mind and I remembered everything. That I was an Heir to Cazier.”

If I did that... “Kade,” I whisper and look at my pack. “What if I can do the same to Kade?”

“Kade is with his family, he’s fine,” Darius tells me, and my head whips back to him.

“He’s not *safe*,” I glare at him. “His memory is wrong. What he said, what he thinks, it’s wrong.”

“He’s with his family, where he should be.”

“I’m his family!” I shake my head, the tendrils of my hair falling in my face. “Those pieces of shit do not deserve him.”

“They’re your family also, something you didn’t tell me,” Darius fires back.

“Why would I have told you?” I spit.

“Because I am the authority, you were to undergo a trial and receive punishment.”

“I think I have given my pound of flesh for my *punishment*,” I growl, and his shoulders tense. I try to settle my anger. “Kade is confused. I think they messed with his memories. If I cleared yours, then maybe I can do the same to him.”

“I doubt that’s the case, and you’re in denial of the shit you have done, but back to the Elites,” Damian grunts and I scowl at him “There is no way the Elites have been created to hunt Heirs. The Elites are here to protect the lands of Vrohkaria.”

I growl at him. This back and forth conversation is getting us nowhere and they are not listening. “They go around the lands on power surges from the Highers witches when they scry. They are not looking for creatures, they are looking for power from the Heirs, waiting until they get a hit and then you guys are sent out. Every time the Highers are hoping it’s an Heir and not a creature. And you have all been trained to capture an Heir and to take them back to the Highers, have you not?”

“We used to be trained in what to do should we come across an Heir,” Zaide grunts, now cleaning a blade on the table. “But since none have been seen in many years, we haven’t had to



worry about running into an Heir, and the Elites were only trained to subdue, not kill.”

“And take them back to the Highers?” I remind them. Their silence answers my question. “What will you do now?” I ask him then look at Darius. “Why hasn’t Charles killed you if Heirs are dangerous and unstable?”

“Charles has his own uses for me,” Darius reluctantly answers.

“Uses? So he keeps an Heir alive over the protection of Vrohkaria? What will the people say?” I snark. “The people are taught as children how bad the Heirs are, the Highers demand it be taught. They are also taught how unstable they are, and are punished if they worship the old Gods, the wolf Gods, instead of the Highers prayer. If Heirs are so bad, why has Charles kept you alive and risked the wrath of the people from the poison he has carried-on teaching,” I scoff. “What a fucking joke.”

“The people aren’t happy, sure. I understand that,” Leo says slowly. “But the whole bullshit about Elites being hunters for Heirs, I don’t fucking believe it.”

“Me neither,” Damian agrees.

“You ask me to share my truths, and once again, you don’t believe a word out of my mouth. What is the point in all of this?” I fume. “You all need to wake up and see what is going on. You would think with how you are all trained, you would notice something isn’t right somewhere. Your minds have been poisoned with lies, just like everyone else.”

“No, we’re just not deluded to some fucking stories your mother made up and told you as a child,” Damian snarls at me and I stand, slamming my hands on the table, my Heir markings appearing.

“Keep my mother out of your mouth, dog, or I will stitch it up,” I growl, Runa echoing it within me.

“Let’s keep on track,” Zaide interrupts me while I stare at Damian with murderous eyes. “We will get nowhere otherwise.”

I stare down Damian until I’m tugged back down into my seat by Josh. *“Let’s continue, there is no point trying to persuade them of this.”*

*“That’s what we came here to do though right? What you wanted?”* I snap back through the link, shrugging out of his hold on me.

The link fizzles out and I turn to Darius, who’s looking between me and Josh through narrow slits. “Stop having a private conversation or I’ll cut that blood link between you two.”

I bristle and peel my lips back at him. I don’t want that, even after what Josh has done. I don’t think I could go through another link being broken.

Darius just holds my stare and smirks, not in the slightest bit threatened by me. I huff and sit back down. Growling to myself.

Gods, this is going to be a long night.

# Fourteen

RHEA

“It’s probably better to start from the Aragnis pack,” Josh chimes in and I squeeze my hands together, my nails digging into my skin. “To start at the beginning.”

Are we really doing this? “I don’t think that’s necessary.”

“Why not?” That question comes from Damian.

“What good will it do?” I bite back.

Darius leans forward, elbows on the tables and hands clasped underneath his chin. “We already know that you didn’t do a ritual that caused the rogures as a child. Did you perform it as an adult?”

“No, I didn’t.”

“If you didn’t—“

“I didn’t have anything to do with the rogures,” I say firmly, holding his gaze. He scans my face for any lies, any deception, but he will find none. His jaw clenches as he squeezes his

hands beneath his chin, looking at me so deeply I feel warmth build in my chest.

“Swear it on the Gods,” he says, and I hold back my surprise.

“I swear on Zahariss and Cazier that I know nothing, and have done nothing, to cause the rogues,” I answer immediately. No hesitation.

A pause, and then he eventually nods. I slump into my chair in relief. He believes me. *Fucking finally.*

“You believe her?” Damian asks, and the other Elites look to their Alpha for an answer.

“I do.”

“How can you be so sure, this could be another lie,” Leo suggests.

“And what would I get out of that?” I fold my arms, glowering at Leo.

“In this, I believe her.” Darius’s tone is firm, unmoving with an undertone of warning. For what, I’m not sure.

“This means the memory stone is wrong and it has been tampered with. The question is, how? Why? If we go through all that you had been accused of at Wolvorn Castle, we might be able to find out who has any reason to produce a crystal to make you look guilty,” Leo says.

I tilt my head. “I can tell you right now who would do that.”

“Who?” he demands.

“The Highers.” Silence. “More specifically Higher Charles, and then my family.”

Zaide grunts while Damian laughs through his words. “You’re joking right? Why in the Gods would the Highers care about you?”

“Isn’t Charles one of your guardians your parents chose for you? Along with Higher Warden?”

“Warden?” My brows pinch together. “I don’t even know who that is.” Then my lips peel back. “My parents choosing to have Charles as my guardian was a mistake, one we all paid the price for.”

“You’re going to have to explain this more,” Darius says. “We are trying to get the truth, no matter what it is. You have to give more than a few words as an answer.”

I tap my fingers along the table, wondering where to even begin. I don’t even want to do this, but we are here and what other choice do we have? Six people against the Highers and the Elites is suicide, never mind being the number one target in Vrohkaria, labeled as a traitor. If we can’t get them on our side all is lost. Even if it’s just to get Sarah, for now.

I’m not sure if us coming here was the right decision, but to gain their help, it has to be done. There is no one else.

“Charles was a very good friend of my parents. He’s been around for as long as I could remember. We all trusted him. My dad even helped him become a Higher.”

“He’s been a Higher for hundreds of years,” Darius points out.

“Then you know how long my parents’ friendship with him was. They didn’t know he would turn on them.”

“How?” Darius asks.

I sigh, looking down at the grain of the wooden table. “The Aragnis pack has produced Heirs for thousands of years, I’m told. My mom was an Heir, she had been for a long time, the longest that I know of any other. Before my seventh birthday, I went outside to play in the woods behind our house like I usually did, collecting lesia flowers as I went. But this time, I overheard something I shouldn’t have,” I choke out, the memories threatening to pull me under. I clear my throat.

“Two people were in the woods, hidden by their cloaks. They said it was time to get to my mom, that it was time to act now. I didn’t understand but I ran. I was scared. I ran back home but they heard me and chased me. They knew I had overheard what they were discussing. I only got away because a wolf came out of the trees, it let me run past it, not interested in me whatsoever. Instead, it went toward those I was running from, enabling me to get home and tell my mom what I heard.”

No one speaks, and I look up. Darius stills, his eyes sharp as he tilts his head at me. The look on his face is indescribable as he’s lost in thought, his eyes clouded.

“Heirs are born as pups,” Zaide questions, and I shake my head and shrug.

“I wasn’t.” I continue on through their confused looks. “A few nights later, Charles came with both Highers and Elites. My dad hadn’t come home yet, which was unlike him. Mom and I tried to fight them off, but there were too many, they were too strong. I was only a child. I was eventually knocked unconscious as they dragged my mom away from me, and I woke up in my basement. Alone. Inside a cage of iron, infused with terbium.”

My pack shifts uncomfortably next to me, and Colten reaches out and squeezes my hand on the table. I squeeze it back before moving away.

“In your home?” Zaide grunts.

I nod, my eyes still on Darius’s now darkened ones. “I don’t need to tell you what happened down there. You have all seen my body, how being in a cage with terbium didn’t let me heal properly and caused the scars you all saw.” I swallow audibly. “If the cage would have just been iron, I wouldn’t have a mark on me, but they didn’t want that, or how quickly an Heir heals.” My vision wavers and I blink rapidly to clear it. “What I will tell you, is that Higher Charles, and a few Elites and members of my family, were involved. I was trapped in my basement, never once being able to leave until Josh found me and helped me escape, just before my eighteenth birthday.”

“But why would they do that?” Leo asks, a horrified look on his face, and Damian looks down at the table, a frown on his face.

I stare into the fireplace across the room, my words detached. “I was the daughter of an Heir, I was to be the next Heir. They were waiting for the moment of my eighteenth birthday when my markings would appear, as they knew I would fully come into my powers. They taunted me about my mom’s death, along with my dad’s, blaming it on me because I overheard them planning to take my mom.” I look back at Darius, trying to hide the pain in my eyes, knowing I’m unsuccessful. “I wasn’t lying when I told you my family was stolen from me. It was always going to happen eventually, but I sped up their plans with what I overheard. I spent many years in... *training* down there,” I spit, gritting my teeth. “Them preparing me to obey their every command, to ready myself to be bred to create powerful children for their use. Or more specifically, Charles’s use.”

Darius stands suddenly, his chair crashing to the floor as his brows pinch together. I stare at him in shock at the sudden movement, apprehension swirling in my stomach. Then I squeeze my eyes shut at the onslaught of bullshit that I know he’s about to throw at me for my *lies*. I wait for the words, wait for any hope of getting Sarah back to go up in flames.

It never comes though, just eerie, tense silence. I peel my eyes open slowly, and watch in confusion as he starts to pace, his hands clenching and unclenching at his sides. I look at his men and they watch him with wide eyes, clearly not knowing what’s up with him either.

“Continue,” Darius demands, his voice barely above a growl, the deepest I have ever heard it.



I move my hands to my thighs, digging them into my legs as I wet my lips. “I was to lay on my back for as long as he saw fit. Patrick, my cousin, was to do the honors of breaking me in, tearing through my virginity to ease Charles’s access into me.” A shiver travels down my spine at the thought. “It was one of his rewards for his help in training me, he got to be the one to use me first. He loved to tell me all the ways he would use, abuse, and break my body. The perfect little plaything. He had waited years to be able to shove his disgusting dick inside of me. He wasn’t allowed until I was eighteen. Didn’t stop him from using my mouth though.” I ignore the way my voice shakes, the way my body starts to tremble, but they wanted to know. So here we are, listening to poor Rhea’s fucking sob story, just so I can help Josh, my brother who just hurt me, get his mate back. The pain of it all is welcomed now, maybe it will swallow me and I can never feel it again.

“Rhea?” Colten asks, his voice full of sadness and I blink slowly, turning my head toward him. Hudson rests a hand on his thigh, and I see him grab it tightly, his knuckles white.

I look over back at Darius, who hasn’t stopped his pacing, but now has what seems to be a dark sheen of mist coating his skin. “He would choke me until I passed out,” I continue. “Even that didn’t stop him. I would wake with either his cock still in my mouth or the evidence that he had been there.” Dark mist surrounds Darius violently as he stops in his tracks, his chest rising and falling rapidly as his men look at him cautiously. “He even reminded me at Wolvorn Castle how he would still get to have me, that he couldn’t wait to—“

“I think that’s enough,” Leo says as Darius practically vibrates on the spot, that mist of his moving over his skin like a river of rage. Is he angry at me for telling him this? Or is he angry that he can’t deny my words as lies after he has seen my body? I finally move my eyes from Darius to Leo.

“Do you also want to know how sometimes Patrick would bring a friend down, specifically an Elite?” My voice cracks. “How they would take turns with my mouth, touch my body for their own enjoyment and then add more scars to it?” I look at Damian. “Again, where is that Elite honor you so proudly declared?”

He swallows roughly, and I clench my eyes shut, my body shaking uncontrollably as I try to rub my sweaty skin where I can still feel their touches on my body. “No more, Rhea, I think they understand,” Josh whispers, and I look at him for the first time since he guilted me into revealing my body to them.

I ignore the worry in his gray eyes, ignore that everyone can see how speaking of these things has an affect on me. But then anger rises within me. At myself for showing how this affects me, at them for making me feel I have no choice but to tell them, and at Josh for causing it.

At Darius for not believing me, at the Highers for what they did, the Elites, my family.

“This is what they wanted to hear, is it not?” I snap at Josh. “This is what you wanted them to know after I showed them what was done to me. Do not fucking tell me ‘no more’ when

all I give is more! More, more, more.” I bang on the table with my last words and stand, pushing my chair back and feeling my power rush through me, uncontained as my breaths become ragged. “I give every fucking thing I possibly can to anyone who deserves it. I showed them what they did to my body so they would help us get Sarah, because you asked that of me. I agreed to stay in Eridian and help others, bring them in and make sure they had some sort of life because it was the best decision for you, Kade, and Cassie. They needed a home and stability, so we stayed. *I* stayed. Even though every time a new person would come in and try and touch me, all I wanted to do was run and never fucking turn back, but I couldn’t, because they needed Eridian as much as we did. I do everything I can, and I have always done more, no matter how much I don’t want to, no matter how much my soul cries for the death on my hands that I have had to take to keep us safe, but it was all for fucking *nothing*.” I look at Darius, tears falling from my eyes, and I wipe them away angrily, growling at myself as he now stands still, his focus solely on me. I laugh, but it’s weak.

“The day I went into The Deadlands and planned to kill you all? I did it to protect the secret that was Eridian, to protect my pack. The Highers and Elites would drag them back to where they *escaped* from.” I point at Taylor. “They wanted to pin the murder of a woman on him, that an Elite killed after having too much to drink, and she refused his advances. Taylor stepped in to save the woman, but it was too late and Taylor was accused of her murder. They were going to sentence him

to death. He escaped and came to Eridian.” I point at Anna. “Blood Witch, that’s it. She’s not dangerous, but she fucking can be if she needs to be. She came to Eridian after she was left, tied to a post in a town she had stayed in for a little while, stones thrown at her for weeks and weeks. All she wanted to do was buy new healing ingredients she was experimenting with as her mother was sick and she couldn’t heal her with what she had. She risked making the journey and got abused for weeks, then her mother died because she couldn’t get back to her with the healing ingredients in time. She escaped to Eridian.”

I point at Seb. “Accused of raping and killing his mate, and his mate’s family nearly killed him and left him to rot in the bottom of an empty well, over something he didn’t do. He escaped and came to Eridian.” I point at Hudson, my hand now shaking, my body vibrating with everything pouring out of me. I can’t stop it. “He didn’t want a pack, didn’t want to declare a home to the Highers and was a lone wolf. He wanted to make his own choices in life. The Highers don’t accept that, so they tried to force him into confinement if he didn’t choose a pack to stay with. He escaped to Eridian.” I point at Colten. “His family left him for dead because he prefers men over women, and he refused to fuck a woman to create offspring in their bloodline. He didn’t turn up to the rite of passage to be an Elite because he could barely move, and was drowning in his own blood from the hands of his own father. He escaped to Eridian.” My breaths become fast pants, struggling to take a full breath, but I don’t stop. “Sybill and Sam escaped from

Sam's dad, who used to beat them daily. Oscar and Katy would be locked in a cupboard while Oscar's dad fucked other women in their home, then drag Katy out when he wanted to abuse her. Sarah." I laugh through my tears, but it doesn't sound right to my own ears. I'm too far gone in all the emotions running through me, feeling too much, hating too much, hurting too. Fucking. Much.

"Sarah. Drugged and raped, repeatedly by her own fucking pack, and when we found out about her, a plan was put in place to *save* her and bring her to Eridian. All who lived in Eridian escaped from the monsters in plain sight." I look at Josh then, my chosen brother. "Josh helped me escape my pack, he got me out of the cage I was kept inside of in my basement. I went to the kitchen and saw the knife my father gave me before my seventh birthday. I couldn't believe I saw it, but it was like he was guiding me, letting me know it was now or never and gave me the hope I needed. When I made the split decision to quickly grab the only thing I had left of him, that's when I saw Kade." I let out a sob as I waver on my feet, numbness crawling up my body as my magic swirls violently inside of me. Josh stands with the rest of my pack, and when he reaches out to me, I push his hand away and stumble back, not wanting him to touch me. Not wanting *anyone* to touch me.

"Kade was chained to the family dining table that was made with so much love by my mom and dad, he was half-dead, starved and staring out into nothing. Josh and I managed to get the chain off of him and take him with us. I wouldn't leave my

cousin in the hands of monsters.” I let out a hollow sound, like a wounded animal. When I look toward Darius, his eyes are filled with concern and it makes me laugh. Laugh, and laugh, and laugh. “But that’s what happened anyway, didn’t it?” I look at each of the Elites in their eyes, until my ice blues land on fresh green once again. “You forced my hand when you came with the Elites in the Deadlands. And then we were exposed, and my pack was split up, pups taken from their moms, two died, and Kaden is in the hands of people that will only hurt and use him. They want him to rape women, to see if he can produce an Heir with being of my family’s bloodline. An *Heir* bloodline. They taunted me with it when he was born, bringing him down and forcing me to do things or they would hurt him.”

I step away from the table, the room shaking as my power comes to the surface, my markings pulsing as the ice-blue tendrils swish around me, lashing out uncontrollably. The fire goes out, empty chairs fly through the air and crash into the walls as an unseen wind travels through the room. I keep backing up until my shoulders connect with something solid, not sure what my power is doing, but not caring as everything within me is unsettled, *wild*.

*Furious.*

“All of it was for fucking nothing, wasn’t it?” I shout, shaking my head as they all look at me, look at the weakness I’m showing. “Because this is where we are now. Sarah is with my cousin, Kade with his parents, my pack is Gods knows where. More bodies are piling up, the rogues are getting

worse and the whole of Vrohkaria thinks I did it!” I scream. “Charles knows I’m alive, along with my family and what the fuck am I supposed to do!? He will not stop until he has me, and that is not an option. I don’t know why he’s obsessed with Heirs, I don’t know why he did what he did, I don’t know why he killed my parents. He has taken pups from their families since I’ve been gone, to see if they have any traits of being an Heir. Training them like he did me, to get what he wants. And I just hid, to keep my own ass safe!” I pull at my hair until I fling my head back, banging it against the wall, but I feel no pain. “And you all just stood there too, the fucking Elites, protectors of Vrohkaria, time and time again while this has been going on under your noses. And then you took us to Wolvorn Castle. Fuck you,” I wheeze out, the words choking out of me. “Fuck all of you.”

I slump in defeat against the wall at my back, my breathing shallow and raspy, and I know I’m not getting enough air in, I know I’m not fucking breathing properly. My power dwindles, coming back into my body as the air stills. Furniture crashes to the floor and there is utter silence in the room, just a few wide eyes.

Josh rushes from his seat, his face blurry as he steps in front of me. His mouth is moving but I hear nothing at all, just silence as black dots coat my vision.

The next thing I know, the room tilts and the floor is rushing toward me, my face heading directly for the stone floor. Just before I lose consciousness, a soft, black mist encases me, turning the world completely black and I let it take me.

I hope it suffocates me so I can find some peace for a little while.



# Fifteen

DARIUS

I watch Rhea sleep, her chest rising and falling with each breath she takes. A sound rumbles within me as I look at her. She looks so small, so fragile. My chest tightens at the sight.

All that she told us, all that she said... My back teeth grind together. She wasn't lying, she was telling the truth. All this time she was telling the truth.

We have been blind to a lot of things over the years, doing the Highers bidding, going where they commanded when their witches pointed us in a direction. We followed, no questions asked. Not anymore.

I didn't enjoy being the Highers weapon, I just wanted to do what has been instilled in me since I was a young boy. To protect Vrohkaria, the people. When did we lose sight of that along the way? That's what I had made my Elites out to be, protectors, and we have failed by following blindly and not asking questions.

The Highers are not fit to rule if this is what they have been doing, and are still doing with what Rhea has told us. How can this carry on? How have I been so fucking oblivious?

Anger swells inside of me and my power comes out of my hands. I look down at it, watch as it flows over my knuckles and between my fingers. What good is it being an Heir after what I have done, or didn't do?

I have learned about the wolf Gods all my life, reading texts and old scrolls, always curious about them, though Cazier was said to have gone mad. But since Wolvorn Castle, I dove deeper, learning everything I could. I know now that I can't trust everything I have read. History is always written by the victor, after all.

I glance at Rhea again, another sound leaving me. It's concern and rightness. Seeing her in my bed, in my room, in my home, even under these circumstances, it feels like it's meant to be. Having her close and in my space does something to me I have never felt before. Or ever wanted to feel.

Why does this need to keep her here fill me with this possessiveness? I want her scent to mingle with mine, to intertwine so we can't tell the difference and our scent becomes *ours*. Something more, something heady, sweet and heavy.

Just one smell of either of us, and others would know who we belong to. Whether I like it or not, whether she likes it or not, I belong to her now. I have since The Deadlands, maybe even before then with what she told us earlier.

I sigh and run my hands down my face, unable to sleep but wanting to stay awake anyway to watch her, to make sure she's okay. To have her in my sight after going so long without seeing her. I was shocked when we came across her near the Aragnis pack, but what shocked me more were her words ever since then in the dining room. I never expected her truth to be what she told us. Never thought, never imagined.

I've been seething in anger since she collapsed and I caught her, wrapped her in my power and brought her to my room. All that she had endured as a child, all that she has lost... It's safe to say we all fucked up.

*I fucked up.*

Just thinking about the whip in my hand, the way her body tensed, preparing for another hit, the way her back bowed, and flinched, and shook after each strike makes me want to tear a hole in the wall and rage across the lands.

And then rage upon myself.

It's no one's fault but my own. As the Alpha of the Elites, I didn't believe her, I didn't want to listen to her, not after that fucking memory crystal. My grief over my mother and baby sister being murdered by rogues clouded my judgment, and with that, I couldn't see the truth. *Her* truth.

I now believe her. Her words, what she did to survive, *how* she fucking survived. No one can fake the emotions pouring off of her, no matter how skilled in manipulating they are. I felt every single fucking one of them in my bones.

The anger doesn't settle knowing I've been some sort of fucking puppet to the Highers's whims, and have been lied to for years. I knew they weren't the best for Vrohkaria, with the taxes they declare and the way they haven't let anyone into the castle for sanctuary since the rogues. I just didn't imagine how deep their atrocities ran.

Rhea whimpers in her sleep, and my head snaps up to her face. Her pretty features are twisted in something like pain. I rise from my spot in the chair, silently rounding the bed and sitting beside her, careful not to disturb her. The dark circles beneath her eyes tell me all I need to know about her sleepless nights. Hardly any according to Anna when I asked how she had been. She eventually told me, begrudgingly, how things are. I know she's not eating either, not taking care of herself, and can I blame her? But I'll make sure she eats, make sure she sleeps and make sure that I will help her. Whether she likes it or not. She may hate me, and I'm angry at her for so many things that seem pointless, but you cannot be released from what we are, and that will be to my advantage.

She may think of me as her enemy, and in some ways, we still are, and I know I have no right to be anything to her, but she is stuck with me until it is impossible.

I'm selfish, undeserving in this, but there is no other option, I won't allow it.

My brows draw together at the thought, but instead of shoving it away, I accept it a little this time.

A whine leaves her, moving something painful within me. She mumbles words I can't quite hear, so I move a little closer. "Lesia flowers." I reach forward, touching a gentle finger to her cheek and soothe her with my touch. Drax comes to the surface, and I can feel her wolf underneath, greeting each other, comforting. She relaxes instantly, sighing into the pillow and burrowing deeper into it. Into my scent. I can't help but feel a sense of pride at that. I run my fingers over her loose hair, drawing it back from her face and feeling the silky strands run through my fingers, before I do it all over again.

A moan, so soft I barely hear it coming from her, and my hand stills, my gaze on her face to see if I woke her, but her pretty, ice-blue eyes stay hidden. So I continue, moving my hand from her hair and down to her neck, feeling her pulse, steady and relaxed under my fingers. I wonder if she realizes that I have done this many times before in Eridian. I would wait until she was asleep in her room and sneak in, unable to stay away, and I would sit on the bed like I am now, and just touch her. The need to do so was undeniable, just like it is now. She was none the wiser of my obsession with her. Maybe now it's time to change that.

Rhea didn't know that I would leave a few hours before sunrise to make sure my scent didn't linger, making my way to my own room and hearing her wake before I would go downstairs. I was furious at first that I could just walk in and she wouldn't wake up, what if someone tried to attack her? But now I know it's because deep down, I wasn't a threat to her, or at least, I shouldn't have been.

We were both wrong in that assumption after what I did.

A quiet knock sounds at the door, and I scowl at it, daring anyone to disturb her from her much-needed rest. With one last look at Rhea, I stand and storm silently toward it. Opening it up, Josh stands on the other side, hand raised like he's going to knock again, but I slap it aside and growl quietly. When he begins to open his mouth to speak, I shove him back with a hand on his chest, none too gently, and he hits the opposite wall. The little shit should be grateful his head is still on his shoulders.

I close the door quietly behind me and walk further down the hall, entering a sitting room, knowing he's following like a kicked puppy. I grab a wooden cup from the table at the back of the room and fill it to the brim with mead, not offering one to him.

He can get fucked.

I move toward the fire and sit down in one of the chairs there, my legs spread out in front of me as I take a drink, tasting its sweetness sliding down my throat as I relax back into the cushion and close my eyes.

I hear Josh take a seat across from me, feel his nervousness, and it pisses me off more.

“What the fuck do you want?” He's either stupid or brave coming to me, alone like this. Especially when I want his head hung from my Keep walls. Rhea is the only thing keeping him breathing.

My little wolf has a hold on me whether *I* like it or not.

“Is she okay?” he asks.

“She will be.”

“I don’t blame you for hitting me, shit, for choking the life out of me,” he eventually says after a long pause.

“I don’t really care what you think,” I grunt, but satisfaction swirls inside of me at seeing his bruised face.

“I don’t doubt you do, just, what is she to you?” I peel my eyes open at his question, arching a brow.

She hasn’t told him.

“That’s none of your concern.” He has no right to ask me this, and I have no intention of telling him. Not even my own brothers know, though they suspect.

He releases his own sigh and I narrow my eyes on him, watching him look into the fire with a frown on his face. “Do you believe her?” he asks, his gaze still on the flames.

“I do,” I tell him, my own eyes going to the fireplace as I take another drink, listening to the crackle of the wood.

His breath whooshes out of him in a rush, and he runs his hands down his thighs. “She’s a good woman,” he murmurs, and I tense, my eyes swinging to him in warning.

“You want her?” I practically growl the question, my body locking up to prepare to slit his throat there and then, uncaring what he means to Rhea. Even if she’s pissed at him right now.

His wide, gray eyes come to me, sputtering until he finally gets the words out. “Fuck no. No, no, no.” I arch a brow at him. “Not that anyone wouldn’t be lucky to have her, she’s great.” I frown, possessiveness rising within me. “Gods,” he sighs, “this isn’t going well.” He leans back in his seat, his brows drawn together. “She’s like my sister, we may not be blood related, but we treat each other as siblings. She’s important to me.”

My eyes narrow. “Yet you let her bare herself to us, guilted her into it. I heard what you said to her.” He hangs his head, shame spreading across his face. Good, the asshole deserves to feel like shit for what he did.

“I don’t know why I did that. I just needed you all to see we aren’t the bad guys here, and we needed something, anything to give us some kind of hope that you can help us. Even if we didn’t want it, even after what you have done.” His hands fist in his lap. “We are nothing compared to the Elites and the Highers, anything we would have attempted would have been suicide, I realized that too late after I directed my anger at Rhea. We needed help, she needed help, and in that moment, that was the only way I could think how to.”

“There could have been other ways” I snap, and it’s his turn to raise a brow.

“I don’t think there could have been anything else we could have done to convince you. You didn’t listen at Wolvorn Castle, you didn’t listen in Eridian. The price of you now *hearing* us is high, especially for Rhea,” he mumbles and my



shoulders lock. “I did that to her, and although you believe her now, believe us, I wonder if the cost was too much for her to bear, never mind myself. I wouldn’t be surprised if she never speaks to me again.” His words come out pained. Good.

“I rather she wouldn’t.” All the better if she hates him.

“There is nothing going on between us, you don’t have to get possessive over her, but we are close, or...we were.”

“You had your dick in her, what’s to say you don’t want her again.” My eyes flash black at the thought, Drax growling within me.

He scowls. “How the fuck do you know that?” I keep my stare blank, and he huffs. “It was a one-time thing, and I did that for her. Gods, it was barely anything. A quick in and out.”

Now I scowl. “Are you telling me you just shoved your cock in her and that was that.” If this bastard hurt her...

“You could put it like that, I guess.” He shuffles in his seat, uncomfortable. “I took care of her, I was gentle and that was it. She wanted it over with and trusted me to do that, and I did. I’m not sorry for it, not when her reason was that she wanted it to be her choice, well as much as she can. She was scared the Highers or her family would find her, and that choice would be taken away. How could I not help her?”

My hand clenches around the cup, hating that she thought she had to choose him to be her first, over being fucking raped. It should have been me, it should have been mine, and they took that choice away from both of us.

“I would do anything for her,” he whispers.

“Sounds like more than brotherly love to me.”

He shakes his head. “For fuck’s sake. It’s not, I don’t see her that way. She’s like my sister. No way would I do that again, even if she asks it of me. Especially not now.” His gaze goes back to the fire, and I read between the lines.

Not now since Sarah it seems. I saw the way he watched her at Wolvorn Castle, the desperation in his eyes as she stood in front of the Highers with her father. I thought she was scared to be around the pack that had taken her. Now, I see it differently.

I take another drink, my glare still on the side of his face, trying not to rip it off at the thought of his dick anywhere near her.

“Rhea is the strongest person I know, but right now, she needs more than just herself. When I first rescued her from our old pack, she was a mess. Bloodied, cut, burned, slashed, thin, weak.” He releases a shaky breath, his eyes turning cloudy. “I could go on and on about her injuries, tell you in detail of every single fucking mark they put on her body. You only saw the aftermath, I saw it first hand. Even so, she still stood tall, held Kade in her arms, and she still killed to help us survive as we escaped out of the Aragnis Pack.”

My body reacts uncontrollably to the thought of her like that, and a growl builds up in my chest, I’m barely able to swallow it back down. I hate what’s she’s doing to me, but I can’t fucking help myself.

“How did you find her in the basement?” I ask him, trying to calm my rage, my regret.

“It was by chance,” he sighs. “By fucking sheer luck. I’m an orphan, my parents were killed when I was young and I was always around Rhea’s parents’ house. They kind of took me in, but I didn’t stay at their house. I lived with some other orphans, but I knew that house like it was my own. After Paul told the Aragnis pack that Alpha Derrik and his mate had died with Rhea, I was distraught. They were my chosen family, and I like to think they chose me too for the time we had together. It was coming up to what would have been Rhea’s eighteenth birthday. I was still grieving their loss after so many years, so I went to their old home. I don’t know why I did, I just wanted to be close to them again. The basement had a small, long window that Rhea and I used to sneak out of to play, and I wondered if Alpha Paul had put their belongings down there as I never saw anything leave that house. I thought maybe I could find something of them, something small that I could keep.” His hands tremble as he shakes his head. “I found Rhea instead.”

I drain my cup in one go and listen to him, listen to him tell me all about what happened at her old pack, her home, and I feel the walls closing in. Feel the rage building once again as I stand quickly and go to grab another drink.

He continues. “She was in a cage, bloody from what I could tell as it was so dark, only a small lantern on a table. I didn’t know who it was at first, I was shocked, mortified that Alpha Paul had someone down there, I didn’t understand. Was it a

prisoner? A pack member being punished? I didn't know but I wanted to see who it was, so I managed to get the window open and get inside. It was quiet, the air suffocatingly still, like death lingered there. The person in the cage wasn't moving, and didn't react to my presence at all. Just laying still on the floor. I thought they were dead. It wasn't until I eventually went up to the bars, crouched down that I saw someone who I thought had been dead for *years*."

I pour another large drink, also knocking it back in one go before filling it up again and moving back to my seat. Josh's eyes are on the wall, locked in his memories and I can only imagine what Rhea looked like at nearly eighteen, locked in a cage for years. His story matches what she told me about being in her basement.

"I managed to reach through the bars and gently shake her awake. It's like she didn't see me at first, her eyes were dead, cold, full of so much fucking pain. Then she whispered my name and tears fell from her eyes, and I vowed I would get her out of there. I didn't understand how she was alive, why we were told she was dead, why the fuck she was in a cage?" he growls, his body tensing. "At that moment it didn't matter, I just needed to get her out of there. Over the next two weeks, I visited her as much as I could, and that's when she told me bits of what happened the night everything went to shit. It would be years though until I got the full story out of her, though I don't know everything. What she told you all in the dining room, some of that was new to me too, about how they..." He trails off and my fingers tighten around my cup.

How they raped her. How they shoved their dicks in places it wasn't wanted, how they touched her with hands that shouldn't have.

*Soon*, I think to myself. I will have their dicks and fingers removed from their bodies.

“She wasn't the Rhea I knew as a child,” he goes on. “Carefree, bright, so curious about the world that she would drag me off to explore and discover new things. They took her light from her and tainted it with darkness, with pain and suffering.”

Is that what Rhea used to be like? Full of light and laughter? My mother and Isabell flash through my mind. They were like that, even Isabell, as young as she was. Her innocence was pure and warm before the rogues killed her, and I didn't have a little sister to crawl all over me anymore, or climb on my back, wanting me to play.

I would have given anything to have that back, would Rhea give anything to have herself back?

“How did you get out?” I ask him, forcing the memories of my family from my mind.

“I set fire in one of our crop fields, big enough to have most of the pack needed to put it out, and to get the attention of Alpha Paul and his family to leave the house, and they did. I rushed inside, straight to the basement, took the key off the table, and got her the fuck out. It wasn't until we made it back up the steps and through the basement door that Rhea noticed Kade there. I didn't even fucking see him. She refused to leave

him, and neither would I. We got his chains off and snuck out the house and toward the boundary of Aragnis territory. That's when we ran into two Aragnis guards. I fought them as best I could, but they were a lot stronger than me. Rhea snuck up behind one of them and shoved her knife in their throat, the other ran off. That was her first kill, the first of many to survive."

"How many has she killed?"

He narrows his eyes on me. "Do not judge her, any life she has taken was to keep her alive, or for Kade, Cassie, and I to live. We both did what we had to do. Including when we sent the bora to you in The Deadlands." I know that now.

I'm not judging her, not after what they have both told me and I'd seen for myself what she has been through. I can't blame her for surviving, and can't deny the sense of pride that goes through me over my fierce, little wolf doing what she needed to do. To stay alive long enough to reach me.

That's what the Gods intended, for us to meet, at least according to Solvier when he spoke to me in Eridian. He told me that I would protect her at all costs and to prepare for what I needed to do. I didn't understand at the time, didn't think anything of it.

Now I understand everything.

"Who is Cassie?" I hadn't heard that name in Eridian.

"She was Kade's mate." The pup's? "She died. Rogures." I look away from him.

“Just,” Josh trails off, elbows on his knees as he looks at me. “Don’t hurt her, not anymore.” I tense, my eyes narrowing into slits. “You fucking whipped her at Wolvorn Castle, I don’t understand how you could fucking do that after you helped her through her heat. I’m not sure you understand the importance of her letting you near her body, never mind in it, but I do. If you care for her—“

“I don’t.” She is my obsession sent from the Gods. My responsibility. Ignore the lie rolling off my tongue.

“Sure, we will go with that,” he scoffs, before sighing and leaning back in his chair. “I saw you after you whipped her unconscious. Your body remained calmed, but your eyes betrayed your thoughts before you could hide them. You made sure she was breathing, made sure she was still alive when you had finished. I wanted to kill you at that moment, I still do. How could you do that to her because of lies from poisoned tongues? She is the best person I know. My family, sister, best friend, and all she has ever done is help others and done nothing for herself. I need to know I can trust you with her.”

I take another drink and lean forward. “Trust me to do what exactly?”

His jaw ticks. “Not to hurt her again, to believe her words, always, and help her. You’re an Heir, you both are, and I suspect you know more about that than she does, at least where your power is concerned.”

I watch him watch me, seeing the determination in his eyes that if I say no, he will unsheathe the knife from his back

pocket that I know he has there, and try to take me out, even though he would know he can't win. This is what Rhea does to people, makes them lay down their life to protect her, like she does to protect them. I have to admire the balls of the fucker, but fortunately, I'm grateful she has people around her that would protect her.

"I won't do anything to hurt her like that," I begrudgingly admit to him. I would never whip her again, never mar her flesh, never cut, never slice, never cause her pain like that.

"But other ways of hurting her?" He tilts his head curiously.

"She likes it," I smirk, taking another drink.

"Gross, I do not need to know that." He shakes his head.

"Though it will be fun to watch you try and get in her pants. She would cut off your balls."

"I have my ways." And I do. She's a puddle when I get my hands on her, unable to deny what we have, whether we both wanted it or not. We are tethered, so we may as well enjoy some things that come with that.

"Be careful with her, Darius," he warns, and my nostrils flare at his tone. Who does he think he's talking to like that? "She would kill me for saying this, but at this point, you may be the only one that could help her. She may be tough on the outside, but when she lets you in, when her walls are down, you will see what kind of person she truly is. She's hurting really bad, more than she will ever let anyone know. I know her enough to know she's one nudge away from either doing something really stupid, or shutting down. If she shuts down



Darius, we've all lost her. I don't think you want that, do you?"

I say nothing, but the little shit can see clearly that I don't want that. He's more observant than he lets on, just like Zaide.

"I've told you all of this in the hope that we can all work together, and get not just Sarah back, but our pack too. I don't know what you plan to do regarding the Highers now you know what you do, but know that she is out for blood, we all are. Rhea hates me right now, so why not have her hate me more if the price is what I deserve, but also, a chance to save her from the Highers. They cannot have her, Darius."

"They won't." I vow to myself, and we stare at each other, letting him see the truth for himself.

He nods, satisfied and gets up. "I hope you keep this vow this time, Darius, because if they have her, all is lost." He leaves without another word, and I'm left alone with my own thoughts.

Everything has changed in a few months. The Elites are apparently made to hunt Heirs, as Zaide confirmed, the Highers are now enemies like the rogures, and they lied about the memory crystal that I still need to show Rhea.

The biggest change of all is now I will accept my need to protect her at all costs. An instinct I can't ignore anymore. I have to go against my father's last wishes to do so, his wish to do what Lord Higher Charles asks of me, but I've had enough of being his lackey.

Many changes are coming, we just have to survive them.

But first, I have to make Rhea sheath her claws and accept her new life. One with me in it.

Permanently.

But first.

*“Meet me in the basement,”* I say down the link, moving out of the room and following the hallway.

A pause. *“We went there just two nights ago,”* Leo replies back.

*“I’ll be there soon.”*

*“Brother—“*

*“Now, Leo.”* He sighs down the link, but I know he will do what I asked.

*“You don’t need to do this, Darius.”*

Yes, I do. Now more than ever.

# Sixteen

RHEA

My eyes flutter open and I blink rapidly, trying to clear the fog that's heavy on my mind. I groan and bring a hand to my head as pain lances through it, feeling like it's splitting me open. I sit up slowly, clenching my eyes shut and feel softness beneath, and covering me. I sigh at the feeling, running my fingers over it. I passed out again, great.

I suddenly freeze, my fingers stilling as I sense *him* nearby. I breathe deep, taking in his scent and wrapping it around me. I can't help but take comfort in it, even though I don't want to.

Why him?

Why does he have this effect on me and why do I care when I hate what he did, how he questions me, how he sees me. How he makes me *feel*.

I can't handle him giving me shit right now. His questions or his eyes on me like they search inside of me, reaching the very depths of myself that no one but him has been able to see before.

I just want to rest. No, I want to go back to Eridian where everything was fine and simple. I was living life as best as I could, surviving, and I was mostly happy. But most of all I was safe, we were safe.

Now I don't think there is any place in Vrohkaria that is safe for me, or my pack.

I have a target on my back, but so do the Highers.

The thought reminds me of when we went to a village after Belldame got the cuffs off my wrists. Word that a Higher was there from those who went out to collect supplies. Higher Aiden was drunk off his paws when we found him, unable to sense the danger that was me, lurking in the dark. I gave him the same mercy they gave Josie and Danny. I snuck up behind him and slit his throat. Then we ported his corpse back to Witches Rest, where he was fed to those pink fish I first saw when entering there. Riets. Who knew they had sharp teeth hidden in their mouths and a bottomless appetite. That was my first Highers kill. Five more to go.

It was eye opening though, to be out into the lands. I hadn't been out into the lands since before we came to Eridian, and so much had changed from when I viewed it as a little girl when I was allowed to. People were starving, fighting with themselves over food and materials, and children were crying. Just like the sight of those at the last village we went to. So much suffering and destruction is left in the rogures' wake when they attack. Is this what Vrohkaria has been like since I hid myself away?

I realize how blind I have been, or in denial. Edward always updated me on what was happening in Vrohkaria, I don't know why he felt the need to, but I never asked him to stop. He told me of villages and towns, how the rogures were growing in numbers, on how the Lord Highers were demanding more payment for their so-called protection against these beasts.

And I didn't realize it was this bad.

And what good did the Highers' so-called protection do? It did nothing but leave people with even lower supplies after the rogures kill, tear and ravage anything they can get their teeth on.

I remember my face was attached to the wooden board and there was a script along with it. Telling me my name, who I was and that I was dangerous and unhinged. If I was spotted, do not approach but contact a member of authority straight away to catch me.

But I'm caught now, in the Elites keep, and I have no choice but to acknowledge that I'm not alone. He won't let me be alone.

Just leave me alone!

“Little wolf?”

How dare he call me that, how dare he even show himself in my presence. He doesn't deserve anything less than pain and hate and rage after what he has done.

He sighs, then moves closer. I tense, pressing deeper into the softness. Let me sink in it, I think, let it wrap me up so I can

just...be.

I feel him sit, feel heat spreading along my leg that he is so close to touching. “You need your rest,” he says. “But I also need to see those eyes of yours.” Ha, why? So I can once again be locked in his gaze and my resolve weakened? Because if the Gods hadn’t given me enough to survive though, they gave me *him*. My weakness, my downfall.

Just like I knew he would be.

Something cool strokes over my hand, my body locks up, and then relaxes. I feel his magic gently roaming over the back of my hand, like a greeting. My fingers flex, and it pushes between them before going to my palm. My heart thumps heavily within my chest, and tears prickle behind my closed eyes at what it’s doing. It wants to comfort, soothe me, and dammit, I let it. I raise my hand a little, letting it fully move all over my hand and then gently place it back down on the softness. It’s like it’s holding me, seeping into my skin. I feel my own magic, just under the surface, instinctively moving toward it. I feel the moment they press against each other, feel the moment I release a breath as Darius echoes it.

The connection thrives like lightning inside of me, and I clench my hand around it, keeping it in my grip as it swirls against my palm. Like-caressing-like. The other thing that is the same as me, but different throughout the whole of the lands, and it’s attached to the enemy, *is* the enemy.

I feel a sob bubble up my throat, and I unclench my hand, batting his magic away and roll over, my back toward him. I

feel the moment he calls his magic back, feel the tension in the air, but I can't do it. It's a lie.

I grab what feels like furs and burrow against it, pulling it over my head as I try and come out of the feeling of hopelessness. And although I feel that, rage is simmering just under the surface, ready to rise and boil over. I just need a little more time before it's ready, a little more time to rest and then I will get out of here.

We shouldn't have come to this keep, we should have stayed at Witches Rest and figured out what to do. Found somewhere else to stay where Darius cannot find me and then made plans to figure out how to get Kade and our pack back.

There has to be others out there that go against the Highers's ruling, that hates them as much as we do. The number of people we have rescued over the years, there must be so many more of them, wanting a new life, wanting revenge.

Because even though most are not directly affected by the Highers, their laws do not protect them, they just take more of their food and leave them to fend off the rogues themselves.

So maybe we can still get Sarah, and then we will go and look for others who are willing to fight for the lands, who will help right the wrong and hopefully not be scared of an Heir.

Maybe some will welcome me. maybe they will.. like me. Forgive me for hiding.

I don't know, but I need to try, it is the least I can do for all those that have suffered at the hands of the Highers because of

my absence.

I hear Darius move, and I burrow deeper. When I feel a hand on my shoulder though the furs, I want the ground to swallow me and he growls beneath his breath. I wait for what's to come. A shove, or ripping the furs off of me and demanding answers.

None of this comes though. "I'll let you rest more and bring up some food later." And then he's gone. His presence disappearing from the room.

I think to myself I should get up, go to the door I just heard close, and make a run for it.

But I'm just so tired.

I snuggle down.

Just a quick rest and then I will go. I will go when my magic recovers from my outburst and get my pack that are here, get Sarah, and disappear, never to see Darius again unless it's on a battlefield.



I don't go though. Darius comes to me everyday and I ignore him. He talks to me, touches my shoulder underneath the furs, my legs, feet. Still I don't say a word.

And I don't hear anyone but him.

I don't smell anyone but him.

I don't sense anyone but him.



Just always... him.

# Seventeen

DARIUS

She won't talk to me, look at me. Fuck, she barely breathes in my direction, always rolling away from me. It's been days since I saw her eyes, since she spoke a single word to me and I feel... restless.

Drax growls, his back turned from me, and I growl back. What does he want me to do? I'm trying to be patient, trying to give her time, but it's wearing thin. She's exhausted, and not eating won't help that. Everything I have put on the table, she doesn't even touch. I've tried to place it on the bed and leave, but when I come back, it's still there untouched. I've even resisted the urge to sleep next to her, just so she can feel like she can come out of this... slump. But again, nothing is working.

I've had enough. I make my way down to the dining room. The smell of meat and vegetables hit me as soon as I pass through the door.

"Still the same?" Damian asks, the look of concern in his eyes unusual for the Heir of Zahariss. But since we have all

learned about what she has been through, even Leo has been asking about her.

I shake my head and grab a plate, then begin filling it with food for her. She will eat today. Whether she likes it or not.

“Maybe if you would let us see her, she may be inclined to talk, to *eat*.” I ignore Taylor and add more meat to the pile. It’s elk, boiled specifically as I requested, so it’s soft and easy to swallow.

“Darius!” Josh snarls, and slams his fork down on his plate. I pause, my hand hovering over the plate and I slowly, so slowly turn my eyes to him.

He looks ruffled, his bun askew at the back of his head and his eyes tired. I look at the other members of the pack and see the same exhausted look.

“What,” I grit out.

“Let us see her.”

“No.”

“This is ridiculous,” he says. “It would be for her benefit. We can get her to eat.”

“No.” She will eat from my hand or no others.

“I have seen the plates come back empty, what you are doing is not working. She doesn’t want anything to do with you,” Sebastian spits, and I resist the urge to put him through a wall.

“Brother,” Leo says, and my eyes swing toward him. I shake my head and grab more meat.

“You would think he would let someone else see her if it would help,” Colten mutters, and my fingers clench around the plate.

“He’s too far gone to allow that, pup,” Hudson replies and I ignore them.

“Any news on the crystal, Zaide?” Damian asks him.

“None, still have no idea of its location.”

“Keep looking,” I grunt. “Rhea needs to see it and then maybe we can have some more insight on the rogures.”

“Of course.”

“Why would Charles refuse to let you have it anyway?” Damian questions.

“Because he knows it is a lie.”

“Do you think he knows something is up with you requesting to see it again?”

“I don’t know. The last time I asked, I told him it was to study the rogures coming out of the ground, he said if I didn’t get anything the first time, I wont the next.”

“Definitely not suspicious then,” Sebastian snarks.

“Do you have any news on Sarah? Kade or the others?” Anna asks, and I look over at her.

“None other than what I have already told you.” She slumps in her chair, her arms folded as she looks toward the fireplace in thought.

“I’m sure they are fine,” Damian says around a mouthful of food.

“You have seen Rhea’s body,” she snaps. “Does that look fine to you?”

Silence fills the room after that, and a heavy weight enters the air.

I grind my teeth and grab the last strip of meat. Taking a cup with water, I leave the room without another word.

Entering my bedroom, my eyes go directly to the form under my furs. My chest feels uncomfortable at the sight, and I quickly close the door behind me, putting her dinner down on the table. Walking over to her side of the bed, I stand in front of her, watch as the furs rise and fall with her breaths. I know she feels me here, just like I can always feel her when she’s near.

“Rhea.” Nothing. I take a deep breath for patience. “Rhea,” I try again. Not even a twitch. I wait it out, but still it’s the same as every other time.

Silence.

And with that, my patience? Gone.

I grab the furs and rip them from her. Her eyes spring open, followed by a sharp inhale before she moves. Moves away from me, from our connection to the other side of the bed. I make myself still as I look over her, assessing.

She’s lost more weight. The dark circles under her eyes are more noticeable, as are her cheekbones.

No more.

“Rhea.” She still says nothing, she just continues to stare at the wall. I walk around the bed until I’m standing directly in front of her, and ignore what I feel as she backs up against the headboard. “Little wolf?”

Her eyes slowly come to mine then, and though I want nothing more than her eyes on me, it’s like she’s seeing through me. My jaw clenches as my hands ball into fists.

“Just say something...anything!” I shout, losing my calm façade. I don’t like being ignored, but being ignored by *her* is something I cannot tolerate any longer.

Something moves within her eyes then, like she has a little focus, like she can actually hear me. But it’s not what I wanted to see.

I don’t want to see pain there.

The pains of what I did to her.

She tried to hide it, but she must know by now that she cannot hide from me.

I see her pain like I see the skies darkening with a coming storm.

I breathe deep in my chest, letting it out slowly. I try to relax my posture as much as possible, but it’s hard to do when she won’t give me what I want. Or hide better what I don’t want to see.

“You need to eat.” My words are blunt, straight to the point.

She blinks slowly, but otherwise doesn't move.

I go over to the table and grab the cup, lifting it and holding it out to her.

“Have a drink first, your body needs it.” Not a single movement. “Rhea.” I drop my tone low, a warning that I won't tolerate this any longer.

Her brows furrow before she looks down at the cup. I wait her out, the air filling with her tension. Tentatively, she reaches for it, and places her fingers specifically where she doesn't have to touch me. That won't last long.

I take a few steps back, trying to give her more space so she feels more comfortable to take a drink. She looks down into the cup like it can give her some answers, like it can take her somewhere else. Her hand clenching around it, her knuckles whitening, and then suddenly, it's flying toward my face. I bat it away quickly, water splashing over me and the floor as I watch it roll. My eyes slowly move back to the little beast that resides in my bed.

Her eyes are hard, her chest heaving, and I smirk.

Then she comes for me.

Her magic forms in her hands, the blue glowing, and I can't help the smile that spreads across my face. It isn't kind, more devious. A ball of her power flies toward me and I raise my hand, calling my own magic to deflect it. It hits my palm and crashes off to the side. We ignore the hole in the stone as she lets another loose. This time, I have my magic swallow hers

and she growls, launching herself at me as she thinks that's the better option. I welcome it.

She throws a punch for my face, and I quickly grab her hand, and then the other. I take her to the floor with ease, too much ease for her as she wriggles, kicks and moves her body to try and dislodge me. All the while, I stay locked in her eyes, eyes that are no longer empty.

Eyes that I can finally look at in-person again, and not be haunted by them when I close my eyes.

My hold on her is firm, but gentle, as I let her get her anger out where she won't hurt herself. When she realizes she can't get out of my hold, she raises her head and her teeth, then she's at my shoulder. She bites down, and I grunt, but otherwise don't move.

I feel the moment her teeth break the skin through my t-shirt, feel the trickle of blood that comes through it. I allow it.

“That's it, little wolf, show me your teeth.” She digs in harder. angry noise spilling from her lips. “I will bear them. I will take it, and I will take your anger, but I won't take your silence,” I growl, and I feel my flesh tear. “You cannot do anything in this state, be the fucking Alpha you are meant to be and take it out on me.” I hiss when she reaches bone, but I don't pull away. Instead, I move her wrists to one hand and move the other to the back of her head. Grabbing her hair in my hand, I force her deeper, selfishly wanting her closer even though she's buried her teeth in my flesh. She pauses, her breaths coming in ragged pants, and I massage the back of her



head. “You need to get out of bed and get stronger for your pack.” She growls before she lets go, slumping back to the floor.

Looking her over, I take her in. Blood coats her mouth, and it should repulse me, but us wolves like seeing blood on our prey. Seeing my own on her though does something to me. Something possessive and probably not stable. Her hair fans out around her, longer now, long enough for me to wrap more around my fist.

An image of me plowing into her from behind comes to me, guiding her with her hair to stay still and arch her back as I pull her down on my cock.

Shaking out my thoughts, I lean forward and she freezes. I pay her no mind as I lick the side of her mouth, tasting myself on her and she huffs, but otherwise doesn't make a sound. I pull back, knowing I'm pushing her, and I still have something to do.

I rise, bringing her with me and maneuvering her until her arms are behind her back, still having a grip on her wrists. I move us over to the chair by the table. Sitting down, after a little struggle on her part, I guide her to straddle my thighs so she's facing me. She scowls, and I smile at her being uncomfortable. I can't help but think how perfectly she fits against me.

I take a strip of meat and hold it up to her. “You will eat, then you will rest.” Her eyes turn hard. I bring the food to her lips and she turns away. I squeeze her wrists in warning,

probably too hard, and she looks at me sharply. “You have to build your strength to kick my ass, right?” She looks down at the meat, wriggling her hands, and I *tsk* at her. “After days of you ignoring me, after days of you being just a lump of skin in that bed, not eating, not drinking and not fucking sleeping,” I growl, my head lowering. “You will eat by my hand until I say it’s enough.” Her eyes flash, bouncing between mine in anger. “Oh no, little wolf, you fucked up with riding my patience too hard. Now. Eat.”

I place the meat back to her lips, and just when I think I will have to force her mouth open, her lips part. She accepts the strip of meat and I watch her as she chews with rapt attention, a pleased sound rumbling from me. When she opens her mouth for more, I make her wait a little for what she just ate to settle in her stomach. When satisfied, I give her another bite. She wriggles in my lap after she swallows, probably feeling uncomfortable, and I raise a brow at her.

“You don’t want to do that.” She stills, and it makes me think she didn’t realize she was doing it. “Unless you do?” She looks down, and I let out a chuckle.

I bring more food up for her to eat, and when she has one strip left, she shakes her head. I let it go, knowing she has eaten a lot. Her eyes start to droop, and she sits up straighter. I stand, holding her under her ass with one hand and she makes a noise of protest. I hush her and walk her over to the bed. Crouching down, I let her sit as I slowly release her wrists, waiting to see her next move.

“Rest,” I tell her softly as she bring her hands to the furs and clutches them tightly. She doesn’t look at me, and I let a low sound rumble in my chest. Her eyes swing to mine. “I will leave for a while, and when I come back, we will talk.” Her brows furrow and I lean forward. Her flinch has me pausing and grinding my teeth. I rise and step back, nodding my head to the furs and leave.

As soon as the door clicks, I rest my head against it, my hand clenching around the handle at her reaction.

I shouldn’t be surprised she’s flinching from me, not after what I have done, but I won’t allow it to continue. I stretch my back out.

No. I won’t allow it at all.

# Eighteen

RHEA

He's here again.

After sleeping Gods knows how long, I finally feel a little rested. With the food Darius gave me, and after he left to do whatever he was doing, I managed to get some sleep. I hate that he got me out of my somewhat den that I made, but his words rang true.

I'm an Alpha, I need to act like one.

"Am I in my new prison?" I keep my eyes closed as I ask him, my throat feeling scratchy from not speaking for some time.

I hear him shift, the air tense and filled with something I can't place. "No," he answers softly, too softly and so unlike him that I peel my eyes open in confusion. Why does he sound like that? Pity?

My hackles rise.

He sits in a chair next to the bed, elbow on the armrest with his chin resting on his closed fist. His eyes roam over me,

brows pinched together, before once again his eyes take mine captive. Always taking them captive. They're not as cold as he looks at me, more curious and thoughtful, and I have no idea what that means. Unsure, scared, and wary, I break contact first, feeling uncomfortable and look around the room we're in, taking it in properly for the first time.

I'm in a bedroom somewhere in the keep, it's minimal, a chest of drawers to the right near a door, a balcony of sorts to my left. The glass doors are shut, and dark curtains drape either side, left open to let light in. Another closed door leads off at the back of the room, and I take a second to wonder what's in there. A fireplace rests across from the large, dark wood bed I'm in, full of wood and alight. A table with a couple of chairs are not far from it against the wall, where Darius sat and fed me. There are two smaller side tables on either side of the bed, with a lantern on one and a picture of a family on the other. I pause at the picture and study it, of the woman and two children in the frame. I know immediately who the woman must be, Darius's mother.

His features come from her with the same chin, ears and hair, along with his nose and the shape of his face. Everything but the shape of his eyes. I look at the small child she holds in her arms, her smile so wide as she looks down at the little boy beside her, who could only be Darius. Younger Darius looks up at her with so much adoration, and love, it makes my heart clench. They look so happy.

"My mother and younger sister," Darius murmurs, noticing where my attention is. I'm shocked for a moment that he so

willingly told me.

“They’re beautiful,” I tell him honestly, not knowing what else to say. Staring at his family, pain lances my heart as I think of my own. I don’t have a picture of Mom and Dad. I have nothing left, even the knife my dad gave me is gone, all I have are memories that are clouded with pain.

“They were.”

“Were?” I ask, my eyes moving back to him.

He shifts in his seat. “Rogures took them too soon. Isabell was only two.” I swallow, feeling the sadness of those words and for the young girl who barely lived before she died. How he must have hated me when he thought I caused the rogures that took his family from him. Is that why he wouldn’t listen to me? I can understand to an extent why he wouldn’t after believing that.

The pain of losing your family is something you cannot put into words, something you never recover from. Especially if they were stolen from you, just like mine were.

It doesn’t mean I forgive him for what he did to me though.

Understanding does not equal forgiveness.

“The rogures destroy everything,” I say solemnly, instead of asking the question I really want answers to.

“They do, my father was next on their list,” he says, and silence wraps around us until Darius gets up, handing me a mug from a table next to the fireplace. I take the warm mug from his hands with caution, wondering if I should throw it at

him again, and look at him questionably. “Anna said it will help with fatigue, and that you have been having this tea regularly to help with the exhaustion you have been feeling.”

So why isn't Anna giving it to me then? And why has she been telling him these things? It's a current weakness I do not want him, or anyone else to know. I hesitantly take a sip, feeling the warm liquid soothe me, and I groan at the taste of honey and gentle spices as it slides down my throat. I watch Darius's eyes darken over the rim of the mug and I shift on the bed, very aware that we are alone in here.

“Where am I?”

“My bedroom.” I turn to stone.

“What?” I gasp, and look around like a death trap is about to come from the ceiling and stab me. No wonder his scent is everywhere in here.

He chuckles low as if he can read my thoughts, and sits back down in the chair next to the bed. “You're safe in here.”

Has he gone mad? “I'm not safe anywhere,” I correct him.

He nods, reluctantly agreeing. “But with me you are.”

I laugh at the audacity of that statement.

I look him over, tilting my head as his eyes are full of something I can't name, but there is no deception within his green orbs, like he believes what he's saying. “Darius, you are more dangerous than most.”

“I am to those who deserve it.” I resist the flinch I felt coming.

“And to those that don’t, it seems,” I mutter.

“I have no mercy when it comes to those who hurt mine.”

“I have been up close and personal with your *no mercy*, Darius, you don’t need to remind me of that.”

He looks away. “Believe it or not, I gave you as much mercy as I could.”

“I don’t believe it.” Splitting my back wasn’t a mercy.

He sighs, and I shake my head, moving the conversation forward. “Why am I in your bedroom and not with the others?” I put the empty mug down on the end table and scoot back against the pillows, bringing the furs with me and placing them in my lap. Then a sudden thought hits me. “Where is my pack?” Has he done something to them, are they with the Highers?

“Calm down, little wolf, your pack is fine. They are probably about to rise from their own rooms that we allocated them.” Again, no signs of lies in his eyes, and I relax back against the pillows as best as I can.

“Why am I in your room?” I ask again.

He’s quiet for a second before his brows furrow. “Because I wanted you in here.” He leans back in his seat, full of confidence only an Alpha can have, but I can tell it pained him a little to admit that, though I don’t know why he even wants me here.



“I have to say, I’m really confused about what’s going on here.” I pick at my fingers, glancing around the room.

“So am I,” he mutters beneath his breath, before rubbing his hands down his face. “What you said, about being in the woods and seeing a wolf as a child.”

I blink at the sudden change in conversation. “Yeah. What about it?” Is he going to laugh at me?

He leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees as his stare penetrates my soul. “Was it a normal wolf?”

“Normal?” My heart rate kicks up a notch, why would he ask that?

“Yes, Rhea, normal,” he sighs like I’m a pain in the ass, but he’s going in so many different directions with this conversation I feel like I’m being flung back and forth.

I open my mouth before closing it, unsure what to say or why he’s even asking me something like this. Where is this coming from, am I dreaming?

“Why would I tell you something that you will probably use against me in some way. Mock or laugh at me and tell me I’ve gone mad?”

“I’m not going to do that.”

“And why would I believe you?”

He says nothing, because he’s got nothing that could counter that.

“Why is it so important?” I mutter.

“I want to know everything.”

“That is something you don’t deserve to know, nor have earned.”

“I still want it.” His fingers tense, his jaw ticking. I look over him curiously. Who is this male to ask such a thing of me, when he has already seen and been told more than he should have.

“Selfish,” I grumble.

“With you, always.”

“What will it take to sate your selfishness?”

“Probably nothing short of a lifetime.”

I blink and then huff at him, shaking my head. “What do I get in exchange for this information?”

“This is not an interrogation.”

“It’s not?” I tilt my head. “Then you don’t need to know.”

“Rhea,” he warns in a low tone that I feel in the pit of my stomach.

“Darius,” I mock, and his thighs tense, like he’s about to stand and come near me.

I don’t want that, so I sigh and slump further into the furs. “The wolf wasn’t normal, or at least one I hadn’t seen before. It had two tails.”

“Two tails?” he repeats like a question.

“Yes.” I wait for a roll of his eyes, even a shake of his head.

But I get a reaction that I don't expect.

His eyes turn black, and goosebumps pepper my skin when silver flecks flow through his eyes. It's been a long time since I had the chance to watch those flecks this close, counting them as I move to the next one, only to lose count and start all over again. I feel Runa stretch within me before shaking her fur out, then sits down, head tilting as we watch them together, I can feel her contentment through me. Traitor.

"No, I wouldn't think you're mad," he whispers as he blinks, and his eyes turn light green again.

"You believe me?" I can't keep the shock out of my tone, and he nods. "But why?" My heart rate speeds up at the way he's looking at me. The softness of his eyes, just like that night in the Eridian forest with the wisps, and when he was playing with the pups.

Why is he looking at me like that now? I don't want him to look at me like that, I can't have him looking at me like that. Like he didn't whip me, like I mean something to him, like I fucking matter when we both know I don't.

The marks on my back prove that.

My mind is a chaotic mess of emotions and confusion as I just stare at him, wondering what he's going to say, but also scared he's just going to sweep the rug right under my feet again. I can't trust him, or his words. I can't be near him, I can't, I can't, I can't.

Keep it fucking down, Rhea.

He sinks deeper into the chair, spreading his legs out, and my damn eyes can't help but glance over his thick thighs before coming back to him. His smirk says he caught me, my returning scowl says I don't have to like it though, even as his eyes roam over me, heating and piercing, like he wants to devour me. Like he has a right to my body, and I hate myself more when I squeeze my thighs together, hating, once again, my body's reaction to him.

Because fuck him.

“While you have been gone for months, Charles has been acting strange,” he says, his voice low and my attention is fully on his words now, at the mention of Charles. “He’s obsessed with finding you, throwing every resource he has and demanding you be found by any means necessary. It was more than he has ever done with other traitors. Though with you being the cause of the rogues, I could understand it.” I bristle at him calling me a traitor. So he was bullshitting. Taunting me? He still thinks I caused the rogues? He blows out a breath, his voice with a hint of a growl in it as he speaks.

“Then Charles has started hinting at me to create pups with another, to carry on my line.” I grip the furs tightly, my heart pounding. I say nothing as I try to ignore my own reaction to the thought of Darius creating a child with another. It shouldn't bother me, but my insides revolt, aggressively and possessively and I blink, internally shaking my head as Runa bares her teeth. “I told him I'm not interested and me being an Heir won't change that.” I let out a subtle breath of relief that I don't understand. “But then he said when we capture you, I

would create pups with you anyway. I told him no, and like fuck you would be willing, even if I decided to. He said it didn't matter if you agreed or not, to fuck you anyway." He stares at me, watching intently.

I grit my teeth and look away, swallowing hard, not wanting to look at him whilst I feel like crawling out of my skin. I hear Darius shift, and then the bed dips next to me as he sits, his hip to my knee. I don't move, I don't think I breathe as I feel the warmth of him seeping into me. A hand grips my chin, and I flinch.

He pauses, an uncomfortable sound leaving him before he sighs heavily, giving me a moment before he gently turns my head toward him, too gentle, as if I would break.

I can't break anymore than I already have, doesn't he see that?

Once my eyes meet his, he runs his thumb over my cheek softly, his jaw ticking with his thoughts and I resist the urge to run from his touch and lean into it all the same.

"Charles said either I rape you or he will." I jolt, my stomach churning and threatening to empty itself. I do try to move out of his grasp then, but he holds firm, keeping his eyes on me as I breathe through my nose, my hands trembling. He shakes my chin a little, not hurting me, but to get me to focus. "I won't rape you, little wolf. And neither will he. When you said Charles wanted to breed you when you were older, I knew then what you were telling us was the truth. Because how could you have known that Charles had said that to me? You

couldn't have, the only way you could have known is if he has said it to you. Which he did, didn't he? Just as you told us in the other room."

My eyes water a little but I blink it away. His thumb still rubs soothing circles over my skin, and that is something I just don't expect from him. The asshole only believes me because of what I said to him matches what Charles told him? I should be happy he believes me, should be thanking the Gods that something is going right.

But why can't he believe me just because it's me?

"I remember very well all the things Charles would say to me. Now he wants you to do the same thing he does," I grit out, trying to banish those words from my mind.

He grows low. "I won't, little wolf."

"You won't?" I whisper, trying to keep the tremble out of my voice.

"Never," he says harshly, his eyes cold at the thought.

"Would you hurt me?"

He shakes his head, but his eyes peer over my shoulder, and I know he's thinking about the lashes he gave me.

"I don't trust you," I say, and his eyes tighten around the edges. "How do I know the Highers aren't on their way here? How do I know you are not preparing to take me back? How can I believe *you*?"

“You don’t know that by my word alone.” That’s the fucking truth. “But you will. I don’t trust you either, I don’t trust that you don’t have an ulterior motive for agreeing to come here so easily.” Easily? We didn’t have a choice. “But I cannot deny what I’ve seen with my own eyes, what I have heard. I need to look into some other things with what you told me, but the marks on your body don’t lie, your reactions to someone touching you sometimes don’t lie. The look in your eyes. Doesn’t. Lie.” He grits his teeth. “We are Heirs of the lands and the below, and it’s our duty to find a way to stop the rogues, we may be the only ones who can.” I hate to admit it, but he’s right in that. “So whether we like it or not, we have to work together to stop them, or the lands will cease to exist as we have known them. Whether we trust each other or not, know that I do believe you in the things you have told me, little wolf.” He says the words softly, like he’s trying to reassure me.

I would love to wrap those words around my heart and keep them safe, to know that he does truly believe me. However, I needed him to believe me long before now, and he didn’t, I can’t forget that. If he would have told me in Eridian after playing with the pups that the moon was falling, I wouldn’t have second guessed him. This connection I seem to have with him was at its strongest then, and even though I can still feel it thrumming between us, he damaged it. It’s frayed, but still holding on. Why can’t it just snap and let us be without it? We both don’t want it even as it draws us together.

“What about Sarah? My pack? Kade?” I ask instead of what I really want to ask. Why didn’t you believe me then? Why did you go back on your vow? Why did you make me hope I may have something I never thought I could have?

That’s the thing about hope, when you have it, it’s a little scary and exhilarating, you feel warmth and tingles all over your body at what could be. But when it’s taken away, you’re left worse than you were before. Instead of hitting rock bottom, you are constantly sinking in the darkest depths of the sea, crashing into a bottomless pit, clawing at your throat for air, even knowing there is none.

Darius’s fingers twitch against my cheekbone. “We will get them and bring them here, but I need a solid reason that they are in danger. I can’t just take them. Vokheim Keep is strong and has its own protections, but against the Highers, especially the Lord Higher? I’m not sure it will hold and stop him from entering, and he will when he finds out I am suspicious of him or not on his side. Which I am not,” he tells me. “Not anymore.”

“You would go against the Highers who you have been working with for *years*, just like that?” I ask suspiciously.

“You think so little of the Elites after we know what we do now?” He drops his hand from my chin. “You think so little of me?” I say nothing. He shakes his head, but I feel it’s more to himself than me. “Elites are the protectors of the lands, that hasn’t changed, only now we have to protect it against someone else too.” We stare at each other at his words, and



there it is, that fucking strand of hope clawing out of the darkness, as bright as spun gold. “If we can find evidence that your pack members’ safety is in jeopardy, I can have them here and no laws would be broken. A fight with the Highers is not what we need right now, we have to be logical about this and let them think we aren’t doing anything for as long as possible, to give us time to get your pack back, to find the others you mentioned they have taken.”

He means this, doesn’t he? I can tell with the look in his eyes. Could he and the rest of the Elites truly be on our side in this? “You really would go against the Highers?” I ask again, unable to let it sink in, looking around the room like they will jump out at me at any moment.

”I *am* going against the Highers,“ he corrects, and my heart kicks up a notch at the force of his words. “I am the Alpha of the Elites before anything else, the protector of the people. I will do what I can for Vrohkaria.”

I ingest his words and I look down, shaking my head. “They have to go, Darius, the Highers can’t continue ruling over Vrohkaria. They are stealing pups for their own gain, they can’t continue doing this.

“No they can’t,” he growls, and the deep, low sound makes my thighs clench. “Their time will come, but it’s not like we can walk in there and take their heads. Again, I need to see what they are planning, especially Charles. If he’s taking children, where are they? This is what I need to find out without letting them know what I’m doing, or those pups taken

could be put in danger. Then I can plan to take him down where the people won't question it when it's revealed about what he has done. He's already on shaky ground with them as it is, but that doesn't mean his allies will rally against those opposing him."

He's right, we have to be careful about this. Cautious. Running in all paws blazing will do no one any good, no matter my need to do so to get Kade.

I can't get him if I'm dead, I know this. It's why I haven't attempted to do so in the last few months. The wait is slowly rotting me from the inside through, building up slowly and it's about to bubble out and I don't know what I will become because of that.

"What he has done to you?" He looks away, like he can't bear to see me and I feel shame hovering below the surface. I watch as that black mist floats around him, flowing in swirls around his hands and the call for me to reach out to it has my own hands clenching, holding it back. "That alone is enough to sentence him to death."

I look up at him sharply at his words. "Why would you care what he's done to me?" I ask, anger suddenly right there. "You *whipped* me." I ignore how my voice cracks at the words, how my hurt is noticeable for him to see. "It has nothing to do with you what was done to me. *Nothing!*"

Power explodes through the room suddenly as he stands, and mine swells, reacting to his. Our markings appear on our bodies simultaneously, pulsing to the same beat that only we

know. “You are the Heir of Zahariss, I’m the Heir of Cazier. I am the only other person in the lands that is like you, matches you, yet is still so different.” He turns away from me, walks a few paces, and then turns back. His eyes are hard and alight with possessiveness as he looks at me “Whether you like it or not. You are mine,” he growls, and I shiver at the deep tone, even as I growl back at him. “Mine to deal with, mine to guide, and mine to protect. Mine in all the ways any other could be.”

My hands fist on my lap, and I bare my teeth at him. “You’re insane. Just because we are Heirs doesn’t mean I am yours, nor are you mine. It doesn’t work like that, it is not like that, it doesn’t *mean* that.”

“No, little wolf,” he says, a tendril of his power floating toward me, stroking my cheekbone. “It means so much more than that.”

# Nineteen

RHEA

I play with the berries on my plate, not all that hungry, especially with the glare on the side of my face.

“Eat,” Darius grunts, but I scowl and lean back in the chair that I’m in near the fire.

“I’m not hungry,” I growl, pushing the plate away. “Are we done here for now? I want to see my pack.”

“You can see them later.” Darius bites into a piece of meat, his eyes holding mine as he chews.

“No,” I say slowly, “I want to see them now.” He shakes his head, ignoring me. “Darius,” I growl, and he smirks, leaning back in the chair and taking a drink. I grit my teeth, my eyes like fire, but he doesn’t burn, not even a little singe.

I get up, pushing my chair back and walk toward the door. I hear his chuckle behind me as I grasp the doorknob and twist. Only, it doesn’t open. I try again, grunting at the effort before I turn toward the asshole sitting smugly in his seat.

“Why is the door locked?” I ask slowly, my body vibrating with tension. He shrugs. *Shrugs*. I look back toward the door in panic. I want to call Josh down the link, but I’ve been blocking his attempts, not ready to talk to him, but now...

“You are not going anywhere until you have had some rest,” Darius says, and my eyes move to him as he stands and walks toward the bathroom.

“That’s bullshit,” I shout, following him. “I’m rested, I’m not a child.” He ignores me, instead turning the taps on to fill the copper bathtub, water instantly spewing from the spouts, and I have to hand it to the humans, they make some resourceful things. “Darius,” I growl when he ignores me.

“Strip, get in the bath.” He busies himself with dipping his fingers into the water, adjusting the taps’ flow as I just stare at him.

“Fuck no,” I sputter. My eyes going back and forth from the tub to him. “Absolutely not.”

“You don’t want a warm bath?” He puts his hands on his hips, brows pinched together like he doesn’t understand.

I do want a bath, just not with him here. “Leave and I’ll get in the bath.”

“I’ve seen you naked, Rhea, don’t act like a blushing virgin now.”

I fist my hands at my sides. “Yes, Darius, you have seen me naked, haven’t you?” I bite back. “And not just in my heat.”

The reminder does the trick, and his eyes harden. “Now get out. I’ll bathe and then I’ll leave to see my pack.”

He doesn’t answer, just stares at me for a moment, his body tense before he leaves and slams the door shut behind him. I scoff and take off the clothes Belldame gave me, glancing at the door in case he comes back.

He doesn’t.

Why is he running me a bath anyway?

I eye the water, wondering if it will turn into lava at any moment before I shake myself off. It’s a bath, Rhea.

I turn off the spouts when it’s full, then dip my toe in the warm water, feeling its perfect temperature before I climb in. I sigh as I sit down, letting its warmth soak into my skin as I lean back, not fully relaxed but letting the water soothe my aching muscles. Cupping water into my hands, I bring it up to my face, washing away all the sweat and strain of the last few days.

And it has been days since I passed out, and then I refused to speak to Darius, refused to eat or drink. Stupid on my part, I did no favors to anyone, especially myself for doing that.

I just wanted to be left alone for a time, to gather my strength and thoughts. To shove all the shit down that I’m feeling so I can fortify myself again.

All I did was weaken myself and now I’m stuck in Darius’s bedroom that he won’t let me out of until he says so. Why my enemy, sort of ally, wants me near him is a mystery when all I

want is to claw his eyes out. Though I suspect it's our connection that is the reason.

He must hate it, loathe it. Serves him right to have to do things he doesn't want to do. It makes me feel fuzzy inside that he feels the need to do so, when his mind is so against it.

Asshole.

Closing my eyes, I breath deeply, running my fingers through the water and eventually, after a little while, my shoulders loosen and my aches and small pains seem to fade away.

For just a moment, I can breathe.

Then the door opens.

I jolt, sitting up and wrapping my arms around my knees as I look over my shoulder. Darius strolls through the door, a plate in his hand and a wicker basket in the other.

“Get out!” I bark, making sure my breasts are covered, even though my back is to him. He ignores me, because of course he does, and puts his items on the counter. “Darius, get. The. Fuck. Out.”

He turns toward me sharply, his mouth opening but he pauses, his eyes fused on my back. I pale and look forward, trying to sink under the water, but it's only so high. The air is tense, stifling, as I clench my fingers on my knees, my nails digging into my skin.

*Leave, leave, leave.*

I can feel his eyes tracing me once again, all over my back, like he can see the scars that are hidden there, the ones he put there. My back burns and aches and itches, and how fucking *dare* he barge in here. How dare he look at me like he can *see* me.

Again!

I don't want him here, he needs to get out.

My heart beats wildly in my chest as my power flows to the surface, humming just below my skin at my call. I raise a hand, about to do anything to get him out of here, when a touch on my back makes me flinch, then freeze, my power retreating under his gentleness. Runa purrs within me as my breaths come out loud, wheezy even to my own ears, but he doesn't let up, doesn't stop as goosebumps appear under his touch.

He moves a single finger down my back tentatively, a barely there sensation as he moves it around on my skin. Up, down, a little diagonal, a little lower. I can't move while he repeats the same pattern that only he knows. The water is still as I'm unable to move, frozen at his ministrations and tears sting the back of my eyes as I lower my forehead to my knees.

Why is he touching a place that he hurt so bad?

How did I get here? We should have never met, we should have kept apart until our deaths. I would rather that than feel this pull toward my enemy. Toward the one that should have kept me safe.



Lie.

What my mom said was a lie.

My fingers dig harder into my skin, so hard I'm sure I have marks, but I need to feel that to not feel what he's making me feel right now.

I tense when he reaches the back of my neck, his finger turning into a hand and he starts to massage there softly. Holding back a groan at how good it feels, I squeeze my eyes shut. He moves my hair out of the way, bringing his other hand up to knead into my shoulders now, and my body loses its tension on its own accord.

Something soft comes to my body then, and the smell of wildflowers tickles my nose. He's washing my back, moving the cloth in swirls with so much care that it threatens to push me under. I lift my head suddenly, looking over my shoulder at him beneath my lashes. He doesn't acknowledge me, just continues to stare at my back and wash it, like it's a task he has to do.

He dips the cloth into the water, and his eyes eventually move to mine. I suck in a breath at the emotion there, the hatred. I turn back around, not wanting my enemy to see my own hatred building, my own anger and pain.

How can he wash me and look at me like that? His actions and words confuse me. Cares, but demands. Hates, but is gentle. I don't know how to navigate this.

“It’s not for you,” he says gruffly after a moment, startling me out of my thoughts. I say nothing in response. “Here.” I look to the side and see he’s moved closer now, right next to me. A berry is in his hand, a small ball of blue. I look to it and then to him in question, and he brings it toward my mouth. “Eat.” His gaze roams over my body. I’m still huddled, but it’s like he can see everything. Especially the weight I’ve lost.

Feeling self-conscious, I slump down further in the water, trying to hide my body when he shoves the berry in my mouth forcefully. “Hewh,” I say around a mouthful, sitting up straighter. “You—“ His eyes have dropped to the water, and I look down, realizing that I let go of my knees and now my legs are straight. He can see all of me clearly through the water. His eyes blaze as they take me in, his breathing deeper than before. His eyes flick up to mine and I squeeze my thighs together as the air fills with lust, desire with an undertone of anger.

Darius growls beneath his breath and tears his eyes away, and I feel like I can breathe again. Another berry appears in my vision, and I scowl. He shakes his head, his jaw tight and I swallow the one I already have in my mouth, opening for another. Bossy asshole.

He watches me take the berry this time, his eyes pinned to my mouth as I chew, and I remember him doing it when I was on his lap which does not help the ache I’m feeling between my thighs. As soon as I’m done, he grabs another berry, and another until I can’t take any more. I don’t even know how many I’ve had. I blink out of whatever trance he had me in,

wondering why I just let him feed me again, but deep down, I know why.

I hate it.

Lock it down, Rhea.

Darius brings the cloth back into the water and takes hold of my wrist. I snatch it away and he scowls, grabbing it again. Trying to no avail to get him to release it, I huff and shake my head, bringing my knees back up to my chest. He studies the red line wrapping around it, scowling as his grip tightens on me. I try to pull back, but he holds tight and brings the cloth to it, gently wiping over it.

“Did you really not heal?” he asks, and it sounds so loud after being in silence for so long. I nod. He nods.

“I supposed it doesn’t matter to you, whether I healed or not,” I say, and his jaw ticks. Dunking the cloth back into the water with more force than necessary, he rings it out harshly and picks up my other wrist doing the same. “What are you doing, Darius?” I finally ask.

This isn’t him, he doesn’t... *do this*.

He blows out a breath, his hand stills on my wrist. “You are an Heir, I’m an Heir. It’s in our blood, in our soul to make sure the other is alive.” My brows furrow and he stands, throwing the cloth into the water. It makes a splash and I wipe my face where it hit me. I glare at Darius as he turns and goes over to the sink. His back is tense, his muscles straining, and I see darker patches on his black t-shirt. They run down his back in

lines, some thin and some a bit thicker, the latter more at the top. Why is he sweating?

“I’ll leave some clothes out on the bed for you, don’t be too long, I’ll be back later.” And then he’s gone, back out of the bathroom, and I look down at the cloth, more confused than ever.

And then I realized he didn’t mention anything about me seeing my pack.

Hello prisoner, my old friend.

# Twenty

RHEA

The door opens, a pause, then it shuts quietly. I huff and pull the furs closer to my skin, wanting to be covered from head to toe while I lie in the bed. *His bed.*

After having a bath, he disappeared and left the door locked. I shouted and banged to no avail, no one came. Now the moon is high, peeking through the balcony windows as I look out at the night sky from the bed. I tried to see if I could go down from the balcony, but there was nothing to hold on to, nothing I could get a grip on, and I would plummet and break all of my bones if I dropped.

I hear Darius come closer, then a pause. I stay still. I know he knows I'm awake, it's not like I'm pretending to sleep. I just don't want anything to do with him.

What am I even doing here?

Once again we are revolving around each other, unable to stay away. I vow at times I felt him after I escaped, watching, waiting. I thought it was a trick of the mind, maybe some

unwanted thought that he was there. But as he stands there, watching me, it's a feeling I *know* I have felt before when I went out into the lands to gather supplies for Belldame.

But if he saw me, if this is not a tick of my mind, why didn't he come for me then?

A rumbling sound comes from him and then he's moving again, the bathroom door opening and closing. The usual routine. Though when he comes back he looks like he has already bathed, he does it again anyway.

I know he lets me hear him, Darius can move so quietly when he wants, so I wonder why he's being loud on purpose.

With him in the bathroom, I throw off the furs and pad along the wood floor silently, making my way to the door. Reaching it, I try the handle again, nothing.

For fuck's sake.

I can't stay in here with him. We're too close.

I rattle the handle again and growl, slumping forward and banging my head against it in frustration. The bathroom door suddenly opens, and I roll my head toward Darius, my eyes like fire as he stops and takes me in, a small smirk on his face.

"What are you doing, little wolf?" There is amusement in his tone.

"Let me out," I bite back, kicking the door. I hide the wince when my bare foot takes the hit.

Darius tilts his head and I look over at him in his usual black t-shirt and loose pants. My power hums beneath the surface as Runa rolls on her back. Nope, I'm not staying here with him.

He ignores my words. "Come to bed." He starts to walk toward the only bed in this room and I grab the nearest thing, a lantern on the dresser to my right. I pick it up and launch it at his head. It flies through the air, my aim true but he ducks out of the way, his eyes coming back to me. "You want to play?" My stomach flutters at his words, my thighs unconsciously clenching. "All you have to do is ask, you know that." I'm already shaking my head.

"I am not staying in here with you, Darius. Open the door."

"No."

"Darius!" I shout, banging a hand on the door.

"No."

My chest heaves as my anger rises. I didn't agree to this, to be in here with him, wrapped around his scent constantly. Without thinking, I raise my hand and my power follows, pulsing in my palm. The glow of blue gently fills the room, and Darius's nostrils flare at it, watching as it swirls around my fingers. He takes a step closer, a shimmer of black coating his skin like waves and I don't think as I force my power out of my palm into a small ball, aiming it at him with a growl.

We have been here before, but I continue all the same.

A small, black circle appears on Darius's hand, and he lifts it, catching my ball and engulfing it, sinking into the black. I

blink as he continues to step closer and I shoot out another one, my hand shaking with the effort but his power swallows it every time. My eyes change and my markings appear as my desperation flows through me. I raise my other hand, blasting small balls out of both of them. One hits the wall, sinking into it slightly before disappearing in a burst of small, blue-misty particles. Another crashes into the chest of drawers, causing the wood to collapse where a hole has been made. They come out of my palms wildly, uncontrolled and with no coordination whatsoever. Darius, however, just keeps coming, stopping any of them from hurting him.

Then he's reaching me, grasping my wrists in his palms and slamming me up against the door. I gasp, wriggling in his grip. With every breath I take, my chest touches his, and I flex my fingers. His magic trails out of his hands, coating my own and I feel its coolness against me, covering my own power. It feels like it's almost reaching into my skin, and my own hovers below the surface as he forces it back into me.

How is he able to do that?

"Let me go," I snarl, looking up into vibrant, green eyes that flare with heat.

"Never." He shakes his head, and the finality in his words cause my hackles to rise. "You were mine since The Deadlands, nothing has changed since then."

My eyes harden and I rid myself of my Heir markings when I see his reacting to mine. "*Everything* has changed." I squirm, but he has me completely immobilized.



His eyes darken for a moment before he looks down at me, at my heaving chest, the way my breasts rise and fall. His eyes trail up to my neck, tracing my jaw, nose, until he reaches my eyes. His eyes bounce between mine before he dips his head, and I still. He inhales deeply at my throat, a rumble coming from him that goes straight to my core. Damn him. His mouth comes to my neck then, right below my ear and a breathy sigh comes from me as he trails his lips up and down.

“You’re right,” he mumbles against my skin, and I tilt my head, unable to help it with the feel of him at my neck. “Everything has changed.” A nip, then a lick to soothe. I shiver. “It also hasn’t.” An open mouth kiss then, and I can’t stop the quiet moan escaping me as I stand on my tiptoes, feeling restless. He moves even closer, the hard lines of his body against my softness. I feel his hardness against my stomach, and desire builds in me, causing me to subtly rub against it. He growls low, pushing his hips forward, kissing up to my ear more aggressively and nipping the top of it. “But don’t hide from me,” he says, lifting his head to peer down at me.

I clench my hands in his grip, his power still encasing them. “I *was* hiding, remember? Now I’m not.”

“No.” He moves his head back and forth slowly, eyes roaming over my face. “You’re hiding your pain.” My heart drops then, and I turn my head, the desire I was feeling gone instantly, showering me in ice. “You’re hiding your suffering, your heartbreak.” I swallow roughly, my eyes stinging. It’s unfair that he can see me so easily, the only one who really

can. “If you keep it in, you’re going to do some serious damage. What that damage will look like, we won’t know until it happens.” Another nip against my neck. “Until you let it all out, you’re hiding *you*.” A damn tear sneaks out as his words aim true, and my wrists are let go of and his hand is on my jaw, turning my face back to him. I glare, even as another tear leaks out, even if I feel stripped bare right now. His jaw clenches as he watches it fall, dropping down to my jaw where he holds me. “I told you the only tears I want to see in your eyes are the ones I put there, little wolf.”

A wet laugh comes from me then, and his brows lower in concern. “You helped put them there.” His green eyes shutter and he takes a step back. He takes a deep breath, hands on his hips as he glares at the floor.

“What is it going to take to move past this?” I slump against the door, a chuckle leaving my lips.

“You would have to turn back time for that.”

He growls and stomps away from me, going into his closet. I hear rustling and a bang, and then he’s walking toward me again, a bag in his hand.

“I cannot turn back time,” he tells me, his knuckles whitening with his grip. “So we need to move forward, it’s all we can do.”

“Because it’s that simple,” I snark.

“Fuck, Rhea.” He paces, huffing angrily as the bag swings in his grip. I eye it warily, wondering what’s in there. Darius

comes to a stop, and then takes two steps toward me. I straighten, wondering what his next move is when the bag in his hand is shoved into my chest.

I grab it automatically as he takes a step back and just stands there. When I don't move, he sighs and points toward it.

“Open it.”

“What's in here?”

“Just open the damn bag. Rhea.”

I frown at his frustrated tone, but I slowly open the bag. Peeking inside, I see numerous things wrapped in what looks like leather. Darius takes a step away from me, and I reach inside to pull one out. Eying Darius, I put the bag down and open it. Wood comes into view, and I hastily remove all the leather, my heart beating wildly within my chest.

I swallow roughly, looking up at Darius, then to the carving within my grasp. Crouching down, I pull the items out of the bag one by one, all of them wrapped carefully in leather. I run my trembling fingers over the first carving, feeling the familiar grooves of wood and nicks I had once carved. My hand shakes as I move on to the next piece and unwrap it, my eyes stinging as I look at the familiar face of Kade, his smile wide and pure. I bring it to my chest, squeezing my eyes closed as my whole body vibrates.

“I searched everywhere for you, everywhere that I could think of,” Darius suddenly says, and my head snaps up to him. “When I couldn't find you, I went back to Eridian.” My lips tremble, and Darius watches the warring of my emotions. His

eyes fill with anger briefly before clearing. “I don’t know why I felt the need to go there, but I did. I went straight for your cave and stayed there. I’m not really sure for how long for, I lost track of time when I was there. After a while, I left, but I took some carvings with me. I…” He trails off, jaw clenching as he looks away from me, clearly uncomfortable. “I wanted to give them to you,” he finally says, and I squeeze the carving of Kade tighter.

My enemy went back to Eridian and got my carvings for me.

The knowledge thaws my heart a little, peeling down the thorns wrapped around it. He knew how much I liked to carve, it was evident with the amount in my cave.

He was... thinking of me. But why?

I don’t ask this question, too confused to even move my mouth as I pick up another carving of a wolf. I run my fingers down its back toward its tail, wondering if any of my others are still there.

Darius walks over to me and crouches. He picks up an item, and he gently starts to unravel it. “I see peace when you carve, I feel your loyalty when you pick up that knife.” He turns the item over as he continues to reveal it. There is more leather on this one, like he wanted it to be extra secure. “I know how deep your loyalty runs. I saw it more at the castle, and I heard it more when I heard your story, your life. It reminds me of my own to my Elites.” He shakes his head, his dark hair falling into his eyes. “I’m glad I kept this as it is your reminder of your loyalty, your courage.”

He finally reveals the item, and holds it out to me. I grasp it quickly, running my finger over the hilt of the knife my father gave, tracing the words. My body loosens for what feels like the first time in forever at having it back in my possession. Even when he believed I was a traitor, he kept something I thought I had lost forever.

My brows furrow as I look down at the carvings, unsure what to say to him. This doesn't change anything, this doesn't make it better, but he also didn't have to do this.

My eyes raise to his, and he looks at the items one last time before he reaches for me. I raise my hand with the knife, but he quickly disarms me. I'm flung over his shoulder, then he turns, walking us away from the door. I quickly grasp his t-shirt, clinging to his back and he grunts, his steps faltering for a moment. Then I'm airborne and landing on the bed. Before I can catch my bearings, the furs are on top of me, and I'm moved on my side, his large body against my back. Darius's arms come around me, holding me close to him as I blink. Because, what the fuck.

"I'm not sleeping in a bed with you," I growl, trying to pry his arms off of me to get away from him.

"This is the only place you will be sleeping, little wolf. I have to keep an eye on you, who knows when the knife you're aiming at me will come my way."

"If you just pass me mine again, then you won't need to wonder, I'll do it right now!" I shout, and he chuckles. I squirm and kick my feet, trying to get him to release me. His

thick thigh comes over mine and I'm completely pinned, unable to move as I scratch at his forearms.

My breathing picks up, the feeling of being trapped rushing through me and I squeeze my eyes shut. "It's just me, little wolf," he says softly, a purr coming from him.

"That's the problem," I wheeze out, still struggling. Twisting and turning for what feels like forever, I realize I'm getting nowhere. I call my power to me, feel it's barely there hum beneath my skin, ready to unleash whatever it wants to get him away.

He makes a deep sound, then coolness is coating my heated body. I peel my eyes open and see his power floating over my skin, the black moving back and forth over my arms like it's stroking me, settling me.

And damn it all, it does.

I relax in his hold, my body slowly losing its tension while I inhale his scent. Runa yawns inside of me and I huff, giving her the stink eye. She's supposed to back me up.

"Sleep, Rhea. You're safe with me," Darius mumbles against my hair, his thumb running over my wrist.

"No," I tell him, my eyes drooping. "I'm not."

"Under the moonlight, you are."

## Twenty One

RHEA

“Did you take something to prevent pregnancy with your heat?” I startle at his questions as I lean on the stone balustrade of the balcony from his room. I look over in the distance, scanning the trees and wishing I was in them, running free. But alas, Darius is adamant I need more rest, so I’m trapped in this Gods damned room.

My gaze moves to the large lake, watching as the moonlight glistens off its surface, looking like silver glass. Is it cold? or is it hot with the summer sun warming it during the day?

Darius comes to stand behind me and I tense, waiting for him to touch me. He hasn’t stopped since he trapped me in his room.

I once again think about reaching out to Josh down the link, but I can’t do it. I can’t hear his voice right now as much as I don’t want Darius near me.

A touch to the back of my neck makes my shoulders pull up to my ears, and he makes a purring sound, running his fingers

back and forth along my skin. I blow out a breath, and my grip on the balcony wall tightens as I feel the warmth of the breeze against my face.

“Little wolf,” he encourages, and I grit my teeth.

“I did, I always do, even though I see to it myself.” Don’t worry, Darius, no pups for you.

“Apart from the last time,” he reminds me, like I need it.

“Yes,” I grumble. He makes a sound from within his chest.

“Tell me more about your childhood.”

“What else could you possibly want to know?” He needs no more.

“I want to know everything,” he murmurs, and his breath tickles my ear as he crowds me against the stone. I move closer to it, trying to resist the pull of his body heat, but he still closes the gap. His hard chest hits my back and then his arms come around to either side of me, hands resting next to mine.

I’m fully surrounded by him, by his sent, his subtle dominance that he keeps low, but I can still feel it all the same. Runa preens inside of me, huffing out a delicate sigh at his nearness.

“I have told you all I think you should know, enough to let you know I’m innocent, and that all we have ever done is try and survive,” I fume. I need him to stop touching me, it’s getting harder to resist. I vow he’s doing it on purpose.



“You have told me that,” he agrees, and I hear him inhaling my hair, a barely there growl coming from his next breath. “I want to know all that makes you up. Your bravery, your heartache, your strength, your pain.” A pause. “Your rage. I want to know it all from the beginning.”

“You don’t have that right,” I say through gritted teeth. “You will never have that right.”

Another pause. “Maybe not, but I still want it. I’m a selfish asshole like that when it comes to you. I’ve told you that already.” He picks up a strand of my loose hair in front of me, playing with it. “You may hate me, you may want to hurt me, kill me, even.” He rests his head on the top of mine, my gaze going back to the lake. “But you feel the pull as much as I do.” I still at his words, not wanting to talk about this. Not now, not ever. “So we can either be civil, as now it seems we work toward a common goal, that would be best. Or...” His voice has dropped lower now, his hand coming up to encircle my throat gently. He tips my head to the side, moving the hair away as his lips touch the side of my throat. “We can tear each other apart when we are near, strip down to nothing but our skin and fight it out. You know how much I like it when we play.” My stomach flutters, and a shallow breath comes from me as I wrestle with the desire that creeps up, that heightens even more as he devours my throat with his mouth. I reach up a hand, clawing at his own at my neck and he growls deep, his fingers tightening like he doesn’t want to let me go. He grinds into me, and I feel his hard cock against my lower back, and flashes of the last time we were together run through my mind.

Heat pools between my thighs and he snarls into my skin, his other hand coming to grip my hip in a bruising hold as he continues to rock into me, never once stopping in his desire filled kisses.

“Darius,” I pant, and he groans in my ear as he nips at it. I nearly falter, nearly give in. “Get off of me.” He stills, whether from my words or the seriousness in my tone, I don’t know. But he does move back, releasing my throat slowly, and then his warmth is gone. I’m shocked for a moment that he actually did what I asked. I was prepared to use everything I have to get him off me, but he moved as soon as I told him to.

I lean on the balustrade, closing my eyes briefly to shut down what my body wants to do. What it’s warring to have.

“My childhood was happy for the times I was with my parents,” I relent, wanting to try and distract both of us. I won’t go deep, but I can give him this if it stops me from wanting to rub all up against him. “My mom taught me all about Vrohkaria and Heirs, constantly telling me stories as my dad taught me to hunt as much as a child could. They were happy and they made sure I was too. I was always off exploring as a child, curious about the lands, but I could only go so far. It felt restrictive, so I spent a lot of time in the woods and fields of lesia flowers.” He doesn’t say anything, but I know he’s listening. “Me and Josh became best friends when I was around five, he was always at our home as he was an orphan. My parents basically took him in as their own. It was a great childhood, until the rest of it was stolen from me.” I feel

myself starting to numb, not wanting to go into detail about *after* I was trapped in the basement.

He comes to stand next to me, his arm brushing mine and I feel our wolves greeting each other. “Your mom was an Heir?”

“She was, she was the most amazing being in the lands.” I swallow over the lump in my throat.

“And she chose Charles to be your guardian?” I nod. “But you don’t know who Warden is?”

“I didn’t have a guardian named Warden, I haven’t seen him before.” I don’t tell him that my mother and father named Edward my other guardian. I don’t trust him enough to tell him about the person that saved not only my life, but Josh, Cassie and Kade’s too.

“He’s a Higher. I don’t know why Charles told us he’s your guardian when you don’t even know him.”

“I don’t know, but who knows why Charles does the things he does anyway.”

“You have a point. I have realized I cannot trust what he has told me over the years.”

“That would be smart to consider.” He turns to look at me, and I can feel his scowl.

“Do you know Aldus? He was the one who gave me the memory crystal,” he tells me.

“I have heard the name, and if Aldus gave you that crystal that is wrong, then he is also on my shit list,” I say, looking up

at the star-filled sky.

“He’s on mine too, I’m trying to track him down.” I look at him then.

“You are?”

He nods. “Higher Aiden hasn’t been seen in a few weeks, I think Aldus is out looking for him and doing his rounds on behalf of all Highers to the people, but I will find him eventually.”

I say nothing in regard to Aiden, he won’t find him. I did kill him after all. Soon enough, the rest will follow. A smile forms at the thought.

“Anything I need to know, little wolf?”

“Nope.”

“Hmm, you will tell me, eventually.”

“You seem so sure,” I say, looking at him.

He dips his head, looking down from the balcony. “In this, I am.”

Confident male.

“When will I see the memory stone, you said you wanted me to see it.” I’m also curious to know what everyone saw.”

“I have been trying to locate it, Charles refuses to let me have it.”

“Of course he does,” I sigh. “How am I supposed to look at it and try and see if I know anything about the rogures if you

don't have it? Wasn't that one of the points of bringing me here?"

"I will get it, I just need some time. We hope we can see something we missed with the ritual that was performed, and with it showing you, maybe you can see why we thought you were the traitor."

"I don't think that matters anymore."

"It does." His tone is firm as he says that, like it's important.

We stay in silence for a while, looking out over the lands. Its not uncomfortable, but standing next to my enemy, sort of allie, mostly asshole, I take in the view before me, knowing this is one of those other precious moments to look upon.

"Is Kade still at the castle?" I dare to ask, looking back up at the stars.

"As far as I know, yes."

I want to ask if there is any way he could get him out, could get *me* in to get him, but we haven't even gotten Sarah yet. For all I know, this could all still be a trap.

"Under the moonlight," he murmurs after more silence stretches, and my shoulders bunch up, refusing to look at him. "The darkest of nights shine the brightest."

I swallow roughly as he repeats what I said to him in Eridian. I thought he didn't hear me. "How do you know that?"

I feel his stare on the side of my face. "How could I not?"

“Maybe we should use a memory stone on you and block it out,” I snark.

He chuckles, and it makes my insides flutter. “I think both of us have had enough of memory stone bullshit.”

“True, but this could be an exception. You can forget all about me and be on your way with your band of merry assholes.”

“Even if my memory was taken, little wolf, it would be impossible to forget you.” I hate the way his words wash over me and burrow deep. The thought of someone not forgetting me, even my enemy, settles something inside of me. I have been hiding for years, I could die and the only ones who would know would be those in Eridian. To have someone on the outside makes me feel like I’m part of the lands, not burrowing into it until I cease to exist. “You know as well as I do that I couldn’t forget you.”

“Souls are a funny thing,” I tell him, picking at my fingers and shaking off my thoughts. “They are this invisible thing, yet are very much there and are a part of you. You don’t see it, but you feel it, and they can hurt, tear, and damn near break you. But you know what I think?” I ask, finally looking at him.

“I want all your thoughts,” he says, eyes roaming over my face.

“I think no matter the *how*, we created our own soul, and since we did that, we can eventually over time, re-make it. We can mold it, take some off and keep the bits we like.”

He tilts his head at me. “And why would you want to remake it?”

“Because I would take out the parts that cause me to falter in my steps, that weigh me down under boulders and drown me in its darkest depths.” I don’t know why I told him that, but the words spill from me anyway.

He shakes his head slowly. “I don’t think you would need to do that.”

“Why not?” I question, my brows furrowing.

“You don’t need to remake your soul, little wolf, all you have to do is conquer it. When you do that, and it is a *when*, Rhea, you will have a home with foundations, not a tent that could blow away at any moment. With that, you will become more than you were, but never forgetting how you started or how far you have come.” He turns toward me, and I’m unable to move back, to get out of his sight as everything narrows down to him, on his words. “When you do that, you will shine more than you do now. The lands will know it too, and they will feel your wrath, but they will also feel your heart.” He nudges his nose against mine, the action too quick for me to avoid. “I could create a path so you don’t stumble anymore, carry the weight you bare and make sure you stay in the light.” He looks me over, a small smile on his face, the one that is unguarded, free. “But you don’t need me to do that for you, Rhea, you can do it on you own. Though I will help you, whether you want it or not.” He turns and heads back through

the doors before I can reply. “Come, time for bed,” he calls over his shoulder.

I stay where I am and bring my fingers up to my nose as it tingles. My chest warms at his words, and my heart crumbles at wanting to believe him, for just a moment, to believe that maybe we can forgive what we had both done.

I lied, I killed some of his men, I hid Sarah and more people died because some of the Elites weren't there to help with the rogues.

He took us to the Highers, broke our vow, and whipped me.

It feels like so much hangs between us, and in the softer moments, we forget for a little while. We both know that the silent words of this mess hanging between us, of anger and betrayal will soon spill out.

And I'm not sure what will become of us at the end of it.

“I'm not tired,” I eventually tell him.

“Don't care, bed.”

Ugh, insufferable asshole.



## Twenty Two

DARIUS

“Keep your dominant foot behind you to power your strike, use your whole arm when you swing your blade, it is an extension of you, not an accessory!” I shout to my Elites as they spar with each other.

The training yard is on the other side of the west wing. It’s a large square enclosed with fencing, with soft dirt on the ground for when they land. The summer sun beats down on their naked backs, nicks and some shallow wounds dripping blood from them as we enter our fourth hour of training.

“You’re hard on them, more so than usual,” Leo says when I reach the fence that goes around the perimeter.

I shrug. “War will be coming.” I fold my arms and lean back on the fence, observing.

He sighs. “This is not where I expected it to be. Fending off rogues and about to start a war with the Highers.”

“Neither did I, but we cannot let it continue.” Not after what was hidden from us right before our eyes.

“No,” he says solemnly. “I can’t help but think of all the times we followed orders, took creatures down, and wondered if they were really looking for an Heir at that time.”

“Those types of questions will probably never be answered, you will drive yourself mad.” He grunts. “Again!” I order, when some of the them finish.

Leo chuckles. “Those that are scared of you will do no good in battle, never mind a war.”

“They think since I’m an Heir, I’m dangerous to them?”  
Ridiculous.

“You always were.”

“Not in any way like they think I am now,” I sigh. I cannot have them fearing me because of who I am. I’m pushing hard in training, but that’s only to help save their lives. Now, they think I’m going to snap their necks with no thought or reason.

“They will come around,” Leo says, laughing as an Elite gets his legs swiped from under him by Maverick. He’s the one who holds the fort when my brothers and I are out. “He’s getting better every time.”

“I did train him.”

Leo shoves my shoulder. “Cocky bastard.” I shrug. “Most of the others are following his lead in not pissing themselves when you’re near,” he snickers.

“I can’t have men who I can’t trust, especially not now.”

He nods. “Are we weeding them out?”

“Yes. I want names of everyone who has a connection to the Highers, or their families have connections to the Highers, no matter how little. We cannot hide Rhea and her pack forever. They also need to train, and I need to be able to trust that my Elites will follow me like they should, not the Highers.”

“I will start on it with the others.” He reaches into his pocket. “Another letter for you.” I see the seal on it and instantly shake my head, letting him know to discard it.

Leo pauses for a second.

“Spit it out,” I say, turning around to face him, my arms crossed.

He sighs, running a hand through his hair. “Are you two patching things up?”

“That doesn’t concern you,”

“Come on, brother,” he says, exasperated.

I turn and look back at my men. “I don’t know about fixing things. How could I ever make up for what I did? I’m still angry at her, at her lies. But my actions and hers are not so simple. We both had reasons, and I’m not sure we are both ready to hear them, though her reasons are pretty obvious.”

“Have you told her why you didn’t disobey Charles’s order?”

“No,” I grunt.

“She may change her mind—“

“My reason doesn’t matter why I did what I did, brother. It’s too late for that. It’s unforgivable.”

“You are too hard on yourself,” he mutters. “You were put in an impossible situation.”

“That doesn’t matter either.” I start toward my men. “Let’s focus on weeding out the rotten for now.” I hear him sigh before he leaves.

I breathe deep and let it out, clenching my hands before releasing them. “Maverick,” I call. His head snaps toward me and he comes over.

“Yes, Alpha” His chest heaves with his deep breaths, sweat dripping off of him.

“Good work, you have improved even more.” He dips his head in thanks. “I know your loyalty is toward the Elites and no one else.”

His brows pinch together. “Of course.”

“Do you have any others in mind who aren’t?”

He looks at me for a moment. “Something is coming, isn’t it.”

“Something we all weren’t prepared for, so answer my question.”

He nods. “I have a few in mind, but nothing solid.”

“It’s a start.”



“You were very angry when we last spoke,” Charles says as he takes a sip of his liquor. I grunt, not replying. He sighs.

“Darius, you need to adhere to my orders, it will not go well for you otherwise.”

“I am not here to be controlled, I’m the Alpha of the Elites.” And he is a piece of shit that needs me to rip out of his throat. Just the thought of his hands on Rhea, what he did to her, what he allowed to happen has me boiling with rage.

Drax growls inside of me, a continuous sound that doesn’t help with my control. He’s damn-near feral as I sit across from him, wanting to be let out to have his teeth sink into him.

We will have his flesh torn soon, we just need to find evidence of where these children are that he has taken.

“It’s for the greater good of Vrohkaria,” Charles goes on. Once again, he sits there, all imposing as he tries to command me to do what he wants. No more.

“I will not rape and create pups.”

He scoffs. “I am very disappointed in you lately, you are not yourself. You seem to think highly of yourself since you have been recognized as an Heir.” He looks over me, nose high in the air.

“Nothing has changed since I have that title.”

“A lot has changed, including yourself.”

“I disagree.” I lean back and fold my arms. “What did you call me for?”

“Do not treat me like a pest, Darius,” he warns, and the air fills with tension. “I am Lord Higher, watch your tone or I will have you thrown in the dungeons with your men.”

I grind my teeth and say nothing. What I wouldn't give to have my hands around his throat. I can see it so clearly too. I would squeeze and watch his eyes bulge, I would watch his blood vessels pop, watch him claw and gasp for breath. Then I would let up, just to start again. Maybe I could hang him for a time, just to watch him struggle, then tie him to a pole or strap him down.

The many, many things I want to do to this male. All I can think about as he moves his mouth, talking to me more like a pet than a respected Alpha, is how many ways I would make him hurt. How many times I would make sure he survives just so I can make him suffer for longer.

I will have that, Rhea, will have that.

“Are you even listening!” Charles throws the glass against the wall, and silence follows as he breathes heavily like a rabid dog on the other side of the desk.

“I have a lot on my mind with the rogues, this is why I wanted to look at the crystal once more—“

“You will not be looking at the blasted crystal again! You have seen it, you do not need to another time. You need to focus before I have you replaced,” he growls, a vein bulging on his forehead.

His words make my eyes sharpen. “You can’t just have the Alpha of the Elites replaced. There are rules to abide by for that to happen, a ceremony. None of my men will take my place unless I allow it.”

“Patrick has no such problem. Now, get me another drink.”

“Patrick?” Rhea’s sick cousin? Just hearing his name has my hackles rising even more. “That shithead hasn’t even passed the rite of passage, and he would die trying.”

“He doesn’t need to,” Charles growls. “Drink, Darius, now!” My jaw ticks, but I get to my feet on stiff legs and go to his liquor collection. I choose one that’s already open and fill a glass, resisting the urge to spit in it.

Taking it back to him, I slam it down and some spills over the rim, onto his precious desk. Power blasts through the air and it slams into me. I fly into the wall, my chest feeling like it’s about to explode before it’s suddenly gone. I drop to the floor, my eyes hard as I look at Charles who cleans his desk.

My hands fist at my sides as I stand.

“I would apologize for that loss of control, however, you are no barbarian, Darius. You know to take care of my things.” I’ll take care of things alright.

I just need more time. Get the crystal, find the names of all pack members who have gone missing or are lost. Then, *then* I can drive a blade into this asshole.

I dust myself off, growling beneath my breath as I make my way back to my seat.

“Your father would be so disappointed with how you are acting.” I think I broke off some of my tooth. “As would your mother and little sister.” The ground beneath my feet trembles, and Charles smirks as he looks over some papers in front of him. “Now, now, you only have yourself to blame with the shame of that. Moving on.” I’ll move you six feet under. “I have planned for Maize to arrive at the keep. She is very easy to get her to spread her legs, so bedding her shouldn’t take too long. She is not a wolf, but she can take a tonic to bring on a mimicked heat cycle to get you, shall we say, *in the mood*.”

I stare. “No.” I will not touch her, the thought repulses me.

He stills, and lifts his head. “No?” he asks in a quiet murmur. I glare, letting him know I will not be doing this. “I wasn’t asking, but very well.”

There is a knock on the door, and I tense as Charles welcomes them in. “Seeing as though you will not do as you are told.” A guard walks to the side of Charles’s desk and bows his head, his neck shows as a sign of submission. “Have someone grab the large, red haired male and the one who uses a bow.” I tense. “And then bring Kaden down to the dungeon with them. We have another interrogation session to complete.”

My stare bores into Charles. “What did you just say?”



## Twenty Three

RHEA

“Darius, just let me out for a bit, I’m going mad being cooped up in here. You said I wasn’t a prisoner, yet it’s been nearly a week of seeing the same Gods damned walls,” I fume, folding my arms over my chest as he enters the room. “You come and go as you like. You were out most of yesterday!”

He just leaves when he wants, especially during the night. I’ve woken up to him gone, and I can’t help but wonder what he is doing. He never tells me.

“Go to the balcony for a little bit, that’s your fresh air,” he says, walking toward the bathroom.

“Ugh.” I throw my hands up and scowl at his back.

I turn toward the bed and hear the shower go on, just like clockwork. I bite my lip, refusing to look over my shoulder, knowing I’ll see him in all his stupid, naked ass glory. I made that mistake the last time I went to argue with him.

He didn’t have his back to me, no, not Darius. I had a full frontal view as I followed him, and I soon shut my mouth and

scurried out of there with my cheeks on fire. His chuckle still rings in my ears. Now, he makes sure the door is a little open and he's always facing this way.

I huff out a breath and turn toward his closet to change into one of his t-shirts. I have some clothes of my own that I brought with me from Belldame's home, but they need to be washed. Darius took them from me the second day I was here and said he will sort it. I haven't gotten them back since.

His black t-shirt comes down to my thighs when I change out of an old one, and I walk back into the bedroom, eyes going to the locked door with anger. It's warded with his power, and that's why I haven't been able to open it.

I huff again and put my hands on my hips, looking around the room and wondering if I can knock the fucker out and somehow that will release the door. I hear the shower go off and I turn, ready to tear him a new one, but I quickly snap my mouth shut.

Rivers of water drip over his skin, they follow his tattoos from his neck, the tops of his shoulders, and then flowing down over the side of his ribs and abs. My eyes move on their own accord to the hair trail leading down, and below the towel wrapped around his waist. I swallow roughly, hating the desire that heats my flesh and I lick my lips, breathing deeply through my nose. A low growl has my eyes snapping up to his darkened ones, and I shiver at the heat in them.

We're locked in a battle of desire and anger, but something that is unmistakably us. I take a peek at his forearm, at the

barely visible design in the middle, and I subconsciously move my hand to my own, squeezing over my own marking. He tilts his head at me, looking at where my fingers grip my skin in an almost bruising grip before he runs his hands through his own hair.

This is so fucked. Everything is fucked.

“Darius,” I sigh, rubbing my eyes and trying to ignore the pull to him. It’s constant even when I’m near him, like a low buzz dancing beneath my skin that can flare up at any moment. Unpredictable, needy, wild. “It’s been too long, I haven’t seen anyone but you, and you’re driving me crazy.”

“You need rest,” is all he says, it’s what he has told me every damn day since I woke up in his bedroom.

“I’m well rested. So after sleeping tonight, you can let me out. I’m as good as new.” He gives me a blank stare and I try not to fidget under his scrutiny. I am feeling better, I’m still a little tired, but not completely exhausted. Why he feels the need to keep me locked in here and do nothing is beyond me. I hate the feeling of being trapped, but I won’t tell him that, though I think he knows it.

He looks me over, from my bare toes all the way back up to my eyes, lingering on any exposed skin he can see as he goes. He can see my frustration, my impatience as a smirk spread across his damn kissable lips. Gods, I need to get out of this room.

He’s the enemy, Rhea. Enemy.

“I’ll let you out tomorrow, on one condition.”

My eyes light up, wondering about his change of mind, but then I scowl. “What condition? There shouldn’t even be a condition.”

He runs a hand over his chest, wiping the beads of water that are left on his skin. “You get into bed tonight, and you’re not going to complain one bit about it when I join you.”

No.

“Why don’t I just go to a different room? That way you can have your own bed back without me complaining that *you* refuse to let me have my own space.”

Since the first time, he’s gotten into bed with me every night, refusing to leave no matter how many times I try to get him to. I even went for his balls last night and tried to bite him, but the fucker doesn’t go anywhere. And when I try to leave the bed, he just cages me within his arms and laughs at me like I’m fucking cute when I’m fighting for my freedom. I don’t stop trying to get out of his arms until I’ve exhausted myself and he always makes the same, smug sound in the back of his throat when I relent.

Asshole.

“Not happening, little wolf.” He begins to undo the towel around his waist, and it drops to the floor with a wet slap. I try very hard to not look down, so hard that my eyes start to sting, because I know he’s now completely naked. I’ve seen a man naked plenty of times with them being wolves, but seeing

Darius is like looking upon something extraordinary, and I hate that I feel that way. He smirks and licks his lips, knowing the effect he has on me, and I internally scoff at how my body is attuned to his, how it remembers his touch. The way he turned me inside out the last time we were naked together. “I could always do other things to make you pliant when we go to bed.”

I blush, letting out a shaky breath and pretending he can't see how my nipples harden, or smell my arousal. It's a reminder of how he once owned my body during my heat, making me experience something I never have before. An orgasm would be nice, we have been somewhat cordial, but I haven't forgotten what he did to me. I don't want him touching my body like that, not after the way he hurt me.

Only right now, I really fucking do. He's been touching me for days, especially during the night. One time I woke up laying on his chest and one of his hands was under the back of my t-shirt, the other on my ass, holding it possessively. I tried to move but he just gave my ass a good squeeze and drew me closer. So damn close, there was not a part of me that wasn't touching him. Thankfully, the t-shirt covers the front of me, but I still felt his hardness against my stomach.

He smirked at me the rest of that day when we woke up and I pretended I didn't feel how hard he was and every night since, I have ended up laying on top of him somehow.

“Not happening,” I answer him, clearing my throat.

“Then let’s go to bed and no complaints, those are my terms.” I look away as he walks to his side of the bed, naked as the moon drawing the furs back to get in. I huff and climb in next to him, staring at the ceiling and pulling the furs up to my chin.

The room is stifling with tension, and I wiggle around, trying to get comfy while holding on to the furs tightly. He shifts next to me, and I see his head turn toward me out of the corner of my eye. I’m restless, and I squeeze my thighs together. The sensation that causes doesn’t help me one bit.

Dammit.

“Settle,” he says.

“I’m trying,” I grit out, wiggling again.

“Fuck it,” he mutters, and then two hands are on my waist and I’m flattened on a hard, warm chest. The breath rushes from me as I scramble to get off him, but his hands land on my waist, keeping me to him in a tight grip.

“Wha-what are you doing?” I ask, hating how my voice has become breathless as I stay as still as possible, not daring to move. Not wanting to acknowledge his hard cock beneath me, right where his t-shirt covers me between my legs.

I shiver, and wetness rushes from me, making my cheeks heat. I push on his solid chest to move, but Darius releases a soft groan and my eyes snap to him. He’s not looking at me though. No. He’s looking between my thighs, like he can see through the material.

He licks his lips, and his eyes slowly come up to mine, dark and heated and my chest heaves. He squeezes my waist and rocks me forward once, making me release a choked sound as his cock slides through my folds and nudges my clit.

I claw my fingers into his chest. “Dar—.”

“I can feel how wet you are for me,” he says in a low tone. “It’s soaking through my t-shirt, making it smell of both you and me.” Another roll, and he grunts. “I’ve been smelling your arousal for days. I told myself I wouldn’t touch, I would wait until you made it clear what you want.” He rocks me back, and then forward once again, and I tremble, my fingers digging into his chest. “But feeling you coating my cock through my t-shirt with how wet you are for me, that’s enough of a sign that you want me. My patience has ran out, little wolf, now more than ever I need to feel you,” he groans as he continues to move me, his head falling back. “Do you think about me? How I shoved my cock so deep inside you and made you scream?”

“No,” I moan as he releases my waist and pulls the t-shirt up. He hisses as my pussy meets his cock and it’s instantly wet. He moves his hips, moving his cock against me, the tip nudging my clit again. I squeeze my thighs on either side of him.

“You’re a little liar, little wolf.” He continues to rock me over his cock, and I’m unable to be quiet. Fuck, why does it feel so good. My nails scratch his skin, drawing blood that

makes him release a deep groan as he watches how he moves me.

The sound of his groan does something to me and my eyes flutter shut. Not wanting to, but relishing that I'm doing this with him. Me. His cock is warm and wet from me, and a deep internal instinct preens at this fact as much as I don't want it to. The fact that he's covered in my scent.

One of his hands leaves my hip, but he urges me to continue rocking with his other hand, and I do, unable to help myself at how good it feels. He trails his hand down to my thigh as I glide back and forth, goosebumps peppering my skin at his touch. It's been so long, so, so long since I felt something good.

I just wanted to feel something good.

His hand moves the bottom of my t-shirt up and drags it over my head, I lift my arms to help him as his heated stare devours every inch of me as he throws it off to the side. Cool air hits my skin, adding to the sensations flowing through me as I place my hands back on his chest, ready to have the euphoria that I know will come. But then I freeze, remembering who this is, what he's seeing. He's seeing me naked after he saw me and all my scars. Seeing me naked outside of my heat.

His eyes flick up to my wide ones, and I scramble to move off of him, needing to get away, needing to stop this madness. But he sits up with ease, pulling me further on his lap as he grasps my chin in his hand. "Don't do that," he says, pulling me flush against him. "You are the most beautiful thing I have



ever witnessed in all my years,” he murmurs softly. His green eyes are nothing but truthful, like he fully believes what he’s saying. He shakes my chin a little. “Scars and all, little wolf. Seen or hidden.” He leans forward and runs his nose up the side of my neck, and I grip his shoulders, holding myself steady. “Make no mistake that I desire you. That I want to own every sliver of your skin, that I want to infiltrate you and tear down every barrier that I know you have built to survive, and don’t doubt, Rhea, that will happen.” He moves his hand from my hip and moves his head out from the crook of my neck. His gaze moves to my forearm, trailing his fingertips down to the middle and circling there as his eyes come back to mine. My breath catches in my throat. “When I’m fully within you, in every part of you, as you will no doubt be within me because I demand nothing less, you will know you will never need those barriers ever again, never against me.”

“Darius,” I say, confused on how we got here and his words.

He smiles. “I will be a barrier for you, shielding you, protecting you, keeping you safe.” He brings my arm up and kisses the center of my forearm, his lips are warm and so gentle. “I won’t let you go. I won’t see you walk away from me and go back into hiding. You will be by my side, always.”

“No.” I shake my head, refusing to hear this, refusing to want and need and hate the idea. He will crush me, I have to remember that, remember how he held that whip in his hands and let it fly through the air to hurt me. “Don’t,” I plead, my voice cracking.

“You know as well as I do that the outcome will be the same, regardless of how we get there. It was set into the lands from The Deadlands, maybe even before then.” His tone has gentled, but I sense his irritation of me not wanting to do this. But why would he want to?

“You don’t even want me.” He doesn’t, not really, and I can’t stop the tear that falls from my eye. I hate this vulnerability I’m showing him, hate how he can see how much his words affect me. “I don’t want you either,” I remind him. Darius’s eyes turn hard, and he lifts his hand off my arm and takes my tear from my face before bringing it in front of us, watching it on the tip of his finger.

“I didn’t want you,” he agrees, and my heart cracks, no matter how much I don’t want him to affect me. “I never wanted you, never wanted this.” He puts the tip of his finger in his mouth and sucks the tear off, his eyes piercing mine. “But I have accepted it is inevitable. Accepted what it is, what we are, and so should you. Your tears will be the only ones I put there from now on, and only from the pleasure I give you.” He moves closer, our lips inches apart and I blink back more tears that want to escape me. “We cannot change how we began, how we got to where we are now, but we can change what happens from here.”

“Nothing will happen,” I whisper.

“More lies, Rhea. I thought we were past this.”

I bite my lip, and his eyes lock on my mouth, glinting. “I didn’t want this either, you know, but I cannot forget what you

did, how you tore flesh from my back. I nearly died, Darius.”

His jaw clenches and his eyes avert to the side. His brow furrows and then he releases a deep growl before turning back toward me, his eyes determined. “Kiss me,” he says.

“What?” He’s just going to ignore what I said?

“Kiss me because I demand it, kiss me because you want it, kiss me,” he says, his eyes darkening, “and I’ll make you feel alive.”

I pause, my eyes bouncing between his as I wonder if I want to close the distance between us. If I want to ignore that he won’t acknowledge what he did to me, like he can run away from it. Why is it so hard for him to do so, he doesn’t give a shit, not really. He just can’t help it with this connection and that’s all it is. Something that has tethered us together to be like this.

This isn’t us, isn’t me or him.

This is the Gods, and I hate them for what they have done.

Can I just take pleasure and feel something good and figure out later how to fix this? How to get far away from him so I never have to see his green eyes again. Do I want that?

I’m so confused and overwhelmed with my feelings of anger, hurt, sadness, need and desire. I just want it to stop, I don’t want to feel like this, I don’t want to think. If he can stop the thoughts swirling around my head for a few mere moments, then I’ll take it. I deserve it.

I close the distance and press my lips to his, and his growl of approval rumbles through him to my chest as he grabs me and pulls me closer, our naked skin pressed together for the first time since my heat.

He invades my mouth with his tongue, pressing closer and guiding his hand up to the back of my head, gripping my hair. He pulls on it, and my head falls back the way he wants as he nips at my lips, licking them before he once more tangles his tongue with mine. Our kiss isn't gentle, it's brutal and angry and dominating.

This is what I want. To not think and just feel.

His other hand moves up my side, stroking over my skin until he has a handful of my breast and squeezes. Hard. I whimper, and I feel his smile against my lips as he moves to my nipple and pinches. I grip his shoulders tighter, moving my hands to the hair at the back of his head and gripping it tightly. He grunts, falling back so I'm on top of him again. His hips thrust upward and I moan as his cock slides against me. I move in tandem with each glide. With every roll of my hips the head of his cock nudges my clit, making my belly clench with what will inevitably come.

He slows his pace and I whine. He chuckles and I growl, biting his lower lip in return. "You know how I like to play," he says against my lips. "Fuck. Do you see how good we can feel together?"

"I hate you," I moan, rocking faster against him, feeling the warmth of his hard cock and he lets me, groaning as he looks

between us and sees his cock moving through my folds.

“Then hate me some more, my little wolf, and ride my fingers until you come.” He keeps a hand in my hair and moves his other one down, skirting his fingers around my belly button until they lower. He presses a finger to my clit, circling softly, never stopping his thrusts and I release a loud moan, trembling as the pleasure builds within me. But I feel so empty, clenching on nothing and I let out a soft whimper.

“I know what you need,” Darius growls, and moves his fingers further down, touching all of me and feeling how his cock is sliding through my folds with ease. He stops his thrusts suddenly, and then he’s pushing two fingers inside of me with no mercy. My head falls back, his hand in my hair keeping me steady as he sits back up and his lips go to my neck, tasting, sucking, biting.

“Gods,” I whimper, clutching his arms.

“Heir,” he corrects on a groan that vibrates against the skin of my neck. “Fuck, so tight, do you feel how much your pussy wants something to fill it? How much it wants *me* to fill it?” I moan at his words as he pumps them in and out of me, the sound of how wet I am turning me on even more. My body starts to tremble, my orgasm building already. “You’re close, aren’t you,” he breathes against my neck, then licks up and along my jaw. “Give it to me, little wolf. I want to feel you strangling my fingers, I want you to soak them. I’ve waited months for a taste again, to have you on my tongue. I would make myself come with the thought of it, waking up and

having to fuck my fist at the thought of you. So give it to me,” he snarls. He moves his thumb up to my clit and presses down hard as he adds a third finger.

“Darius,” I moan, clenching around him as I move my hips up and down, riding him faster as I near the edge. “Fuck.” Darius leans me further back, keeping his grip on the back of my head to hold me as his mouth comes to my nipple and bites down.

My orgasm barrels through me, my pussy pulsing, my back arching as he growls against my skin, listening to my moans as he continues to ram his fingers into me. My body trembles and my eyes flutter shut as aftershocks wrack my body, and I become pliant in his hold. Just like he said I would.

I’m grabbed and turned, my back hitting the soft furs as my legs fall around his waist. “Good girl,” Darius growls, and I make a soft noise at the back of my throat before I peel my eyes open. I whimper as I watch his hand glide over his cock, his fingers glistening with my orgasm as he stares between my legs. His stare is possessive and so full of heat that my body does a full shiver, my legs twitching.

Darius strokes faster, his breaths becoming ragged, and then his eyes snap up to mine before he tilts his head back and releases a deep groan. Ropes of cum land on my pussy, thighs and stomach, and I watch the corded muscle of his tattooed neck strain from his release.

“Those fucking eyes,” he breaths when he stops stroking himself and leans forward. Hands land beside my head,

making sure not to crush me with his weight as he looks deep into my eyes. He brings a hand up, and I watch as he brings his fingers to his mouth and sucks them clean of me, his eyes closing a second as he makes a satisfied sound. He then moves his hand down to my pussy, and I jolt as he smears his cum over my clit. Bringing his hand back up, he touches his fingers to my lips and they part in an instant, tasting him until I can't any more. He leans down and kisses me, and I can taste myself as his tongue spears into my mouth, not caring that he can also taste his own cum as he kisses me until I'm boneless on the bed.

He sits back, rubbing over my body and I realize he's rubbing his cum into my skin where it landed, making sure I have his scent. I'm too tired to care what I look like, but he must like what he sees as his eyes flare with heat again. "Laeliah," he murmurs, and my heart skips a beat. He leans down and takes my lips with his again. This is more gentle, soft, but still so possessive. I'm once again lifted and turned until Darius is on his back and I'm laying fully on his chest, never once breaking the kiss until I eventually pull back.

"I need to clean up," I murmur against him. Ignoring what he said. I can't make myself regret what we did, not with how relaxed I feel after so long, but I need to wash up.

"No," he says, guiding my head to his neck and I breathe him in, unable to stop myself. His heart pounds against mine as I lay on top of him, and he runs his fingers over my back. Up and down, up and down. Sometimes he goes in a diagonal move, starting from the top to the bottom, sometimes his

fingers trail in a straight line, sometimes he only moves them half way down my back until he goes to the top again.

My mind is in a content haze as I sigh and relax on top of him, letting his touch soothe me. He makes quiet sounds as he strokes over my skin, like it's settling him too. His other hand comes to the back of my head and he runs his fingers through my tangled hair, carefully getting out all the knots whilst still moving over my back with his other hand.

It isn't until I'm in a half asleep state that I begin to realize that his fingers on my back aren't just mindlessly moving. There's a pattern to them, to the trail they make over my skin like in the bathroom. It's meticulous, a constant pressure that's gentle, but knowing.

He's following the pattern of scars that he put on my back from when he whipped me.



## Twenty Four

RHEA

I wake to an empty room as I stretch out my muscles. I glance around for any signs of Darius and breathe a sigh of relief when I don't find him. I shuffle on the bed, and then grimace as I remember the dried cum I still have on me from last night.

I'm not sure how to feel about what we did. It gave me some peace for a little while, it made everything stop for a moment. But Darius won't even acknowledge what he did to me, yet he can trail his finger so softly over each scar that he gave me without even seeing them. How can he trace something that's hidden? And why?

I can't get a read on him and that's even more frustrating and confusing. What does he want with me?

We are inevitable, yet we both don't want this connection. But that tether that ties us together is frayed, and the best thing to do is snap it completely. I just need to find out how.

I ignore how my stomach turns at the thought.

I lift the furs covering me and place my feet on the cool floor. I'm about to get up when a shock of blue freezes me and my eyes widen. Barely breathing, I lift a shaky hand toward the tall glass on the table beside the bed, and stroke my fingers over the blue petals that darken at the ends.

They are just how I remember them. Beautiful and wild, and the sweet smell they give off is so distinct, you can't mimic it.

A door opens behind me but I don't turn, my eyes completely glued to the flower I haven't seen in so many years, that it brings tears to my eyes.

"How?" I eventually whisper, my voice cracking as I hear him coming closer.

"It was around," Darius says, his tone bored.

My head whips around to him standing at the foot of the bed, his eyes guarded as he looks at the flower and then to me.

"Why put it there?"

He shrugs. "I just did, Rhea. Don't think too much about it." He looks away from me and moves toward the bathroom. His t-shirt stretches over his back, and the jeans he wears hug his ass and legs. It's hard for me to move my eyes away.

Don't think too much about it?

I look back at the flower and run my fingers over the glass, mesmerized by their color.

How can I not think much about it when this flower signifies my happy childhood, my mom.

My favorite flower.

But he can't know that it is, I haven't told him that.

Darius opens the bathroom door and I scramble after him, pausing as I realize I'm naked and grab a fur pelt off the bed to wrap it around me. Entering the bathroom, he turns a tap and starts to fill the copper tub before grabbing something off the shelf and pouring it into the water, turning it a light pink. He then dips his fingers into it before going to the taps, adjusting the speed of each one before swirling the water around.

I watch on, my brow furrowed at his attention and wonder why he always makes baths for me daily.

I clear my throat. "What are you doing?"

His stare is blank as he looks at the water and then back to me. "Drawing a bath. I would think that is obvious, little wolf."

"Har fucking har. I can clearly see that, but why are you adding stuff and checking the temperature? You have done this every day." But still he always checks.

A dark, raised eyebrow is all I get in return before he turns off the taps and stalks toward me. I back up, clutching the fur to my chest and my back hits the wall. Darius stops in front of me, eyes trailing down until he reaches my bare feet. He tilts his head at them, running his thumb over his bottom lip.

I glance down, wiggling my toes and look back up at him. "Why are you staring at my feet?"

“I’m thinking they would look great over my shoulders,” he says in a low tone that sends shivers down my spine. His eyes move slowly up to mine and the heat in them has me gripping the furs tighter. “Do you not remember the last time they were there?” He moves his head to the other side. “Do you remember your moans echoing off the cave walls as I made you come on my cock again and again?”

Yes, I do remember. Too fucking well.

“That was during my heat and nothing else.”

“Bullshit.” He smirks. “I suspect you think the same as last night as you rode my fingers?”

“It was nothing.”

“Hmm.”

“It was.”

“Sure, little wolf,” he chuckles before bringing his hands up and peeling my fingers from the fur. “Now, it’s time to clean up.”

“I can do that on my own.”

“Your point?” My hands scramble to keep my grip on the fur but Darius easily removes them, and the pelt drops to the floor.

Chills spread across my body as Darius’s eyes trace over every inch of my skin with the morning light peeking through the large window. I fold my arms over my chest, trying to cover myself somewhat and once again feeling vulnerable whilst he’s still fully clothed.

“Show me,” he rasps, and my eyes widen. I start shaking my head, a firm denial. “Show. Me.”

“No.”

“Rhea.”

“Darius.”

He growls, baring his teeth at me and I bare mine. No way in the Gods will I show him. He’s seen them once, and that’s enough.

We eye each other for a minute or so, his stare filling the depths of me and I’m trapped. Like a pup caught in a snare, I can’t get away. It can try to move, try to bite and claw, but ultimately, it does nothing. You’re still captured and that’s exactly what Darius’s eyes do to me.

His gaze on mine has always felt surreal, like something bigger surrounds us, a bubble that encases us, muting everything. We can’t see it, but we can feel it. Like a soul.

Darius eventually sighs and scrubs his hand down his face, breaking our connection, and I wonder what he must be thinking. I was prepared for him to continue to push at me until I gave him what he wanted, but he relented too easily. I don’t understand why he wants me to show him the battle that took place on my body, of what I’ve been through. Especially since he hasn’t even looked at the scars he has given me himself.

“The soul within, will rise to its highest,” he murmurs, and my heart stops, refusing to beat again as I stare at him in

shock.

He needs to stop saying it, to continue it.

His determined green eyes let me know he won't stop.

I shake my head, remembering how I started it by letting it slip in Eridian while we were searching for Solvier, when the wisps came to play with us, how he asked me what I said and I brushed it off. But he knew exactly what I said, and he knows that I know now.

“When we go under the moonlight together,” he starts, lifting a hand and trailing a finger down my cheek. He rests it on the side of my neck as I tremble under his touch, his words. “That is when we will be indefinite. Effiniar.”

“No, no. You can't be serious? And how do you even know all of this and that language?” What is happening here?

“You think I'm an Heir and I don't even know a little of the language of the Gods?”

“Yes?” I say slowly as my arms fall to my sides. Darius doesn't glance down at my breasts as his eyebrows pinch together.

“That makes no sense, Rhea.”

“No.” I lift a hand and stab my finger into his chest. “What makes no sense is that you didn't even know who you were and now all of a sudden, you can speak the Language of the Gods like it's your first language.” He looks down at my finger digging into him and his lips twitch. “It's not funny, asshole, you can't possibly...” I trail off as I remember all

those months ago at Wolvorn Castle, when he mouthed a word to me. “That’s what you said to me?” My hand falls and I lean heavily against the wall at my back.

“What did I say to you, little wolf?” He moves closer, his hands landing on either side of my head, crowding me. “What did I say, Rhea?”

“Sion,” I tell him quietly as his head dips and he runs his nose up the side of my neck.

“And what does it mean?” he murmurs, his lips now grazing my ear and I flatten my hands against the wall, driving off the need to touch him.

“Run. You told me to run.”

He pulls back and his eyes bounce between mine before I’m scooped up into his arms and lowered into the tub. I barely register the warm water staving off the chill in my bones after remembering that he told me to run from the great hall. From the Highers. I want to ask why he told me to do that after what he did, but I can’t seem to move my lips, I can’t seem to get the question out. I’m too scared of the answer, or what it would mean and what he knew. Because why else would he tell me to do that?

“You’re thinking too much,” he says as he kneels next to the tub and grabs a cloth. He dips it into the water before picking up a bar of soap and lathering it into the material. I watch his movements carefully, aware that I’m naked in a tub and if he wanted, he could easily push me under the water and hold me

down until I couldn't breathe. He didn't any other time, but my mind is a mess right now. Is he messing with me?

Is this what he wanted? To knock me off kilter and to trust him when he says that he believes me? But maybe, he's really preparing for me to go back to the Highers and then they can hand over my punishment to him so he can whip me some more?

Has he led me into a false sense of security? Have I let my guard down? Have I put my pack in even more danger by bringing them here? Are the words he said to me last night all a lie?

What am I doing?

My hands grab on to the edge of the tub in panic, preparing to launch myself out and head for the door, grab my pack and go back to Belldame's. She will protect us, I know she will, or at least my pack. I could take them back there to safety while I go off on my own. I survived in the lands before. Sure I was near starved, but I was alive. I made it so. I could do it again and my pack would be safe, and the Elites and Highers would leave them alone because they would only be hunting me wouldn't they?

They would be safe.

They wouldn't be in danger—

Hands grab me and I lash out, hearing a grunt as I struggle in the grip that has a hold of me. Thrashing around in the water, I growl low and as I feel my power rising, I release it in a rush



and I watch the blue erupt outward, like an explosion of shards as it crashes against the walls in all directions. A thin, black barrier flickers in front of me, and then I'm pushed back at my shoulders. My head bangs against the slant of the tub and I grunt, moving my hands to claw and hit whoever has hold of me.

“Pack that shit in, Rhea,” Darius growls down at me and I blink, my hands pausing against his chest. My chest rises and falls as he comes into view, and I can't help the pained sound that escapes me.

Not because he's bleeding from his nose and mouth, not because he has scratches down his face and neck. No.

Is it because he's going to betray me again?

“Are you done?” he asks, his tone as hard as his eyes. “You nearly took the fucking room down.”

I continue in my struggle. “You're going to send me back to the Highers, you're going to send my pack away.” I catch him in his jaw. “You were never going to get Sarah and I'll never get Kade back.” Painful sounds release from me. “You're saying all these things, keep fucking touching me because you want me to start to trust you.” The water sloshes around me when I don't let up. “You're lying to me again!” His power seeps out of him, moving toward me and coating my body. I start to go limp in the tub, my head clanging against it and I drop my arms to my sides, letting them float on the surface as I breathe noisily.

“I’m not lying to you, Rhea,” Darius growls, his grip on my shoulders tight and he shakes me a little. “I’m not taking you to the fucking Highers either. I will help get Sarah, and then your pack and Kade.” He breathes out angrily. “And I’m constantly fucking touching you because I can’t help myself!”

I glare at him before looking at the damaged walls in the room, unable to trust his words, no matter how his last sentence has an affect on me. The stone is cracked in places with bits still crumbling to the floor. The window is smashed and there is water leaking from somewhere, but my focus soon goes back to Darius, uncaring of what I must have done to the room.

“Get off of me.” My tone is hard and Darius’s hands twitch against my bare shoulders.

“Want to tell me what the fuck that was first?” I stay silent, my rapid breaths easing as I try and think of a way to get us all out of here. “What is going on in that pretty head of yours, hmm?” I push against his chest, just now noticing that he’s fully in the tub with me, his clothes wet and I can see every ridge of muscle he has on display. “Rhea,” he snaps.

My eyes fly to his searching ones as my power settles to a low hum. Feeling a soft touch at my waist under the water, I look down, watching the tendril of Darius’s power wrap itself around me, holding but not hurting, grounding but not unsettling. I slump down and close my eyes, wincing as a sharp, stabbing pain rattles my skull.

“Answer me,” Darius demands, and I keep my eyes closed as nausea rises within me.

“Are you going to betray me again?” I eventually ask what I fear the answer will be. I swallow roughly, hating myself for asking, that he will know what I’m scared of. “Is this the plan? To bring me and my pack here, to take us to the Highers? To still punish me for what I did to your Elite trainees? For stopping you from being able to go back from Eridian to help with the rogures?” I breathe shakily. “Do you really believe I put a curse upon the lands? So you fill me with tasteful lies and deceitful words to gain my trust?” I peel my eyes open as the hands on my shoulders move, taking their warmth with them.

Darius sits back on his heels, his face a picture of shock and confusion. “I thought we have been through this. I told you I believe you.”

“And I don’t believe *you*.” I watch his throat move as he swallows, and the tick in his jaw begins to twitch in frustration.

“Come, the water is getting cold,” he says quietly. He reaches for me again and I slap his hand away. He growls and comes for me again, wrapping his magic around me so my arms are pinned at my sides. I call for my own, but it doesn’t answer. Totally subdued under his.

I’m lifted into his arms and he steps out the tub as I scream and wiggle in his hold. He’s unbothered with my antics, like he’s dealing with a naughty child, and I turn and sink my teeth

into his collarbone. A grunt, then a chuckle is his answer, and then I'm flying through the air before I land on the bed. His power floats back to him and I scramble upright, quickly going to my knees as that pain in my head flares up again.

A gentle hand strokes my hair, ignoring my feeble attempts to swat it away, but my efforts are wasted as the pain makes me whimper, curling myself forward as I cradle my head in my hands.

That hand still strokes my hair, running his fingers over the front of my forehead before moving back to the base of my neck, rubbing gently before repeating.

"I won't betray you again," he tells me, his tone serious but it sounds far away as fog starts filling my mind. "And I won't let you go either. Not to the Highers, not to the people, and not to the lands. You can hate me all you like, but I would rather you look at me with hate filling your pretty, little eyes than to not have them on me at all. To not see the color of crystals that hold so much within them." The bed moves and then I'm moving, my head hitting the pillow and the furs brought over me, making sure I'm fully covered. "I'll ask Anna for something to help with the pain."

Then I'm alone with my thoughts as the fog burrows deeper within me. I reach out to Runa and she comes, rubbing up against me and releasing a whine that's so full of sorrow as a tear escapes behind my closed eyes.

I know what this pain is.

It's the price of breaking the blood link so suddenly. I read about it in the books Edward gave me once. Pain can happen straight away or it can happen up to several years down the line, returning without notice. It's a punishment for breaking the link that's sacred among wolves. Of what the Gods gave us.

Is Kade feeling it now that I am? Is he okay? Is he safe? Gods, I miss him so much.

More tears fall and I bury my face into the pillow. Not wanting anyone to hear me or come near me. I just want to be left alone and ride this pain out. The sooner it goes, the sooner I can begin my task.

I refuse to leave the lands without spilling the blood of those that harm it and harmed my family.

I'll get Kade back if it's the last thing I'll ever do, and make sure he's out of the Highers and our family's clutches.

I just need their hearts to stop beating first.

One by one.

And maybe my own needs to stop for the male that has just come back and is now pressing a cup to my lips.

# Twenty Five

KADE

I jolt awake, sweat dripping from my face, and I move my hand to my head, feeling remnants of pain shoot through it. I roll to the side, watching as the sun begins to rise through the locked window of the room I've been staying in at Wolvorn Castle.

I don't know how long I've been in this room apart from when they take me to the basement. I don't know if it's been a week or months. Fuck, even years. I can't remember the feel of the wind or the freedom of being with Axis as we run through the forest. All I remember is a jumbled mess of confusing memories, thoughts and feelings, none of it makes any sense.

A knock at the door has me turning and moving to sit against the headboard of the single bed I'm in. The room only has enough space for it with a dresser to the side, and a bathroom that only has a shower and toilet. I'm not sure what part of the castle I'm in, but they tell me it's to protect me from *her*, the traitor of Vrohkaria. They tell me she will come for me, that

she will hunt me down until I'm in her grasp to do with what she pleases.

My mom and dad say this is what's best for me. That they have missed me so much and it won't be long until they can take me home. But that feels like forever ago when they told me that, or when I even last saw them.

Being cooped up inside is not good for a wolf and Axis has been volatile toward others sometimes when they enter the room. He's claimed this place as his territory and he will do anything to anyone who he thinks threatens to claim it.

He moves within me, prowling restlessly and snarling viciously, wanting to burst out to wander freely.

The door opens, and I sigh and look toward it, waiting for whoever will come through it.

"Time for dinner," a feminine voice calls as Maize walks through the door, a tray of food in her hand. I look away from her out toward the window again. I don't like her, she hurts me too. "Stop sulking," she warns, and comes closer to the bed.

She slams the tray down next to my legs and my eyes move toward it, not even hungry as I try to keep the growl from wanting to escape. No such luck as it comes out anyway, Axis backing it as I glare at her.

"Come now, puppy," she laughs, playing with a strand of her long, dark hair around her fingers. "I know what could calm you down." Her demeanor suddenly changes, and she places a knee on the bed, her strapless red dress riding up her thigh as

she moves a hand to my leg. I watch in disgust as she continues to crawl along the bed until she straddles my lap and I grunt, fisting my hands at my sides. If I move, she will do that thing that makes me feel like my brain will explode.

She runs a fingernail down my cheek, and another growl comes from me, a warning, but her lips tip up into a sultry smile as she wiggles over me. She moans shamelessly, rocking over me like she felt something good, yet there is no sign I would want it. My insides revolt.

I can't hold back. I shove her hand away. "What would your precious Darius think if he could see you now?" I ask her, and she finally stills.

"My future mate will not care what I do before we are fully mated. He knows women have desires that we cannot resist." Her voice turns into a purr that feels like shards against my skin. "You're old enough, and I can see that you're stressed."

"Then let me out of this fucking room."

"Now, why would I do that?" She runs her hands up my thighs beneath the furs and I grip her wrists, my grasp firm. "Gods, you may be old enough but you are still a petulant child I see," she huffs, and then climbs off of me and goes toward the window, straightening her dress as she leans against it.

"I'm sick of seeing the same walls, but that doesn't mean I'm going to fuck you to pass the time. Wouldn't be worth it at all," I sneer at her and her head whips around, her eyes full of anger.



“Watch your tone, puppy.” She points a finger at me. “You are only here because Lord Higher thinks you are in danger. I can still go to him and convince him that the bitch of Vrohkaria doesn’t give a shit about you. But you know that already, don’t you?” She sashays toward me, a malicious look on her face as she places her hands against my head. I go to grab her wrist once again but I’m frozen, unable to move. “I am a witch after all, do not test me. I can make your little head go pop if I want. You know I can.” My body shivers as she brings her other hand down and grips the top of the furs, pulling them back. She immediately reaches down for my soft dick, running her fingers over the cotton pants I wear and my blood turns cold at her touch. “I can also easily get what I want from you and all you would be able to do is watch. But then why should I grace you with what I have?” She moves her hand away and I breathe heavily through my nose. “Now, Aldus wanted me to check on your memories, he said he needed to make sure that whatever Rhea did to you isn’t coming back.”

The second she releases my head, anger surges to the surface and I lunge for her, toppling her to the floor as I dive off the bed. I snarl down into her face, and her shocked eyes meet mine. I grab her hands, pinning them down as Axis simmers just under the surface. “Don’t ever fucking do that to me again. Do you hear me?”

“What is going on here?” Aldus booms behind me, and I squeeze my hands around Maize’s again, hard enough to hear her bones creak before I let go and get off her.

“Ask the whore,” I snap, my eyes going to his light ones before returning to the bed and moving over to the food that had been spilled.

“Watch your words,” he says, moving over to Maize and helping her off the floor with care. “I understand you are frustrated with what is happening at the moment, but you do not treat someone who is trying to help you this way.”

“Help herself to my dick more like,” I mutter, and he lets go of Maize and walks over to me where I’m sitting on the bed.

“Maize, leave us, you have done enough for one day, I will speak to you later.” Maize gives me one last scathing look before she huffs and leaves the room, slamming the door behind her. “That is not how you treat a woman,” Aldus sighs. I ignore him, gritting my teeth as I stare at the wall. “Kaden, I can’t imagine what you are going through, there have been many changes far too quickly for a young mind to take. But please take care with how you are with others.” When I still say nothing, he turns toward me. “We don’t want to take you to the basement again for correction.” My body stills at the thought. “How’s the pain from the destroyed blood link.”

“Fine,” I mutter. It’s not, it’s excruciating, but he might keep me here longer if I tell him that. I need to leave.

“Any other issues? Confusion, disorientation?” I shake my head. “Okay, why don’t I go ahead and check if Rhea’s memory spell is still in effect. We told you it could come back and it may take time to eradicate it all together. If you keep showing good progress with your true memories, it won’t be

long until you can go back home with your mother and father.” My hands clench. “But these outbursts are why you are still here, why you need correcting again.”

He brings a hand up to my temple and I close my eyes, awaiting the pain that comes with these checks. They are done every few days, but I’ve never really been given an explanation as to what exact spell *she* put on me, just that it’s festering in my mind and they are trying to help me.

A niggling pain starts in my temple and I grip the edge of the bed tightly, preparing myself for the strange sensation of something exploring within me. Axis stands to attention, hating this every time it happens, his hackles raise. His ears perk up in alert and he growls deep and low, lowering slightly at the unwelcome visitor.

Excruciating pain as hot as a thousand knives stab through my skull and I feel myself sway back, my throat closing with its intensity. More severe than I have ever felt. I feel myself being moved back, then I’m laid down, that hand of his still on my temple. Memories flash like I’m watching it happen right in front of me. So many emotions come to the surface with seeing many bad things, nice things and sad things.

Light hair, eyes so blue, holding me, comforting me and I feel a rush of warmth, the feeling of love and safety holding me close. And just for a moment, everything feels right in the world. Then those eyes turn hard and angry, a snarl on her face and then I feel pain against my legs, my stomach starving, my back sore from staying in the same position. A weight around

my wrists as the metal digs into them as I peer into the eyes that can be nice and mean from one breath to the next.

Then darkness. A howl. A scream. Blood. So much blood it covers my hands and face. Something warm. I'm holding it, screaming and then the warmth goes, and it's cold. Lifeless and I'm crying, shaking and shouting. I look up and again, *she's* there. Looking at me while I lose everything. But she knew that didn't she? She was the cause of it all. That's why I'm holding the lifeless body that should have been my mate in my arms. She didn't stop it, she didn't save her.

Light, so bright it hurts to look at, emerges. Trees, a canopy above me, a stream trickling away. I watch as a silver butterfly hovers before a flower, its wings gleaming in the sunlight before it flies away, moving from side to side. I stumble after it, my hand reaching toward it, wanting to touch the brightness, to hold on to it so that I don't have to go back to the darkness. I can feel it chasing me, stalking me. My feet crash into the river, but I can't feel its coldness as I chase the butterfly. I need to get to it, I need to hold it. I climb up the bank on the other side of the river, my hands clawing at the dirt for purchase and then I'm running at full speed, the butterfly moving faster and faster as we fly through the woods. Around trees, over bushes, atop boulders. It doesn't stop and neither do I. We reach atop a cliff, and I rush to a stop, my feet an inch from the edge. I watch the butterfly hovering just out of reach, seemingly looking toward me. I stretch out a hand, my fingers almost touching it when the silver butterfly moves toward me.

My skin connects with its wings and everything comes into focus, the butterfly changing into a form. My gaze dips down to light eyes, a mix of gold and browns, and then I'm falling forward, off the cliff into nothing.

I no longer see the brightness.

I no longer see the silver butterfly.

Only the dark, rising to greet me.

## Twenty Six

RHEA

“Rhea!” Colten slams into me, squeezing me tightly as the others come over. A growl comes from my back, and I ignore Darius as I rub my cheeks to them. Anna looks me over, and I nod my head, letting her know I’m okay.

My eyes go to Josh, and he moves toward me slowly, a hesitant smile on his face. “Hey, it’s good to see you.”

“Yeah,” I say quietly. It’s awkward as he moves his cheek next to mine. We have never been like this, so out of touch with each other. He clears his throat and steps back.

“You feeling okay?” Seb asks. He stands next to Taylor, who glares over my shoulder at Darius.

“Better.” A hand at my back nudges me forward, and tingles erupt over me at just the feel of him. Then my cheeks heat at the reminder of what we did.

Darius guides me over to the table where we all first sat when we arrived. I take a seat next to his at the head and shuffle forward, the silence stifling.

His men are all here as per usual and their stares grate on me.

“We need to go and get Sarah,” I tell them, finding my voice eventually.

I could feel Darius’s intense stare on the side of my face, but I ignored him. I stayed in bed for another day and eventually the pain in my head dissipated. With him finally letting me out of the room, it’s time for Darius to keep his word.

“We will go in quietly, get her out and bring her back here,” Darius says, and I finally look at him.

“I’m going with you,” I tell him. I won’t take no for an answer.

“So am I,” Josh declares, and the rest of my pack agree.

“It will be easier for us to go there alone. We are not the ones with a target on our backs,” Damian points out and I give him a death stare, shaking off my nerves.

“I don’t care. She knows me, us. She was a mess when she came to us, she will be scared.” I swallow and shift in my seat, remembering how bad her condition was. “She will need Josh.” The Elites turn and see Josh nod in agreement, his hands clenching on the table. We have no idea what she has been through, and he’s preparing himself for that. I suspect he has for a long time.

Darius is silent for a moment, looking at us all around the table. “We will have to keep to the shadows. Zaide and Damian can keep members of the Aragnis pack busy who are

there, while Leo, Rhea, Josh, and I find Sarah. The rest of you stay here and prepare for her arrival.” They all mumble our agreement as I breathe a sigh of relief.

“I’ll make sure to have everything ready to help heal her if needed,” Anna says gently, rubbing a hand down her face, no doubt remembering the last time she tended to her.

“I’ll get what you need,” Jerrod says, his voice gruff and Anna nods her head in thanks.

“Then let’s go, she’s been there for months. When is she set to have this arranged mating again?” It can’t be far off now, and we can’t let her mate with Patrick.

“In a week or so. It was held off so she could heal,” Leo answers, and Josh growls low. Hating the thought of her mating with someone else, and the fact that she had to heal.

“You will get her,” Taylor tries to reassure Josh, even though I can tell he’s still pissed at him for what he did to me. They all are I think, but there are much bigger things to focus on right now.

I look back at Darius. “Do you know where the Alpha house is?” I point to my old home on the map that they have out in the center of the table, tracing the woods behind it. Where everything changed.

“I’ve been there many times,” he informs me. “I know where it is.”

“You have?” I ask in surprise, and he nods. “Why? When?”



“My father used to take me as he was training me to be an Elite. I would go around the packs and see to any issues when they would arise. I haven’t been to the Aragnis pack in about fifteen years, apart from the other day when we went roguere hunting. We are more out in the lands instead, killing rogures and any creatures that were a problem.”

Fifteen years, I was thirteen. “Did you go inside the Alpha house?” I tense as I wait for his answer.

He scans my face, his own body before suddenly turning rigid. “Yes,” he eventually says. “A few times but it wasn’t for long. My father would send me away to talk with pack members for a few hours.” He had been in my house when I was in the basement below. Walking just above me, did he hear me? Was he there when I had visitors? “Why do you want to know...” He trails off, and his eyes turn hard, a growl building up in his throat that’s akin to a quiet hum. He looks toward the walls behind me, scanning them as his brows pinch together before they flash in acknowledgement. “Do you recognize anyone in the pictures behind you?”

I swallow roughly.

The Elites look between Darius and where his eyes are fixed on a picture. I know which one he’s looking at. The one I saw when I first came into this room, the one I refuse to look at again. I hesitate before I nod. Not sure why he’s asking me, but I don’t like the look in his eyes, it’s... scary.

“Who?” He demands, his voice rough, and I know I have no choice but to answer. His whole body is taut, his eyes dead,

and the air is stifling around him.

“The male on the far right.” Darius looks back at the picture, if he could become stone, I’m sure he would have. He doesn’t move, not even a twitch of his finger as his eyes bleed black instantly, tendrils of his power subtly coating his hands. His Elites tense.

“You’re certain?” The growl in his voice could have been from the below itself.

I pick at my fingers. “On my life.”

“Where did you see him?” he asks harshly.

I look around at the Elites, at the tightness in their posture, the panicked look in their eyes and I know this is bad. I don’t know why, but it is. “I don’t think it’s best to—“

“Answer me!” he shouts and I flinch, my eyes like saucers as I look at him. Darius doesn’t shout, he doesn’t need to.

“He came to the basement,” I whisper.

“Basement,” he repeats slowly, and I nod. “Your basement”  
Another nod.

Darius rises like a storm from his seat and black mist explodes from his feet, curling around him as his nostrils flare and his rage filled stare stays fixed on mine. I’m rooted to my seat, unable to move and I feel my own power within me reacting to his as my breathing picks up. Did I do something wrong?

“Darius?” I don’t even know if I mouth it, whisper it, or shout it. I just know that my ears pop from the pressure of raw power in the room, and his dominance suffocating it. His mist now floats out of him, moving above us so hastily that we are going to be in total darkness if he doesn’t calm down. What is going on?

I press my hands against the table, about to rise from my seat when Darius lets loose a growl full of menace, reminding me of the time in Eridian when he held the memory crystal. I freeze mid air, not daring to move. He shakes his head, hands curling into fists as everybody stays as still as possible. His dark eyes, now full of silver flecks, roam over my half seated posture before he releases a breath, then another until he calls back his power and turns, heading for the door before going through it and slamming it behind him.

“Fuck,” Leo curses, rubbing a hand over his face as he too gets up and follows Darius out, Damian going along with him in a hurry.

I fall back into my seat, my heart beating wildly and I press my hand against it, trying to soothe myself. “What just happened?” I gasp, looking at Zaide and Jerrod.

“He came to the basement where you were kept?” Jerrod asks me, his head tipping to the picture and I nod.

“It’s not something you forget.” I refuse to look at that picture again, refuse to see his face.

“Who is he?” Colten wonders aloud as Hudson moves his chair closer to him, his eyes on the door.

It's Zaide who answers, voice holding a hint of anger.  
"Darius's father."

I blanch, feeling the blood drain from my face at his words. My stomach drops. I look toward the door Darius went through with dread sitting heavily on my shoulders. "Please tell me you're joking?" I plead to Zaide, but he shakes his head, his jaw ticking.

"I'm not."

I stand up and rush toward the door where Darius went. I open it to find a hallway, and hear voices coming from the end of it. Walking fast, I make my way toward them, to... I don't know, to tell Darius that it wasn't his fault? That if he didn't know, which judging by his reaction, he didn't, then that doesn't make him at fault.

No matter what he has done, this is not on him.

I round the corner and come to a halt, Damian paces in front of a door, his hands running down his face.

"Where is Darius?" I ask, and his head flies up, a scowl on his face.

"Doesn't matter, just leave him be."

"But—"

"Leave, Rhea. He will come out when he's ready."

From where?

I eye the door behind him curiously, wondering where it leads to, but I nod all the same and turn back.

I look over my shoulder and Damian eyes me, leaning back against the door until he's out of my sight when I turn the corner.

My mind works as I think of one thing.

What could be behind that door that they don't want me to see?



We move through the tall stalks of grass, retracing the path we took before Darius and his men showed up, heading for my old home. The Elite armor fits me comfortably against my skin, the leather fitting just right on my legs and over my torso. The cloak I have on hides it, no colored straps in sight and the hood and half mask conceal my face. The others are dressed the same, making sure we cannot be traced back to the Elites with their recognizable armor.

Apprehension swirls within me at seeing my old home again. Would it look different or exactly the same? I prefer it to look like something I have never seen before, then I can keep the home I had in my head as a child safe and untainted.

Darius walks alongside me, posture stiff. He's barely said anything to me since he returned to the dining room after a long while. He can barely look at me, and Darius *always* looks at me. Always has his eyes on me when I'm near. I can't believe his father was one of the men to come to the basement. I haven't thought much about it, thinking comes with

memories, but I know we will need to have a conversation about it at some point. No matter what Darius did to me, I won't blame him for his father's sins of standing by and watching what happened to me while doing nothing. And by the looks of it, if he was alive, I'm not sure he would be much longer. The dark mist clinging constantly to Darius's like a second coat of skin showing how angry he is. It should scare me, wondering if he has some anger toward me, but seeing his power unfurls something familiar and soothing inside of me.

I move closer to him instinctively, waiting for his scent to wrap around me, and then I tentatively reach out to grab his hand. Something inside of me wanting, no, needing to touch him right now. With the feeling like he's about to explode at any moment, I can't deny it. He looks down at me sharply when my palm slides along his, confusion in his rage filled eyes until he looks at my small hand holding his large one. Maybe I shouldn't have done this, maybe this was a mistake. I give his hand a squeeze anyway, feeling my power gently pressing against his before letting go, but he doesn't let me. He grips it in his own, dragging me into him until he pulls us to a stop in the long grass. The others continue forward, leaving us behind for a moment.

I look up at Darius in question, wondering what he's doing, when he leans down toward me, the mist sinking back into his skin and disappearing. I hold my breath, feeling like prey in a trap, but when he puts his forehead against mine gently, his eyes open and feeling like he's seeing my soul resting inside of me, I can't move.

“This changes nothing,” he tells me, the first words he’s spoken to me. “No matter the past, you still cannot run from me.” I let out an aggravated breath and shake my head at him. Asshole.

His eyes turn dark for a moment, confliction creeping into them before he gently rubs his nose against mine, the action so delicate and so unlike him that my chest warms. The moment is soon gone when he lifts his head, eyes bouncing between mine. Releasing me, he adjusts the hood over my head and continues forward. I touch a hand to my nose beneath the mask, blinking at how that small, gentle touch warmed my whole body and then I follow him, ignoring the flutter in my stomach.

My nerves soon pick up as we reach the hill that overlooks my old home, and I stop and suck in a sharp breath. Memory after memory assaults me. Good, bad, sad, happy. It all feels too much. Cabin after cabin can be seen. The small pond I used to try and catch fish in is glowing under the moonlight. The area in the middle of the village has stalls propped up, ready to sell their wares come morning, and I remember always going there first thing as a child to see if anything new could be found. The wooden statues of where the wolf Gods used to be are no more, just an empty, dirt space instead now. When did they abandon the Gods?

I lift my eyes and see my old home and I shiver. It’s the largest one, big enough to house twelve people. It stands in the back of the village, proud and known to all just exactly what

that home is. The Alphas. I pick at my fingers, my gaze unfocused as I take it all in.

It's quiet in the pack, no one in sight apart from a few who wander through the cabins on patrol, and I wonder why they are not checking the perimeter instead. Especially after we heard rogues nearby not too long ago, but we saw no one.

“Strange, isn't it?” Josh says, startling me. I nod in response, unsure what to say, still a little angry and hurt at him. “It's changed, more homes now, but it still looks the same as it used to, even with that huge tree over there.” He points to the right, and I see the tree he's talking about. “The many times we used to climb that tree and get shouted at,” he chuckles, and an unwanted, soft smile spreads across my face, thinking back on the memories. “Your mom was scared to death of us breaking our necks.”

She was, though she would always help me by telling me the best places to put my foot, and which branches to grab that were strong enough to hold my weight. She always did her best to protect me, even toward the end.

“Do you think we made the right decision?” I whisper, unable to keep the question in. I'm aware of others listening, but they know so much already that I just don't care anymore. Josh turns to look at me, a question in his eyes. “Leaving, I mean. Do you think we made the right decision?” I clarify.

His gray eyes turn angry. “Of course it was, Rhea, how can you even ask that?”



I glance down before looking over at my old home again. “What’s one person’s suffering to hundreds of children?” If I had stayed, Charles wouldn’t have taken kids. They would be at home with their parents, loved, happy and healthy. “They could have led a happy life with their parents. I had no one.”

“Charles took those children, not you,” he says. “You can’t blame yourself for what a sadistic old man has done.”

“No,” I agree. “But I can blame myself for staying hidden. That’s on me.”

“No, Milal, it’s fucking not.” He’s getting angry now, and I sigh.

Darius steps up to my other side, giving Josh a hard look before focusing on me. “We’re not sure what he wants with you, only it has to do with you being an Heir and wanting to breed you. You can’t blame yourself for his actions when all you are doing is trying to survive.”

They don’t get it, they don’t understand. What those children are going through is the same as what they did to me. I wouldn’t wish that on anyone.

I look out over my old home again, feeling Darius’s stare on me once again. A gasp is pulled from me as I spot a dirt filled field, the ground dry and dead. “The Lesia field.”

“They got rid of it,” Josh says, and my eyes begin to sting.

“How could they do that?” My voice trembles, and I clench my hands at my sides, very aware everyone heard the wobble

in my voice. Darius looks back and forth between me and the field.

Josh squeezes my shoulder, ignoring how Darius tenses.  
“Why do they do anything that they do, Milal?”

“Just another thing they took from me,” I say, hating how much they have ruined. Destroyed.

“We need to move,” Leo whispers suddenly, and nods toward a male on patrol heading in our direction.

“Stay close to me,” Darius whispers, a hint of warning in his tone.

“Okay.” He holds my stare, making sure I will, and then we move.

Heading for the village, Darius takes the lead as we dart down the hill on silent steps until we reach the first cabin, making sure to avoid the male on patrol. Crouching underneath a window, we press ourselves against the wood and listen out for anyone nearby. Anna gave us a concoction to hide our scent, so they won’t be able to smell us, but if we bump into someone there is no hiding our presence.

We tread carefully, dashing between cabins and making our way to the back of the village until we squat down beside an old cabin, looking upon my old home. Shivers wrack my spine at being so close to something that caused me so much pain. We spot Zaide and Damian coming from our opposite direction, and they nod our way before walking up the few steps to the Alpha’s home.

My heart is in my throat as they knock on the door, and it's not long until my Aunt Selena answers. I shift where I'm crouched, Runa restless within me at seeing her. My mother's sister doesn't deserve to be in my old home, doesn't deserve our family's last name, doesn't deserve to live. Not after she betrayed her only sister and her niece. Her son.

Rage washes over me, and I go to move without thought, wanting her blood to coat the lands as mine did, for what she did to Kade. A hand shoves me back against the cabin, green eyes intense. He looks over at my aunt before coming back to me, shaking his head.

"Oh, hello boys," she purrs to Zaide and Damian, and my body tightens at the sound of her flirtatious voice. I look toward her and cringe at the way her blue eyes roam over them lavishly. She was never one for monogamy, even though she is mated.

"Alpha Selena," Damian says respectfully, "is Alpha Paul at home?"

"Oh no, he's at Wolvorn Castle. Lord higher Charles wished to speak to him about the wayward traitor. My sons are also with him. What is this about?" She opens the door more, but Damian and Zaide don't enter.

"I didn't know he was there, that's unfortunate," Damian sighs like it's troublesome.

"Could I help? I may be female, but I can be of assistance in many ways." A growl builds up in my throat, and Darius's

palm covers my mouth, rubbing a thumb over my cheek. My eyes go to him as they continue to speak.

“We have spotted rogues around your perimeter, we are worried they are closing in,” Damian lies. “We already killed the ones that got close when we last came, but they seem active again near here. We were hoping we could show Alpha Paul where we think they could enter and discuss how to proceed.”

“I can come with you while he is out, that’s no problem. Let me grab my cloak.” She rushes inside the house before coming back out, closing the door behind her. “Let us go.” She loops her arm through Damian’s, and Zaide smirks over at him seeing how uncomfortable he is.

She talks excessively as they walk off, and we wait until they are out of sight. I blow out a warm breath through my mask and into Darius’s palm. Darius’s eyes hold mine, and I nod at the unspoken question in his eyes. I’m ready.

He releases me and we move quickly from our hiding spot, heading for the back door of the home that I grew up in. Darius stays in front of me until we reach the back entrance, mindful of the creaks as we step on the wooden porch. He puts his hand on the doorknob and looks over at me. My hands shake, but I hold my breath until we hear it click. My insides feel like they want to spill all over the floor, but I swallow it down.

Darius peeks inside, scanning for anyone present, and then we shuffle into a small mudroom that I know too well. Shoes

and boots litter the floor with cloaks hanging up on hooks. Darius puts his ear to another door that leads into the kitchen whilst Leo closes the back door behind us. When Darius hears nothing on the other side, he opens it and we pass through and stop. I listen for any movement in the house, but there is none, we're alone here.

I look around the kitchen, the wood surfaces and hanging pans looking exactly the same as before I left. No family pictures hang around the room though, it's just bare, lifeless and stale. The dining room table that my mother and father lovingly made so many years ago is still the same, dominating the large, open space and I move forward without thought. Coming to a stop at one of the table's legs, I crouch down and run my shaky fingers over the marks and grooves in the wood, sadness washing over me as I trace them with my fingertips.

"What is it?" Darius whispers, bending down beside me. He looks at the markings and grinds his teeth. "Is this where Kade was chained to?" I nod silently, feeling tears well in the back of my eyes. I stand, unable to look at them any longer. Darius looks at them one last time before he makes a move toward the stairs.

I grab his arm in my trembling hand to halt him. He looks back at me and I shake my head. "She won't be up there."

His brows furrow. "Then where would she be?"

I take in a lungful of air. "If she is here, she will be down there." I point to a door to the left of the kitchen, looking at the

dark wood for the first time since I've been in the room. "The basement."

Darius watches me for a moment, something like concern flashing in his eyes before he turns and heads for the door. I follow on unsteady legs, not sure if I'm ready to face my past.

"I can't hear anything," Darius mutters as he presses his ear to the door.

"You won't, it's spelled." I rub my arms, fighting off the chill that I'm sure only I can feel. My eyes move to Josh, his eyes are full of pain and fear, most likely remembering how he found me down there and the possibility of Sarah now being in the same place.

Darius looks at the door, a tick in his jaw noticeable before he reaches up and releases the bolt at the top. He pulls the door open, the wood creaking as he peers down into the darkness. He won't find any light. Not until he reaches the other door at the bottom. His eyes go to the back of the door, noticing the scratch marks there and his eyes swing to mine. I lower my head, feeling a chill down to my bones.

I remember getting away from the hands that grabbed me once, only to come to this very door and it wouldn't open. I scratched until my nails broke and bled, until I had splinters in my fingers whilst they laughed down the stairs at my feeble attempts to escape.

Darius's body tenses, the air thickening before he starts going down the steps, the many, many steps that will take us

deep beneath the house and to the nightmare I had survived through. I follow, Josh behind me and then Leo at the rear.

Leo closes the door, and we are encased in darkness, unable to see anything. I put one hand on the crumbling stone wall to steady myself as we make our way down, my breathing becoming choppy and small. Oh Gods, I don't know if I can do this.

A hand grabs mine, gently but firm. It strokes over my knuckles before it's placed on his back, urging me to grip his cloak. I don't care who he is right now, my enemy, my torturer, my downfall. I just need to hold on to something, anything to keep my legs from surrendering beneath me.

We continue down. Down, down, down until I bump into Darius's back as he comes to a stop. We've reached the door that leads into the basement room. My old prison. A place where Sarah could be.

Darius slowly opens the door, a line of light peeking through the crack and expanding as he pushes it wider. I blink, the sudden light blinding me for a moment until my vision clears. We head into the room, and then we stop in our tracks, taking in the sight before us.

"What the fuck?" Leo whisper barks.

"Sarah." Josh's voice is full of panic as he rushes forward toward the back of the room. Toward where Sarah is.

She lies limply on the cage floor, blood covering her sheer nightdress. Josh reaches through the cage bars, his hands

trembling as he touches her cheek and then her neck for a pulse. He looks around the room, eyes full of murder before getting up and searching nearby on a table.

“She’s still breathing, help me find the key!” Josh rushes out. Leo springs into action, looking in the drawers and tables that line the length of the wall to my left, while my feet refuse to move. Papers, books and what looks like alchemy sets litter the surfaces, while a large desk at the back of the room adorns more papers and pens, sketches pinned on the wall above it.

And I can’t move. My heart beats painfully in my chest, the air around me tightening.

I hesitantly look over to the right of the room, to a wall I know too well. Weapons, instruments, poisons, and other objects are all in their rightful places on the hooks attached to the stone. I walk over in a trance, my feet heavy, ‘Darius’s eyes on me. Stopping in front of the wall, my eyes roam over the knives, sheers, pokers, clamps, ropes, chains and other contraptions. I lift my hand, it shakes violently as I move it toward the poker on the wall. As soon as my finger touches it, I clench my eyes shut.

*“Want another one?” Patrick sneers down at me as he hovers above, his knees on either side of my waist as his naked body shines with sweat and blood. My blood. How many times has my body bled in all my seventeen years of life?*

*He has me strapped down on a table, my arms tied above my head while my ankles are chained. I can’t move, can’t get away*



*from what he's doing to me. I shake my head up at him, tears rolling down my cheeks.*

*"Do be gentle, Patrick," Charles laughs in that grating voice of his, stroking the tops of my feet. "We can't have her passing out again so soon."*

*"That's true." Patrick lifts the poker he has in his hand, running it from the base of my throat and down between my bare breasts. My body twitches, unable to keep still, always on edge that at any moment pain will come. He reaches below my belly button and my body locks up, fear paralyzing me. "But I think she wants another one." He smirks down at me as Charles's hand is now running up my leg. The poker breaks through my skin right above the most intimate part of me, and I scream, my hands clawing at each other as he licks his lips, watching what he's doing to me. He keeps going, keeps pushing until I feel it split everything within me and pierce the wood beneath me. "So pretty when you're covered in red and screaming for me."*

*I gasp through my sobs, choking on air. "S-stop, p-please."*

*Patrick groans. "Oh Lasandrhea, you know what your begging does to me." He grabs his hard dick in his hand, stroking himself and moaning my name as his eyes trail over my body.*

*Charles moves to the side, lifting a hand and running a finger around the poker, collecting my blood. He sighs as if he's content before he pops his finger in his mouth, his eyes*

rolling back. "Make sure you mix it with her blood," he rumbles, going back to circling his finger around the poker.

Patrick's breathing begins to pick up, his body becoming tenser, and I know he's close. Charles grips the poker, twists and then suddenly yanks it out of me. I open my mouth to scream, but Patrick's already there, scrambling over me. He moves so fast, his knees on either side of my arms, and before I know it, he shoves his cock in my mouth, cutting off any sound I was making and causing me to choke and gag. He moans, his hips moving rapidly as he grips my head in both hands and holds me still. "Cover those teeth or I'll remove them," he growls, and I do, more tears pouring out of me because I know he will do it, he's done it before. "Swallow everything," he rasps out and then moans as he releases in my mouth, his eyes glazed in pleasure as I cough around his dick.

Patrick pulls out of me, leaving me a mess of tears, spit, and blood as I try to catch my breath, lying limply in defeat to the pain, to them. Charles gives me a pointed look, his fingers gripping my jaw and I swallow. Swallow Patrick down and try not to throw up. I don't want him in my body, I don't want a part of him inside of me, but he is. He always is, because he has done this every day for as long as I can remember. I can't get away from it, can't stop it.

"Pretty," Patrick murmurs, and then the door opens and he turns his head. "Ahh, just in time." It's his friend, the one with dark eyes, he's come again and I know I'm not going back to my cage any time soon. Know this is only the beginning for the day. For them to continue hurting me and violating me and—

“Little wolf?” My memoirs fade, the fog lifting at that voice. “Breathe, dammit!” What? Breathe? I am breathing. “Rhea!” someone calls, and I open my eyes, not even realizing I closed them. Light, green eyes stare at me and I scrunch my face up. What is he doing, and why am I on the floor? Why am I in his lap? “Fucking breathe!” Darius demands and slams his palm against my chest, his power rushing into me and I gasp, my back arching as it sinks into me. I take in lungfuls of air, my chest burning as I grip his shoulders.

“Fucking Gods, Darius,” I cough, still taking in air. “Go easy on my chest.”

“Don’t stop fucking breathing then!” he growls, his hand still on my chest, now moving in circular motions roughly, almost in a panic.

I look up at him, breathing heavily. His eyes are a little wild, and there is a tightness around the edges. I look around. Josh has Sarah cradled in his arms and Leo looks over at us from his position next to him, pity in his eyes. I blink and move my gaze away and then look down. “Why am I in your lap?” I rasp, my throat dry.

“You wouldn’t respond, wouldn’t even move, and then you just dropped. I caught you before you cracked your fucking head on the floor!” Darius barks at me. “Why the fuck do you keep passing out?”

“We have to go,” Leo says, and takes a port stone out of his pocket. I look around the room and then to Sarah.

“Is she okay?” I ask Josh, and he swallows roughly, pulling her tighter to him.

“She’s out for the count, but I can’t see any life threatening injuries.”

“You go on ahead,” I tell him. “I won’t be long.”

“Rhea, just come with us,” Josh says, looking around the room. “It’s no good for you being here.” It was no good showing the war on my body either.

“No, there might be something here. Just go.” I stand, wobbling on my feet but Darius steadies me, his hands holding my hips. I look down at him before I move away. “Go,” I order Josh, putting some dominance in my voice.

Leo looks to Darius, who gives him a nod and then they port out. I move over to the desk at the back, pushing down the dark memories that try to drown me. “Are you going to tell me what that that was?” Darius asks, coming to stand beside me and rummaging through papers.

“Now isn’t the time and I owe you nothing, Darius,” I murmur, feeling out of sorts after that flashback, after feeling like I’m going through it all over again. I won’t let it take me under. I refuse. But if it must, it will be on my own terms and when I’m on my own. “Let’s have a quick look and then we will leave. There might be something here that will tell us what Charles really wants, or maybe what he has done with the kids he took. He came down here and would write all sorts of things when I was here, maybe he’s still doing that or my family took over.”

“Fine, but you will fucking tell me when I want to know,” he mutters and goes over to another table.

“Not if I have anything to do with it,” I grumble.

“That’s the thing, little wolf,” he says in my ear, having not realized he came up behind me. “You won’t have a choice, eventually. When everything comes pouring out of you, it will be me there. Have no doubt about that.”

## Twenty Seven

RHEA

“Are we going to talk about it?” Darius asks, hot on my heels as I wind down the corridors in the west wing, trying to find where they have taken Sarah. We’ve been back less than ten seconds from my old home, and he’s already on me like a pixie orgy.

I scoff at him. “Oh, *now* you want to hear my side of the story? I’m surprised you let me the other night without threatening to break my jaw. Did someone slip something in your drink?” I can’t deal with him right now, I feel too raw, too out of sorts.

I’m grabbed by my arm roughly and the next second, I’m slammed up against a wall. I grunt, glaring up at Darius. He lowers his head, his lips a touch from mine and my eyes narrow. “You will tell me,” he rumbles, the sound deep.

“Don’t you think I’ve told you enough? What fucking more do you want from me, huh?” I shove at his chest, but he captures my wrists and pins them to the wall beside my head. He runs his nose along my cheek to the side, the movement

slow until it trails down my throat. His lips touch my pulse that's beating rapidly, wildly. I can't control it, can't control how my body reacts to him. His lips move up my neck until he nips my ear, causing me to suck in a sharp breath and resist the urge to tilt my head.

"I want everything, little wolf," he murmurs, his breath caressing my skin as he speaks. "The moment you decided to try and kill us in The Deadlands, I owned you. I own everything down to the soul within you."

"You can't own what's barely there, Darius," I whisper. How could I have one after what they did to me, what has been done to me, what Darius did to me. It feels like there is nothing fucking left of it. He moves back, his face so close to mine.

"You think you barely have a soul?" He asks, I say nothing, but he sees the answer in my eyes. He breathes out a chuckle, shaking his head. "You have a soul, Rhea, just like we discussed the other night, you don't need to remake it. I've *felt* it. There's nothing wrong with it." My brows furrow. "Every time you look at me unguarded, as rare as that is, I see it. See what's within you, see who you are."

"A murderous, manipulative whore?" I ask, still hurt over the words he once said to me.

"No," he says quietly. "I see what's mine."

"I am the lands," I correct.

“And I am the below. One cannot be without the other.” I stare up at him, my stomach fluttering at his words even as confusion swirls in my mind, but it doesn’t stop the heat pooling between my thighs at him calling me his. Which is beyond ridiculous but happens nonetheless.

This pull we have, that’s what’s making us react in this way to each other. This connection, it isn’t real, it was created by the Gods, but they chose wrong. So fucking wrong. I have to remember that.

“I can still feel your whip on my back,” I tell him, and then I see it, the small flinch he tries to hide as his eyes turn cold. “I feel every slash, every strike, every. Single. Hit. I understand your reason behind it now. At least that’s what I’m telling myself. To you I was the traitor who brought rogues upon us, the ones that killed your family. You needed me to talk and I wouldn’t, or more, I couldn’t say what you all wanted to hear in that hall. Then you did what was ordered like a good little sheep by reaching out for that whip,” I snap. “I may understand it to an extent, but I can’t forgive you for it,” I whisper, and his jaw ticks. “I don’t know if you even want to be forgiven, or care to, but I suspect not. You may now understand that reality isn’t what it seems. But I was *real*. I never lied for malicious reasons, I’ve never put myself before others. I have never done something that was for me, nor would I do something as cruel as releasing a curse to have beasts roam and prey upon innocents.” I let out a shaky breath. “The last time I begged, I swore it was the last. Until you.” His eyes flash black. “And you didn’t hear me, didn’t listen or care



to.” I shove my arms forward, and he releases my wrists. He takes a step back, his eyes never leaving me as I turn and continue walking down the corridor. “I owe you nothing more when it comes to me. You may think I’m yours, maybe in some sense of protection because of us being Heirs, but nothing else will be yours, Darius.”

“Your body is mine,” he growls behind me, and I stop at his words and look over my shoulder at him.

“The other night, I just wanted to feel something other than darkness and despair, the other time, I was in heat, allowing me to override my anxiety of letting someone into my body. You’re the second person that can say they have been inside of me, but what we did in that cave? That was a bodily reaction, motivated by my heat. There was no mind, heart, or soul involved. I won’t let you inside of me again, I doubt I will let anyone ever again.” I mutter the last words. “So if you are doing this for a fuck, Darius, it is a lost cause.” I walk away from him, leaving him standing there.

I rub at my arms, feeling the pull to turn back but I don’t, I can’t. Because I just lied, again. And this time it was for me, because if he knew that he tore off a little bit of my heart when he left that cave with his words, he would use it to hurt me, cut me down with his words. Even more so if he knew how deep the wounds are that he’s caused me by using that whip. I don’t know if I can handle that right now. My defenses are low.

“Vihnarn,” Darius murmurs, and I trip over my feet, throwing a hand out to steady myself against the wall. I turn

sharply.

“W-what?” I stutter, my eyes wide.

“Vihnarn,” he repeats, and tilts his head. “You called me that at Wolvorn Castle.” I swallow. “What does it mean?”

“Why?” I question, stalling for time.

“Answer me,” he demands roughly.

“I thought you knew the language?”

“A little.”

“It means warrior, brave, strong, honorable,” I rush out.

“That’s all.”

“Hmm.” He tilts his head the other way, studying me, and I don’t know if he can tell that was a load of bullshit what I just said, but he eventually nods. “Go right at the end and third door on the left.” With that he walks off, his body tense.

I don’t waste time and follow his directions to where Sarah is, thankful he didn’t push it or call on my bullshit. I reach the door in no time and hear murmurs inside. I knock gently and twist the handle before pushing it open, seeing Sarah lay in the larger bed in the center with Josh lying down beside her, stroking her hair as she sleeps. He looks up when I enter, the pain in his eyes damn near unbearable.

“*She’s okay now, we got her,*” I tell him down the link, and he squeezes his eyes shut. It’s the first time I have spoken to him through it since Witches Rest, but I can’t help but try and reassure him everything will be alright.

“Thank you. For making it possible to save her.” He keeps his eyes closed when he replies and I’m grateful, because he would have seen the hurt in mine for what he pushed me into doing. But seeing Sarah here and safe makes my feelings conflicted.

I know Josh will come to me when he’s thinking more clearly, It still doesn’t stop the hurt running through me though.

“I’ve checked her over and she has some wounds on her arms and the side of her ribs, but that’s it. She hasn’t been touched anywhere else that I can find.” I look toward Anna as she sits at a small table at the back of the room, mixing something in a bowl. I breathe out a sigh of relief, knowing the unspoken words she hasn’t said.

She wasn’t raped, thank the Gods.

“She will be okay now,” Anna continues. “Just time. We all just need time.” She continues with her mixing and I look back toward Sarah on the bed.

For some of us, all the time in the lands won’t heal some hurts, we just learn to cope with it better. They are still there though, lingering beneath the skin. Sometimes they come to the surface, sometimes they lay dormant. But they are still ready to strike at any moment, catching you off guard so it can pull you under.

I nod my head at Anna and close the door softly behind me, leaving them to take care of Sarah until I can talk to her. I lean against the wall beside it until I’m sitting on the floor, my

body landing with a thump. I close my eyes and rest my head against the cool stone at my back, exhausted once again. No matter how much sleep I get, I'm just so tired all the damn time. Belldame thinks it's because I don't have full control of my power, so because I'm having some sort of internal war with it, it's exhausting me.

*“Imagine your soul and your Heir power as two separate strands,” Belldame tells me as I sit in a grassy clearing with her. “They need to come together, intertwine, and then fuse to create a new strand. It will fight you, they will clash, especially because you are not fully connected to your wolf.”*

*“She won't come out no matter how hard I try,” I grumble, mentally scowling at Runa. She huffs and lays her head down on her paws, eyes closed with not a care in the world.*

*“Then I fear you will never be able to grasp your full potential if she won't come out, and with this war between your soul and power, it will exhaust you, and you will be prone to outbursts.” She sighs, and comes to sit down next to me, the bones hanging from her neck rattling. “There has to be a way, child. Every Heir that has come here has all been one with their wolves and have said when they received the power of being an Heir, it was like it had been there all along. That's the only difference I can see between you and them. Your wolf.” She picks at the bones around her neck. “What I do know within everything that I am is that Heirs are the only ones that can rid the lands of this plague of rogures. It's getting worse, the lands are dying, the dark is rising.”*

*Some Heir I am when I can't even control my power, or it exhausts me when I use too much. I huff and lean back on my hands. "Are the lands punishing us? Is that why the rogures are here?"*

*"I do not know, child, all I know is what's been passed down to me. The Gods are angry, and we are feeling their wrath. That's all I know, but I'm not sure of what."*

*"Can a ritual be done to curse the lands?" I ask. "Darius said I did it, which is not true, but what if the ritual part is right and it caused the rogures?"*

*"I'm not sure, I haven't heard of such a thing before. This is why you should visit the Gods' home. They have all the knowledge."*

*"I don't even know where the Gods are. I have no idea where that is or where to even start looking," I grumble and pick some grass between my fingers, sending some power into it slowly and watching it lengthen.*

*"It will reveal itself," Bell dame tells me, watching as I make the grass grow. "It must."*

I blink my eyes open sleepily, the corridor now brightening with the sun rising through the window. Shit, how long did I sleep for. I scrub my hands over my face and stand, stretching my muscles out. I groan at the feeling and crack my neck. Damn that felt good.

"Are you ready to go over what we took from your old home," a voice says out of nowhere, and I react on instinct.

My hand flies through the air until it connects with a throat. My eyes widen as Leo coughs and splutters. “Oops?” I say, looking over him warily as he finally straightens and rubs his throat.

“Damn, Rhea, keep your hands to yourself.”

“Don’t sneak up on me then,” I fire back, watching him with caution to see if he will retaliate.

He shakes his head. “It’s no wonder he liked you from the first moment, even though you tried to kill us.” He thinks for a moment. “It probably turned him on.”

I scowl and put my hands on my hips. “I don’t know whether to be horrified or impressed someone can get a hard on mid battle.”

“It’s the adrenaline,” he chuckles, then his face turns serious. “Go easy on him, yeah?”

I shake my head. “Would you go easy on someone in my position?”

“No,” he agrees, his eyes tightening. “He did what he had to in the moment to protect me, us.” My brows furrow. “If Darius breaks an order from Charles, he doesn’t get punished, at least not physically. Charles would punish me and the others instead, knowing that would get Darius to agree to do what he wanted because Darius would take his wrath himself if that were an option.” The breath releases from my lungs in a rush. Is that true? Did he only do it because he was keeping his men safe? I look over Leo, looking for any sign that he’s lying, but

all I see in his eyes is him imploring me to hear him. “Darius is punishing himself enough, just... think about it.” I go to respond when he says, “Come on, we’re waiting in the dining room.” He turns and I follow, shaking my hand out from the soreness. Bastard has a stupidly hard neck.

I enter through the door and see the Elites and my pack, apart from Josh, Anna, and Sarah, sitting at the table. The walls that were full of pictures of the Elites is now gone, not a single frame to be seen, and those stupid flutters in my belly start again. Moving toward the table, I flop down in an open seat, ignoring Darius’s stare on me as what Leo told me runs through my mind. Why hasn’t Darius told me this himself? Does he think I wouldn’t understand to some extent? All I have ever done is try and look after my pack. Shit, I even went into the Deadlands to kill, no, *did* kill, some of his Elites to protect them. My stomach churns, and I do raise my eyes to meet his then. I see confusion in them, like he knows something is off, but he doesn’t know what. I quickly look away and down at the number of papers in front of me that we rushed to get. I pick up one of the sketches in front of me and wrinkle my nose.

“What is this?” I ask the room, looking over the drawing of a beast-like creature and putting what Leo told me to the back of my mind.

It stands on two legs, its wolf-like face having very human eyes and ears, apart from the pointed tip at the top. Its skin falls off in clumps behind it and foam drips from its lips.

“It looks like a deformed roguer,” Damian says, and I can see that for myself.

“Have you ever seen something like this?” I ask him and pick up another sketch of this creature.

“We haven’t, and I’m assuming you haven’t either?” I shake my head. “Well I hope it’s just a sketch.” He shivers and gives the drawing a wary look. I hope so too.

I pick another piece of paper and it’s covered in names, some crossed off and some having certain markings beside them. I study the names and notice they are all female, and so many of them. I stand quickly and lean over the large table, moving papers out the way and collecting the ones that have more names on them. When I can’t find any more and have a reasonable pile in my hand, I take them with me as I go to sit on the floor in front of the fireplace so I have more room.

“What is she doing?” Leo whispers.

“Concentrating,” Taylor replies.

“She could have just done it on the table,” Damian grumbles.

“Is this really worth complaining about?” Hudson says, and I hear more paper being shuffled around.

“Maybe he needs to get laid,” Colten chimes in. “Hey Seb —“

I block out their bickering and spread the papers out in front of me, scanning name after name. I move through the sheets, seeing so many crossed off, then I come across one I



recognize. “Fuck.” I keep looking over the papers, dread filling me.

“What is it?” Darius asks as he comes over and crouches next to me. His knee touches my side but I don’t move from the contact. Not when his scent wraps around me, wanting it in this moment.

“Look.” I pass him the paper and he takes it from me, studying the names. I point to one. “Sarah is on this list. These could be the names of people that are... training, or taken. Otherwise, why would she be on there?” There are so many names, hundreds. None of my pack are though. My throat closes up at the thought of still being unable to get them. “Do you recognize any of them?” He shakes his head.

“We’ll look over them and see if we recognize a name. Then I’ll go and get the pack records and bring them here and we can see if any names match.”

“Where are the pack records?” I ask.

“At Wolvorn.” My heart stops. With the Highers.

“How will you be able to look at them? Won’t the Highers know?” Will he tell them I’m here with my pack? I pinch my lower lip between my fingers.

“I’m allowed access, but if I’m questioned, I will just tell them a member of a pack has gone missing and I’m checking if they have moved packs without informing them. It won’t matter, but if we find names, the same names that are on these papers, I can go to their home and ask about them. See if they

are around.” I nod, still pinching my lip. “We will know more about what these names mean then.” It can’t be anything good if Sarah’s name is on there.

Fuck it. “Will you tell them we are here?” The least he can do is tell me so I can prepare. So we can leave.

Tension fills the room and I know the others heard my question as they quieten down. I look over at Darius and into his furious eyes while he rolls his shoulders. “Why would I do that?” I give him a pointed stare and he growls. “I said I believe you. What more do you want?”

I shrug. “You could easily hand me over and then continue on your way, doing what you have been doing since whenever.”

“I wont do that,” he says, taking my hand away from my mouth so I can’t pinch my lip anymore. I pull out of his grip and rest my hand on my thigh. “Things have changed, but I have to tread carefully. If the Highers, specifically Charles, become suspicious of my actions, we will never find out what he’s up to, where he has taken people and what he wants.”

“If you can find where he has taken the people, children... What will you do? Can you find out where my pack members are?”

“I will try to find where they were taken to, and we will get all of them somehow, bring them back here.”

“Kade?”

He shifts. “The same still stands, I will try and get information.”

I squeeze my hands together in my lap. “The Highers will know then, Charles will know.”

“He will,” he agrees, and stares at me determinedly. “But I can’t ignore what he’s doing, none of us can. That is what an Elite is, a protector and we won’t turn our backs on the lands.”

I look him over before looking at the rest of his men in the room who nod their heads in agreement. “When will you go?”

“Tomorrow. The sooner the better, and then we can figure shit out.”

“What about the rest of the Elites here?” I question and stand, moving back over to the table.

“They are mine, I will tell them their orders.”

I eye Darius skeptically. “Are they loyal to you or the Highers?”

He growls. “That’s what we will eventually find out.”

# Thirty Eight

DARIUS

“Let me in, my children are starving. Please!” We watch a woman plead amongst the large crowd that has gathered outside Wolvorn Castle. The Highers’s Guards are trying to attempt to calm them, pushing them back from getting within the walls. Up on the battlements, more of them have their arrows notched in their bows, ready to fire if it gets out of hand. I growl beneath my breath when I see bodies hung from there, limply. Sometimes those who are sentenced to death get hung there to warn others what will happen if the law is broken, but over twenty of them? That’s too many in a short amount of time, what is going on?

“They should let them in, they have enough room,” Leo snarls, standing at my side as we watch a male in tattered clothes swing at a guard. He shouts for food for his children, and he’s soon detained by another and taken away as the crowd shouts and cries for help. A child stands a little further back from the crowd, a bucket in one hand and clutching the

hand of who appears to be her younger brother. I clench my jaw at their dirtied appearance. “This isn’t right.”

“It’s not,” I agree as a male knocks over the child and her brother. I move over to them, snarling at the male before crouching at their side, gritting my teeth at the burning that shoots up my back. The girl looks up at me with fear in her eyes, holding her brother close as they huddle, seemingly wanting to have the ground swallow them to protect them. “I won’t hurt you,” I tell her as softly as I can manage, but she grabs her brother’s hand and runs off into the crowd, scooting in between people. I release a sigh and watch on.

“You tried,” Jerrod says, watching the crowd as I am. “They fear us with what we are capable of, destroying creatures of all manner.”

“It shouldn’t be like this.” I shake my head at how wrong all this is. “Elites. Protectors, that’s who we are, what we have trained for. Yet everyone is scared of us. How have we gone so long to let it be this way?”

“It didn’t matter what people thought of us,” Jerrod says as I rise and scan the crowd. “Now, it’s different.”

“We really have had our eyes closed, haven’t we?” Leo asks quietly, and Damian nods.

“We have. How have we not noticed that it has gotten this bad?” Damian asks.

“We have been blinded, but no more,” I tell them, and the others nod. Rhea is right about a lot of things, and the one

thing she is right about, above all else, is that we have no honor to speak of. Especially if I can't even go up to a child and not have her be terrified of me. "No more. I won't be an Alpha, an Elite that they fear unless they give me a reason to."

"It's time for change," Leo says, gripping the strap of his armor going across his chest. "And I think it's time to clean house. Find those who are loyal to you or the Highers. Rhea said some went to the Elites about their abuse and they turned their backs. I'm sure you don't want members like that under you."

"I don't." I grunt, watching as a brawl breaks out, the people of Vrohkaria going up against the guards. "This will start a war between the Highers and the Elites, and we don't know how the people will react. We can't let whatever Charles is doing continue. It's time for a new authority and it is not the Highers." No matter the cost in the end. "We have to tread carefully and hide that we are opposing them for as long as we can, as well as weed out the Elites that are not loyal to me. A war isn't what we need right now with the rogures increasing, and the lands are already in disarray. We need to set up a place where people can go and be safe from the rogures. The Highers won't let them in Wolvorn Castle unless they are no longer there."

"It will take time to find a place. I'll look into it," Leo says, and I clap his shoulder. "We need to find where the people on that list are first."

“We also need to find the memory crystal. I hope Rhea can shed some light on it.”

“I’ll stay behind,” Zaide says, and I look over at him. “Charles has a female on the regular who meets him in his office at certain times, she always gets there early when he leaves the door unlocked. I may be able to get some information from her.”

“Charles fucks females in his office?” I ask in disgust. He shrugs, and I hope to fuck they don’t use the chair I always sit in. “Be careful and don’t get caught,” I tell him.

“Always.”

A shout comes from the battlements, and the male with the tattered clothes struggles against a guard as he’s dragged forward. Another comes to them, a loop of rope in his hand, and he starts winding it around his neck. My eyes flick to the hanging bodies. The male shouts, and a woman screams below, looking up at him, begging for him to let go. I take a step forward, but it’s too late. The male is pushed over the wall, the drop and sudden pull as the rope tightening snaps his neck. Dead. I swallow.

The woman collapses as the others look upon the male in horror. The brawl starts to disperse, and I watch as the girl with her baby brother cling to a woman who holds them protectively, as another now goes to the sobbing woman.

They just killed a man for seeking sanctuary. That’s why there are so many bodies hanging from the wall.

“We need to find a place, quickly,” I order.

“Top fucking priority,” Leo growls.



We move through the halls, heading for the records room at Wolvorn Castle. Our presence hasn't been noted yet, but I would be a fool to think the Highers currently in residence aren't aware.

“Do you think we will have time to grab the documents showing where Rhea's pack members have been assigned?” Jerrod asks, and I look over my shoulder at him. His body tenses when he meets my stare, but he doesn't look away.

“I'm not sure, I don't want to stay longer than needed, but it would be a good opportunity to look.” I see his shoulders slump before I turn and walk down another hallway.

We would have just ported here, but the Highers banned the use of them in the castle. Wards are placed on every wall that will activate when a port stone is used, denying the magic within that enables us to port. Rhea and I are the only exceptions to using port stones; the magic within not depleting. It must be an Heir thing.

“Does this have anything to do with the pup I have seen you with a few times back in Eridian?” Damian asks Jerrod.

“You've been quiet since we came back, quieter than Zaide.”

“Which means you have been real fucking quiet,” Leo adds.



“I just want to check on him,” Jerrod mutters. He was close with the kid in Eridian for the time we spent there. Oscar, I think the kid was called.

Elites don't generally settle down with mates, a family. Our life isn't easy. Being away for long periods of time or being called away at a moment's notice, not many can stick that out. So having pups is also not a common thing with an Elite.

Which pisses me off more for Charles's demand of it.

“I'm sure he's fine,” Damian lies. We all know the pups were taken from their mothers when we arrived, going under health checks before finding their fathers. After everything we know now, we have no idea if that was true. All this could have been avoided if we had just taken Rhea alone. With Aldus at Eridian, we couldn't have done much since he broke the barrier and Maize summoned the Elites on his order. I couldn't keep them hidden.

I broke my vow.

“It's been months,” Zaide grumbles. “Why haven't they been brought back to their mothers and in a pack?”

“That's the question, isn't it? Why hasn't Charles returned them to their old packs or a new one?” Leo asks. “This whole situation is fucked.”

I couldn't agree more. Everything is fucked, and what I've seen over the past few months with Charles's obsession in finding Rhea, and all that Rhea has told us... Regret threatens to bring these castle walls down with all that I have done, or

didn't do. We've all been so fucking blind, *I've* been so fucking blind. We all became Elites to protect Vrohkaria and with what we know now, we have all been helping it toward its ruin.

Unknowingly or knowingly so, we helped.

I open the large door and we enter the records room. Shelves upon shelves hold scrolls and books of Vrohkaria in alphabetical order on every single being in the lands. From pack names, our history and the Elite members and families, everything is held here.

I haven't thought before about why we have these records, but now I want to know what the reason behind it is. Surely this much record keeping isn't necessary.

We walk in between a row of bookcases, the smell of leather and paper filling the space. I look at the signs at the top, waiting until we reach the pack records section. I stop when I hear a shuffle of feet from further down the rows, and I grab my brothers' attention, putting a finger to my lips, letting them know to be quiet.

I stalk down a row, letting my senses out and following them until I round a corner and come face to face with none other than Aldus.

"Oh! Alpha Darius." He nods his blond head respectfully at me, shuffling the papers he has gathered in his arms.

"Higher Aldus," I greet, folding my arms over my chest. I stare down at him, wondering if he knew what Rhea's family

did? Was he involved with Higher Charles? Drax growls within me. “Looks like you have been in here for a while?” I nod toward the numerous papers, keeping my face set into a natural façade, hiding the anger I feel brimming underneath my skin.

“Ah yes, record keeping is never ending. I feel like I live down here sometimes,” he chuckles. “Is there anything I can help you with?” He looks at me, and then to my brothers.

“We’re just here to check on some things before we head out again. Some members of a pack have gone missing,” I say carefully. “So we are checking to see if they had moved packs without telling their family, if not, then the rogures have probably killed them.” I watch for any reaction on his face.

“Ahh, yes, a few of them do that.” He shakes his head. “More work for us when they could just inform them.” He shuffles on his feet. “But rather that than the rogures getting to them.”

“Have you spoken to Higher Charles?” I ask.

“I haven’t had a chance to speak with him for some time. I’ve been out in the lands, updating records and seeing to the people the best I can in these trying times. I’ve been looking for Higher Aiden, but no one has seen him.”

Hmm. “Do you remember when I was around sixteen and my father brought me to your office?” I ask him, and he looks away, seemingly lost in thought.

“I do recall a time or two, why do you ask?” He moves those papers in his hands again.

“My memories were hidden, or blocked,” I say, and his light brows pinch. “I remember my Heir markings appearing, and then my father took me to your office some time after. I went in an Heir and came out forgetting I was one. Charles said he would speak with you about it.”

“It was quite a shock when your markings appeared many months ago. A male Heir hasn’t been seen longer than a female. It’s truly startling.” He looks over at me, at the marking hidden at my neck. He hasn’t seen me to know they are there, but it is in the history of the Heir’s where the markings are. “I do briefly remember your father coming to see me with you, we talked about the upcoming changes within the Elites. That was around twenty years or so ago, you were around sixteen. I have no recollection of you being an Heir then, which is troublesome considering I have an affinity with memories.” He adjusts those papers again. “Charles hasn’t spoken to me about such a thing yet. I will be seeing him for a meeting soon, so I will bring it up with him.”

“I went into your office as an Heir and walked out not being one.” I stare him down, wanting him to give me some answers. I know he attempted to conceal them, but I can’t let him know that.

He shakes his head slowly. “I’m not sure how that happened, and as far as I’m aware, your father hadn’t had the ability to tangle with memories. I certainly didn’t do anything with

them.” Fucking liar. I want nothing more than to take him to my basement at the Vokheim and interrogate him, but doing so now will cause a stir that we cannot afford to happen. We are not ready to show our hand just yet. Aldus scratches his chin. “Is it possibly you did it to yourself?”

My brows furrow. “Not that I know of, I’ve never been able to alter memories or block them,” I lie. I know I hid my memories to protect myself from being an Heir.

“When you have some time, come and see me if you would like. I can go through your memories and try to find what triggered you to not remember.”

I nod, but he must think I have no brain cells if he thinks I actually will. “How is Kaden doing?” I ask instead, and his eyes flash for a second.

“He is well, considering,” he sighs. “Maize is keeping an eye on him in the east wing, but sometimes the memories that Rhea changed appear again. We continue to remove them to release his true memories. He gets confused, and can be violent.” So he’s still here.

If I didn’t know what I know now, I would believe his every word and go about my day. But I know better, especially after the last time I saw Charles. “How can fake memories come back, I thought you removed it permanently?”

“I thought so too, but it seems it’s embedded inside of him and it pops back up when he gets stressed, and is emotionally overwhelmed.” I tilt my head at him.

Rhea said his memories were altered, but Aldus and Maize told me they removed the block she had put on it. So what are they doing to him with these... interrogations?

“So Rhea was strong enough to embed a block inside of him?”

His eyes light up. “Yes, very powerful magic, and dangerous. We are lucky we can keep removing her power that’s trying to remove his true childhood memories. Unfortunately, he must stay in the castle for his own safety, and others at this point as we don’t know what he will do when he’s in between reality and the memories Lasandrhea planted inside of him.”

“Any word on her being sighted?” I want to know if they know anything.

“No, though with the posters up with her description and most of Vrohkaria knowing about her and the dangers she poses, she can’t hide forever.”

“You were her guardian, you must feel betrayed by her,” I say carefully, and he looks down for a moment.

“It is very unfortunate. Her parents were well respected, and if they saw what she had become, they would be howling to the winds in despair.”

“Were you close to her?” I fold my arms over my chest.

“At one point, yes. Though she was a little pup. Then I became busy with Higher business and I couldn’t be around as much. Then the news broke about her parents, and that she had

gone missing. I'm not sure if her path could have been changed if I were more involved in her younger years, but it seems nothing could derail that girl from her ways."

"I will let you get on, Aldus, you must be busy," I say, stepping to the side to let him through, wanting to wrap my hands around his throat. Now is not the time.

"Yes of course." He bows his head. "Come see me and we can try and figure out what happened to the memory of you being an Heir." With that he walks past us, his arms still clutching those papers.

"Aldus is the only one who can mess around with memories," Leo says quietly when he hears the door close. "Do you think we can find proof that he tried to mess with your memories, or Kade's?"

"I don't know, but maybe I need to go to my father's home and see if there is anything there. He knew I was an Heir, he saw it for himself, maybe he kept his own record of it even though he never spoke of it again. There is also the fact that he went to see Rhea in the basement." My father and I were not close. He trained me hard to be an Elite, and out of some sense of loyalty, I kept my last promise to him to do what Charles has asked. Now I know he wasn't the male I thought he was, he wasn't the Elite I thought he was.

My temples pound. I suppose Rhea can't even stand to be near me, well, more so now after finding out my father was involved. But when we went to her old home to get Sarah and she caught my hand, I saw in her eyes that she didn't blame

me. No matter what went on between us, she didn't blame me for my father's sins.

How could my father have stood by and let Rhea be trapped in that basement? How could he have not gotten her out of there?

It seems the poison of the Elites runs deep, and I need to go even deeper to get rid of the rot.

"You haven't been home since..." He trails off but I know what he's going to say.

I haven't been home since my family was killed by rogues.

"Maybe it's time I did. My father was hiding things, especially concerning Rhea." I remember every time we went to Zakith, where my father would go to the Alpha house and send me off around the territory. All that time, I hated him for shutting me out of conversations with Alpha Paul, I was to be the Alpha of the Elites. It was important I was present for talks and meetings. I know better now, he wasn't there for conversations, he was there for *her*. I clench my fists and Leo and Damian eye me warily.

"Let's not destroy another room, brother," Damian says, and moves over to another shelf. "Let's try and find these names and get the fuck out of here. I don't want to be here any longer than I have to be." He slaps me on the back and we get to work, trying to find names from the notes we found in Rhea's basement.



If we find any names that match, that confirm the Highers have been taking people right under our noses.

And we didn't even realize...

## Twenty Nine

RHEA

I hold Sarah's hand in mine as she sits on the bed, rubbing my thumb in soothing motions over the back of her knuckles as she looks up at me with an apology in her eyes. Josh sits on a chair next to the bed like I am, his eyes not once moving from her.

"I'm so sorry," she whispers, a tear falling from her eye.

"What happened?" I ask.

She looks at Josh before her eyes fall to her lap. "When they took me, they put me in a room and my father came." She swallows roughly and her hand shakes in mine. "He... he started shouting, screaming even. He said awful things. He went to hit me, but his second in command reminded him that I can't have any more injuries when I go in front of the council." She shakes her head. "They said they would hurt you all if I didn't agree with what my father said. I didn't know what to do, I was so scared. I... I didn't mean to betray you when they took me to the hall, I vow it. I didn't know what to do... I didn't—"

I knew there had to be a reason why she did what she did, but her words have shoved out any doubt left in my mind about it. I shift to the edge of my seat and move some of her dark hair behind her ear. “It’s alright now, I’m sorry too. I said I would keep you safe and I didn’t.” I clear my throat and try to get rid of the feeling of someone choking me. Another failure. Push it down Rhea. “Can you forgive me?” I ask her.

“You have nothing to be sorry for,” she sobs, and I see Josh clenching his hand. “I betrayed you all by going along with what my father wanted.”

“You did what you had to do, what you thought was best, I can’t blame you for that.” A sob passes her lips, and I lean forward, gently wrapping my arms around her, the need to ease her making me not able to help myself. I hold her as she cries, my eyes connecting with Darius as he leans beside the door, his jaw ticking as he watches us.

Josh shifts in his seat, his knuckles white as he watches Sarah. She quiets after a while, then she leans back and wipes her face. She settles back in the bed and looks over toward Darius near the door. She tenses slightly, but then lifts her chin.

“Are you going to take me back?” Her voice wavers, but it’s still strong. Brave girl. Josh tenses as he waits for his answer, his face hardening.

“No, I’m not,” Darius tells her, and the room relaxes.

“But you’re the Highers’ weapon,” she says. “You... you could have told them I’m here, told my arranged mate I’m

here.” Josh flinches, a growl rumbling in his chest.

“I’m not their weapon to do with as they please anymore. A lot has happened and changed.” Darius’s eyes come to mine as he speaks. I look away.

“Did you know my father sold me?” she asks him, and I freeze along with Darius.

“Sold you?” His brows furrow, and I look at Josh as he practically shakes with rage.

“He sold me to the Highers. To be used as they see fit. But not before my father let my pack have their share first,” she chokes out, and I slump back in my seat, my own eyes stinging with her words. “I overheard that they have done deals with others too, but I don’t know who. They didn’t exactly tell me what they were doing.”

I know what happened to her. I saw the evidence on her body when she came to Eridian, then she told me some of it, but hearing her own father was aware? He was a part of it? And that others have done the same too?

“What the fuck is wrong with people?” I whisper to myself before getting up and starting to pace the room. My emotions run high, wanting to burst out of my skin. “What happened to what wolves are meant to be?! We are protectors, providers, defenders. When did the wolves of Vrohkaria turn into monsters?” I shake out my hands, feeling the need to do... something.

“What did they want from you?” Darius asks Sarah, keeping his eyes on me. “The Highers?” I wait for her answer, as this is also what she hadn’t told me.

Sarah looks toward me. “They said I was a suitable candidate to potentially produce a pup to be an Heir. I was to be given to the Highers after my arranged mating to the Aragnis pack. I don’t know anything more than that. Just that I was to be taken somewhere.”

I look at Darius, his face a picture of disgust. “Why is producing an Heir important? What does he want with Heirs?” I ask him.

“He mentioned to me about creating stronger pups to defeat the rogures, but this obsession he seems to have had for a long time, doesn’t make it feel like the only reason he has.” He folds his arms, the muscles bulging in them. “Before you arrived in Wolvorn, no one ever mentioned the Heirs, unless it was a passing conversation about them not being around anymore. The people were glad they weren’t around because that meant they were safe.”

“But they aren’t safe. Not from the Highers or the rogures,” I growl.

“I know,” he says bluntly.

“Do they know I’m gone?” Sarah asks from the bed.

“Not yet,” Darius answers. “And when they do, they won’t know where you are, I will make sure of it. Come, little wolf,”

he says to me. “We have a lot to discuss.” Darius walks out the open doorway and enters the hallway.

I move over to Sarah and press my cheek to hers. “You’re okay now, if you’re in danger here I will have you moved to Witches Rest.” Her eyes widen. “Josh will explain.”

I move as Josh stands, coming over to me and pulling me close, kissing the top of my head. I tense under his touch, my arms hanging loosely by my sides. I hear a growl from the hallway, and I roll my eyes, pulling back from Josh to see Darius scowling at us.

“I’ll talk to you later,” I tell Sarah, and follow Darius out and down the hallway.

He continues ahead of me, silent in his steps. I follow quietly as we get further and further away from the rooms on this level. Darius takes a right and descends down some steps. I look out the small windows as we continue down, seeing gardens at the back of the keep that I haven’t been to on this side. We eventually come to a door at the bottom, and Darius moves the bolt attached to it and opens it up.

We step out into the open, the smell of all the various flowers hitting my senses with their sweet, earthly smell. Darius follows a stone path further into the gardens, leading me toward the back of the enclosed keep. He pushes open an iron gate that has ivy clinging to it, ripping it apart as he pushes the gate open fully. I duck my head, feeling the ivy tickle my face as I go through.

Once out on the other side, weeping willows surround us, their leaves swaying in the slight breeze as Darius walks through them. I let my hand stroke them, feeling their life within like a pulsing heartbeat. We continue over grass, Darius quiet and me curious, if not slightly nervous at being back here on our own.

Why is he taking me out here?

We come to an open, circular space within the willow trees, the sun shining down on us and creating shadows of branches under the trees. The grass tickles my ankles as I step into the area, the strands longer here. Darius pauses and I stop, looking him over as he folds his arms.

“Zaide is staying back to either try and find where the memory crystal is, or grab it if he can,” he says. “He’s trying to ask a female that Charles brings to his office to speak to her.”

My nose scrunches in disgust. “Will he be able to stay there long?” He shakes his head.

“Just as long as he can until it becomes suspicious. I won’t have him put himself in danger for it, he can handle himself well though.”

I take a breath before my next question. “My pack? Kade?”

“We have brought records here, so we can look through them for your pack’s names. Kade is still at Wolvorn. They say it’s for his own safety.”

My stomach drops. “Safe?” I scoff, unease slithering inside of me. “He’s not safe there, what are they doing to him.” I stare off into the distance, dreading what he may be going through.

“Nothing good, Rhea,” My eyes swing back to him, and a knot forms in my stomach. “I met Aldus there,” Darius says, changing the conversation. I have a feeling he knows what’s going on, but won’t tell me. I don’t know whether I’m thankful or pissed. “He said the memories you changed keep appearing and are held behind a block so he becomes violent. Aldus and Maize are having to keep removing the block you have put there to get to his memories.”

I close my eyes briefly. “I only ever blocked his memories as a child because his nightmares were terrible. He would scream for hours or be still and quiet after sleep when he would finally let himself rest. I didn’t... *change* his memories.” God, Carzan, I’ll come as soon as I can.

“I thought as much,” he says, easily, and I have to stop the skip of my heart that he believes me. That he may actually be on my side, even if I don’t want him to be. But this is bigger than my issues with him. Than us. Lives hang in the balance and I need to shove down what’s going on between me and Darius the best I can. “Did you know about Sarah’s father?” he asks.

“No, I didn’t,” I answer, folding my own arms. “I knew her pack was doing... *things* to her. She was a mess when we got



her, her injuries then...“ I trail off. “I had no idea her father was involved.”

He looks away from me, his jaw ticking. “How many more people have they done this to?” he wonders out loud.

“A lot,” I tell him softly, thinking of how many innocent beings are being taken from their homes. “The Highers have been taking them for years, I didn’t know. I thought it was just me when I was younger. I never imagined this is what was going on.”

“And how do you know, now?” he demands, and I scuff my boot into the ground.

“I can’t tell you that.” He raises an eyebrow, but I can’t tell him about Edward being the one who told me what was really happening, it would put him in danger. The less people who knew about him, the better. Though I haven’t heard from him once, and I’m getting worried. He said the Highers were leaving him out of decisions, being kept out of the inner workings. Are they getting suspicious of him? “I’m serious, Darius, this is something I can’t tell you. I’ve had help with bringing people to Eridian over the years, getting them to safety there. They even helped me. I didn’t know Eridian even existed. I probably would have been dead a long time ago if I wasn’t told about it. I can’t tell you who I had help from, just that they are on my side and it’s less dangerous for them if less people know.”

He examines my face closely. “You trust them?” he finally asks.

“I would trust him with my life.”

“Him?” His arms flex.

“It doesn’t matter.”

“It fucking does,” he growls while I hold his stare, unflinching no matter how my insides swirl at his possessive tone.

“Listen here you big, fucking asshole babysitter,” I snap, taking a few steps toward him. He watches my every move, his eyes bleeding black, a wolf ready to pounce. But I don’t falter until I’m four steps away from him. “I am not *yours* to be possessive over, or claim, or protect. We have been through this.” He dips his head slowly, never once taking his eyes off me. The move was so animalistic, I have to work hard to control my breathing as my heart speeds up.

“You are what I say you are.” His voice is quiet, full of gravel and a threat that I don’t know about.

“No.” I shake my head harshly. “I will not become some plaything to you, I am my own being!”

“You’re *my* being.”

My bravado falters at that for a moment, the words dragging that hope, that yearning that’s deep within my soul that I have kept buried for *years* until him. How can he say such things to me after what he has done? Why does he have to be the one saying this to me?

“You know the connection cannot be helped, that’s all this is, Darius,” I say tiredly. “It’s not real. I won’t let it be, not with

you.” His whole body tenses. “It will go, I’ll make it so. I will drag it out, I will pull it out, I will tear it out piece by piece.” My heart cannot take anymore.

I’m on my back in the next second, he moved so fast I had no time to react. My hands are pinned by my wrists at the side of my head and his face is inches from mine, his nostrils flaring. “You even attempt to rid anything,” he snarls down at me, his eyes fully black now. The only color left the green of his pupils. “I will chain you in my room, I will lock you in there, never letting you out, never letting you feel the sun on your skin until you see fucking sense.” His eyes burn into mine as I stay frozen beneath him, his power coming out and floating around the back of him. “You drag it out, I’ll shove it back in. You pull it, I will push it. You tear it, and I will grab every, single piece and put it back together again.”

I flex my hands in his hold, and he growls. It’s low, full of dominance, and I can’t help my reaction. I slump in the grass, my body limp in his hold. The purr that comes from him is full of satisfaction as his power moves over my sides, the coolness settling me.

“I do not want it, Darius.” I whisper the words softly, letting some vulnerability show in my voice. His eyes bounce between mine. “I have never really gotten what I want in my life, I’ve not asked for much, if anything for myself. But this, I want this.” He presses his weight further into me, making me completely immobile as he slips between my thighs. “I want to not have this connection to you, I want to not be tethered to

you. I don't—" My lips begin to tremble as desperation rushes through me. "I don't want it to be you."

Silence. Utter silence surrounds us. The branches cannot even be heard with the rustle of leaves from the wind. Darius's eyes start to move then. He slowly peels them from my eyes, trailing down the bridge of my nose until his eyes connect with mine once more. His power comes to his hands, and I feel its calmness against me. I suck in a sharp breath, my lips parting as it caresses my skin. The call of my own comes, greeting him and I have to close my eyes as the feeling of home rushes through me.

Why does he make me feels so good, but hurt me so bad? His power connecting with mine is like finding water after having none for days. Finding the sun after beings kept away.

It's not fucking fair. But then. When has my life ever been?

"Open your eyes, little wolf." I do. With his power connecting with mine, I'm unable to deny him. "You feel that?" he asks, pushing more power against me and I breath out a shaky breath. I feel it all. "That is something neither one of us can deny. It's a higher power, more than me and you combined. Whether from the Gods or something else, it is the path they have chosen. I will not come off that path." My eyes sting, and I bite the inside of my cheek. "You may have not asked for much in your life, you may have not been given the choice. You also have no choice here," He says, and a noise leaves me. It's sad, resigned. "But it doesn't have to be terrible, it doesn't have to be hateful. I'm a selfish asshole. I'm

not good at sharing, not good at compromise, and especially not good at letting things go that I deem mine.” He dips his head, running his nose up the side of my neck. “And I won’t, Rhea,” he says, and I tense in his hold. “I won’t let you go again.”



I sit down in the grass, running my fingers over the strands as Darius sits a few feet away from me, watching me closely. After he let me up, we were silent for a long time. The sun is close to setting now, but I haven’t felt the need to break the silence. Not after everything he said to me.

He won’t let me go, he won’t let me choose. I can’t say I’m surprised. Darius isn’t the type of male to let something go. As he said, he’s selfish. Even though his words wanted to burrow under my skin, wanting to feel content with the fact that he will be a constant thing according to him, I can’t let them. Too much has happened.

He eventually breaks the quiet first. “The Highers, especially Charles, have a lot of followers. Even though there is an uprising happening at the moment, some people are demanding that the Highers step down as they are not fit to rule Vrohkaria,” Darius tells me, and I can’t help but feel a sliver of hope that some are rebelling. “Despite the fact that they won’t let anyone have a safe haven inside the castle walls from the rogures, they still have alliances amongst the packs.”

“Probably packs that some have given their children up to gain titles, power and authority.” Pieces of shit. “How deep does this go? How many are on Charles’s side?”

“A lot,” he says.

“Charles and the other Highers have been kidnapping children for years, and no one knew apart from those involved. Then Sarah tells us a deal was made with her father for her, and she has heard of others who have done the same. All involved deserve to die for what they have done.”

“You want to go around packs and kill the ones involved?” He tilts his head, waiting for my response, but he hasn’t outright shut me down.

“Some gave their children up for their lives to be comfortable while their child lives in misery. They abuse, rape and break their own flesh and blood, their own pack members. They don’t deserve to live, Darius. How can they stand there and watch their child get taken, watch as their pack rape others. It’s sick,” I spit. “The Elites were made for hunting Heirs, yet you think they were made to protect the lands. What will you do? Will you turn a blind eye to it now that you know?”

Shadows dance at the back of him as his nostrils flare. “I can’t turn a blind eye to it, I told you that. But I also know that right now, we can’t take Charles down, or his followers when we find them without evidence to show people. We don’t have the power to fight them and win right now.”

“We are Canaric wolves, we are Heirs. How can we not be powerful enough?” We are practically second to the Gods.

“I’ve recently remembered my powers as have you, yet yours is volatile.”

“How do you know that?” I ask tentatively.

“I can sense it, it’s inside of you, wild, untamed. It’s why you’re tired all the time, why you have outbursts.” He tilts his head, smirking. “Why you can’t hit me with it.”

I scowl. “I’ll get the hang of it, it will just take a little time. That’s all.” I don’t like that he knows I’m not in full control. Not being able to stand equal against a male like Darius is a death sentence. Or a whip against your back. Though I don’t think many can stand equal to him. Unless you are a Higher.

“It also takes your wolf.”

I pause. Intelligent fucker. “Yeah, that’s out of the question, so I will just have to learn without her.”

He lifts his palm, shadows of black mist dancing around his fingers. “You need to bond completely with your wolf, but you aren’t. When was the last time your wolf came out?”

“When was yours?” I counter. My wolf is a sore spot, and it seems he knows it when his eyes light up.

“A few weeks ago. Rogures attacked a small village near the Unforgivable Sea. Not many have seen my wolf and lived.”

“Why is that?” I wonder.

“It’s not your average wolf.”

“We are not normal, but Canaric.”

He clenches his hands and the mist moves up and around his back. Two thick tendrils of darkness spread out from behind him, looking like tails swishing back and forth. I lean closer, just slightly as I look at those shadows in fascination.

“I may be Canaric, but even my wolf hasn’t been seen before. It’s not in Vrohkaria history anyway.” Those tails sway back and forth and Darius stands, moving closer to me.

I rise too, feeling my own power within, swirling and bashing against my insides, reacting to his. “Why is your wolf different? Are there others? Like the one I saw?”

He stops in front of me, the green of his eyes glowing slightly. He reaches out his hand and grips my chin. It’s a firm hold, but not painful. “Maybe, but I think you know why mine is different.”

My markings appear, I feel the warmth of them before they settle upon my skin. Darius’s own markings pulse within the tattoos on his neck, and up to just below his jaw. “I don’t know why.”

His eyes glow brighter as he drops his hand, but he doesn’t step away. “Your wolf needs to come out.”

“She won’t, she can’t,” I reluctantly admit. Runa moves restless within me, my power floating around her. The grass at my feet grows, the stalks becoming larger as nerves settle within me. Darius looks down and watches.



“You won’t be able to control it unless you become one with her. You will be of no help against the fight with the Highers when it comes. Be of no help to get your broken pack back. To get Kade back.”

Rage rushes through me and I raise a hand, a ball of power pushing out of my palm as I lay it against Darius’s chest. He’s forced a step back until his power rises to meet mine. Darkness encases us, the black mist swirling violently around us and only the green glow of Darius’s eyes is visible. My breaths come out in pants as ice-blue tendrils come from my sides, and lash out. It connects with Darius’s barrier around us, sparking every time it comes into contact with it. The flashes of blue light us up with every hit, and I see Darius watching curiously.

“I can try and force her out,” he tells me after a moment. He catches a wayward tendril in his hand and wraps it around his fingers, playing with it. Completely unaffected. “She won’t like it, but if there’s no other way, it will have to be done.”

I’m already shaking my head before he finishes. “That’s cruel.”

“That’s survival, little wolf. If you don’t get to grips with your power you will die. You could kill innocents. Is that what you want?”

More power unleashes from me, a wave of it smashing against the sides of the barrier. “No.” I stumble back against the black, feeling his magic soak into me and calm some of my own power. “Of course not.”

“Then let me help you get her out. It might not work the first time, but we have no other options here. I need you to be as strong as you can be to face the Highers when the time comes.”

“I already got one, I don’t need to drag her out.” His eyes sharpen at my words. Shit.

A rumbling comes from his chest, and he steps forward. His eyes bounce between mine before they light up in recognition. “Higher Aiden,” he murmurs, and I swallow. “Did you kill a Higher, little wolf?”

“I...”

“You did, didn’t you?” His tone has dropped now. He licks his lips. “How did you do it?” He asks, taking another step closer.

“I didn’t-”

“When did you do it?” Another step. “Did you make him bleed?” The air turns heavy as desire pours off of him.

“I didn’t do anything.”

“Tell me. I’m not angry. Far from it.” His eyes flicker black.

I take a breath. “I found him drunk,” I whisper. “I followed him and slit his throat.”

“Fuck,” he whispers, lowing his hand to adjust himself. My eyes track the movement. “Do you know how fucking hard I am for you right now?” I shake my head, eyes glued to his

obvious erection. “You being murderous always turns me on. It’s the way your eyes shine, so full of rage and hate.”

“They were full of rage for him,” I admit. “For what he was a part of. I will take every last one of them out.”

He takes a deep breath. “If you don’t want me to take those shorts off and fuck you, little wolf, I would stop mentioning it now.” I swallow the moan that rises, even as heat pools in my stomach.

“This is fucked up,” I tell him.

“Nothing is fucked up when it comes to you.” I inhale shakily and clear my throat. It would be so easy for me to offer what he wants, I have no doubt he would jump at it. I squeeze my thighs together.

“So now you know I can take a Higher down,” I say, steering the conversation to safer waters.

“You caught him unaware, Rhea. It won’t always be like that. Their power is above the norm, especially Charles. You can sense it on him, I know you can.”

Of course I can, but I thought that was normal. Most Highers are usually wolves with witch’s blood in them. But Charles is different. “What is he?” I ask.

“Powerful, more so than he should be.” Darius slams into me unexpectedly, holding my throat in his hand and pinning me to the barrier.

I push a hand into his chest, my power rushing into him and he growls. “Stop fucking fighting.” I can’t, it’s all I’ve known.

“Trust me.”

That’s laughable.

My fingers dig into his chest as my hair rises around me. My eyes begin to change, I can feel it happen, and Runa whines inside of me. Blue strands come through the ground at my feet and rise above us, surrounding us as they move violently. My powers shoot out around the barrier, pinging around it as I try to escape. Darius brings the darkness closer to us, tighter.

“Get off me,” I demand, forcing more power into my palm at his chest. Trying to get every scrap of it to do my bidding.

“No,” he growls back, shadows covering his body, protecting him.

Blue and black collide around us, sparks and tendrils roaming wildly within the barrier he created. Shadows grab my wrists, holding them down on either side of me and I start to thrash in panic as hot pain enters me. I squeeze my eyes shut as a gritted scream comes from me, taking my breath away. Then lips touch mine.

Soft, but then more demanding, rough.

I whimper, opening to him to distract me. Letting his tongue dance with mine, I falter in my struggle, the pain receding to a dull ache as he devours my mouth. My body relaxes back against his barrier, those shadow hands now rubbing soothingly at my temples. A pitiful sound comes from me as my magic fizzles out, and Darius makes a noise at the back of his throat at the sound.

He nips my bottom lip, breaking the kiss to rest his forehead against mine. “Trust me,” he whispers against me, and I open my eyes. Those silver flecks are back, and I’m unable to do anything but watch them float.

“I can’t,” I choke out, shaking my head against his. His eyes shutter, and he exhales roughly. Giving my jaw a small bite, he releases my throat and steps back. Light surrounds us again as he calls off his barrier and I stumble forward.

Darius catches me, lifting me as my markings begin to fade, my eyes heavy as I rest my head on his shoulder. He holds me close with an arm under my legs and an arm around my back as he makes his way over to a willow tree. I try to struggle, to get him to let me down, but my body feels like stone. He sits down, being gentle with me, and he gets me comfortable in his lap. My head feels fuzzy, and I couldn’t even move if I wanted to. But his scent around me wraps me up in a delusional sense of safety, in a fake attempt at comfort. I’m too weak to reject it as I burrow my face in the side of his neck. His palm comes to the back of my head, gently massaging there and making a small, satisfied moan come from my lips at the feel of it.

He chuckles against the top of my head and rests his free hand on my thigh. “Rest, little wolf, I’ll keep you safe.” He keeps saying that.

I try to snort, but I don’t think even a small sound escapes me as my body goes limp and I fall asleep in the arms of my own personal enemy.

# Thirty

RHEA

I side eye Darius as I eat the meat and vegetables on my plate. His mouth is set in a hard line as he stares at the empty wall at my back, the one where his father was, and I refuse to ask him about it. I don't want to know his thoughts, I don't want to know why all the pictures were removed.

We haven't spoken about anything in detail. Him whipping me, my past, his father being involved. Nothing. It's all just surface level, and I'm not sure I even want to go deeper.

He seems to refuse to acknowledge what he did to me. Either ignoring it completely or changing the subject. Does he really not care?

We know why we need to be around each other, but does he not feel... regret?

I can't help but wonder if the Highers had given me to him to punish had I not escaped, would he have been just as bad as those that hurt me? It's stupid considering he whipped me, so I should think that's enough to show me who he is, but

emotionally is where I hurt the most with him. I understand why he hurt me in that hall, I understand he was following his orders to protect his men, if what Leo said was true, and that I was believed a traitor to the lands. I would do the same for my pack, but he hasn't come out and said so himself. Though deeper, so deep down inside of me, I want to scream at him about why he didn't choose me. Why, for once, couldn't someone just choose me. None of these thoughts make me feel any better.

I sigh and pick up my mug of fruity water, gulping it down my suddenly dry throat. Sweetness explodes over my tongue and I enjoy every swallow. We never had anything like this back at Eridian, and I empty my mug. I rub the back of my neck when I'm done, my body feeling achy. The battle within me is starting to really take its toll and the only explanation is what I have been told. About not being one with Runa. No matter how many hours I sleep, I still feel tired and drained. I don't know how much longer this can go on for, but Runa still won't budge.

I've gone with Darius to the willow trees one other time to try and get Runa out with no luck. She's so stubborn, but I think it's more than that.

She's afraid of what will happen when she comes out, traumatized by the one and only time she did. We both were. Now is the time to overcome that though, so much is at stake, and I have no idea how to make it happen. I hate the fact that either he or I are going to have to use force to get her to come out. I can feel the resistance weakening every time, but time

isn't on our side. We can't move forward and plan to save my pack, the people Charles has taken, and take care of the rogues if I can't even use my power without being controlled or it draining me.

Charles is stronger than most, you can feel it from him when he lets you, and he let me know a lot when he would come down to the basement. His dominance, his strength, his cruelty. Then there's the other Highers and his supporters to also take into account. What good would it do to storm the castle only to get killed before we even got started. I also can't risk Kade, I have no doubt he would use him as a shield if he needed to.

I clench my hands on the table at the thought.

It's been too long since I've seen him, since he spewed hurtful words at me and refused to come with me. Every time I think about him my heart cracks open all over again. I know it's not him fully, his mind has been messed with, but it still hurts nonetheless. When Darius told me he's still at the castle, I don't know if I'm relieved that he's there rather than back in Zakith in our old home. Then there's the rest of my pack being Gods knows where. I need to get them, need to make sure they are safe and take them to Witches Rest. I have no doubt Belldame will take them in, keep them safe.

“Are you going to your father's?” Leo asks out of nowhere, and I look up and see him looking at Darius.

My eyes move to him just in time to see his jaw tick. “Yeah, I'll leave soon.” I swallow, wondering why he's even going



there and look back down at my food, not hungry at all anymore. “Rhea will be coming with me.”

My head snaps up. “The fuck I am.” My voice raises, an edge of panic in it, and I hate how his eyes turn sharp at the sound.

“You are, there may be some things there that may help us show Vrohkaria what the Highers have been up to. My father was very close with Charles. I haven’t been to that house since the day my family passed. He liked to store information and collect things. There will be something there, no matter how small.”

“Then just go, grab what you need and come back, I don’t need to be with you,” I argue.

“You’re coming.” The finality in his tone makes me bristle.

“Were do you get off thinking you can just pull a leash and I’ll follow.”

His smirk turns seductive, and I resist the urge to clench my thighs together at the sight.

For fuck’s sake.

“Don’t give me ideas, little wolf, it would be a sight to see you with a collar around that pretty little neck of yours.”

My cheeks heat and Sebastian chokes on his food. “Hot damn, do I get to see this?”

Darius snarls at him while Josh clips Seb around the back of the head.

“Give it up,” Taylor gripes.

“It was worth asking.” Sebastian shrugs and goes back to his food as Colten snorts. Anna sighs.

“What do you want us to do in the meantime?” Leo asks Darius as I watch Josh carefully put more food on Sarah’s plate, getting a small, shy smile from her in return.

I look away.

I’m glad Sarah is able to come down and eat with us, but I still feel betrayed by Josh on how we got here, and then I feel guilty because Sarah may not even be here if he didn’t push me. Then we also wouldn’t have the Elites seemingly on our side.

I’m still not sure I can trust them.

“I want you to continue going through the Elite’s records and see who has ties to the Highers,” Darius tells Leo. “If their family pack has an alliance with them, if their parents have a relationship with them.”

“You don’t know who to trust?” Hudson asks, sitting back in his seat.

“If the Elites were made solely for the reason of hunting Heirs, and with two of them under one roof, one being known and one not, I expect a knife will be in my back at some point. We can’t let them know Rhea or any of you are here at the moment until I know for certain whoever is under my roof is trustworthy, otherwise they will run their mouths to the Highers.”

“Do you not have protection around the keep?” I wonder.

“Protection arranged by the Highers,” he tells me.

“Well shit,” I mumble.

“Definitely,” Jerrod says.

“We are changing it to Darius’s barrier instead, but he has to do it slowly so it doesn’t tip off the Highers witches,” Leo says, taking a drink. “What do we do if any Elites have close ties to the Highers.”

Darius’s lips peel back. “Then we watch, listen and learn. The outcome of their life depends on what we find.” He stands and walks around the table to me, nodding his head in the direction of the door. “Come.”

I raise a brow at him and fold my arms. “I told you, I’m not going—“ I’m picked up and thrown over a large, muscular shoulder, an arm clamped around my thighs. Before I know what’s happening, we are walking out of the large room. “What the hell? Put me down right now!” I shout, wiggling for him to release me. My hair hangs as he moves, the strands hindering my vision. I claw at his back and his hisses.

“Hush.” A sharp pain comes from one of my ass cheeks through my shorts and my mouth drops open.

The fucker just bit me.

I’m too stunned to do anything but blink as we walk down the hallway and step into another room. He closes the door behind him with a kick of his boot and then walks forward. I’m suddenly upright, then my ass hits a solid surface. I shake

my head as dizziness overcomes me and blink a few times until I see I'm sitting on a desk. Darius is rummaging through the shelves to my right, moving books and objects.

"I can walk you know," I grumble, taking a hair tie out of my pocket and putting my hair up in a high ponytail.

"I never said you couldn't."

"So don't pick me up like a sack of grain."

He looks at me over his shoulder, his smirk devious. "Why would I stop doing that when I can throw you around and put you where I want you. Next time I'll put you on my cock."

Uhhh. What?

"The fuck, Darius," I sputter, eyes wide and trying to banish the memories of him moving inside of me. What is wrong with me?

"*Fuck* being the word, yes. We will fuck, a lot."

"I don't want to fuck you." Oh what's that, ha yeah. Hello, denial. Gods dammit.

I hate that he's the only thing at the moment that could make me feel good if I allowed it, even for a few moments. When he touches me, my worries are non-existent and I can't find another way to let go.

He's in front of me in the next second, his lips a touch from mine. "Little liar." He feathers kisses along my jaw to my neck, and I grip the sides of the desk tightly, trying to keep my breathing even. Gods damn his mouth. His hands land on my

thighs and spread them roughly. I let out a squeak in surprise. Unable to resist with him touching me. He puts himself in between them as he nips below my ear, and I shiver. He growls low, licking and biting and I'm damn near panting. "You were happy enough to get off on my fingers, let's see how much you want to come on my tongue."

My stomach pools with heat.

His hand comes to the back of my neck in a firm hold, keeping me where he wants me as he licks from the bottom of my throat, to the swell of my breasts above the neckline of my tank top. I feel his power come to my nape, and my body relaxes at the touch instantly, the feeling of rightness flowing through me. His free hand comes up, pulling my top down at the front and biting my nipple through my bra. I whimper, resisting the urge to burrow my hands in his hair to keep him there, to keep this feeling of being wanted by my enemy that seems to be the only one who can make me feel alive.

I begin to wonder how this is even happening, but then thoughts leave me as he continues to lick and bite and I don't care anymore. I just don't care.

"Are you wet for me, little wolf?" he murmurs against my flesh. I squirm, unable to keep still. "If I pull these shorts down, would I find your panties wet? When I run my tongue over them, would I taste you?" His groan is low. "Do you know how much I want to taste you? To have you directly on my tongue, down my throat and inside of me?" I pant. "You have no fucking idea how much I crave you."

I moan at his words, unable to help the arch in my back. The hand on the back of my neck tightens, and then he's pulling me down until my back is flat on the desk. I peer up at him, the heat in his eyes making me squeeze my legs at either side of him. He licks his lips, trailing his gaze over me until he zeros in between my thighs. His eyes flick up to me as he reaches down and unties the string on my shorts, dragging them down my legs and throwing them off to the side. His nostrils flare as I'm sure he sees the dampness on my underwear, and he growls huskily before he dips his head without a second thought and inhales.

I jolt at the small touch as he runs his nose up and down my panties, and then he moves to lick on either side of my underwear as I tremble. He groans, his hands gripping my waist tightly, his fingers digging in as he stops my squirming when he moves his tongue in circular motions over my clit through the material. I suck in a breath at the feel of heat, wanting more of it, not caring that this is insane. As if hearing me, my underwear is suddenly gone and he stares at the space between my legs.

“Fucking dripping,” he growls, and then his mouth is on me, devouring me, tasting me.

“Oh fuck.” I let out a long moan, my fingers going to his head and gripping his hair tightly as I tip my head back and close my eyes, feeling everything he's doing to me. What only he can do to me.

No one has done this to me before, and this new feeling of his mouth on me, the heat of it, the smooth glide of his tongue as he tastes me has me opening my eyes to look at him. The sight of him between my thighs, the sounds he's making as if he's been needing this more than air sends something feral unfurling inside of me. His gaze clashes with mine, his so dark, dominant, and possessive, it just adds to the pleasure building within me. I could stop this, I could let my power out and shove him off me, I could tell him to stop and I know he would. But I don't want this to stop, I want more.

"Darius," I breathe as he moves lower to my entrance, and then his tongue is inside of me. The noise he makes is more animal than male, and he groans as he tastes me properly for the first time. I whimper as he continues to use his tongue to get me closer to the edge.

He moves back up to my clit, and his tongue moves in a circular motion that has my breath hitching, my legs shaking. He wants me to come, I can see it in his eyes, the way they glint as he keeps them on me.

"Has anyone ever tasted you like this?" he growls, his power floating from his hands and over my stomach.

I shake my head. "Never." My reply is a breathy whisper as more heat pools in my stomach.

His eyes darken further, a possessive rumble coming from his chest. "You taste of wildness," he murmurs against me. "Of sweetness, power. Mine." Two fingers are suddenly inside of me, then curling as he bites down on my clit, and I'm

soaring. Long groan comes from me as my back comes off the desk. I feel myself clenching around his fingers, hearing how wet I am as he thrusts them in and out of me. He removes his fingers suddenly, his tongue replacing them as he lets out a low groan as he cleans up every bit of me. His fingers will leave prints with how hard he's grabbing my waist as he pulls me closer to his mouth, licking me everywhere and making sure he gets every last drop. "Delicious," he growls into me, giving my clit one last lick that makes me jolt with how sensitive it is.

I slump back against the desk, vaguely aware that something is digging into me, but I'm too relaxed to care. Darius's mouth is gone from me, then he moves until his lips are on mine. I give in and open for him. I can taste myself on his tongue as it devours me, and it makes me moan, loving and hating that I'm inside of him in some way, just like he said.

"Now we are ready to go," he whispers against my lips, and I watch him with half-lidded eyes as he nips my jaw and gets up. He gathers my shorts, gently pulling them up my legs before lifting me by the waist in one arm, pulling them back on me. With no underwear in sight, I raise a brow at him. He lifts them and shows me the material before he puts them in his pocket, like they are his to keep.

"They're mine," I tell him, my body still high on the pleasure he just unexpectedly gave me. He takes a hold of my arms and pulls me up.



“Not anymore, little wolf.” I huff, and his smirk is down right dirty as he licks his lips. “Nothing is solely yours anymore.” I scowl at him, but he chuckles and moves over to the shelf as I right my clothes, ignoring how my bra scrapes against my sensitive nipple where he had his mouth on it.

“What was that about,” I mutter, still catching my breath.

He doesn’t turn around as he speaks. “I knew going to my father’s wouldn’t exactly be what you would call a ‘good time’, for either of us.” he says, his voice low. “I wanted to taste you before we went there.”

“Why?” I ask, tilting my head.

He walks back over to me, sliding his hands up my bare thighs and I shiver, ignoring how his lips tip up at my reaction to him. “Because with the taste of you still on my tongue, with you less tense because of me.” His eyes are full of smugness at that. “I can take you in there knowing that you don’t belong to him, or anyone who came before me. Or anyone who had ever put their hands on you, or watched you.” He growls the last word, his eyes flashing black and I swallow roughly. “They don’t own any part of your body, Rhea. You didn’t give it to them freely, you didn’t let them see you freely. You will never be in that position again, little wolf.”

“Like I was outside Witches Rest?” I snark, trying to deflect how his words settle something deep inside of me. He lets out a deep breath, his jaw ticking, like he hates what he saw. My eyes slip away. “So you wanted to claim some sort of ownership instead?”

“You already know I own you.” I scowl and he chuckles like it’s funny. “You wanted what I gave you, even if you are too stubborn to ask.” I wouldn’t even know how. Gods, my cheeks heats even thinking about it, but he’s right. If he can take me out of my own head for a few moments, give me something other than the pain I feel after everything that has happened, I’ll take it. Even from the enemy. “We don’t have to like each other to give pleasure, but it isn’t a chore for me to be between your thighs, little wolf. I wanted my mouth where it hasn’t been before, and I would gladly suffocate from it. Owning you, tasting you, making you squirm until you come on my face again and again,” he whispers in a low tone, and I squeeze my thighs together, my sensitive flesh throbbing. He smirks, dipping his head and nipping at my neck. “I would gladly keep you in my bed, sated, satisfied, clawing at my back as I make you beg for more. That day will come, little wolf. My cock will be back where it belongs.”

“You can’t say things like that,” I tell him. Does he want me mindless? Because my body seems to like his words and I haven’t got a Gods’ chance in Vrohkaria of stopping my reaction to them.

“You don’t like hearing the things I want to do to you?” I look away from him, my cheeks now on fire. He presses his hard cock into me, letting me know just how he feels about where his cock should be. “I thought so.” I huff as he runs a finger down my cheek, before rubbing his nose with mine. “Adorable,” he chuckles. “Time to go.”

“Adorable?” I ask, my eyes wide but we are already porting out of there.

# Thirty One

RHEA

I grip Darius tightly as we land outside a large, family sized cabin. A bench swing sways gently back and forth on the wraparound porch, with chimes hanging from the roof creating a melody of its own as the breeze flows through it. Leaves are littered on the wooden floor, the worn steps full of them and rotting. It's eerily silent, and there isn't another home to be seen. Just empty, green land with what looks like a barn further back off the house with woodlands surrounding us.

“This is your home?” I ask Darius as I step back from him and rub my arms, a sudden chill taking a hold of me.

He nods. “Yeah, this is where we used to live until I became the Alpha of the Elites and my father became a Higher. He moved us to a town closer to Wolvorn Castle when he became one, so this has just been left empty for a long time. He used to come out here sometimes, and I would go with him on a few occasions, hunting in the forest and he would teach me about being an Elite.”

“He was an Elite before a Higher?” I ask, not really wanting to talk about him.

“Yeah, you have to be an Elite first, and then you can become a Higher if you are chosen. My father taught me everything I know as I would eventually take over for him as the Alpha of the Elites. He was a Higher and the Elites’ Alpha for a time until I was ready. Then he wanted me to become a Higher.”

I look over at him and see the tension in his body. “You didn’t want to become a Higher, did you?”

“I didn’t want to be stuck in a castle, going to meetings all the time and being present for every trial when someone broke the laws of Vrohkaria. I still don’t. It was never in my plans. The Elites is where I want to be, and will always be.”

I can tell he feels strongly about this, the conviction in his voice, the determination in his eyes. This male will not waver in this.

“What happens when we take Charles and the other Highers down? There will be no ruling body, people will descend into their own chaos. There has to be some form of authority, and I guess the Elites could be it. Well, a new form of Elites that are solely to protect the Lands of Vrohkaria and not do the Highers’ bidding.”

“The people are already in chaos with the rogures plaguing their homes and slaughtering everything in sight. It has been happening for years, but now it’s much worse and they aren’t slowing down. Reports of them are coming in daily and there

are only so many Elites I can send out. What's important now is to save the people from the plague destroying their lives, be it the Highers or the rogures, and saving the innocent lives who were taken from their homes," he growls, looking over his old family home. "We will deal with the rest after."

I sigh, ignoring the *we* in his reply. "No one has figured out the purpose of the rogures or how to stop them. We can end the Highers when we are ready, but the rogures? We are still in the dark."

"We know a ritual brought them here, if the memory crystal is at least true in some form."

"Which I still need to see," I point out.

"Which you still need to see," he agrees. "Hopefully, we can get it soon. Then you can look at it and see if you can figure out anything. If a ritual brought them onto the lands, then one should rid them of it."

"That's the theory. I guess we need to start looking into some rituals. I know of none that bring forth beasts that plague the land, never mind sending them back."

"Me either, but there has to be something, somewhere that will tell us. Belldame said we should go to where the Gods once roamed, maybe there's something there."

I cock my head at him. "When did she tell you that?"

"At Witches Rest when you were packing."

"She said that to me too. If we ever find out where that is, or if it even exists, it's a myth," I say as I walk toward the steps

that lead to the front door.

“It is, but the damn witch seems adamant that there is such a place. I’ll have to search in the library back at Vokheim and see if we have any books on it.” Darius steps in front of me and opens the unlocked door and enters. I follow, coughing at the dust being disturbed from our entrance.

“You have a library at the Elite Keep?” I ask as we enter a spacious room with a living area to the right and a dine-in kitchen to the left. It’s cozy, the furniture a mixture of warm reds and gold, the walls a light beige with pictures hanging from them.

“We do,” he tells me as he walks down the hallway to the back of the house, not once looking around the space. I wonder what he’s feeling being back here after the death of his family. Though I don’t know how his father died. His face gives nothing away though.

I walk behind him, looking at the various pictures of his family on the wall. I ignore looking at his father and just concentrate on his mother, sister, and him as a young kid. He looks happy in one of the pictures, he’s holding a baby, his face angled down toward her and the smile on his face is one of pure adoration, telling me everything I need to know about their relationship.

He loved his sister, and then lost her too young.

I swallow over the lump in my throat and continue looking at his childhood years, of his mother and his sister growing until there are none left. No more pictures to be taken. A pang goes

through me as I remember that he told me he had someone he would die for back in the cave in Eridian. This is who he meant, I'm sure of it. I can tell by the affection that fills his eyes for his mother and sister.

I move away from the pictures and toward Darius as he stops outside a closed door and puts his palm on the wooden surface. Runes glow gently, turning to a pulsing blue until they stop. Darius grabs the door knob, turning it. I follow with apprehension filling me as we enter a sizable office space. Dust layers every surface, letting me know it's been a very long time since anyone was inside of here.

Darius pauses, then he takes a deep breath before turning to me, eyes hard.

“Look for anything. There could be nothing here, but my father was particular about recording things. Findings, creatures, anything he thought worth it, he would write down.”

I nod and move over to the back of the office as Darius moves around the desk and behind it, searching there. I rummage through the table at the back, moving crystals and papers, not noticing anything other than what looks like Elite business. I sneeze, the dust being disturbed by my movements and I move to another table when I find nothing but food numbers and Elite routines. I move to a shelf, moving over small clay statues of wolves, snorting when I see one of the Highers's emblems, but then I freeze.

A quiet buzzing fills my ears, and I feel power pulsing gently. I look around wondering where it's coming from, but



find nothing. I tilt my head to listen better as Runa's ears perk up. "Darius?" I call. "Do you feel that?"

"Feel what?" he asks and comes to a stop next to me. "What are you—" He pauses, and his brows scrunch. He looks around as I did before black tendrils of mist float out of his hand. I watch them, transfixed and swaying like they're in water as they stretch and move until they slowly move downward.

We both watch them move downward, neither of us moving as they connect to the wooden boards beneath our feet. His power seems to shiver as they touch the surface, like they're vibrating. I crouch down and tentatively touch a hand to the floor, my eyes widening as I feel a pulse of power. My head snaps up to Darius as he crouches beside me and puts his palm to the floor.

"You feel that?" I whisper, looking back down to watch his power run over the back of my hand, the small tendrils gently stroking my knuckles.

"Yeah." His face is tense, his body stiff as he concentrates on the spot beneath his palm. "It's a ward of some kind."

"Why would your father have a ward on the floor?" Seems like a strange thing to have.

"I'm not sure, but we're about to find out. Add some of your power to it."

My brows furrow but I do what he asks, watching him warily before I close my eyes and call on my power. Runa

shifts inside of me, but I ignore her being uncomfortable and focus on pushing power to my palm. I feel my face tingle, and know my markings have appeared. Shifting slightly when I feel Darius's stare on me, I try to concentrate.

My palm heats as the power shifts within me, slowly winding around to the area I want it, and my eyes open as ice-blue strands float out of my hand, running over the wooden surface and intertwining with Darius's. The black and blue strands touch each other almost reverently, like they are greeting one another and figuring each other out. I suck in a sharp breath when they connect and hold, wrapping around each other and creating a gentle light.

Darius makes a sound, it's deep from his chest and I look over at him. His eyes are transfixed on our power woven together, his eyes glowing slightly but filled with...awe?

"What are they doing?" I ask him. I've never seen this before.

"They're molding together, becoming stronger," he murmurs. "Our powers are an extension of ourselves, they want to get to know each other and seem to like what they find."

I watch as they seem to dance around each other, like two snakes slithering against one another. An unbidden smile spreads across my face as a tendril from both of our powers reach out and intertwine another strand. Darius looks over at me, and my gaze lifts to him. The heat in his light greens takes my breath for a second and my smile drops. I lick my lips, and

his eyes drop to my mouth before roaming over my face. No doubt looking over my markings.

“Laeliah,” he murmurs softly, and I look away from him as my cheeks heat.

He makes me feel beautiful when he calls me that, makes me feel wanted. I’ve never been wanted in this way... But the way it rolls off his tongue and the way he looks at me, I realize he wants me regardless of the damage to my skin. Of me killing some of his Elites, of keeping secrets and lying. Of what his father and others have done to me.

He makes me feel wanted for just being... me.

I ignore his intense stare on the side of my face as I don’t know what to do with all the thoughts and feelings emerging inside of me. If I let him have me, all of me, I’ll drown and never surface again. The connection we have will flare to life more vibrant and strong, and I’ll be unable to stop myself from stepping deeper into the pool of our souls, never being able to recover, never being able to take back the piece of me that I’ll give him.

And that petrifies me.

I once told him he was the most dangerous of all to me, and that still stands. So why do I want to walk headfirst into the abyss and sink? Why do I want to be swallowed by the waves and crash into the rocks? Just to see what it could feel like, for just a moment, to be someone’s other part?

Could I forgive him for what he did to me?

Our power crackles on the floor, bringing me out of my thoughts, and the next thing I know, Darius is grabbing me, hauling me back. I grip his forearms as his arms wrap around my waist as we watch our powers come back into our bodies, separating themselves. The markings glow upon the floor where they once were, pulsing. The cabin shakes and I look around frantically, wondering what the fuck is going on until the floor where the markings were just...disappears.

“What in the Gods?” I mumble, seeing the darkness below, but also notice a ladder going down the gap.

“Looks like more secrets my father kept,” Darius growls. He squeezes my waist before dropping his hands and crouching down next to the hole in the floor.

I didn't realize this would turn into a fucking *guess what* game. Who has a hole in their floor?

I walk over to him and peek over his shoulder. “So, uh, this is new.” Darius turns his head and gives me a dead stare. I shrug. “Are we going down there?” The thought of going into a dark, tight space has my breathing picking up slightly.

His eyes roam over me. “I'll go down, you stay up here.” He turns and then starts his descent down the ladder.

“Wait, what? I'm not staying up here.” I look around, panic filling me at being left alone in the room of a man who I hate.

“Your heart rate has increased, you're sweating, and your breaths are coming out faster and faster. You're clearly

struggling with even the thought of coming down there, Rhea. Stay up there.”

“I’m not some weak wolf, Darius,” I growl at him and put my hands on my hips. Pissed that he reads me so well.

He raises a brow at me but says nothing. Which is wise because I would have kicked him in his stupid delicious face and sent his ass sprawling down the ladder.

I sigh and gather myself. I’m not going to let a creepy, dark hole scare me off, it’s better than staying up here on my own. There is obviously something down in the hole of doom. It was hidden behind wards so there has to be something that’s definitely not meant to be found.

I peek over the edge and wait until I can’t see Darius anymore before I turn and step down onto the ladder. My hands shake, and my knees wobble with every step down, but I focus on not falling on top of Darius and keeping my breathing steady.

“Not far to go, little wolf,” Darius calls from below, and his voice is so unexpected, my foot slips. And then I’m falling.

I release a shocked scream, and then an *umph* when strong arms circle me. Clenching my eyes shut, I will my heart not to explode. My arms circle Darius’s neck and I breathe in his scent, my body slowly relaxing. I feel his hot breath against my temple as we stay still, him holding me and me dying on the inside with embarrassment.

“I got you,” he murmurs as he holds me tighter.

Unexpected tears fill my eyes at the tender way he pulls me closer, and I breathe out a shaky breath. I want to stay in his arms but want to get away from him as quickly as possible, too. He hurt me, more than I even thought possible for the little time we have known each other, but it left deep wounds all the same.

I clear my throat and release the death grip I have around his neck. He slowly puts me on my feet, looking down at me, and I can barely make out his face in the darkness. There is something in his eyes that wants me to run, but also wants to stay and search for the answers that I want. Need.

Is he sorry for what he did to me?

He blows out a breath and turns, grabbing my hand and pulling me behind him. I look down at our intertwined fingers and wonder when I got so used to his touch, why I don't refuse it or clam up at it. Apart from the times I flinched from him unexpectedly after he whipped me, I've never shied away from it, I welcomed it even, like it's always been there.

We walk down the corridor, my other hand going to the wall at my side so I don't personally say hello to it with my face. Darius doesn't seem to have a problem watching where he's going, just moving forward until he stops. I hear the creak of a door, then feel the wood beneath my fingers as I'm pulled past it. Darius shuffles to the right of me, and then light fills the space. I bring a hand up to shield my eyes, blinking against the sudden harshness of light and waiting for the spots in my vision to dissipate.

Once they do, I wish they wouldn't have.

## Thirty Two

RHEA

“Fuck,” Darius snarls as we stand still and take in the space. My body grows cold as I look around the room, trying to not let my own memories take me under. “That motherfucker!” he roars, his whole body shaking with what I can only describe as pure rage. I swallow roughly.

Black, mist like shadows suddenly surround him, swirling angrily, and I take a step back at the power within them as they lash out. Two thicker tendrils come up behind him, looking vicious and ready to attack. But there is nothing to attack here.

Whoever was in here before us is dead. The bones in the cages give that away.

Nausea swirls in my stomach.

The ground begins to tremble, Darius’s power filling the room so potent that it fills my lungs. He snarls and growls, his chest heaving, nostrils flaring as he stays rooted to the spot, like taking one move will explode all that rage. And I’m inclined to agree. Black strands form around his clenched fists,



whipping out harshly before covering them completely. More spread around his feet, misty and thick as it prowls over the ground. Runa backs up within, and trepidation runs down my spine as the trembling ground moves to shake the walls of this place.

He looks ferocious, unstable and wild.

Yet even though nerves run through me, I'm not scared. In fact, feeling his dominance pulse off of him feels heavy, but also like a gentle caress against my skin.

Something preens within me at the sight. At this strong Alpha in front of me and who is, by all manner of souls, mine. I've never seen him like this... so feral.

I suspect not many have.

Moving on unsteady legs toward him, my own body feeling like stone from his power and dominance pouring off of him at the sight of this room. He sees now what his father was, what his father was doing. My words may have told him that he came to see me when I was locked up, but he can see first-hand with his own eyes of his father's betrayal to the people of Vrohkaria. I didn't know he had a place like the basement where I was kept, but I know he didn't help me in that room. He aided my monsters, and now Darius has a taste of who his father really was.

I take in a ragged breath and ban the memories from my mind. The way his father watched and wrote down words I never saw, laughed along with those that hurt me, gave suggestions on other activities.

The walls start to crumble, bits and pieces of rock falling down as plumes of dust slip through the wooden planks above us. I look above me nervously as a beam starts to split. He's going to bring this down on top of us if he doesn't stop.

I step in front of Darius. His eyes are black, those flecks of his thicker, and the light green of his eyes glow unnaturally. I've seen him be cold, I have heard death in his voice, but this? This is uncontained fury, wild and reckless. So out of control for an Alpha who I have seen control his actions easily.

Darius's eyes snap down to mine, and I swallow when he takes a step toward me, his body a whisper from mine. He snarls, the sound coming from him terrifying as his power lashes out around my legs, holding me captive as he bares his teeth.

He's hurt me before, but with the forceful way that the walls are rattling, threatening to bring the roof down upon us, I am not so sure that he won't hurt me now. He seems too far gone, only seeing a shade of anger I have never seen. He needs to calm down. I know it must be a shock to see what's in here, but he's not himself right now.

And yet, I still don't fear he would hurt me.

Taking a deep breath, I ignore how he snaps his teeth at me, his canines longer, and they graze the tip of my nose slightly in warning.

Don't come near me, don't get too close.

But I am Heir of Zahariss, Canaric wolf.

I will get close if I will it.

He's barely hanging on by a thread as more stone crashing to the floor and a table rattles until the items on there smash onto the ground. The whole room seems to be shaking now, vials rattling, books loosening from the bookshelves, the chains inside the cages clanging.

Another wooden beam above us splinters, and my eyes snap to it.

I call my power slowly, willing it to do my bidding, to let me stay in control as I guide it to my palm. My eyes go back to Darius, his teeth still bared as his power squeezes more around my legs.

“Get...away.” His words are more growl, more wolf than man. I shake my head. “Rhea...” he warns, his trembling intensifying as the stone cracks beneath him, us. Even in this state, he's trying to tell me to go, knowing he's trying to fight the rage inside of him.

Delicate strands begin to appear out of my hands that are hanging loosely at my sides, and I send them down to his power around my legs. They run over it, a gentle caress, making sure there are no sudden movements so as to not startle him. I see him shiver as soon as they connect, and I feel all of his power like it's within me. It's potent, strong, and dangerous. I lift my hands carefully and put them on his chest tentatively, never breaking eye contact. Feeling his strength, his warmth, my palms rise and fall with each rapid breath he takes. I send my power into him through my hands while I

keep the tendrils at my legs soft and gentle. My magic sinks into his skin, and I feel the moment it does, just like I feel his heart beating uncontrollably as I move my fingers back and forth as the two thicker shapes of his power at his back move side to side, violently. Darius growls. It's a low, deep sound that is full of pure warning and threat. But still locked in his eyes, I feel no fear.

He could have moved his power to squeeze me and break my ribs, he could have torn my throat out at any moment, but he didn't.

This powerful male, this powerful Canaric wolf, he won't hurt me. Not now.

The truth is in the way he's trying to control his rage, the way he's warning me away.

To protect me.

I feel lightheaded at the thought. My enemy, protecting me when he has already hurt me once, feels like a pivotal moment. Seeing his restraint, his will to not let any of his violence touch me, it's a powerful feeling.

"Darius," I say calmly. He doesn't react, just growls deeper as the ground shakes more violently. He doesn't speak back, doesn't make a move to stop his power. Another crack sounds above us. Taking a deep breath when his magic squeezes my legs, I try again. "Vihnarn," I whisper, slowly bringing my hands up until they rest on the sides of his neck. The word falls more easily from my lips than I thought it would. Saying it aloud again since Wolvorn Castle, I thought it would be like

poison dripping from my tongue, yet the word feels right.  
True.

Darius's pupils dilate, his breaths coming out in fast pants as his nostrils flare. I'm not sure if that is because of my touch or my voice, or even the word, but it's a reaction. "Calm down, vallier?" *Please*, I urge him, keeping my eyes on him at all times.

The two thicker mist's at his back come to his sides and wrap around me suddenly, pulling me closer, our bodies now fully connecting. They hold me there, their hold firm but not hurting. My hands dive to the back of his neck, and I scratch my short nails slightly in his hair, feeling a tremble go through him, his power not whipping out around the room as violently. I realize I hold the power over him at this moment, and that causes heat to pool in my stomach. Knowing I'm the reason he's controlling himself, and I'm the reason that he seems to be calming down.

The Alpha of the Elites, the Heir of Cazier at my fingertips sends a shiver running down my spine.

He growls again, but this one is not as threatening, more approval, and my stomach flutters at the sound. I call more of my power to reach out to him, so he can feel that I'm here. Those two, thick tendrils of his squeeze around my waist, and the connection thrums between us, heady and strong.  
Undeniable.

I bring my face closer to his, and his power lifts me up until our noses brush one another, and I never break eye contact

with him as another violent shudder racks the room.

Something smashes on the floor, papers scatter about and appliances move on surfaces. I ignore it all though, and just keep looking at him.

“Vallier, Vihnarn. Dalie eon, uri ne?” *Please, Vihnarn. Calm down, for me?* I ask in a breathy whisper. I see the struggle, see his magic sporadically moving to calm slighting to a burst of violence. I implore him with my eyes, and yet he still doesn't say a word, it's like he can't.

I lower my hands, and Darius's eyes follow them, a stillness overcoming his whole body. I move them down to touch his power over my waist, thinking if I can get him to release me, I can try and guide him to the door, out of the basement where he could maybe unleash all this power outside, where it will be safe.

But as I touch his power, trying to peel it from my body, his eyes sharpen, a rumbling sound coming from his chest, and then, he's on me.

With a hand at my throat, he moves me back until I'm slammed into the wall. His eyes pin me in place, a warning not to move, not to try and escape his hold as his ragged breaths hit my face. I blink up at him, feeling his dominance wash over me, heat pooling in my stomach. Then his mouth crashes against mine. I let out a surprised sound as he groans deep into my mouth. My head spins as he suddenly lets go of my throat and begins tearing at my shorts, his power holding me by my waist as he quickly pulls them down my legs and off to the

side. I gasp into his mouth when he lifts me with one hand, my legs automatically wrapping around him as his other hand goes straight to my uncovered pussy. He wastes no time shoving two fingers into me roughly, the wet sounds letting him know I'm not against what he's doing.

I moan, leaning back against the wall as I grip his shoulders tightly. He growls as his fingers move in and out of me, a possessive look in his eye that I haven't seen as strong as this before. The determination, the wildness.

"Fuck, Darius." He's relentless, touching a spot inside of me that lights me up just like before. His power sinks into my skin where it's touching me, and it just seems to heighten the pleasure he's suddenly giving me. Like he had to do this, like he couldn't help himself even if he tried. "Gods," I moan, my legs beginning to shake around him. I don't care where we are at this moment, all I can feel, all I can smell, is him. And I want more.

He says nothing, just going for my neck with bites and growls. It's like he can't talk, like he can't think about anything else other than what he's doing to me. I move my hips, wanting him deeper, but he bites down in warning, his power tightening on my waist to keep me still, to not move. Making sure his prey cannot escape.

He pulls his fingers out of me suddenly, and I whimper at being empty, wanting, no, *needing* him to put them back. The ground still shakes, and something else crashes to the floor. I

pay it no mind as I claw at his neck, at the madness that is happening.

But I can't seem to care when his hand goes to his pants and he pulls himself out. My heart stops for a moment at seeing his hard cock, pre-cum dripping from the tip. I swallow roughly even as a whine comes from me. It's needy, a desire that rushes to the surface and a feeling like I'll crumble like the stone walls if I don't have it. He strokes himself with a roughness that has my legs tensing, it's almost angry. Darius pulls his head out from my neck, and I glance up at him, my chest rising and falling rapidly like his. There is no going back from this moment. I said I wouldn't let him inside of me again, and here I am, arousal dripping from me at the thought of him taking me in this anger, in this possessiveness that has suddenly overcome him.

There is no heat to excuse this, no other way that I can see to make this anything other than what it will be.

Allowing him to claim me in this moment.

Some clarity forms in my mind. We shouldn't do this, we shouldn't go over this wall.

His tip nudges against me, and I can't help the moan I release, the heat of his cock so startling as I wiggle to have a little inside of me, my body knowing what it wants. His power comes to my wrists, and then they are pinned to the wall on either side of my head. My chest heaves as Darius watches my reaction as he presses his hips forward a little, so focused on me and me only. He's looking at me like I'm the only thing in



the lands, like I'm a prize he wants, a treasure to keep. He's looking at me like a Vihnarn.

I swallow roughly as my stomach drops, but a breathy moan releases from me when he nudges me again. My eyes flutter at the sensation, and then he snarls, thrusting inside of me in one go and my head tips back on a whimper, banging against the stone as a hand comes back to my throat.

My power recedes, and he groans as he pounds into me, his pace brutal, almost too much as he doesn't let up. His hand squeezes me, his power holding firm on my wrists, and I'm completely at his mercy, just how he likes me to be. I squeeze my legs around him, my boots digging into his ass. Sweat beads my back as another crash sounds in the room, but all I see is him. I want him closer, need him closer, overcome with this desire to be as close as possible.

"Darius," I whimper, feeling that impending pleasure rising within. Only he can make me feel like this, only he can give me euphoria like this. It feels more heightened this time, stronger than ever before and I'm not sure what that means. "Oh Gods. I...can't." It's too much, it feels too much. I try to wiggle, to move my hips back but he snarls, thrusting into me harder than ever before, cutting off my air by my throat as his eyes bore into mine. Take it, is what he's telling me without words. He groans as my pussy squeezes him, his other hand gripping my ass to pull me toward him in time with his thrusts.

I gasp, my eyes rolling into the back of my head as he changes the angle and then I'm soaring. My legs tighten

around him as my body shakes, my hands forming into fists as my pussy spasms. My orgasm feels like it doesn't stop, just continues as Darius continues to pound into me. Bits of stone crumble from the walls to the floor, his dominance suffocating the room as he fucks me through my release. When my moans turn to whimpers, he lets air back into my lungs, and I slump against the wall, my body tingling. Darius comes to my neck, growling and snarling until he bites down on my shoulder and thrusts one last time. The pain has my back arching as he moves jerkily inside of me, feeling the heat of his cum filling me. I tremble, my pussy pulsing on his cock as he rumbles an approving sound against my neck. His thumb rubs over my wildly beating pulse against my neck as he nips at the bite mark he made. He lazily moves in and out of me, his hand kneading my ass cheek as he gets as close to me as possible.

I blink, slowly coming down from my orgasm as the trembling in my body decreases. Darius pulls back and looks over my face, possession radiating off of him, satisfied with what he did. Grunting, he leans forward and licks my jaw, nipping it before bringing his forehead to mine. My chest rises and falls in fast bursts, and I wiggle against the wall, my pussy sore. Darius groans, pulling his hips back a little before pushing his cock back into me. I whimper, and he rubs his nose against mine, all the while, still saying nothing.

He doesn't need to though.

His power filling the room dwindles, and Darius takes in a deep breath, his magic around my wrist gentling as he guides my hands to his shoulders. I squeeze, feeling the need to hold

on to something for a moment while I gather myself. His power around my waist holds me steady as he looks down and pulls his cock out of me. He does it slowly, watching it all happen and I look down too. My cum shines on his softening cock, and he brings a hand down, running a finger through it before he moves to my pussy. He touches my entrance gently, circling it as his cum leaks from me. My cheeks heat, and I try to move back, but his power squeezes me in warning. I still, panting at his ministrations and his undivided attention on my pussy. He pushes a finger inside of me, and I moan at the slight pain, but also pleasure. Darius moves that finger in a circle, before pulling it out and bringing it up to my lips. Never breaking eye contact, he pushes against my lips and I open for him, allowing him to stroke his finger over my tongue until he's satisfied I have both of our cum in my mouth. He brings his other hand up to hold my jaw, and then replaces his finger with his mouth. His tongue goes straight for mine so we are tasting each other at the same time, making sure we both get every taste we can. My head feels dizzy as he continues to kiss me, licking inside of my mouth and nipping at my lips. Once he's had enough, he breaks the kiss and without looking away, he moves his hand back to my pussy and makes sure any of his cum that escaped me is pushed back inside. A breath releases from me as I let him, waiting him out.

When he's done, he swirls a finger around my clit one last time before lowering me to the ground. His hands on my waist steadies me as his power moves back into him, his dominance

receding. We stay still, breathing in each other as we come down from what just happened.

Darius looks around the room, still holding me and his eyes harden as he takes everything in. I shake my head at myself, sighing in disbelief that not only did I let Darius fuck me after I said It wouldn't happen again, but I also wanted him to. Feeling his raw power, feeling the same control I had over that, him protecting me from himself... it was too much to not give in to what my soul is calling for deep down.

To be one with him, connect, feel... to be free in the moment.

Darius looks back at me, his eyes going from my face to my pussy, and I feel vulnerable again, wondering what scathing words he may throw at me this time. The last time we fucked, he didn't like his cum coming out of me, didn't let me have an orgasm and hurt me with words before he left.

I can't let him do that this time, not now when I'm already feeling too much, not when I know I won't regret what we did here, no matter how much we shouldn't have been so stupid. Sure we fucked when my heat came, but I'm not in heat now. I have no excuse for what I just did with someone who hurt me and my pack. Who betrayed the vow he made to me in my cave. I believed him and he destroyed that tentative trust between us from that night with his actions.

I just slept with someone that was responsible for taking us out of Eridian. For whipping me, for taking Kade into the clutches of the Highers and his family.

I start to shake, tears filling my eyes. What have I done? I slept with the enemy, and although he has been blind to what's been happening under his nose, we also wouldn't be in this position if it wasn't for him. We wouldn't have his help.

I open my mouth to say something, anything, but Darius leans forward and rubs his nose against mine. Then I can't say anything at all, because the way he's looking at me...

Later, Rhea, shove all of it down and figure it out later.

My shorts are suddenly being pulled up my legs for the second time today, and he sorts himself out, putting his cock back inside his pants that I couldn't look away from. Once it's out of sight, I blink up at Darius, and his eyebrows scrunch at whatever look must be on my face. He opens his mouth to speak when a bookshelf slowly crumbles to the floor. I stare at it, and then the mess in the room, remembering that while Darius was fucking me against the wall, the room was crumbling with his power. Yet when I look behind me, the wall we were against is fine, not a single crack.

I look back at Darius and he raises a brow, a smirk on his face. I scrunch my nose up at him and he chuckles, raising a hand to my shoulder and running a finger over the bite he left there. I shiver and bat his hand away, walking farther into the room as he chuckles at my back.

Then we soon sober up. Looking at the cage, I wince to myself that we just fucked in a place like this.

“That shouldn't have—“

“If you say that shouldn’t have happened, I will put you back against that wall and fuck you until you cannot speak.” My breath catches in my throat. “Let your body be free, stop holding yourself back.” It’s how I protect myself. I don’t voice that though.

“What in the Gods is wrong with us,” I whisper, eyes still on the cage.

“Nothing,” Darius replies. “There is nothing wrong with our bodies joining.” His voice still has an undertone of growl in it, but he’s sounding more normal now.

“We are in a basement, next to a cage.” I frown at myself.

“I’m not ashamed to sink myself inside of you at a moment’s notice, Rhea, no matter where we are.”

“So you would happily fuck me in the center of a village?” I say.

His breath hits my ear in the next second. “If you think I would let anyone look at your naked body, let them see what is mine, then you don’t know me at all.”

“I don’t know you, Darius.” Silence ensues after that, because that’s the truth of it, isn’t it?

We are pulled together, but we are still strangers.

“You may think that, little wolf, but you know me in ways that others never have. Whether you see that or not.” He runs a finger along the back of my neck, then he walks over to one of the cages.

I follow, stopping when I'm beside him. I look down into the cage and swallow roughly. Dried blood is splattered on the floor, a chain still wrapped around the wrist of the skeletal figure. I look down the row of cages and see the same in all of them.

"They're female," Darius says quietly, examining the remains.

"They have been down here for a long time. Do you think they died before your father did or after?" Were they left here to starve when his father was killed by rogures. The thought turns my stomach and tears sting my eyes.

Darius looks over at me and tells me what he thinks with his eyes, without voicing it. They suffered when they were alive, and suffered after his fathers death, being left down here alone.

I blink a few times and clear my throat, moving around him and toward an alchemy table. I examine the vials and liquids, some spilled and some smashed. There are random labels and notes beside them and my hand shakes as I pick up the piece of paper with words scribbled hastily.

*Day one*

*Five females*

*One new rogure*

*One female, pregnant, moved her to Zaigar with the others.*

*The new rogure experiences some human tendencies, mainly lust, after giving him one dose of Ultrian.*

*Male is aggressive, but once he has released his seed, he calms somewhat. That period only lasts until he is fully erect again and he needs to relieve himself once more.*

*I must have more females brought here, five will not be enough.*

*Must contact him to organize it.*

### Day 7

*New rogure killed one female. He was kept in his cage for two days without release after being given a dose. Extremely aggressive. One female was put into his cage on day three. He rutted the female and did not stop even though he released his seed inside of her again and again. He stayed erect and penetrated her any way he could. He broke her pelvis and split her vagina from her entrance upward. Lacerations brought on by the new rogures's claws were on the female's hips, stomach, chest, and neck. The new rogure didn't stop penetrating the female and would not release her. Even after she died from blood loss.*

*For the females to survive, we cannot withhold the new rogures from releasing its seed. Must at least have twelve releases a day to stay somewhat gentle enough to impregnate and not kill the females.*

*Need to make more doses of Ultrian.*

*Order more dassil, corsiel dust, blood of original rogure, and male wolf.*

### Day 9



*Male has calmed and claimed the female in his cage for his own. Refuses to let her come to the cage's opening. Aggressive when I get too close. May need to try and sedate new roguire to remove the female and test her pregnancy status.*

*New roguire won't stop spilling his seed either inside the female or upon her skin. Female shows no signs of distress and seems to be in a haze.*

### Day 11

*I realized that the female inside the new roguire's cage had begun her heat. Managed to extract her from the cage when the male roguire began to show signs of calming after the female's heat was over.*

### Day 23

*Female that had her heat with the new roguire is pregnant, sent to Zaigar with the others.*

*New female arrived along with supplies for more ultrian.*

*New roguire once again rutting at a steady pace with all females. This version of ultrian is working best. It is more stable within the new roguire's system and when given the weekly dose, can be sustained.*

“What the fuck.” Taking the papers in my trembling hands, I walk over to Darius and show them to him. He reads them over with a furrowed brow, scanning the text.

“New roguire?” he questions, swapping the papers around and reading them again.

“I have no idea what that means. They caught a roguer? And then gave him this ultrian drug and then let it rape females?” I breathe deep. “Is that what this is saying?”

He nods grimly, his nostrils flaring. “And when a female is pregnant they sent her away to Zaigar... wherever the fuck that is.” He shoves the papers on the table and drags his hands down his face. “That’s my father’s writing,” he confesses, and my stomach sinks.

I bite my lip and look away from him, folding my arms. My fingers dig into my skin, piercing the flesh but it grounds me, somewhat. “Bastard,” I hiss.

He nods, and looks around the room again. “This has been happening for a while, right under my nose before he died. I remember him sending me out for hours, telling me to hunt and hone my skills, even after they were perfected. I thought it was strange for me to still keep doing it. Now I know he wanted to keep me away while he probably came down here and...” He points to the cages.

I walk away from him and continue to look at the surfaces around the room, hoping my stomach doesn’t lose its contents. The room is full of papers and books and journals. It will take forever to go through them. To take these all back with us will take a few ports.

I run my finger on the bookshelf at the back, dust collecting at my fingertip. Books are scattered on the floor that must have been knocked off by Darius’s power, and I pause at a symbol on a weathered, black book. My breath catches as I

look at the symbol of Zahariss on the spine, a white circle with a black crescent moon inside of it. I carefully pull it out, wiping the dust off the front of it. The front is plain black, no words to say what's inside. I open it carefully and land on a random page.

*We strapped the female down after her wolf went back inside of her. It took a few of us taking turns in using tools to get the wolf exhausted enough to retreat, but we used pain methods to see how quickly the wolf healed, and our findings were excellent.*

*The wolf healed small cuts in a matter of minutes. With deeper non-fatal wounds, that took some hours. We placed a variation of wounds over the wolf, examining each area and time it took to heal and also pain limits.*

*The wolf is extremely strong and gives off a strong aura, which is definitely Alpha. Not a common finding indeed. Though it's not surprising as she is the daughter of an Heir of Zahariss—*

I drop the book and stagger back, my heart racing, hands clammy. No, no, no. I stare at the black book on the floor, the *whooshing* of my heartbeat filling my ears. The page is still open, my body trembling like something is going to come out and attack me. Darius rushes over to me, his mouth moving but all I hear is mumbling. He follows my widened gaze to the book on the floor and he takes a step toward it. That's what snaps me out of myself.

I rush forward and collect the book off the floor and hold it to my chest. “No,” I tell him, my breaths coming out faster as I step back and away from him.

He pauses mid step and watches me with a frown. His eyes go to the book clenched tightly to my chest, then to the book scattered on the floor until his eyes meet mine again. “What’s in that book, Rhea?”

I shake my head, not wanting him to read what’s inside. “No,” I repeat, trying to stop the wavering in my voice.

He takes a step toward me, and I take another one back. “Give me the book, Rhea,” he demands, eyes hard.

“It doesn’t concern you.”

“Of course it concerns me, it was in my father’s fucked up experiment basement. Give it to me.”

I clutch the book even tighter to me, shaking. “Not this one,” I say, my voice cracking, my lips trembling. “Not this one, Dar.”

He stops abruptly at the shortening of his name, and tilts his head at me curiously. His eyes roam over my shaking form, to the white knuckles I have on the book, to the fear I’m sure he sees in my eyes. “What is in there that you don’t want me to see?” I just stare at him, my eyes pleading not to push this, damn near begging. “If you do not tell me what is putting that fear in your eyes, little wolf, I cannot get rid of it.” My eyes water, shaking my head again. He takes a step closer, grinding his teeth before exhaling. “I will drop it, for now.”

I let my head fall forward in relief and nod. It's enough for now, though I doubt he will let me have this small reprieve for long. I'll need to read it and then get rid of it. I need to know everything that's inside, even though the thought of it turns my stomach to stone. I lift my eyes and quickly search the floor to see if there are any more books with the symbol of Zahariss. I find none.

“Let's gather some things and port back,” Darius mumbles after a tense silence. “I'll bring the Elites back here to gather the rest for all of us to go through.”

I nod and step toward him, unable to look him in the eye. He reaches out and pulls me close, tracing a finger down my cheek as I still tremble. I breathe in his scent deeply, letting it fill my lungs and we port back to the Elite's Keep.

# Thirty Three

DARIUS

I walk into my closet, blindly grabbing a t-shirt and shoving it on. I spent the morning training with my Elites and making them squirm with just my presence. Then I made sure the men that came back from taking care of some rogures had been assigned to another mission after they rested. It never ends, a constant circle of sleep, go out and fight, come back and sleep. Again and again. The Higher's witches are sending over information of more power bursts daily.

It just keeps getting worse.

I head to my office and throw the last stack of papers onto the large table. My brothers are seated around the table here, going through what we brought back from my father's house. I take a seat and scan through the notes on what he recorded in his hidden basement.

It's a shit show, one I never saw coming. My father kept females and rogures in the basement below my feet and I never knew. Just like I never knew Rhea was caged in her basement when I visited her pack. I knew her scent was

familiar and now I know why. I scented her in her house when I visited with my father. I realized it when we got Sarah.

Was she bleeding below my feet as I listened to my father speak to Alpha Paul? Was she starving whilst her Aunt Selena made us a meal? Was she about to be abused as my father sent me away to talk with the pack?

I growl at that thought, my insides violent as Drax peels his lips back and snarls, snapping my brother's heads in my direction.

"You good, brother?" Leo asks, his eyes cautious when I look up at him.

I grind my teeth. "This has been happening for who knows how long and we didn't get a sniff of it. How is it possible? And how the fuck did I not know about my own father?"

It disgusts me to know my father did nothing to help Rhea, to know that I come from a man like that. When we went down into that hidden room, it just cemented it for me, and I couldn't control my reaction. The rage I felt in that moment was nothing like I have ever felt in my entire life, my control was at a tipping point, and I didn't care what felt my wrath until pretty, blue eyes looked into mine.

If it wasn't for my brave little wolf coming to me, calming me in a way I'm sure only she could have, we would be buried beneath rubble.

Though we both didn't expect her to end up on my cock, she ended up there nonetheless, just like I said she would. I

couldn't control it, couldn't think of anything other than being buried inside of her in that moment as soon as she uttered that word.

A word we both know what it means, yet she pretends otherwise.

My little liar.

"None of us knew," Damian says, flipping through the pages of the journal, bringing me out of the memory of her heat wrapping around me. His words crush the thought. "We all feel guilty for that." His jaw ticks. "Rhea was right."

Jerrod leans back in his seat. "Right about what?"

"There is no honor in being an Elite." Silence follows after that statement.

There is nothing we can say, it's the truth.

"I'm the Alpha of the fucking Elites, why wasn't I approached by the Highers to be a part of this?" I wonder.

"No idea, maybe you had to become a Higher first. Charles has been pushing you to do it," Jerrod says, moving his braid over his shoulder as he grabs another journal to go through.

"He's been on everyone's ass, asking me constantly through letters if we have found Rhea and also stretching his own guards thin to look for her." He's obsessed with finding her, but he won't have her. "He also hasn't addressed the people about the rogues, and he still hasn't let anyone into Wolvorn, uncaring about everyone suffering."



“Piece of shit,” Damian says. “I have been looking into a place where we can send some people, there is an old farmstead in Colhelm. It needs some fixing up, but it’s large enough to house some that desperately need it. It has woods surrounding it, and we can place traps within them and a barrier around the homestead. It should keep them safe enough until we get there should the rogues try to attack.”

“I’ll send some Elites ahead and get them started,” I tell him.

“While going through the lists that were taken from Zakith, we found some things out.” My eyes swing to Leo. “Some Elites with close connections to the Highers, or those of a poor background have been selected by the Highers to take others from their homes,” Leo tells us, and my hands ball into fists. “The problem now is that we have a list of names that are within the Elites that are potentially a threat to us. What do you want to do about it?”

“Get rid of them.” I don’t want them in my keep, living and breathing after what they have done. The Highers and those involved would never expect me to know all this information, they wouldn’t expect us to begin to uncover just how poisonous they are. And they wouldn’t expect the *Highers’ weapons* to be their biggest threat. We have the advantage, for now.

So many packs are involved in this, including Aragnis, Nightshade, some from Aliseon and Karion. So are many families that have been in the Elites for generations.

“People will notice those that are missing.” Leo shakes his head. “Especially their families and the Highers.”

I fist my hands. “I don’t give a fuck. They are part of this disgusting experiment, taking children.” I shove the notes my father scribbled down. Just seeing how he observed a female getting raped by this new rogures again and again makes me want to tear out of my skin. I sit back roughly in my chair and my eyes connect with Leo. He knows what I want without having to ask. I look away when his eyes turn concerned, not in the mood to deal with his shit about it. “It’s right there, the names of Elites who had taken them to another location. There is no getting out of what they have done.”

“Send them away on a mission.”

My head swivels to the doorway, and I see Rhea step into the room. She’s wearing shorts and a loose-fitting t-shirt. My t-shirt as I still haven’t given her the clothes she brought from the witch’s home. Her hair in a nest atop her head, thrown up with zero fucks to give and it’s one of the things I admire about her. She doesn’t care for her looks, she cares about her people. But as I take in her face, noting the dark circles beneath her eyes and the subtle slump in her shoulders, I know she’s exhausted, Which is no doubt also due to her power fighting within her.

Since we came from my father’s last night, she’s been restless, staring off into the distance and it has to be something to do with that book she refused to let me see. Though I will read its contents soon enough.

Even in her exhausted state, and the glare set on her face, my cock still thickens in my pants. I see the bite mark I gave her, and the possessive rumble that builds up within me, is out before I can stop it. Her eyes meet mine, and they fill with heat for a moment before she shuts it down. Does she even know the way she looks at me sometimes?

She looks at me like she hates me, rightly so, but when she drops her guard without knowing, I see what's really there.

Lust, longing...and pain.

The reminder makes me continue.

“What good will sending them away on a mission do?” I ask her.

She moves to the end of the table, scanning the contents with a hard glare. “Send them on a mission and then kill them,” she says bluntly as her eyes flash up to mine. My bloodthirsty little wolf. I smirk. “But not before we get information from them. We need locations of where they took whoever was selected. We know of one location mentioned, but we don't know where that is, or if there are others.”

“That's a given,” Leo grunts, and her eyes move off of me to him. She shouldn't be looking at him, she should only have her eyes on me. “But others will still have questions about where they are.”

She shrugs. “I'm sure they will, but if the mission would take a long time, then it gives us time to figure shit out. Go to locations they can tell us, and if anyone is there, we have time

to get them out.” She swallows and looks down. “We need to get them out.”

The look of guilt on her face is obvious, but we are just as guilty. Of a lot of things.

“It would work,” Damian agrees. “For a time.”

“Time that we don’t have, but it’s the only option now. To clean house and see if the remaining Elites are loyal to me.”

We need as many people as we can to eventually get rid of Charles. He doesn’t suspect we know anything right now, and we need to get those who have been taken to another location safely. If we can successfully start emptying these places where they are keeping people. He will get nervous, sloppy and eventually mess up. That’s when we need to strike.

I would copy these notes and put them out into the world to show the people just what kind of authority they are living under, but that would be a mistake to do it too soon. The rogues are already causing chaos, we can’t have any more right now. Then Charles will definitely know someone is on to him. He will be more cautious and we can’t have that in his unstable state. We can’t fuck up with so much on the line.

Then there is Kaden, still at Wolvorn with all the Highers. He could easily be used against Rhea and she won’t put him in harm’s way. She would rather hand herself over than that.

But with us not knowing what Charles and the other Highers are actually doing, we were in the dark about their goals. And being in the dark can lead you to blindly walk into a blade.

“We organize the Elites and get rid of those involved. Then we find where those that have been taken are being kept, and move them to safety. Then we cause an uproar in Vrohkaria and release the copies of records we have here to every town. Then we get Kaden and strike,” I tell the room.

Rhea lifts her head, biting her lip. I get lost in her ice-blue eyes and the connection that flows between us. Drax growls lightly inside of me with her attention on us, and I echo the sound. She tilts her head curiously, eyes roaming over my body and I let her. Let her see my strength and power. Let her see that I’m built to protect her.

“I’ll be out back and waiting at the willow trees,” she informs me and heads out the room, knowing we are going to try and get Runa out again. I watch the sway of her ass and lick my bottom lip, wanting to bite it, mark it, fuck it.

She has me turned inside out. I can’t think properly around her, fighting the instinct to grab her and take her to the floor. Rip her clothes from her body and put my scent all over her, letting her and every other fucker know that it’s mine. She’s mine.

And when I fuck her again, she will feel it with every step she takes, even the slightest bit of movement will remind her what I did to her. How I owned her and how she let me and enjoyed it.

My cum will stay inside her, I will fuck her enough that it’s always there, dripping from her body and rubbed into her skin.

I'll make her walk around with the taste of me on her tongue and—

“The fuck, Darius.” I blink, and look toward Leo. “Brother, keep your misty shit to yourself,” he smirks and leans back, shaking his head.

I look down and realize tendrils of my power are coming out of me, flowing in the direction Rhea went. I breathe deep and call it back to me, shrugging at my brother's amusement.

“Good luck with that one,” Damian chimes in. “After whipping her, I doubt she will let you touch her.”

“She let me have *breakfast* the other morning,” I tell them, my own smirk appearing on my face. “And dinner.” But then it falls at his reminder of what I did to her. My eyes darken at the thought and my jaw ticks at being manipulated into thinking she was the cause of the rogures. “I didn't know she was innocent when I did that,” I say aloud, reminding myself of that fact. Still unable to say the words.

“We know,” Leo says solemnly. My brothers quiet down, going back over the papers as I try to banish the memory of her blood on my hands.

Footsteps sound to my right and Josh pokes his head into my office. He looks us all over before asking. “Have you seen Rhea?”

“No,” I tell him, glaring. I'm still pissed at him for making Rhea bare herself in front of everyone, and so is Rhea. The tension between them is easily noticeable. I'm glad for it, I

don't want him near her at all. He's been inside of her, took what should have been mine to begin with and every time I see him, I want to rearrange his face against a wall.

Even though what Josh made Rhea do, made us all take a step back and think things through, she shouldn't have had to show us what she had been through. He betrayed her trust and forced her hand to save Sarah, but I don't give a fuck. The look on Rhea's face and the dead tone of her voice when she revealed herself is enough for me to want to stab him in his eyes, peel them out and crush them beneath my boot.

Josh's gray eyes narrow on mine, knowing I'm bullshitting. "Well if you see her, tell her I'm looking for her."

Again. "No." He can stay the fuck away from her and he may keep his head.

He growls, stepping into the room. "Stop being a prick, Darius, I need to speak to her."

"I doubt she wants to speak with you."

"She doesn't really want to speak to you either so we're both fucked, aren't we?" he snarls before walking out the room.

He's not wrong, but that doesn't mean I have to like it. She may talk to me about certain topics or anything regarding the Highers and rogures, but other than that, emotionally she is a fucking wall.

Unfortunately for her, I'm the Heir of Cazier, and destruction is in my blood.

Her walls won't last long as I plan to destroy them one by one.



# Thirty Four

RHEA

My hands glide through the willow tree branches, caressing them and feeling their life within. All life has power, its own heartbeat, its own language, and I'm feeling it more and more with everything around me. Not to say, it's making me exhausted all the damned time.

I sigh, feeling my magic swirl within me as a chaotic mess of strands. Runa sleeps without a care in the world, ignoring the power thrumming around her space. She's been tired too, sleeping more unless something annoys her. Then she wakes up all growly and shit.

Which makes me all growly and shit.

Sitting down at the base of a willow tree, I rest my head back against its trunk and close my eyes. I press my palm to the earth beneath me and gently guide my power through my hands into the soil. Grass tickles my fingers as it grows, every stalk getting longer and longer. I can feel each one like I'm a part of it, feeling the beating of life strumming through it.

I've always been close to nature, always wanting to be in the trees and playing in grassy wildflower fields. Being the Heir to Zahariss, the God of life itself, it's not hard to understand why I like being surrounded by greenery so much.

Zahariss was said to have created the first tree. Taller than any mountain and wider than any seas. Full of thick branches and leaves the size of castles, their blooming flowers said to glow until the end of time. Cazier, on the other hand, was the destruction of life. Tearing down anyone in his path and wilting the life from beneath his steps when he came to the land from the below. Opposites in power, yet the lands lived, thrived, and the Gods stayed in Vrohkaria, roaming until they just disappeared.

But the land is now suffering, plagued with creatures so vile and slaughtering life.

The rogures came and are threatening the very land the Gods made, with no known way to stop them or banish them back to wherever they came from. I've heard the Elites talking about many towns and villages they have been to when the rogures attacked there. So many were overtaken and so many of our people were lost.

Darius mentioned that survivors were going toward Wolvorn Castle for sanctuary, for a safe place to stay. As big as that castle is, it still wouldn't be able to hold everyone. The people are creating uproars at the castle gates, demanding the Highers put a stop to the rogures or put someone else in a position of power who can help them. But this isn't helping anyone, and

riots are becoming more frequent and lives are lost over quarrels and whose side they are on.

All the while, I'm sure Charles is taking advantage of the situation and stealing children right under people's noses.

It's fucking sick, and the thought that Kade is with him in that castle, with our family, Gods knows what else they have said to him, done to him.

It brings back the words I read in the book. It reminds me of all the things the Highers are capable of, and I'm sitting here, in a field of willow trees somewhat safe.

I wonder where Edward is, how he's dealing with all the chaos lately. I don't even know if he's okay, if he knows where I am. I could ask Darius, but that would be telling him about him and I just can't. Not yet.

I move my hands through the stalks as I slowly push more of my power into them, feeling connected as my palms warm. If I survive whatever is to come, I need to make sure my pack has a place to stay. They can't go to Eridian, not now that the Highers know. Maybe to Witches Rest. They could create a life there, and Belldame would keep them safe. Edward would help me get them there, I just need to find a way to contact him.

The scent of earth and sweet flowers relaxes me even more, and I'm itching to carve. I can't remember the last time I even did so, but I want to be at one with my thoughts, carving a new piece to add to my collection. That thought stops me. Do I even have one anymore? Or has it been destroyed? Darius

knew where they were, in my cave, and I'm not sure if he has told anyone. I'm not sure I dare ask. I don't know if I could take it with the knowledge that the pieces I have created over so many years are no more.

No more.

Just like Danny, Josie, and Solvier. Grief hits me out of nowhere. Filling me up from the tips of my toes and going straight up to my heart. I place my hand over it, feeling as if it's being torn apart chunk by chunk. I swallow the cry that wants to be released, needs to be released. They didn't deserve any of this, and I can't help but feel responsible.

Gods, it's always me in the middle of it all, isn't it? Always my fault, my crime, my heart, my fucking soul. I'm bone tired. When was the last time I fully rested and felt truly safe?

Then it occurs to me that apart from as a child, I don't think I have ever slept peacefully. Even though every night Darius takes me to his room, puts me in his bed and wraps his arms around me, I still don't feel completely safe even though I fall asleep pretty much instantly.

I've narrowed it down to him not trusting me, that's the reason why he keeps me in his room and in his bed to sleep. That's what I'm telling myself anyway.

A touch on my foot startles me and my eyes spring open. My eyes clash with Darius as he raises an eyebrow at me and looks pointedly at the tall stalks of grass surrounding me where I sit. They cocoon me in, sheltering me from the view of anyone else, but Darius still found me.

My cheeks heat as his stare is focused on me, like it always is when I'm near. My gaze roams over him, and he stands taller, letting me see all he has to offer. I know what he feels like between my legs without the haze of my heat making it feel foggy. I know what he tastes like, what we both taste like together, and it's something I have begun to crave. It's a deep feeling that stirs in my belly, the want for it, always. I don't know a lot of details about what we are, I'm not sure if this craving is normal, but it is there anyway.

I'm finding it harder to care too deeply about the way he affects me, my willpower to resist is near nonexistent the longer we are near each other. I try to keep these walls up to protect myself, but I know eventually it will be all for nothing. It doesn't mean I won't try though.

"Any particular reason why you wanted to snuggle with the grass?" he asks, amusement filling his eyes.

I roll mine and get to my feet, dusting off my ass which is full of dirt. "I would rather snuggle with grass than anything else."

"You snuggle with me every night."

I look away from him. "No, you wrap around me like I'm your personal pillow."

He chuckles. "You don't complain." That shuts me up because he's right, I don't even fight it now. "What were you thinking about?" I give him a look. "You were deep inside that pretty head of yours, so tell me." He folds his arms, feet

shoulder-width apart and I don't have the energy to go around in circles with him whilst he tries to get me to answer.

“Josie and Danny,” I tell him, and something flashes in his eyes. “And Solvier. You know, you never did tell me what he said to you in Eridian.”

He looks me over, thinking of his answer. “You really want to know?” I nod. “He told me to do what I must, and I will know when the time comes.”

My brows pinch together. “What does that mean?”

“Your guess is as good as mine.”

“And that's all he said?” I ask, eyeing him. He nods, but his eyes give away his lie. What could he have told him that he doesn't want me to know?

“Are you going to show me the book you took now?” My eyes flash at the unexpected change in conversation.

“No. There is nothing in there that you have to know. I said I would tell you, but there is nothing that would help with anything.”

“You do know that the contents of that room belong to me, so you are stealing something of mine.”

“Drop it, Dar,” I warn, and now his eyes flash.

“I will find out.”

I huff and move through the stalks of grass to pass him, but I soon find myself on my back, an *oomph* leaving me as

Darius's weight falls on top of me. "Darius," I growl, shaking my head to get a piece of hair out of my face.

He braces his hands on either side of me and looks down, a small smirk on his sinful lips that I can't help my eyes from going to, remembering where his mouth has been on my body. "Let's try and get your wolf to come out and play if you won't tell me what I want."

I suck in a breath as his power slams into me without warning, thick, black strands coming from behind him and reaching for me. They come to my sides, so many of them that I can only see a few green slivers of the grass I grew. My back arches at the sudden attack, a small sound escaping me as I struggle beneath him, my hands gripping his sides.

"Calm," he orders me, and my eyes narrow. It's too intense, always intense. He watches me intently, his gaze flicking between my eyes. "Let some of your power out."

I shift a little underneath him and call my power to the front of my body, annoyed that I did what he asked without question, but instinctively, reacting to his power. Runa wakes at the feel of his magic, backing away inside of me with a snarl. I ignore her, mentally shoving her forward but she won't budge, her paws digging in to keep her still. I grit my teeth in frustration. These sessions are exhausting, and Runa's not willing to help at all. She just flat-out refuses and it feels like the bridge between us, as rocky as it always has been, is crumbling and collapsing bit by bit.

Darius leans further down, his face so close to mine as he watches my internal struggle. His markings appear on his neck, the black, harsh lines pulsing gently and I feel the call to my own, my skin warming as my own appear. He watches in fascination as he always does when they come to the surface. He trails his eyes up from the side of my face, to my temples and then resting in the center of my forehead, taking in the delicate design. His eyes brighten slightly, and those silver flecks appear in his light green eyes that I'm always transfixed with.

“She’s as stubborn as you.” I let out a huff. “We’re going to try something new.”

“What?” I whisper, feeling his power tickle my sides.

He doesn’t answer, but strands come up to my face, caressing my skin and I flinch, my fingers digging in his waist. I feel them follow my markings, tracing them with tenderness. I shiver, the touch doing...*something* but not quite sure what.

Suddenly the whites of Darius’s eyes turn black, the flecks more prominent and his green eyes glow eerily. His black strands come to my temple, adding a firm pressure so I can’t move my head, and that’s my limit. I call more of my power, readying myself to push him off of me, but he restrains my hands to him, his magic wrapping around my wrists to keep them there and darkness swallows us as he releases his dominance.

All I see is black around us, the green glow to Darius’s eyes and the blue strands of my power being slowly swallowed by



his darkness. Panic starts to set in as Darius's eyes pin me still, unable to move. Those strands at my temple feel like they're digging in my skin, wanting to get beneath the surface and I let loose a gritted scream, pain shooting through me and straight down my spine. Darius's hand comes to my throat, squeezing gently, a warning or comfort, I'm not sure.

My power swirls inside of me, rage and wildness twisting so violently that it feels if I don't let it out, I'll burst. Darius leans further into me, and then I'm completely immobile.

"Darius—" I choke out, unsure what's happening.

"Calm," he tells me again, eyes intent on mine, reassuring. "Relax, let me in." His power at my temples rub soothingly over my skin, and it's so tender in contrast to the pain rushing through me that I want to cry. I shake my head, refusing to let him get anywhere near inside of me. "It's the only way to bring your wolf out, for you to have control of your power, Rhea. Let me in," he demands, and I squeeze my eyes shut.

Runa stands inside of me, protective and unmoving as she snarls at Darius trying to get inside, trying to get to her. I whimper, knowing she's just as scared and knowing what I'm about to do will upset her.

"I can't." My whole body is trembling, shaking so much with the force of all that is him that my teeth rattle. My eyes squeeze shut.

"You can, you must," he growls, his lips moving over mine as he speaks. "We don't know how much time we have, you have to give it to me, little wolf." A tear trails down my cheek

and I slowly open my eyes, locking them with Darius's. "You can trust me with this, little wolf. If anything at all, you can with this."

At his words, I slump into the earth beneath me, giving him what he wants.

My submission.

He doesn't waste any time, his eyes flare and the power at my temples crawls into my skin at such full force that all I see is nothing.

Not a single sliver of light.

The last thing I hear is Runa howling, and a deep growl before I give myself to the darkness.

# Thirty Five

DARIUS

Black surrounds me as I step forward into...nothing. I look around the space, my wisps of power brushing against me as I assess the situation. Magic crackles around me, small specks of blue shining randomly here and there. Taking a step forward, approaching whatever I can sense in front of me with caution, I reach down for my blade but feel nothing.

I'm not sure how I did it, but I'm sure I'm in my little wolf's mind space, just like she came into mine at Wolvorn Castle.

I continue forward, the blues around me appearing more often in a frantic motion the closer I get. A low growl suddenly echoes into the dark space and I pause, tilting my head as I consider the sound. Then I hear shuffling and I follow it, turning to keep the sound at my front as it circles me.

"Hello, wolf," I say into the darkness, a smirk pulling at my lips. "You have been causing Rhea all sorts of problems, haven't you?" Another low growl and I chuckle, unbothered as Drax's ears perk up inside of me, intrigued by the sound.

"With your reluctance to come out, you're exhausting her, did

you know that?” More movement, nails scraping the floor. “She can’t help anyone in this state. How do you expect her to get Kade when she can’t wield her power the way it should be?” A low whine echoes around me and the sound of movement halts.

Suddenly, blue sparks spread out in a wide arc, illuminating two piercing, ice-blue eyes in the distance in front of me. Rhea’s power spreads out, branching into strands as it creeps closer to me. I stand still, readying myself in case of an attack, yet they halt just before me. Not touching, just observing. Curious and almost scared.

I gently call my power and move it toward the blue, slowly, not to scare it. The black touches the blue and the strands vibrate at the contact. I suck in a breath, feeling the intensity of it myself.

Raw power touching raw power.

Our Heir powers are like no other, and gifted to no other. It’s the purest form of magic.

The blue strands flinch back, and another low whine comes from the wolf. Drax shifts inside of me and I clench my jaw, not liking the sound. My strands stay still, waiting for Rhea’s to come forward again, and they do. They wrap around each other, the blue tentatively at first, but eventually roam over the black mist like strands with eagerness. I blow out a deep breath at the feeling of contentment that runs through me, noticing that it oddly feels like the barrier that was once around Eridian.

I watch as they spin around each other, swirling together, almost like they are playing. The blue eyes in the distance lower, a low growl coming from her, but it's not aggressive, no, it's soft, almost like a purr. I smirk over at her.

“I will not hurt you,” I tell her, and her eyes sharpen. “Drax wouldn't allow it.” He rumbles his agreement. “You feel him, don't you.” Her head tips to the side. “Don't you want to meet him properly? To run with him?” Her paw moves as she takes a tiny step forward. Drax stands tall within me, an eagerness washing over me for him. But the female wolf stops, hesitance filling her posture.

I'll wait you out, wolf, just like I'll wait for your keeper.

I watch our powers, moving and thriving with a mixed feeling of fascination and rightness when I feel a new presence enter the space.

I turn my head and look toward the new being as the power of Zahariss swishes off in the same direction. A hand appears when the glow of that power reaches for it, calling it. The blue stands wrap around the hand, almost in greeting, as the face of a woman who controls my every thought appears.

Rhea watches her power float around her palm, a small smile on her face as wiggles her fingers. I can't look away from her beauty, from her delicate features that also haunt my nightmares from what I did at Wolvorn Castle. The same features that were twisted with pain as I stripped the flesh from her back at the command of Higher Charles, making her bleed all over that stone floor.

She looks so innocent playing with her magic, and I hate myself more for ever giving her an ounce of pain, for being partially responsible for taking her home away from her. A home she fought for with every strand of her soul.

I did that because I couldn't refuse the command. I couldn't let my men suffer over a traitor, no matter what she was to me.

If I could change that day, I would.

If I could go back and change ever agreeing to go into The Deadlands, I would.

No. No, I wouldn't have changed that. Because to not have her, even as hateful as she is, is a crime higher than any other. But I should have pushed her more to talk to me in Eridian. I knew something wasn't right, but I automatically thought she was the one doing something to her pack, thought she was harmful to them.

Rhea was just a pawn in the games of people in power through no fault of her own. Being an Heir of Zahariss marked a target on her back since the day she was born, and I have to wonder if I hadn't had my own memories blocked, would my life have been similar to hers?

Would I have been trained to do unspeakable things to females like she was trained to let it happen, otherwise there would be consequences?

My upbringing was warm. I was a happy child. My mother and sister gave me all the affection I needed as a child, and my father, although cold, taught me everything I needed to know

about being an Elite. As I grew older, the harder he was on me, and he didn't have time for me anymore. Yet even he had ulterior motives as Elites were made to hunt Heirs. He was an accomplice in what happened to Rhea. He wasn't a man I knew at all.

A small giggle has my hearing homing in on the sound. I haven't heard it in so long, and a rush of...something flows over me. It starts in my chest and expands, until it runs down my arm to the center of my forearm. I want to hear more of that, I want to hear it daily, and I want to be the cause of it. Just like I also want to hear her cry out my name when I make her come on my cock. It's a daily need.

The few times I'd fucked her during her heat and yesterday wasn't enough, not nearly at all. Those weeks searching for her after she escaped Wolvorn Castle have always ended with my hand wrapped around my cock to the memory of me pounding into her, remembering her little moans and cries of pleasure. The way her body trembled and needed to be as close to me as possible.

I did that to her, me. And I'll be the only one to do so.

She was mine the moment I locked eyes with her in The Deadlands, whether she likes it or not. I couldn't give a fuck, the truth still stands.

She will only have pleasure from me in all forms. From my hands, my mouth, my cock, just like yesterday. Not even her own dainty fingers will get her off unless I allow it, and she will get her ass slapped for every time she comes by herself if

I find out about it. The good thing for her is, no one else has touched her since she ran from me. I would know.

I placed my scent on her during her heat, that, I don't even think she knows about, and she wouldn't unless someone approached her with the intent of claiming her. That's the only time when an Alpha is able to scent it, it lets them know she is claimed. Letting them know that if they want her, then they need to challenge me.

And no one will challenge the Alpha of the Elites.

Another laugh, this one more lighthearted and I've had enough of hiding in the shadows.

I stalk toward her, noticing her wolf has also backed away into the darkness. Rhea's gaze is too focused on her power to see me coming until I'm right in front of her. "Little wolf," I murmur, and I know my voice is a low husky tone by the way goosebumps pepper her skin. Her head snaps up and her eyes widen in my presence. I let loose a smirk and grab her chin, keeping her where I want her. "Looks like I'm in your mind this time."

"What?" She tries to look around but my hold won't let her. "We're inside...*me*?"

"I'm about to be inside of you," I growl low and slam my mouth down onto hers, unable to keep this sudden need away. Not after hearing the innocent happiness coming from her.

She squeaks in surprise, her hands clawing at my grip on her chin. I don't relent, I don't let up. I can't hold back anymore. I



use my free hand to glide up her back, up to her nape and take a fist full of her hair, sharply pulling her head back. She gasps into my mouth, and I don't waste the opportunity.

My tongue dives in. Tasting, stroking, fucking owning as she whimpers against me. I pull her closer to me, letting her feel just how hard I am for her and she arches into me, rubbing her stomach against my covered cock. It's not enough, it's never enough.

I release her mouth and look down at her. Her pretty eyes are glazed, her cheeks rosy and breathing erratic. Letting me know just how turned-on she is. I lick my lips, wanting to taste her again on my tongue, and that's exactly what I'll do.

I lower her to the floor, not too gently in my haste and she growls when her back slams against the ground. "Darius, what the fuck are you doing?" she breathes, her eyes taking me in as I lower myself on top of her. Her body deceives the anger in her voice. I smell her arousal.

I grip the sides of her shorts and yank them down. "Eating you," I murmur in a low tone, taking in the wet patch I can see on her panties. I growl, leaning forward and licking over it, having a small taste of her, but I need more. More, more, more, more.

I roughly spread her legs wider, needing to be able to get closer. A moan comes for her, and then a hand is in my hair, gripping it hard. My eyes blaze as I look up at her, my impatience wearing me thin. "You can't just, you know," she breathes, her chest rising and falling with harsh breaths as she

looks down at herself. The innocence of her voice as she can't even say aloud what I'm about to do, unfurls something feral in me.

One day, she will ask me for exactly what she wants. And I will give it all to her.

"Can't what?" I tilt my head, my hands squeezing her hips. "Taste you?" Her pupils blow wide and I chuckle. "I want to taste you all the time. I want inside of you all the time. So I will have you, at any time." I lean down and breathe in her scent, a rumble coming from me. "But, little wolf," I murmur over her panties, and she sucks in a sharp breath. "I'm going to do more than just taste you." I grip the sides of her panties, ripping them down the center and I waste no time.

I dive onto her perfect, little pink pussy, my tongue going straight to the source of her arousal. She may seem to think she hates me, but there is no denying her body craves being near mine.

I groan at the first taste of her, and she lets out a long, low moan at the feel of me. I lick her entrance, letting my tongue dip inside of her, gathering as much as I can. Collecting what I'm doing to her on my tongue. She wiggles beneath me, and I tighten my hold on her hips. I move further up and circle her clit, teasing until I keep a steady rhythm. I suck, lick, bite at her, claiming it as mine and only mine. My growls echo around us and I grip her more tightly, feeling her start to shake and I know she's close. I bring a hand up between her thighs and shove two fingers into her roughly, just the way she likes

it and start fucking her with them. She whimpers, breathing heavily as her hand in my hair tightens, her hips rolling, fucking herself on my fingers.

“Look at you, little wolf,” I murmur against her, my cock leaking to be inside of her. “Fucking yourself on my fingers again, dripping down my hand.”

“Darius,” she moans, her back arching. Hearing my name from her lips makes me feral. “So...close,” she pants, and I twist my fingers inside of her, aiming for the sweet spot and suck her clit. She shatters. The sounds of her moans, the shake in her legs, her cum coating my tongue, I can’t hold back. I pull my fingers out of her, looking at her blissed out face for a second and then grab her waist, flipping her onto her stomach.

That takes her out of her haze though.

She growls, her foot coming out and connecting with my side. I grunt, snarling at the back of her head. I go to reach for her, but she turns over, planting a foot on my chest and pushes, blue strands of power coming out of her foot to help with the force and I’m shoved back. She scrambles to her feet and I stand too, raising a brow at her.

“Want to play, little wolf?”

She shakes her head, eyes wary, cheeks flushed. “You’re not fucking me, Darius, I don’t even like you.”

I lick my lips, looking at her flushed face. My eyes dip down to her naked pussy. “I can taste you on my tongue, and we fucked yesterday, you like me just fine.”

“My body may react to you, you know I have no control over that, just as much as you don’t with me, but that doesn’t mean I like you.” Her eyes harden, something shifts within me “You have done too much.” I hold back the flinch at the reminder, my face a mask of indifference. “You let them take my pack, you let them into my home. You destroyed our way of life!”

“Well I am Cazier’s Heir, he was the destroyer after all.” And I know it well, looking into her eyes.

“That’s all you have to say?” she demands, her tiny hands balling into fists at her side. “You’re not even sorry, are you?”

“Sorry?” I scoff, and then grind my teeth. She has no idea how much my regret runs deep.

“Yes, Darius. Sorry.” She throws her hands up, and I can’t help it. The look of anger on her face makes me even harder, makes my need for her more potent and to douse those flames sparking in her eyes. To make them fill with need. Need for me.

I stalk toward her, my power reaching for her. She counters, throwing up her hands and her magic comes forth, colliding with mine in a tangle of will and strength. I move through the strands, moving my hands out to create a clear path to her. She brings her hands forward, trying to push them together to have her power close in on either side of me, but she hasn’t realized she has already lost.

I have control of my power, she doesn’t. I slash both hands out at my side and her power sails through the area away from

me before dispersing. She watches it turn into nothing, her eyes wide, chest heaving but I'm already on her. I grab her by the throat, hauling her to me as she brings her fist up, hitting me straight in the nose. I growl down at her, baring my teeth as she digs her fingers into my wrists, drawing blood.

She freezes at that, and I watch the small trail of red run down my arm and smile at her. It's not friendly. "That wasn't very nice now, was it?" She kicks my left side at the thigh, using her power to cause more damage and I use mine to drag her to the floor. I kneel in front of her and once again flip her on her stomach. She growls and snarls beneath me, small strands of power fighting with my own to release her. But there is nowhere for her to go.

She's trapped in my grasp, and I won't wait any longer. I pull her hips up and bite the top of her ass. She squeals, trying to move away from my touch as I let out a low chuckle, biting the other and then licking the mark. I shove a finger inside of her, her pussy clamping down around it and I lick her from ass to clit. She gasps and struggles in my grip, but she's in my possession to do what the fuck I want.

I unbutton my pants, releasing my aching cock. I moan when I wrap my hand around it, squeezing the base as I continue to move my finger inside of her, licking at her. My power keeps her on the floor, holding her still. She quivers beneath me, choked moans coming from her as her power still tries to fight with mine.

Not for long.

I pull back and press my hand to the back of her head and push down. Just as it touches the floor beneath my palm, I pull my finger out to drive forward with my cock, not stopping until I'm balls deep in the tightest pussy known to any male. I groan at her walls clamping down on me, pausing for a moment to savor the feeling of her wrapping around me again. Then I pull my hips back before driving forward in a brutal thrust. Her muffled scream makes me growl in approval. My fingers grip her hair tighter while keeping her head down to the ground, my hips moving faster as I slam into her again and again. She moans louder for me, her fingers clawing at the floor as more wetness coats my cock.

“Fuuuuck,” I pant, my head tipping back at the feel of her. “Your pussy was made for me, Rhea, don't you know that by now?” She makes a noise low in her throat as she flutters around me. “This is where you're meant to be. Taking my cock in this tight pussy of yours and moaning my name.” I lean over her back and bring my free hand to her lips. “Suck.” She obeys immediately, too far gone to do anything else as she takes my fingers into her mouth, getting them nice and wet. She sucks my fingers like I want her to suck my cock, and the thought has me pressing them to the back of her throat, stroking over her tongue. She gags, a tear leaking from her eye and I've never seen anything more beautiful. “Good girl,” I rumble, stroking my thumb over her cheek before I withdraw my fingers from her mouth.

I lean back up, still driving into her in long, hard strokes and I look down as I bring my wet fingers to her ass. I circle the

flesh there, rubbing and gently probing as her choked gasp reaches my ears.

“Darius,” she moans, hesitance clear in her tone.

“This hasn’t been taken before, has it?” I ask, my eyes watching as my fingers continue. She makes an affirmative sound that has my balls drawing up. “One day, I will take you here, fully, and that will be something else that is only mine. Just like I’m the first to have my fingers inside of you, I’m the first to taste you, I’m the first to satisfy you.” I let go of her hair and bring my hand up to grab one ass cheek, pulling it to the side as I watch myself shove a finger all the way inside of her. She groans, a mix of pain and pleasure, but I don’t stop, moving my finger back and forth through the ring of muscle, adding another one. My eyes roll into the back of my head as she squeezes me impossibly tighter, a long groan spilling from me.

“Oh, Gods,” Rhea whimpers, rocking her hips back to meet my thrusts and I grit my teeth, holding back the urge to come. She feels too fucking good.

I pick up speed, feeling her clench around my cock as I reach the end of her. The sound of just how wet she is echoing with each slap of our skin has me growling in appreciation, knowing I did that to her. Only me.

“You ready to come, little wolf?” I grunt, and she nods her head frantically, her small, little breathless moans an aphrodisiac to my ears, but now I want to hear her scream.

I take my fingers out of her ass and grab her by the hair again. I pull her back, so she's flat against my chest, and push a clean finger into her pussy alongside my cock, her arousal making it slide in. It's so fucking tight. I pound into her with a brutal pace. Her hand comes up, gripping my hair as she clamps down around me, throwing her head back in a scream as she comes. Just like I fucking wanted her to. I remove my finger and grab her hips, the hold bruising as I slam into her. I growl into her shoulder, licking at her skin before biting down in the exact same place as the last time, as I spill my release inside of her, groaning at the thought of it being where it belongs.

Rhea slumps back against me, her body shaking in the aftermath of her orgasm and I hold her there, slowly moving my cock back and forth inside of her to make sure she gets every last fucking drop. She moans lightly, probably sore, but the thought makes me bite her shoulder harder, knowing she will feel me there every time she moves. Again, just like I wanted.

She whimpers as my teeth dig deeper, and I rub her throat before I release her neck once all my cum has coated her insides. I push her back to the floor gently, and she goes down without a fight. A satisfied, rumbled purr comes from my chest that I did that to her, sated her. Turning her on her back, I pull her legs apart and watch my come trickle out of her. I didn't get this view yesterday.

I move my eyes up her body, looking into my fully satisfied, little wolf's eyes, and I bring my hand to her abused pussy. I



collect my cum, circling it around her before I shove it back inside of her. I watch as she winces, yet her eyes heat. I rub my fingers around her insides, making sure it's embedded into her, staying there. Always with her.

The last time I saw my cum leaking out of her this closely was in her cave. The possession I felt for her at that moment wasn't acceptable. The need to keep her, the need to be inside of her a constant threat to my sanity. So I left, said vile things and tried not to destroy the forest around her home in my anger at what she made me feel.

I don't feel anything like that, ever.

But I always do with her. She's not just a hole to empty my cum into. I know that now, I even knew it then. She's more than what I ever wanted, because I didn't want it.

We also can't refuse what we are though.

If we do, I suspect we will end up like the old Gods. Going mad, always craving, never quenching our thirst. We can't jeopardize what we are trying to do because she's stubborn and I can't apologize to her.

I don't even know how to begin. My back twinges at the thought.

But she's mine. The Gods themselves chose, and you don't go against a God.

Not for this.

Never for this.

And I don't even want to anymore.

Since the moment I stared into her pretty, ice-blue eyes,  
everything shifted inside of me, and I can't let that go.

# Thirty Six

RHEA

Darius continues to shove his cum back into my pussy, circling my clit teasingly every now and again. I lay totally spent beneath him, catching my breath as pleasure still thrums through me. He always makes me feel alive in those moments, seen even, but as I come down from my orgasm, the reality of what we just did sets in. Again.

I lean up and move myself away from him, closing my legs as my cheeks heat. His stare moves from my legs to my face, turning hard at the distance I've put between us. I swallow hard.

Darius sees the look on my face and his jaw ticks, his fists clenching on his thighs as he sits back and puts himself away. "Don't do that, little wolf," he murmurs quietly, a warning.

I shake my head. "That shouldn't have happened."

He growls. "Enough. Stop saying that. It's inevitable and you know it. It's something we both can't escape even if we wanted to. And I don't want to."

“We can go to others, try and stem the ache.” Like I could. I won’t be able to stand anyone touching me like he does, and it’s hard to ignore my body’s needs when I’m near him, the hunger he’s created inside of me.

He lunges forward suddenly, his hand wrapped around my throat as he brings me closer so we are nose to nose. “You so much as look at another male with lust filling your pretty eyes, and I will pin him to the wall where he can watch me fuck you for days. Then I’ll take his eyes for seeing you like that before I take his heart and eat it for fucking dinner,” he growls. “Do not test me on that, Rhea. You won’t like the consequences.”

I shouldn’t feel all tingly with that declaration of his possession, but I can’t help shifting where I sit, feeling more wetness between my thighs mixing in with our releases.

I bite my lip. I have no doubt he will do it, I can’t say I won’t do the same if someone else touches him. Just the thought has my hackles rising. He may be possessive of me, but I think I am of him too.

This is all twisted up, a mess of emotions and want, and a desire for each other when so much has happened between us. We can’t let what has happened affect what we are trying to do now. We can’t let it stop us from spilling the Highers’ blood, getting my pack and finding those that had been taken.

I sigh, resigned but give him a nod. “The same applies to you then,” I tell him. Needing him to know that he cannot make demands of me without having demands of my own.

“I don’t want anyone else, the only one I want wrapped around my cock is you. You have my word,” he tells me instantly, his eyes bouncing between mine.

“I’ve come to realize your word means shit, Darius.”

He applies a little more pressure on my throat before he rubs his thumb across the bottom of my jaw. He seems to think for a moment before he speaks again.

“I didn’t know you were innocent,” he says, the first that he has been close to admitting what he did out loud to me. “Your words were always half truths and lies, Rhea, we both don’t trust each other. We are both aiming for the same thing now. Stop the Highers and get rid of the rogures. On this, we can work together and have added benefits.” His gaze goes over to the bite mark on my shoulder that he gave me, his eyes heating before they come back to mine. “Let’s make a blood oath.”

I jolt, my eyes wide. “We can’t do that.”

“We can and we will. It’s the only way we can trust each other for the time being.” I think on his words, and I know he’s right. We would never trust the other fully, unless there was a safety net in place.

“Okay,” I whisper, and he releases my throat and sits in front of me. I get comfortable, grabbing my shorts and putting them back on, feeling his eyes on my every move. Then I sit in front of him, our knees touching. “How do you know about blood oaths anyway?” I wonder. “They are of the Gods that no one blesses anymore.”

“We are wolves. Even though we don’t worship them since Cazier earned the title of the Mad Wolf, they still gave us our wolves. Gave us life,” he says. “I’ve learned a lot about the old Gods, reading tomes and going back in history when they roamed the lands. With me being the Heir of Cazier, I needed to know more than what I was taught.”

“And what did you learn?”

“I learned that we never should have abandoned the Gods, we never should have listened to the lies that were taught and drip-fed to us since we were pups. Even if Cazier was mad, he wasn’t born that way. It was a cruel twist of fate that his mate walked a different path.”

“You don’t care for mates, so I’m surprised you feel that way.”

“I don’t.” He eyes me. “And neither do you.” Truth. But much has changed. “But what if he was stuck with Zahariss? How can we punish the Gods for something out of their control?”

“The Gods left us though,” I grumble, hating the thought. But where else could they be if they didn’t abandon us? “My mom taught me everything she could about the Gods, information you can’t find in books.” I look down and rub my legs. “It wasn’t fair for them to have people turn their backs on them when they made us. We owe them a lot, at least our gratefulness.”

“Kyt,” he says, and my head snaps up. He smirks, his eyes light in amusement. “I told you I know some of the language.”

He shakes his head on a chuckle at my surprise while my heart threatens to beat outside my chest. “I took some scrolls and books from the Highers library. I was looking for them when we were dropping off updated Elites rosters. They were hidden away by a concealment spell so they obviously didn’t want it to be found. Unlucky for them, they didn’t expect an Heir to go hunting for it.”

“Kyt?” *Yes.*

He smiles. “Kyt”.

I raise a brow. “Zie lebahn brier” *You learn fast.*

He chuckles. “Kyt, dah lebahn brier.” *Yes, I learn fast.*

I let out a small laugh. I can’t help the giddy feeling rising within me at someone else knowing the language of the Gods. It’s as much a part of me as it is breathing, and I’ve missed being able to speak it with someone. It’s a shock to hear him speak the language so dear to me, to my family. “Do you know all of it?”

His eyes move, once again looking at my shoulder where he bit me. “Most, Vihnarn.” I freeze at his words, that giddy feeling turning to dread as his eyes slowly come back to mine.

“You lied,” I utter, looking away. “You said you didn’t know what that meant.” I’m not sure how I feel about him knowing what that means, or that I lied about it. He doesn’t look angry though.

A strong, gentle hand cups my jaw and turns me back to face him. Darius shakes his head slowly, his eyes so clear. “There is

nothing that could be done, you know that. We both didn't want this, but we have to live with it."

"We don't have to," I whisper. As soon as the words are out of my mouth, something revolts inside of me. Darius's eyes flash black. Another warning.

"We do. I won't have it any other way. I don't want it any other way. I'll look after you, Rhea." I blow out a shaky breath, a light filling me within, wanting to believe him. "Under the moonlight, little wolf."

My body warms as we stare at each other, once again narrowing everything down to just the two of us. This pull, this connection we have, it could destroy me. More than anyone else ever did. I feel his possession though, his protectiveness of me, and I can't say I don't enjoy it, welcome it even. No one has looked out for me like this. Well, maybe Josh, but not this way where it goes beyond sibling connections.

I bring up my hand and bring his palm to my cheek, leaning into his touch, his warmth. Just once letting my walls drop a little and accepting it fully. He strokes my cheekbone and leans forward, touching his nose with mine. We breathe one another in, letting our scents wrap around each other before his lips gently claim mine. It's a devastating kiss. One that evoked feeling and want. Not just need.

Darius's mouth moves against mine gently, small little nips to my lips before he slows down. I break the kiss, overwhelmed by him, overwhelmed by the conflicted feelings



within me. I breath out a shaky breath and he moves his hand off my throat, running along my shoulder until he gets to the bite he left there. I shiver as he runs a finger over it before he finally pulls away.

“So, blood oath,” I say, clearing my throat. I can’t get into this now.

A part of me wants to scream at the unfairness, scream at Darius about what he did to me. Another wants to fall into his arms so he can maybe make me feel just a slither of peace for a moment.

He sighs, but nods. Raising my right arm to him, Darius stills, his body locking unnaturally as silver flecks dance in his eyes as they darken. My brows furrow, and I follow his intense gaze to my arm.

Now it’s me that stills.

I try to move my arm back, but Darius shoots his hand out and grabs my wrist, pulling my arm closer to him. He brings his other hand up and trails his fingers from above my wrist to the middle of my forearm. Goosebumps appear in the wake of his touch, following his path. He circles the space in the center, tracing the subtle pattern that’s appearing there.

I follow his hand, mesmerized by it as tingles begin under the surface where he’s touching. My chest warms. I bring my free hand up and rub the spot, shifting where I sit, slightly. I move my gaze along his muscular arm, to his shoulder and to the side of his neck until I move to his jaw. Then finally his eyes.

No words pass between us as I find his stare on me. There is nothing to say as our bodies speak for us. Still holding my wrist in his grasp, he grabs the collar of his t-shirt and pulls it down so I have the full view of his neck. I suck in a sharp breath, my hand shaking as I reach forward and trace the marking that appears. He makes a soft sound deep in his chest when my fingers touch his warm skin, his eyes heating. I move back suddenly and he releases my wrist.

“Why is it there?” I whisper.

“I’m not sure, it was the space given to me.” I nod. “I know it’s not the normal space, but then, we are not normal, are we?” We aren’t. “The blood oath,” he murmurs huskily, and I once again give him my right arm. He shakes his head. “The other one.” I pause for a moment before complying.

He brings my left hand up to his lips, kissing my wrist before moving just above it. His eyes flicker to mine, those flecks still there as he bites down. I flinch at the sharp pain, gritting my teeth as he pierces me further. Blood wells around his mouth, eyes still intent on mine before he gently pulls away. He licks the wound, tasting my blood before he raises his left arm.

I take his hand in mine, so large compared to mine, and pull forward until my mouth hovers just further above his wrist. I hesitate. A blood oath isn’t something to take lightly, in fact, it’s not allowed anymore, made forbidden by the Highers. It seems Darius really couldn’t give a shit about Highers laws anymore, and for that, I’m glad.

Darius locks our fingers together where I still hold his hand. He squeezes reassuringly. I take a deep breath and then move my mouth to the heat of his skin. I waste no more time and bite down. My canines instantly break through and his blood rushes into my mouth. Darius growls softly, and I look at him as I bite down further. He grabs the obvious erection through his pants, and I raise a brow, letting his blood run down my throat.

He smirks, eyes wicked as he licks his lips. I roll mine and move back, my canines sliding out of him as I lick around the bite. I let go of his hand and sit back, then wait.

“I make this oath in truth,” he starts. “Break the oath and break the bond. I make this oath through blood that I will not be a danger to the twin oath bearer.”

“I make this oath in truth,” I repeat. “Break the oath and break the bond. I make this oath through blood that I will not be a danger to the twin oath bearer.”

“For sacrifice we forfeit,” we conclude at the same time.

Magic tingles through the air, and I look down at the bite mark Darius gave me. It glows, the pale light following the pattern of his teeth rapidly, until it shines violet before dimming. His bite mark will be a permanent spot on my skin until it's broken, only to be seen if we allow it.

What's another mark on my body?

I start to feel dizzy, more exhaustion drowning me again and I slump forward into Darius. He grabs me by the waist,

maneuvering me until I'm straddling his lap and he guides my face to his neck underneath his jaw. I nuzzle his skin, humming slightly at the scent of him as my eyes close. Letting myself go for just a moment with him.

“Zier ny lumniva, little wolf.” *You're my moonlight.*

I go to speak when a ferocious growl sounds around us, and my heart beats wildly in my chest. Darius stands, bringing me with him and placing me behind him. Darkness seems to shrink in on us, and blue eyes pierce within. I go to step around Darius, toward who is mine.

“Runa,” I call gently, and the growl stops briefly, a whine coming from her. Tears sting my eyes as I pass Darius to her, but he grabs me and hauls me to his chest. His arm comes around my waist, my back to him as I lock eyes on my wolf.

I've never seen her like this before, I've only ever felt her strongly.

“Runa, come to me,” I plead with her, but a howl rents the air, and then the feeling of being compressed hits me, like it would if we had ported.

Light shines through my closed eyes lids, and I blink them open, looking around the willow fields. She banished us out.

Darius's breath hits my ear on a chuckle. “Stubborn as you.” I huff. “We will guide her out, no matter what. Trust me.”

*Trust me.* He says that a lot lately, and with the blood oath he just expects that to happen? There are still secrets between us,

and we haven't even spoken in depth about what happened at Wolvorn Castle. At this point, I don't think we ever will.

So how am I supposed to move past that niggle in the back of my mind reminding me of how much he hurt me?

I can't, and I'm not sure I ever will because he doesn't even acknowledge it.

Yes we are civil, working toward a common goal.

But my heart still hurts, and unfortunately, the one who hurt it is the only one who can fix it.

# Thirty Seven

RHEA

I look down at the bite mark on my wrist and run my fingers over it, feeling the magic within tingling. Does it make me feel better knowing it's there? I'm not sure.

I sigh and look at yet another lesia flower on the table, two this time, and I'm yet again left wondering where Darius got them from, or why he keeps bringing me fresh ones.

I'm not complaining, I love seeing them, and love the smell perforating the air. But I'm still left with the reasoning why he's doing this.

I huff and get dressed, knowing I've slept far later into the early afternoon after what happened yesterday.

That thought brings me back to Runa as I don another one of Darius's t-shirts.

She's quiet, no more than usual, but it almost feels like she's... sulking.

I wish she would have come to me instead of kicking me and Darius out, I could have seen her, apologized for not

protecting her as I should have all those years ago.

But she shut me out.

I guess I should feel lucky that I was even able to be in the same space as her. I didn't even know it was possible to be inside my own mind. Though I shouldn't be surprised as I ended up doing that to Darius.

It felt so real though, like we were in a different space, which I guess we were. It wasn't like we were an apparition or projected there somehow, no. I felt everything in there as if I was still on the lands. I know that to be true after Darius fucked me and then we gave each other a blood oath. I look down at the bite mark again and will it to disappear. It does at my command, as easy as thinking, just like with the scars upon my body.

The room suddenly begins to shake, and I wobble, reaching a hand out on the bed to steady myself.

The windows rattle, and cracks form in the floor. The glass holding the lesia flower wobbles and falls over, rolling until it smashes, the water spilling.

My brows furrow as I look at it, then I look to the door when I feel the power this commotion is coming from.

Moving on wobbly legs, I rush out the door and down the hallway, holding onto the wall for balance as the shaking intensifies. I hear shouts from somewhere, but I pay it no mind as I follow the invisible tether to the holder of that power.

I round a corner and come to a halt, noticing where it's coming from. It's like a concentrated well of magic, just ready to burst free from the door it hides behind.

Clenching my teeth as his dominance hits me next, my own rises to hold his off. Someone shouts in alarm in the direction of the stairs when another wave passes through the floor, and I move to the door, putting my hand on the handle and shove open the door.

Mist crawls along the floor in waves. It spreads out, but then recedes before repeating the motion. Every time it crawls out, the room shudders, as does most of the keep by the sound of people in distress.

My eyes snap to Darius as his body is coated in a fine sheen of black. His markings are apparent on his neck, and two larger masses spread above each of his shoulders.

“Darius, what—“ I start to say, but I immediately pause as I follow where his eyes are glued. They look glazed over, unfocused, but not. When I track them to the book he's holding, I gasp at the symbol on it.

Darius's head snaps up, his brows furrowed until he blinks. My heart hammers inside my chest at what he's doing, at what he's done.

“Rhea,” he mumbles, looking down at the book and then back to me.

I'm already shaking my head, my legs feeling weak at what he's done. *Trust*. That's what he said, and yet he went digging,



finding the book I tried to hide so hard to hide from everyone, from him. And yet here he is, betraying that trust again and now he's read some of it. Read what they did to me.

"Rhea," he says again, letting the book hang loosely by his side in his grip.

"How could you," I mutter, my stomach swirling with nausea. "You said you would drop it."

"I said I would drop it *for now*, little wolf."

"You still had no right!" I shout, my body shaking with the need to move, to get out of his sight with the look in his eyes. I take a step back.

"Don't you dare—"

I turn and run down the hall, going toward the steps that will take me outside, that will take me away from here right now.

Feet slap against the stone behind me, and I increase my speed, getting to the steps and running down them three, four at a time. Reaching the door at the bottom, I open it and slam it shut behind me, ignoring Darius's shouts as I head for the willows.

Shoving open the gate with him hot on my heels, I throw a barrier up behind me and keep going. I hear him growl, but I continue on, the grass tickling my feet as I go.

"Rhea, just wait," Darius calls.

"Get the fuck away from me," I shout back, and then his barrier appears ahead of me.

I slow my gait, my chest heaving as I walk to the barrier and place my hands against it.

Nothing, not even a crack.

I growl and spin toward Darius who stands a little ways away from me, his brows furrowed. “Are you done?”

My eyes harden. “You had no right!”

“I did. We are not hiding anything from each other any more.”

“That was private.” Those were my memories of my childhood. No matter how horrid it was, it was mine.

Darius shakes his head, his nostrils flaring. “I told you I want to know everything where you are concerned.”

“So what? That makes it okay for you to do that?” I scoff and wipe a tear angrily as it falls. I should have known he would go looking for it, should have hidden it better. Darius will always get what he wants, regardless of his words. Though he is right, he did say for now. But this can’t go on. No matter the blood oath, there is no trust, and any trust that existed, he’s broken it. I can’t keep doing this.

So with that thought in mind, I ask him what I’ve wanted to know but have been too scared to up until now.

“Did you know?” I ask him suddenly. He tilts his head. “You know all sorts about me, it’s about time I knew something about you. Did. You. Know?!”

“Know what, little wolf,” he murmurs, but his eyes flash, looking off to the side.

“No more secrets, huh?” I scoff and turn to walk away, but a rope around my waist halts me. I look down and see his magic warping around me, holding firm but not hurting. I try to move it with my own, try to get it off me and I’m yet again unable to do so, just like his barrier.

“Darius,” I say, praying for sanity... I’m about to lose my mind. “Get. Off. Me.” I turn and see his pacing ramping up. His feet land on the grass more heavily, and he scowls at the ground as his arms swing aggressively with his walk. Stalks start to turn brittle, darkening in color, almost like they are... dying.

“Ask me and I will tell you. No more secrets, no more... hiding.”

“Hiding from me, or you?” I snap, and he shakes his arms out.

“Ask.” He doesn’t look at me as he paces, and I’ve never seen him so... uncomfortable maybe? Nervous? But this is Darius, he doesn’t feel these things.

“When you saw me in The Deadlands, did you know I was an Heir?” I watch him carefully, waiting for his answer.

“Not at first, but I suspected,” he says, and I blow out a breath. “I figured it out when you asked me to protect your family in the cave. Though I still didn’t know I was an Heir at

the time, I just... knew. Felt you were one.” And yet he still didn’t out me, I outed myself. Why?

“And this?” I ask, moving my hand over the center of my arm. My fingers dig into my skin, not wanting him to answer, but I have to know.”

Darius looks over at me, at where my hand is and something flashes in his gaze before his pacing becomes longer.

“Did I know?” he asks, but I think it’s more to himself as his fists clench at his side. “I didn’t know until you said so.”

My eyes close briefly, and something like relief fills me that at least he didn’t know. It doesn’t make it better, but it doesn’t make it worse either. Runa lies down inside of me, head resting on her paws, but I can feel her anxiety, feel her tension.

“Would it have mattered at all if you knew? I wonder aloud and Darius stops, turning to face me. “Would you still have done what you did?”

He swallows roughly and thinks for a moment, then he shakes his head. “I don’t know.”

My heart drops, and I nod, a scoff coming from me. “Of course you don’t know. You’re the Alpha of the Elites, the Highers’ dogs, nothing else matters than that.”

He runs a hand through his hair. “Rhea—“

“I would never have done what you did to me knowing *that*. It takes me less than a second to realize that, but you?” I tilt my head back, my anger rising. “You don’t know.” I place my hands on my hips, a growl coming from me. it hurts more than

I should let it, and my heart can't take any more beating right now.

“I—“

“Fuck you,” I breath, and then snap my head up at him. “Fuck. You.” I go for him, and I'm barely aware that he releases his hold on me and then I'm hitting him. Anywhere and everywhere I can. His face, chest, legs, feet, stomach. I hit and kick and scratch and slap and I don't stop. Screaming at him, growling, hating that I'm feeling so raw and open and yet the fact remains.

He doesn't know if that would make a difference in his decisions.

The Gods really chose wrong.

The Gods are liars.

I don't want it. I don't want it. I don't want it!

Hands grab my wrists, and then they are pulling me into a hard body. My breaths come out in hard pants as I struggle, wanting to get away and I hurt.

We go down to the floor and I land on top of him, and I know he fucking let himself be taken down. It makes me even more angry. Without thinking, I have my knife from my boot in my hand, and in the next breath, it's at his neck. I look down at Darius, and he doesn't even flinch, doesn't even try and move it as his arms lay limply at his sides. I dig the knife in further, and I watch as beads of blood form and dribble down his neck.

“How could you say you don’t know,” I whisper to him, and to my horror, tears sting the back of my eyes.

“Back then, I was too angry after what I saw in the crystal, too blinded. I don’t know if it would have mattered at that moment when all I felt was rage.” My fingers tighten on the hilt.

“You *whipped* me,” I say. “You...” I choke on a gasp. “You whipped *me*.”

He becomes blurry as I remember that moment. The pain, the betrayal, every slice, every strike, I feel it all as if I was still there, kneeling on that cold floor in front of the Highers as he did it.

He closes his eyes briefly. “I did whip you,” he replied, his voice hoarse. My head bows when he has finally said it out loud. Not once in all this time has he said those words to me. “I’m sorry, little wolf.”

“No, you’re not.” My other hand goes to his chest, my fingers digging into him as my body shakes. “Liar.”

“I’m sorry,” he repeats. I shake my head. His hand moves and he slowly cups my chin before raising my head. “I’m sorry for what I did to you. You will never know how deep that regret goes, my pain, knowing I did that to you. I tore your flesh from your back. From you. From my Viharn.”

A sob escapes from me and I squeeze my eyes shut. I’ve wanted him to admit what he did and to apologize for it, to show me he has some regrets. But I don’t even know if this is

enough. If I can move on from this. A hand on my own that holds the knife has my eyes opening, landing on it.

“What kind of male am I to do that?” Darius murmurs. “How can you even look at me sometimes, how can you still let me in your body?” He laughs to himself. “And I take advantage of the connection because I want you. You know I do, and you still let me,” he sighs. “And even now? You’re not doing what you’re supposed to be doing and driving that knife into my throat.”

“I should,” I whimper, a tear running down my face. I should do that, end it here and now.

“You should,” he agrees. “Take It.”

“What?” I chokes out.

“Take it. Your revenge, your justice, the blood you are owed by me. Take. It.”

“That’s not—.”

“Take. It.” He growls, releasing his dominance, and I gasp, my hand that was on his chest now moving to the side of his neck. I grip him there, holding his eyes.

He’s not scared, not even the slightest bit of hesitation is registering in his eyes as I could quite literally kill him, here and now.

To be free of him, us.

He pulls my wrist, and the knife sinks deeper into his skin. I release a panicked sound, feeling sick to my stomach as I take

the knife away, holding it up high. My chest heaves, my body trembles and I know my eyes are wild, confused and unsure.

“How much did you read in that book?” I ask.

“As much as I could before you appeared.”

Bastard. “You didn’t have to read it, there was nothing in there that mattered to you.”

“It is about your life, nothing else matters more to me than that.” I falter for a moment.

“You still had no right.”

“When it comes to you, right and wrong doesn’t matter,” he says easily.

I growl and bring the knife down. Darius doesn’t look anywhere but at me as the knife slides through flesh, easily. Darius grimaces, but otherwise, doesn’t move at all.

Tears drip from my chin. “How can you do this to me,” I whisper, shaking my head. “Not only... not only did you know I was an Heir, but you don’t know what you would have done if you knew what we are. You continue to break my trust, wanting to know things about me without my permission.” I hiccup, my stomach dropping. “What did I ever do to deserve this?” I scream, twisting the knife. “I have done nothing but try my best, done nothing but try and save others, done nothing but put myself last!”

Darius grunts, his hands raising to land on my hips. He squeezes them gently, his thumb rubbing back and forth



against me. Not once does he try and remove my knife, not once does he try to get me off of him.

“You did nothing wrong, I know that now. I didn’t back then.” My brows furrow at his words. “When you told me there is no mercy in the lands before I walked behind you and whipped the flesh from your body, you were right. But I was wrong. I shouldn’t have done that. I have lived with that regret, and will always continue to do so. But at the time, I thought I was right. I was trying to punish and get information out of a traitor of the lands who caused the rogures. Who caused the very thing that killed my family.” I suck in a breath at the reminder that he has also lost loved ones, and that he thought I had caused that. I try to think of it from his point of view and what I would do if I were him, and I don’t even know the answer to that. He continues. “How could it be you who caused so much pain? How could this female be an Heir? She is just like what the stories say about them being dangerous, and we have a right to do what we must against them. Those were the sort of things running through my mind after I saw that crystal, and I was lied to.” He lifts his eyes to the sky above, but I don’t think he’s really looking at anything. “When I suspected you were an Heir, duty should have come first, and I should have made it known what you were, but after everything, I still couldn’t reveal it to the others what you were. Just like you couldn’t reveal it to me until you felt you had no choice, because you also suspected.” He makes a frustrated sound. “Even though at that time you were a traitor, I did have mercy on you the best that I could, Rhea. It may not

seem like it, but I didn't put much strength into whipping you, I just made it seem like I did. Not like it even mattered." He swallows roughly and his eyes become unfocused, like he's seeing something from memory. "I had two options at the time, to hurt the traitor or have my men harmed. I couldn't resist the order, and I didn't know you were innocent at the time. So I made a choice I thought was right."

I still. "Then what Leo said was true?"

His eyes snap back to me. "What?"

"Leo said that if you didn't do what Charles said, he would hurt him and the others." That's when he also said to go easy on him.

"Fucking Leo," he breathes, looking back up to the sky. "He didn't lie, but that is no excuse for what I did." So it was true. He sits up suddenly, and the blade in his shoulder digs deeper. "I can never take back holding that whip." He doesn't look away from me as his hands start to run up my back, tracing lines he cannot see. I shiver. "I'm sorry for all the wrongs I committed against you, Rhea. I'm not sorry for many things in my life, I'm not sure I'm even capable of it, but with you, I am."

"I begged you to keep Kade safe, to keep my world safe," I say, thinking back to all he has said to me.

"And I broke my vow."

"I begged you to listen to me, that I was innocent." I hadn't begged since I was a child, but I did with him.

“And I ignored it.” His hand comes to the back of my neck. “I’m sorry.” My eyes bounce between his, and I feel my face fall. I slump forward, the fight leaving me. My head lands on his uninjured shoulder, and I breathe in his scent, always wanting his scent.

“I’m sorry,” he says again, massaging my neck.

“How can I believe you?” I mumble against him.

“I am, little wolf. Believe me in this.” A pause. “Please,” he grits out in a low tone and that word, his saying *please* settles my soul a little. Darius doesn’t say please, but he did for me. “I’m not saying it for forgiveness, I’m saying it because I am regretful. If I could take that moment back, if I could have just shoved down my rage to *listen*, I would have.” His hands tighten on me. “And then I would have chosen you like I should have done to begin with.”

Why can’t someone choose me first?

I pull the knife from his shoulder, and more tears fall from my eyes. I try to burrow myself there, just wanting to hide for a little while, to just let myself fall for a moment. Sobs wrack my body when I can’t hold it in any longer, and I choke when I can’t get enough air in. Darius’s grip tightens on my neck, trying to pull me from him and I fight it, until I relent.

Thumbs swipe at my tears, but more just keep falling in their place. In my blurry vision, Darius drops his head, then he’s rubbing his nose against mine so gently. I hiccup, trying to get away again but he just brings me back to his neck, to a place that makes me feel somewhat safe.

I feel his magic in the air, feel it coming from him but I don't look, just stay where I am as my body shakes with my heaving sobs.

“Let me feel your sadness, your rage. Your hatred... your pain, Rhea.” I shake my head, wanting to cover my ears but also wanting to hear his words, hoping it will just stop this hurt. Everything hurts. “Let me have it all,” he continues. “You have been hiding long enough, you don't need to hide from me, never me.” A pained sound leaves me and I feel his body tense under mine. “The vow I make next, I will not break.” His magic seeps into me. “I'm the Heir of Cazier, of the below,” he says, his hand coming to the back of my neck again. “I am the dark, so find sanctuary inside of it. Let it out into the open, where I will take it as my own.” My trembling worsens, my teeth chattering. “I will shield you, you only have to let me.” My fingers dig into him, my teeth biting his shoulder as another sob comes from me. “I don't deserve it, but I won't let you down like I have done in the past. My days are now spent for you, and only you. And from now on, I will always choose you.”

My power flies out of me, uncontrolled, wild and free, but this time, I'm not scared. I don't want to call it back, I just let it...be.

“I'm sorry,” he says again.

“It... it hurts,” I choke out, and Runa moves restlessly inside of me. He brings me even closer than I thought possible, wrapping my legs around him so we are chest-to-chest.

“I know.”

I sniffle. “I want you to hurt just as much as I did.”

“I know.”

I whimper, and Darius lifts my head again. I feel his eyes on me and I scrunch mine closed, hating that he’s seeing me like this, but I feel relief that I let some of my hurt out. He puts me back to his neck and I feel the coolness of his power wrap around me, soothing me. I feel his breath on the top of my head, and then he inhales a deep breath, a rumbling sound coming from him. He holds me as I cry more, as I claw at him to get closer, even though that’s impossible. His scent makes me feel like I can hide here for a little while.

I just want to hide for a little while.

Darius shifts me in his arms, and my arms go around his next, a frightened sound leaving me. Not yet, just let me stay a little longer. He holds me tighter, keeping me close.

“Under the moonlight,” he says to me, and I whimper at his words, their meaning. He stands with me still in his arms, and I hold on tight. The rocking motion of him walking makes my eyes droop. They feel itchy after all the crying I’ve done. A door closes, and he mumbles something to me but I can’t make it out.

All I know is that I feel warm, protected. Drained.

I don’t know what tomorrow will bring, but it has to be better than today.

It has to be.

# Thirty Eight

RHEA

I take in the most delicious scent into my lungs. I move closer to the source, wanting it to live inside of me whilst I try and clear the fog of sleep from my mind. Warmth curls around my body, and that's when I pause as realization hits me. My eyes spring open and I see a tanned, tattooed neck with dark markings. I follow the swirls with harsh, delicate lines up to a sharp jaw, and I know I'm currently laying on top of Darius, I slept on top of Darius. My legs are on either side of him, and my hands are on his sides. My brows furrow as I remember how I ended up here.

Darius reading the book. Darius admitting that he whipped me, that he was sorry. Then I remember that I wanted to kill him, but I couldn't.

I whimper at that, remembering everything within me rebelling at the thought of it. Large hands touch me, sliding up my spine with firm pressure and squeezing me closer. Warm breath hits my temple, and then a tender kiss before I hear the

hum in his throat as he tries to soothe me. The vibrations hitting my lips at his skin.

I rise slowly on Darius, my ass still perched on his stomach as his hands fall away. I move without rousing him, his steady breaths telling me he's still sleeping. His power moves over me though, the dark mist gently flowing around me before going back into Darius as I take a peek at his face.

He looks peaceful in sleep, his dark hair tousled and messy, his brows relaxed and lips slightly parted. He looks... mortal. He doesn't look like the Alpha of the Elites or the Heir to Cazier. He just looks like Darius, and in this moment it reminds me of the night we were greeted by wisps, meeting the wild wolves and kissing me under the moonlight.

He showed me softness last night too, in the weeping willow fields. Shielding me as he told me he was sorry for what he did to me. Finally admitting to whipping me.

I saw nothing but truth in his eyes, and isn't this what I have always wanted from him?

To acknowledge and apologize for what he did?

But he knew that I was an Heir, and he said that he didn't know if it would have changed anything in that moment if he'd known more about us. That hurt.

But after his explanation about how his men would be hurt, and in that moment that everything happened, I was seen as a traitor, I understood.

I have gotten my apology, and I believe him that he's regretful. He showed it by shielding me, letting me hit him and take him to the floor. With letting me hurt him and stabbing his shoulder. I think he would have let me end him if I could have. His eyes showed me as much.

I move my gaze to the balcony door, watching as the sun rises on another day of who the fuck knows what. There are more important matters going on in Vrohkaria than me not moving on from what he did to me. Especially when a part of me feels I deserve each lashing he gave me for hiding away while others suffered.

But I fucking suffered too.

The urge to lean back down against his neck is strong, to hide away a little longer, but I resist. I lift my leg gently to move off his stomach when hands shoot out, grabbing my waist. I squeal as I'm flipped over on my back and Darius comes down on top of me.

His face burrows in my own neck, breathing me in as he murmurs in a gravelly voice. "Good morning, little wolf."

"Morning..." I reply, unsure of well, anything.

He chuckles, sending goosebumps peppering my skin at the light sound, and he rolls off the side of the bed, taking me with him as we stand and he puts me on my feet. "Go and get cleaned up and let's have breakfast," he tells me, pushing me toward his bathroom and slapping my ass.



I scowl over my shoulder at him, wondering why he's being so... normal as I head for his bathroom to shower. I peel off my clothes from the night before, the dirt on them making me wonder how dirty the bed is, before I hop in. The water makes me moan as its heat cascades down my face and body, feeling everything loosen. Wanting to wash away the shit show of yesterday, I grab some soap off the side and rub it all over my body, moaning again as I massage my muscles.

“If you keep moaning like that, I'll join you.” I jump at the sound of Darius's voice and peel my eyes open.

I blink through the water and see he's standing over near the sink, a dark t-shirt in his hands. His eyes track the water moving over my body, his stare dark and heated. I feel everywhere his stare lands, between my thighs, my breasts, my neck. My breathing picks up as my hands clench. When his eyes finally reach mine after examining me closely, he licks his lips and I have to damn-near lock my knees to stay up right because fuck, he cannot look at me like that.

His lips tip up at the side like he knows, as he places the t-shirt next to the sink, heated eyes still locked on me. I swallow. We are here again, same stare and dance with our eyes, but then I vaguely hear a tap, tap, tap sound in the bedroom, and without a word, Darius leaves, keeping the door open behind him.

I hurry through the rest of my shower and step out, wondering what that sound was. Drying off, I put on the t-shirt that is far too big and ends above my knees. I lift the collar and

bring it to my nose, inhaling the scent of Darius before I enter the bedroom. I spot him near the balcony doors with a scowl on his face. I follow his line of sight and my eyes widen.

“Illium,” I breathe, and rush over to him, moving past Darius and opening the doors. He comes, cawing at me and flapping his wings, lifting himself to perch in my hands as I sit down on the floor and pet him.

Gods, it’s been too long since I’ve seen him.

“You know this Croneian?” Darius asks, coming to stand next to me as he eyes Illium like he just shit in his breakfast.

“Yes. he’s Edwa—“ I cut myself off and freeze. Darius doesn’t know the name of the person who has helped me, only that they have. I peek up at him, looking at the confusion on his face and then look back down at Illium. He’s got a small leather strap around his neck with a small piece of rolled-up paper attached to it.

I gently pop Illium on the floor and take the strap up and over his head, scratching his chest before I untie the strap and unroll the small piece of paper.

*I hope you are safe. I’m sorry I haven’t been able to contact you sooner, Charles is not... himself. He is keeping us all busy searching for you, but also punishing those that are either rebelling against his rule, or wanting sanctuary within the castle walls. I am trying to save those that fall under his wrath, but Rhea... things are worse than ever before.*

*Stay safe, and I will contact you soon as I think I may have found where he has been keeping those he stole, and where he sent your pack.*

*Wait for my letter.*

*Edward.*

The note is snatched out of my hand and I startle. I get to my feet and pick up Illium, walking through the balcony doors and murmuring words of thanks before I send him off in the morning light, which he should not be flying in. I watch until he's just a speck before I turn to Darius, nervousness wracking through me after reading that letter.

I'm glad Edward is safe enough to contact me, though I never know how Illium finds me, but that he also may know where those that were stolen are? Will my pack be there?

“Who the fuck is he?” Darius growls, prowling toward me. I hold my hands up, backing away from him but he just keeps coming.

“He is—“

“No male should be messaging you,” he says quietly, but no less deadly as he stalks forward and I move back. I look over my shoulder and peer down at the ground over the balustrade, wondering how to explain before I shout in alarm as I'm lifted, and my ass is slammed onto the stone. I grip onto Darius's shoulders, my eyes wide as he steps between my legs and grips the back of my neck, his face full of fury. “Why the fuck is this male sending you messages, how does he know you are

here?” He gets right in my face, eyes sharpening and bleeding black.

“He helps me,” I breathe, trying not to panic with the thought of falling Gods knows how many feet to my death below me if he lets go. “He’s the one—“

“The one who what?” he growls. His hand on the back of my neck squeezes and his nostrils flare. I pause, and really take him in, on why he’s so angry. I huff out a breath when I realize.

“Darius,” I say calmly, but with an edge to my tone. “Back. The fuck. Up.” My power slithers out of me in warning, and he responds just like I knew he would. He starts breathing heavily, a wild look in his eyes as his power trembles with the rage pouring off him. “Dar,” I say more gently, shaking my head and moving my hands up the sides of his neck, stroking my thumbs over his skin, feeling the power thrumming beneath it. “Stop being jealous.” I scrunch up my nose. “He’s like a second father to me.”

He stills, before he lets out a long breath and finally relaxes. His hold on my neck loosens, but he doesn’t take it away as his power moves more gently, a casual flow as it seeks out mine and intertwines with it. The blue and black twirl around, the strands wrapping into each other between us.

“You will not touch another male,” he grunts, his nose coming to my hair and his lips skimming my temple.

Possessive male.

“Nor will you touch another female,” I tell him.

Fuck, I’m a jealous female.

“Never,” he says, and his hands go to my thighs as he lifts me to him. I wrap my legs around his waist and he brings me into the bedroom, taking a seat on the chair and bringing me with him, resting on his lap. “Tell me,” he orders, and I move my hands to mess with the bottom of his t-shirt, scrunching it up and releasing it.

“As he said, he may know where Charles has taken others too, my pack may be there, we just have to wait.”

“Not that, tell me about Edward.” When I say nothing, he huffs. “I thought no more secrets?” he says, and I look up at him.

“I told you, he’s like a second father to me. He’s the one I told you about, who has helped me. He saved me, well, us.” He raises a brow and I clarify. “Josh, Cassie, Kaden, and I. We were wandering around Vrohkaria, doing anything we could to survive. He found me at a market one day when I was trying to steal some food,” I say sheepishly, but he doesn’t say anything about that. “He followed me. He told me he knew my mother. I didn’t believe him, but he said arbiel cana to me. Only my family knew those words.”

“We bleed wolf,” he says, and I nod, forgetting he’s spent the last few months learning the language.

“When he said that, I knew he knew my family, and that he was appointed as my guardian.” I watch as that bit of

information sinks in. “He told me about Eridian and I didn’t believe him at all. Until he took me there. All he asked in return was for me to help others that needed a safe haven. I didn’t like the idea at first.” I shift on his lap, realizing all I’m wearing is his t-shirt. “Didn’t like being around others much, or being touched a lot.” His hands move to my thighs and squeezes. “Josie helped me get past that over the years,” I say quietly, looking over his shoulder toward the windows.

He releases a long breath, his thumb moving lazily over my skin. “I didn’t know that would happen to Josie or Danny that day. I didn’t agree with it. They were killed in cold blood. They will pay for their deaths.”

“You didn’t stop them either,” I tell him. “You stood back and let them do it, told me my pain had only just begun,” I grind out, swallowing down my grief.

“In a room full of that many Highers and Charles himself, I couldn’t have done anything and everyone in that room would have been in danger. I did try to get Charles to listen to me, but he cut me off. I thought it would make matters worse if I persisted.” I settle a little knowing he at least tried, even if it did no good. “I believed you were a traitor at the time, the cause of the rogures,” he growls and my eyes go back to him. “It’s what I believed then,” he repeats, like he’s reminding himself.

“And now?” I bring my eyes back to him. “Do you believe me?”

“I already told you I do,” he grunts, his eyes bouncing between mine. “But you don’t believe me, do you?” he sighs. “What will it take for you to believe me?”

“It’s... a lot to process,” I say, and his jaw ticks. In one, swift motion, I’m picked up, moved and placed onto the bed.

Darius looks around the room and heads for the table. He swipes some cups off without a care, and I watch startled as they crash to the floor. He then puts the table on its side. With a hand holding it steady, he lifts his foot and brings it down on the leg of the table. The wood splits and he grabs it, twisting it until it snaps. I watch, my mouth open that he just broke a piece of furniture. He brings the broken leg of the table to me, then he reaches into the back of his pants and pulls out my knife.

“What?” I blink up at him.

“Carve and listen,” he says, and I look down. I haven’t carved in so long. I run my fingers over the wood, then tentatively run my knife over it. It’s clean, not a spot of Darius’s blood on it, which I’m glad for. Just the thought has my stomach rolling.

I take a breath, breathing in our mixed scent that are so familiar to me now. Hints of sweet and rawness wrap around me, and I wonder if it will get stronger, add more of our scents together to create something unique that is just us.

Will I allow it?

“I know it will take a lot for you to trust me, we haven’t had that with each other before, have we?” Darius asks, and I nod as I start to carve away at the wood. “Even with the blood oath, that is just reassurance that I won’t betray you, but I will prove to you that I won’t. No matter how long that takes me.” He crouches down in front of me, wiping off some wood shavings that have landed on my leg. “What I said to you yesterday, I meant it, every word. Like I said, I’m not asking for forgiveness, I only wanted you to hear that I regret a lot when it comes to you, now more than ever.” I start rounding off the edge. “The distance between us is, admittedly, driving me insane. I’m constantly pulled toward you, and I think you don’t feel the full effect as you are not one with your wolf.” I think about that for a moment. I do feel the pulls, but I agree it does feel a little muted. So just how strong is it for him? My eyes flick up to his, but he’s watching me carve the wood. “I’m not a male that is patient when it comes to you. I have no boundaries when I want to know something, no, it’s a need to know everything about you. But, little wolf, the connection isn’t making me want to know that, it’s just... you.” My hand stalls on the carving, and his covers mine, holding it firmly as we make another groove in the wood. “Even though I didn’t know who you truly were, I think, no, I *knew* deep down who you were. I tried to ignore it.” He laughs at himself. “But I should have known I could never ignore you. It’s impossible to do so.” My cheeks heat at that, and he reaches up and runs a finger over my jaw. “Do you know how you escaped Wolvorn Castle?” he asks, and I frown.



“We ported out of there,” I say slowly. He already knows this.

“And how did you get the port stone?”

My brows pinch together. “Anna had one. She said she woke up with it.”

He nods, shifting where he sits. “Who gave it to her?”

“What?” I ask, pausing in my carving.

“Who gave it to her?”

“We don’t know, we suspect it was Edward.” He said he would try and get us out of there, and it’s the only explanation that he gave it to Anna.

“It wasn’t your friend,” he spits, still hating I’m talking to another male.

“How do you know that?”

His eyes bounce between mine. “Because I gave it to her.”

## Thirty Nine

RHEA

I stare unblinkingly at Darius, trying to process his words. I shake my head, unable to believe what he's saying, at what he's telling me he did.

“I—” I what? What exactly am I trying to say here?

“I gave it to her after I came to you in your cell, after I did what I did to you.”

“But why?” Why would he do that? He didn't believe me then, he didn't believe my words.

“The moment I left your cell, I stopped at the entrance to the dungeon and I knew I couldn't leave you there to rot. You were wounded after I whipped you, bleeding and in pain. I didn't like seeing you like that.” His jaw clenches. “No matter how, at that time, you were a traitor, no matter if you were the cause of the rogues, no matter how you lied and killed. I just couldn't leave you there,” he sighs and runs his finger over the wood. “Do you know how much it took within me to place that port stone on Anna? Hoping she would be able to get

close to you to be able to get you out of there.” He shakes his head. “I’m an Elite, I uphold the law, I drag traitors back to the Highers or kill them to protect Vrohkaria. That’s my duty. By placing that stone with Anna, I turned my back on it.”

His fist clenches, but his eyes never leave mine. He looks... troubled, and I don’t like seeing this side of him, it makes me uncomfortable. A troubled Darius is not a good thing, yet I crave it.

He’s seen me vulnerable more times than anyone else, and with him showing me another chink in his armor, I take it all in and keep it close.

“I loathed what I was doing, trying to aid your escape. Yet the thought of you in that cell rotting away was something I could not let happen, even if I didn’t understand it fully at the time. So I gave Anna the stone.”

“And that’s why you told me to run,” I whisper, and he nods.

“I hate I was put in a position of choosing duty and you.” He shakes his head, a scowl on his face. “The Highers interrogated so many guards to find out how Anna got hold of the port stone after you escaped, and I sat by and watched, never once revealing what I did while others suffered. The worst thing is, I don’t regret it for a single second. I made a choice and I did it without hesitation.”

Warmth fills me that he’s the one that ultimately helped us escape, that he *did* choose me over his duty, even if he didn’t know I was innocent, even if he let others suffer. He chose me.

Finally me.

Does that make me a bad person for not caring that guards suffered?

“When you escaped, I thought I could track you easily. I have your scent, so it should be simple, all I had to do was get close. And I did once, briefly.” His eyes flick up to mine. “I knew it was you, covered in a cloak to hide yourself. It was weeks after you left Wolvorn Castle and you were at a village. I watched you walk around, looking at every little thing, yet also with hardened knowledge as you passed stalls full of wares. I could have captured you then, brought you back to the Highers...

“But you didn’t.”

“I didn’t. I just wanted you within my sights at that moment. Then you saw your poster and a male approached you. I saw you tense, and then my focus wasn’t on you anymore, but the male after he left you.” I remember that male talking to me about my poster, remembering the nervousness I felt. “He stalked off while I stalked him. He turned back around, looking at you closely, too closely for my liking. When he moved, so did I.” His eyes turn black briefly and my heart rate kicks up. “I came up behind him, placed my hand over his mouth and dragged him further behind all the stalls until I reached an alleyway. I didn’t hesitate to snap his neck. I killed him in cold blood, he never stood a chance. When I dumped his body in a nearby cellar, I tried to find you again, but you

were nowhere, and I couldn't pinpoint your scent as there were too many people around. But I found a girl."

I breathe deep, listening with rapt attention at the story he's telling me. I know exactly what he's on about, where he saw me and my body tingles at knowing he was there, just watching me, *protecting me*. I didn't even know.

"She held a bucket, and though she had been crying, she was smiling. Do you know what she told me?" he asks.

"Zahariss," I whisper, and he lifts a brow, a smirk appearing on his face. "I told her that Zahariss will eat the bad men, I remember her."

"Bloodthirsty little wolf," he murmurs. "Even then I couldn't turn you in. Even then I was protecting you, ignoring my duty as an Elite to protect all when I was saving a traitor and letting her go." He sighs, running a hand up my thigh. "I did all of that before I knew the truth, so when I tell you I believe you, I do, little wolf. Of everything you have told me and everything you will tell me after. I will never doubt your words again, no more secrets."

I place the wood and knife to the side as Darius watches me with curious eyes. My heart beats wildly in my chest as I move forward and slide into his lap. He releases a breath, his hands going to my hips to hold me in place. I think this is the first time I have willingly gone to him like this, touched him like this and I feel nervous, but it just feels right.

My hands slide up his muscular chest, feeling the definition there before I move them up his shoulder and then my hands

are at the back of his head, my fingers tangling into his hair. Everything he's told me whirls through my mind, and I can only think of saying one thing to him.

"Thank you." My eyes bounce in between his.

"You don't have to thank me, Rhea."

"I do," I tell him, hesitating for a moment before I lean forward and rub my nose with his. His eyes flash, and he rubs my nose back. I grip the back of his head tighter, feeling a swirling in my stomach and noticing the position we are in. I wiggle and lean back, never breaking eye contact.

"Careful, little wolf, you know it excites me," he murmurs, and it causes a smile to spread across my face, a lightness filling me. He tilts his head, a hand coming up to run a thumb over my cheek. "Laeliah." *Beautiful*. He traces my smile with his finger, then he scowls. "Don't smile at anyone else like that."

I laugh, a lightness filling me as I push at his chest. "You're ridiculous." I get up and move back to the bed as he frowns.

"I'm not joking, little wolf. You smile at someone like that and they won't breathe for another second." He stands and comes to sit next to me.

"Okay, Dar." I pat his shoulder and his frown deepens. We sit in silence, his body pressed to the side of mine and I feel his silent strength wrapping around me. "So what now," I ask, turning to look at Darius to see he's already watching me. I shouldn't be surprised, he always is.

“Now a lot has changed, little wolf,” he murmurs, his gaze fleeting over my features. That’s an understatement. So much has happened in so little time, it’s hard to catch my breath. “What’s done is done, nothing can change that now. We continue with what we have been doing.”

I nod. “I will get justice for them, and get my pack back. Get Kade back. There is no alternative for me.” I won’t survive it. I will never forgive myself if I don’t get them, if I don’t try. “They are my family.”

His eyes blaze and I know he understands. He lost his own to the rogues. “They are, and I will help you in any way I can.” He tucks a piece of wet hair behind my ear. “Now, this male.” There is still a slight edge to his voice, but it brings a small smile to my face.

Insufferable male, he just won’t let it go.

“He was the one who found abused beings. He would scout them and give them the option of moving to Eridian. The only thing he asked is that it was indefinite. You weren’t allowed to leave, it was too risky to be caught and then we would be found. He mostly gets Omegas to guide the ones being saved to The Deadlands and we would go there and then escort them to Eridian. We did only good, Darius,” I tell him. “Our pack may be small, but they have come along so well from how they were when they first came, especially the pups.” I shake my head, heart clenching at the thought of them being Gods knows where. “I promised I would protect them, I promised they were safe,” I growl out, my anger and taking over. I pin

Darius with my glare. “I failed them and now I will rescue them.” I point to the note Darius dropped to the floor. “I trust Edward’s word. If he sends a letter with a location, we need to go.”

“It could be a trap,” he reasons. “It could be covered by those loyal to the Highers.”

“I don’t give a fuck, Darius. I will kill and slaughter and hunt them all. It’s been months, I can’t bear to think what they have gone through. I will go on my own if I have to.”

“Like fuck you are,” he scoffs, his eyes taking on a wild edge. “You’re not leaving my sight.” He tilts his head at me and I tilt mine back. “That may not be to your liking, but I couldn’t care less. That’s how things are and how things will go for the time being. I will put together a team and you do the same with yours. We will go together and search the area.”

“We will find something, Edward’s good with his word. He even told me you were coming to The Deadlands.”

“How did he know that?” His brows furrow, looking at me closely.

“Can I tell you another time?” He starts to open his mouth but I lift my hand and put it over his lips, silencing him. “This is not me keeping a secret from you. It’s just that this isn’t mine to tell, it’s for his safety. If this was my secret I would tell you.”

“Would you?” he asks behind my palm.



Would I? He told me his regrets. He's told me he's sorry and I believe him. He also helped us escape Wolvorn Castle, went and got something precious to me out of my cave and has been protecting me ever since, so why wouldn't I? I look down to the middle of my forearm before I look back up at him. "Yeah, Darius. I would."

His eyes hold mine, that connection zapping into place and he nods, nipping my hand and I remove it from his mouth. "Fine, little wolf, but you will have to tell me eventually." I do. "I don't like the idea that he knows you are here. How did he know that?"

"I have no idea how to be honest. Edward always knows. I think he has Ilium keeping track of me at times, but I know he has many Croneians."

"If he can find you here, then others can. We may need to look for somewhere else to move to. But also." He stands, cracking his neck as he stares down at me. "If he's a father to you, why isn't he here? Why hasn't he come to see you?"

I get up and walk over to the bedroom door, Darius following behind me. "He's important, and he has important dealings."

"If you say so," is all he says, and I get that he's not happy with not knowing everything. I turn toward him, but then suddenly find myself eye-to-eye with his ass.

"Stop throwing me over your fucking shoulder, Darius," I growl, my fingers digging into him.

He chuckles, biting the curve of my ass. “I don’t see why not,” he says, walking out the bedroom and down the hallway. “I like looking at your ass before breakfast.”

# Forty

RHEA

A knock sounds on the door to the spare room that I have been coming to every now and then. It's also the room where I hid the book with entries of what happened to me. I'm not sure where the book is now, and I haven't asked Darius, not wanting to bring it up and sour things between us. I'm not sure where we both go from here, though he is pretty clear with what he wants, I on the other hand, am just taking it day by day.

I walk over to the door and open it when another knock comes. Josh stands on the other side, his hands in his pockets as he looks down to the floor.

“Can I come in?” he asks, voice soft. I sigh before standing to the side to let him in. Moving to the end of the bed, I sit with my legs crossed, hating the conversation we are about to have but know it's a long time coming.

Seems a lot of things are being said out in the open lately.

He moves to the chair in the room near the small desk, grabbing it and sits down in front of me. Resting his arms on his knees, he's silent, messing with the bun he has in his hair. It's a move I know he only does when he's unsettled.

"I'm sorry," he whispers eventually. I pick the side of my fingernails, biting my lip. "I never should have asked you to remove your glamor. It was wrong. I have no excuse."

I believe he's sorry, I do. But. "You hurt me," I tell him, and he sucks in a shaky breath, nodding. "It was something I never wanted others to see. You only saw it because you got me out of that basement, and I made sure to have it blocked from Kade's memory when Edward did that for me."

"I know, Milal. I should have never done that. I honestly don't know what came over me."

"It's the mating bond, Josh," I tell him, and he freezes, looking up at me. "You think I didn't know?" His gray eyes turn wide, but sad, and I know it's because he didn't talk to me about it. "A bloodmate's bond trumps all and everything. I can understand that. What you did still hurts, I feel betrayed. You used the fact that you saved me from a place I had no choice in being as a weapon to get what you wanted. Used the fact that I have always felt like I have owed you for that."

His head drops, and he runs a hand over his face. "You never owed me. Never." He shakes his head and clenches his fist on his knees. "I just, I was crawling out of my skin to get to her, and it felt like everyone was my enemy, standing in my way. You were collateral damage of that." His jaw ticks. "I'm so

fucking sorry, Rhea. I'm ashamed of myself for what I did. You are the sister I never had, and I cannot believe I did that to you. I wasn't myself."

He looks so dejected, and I know he won't forgive himself for what he did. What he made me feel like I had to do. I hate this rift between us. We have had arguments over the years, sure, but we have never been this far apart before. I need him. He's my brother, my chosen family, and I know he will carry this for as long as he lives.

"You can never do that to me again, Josh."

"*Never,*" he says down the link, and I feel the hum of the blood link between us for the first time in what seems forever. It's a welcome comfort, but also comes with pain at the empty spot that's there from Kade.

It's that thought that stops me. We can't be like this with each other, we have lost so much already.

"I'm so happy you found her. I really am. You deserve to be happy, Josh." I pause. "What Darius did outside Witches Rest..."

"I deserved it, it's why I didn't even defend myself," he says quietly before tilting his head. "He said he will not hurt you again, you know."

I start at his words. "Since when do you two talk," I mutter.

He huffs. "Not much, and not often. After you told them about our lives when we arrived here and collapsed in the dining room, I went to the room you were put in to see how

you were and we talked for a little while. Darius hadn't left your side."

My chest warms at his words, at the thought that Darius stayed by my side when I was deeply asleep. Thinking about it, when I did wake up, he always came to me everyday, stayed with me until he left at night for a while. But he always came back even though I wouldn't talk to him. I wasn't able to shove all my emotions down to function and I was letting my hurt spill out.

He never faltered though, and when his patience ran out with me, he helped me wake up from the slump I had found myself in. When I think about it, Darius has helped me a lot while I've been here.

Taking a steady breath, I lean forward and take Josh's clenched fist in my hand. "I forgive you," I murmur, just wanting things to be right between us. "So much has happened, I don't want this distance between us. I want my brother." He grabs me suddenly and yanks me to him, crushing me into a hug. My legs dangle on either side of him as I wrap my arms around his neck, holding him close. I've missed him.

"I'll make it up to you, Rhea." He squeezes me tighter. "I prom—"

The door to the bedroom slams open, and I jump, my head snapping up. Darius stills in the doorway, looking over me on Josh's lap and his eyes turn murderous, hard and cruel as they move to Josh.

“Get, the fuck, off of her. Now,” he growls deep, his dominance spilling into the room. I scramble off Josh’s lap, wary of the last time Darius fought with Josh. I go to speak when he says. “Charles is on his way here. We need to move you and the others somewhere else.”

My blood turns cold.

“I’ll grab Sarah,” Josh says in a rush, leaving the room to do just that, but not without giving Darius a wide berth as his eyes track his every movement.

I look around the room, noticing some of the clothes that have been given to me thrown haphazardly around the room. I start to head for them, wanting to hide them just in case anyone comes in here when a hand grips me roughly by the back of my neck. I’m yanked into a hard chest. Lips graze my ear next, and I shiver, before hissing at the slight sting as Darius nips it, his anger filling the room.

“Leave it, someone will clean it up. As for what I just walked in on, little wolf,” he growls low, pressing himself into me so I can feel all of him. “I think we need to have a discussion about why you were sitting in the lap of another fucking male.” He moves his lips from my ear to my shoulder, biting down through the fabric of my t-shirt hard enough to make me whimper. “But that will have to come later, and it will come, Rhea.”

He spins us, his grip on my neck guiding me out the door and down the hallway. “He’s like a brother to me, Darius, you can’t—“

“Quiet. Not now.” It’s a command, his voice dripping with it and I know now isn’t the time to push him. I walk down the hall in silence, turning down the winding hallways until we reach the end of one.

Darius opens the door and shoves me inside, still pissed at what he saw in the other room. His scent wraps around me along with traces of mine, and I wonder why he brought me to his bedroom. I spin, about to ask him when I see him closing the door, him on the other side. I move toward it, grabbing the handle. I pull but the door doesn’t open.

“Darius,” I whisper hiss. Wondering what in the Gods he’s doing.

“I’ll come back when they are gone,” he tells me through the door, his voice slightly muffled.

“I’m not staying in here on my own, where are the others?” I ask, panic rising within me.

“Safe,” is all he says, and then I hear his footsteps retreating.

“Darius!” I shout, banging on the door but he doesn’t reply. “Bastard,” I growl, and then call on my power to break the fucker down. Mist like strands reach the door, trying to force it open but nothing happens. “That fucker.” My breathing picks up and I lean back against the door, my heart beating out of control. Runa whimpers inside of me.

Shit.

What if Charles does something? What if he hurts someone and then finds my pack here?



What if Darius has lied all along and sides with Charles and tells him?

No. No, we are past that.

*Trust*, I remind myself. We made a blood oath to secure that. To put my mind at ease that he wouldn't intentionally do something to hurt me. I look down at his bite mark on my forearm, a reminder that he made an oath to me. It gives off a subtle violet glow, like it's reminding me that he wouldn't put me in danger. And after everything he's said and revealed to me lately... no, he wouldn't do that to me, I'm sure of it.

But that doesn't include the rest of my pack.

*You are mine, I have a responsibility to protect you from any threat that isn't me. Your pack is an extension of you, so they will also be protected as long as you are.*

Remembering what he once said settles me, because he has stuck to that, especially when I wasn't under his protection.

I rub my hand down my face. Darius hates the Highers as much as I do now. He wants Charles's head on a pike. I need to remember that.

My eyes move to the door I haven't been through yet, and I walk toward it, picking up the last carving I did, curious what's on the other side. It opens to a large sitting and dining area, and I kick myself for not coming in here when Darius last locked me in the room. Beige walls and dark flooring give it a more neutral feel than the dark of his bedroom, and I instantly like it. I go over to the floor to ceiling windows and

peer out. I can see the willow trees from here where Darius and I try to coax Runa out, and then further back I can see the same mountains in the distance like I could if I were on the balcony. I sit on the floor and lean my head on the window, waiting as the sun shines down on a lake further east, the water glistening in the light.

It's hard to believe I'm in the position I am right now. My cozy life at Eridian is gone. The Highers know I'm alive and the most deadly one could be right beneath my feet for all I know, right now. My pack is scattered to Gods knows where, and we are uncovering more devious acts the Highers and the Elites have committed.

Anything is a lie at what they portray, you can't trust any of them. The fact we are in a keep full of Elites that could come and stab any of us in the back at any moment doesn't help my sleep whatsoever. The constant worry of some of them coming to this wing and spotting one of us is terrifying. Then there is Sarah. That's probably why Charles is here, to let Darius know she's missing. I doubt Darius thinks Charles is stupid enough to not suspect something's going on. Damian and Zaide spoke with my aunt Selena and took her away from home. My aunt would have told them that when they realized Sarah was missing.

Darius knew it would come. That he would be questioned about his Elites' presence there and that Damian and Zaide would be questioned. I have to trust they know what they are doing.

I just hope Darius can appease Charles enough to get him to leave. We can't face him right now, even though I want nothing more than to go down and rip him to shreds. To demand he give me back Kade and tell me where my other pack members are, along with those he has stolen.

Who knows how many Elites are on his side inside the keep that will turn on their Alpha though. Darius is strong, but against Charles and how ever many Elites? It's a death sentence. No. We can't attack now. If Charles suspects anything, he will have them moved somewhere else. I'm sure of it.

And then he will turn on us.

He's Higher Charles for a reason, more powerful than the rest, yet no one knows the extent of his power. Just that it's strong.

I shiver at the memories forcing themselves into my mind, of the way he used some of that power on me.

I remember my blood slowing in my body. Every pump of my heart driving pain through my ribs that stole my breath. He also likes fire, lots and lots of fire. The bottom of my feet will attest to that. Though his fire isn't normal.

I get up and pace the length of the room. Back and forth, back and forth. Shaking my arms out, I try to banish the reminders that my body will never look the same unless I spell it to do so. That I will always have the reminder of what they put me through.

Never escaping, never leaving. Just, always there.

I pass the windows again, but instantly stop, clutching the carving of a lilk tree. My heart beats erratically as I press my face to the glass and look far out into the distance. Black dots emerge. There has to be hundreds of them scattered over the grassy hills there. I press my palm to the window, swallowing hard as more and more come into view.

Then I realize exactly what it is.

Rogures.

So, so many of them.

My heart aches knowing that there will soon be an attack on a village somewhere and it will extinguish so many lives.

And all I am able to do is nothing.

Just watch as they move and pray to Zahariss that whoever those rogures come across, they run.

All they can do is run.

# Forty One

DARIUS

I make my way down the stairs after grabbing a quick shower, making sure Rhea's scent is completely washed off. I loathe it.

Heading to the main hall where I know Charles will be waiting for me, I steel myself for his presence. Maverick came and informed me that Charles ported to Vokheim Keep with some of his guards and Maize, just moments before I went looking for Rhea. I knew he would come eventually with what he said to me when we last spoke. I just didn't think it would be this soon.

Leo waits for me at the entrance to the hall and gives me a small nod, his jaw clenching, letting me know he's pissed at something. No doubt Charles has run his mouth. He opens the large, double doors and moves to the side to let me pass through, following behind me. My Elites sit on the bench seats of the long tables, and their chatter quickly dies down at my entrance. I walk down the middle, my boots heavy on the stone floor with every step I take.

Keeping my mask firmly in place as their Alpha, I look over the ones who are meant to be loyal to me and me alone. Yet some meet my eyes, a swirl of defiance in them and I keep a mental note to tell my brothers the names of the ones that defy me, that disrespect me by meeting my stare. I release my dominance into the space and some sit up straighter, my strength making their focus intent on my every move as I make my way down the aisle.

Charles sits at the largest table in the hall at the end of the room. It's raised on a small platform where my brothers and I sit when we hold meetings here or dine. I nearly snarl at him taking my seat at the center of the table, but now that I know what he has been doing to his own people, unbeknownst to them apart from those involved, it's even harder to keep Drax in check with his possessiveness of our place.

I walk up the two small steps to my table and stop directly in front of him as he lounges back in my seat. Maize, sitting on his left, throws a flirtatious smile at me as she leans forward to give me a view of her tits that are spilling out of her top, that I have zero interest in.

“Alpha Darius,” she purrs. My back teeth grind. “I have been waiting to see you. Come, sit.” She gestures to the empty seat next to her while I just stare blankly. When she realizes I'm not moving, she pouts and slumps, crossing her arms and looking around the room.

My eyes move to Charles. “What are you doing here? If you needed to speak to me I would have come to Wolvorn Castle.”

He takes a sip of wine, *my* wine, swirling it in his glass as he gives me a hard look over the rim. “I have news I need to share with you immediately,” is all he says as I wait for more.

He doesn't give me more, and I bite my tongue, drawing blood. Drax stands taller. “And what is this news?” I lean forward and take a small piece of bread, biting into it as I wait for his reply.

“Alpha Paul and his son Patrick left Wolvorn to go home to an empty house.”

I scrunch my brows. “That's a problem because? Did Alpha Paul's mate leave him?” I act a little interested, chewing slowly. I take another bite of the homemade bread and wait for him to continue, knowing it's the game he plays. Only he doesn't know that I now play it too.

Charles sighs and places his glass down on the table, hard. “His mate is there, that's not the problem. The problem is that Patrick's soon-to-be-mate is missing. Once again.”

“How the fuck is she missing again? We just retrieved her from Eridian a few months ago.” I throw the bread left onto the table and fold my arms, staring him down. “I cannot go on another task of hide and seek, there is too much to do.”

“You will do what I say,” Charles booms, and the room stills. You can feel the tension rising, my Elites restless while others hunger for my blood.

“Get out,” I order my Elites, barely managing to contain my fury, barely managing to not leap over this table and rip his

head off with my bare hands. My Elites rise from their seats, wasting no time to remove themselves from the hall. When they're all gone, I give Charles a warning look. "Do not come into my keep and order me to do what you say. You forget, I help you because I choose to."

He lets out a low laugh, his dark eyes cruel. "Darius, how do you think that is true? I am the ruling authority over Vrohkaria, my word is law, you know that from our last meeting. If I tell you to do something, you will. You are beneath my heel!" He slams his hands down on the table and it cracks, the wood shattering beneath his force as he stands.

I don't move. Not when pieces of wood slice my cheek and hit my body, or when the rest of the table crumbles to the ground, food and drink wasted. I feel Leo move close to me, his body tense as he waits for my word, but I give him none. I wipe my t-shirt down with my hands, getting bits of wood from it and raise my head at Charles.

"You may be Lord Higher, but you know I do not cater to anyone. I have helped you because my father asked it of me with his dying breath. I adhere to the Laws of Vrohkaria, but that is not you. Be careful, Charles, or you will lose the support of the Elites if you continue to try and make me your errand boy."

His eyes flash indigo, and I narrow my own on him, feeling warmth at my neck at my markings wanting to appear at the show of power before me. "You will not have the loyalty of the Elites for long, Darius, without my help. I already have



their families coming to me, concerned now that an Heir is Alpha of the Elites. Who do you think appeases their worries? I do. Without me, you would no longer be the Alpha of the Elites.

“I couldn’t give a fuck what people think. I am the Heir of Cazier, I am a Canaric wolf, and there is nothing that can change that, nor my position as Alpha.”

“We have already discussed how I could replace you,” he muses, and I bristle. He helps Maize up from her chair with a hand. She smiles up at him, biting her lip, and I want to snap her neck. “You will search for Sarah, you will bed Maize and produce offspring in the meantime while we look for Lasandrhea. When she is found, we will produce children with her as well, we will proceed as I demand it.” Over my dead fucking body. “You will do what you are told before I gather the Highers and make a call to position, and force you in the seat your father left you. Do you understand, Darius?” His dark eyes bore into mine, but mine are just as dark.

“You cannot force me into a seat.”

“I can and I will, it is bound by oath. There is no escaping it.” That’s what he thinks. “This is your last warning. I will not tolerate any more from you. A mating will settle the people, will help ease the rebellion that they seem to think will change anything. Then we can once again focus on the bigger problem. Ending the rogures.” He walks forward, leaving Maize behind the table and stopping when he’s next to me. “I will be talking to the Elites that were at the Kazari pack the

day Sarah disappeared and you will do as I require straight away.” I clench my jaw. “You are pulling away, Darius, don’t think I can’t see it. I’m busy, not blind, and I will find out what has made you this way and crush it, to remind you who you adhere to.” He walks away without another word. I take a few deep breaths, feeling the rush of power that wants to escape at my feet.

“Darius,” Maize purrs. Her voice grates on me, like knives peeling my flesh. “This mating will be a blessing, you will see. I do hope we can try... a lot.” I step away and she moves closer. Leo clears his throat and my head swings his way.

“I’ll leave you to it then,” Leo says, glaring at Maize before he walks down the hall.

“Go upstairs, third room on the right and *no* further. I’ll join you shortly.” She smiles, all teeth, and arches her back a little.

She does nothing for me, absolutely nothing.

“Of course, Alpha Darius, I will be eagerly waiting.” She runs a finger down my arm as she passes, and I want to break them as revulsion spears through me.

I know Charles said he wanted us to mate, to create pups to put the people at ease. To make it known that I, the Heir of Cazier, have settled down and it will make the people think I’m not dangerous.

He’s wrong.

I will always be dangerous to those that hurt mine, to those that hurt the people.

And the Highers and Maize are those people.

As soon as the door to the hall closes, and Maize does as she has been told, my power explodes and the room shakes with its magic as I growl loud, staring at the floor. Black mist swirls around my ankles, rising up my entire body like a whirlwind. Bits of wood flow into the strength of it, faster and faster until a blast of power releases from me, sending those pieces of wood flying out in different directions and crashing into the walls.

“Motherfucker,” I growl, my breathing rapid. I clench my fists, squeezing and releasing. The mist surrounding me spins widely, and I let it free as it twines. Strands lash out, and all I can see is complete darkness for a second before I hear Leo.

“Darius, brother. Calm down,” he calls, and I suck in a breath as Drax growls low. I breath deep a few times before I gain control, knowing there is something I need to do. My magic comes to a stop and I recall it, letting it sink into my body as Drax growls and snarls within me. “What are you going to do?” Leo asks, tentatively coming to stand in front of me. “Do you think maybe you should go and find another mate to give us more time? We need to find those missing and where they have been hidden.”

“The last thing I want is to fucking mate another, Leo,” I tell him, looking down at my arm and the mark where Rhea’s bite is. It’s concealed to everyone else but me and her, unless I allow it. “I don’t have time to be fucking around with this shit.”

“What if we find someone and just pretend you’re going to produce an Heir?”

“That will require mating bites, I can’t do that,” I sigh, looking around at the mess of the hall. Plus, I don’t think she would survive long if my little wolf got a hold of her.

I feel Leo’s stare bore into the side of my face. “Then what do we do?”

I move toward the exit. “We find the location where he’s keeping the wolves and we end it. We’re running out of time where he is concerned.” I pause and look at him. “Come to the basement, then I will deal with the bitch upstairs.”

Leo sighs but follows me anyway.

Closing the basement door behind me, Damian rests against the wall, his eyes full of concern. I brush it off as I walk down the hallway, Damian and Leo following. I roll my shoulders as I reach the bottom of the stairs, looking up at them and taking a deep breath. Drax’s hackles rise, wanting to tear out of my skin and rip Maize apart, knowing she’s just above, waiting for me.

But she is no threat to Rhea. He doesn’t understand that as my magic pores out from my body, a mist shadowing my skin.

*Calm* I say to him, and he snarls so forcefully that my teeth bare.

I didn’t expect Charles to come here, or to bring Maize.

Not now, not yet.

The threat of what Charles said hangs heavy over my head when we last spoke, of what he said he would do to my men and Kade.

Stretching my neck to the side, I head up the stairs. Dread settles inside of me, and I know whatever happens in that room, it will change the course going forward.

I don't know how fast things will change, if I can hide it, if I can make it work to where no one knows for a time until we get things sorted enough here.

But I have to try and do something to give me more time until the unknown breaks loose.

Every step I take, my shoulders stiffen in resolve.

A scream suddenly sounds from up the stairs, and my head snaps to it as Leo and Damian are instantly at my side. I'm rushing up the stairs in the next second, unsure of who that was, but worry very much at the forefront of my mind.

No one should be up there apart from Maize, and Rhea is locked in our room with my magic, far away from where I sent Maize.

We take the steps two at a time, pausing at the top as silence descends. I tilt my head, trying to listen to where that scream came from.

A gurgle reaches my ears, and I'm walking down the hallway in the next moment. Rounding a corner, the smell of blood hits me, and unease fills me.

I sense Damian and Leo tensing at my back as we move further down, following the scent of blood. I spot an open door to my left, the one where I sent Maize, and I look over my shoulder to them and nod in its direction. My blade is in my hand in the next second, wondering who the blood is from and if someone else came up here without my permission.

Another gurgle, and then nothing.

I reach the entrance to the bedroom and pull up short, my eyes taking in the scene before me.

“Fuck.”

## Forty Two

RHEA

### *Before*

I growl and pace, my fury and nervousness shaking around inside of me at the image of those rogues in the distance, at Charles's presence within the keep.

I can't stay in this room, I can't shake the feeling that something is wrong.

I walk over to the table next to the bed and pick up the new lesia flower there, after Darius replaced the last one. I inhale its scent, trying to calm myself but it doesn't work. Putting it back in the glass carefully, I look at the door and growl before walking over to it.

I ease my mind and feel for the power inside myself, the power that was gifted to me by a God. Darius cannot keep me in here.

I place a palm on the door, feeling Darius magic locking it tight. I will my power to move to my palm, and the call works.

It seeps out of me and to the door, feeling around Darius's magic, trying to slip through a crack. When I find none, I close my eyes and push harder, forcing more into the wood until a tiny crack in the seal reveals itself. I punch my magic into it, getting beneath and forcing Darius's magic away from the surface. Sweat beads at the back of my neck, and my arm shakes with trying to stay in control, but I press on.

A small burst of power hits my face like a gentle breeze, and I open my eyes, smiling that I managed to release it. I take a breath and pull down the handle, popping my head out into the hallway. I'm not sure what I was expecting to find, but it's empty.

Walking out the room and down the hallway with the same feeling of dread laying heavy in my stomach, I open my senses and try to listen out for anything. But all is quiet.

I'm not sure where Charles would be, I've only ever been in this wing and the gardens out the back. The rest of the Elites still don't even know we are here, so we have been secluded to this part of the keep. Turning down another hallway, I hear a door close, a barely-there sound, but I hear it nonetheless.

Who was that?

Freezing for a moment, I wait for anything else. When nothing comes, I creep on light feet toward where I heard the sound. Rounding a corner, I tilt my head when I hear what sounds like shuffling from one of the rooms further down. Swallowing, I take small steps, wondering if one of my pack is in there, and my eagerness at hopefully seeing one of them has



me quickening my steps. When a rustle of something reaches my ears, I pause in front of the door.

I reach for the handle when a scent assaults me.

My brows furrow, and my lips peel back. The scent is familiar in a way that I can't pinpoint. One thing is for sure, it isn't one of my pack members, and I don't like it.

A breathy sigh comes next, a pitch to the tone that is female, and my eyes glare holes into the door.

Without thought, I'm pushing the door open. It swings back against the wall with a *bang*, and the figure in front of me turns, a smile on her all too familiar lips as the strap on the left side of her dress slips down her arm.

As soon as she sees me, she freezes, her eyes wide as mine blink.

"Maize?" I growl, not sure I believe what I'm seeing.

"What the fuck are *you* doing here?!" she demands, lifting her palms as her magic comes to it, azure in color.

I look around the room. No one else is in here, and I don't hear anyone else coming. What is she doing in here? I look down at the dress she's wearing as rage crashes to the surface. It's barely a scrap of material, a slit up one side high enough to see she's not even wearing any underwear. My eyes track up the body of the dress, the dip low at her chest, her boobs barely being held in.

She moves back a step, and my eyes go to the bed. That's where her underwear went. She has it placed in the center, and

I see a damp path there. My back teeth grind as my glare settles back on her.

“What are you doing?” I growl, taking a step into the door. Memories of her being near Kade flowing through me. She hurt him.

“You shouldn’t be here!” she shouts, her magic spinning in a ball wildly. “How did you even get in here?”

“I’m right where I should be.” My hands ball into fists, and I make sure to listen for any other signs of life. In case this is some sort of trap. Why is she in this wing?

“Does Darius know you are here?” she asks, her eyes looking over my shoulder. She smirks. “Oh, isn’t this lovely. I can deliver you to him as a mating gift.”

My mind stutters. “What did you just say?”

“Oh, you poor thing,” she mocks. “You think Darius, the Alpha of the Elites, would continue slumming it with you?” She laughs, the sound cruel. “You are a traitor, he wouldn’t want to see you. Well actually, he would, he would love to whip you some more.” I flinch, but I don’t even feel it, the word *mating* repeating over and over again. “I watched you, you know,” she says, a smug smile on her lips and I tilt my head at her, but it doesn’t feel like it’s me. It feels like something else is slowly taking over my body. “I think you saw me at one point, tried to follow me to see, but you’re too stupid to look up in the trees.” My mind goes back to the time I asked Josh where the Elites were in the Eridian forest, so sure I saw someone, and I did, her. She frowns. “I feel so bad

for my Darius having to put up with you, you were like a wanton whore with him, rubbing yourself on him like the desperate bitch you are,” Maize continues as I feel the warmth of my markings as they appear on my face. Maize raises her hands. “Maybe after I restrain you, tie you to a chair as Darius finally mates with me and makes me fully his...”

His?

I look to the bad, and then back to Maize, the move feels slow, like moving through a slog. The rage inside of me, however, is fast. It’s like a volcano ready to bust, and when Maize’s mouth continues to move, a smirk upon her face. My eyes once more go back to the bed, to her underwear, then to her dress, her words.

“... He will fuck me so good, and you can watch...” I don’t hear anything else, because I’m moving. The thought of this witch touching hm, of Darius fucking her... Does he know she’s here? Does he plan to fuck her on this bed.

That volcano just erupted.

My magic comes to my palms and I send out a ball straight to her. She deflects it with her own, shock flashing across her face before anger overtakes her.

She’s angry? She hasn’t seen anything yet. She was protected behind the Highers’ barrier last time, here, she is out in the open.

Both of her hands push out at me, and I’m sent through the air, caught off guard. My back connects with the wall, and I

know it should hurt, but I don't feel it. I rise to my feet and go at her again as she cackles. A shard formed from ice comes at me next, and I dash to the side of the room, knowing it scraped against the top of my arm. Still I move forward. My magic whirls inside of me, angry and wanting to be let out, and I let it. Strands of my power burst from my body, whipping out of my hands as I reach her and grab her by the throat. she screams, her eyes becoming bloodshot as I squeeze harder and my strands begin to pierce her skin. There is no rhythm to my magic, no control of thought over their placement against her body. All I can see in my head is two bodies on the bed. One of them belonging to me, the other belonging to no one.

Darius belongs to me, and I, him. No one else touches him in that way, has him in that way.

How dare she even utter the words.

A growl I didn't know I was capable of, rising from my throat as Runa echoes it. Throwing Maize off to the side, I look down at her as I take a step toward, feeling a sting at my side. I look down. An ice shard protrudes just under my ribs, sticking out as my blood leaks around it. I grip it in my hand, my eyes locking with Maize as I pull it out. It's in the way. She stares at me in horror as my magic is pulled back toward me, and I feel it traveling within me, rushing to the area where I'm hurt.

She casts her hands, and in the next second, she's on her feet with a blade made of ice.

I move toward her.

“Kade enjoys my company.” She smiles, teeth bloodied. I stop short at that name, my blood that was boiling instantly turning cold. “He’s such a lost pup,” she pouts. “Someone had to take care of him... make him see the error of his ways. Make him scream.”

I’m on her again, ducking under her blade as she swings, and I send us crashing to the floor. I grapple with her blade, my hand coming to her wrist to pin it down. A blast of her power hits me in the stomach, and I cough, blood splattering from my lips. I growl and pin her other wrist, my eyes hard. I try to call my magic to restrain her, but it’s solely focusing on the damage to my side.

“Where is he?” I snarl, squeezing her wrist so hard her bones creak.

She laughs. “At Wolvorn Castle, where else would he be. He needs to be trained properly, under the guidance of the Highers, and me of course.”

“What have you done to him?” She wiggles beneath me, laughing. “Tell me!”

She spits in my face. “Darius will not be happy you are here, and he will not be happy when he sees what you have done to me.” She licks her lips. “He’s going to be ferocious after he captures you, and I will sooth him with my body. I will make sure he is relaxed and where he should have been all along. Inside of me, for the rest of our lives while you are used as the Highers pawn, a brood mare, squatting out babies one after the other. I’ll come and visit you sometimes, bring Kade along. In

fact, Kade can also father a child from you one day, it is what is to be expected of him.” I’m going to be sick. “But most of all, I will come and see you when my belly is full with the Alpha of the Elites’s seed. Showing you what you can never have, what I see you desire within those desperate eyes.” I snap my teeth at her and she cackles. “I saw the way you looked at him in Eridian, you poor unlovable fool. You can never be what he needs. No, I shall be the one to sate his thirst, his hunger. I am the only one able to satisfy him, and the Highers know that, so I will have him while you torture yourself with images of me and him together after I make you watch it all.”

I blink.

Then I blink again.

A tinge covers my vision, and I feel my body shaking. Runa growls so deeply that I’m sure it escapes my lips as fear bleeds into Maize’s eyes. “He is not yours to have,” I growl down at her.

She smirks, and I feel her magic once again coming from her hands. Cold instantly hits my palms, then my fingers. So cold that it burns. Ice begins to cover the backs of my hands, and I try to remove them from Maize wrists, but it’s no use, I’m frozen to her. My teeth start chattering, my body shivering as my eyes focus back to her as she speaks.

Her smile is slimy. “Oh but he is mine, Lord Higher has decided, and Darius agreed.”

He agreed? He wouldn’t, he couldn’t have.

My head spins, the pain in my hands now traveling up to the middle of my forearms as the ice spreads. I watch as it reaches the center, covering my markings along that arm. When it covers up the spot in the middle. That's when I feel something I haven't felt before.

A wildness. A catalyst.

A savagery that I instantly cater to.

I lunge forward, and my teeth are in her neck in the next second. She screams, and I bite down hard, growling and snarling as her blood spills into my mouth. I rip and shred, carve and slaughter at her neck as she tries to fight me off. I'm vaguely aware of her wiggling frantically beneath me, vaguely aware that the ice she has on my body is now moving along my arms and quickly spreading up to my own neck.

I still don't stop.

I take a chunk of her shredded flesh and pull back, taking it with me. It falls from my mouth and I go back, just catching Maize's pain filled face as I go to the other side. My teeth are back in her skin, and this time I maw and bite my way deeper as she screams.

She will not have him.

She will not touch him..

He is mine.

Mine.

Mine.

Mine.

Not being able to get a hold of the loose skin on her neck anymore, I go for her shoulder, chomping down on anything I can reach. I don't stop, can't stop as Runa backs me up within me, growling low in encouragement at the possible threat before us.

In the back of my mind, I know I should stop, ask her about Kade, force her to tell me how I can get him out of there, force her to help me even if I have to torture her to get my answers.

But the thought of her and Darius together, that she is here for that which he agreed to...

My instincts have taken over to get rid of the threat, and I couldn't wrangle for any control even if I tried.

So I don't try and control my actions, I wield them.

And I won't stop until I'm satisfied that the prey I have beneath me stops breathing.



# Forty Three

DARIUS

Now

Rhea stands there, the side of her body in view. Blood coats her in places, and I'm close enough to smell some of her blood is tinging the air. I step forward, not even looking down at the body before her yet as I need to see where she is injured, need to see where she is hurt.

I see a few cuts and scrapes, and my blood boils inside of me, a rage so quick and strong. My Heir markings come alight, and I know my eyes have changed. I growl, it's low and deep, hating the thought of her hurt.

Rhea's head snaps my way, a snarl on her face. She's shaking, her own Heir markings appearing because of mine, and that calms me somewhat. The connection thrums between us, an invisible rope twining with each other and I take a step forward.

She bares her teeth, her hands clenching into fists at her side as she turns toward us. Blue strands appear around her knuckles, whipping around wildly and I pause, tilting my head at them. My own power reacts, ready just below the surface.

Leo and Damian release curses.

She has blood covering her mouth and neck, the red painting her skin. It flows down her t-shirt, splotches and splatters of it, and I wonder how much of it is hers.

The thought makes me growl again.

I take another step forward, then another, all the while my little wolf is shaking with rage. When I step through the open doorway, I turn my head to the body on the floor, her eyes dull and open. My brows furrow.

I go to take one more step into the room when Rhea growls her warning.

My head snaps her way, my dominance coming out so the aura fills the hallway and the room. Her's meets mine, but rather than a clash, it melds together, creating something that is ours.

I look over her, at her markings pulsing, at the way her eyes fill with black specks that I haven't seen since Wolvorn Castle that first time.

The body on the floor twitches, and I pull my eyes away to look at it again.

“Fuck,” Damian says, going to move past me.

Rhea lets out a deep snarl, and my hand reaches out, gripping Damian by the arm as she watches his every move, turning to stand in front of her prey, ready to not let him near.

“Go,” I tell him. “And you too, Leo, I’ll handle this.”

“She fucking killed her,” Leo hisses. “When this reaches the Highers...”

“I said go. Do not make me hurt you to get you away from her.” They hesitate, but they do as I’ve ordered and leave me alone with the female who has fury in her eyes.

When I hear their footsteps retreating, knowing they are away from here, I move into the room and close the door, never turning my back on her.

She watches me, her eyes the only thing tracking me as I move to the center of the room.

“Did you kill a witch, little wolf?” I ask, once again trailing my eyes over her blood soaked body. She looks like a warrior, a warrior that took out a Highers’ witch and survived.

My cock fills at the sight, even though anger settles beneath my skin. How the fuck did she get out of our room?

I take another step toward her, and she snarls at me this time, her eyes wild, her chest heaving. I’m not the only one angry it seems.

I tilt my head at her, licking my lips. “You want to fight?” I ask her, and her hands ball into fists. “What has got my little wolf so worked up, hmm?”

She says nothing.

Fine.

I take another step forward, ignoring her warning growls and snarls. She doesn't scare me, doesn't realize that all she is doing is turning me on.

A deep *purr* comes from within me when I look her over. She's not going to talk this out right now in this state. I don't know what Maize said to her, if she knows what the witch was here for. Her eyes tell me she knows though. Her dominance pulses off her, and I let mine greet it again, letting her know that there is something just as equal in this room with her.

Her growls get more violent, and an unknown breeze passes through the room. I smile.

I rush her, my arms gripping hers as she kicks out at me. There is no coordination to her attacks, no thought or reason at all. She snarls and growls, twisting and kicking and baring her teeth.

She's wild.

I spin her, pushing her toward the bed. She struggles, but I keep a firm hold. Her head flies forward, and her teeth lodge in my shoulder. I groan before letting a chuckle release from me. Ahh, so that's what she did. My little wolf tore at Maize's throat until she was no more.

Gods, I couldn't be fucking harder.

We fall to the bed, her legs around my waist, and I'm unable to stop the rock of my hips, letting her know exactly what I

think about what she did in here. My hands move down to her wrists, and I pin them at the sides of her head. She snarls into my skin. I rip her free of my shoulder, feeling my skin split as I hover above her. She snaps her teeth at me, her eyes full of rage and I smirk down at her.

“Look at you,” I purr. “So feisty, so violent.” I rock into her again, and her thighs squeeze my waist. “Fuck. You have no idea what you look like right now.” Moving her wrists into one hand, calling some of my magic to secure my hold, my other hand goes to her throat. She snaps at it, wanting to bite, but I evade her teeth and grip her tightly. When she still doesn’t settle, I squeeze. A wheezing breath comes with a growl next. “You have caused a problem, little wolf.” I tell her, unsure if my words are even sinking in. “You just sped up the timeline, and that is something we agreed not to do.” She wiggles beneath me, but all it does is cause friction on my cock. “Keep doing that.”

“Fuck you,” she breaths.

I laugh, but it’s not a nice sound. “What the fuck do you think you are doing, putting your self in danger like that.” She goes to reply, but I apply more pressure to her throat. “No,” I growl down at her. “I don’t know how you got out of our room, but going after a Higher’s witch? Are you out of your mind!” I shout in her face, my control slipping.

She could have been seriously hurt, she could have been fucking killed!

“You do not have full control over your magic, you have no weapons on you, and even though I’m hard as a fucking rock thinking about how you tore into her with your teeth...” I take a deep breath, willing for some patience, but I find none. “Do you have any idea what would have happened if she had killed you?”

“You let her in here to fuck her,” she croaks out, her eyes flashing. Does she really think I would touch another?

I stare at her for a moment, and then I’m dragging her off the bed. I let go of her wrists and spin her to face the wall. Her palms slap against it, and I hold them there with my magic. I’m taking her shorts off in the next second, and then I bring my hand down on her ass.

She arches her back, trying to escape the sting, but I do it again. Then again and again. “I would have fucking tore this keep down If you had died,” I tell her, my tone low and dangerous just thinking about it. “I would have destroyed anything and everything near me. I wouldn’t care who it was, who was near. The thought of you not being here...” I growl and slap her ass again. She whimpers, squirming where she stands, but she’s at my mercy. “I have been without you for months, I won’t be without you for a lifetime.”

I rip her panties off of her, feeling between her legs and groan at the wetness that I feel there. I gather some and bring it to my lips, closing my eyes at the taste of her. Reaching a hand around to the front of her throat, I gather some of the blood there and bring it in front of her to see.

“Look at this,” I tell her. “I’m going to fuck you with the enemy’s blood on both of our hands.” She snarls. “You don’t like that?” She says nothing, and I think for a moment. “You don’t like her blood on me?” She hesitates, but then shakes her head. “Tough shit, little wolf. You made her bleed, and the enemy’s blood is ours. You don’t do things on your own anymore, you have me now. And me fucking you with that bitch’s blood on both of us? Fuck, Rhea, I could come right now at the thought of your little teeth tearing into her.” I bring myself out and stroke a hand down my cock. I have to have her. Now. I tilt her hips and then I’m inside of her in a brutal thrust. Rhea screams, her hands clenching against the wall as I pull back and thrust forward again. “That’s it,” I purr. “Feel what you do to me, how hard you make me. Feel how much I fucking *crave* you.”

She moans, going on her tiptoes and my hand is in her hair, yanking her head back so she can look at me for what I have to say next.

“I would never fucking touch her.” She glares. “I could never touch her. The thought of it makes me sick, just like the thought of you touching another does the same. That’s what this is, isn’t it? Why you did what you did?” She snarls, and I snap my hips forward, drawing a moan from her. “Fuck, you’re squeezing me so good.” She whimpers, pushing back against me. “Good girl,” I groan, pushing her head forward and nipping at the nape of her neck.

She pulses around me, and I bring my other hand around, circling her clit. The moan she lets out has my balls tightening,

and my thrusts speed up. The sound of our skin slapping together, the harsh sound letting me know I'm not taking it easy on her. She doesn't want me to right now, and I couldn't even if I tried.

She feels out of control, scared that she can't calm down. I feel it in the air, feel it like her soul is telling mine. So I will give her this, fuck her until she can't move, letting me bring her back from her fury that she has no need for.

Letting her know that I will be here to catch her if she falls, no matter what the fall looks like.

"You are mine," she says on a moan as my hips snap forward, faltering for a moment at her words. "She isn't allowed to have you, and you were going to let her!"

"It gets me hard that you are possessive of me, little wolf, but I don't want anyone touching me like that. Only you." I move my fingers down, feeling her stretching around my cock. "You are so fucking wet for me, it's dripping off my cock." She whimpers. "You like that, don't you? The thought of your scent on me, that anyone else close enough to my cock would know that this doesn't belong to them." She growls in agreement, and I laugh. "Only you, little wolf," I say, punching my hips forward and my fingers go back to her clit. She clenches around me. "I was never going to let her touch me, no matter the consequences of that. Now come on my cock and coat it. Let it sink into me and stay there, right where it should be." Her back arches as her pussy contracts. I feel a surge of wetness on my cock, dripping from her every time I



pull my hips back as she comes. “Fuck.” My hips stutter, and then I’m gripping her waist, pinning her to me as I give her what she really wants, even though I’m sure she doesn’t really know why she wants it. But I do, I know my instincts and I know hers.

My eyes close, and my head tilts back as some of the tension releases from my body as I paint her insides. Rhea slumps forward, her legs shaking, and I quickly pull out of her and lift her in my arms. I leave the room, taking the hallways until we reach our bedroom. Laying her down on the bed, I spread her legs, not done with her yet in the slightest. As soon as my cock is back inside of her, her eyes open, connecting with mine.

My hand goes to her throat again, ready to restrain her in case she tries to get to my throat, but her eyes are clear now, and her markings receded.

I lazily pump in and out of her. “Are you hurt?” She shakes her head, but I lean back on my knees and look her over. I rip her t-shirt down the middle, she grumbles, but I ignore her. She has a slice in her arm, and a wound near her ribs. I growl as I put my hand to it, never stopping as I continue moving my hips back and forth. “You are hurt.” I feel her magic pulse beneath my hand, my eyes flicking up to hers as my brows furrow. She’s healing.

I’m still pissed she put herself in danger, but to know that her magic is healing her at a faster rate than having a wolf does, calms me.

She moans, her eyes rolling into her head and I lean back down over her, changing the angle. She sucks in a breath, and I nip at her jaw as her hands come to my shoulders. I haven't even undressed.

“I'm going to fuck you all night. That way, you will know that I don't need to go anywhere else. That I don't *want* to go anywhere else. It's always you, Rhea.” She whines as I draw her legs around my waist, pulling her closer by her ass to get deeper. “Good girl,” I tell her as she comes again. I watch her as she does, possessiveness rising within me, never wanting anyone to see her like this, and they won't. I will fucking kill them.

Just like she killed Maize.

When she comes down, I'm back on my knees and pulling her in my lap. I raise her up and down with my hands on her ass, squeezing and kneading the flesh. She hisses, probably from me smacking her ass before, but she doesn't tell me to stop. My mouth comes down on her, needing to taste her, and she opens instantly, letting me in. My chest rumbles in approval as our tongues tangle together, and she echoes it, all the while I'm dropping her back down on my cock. She moans into my mouth, and I devour the sound, bouncing her harder. She pulls back on a gasp, her pussy tightens around me again and I groan, my grip tuning bruising. She wraps her arms around my neck, burying her face there as she bites down.

My release spills inside of her, and I can feel the smirk she's hiding, knowing she just caused me to come quicker than I

wanted.

Does my little wolf think she has the upper hand?

I throw her down and hover above her, looking at the lightness in her eyes and pausing for a moment to take it in.

When she wiggles on my cock, I smirk. “Playtime starts now, and when I’m done, you will be waking up with my cock still inside of you.”

## Forty Four

RHEA

I glare at Darius as he comes out of the bathroom, steam billowing behind him as he rubs his hair with a towel. He's fully dressed, and I suddenly realize that I haven't once seen him fully naked since my heat.

He notices my glaring eyes, roaming before he meets my eyes. "Morning, little wolf." He smirks down at me, and my anger spikes.

"Don't 'morning little wolf' me, you prick." I walk over to him and kick him in the shin. I'm barefoot, so I doubt it does anything. "Don't you ever fucking lock me in a room again." The soreness between my thighs has me shifting on my feet, and Darius eyes the movement, a gleam to his eyes.

"Are you sore?" I huff. "Ahh, sore but satisfied," he rumbles. "Good." Damn male.

I move over to the bed and sit on the edge, everything coming back to me from last night. Darius was true to his word and didn't let me rest all night until I passed out, until I

woke up with his cock still inside of me. I rub a hand against my mouth.

I killed Maize.

I didn't control myself and get information out of her, I didn't ask about Kade.

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

"Hey." Darius is in front of me now, looking down at me with worry in his eyes. "It doesn't matter."

"It does matter. Gods, what did I do?" I bring my hands up to cover my face. I was reckless, I shouldn't have killed her and kept her alive. She could have been my chance to get Kade, to find out if she knows where the rest of my pack are. But I was too far gone with thinking about her and Darius together, about them...mating.

I couldn't stop the rage, the need to end her.

Hands grab my own, removing them from my face as Darius crouches before me. "Would it have been better that Maize was still alive, yes. Would it have been better to interrogate her to gather information, also yes. But, little wolf, when I sent her up to that room." I tense, and he reaches for my thighs, squeezing them. "I was going to do those things anyway." My brows furrow, and he sighs. "I was ordered by the Highers to mate with her." A growl bursts free from my throat before I can stop it. He chuckles, I glare. "I agreed at that moment, because if I didn't people would get hurt."

"Who?" I whisper. He says nothing. "Who, Darius?"

He sighs. “My men, and Kade.” My heart lodges in my throat. They are hurting Kade, my fear of that now a reality. And his men once again, held over him to keep him in line. I swallow roughly as Darius stokes down my thighs. “I didn’t want that, so I agreed. I didn’t expect Charles to turn up here, or Maize to be with him to mate. I told her to come up here to this room where I planned to get as much information out of her, under the guise of eventually mating with her. That was *never* going to happen,” he says forcefully, needing me to hear him. I look into his eyes and see no lies there, only see the truth. But is he just saying this? Can I trust his words? “Believe me, little wolf, I wouldn’t touch her like that. Just like I told you.” I think back to how he helped me calm down. I think back to his reaction to her death. He wasn’t angry, only angry that I put myself in danger. I nod at him, and he releases a breath. “When I had the information from her, her head was mine, but you got there first. How did you get out of our room?”

“I undid your power.”

His jaw ticks. “Smart. Dangerous, but smart.”

“What happened, tell me everything.” My hands clench in my lap

“Charles knows Sarah is missing. He wants me to look for her again, that I have no choice but to do so. He knows I’m pulling away from him, from his authority, but I don’t think he knows why.” That’s good, at least. “He keeps threatening to make me a Higher, to take a seat.”

“Wouldn’t being a Higher help us with what we are trying to do?” I ask.

He thinks for a moment. “No. I would be bound to Charles if I became a Higher. I would be in an oath to protect him, to not harm him. Which defeats the point of what we are trying to do. I also don’t want to become one, as I’ve told you. Even more so now after finding out that my father was involved with whatever Charles is doing. What they are *all* doing.” His eyes darken, rage brimming underneath the surface of his skin. “My father, what did he do?”

I look away. I don’t think this is the time for this conversation.

“Rhea, tell me.”

“It will do no good, Dar.”

“I’ve been thinking around over and over in my head. I’ll go mad at this point in wondering.” His hand on my chin brings my face toward his. He rubs his nose against mine. “I want to know, I have to know.”

“There are more important things to—“

“Nothing is more important right now,” he says, and my eyes widen at the intensity of his words. He pushes me back against the bed and crawls over me, slotting himself between my thighs. He runs a hand through my hair, playing with the strands as he waits for me to speak. My hands tentatively come up to his sides, laying them against his ribs over his t-

shirt. We don't do this, just touch for the sake of touching unless we are fucking.

It feels like he needs it now though, maybe I do too.

"Tell me," he says gently, and it's with that gentleness that I crave.

"He came a few years after I was captured," I begin. "I'm not sure, I didn't really keep track of time. I didn't know how, but I think it had not long before been my tenth birthday. They used to torment me every birthday. He came with Patrick and I thought..." I trail off, my head moving to the side to avoid his eyes. He grips my chin and pulls me back, his eyes imploring me to continue. "I thought this is it, I thought this could be my chance. That he is here to help me, to save me from my family. But he didn't." He strokes a thumb over my jaw, probably sensing the rising emotions within me. Runa comes to the surface, and I feel Darius's wolf coming closer beneath his skin. "He unlocked my cage and said everything would be okay, so I went willingly to him. But as soon as I stood from my cage, he laughed, shoved me toward the table in the room and started barking orders at the others that were there." Power slides out of Darius instantly, but I'm not frightened. Black mist like smoke curls around him and flows onto me, roaming, reassuring. I take a deep breath and move my own below the surface, greeting his. He shakes with rage, and I grip on to his ribs harder. "He would be there as the others... test me. He would be in a corner, writing things down, giving instructions, laughing along with them as I would cry for my mom." A tear slips from my eye, and the room shakes with Darius's power.



“He didn’t touch me other than to place me where he wanted, but he didn’t help me, Darius. He encouraged them, just like they all do when they weren’t participating.” He closes his eyes briefly before leaning forward and rubbing his nose with mine.

I blink out of the memory of their laughter, their cruel, cruel laughter that used to ring in my ears constantly for years after I escaped. I don’t want them back.

“If I could kill him with my bare hands, Rhea, I would. Father or not, blood or not, I would do it.”

I think about everything I have found out so far concerning Darius, and I think he would. He made it possible to escape Wolvorn, he didn’t capture me in the village and took out the one who he assumed knew who I was. He hasn’t once revealed I am here to anyone and helped get Sarah back, is helping me now to make things right.

My eyes bounce between his as my brows furrow. He’s so full of anger toward his father, toward what he has done to me. I can feel his need to rip things apart, to hunt and kill like I’m the one with these feelings.

I think my enemy would destroy the lands and put it at my feet if I only asked him to.

“What happens now?” I ask, moving on from the feelings swirling around inside my chest. With Maize dead, the Highers aren’t going to like that.

He sighs. "I think we can get away with Maize being gone under the guise that she is... busy with me." I frown and he chuckles. "You know she is dead, little wolf. No need to pout."

"I'm not pouting." Am I?

He says nothing and continues. "With that, we can hopefully keep the Highers none the wiser, and continue with what we set out to do. Find those that were taken and get Kade." I nod. "In the meantime, we still need that memory crystal, and to look for the plane of the Gods."

"I don't even know where to begin," I sigh, slumping down further into the furs.

"Well, the library is a start." My ears perk up at that.

"You really have a library?" I lean up on my elbows, excitement running through me.

"Of course."

"Why haven't I seen it then?"

"We have been busy with other things. We need to lay extremely low for now, so what better time to start searching than now?"

"What kinds of books are in the library?" I ask as he pulls me to my feet.

"Many kinds." He looks over my body. "As much as I like our enemies' blood on you, you need to clean up." Our enemy. Not mine, but ours.

I look down and my nose twitches. I may want to spill the blood that has done wrong, but I don't want to bathe in it. Though looking at Darius's intense eyes on me, I don't think he minds at all.

He nods toward the bathroom. "I have some things to do and then I'll take you there."

"What things?" I wonder, and then a thought hits me. "Does it have anything to do with you sneaking off in the middle of the night?"

He pauses. "You're supposed to be asleep."

"And I wake when you are not here." I hate to admit that, but it's the truth. I feel it as soon as he leaves the room.

"I didn't think you would wake up," he murmurs quietly. "I will stay with you for the night so you can sleep."

I shake my head. "What is it that you are doing that you need to leave in the middle of the night?"

"It's something you don't need to know." I raise a brow. "Trust me, little wolf. There is no need for you to know, or I would tell you."

"But—"

The door closes behind him as he leaves, and I'm left to wonder again where he is going.

Next time, I'll find out.

# Forty Five

RHEA

I stare at the tall shelves that surround the large room. Hundreds of books and scrolls line the walls within the dark wood, making the space feel older than time. Delicate balls of light float around, their gentle glow enabling us to see. A table that could seat thirty takes up room in the middle, pens and papers decorating it as if it's frequently used.

“This is amazing, “I say to Darius at my back as we walk further into the room.

“The Highers may have their library, but so do we,” he tells me, moving off to the side toward the shelves there. A ladder is placed against them carefully, and Darius moves it to the side on some rolling mechanism.

“Humans?” I ask him, looking at the ladder.

He peaks over his shoulder at me. “They may be weak, but they invent a lot of useful things.” I nod and run my fingers over the spines of books, feeling the leather beneath my fingertips.

“Have you seen one?”

“Human?” I hum in response. “Never, they live off in the far lands to the North supposedly.”

“Isn’t that where the Demons live?” I pull out a book on Vrohkaria and flick through the pages, looking at the settlements in full color.

“They do.” I hear him walk over to me and come to a stop. His arms surround me, resting on the shelves as I continue to look through the book. “Curious about the other lands?”

I huff out a laugh. “Not really. Though I know there are many beings that walk among us, I think we have our hands full with wolves and witches.”

“That we do.”

A door opens and we both turn toward it. I gasp, the book I was holding falling to the floor. “Ellian?” I question, looking over the Omega that brought Sarah to us.

His light eyes widen for a moment before he lowers his head. “Alpha.”

I scramble to pick the book up and put it back. Stepping under Darius’s arms, I move toward him. “What are you doing here?” I look between him and Darius.

“He works for me,” Darius answers, his brows furrowed. “You know of him?”

“I...” Stopping myself before I tell him about Edward, I pick at my fingers, wondering how to answer.

“Alpha Darius kindly gave me the honor of keeping his library organized and clean many moons ago,” Ellian says, his curtain of dark hair now reaching his shoulders.

I look toward Darius. “When you called me an Omega back in The Deadlands, it was like they were beneath you, you called them weak,” I remind him. “Yet you have one working for you.”

Darius moves closer, stepping up beside me. “They are weak in strength, fragile and breakable, but that doesn’t mean they are useless. There is strength in knowledge and intelligence, in willpower and courage.” My eyes bounce between his, wondering if he means more between his words for when he called me an Omega all that time ago.

A throat clears, and our eyes unlock, moving toward Ellian again. “Is there something I can help you with Alpha Darius?” I want to ask him if he told anyone that he helped Sarah that day, if he has seen Edward at all since then. But before I can, Darius speaks.

“No, leave us.”

Ellian bows his head and leaves the room without a word, making the tension rise between the pages in here.

“So,” Darius murmurs, and I tense. “Want to tell me how you know the Omega?” I shake my head. “More secrets.”

I round on him. “You have the audacity to say that when you still have some of your own.”

His eyes dip down to my bare feet, raising them in a slow caress until he meets my eyes again. “Secrets aren’t what I would say I have with you, just knowledge you don’t need to know.”

“That’s bullshit.” He raises a brow. “Then I have knowledge you don’t need to know either.”

Darius tilts his head to the side. “Are you being childish?”

I sputter. “Excuse me?”

He starts to circle me, and I turn with his movements, not wanting him at my back. “It’s cute.” My hands clench at my sides. “Seeing you all worked up, your eyes alight with anger.”

“What is wrong with you?” I keep following him, keeping him in my sights.

“You are what’s wrong with me.” He comes to a stop, and I do the same. “If anyone else spoke to me the way you do, they would be punished for the disrespect.”

“Calling you out on your bullshit is not disrespectful.”

“Not for you, no. You’re lucky I like your fight, your attitude, and your childish pouts. Again,” he looks me up and down, “cute.” My anger rises, making my markings appear. “Now though, when you are like this?” He takes a step, his boots touching the tips of my toes. His scent greets me, and I inhale sharply as he takes a strand of my hair and plays with the ends. “You’re beautiful.” He lets go of my hair and runs his thumb over my lips. They part as he presses down, and my tongue comes out for a taste on its own accord. His eyes

darken on a grunt. “Only you can make me react the way I do to you, make my need for you ever present over anything else.” He inhales deeply, letting some of his dominance flow on a small growl. “My patience has never been tested as much when it comes to you, so, little wolf.” He takes another breath. “Stop rubbing your thighs together and looking at me with those damn eyes of yours so we can get some work done.”

Blinking at his words, I take in the color of newly sprouted grass. There is that pull again, something *other* wanting us closer, needing us closer. It feels stronger now. Instead of guiding, it’s pushing, shoving with a violence that is so hard to deny.

“Let’s see what we can find in here,” Darius says, stepping back and moving off to the shelves at the side.

Runa stretches within me, and I hide my markings, placing my hand over my forearm as I feel a pulse of magic there. I don’t need to look down and see, I can feel what is showing.

And I have to wonder, is his showing too?



“There is nothing here about a plane of the Gods. Just texts on how they would be the destruction of the lands when they went mad, Cazier mainly.”

“He was a God,” Darius says in the seat across from me. “With his power, nothing could have stopped him from getting to his mate.”



“But what changed?” I wonder aloud. “Cazier and Zahariss created the lands. Nurtured them for years upon years. What caused Cazier to go mad, and then just disappear after the Heirs started appearing?”

“That is unknown. Zahariss hadn’t been seen either.”

“I wonder if he loved her,” I say aloud, looking through the large windows at the back of the room. “Can Gods even love?”

“Heirs can, so I can’t see why they wouldn’t be able to.” My eyes swing to Darius. “Heirs have mated with other wolves through history, in secret of course after they were deemed dangerous. They still had families of their own, loved others, and spent their lives together until they died. Records showed their loved ones were also executed if found to be involved with an Heir. Though we are talking about hundreds of years ago now.”

“That’s sad,” I whisper, looking back to the window.

“What is, little wolf?”

“That they had to love in secret. That they couldn’t show others their love in fear of the consequences.”

“They had no choice, they were deemed dangerous and to be dealt with on sight.”

“I know they had no choice.” I wonder how they must have felt. Heirs were in danger from being killed if they were spotted and found, and then that threat would lead to their loved ones. They must have been lonely.

“Things will change,” Darius says suddenly, flipping to another page in the book he’s going through. “When the Highers are gone, and the rogures are defeated, Heirs can love freely if they wish it. Live freely.”

“More Heirs won’t be born until we die,” I remind him.

“There are still two living Heirs in this room.” My eyes lower, and then I pick up another book as silence descends.

“What do you want to do about the notes we found in your father’s basement? Of this new rogure and what they were doing to females?” I ask him.

“We are seeing if we can find the place that was mentioned, then we will try and gather the ingredients and see if we can find out what it does. Anna agreed to help, since we don’t have an Elite witch now. Not that Maize was trustworthy anyway.”

“You would use that on another? Experiment like they did?” My stomach turns at the thought.

“On someone who deserves it, yes,” Darius says without hesitation.

“Do you have anyone in mind?”

“I do.” He flips a page and then flips it back again. “Look at this.” He slides the book toward me.

*The Heirs location to where they reside is unknown. It is thought that they rest in nearby forests or within mountains, dwelling inside caves only they know, but this has not been confirmed. In once a tale of old, it is said they had been seen a*

*lot near the ruins of Tyeetha, an old structure that once resembled a temple, a place of worship to the Gods.*

“The ruins in Zakith?” I ask, looking up at Darius who nods. “It’s just bare bones, crumbling and deserted. My mom said it used to be a place cherished by all and many would go there to be blessed.”

Darius shrugs. “It’s a start, we will go there once we figure out how to keep what has happened to Maize quiet.”

“And if we don’t?” I question.

“Then a war is coming sooner than we had hoped.”

“That’s the last thing we need right now with the rogures,” I say, and then I sit up straight. “Shit, I saw rogures in the distance, I forgot to tell you.”

“Where,” he demands, his eyes sharp.

“North. Darius, there was so many of them.” I bite my lip. “They will cause so much harm.”

“I’ll send some Elites over there.”

I bite my lip. “What if they’re too late?”

“Unfortunately, little wolf, we always are lately.”

# Forty Six

RHEA

I'm flung upright and plopped down onto a seat as the chatter stops in the dining room. I'm still gathering my bearings as Darius takes a seat at the head of the table next to me, a smirk upon his face as he starts putting food onto a plate.

"Uhh, well that's different," Damian mutters across the table.

I huff. "You're telling me, I can't seem to walk on my own recently." I give Darius the stink-eye. This habit of his of throwing me over his shoulder needs to stop.

"I like looking at your as—" I growl, cutting Darius off as his eyes heat.

"Stop putting me off my meal," Leo grumbles into his food.

A nudge at my side harbors my attention. "You good?" Josh asks, eyeing me and Darius like we've lost our heads. Maybe we have, at least I think Darius has or he gained a new personality. Who the fuck knows at this point, only things have changed between us. Sarah giggles at Josh's side and he immediately leans into her, nuzzling her neck.

“This is a new development,” Sarah says, giving Josh a lovesick smile.

“It’s something alright,” Leo mumbles around a piece of meat, and I glance his way. “Did you suck him good? I’ve never seen him so relaxed.” I glare, my hands tightening in my lap as Darius’s head whips his way, his own stare hard on the side of Leo’s face.

“Jealous you’re not getting any?” Zaide chimes in, his knife in hand as he sharpens it, not even bothering to look up. I didn’t know he was back. I thought he would still be trying to find the crystal.

“Ha,” Seb laughs. “Don’t worry, blondie, I’m sure you can have a good shower session worthy of an orgy after we have watched Darius and Rhea eye fuck each other after dinner.”

“The fuck?” I sputter, my eyes wide. We don’t eye fuck.

Seb leans forward so I can see him down the table, that twinkle in his eyes never leaving. “Come on, Rhea, baby,” he coos, and Darius halts the piece of meat he was putting on his plate, growling low at Sebastian. “Oh, would you look at that, he’s got it bad.”

“The only thing I *got bad* is the urge to put my hands around your neck,” Darius tells him, the low tone of his voice a warning but it only makes Sebastian smile even more.

“Gods,” Colten whispers to Hudson. “I knew it was coming but I didn’t realize how deep it ran.”

“It was easy to see, pup,” Hudson replies. “Now eat more, we have training later. Taylor is already out there waiting with Jerrod.” Colton mumbles something else, but does as Hudson says. I pretend I don’t notice. Those two need to just jump bones already.

I’m still smiling at them as a plate is put in front of me and I look down, the confusion plain to see on my face when I look up at Darius. He ignores me and goes about getting another plate and piling on food while I stare at him.

Darius sets his own plate down and finally looks at me. Something heady stays in his eyes as he looks between me and the plate, a silent command, telling me without words that this is how things will be from now on. That he will provide for me and he is showing others exactly what he sets out to do also.

This is more than the blood oath we gave, more than a tentative truce, more than our confessions. This is more than anything I have ever known. All from just receiving a plate of food.

I swallow and look at my plate and dig in to the large amounts of meat and fruit, ignoring Darius as he watches me intently. The table is silent, they’re also acknowledging what this means, what he’s declaring to everyone.

He will be the only one to give me food from now on.

“Did you get it?” Darius says, and my gaze follows his to Zaide who shakes his head. I pick up another slice of meat, the

flavors exploding over my tongue and damn, I've never eaten such delicious meat before.

"I'll try again soon," Zaide replies and my mood sours a little that the memory crystal still hasn't been found. I need to see it.

Darius nods. "We are awaiting news of some information that could lead us to those that were stolen and Rhea's pack members," Darius announces after a time, and heads shoot up, giving him their attention.

"Where did you get this information?" Leo asks, running a hand through his blond hair.

Darius turns to me. "Rhea's *friend*." He says the word 'friend' like he's just eaten wolf shit, and I give him a warning look. Josh turns to me, asking an unvoiced question.

"*Edward sent Ilium to me, left a note saying—*" The link goes dead and I let out an aggravating breath at Darius. "Will you stop doing that!" I seethe. "How do you even do it? You never tell me."

"Why would I tell you, so you can stop it from happening?" He raises a brow and leans back in his chair. "I told you not to have private conversations around me."

"Ugh, you're so annoying." I turn to Josh. "Yes, Edward. He said he will try and contact me again soon." He nods and takes a hold of Sarah's hand tightly, a look passing between them.

"We will leave when we receive word. In the meantime, Zaide and Damian will no doubt be summoned to Wolvorn by

the Highers to be questioned about their time in Zakith. When that happens, we lay-low but be ready to send some Elites out on a hunt.”

“Then we go hunting them,” Damian says.

“They should have learned loyalty,” Zaide muses.

“They should have.” Darius taps his fingers on the table.

“Make sure you get armor for everyone, Damian. We will keep training for now as we wait. We haven’t heard from Charles yet, but I don’t think it will be long before he asks about Maize.”

“I doubt we have much time,” Leo says. “And if we do receive news of the others whereabouts, they may not even be alive when we reach there.”

“Don’t fucking say that,” Hudson growls, looking at me out the corner of his eye while I slowly pick at my food, eyes on my plate.

“I’m speaking truthfully,” Leo defends himself. “We all know it’s possible.”

Swallowing roughly, I eat slowly. Three months ago I was in Eridian, working toward winter and trying to get through to Kade about letting Axis have more control than he should. Now I’m here, at the Elites’ keep, with not even half of my pack, eating a delicious meal given to me by the Alpha of Elites, and my pack is out there somewhere, maybe dead, and Kade is in the clutches of the Highers and our family.

What am I doing?



“We don’t know anything yet, so there is no need to speculate,” Hudson says.

I shouldn’t just sit around like this.

“And you all need to be realistic in what we may find *if* we get a location,” Leo barks back. “You need to prepare if they are all dead.”

I’m not even helping anyone right now.

“You will be dead if you don’t shut your mouth!” Josh shouts.

“Not before Rhea gets us killed when they find out that she killed Maize!”

I drop my fork, the clang of it ringing loud in the suddenly quiet space as everyone looks toward me. My vision turns hazy and my power rushes to the surface unexpectedly. So strong, angry, wild and free when it bursts out of me. Ice-blue whips around me, my hair floating. I can barely hear anything, and I can’t see anything as my power is rushing out of me uncontrollably.

Someone shouts, things crash and bang and split and all I feel is.... lost.

Why me, why them, why us. Why am I sitting here doing nothing while others suffer again?

Why, why, why.

Haven’t I given enough blood to this world? Enough tears, enough cries, enough fucking pain! Haven’t I given more than

is due for the stain on my soul from what I had to do to make sure we all survived. Yet they are out there, alone, and I may have just caused more deaths by not controlling myself with Maize.

I'm not worthy of this power coursing through me that I cannot even control. I'm not worthy of the title Heir of Zahariss if I can't even protect my family. I am not worthy of being the daughter of a mother who did all she could for me.

Tendrils flow over me as a wall of power keeps me encased inside. It ripples angrily, sparks spitting out of it as Runa comes to the surface. She's angry, so angry at the world, so menacing with a snarl upon her face. Power flows over her, coating her like armor as she runs at me from within and I lurch forward, gripping the table in front of me tightly, retching from the force of her hitting me.

My thoughts are scattering between anger and despair, I can't focus on one or the other as Runa continues her battle from within. Hitting me again and again to the point where I swear I feel her creeping out of my skin. I can't pull my power back and I can't hold her back.

Darkness leaks through my blue, misty tendrils creeping forward and reaching for me. But I can't move, stuck still as pain slices through my body, holding me captive. I grit my teeth, breathing heavily through my nose as I try to call my magic back, but I can't. It's not listening. It won't listen.

That's when I start to panic. I can feel it taking more of me, leeching from me as my eyelids droop. I stare at the black,

willing it to reach me, to get it to stop, to just make it stop. As if it can hear me, it springs through my wall of power in a burst of speed and hits me in my chest, forcing me to take a breath.

I wasn't even breathing.

I suck in lungfuls of air as more and more black reaches me, and I welcome, wanting it to help me. I'm suddenly yanked from behind and lifted into a set of strong, familiar arms, the black fully covering the blue around us.

“What—“ I cough, gripping Darius as he holds me tighter. “I can't, I can't stop it,” I tell him, my body waning.

“Don't worry, little wolf.” he says gently, his lips coming to the top of my head. “Sleep.”

“I'm sick...” I breathe, “of fucking... sleeping.” But I do, unable to help as my power takes all of me that I have to give and I succumb to exhaustion.

Again.



Shouting reaches me and I peel my eyes open, wincing at the light piercing me.

“This needs to fucking stop, she can't control her power so she shouldn't use it, its dangerous,” someone shouts.

“She's learning, she isn't fully with her wolf yet but when she is she will have control,” Darius tells them.

“She nearly took my fucking head off!” Leo growls, it must have been Leo that was shouting. “You can’t expect me not to defend myself from an attack. Even if I have to stab her to—“

His words are cut off and I move my sleep-ridden eyes to where Darius has him pinned against the wall by his throat. “Do not,” he says in a low, dangerous tone. “Finish that sentence if you want to walk out of here without bleeding.”

“Brother, you can’t be serious,” Leo coughs out, his eyes wide.

“Deadly, do not make me hurt you, Leo,” Darius warns, and then lowers his voice, speaking too quietly for me to hear. Whatever he says to Leo has his blue eyes snapping to me over Darius’s shoulder, an understanding in them that wasn’t there before. He nods, his eyes moving back to Darius when he lets him go.

“Okay, I got it,” Leo tells him, putting a hand on his shoulder before he walks out the room without another word.

“Hey,” Anna’s gentle voice says, and I turn toward her on the other side of the bed.

“Hey,” I croak, moving to sit up the best I can. Darius rushes forward and helps me settle back against the pillow, his face tense.

“Drink this,” Anna says, handing me a cup of something green that smells like shit. I wrinkle my nose and look at her. “It will help, I promise.” She smiles, moving her red hair over

her shoulder and taking a seat on the bed next to me while I look at the green liquid, hoping it'll disappear.

“Drink or I will force it down your throat,” Darius warns from my other side, arms folded as he watches me.

“Gods,” I mutter at his grumpiness. I pinch my nose and bring the cup to my lips, trying to ignore the thickness of the liquid and drink it as quickly as possible.

“Good girl,” Darius praises and now I scowl, trying to keep whatever I just drank down. “How long until she feels the effects?” he asks Anna while I settle deeper into the pillows with a sigh.

“Around an hour,” is all she says and squeezes my hand. “I’m worried about you, Rhea. This power of yours.” She shakes her head, frowning. “If you can’t get a grasp on it, it will take everything from you.”

“I’m trying,” I assure her. And I am.

“Everything comes with a price. Yours will be your life if you don’t get it under control soon,” she tells me and Darius growls, the room vibrating with the depth of it as he starts pacing the length of his bedroom.

“What?” I ask her, my heart pounding. I can’t die, my pack and Kade are still out there, and I fought too fucking hard to stay alive.

“You’re giving too much too quickly and running yourself dry. If you have nothing left and attempt to keep going, or in your case unable to stop, it will take all of you.” Her eyes

shimmer with tears. “You just need your wolf to be one with you, Belldame told you as much.”

“She doesn’t want to come out to be whole.” I deflate, wondering where in the Gods I went wrong. Does Runa hate me? Hate me for what she went through?

“She does want to,” Darius tells me, still pacing the floor. “I felt it, she wants nothing more than to feel the ground beneath her feet. Fear is stopping her.” He runs his hands through his hair, his gaze burning a hole wherever it lands.

“Even so,” I say, eyeing him cautiously, “there isn’t much I can do if she won’t come out.”

“You need to push harder,” Darius growls.

“No,” I snap at him, baring my teeth. “I can feel her, it’s too much, she needs to rest, Darius.”

“She will be able to rest indefinitely if she doesn’t show herself because both of you will be dead!” he roars, the room rattling with it as I stare, my wide eyes connecting with him.

“Dar...” He shakes his head and storms out of the room, the bedroom door banging off the wall violently.

I sigh and lay back down, still exhausted on a soul level. Everything feels like it’s crashing down around me, one failure after another. Always something getting in the fucking way.

I didn’t know this time it would be myself.

“Rest, Rhea.” Anna pats my hand and I jolt, forgetting she was even here. She gives my hand a squeeze and collects her

things before leaving the room.

Leaving me alone in my own silence.

I gently prod at Runa. She's curled up asleep, just as exhausted as I am. My Heir power floats around her, blue sparks coming from it every now and again, never settling but not aggressive.

At the moment.

I don't know what even happened in the dining room. My thoughts just spiraled and it just burst out of me. Well, my power did.

Did I nearly take Leo's head off? Am I a danger to those around me?

That thought stops me cold. No, I won't accept it. I can't.

I need to figure it out, my pack is at stake. Kade's life is at stake. They won't hesitate to use him to get to me, they already did.

But I fear this time they would do something I can't even attempt to repair.

I can't raise the dead.

When you're dead. You're dead.

I won't let them take his life, I fought too hard to give him one, and I won't let this power inside of me take mine. There is too much left to do.

I look toward the door where Darius left, wondering if he's right about Runa. He's the only one who can help, and to do

that, I need to truly let him in. I need to forgive him fully for what he did to me and move on. He said sorry, he spoke his truth, and I think I need to speak the rest of mine.

He's my only float in the seas of my path at the moment, and I need to grab onto it and hold tight.

He's the only hope I have of getting Runa out and I need to drop some walls to do so.

My pack is worth the sacrifice, Kade is worth the sacrifice of letting the person who is the most dangerous of all inside my walls that I have so carefully crafted.

Darius is the Heir of the destroyer, he would have taken my fortress down in time anyway.

Anna checks me over again and then I drink down more of that horrible drink before I wobble out of bed to go find Darius.

I find him in the library, his pacing still on form as he goes back and forth in front of the window. Light shines on him, his shadow seemingly thicker on the floor and I know his magic is pooling around him.

I close the door behind me, keeping him in my sights as he growls to himself. I sigh, rubbing my arms and shuffling forward, feeling the exhaustion down to my bones. Anna telling me I would die if I can't get my magic under control wasn't something I saw coming. I thought that I could learn to live with the way things are now seeing as though Runa won't come out.



It seems I have no choice in what I need to do now, no matter my feelings.

I walk over to Darius, mindful of the tension brewing off of him. He seems angry, and I'm not sure at what.

Me, maybe?

“Darius?” He continues his pacing. I take another step, reaching out a hand to halt him. “Darius—” He turns suddenly and then I'm on the desk, one of his large hands grasping my throat in a firm hold. My legs dangle on either side of his hips as he breaths harshly.

“She will come out of you whether you like it or not,” he snarls down at me while I blink up at him. My hand goes to his wrist, trying to pull his hand away from my throat but his hold is firm. “I don't care for your feelings on the matter, whether you think it is cruel. I will drag her ass out of you!” His words are full of anger, but I detect a hint of something else in them. “I will not lose you to your own fucking power.”

“Darius,” I gulp, and he feels my swallow in his hand. His thumb moves over to my pulse point and his eyes draw toward it, fixated as he can feel it beat beneath my skin. “I know,” I tell him, and his eyes slowly come to mine. His hold on my neck softens slightly. “I know she needs to come out. I... I don't want to die,” I tell him, and I feel the unwelcome sting at the back of my eyes. “I fought too fucking hard to stay alive,” I croak. “And though I loathe the thought of dragging Runa out when I know she doesn't want to and it will hurt her, I

can't let this be the reason I become one with the lands. Not like that."

Darius's eyes close briefly, and he leans forward, his forehead resting against mine. He inhales deeply, his thumb still rubbing back and forth over my pulse as he just breathes me in. "You may hate me even more for what I may have to do to drag her out of you, but at least you will be alive to do it."

I shake my head against his. "I don't hate you, Darius," I whisper, and he pulls back, moving to rest on his hands at either side of my head as he hovers above me. His brows furrow at my words, his eyes swimming with confusion. "You hurt me, you explained and you regret it. I believe you." I bite my lip. "I believe all that you said down in the willows. I was angry and I said some things I didn't mean, but Darius, I never hated you. How could I?" Not when he is who he is to me. Hate is not possible for us.

"I took away the ability for you to hate me," he mutters, looking off to the side.

"No, the Gods did." I reach up and hesitantly touch his face. He stills as I stroke his chin with a finger, feeling the stubble there as I scratch at it. I move to his lips next, running over them softly before I move to his cheek. Then I press my finger in harder, turning his head so he's looking at me. I trace his nose and the small scar there next, before touching between his eyebrows and then running my fingers through his hair.

Touching seems like such a normal thing for many, but to us, this is new, something unfamiliar. I can't say I don't like it

though. Being able to touch him freely feels like I'm taking a new breath of air after a long time.

Darius sighs, pausing for a moment before he tilts his head into my hand that's in his hair, and I wonder how long it has been for him that someone touched him like this. Darius doesn't seem the type of male who allows this type of... affection. He always said he never wanted a mate so I'm assuming he didn't stay around and cuddle when he had... arrangements. Yet he stayed in bed with me, wrapped around me every night, probably so I wouldn't try and kill him, but he still cuddled with me nonetheless. Or is it the same now, just being close to me because he needs me near to keep an eye on me?

Doubts start to rear their ugly head and I start to move my hand back. His own flies up and captures my wrist, keeping my hand in his hair as his gaze roams my face. He grunts at whatever he sees, and he leans down and rubs his nose against mine. I melt into the table, closing my eyes and soaking it up like a flower that needs the light. We stay like this for a while, my hand combing through his hair while he nudges my nose and face, breathing me in.

This is a moment of soft affection that I will store away in my precious memories, along with the others where it is Darius, and not the Alpha of Elites.

“Will you help me?” I ask him quietly, squirming a little at his nearness. “I don't think I can get her out on my own.”

“I will help you, little wolf,” he murmurs against my neck, nipping slightly. “You only need to ask and I will do it.” He leans up again, a smirk resting upon his face. I will happily help you out with the other problem too.”

“What other problem?”

“The one where you won’t ask to be fucked, so I will take it upon myself to fuck you when I see fit.” I blink up at him. “Problem with that?” I hesitate before slowly shaking my head. “Then let’s get started, because I need to feel you wrapped around me.”

# Forty Seven

RHEA

“Come on, Rhea,” Darius purrs, blocking my fist with a slap of his hand. “You can do better than that.”

“It’s been hours asshole,” I pant. “Isn’t it enough already?” Sweat glistens my forehead as I lean over and put my hands on my knees. We have been sparring since this morning, and I’m damn near close to collapsing on the floor. We have been training with Taylor since he came to Eridian, but this? This is pure fucking torture.

“You need to get better, and you need all the skills you can get to survive.” Darius takes a step toward me and straightens me up. I groan as my muscles protest. “Feet shoulder width apart and lean into your hit, always. Don’t pull back at the last seconds for your next maneuver. You don’t know how things will go, or what your opponent’s next move is. So every hit, every strike, it counts.” I nod, blowing out a breath. “Let’s work on your power control and then wrap up for the day.”

I look around at the rest of the pack and see them in a similar state as I am. Taylor and Colten seem to be the only ones still

going strong, they have barely broken a sweat. Seb runs around in his wolf while Josh blocks his attacks. Neither can get a hit on the other.

The weather is a lot cooler now that we are in the first week of fall. The leaves are beginning to change color, and I take in the scents around me, loving being out in the open even though I have sweat dripping down my back.

“Okay, let’s try with magic.” I bring my hands up, calling to the power within me and feel it answering my call. The strands inside me rush to the surface, mist forming around my hands. Darius watches on, calling his own. His mist turns solid as he raises his hands, and I wish I had his control. “How do you have so much control when you didn’t even remember you were an Heir until I broke through?” I ask him.

Darius looks down at his hands, his power moving over them. “I told you, this is as easy as breathing. When you and your wolf are in harmony, I’m sure it will feel the same. It feels no different than having a blade in my hand, an extension of my own body that I can do with as I please.” His power shoots out of his hands, splitting off from him and wrapping around my own. Black and blue intertwine and it feels like his hand is in my own, not his power. “Try and force mine off of you,” he orders, and I look down at my hand to concentrate.

I will my power to push through his, to grip it in my own and twist it off of me. But my power has its own ideas and eagerly strokes over his. I scoff at the audacity of it. I push harder, licking my lips as finally, my mist moves, pushing against his.

The black moves a little away from my hand, bristling until it moves back, gathering tighter around the blue. I can feel my energy start to drain with my efforts, and I growl, getting more frustrated when it doesn't budge at all anymore.

“Calm,” Darius commands, and my head snaps up to him. “Control your emotions, your power is a part of you, within you. If your mind is all over the place, your power will be too.”

“I'm...struggling,” I admit, hating the weakness I have over my emotions at the moment, but I know I need his help. My legs start to shake, and my bones hurt.

His eyes hold mine before they roam over my face. “I know, little wolf, which is why you have to try harder. The good thing is that you recognize it, and now you can figure out a way to help yourself with it.” He steps closer until his chest brushes the front of mine, and I drop my hands to my sides. I look up at him, our powers still wrapped together around my hands. “Has it always been like this?”

I swallow. “No, not really. Since I let my Heir power in completely, I feel wild. Just... wild.” It's a constant swirling within me, a constant battle of my power and myself. Like it's wrapping around my soul but poking and prodding at it, aggravating it to make it unpredictable and therefore, making me unpredictable too. “I don't like it.”

His hand comes up to the side of my face, his thumb running along my jaw. “You need to get your wolf out as soon as you are ready.”

“I know, I just need a little more time to prepare.” I just want more time with Runa before she hates me.

“It’s said that when you are an Heir, what makes us powerful is that the magic within us is one with our wolf’s. That’s why we are able to do things others cannot and only dream about. It is a rarity, powerful, special and heavy. Being an Heir comes with a lot of hardships, at least in this age.”

I shake my head and sigh. “It’s not like I don’t want her to come out, I just don’t want to force her to. It feels cruel, and I know it will hurt her. She was hurt enough,” I whisper the last words, my head drooping in guilt, but Darius doesn’t let me. His palm connects with my face, holding me steady.

“It wasn’t your fault,” he growls, and I scoff. He shakes my head a little, his eyes hard as his fingers dig into my skin. “It wasn’t, little wolf. How could a child help what happened? You need to let this way of thinking go.”

“I could have stopped her from coming out, I could have prevented it and kept her safe within me. I failed one of the most precious things in my life.” She was as young as I was, just a pup in terms of age. We both were too young, and we were wrongly hurt again and again. Getting your wolf is the most surreal experience we can have, sacred, and I let her down.

Magic gathers in my chest suddenly, the heat of my face letting me know my markings have appeared, and Darius watches them appear intently, trailing his gaze over them as they form. I see the ones on his neck, pulsing with mine, like



recognizing like. I lift my hand, my power still floating around it and touching a single finger to one, delicate line under his jaw. I gently trace it down his neck to the curve where it meets his shoulder, feeling his power beneath my fingertip. He swallows hard, a deep sound coming from his chest that I feel bone deep inside of me. I close my eyes and breathe him in, just feeling peace for a second. A touch against my lips has my eyes springing back open, to see the only eyes that have ever captivated me.

He watches me with an intensity I have never felt before as our breaths mingle against each other, our lips touching but not fully connecting. I watch his pupils dilate, and I feel my own eyes change as once again, everything disappears and all my focus, all I see, is him.

The male with the wisps, the wolves, a boyish look on his face that's so rare and few and far between, the one rubbing his nose gently against mine. When he looks at me with such unguarded intensity, it feels like I can't breathe, yet breathe fully for the first time in my life.

He will be my savior.

My destroyer.

My moonlight if I let him be.

"You are the most dangerous person to me." I whisper against his lips, reminding him or myself, I don't know.

"And you are the most beautiful," he murmurs before his lips are fully on mine, demanding access instantly. I part my lips

and let him in. He makes a sound of approval as I cling to the sides of his neck while he tastes me. A hand moves up my back, fingers trailing up my spine until it's at my hair. His fingers glide between the strands before he grips it in his fist and tilts my head back. A moan escapes my throat at the dominating hold, and he pulls me closer to him, our mouths never stopping, never not tasting while we feel each other.

He gentles the kiss, moving slower and savoring it until he moves back. My eyes slowly open and lock with bright ones, blinking away the haze of desire that he has stirred within me. He smirks, his own eyes heating before he pulls me to him again and rubs his nose against mine.

Wrapped in his embrace, for a few moments my worries, doubts and fears all fade away. Like he took them from me to give me this moment of peace.

And then I'm flat on my ass.

I grunt, my eyes widening in shock as I stare up at Darius above me, a chuckle falling from his lips. "Never let your guard down, little wolf."

"For Gods' sake," I grumble out, looking up toward the sky and sighing.

As much as I enjoyed that moment of peace, he quickly reminded me of how fast that can be ripped away from me.

"Hey," Josh says as he and Colten come over, and I see Darius tensing out the corner of my eye. I wave a hand in

greeting, noticing Hudson not far behind them, it brings a smile to my lips.

“Hey Colten,” I say, my eyes meeting his. “Met any strapping Elites that tickle your fancy?”

He sputters, his cheeks turning a shade of red as Hudson steps up next to him, a scowl on his face as he glares at him. “Rhea!” I shrug, keeping the smile from my face. “We haven’t been near any other Elites so how would I know.”

“You can still look and see if you like any. I can come with you and we can sneak a look at them while they’re sparring. They would all be sweating, muscles on display— Hey!”

“You will not go near any of my fucking men whether they are sparing or not,” Darius growls in my face, holding me by my arms so I’m practically dangling where he has me lifted off the ground.

“Why not?” I ask him, and his eyes flare, a deep, rumbling growl coming from him as he throws me over his shoulder. “Darius!” I screech. “You need to stop shoving me up here, I can walk on my own and you can’t keep throwing me around like a rag doll.” I punch his ass and scowl when he doesn’t even miss a step.

A smack on my own ass makes me jolt. “You will not look at my men, and my men will not look at you all flustered. They will not eye every curve of this fucking body of yours, and you will not see them wanting to fuck you then and there. You dare spar with them and I’ll fuck you in front of them all, and then

they can see what they will never fucking get.” His arm tightens over my thighs. “Do you fucking hear me, Rhea?”

No, no I fucking don’t because my panties are suddenly wet, my thighs are squeezing together and my breaths are coming out faster at his possessiveness.

“Rhea,” he demands.

“Okay,” I say a lot more breathlessly than I thought I would. I may have agreed, but a part of me wants to push him to see how far he really would go. “Maybe—“

“Rogures!” Our heads snap toward the shout, seeing Damian rushing toward us through the branches. We scramble to our feet, rushing out to meet him.

“Where?” Darius demands, making his way across the willow field and toward the keep.

“West, heading straight for us,” Damian tells him. “Darius, there are many, I haven’t seen this many together before. Leo is calling to arms, the Elites should be ready soon.”

Darius nods and he opens the door to the keep, rushing up the stairs with Damian and I on his trail. “Get archers on the battlements, have a quarter of men go wolf, and the rest to be equipped with weapons. I’ll be there soon.”

Damian speeds off down a hallway and I follow Darius back to his room. He starts undressing, reaching into another small room and starts donning his armor. I rush ahead and grab his black wrist guards and begin tying them to his forearms. He pauses and watches me, curiosity in his eyes.

“The least I can do is help. My pack is here, you will protect them whether you mean to or not. I will help.”

“I will protect everyone within this keep and no, you will not help,” he growls harshly.

“Dar,” I start.

“No,” he repeats, putting on the rest of his armor. The red and gold straps across his chest are a stark reminder of his status as Alpha of the Elites. “No one knows you are here, if you do help, they will find out and we haven’t confirmed all the Elites who are loyal to me.”

“I’ll wear a hooded piece of armor and a face mask, they won’t even realize it’s me.”

“They will if you use your Heir power,” he argues.

“Then I won’t,” I compromise.

“And what? Risk yourself getting killed? Not a fucking chance, Rhea.”

“I cannot just stay cooped up in a room and do nothing, Darius.”

“You can and you will!” he roars, and I flinch. His eyes flicker in regret for a brief moment before he turns sharply.

“Don’t you dare,” I rush after him as he heads for the door. “Don’t you dare lock me in this room again!” He slams the door shut and I scream out my frustrations, banging on the impenetrable wood. “I can help, you cannot expect me to stay here.”

“You need to be safe, Rhea, you are not at your best right now, you are still recovering,” Darius says from the other side of the door. “I cannot do what I do best if I’m worrying about you out there.”

“And what do you do best?” I ask.

“Destroy.”

# Forty Eight

DARIUS

Rhea curses and bangs from the other side of my bedroom door as I turn and walk away. I know she doesn't like being trapped in there, but it's the safest place for her. I won't risk her being seen by others or worse, getting hurt.

Her power is a liability and if something goes wrong, she could not only harm my men, but herself in the process. I would rather take her wrath than have that happen, and the thought of her eyes alight with anger excites me for later.

I round the hallway and head down the stairs, my brothers by bond and not blood, waiting for me at the bottom. "Are we ready?" I ask Leo as I walk ahead of them, heading to the west entrance of the keep.

"Yeah, archers are in place, wolves are ready, and Rhea's pack is safe in the keep." I nod my head in thanks. "We're waiting for your command," he says, as I throw open the door and walk through the courtyard, seeing my Elites waiting on either side, wolf and man alike.

They follow behind us as I head toward the gate, the sound of their boots hitting hard on the stone floor vibrating through me. My fingers twitch in excitement for the fight, for the bloodshed to come and to watch the many rogures's heads roll.

I pause at the gate leading outside the keep walls. The two Elites on either side of the metal structure stand at attention, waiting for my go ahead to wind the cranks to open it. I turn to my brothers as they shuffle impatiently, ready for what's to come. I look past them to my Elites, all standing still, feet shoulder-width apart and waiting for my command.

"Elites," I call, and they stand straighter, hands behind their backs. "Rogures are upon us, remember your training. Do not let them bite you, you may as well take a knife to your own throat if you survive it. Their poison will boil you from the inside and eat away at your organs. There is no cure, remember that." I look over the sea of them, making sure to make eye contact. "Watch your backs, stick with two or more as the rogures will branch off into smaller packs. Do not get caught on your own, or you will be as good as dead."

"Rah," they shout, slamming their palms to their chest, acknowledging my words.

"We are Elites," I roar, feeling the oncoming battle igniting my blood.

"Rah!"

"We are deadly,"

"Rah!"



“We are destruction,” I growl.

“Rahhhh!”

I turn and nod for the gate to be opened. Metal scrapes along the stone wall and as soon as there is enough space, I point to the opening. “Go.” Dozens of wolves race past us, growling and snarling. We follow, blades in hand. Leo pulls out his bow, poison-tipped arrow already notched. Jerrod swings his twin blade axe, getting his grip just right. Zaide has his duel blades at the ready, and Damian has his gripped tightly in his palm, eyes hard.

I watch ahead as black shapes come into view, their number increasing every few moments and I growl beneath my breath. Leo wasn't wrong. There has to be at least a hundred rogues coming our way, if not more. They stalk out of the trees of the Bayson forest that covers most of the west side of Vrohkaria, their unusual howls only known to them sounding around us, and the hairs on my arms raise in anticipation.

“Fuck me,” Leo murmurs, “There are more than I thought.”

“Kill them all,” I tell my closest. “Do not stop until they are at your feet.”

“Always.” He grips my forearm and I grip his before I do the same with Damian, Jerrod, and Zaide.

We pick up speed over the grassy terrain, my Elites spreading out with the wolves just up ahead. They wait at the top of the small hill for my signal before we head for the

creatures that have been destroying the lands for years, plaguing, ravishing and killing everything in their wake.

That killed my family. I will kill them all.

I hold at the crest of the hill, scanning the forest for any signs of more. When it's clear no more are coming, I face the mass of black against the green of the ground. Their snarls fill the air around us and thick, black saliva drips from their sharp fangs as they continue to stalk toward us. No sense of danger and no preservation of who the fuck they are going up against.

“Hold!” I call down the line, my men taking up their stance to prepare to attack. I wait, watching for the first sign of them rushing, because they will. And not even two minutes later, they do. “Charge!” I bellow, and we move as one, running forward behind our wolves to hit them head on.

Drax growls within me and I feel my markings on my neck appear. I can feel him giving me his strength alongside my power as we rush forward to end the threat.

Just before we hit the bottom of the hill, stones are thrown into the mass that will slow their movements, and then we make impact. The first wolves use the slight incline of the hill to their advantage and jump, landing on the backs of a few unsuspecting rogues. Trusting that they can get the kill, I swing my blade straight through the first rogue's mouth, splitting it open on either side and then thrusting my blade upward, straight into its heart. Dead. A second one comes at me and I spin, my sword turning with me as I injure the beast and my foot lands on its side, knocking it over. I waste no time

lifting my blade high and bringing it down on its gray, rotten neck, severing it.

An arrow flies past me, its slight green hued poison tip landing in the bone colored eye of a rogure just up ahead. The next second, an axe comes down, embedding itself in its skull. A growl from my right has me turning and taking a leap onto the back of another, gray clumps of flesh coming from its body as I grab its head. Zaide crosses his blades at the front of its neck and pulls the blades apart, slicing through the flesh. The rogure falls and I lock my knees as I follow it down to the ground. I spot Damian to the side, helping an Elite who has a bleeding arm. He takes the rogure down but as he looks at the man with the bite wound and black mixing into his blood, his eyes come to me briefly as I grit my teeth. I give him a nod, knowing there is nothing we can do and this is for the best.

Damian murmurs something to the Elite, his eyes a flash of sadness before he speaks back, his palm slamming against his chest. He drops it as Damian drives his blade through his chest and into his heart. The body drops to the blood soaked ground and then Damian turns and heads for the next rogure just as I do, pushing my power out of my palm and spearing it.

We can't stop and mourn the dead yet.

The sun slowly begins to set as we litter the ground with dead rogures. I stand on bodies, both my men and beast squishing beneath my boots as I look at the carnage in front of us. Blood and guts trail over the now red grass, the smell of death clinging to the air. I search for my Elites and count how

many men we have left. I look across the battleground, spotting an Elite crouched on the ground, his hands shaking another body and I home in on it, tilting my head as I hear his pleading cries for his brother to get up. Another Elite further on growls and repeatedly kicks a dead rogue, calling it a bitch like it can hear him. I swing my gaze to my left and spot a few Elites near the Bayson tree line, talking amongst themselves and looking back in my direction. I narrow my eyes, instinct telling me something isn't right when they break off into the forest. I stalk after them, calling my brothers and leaving the rest of the Elites to deal with the last of the rogues.

They reach my side almost instantly, covered in sweat and bits of gray flesh, their skin more red with the splatters of blood. "You good?" Damian asks, looking at the blood seeping down my arm from where one of the rogues sliced their claws through my leather armor.

"I'm good," I tell him, checking them over for injury and seeing nothing serious. "I think we have found ourselves some new traitors," I growl, nodding in the direction the men went as we hit the tree line and stalk inside. My men are as stealthy as I am, listening to anything to indicate the traitors' whereabouts.

I hear heavy breathing just up ahead and I move fast, rounding a large tree to see some of my Elites lined up and facing us. "What the fuck are you doing?" I snap as my brothers stay at my back.

The blond, Christian. “No can do, Alpha,” he says in a mocking tone, and growls sounds behind us. I know what they are from, I don’t need to turn to know the sound. I’ve been hearing it since the day I had news that my mother and sister were killed by them. What does surprise me though, is how did they sneak behind us?

My brothers turn, protecting my back as I snarl at Christian. “Explain. Now.” I call my power to my hands, and then I feel a tingle at the base of my spine as two masses appear at my back. Christian and the others look upon my power with disgust, they will soon look upon it with terror.

“We don’t want no fucking Heir scum to be the Alpha of the Elites. You belong in the pits of Derraztfur,” he spits on the floor, mentioning the lava filled caves of the Dracozar Lands that lie past The Drylands’s mountains. “And that’s where you will go now while Patrick Kazari takes over as Alpha.” He shows me a port stone and I tilt my head, my eyes narrowing in on it. My eyes change.

“I don’t know whether you are brave or have a death wish daring to attempt to do this to me.” More growls come from behind my Elites and they all laugh.

“We dare because a new age is coming and it doesn’t include you. Patrick will take over the Elites and Vrohkaria will be ruled as it should.”

“And how should Vrohkaria be ruled?” I tilt my head, my eyes scanning the men.

“By having women on their backs,” he snickers, his eyes crazed. “We should be able to choose who will birth our strongest line. All this bullshit of consent and needing to have mating arrangements.” He rolls his eyes and my vision narrows. “Even Lord Higher Charles thinks it’s so fucking dumb, Patrick told us so in a tavern weeks ago. All we have to do is get rid of you first, and what better way then to send Heir scum to the pits? There would be no way you could make it out alive.”

“All you have to do is betray your Alpha, right?” Leo scoffs from beside me, his bow aiming at the rogures behind me. “The people of Vrohkaria won’t stand for this new age. You’re a dead man anyway, so you won’t see it fail.”

My power slashes out like a rope and wraps around Christian’s neck until a deafening crack slices through the air, causing the others to stumble back in shock. Christian falls to the floor, his head now at an odd angle. I take a step forward, trusting my brothers at my back as the other traitorous men fall on their asses.

“W-wait,” one of them cries as my power sails over them, aiming for the eyes of the two rogures behind them.

I feel their eyeballs pop as my power enters their flesh, aiming for their brain and killing them instantly. My men take care of the other rogures behind me quickly as I stare at the two men before me. Walking toward them, I bend down when I reach the first male, the tails at my shoulders moving back

and forth. I smell the undoubtable stench of piss, and I look at the man to the left, Gerry, and scrunch my nose up.

“It was all Christian’s plan, he made us do it,” he says, and I sigh.

Weak fucking bastards. How did these males become Elites?

I tilt my head and look up through the branches above, seeing the night sky alive with stars and moonlight. I smirk. I know exactly what I’m going to do.

I stand and turn, moving past my brothers and call over my shoulder. “Take them to the basement.” Their chuckles are all I need to hear to know how we are going to enjoy getting information out of them.

Those rogures that were with them did not attack them, they didn’t come for the men that tried to take me to the pits of Derraztfur To be burned for eternity in its caves. The question is, how did they control those rogures?

# Forty Nine

RHEA

I move swiftly, plunging my blade into the stomach of a roguer, the metal easily piercing its gray, rotting flesh. It snarls, its teeth whipping around for me but soon falls on its side. I move over to the next that's fighting with an Elite, aiding him as I slash its flank while the Elite aims for its throat. Blood gushes from its body, bathing it in red as it collapses to the ground. There are so many rogues, more than I have even seen at one time and the thought of a large pack of them like this entering a village makes bile rise at the back of my throat.

The Elite looks over me, a furrow in his dark brow and I turn quickly, looking for the next and adjusting the half mask on my face, making sure only my eyes are visible.

Darius thought he could lock me in his room again, he was so fucking mistaken. As soon as he left, I donned the Elite armor I found in his closet, a few blades, and then I undid his magic on the door just like the last time. Though it took me a little longer as he strengthened it. Once I reached outside



without being seen, I moved silently around the castle walls, following a small group of Elites as they called orders. Joining them in formation, I made sure that I stayed hidden and at the back. Then I watched in awe as Darius commanded and encouraged his men. Chills coated my body at the Elites all shouting their agreement and acknowledgement to their Alpha. It was mesmerizing.

And eye opening.

It's easy to forget just who Darius is with everything going on. He's in control of hundreds of Elites, all trained to kill. And Darius is the deadliest one of them all.

Walking over dead rogures and Elites alike, I scan the bloodshed around me. The scent of death potent as well as the metallic taste of blood in the air. What was once a lush ground of green is now bathed in red and entrails. I haven't seen this much carnage before, never been in a fight like this.

Why did the rogures come here? They usually go for smaller villages, not stone fortresses.

Groaning reaches me along with the sound of grunts and small whimpers as I walk past more bodies. I wipe the sweat from my brow beneath the hood I have pulled up. It's attached to the leather covering my chest instead of putting on a cloak that could hinder me more than favor.

Looking up, I spot Darius in the distance, swinging his black blade with ease and striking down one rogure after the other, showing just how skillfully he can move and destroy those in his path. I'm still watching his every move when a weight

crashes into me from the side. We go down, landing on top of something hard yet soft, and I bring my blade up to the drooling black jaws aiming for my face. I growl low as its claws sink into my side, ripping through the armor and my skin as I take aim for its bone colored eye. It shrieks in pain when it pierces it, blood already dripping down on me as it thrashes above. I waste no time pulling my blade out and stabbing at its side while my glove-covered hand pushes its jaw away. One, two, three stabs and the rogure lets out a little cry before it collapses its full weight on me. I let out an *umph*, barely breathing from the weight of it. Dropping my blade to the ground, I try to use my hands to shove it off of me, but it doesn't budge.

“Fuck,” I pant, pain radiating through my side. I bend my legs, feet planted firmly on the ground before lifting my hips and pushing with my hands to eventually roll the fucking thing off of me. I breathe in lungfuls of air, gasping for breath as it feels like it's crushed my damn ribs. Getting squished to death is not how I want to go out in life. Definitely not.

I sit up, looking for my blade and pause when I realize I'm sitting on a dead body. I scramble to my feet and turn, looking at the lifeless eyes of the male. His throat is gone, ripped out of his body and black, bubbling foam drips out of the wound. I cough, and then cough again and shake my head, reaching down to pick up my blade as nausea swirls in my belly. The dead male's essence slowly begins to leak out of his body. The light, small orbs float up and gather on the slight breeze, to be carried away and into the night sky. When a rogure bites you

and you have its poison running in your body, it takes longer for your essence to be released, sometimes if there is too much poison in your veins, your body doesn't release your essence at all, forever stuck in the below.

No one wants their whole being, their soul and essence stuck down in the below, forever waiting with no hope for rebirth.

I sigh, seeing the essence of others begin to gently escape and I once again start to move. Only a few rogues are left, easily dealt with by the many Elites left over. I grip my side with a grimace, seeing the blood seeping out. I search the battleground, looking for a familiar male and I spot him walking out of the forest. His closest are with him, dragging two men behind them by ropes attached around their ankles.

I narrow my eyes, wondering what in the Gods he's doing when a breeze catches my hood, blowing it down and revealing my hair that I braided. Darius's head snaps my way, like my hair was a beacon in the moonlight and I freeze.

Fuck, *fuck*.

His mouth moves, and the others look over at me. I see their eyes widen before they look at the other Elites near me who have paused to do the same. I swallow and look at the Elites surrounding me from the corner of my eye, gripping my blade tight but keeping my back straight.

Show no weakness.

Black mist spreads along Darius's body until two masses form behind him, thick and moving viciously as he begins to

stalk over toward me. I hold my ground and wait, wait for whatever is about to happen because I just fucked up. My heart beats wildly and I lick my dry lips behind the mask, nervous of how this will go.

An Elite moves closer to me from the left and I turn slightly, looking at the stern face and brown eyes full of curiosity.

“And who are you?” he asks, his voice gravely as he looks me over, pausing on my armor-covered chest.

I tilt my head at him. “Who are you?” I repeat, keeping an eye on some of the other Elites as they come closer.

He chuckles, reaching out a black, covered hand. “I’m Maverick.”

I look at the hand he’s holding out and study it. Will he attack me if I reach out, do I back up and head toward Darius? I look at another Elite out of the corner of my eye before I tentatively place my hand in his, my body stiffening in case of an attack. But all he does is grip my hand gently, giving it a squeeze and then releases it when a growl rumbles through the air.

My spine straightens, and my head snaps toward Darius, ignoring the pain thrumming at my side. He comes to a stop a few feet away from us, the other Elites moving closer, stopping at the arrival of their Alpha. Darius’s nostrils flare, his eyes going to my hand and then to Maverick’s before looking him dead in the eye and snarling.

“Do not touch her, Maverick,” he growls low from his chest, the sound seemingly echoing in mine and filling my body with his possessiveness. My heart beats painfully as he comes closer to me, not stopping until he’s at my side. Leo, Damian, Zaide, and Jerrod move closer, forming a semicircle around us.

“I did not know the little warrior was off limits, Alpha,” Maverick says, dipping his head in respect. “I hear you loud and clear.”

“Make sure you remember that,” Darius says before raising his voice. “Make sure all of you remember that.” Then his eyes move to me, cold and furious. “What the fuck are you doing out here,” he growls. “Can you just do as your fucking told for once!”

My hackles rise. “I’m not a fucking dog,” I snap at him. “And I wanted to help. You tried to lock me in the room again, who do you think you are doing that?” I go to shove at his chest, angry at him for thinking he can order me around, but two things happen simultaneously.

The Elites gasp when I put my hands on their Alpha, the tension rising at wanting to take my hands off of him but knowing they can’t, and then me hissing in pain, the move causing my side to stretch and more blood to trickle out of it.

Darius stops me in a second, turning me to look at my side as I try to swat him away. “Still,” he commands, an edge to his voice as he bends down to get a closer look. “It’s not deep, make sure to concentrate on the wound with your magic like you did before, make it heal faster.”

“I am, asshat,” I mutter, my cheeks heating with all the attention on us right now. I’m not sure if Darius knows or even cares that his Elites are looking at him like he grew a second head. “You’re hurt,” I say, looking at his arm and not liking seeing him bleeding there.

He pauses for a moment when I reach out and touch around the wound. “I’m fine,” he murmurs, standing straight and looking down at me. Anger still swirls in his eyes, but concern shines through it. “Elites,” he commands, and they come toward their Alpha. Those in wolf form shift back, unbothered about their nakedness and I try not to blush at all the male forms in my vision.

My gaze moves back to Darius warily, wondering what he’s doing. I wasn’t exactly wanting to be seen here. The men that are tied up by their ankles curse and whimper, laying on the ground behind Jerrod. I glance at them in confusion as Darius waves a hand and Jerrod and Damian drag them forward before him, landing in between Maverick and I.

“These men are traitors,” Darius says, his voice loud and clear and my heart skips a beat. “I am Alpha of the Elites, I am Heir to Cazier. Those who do not like that, now is your one and only time to openly challenge me and I will not take your life.”

I swallow hard, my hand flexing on the hilt of the blade at his open challenge. I look around and see some Elites shuffle on their feet. Nervousness can be felt from everyone, coming in all directions while some have faces of fury at the two men

at Darius's feet. My gaze moves down at the two men on the ground and startle as their eyes land on me.

“Evil,” one spits, and I flinch. “You're one of them, aren't you? Your kind should have never been born, you should have been hung as a babe and fed to wild wolves.” Darius lifts his foot and kicks the man in his face, blood spurting from his nose as he cries out.

“Why is he saying that to you?” Maverick asks me, and I look at him and then Darius, seeing his black mist like tails suddenly swishing behind him.

“Remove your mask and show them, Rhea,” he tells me, and I hear Maverick suck in a sharp breath, no doubt at my name.

I shoot Darius a questioning look and wonder if he is sure. He nods, his eyes hard but a sliver of softness I'm not used to seeing shines through. It's that little light in his green eyes that makes me reach up behind my head and untie my mask, knowing he will protect me from what this may cause. I bring the material off of my face slowly, breathing heavily as I'm revealed to those around me.

Mutters and curse words float around me now that they know who I am. Some are just shocked while others are downright full of disgust. My anger builds at that.

“You are a stain.”

“Murderer.”

“Traitorous piece of shit.”

I turn sharply toward the one who called me a traitor, aware of Darius watching my every move. The male's lips peel back in a snarl as his light eyes fill with hatred. I drop my mask to the floor and walk toward him, other Elites parting for me as I call upon my markings, showing them all just who the fuck I am.

I am wolf.

I am Heir to Zahariss and protector of all.

Yet why should I protect him?

I move until I'm standing in front of him, and he tries to stop the tremors racking his body as I let loose my dominance. Elites drop to their knees that are near me, and the man in front of me cowers under the strength of it.

“What has been told about me is wrong and I was falsely accused. I am wolf, just like you are,” I spit at him, my eyes hard as I sense Darius move to stand behind me. “I am just like you, I bleed like you, I hope like you, I fight like you. Yet you sit there with your tiny, pea brain that doesn't have a thought of its own and blindly follow the word of a man and his rats without so much as thinking for yourself.” I feel heat at my back, the tingle of power coming into contact at my waist and my own reacts. Blue and black mix at the touch against my waist that brings comfort and strength as others watch on. “Your Alpha is the Heir to Cazier, and I am his counterpart. Are you loyal to your Alpha?” He swallows and bends his head, telling me all I need to know. I turn my head



and look at Darius, his face stern and a snarl on his lips aimed at the pathetic wolf at our feet.

“The Highers have betrayed us, betrayed the lands by stealing pups from their homes and using them how they see fit,” Darius shouts, and I hear the resounding shock of the Elites. “Rhea was captured by her family and Lord Higher Charles at seven years old and was kept in her basement until she escaped before she turned eighteen. What we were told was a lie, a cover up to what they wanted to do to her, an Heir,” he growls, and the Elites look toward me, their eyes wide as Darius tells them the truth. “She is no traitor. She spent her life protecting others as best as she could in Eridian, saving those abused in their own home, where they should have been safe.” I shift on my feet, uncomfortable with the attention on me but I never let myself falter, keeping my head held high. “Will you support that the Highers are willing to take children to abuse? Are you willing to let them take your pups?!”

Deadly growls surround us at Darius’s words. I gaze at them all, at the Elites looking at Darius with trust, knowing he won’t steer them wrong. Hope fills me as they look toward me, dipping their heads in a show of respect and I let loose a sigh of relief. They are loyal to their Alpha, and this Alpha has spoken for me, that’s enough for them.

“The Highers are more concerned with arranged matings than letting the people take safe haven inside the castle walls, you have seen it for yourself. Is that who you want leading Vrohkaria?” Darius asks them, and ‘no Alpha’ can be heard

echoing around us. “Are you unloyal to me, your Alpha?” Darius calls, and the Elites bring their palm to their chests, the sound loud in the silent air as they tip their heads to the side in submission. “Then you are loyal to me and me alone. The Highers have our loyalty, strength and numbers no more.”

“Rah,” the Elites call and tingles spread throughout my body as the sound vibrates through me.

I look upon the Elites around us, all pledging to him and him alone. At this moment, I really feel that we stand a chance, a chance to make a change and right the wrongs. We could make the lands right if they stand by Darius. He has clearly earned their respect and I can't help but feel pride in the male at my back.

I look back down at the Elite before me. No, not Elite, a rat in wolf's clothing. A solid touch at my hand has me looking down at Darius's strong fingers wrapping around mine on the hilt of the blade. My eyes move to his, and he tilts his head toward the vermin on the floor.

“Rise,” Darius orders, and the Elites do, looking at their Alpha for their next order. The rat in front of me goes to do the same, but I put a hand on his shoulder to keep him knelt. His hateful eyes snap up to mine. He won't be loyal to his Alpha. “Do what needs to be done,” Darius says, his breath in my ear. He turns my head so he can see my eyes. “And remember,” he growls, his voice rising. “If anyone touches her, you will be next.”

I realize now my enemy *would* destroy the lands and put it at my feet. I can see it in his eyes. The determination, the claim, the... adoration. I've never felt anything like this.

I don't think twice.

I grip the rat's hair in my hand and tilt his head back, my heartbeat pounding in my ears.

Then with no remorse, Darius and I bring the blade up to his neck and slice.

# Fifty

RHEA

Running a hand down the white, cotton dress, I look around the hall full of Elites. A few have their eyes on me, not vicious, more curious after battling the rogues outside the keep. Some have respect in their eyes after I slit the throat of a traitor just hours ago and tip their heads to me before going back to their meal. Sconces decorate the hall to light the dark room as the moonlight shines through the windows. Plates and bowls of food are placed on the tables, a feast fit for almost a ball instead of hardened warriors as they drink back their ale. We all deserve to relax a little after the battle.

My gaze moves over to Colten as he talks with a male further down the hall. The conversation looks slightly heated, but then the Elite reaches out and puts a hand on his shoulder, causing Hudson, who sits across from me, to tense at the contact. I smirk into my cup, letting the cool water slide down my throat. The ever protective Hudson clenches his jaw, his eyes homed in on that hand and he stands, moving closer to Colten and leaning against the wall. I snort.

“What’s so funny?” Josh asks, and I nod my head over to them. “Gods, they are so blind.”

“I don’t think they are blind,” I tell him, picking up a berry and popping it into my mouth. “They just need to sort their shit out, whatever that is.”

“They are too stubborn, or at least one of them is,” Taylor mutters into his drink.

“They need to fuck,” Anna says, and I let loose a smile.

“We can fuck,” Seb flirts, licking his lips at Anna as she visibly recoils at him.

A laugh busts free before I can stop it, putting a hand over my mouth to try and silence it. A growl comes from my left and my eyes snap to the table at the back of the room, at the male with a scowl on his face. He watches me, then his eyes go to Anna and Seb across from me. I roll my eyes at him, but they soon trail down his muscular chest, then watch his arms as he brings a cup to his lips as he takes a drink. My gaze moves further up and our eyes connect, locking in place.

Darius tilts his head, his own eyes trailing over me in the dress he gave me to wear tonight. I shift at his perusal, not used to wearing anything like this. It’s modest, comes just above my knee and the neck of the dress only dips ever so slightly at my front, still hiding anything that could be seen as vulgar. But with the way Darius is looking at me, I feel practically naked. I squirm in my seat, my thighs clenching and his eyes heat, watching the movement.

I've been restless since we came back to the keep. He went to torture the males he tied up and I watched, turned on as he dragged them away, his face full of anger and deadly intent.

I don't know why that makes my need for him strong, but his show of strength makes me want him to show me that strength in another way. His hands on my hips as he drives into me, his lips at my neck, telling me how I make him feel...

I shake my head, damn male.

His eyes eventually move away from me and I breathe out a breath, reaching for another berry. Darius then stands, and the room quiets down as the Elites focus on their Alpha.

“For now, the Highers do not know we are not under their paw. We need to keep it that way for as long as possible to prepare. War will come eventually between the Elites and the Highers, and with rogues plaguing the lands, I foresee a lot of deaths in the coming future.” I pick at my fingernail. I never wanted to bring anyone into my desire to rid the Highers at the cost of lives, but this is bigger than just my own personal revenge, they have hurt so many others, and it seems, are continuing to do so. “When I or any of my brothers are not present in the keep, Maverick will be here in my stead, assigning those who still need to go hunting and those who will stay back and guard the keep.” My eyes move to Maverick at the table across from me as he nods his head in acknowledgement. “No Higher is allowed into the keep when I am gone, or their witches. Some Elites, who are currently on hunts, will not return, they were traitors to me and the lands.

As for the ones who went to the basement, we gained some information.” Everyone sits up straight at the news, including myself. “The Highers’ witches have sometimes been giving us incorrect information when they have told us they have found power spikes in the lands. They did this by either diverting our attention away from what was really going on in towns and villages, or sending specific Elites who were loyal to the Highers to murder parents and steal children for their sick purpose that we are not fully sure of.” The room is silent at his words, but you can taste the anger in the air. I feel it inside myself at just how low they would go to gain children. “The prisoners do not know the locations where these children have been taken, but we now know we cannot trust any information we received from the witches. At this time, when we receive news of power spikes or rogures from them, only half will go, assess the situation before any reinforcements port in. We cannot risk the lives of innocents, but we will do what we do best and protect them and others.”

I watch the Elites take in the news, full of fury and disgust at what the Highers have been doing. Guilt is spread across some faces and I can’t help but feel sorry for them. They had no idea, how could they? They thought going to every call from the Higher’s witches would be doing good, and would save lives. When sometimes getting that information causes deaths.

They have all been lied to, tricked and deceived. I’m sure this isn’t what they signed up for when they chose to become an Elites, and I understand the failure I’m sure they must feel.

Maverick stands. "I will do as you ask, Alpha." He tips his head. "We all will, we will not fail you." The other Elites stand one by one and place their palms flat against their chest and again, I can't help but feel pride in their respect for their Alpha, their unwavering loyalty that Darius has earned from them.

Darius, for the asshole he is, does want to do good, he wants to protect and he wants what's best for the people of Vrohkaria.

He's made mistakes, but he made them under the assumption that I was the bad one, I was the traitor and he's trying to make amends for that. I can't deny it.

We all go back to eating, the chatter casually getting louder as the night goes on. Finishing my meal, I stand and decide to call it a day and make my way out of the room. Pausing a few steps away, I look around and see all the Elites eyes on me. Uncomfortable with the attention, I come to a halt and run my hands down my dress. An Elite stands from a table and I hold my breath for...what? Cruel remarks, accusations, I don't know what but it wasn't what comes from his mouth.

"Goodnight Rhea, Heir of Zahariss. I hope you rest well." Stunned, I just blink at him as others agree, smiles on their faces as they wish me goodnight.

A hand on my arm has me coming out of my daze and then my feet are moving as Darius guides me out of the hall. We round a corner, and then I'm dragged into a dark alcove, my back hitting the wall.



“Dar—“ His hand is wrapped around my throat in an instant, his furious gaze on me and I bring my hands to his wrist.

“Did you think I forgot that you left our room and took it upon yourself to come out of the keep’s walls, putting yourself in danger? Again?” he growls, dipping his head.

“I couldn’t—“ I try to choke out.

“Then,” he murmurs, his face inches from mine. “You made my men curious and I had no choice but to let you reveal yourself.” His nose is now touching mine, his eyes alight with anger. “They could have all attacked you. They could have harmed every hair on your pretty, little head, and then I would have had to kill them.”

I suck in a breath and he rubs his nose on mine. His scent invades me and tingles spread throughout my body. He moves back, his gaze darkening when he roams over my body, his nostrils flaring. I’m suddenly turned and my hands land flat on the stone wall. His hand drops from my throat to grip the back of my neck. He pushes me forward and I turn my head so it’s flat against the wall. My breathing picks up and I lick my dry lips, which causes Darius to release a low growl as he pulls my dress up and over my hips. A rumble comes from him as he slides his palm over my skin and then he slowly peels my panties down my trembling thighs.

His fingers roam down between my legs and I groan as he plays with me, feeling how wet I am. “You think I didn’t notice you fucking me with your eyes?” I whimper. “So needy, little wolf.” His voice whispers in my ear and a shiver wracks

through me as I press back into his hand. His dark chuckle reaches me and then his hand is gone. I almost whine at the loss but then I feel the head of his cock moving back and forth, gathering my wetness.

“Darius,” I moan, squirming while his hand tightens on the back of my neck.

“Is this what you want?” he asks as he puts the head inside of me. I try to push back further but a hand on my hip stills me. “Tell me.”

I groan in frustration. “Asshole.”

“Tell me.” He nips at my neck. “I will give it to you, all you have to do is tell me.” I slump against the wall, wiggling on the tip of his cock. “Greedy little wolf,” he murmurs, and I clench around him.

I’ve never told him what I want, never voiced it really unless I said so in my heat that I don’t recall. Every time he has put his hands on me since then, he has always been the one to initiate it, and I’ve let him have his way every time. Now though he’s waiting for me, and my cheeks heat thinking about it. Why does he need me to say it?

I wiggle some more, going on my tiptoes and pressing back to get him deeper, but he halts me again. His hand comes around and starts lightly petting my clit, and I whine at needing more as he teases me, then pulls his hand away all together. I need him fully inside of me now.

“Darius, fuck me,” I tell him on a growl. “I want you to fuck me.” He chuckles darkly before he fills me in one smooth motion.

My hands scramble on the wall as a long moan tears from my throat, and he wastes no time, driving in and out of me at a punishing pace as I clench around him. He growls low, feeling me, feeling what he’s doing to me and my eyes roll in the back of my head as pleasure washes over me.

“Do not ever put yourself in danger again,” he orders, the sound of our skin slapping together echoing around the alcove. “Answer me.”

“I wanted to help,” I pant, moving a hand down until I reach between my legs and feel him pushing into me.

“Fuck,” he groans, moving his hand from the back of my neck and to my throat. He pulls me up, his mouth attacking my neck as he continues to slam into me. “You will not help unless I allow it, Rhea.”

“You cannot tell me what to do,” I whimper when he does a hard thrust and I arch into him, his hand squeezing the air from my lungs. “Darius.”

“Want to come, little wolf?”

“You know I do,” I pant, moving my hand up to rub my clit. I tense around him and he licks up my neck, biting and sucking.

“Then answer me,” he demands, his grunts right in my ear and he moves a hand over my fingers and rubs them over my

clit, harder.

Pleasure builds as my orgasm nears, and I whine at the sound of us, the feel of him pounding in and out of me. “Why does it always feel this good?”

“Because it’s you and me,” he groans. I try to move my hand faster, but he stills it and I let out a cry, frustration building as he won’t send me over the edge.

“Please, Darius,” I pant, wanting, no *needing* him to let me move my hand so I can feed the need that he has caused inside of me. He groans into the skin at my neck as he picks up his pace. “Gods,” I breathe when he hits that spot inside of me and my legs begin to tremble. “Okay, okay. I won’t help unless you say so.”

“Good little wolf.” His hand moves over mine and his fingers move between us until he pinches my clit, moving in circular motions. He squeezes my throat next, my breath hitches and with two more thrusts, my orgasm barrels into me, curling my toes as I let out a long, loud moan. So loud I think they would hear it back in the hall.

“Fuck, Rhea.” I feel Darius tense, and then he releases into me, making sure there is nothing left as I tremble against his chest. He releases my throat as I come down and I slump forward against the wall, panting as I try and catch my breath. Darius lets go of my throat and pulls out of me, lifting my panties back up. He runs a finger over the seam, feeling his release gather and he hums to himself. “I want you smelling of me for as long as possible.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” I huff as he pulls my dress down and turns me around to face him.

He narrows his eyes. “If you wash me from your body too soon, I will replace it.”

I tilt my head, my own eyes roaming his body as he tucks himself away. “And that would be a problem because...” A sound rumbles from his chest and before I know it, I’m picked up, put over his shoulder and we are striding up the stairs toward his room. “Put me down, you overgrown oaf,” I laugh, feeling satisfied and feeling lighter as I shimmy in place.

He pauses, and then smacks my ass. “I’ll show you the problem when you can’t stand or string a coherent sentence together after I’m done with you.”

# Fifty One

RHEA

I rouse from the bed, a tinkling noise rattling against the windows. I look over to the side of Darius's bed and see he's not there again. Though this time I didn't wake up when he left, he definitely tired me out.

*Tink.*

My brows furrow and I creep out of bed, picking up the dress I had on earlier and putting it on. Padding over to the balcony doors, I open one and step outside in the night, wondering if it's Illium. I frown when I don't see him anywhere, and I go to turn when something clacks against the door. Looking down, I see a stone rolling to a stop. What the... Picking it up, I examine it in my hand. Another comes then, landing next to my bare foot and I look over to the balcony. Creeping closer, I open my senses and look out toward the distance.

Leaning my palms on the stone, I look down and spot a figure standing below. He's wearing black pants and a t-shirt rather than donning his armor like earlier.

“What are you doing?” I ask Darius, my head tilted.

He throws a stone up in the air before catching it. “Come down,” he says, his tone soft.

“Huh?”

He huffs, looking up into the night sky. “Come down, barefooted, and quickly.” Confused, I eye him one last time before I leave the room and make my way down.

Rounding the hallways and opening the door at the bottom of the stairs that lead me outside, I walk out with the warm summer breeze gliding past me. Darius waits for me, his arms folded and he nods his head to follow him.

“Where are we going?” I ask as we walk. I follow close behind him on bare feet, watching as the muscles of his back move with each step. My eyes are unable to help trail down to his ass and then down to the back of his thighs. His dark chuckle brings me out of my staring.

“I can feel your eyes on me, little wolf.” I huff.

We take the now familiar path toward the iron gates where we go to the willow fields. My dress gently flows around me as we walk under the moonlight, and I inhale the scent of the lands, relaxing my shoulders as I take it in. The grass stalks flatten under my feet as we pass the gate and as we venture deeper, Darius pauses suddenly, looking up toward the moon once more.

“This will do.” What will do? He turns toward me with a look in his eyes that I cannot understand. He goes to open his

mouth, but then closes it, stepping toward me. “Put your power to the ground, just a little further up.” He nods in the direction in front of him.

“What? Why?” I wonder, looking down. “The land is healthy here.” He sighs in frustration but what does he expect me to say? He woke me in the middle of the night and brought me here, I’m going to have questions.

“Can you just do as you are told?” I blink at him. “Of course you won’t,” he says, but it’s laced with something like adoration along with a small smirk. He walks over to me. I tip my head back to look at him and he stands in front of me, his eyes roaming my face. “Just do it, little wolf.” He leans forward and rubs his nose against mine. A breath escapes my lips and he takes a good amount of steps back from me, giving me room.

I eye him curiously as I walk a little, feeling the grass tickle my feet. “How much power?” I ask him, calling it to my palm already.

“Just a little at first,” Darius says.

Crouching down, I feel the stalks between my fingers, the summer breeze making them pass through them gently. Looking over my shoulder at Darius, he stands there, arms folded as he watches me with an intensity that makes fireflies swirl in my belly.

Without taking my eyes off him, I place my palm to the ground and immediately feel life pulse through me, greeting me. I wiggle my fingers before I guide my power into the



earth, watching as the glow of my tendrils seep down before I lay my hand flat on the ground. The grass lengthens.

“What now?” I ask him.

“Keep going.”

“Why?”

“Just do it.”

I look down and do as he asks, calling more power and tingles spread to my fingertips, flowing through my hands. They connect with something deep into the dirt, and I tilt my head, pushing a little more into it. Something tickles my hand, and I snatch it back, watching as a stem appears out of the ground. It sprouts up, coming up to below my knee if I were standing. My head turns sharply to Darius when I see a bud form at the end.

“Is.. is that...”

“More,” he says gruffly. I look down at the bud, wondering how it got here. “More, little wolf,” Darius says again, this time more demanding.

Taking a deep breath, I do as he says, pressing my palm back down to the ground and pushing more of my power into the earth. I feel it spread out under it, like roots moving and twining, connecting with others. A stem pops up next to the one in front of me, then another and another. I pause, hesitant and not quite sure what’s going on.

“Keep going,” Darius whispers, but I hear it all the same.

With shaky hands, I press my other palm to the ground and push more and more power into the earth, feeling my markings appear as sprout after sprout shoot up around me, spreading out. There are hundreds of them, if not more. The green stalks keep coming all over the clearing while I look at Darius.

“Just a little further.” He keeps his eyes locked on mine as I force more power into the earth, unable to look away until my gaze snags on a color out of the corner of my eye.

Blue, a blue I know so well. I gasp, rising to my feet on unsteady legs. My eyes widen as blue flowers after blue flowers bloom, too many for me to count. They start glowing under the moonlight, and tears sting the back of my eyes.

“Lesia flowers,” I breathe, reaching down to touch their petals, feeling the breath releasing from my lungs like the force of a wave against a cliff.

My eyes take them all in, feeling a homesickness wash over me briefly, but then replaced by a giddiness that I can't contain. I stalk through them, feeling them on the tips of my fingers as happiness unfurls inside of me, the feeling strange after so long. They reach up to my knees, and I make sure not to crush any as I move. Stopping beside another one, I caress its petals and marvel at its beauty. A laugh suddenly comes from me, and then, I'm running.

I run through the flowers that were my childhood, that remind me of my mom with a smile on my face as I laugh in delight. I pick a flower and twirl around, smiling down at it as

I bring it to my nose and smell its scent. I can't believe this, I can't believe the sea of blue I'm surrounded by.

Still smiling, I pick a bunch of them, my bare feet covered in dirt as I don't stop running and twirling in the field of lesia flowers. The moon shines down on them, making them glow and lighting up the way, making me feel like I'm gliding through them on water.

I pick one last flower and spin, and then stop short. Darius stands a few feet away from me, having come closer at some point, his eyes alight as he takes in my appearance that is no doubt covered in dirt and frazzled.

"How?" I ask Darius, closing my eyes and taking in the sweet scent surrounding me. It feels like I'm wrapped up in a blanket of happiness and safety.

"You missed them," Darius says. "I saw what they meant to you when you realized they got rid of them at your old pack home." Is that why he started bringing me a flower every day?

Gratefulness fills me. "Were they always here? Just hidden deep below?"

He looks off to the side. "No."

"No?" I ask, surprised. "Then how did they get here?" He hesitates in his answer, and I tilt my head at him curiously.

He shrugs. "I bought seeds from a merchant." My eyes widen, and he looks around the field, his jaw ticking like he's uncomfortable. "I spent any time I could coming out here and putting them into the ground."

“You... you planted every one of them?” There are hundreds. Is this where he has been going at night?

“Yeah,” he whispers, and I look back at him with tears in my eyes.

“I...” I look around in awe, and my chest warms at the fact that he did this for me. Darius, the Alpha of the Elites, planted flower seeds, for me.

“It’s yours now, little wolf.” He nods to the flowers. “Do with it what you wish.”

A smile spreads across my face and he looks over my features, his shoulders tensing. I walk back over to him, stopping a few feet away. “There are so many of them,” I tell him, and he grunts.

“I wanted to give you something back that was taken from you.” I swallow past the lump in my throat as emotion threatens to choke me. I felt like since I was captured and put in that basement, all anyone has ever done was take from me what I had not freely given. He has no idea what he has just done for me. The single flowers were more than I could hope for with seeing a lesia flower again, but this?

I bite my lip and my feet take me the last remaining steps to the male who gave me a field of lesia flowers. I pick a flower from my bunch, the best one and hand it to him, suddenly nervous. He’s the Alpha of the Elites. What would he want with a flower? But the urge to give him one overwhelms me. He did all of this for me, he didn’t have to but he did. I want to

show him my appreciation and this is the only thing I can think of right now.

I don't look up as I hold it out to him, nerves flowing through me and a shyness overcomes me that I don't feel often. It's not enough that it overshadows the elation I feel though. I hear rather than see him swallow, and then his hand is reaching out, his fingers grazing mine as he gently takes the flower from me.

"Laeliah," he murmurs, and my head snaps up, a smile on my face at him calling the flower beautiful. But he's not looking at the flower, he's looking at me.

My chest rises in the deep breath as he takes a step closer, towering over me as he raises his hand and carefully, so carefully tucks the flower in my hair, just above my ear. When he's happy with it, his hand comes down to my cheek, and he holds it in his grip.

"Laeliah," he repeats, looking deeply into my eyes as he tilts his head down and places the softest of kisses against my forehead.

I close my eyes and let the feeling of tenderness fill me, letting out a small sigh at the contact. Moments like this where he's so gentle with me are not often, but it makes me cherish them more, unable to help the way it makes me feel. Cared for, adored. I don't get to feel that a lot of the time so when I do, I wrap it up within me for safe keeping.

Darius makes a noise in the back of his throat before rubbing his thumb over my jaw. "Go and play, little wolf." He takes a

step back, a small smile on his face that I want to see more of.  
“I’ll watch over you.”

I go to him and raise up on my tip toes, placing a kiss on his cheek. “Thank you.”

Then I turn, smile, and I run.

I run through the flowers that were my childhood that were stolen from me but now have been given back. Runa howls in delight inside of me, and I echo it in the giggle that escapes me. And then I twirl and spin, letting my magic flow after me like ribbons dancing on the breeze in pure happiness as their sweet scent tickles my senses. I laugh, the sound so free and innocent that I wonder if it even came from me as it has been so long since I’ve heard it, but it did come from me.

I don’t stop moving in a field of blue flowers that my enemy made me. Just for me. Well into the night and when the sun begins to rise, and the flowers stop glowing, I still play, run, twirl and be *free*. Darius gave me something so precious, and I’m not even sure he realizes it.

I stop in the center, my chest heaving and my smile wide. Turning to Darius, he stands there all imposing, arms folded, but I see his own smile on his face as he watches me.

I add that to the smile with the wisps, the pups, when he kissed me under the moonlight.

I add that to my precious memories to keep as he tilts his head at me and smirks.

And then I continue to play while he's there, watching over me and never leaving my side.

## Fifty Two

RHEA

“He made you a field of lesia flowers?” Josh asks and I blush, nodding. He shakes his head and looks at Sarah. “Do you want that?”

She laughs and pats his shoulder. “No, don’t worry, I won’t have you planting seeds in the middle of the night.”

“As long as he doesn’t hurt you again,” Taylor says a few seats down from me. All my pack are sitting here in the dining room. It has been a while since we all gathered and I thought it would be a good time to fill them in on the fact that it was Darius who helped us before we arrived here.

I look toward Taylor. “He has done things I’m sure we are all angry about, but we cannot deny he has helped us also.” My eyes go toward Sarah and she nods. “Darius helped us escape Wolvorn,” I tell them, and Seb chokes on his drink.

“What?”

“He gave the port stone to you, Anna.” I look toward my friend whose mouth has dropped open. “Unbelievable, right?”



I shake my head.

“How is that possible?” Colten mutters, seated next to Hudson as usual.

“He told me that even though at that moment I was a traitor, he couldn’t leave me there. So he placed the port stone on Anna in the hopes that we would be close enough to escape, and thankfully we all did.”

“He couldn’t leave you there because he couldn’t deny his instinct to protect,” Hudson says, side-eyeing Colten. “It overshadows duty at that point.”

I nod and sit back in my seat. “I figured as much that you all would know by now without me voicing what is going on between us.” They all nod, and I chuckle. “It has been quite a few months, hasn’t it. All our lives have changed. I can’t help but feel we took Eridian for granted, and didn’t cherish it enough. I long to see the link trees again and play with wisps and see the wolves.” I sigh and look up toward the ceiling. “I want to go to the graveyard and place stones for Solvier... For Josie and Danny.” I sniffle and wipe my hands down my face. Looking toward my members, their eyes are just as seldom, their grief clear.

“We will go back there and guide them to the lands,” Josh says, gripping Sarah’s hand tightly on top of the table. “We may not be home right now, but we will be. After we have gotten our pack back, the Highers are dead and gone, and the rogues are no more, we will go home.”

Home. Will home still be Eridian?

The doors to the room suddenly open, and the Elites come through, their steps urgent. We rise to our feet, my heart in my mouth at the serious expression on Darius's face.

“What's wrong?” I ask, and he comes to a halt.

“We have the memory crystal.” My eyes widen as Zaide comes to stand next to him.

He reaches into a small rucksack and retrieves a small, covered package. “Charles will know I have taken it. It was warded, but I managed to get past them with some help.” He holds out the package and I take a step back from it.

This is what caused everything to go to shit in Eridian, what caused Darius to break his vow and send us all to Wolvorn.

Darius steps forward and takes it, coming to a stop in front of me. He places his thumb and finger at my chin and raises my head. His eyes bounce between mine with furrowed brows, a frown on his face. “It won't be like the last time,” he reassures me, like he can hear my thoughts, my fear of a repeat of the last time.

I nod, closing my eyes and taking a deep breath. We have been waiting for this moment, to find out the truth. I can't be afraid now. “Okay,” I breathe, and Darius nods.

We all gather around the table and Darius stands directly across from me, placing the package in the center. Nerves rattle through me at what I will see as Darius opens it up and there it is, resting against the cloth.

I sense the magic within it, sense its wrongness still lingering within. My eyes flick up to Darius, who's already watching me. He nods toward the crystal, and I take a breath, reaching a hand out. Just as I'm about to touch it, a yellow spark comes for it and whips at my hand. I hiss and pull it back in pain, glaring at the crystal.

"You good?" Darius asks, and I nod. "Why is it doing that?" he asks the room and they all shake their heads.

"It was doing this when you first held it in Eridian," Leo says, hands on his hips as his eyes come to me. We haven't spoken really since I supposedly nearly took his head off. Some part of me feels I need to apologize for it, but I haven't got the chance yet. "Try again."

I look to the crystal and reach out again, only to be stung by another spark. Darius grunts, and he picks up the crystal. Sparks fly, but he doesn't let go as his eyes glaze over. My heart hammers inside my chest as I wait with bated breath as he sees what's inside the crystal. After a few moments, he drops the crystal and his eyes clear.

"It still shows the same thing," he says gruffly and my eyes drop to the table.

"I can sense the wrongness coming from it, it's not normal."

Darius folds his arms and tilts his head. "Pick it up again, but this time, coat your hand in your magic."

My eyes flick up to his, unsure. At his confident stare, I reach forward again with a covered hand, and I connect with

the crystal. I'm instantly thrown in the memory, like I'm standing right there.

I'm in some sort of circular area, ruined pillars and structures surrounding me. Grass covers beneath my feet, and I look around and see dark, circular patches. They are dead and rotten, and a dark mist hovers along them. There are more appearing around the ground, and my eyes move to the center. Beings in hooded cloaks stand around a raised platform, their hands resting loosely at their sides. I can't see their faces, but they are all standing there, like they are waiting for something.

"You can't do this!" a woman screams, and my head snaps toward the sound. A figure stands just outside of the platform, looking up at someone who hangs there from the pillars she's attached too. Blood drips from her chained wrists, and I swallow as I move closer, veering off to the side to get a better look at what I'm assuming is supposed to be me.

"We already have, Catherine." I stop short at that voice, at that name. No, it can't be. My palms sweat, and on shaky legs, I round the center. "This has been planned for some time now. After disposing of the problem that arose, it was easy to guide you where we needed you to be."

"W-what?" the woman asks and I can hear the pain and exhaustion in her voice.

"Well... you see, Derrik was getting too close to finding out things he shouldn't." I swallow the cry that wants to be released as I move in-between the hooded figures. I could walk through them as they are not really here, but I don't want

to disturb the magi. “He had to be dealt with swiftly in order for us to proceed with the ritual. A hunting accident was the perfect way to go about it, wouldn’t you say?”

“No! No, no, no. How could you?” the woman cries, and my own eyes sting with tears. “He did everything for this pack. For his family! You were his closest friend. He helped you when you needed it, helped you become who you are. And this is how you repay him? Repay us?”

I feel another enter the space, and I pause, my head lifting and going to Darius. His brows furrow as he looks around the area, and then he spots me. He stalks toward me, and I stay put, listening to the memory as a tear streaks down my face.

“Yes, well... his sacrifice was needed, as is yours,” the man scoffs. “Don’t worry, my dear, it will soon be over.”

I can hear her wiggling, hear the chains clanging as she tries to get free and I don’t dare look. I can’t. Darius reaches me, a hand coming up to my face to wipe another tear that falls.

“What is it? Are you hurt?” I nod, because I am hurt, I’m in so much fucking pain. “Where?” he demands, hands roaming my body like he can see the wound. This one lies deep down inside of me instead.

I bring a hand up to my chest and claw at my heart as I hear a laugh, and more rattling of those fucking chains. Darius pauses, then brings a hand over mine and flattens it against my chest. He makes a rumbled sound, and I close my eyes and lean my head forward against him. His other hand comes up to the back of my head, running his fingers through my hair.

“The memory is different this time,” he whispers. I want to ask what he means, but the woman speaks again as chanting from the hooded figures echoes the space.

“You have no idea what you are doing. You will plague these lands with creatures that are not meant to be. Creatures that should stay below and never surface. You cannot undo this. Think this through. The lives of so many will be lost over time.’

Rogures, fuck. She must mean the rogures.

“Not for you to worry, my dear. I think I can handle a few pesky creatures that come out of the below, especially with what you are about to give me.”

I raise my head, and with a strength I didn’t know I could have right now, I look toward the center of the platform where she hangs. The hooded figures raised their arms above their heads, and swirls of red come from their fingertips, flowing toward where she is. Darius tenses.

The man in the center cups her cheek next, having floated up to her at some point, and I can see the hate in her eyes. “You were always supposed to choose me, you know. If you had, perhaps this wouldn’t have happened, and I would have waited for your replacement instead.”

“Don’t you dare touch—”

Me. She was going to say me. I whimper when a blade at her throat stops her from saying my name, and Darius hauls me closer, concern written all over his face.

“Don’t worry, I won’t be touching anyone anytime soon. I have things I am required to prepare for.”

I fall to my knees, watching as the blood flows from her body, but she still finds the strength to speak as her Heir markings appear on her face.

“I curse those who commit wrongs against me and mine. I curse those who steal what is not freely given to feel pain and suffering over time. I curse these lands until its last days. His hounds will hunt and gather and kill all who did an injustice against the line.”

I shake against Darius, he’s murmuring words to me but I can’t hear him as I watch light shoot out of her markings and up into the night sky.

“No!” the man roars, and then the blade slices through her neck in one swift strike. I scream, clawing at Darius as I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to banish what I just saw.

“Rhea!” Darius shouts, and I’m picked up as light shines behind my closed lids. I can hear shouting and panicked voices, and then hands are touching me while Darius growls and snarls at them all. “Back off!”

I bite down into Darius’s shoulder as I scream, scratching at his neck, wanting to hide, wanting it to stop, wanting to never see what I just witnessed. I’m jostled, and then I’m placed on something soft as Darius’s body surrounds me, all of me. I’m trapped between him and the furs beneath me in a cocoon.

“What’s wrong, little wolf, tell me.” I cry into him, and his power coats me, cooling me and seeping into my skin. I take a ragged breath, gasping for air as he tries to calm me down.

“Rhea, tell me, now.” I can hear panic in his voice.

I loosen my bite in his shoulder. “It...it.” I can’t even say it, I don’t want to.

“What, Rhea.” He guides my head away from him, holding my face in his palms as his nostrils flare. “Little wolf, tell me what’s wrong, I will make it better.”

He can’t, he never can.

“The woman,” I gasp, holding on to his shoulders tightly.

“In the memory?” I nod.

“She’s,” I hiccup. “She’s my mom.”



## Fifty Three

RHEA

That's where they must have taken her after they knocked me out, to that ruined place. I had always wondered what had happened, only knowing that she died because of the Highers, but to actually know the truth? It is even more devastating. They killed her like that, and also killed my dad in what they deemed a hunting accident.

“Fuck,” Darius says as he hovers above me, his eyes wild. “Fuck, Rhea, that's why I thought it was you.” His eyes go hazy, like he's looking straight through me before he shakes his head.

“That's not important right now.” I sniffle, and he closes his eyes briefly.

“You're right. You shouldn't have had to see that.”

I rub my eyes, they feel puffy and scratchy. “I had always wondered,” I croak out, my throat feeling raw. “They told me that she was dead, along with my father, this confirmed it.”

His hand comes up to move some hair out of my face.  
“Charles was responsible for their deaths.”

“He was,” I agree. He was the male to slit her throat. I gag, and Darius sits me up, and then a cup of water is in front of me.

“Take little sips.” I do, slowly drinking it slowly. I look around and realize we are in his room. He must have thought taking me somewhere quiet is what I needed. He wasn’t wrong.

“I need to see the rest of it,” I tell him, needing to get it over and done with.

“No,” Darius says sharply.

”I *need* to see the rest of it. That was the whole point, to see if we could figure out anything.“ It was clear Charles was doing some type of ritual, that what he did brought the rogures to the lands. He fucking did that yet blamed me in front of everyone. He went along with it and I was the one to take the fall for what he did.

“You said the memory had changed, what did you mean?” I ask him.

His fingers stroke along my cheek, his gaze roaming over my face. “There was no one else in the memory I saw. Just... who I thought was you, spilling blood on that platform and then rogures rising out of the ground.” His eyes bounce between mine, and I see that flicker of regret there. “I think your magic cleared whatever hid the true memory.”

“I didn’t feel wrongness when I was in the memory.” I swallow. “Just the truth. I need to see the rest.”

Darius shakes his head. “Rhea, it can wait.”

“I can’t, Darius. If I don’t do it now, I...I don’t think I ever will.” As much as I want to see my mom, even in a memory, I never want to see her like that.

He sighs. “I don’t want.” He pauses, searching my face. “I don’t want you to hurt anymore.”

Warmth spreads through me at his words. “Even if it hurts, I need to see the rest.”

“Are you sure?” At my nod, he gets up and places a kiss on my forehead. “I’ll go and grab it, wait here.” And then he leaves.

As soon as the door shuts, my eyes go to the ceiling, letting the tears silently fall from my eyes. The vision of my mom’s face before he killed her flashes through my mind, and my hands grip the furs tightly beneath me. I take in the scent of me and Darius to calm me, noticing how it’s mingled with mine.

My mom was in so much pain, but I could see, no, I could *feel* her hatred for Charles, could feel her determination to not give him what he wants, which I’m still not sure of. Either way, I don’t think it worked out what Charles had intended. My mom was truthful, though, beasts did plague the lands, and we are all paying for it.

I wasn't the one to cause roguers, my mom was if her last words to Charles was anything to go by.



Sitting on the bed, I eye the door for what seems to be the hundredth time. Where is Darius?

Fed up with waiting, I leave the room and follow the familiar hallways until I reach the stairs. Descending them, I hear murmurs, and then a door slamming. Rounding the bottom of the stairs, I follow the voices until I near the door that Damian wouldn't let me in. I hear a sound coming from there, but then it cuts off sharply.

*"Where is everyone?"* I ask Josh.

*"Hey, you okay?"*

*"I'm okay,"* I tell him, *"so where are they?"*

*"We are in the dining room with Jarred, Zaide, and Damian. I'm not sure where Leo is, and I've not seen Darius since he left with you."*

So where is he?

*"I'll go find him, I'll catch up with you later."*

Walking toward the door, I see that it's open slightly. I look behind me, checking if anyone is there and then I open the door. Stairs lead down in a circular fashion, only a few sconces lighting the way. A rattle sounds below, and my hand tightens

on the handle. With one last look over my shoulder, I descend the steps.

The stone is cold beneath my feet as I go down, it's just as cold as the air the deeper I go. Where does this lead too? I wasn't allowed in here last time. I see light at the bottom after some time, and then I'm in a room with cells on either side that are empty. Is this a dungeon? If so, where are the traitors who Darius got information from? The faint smell of blood and stagnant water penetrates my nose, and I rub at it, not liking the smell.

A faint sound, like a grunt, has my head tilting at a door at the end of the room. Cautiously, I head down that way, the stone getting cooler against my feet with each step I take. Just how deep am I? Opening the door, a barely lit hallway is on the other side, and I head down it. Rounding a corner, it opens into another large space, and I flinch as the sound of something connecting with skin reaches me. My heart beats wildly within my chest at it. Is a prisoner being punished? Walking further into the room, noting more empty cells to my left, the room looks like it branches off to the right. Taking a step in that direction, I spot a figure in the dim light. Their back is to me, so I don't know who it is, but by their form I know it's male, but it's not Darius.

Brows furrowed, I continue on silently, but come to a stop suddenly when they bring their arm back. Something dangles from their hand, and I recognize what it is straight away. I felt each strand against my back after all. Droplets of something

drip for the leather strands, and I know its blood. Each splash on the stone sends shivers down my spine.

The male pulls his arms back before bringing it forward in a quick slash and I feel like I can't breathe. A quiet growl sounds as it connects with flesh, and my vision wavers as memories rush to my mind. The feel of it connecting to my skin, splitting it, tearing it apart. My mouth fills with saliva and I put a hand against my stomach as nausea threatens to rise.

He lifts the whip again, and I move on shaky legs, needing to stop what he's doing. It may be a prisoner, a traitor, but there are other ways than this. I just need it to stop.

The male doesn't hear me coming, unsure if he is just concentrating on his task or doesn't care, but as I get closer, I recognize the back of his blond head.

"That's enough now," Leo says quietly, his arm coming to hang by his side as he holds the whip loosely. "You need to stop this, you have punished yourself enough."

Punished? What is he talking about?

"It's never enough."

The world tilts, and I put a hand on the stone wall to stop myself from falling. My hand shakes as I grip it, getting my fingers into the groove as my knees threaten to buckle. My breathing turns ragged, and I squeeze my eyes shut, shaking my head.

“It is, brother. You have bled more than most.” There is hurt in Leo’s voice, like he’s had this conversation a thousand times.

“No more than her. Again, and be quick. I need to get back to her.”

No. It can’t be.

I stumble forward, needing to know this isn’t what I think it is as Leo sighs, his grip tightening on the handle. This is a trick of my imagination, maybe I heard wrong, maybe I’m hearing things.

I’m so close behind Leo now, and I try to ignore the amount of blood splattering the floor as Leo raises the whip, about to bring it down on the naked flesh before him.

Without thought, I rush the last few steps, and with a trembling hand, I rip the whip out of Leo’s hand. He turns toward me sharply, but I already have magic at my palm and I slam in into his chest, sending him crashing into the wall. My chest heaves, anger overcoming me for a moment as I step toward Leo, but there is no surprise in his eyes that I’m here, just sadness. That makes me pause.

I slowly, ever so slowly glance down at the male kneeling on the cold, stone floor. His back is a mess of torn skin and painted with blood. It drips down into some dark pants, and I cast a glance to the table at the side and the clothes he was wearing earlier. My eyes shift back to his wounds. One, two, three... I see more and more all over, some deeper than others. The whip drops from my hand, the sound echoing in the

silence and I see his back tense, his shoulders stiffen and a tear streams down my face.

He doesn't turn to look at me. I know he knows I'm here, I know he senses me behind him. It's the way his breathing has changed, the way he holds himself rigid. I shuffle a step forward, still he doesn't look.

I swallow roughly and look at Leo who takes a step back, his hands fisting at his sides. How long has he been doing this? When did it start? Why?

Why, why, why?

“Leave.” One word, that's all he is giving me and it's the wrong one. I'm already shaking my head. Leave? You have to be fucking kidding me. I'm not going anywhere until he tells me what's going on, and explains to me why this is happening. How long has this been going on?

I let out a shaky breath as I look over his back again, a cry bubbling up my throat at the mess of it.

“Darius,” I whisper as another tear slides down my face. “What have you done?”

To Be Continued...



# Language

Arbiel canna – We bleed wolf.

Vallier – Please

Sion - Run

Effiniar – Indefinite

Kyt – Yes

Dah – I

Ny - My

Zie – You

Zier - Your

Lebahn – Learn

Brier – Fast

Laeliah – Beautiful

Lumniva - Moonlight

Vihnarn – Unknown

## Afterword

Oh man.

This book, this fucking book was SO hard because it was originally too big. So after a lot of faffing and changing, I finally had an end.

When I wrote this ending, it just felt right.

A little mean, I admit, but it felt like we have come a full circle.

Rhea. I love this girl.

She shoves everything down and always puts others before her. But eventually, you have to let it out and let go. I love her fight in this one, especially with Darius, but I also love her strength to understand, to put herself in others shoes. Strength isn't always physical, and though Rhea doesn't shy away from punching an asshole, her heart is her biggest strength of all.

I cannot wait for her.... shall we say, upgrade, in book three.

Darius. This dude.

If you had read my note at the end of book one, you know I tried to change what he did to Rhea, and that these characters refused any other outcome.

Coming into the second book, I had no idea how this was going to go. I'm along for the ride just as you are.

The way I see it, to grovel, you want forgiveness.

Darius does not want Rhea's forgiveness, in his eyes he does not deserve it. He doesn't make excuses for what he did, he doesn't even try even though he couldn't acknowledge what he did to her for so long. Or more so, he could't say aloud what he had done.

He knows what he did was unforgivable, and he has been punishing himself for it since the moment Rhea escaped.

I didn't know this part if the story at first, but when I did...

Damn.

And let me tell you, the scene where he told Rhea he had planted all those lesia seeds and let her play... I was swooning, not going to lie.

*\*Insert gif of heart eyes\**

Thank you for reading the next book in this series. I know the ending of book one may have been hard, and I hope, still with time, if not already, Darius can win you over....

But he will always be a alpha-hole \*smirks\*

So hold on tight for book three., it's about to get.... wolfy

As always, thank you for coming with me on this journey of  
mine.

I hope to see you back in Vrohcaria soon.

Much loves and reading,

Kelly <3

# Acknowledgments

## **My family.**

All those times where my head was buried in my laptop, where I would rant about how nervous I am about this book, where I would repeat myself a million times about the same things... thank you for feeding me, supporting me, and listening to me.

## **Incognito**

Appreciate you always.

## **My Alpha and Beta readers.**

Thank you for your input as always, you guys help me make this book the best it can be.

## **Mandy**

Honestly, you talked me off a ledge and assured me this was enough. Thank you for kicking my self doubt to the curb.

## **Masochists & Muffins**

I adore you all and appreciate your support so much.

**Reader.**

After the ending of the last book, thank you for trusting that we are going in the right direction, no matter how dark it looks.

## Come Stalk Me

Pre-order book three in The Hidden Of Vrohkaria series  
coming 2024 > [TLD](#)

Book Three Goodreads TBR - [Here](#)

Book three Arc interest form – [Here](#)

Come and join my readers group for updates, teasers,  
giveaways and more here at > [The Cove](#)

Or click here for more links > [Here](#)