



THE
EVER
QUEEN

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LJ ANDREWS

THE EVER QUEEN

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A MAN HE'S NOT . . .

...WE WORK WE ROT.

NO SLEEP UNTIL IT'S THROUGH.

A SAILOR'S GRAVE...

...IS ALL WE CRAVE.

WE ARE THE EVER KING'S CREW



Content Warning

This book contains content that some readers might find triggering such as:

Violence
Attempted Sexual assault (not between
MCs)
Gore
Explicit sexual content
Murder of close family members
Torture
Mutilation
Dark Themes
Isolation
Abuse, physical and emotional
Kidnapping
Threats of violence against women

Read with Care





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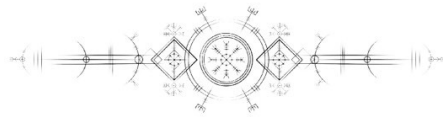
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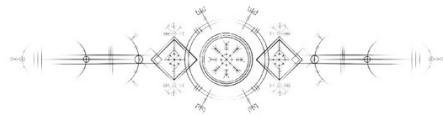
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*To those whose souls exit their bodies
when the villain whispers,
"Hello, love..."*



THE EVER KING

RECAP

Welcome back to the Ever Seas. This book is going to pick up right where we left off in the Ever King, but just to recap, here are a few details you'll want to know.

Valen Ferus, the king of Night Folk fae, an earth bender, killed Erik's father, Thorvald twenty years ago. The fallen Ever King attacked one of Valen's family members when it was revealed that Erik had been brutalized during a capture of the earth fae to the point of scarring and destruction to one of his legs. The Night Folk king killed the Ever King for the attack.

Ten years after Thorvald's death, the earth fae and sea fae collided in a great war in which the earth fae were victorious.

Unknown to her people, Livia Ferus, the earth bender's daughter, would sneak to the prison cell of the young Ever King and read him fairy tales about a songbird and serpent who found friendship. Eventually, teenaged Erik was banished into the Ever Kingdom and barriers and wards were placed between worlds, the Chasm.

Another ten years pass before Livia touches the wards and unknowingly releases the hold on the Ever King. Erik and his crew attack the fort of the earth fae, and kidnap Livia as leverage for Erik to use against the earth bender. It was the belief of Erik that Valen Ferus had a lost power of the dead King Thorvald.

Livia's fury magic heals the earth, and she begins to heal a plague of the Ever Kingdom called the darkening. Soon, Erik discovers with the help of Lady Narza, his grandmother and the ruler of sea witches, that the power he once believed was his late father's does flow through Livia's blood, simply not in the way he expected.

It is discovered that, after breaking a powerful talisman one of the nights Livia had gone to read to Erik after the war, the magic fastened a heartbond between the earth fae princess and the young Ever King.

By working to heal the Ever Kingdom, Livia finds a place among the sea fae. She finds friendship with Celine Tidecaller, the lone woman who sails the Ever Ship, and Sewell, the galley cook.

Gavyn Bonerotter (or Gavyn Seeker if asking Erik) is the lord over the House of Bones, and one of Erik's most trusted people other than Celine, Larsson Bonekeeper, and his cousin Tait. Gavyn and Erik plan to ward the Chasm again, a way to keep Livia's people from dying in their attempts to get her back.

Meanwhile, the longer Erik and Livia interact, the harder they fall and find love in each other. But some despise the Ever King. Assassins attempt to kill Erik and either take Livia or kill her, but through their bond, Erik and Livia survive the attack.

Shortly after, while Gavyn is attempting to re-ward the Chasm, Livia's cousin Aleksi manages to latch onto the bone lord before he can use his ability to shift into water and is nearly killed when he's ripped through the currents of the Chasm.

Erik uses his healing song to save Aleksí, and it is revealed to Livia this isn't the first time it's been done. During the war, Erik also healed her dying uncle as a repayment toward Stieg, an earth fae warrior who'd protected him when he'd been captured as a child.

With hatred beginning to shatter into a desire for unity between earth fae and sea, Livia shows her cousin her new place in the Ever, hoping Aleksí will stand by Erik when they try to convince her father to accept the Ever King.

To prove her place at his side, Erik places Livia on his throne, a show of equality to his people, and names her as the first Ever Queen.

Together, they make plans to unite the earth fae and sea realms as allies after returning to Livia's people as king and queen. Before they can set sail, Larsson betrays them all, reveals himself as the half-brother of Erik, and plans to fight for the crown of the Ever. Livia is taken by Larsson and someone else she recognizes on his ship.

Desperate to find her, Erik sends Gavyn to search the Ever Seas, then takes the risk of sailing through the Chasm again, returning to the land of his enemies. Tait, Aleksí, and Erik are ambushed by Jonas, a prince of the earth fae realms. The book ends with Jonas telling Erik he will be taken to Valen Ferus to meet his end.

PROLOGUE

THAT DAY

HIS ENDING WASN'T GOING to change.

In truth, the boy had always known this was how his story would go—such was the way of landing on the losing side of a war.

Gentle water lapped on the shore at the boy's back. Warriors stood between him and home. Damp sand dug into the dirty trousers covering his bruised knees, but there was a bit of relief in the chill of the sea that allowed him to breathe again.

Nights spent cramped in the cruel stone walls of the cell were at an end. Now, he'd face his fate.

At his side, another boy awaited punishment much the same. A boy the young king was meant to hate. But the king could not entirely despise the other young sea fae. Another failure he ought to add to the list of ways he had yet to be the king his father would've wanted.

The second boy, battered and dirty, was the only one from home who'd remained.

Others from their realm had already fled in their garish ships of bone and soft wood, of black and blue sails. The moment the fighting ended, they faded beneath the violent tides.

The boy king feared the folk on the shore, feared the blades on their belts, the blood beneath their fingernails. But he still held a bit of power—pulses in their jaws, avoidance in

their stances, the way they stared at the boy king like he might lash out in the next heartbeat. He feared them, but no mistake, the fae of the earth also feared the king of the sea.

As he listened to the punishment leveled against the second sea fae by kings and queens of enemy realms, the young king curled his bruised fingers around his new small charm. The girl had tried to make it more valuable than it was—silver was a grand term; the small swallow was more like soft tin.

Still, from the moment his little songbird sped away through the tall grass, the young king clung to her parting gift. Hate boiled like the poison in his blood, yet ... he could not shake his thoughts of the little bird who'd told him grand tales in the darkest night.

One look. One final glance. He could steal one more from the girl before he was locked beneath the waves. Instead, when the boy raised his eyes, he was met with an enemy, war battered but deadly, and clad all in black.

The dark eyes of a fae king who could bend the bedrock took him in like the night drinking the sun. Perhaps the boy's ending would not be banishment. Perhaps the earth bender king would stain the sand in poisonous blood without a thought.

“You did not challenge me, boy,” said the enemy king.

The challenge. The entire purpose for the sea king's arrival to the earth realms. Like a fool, he'd shamed his kingdom. One soft moment of the heart, one healing song given to a dying enemy, and the boy forfeited his chance to reclaim the power he lost for his father all those turns ago.

“The opportunity was taken by other things,” was all the young king said.

Fear was there, but he wouldn't show it. Weakness was not meant to live within Ever Kings. So, the boy lifted his chin, waiting for the blow of the same dark, deadly axe that had carved his father's heart.

Unease slithered down his spine when the earth bender lowered to one knee, when he placed himself nose to nose with the boy.

Why would a victorious king descend to the same level as his defeated?

The earth bender king could snap the boy's neck, yet he spoke the next words in a soft voice, almost kind.

“You could stay here. You'd be welcome amongst our folk and still lead your people if you wanted. There are kings and queens here to guide you.”

Stay? The father of his songbird, an enemy, a man he'd come to kill wanted him to ... stay?

Swifter than a star falling in the night sky, the boy glimpsed over the enemy king's shoulder. She stood beside her pale-as-frost mother. The girl was dressed in a pretty green gown, and a gold chain draped over dainty, dark curls. Different from the simple nightdresses hidden beneath her oversized fur cloaks she'd worn when she snuck out to his cell.

Sapphire eyes caught his, and the boy felt a shift. Something sturdy took hold somewhere deep in his chest, a feeling he'd never known before.

Stay. He could stay and hear more of her tales while ... kings controlled him. That was all this was, another chance for a new version of Harald or Thorvald to shape him into a hand-crafted king of their liking.

With a curl to his lip, the boy turned back to the enemy.

“I know what the guidance of kings means, Earth Bender,” the boy said in a low snarl.

“I am not your uncle, boy. Nor am I your father.”

Gods, could he read minds? The boy held his breath, uncertain what moves to make when his enemy, a man who should slit the boy's throat this moment, lowered his voice again.

He spoke even softer, even kinder, as though the earth king knew the secret and sensed the pull to the little bird standing beside her mother. As though the earth bender didn't mind if a sea serpent befriended a songbird.

“Stay, Erik Bloodsinger,” he said. “There are folk here who would be better for it if you did.”

Once more, the boy looked to the girl. *Better for it*. Would she be better if he remained in her world? Doubtful. Still, the boy wanted to agree. Fiercer than anything, the boy wanted to forget the disdain of his father, forget the hatred, and remain with the little bird and her stories.

But hatred was a fickle thing. The blur of want and desire could be blotted out when loathing and fear held fast.

The boy chose his ending. He chose not to remain where songbirds sing their haunting songs. He vowed blood where the enemy offered peace. The boy saw to it the earth bender had no choice but to lock him away.

While the tides spilled over the head of the young Ever King, as violent currents swallowed him and dragged him home, he thought of her.

He thought of how one day he might find a way to finish the tale he began on the land of his enemies. He could rid her of the enemy king since, as he'd already come to realize, she wasn't theirs.

She was always going to be his.

CHAPTER ONE

THE SERPENT

FOR LIVIA.

Her name kept rushing through my head with every kick, every strike from the earth fae warriors.

I needed to live for her. I needed to return to the Ever Ship and find her. All I needed to do was survive long enough for Aleksi to speak for me.

Jonas, a prince from one of the earth fae realms, sneered at me as his men shoved a dirty scrap of leather into my mouth. I swallowed against the musty taste of it, as though it had been tucked down sweat-soaked trousers and baked beneath a hot sun.

Jonas gripped my arms and forced me up. Fire lit in my thigh, as though a flame were devouring the bone.

“Send a signal to the shore watch,” Jonas commanded. “There could be more of these sods in the tides.”

A little longer. Survive a little longer.

Two warriors were trudging toward the trap in which both Alek and Tait had fallen. Soon enough, they’d realize their error. I would face the earth bender—on my damn knees if needed—and we would bleeding sail back to the Ever and find my queen.

I didn’t fight when Jonas commanded two warriors to bind my wrists. I didn’t fight when they tugged me forward to where a row of earth stallions awaited their riders. The charges were strange-looking. I’d seen them before, but unlike the

horthane of the Ever, these beasts hardly seemed capable of swimming in the tides. Dull teeth, rounded hooves, and swishing tails that looked like fae hair.

“Henrik.” Jonas nodded at a warrior. “On second thought, let the other sea fae rot for a bit. I want the focus on the king.”

The warrior dipped his chin and halted ten paces from the sinkhole in the knoll. *Shit*. They were leaving Aleksii.

From here, the muffled shouts of Alek’s and Tait’s voices were there, but wholly unintelligible. Perhaps it was a spell, a curse of fate, but they sounded like nothing more than men shouting through a door far away. Alek’s own people did not realize they’d ensnared a prince. A prince whose voice and support I desperately needed.

A rush of panic tightened in my chest. Through the rancid gag in my mouth, I grunted and protested. Jonas merely freed a chuckle laced in venom, mounted his charge, and yanked on the tether around my wrists. I stumbled at the pull.

Jonas leaned over his leg, eyes narrowed. “Keep up, Bloodsinger.”

I was dead.

The prince tugged on the rope again, and I limped forward, the weight of suffocating failure pressing on my spine with each shuffled step.

What would happen to Livia if I did not reach her? Would Gavyn find her? Perhaps he could bring her home, get her free of the troubles of the Ever. She could ... return to the peace I’d shattered.

My face tilted toward the sky. The stars were different here. Only Voidwalker would be recognizable, but he was at my back, hovering over the sea.

When I was gone, I hoped ... I hoped the gods might let me live in both skies like Voidwalker. That way, I could always see her.

The warriors kept a steady pace. There were times I stumbled, and the earth prince didn’t slow, merely told me to

get up and quicken my steps. By the time we reached the ominous gates of the main fortress, sweat coated my brow, my leg had long ago shifted from burning pain to sharp, numbing pricks, like stitching needles dug into every pore.

From one of the watchtowers, a warrior blew a curved horn. The procession halted for a bit at the gates, giving me time to catch my breath through the lump of sweaty leather.

Iron chains clanked; thick rope stretched and groaned as a heavy portcullis broke free of its resting place, allowing the warriors entry.

Eyes studied us, every damn move, as we made our way inside. Murmurs followed like shadows when the folk within the gates recognized the sight of me.

At the wide, arched doorway that would lead into the main hall, we stopped.

Jonas kicked a leg over the furs atop the back of his steed and dropped to the dirt. He leaned into a guard at the door. "Where is King Valen?"

"The tower, My Lord."

"Fetch him. *Now.*"

The guard seemed startled at the briskness of the prince's tone. It didn't take much to guess, he did not speak in such a way often. No doubt, most of the earth fae folk behaved differently since I'd robbed them of their princess.

Not so long ago, the windows had been draped in festive ribbons and shades. Stacks of sticky breads and sugared sweets had lined the table for their masque. Now, inside the hall, sweets had been replaced with pungent ale, swords, and scrolls of poorly drawn maps of what I guessed was their version of the Ever.

They were drawn wrong. They'd never find Livia by guessing, and they'd never get through the Chasm with their slender ships that looked more like a sea serpent than a vessel.

I couldn't die here, or she would die.

I knew Larsson could kill, and ruthlessly. I'd seen enough to give him the damn name of Bonekeeper.

Chatter ceased when Jonas pulled on the rope. "We have Bloodsinger!"

A few gasps followed. Blades were pulled off the table. With a great shove, Jonas knocked me down onto my knees. The leather fell from my mouth, and laughter rose against the rafters overhead.

Two boots, scuffed and coated in mud, stepped in front of me.

"Pick him up, Stieg," someone shouted from behind.

The man knelt. Slowly, I lifted my gaze to meet the warrior.

Stieg still had scars on his jaw that crept out from beneath his braided beard. One scar cut through his eyebrow, given to him while trapped in that room with me as a prisoner all those turns ago.

If anyone would listen, it would be the warrior.

"I didn't harm her," I rushed out in a quick breath. "I didn't harm either of them. You must listen—"

"I warned you," Stieg said, a touch of sadness in his tone. "I cannot protect you now, Ever King."

"*Listen* to me," I gritted out. "Your prince is trapped in the knoll, Stieg."

The use of his name furrowed his brow. Stieg rose, lifting me back to my feet. He kept his hold on my arm, spun me to face the hall, but flicked a hand at two men beside a narrow doorway.

When the men abandoned the hall, I dared hope.

Two paces away, Jonas still wore a vicious kind of grin, and now stood beside a man who shared his face. A brother. Livia had mentioned there were twin princes.

Black like the thickest ink spilled through the whites of their eyes with their dark magic.

Around the princes were warriors gripping blades until their knuckles whitened. Men, women, all of them studied me as if they hoped their eyes would peel the flesh off my bones. Close to Jonas was the woman who'd been beside Livia the night I took her.

She tapped a dagger against her dainty palm. Runes were inked down her forehead, chin, and throat. She, perhaps, looked the most ferocious of them all.

Doors to the side of me slammed against the walls, knocking two shields from their hooks, and the hall silenced like a wave leaving the shore.

There in the doorway, the earth bender king stood, axes in hand, shoulders lifting and falling in heavy, angry breaths. Eyes that once had pity for a boy at the end of the war now burned in malice I could taste.

Stay, Erik Bloodsinger.

The man standing across the hall was not looking for peace. He wanted blood.

Red lined his black eyes with a touch of bloodlust. Dark hair spilled over his brow, unkempt and wild. A king of might and dignity during the war, now he seemed more beast than man.

I didn't have time to take in much of anything before Valen Ferus, killer of my father, spun one of his blacksteel battle axes in his grip. Long, Night Folk fae legs had him across the hall in less than ten strides.

Stieg abandoned me in the same moment my back slammed against the stone wall. Air fled my lungs from the blow, then was blocked from returning when Valen used the handle of his axe to crush my throat.

"Where is she?" he roared in my face.

His words from so long ago filtered through my mind—
Stay.

I was certain the earth bender king would see to it I would always remain. He'd make it so my bones littered this land

until they turned to dust.

CHAPTER TWO

THE SONGBIRD

THE AIR WAS STRANGE, smooth and too rich with spices like cardamom and citrus. I drew in another long breath, seeking the clean sea and heat in the breeze from the royal city.

I groaned, shifting on a pulpy surface. Plush as bunches of moss under my spine, but pain bloomed through my chest as though someone took a rusted spike and rammed it through my body, pinning me in place.

I cracked one eye. My lashes were crusted in salt, from tears or the sea, I couldn't recall. Truth be told, I couldn't recall much for a few breaths until ...

Larsson.

My other eye snapped open, sacrificing a few dried lashes to my wet cheeks. I shot upright, half expecting to be yanked backward by iron chains or a collar around my throat.

There were neither. All around were arched lancet windows, unlatched and allowing a morning breeze inside a ... room. Rounded edges of a tower tapered up to sturdy rafters of a pointed rooftop.

Where the hells was I?

Thick green and gold drapes were hung around four impressively carved posts of the bed, a woven rug of pinks, oranges, and blues of a sunset on the sea coated the rough-cut floorboards, and a chestnut vanity, complete with silver brushes and combs and oils for perfuming the skin was pushed against one wall.

Someone had dressed me in a thin shift, clean, and made of handspun silk. My hair was in a tangled plait over my shoulder, as though I'd slept on it more than once, and it needed to be brushed. Only faint bruises from where I'd been tossed onto the deck of Larsson's boat remained on my hip.

How long ago did he take me?

What sort of game was this?

I'd expected damp cells, piss and refuse around my feet, perhaps even waking in the Otherworld. Not a luxurious chamber reminiscent of my rooms in the Crimson Fort.

For a moment my feet hovered over the floorboards, like a scaled, toothy creature might reach up and bite, until I let them fall, toes wiggling. Pieces of the moment I'd been snatched from the royal city began sliding into place.

A ruse, Larsson had drawn me out of the king's chambers, but ... gods, Tait!

Heartwalker, bleeding out on the stone steps near the docks. The image was pungent in my brain, real and fierce until I was certain I could taste his blood on my tongue.

I fisted my hands and pressed them against my forehead. Tait, that scowly bastard. I always thought he despised me, but he'd known something was wrong and came for me all the same. He came to protect me.

I bent over my knees, fingers steepled in front of my mouth. Why was it Larsson?

"Brothers." The word slid from my lips, a soft declaration to the empty room. My pulse quickened. Clear and poisonous in my mind—Larsson had named Erik as his brother.

The rumors of Thorvald fathering another little hadn't concerned Erik; he was convinced if a child of Thorvald had existed, his position as king would've been challenged by now. But I'd sensed it—the strange bitterness, a claim to a lost birthright—buried beneath the corrupted soil of the darkening.

By the gods, we'd all been so duped.

A small, unfamiliar sneer pulled at the corner of my lips, a bit of hope—when Erik found Larsson, he'd peel his flesh from his bones. Brother or not. This time when the darker edge of my heart reared her head, I didn't shove her away.

I pressed my thumbs across my brow, soothing an ache in my skull, and kept filtering through what had clashed with truth, and what wasn't clear. Larsson believed he was the true king, and he wasn't alone.

I dropped my hands into my lap, teeth clacking when my jaw clamped shut. Others aided Larsson in his treachery, and one face grew clearer the more fog emptied from my mind.

The sound of a latch clicking drew my focus to an arched door across the room. Constellations were carved along the frame and split when the door opened. I scrambled around to the opposite side of the bed, desperate for a blade, a shard of wood, anything to defend myself.

I'd expected Larsson's face in the dim light. Instead, I met the brilliant gaze of a woman I didn't recognize. Hair the color of silver twilight flowed down her slender spine. Her ears were sharply pointed and pierced in dainty gold chains. But it was her eyes that stunned me. Bright as a bursting star, so blue they nearly glowed.

Her full, darkly painted lips twitched. "You're awake. I didn't trust the sea witch to actually tend to you, so I took the liberty of supplying a few healing herbs myself."

"You work with Fione," I gritted out through my teeth, still searching for something jagged to break the skin on this woman.

The day Larsson took me, porcelain features had met me on the boat. The sea witch, she'd been part of this. To what end, to what depth, I didn't know. If Erik slaughtered Larsson, those darker edges of my heart yearned to be the one to spill *her* blood.

"I work for no one." The woman entered the room like a gentle dance. She was delicate in her hands and features, but her body seemed sturdy enough to lift a blade for a few kills.

“Truth be told, I find the sea witch rather dull. Perhaps a little odious.”

My brow arched. “Who are you?”

The woman drifted to one of the windows and spread the thin, iridescent drapes aside, revealing a crisp black night. She inhaled, filling her lungs, then let out her breath with a whimsical sigh before she faced me again. “I am more like you than you know.”

She took a step closer; I took a step away. “Larsson took you?”

“Oh, no. Not exactly.” Silver rings adorned each of her fingers, catching the candlelight when she waved them about. “This is my home. Though I do not particularly care for some of the houseguests.” She was oddly calm, yet a flicker of annoyance sparked behind the blue of her eyes.

“Where am I?”

“The palace of Natthaven.”

“That explains nothing.”

“I’m not certain it matters to explain everything.” She laced her fingers together and came closer, stopping in the center of the room. “My ambition is to see that you are not harmed. I’ve had little choice in many things, but I will not stand for needless battering.”

I sneered. “You speak as though I should be grateful to you. I am not. Larsson Bonekeeper seeks to harm the Ever King, the man I love, and steal his crown. If you stand with such a fiend, you are no friend to me.”

“If he is a firstborn heir, is it truly stealing a crown if it is his right?”

“Erik Bloodsinger would have welcomed a brother,” I said, a break in my voice. “If you and Larsson think any of this was necessary, you do not know your king.”

The woman scoffed. “The sea king is no king of mine.”

“Good. I will be certain to list you amongst the traitors.”

Her lips spread, flashing white teeth. Not a cruel smile, almost like I'd said something amusing. "No, he is not my king. I am not a sea fae."

I took in her features. She looked fae enough, but she had no sharpened teeth, no sea toughened skin. "Well, I am a royal of the earth fae. No matter what side you stand on, you have betrayed someone by working with Bonekeeper."

"Unless I am not fae." Again, she looked around, scanning the room. "I told you, this palace is *my* home. I'm honored to meet another princess."

"Queen," I spat. "I am a queen." For a moment, I held steady, fists clenched, but slowly, I released the bitter air in my lungs. "If you are not fae, then—"

"You would call us elven," she interrupted. "But specifically, I hail from the Dokkalfar clan, shadow elven."

I blinked. "Elven?"

Dokkalfar. *Elves*. How many nights had my mother, father, my grandparents, read tales of the gods' chosen folk?

The ancestors of the fae.

"Wars and disputes between other lands thousands of turns ago saw to it elven clans settled into their own distant corners to live peacefully." The woman smiled and sat on the edge of the bed. "But we've always been here. Closer to sea fae than your folk, since we, too, live on isles in dark seas. Then again, your people are the youngest of cultures. You would know the least about elven lore."

I adjusted on the other side of the bed, crossing one ankle under my leg, and faced her. The beat of my pulse quickened. Was she dangerous? Would she lash out? I licked my lips, dry as hot sand, and spoke carefully. "If you are a princess of elven, why do you align yourself with Larsson Bonekeeper?"

The woman couldn't have been any older than me, but there was a heaviness in her eyes, as though life had not always been kind.

“Are your wounds healed?” The elven gathered her gown, crept over the mattress, and settled beside me, inspecting a few bruises on my neck.

I pulled away. “I’m fine. You’re avoiding my question.”

The façade of indifferent strength cracked over her features. With a heavy sigh, she stared at her hands, rolling one of her rings around a center finger. “Would you believe me if I told you I do not relish the thought of your suffering?”

“Seeing how I’m trapped here against my will and you are making no moves to release me, no. I would not.”

A burn of emotion tangled the glowing blue with the silver in her eyes. “I was not necessarily given much of a choice but to align myself with those who’ve risen against you.”

“You’re a prisoner here?”

“I am not bound, but there are reasons I cannot stop a raid against your king or your kingdom.” Words sliced over her lips like barbs. “It has been long in the making, well-planned, and arrangements have been made to see it done. But.” She swallowed. “I will see to it you are not harmed. They simply need you kept away from the sea king for now.”

“And I will never cease fighting to return to him.”

Her face fell. “Come with me, fae. I’d like to introduce you to Natthaven. Perhaps, I might explain a little more.”

The woman strode back toward the door. Another pause once she reached the latch. “I wonder if perhaps we might find a way to help each other.”

“I don’t trust you.” There was little point in avoiding the truth. She could very well be leading me into a trap, to death, to Larsson’s need for blood.

“I know.” She opened the door and gestured for me to follow. “But you will be planning your escape, with or without me. If you are to even have a chance, you’ll need to understand where you are and what stands against you.”

“You ... you’re helping me escape?”

“Not at all.” She grinned over her shoulder. “I’m providing information, fae. What you do with it will be entirely up to you.”

CHAPTER THREE

THE SERPENT

NOSE TO NOSE, a flash of hateful red flooded the earth bender's eyes. I recalled what Livia told me once—her father had succumbed to a curse of bloodlust in earlier days. She'd made it seem as though he was free of it; looking at him now, I wasn't so certain.

Valen was going to strangle me before I could utter a word.

Wise of him; he knew what my blood could do. No doubt this way was preferable so he could watch the light leave my damn eyes.

Valen gave more weight to his axe; my lips curled against the anguish of the handle. "After everything, boy, taking my daughter was your greatest mistake. To know you harmed my son and my nephew as well, will send you to the Otherworld in *mere shards* of bone!"

I tried to shake my head. Black spots, like flecks of night mist, spilled into the corners of my eyes from the pressure. Somehow, I managed to lift my hand and grip his wrist, desperate to shove him back. Valen drew closer, his body trembling from rage, from anguish, from fear.

"No," I gritted out. It wasn't enough, but I could not gather breath to speak anything else.

"Valen, he can't die." A slender hand curled around his arm. Hells, Livia's mother. She tugged on her husband's arm, pale eyes on me, fierce as jagged ice. "Not yet."

"He can, and he will."

The queen stepped between me and her king. “We do not find her if he is dead.”

Another heartbeat, two, then the earth bender slowly retreated. His body stiffened, taut and hard, as though each step taking him from me caused hot agony to rage through his limbs.

When, at last, the handle of his axe fell away, my body gave out. I landed on my knees, gasping, the tang of hot blood on my tongue. Bile curdled in the back of my throat. Gods, I was going to vomit on his damn boots.

I drew swift breaths through my nose until the rancid mix of blood and acid soothed. With the back of my hand, I swiped my mouth. A red streak was left behind. More than one earth fae let out a gasp and stepped back.

Even the king and queen gave me more space.

They feared my blood. I blinked and wiped my hand on my trousers. My leg burned as though the bones had turned to liquid fire when I sat back on my heels. To stand would level me as a threat. It would place me as a foe, an equal.

For Livia, I’d remain on my damn knees in the hall of my enemies for as long as it took. Wherever my father was in the Otherworld, I had no doubt he was boiling in shame.

Thorvald could kiss my ass.

“I didn’t harm them.” The words came out in a low rasp, hardly distinguishable over the heavy draw of breath.

The earth bender tilted his head to one side, a wild, feral sort of look on his face. He lowered to one knee and used the curved blade of his axe to tilt my chin. “Give them back to me, Bloodsinger, and I will end you swiftly. Each moment you postpone, I add another day to your torture. You think your blood frightens me?” He leaned close, voice low. “You have forced me to face my greatest fear already. Nothing about you frightens me.”

When he tore the axe away, it sliced my skin. True to his word, the king didn’t flinch at the sight of my blood dripping onto the floorboards. The only hint he gave that my blood was

unsettling at all was the way he held out an arm, shielding the queen from getting too close.

“I didn’t harm her,” seemed to be the only words I could scrape out.

“Then return her, Ever King,” the queen said, her face hard and lovely as polished marble.

Over the shoulder of Livia’s mother, I caught the dark gaze of a broad fae with similar brown skin to the earth bender and the same midnight hair.

I would never forget the face of Aleksi’s father, the one who’d threatened me over the body of his consort, not believing I’d agreed to heal his dying lover.

Now Alek’s father looked at me with a conflicted sort of hatred. I’d saved his mate, yet in his eyes, I’d also robbed him of his son.

“Don’t look to my brother. He won’t stand for you anymore.” Valen leaned in close again. “You destroyed any debt for what happened during the war by taking our children.”

“I do not come for battle, King. I—”

“If you’ve come to barter a ransom, you will not find it,” he snapped. “You will give me my daughter, then I will take your head.”

Valen shoved my chest, knocking me onto my back. In the next breath, he reared over me, one knee pressed against my heart.

Shouts rose in the hall. Angry, sharp.

I coughed against the weight of the king. I could practically see the rational thought leave his mind as a dark kind of madness took hold, a sort of wild expression where he likely planned how to reopen every scar and pluck every bone from my body until I was nothing but flesh and gore.

“Uncle Valen, stop!”

Valen, still pressing me into the floor, held a blade half raised over my skull. My eyes opened, but I did not dare breathe, certain any movement would draw out the call for blood in the king's eyes again.

“Don't kill him!”

All gods. Aleks.

The prince shoved through the crowd, a small unit of warriors at his back, two of whom had a hold on Tait.

A strange bit of relief bloomed through my chest at the sight of my cousin's dirt-smudged face. Tait tilted his head as if silently inquiring on the damage done to me.

I was alive. That was the best we could hope for in the moment.

“Alek!” The prince's father shoved through the crowd.

From my angle on the floor, I could make out Jonas and his brother. The prince, who moments ago had been ferocious and filled with venom, dropped his chin, hiding his face. He closed his eyes, and if I had to guess, the man felt a great deal.

He simply did not want anyone else to see it.

I lifted my head just enough to watch Alek's long arms embrace his father fiercely. He clapped his back.

“You're alive,” his father pulled him away, hands holding his son's face.

“I'm alive.” The prince offered a wet grin. “Where's Daj?”

“In the North, guarding the borders with your grandparents. There ... there's been chaos across the realms since you were lost.”

Alek's brow furrowed. My insides tightened. It explained why the fort was less guarded than I'd expected. Warriors and royals seemed to be scattered. Why? What had happened here?

Aleks stepped around his father. His face was painted with dirt, sweat, and hair that stuck to his stubbled jaw. He glanced at me on the ground, then faced the room.

“Have the Rave grown so desperate they lose all sense?” Alek’s voice rose, fierce and rough. He strode to Jonas. The other prince blinked until Alek cupped the back of his head and drew his forehead to his own. “Use your head, my friend.”

“I thought you were gone,” Jonas whispered; a simple, breathless declaration.

Alek clapped the side of Jonas’s neck, then clasped arms with his brother, and embraced the woman between them. She clung to Aleks, saying nothing, but her slender shoulders shook with silent tears.

To get a glimpse at their anguish settled in my chest like heavy stones stacked atop one another. Bitterness, vengeance, a singular focus in my own dark mind had uprooted friends, family. It had left them to imagine the dreariest of things until their unified warriors acted first before strategy.

Alek turned toward his uncle. “Ask yourself, why would Bloodsinger come to our shores without a full crew after what he did? Don’t kill him, Uncle. It would be the worst mistake you could make in this moment.”

Valen rose, eyes wide as though he were still locked in a bit of stun. “I saw you get dragged under. How did you survive the Chasm?”

“Because of him.” He gestured in my direction. Alek cleared his throat, raising his voice again. “The Chasm tore me to pieces. I would not have survived if Erik Bloodsinger had not saved me. The way he saved my father.”

“Aleksi.” Alek’s other father gripped his arm. “You know?”

“I’ve always known,” Alek said, then faced the hall again. “Be the warriors I admire and use your damn heads. He is not here for blood and does not deserve to have his spilled. After seeing the Ever Kingdom, I learned swiftly that despite the pain of that night, the sea fae came for a reason.”

“You think I give a damn about his reasons? *Where is she?*” Valen Ferus was losing his grip on patience with each heartbeat.

Aleksi dropped his chin. “Livia was ... she was well in the Ever. I saw her, spoke with her. But the Ever is under attack and ... their enemies have taken her.”

I’d barely staggered back to my feet before Valen Ferus wheeled on me again. “You *lost* my daughter?”

If he hesitated to kill me before, he looked wholly prepared to do it now.

“It was a betrayal none of us saw,” Aleksi said. One of his mud-caked hands pressed against Valen’s chest. “Livia was betrayed by a friend of us all.”

No one spoke for a breath, then another, until Valen let out a deep, wretched shout of anger. He let an axe fly. The blade dug into the wooden slats of the back wall.

“I want him out of my sight!”

The king raged, but the queen approached with a chilling silence, as though she were made of ice. Livia’s mother drank me in with unwavering scrutiny. She, perhaps, was more frightening than the king. If I had to guess, I would not be surprised if Livia’s mother knew how to kill without her victim even knowing they were wounded.

“Take the Ever King away while we hear our prince’s tale.” The queen leaned close, voice rough. “Then we’ll decide his fate.”

It happened swiftly. Fae guards took hold of my arms, then more surrounded Tait, dragging both of us toward a side door.

“No.” For the first time, I resisted. A bit of panicked madness dug into my brain. “There is no time for this! I must lead you through the Chasm. Do not waste time due to hatred of me. She will pay for it!”

The king and queen wouldn’t look at me, like I’d become nothing more than a haunt in the room.

Cruel, burning panic tugged at my throat. How long would the earth fae leave me in a cell while Livia was tortured, battered, or worse, beneath Larsson’s search for power?

Guards yanked me toward the corridor.

Aleksi frantically spoke to his uncle, his father, to his aunt, to anyone. They muttered something I could not hear, and he groaned, shaking his head.

A frenzy of horrid possibilities took hold of my mind. By the time they dragged me into the doorway, sweat coated my brow, and my leg ached from thrashing.

“Gods, don’t do this.” I managed to slip my arm free of one of the guards and gripped the frame of the door. “King, please.” My voice cracked; I hardly knew what I was saying. “She needs me to find her; she ... she needs me to remind her to breathe.”

For a moment, I thought Valen jolted at my words. Livia’s mother peered over his shoulder. A bit of wet glass coated her pale eyes.

The queen’s tears were the last thing I saw before the door slammed in my face, and I was tossed out of the great hall.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE SONGBIRD

THE WOMAN, flanked by two guards in silver bracers and blue tunics, led us down a narrow corridor. Rafters that came to a point overhead were draped in satin banners with curious constellations glittering in the light.

My toes hardly touched the woven runners, always ready to race away, always spinning about, looking for the wretched grin on Larsson's face. One I'd considered friendly not so long ago.

"We'll walk alone, Dorsan," the woman said to the guard on her right. He was young in the face, but stern as stone.

One tilt to his head and the second guard halted in the doorway, giving us freedom to enter a forest pathway that carved through bowers of trees and shrubs.

Verdant canopies of branches intertwined like knobby fingers. Glossy black ferns lined the path, trapped midnight woven in the velvet leaves, and serpentine wooden walkways honeycombed throughout the forest, up slopes and down into ravines.

Each walkway lifted over stilts lost beneath water with no current. Stagnate tides were left to gather foamy green blossoms over the surface until the black water looked like a meadow of grass.

"Follow that path"—the woman gestured inward—"and you'll meet the swamplands. Beautiful, but dangerous should you not keep to the path. However, sun wings are friendly

enough to light safe steps should they find you appealing enough.”

“Sun wings?”

The woman flicked her fingers in front of her face. “Tiny insects that flicker with gold. Rather beautiful, but wholly suspicious little things.”

Milky blossoms were carried on the breeze, a collision of sweet and silk buried under the brine of the nearby sea. Cerulean tides glowed like fire beneath the setting sun.

“You may want to flee,” she whispered, “but your enemies crafted a rather sturdy spell cast while you slept. It binds you to their presence, so if they remain on the shores, so do you. I assure you the Otherworld will call should you try to leave.”

“Exactly the thing a captor would say.” I angled for another path, ready to sprint through the trees.

A hand curled around my arm. “Be still. I will take you.”

This had to be a jest, some sort of trick, but without protest, the woman carved through the trees, directed at the shore.

One glance over my shoulder, one weary breath, and I followed.

By the time trees thinned and only spiked leaves of strange shrubs irritated my ankles, my strange companion held out an arm. “Wait. There is a ward buried deep here” She reached for a knobby branch, fallen in the foliage, and tossed it over the border of the wood.

Once the limb landed, the sand and pebbles swallowed it until only one sharp end was not submerged. Earth hardened, trapping the limb in place.

The woman sighed. “A snare spell. Not deadly, but I’ve no doubt the sea witch feels a bit of resentment toward you and would let you rot in the sun should you be caught.”

Despair cinched in my chest.

“I can take it,” said the woman. “This is not a blood spell.”

“Take it?”

“Yes.” The barest of grins twitched in the corner of her mouth. “I have ways to take matter as I please. Spell casts, affinities, all magic is matter unseen. If you wish to prove my words at the sea, I will take it so we may cross.”

“Why would you help me?”

“In truth?” The woman smoothed her slender hands over the folds of her gown. “I’m rather irritated by all the spell work on my isle. We can hardly walk anywhere without snares or sharp edges protruding into our flesh, trying to stop us. And”—another hesitation—“there is a disquiet in my heart. I’m not satisfied with the tales I’ve been told as to why you are here.”

Perhaps I was naïve in the art of war and battle and enemies. My sheltered, love-soaked life had lent few opportunities to truly face deception from those I knew. She could be lying, could be leading me toward a trap. Still, there was a softness to her features. A nudge from somewhere in my veins—fury magic or instinct—that urged me to keep calm at her side.

“Prove your words then,” I said. “Get us to the shore.”

“Hold steady. We’re close enough you may be caught within the removal.” She splayed her fingers over the shrubs and sand.

In the next breath, I was bound in cold, a breeze like frost. Speckles of damp misted over my face, tossing me this way and that until I landed face down on the forest floor.

I coughed and sat up. Nothing seemed to have changed. The sea remained fifty paces away, the forest unmoved.

“It’s gone.” Behind me the woman stood, hands clasped, starlight hair whipping around her features. A sheen of mist recoiled into the lines of her palms. With her chin, she pointed at the limb she’d tossed.

Hells, where it had been sunk in hardened earth, now it was free and coated in soft sand as though it had fallen there with intent.

Without pause, we stepped from the trees and onto the shore.

“You broke the ward?” The question came as a whisper, more a musing for myself, but the woman nodded.

“Now we’ll be able to cross from the trees to the shore without incident.” The woman strode toward the water’s edge. “Well, prove what I say. Give it a go.”

Tucked in the back of my skull, I knew, logically I *knew*, she was being truthful. There was no way I would be allowed to flee. Still, I could not resist; there was nothing I wouldn’t risk to get back to Erik Bloodsinger. I darted for the sea. When water struck my knees came the sharp jolt of pain.

I screamed and fell back into the lazy lap of waves.

Gentle hands scooped under my arms, lifting me from the sea. “As I said. The first thing that was done when you entered the borders of Natthaven was ensuring you remained within them.”

“So take it away as you did the other. *Please.*”

A shadow burdened her features. “Blood spells are another sort of matter. They are always removed with pain, anger, cruelty, all manner of viciousness. I cannot take in such a way. This ward—” She faced the sea again. “I dare not touch.”

I shook her off. Seated in the shallows, I hugged my knees to my chest, and screamed—pain, rage, despair. All of it rose to the pink clouds. Throat ragged, I reeled on the woman. “Why are you doing this? Let me go, and I swear to you, the loyalty of the Ever will be yours. We will help you.”

Without a care for the water, the elven sat with me. Her knees and gown hugged against her chest much the same. Almost friendly.

She studied the bloody gleam on the horizon, the last remnants of day, as purple dusk with the earliest stars speckled the upper skies. “Natthaven is a peaceful isle. Some have even named it the fading isle.”

“Why is that?”

“The isle can fade into the mist.” The woman smiled. A touch of pride crinkled the corners of her eyes. “A gift from the gods, I like to think. Should we be threatened, we can take the whole of our clan to safety. Or, I suppose, if we are ... forced to relocate ...” She hesitated, smile fading. Something about the last words seemed to grate at her. “Natthaven will shift elsewhere.”

“The land itself holds magic?”

“Doesn’t every land?” She tilted her head. “I am told your ability comes from the soil. You’ve accomplished feats in your realms and the sea. I would believe there is magic in all lands.”

A wicked curl pulled at my lips. “Perhaps I will destroy yours with my fury if it gets me free of here.”

“I think Natthaven would be rather offended should you try. You’d be better suited to call to the gentility of the affinity in our soil to aid you, rather than destroy it. Magic is fickle across realms, is it not? Offend it, and it seems content to punish for the sin. Take your sea kingdom’s blight as proof.”

“How did you know?” I shook my head. It didn’t matter how she knew things, not really. “That was a sea witch curse that lost control.”

“Oh, true. In a sense,” she said, almost indignantly, “the witch and Larsson were not ready for the consequences of their dark spells. Like I said, blood spells and dark magic create a different sort of physical matter, or remnant. The blight you see is a dreary remnant of what was done to bring us to this moment.”

“What was done?”

The woman considered me for a breath. “I told you, fae. This is not an attack that has been built on a whim. It has been planned, executed for turns, and the sea kingdom is no simple thing to overthrow. Dark spells, clearly, were needed.”

The darkening was potent, damn near painful, when my fury slid into what was done to cause it. Death, agony. I’d known something in the soil spoke to me whenever I dug deep

with my fury. It made a bit of sense that wretched magic would leave behind cruel remnants that ached.

“You speak like it is nothing, yet I see the disgust in your eyes.”

She hesitated. “I may disagree with some actions of others, but I’m in no position to fret about your troubles when I have my own folk to consider.”

I shook my head, agitated. I didn’t understand the woman’s kindness, yet refusal to truly help. If she was a prisoner here, then she had found her greatest ally.

“So, what I know of your isle is it is small but can fade into the mists.” I looked over my shoulder. Dark spires of a stone palace rose over the treetops. “You can take away spells through your magic?”

“Affinity,” she corrected. “I can take any physical matter. Stone, wood, flesh, if I truly focus.”

“But not blood spells.”

Her jaw flexed. “It is to the benefit of everyone if I avoid taking anything that brings the darker sides of the heart—greed, pain, hate—such things as those. Blood spells are crafted through dark desires, through death, through greedy motivations, after all.”

The way she spoke, so plainly as though everything was so damn obvious, was amusing. “Ah, well, I have not one bit of confusion any longer.”

“I’m not the greatest teacher of explaining affinities when I truly only ever speak to my folk.” A pinch to her mouth hid a smirk. “Think of my power as a summons. Shadow elven can use their gifts like me in most ways.”

“What do you mean, *most ways*?”

Her eyes went glassy. “I will tell you this, fae. There are gifts—perhaps more curses—the gods saw fit to bestow upon me that ought never be used.”

Hair lifted on my arms. I wanted to press her more, but she’d already shifted back to her lighthearted, deliberate tone,

silencing my curiosity.

“Some elven do not darken what they take like me. Some gather light, and it is clearly written upon their palms as they use their gifts. Certain elven can even carve through gleams in a room and walk through them to other areas of light in a structure. Difficult and terribly exhausting.”

“Seems odd for shadow elven to use light.”

“I did not say it was my folk who used the light. There are clans.” Her shoulders stiffened. “Light elven—or Ljosalfar—use light and fire. You will see for yourself soon enough.”

“Why does it feel like you keep alluding to things, yet you never speak plainly?”

“Why, indeed?”

Gods, she was irritating. I studied her. Lovely, a little mischievous whenever she grinned. It struck me in the next breath. I was bound here. What if she faced the same fate? It was possible she could not tell me much of anything.

Yet, if that were true, here she was, a stranger, subtly attempting to help. This was a way to help.

A burn of new hope took hold in my chest. “I have a heartbond, a connection with my king. Did the spell casts shield that in the same way?”

“The spell casts concealing us are strong enough to keep us locked away from the whole of the world if we wished,” she said almost dreamily, as though simply spouting off words from a bit of parchment.

“There must be a way to break them.”

She shook her head. “Not these blood spells. Only those marked may step foot on Natthaven now. And only the sea witch does the marking.”

“It’s possible to leave then.”

“They’ve only marked one other soul who steps foot off the isle. Larsson bears the ability to cross through the wards, but he will not leave. Not yet. You are connected to the witch,

fae. However, if you were, let's say, *forced* from the isle, it would shatter the spell casts. But that would be wretchedly painful, and of course, deadly.”

I would risk death to be free of this damn place.

“Naturally, death of the spell caster brings the end of some magic.”

“So, kill Fione? Gladly.”

“You do not understand. There is no killing any who stand against you.” The elven's expression twisted into something dark, almost fearful. She looked over her shoulder for a moment, then lowered her voice. “Forbidden spells made them your enemies, and once the forbidden has been tasted, it corrupts until it is no longer forbidden.”

“I don't understand.”

“You cannot kill them,” she whispered. “Bonekeeper is shielded by the sea witch. He cannot die so long as that spell holds. And she has shielded herself so fiercely she cannot be ended without a white iron blade.”

“What is that?”

Another glance into the trees. “Elven made. A blade that does not kill from the strike, does not even draw blood. But it rots the heart, draining magic from the pores, until the lifeblood ceases to flow. A painful death.”

“Elven made!” I shrieked. “If you have these blades, why in the hells have you not used them?”

“Why, indeed?” The woman's mouth tightened, her lips bloodless.

She couldn't. Something had her trapped from acting against anyone, that or she was being threatened. What had she said? She cared more for the good of her people. What if Larsson had harmed someone she loved?

“How did they overtake your isle?”

“It was not overtaken. Bonekeeper is known among elven clans, so I did not think much of it when he was in the travel

party.”

“Known?”

“He is part elven,” she said, slightly befuddled, as though stunned I hadn’t known.

Bleeding hells. “He tricked you, then. Came as a friend, then betrayed you.”

“I cannot say *he* betrayed anything,” she muttered, trailing her fingers in the tides. “He did not do much talking. Although, I did not take kindly to the sea witch and the sea fae who joined them.”

Them. Were there more sea fae here? Larsson had sent assassins to kill Erik once, but I’d not paused long enough to think he might have more support than I knew.

“Is there someone else besides Larsson and Fione?”

“There is.” A throaty timbre came at our backs.

There, at the edge of the trees, a man with hair like the sunset sneered at the two of us.

“Skadinia.” He grinned—snarled, was more fitting—at the woman. “What is all this?”

She stood swiftly and stepped from the tides. “Arion. Our *arrangement* lent me the task of tending to her wellbeing.”

“You are to keep her alive, not stroll along the shore.”

“The fae was distressed. I chose to orient her to Natthaven. Nothing more.”

“Why, then, did you speak so poorly of my cousin, *chridhe*?”

I didn’t know the term he’d used, but it caused Skadinia’s nose to wrinkle. “I spoke plainly of Bonekeeper. If you consider that poorly, then perhaps he should think again on his actions.”

Arion was a broad man. Ears sharply tapered and capped in gold. His brows were thick and expressive, but it was his eyes that unsettled me. For the warmth of his complexion and

hair, the deep brown of his eyes was cold and distant. Like hope would be drawn in and left to die.

This was what she'd feared, no mistake. All this time, Fione, even Larsson, hardly shifted Skadinia's tone. Only when she hinted of more did she ruffle. Arion, he'd brought Larsson to her isle. This was the man who'd trapped her somehow.

Another elven.

Dammit. If it was true, if Larsson's folk were elven, then his connections were of no small means.

"It is time," he said. "Bring her to the hall. And, Skadinia, do it silently."

I choked on my own stun when Arion waved his hand and a golden fissure split through the fading skeins of sunset until it seemed as though the firmament divided and he walked through, abandoning the shore.

Breathe. Focus.

"Come," she whispered, taking hold of my arm. "I've shown you all I can of Natthaven."

"Skadinia—"

"Skadi," she said, voice low. "Only one other calls me by my full name, and he is not Prince Arion."

Prince? Another damn royal.

"Skadi," I said. "Clearly, something is keeping you bound to them, but we can—"

"You cannot help me," she said with venom. "You do not understand the elvish ways. Listen to me, fae. There is nothing more I can do for you, so long as Arion holds to agreements made, he is the voice of Natthaven."

So many words were being left unspoken. I wanted to shake her, wrench them from her throat, but in the next breath, we were met with the two guards we'd left at the doors.

Skadi's shoulders slumped. "I will be by your side. He seeks blood, fae. Not your life."

She linked her arm through mine, much like Mira or Celine might do, and gently nudged me up a serpentine path where Larsson Bonekeeper awaited.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE SONGBIRD

BEAUTIFULLY CARVED beams and rafters lined each corridor. The runner along the hall was mystical and intriguing, with scenes of cliffs at night, brilliant purple blooms against the moonlight, and midnight seas beating against a shoreline.

Skadi kept her chin lifted, her pace like a dance over the floors. Regal, but in the twitch of her jaw was her unease.

The room was wide and oddly terraced in an upper level, with a long wooden table on a lower level. Half the walls were stone, as though this part of the palace was built into the side of the dark cliffs outside.

A river stone inglenook billowed with the savory scent of woodsmoke and ash. Some walls were made from the natural rock, others were insulated with clay and soft lumber speckled in rain-soaked moss.

Along the blackwood table, runners with blue frosted peaks and bind runes I couldn't read in the design were laid out on the surface. A feast of simple smoked fish and tart jellies piled on silver plates, and a simple candelabra flickered from ebony wax candles overhead.

Seated at the far end of the table, a man with a blue tricorn atop his head scooped mashed roots and fleshy bits of fish into his mouth.

My heart burned for Erik. He had to know. He needed to be warned.

“Lord Hesh.”

Hesh, the lord over the House of Blades, slurped another bite. A warrior-strong body, with an impossibly square jaw, the bastard was more ogre than fae. “Earth fae.”

“I believe you know me as Queen.”

Hesh laughed, deep and menacing. “I think we both know that title was always doomed to be short-lived, *earth fae*.”

I clamped my teeth to keep my breaths from coming in short, stilted gasps. He had no fear, no trepidation for Erik’s retaliation. What the hells did it mean? Was the whole of the Ever against my serpent?

Somewhere in the numbness of my heart, terror split through to the surface.

This fear takes your thoughts, and I will not tell you not to let it, but I will remind you of who you are. For you are a formidable foe.

Erik proved his trust in me with his words and actions. I could die here. If that was my fate, I would do so protecting the Ever King, standing for him, fighting for the life we’d dreamed of living together.

It was a beautiful dream and deserved a fight, even to the death.

From a back door, Larsson entered. My stomach twisted. Once a friend, once a man who’d laughed with us, who’d helped rescue me from a sea singer, now was cruel and wretched. His handsome grin split over his stubbled chin, and his dark hair was mussed around his face.

“Hello, Lady.” Larsson took a high-backed chair at the head of the table. “How glad I am you’re awake, though I’m disappointed I was not informed sooner.”

His gaze shot to Skadi. The woman did nothing but pop one shoulder in a lazy shrug.

“So indifferent?” Larsson clicked his tongue. “We’re nearly kin.”

“Not yet,” was all Skadi said.

With more bluster, the same doors which Larsson had used clattered against the wall. More guards, more swords entered, and between them was the elven prince, and on his arm, Fione.

The sea witch was horribly beautiful. Pale hair slicked and knotted at the base of her neck. She wore a black gown of satin and lace and moved as through a gentle tide.

“It is such a pleasure to see earth fae in a proper place,” said the sea witch, nodding at me as she accepted Larsson’s hand. “At our mercy.”

“Clever, Fione.” My fists clenched. “Now that you’ve finished pining to be a king’s bedmate, you’ve had time to practice your wit.”

“Come now, Lady,” Larsson said once Fione was seated at the table. “You berate Fione when you are much the same.”

“I am queen.”

“You are a delusion,” Larsson said. “One my younger brother conjured in his own mind all so he might believe someone actually wanted him for exactly who he is.”

The way Larsson flouted my connection to the Ever King was astonishing. He’d spent weeks with Erik and me. He knew our devotion.

With a wave of his hand, he gestured for a chair. “Sit. We have a great deal to discuss. I see you’ve already met the princess of this isle, but have you met her betrothed? Prince Arion, my cousin.”

Larsson’s lip curled as though I ought to be impressed. I was not, only puzzled.

“Betrothed?” I whispered at Skadi.

The princess shuddered, but simply turned away, gaze on the floor. I would get no more aid from her, at least not surrounded by the others. Skadi believed knowledge of this place was how I would find a way to be free. I took to heart the notion of it. The more I knew of Larsson Bonekeeper, the more I could use against him.

“You are elven,” I said, voice a whisper.

Larsson plucked a wet, green fruit from a platter in the center of the table. “Half, yes.”

“Erik ...” I swallowed the pain of his name on my tongue. “Erik didn’t know?”

“No one but Fione knew.” Larsson wiped his fingers on a linen cloth. “I am the son of the fallen Ever King and a noble elven woman from the Ljosalfar clan, the light—”

“I know the clans. Skadi explained them,” I said abruptly.

“Quite a powerful combination, wouldn’t you say?”

Anger I’d come to expect burned low in my gut, but now I could hardly stomach it. “Yet, you have no sea voice.”

Larsson slapped a hand on the edge of the table. A bark of laughter followed. Arion blew out his lips and tossed back a goblet of a sweet-smelling drink. Next, Hesh. Chortle and snort and guffaw. The blade lord sounded more like a sea hog than a man.

“I have a voice, Lady. I merely forgot to reveal it.” Larsson waved his fingers from the side of his head. “Must’ve slipped my mind. Without Fione blocking him, I’ve few doubts that Heartwalker would’ve felt every desire and learned the truth.”

A cinch burrowed in my chest at the mention of Tait. “He was your cousin too.”

“True.” Larsson’s grin faded. “I didn’t mind him, not really. Another reason I hated killing him, but he is so damn loyal to Bloodsinger, it’s for the best. He never did find out my voice. Amusing how Thorvald’s sons both carry a gift of blood. Bonekeeper might be the adopted title, but my gift does not lie in the bones.”

My tone was clipped. “So proud, yet you admit to nothing.”

“Elven blood is interesting,” Larsson went on. “My cousin takes from the light, like his future bride takes from her darkness. Being both sea fae and elven, well, I take from the blood.”

“Take what?” I despised the tremble of my chin.

“Abilities. Voices. Magic.” Larsson’s brows waggled, like I ought to be delighted.

“You steal the magic of the blood.”

“I do. The more blood I devour, the longer I can steal another’s ability. Seems to work best on sea fae.” He lifted the chain of bones he kept around his neck. “Death is the best way to get the most blood. After a time, I began collecting the bones. A sort of memento.”

Gods, he was deranged. “I wonder how your elven folk trust you not to drink their magic away.”

“Alliances have been signed in blood.” Larsson frowned. “But even without, I would not harm Arion or his court. Or even his betrothed. We’re kin.”

“And what is your brother?”

He looked away, either stumped or ashamed. “An unfortunate bit of collateral in the way of my crown. Save your anger for Thorvald, Lady. He is the one to blame.”

Doubtless, Larsson would never see himself as the villain. “So, what is your plan, then?”

“To claim my birthright. I already told you this on the boat.”

“You cannot take the blood crown. You cannot take the Ever. Erik will not allow it.”

The crown of the Ever King was no ordinary crown. Brutal, like the Ever, should one outside the bloodline of the direct heirs don the crown, it would burn and fester on their skin.

Larsson’s face hardened. “Bloodsinger will truly have no choice. I’ve but one task remaining before the wards against me are gone, and I will be able to take the blood crown without injury.”

“Wards against you?”

“A loving gift from my father.” Larsson’s jaw pulsed. “Seemed he preferred the notion of a weaker heir like

Bloodsinger, so he made certain I would never be able to return to the Ever.”

Fione sniffed. “What a fool.”

“Aye, that he was,” Larsson said. “We’ve been breaking through Thorvald’s wards for turns now. Had I known I would’ve needed to wait for that damn Chasm to complete the final piece, I might’ve just slaughtered Bloodsinger long ago and taken a chance that the crown would naturally pass to me. Would’ve saved me a great many turns of his ruthless tantrums and obsession with earth fae.”

I needed to get off this damn isle. I needed to find Erik. One palm pressed to my heart, I tried to summon the heat, the comfort. *Serpent, please hear me.*

Emptiness answered.

“So, you needed the Chasm to open?”

“I needed you as much as Bloodsinger.” Larsson’s eyes heated.

“Ironic, isn’t it?” Arion’s cheeks flushed from ale and amusement. He refilled his cup from the ewer and took a long drink.

I blinked back to Larsson. “Where do the elven play a role in all this?”

Arion seemed wholly content to scheme with Larsson, but Skadi, she did not want this.

“Arion and I grew up together. My mother was the niece of his father, king of the light clans. At first, he tired of my constant talk of claiming my birthright.”

“Constant?” Arion wiped his mouth with his sleeve. “It was obsession.”

“With the wards keeping Thorvald’s firstborn away, it was likely my desire would never happen,” Larsson said. “Until Thorvald died. I suppose I should thank your father someday.”

My jaw set. “What good did that do?”

“Barriers keeping the firstborn of the Ever King out of the sea realms weakened, and I began to study how to weaken the rest.” Larsson waved a hand. “You don’t need to know all the details, Lady, but I found my way back. Once I did, I think my cousin, at last, saw the merit, and he began his own campaign to be king.”

Skadi drew in a sharp breath and closed her eyes.

“What did you do?” I looked at the elven prince. “Kill your father?”

“My father lives, fae.”

“Arion is positioned to be king over all elven clans,” Larsson said. “But the rise of elven kings is rather cumbersome.”

“Well, we must prove we have what it takes to lead.” Arion winked, losing himself again in his cups.

Larsson went on. “Victory in battle is required of all elven heirs.”

“So, he helps you win the Ever through battle and earns his place as king.”

“There is more to his ascension over *both* clans.” Larsson looked to Skadi. “But it is inevitable.”

“Skadi,” I said. “Are you forced into this betrothal?”

She lifted her gaze. “You do not understand our ways, fae.”

“That’s right.” Arion rose. “Skadinia will be my kin; it has been arranged for turns.”

“Nothing was set, and true negotiations were not to be had for turns to come,” Skadi muttered, but the way she grimaced I wondered if she’d meant to speak at all.

“When fate opens the way, *chridhe*, it would be foolish to ignore the chance.” Arion turned his cold gaze to me. “There is unique power within kin bonds, and when she is truly mine, she will want for nothing. *All* our agreements will be honored,

if she is but loyal to her king. So, cease with your attempts to convince her otherwise.”

Hesh rose from the table, dabbing his mouth with a linen. “It is time for me to return. The sun has set.”

“You know not to be seen,” Larsson said, voice low.

“I know how to sail my ship without the notice of the palace.”

“Yes, but you don’t know where Bloodsinger has gone.”

Erik wasn’t at the palace? Doubtless he was searching for us, but Hesh would now search for him. *Serpent? Please answer.*

Nothing.

“My men will find him,” said Hesh.

“Like last time?” Larsson glared at the blade lord. “Remember? When you supplied your men, and the earth fae stabbed them with roots.”

I swallowed. Gods, Hesh had been involved in the assassins who’d attacked at the palace.

“A mishap that won’t happen again,” said Hesh, and he quit the hall in a thunder of heavy steps that echoed down the corridor.

Skadi spoke of the marked being able to breach Fione’s wards. Hesh must’ve been the marked, yet I saw no hint of any rune or talisman.

“Hesh was not pleased with your bout of brutality, Lady.” Larsson winked and took a bite of fish off his plate.

“Then my life is utterly complete,” I retorted.

Larsson chuckled. “I must say, I did not anticipate the heartbond to aid in healing my brother that day. I’d even dropped a few sleeping herbs in Murdock’s wine to ensure he would be worthless to the king.”

My heart split in two. The day of the attack, Larsson had looked so flustered, so ill with worry. Gods, now it was clear

he'd only fretted that his plan would fail.

Larsson clapped his hands. "It is because of that heartbond that I brought you here, Lady. In fact, it is the whole reason I needed the Chasm to open. Gods, how surprising it was to realize what I needed was an earth fae princess."

"Not near as surprising as how cowardly you turned out to be."

"I doubt you'll feel that way soon enough."

A bitter scoff slid over my tongue. "I so look forward to the moment you realize what sort of monster you've unleashed. Erik will destroy you, and, gods, I hope he takes his time."

"And I look forward to when you're no longer so enamored by Bloodsinger." In swift movements, Larsson rose, had a hand wrapped around my braid, then yanked me down until he forced me onto my knees.

Soft spoken and direct as she'd been, Skadi cried out. "What are you doing? You said you only needed her kept at a distance. You said you weren't going to hurt her."

One snap of his fingers, and Arion had elven guards surrounding the princess, holding her steady. Still, she cried out, pleaded.

"You're going to take this, Skadinia," Arion said. "It will not kill her, so stop fumbling about."

Skadi's eyes bulged. "No. I won't. I won't use it for pain. You know what happens."

He cupped her chin. "These are our enemies, and they hold a power that gives them an advantage over us. This is our way to claim this battle, a way that two born of Elven blood will hold thrones and is for the benefit of your kin. You must understand there is pain that is used for a greater good."

Skadi shook her head, whimpering.

Fione moved in front of me. "Expose her heart."

Larsson didn't hesitate before slicing a small knife down the neckline of the nightdress until the swells of my breasts and tops of my nipples were exposed. "No wonder my brother kept you all to himself, Lady. Lovely."

Fione huffed and hurried to add her pungent herbs to her bowl. The same knife carved down the cleft of my breasts. I screamed and tried to pull away without causing the blade to shift and stab my heart.

"Arion, do not allow this on our lands! Do not bring hatred here!" Skadi cried.

"Do it now, or I take this isle by force, Skadinia."

"And you will destroy the bonds of trust and kin," she seethed. "You will be a wretched king from the start should you take the shadow clan before the proper time."

Arion tightened his grip on her chin, voice low. "I will do everything it takes to secure my birthright. You understand?"

"You cannot harm—"

"If I am victorious, what will it matter if he lives or dies?" Arion shouted. "I will, by blood, have earned the position of sovereign of both clans; I will have you."

"I'll never agree."

Arion sneered. "I will be your king; you will not have a choice. But refuse to aid me and my kin in this battle, and I will not soon forget your resistance to your future king."

The prince had someone he was using against Skadi. Clearer than ever, the woman was a prisoner in her own realm.

"Hesitate longer, woman," Larsson said, "and you will be marked a traitor against us. Find the bond and take it."

Fione stroked a delicate finger down my cheek. "It is time to tear that heartbond from your body."

No. Death did not await me here. They were after my *bond*.

"I detest you," Skadi said, but around her shoulders, billows of satin mist coiled over her fingers and the blue of her

eyes flashed like silver caps on a night sea.

Cruel hands wrenched me to the side. My bare chest was hovered over a mortar, blood dripping onto the clay.

Fear throttled my airway. *I am Livia ... I am Livia Ferus*
...

Cold, harsh and consuming, dug into my skin around the wound.

“That’s better,” Arion said.

Through the blur of tears, I could make out the red of his hair hunched over a weeping Skadi. Black mists slithered over the tiles like the ghosts of fallen serpents until their chill coiled around my arms, my wrists, then dove into my heart.

Fione added a thick, tar-like substance to the bowl and my blood, chanting a strange spell that guided the darkness to scoop blood into the mortar.

“Steal it away, elven,” the sea witch said. “Then I will ensure no new bond from the House of Kings can be fashioned.”

Gods, I hoped Erik knew how fiercely I’d loved him. So short a time, yet he’d been the center of my existence. I hoped he would not lose himself when this was over.

More blood was dragged from the wound. More mists tugged and yanked at my sinews, like cold fingers massaging my heart.

I writhed and thrashed until Larsson cursed me again and gripped my hair to the roots, holding me steady.

“The pain will be over soon, Lady,” he crooned. “In truth, I doubt you’ll feel much distress over Bloodsinger at all after this. You might even want me to end him for what he did to you.”

Tendrils of darkness dug into my breastbone. Whimpers and sobs followed from across the room. Murmured apologies, mutterings of fear. Skadi did not want this. The shadows threaded through bone and flesh, dark needles and thread.

Unable to hold in the pain, I cried out. Unseen claws ripped at my heart until I was certain I'd bleed out. Larsson flipped me onto my back, straddling my hips to keep me confined. Breasts exposed, blood on my chest, I'd never felt so trapped, so suffocated.

Time did not exist. All I knew was the agony, the sorrow. Like poison ripping every joyful moment from my heart, such despondency had never existed before.

Tar and blood in the bowl puffed out a strange smoke until nothing but bits of ash remained, and the pain ceased.

Sweat beaded on the sides of my face. Breaths came rough and sharp.

"It's gone." Fione studied the ash, flat and devoid of any care. "It can't be formed again."

The same echo of sorrow took hold when the skin below the crook of my elbow was red and irritated, but ... there was no bind rune. The mark of the House of Kings was gone. They'd robbed me of the bond formed so many turns ago when I'd fallen for the somber boy in a prison cell.

Whatever pieces of Erik had threaded through my heart on that night, now they'd been slaughtered.

CHAPTER SIX

THE SERPENT

“GET UP, BLOODSINGER.” A Rave warrior used the toe of his boot to nudge my hip from where I’d stumbled out of the great hall, landing on my back on the floor.

Fire blazed through my veins. Fists clenched at my sides, I let out a roar of pain. Not from my leg, not from the scars, not from the kicks and strikes of the earth fae. It was the cry of a shattered heart.

The last time had been the day my mother died. My boyish soul felt as though it might never piece itself back together again when the light faded from her eyes.

This was worse.

A suffocating torment wrapped around my heart, my bones, my very soul. I knew her folk would hate me, they’d want me dead, but I thought—gods—I thought with Alek, with my surrender, they would take to the tides immediately.

I’d done this. Rejected every offer of peace, threatened all my life to return and ruin them, and then I did. I stole their hearts away beneath the sea. I created too great a divide so they could not even unite with me when it mattered most.

I failed her, but I wouldn’t again. Not for another moment.

“I said get up.”

The moment the guard gripped my tunic, I snapped into sitting and curled a fist around his throat, choking off his air.

“Erik!” Tait’s voice was a warning. The guards who had him were coming for me.

They'd be too late.

The warrior in my grasp grappled for my hand, trying to break my crushing hold on his throat. His eyes were wide, face flushed; my grip tightened.

I snatched a small carving knife sheathed to his hip and slashed the flesh over the top of my wrist. The warrior made a grunting sound at the sight of my blood spilling over my skin onto the stones. Some drops landed on the warrior's fatigues.

Teeth bared, I leveraged back to standing, and spun the guard in front of me, the same way I'd done to Livia the night I took her. With the bloodied tip of the knife aimed at my new captive's face, his fellow warriors halted five paces away, hands out in a show of tense peace.

"Bloodsinger," said the warrior nearest to us. "What is your plan? You are surrounded here."

"My plan?" Darkness robbed any hint of compliance, of compromise, from my tone. "My plan is to take to the sea. My blood can kill the lot of you in moments. Release me and my cousin, and we will go. No lives lost."

"You attacked us, Bloodsinger. You took a royal. You know we cannot let you walk away."

"*She took me.*" My voice rattled against the sconces, the doors. Each passing breath robbed me of my sanity a little more. I did not care if I descended to the depths of the hells, I did not care if it made my soul black in the process. "She owns me. I will not go into a cell to wait. I'll die first, then I shall still search for her from the Otherworld."

"Put the blade down." Steig stepped from the great hall and glared at me. "Don't take the wrong steps here, Erik. Not again."

"I will do every wrong and wicked thing if it brings her back."

I flipped the knife, so the blade pointed back at me, and with a few clever moves of my fingers, had the sharp edges gripped in my palm. I squeezed until bubbles of my blood fountained through my clenched fingers.

The guard in my hold let out a rough breath when more of my blood dribbled down his chest.

“Keep steady, Frey,” Stieg told the man in my grasp.

I was no longer listening. With a quick motion, I flipped the knife to grab the hilt and leveled the blade at the guard’s throat. Blood fell onto his skin from my slashed fingers. He winced, straining to keep a distance from the poison, but I only tightened my arm around his upper body, keeping him close.

Tait struggled against his guard. One boot slammed into the warrior’s knees. The man cried out, yet managed to keep a hold on my cousin’s arm until a second guard came to aid him.

“Go,” Tait snapped, teeth bared. “You leave me, Erik, and go to the tides.”

Dammit. After all he’d done, the last thing I wanted to do was leave Tait in the hands of the earth fae, but ... I would. I would not hesitate. If the choice was to escape to the ship, to find Livia, but leave Tait as a captive—he would need to wait his ass in a cell until we could return with my queen at my damn side.

If Livia’s folk would spend days plotting how to slip through the Chasm, if they would not put aside my sins and their hatred to save her, then I would go at it alone.

I’d already wasted enough time in a futile attempt to join forces.

The guard in my bloody grasp panted and coughed as I scuffled us toward one of the windows, him as my shield.

My head spun with the impossibility of the escape, but the need to reach the sea blotted out any reason.

“Erik, there is no way out,” Stieg insisted. “Don’t run again. We will help.”

“You are not helping!” I shouted.

My voice drew the doors to the hall open. In the doorway, the Night Folk king was joined by more half-familiar faces I thought I might’ve seen on a battlefield as a boy.

“I will kill you if you spill another drop of our blood,” Valen said without unclenching his teeth.

“*Kill me,*” I roared back. I shoved the guard away from me once I reached the window. “If I do not find her, I’ll offer my throat for you to slit.” With the hilt of the bloodied knife, I shattered the glass at my back. “What do you not understand? I care nothing for my life if she is not in it.”

The ground shifted and rolled much like stone had turned to a stormy sea. I stumbled and used the wall to brace.

“No! Godsdammit!” Behind me, in the broken window, a thick, root-ridden mound erupted from the soil and blocked my foolhardy escape.

Valen glared at me from where he crouched on the floor, hand splayed over the stone tiles.

“A bit of soil is not enough to stop me, Earth Bender.” I opened my palms at my sides.

The way I’d pulled water into the lungs of the assassin in the garden, I summoned the same of the flesh from the guards. It was a silent song, a gods-gift my father exploited. An ability to speak to blood and water inside a body with my voice was a weapon in his heir he’d planned to use against any who stood at odds with the king.

The pull was weaker here in the earth realms than back home, but soon enough, warriors in the corridor coughed. A few grabbed at their throats, water trickling from the corners of their mouths.

Valen watched in a wild stun as his men stumbled to their knees, drowning on the sudden fluid in their bodies.

Moments. Mere breaths. That was all the time I had to find a new window, slip over jagged glass in the window frame, pray I didn’t shatter my leg a second time on the impact of my fall, then manage to outrun earth fae arrows and spears until I reached the sea.

With a limp.

With no weapon but a simple knife.

Holes punctured every step of my feckless plan, but my thoughts were too lost in a panicked need to act. I stepped over them.

Halfway down the new corridor, a fierce biting heat split through my chest. “Dammit.”

I groaned and doubled over.

“Erik!” Tait shouted.

I hardly heard anything around me. The agony was bone deep, as though someone had cracked through my ribs, peeled out the marrow, then replaced it with molten ore. I could not draw a deep enough breath. Dark spots clouded my sight. My knees struck the stone floor.

Somewhere in the haze, strong hands took hold of my arms.

“Blood’s spilling out of his chest!”

“Warrior,” my voice cracked.

“Erik.” Stieg, blurred and distant, looked down at me. “What happened?”

I coughed, tasting the heat of blood on my tongue. Some unseen force was splitting my body apart. One palm covered my chest, desperate to keep my heart in place.

“Did you strike him?”

Hells, that sounded like the earth bender. I didn’t care. Something like a festering disease was cracking my ribs. When I pulled my hand back, fresh blood coated my fingertips.

Through the laces of my tunic, a jagged gash carved through my flesh. I watched in a bit of horror. Tinged in the crimson was a flicker of gold, like a spark of sunlight.

“Don’t touch him.” Tait’s voice broke through the fog. Possible the earth fae were too stunned to hold to him, but soon my cousin’s face was blinking over me. “What did you do to him?”

“I did nothing.” Stieg leaned over me. “How is he bleeding?”

“Touch his blood if you wish to die, warrior,” Tait snapped, then pointed his attention to the flow of gore down my chest. “Erik, this blood is not normal. This is a curse, some kind of spell.”

A spell. An emptiness. Something inside me was missing.

Like a blade to the heart, the truth struck without mercy.

No, gods no.

The pull, the draw, the slightest hint of comfort knowing somewhere across the seas and skies her beauty existed, wasn't there.

“It's gone.” My head slumped back to the floor. I stared mindlessly at the rafters overhead. “Livia ... our heartbond. It's gone.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE SONGBIRD

TEARS MINGLED WITH BLOOD. I grappled for my bodice, desperate to cover my body. My shoulders shook in silent sobs. An ache bloomed through my veins, unyielding. Hot agony, unlike anything I'd known before.

An end, a destruction. A death.

“Skadinia! *Stop.*” Arion shouted. Wooden legs of his chair skittered across the floor, and steel pulled from leather sheaths.

Blurred through salt and pain, still I made out Skadi's shape. Beringed fingers splayed, coils of darkness embraced her palms, her arms. Not a shadow, something more. Sea spray beneath a moonless night.

“Stop? You were the one who told me to reach for pain,” she raged. “Perhaps you do not wish me to feel.”

“You're wrong,” Arion insisted. “Has he sheltered you so fiercely that you did not know pain is due in battle? You cannot go heartless when each enemy cries out in agony. We are fighting for a stronger future of all elven. Why don't you see this?”

Arion lifted his arms, matching Skadi's stance. Wicks of candlelight flickered. Flames leaned toward the prince, bent—leapt away. Arion's hands were as fire.

“The power in her veins was needed, woman,” Larsson seethed. “Your world is secure and unthreatened when the crown of the seas rests on my head. Elven folk will soon hold power in every realm. Why do you resist?”

Blue rage, hot and sharp, burned in Skadi's eyes. She did not spare a look at Larsson, her ire remained on her fellow elven. "I know what becomes of me when a kinship bond is formed with *him*. Do you think I am so foolish not to know you will make me your blade? You will have me wallow in death."

My mind spun. I did not understand what was happening, only that something had overtaken Skadi. Something about her mists had shifted her into this cruel, venomous woman.

"That is not true," Arion said, but his lip curled like he was more frustrated than concerned. "You will be my wife, Skadinia. Our affinities will serve each other."

"You have no desire to serve me, Arion."

His gaze hardened. "Continue to betray our folk, and I'll have no choice but to keep you numb."

Skadi's grin was cruel, frightening. Empty. "Then we agree—I would rather remain heartless than feel the repulsion of calling you husband."

Without warning, Skadi flung her arms. Mists met fire when Arion swung back.

"You are breaking our agreement," Arion said, a threat in his tone.

"You are the one who fractured it by this torture. *Torture* of an innocent, Arion. This is not the way to your birthright."

"What do you know of birthrights?" Arion struck again.

Singed skin broke from Skadi's sleeve. She cried out and doubled over, still entwined in dark salt and mist. When her chin tilted, the gleam in her eyes was something rotten—hate and bloodlust—a look that did not belong on features as hers.

"Skadi," Arion hissed, cutting her name in half. "Don't. Step out of the dark, you've wallowed too long in your tantrum."

"I thought you just said I ought to remain numb. Isn't this what you wanted? A complacent, unbothered wife?"

More than ribbons of mist, a burst of darkness, a cloud, a creature, erupted over her figure, splaying like dark wings around the room. Arion shielded his face. Larsson and Fione ducked beneath the table. Even the few elven guards bracketed against the wall.

Whatever power rolled in the mist, when it touched me, it did nothing fearsome. An embrace, cold and shocking. Then it was gone. A dark shadow of a creature, spilling from the doorway, the windows, the floorboards.

When it was over, I raised my head, breathless.

Nothing was terribly out of place. Only a faint hint of brine in the air. But Skadi had grown still and stoic. The light in her eyes was gone.

Elven guards seized her arms at the command of Arion. Only callous apathy masked her pleasant features when they led her away. She offered not a single glance over her shoulder, as though nothing bothered her in the least.

“What are the consequences of that outburst?” Larsson shoved against the table, rattling the goblets.

Arion wiped sweat off his brow. “I don’t know. But she won’t be trouble any longer. She’s lost to it for now.”

“Keep her that way,” Larsson hissed.

“Do not think I plan to fail here, cousin,” Arion bit back.

With a grunt, Larsson shouted at the last remaining guard to return me to my chamber. Numb, in pain, I went without struggle.

Like Skadi, I did not look back.



ALONE, when the moon was high, I pressed my forehead against the cool window. A new shift had been placed on the bed by the time we’d returned to the room. I’d promptly changed, desperate to hide away the truth of what happened.

My palm massaged the place over my heart, a constant burn that hadn't faded. The way Larsson spoke, it was as though he'd expected some resentment for Erik to fill the hole.

There was only a suffocating sort of longing.

One I was certain would fracture whatever was left of my heart and soon take me to the hall of the gods. Then, there was a new pain for a woman I hardly knew. Skadi. There'd been action in her cloak of mist, a plan she'd risked to enact.

I could not help but think it was for my benefit.

Now, by the stony look on her face, it had harmed her. My soul ached for her. Whatever the mists had done, Skadi was truly a prisoner now.

The air was colder, and a smoky flavor hung low and heavy, like the first frosts were approaching. Through the haze, winged insects flitted around night blooms outside the window. Flashes of gold coursed over their iridescent wings. Sun wings. I traced the flight pattern of one, two, watching as they bounced about the glass, as though summoning me, *trusting* me.

All I had were Skadi's words, vague and indirect, but there was a burning within me, one that had me convinced the magic in the soil of Natthaven would shield me if I could break free of these walls.

Stars brightened the Ever Sea in the distance, open and endless. *Home*.

Without warning, a wet sob slid from my chest. I held my fist in front of my mouth to muffle the sounds and slid down the wall until my knees were hugged to my chest.

The door swung open.

"All well, Lady?" Larsson stood in the doorway, his dark hair free and wild about his angled face. "My men thought they heard screaming, thought they heard someone attacking you."

"The only one who's attacked me thus far is you." I pressed my back against the windowsill, slowly rising to my

feet.

“Surely you know this isn’t exactly personal to you.” Larsson crowded me against the wall and stroked a fingertip down my cheek, laughing when I wrenched my face away.

My stomach twisted. “You won’t get to Erik.”

Larsson frowned. “Still lingering affection for him?”

“More than affection, you bastard.” I spat in his face.

Larsson lifted his arm, ready to strike, but stalled when I flinched. He sighed, the twist of a grin returned. He tilted my chin with his thumb. “You know, your blood serves more than one purpose. I thought the lotus trade would be our answer to heal the marks of the darkening.”

“Marks of your use of dark magic.”

“There are times when dark spells must be used against dark spells. You think it is natural for a kingdom to be warded against its true king? Thorvald used wicked spell casts to keep me out. I had no choice.”

What a creature he was. The sort who would never shoulder his own darkness. Erik was brutal, even wicked at times, but he never laid his cruelty at the feet of others. He bore it like a banner in his words and actions.

“House Skurk proved helpful for a time, pirating many crates of blooms to test, but Lucien had to get greedy.”

The skin on my arms prickled. “You arranged for Erik to kill him?”

Larsson chuckled. “Clever way to tie up loose ends, don’t you think? Fione finished off the rest of his brothers with a rather costly bottle of seaflower wine. Those sods didn’t even pause to consider the risks of an unmarked bottle before serving it at their next household feast.”

Lucien Skurk had been a vile creature, and knowing the pain he’d leveled on Skondell, I was glad Erik tortured him. But to think an entire hall of the Skurk household fell prey to Larsson’s whims caused my fingers to tremble at my sides. “You’re a wretch.”

“Consider me wounded,” he said with a heavy dose of irony. “Once I saw the mark of the House of Kings on your skin, I knew your blood would have the power to clear the blight and break the final ward over the blood crown.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You don’t need to. All you must know is that little bond with Bloodsinger was exactly what I needed.” He splayed one palm on the wall, caging me with his body. “Now that it’s over, I admit I rather like having you all to myself.”

“Don’t touch me.” I shoved back. The motion only caused him to laugh and press his body against me, forcing me to slide against the hard planes of muscle on his chest.

“A king can touch what he likes, Lady.”

“You should be so proud,” I gritted out. “Depending on spells and tricks to take a throne when it was given to Erik as a tiny boy. Who is the pathetic one?”

One step back, and Larsson’s palm clapped over my cheek. Pain lanced up my temple, down my throat, and a derisive snort followed. A mocking sort of laughter peeled from my chest despite the pain.

“You are weak,” I said, trying to steady my voice. “You caused the darkening, lost the ability to control it, and ... and needed *Erik Bloodsinger* to find the way to finish your entire scheme because your own father ... never wanted you in his kingdom.”

“*Shut. Up.*” Larsson’s fists tightened at his sides.

“The crown of the Ever was never yours, and you know it,” I went on, my voice a near hiss. “Now, Erik will send you to the hells, then drag you back, all to return you with fewer limbs than before.”

Larsson hit me again. A show of a weak man when a bold woman stumped his stupid words. That was all he was, a weak man.

For a few breaths, he held my glare. Hatred burned like flames against a pitch night in his dark eyes. Then, slowly, his

lips curved into a wretched grin that sent horrid pin pricks up my arms.

“Bloodsinger will lose his mind over you,” Larsson said. “He is rather possessive, isn’t he?”

With a mighty shove, he pinned my back to the wall again, knocking the air from my chest, and clapped a hand over my mouth.

Panic flooded like ice in my veins.

“Bloodsinger sees you as his perfect possession. All his.” Larsson dragged his lips over the edge of my jaw. “He said it more than once. I wonder if his desire to fight for you would dull if I claimed his little earth fae for myself.”

No, gods.

Larsson used his legs to slip between mine, spreading my thighs. I screamed under his hand when he bit my neck. Hard. His tongue lapped at a dribble of blood from the wound, and his free hand gathered my skirt in bunches.

No. No, he was going to rape me. He’d mark me. Leave a brand for Erik, for me, to always see.

Larsson’s hand slid beneath my dirty skirt. “I think I will carve my name right here, Lady.”

He cupped me between my legs. His fingers trying to force their way into my entrance.

Breathe. Focus.

Erik’s darkness was my light. He was mine. If his heart was mine, then so was his viciousness.

With my body entangled, arms and legs trapped by Larsson’s weight, all I had were my teeth. I bit down on his ear with such force the harsh tang of blood spilled over my tongue almost instantly.

Larsson roared in pain. His hands slid from my center. My dress fell back into place. I grunted and winced at his flailing hands, striking me in the ribs, the face, the breasts, the skull.

I closed my eyes and bit harder.

In a fierce yank, Larsson pulled back, his hand clutching the side of his head. Blood dribbled over my lips. Something fleshy and solid danced over my tongue. Gods. Oh, gods. My insides lurched, readying to retch, when I opened my lips and a clump of something mangled and bloody slipped from my mouth.

A piece ... a piece of his ear. I'd bitten off part of his damn ear.

"You bitch!" Larsson roared and his fist collided with my face.

I crumpled. Black spots danced in the corners of my eyes. The pain didn't stop. He kicked, hit. He was going to kill me.

I love you, Serpent. Destroy him for me.

Larsson kicked his boot against my ribs, and I fell face down on the cold stone. Another slam of his boot to my belly, and I retched. Then, it stopped.

My mind was muddy, and I wanted nothing more than to slip into the oblivion grasping at me from the shadows. I coughed, too numb to truly feel the pain. Voices came in the interlude. Murky sounds, like they were buried within a stormy current.

My head throbbed, but the longer I was left in peace, the clearer the voices became.

"Quit battering her." Fione's voice broke through the brutality. "Hesh sent a report on Bloodsinger."

Larsson's heavy steps abandoned my side. His absence bolstered enough courage to crack my eyes. A haze clouded my vision, but I could make out just enough to see Fione's dark, crimson lips.

"Gods, what were you thinking?" Fione inspected Larsson's ear.

"Tried to reason with the whore," he lied. "She attacked. Ask one of the elven if there are shackles, and why the hells is she still on the side of Erik Bloodsinger!"

"Give it time to fade."

Their voices dissolved when the door slammed. I rolled on my back, skull throbbing, body aching. How long I remained unmoving, I didn't know. From the narrow washroom attached to the bedchamber, a single ribbon of misty night flowed over my head.

I squinted, uncertain if I was seeing correctly. It looked like Skadi's mists.

Then, it was gone.

Another breath and a loud clatter jolted me into sitting. My battered bones protested, but I looked over my shoulder at the washroom.

"Godsdammit, what is ... *shit*. What is this?" A man's voice murmured and cursed.

I struggled to my knees but could not manage to stand before the door creaked and a face peered from the washroom.

Water still dripped from his defined chin, and his dark eyes widened the moment he saw me. The door kicked the rest of the way open. Gavyn Seeker, still shaping into his broad, strong form from his water shifting, stepped into the room.

I couldn't breathe. I couldn't think.

A grin split over Gavyn's stubbled face. "I don't know how I arrived here, but good hells, it is a relief to see you, My Queen."

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE SERPENT

THE PAIN HAD CEASED, but the sorrow remained. Heavy, unyielding, damn near torturous. Since the war, since those nights my songbird would come to read her tales to me, I'd been filled with her light, her beauty, her heart.

I'd been so lost in my own hate and anger, I'd never truly noticed it.

Now, it was as though my body were nothing but a shell. Without her, I was half a soul.

I stared down at my bare chest. The blood had ceased flowing, but the skin was split and irritated.

After I'd spluttered about the heartbond, after I'd mentioned Livia's name, the earth fae went mad. I'd been half awake, but the earth bender himself demanded I be taken away. Stieg and the warriors took action.

They'd barked orders to be wary of my blood, but to settle me in some locked room, somewhere in the fort.

Tait had followed, explaining in hurried words anything he knew of heartbonds until the guards seized him again and separated us.

The heartbond connection was meant to be unbreakable. A knot gathered in my throat, sticky and hard. Meant to be unbreakable, yet it was broken. Gone. Lost. Nothing but a flicker of remembrance remained.

Memories were muddled, no mistake. Along the way, the pain had robbed me of my consciousness, but I was alert now.

Part of me wished I wasn't.

This was not the reality in which I desired to live. To know Livia was still out there, to know something had happened to her to cause this, remained my sole purpose, remained the strongest draw to wake, to fight, to bring her home.

She had to be out there. She had to.

The anguish had cut me at the knees. Never before had I experienced such torment. For too many moments, I could barely walk, barely breathe. I'd damn near pleaded for the seas of the Otherworld to drag me away.

I peered into the foggy mirror hanging on the washroom wall. My hair stuck to my brow in sweaty waves. Dirt and grime tinted my cheeks, and bruises littered my arms and chest from the treatment from the prince and warriors.

I pressed my forehead against the cool glass.

Songbird.

There was a feeble tug in my heart, like whatever corpses of my bond remained yearned to find its mate.

My eyes squeezed shut, and an unfamiliar and mightily unwanted sting bit behind my eyes.

Gods, I would not bleeding shed a ridiculous tear in the halls of my enemies. How long had it been since I'd cried? My mother? During my torture? I was not even certain if I'd cried for my father's death.

Hopelessness was crushing, and tears seemed the only step to take, but it would solve nothing. To crumble and break would not bring her back.

With the back of my hand, I rubbed the burn away, sniffed, and straightened to face the mirror.

"This means nothing," I said to the emptiness, imagining Livia could hear every word. "Bond or not, you are mine, and gods, I'm yours, love."

"Is that so?"

I froze, lifted my gaze, and peered into the glass.

“Queen.”

Livia’s mother stepped into the washroom, standing in the cold skeins of moonlight carving through a small window. Queen Elise fought beside her husband in the war; she was not a piece of glass in a glittering palace. The woman was a mortal who’d won a crown amidst the fae folk.

And she wasn’t alone.

Beside the queen was a woman with dark skin and silver spheres pierced in the dimples of her cheeks. A vague memory took shape; I’d seen her before. She’d been there on the shore when I’d been banished to the Ever. She’d stood beside the man who’d taken my blood to build the barriers against me.

The woman kept close to the door, a subtle smirk on her mouth when she caught my scrutiny.

Queen Elise clasped her hands in front of her slender body. Two fingertips were missing on one hand, but from my memories, they never hindered her grip on a blade.

The queen stared at the gash down my chest. “Nothing but violence has occupied my thoughts about the king of the Ever for so long, but to act on it now that you are returned, I do not think would bring me back to my girl.”

I stepped closer, frustration boiling to the surface. “The way I see it, the only one trying to get your daughter back is me.”

A slight curl tugged at her lip. “Such a strange feeling I have for you, Ever King. I want to cut out your tongue and feed it to you in pieces in one breath, then in the other I want ... to embrace you for ... for loving Livia the way she deserves to be loved.”

My pulse quickened in my skull, beating against the bone.

What was this game?

The queen cleared her throat, composing herself, and frowned at me again. “Aleksi tried to explain this ... bond.” She gestured at my bloody chest.

The second woman snorted a laugh. “Valen didn’t take kindly to the idea of Liv’s heart being bound to this one.”

Elise smiled, but clearly tried to hide it, tried to be stern. “For some reason, my nephew is rather relentless in his defenses of you. He went on and told the great hall that you healed him when you could’ve let him fall to his injuries. He explained the troubles in your lands. Most of our folk want to keep you locked away until the remaining royals arrive.”

“Remaining royals?”

“You attacked our world, Bloodsinger,” Elise snapped. “We are made of bonded kingdoms. Your actions impact us all. Do you think the other kings and queens care nothing for Livia? I assure you, they love her like she is their own.”

“Kase wants Malin to make him forget how to breathe,” the second woman said, her smirk never leaving.

Was this all a damn jest to them? Did they not realize what was at stake?

“You not only took my child, a royal daughter,” Elise went on, “but your actions incited panic across the realms. The war ended not so long ago, Erik Bloodsinger. Civil disputes, fear, threats, all of it now lands on our heads because of you.”

“You speak of riots? Panic?” I pressed, all at once irritated that a piece of me actually cared what became of others. There wasn’t room to care about anyone but Livia.

Elise stepped next to me, close enough she could slip a blade through my gut, and I wouldn’t have time to shift out of the path. “Nothing we cannot peacefully handle, but our folk are not the concern. It is the sea fae emerging from the tides across the realms that is causing our Rave warriors to divide to protect every shore.”

“What?”

“They began to arrive several nights ago. It keeps us on guard, fighting our own civil unrest, and preparing for another war. Another reason every throne is convening to plan our moves.”

“I did not send them.”

Elise paused, glancing at the woman. Her companion’s grin fell, and she nodded at the Night Folk queen. “He speaks true.”

How she knew I wasn’t lying didn’t matter. I needed to be free of these walls and setting sail within the next chime, or I would poison the lot of them. As much as Livia loved her folk, they would not be the cause for me to not find my songbird again.

I flexed my fingers and lowered my voice. “Let me go, and I will see to it you have protections from the Ever King against any rogue sea fae. I will offer assurances to your folk that we are not here for war.”

“Again, I hardly know what to think of you,” Elise said.

“Forgive me, Queen, but I don’t do any of this for you. I came seeking help for her.”

Elise considered me for a long breath. “And why is that? Why heal my nephew when the Chasm broke him?” The queen paused. “Why would an enemy want to help my daughter breathe?”

I lowered my voice. “Why do you think, Queen Elise?”

Shorter than me by a head, still, when the Night Folk queen locked her gaze on mine, I fought the urge to cower like I’d been kicked. “Look me in the eye, Erik Bloodsinger, and tell me of my daughter.”

Instinct demanded I argue and fight, but there was a fierceness in the queen’s eyes, a brutality. She wanted to know my heart, she wanted to know if I would go to the depths of the hells the way she would for her girl.

“Your daughter—” I cleared the roughness from my throat and swiped my tongue over my drying lips. “Your daughter is my beacon. I will never regret taking her, for she is my home. I love her, Queen. There is no part of me that would choose anything over her. Let. Me. Go.”

A tear dripped from the corner of the queen's eye. "I believe you."

"You should," the second woman said, voice rough. "He did not utter a single lie."

"Why does your word matter?" I snapped, patience lost.

The woman's lips curved. "I taste lies, Bloodsinger."

A bit of stun robbed me of my words until it bled to the boil of frustration. "Then why in the hells am I still here? Let me go. I sought your warriors, I sought your aid, but I will go at it alone if all we will do is sit around *planning*. You do not know the ways of the Ever, the ways of this ... bastard who took her from me. The longer we wait, the more power he can gain, the more he could ... take from her."

"Do you think I don't realize that? Do you think all of us don't realize that?" The docile, soft-spoken queen shattered, and the fiery warrior inside Livia's mother was snapping free. "Do not for one moment think my thoughts have been anywhere but with my daughter these long weeks, Erik Bloodsinger. This is your doing, and we will do anything to retrieve her, but you cannot come here demanding we set sail within moments. There are protections that must be placed, strategies we must decide. You have caused this delay by taking her, by building mistrust, not us."

"Then why are you here?"

Elise blinked, her eyes glassy and damp with angry tears. "To hear the truth, Ever King. You will need more than Aleksi to stand by your side. Junius"—she gestured at the lie taster—"and I will speak for you in the hopes it brings us to Livia swifter."

The queen planned to stand with me? Against her own husband?

I'd hoped but never expected anyone—certainly not Livia's mother—to believe me. After so long, being unable to leave, I'd begun to think they would never be content until my blood soaked their soil.

Elise turned for the door. “Food will be sent to you. Herbs for healing your wound if you require them. We will send for you when the others arrive.”

I let out a rough breath. “Queen, do not keep me here.”

“My word is not the only voice of power. You must face us all.” Elise’s pale eyes returned to the gash on my chest. “Aleksi called it a heartbond.”

My palm rubbed the wound. “Yes. Old magic of the Ever.”

“Why is it gone now?”

I didn’t truly know how to explain any of it. “I don’t know. It felt as though my heart was being torn from my body. When ... when she was taken it dulled, but this?” Gods, I could hardly gather the words. “This feels different.”

“Yet you’re still desperate to find her.”

My brow furrowed. “It was not a bond that made me love her, Queen.”

Elise tucked a lock of her golden hair behind her strange, rounded ear. “You should know, Bloodsinger, loving my girl has likely saved your life. For now. I have a final question, and I hope you have enough respect for my position as Livia’s mother to speak the truth. I am not fae, clearly. Would I be a hinderance to my people, or a strength should I sail to your kingdom?”

Well, shit. “Queen, I have witnessed your skill on a battlefield. I’ve not forgotten that day you aided in my rescue, and—”

“You are stalling, Ever King.”

I rubbed the back of my neck. The scars beneath my palm prickled in disquiet. “The currents of the Chasm are fierce for even fae. But mortals drown, yes?”

Elise’s chin dropped. “Yes. They drown.”

“I fear the ferocity of the barrier and the time it takes to sail through. I do not know how you might fare, Queen.”

“Livia has a great deal of mortal in her blood. My husband’s mother is also mortal.”

The earth bender was half-fae? I wouldn’t have guessed it.

“I don’t have all the answers, but Livia was bonded to me when I took her, Queen,” I said with a touch of hesitation. “Unknowingly but bonded all the same. The Ever was already part of her and would not harm her.”

Silence was heady, but after a moment, Elise lifted her chin and unlatched the door. “Thank you. That is what I wanted to know. We will send for you soon.”

“Queen, don’t leave me here.”

The lie taster was already out the door, but Elise hesitated. “I might trust your words, but I will take no risks when it comes to retrieving my daughter, nor will my husband. Do not forget you made us your enemy.”

The queen abandoned the room, shoulders curled in a bit of defeat, and snapped the lock into place.

Alone, the cruel clutches of desperation throttled me from behind. I picked up a wooden chair in the corner of the room and threw it at the locked door, then slowly slid my back down the wall until I was on the floor.

I buried my face in my hands, breathless, furious, more broken than before.

Songbird. Nothing.

For the first time since tales were told to a lost boy in a prison cell, Livia Ferus felt utterly lost to me.

CHAPTER NINE

THE SERPENT

“WHOA, SHIT, I MEAN ... CLOSE ONE.”

My head snapped up. The back of my neck throbbed. I didn't know how long I'd remained against the door, but my dark solitude was interrupted by a soft, young voice outside the window.

Somber dawn was breaking through the velvet night, but the window was still shaded in thick clouds from the sea. Clicks and scrapes came from the glass, but I saw nothing until the pane groaned in protest when it was cracked open.

I stood abruptly, gritting my teeth against the white-hot spark of pain shooting through my bones.

From the misty dawn, a hooded head poked into the room.

A small body rolled over the windowsill. Ungraceful, and with more than one uttered curse followed by prompt corrections, as though he thought I might take offense. In the next breath, the hood was tossed back, and Livia's young brother glared at me from across the room.

What the hells?

“I got better.” He drew a small carving knife from his boot. “So don't try nothin'.”

“Prince.” I held out a hand. “Does your mother know you're here?”

The boy kept his scowl, slashing the knife with mock battle sounds, and shook his head. “What do you think? I'm

dressed like I'm gonna ass-in-ate you, like Maj would even let me do that yet.”

“Is that so?” I tried to keep the smug laugh from my voice. If Livia's brother wanted to attack, let him. He'd opened the window. I had my out. I'd leveled the boy once. My songbird would need to forgive me, but I would do it again.

The young prince huffed, then stuffed his knife into his belt, frowning. “Everyone thinks you're the only one who can get us to Liv.”

“Oh? And what do you think?” I took a slow step toward the open window.

The boy shrugged and kicked at the floorboards. “Maj seems to think so. She was arguin' with Daj about you. Thought I couldn't hear them, but Uncle Sol said everyone's restless waiting for the rest of the kings and queens to come. Says everyone is sort tempered.”

I assumed he meant short-tempered, but I didn't correct him. I didn't have time for this. Still, something in the boy's voice, be it the subtle quiver or the determination to learn a new truth, brought me to a pause.

“Why are you here, Prince? Have you come to assassinate me, or is it something else?”

The boy paused. “I'm gonna get in a lot of trouble, but Alek, he says you gotta get gone. I think my maj and daj thinks so too, but there are rules and shit—I mean, *things*—since every king and queen rules equally. They gotta make a plan before kings and queens leave, so bad folk here don't try to take the thrones.”

“Sounds like a predicament but does not explain why you're here.”

The boy rolled his eyes and seemed to forget for a moment he despised me. “Jonas said you looked ready to cry when they said you couldn't go get Livie in the great hall. Was that true?”

“I did not cry.”

The boy snorted with a bit of derision. “Not what everyone else said. My maj says you’re soft for Livie, and every time she says it, Daj says he’s gonna kill you. Maj keeps reminding him they were enemies too.”

I made another slight move for the window while the prince was distracted with a loose iron nail in the floorboards. “I don’t know this story,” I said. “Your parents did not like each other once?”

I came to a halt when the prince smiled, slow to start, but there. He lowered his voice like he might share a grand secret. “My maj and daj come from houses that used to be like the *worst* enemies. They shoulda really hated each other. But Maj saved Daj’s ass—I mean, his life—and they took vows. That was way back in Night Folk and mortal wars, though.”

A grin tugged at my lips. There was little question where Livia got her fiery spirit.

The boy let his voice trail away when it cracked. He pressed his fists against his eyes, clearly uneasy about showing tears. His shoulders trembled, and his lips tightened. “I don’t want anyone else to go, but I don’t wanna never see my sister, and ... why’d you take her, Bloodsinger? What’d she ever do to you?”

Each word was a knife to the chest. “I took her because I thought it was the way to please *my* family. I was wrong.”

The young prince used his tunic sleeve to wipe his nose. His eyes were like wet onyx when he lifted his head. “I keep thinking if I’d ... if I’d been stronger, I could’ve protected her and—”

“Nothing that happened was your fault,” I said with sincerity. Three paces from the window now, and I did not know how I’d slip out without harming the boy again. Naturally, I was reluctant to do so, but I did not see another way. “The only reason I got the drop on you that night was simply because I am taller.”

He snorted. “Not the *only* reason.”

“I saw how you handled that axe. Your sister is fortunate to have a brother like you. Believe me when I say that, since I’m almost certain my brother is trying to kill me.”

The young prince folded his arms, one brow arched. “Why are you sneakin’ for the window like I can’t see you?”

My leg pinched when I stopped abruptly. There was no other choice. “Listen, Prince—”

“My name is Rorik. Gods, did Livie not tell you or something?”

“Rorik.” I took a step for the boy. “I do not wish to do this again, but I need to get to the sea, and I need to get to your sister. I hope you’ll forgive me, but—”

“Why the hells do you think I’m here?” The young prince took a step to the side, brow arched like I’d slipped into a sudden madness. “I’m part of the *scheme*.”

Scheme? Rorik waved his hands toward the window like his thoughts should be obvious. As if on cue, a strange coo fluttered through the window, like one of the doves of the earth realms.

“Bleeding hells,” Rorik grumbled, smacking the heel of his hand to his forehead. “I knew I’d start talking—Alek told me not to, but I had to know why you took her and all that.”

“Prince—”

“Ror-ik. *Rooooorik*, Bloodsinger.”

“Rorik, what are you talking about?”

The prince rolled his eyes and groaned.

“Alek and the others know you can’t wait for the kings and queens to arrive. I mean, it’ll take until tomorrow’s sunrise—at the earliest—for Ari and Saga to get here. Kase and Mal will be even longer. I mean, I guess Calista and Silas are to be here within the next toll, but they’re only one pair.” The boy waved his hands to the window. “So, get gone. I’m puttin’ my neck out here, and probably won’t get honey cakes for a whole turn because of you. You owe me for so many things.”

The boy flopped onto the bed, ticking off every slight against him—the bump on the back of his head, stealing his sister, making him cry in front of his young companions once his sister was gone, now apparently his sweets were at risk.

I was utterly puzzled. A ruse? A test? No, Elise nor the earth bender would ever risk their son with me.

With a slow, steady bend backward, I peered out the open window. Heavy mist covered the cobbled paths below. There were no guards, no warriors?

“Go.” Rorik waved his hands. “Mira can only hold the illusion for so long.”

A hiss rose from the darkness below. Little by little the mists faded enough to make out three figures, clad in all black with hoods much like Rorik’s.

“Erik.” Aleksi tossed back his hood. “Get down here, you damn idiot. We’ve got a small window of time.”

Bleeding gods. The prince was breaking me out of his own fort. Eyes wide, I glanced back at Livia’s brother.

“Don’t trick us, Bloodsinger,” he whispered.

What could I say? The boy had no reason to believe me and had clearly placed all his faith in his cousin’s word.

I gave the young prince a quick nod, then leveraged my legs over the windowsill. Aleksi was like a phantom in the night. His training as one of their warriors was obvious in the way he moved in soundless steps, the way he eased a wooden ladder against the roof’s ledge.

I leapt off the final pegs into a crouch, but stumbled when the other faces came into focus.

Prince Jonas’s eyes were painted in thick kohl, and it looked as though someone had dipped their fingers in black paint, dragging them down his face. “Still a bit bruised from our introductions, Bloodsinger?”

“What is this?” I asked Aleksi, voice rough.

“A terrible idea,” was all he said as he peered around the rounded wall of the tower.

Jonas leaned close, a sly kind of grin on his face. “We want Liv back. Alek’s been talking to us in your favor, be grateful. Know this, I’ll help you escape, risk treason and all that shit, but I’ll not apologize for bruising your ribs. You bleeding deserved it.”

“Can we go?” A woman’s voice, fatigued and weary, followed.

The same woman who’d stared at me like I would be better off gutted sat atop a large stone, her slender fingers massaging the sides of her head.

Her hair was dark brown with a few sun-lightened streaks of red laced throughout the tight braid draped over her shoulder. Her bright eyes narrowed at the sight of me. “I promised Livie if the man who danced with her at the masque hurt her, I’d cut off his cock. I hope you know, I keep my promises, Bloodsinger.”

“Careful with your words, Mira,” Jonas said, draping an arm around the woman’s shoulders. “Alek seems to think that might be Liv’s favorite part of Bloodsinger now.”

“These are the grand heirs of the kingdoms of earth fae, Ever King.” Alek rolled his eyes.

Footsteps crunched over the grit on the cobblestones. On instinct, I backed into the shadows when another hooded figure approached.

“Sander,” Jonas hissed. “Is it done?”

The newcomer tossed back the hood, revealing a face shaped a great deal like Jonas’s with the same kohl around the same moss green eyes. He tucked a leatherbound book into his belt. “They’ll be out until well after dawn. You know Ash will murder us for dousing him.”

“I’m not worried about Ash,” Jonas said. “But Tova? She holds grudges.”

I didn’t know these people. I didn’t care.

Prince Sander squared to me. “Junie said he told the truth, right?”

“She did.” Jonas folded his arms over his chest, mouth tight as though he wasn’t particularly pleased with it.

“Be grateful the lie taster was curious enough to hear you, Bloodsinger,” said Sander. “We just placed sleeping elixirs into the ale of folk who practically helped raise us. We’re now trusting you to get us to Liv. We know we can’t wait for a council, and I assure you, should our parents and Mira’s arrive, you’ll face their wrath too. It will only delay everything.”

“I would think you all would like such a thing.”

“Trust us, we would,” Jonas said. “But Sander found lore on this heartbond issue. Seems it must’ve been fierce, as in you really care for Liv, if it made you bleed like that. Then, with Alek’s assurance—”

“Which should’ve been believed straightaway,” Aleksi insisted.

“Look, I’ve been waiting for Valen to tear this bastard apart,” Jonas said. “You’ve now robbed me of the only joy I’ve had these last weeks, so cease your groaning.”

“I can hold the illusion to dissuade the Rave for moments more,” Mira complained. “Do you fools wish to remain here, chattering, or are we going?”

For the first time, I realized the thick mist was not truly there. No salt on the tongue. It was an illusion. The princess’s fingers trembled, sweat beaded over her brow.

“You know your marks?” Jonas asked.

The three royals nodded. Aleksi smacked the back of his hand against my chest. “Keep to the shadows, Erik.”

They tugged their hoods over their heads once more and slipped around the tower into a square tucked near the back of the fort. Stables with thatched rooftops, stands of straw, and dried oats were lined in neat rows. Armories stacked in axes, swords, and shields littered the square, and crates with earthy

roots and sweet pears were covered in linens, ready for the morning crowds.

Shadows of wide shoulders with spears and blades swayed in the torchlight against the stone walls.

“Rave,” Alek said in a low hiss.

The lot of us took cover between a goat pen and stable with their strange creatures that reminded me of bulkier horthane with their hooves and long swishing tails.

I pressed a fist to the tangled muscle cramping below my hip, bit the inside of my cheek when it felt as though the pressure might snap the bone, and held my breath as two Rave officers strode past on their patrol.

“Hurry.” Jonas led us out, rushing toward a square building with a sod roof and narrow windows that only lined the top edge.

I kept close to Aleks. I didn’t consider it could be a trap, didn’t try to dissect why these royals, all at once, would turn against their own folk—their kings and queens—to aid an enemy. I knew Aleks loved Livia, and in turn, I suspected so did the others.

They were not here for me; they were doing this for her.

Jonas held up a fist at the corner of the building. “Who’s on watch, Mir?”

“Edda.”

Jonas stripped his cloak, handing it to his brother. He adjusted the neckline of his dark tunic. With both hands, the prince mussed his wavy, chestnut hair. “Perfect.”

There wasn’t time to ask what he had planned before Jonas stepped out of our cover, stumbling just enough to appear as though he’d had too much hard ale.

“Edda?” His voice carried, slurred and heady in a strange desire. “Gods, how is it you look even lovelier in your leathers than out of them?”

The woman's response was soft, but her snicker was clear, and the plan grew obvious.

I shook my head. "Surely, this won't work."

Aleksi grinned. "You don't know Jonas."

For what seemed endless breaths, we waited. Gods, I could poison the guard and be on our way sooner than this.

A heavy hand clapped against a wall.

"He's ready. Silent steps," Sander whispered, then emerged from the shadows, rounding toward the door of the building.

I followed, low to the ground.

Around the corner, Jonas came into view. Bleeding gods, he had the guard's chest pinned to the opposite wall. His body caged her, her back to his front, long golden hair tangled in his fingers. The woman's head fell back against his shoulder, her gasps laced through the silence of the night, as the prince trailed his hands and mouth over her skin.

If I wasn't desperate to leave these realms to find my songbird, I might laugh at how swiftly the prince took the guard's attentions away.

Air inside the new structure was musty with mildew and damp soil, and from the shadows came a dry voice. "Erik?"

My blood chilled. "Tait."

Bound in chains, tethered like a creature to a post in what was a clear storage shack, Tait lifted his head. Already, Prince Sander was on his knees in front of my cousin.

"What's going on?" Tait bared his teeth.

"We're going to the sea, Heartwalker," Aleksi said.

Prince Sander had tricky fingers. Not what I would expect from the man. Where his brother was dominant and vicious, Sander seemed quiet, lost to his own thoughts. Then again, the ones with a great deal of time to think were often the most cunning.

He slid a whalebone pick into the lock on Tait's shackles. No more than three breaths, and a click followed. In haste, Tait shed his chains and rose, stumbling over a loose lip in the floor straight into Princess Mira.

She shoved him back. "Watch your hands, sea fae."

Tait let out a slight hiss before coming to my side. "Are you harmed?"

"No."

"The bond?"

My jaw tightened. "Lost. It feels empty."

A flash of rage filled Tait's crimson eyes. "He'll pay."

"Aye. He will."

"Hurry," Aleksi said. "Mira, cover again."

The princess drew in a long breath before we abandoned the shelter. Thick mist hovered around us, nothing more than an approaching storm filling the crevices and corridors of the earth fae fort. I was curious about the fae magic but buried all my questions for Livia.

Soon, she would explain it all while wrapped in my arms. Preferably naked. In our bed.

Outside, Jonas had the guard panting, crying his name, his hands down her leather trousers. We crouched behind the walls, waiting until his low voice rumbled in some brief farewell, and the woman's pitchy laugh followed.

He joined us, hair mussed, and the kohl on his face smeared.

"Well?" He took the cloak from his brother, glancing at Tait. "Ah, looks like it was a success."

Mira studied Tait's face until he shifted away. "What is it, woman?"

"Stop moving," she snapped. "I'm creating your features. Edda will check on you within a few moments, and you'd

better be there, at least for long enough that we have a head start.”

“Mira is highly skilled in re-creating folk,” Aleksi explained. “But it’s simpler and more believable if she commits your face to memory.”

More delays. I closed my eyes, biting back my own anxiety to move, to be free of these gates.

Soon enough, the princess gave Aleksi a nod. “Should hold until we’re gone.”

“Wonderful,” Jonas said. “Is no one going to praise me for my skill?”

“No,” said Sander. “There was nothing spectacular about your everyday antics.”

“My own brother.” Jonas clicked his tongue. “Next time you will be the seducer, Sander. You can put them to sleep by explaining your latest *riveting* read.”

We hurried toward the outer gates. I ignored my aching bones and crouched when the royals said crouch, ran when they said run, until we reached the same cliffside I’d tumbled off with Livia. Gods, it felt so long ago.

“I warned Queen Elise the Chasm would likely kill her.” I pointed between the twin princes. “As mortals, you both should stay back.”

Jonas’s eyes darkened, like night swallowed the green and left nothing behind. “Forgive me, but did Bloodsinger just call me mortal? Has he not noticed our eyes?” He faced Sander. “Is it not working?”

“You are not fae.” Their ears were the blunt, rounded shape, the same as the Night Folk queen.

“Because our ears are a suitable size, you think we are mortal?” Jonas waved his hands over his pitch eyes. “Does it look like I don’t have magic in my blood, Ever King?”

“They’re called Alvers,” Aleksi said. “A cousin of fae folk, and they’re quite sensitive about their odd-looking ears, if you couldn’t tell.”

I waved them away. “Fine. You follow me, and your lives are in your hands. I’ve no time to keep your royal necks safe in the Ever.”

“We know what we face, you damn sod.” Mira crossed her arms over her chest, frowning. “Alek told us a great deal, but we all remember the power of the sea fae when they attacked, when *you* attacked.”

I flashed my teeth and peered over the ledge. Horns blared from the fort.

“Time is spent,” Aleksi said. “We’ve been found out. Go now, or we all end up in the dungeons.”

“Follow after me.” I did not waste another breath before falling backward off the ledge. Eyes closed, arms wide, I called to the sea. Cool tides broke the fall, and in the shadows of the dark currents, crimson sails rose from the seafloor to take us home.

CHAPTER TEN

THE SERPENT

ONCE WE WERE SWALLOWED belowdecks and the water drained, lowering us to the floorboards, I limped to the helm. Aleksi and the others remained close.

“There are levels to this monstrosity,” Jonas muttered. “And it’s longer than I thought, but why couldn’t our ships make it through the Chasm?”

“Jo,” Sander said, laughing. “Look at the difference between this vessel and our longships. Numerous sails and levels—”

“Decks,” Aleksi said. “I’ve learned they call them decks.”

Jonas didn’t seem to be listening. He paused at the top of the hatch, one hand running along the rail. “Is this ... bone?”

“Yes,” I grumbled. “Stay close until we find your places.”

“What does he mean places?” Mira whispered to Aleksi.

“Everyone has a place aboard the ship.”

“You’re a proper sea fae, Bloodsummoner,” Tait said, nudging Alek’s arm, and promptly ignored the narrowed gaze of the princess when he stepped too close.

“The king be aboard!” The roar of a crewman greeted me once I stepped onto the main deck.

The Ever Crew bustled about, pausing only to dip their chins when I limped past, making my way toward the helm.

Until we all were brought to a halt by a shrill, bitter voice. “Heartwalker. Bloodsummoner. You damn wretches.”

Blocking the steps leading to the helm, Celine Tidecaller stood as a furious barrier between us.

Her eyes burned in fear-lined rage. “No signal, no assurances for those you left behind. What am I to think about my king while we wait here? Now you show your faces, grinning like we ought to cheer you on?”

Celine stomped down the steps. Beneath the blue headscarf keeping her hair off her brow, the silver strands caught the light as she tossed it over her shoulders. Her fingers twisted the spike in her one fully formed ear, a twitch she often did when she wanted to claw at eyes.

She spared no glance my way, merely shoved past me as though I were a haunt aboard the ship, struck Aleks in the shoulder, and attempted to slap Tait before he dodged.

“Dammit, Tidecaller, stop,” Tait hissed. “Did you think we were lounging about? They had me in irons.”

“I will have you in worse soon enough. And you, Bloodsumner,” Celine reached into her tunic pocket and tossed a silver coin at Alek. “Here I was, imagining all the ways you betrayed us.”

“You’d think so lowly of me even after all our bonding in the Ever?”

“Yes! I’ve been thinking rather violent things against you.” Celine’s blazing eyes peeled off Alek and onto me. She clamped her lips tightly, a wrinkle to her nose. “It’s good to see you alive, King Erik.”

I dipped my chin. “Tidecaller. Quite through with your words?”

“Are you ... were you harmed?”

“No.”

“Lies on the tongue, little eel.” Sewell stepped around Stormbringer near the mast and closed the space between us, inspecting the new scrapes and cuts on my lips and brows. “The bite of a wolf?”

“A few minor bites,” I told him and opened an arm toward the new royals aboard. “But I think we might be coming to a tentative truce.”

Sewell freed a slight groan. “More tricky foxes.”

“Earth fae?” Celine rolled her bottom lip between her teeth.

“Royal earth fae,” I shot back and turned away.

“You trust them, Alek?” Mira whispered, gripping the prince’s arm.

“With my life, Mir.”

What a strange sight, seamen from the Ever Ship marching aside earth fae royals. I shoved it away and clung to the tepid peace we’d found. Livia would need it.

“Make ready to dive,” I shouted. “Get us into the wind.”

No hesitation, the ship bustled with movement. Men shouted a ripple of commands down the deck. Sails snapped, dropping to full cover. Rigging was tied off and doors were sealed.

Celine, at last, allowed us to gather at the helm. I curled one palm around the handle, embracing the rumble of power in the connection of my ship.

“Hold tight,” I told the royals. “You will not like this part.”

Another flick of my hand, a burst of wind filled the sails, bulging them outward like great, blood-soaked clouds.

The seas licked at the hull as though each current were a reel, pulling us down. I breathed in a long draw of brine and salt and home, then faced the main deck.

“Hoist the banner!” I shouted. My men bustled about, grunting and yanking the rigs, until the banner of blades crossed behind a serpent’s skull snapped and whipped in the mounting wind.

“At the ready to swim, me boys!” shouted a hunched man with holes in the points of his ears from too many fights with

jagged teeth. The crew roared and hissed their approval and met their positions on the deck.

I clasped the helm through a violent shudder that rolled through from bow to stern like a wave of the sea. *We're coming, Songbird.*

Great heaves of thrashing waves and foam tugged the bow beneath the surface. With each level of tides devouring the deck came the haunting voices of the crew:

A man he's not, we work we rot.

No sleep until it's through.

A sailor's grave is all we crave.

Icy sea swallowed me whole as they finished the final line.

We are the Ever King's crew.



WATER THRASHED in a frothy torrent when the jaws of the sea serpent on the bowsprit carved through the surface. Pale sunlight broke over the dark wood of the deck in a prism of warmth as the ship pointed toward the sky for long, drawn breaths. Another heartbeat and the keel slammed back onto the surface of the sea, swaying the ship in violent dips until it leveled again.

I drew in a long breath through my nose. The Ever.

Waves tossed the ship side to side, the sails whipped, and crew below shouted commands for the rigging and securing crates and casks.

From behind the helm came deep, guttural heaves of someone spilling their innards into the tides for the snapping jaws of silverfish to devour.

Tait finished licking the edge of his paper smoke. “You did well, Prince.”

As a reply, Sander vomited again. Jonas clapped his back a few times in reassurance, a little pallid in the face himself.

The twin royals were not the only discomfited earth fae.

On the main deck, Sewell kept barking at Aleksi and Mira to, “toss into the tides,” and Celine translated with a fierce, “Retch on the deck, you scrub it clean, you sods.”

I’d sailed beneath the tides as long as the royals could tolerate. We were near enough to my desired destination, through the haze on the horizon I could make out the towering cliffs with the endless falls of the House of Bones.

“Tidecaller, send word to Lord Bonerotter. Tell him the king demands a meet.”

Celine’s eyes went wide, but she dipped her chin. I did not know if Gavyn resided in his lands, or if he remained lost in the Ever, searching for Livia. He was the only other in the kingdom who knew of our predicament.

I needed something—some direction, some plan, *some hope*.

The Ever Crew understood we’d been betrayed. They knew my queen was taken, but they knew nothing of Gavyn’s involvement. To them, this would be a private meet between a house lord and their king, nothing more than new ale, new women, new respite.

Eyes closed, I tried to calm my mind, tried to reach her, desperate to hear the soothing tone of her voice. It never came.

“Are we ... are we going under again?” Sander asked, a little breathless.

“No. We’re headed there.” I pointed toward the cliffs. “Gain your sea legs in the meantime. The lot of you can hardly stand upright.”

Sander glowered at me, but a grin played in the corner of his mouth when Tait shoved the prince’s arm and handed him a bit of hardtack.

“Eat. It helps.”

Sander took the cake, breaking it in two. “How would you know, sea fae?”

Tait shrugged. "It's what our queen told me once."

The mention of Livia was a harsh bite of pain across the chest. The longer we were parted, the more her very name was a blade, twisting deeper and deeper.

"Bloodsinger, I have questions." Jonas stepped beside the helm. "Why, I'd like to know, am I not utterly drenched, when not moments ago the sea was digging into my brain?"

"Wouldn't serve us well if we were always wet," I said. "There are spells laced in every grain of wood, every thread of the sails, and every bone on this ship, for when we surface and dive again and again."

Jonas inspected his damp tunic, a little bewildered. "No doubt Sander will tell you that is fascinating and will likely wish to read up on it, but I will not give you the satisfaction. It's only mildly interesting."

The man had beaten me, doubtless would've reveled in killing me, but, in this moment, I could see why Livia enjoyed his company.

He was tolerable.

"Is she really your queen?" Jonas asked, voice lower than before. Levity abandoned his features, only to be replaced with a furrow of disquiet. "You took vows? I'll have you know every queen back home will be rather perturbed if you did. Especially my mother who has no daughters to help ready for vow ceremonies."

My grip tightened on the handles. "Kings do not vow in the Ever, at least they never have. My word made her queen, but she is more."

"More what, Bloodsinger? I want to understand you. How is it you come to our land, attack us, *take her*, then return with the same anger, same fire, only now it revolves solely around Livia?"

"Do you remember the war, Prince? The aftermath?"

"I'll never forget it. I remember you." He nodded toward Tait. "I even remember your cousin. Two boys, who looked so

much like me, were all that remained of this great sea fae army.”

“I will never forget it either,” I said, voice rough. “I will never forget how an earth fae girl, the daughter of my father’s killer, came to my cell every night and tried to befriend me.”

“What are you talking about?”

I scoffed. “You think your little festival was the first night we ever met? You think it was happenstance I singled out the earth bender’s daughter?” I reached into my tunic and pinched the silver swallow charm between my fingers. “Think again, Prince.”

Jonas’s eyes darkened. “I’ve seen this. After the battle, we made totems and Livie bought this charm and made ...” He lifted his eyes. “But she had nightmares of you returning. I thought she feared you.”

“Perhaps she did, in a way. The night she gave me this, I vowed I *would* return. At the time I thought it would be to kill the earth bender, but it all changed.”

“She never said her worries came because she bleeding *knew* you.”

“Now you know.” I paused for a few breaths. “My heart has been hers for turns, not weeks. It has been bonded to her since the war. That is what I mean when I say she is more than my queen. She is my every thought, my every breath, Prince.”

Jonas tilted his head back, gazing at the clear blue of the sky. Muscles tightened in his jaw. I could not read if he was furious or simply boggled. After a moment, he cleared his throat, nodding. “So, where is this place we are going, and how will it help us find Liv?”

I arched a brow, tensed, and ready to fight with more venom for my bond. “That’s all?”

“What more do you want me to say?” Jonas cocked his head. “Livie is like my sister, and all I’ve ever wanted for her is a man who will always fight for her, always love her. Didn’t expect it to be you, of course, but here we are. I do hope I get

to rot some of these bastards who betrayed you. I can, you know. Rot their brains with nightmares.”

“What?” Celine’s voice cut in. “What did you say?”

Jonas flashed her a white smile. “That’s right, lovely. Nightmares can be quite corrosive.”

“Tidecaller,” I said. “Acquaint yourself with more earth fae —”

“Not a fae,” Jonas said, grinning at Celine. “Alver. Much better than common fae.”

It was entertaining watching a silver-tongued prince try to woo Celine Tidecaller, a woman who lived amongst the surliest of men, whose first attempts at embracing her femininity along with her brutality came from Livia.

She was not a woman who’d recognize the prince’s attempts to seduce.

“Prince Jonas,” I went on, gesturing at each royal, “his brother Sander, and the Princess Mira is down by Bloodsummoner.”

“What is your given name?” Jonas’s mouth curved in one corner when he faced Celine. “I’d love to know what to call you if ever we are alone together.”

“Aye,” she said. “I do love when men cry out my name as I gut them.”

Sander laughed and shoved his brother’s shoulder.

“Erik, I’ve heard nothing from Gavyn.” Celine’s voice was rife in burdens unspoken. “But the gates of the lord’s house are opening to us.”

Perhaps Gavyn could not respond. Perhaps he’d left word to welcome the Ever Ship. I sent Celine with orders for the ship to ready to let go the anchor and prepare to set to shore.

Mira and Sander tried to join, interested in how the crew worked on the numerous ropes and sails and duties securing such a large ship. Already, the princess seemed at ease near

Sewell and Skulleater, explaining how earth fae longships took to rivers and used numerous oars on sea or freshwater.

The House of Bones was always bathed in soupy mists from the endless silver falls drenching the cliffs and ridges surrounding the main valley. Fewer forests, swamps, and trees than the House of Mists, but still damp with marshes and numerous streams.

Gavyn's lands were flat with sandy soil, less suitable for crops that grew plentiful in the House of Blades and House of Tides, but the folk of Gavyn's house were skilled in mining minerals, stones, and the precious gems of our coin. From the oily grass stalks in their flat meadows, parchment and thin paper were pressed. Leather for hats and belts and boots came from the mighty herds of kossa, a horned creature much like the fatted pigs of earth fae.

The House of Bones boasted a fearsome name with brutal voices, but the folk here were industrious, skills encouraged by their lord. Rather busy and curious himself, Gavyn encouraged his folk to better themselves, to think for themselves. Young as he was, he was a skilled leader.

Sewell kept his head down, the brim of his leather hat pulled low. How long had it been since he'd stepped foot in his own house? He took refuge in the royal city when we docked, and Gavyn always came to him there.

"All right, Tidecaller?" I whispered.

"Aye, My King." Celine said the words but never dropped her stringent focus from the tall gabled rooftops of the lord's house beyond the wooden gates.

She wouldn't be recognized. Celine had been too young when her mother was executed and Sewell torn from power. In truth, I wasn't certain I cared if she was recognized. I wanted them safe, no mistake, and there were sods in the Ever who would see Sewell as a traitor simply because Thorvald called him such, but I grew weary of bowing to such ideals.

We'd already toppled the society of the Ever by crowning a queen. Perhaps it was time to do the same for the most loyal

of traitors in this boat.

Gavyn's household was arranged near the shore, and already the wooden gates were opened to his courtyards. The manor was made of smooth pearl stone, and crushed shells glittered over the rooftop slats. Tall windows let in too much sunlight, and all around the house were fountains and speckled stones collected from all reaches of the Ever.

At the sight of the Ever Ship, at the sight of me, Gavyn's outdoor staff dropped to one knee, chins dipped. Whispers followed us up the wide stone steps, some murmuring that some in our company did not look a great deal like sea fae.

The moment we reached the landing outside, two heavy blackwood doors groaned under their own weight and opened.

I held out an arm, halting those at my back. From the dim hall of Gavyn's manor, a man dressed in a fine blue cloak and dark trousers emerged.

My eyes widened. "What are you doing here?"

The man bowed at the waist, so his frost-white hair fell over his sharp features. His eyes unnerved many, but I'd always found them rather curious. The gray was like a storm over the sea, so sharp, so deep, the color seemed to swirl around his pupils.

"King Erik, welcome."

"Where is Lord Bonerotter, Maelstrom?" Something was not right.

Maelstrom straightened and approached. "Not here, My King. The House of Mists has claimed the House of Bones."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE SERPENT

“NO NEED for blades to be drawn.” Maelstrom held out his hand when Celine unsheathed a dagger. “Are we not all after the same thing?”

“You tell me, Maelstrom,” I said. “Why has Lady Narza’s house taken hold of another?”

Hot rage knotted in my chest. If my own grandmother had betrayed me in my absence, I would do as promised and burn the Ever, only to start anew with new folk, new lords, new laws.

“We joined with the bone lord in a council.”

“And where is Lord Gavyn?”

Maelstrom shifted on his feet. “Gone. I’ll explain inside.”

Celine broke. Her voice trembled. “And how do we know you speak true? How do we know you’ve not harmed the lord of this house?”

“I’ve not, young miss,” said Maelstrom, sympathy swirling his eyes even more.

I held out a hand, urging Celine back. “Where is Narza? I wish to speak to her.”

“The Lady of Witches is not here either.” Maelstrom took a step closer. “After a curious meet with the bone lord, he told her where you went. She kept me here in her stead, and took to the winds, searching for you.”

“No light in the mists?” Sewell muttered, a clear strain to his voice.

“My man has a point,” I said. “If you are here, if Narza is gone, who guides the House of Mists?”

“For now, it is in the hands of trusted advisors. I will return now that you are back. My son was asked by the Lady of Witches, should you return first, that he join in your search with one of our ships and a small crew, My King.”

The front entrance opened, and a tall man dressed in a mist green tunic entered the room. His copper hair was tied off his neck and neatly tucked behind his pointed ears. He looked like a pleasure sailor who traveled gentle tides in the coves, never facing far seas with wind and storms.

Perhaps Tavish Spellbreaker preferred folk to underestimate him.

I did not know the man’s character, but I did know he was a fierce spell caster. One of the few who had a voice capable of sniffing out weaknesses in a witch’s curse. Not many spells could withstand Tavish should he wish to unravel it.

Tavish dipped his chin, a sly kind of smirk beneath the stubble. “My King.”

The man was a little over ten turns my senior, and highly valued in the House of Mists.

“He will aid you should you need, King Erik,” Maelstrom insisted.

There was respect in his tone, a gentleness that set my skin aflame with disquiet. Then again, I’d always been unsettled around the man. Maelstrom stood at the right hand of Lady Narza, one of her trusted few she welcomed within her inner circle.

No one truly knew Narza’s mate, only rumor and suspicion. I was never told anything about my mother’s father, but I’d often wondered over the turns if every time I looked at Maelstrom, I was looking at my grandfather.

Maelstrom took a step off to the side, beckoning us into the great hall of the manor. “Come. I will explain what I know.”

I sent Stormbringer to bring word to the Ever Crew to make their way through the inner markets of the square, eat, resupply, rest, bed folk, whatever they pleased while they waited. The royals, Tait, Celine, and Sewell remained at my side.

Without a word, I shoved past Maelstrom, ignoring Tavish and the few witches and sea folk from the House of Mists in the corridor. Their silk robes, coral pink and silver-blue hair, out of place amongst the muted colors and reserved expressions of the servants of the House of Bones.

Maelstrom took us into a large parlor room with a polished desk topped in neatly stacked parchment and fishbone quills. Kelp satin sofas were arranged over woven rugs, and overhead was a glass chandelier with fragrant wax candles, casting the room in the constant scent of morning sea mist—clean and cool.

Docile servants slipped in, leaving silver trays of sponge cakes, sweet wine, and a roasted fish rolled in savory herbs.

Alek was the first to snatch a handful of food, Jonas close behind. Mira rolled her eyes, complained at their wolfish manners, but subtly took a handful of cakes before retreating to a corner beside Celine and Tait.

Near the two women, three men gathered empty serving trays, readying to leave until one caught sight of the princess. One hand went to the pocket of his woolen trousers. I turned away until a few plucks of string transformed into a lovely sort of tune, gentle, sweet, the sort of music to listen to on a bright morning.

I thought nothing of it until Jonas’s voice broke out over the sound.

“Good hells, Mira. What are you doing?”

The princess’s eyes were glassy. Her fingertip teased the sharp point of Tait’s ear. My cousin was pale as a winter sky.

He let out a hiss when Mira ran her palm down his chest.

“You’re not so horrid, are you, sea fae?” Good hells, she tried to nip at his ear.

Tait seemed ready to slit his own throat.

“Filib, cease your song!” Maelstrom’s booming voice rattled the chandelier overhead.

Bleeding gods, these damn sea singers.

Hardly noticeable to sea fae, the songs of the Ever were like a scratch in the backs of our heads. Sea singers did not have power over even the earth fae who favored women, but place those men or women with a siren, and they would bend much the same as the princess.

The sea singer dropped to his knees. “Forgive me,” he whimpered. “It’s just ... been a great many turns since one could *appreciate* my tune.”

I crossed the room and gripped the sea singer by his thick, golden hair. “The earth fae are under my protection. Play for her again, and it will be your final song.”

“Yes, Highness.”

The moment I released his hair, the sea singer rushed from the room. Mira’s trance was fading, but Celine still had to peel her off Tait.

The princess narrowed her gaze. “What is it, sea fae? Too mighty for me? I *saved* you.”

“And now I am saving you. Call us square, woman.” Tait clenched his fists at his sides. Almost like he battled keeping his own distance.

“We’ve always teased about sea singers,” Jonas said, “but I never thought they were so powerful.”

“Don’t underestimate them.” At this rate, I’d be claiming every damn royal the way I’d claimed Livia to keep their minds free from the songs of the sea.

“Happened to Livia too,” Celine said, grinning when Mira’s trance bled out in full, leaving the princess with her

face flushed and buried in her palms. “Draws out the desire. She couldn’t keep her damn hands off the king.”

“I do not desire him,” Mira insisted, glaring at Tait, who’d gone to stand beside Aleksi.

Celine winked and popped one shoulder. “As you say, earth fae.”

“Enough. Tell me what you know, Maelstrom.” I took my place in a wide chair in front of Gavyn’s desk.

Maelstrom sat on the edge of the desktop, arms folded over his blue doublet. A powerful spell caster in his own right, but in this moment, he appeared like more of a king than me. “Are you well, My King?”

“That is not why we are here.”

“Forgive me, but you went to the earth fae, and we worried ... the Lady of Witches was concerned.”

“Oh, the Night Folk king still wants his head,” Jonas insisted, tossing another slab of fish into his mouth and speaking around it. “We broke him out.”

Tavish claimed a chair beside the center window. He crossed an ankle over one knee, grinning. “Earth fae betrayed their folk?”

“We share similar motivations,” I said, eyes narrowed. “I’m not here to tell you a tale. Maelstrom, tell *me* why the bone lord is not here.”

“We were summoned. Lord Gavyn was searching but had not had any luck finding even a glimpse of the missing queen. He thought perhaps there was a spell, or something we could use. When Lady Narza heard where you’d gone, she left the bone lord to me, and set sail.”

“Narza went through the Chasm?”

“Last eve, before sunset.” Maelstrom ran a hand over the silver stubble of his jaw, worry carved in the lines on his face. “She sailed undersurface, swiftly. She is surely there by now.”

I wheeled around, facing Tait. “We have left her in a dangerous position.”

“Narza is not easily overcome,” Tavish muttered, but he faced the window, as though lost in his own thoughts.

“Where has Gavyn gone?”

“Before we could even find a proper spell to aid him, something ... took him away. I don’t know how to explain,” Maelstrom said. “We were at the shore. He told me he’d planned to go to the Tower, to stalk traders, see if there were any rumors.”

“Wise thoughts,” Sewell said.

True enough. The Tower was always bustling with sea farers. If word of Livia were to be heard, it would be there.

“What is difficult to explain?” I asked.

“He was preparing to leave, in the way he does.” Maelstrom hesitated, notably uneasy to speak of Gavyn’s ability.

“You know?”

Sewell groaned—a shaky breath slid through his teeth—and he stared at his son’s empty desk.

“That he is a seeker? Aye. His voice is safe with us,” Maelstrom assured. “He’s a fine leader. I’d hate to thwart that. As I was saying, he was beginning to take to the sea when ... darkness covered him. It took him.”

Celine whimpered. “What? What does that mean?”

“It had power,” Tavish said, dark and rough. “It was a force. I don’t know what it was, and I tried to unravel it, but it was gone too soon. Along with the bone lord.”

Gavyn was taken by a damn spell. This couldn’t be real. I stood and paced behind the desk.

“Larsson knows of him,” Celine whispered, admitting the thing we all feared.

“Shit.” I kicked the leg of Gavyn’s desk. All the while, Aleksi was murmuring to the other royals, explaining Gavyn’s role and ability. I blew out a rough breath. “All right. We’re now searching for Livia and Gavyn.”

“How long’s he gone?” Sewell’s voice was clear in words, but rough and broken in tone.

Maelstrom sighed. “Two nights.”

Dammit.

Aleksi paced, one thumb over the raven hilt of his warrior’s blade. Jonas tilted his head, listening as Sander whispered something I could not hear. Mira had an arm around Celine’s shoulders as though they were boon companions, as though the princess already knew of Celine’s connection to this house and the missing lord.

“We’re going to the Tower,” I said. “Gavyn had the right idea. If any rumors about missing queens and lords are to be had, we’ll find them at the Tower.” I turned on my heel, storming toward the door. “Many thanks, Maelstrom.”

“Wait.” Maelstrom tugged on a strap of leather that hung around his neck. On the end was a bit of silver marked in a rune for knowledge. “Take this.”

“What is it?”

“What I wish the queen or the bone lord had. It’ll allow us to find you should we need to, should we hear anything, or should you find your crew in trouble.”

I gave a tilt to my head and strung my neck with the leather. The clink of the silver touched the swallow against my chest.

“And Tavish is to accompany you.”

“You give up your son to aid me, Maelstrom?” My voice was lined with suspicion.

The man never looked away. “He insists on his own, King Erik.”

“Odd when you’ve had little to do with the House of Kings, don’t you think?”

Maelstrom’s lips twitched. “We have always stood with the House of Kings, since a boy king took the throne. We always will, Erik.”

For a moment, I studied the man, unspoken words and suspicions alive between us like a physical thing so thick it could be tasted. They did not stand with the House of Kings of Thorvald, but of his son.

Because Thorvald was not theirs, but me ... I was. And there was no time to think on it now.

“I wait for no one,” I said over my shoulder. “If you wish to sail, Tavish, then gather your crew and follow our wind.”

Tavish hummed in agreement. “By your lead, King Erik.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE SONGBIRD

I BLINKED. “Gav-Gavyn?”

Pallid and nearly diaphanous, like his flesh had yet to thicken on his bones, Gavyn Seeker filled the door frame. He moved swiftly and knelt at my side.

His mouth twisted into a snarl when he scanned the marks on my face, my arms. “Gods, I will kill him before the king gets a chance.”

I curled a hand around his wrist. “Is he here?”

Gavyn shook his head. “No. I went to search while the king went to the earth realms.”

“He went ... to my folk?” Bleeding gods.

“I don’t know what is happening through the Chasm,” Gavyn admitted. “But I’ve been in contact with the House of Mists. The Lady of Witches herself went to aid the king.”

Hope lifted in my chest. Hesh stood against Erik. Joron of the House of Tides was unknown, but if he had Gavyn and Narza, then Erik would be evenly matched to Larsson. Then again, Larsson had control of a mythical elven isle, and there was a reason Skadi had feared it. There was something she knew, something else that threatened her and likely us.

“What has he done to you?” Gavyn’s teeth ground together as he inspected the open wound down my chest, bruises on my face.

I fought to keep my voice steady as I hurried through the removal of my heartbond, then the beating.

“What use could he have for the heartbond other than healing the darkening?”

“He made it seem like there was more to it, like it would help him gain the blood crown. He thought it would gain my compliance since I wouldn’t feel anything for the king any longer.”

Gavyn rested a hand on my knee. “Tell me true, Livia. Has it altered how you feel for the king?”

“It did.”

A wash of hurt crossed Gavyn’s face.

“You misunderstand me,” I whispered. “It has not changed how fiercely I love Erik Bloodsinger, but it has certainly changed the lines I would cross to reach him. Something has been altered inside me. Once I feared violence and bloodshed. Now I can think of nothing else but making them suffer. I think they’ve made me a monster, Gavyn.”

His palm cupped the side of my face. “No. They’ve made our queen their villain. And I cannot wait for them to realize their mistake.”

I scrubbed my face, forcing the unease to fade to the back of my thoughts. “Have you heard from the king at all? My father will try to kill him.”

“And he accepted that risk, Livia,” he said. “Erik knows no one will fight harder for you than your own people.”

“And you risked yourself searching for me. I am glad ... I am glad Erik has your loyalty.”

“You think I do this only for Erik?” Gavyn rubbed the back of his neck as though his own nerves were taking hold. “I owe you. How could I not search for the woman who kept my father alive on the Ever Ship?”

“Your father?” Like another strike to my skull, his words pummeled against me. “*Sewell?*”

Bleeding hells, all those stolen glances between Celine and the cook made a great deal of sense. Her fierce worry when

she'd found him injured in the galley, the way she'd cried, the tender touch to her cheek from Sewell's fingers.

"Lord Sewell was once his name, but I've always called him Daj." Gavyn smiled, almost shyly. "I know what you did not only for him, but for my sister. After she had her siren's call torn out when our mother was killed, Cel fears others beyond Daj, Erik, and me. You did not need to embrace her, yet you did. You looked out for her."

"She looked out for me too." Gods, I missed them all. I blew out a long breath. "I am grateful he has the lot of you after ... after losing Tait."

"Losing him?" Gavyn snorted. "That sod couldn't be brought down by a knife. Heartwalker's alive."

In relief, I let my head fall against the cool walls, allowing the tears to trickle from the corners of my eyes.

"Now, I must ask—where the hells are we?" Gavyn looked about the room, a pulse to his jaw. "I was at the shores in the House of Bones, then it was like an iron hook dug into my spine and dragged me here."

The darkness. The mist. My heart stilled. It had to have something to do with Skadi.

With hands waving, I stammered and blustered through a tale of Skadi's strange burst of darkness, how she'd seethed over the violence against me, how when Gavyn appeared it looked as though the same skeins of mist had dragged him through the washroom.

When I finished, Gavyn tilted his head. "You believe an *elven woman* brought me here?"

"It seems the only way. Shores are warded, but she can take through her ability," I said. "I know little else other than this isle is called Natthaven, and it can fade should they desire it to. In truth, I don't fully understand any of the magic here."

"You truly think they're elven folk?"

"They are like no fae I've met, Gavyn."

He cursed. "And she said you cannot leave the isle?"

“I tried. She told me there is a spell keeping me near Larsson.”

“Dammit. We can’t stay here. If the woman is truly responsible for somehow finding me of all folk across the Ever, then perhaps she broke the wards. It must be a chance for you to escape.”

Hope, warm like the cloudless summer, burned in my chest. It was possible. Skadi had done something ferocious, no mistake. Perhaps it had shattered more than one ward on the isle.

Breathe. Focus.

I recounted everything I’d learned from Larsson—his magic that borrowed abilities, his involvement with the darkening, his sea witch lover. I told Gavyn of Hesh and how I believed the blade lord to be marked with some spell that welcomed him through the wards around the isle.

By the time I finished, Gavyn was pacing. He ran his hands through his thick, black hair, then sat on the edge of the bed. “My mother believed in elven folk. She always told me they still lived in the deep seas on their grand islands with mountains that reached high enough to the sky, the hall of the gods could be seen. Clearly, they’re powerful, and I’m unsettled that they stand on the side of Bonekeeper.”

Deep in my gut, there was a sharp jab, a noxious, barbed weed spooling around my insides, lining them in hatred for Larsson, for Fione. They played with lives like pawns of no consequence. They took and never gave.

“So, Larsson did all this?” Gavyn sauntered across the room and touched a thumb to the ridge of my cheekbone.

A shudder raced down my spine, thinking of how he’d touched me, how his mouth had been on my skin.

“He threatened to brand me, to claim me with his body and leave a mark for Erik to see if ... if ever I get free of here.”

“Bastard.” Gavyn crouched in front of me. “Whatever he did, Livia, don’t you dare believe his words. I have known Erik Bloodsinger since boyhood, and never have I seen his

soul so free than when he is with you. I never thought I would say it for my king. I did not think he truly knew how, but he loves you.”

“I know.” I swiped at another tear and straightened my spine. “Larsson did not get far. I, well, I bit part of his ear off, so he attacked me.”

The way Gavyn’s mouth dimpled, and he took my face in his hands. “If that is so, never tell my king, but I think you’ve made me fall in love with you too.”

I smirked and shoved him away, reveling, even for a moment, in a bit of light in the dreary.

Gavyn strode to the window, leaning against the edge to avoid catching the eye of any patrols outside the palace.

“There are guards, but I know the way to get outdoors,” I told him.

“I could slip from this room. My voice attracts me to water that is in the vicinity of my aim. I will aim for the corridors and see where it takes me.”

“Can’t you simply take me from this room? I thought you helped Sewell escape a cell once.”

Gavyn kept studying the door frame, as though planning a proper point of attack. “Erik left water in the cell, but I didn’t shift with my father. I laced the guards with a sleeping draught and stole their keys. To safely shift with someone, I will need a great deal of water; I need to get us to the sea. *Safely* is the word on which we should focus, Livia. Remember what a blunder it was to shift with your cousin.”

“The Chasm battered him, I thought.”

“Partly, but a poorly arranged shift with me added to it. It was as though my voice sliced him open. Then coupled with the Chasm’s violence, I’m still not certain how he survived. I’m going to see what’s out there, all right?” He tilted his head toward the door.

I clasped his hand. “Be cautious, Gavyn.”

Gavyn removed a small vial from a pouch on his belt. The glass was wrapped in thin twine and capped with a battered cork.

“What is that?”

“A toxin that rots the lungs when breathed too deeply. Works in moments.”

“You simply carry poison around?”

He clicked his tongue. “You didn’t think Erik had never taken advantage of my ability, did you? I work in secrets, and folk never know I’m near. I’ve developed a habit of making certain those who plotted against my king did not greet the sunrise.”

I ought to be horrified that Gavyn killed without a hint of remorse. Horror did not fill my chest. Instead it burned in gratitude, in a kinship with the bone lord. It put the torment of my soul at ease, knowing Erik had never truly been alone as a young king. Even if it had felt that way at times.

And he wasn’t alone now.

From the washroom, Gavyn scooped a handful of frigid water from a pail. With care, he let the droplets slide down the bedchamber door, then returned with more, splashing it along the floorboards until a trickle slid beneath the crack in the door to the other side.

Gavyn made quick work of delivering a knife and a second dagger from his belt.

“Is that enough water?”

“It’s plenty.” He rolled his shoulders back, letting out a long breath of air. “I’ll be back shortly. If I’m not, rise up and be their villain, Livia.”

I didn’t have time to say another word before Gavyn’s skin peeled away in glistening droplets. He faded into the puddle at the door. I spun the small knife Gavyn had left in one hand and clutched his dagger in the other.

It took moments, no more than a few breaths, before grunts, curses, and something heavy—like a body—collided

with the door. Sick cracks drew out vivid images of snapping necks. Coughs, wet and thick, lent me to think Gavyn was shoving doses of his poison down the throats of the men guarding the door.

Then, silence.

Another breath, and the latch jostled. I pointed Gavyn's dagger blade down. The knife, I pointed out from my chest.

The door opened, and Gavyn, blood splattered on his chin down to his hands, stood in the doorway, breaths heavy. The burn of sick boiled from my belly when he dropped a severed hand in a wet slap on the floorboards.

"All clear ... My Queen." Blood stained his teeth, but his eyes were alight with a dark thrill.

Behind the bone lord, four bodies were crumbled in gory heaps.

One man had veins, as dark as the bark on trees, splitting up his throat. Another looked much the same, but the foam spilling over his lips was tinged in pink. The two other guards died in pieces—one had swallowed a matching dagger Gavyn had left me, the amethyst hilt jutting out between his lips. The final guard, his horribly lovely features were frozen in a silent scream, and one arm ended in a bloody stump.

"Gods." I took Gavyn's blood-stained palm as he helped me step over one of the guards. "Did you need to cut off his hand?"

"Of course not." Gavyn winked. "Better run, Livia. There were five guards."

"What!" Blood drained from my cheeks. "And you didn't think to tell me someone was running off to warn Larsson?"

"Trust the king's seeker, Livia. I'm well-versed in assassination."

"Oh? And how is your record of escaping an elven isle that fades into the sea?"

The bastard tilted his head side to side, as if mulling over the question in earnest. "Well, I suppose we'll find out soon

enough.”

Gavyn clung to my palm, racing us down the dark corridor toward a stone archway without a second glance at the brutality left in the doorway of the bedchamber.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE SONGBIRD

VOICES RUMBLED around the corner like a slow flow of the tide coming to swallow me up. My heart stuck to the back of my throat, pulsing and throbbing with every step down the corridor.

“Here.” Gavyn shoved my shoulder, sliding us chest to chest, into a tight alcove ten paces from a coiled staircase.

Notches were cut into the walls, a sort of storage space of sorts. Vials, rope baskets, and leather pouches filled with savory spices lined every level.

“Get behind the basket,” Gavyn said in a hiss through his teeth. He left me no room to protest before bending and twisting my limbs like I might be made of string. A slow, gentle hum broke the silence before Gavyn formed into a small puddle after pulling a bit of damp from the moss on the stones.

It was rather remarkable how little water he needed to shift into the tides, and no wonder many sea folk held a bit of fear for a seeker.

Steps joined the voices. Heavy and thundering, as though they already stomped over my skull. All my senses were heightened, flashing in heat and cold from one breath to the next. Fear battled with viciousness; panic collided with boldness.

“Said what I said,” came the rasp of a man who’d indulged too much in harsh herb smoke. A painful sounding voice, as though every word took a great deal of effort. “A man came

from nowhere, then turned to nothing but water whenever we tried to cut at him.”

Another voice grunted and sniffed. “Any of Idun’s *vatska* in your blood? She brewed a new batch three sunrises ago and ___”

“I have my wits, you sod. I’ll prove to you ...”

I held my breath, holding a hand to my heart as though they might hear the beat against my ribs, when two darkly clad guards hurried past the alcove.

I didn’t emerge from my position until the water on the floor began to swirl and thrash, shaping Gavyn like he was a statue carved from the sea.

“Come, hurry.” He snatched my hand again, tugging me back into the corridor. “We’re on a rocky point. This palace or fort or whatever it is seems to be built half into a mountainside like the palace in the royal city.”

Gavyn urged me to keep my back to the wall and tapped my wrist until I had the point of the dagger outstretched. “Below is a forest. We need to make it to the shore.”

“All right.” I spoke in tight, rough gasps. “I’ve gone through the wood with the elven before. I ... I think I could guide us again.”

“We may need to draw more blood.” Gavyn paused once we reached the lower step. “You with me, Livia?”

What he meant was, would I be sturdy enough to see this through? I could remain here, letting fear and unease paralyze me until Larsson found me, or I could get far enough out of sight until I could find a way back to Erik.

You are the queen of the Ever. I spun the dagger like my Uncle Tor taught me. “I’m ready.”

Gavyn kicked open the door into an open entryway that would lead outside, and as expected, we were met with new blades.

The guards were few enough we stood a chance to escape, but three men to two remained a barrier we might not cross

intact.

“The fae’s gotten loose!” a man shouted.

Steel cut free of sheaths. Elven swords were broad, lined in bronze and silver from hilt to point. Each seemed crafted for its wielder and was as formidable as it was deadly.

Turns sparring my father, my uncles, the first knight of our kingdom had lent me a fair bit of stealth and speed when I lunged at the guard nearest to me. In a lithe motion, he used his thick arm to shield against my strike, knocking my blow to the side. With one hand, the guard gripped my hair and pinned me to the wall. Before the guard took his strike, Gavyn rammed the point through the elven’s spine. The bone lord clapped a hand over the man’s mouth to muffle his cry, then twisted his head with a sick crack.

The guard slumped over, his neck arched at a sharp angle.

I snatched my fallen dagger and hurried after Gavyn as he faded into mist in one breath, only to take shape in the next, directly behind one of the remaining guards.

Without an uttered sound, Gavyn ripped his blade across his throat.

Another man faced me. His eyes locked with mine, amber with skeins of red, like a fiery sky. Almost sea fae, almost earth fae, but the wicked perfection of his jaw, the smooth, sun-darkened tint of his skin, the lustrous shade of his hair, proved he was elven.

I dropped to the ground, level with the thin flap shielding his cock, a spot where leathers from the thighs tied to the guards over the belly and waist. A place with vulnerabilities. My father, my mother, Sewell, Erik, the ways they’d taught me to be swift and sure with every strike filled my head.

I tilted away from the edge of his sword and thrust the point of my blade into the crevice where leg met body. A splatter of blood burst from the wound, spilling over my fingers.

The guard wailed in agony and dropped to one knee. Steel struck stone in a violent echo once his sword clattered to the

ground. I ripped the blade free, and with his head lowered, stabbed the point through the back of his throat.

The guard spluttered. One heartbeat, two, and he slumped face down on the floor.

I scooted away, hot, sticky crimson stained across my nightdress.

“Livia.” Gavyn skidded on his knees in front of me, hands on the skirt. “Yours?”

I shook my head, gulping air until my heart slowed. “I-I-I’m not injured.”

Satisfied with my reply, Gavyn took hold of my hand again, and raced us into the wood.

Our steps were swift and hard, pounding over the wooden planks of the crisscrossing walkways. After a time, Gavyn ignored my protests to remain on the path, insisting he could taste the sea in the air, and bolted through the raw forest.

All around were lush trees, ferns with glossy black leaves that looked like pieces of the night sky. The deeper we ran, the more shrubs with thorns as thick as fingers grew. On every branch were amber berries bursting at the skin with silken juices. Air grew thicker with floral perfumes, then layered with a hint of brine and a taste of sand.

My legs screamed, and my lungs felt as though they would combust in flames by the time Gavyn slowed our pace, and drew us between two trees with twisted roots like eels flailing on the surface of the sea.

Mutely, Gavyn peered over a ledge. “The shore is not far, but it places us in the open.”

“Then we run fast,” I said.

Gavyn’s teeth flashed, his brutality on display. “As you say, My Queen.”

The hillside was rocky and twisted around trees perched along edges that dropped into deep ravines.

Our pace was slower than before, but as the trees thinned, I kept my focus on the black glass of the sea, as though I might see crimson sails approaching.

Cool air stung my cheeks, a wind carried the scent of damp leaves and bark, and a strange flicker of seafoam green lights twinkled in the treetops like stars. The glimmers appeared whenever I was at least five strides away, then they'd dull as I ran by.

Like a bit of magic guiding me forward.

Almost the way I imagined the stars leading Nightfire to his lost love in the sky.

The thought breathed new life into my lungs; I took it as a bleeding sign from the damn Norns of fate that this was my path to find the love robbed from me by the cruelty of others.

When the wind thickened with a faint bit of salt and moss, tears squeezed from the corners of my eyes. The sea. Gentle waves crashed over long, curved sandbars stocked with bits of crystal, so with every pass of the tide, the beach looked like a reflection of the stars above.

“Hurry,” Gavyn urged.

My bare feet kicked up sand with every furious step.

“It will be uncomfortable,” Gavyn said, without facing me. “The shift. I’m told by my sister it is like little nicks of a blade during the travel.”

I cared little if it felt like my bones were being ripped free from my body. If I was free of here, if I was back in the arms of the Ever King, I would pass through the three hells without an uttered complaint.

From the tower of the palace, a bell, booming and furious, rang out in the night. In the darkness, shouts, horns, more ringing alarms sounded off.

“Make ready,” Gavyn shouted. His heavy steps broke the water’s edge.

My body slammed backward. For too many agonizing breaths, I thought my skin might melt off my bones. The sharp

tang of blood spilled over my tongue. A haze boiled in my brain. I blinked through the stun to muffled cries.

There, knee deep in the water, Gavyn kept ramming his shoulder against an unseen barrier, like he was trying to break through a door. “Livia, it’s pushing me back. I can’t get through.”

Fear lived in the dark shade of his eyes. I tried to race for the shore again, but a blast of fire shot down my arm. I fell forward, breathing in damp sand. Blood dripped from my palms. The flesh looked as though I’d fisted burning coals.

“Gavyn.” My voice cracked. “I cannot leave. I ... cannot follow.”

“No.” His voice was as though he’d drifted underwater. “No. Try again.”

I held up my battered palms. “It’s the spell. The elven told me it ... it’s fatal, Gavyn.”

His mouth twisted like he wanted to shout his anger, curse the wretched luck, perhaps plead for me to try again.

“Go,” I said gently. He shook his head. “Please, Gavyn. Find Erik. I will try to find a way to break free of this place. Do your part and bring my king to me, and I shall do mine.”

“I can’t leave you,” he said, slamming his fists against the invisible wall between us.

“You can, and you will. We have no other choice.”

His jaw tightened. Red, cruel rage lived in the kind lines of his face. He roared a curse once more. “Hide. No matter how long you must hide, do not let them find you. Promise me.”

“I am well versed at using the earth, Bone Lord.”

“You better be.” Then, at last, Gavyn faded into the tides.

Serpent, I love you, I whispered through my heart, knowing it would never reach the king.

The warning bells still rang into the night. Soon the shore would be filled with guards, or worse—Larsson. I peeled away

from the empty black tides and sprinted toward the shadows of the wood.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE SERPENT

I LEANED over the rail at the bow, tossing bits of bread into the sea, watching the thrashing fins of yellow-tailed eels that only surfaced on moonless nights.

The journey to the Tower from the House of Bones was a distance, across the whole of the kingdom. The journey would normally amount to three days if sailed atop the surface. It took half that by sailing below.

I'd not given the royals a choice; we dove beneath the tides.

Since leaving Maelstrom, the day and into the night was spent beneath the surface until we reached the edges of House of Mist territory, and the earth fae practically sobbed for a breath of air.

“Bloodsinger.” Mira approached from behind. Her dark hair was done up in wrapped plaits like a crown around her head, and she'd donned a new skirt with a leather corset and thick red fabric that struck her ankles. No doubt, Celine would be grumbling about sharing her wardrobe all over again.

“Princess.” I didn't look away from the feeding frenzy in the water.

“Listen.” She hesitated. “I wanted to tell you ... I, well, I believe you.”

“Believe what?”

Mira sighed loudly and rested her elbows on the rail, mimicking my stance.

For a few moments, she watched the eels scour the water for any crumb of the bread. “I believe you truly love Livie. This isn’t a strange obsession or power move.”

I chuckled darkly. “Painful to say?”

“Yes. I’m certain I vomited a little.” She sighed. “The night you took her, I felt like I might die inside. I imagined all these horrid things you were doing to her.”

Sick turned in my stomach. I’d known it. It was my plan: make the earth folk suffer, make them think I was using her body, that I was slicing her to pieces.

The notion of harming any piece of Livia Ferus boiled in my brain, but I knew their fear too damn well. It was the same fear that lived in my every breath since Larsson snatched her away.

Mira flipped around, her back to the rail, and lifted her golden eyes toward the pitch sky. “I blamed myself. I encouraged her to go with you that night.”

“I assure you, nothing would’ve stopped me.”

“I know.” She hesitated. “One of the queens, the fate queen we call her, she is my cousin. I think Elise must’ve told her I wasn’t eating. Hells, I never left my chamber at the tower. My cousin, she and her king have a gift of knowing fated paths and destiny, I suppose. She sent this to me about ten days after the masquerade.”

The princess handed me a battered piece of parchment, thin and brittle from countless folding and unfolding.

It was a simple note, direct, loving.

Mir—

There is a bit of fate at play here. We ought to have some trust. You know how I feel about the damn Norns, so that is saying something coming from me.

It’s what I keep telling my Cursed King. He’s rather perturbed with me, you know, since I may have kept this particular twist of fate quiet. Yes, I’ve known there was still a connection to the sea since the war ended.

Understand, the last time we tried to alter fate, our world descended into war. I had to let this go as it was destined to go.

But the moment we heard the news, both Silas and I felt the same pull that this was part of a new path of fate. We both had the same thought:

A heart stolen by hate and pain finds love unbending in his claim.

There is more to this tale, my love. Stay vigilant, stay strong. I have a feeling our eyes will soon be opened.

Calista

I read the missive once more before returning it to the princess. “You believe this speaks of me and Livia?”

Mira nodded. “You have claimed her heart, Bloodsinger. I think you claimed it ten turns ago. You know, when I saw you at the masque, I felt the draw you had to Liv. I even told her. I did not want to believe anything good could come from this, but ... I have seen you here. The way you speak, the way you demand, all of it is only to find her. You are ready to slaughter your own people.”

“Those who took her are not my people.”

“You know what I mean.” The princess fiddled with the laces of the bodice. “I trust you. When we have Livia, when we return, you shall have another voice to speak for you. That’s all I wanted you to know.”

Gods, I hated moments as this. All I wanted was to be left alone with the remnants of my scabrous heart, perhaps wallow a bit in the misery, then dream up more ways to destroy those who’d kept my songbird from me. Now, I was here, and Livia would curse me if I did not acknowledge I had some sort of ability to feel.

I winced at the burn in my hip and faced the princess. “Turns out, you are rather useful. Your illusion magic is impressive.”

“I’m taking that compliment as your declaration of our undying friendship.”

“A foolish thing to do.”

“Far too late, Bloodsinger. It is done.” Mira’s face sobered. “Thank you. For fighting for her.”

“Even if you were the one who took her first, you bastard,” Jonas shouted. “Everyone seems to forget that detail.”

I rolled my eyes, turning back to the sea while three princes joined. Tait and Celine kept a step away, but slowly, much the same as Livia, the earth fae royals were finding a place among sea fae.

Except for Mira and Tait. The princess placed a great deal of distance between herself and my cousin the moment lanternlight revealed his features.

Celine snorted. “The sea singer effects are well gone, earth fae. Unless you’re worried there might be more reason—”

“Tidecaller,” Tait was the one who interjected.

“I assure you, there is nothing that draws me to Hearttalker —”

“Heartwalker,” Tait corrected as he yanked out one of his paper herb smokes.

“The only thing I’m grateful for is the man had the decency to keep his hands to himself.” Mira let out a huff of irritation. “You said yourself, Celine, it was unavoidable.”

“True, but it was amusing.” Tidecaller leveraged onto the rail, her legs dangling over the edge.

“We’re close to this Tower?” Sander asked. He unrolled a map of the Ever onto the deck.

“Aye,” I said. “We’ll be there well before sunrise.”

Sander poked his head over the rail. “There are many lush isles here, but near the Tower, it says we meet Ice Fjords?”

Seas around the House of Mists were more like thick, fog-soaked swamps. In the distance, rolling isles shaped against

the horizon. Trees with coiled trunks and leaves so lush they blotted out the heavens in great canopies of green lined the shores of the territory. Rivers and ponds and marshes with colorful sea birds and scaled creatures that took to both water and land lived in every township.

Herbs and stones and crystals were aplenty in the House of Mists. A perfect residence for the witches and spell casters of the sea.

“The Ice Fjords are white stone,” I said. “Not truly made of ice.”

“Alek told us some of these noble houses did not take too kindly to the idea of a queen,” Jonas said. “Do you think they had anything to do with this?”

“It would be a bold move, a first. No king of the Ever has been overthrown. Not even an attempt.”

“Why would they?” Celine said. “Ever Kings before you kept house lords powerful, laden in coin and mates. The blood crown does not sit atop their heads, but they were like kings all the same.”

“Erik was changing things,” Aleksi said. “It angered some folk.”

“Larsson would’ve done this with or without Livia,” I said. “If he has the blood of Thorvald, clearly, he was biding his time.”

“Then why now?” Sander scratched his dark, mussed hair, studying the map as if it might offer up answers.

“That is what I intend to find out.” Unknowns stacked heavy and hot in my gut. Why did Larsson wait all this time if he was my brother? We’d met during my fifteenth turn. I was more vulnerable then. “The darkening is clearly some part of his attempt.”

Tait flicked his smoke into the sea and puffed out a long cloud. “Livia was here for weeks. What took so long for him to take her if this was all about healing the darkening and taking the crown?”

“What does it matter?” I snapped.

“It matters,” Sander offered, rolling the map. “Think of it. Your traitor waited, tried small attacks without drawing attention to himself. Until now. There is a reason he felt ready to betray you. He might have more support.”

I did not want to think of it. All I wanted to do was plan how I got my hands on Livia. Part of my mind wanted to shadow any of the other threats, Larsson included, as though all I needed was my songbird back and all would be well.

But the prince was right. There was a reason Larsson acted now.

“Lord Joron of the House of Tides was not pleased, but not as disgusted with the notion of a queen as Hesh of the House of Blades.”

Celine blew out her lips. “Joron only has a female heir. Perhaps he now sees merit in having a queen. Means his house has a chance of not passing on to a new male line.”

“This Hesh, though,” Jonas said, rubbing his chin in thought. “You suspect he was uneasy?”

“He is the High Farer of the Ever Sea, a war man. He lives for battle and blades and power. He does not want the Ever to change, so no, he was not pleased.”

“Then he has my suspicions,” Jonas said.

The prince could have his suspicions, but until I found my queen, every house of the Ever was guilty until they proved their innocence by kneeling at her feet.



CANDLELIGHT FROM SCONCES doused the sea-battered walls of the Tower in gold light. Shells and stones added a touch of whimsy to the refuse and dust at the entrance of the pub.

“Pesha is the one who knew Larsson best. She sticks close to the main rooms,” Tait said. “But she could be at the ladies’ house. We’ll need to send Tidecaller after her. Better yet, let’s

send the princess. I'd love to see a pampered royal step foot in those rooms."

"Hearttalker," Mira shouted. "Thinking I am some pampered princess who plays with glass knives will be a grand mistake."

"Heartwalker," Tait grumbled under his breath. "Send her to the ladies' house, Erik. I beg of you."

"We go to the pub first," I said. "Stormbringer."

"Aye, My King." Stormbringer's broad shoulders cleared a swift path through the crew. He dipped his chin, adjusting the patch over his left eye socket. "What's the word?"

"Keep the men close to the ship. Inform Tavish we will be in the pub, and if anyone finds Pesha, bring her to me."

Stormbringer flicked his fingers away from his forehead in a simple salute, then barked the commands to the rest of the crew.

Inside the main tavern, my blood heated. Not so long ago, I'd had my first taste of my songbird within these walls. Her sighs, the sweetness of her on my tongue, the way she'd tangled my hair around those slender fingers and claimed what she wanted was a moment I'd not soon forget.

Gods, I was desperate for her to be back in my arms.

Savory hints of roots from the coves and herbs from dried grasses along the shores tangled with the hint of sweaty bodies and arousal. Doors to the rooms with cots and rough burlap quilts were closed. A full house. Each space would be filled with sailors and the body they'd chosen to love for the night.

I looked back to prepare the royals for debauchery, no need for more attention to ourselves, but Mira strode through the crowds with Sander and Aleksi, unbothered by the chaos.

Jonas was lost to us, chatting with one of the pub maids wiping down a table. The woman tucked her sleek, fiery hair behind her sharply tapered ear. Part siren, if I had to guess, with her crimson lips and the way she kept humming and touching the place over the prince's heart.

“Gods.” Tait took hold of Jonas’s arm. “Are you a royal or not?”

Jonas winked at the pub maid, then followed Tait. “My parents were thieves, still are at heart. Sander and I feel most at ease around crooks. This is like home.”

“Royal thieves?” Celine rolled her eyes. “I don’t believe it.”

“Believe it,” Sander said. “Our family bonding meant wild schemes to get *anything*—a honey cake from the cooking rooms, a nightly storybook from the repository, a new way into the market.”

“Our father still hasn’t accepted he’s a king, isn’t that right, Alek?”

Aleksi nodded, chuckling. “The royals back home are not as snobbish and pretentious as your royal here, Tidecaller. Probably why you like Livia better than him.”

Celine bit down on her lip, fighting a laugh, and pulled out a chair from one of the larger tables.

If Harald were here, he’d demand I take a bit of flesh from each of them. Any lightheartedness during a direct task would not be permitted. How many times had my uncle tossed me down to the ground, shouting at me to be ruthless, until my face was soaked in his spittle?

How many times had he demonstrated how a king ought to be brutal on Tait? A way to order my compliance all to get my cousin’s pain to stop, and a way to prove how weak I was. If a father could break his own son, why could a king not break his subjects?

It was unnerving the way the earth fae royals could tease and taunt, then snap into something vicious in the next breath. I was not lighthearted, and I did not care. Livia could drag out a laugh from my chest, a smile on my face. Others did not need those from me.

Still, in this moment, I knew Harald was wrong. There was a great deal to be said in fastening loyalty through respect and trust, not fear.

Tallow candles burned in the center of grimy tables. Paper cards and wooden chips slapped on the surfaces. Weapons clinked and clacked against the wooden table as the others leveraged their blades onto the top. I remained standing, scanning the pub.

Ladies with ruffled skirts sat on the laps of men tossing their bets and gambles. Men kissed the throats of women against the counter. A few gazes caught mine, dipping their chins in respect, then promptly dodged our table in the next breath.

“My King, welcome. Always a pleasure to serve the Ever Ship.” The pub matron swayed her rounded hips to our table. “Best wild pear wine just come in from the Glass Isles. A round for your lads?”

Celine cleared her throat.

The matron scoffed. “And your wee, tender ladies.”

A hiss slid through Celine’s teeth in the same moment she let loose one of her knives. The point slammed into the wooden lath wall a finger’s width from the pub matron’s ear.

“*Ack*, such manners, girl.” The matron hardly flinched and ripped the knife out. She jabbed the blade toward Celine. “You’ll be gettin’ this when you be gettin’ gone from my pub. Not a chime sooner.”

I slammed a palm on the table. “Mariope. I’ve need for Pesha. Is she here tonight?”

“Oh. I did not realize you’d be wantin’ company, My King.”

“Pesha, woman. Where is she?”

Mariope ruffled and scrubbed a dingy linen over the table, as though scrubbing eased her nerves. “Was visiting the village earlier this evening. I’m certain she be back by now.”

“Send for her.”

Mariope dipped her chin and strode away.

“Who is this Pesha?” Aleksy asked.

“Larsson’s favorite company whenever we docked.”

One round of the wine promised made it to our table by the time Pesha sauntered into the pub. Her gilded curls were toppled on the crown of her head and pinned in with wildflowers from the shrubs near the shore. Her sun-darkened skin was dusted with too many powders, and her lips were glazed in red.

She smoothed her sea blue gown, adjusting the neckline so it plunged down her breasts and curled a palm over my shoulder. “King Erik. I was told you requested an audience. Tis an honor, My Lord.”

She tried to stoke my ego, but her voice trembled. Doubtless, my scars and the rumors of my brutality with lovers had reached her.

I pulled out the chair at my side. “Sit, Pesha. I’m here for your words, not you.”

“You don’t ...” Pesha’s face heated. “My King, all respect, but I’ve got to earn coin like the rest of us. I have a meet within the chime, and if this crosses over—”

Tait slammed a pigskin filled with copper coin and silver chips. “Sit.”

The woman obliged, snatching her new purse, and tucked it inside the bust of her dress. With a wide grin, her needle-jagged teeth flashed. “Well, now that we’re in order, how may I serve you, King Erik?”

“Have you heard any word from Bonekeeper as of late?”

Pesha’s thick lashes fluttered like wings over her eyes. “Oh, Highness. I’ve not seen him for some time. But.” She paused. “I’ve taken company of a few menfolk who’ve been tangled in with my Bonekeeper. Not certain I recall *everything* they might’ve said.”

With a coy sneer, Pesha tugged one of her coins from the purse and rolled it between her forefinger and thumb.

“You dare keep secrets? You speak to your king, woman,” Tait said, voice thick and low.

“She knows.” I chuckled with a new sort of malice and scraped my thumb over the point of one tooth until a drop of blood bubbled to the surface.

Pesha tried to scramble away from the table. I’d expected it, and gripped the back of her neck, drawing her painted face close to mine.

“Dear Pesha, would you like to know what I expect?”

She closed her eyes, quivering, and let out a whimper when I traced her cheek with my blood.

My grip tightened on her neck. “Answer me!”

“Yes,” she sobbed. “Yes, My King. What ... what d-d-do you expect?”

“I expect,” I said, drawing my face alongside hers, “that when I ask for something, something like finding my queen, you answer. You see, I’ve grown tired of liars and cheats and traitors. I’ve no patience for the lot of them, and I’d rather rid my kingdom of such folk than make deals.” I lowered my voice to a whisper and spoke directly into her ear. “Understand?”

Pesha nodded. “Y-Yes, My King. Yes.”

I released her, putting an arm’s length between us. “Good. Now, tell me what you know.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE SERPENT

PESHA KEPT her gaze pointed to the table, her fingers tangled together like threads on a weave. She'd told her tale of her evenings with the second mate of the *Fire Storm*—Hesh's ship.

It answered some questions but brought many others.

“Why should I believe you that you've not bedded Larsson in weeks?”

Pesha lifted her chin. “King Erik, I swear to the gods, I've not. He went and got himself a mate, as I told you.”

A mate. Pesha insisted Larsson aimed to create a bond with a woman, much like my bond with Livia. No mistake, he wanted the power that came with it. The difference between Larsson and me was I loved my mate, with or without a heartbond. He would fall for his manipulation of such a gift, the same way as my father.

I'd make certain of it.

I drummed my fingertips on the table. “You're certain the House of Blades has joined with Larsson?”

Pesha sniffled. “Yes. I didn't realize they was plotting treason, My Lord.”

“And Lord Hesh has sided with a traitor. This is what the second mate told you?”

“Aye. Bonekeeper has his own plans, as I understand, but once Bonekeeper rises, Lord Hesh wishes to make amends for what he lost during the earth fae wars. He wants the earth fae

to bend the knee to him. Already the House of Blades be sending folk through the Chasm to cause a bit of torment before Hesh brings battle.”

It explained the sea fae sightings that had the Rave warriors divided across the earth fae kingdoms.

“This could be why Larsson made his move,” Celine whispered. “He’s found something, some power, and Hesh knows of it, making him bolder.”

I clenched a fist over my knee. “When you were attending to the second mate, did he say where they were gathering?”

“I’m skilled at what I do, My King,” Pesha said. “I kept him talking, kept him busy elsewhere, after all. Although, I fear you will not care for my answer.”

“Tell me anyway.”

“He said it is an isle that folk cannot find, for it be shielded by spells. Only the blade lord can step through. Has a mark or some key, I am told. Paedar did not know what exactly, but it is the only way to find and step foot on this isle. Not even the crew goes ashore. That is all I know, My King.”

Already, my mind had drifted to a suffocating kind of darkness. A hate so fierce it heated through my skin, it scorched the remainder of my heart. Death was too swift for Larsson.

He would die, but it would take ages. Perhaps my lifetime.

Yes. I would tend to him for the rest of my days, slicing, plucking, carving. I’d tend to him until I slowly whittled him down to bone.

Pesha whispered a plea to be excused from the table. I waved her away.

“Dark tides, little eel,” Sewell whispered, fear alive in his dark eyes. “Told our fox, they see it—” He tapped the skin near the crook of his elbow, a signal to where Livia’s mark of the House of Kings would’ve been. “They take her like they took two little eels for turning tides.”

Sewell had lost love and family for standing against the ways of the Ever. Larsson may have other reasons, but Hesh was part of this. He aided in the suffering of my songbird because of me. Because I wanted a new kingdom that was not the one of my father.

We'd need to watch our backs for Hesh and his men. If they planned to return to the earth fae, to spill more blood, doubtless there would be watchers looking out for the Ever Ship.

"Whatever dark spells are at play here," Aleksi offered up, "they could've used them to snare Gavyn. Perhaps he was getting close to finding Liv, and they knew it."

I nodded at Sewell, readying to agree there was certainly something not right about Gavyn's absence or about Pesha's tale.

"King Erik," the pub matron interjected. "Your presence has been requested in the upper rooms."

"No."

Mariope shifted. "My King, I believe you will want to take this meet."

"Seekers, little eel," Sewell said, with a breath of hope.

Gods, he was right. It could be Gavyn.

Mariope guided us toward the steep, gods-painful staircases, and directed us toward the room where we were to gather. Like always, by the time I reached the top, I considered cutting off my leg. No one questioned and followed, every last royal unsettled by Pesha's tales.

I entered the room but halted abruptly. "Narza."

My grandmother stood in front of the narrow bed in the room. The shade of her hair, now a soft coral, fell in loose waves over her shoulders. Shells and fishbone crowned her head, and her gown was made of kelp satin that glistened beneath the candlelight.

My jaw pulsed. "I did not expect to see you. I was told you had left the Ever."

She laced her fingers in front of her body, stiff and stalwart as always. “That is true. We returned at dawn, but when I was informed you’d taken the talisman, I followed after you immediately, King Erik. We were not far behind.”

The House of Mists was known to sail, at times, even swifter than the Ever Ship with their current spells and wind summons.

I fingered Maelstrom’s leather strap around my neck. “The way we left the earth fae realms, I wasn’t certain how they’d receive you.”

“Not well.” Narza’s lips quirked. “Deals were made, but I find them to be for your benefit.”

“Deals.” The hair lifted on the back of my neck. “What sort of deals?”

“The sort that will give you advantages over our enemies.”

From an arched doorway that led into a narrow washroom, another figure stepped into the room. Tall and brutish, clad in black like spilled ink, and a red cloth mask, from nose to chin. He tugged down the mask to reveal the scowl etched on his mouth.

“Bleeding hells,” Aleksi muttered.

Words dried on my tongue. For a breath, I could not move, too stunned to think, to act.

Valen Ferus’s dark eyes bled with hatred. “Hello, Bloodsinger. I don’t think we finished our conversations.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE SERPENT

STEEL SLICED OVER LEATHER. I had my cutlass freed, but at my back, so did Celine, Sewell, and Tait. Valen merely rested his hands on the blacksteel heads of his axes, twin death tethered to his belt.

From the same room, another man emerged, dressed like a tall assassin. A woolen cowl bunched around his throat, thick belts that slimmed his waist, and the glitter of knives and daggers on each limb.

“Warrior.”

“Erik.” Stieg stepped between the tip of my sword and his king. “Put your blade away.”

“They are not here to kill you, King Erik,” Narza said, an eerie calmness to her voice.

“You were not there.” My gaze locked on the earth bender, unblinking. “I assure you, nothing would please him more.”

Valen stepped around Stieg, but he faced the royals—all lost in a sort of bewilderment.

Aleksi swallowed with effort. “Uncle.”

“Tor arrived at the fort,” Valen said stiffly. “Sol sent word to the North the instant you turned up alive. So, your father arrived at a fort devoid of the son he believed was dead for weeks. I watched both your fathers mourn all over again.” The earth bender wheeled on the princess. “I saw your parents when they arrived. Two souls who’ve lost so many, I watched

them lose their wits trying to get through the sea to a daughter they fear will go missing, much like mine. And you two.”

The twin princes stiffened, but held their tongues, respect for the earth bender shadowed on their faces.

“Your mother and father are some of the most resilient folk I’ve ever met.” Valen stepped close enough their noses nearly touched. “I never want to see the likes of them break the way they did when they arrived without their sons there to greet them.”

Silence thickened in the space. Ten breaths, even more, pressure dug into the pores on my skin, as though the agonizing remorse from every earth fae royal flowed through my veins. With a touch of caution, Tait and Celine lowered their blades and stepped beside Sewell.

I sheathed my sword, uncertain what moves to make.

At long last, when the walls felt as though they might crush us all, Aleksi dipped his chin and faced the earth bender. “Forgive us, Uncle. We freed the Ever King. This was not Bloodsinger’s doing. I know of the Ever. I know of this enemy, and we could not wait for the others to arrive. We *could not* wait for a council and strategy.”

“So, you thought it wise to manipulate my son into freeing a man who’s killed many of our people, who took a princess of the realms, and follow him without a word of goodbye.”

“I left a note,” Mira whispered.

“Ah, yes.” Valen scowled at her. “Exactly the thing every mother and father wants. A missive telling them they may never see their child again, tucked away—I might add—so it was not seen for nearly two days.”

Narza touched my arm. She tilted her head, mutely commanding I speak. What the hells was I supposed to say? I was not taking the time to return the royals to soothe the hearts of their families.

They made their choices, and I was going forward from here. Not back.

“Be angry if you wish, Earth Bender, but they weren’t wrong.” My voice was even, steady. Inside, I was flowing in heavy apprehension. “We would be days behind if I’d been left in that room while kings and queens counseled on how to execute me.”

Valen’s mouth tightened. Doubtless, he wanted to crush my skull under his boots.

“We aren’t saying you or anyone else did not want to begin the search, Uncle,” Aleksi said. “But it was taking time we did not have.”

“He knows.” Stieg sat on the edge of the bed, a misplaced smirk on his face. “It is why we are here with only two of us. We had to do the same.”

Mira arched a brow. “What do you mean?”

Valen’s features softened, still burdened, still furious, but there was a bit of a crack in the rage. “Were you all not listening? Every crown is at the fort. Do you think any of your parents would’ve stayed behind willingly?”

“You’ve now seen for yourself and might take my word with more ease,” Narza said. “Our ships simply cannot house full armies *and* our crews.”

Jonas chuckled, tentative and strained, but slowly the prince’s flash of mischief returned to his eyes. “You snuck away? Elise will murder you.”

“Elise was the mind behind it. Someone had to go after you, and she believed Bloodsinger when he said that current would crush her. After sailing through it, I agree. I came since this animosity was built between my house and the Ever King.”

Now Sander laughed softly. “So, we’re all dead when we return, you included, Valen?”

The earth bender cleared his throat and folded his arms over his chest. “I am certain my fellow kings will have strong words about my departure.”

“He’s not worried about the kings,” said Stieg. “It’s the queens.”

Valen tugged an axe off his belt, then the other. He laid them on the table, crossed at the handles, then stepped back. “I call a truce, Bloodsinger. For now. Our ambitions align. I only wish to find my daughter, and since you gave me no choice but to follow you here, I am with you. *For now.*”

He darkened his tone on the second declaration, proving whatever alliance might be forming in this musty room would be temporary.

I would take temporary.

I dropped my cutlass on the table. “Agreed, Earth Bender.”

Valen kicked the leg of a chair, sliding it out, and sat. He gestured for me to take the seat opposite him. “Then tell me what you’ve learned.”



BY THE TIME I’d finished explaining the betrayal of Larsson, the belief he could be Thorvald’s bastard, and rehashing Pasha’s tale, the others had found places to perch in the room.

Stieg sat beside Celine and Sander on the narrow cot. Jonas and Aleksi had both leveraged onto the windowsill, while Sewell, Mira, and Narza joined us at the table.

“Your son,” Valen asked, glancing at Sewell. “He does not disappear like this?”

There was no reason to keep the truth of Gavyn’s bloodline hidden from Valen. The earth fae would find the destruction of Sewell’s mate and family despicable.

Sewell drummed his fingers on the table. “Boy speaks in the seas. Soothes our hearts.”

“He’s telling you, my brother will usually send word,” Celine said. “Even if it’s just to let us know he’s alive. I’m always with Daj on the ship, but Gavyn is kept apart. We speak through missives or the tides often.”

“Because *you* can hear him and speak through the sea?” Valen asked, more like he was repeating words to let it solidify in his mind.

“Aye.” Celine stared at her hands, knee bouncing. “Earth bender, I don’t ... I don’t want you to take her from us.”

“Tidecaller,” I said through my teeth.

“Let her speak,” Valen said. “What do you mean?”

Celine was bold, rather deadly with a blade, when she was not unsettled. Around anyone beyond her blood, me, and now Livia, she was silent as a whisper in the storm.

Still, she straightened her spine and met Valen’s gaze without falter. “I know you hate what my king did, but it was old magic that brought them together, the kind none of us understood. Not even him. The Ever called to her, and she’s, well, she’s part of us now. She matters to you, but she matters to us, as well. I’ve seen the bond; it’s real, Earth Bender.”

For the first time, the furrow over Valen’s brows faded. He leaned back in his chair, studying Celine. After a moment, a slight grin tugged at the corner of his mouth. “I am glad she was not alone when she was forced here.”

Livia’s father would always despise me for what I’d done. I could not blame him—I would always despise Larsson for doing the same.

“I must set sail,” Narza interrupted. My grandmother remained silent, stoic, a mere spectator during the meet.

“You return to the House of Mists?” I asked.

“No. I return through the Chasm.”

“What?”

“I told you, King Erik, deals were made.”

“That tells me nothing.”

Narza rose and made her way for the door. “With such fierce trust broken, there needed to be something that would leave them assurance I was not there to cause harm, nor was I going to harm a king.”

My grandmother nodded at the earth bender.

“What are you getting at?”

“There is old magic that was once performed during peace treaties, a show of strong alliances after battles or skirmishes. It is a spell called *neach-dai*. Each bond creates a compulsion to protect, but that is the only similarity. The rest are quite unique, for the specifications of what would bring the most peace are set by those who will *receive* a bonded.”

“What have you done, Narza?” My voice was a blade, sharp and cutting.

“It is a lifetime bond,” she went on, voice rough. “A bonded is only released through death or an exchange, where another will accept the *neach-dai* on their behalf. I am bonded to the earth fae now and have vowed to protect them according to their specified needs.”

“What the hells?” I gaped at the earth bender. “She is a lady of the Ever.”

Valen’s face burned. “And my daughter is a princess.”

Bleeding gods. I shook my head, facing my grandmother. “What specifications? What does that mean?”

When Narza hesitated, Valen stood. “We requested she remain in our realms to shield against the sea folk should they bring a threat. Fitting since it sounds as though more are planning to bring that threat.”

“She leads the House of Mists here,” I argued in a frenzy. “She has family here.”

Valen held a bit of distress in his gaze for half a breath, then his face hardened. “I have no quarrel with the sea witch, but you are learning how devastating it can be, Bloodsinger.”

I hated every word, but he was right. I’d taken Livia with the intention of devastating her people and those she loved. I was not particularly close to Lady Narza, yet the idea she would be forced to live elsewhere knotted my chest in a discomfiting pressure.

“I agreed, Erik,” Narza whispered, approaching slowly. “This, what you fight for, what you are doing, is more important than where I live out the rest of my days. They are not cruel people. They won’t harm me. The *neach-dai* is meant to be a peaceful bond for new allies. I protect them, but they also protect me. As the bonded, I simply comply to their parameters in the agreement. They have open shores, and I know the moves of the sea fae; the need for protection in their realms is reasonable.”

“Will you ever return?”

“I can’t stay long if I do. Already it is swiftly urging me to go back.”

“If you don’t?”

Narza tilted her head. “I think you understand deep bonds enough to guess, Grandson.”

She would die. Break the bond and die.

“You cannot keep her,” I told Valen. “She wouldn’t have betrayed you. You have a lie taster. Was her word not enough?”

“Junius had already gone to meet her folk, hoping to pass on what she’d learned, to *save time* in our councils. This bond was a compromise, Bloodsinger,” Valen said. “After everything you have done, how do you expect us to trust sea fae? Not to mention, every damn heir to every damn throne is here in the Ever, but for my son. We needed to know every royal line would not be crushed from existence by misplaced trust.”

“Erik,” Stieg said. “This was how we made a swift decision. We needed assurance.”

“Really now,” Narza said, a soft smile on her lips. “You think me so fragile that I cannot defend myself? Now that we suspect Hesh, admit it, King Erik, this will show the unity you craved for our people. Should he arrive, he will be met with forces of two worlds.”

“We do not know what forces Larsson has gathered,” I whispered. “What if you are needed here?”

“You will have every support from my house, Erik.” Narza’s eyes were glass when she looked at me. “I should’ve fought harder. I should not have resigned you so quickly to being another Thorvald, beyond reproach. I was wrong. You are the king the Ever needs, and the House of Mists stands with you.”

I wanted nothing more than to fade into the floorboards. Every damn eye watched the unnerving interaction.

My grandmother was no soft, gentle woman. She was a leader, a sea witch capable of casting horrifying spells. To see this side, a bit of remorse in her features, I hated every breath of it. I did not want her to stop.

“Your people will not harm her?” I asked Valen, voice rough.

“Not in the least,” he said. “And when we return, I will personally see to it she has anything she desires. Any of her folk, as you said, her family, would be welcome to join her in our lands.”

It didn’t feel like enough. I wanted to lash at the earth bender, at the warrior. I wanted to blame them for what was done, for the deals made, but it fell on my shoulders.

“You ought to use the shell soon, Earth King,” Narza said. “You recall how it is done?”

From inside his tunic, Valen tugged on a silver chain. Tied in the center was a pale, coiled seashell. “I simply speak into it?”

“Always begin with his name.”

The earth bender looked unconvinced, but slowly lifted the mouth of the shell to his lips. “Ror. Do you hear me?”

My grandmother stepped next to my side. “Do you recall this spell?”

“The harvest festival.” I watched the earth bender lift the shell to his ear, waiting. “When I kept running off, and my mother feared I’d get lost. You bewitched two shells, so I could call to her.”

“You were a horribly busy child.” Narza lowered her chin. “It brought Oline a bit of peace knowing she could always speak to you. I thought it might do the same for those left behind.”

“Thank you.” I cleared my throat. “Grandmother. This sacrifice, it will never be forgotten.”

“Their help is needed. You and your queen are destined to heal the hatred between worlds, Erik. I know it to my bones.”

Narza paused, taking a moment to smile at the chatter in the room. “I mean what I say, they are not cruel, Erik. They are in pain. You did not know a kind father, but he—” She nodded at the earth bender. “Is a father who will go to any lengths to protect his children. This bond is not something he took lightly and only at my encouragement. He wants his daughter safe, that is all. Do not blame him for my choice, don’t blame yourself, and don’t let it be in vain. Find her. And of course, do come see me from time to time.”

I chuckled, soft and hardly there.

“I hear him!” Valen stood, a laugh scraping from his throat. The sound was odd. I knew him only from a war, stern and desperate for peace, and now as a man who likely dreamt of spilling my blood. Not this, not a father, laughing at the sound of his boy’s voice.

“Yes,” he spoke into the shell again. “Tell Maj we found them. No, Rorik—hush for a moment—your mother will handle Ari, not you.” Valen glanced at Mira, whose chin trembled. “Yes, we have a lead on Liv.” Valen’s smile was genuine as he listened to Rorik’s response. “No, son, I haven’t killed him.” The earth bender shook his head. “No. Nor am I decided if I appreciate that you took a liking to him.”

Jonas snorted. “Winning over Ror by a few words, Ever King.”

“Told him he was fearsome with a blade.”

“That’ll do it,” Aleksi said. “Make him think he’s the next captain of the Rave, and Ror will be your most loyal friend.”

This was too strange, too odd. Finding an alliance to save Livia was one thing, but to feel a sense of kinship with earth fae was another matter I did not know how to absorb.

“Ror, I can’t hear you.”

“It fades,” Narza explained. “Only a few moments every time you begin to speak. With this distance, it will likely only be open once, perhaps twice a day.”

“It’s fading, son. I will speak to you soon,” Valen said, voice soft. “Listen to whatever your mother and uncles ask of you. I’m proud of you. I love you.”

A strange feeling took root in my chest, a bit of envy, a touch of longing, a heap of remorse. Not once had my father said such a thing to me. When I’d been snatched at four turns, he’d shouted to return his heir—not his son. A blurry memory of Thorvald demanding I honor the Ever was all I had of the man in my most frightening moment.

“I can’t hear him.” Valen looked to Stieg, then returned the bespelled shell under his tunic. “So, Bloodsinger, are we going or not?”

Outside the Tower, we stood near the docks while the Ever Crew loaded skiffs and rowboats with a few supplies.

Tavish had disembarked his ship and stood beside Narza, discussing the crew of her ship, and occasionally arguing with her on the merits of a *neach-dai* bond. Until he saw the futility of it, bid her a somber farewell, and left to ready his crew.

Narza draped her shoulders in a silver cloak that resembled starlight, a glare pointed at the Ever Ship in the sea. “Stay safe, Grandson. The bond is pulling me back.”

I swallowed. “I will send word when I can.”

Strange, but there was a new emptiness in my chest when Narza slipped away to the smaller vessel Tavish had sailed. She’d insisted the *Shadow Wing*, the ship of the House of Mists, be left for our uses, and Tavish would sail it alongside the Ever Ship.

“My King.” Halfway down the dock, Pesha waved her hands.

“We’ve wind to meet, woman.” I didn’t stop and aimed for the shore.

“King Erik!” Pesha grew shrill and touched my arm. “Wait.”

“What is it?”

“Paedar ... I didn’t tell you, and I should’ve, but ... I can’t keep it any longer. Not after what I know.”

“Speak!” I hissed.

“He was ... he was my meet, My King.”

Pesha screamed when I grabbed her arm, not enough to be painful, more a bit of panic, more a hope that maybe ... “He’s here? Does he have her?”

Tears lined her lengthy eyelashes. “No, My King. Just came for a meet, but this time, he be bein’ joined with another man from the crew. They ... saw the royal ship. They be slinking aboard your decks.”

I snapped my gaze to the Ever Ship. A dark kind of smirk played over the scarred side of my mouth. Hesh’s men boarded the king’s ship?

They’d expect to send me to the Otherworld.

And, instead, I’d be certain to send them.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE SERPENT

“THINK SHE WAS SPEAKING THE TRUTH?” Tait scratched his stubbled chin. “I’ve not seen anyone out of place.”

“Could’ve concealed themselves amongst the crew at the Tower,” Aleksi said.

“More half-witted assassins.” I slumped in a chair at the table. Assassins were bothersome on any day, but these sods, wherever they were on the deck, were wholly aggravating. Each pause, each delay, kept me from Livia and added another layer of violence in my soul.

Sewell tapped a finger onto the page of the book. “Dark tides, little eel. Dark tides, indeed. But get one to whisper, and we might see the minds of false eels.”

“Aye. True enough, Sewell.” I gripped his shoulder, shaking him slightly. “We get one screaming, we might learn exactly where Hesh or Larsson are keeping her. We make them scream now.”

Valen, somber and quiet against the wall, scrutinized my every movement. The earth bender had said little about traitors, merely followed, keeping a close ear to our rapidly spun plan to show what happened when the Ever King was betrayed.

Sewell’s mouth twitched. “Burn the bones, little eel.”

When I put hands on them, they’d do more than burn. They’d rot from the inside out.

On the main deck, Tait and the earth fae ordered the crew into a line. Men shifted with unease, others hardly cared, lighting their smoke herbs and puffing out clouds to the fading sunlight.

When I stepped onto the deck, their spines straightened.

No one appeared out of place, and it only fueled the rage in my blood more.

“Heartwalker,” I said, voice low, so no one would hear me over the thrash of the sea. “Any desire for my death?”

“I’m blocked, Erik. They came ready with spells or wards, knowing what my voice does, no doubt.”

Wards. Spells. An isle that could not be accessed without a bleeding key. The more tales that were said, the more I knew Larsson had his own aid from damn sea witches.

“Then we do it my way.”

“I prefer your way for this.” Tait’s teeth flashed viciously.

Tavish stepped away from the rail. He’d come aboard, insisting he aid us in the hunt. “I’ll work to break any curses or spells.”

“Unnoticed.”

“I’d never be noticed.” He faded to the far side of the deck.

I stood in the center of the front line of my crew, hands clasped behind my back. “Arms out, you wretches. If you move out of line, you eat your blade.”

Anxious murmurs filtered through the men as they rolled up their tunic sleeves, revealing all manner of scars and tattoos. Some cast wary glances, no mistake taking note that Sewell, Celine, and Tait were not in ranks, and were gathering weapons.

Valen would see the darker pieces, the edges of my soul his daughter said she loved, and I could not hold back despite his presence. It was damn close to a need to make anyone who’d associated with Livia’s harm suffer.

He would accept it, or he would not. I cared little in this moment.

The first man in line was an ancient bastard simply named Scar for the taut, grisly line of mutilated flesh that caved half his face.

I slashed the thin skin on his wrist.

Scar winced; his eyes slammed shut and disappeared behind folds of skin and thick brows. Before he could pull away, I sliced my own thumb on one pointed tooth and pressed the tip to the open wound on his arm.

More murmurs, more unease, came from the crew. No one questioned. No one shifted away, but fewer men met my gaze.

“Done nothing to hurt me bond, King Erik,” Scar whispered, eyes still closed.

I waited ten breaths, then inspected his veins. Blue and protruding through his ancient skin, but no ebony shades, no convulsing. The blood bond of the ship was intact. It was still being honored. The Ever Crew, so long as they were loyal, my blood could not touch them while aboard the ship.

I dropped Scar’s arm and moved down the line. One by one, the men allowed me to poison their blood.

Stormbringer volunteered his arm before I reached him. “I’m no fool, My King. I know what all this is about. Send me to the hells of the sea if I’ve gone and betrayed me king and our earth lovey.”

For the first time, I hesitated. When I’d been rescued from the earth fae as a little, Stormbringer had been a boy of fifteen, serving his first turn on the Ever Ship.

After Thorvald fell under Valen’s axe, to distract me, Stormbringer had taken me belowdecks, snatched a sweet honey drop from a secret store in the galley, and told me tales of his home isle near the Tower until I’d fallen asleep.

I was aloof, rather distant from my crew, but apart from Sewell, Celine, and Tait, Stormbringer was one I did not wish to kill.

“When the truth comes out,” Stormbringer said, leaning close until the strap of the patch covering his lost eye nearly brushed my brow, “best to make them pay in pain, says I.”

His blood did not rot when touched with mine. I might’ve imagined it, but I thought Celine released a breath of relief the moment I moved on to the next.

The third man on the second line, I did not know his name. Not entirely uncommon. Tait and Larsson recruited more than me, and over the turns, with the darkening, I’d long ago stopped trying to know much of the new crew, my thoughts elsewhere.

Still, the hair lifted on my neck when I studied the man’s face. “New recruit?”

“Aye,” he said gruffly, giving me a smirk from beneath a wiry, russet beard.

I snatched his wrist and sliced the skin. My blood dripped into the gash. One breath, five. Nothing.

I released the man’s wrist, uneasy, and went to move onto the next when he coughed. The bastard doubled over, a hand to his chest, dark, foamy spittle on his lips. His eyes shaded to a sickly sort of yellow and met my eyes in a shock of horror.

“How?” He gagged. “She s-s-said it’d shield ... us.”

Tavish barked a laugh across the deck. “Oh, your little witch might’ve promised it, but such protections only work if spells are not *broken* by another.” He wagged his fingers, then winked, as though we were friendly. “Enjoy, My King. Looks like you have one more.”

From the back corner of the line, a man in a heavy canvas coat made a mad rush for the rail of the ship. The twin princes were nearest and blocked his retreat. Eyes the color of midnight, Jonas and Sander stalked the coward away from the rail. Soon, the fae pleaded for some creature, some horror to leave him be.

He whimpered and lowered to his knees. Pressure gathered in the air like an approaching storm. The princes knelt with their victim, saying nothing, but whatever their magic was

doing seemed to be torturing the traitor from the mind outward. He screamed, swatting at things unseen.

Nightmare magic. I grinned, all at once pleased I'd taken on a few earth fae.

The bastard at my feet convulsed from the spreading poison. Too simple.

My fingers curled around his throat; I dragged his crimson face to mine and hummed. The sound was low, dark, vicious. His body stopped seizing, and his veins lightened.

Once his breaths slowed again, I tossed him back. "What is your name, traitor of the Ever?"

"Paedar Bladeclaimer, My King."

"Ah, second mate of the *Fire Storm* I hear."

He didn't answer straightaway, but slowly he nodded. "But I-I-I did nothin', swear to the gods. I didn't do nothin'. I'm bonded to the crew, you see, and ..." He paused to swallow some of the excess spittle on his lips. "We have no choice if our lord commands it. Swear we didn't. But I did nothin' to her."

Molten heat split along the scars, the fractures remaining in the bones of my legs, when I crouched in front of the bastard. His features were roughened by long days beneath the sun. Stringy locks draped over his wide shoulders, and his bottom teeth jutted over his top, so the sharpened points of the canines were hidden.

He was larger than me, doubtless stronger, yet he quivered like an eel being reeled in off a hook.

"You did nothing, you say?"

I paused long enough to leave Bladeclaimer wondering what move I might make. Then, I rammed the point of my blade into the fat of his belly.

"What you didn't do," I hissed against his ear, "was confess to your king that the lord of your house had betrayed your kingdom. What you didn't do—" I twisted the cutlass in his flesh, devouring the sob of pain. "Was prevent Bonekeeper

from scheming against me.” Another twist, another yelp. “What you didn’t do, was speak up about *where* she was taken. The latter, of course, is the most grievous of the things you *didn’t do*.”

I nicked the tip of my tongue until the sour taste of blood coated my mouth, then spit in his face, watching as watery blood slid down his crooked nose to his lips. With one finger, I took the spittle and painted the insides of his mouth.

He screamed and thrashed, and I dug my sword still in his belly deeper.

With one knee, I nudged him backward, watching from the corner of my gaze as his body convulsed and writhed, as the blackened veins snaked along the sides of his neck.

Murmurs rose from the spectators, likely earth fae, as they watched in a bit of horror the truth of what my blood could do. I cared little. The claws of bloodlust had already latched on, and all I craved were those damn screams that shattered the night.

While Bladeclaimer succumbed to poison, he lost his fingers one by one. He was gasping by the time he lost his eyes. His heart stopped before I finished slicing off the points of his ears.

With the back of my sleeve, I wiped blood off my lashes and spat drops of the splatter onto the floorboards. I spun around to where Jonas and Sander still hovered close to the whimpering fae, curled at their feet.

“Take him to the brig!” I shouted, nodding at two crewmen. “Make sure he knows what happens to traitors aboard the Ever Ship!”

The men dragged Hesh’s second assassin past the fallen traitor. My lips twitched in an austere sort of grin when the bastard vomited at the gore.

“My King!” Tavish shouted across the deck.

My heart went still as the corpse at my feet when Alek shoved through the crew, another man’s arm draped over his shoulder.

“Erik.” Gavyn’s face was haggard, a trickle of blood fell off his lip. “I found her.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE SERPENT

GAVYN FOUND a seat on the edge of my cot, spine curved like a scythe. He'd been offered a clean tunic and half-cut trousers but kept his feet bare. Rarely out of sorts, now his dark hair was curled and loose around his features, and more stubble than was typical darkened his brown skin. In his hands, he gripped a steaming tin with a concoction from Sewell that smelled of cloves and mint.

"How did you find us?" Tait asked.

Before Gavyn answered, Tavish raised three fingers. "Apologies, should I ask permission before casting beacon spells? Thought we should have a way to draw him back to us since he didn't know you were wearing the tracker talisman."

Gods, I made a note in my head to thank Maelstrom for sending his bleeding son.

"If I'm no longer needed," Tavish went on, securing a leather hat atop his head, "I best be seeing to my own crew. I've a feeling we'll need to be rested up for a battle soon enough."

Another wink, another smirk, and he left us in my chambers.

"Tell me," was all I needed to say before Gavyn dove into his tale.

Fione was the new, hopeful mate of Larsson. Truth be told, her involvement was no shock, I'd already suspected a sea witch stood on his side. There was one sea witch in the Ever

who wanted me to pay for her mortification of being removed as the future mate of the king—Fione.

Hesh's betrayal was solidified, though Celine took a bit of pleasure describing the carnage her brother had stumbled upon was done to Hesh's second mate.

What I didn't understand was how Larsson found his way to the strange isle he'd made into his fortress, and how I never realized he was my damn brother. Was I so desperate for acceptance I'd ignored signs of his disdain?

While others inquired of Gavyn's journey, I searched my soul, my heart, any crevice of my insides where I might hear her voice.

Songbird, answer me.

I closed my eyes. A heady sense of dread stacked in my gut. The bond, the bright tether that kept my heart from descending into despair, was utterly dead.

"Where was she when you *left* her?" I said, opening my eyes and glaring at Gavyn.

"You say that like I had any other choice."

"You did. Take her out of his hands." I took a step closer. "That was what you were to do if you found her, instead you left her."

Gavyn shot to his feet. "It wouldn't let her go. Did you not hear me? There are spells keeping her there."

I slammed a palm on the table, knocking aside an unlit candle and an old compass made of gold. "I did not ask for excuses. I asked for *her*, no matter the cost."

"Bloodsinger." Valen—to the stun of everyone—knocked my shoulder, drawing me away from attacking one of my only true friends. "Hear him out. He is our connection to Livia. Keep your head."

Gavyn was forgiving. When I faced him again, his expression was sullen, not hateful. He dropped his chin, running his fingertips along the rim of the tin. "I tried to get back to her, Erik. I'd planned to shift with her at the sea, but

the moment I stepped through the wards, the isle began to fade from me. Like a shield kept building until it was lost to me. I don't know how long she can hide or fight them off should they find her."

Ice flowed through my veins, growing more and more frigid and numb the longer Gavyn recited his tale of unwittingly discovering this fading isle. His tale aligned with Pasha's. Not long after the House of Mists had arrived at his manor, Gavyn felt an unnatural pull to shift, as though his voice was acting of its own accord.

He'd retired outdoors—for air, as he put it—then, unbidden, he was forced into the tides until he spilled out of a washbasin and into Livia's chamber.

"What sort of power can do that?" Celine coiled a lock of her hair around her finger, knee bouncing from where she sat near her brother.

"I am telling you," Gavyn said, "there is something strange about this isle. Livia was told they're elven folk."

"Elven." Sander shook his head. "There's a great deal of debate over whether or not they are extinct."

"These folk were different," Gavyn said. "Then, this isle, I swear to the gods of the seas it called to me. It drew me there."

"How did you both get free of the fortress?" I asked.

Gavyn described their escape through the strange palace built into a hillside, and how they'd slaughtered guards.

Part of me did not want to ask more. I didn't want to imagine her chained, frightened, harmed. "What has Larsson done to her?"

Gavyn gave a wavering glimpse at Valen. Dammit. He feared the earth bender's reaction.

"Tell me," I demanded.

"Larsson and Fione used one of the women on this isle to remove your heartbond. I don't know how it was done."

I yanked the neckline of my tunic, revealing the gash over my chest. “I’m aware. Why? Did he claim it from her? Did he *force* her to bond to him?”

“No. There was purpose behind it. Something about wards over the blood crown. But he also thought it might make her hate you, as though the only reason she loved you at all is due to the bond.” Gavyn held up his hands. “It failed, I assure you. Your queen is even more determined to find you.”

“Tell us what you’re not saying, Gavyn,” Tait said. “I feel it, your desire to keep something from the king and the earth bender.”

“You better tell us everything you know,” Valen answered in my place.

“Boy, speak truth,” Sewell told his son softly. “Kill the lies.”

“I’m not lying. I’m omitting.” Gavyn hesitated. “When I arrived, it was shortly after Larsson had ... attacked her. She fought him off, but he’d wanted to ... claim her, brand her body.”

The corners of my vision blackened. Each word blotted out the final pieces of light in my heart, leaving them filled only with hate, vengeance, and rage. Through a haze, I heard Valen’s rant, his spitting anger and demands that we get to his girl.

On this, the earth bender and I could not agree more.

Without a word, I turned from my chamber, ignoring the few calls of my name. As though lost in a dream, I drifted over the deck, down the hatch, to the back cell in the brig where Hesh’s assassin sat against the corner, his legs outstretched, ankles crossed.

I had the barred door unlocked in the next breath, my fist curled around his throat. “Tell me where she is!”

He spluttered.

I slammed his skull against the wall once, twice, a third time until blood dripped off the wood splinters.

“Erik!” Aleksi stepped into the cell.

“Get back, Bloodsummoner.” I dropped the assassin and tugged a knife from my belt to cut a gash over my wrist. “How many times can I poison you until you’re too corrupted for the gods to accept?”

Hesh’s crewman held up his hands, trembling. “Please.”

“We’re beyond pleading.” I stabbed the tip of the knife through his ribs, just enough to draw blood. “Don’t want you to lose too much; I want your head clear enough to feel every bit of this.”

“Let me live!” The man caught my wrist, my blood seeping through his fingers. “Let me live, and I swear I will tell you everything I know.”

Coward.

I pulled away, aware there were more observers beyond the cage now. With the hem of my tunic, I wiped some of my blood away on my wrist, a twisted grin on my face. “Agreed.”

The man let out a long breath and slowly rose from the floor. “You ... you will never find the isle.”

“Piss poor answer.”

“No.” He held out his palms, a weak shield between us. “You will never find the isle without Lord Hesh. He has been marked by a spell that allows him entry through the wards. And I know ... currently, Lord Hesh is not on the isle. He left it to send us to find you and make plans on how best to begin attacking the earth realms. He’s confident a new king will sit atop the throne soon and wishes to waste no time.”

The twins paled. Alek clenched one fist, his other hand on the hilt of his sword as Celine offered her version of comfort, which came out more like declarations of slitting throats in their name should anything happen to his fathers left behind.

Valen and Stieg had not ruffled. Stieg even wore a smug grin, like the notion was irritating more than frightening.

“What is this mark or key to the isle?” I spun the knife, a silent reminder of what would come of him should he lie.

“I-I’m not entirely certain, all I know is it was done by the sea witch, and it is permanent.”

I tired of this game, these complications keeping me from my songbird. “What more do you know?”

“Nothing.” He dropped to his knees. “I swear, My King. I’ve told you everything.”

“As I thought.” I swiped the knife over my palm and clapped my hand over his mouth. Foolishly, he opened his mouth to scream. His hot breath, the damp of his tongue brushed over the blood on my hand. I pulled away, allowing him to fall back, already his veins burned black as scorched wood.

“You promised,” he cried. “You vowed I could live.”

“I allowed you to live as promised.” I turned at the doorway of the cell. “It was you who failed to negotiate how long.”



WIND in the sails would take us to the House of Blades. But it was in the interim, during scheming and hating, that Sewell doused the king’s wine in sleeping herbs. Days since true sleep had taken hold, the bastard merely took my rest into his own hands.

I knew it within moments when I could not keep my damn eyes open as I strapped swords, knives, and daggers to sheaths on my thighs and belt, preparing to burn the House of Blades.

One moment I was standing, straight and sturdy, then the next I stumbled backward, half on the cot of the king’s chambers, half off. Sleep took me like death claiming breath from the lungs. I could not escape it, could not fight it.

I dreamed of Livia.

I never wanted to wake.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE SONGBIRD

CLEAN RAIN, a touch of leather and salt, soothed my heart. I nuzzled the warmth of his skin, drawing in a long, greedy breath.

Gods, there was nothing so euphoric as lying beside the naked body of the Ever King. His laughter, deep and rough, rumbled from his chest when my foot threaded around his calf, like a needle pulling thread, and tugging it closer.

“You’ll break your toes if you keep doing that, love.”

“Then stop trying to sleep with such distance between us.”

“Distance.” Erik laughed again and rolled onto his shoulder, his weight sliding me across our bed, until my chest was smashed against his. The shock of his crimson eyes sent my pulse fluttering. His callused fingertips traced my jaw, as though restoring a memory of every line, every curve. “I am as close as I can be without being inside you.”

“Ah, but that is the trouble here, Serpent.” I brushed my lips across his throat. Heat pooled in between my thighs when Erik palmed my ass, rolling me on top of his strong body. “Why are you not inside me?”

He brushed my hair off my brow, tucking it behind my ears. “Gods, you’re beautiful.”

There was a broken edge to his voice, like a shard of glass. Through the shattered pieces, something dark and dreary pounded in my head. A distant memory, breaking through my beautiful illusion.

This wasn't real.

"Find me, Erik," I whispered.

"I am trying, love." His palms slid down my spine, touching each divot, until they came to rest on my thighs, straddled over his waist. "Tell me, at least, this moment means you are safe. For now."

I closed my eyes, afraid I would destroy the peace, yet desperate to recall what was going on around me. "I am hidden."

Erik's fingers glided along my inner thighs, close to the heat of my center, but like a damn villain, he'd pull his hands back before he touched. By the bleeding grin on his mouth, he knew exactly what he was doing. "You're so flushed, Songbird."

He was a villain, but I knew how to bring a villain to his knees. I reached between my legs and wrapped my fingers around his swollen cock.

Erik drew in a sharp breath. "Woman."

"Yes?" I stroked my hand up the shaft, grinning. It felt so real, so close.

Erik removed his hands from my legs, pressing his palms to his face, and groaned as his hips slowly started to buck against my touch. After a moment, he let out a rough sound, a sort of growl, and gently urged my palm off his length.

Erik pressed my fingertips to his lips. "I cannot hear you."

"Nor can I." I knew what he meant. Wherever reality lived, back there we were not *this*. Not close. Torn.

"I know how to find you, Songbird, and I will."

Call it the dream, where rules of understanding did not apply like they did in the waking world, or perhaps it was a bit of fate pulling us together in this moment, but I spoke without thinking. As though somewhere, deep in my mind, I knew what he was doing. As though I could still hear him through remnants of our broken bond.

“Aim for the heart, Erik.” I pressed a palm over his scarred chest. Beautiful lines of his strength, his resilience. I kissed several before lifting my gaze. “You’ll find me in the heart.”

Bleak dawn greeted me when my eyes fluttered open. The space beside me was not the warm silk of our bed at the palace. Only dried leaves, damp twigs, and cold soil remained. Erik had never been there.

I rolled onto my side, running my palm over the place I wished he’d be, and let a steaming tear land on a brown leaf. There, the dagger and knife from Gavyn were still hidden in brambles.

After I’d fled from the beach, I’d found refuge in a natural bower of trees, but this was not the same structure I’d claimed last night. Now, the branches were bowed in a dome around me.

I’d built something similar as a girl. Alek and I would set up our war camps in the wood behind my family’s castle, playing Rave heroes, and I’d crafted us quite an impressive forest longhouse once.

Over the turns, Mira, Jonas, and Sander, the lot of us, added touches to it—a leather pelt for a door, windows with clay edges, even a table and sleeping mats to rest our weary warrior heads.

I gaped at the arched branches now, then my palms, studying each finger like they were new to my hand. Had my fury commanded Natthaven? Heat from fury magic dripped beneath my skin. Whispers, imagined or real, breathed into my lungs—you are the *Ever Queen*.

I was not powerless, no matter how Larsson and Fione tried to make it seem.

With my king, we’d cleared knolls and townships, rocky vales and deep ravines of blight when not even the Lady of Witches could find a cure. I was born of warriors, a daughter of earth fury, and I was not powerless.

One by one, my fingers unfurled over a drooping stem of a closed bloom. The petals slept against the chill in the dawn,

but beneath my hand, a spark of life unfolded each satin piece awake until the face of the blossom reached for the sullen sky.

Not powerless.

Today. I would leave this damn isle today.

I yanked a thick blade of nearby milkweed and fashioned a pitiful sheath, fitting each blade against my shin. Once the knife and dagger were settled, I fisted the skirt of the nightdress in one hand, offered a silent thanks to the trees of the isle for shielding me, then aimed my step for the shore.

If I could command the soil as a daughter of fury, could I command the sea to bring me home as the queen of the Ever?

I slipped through two evergreens and whimpered when my battered, bare feet landed atop frosted roots. A thorn snapped off in my heel. I limped to a fallen log and sat, carefully removing the pointed tip.

A flicker of soft light drew my gaze. Once, then twice, a small bulb of gold would break against the dim light. Sun wings. Littered amidst the mist-soaked trees, the creatures seemed to align, fashioning a fluttering thread that wove through the wood, as though leading me forward.

Stunned, a little uncertain, I followed the first bulb. A soft hum of rapid wings ghosted by my ear, until the creature faded into the darkness, speeding to another place in the line.

There wasn't time to question. Skadi once said should the creatures trust, they would aid in journeys through swamplands and treacherous ground.

On and on, the sun wings led me forward, twisting and turning through trees, across bramble-coated wooden paths, and over knobs of jutting tree roots in the murky waters.

At long last, after a steady trek down a slope, my legs trembled from fatigue. Air burned like a flame, but the mist had lessened, a pale beam of sunlight fought mightily to break through the ominous cloud cover. Each gust of wind was heavy in sea and sand.

I was close.

With care, I leveraged over a fallen log, keeping my steps cautious when the path took a severe slant. I slipped and skidded on my backside several paces until I rolled onto flattened earth.

What seemed to be the swing of a lantern in hand, drew closer through the trees. Hidden this long, I ought to have known the isle would be coated in guards, likely anxious for blood once they found their fallen warriors. Whether one or a dozen elven guards approached, it mattered little.

Today. I was leaving today. Even if I had to fight.

I leveraged to my knees and yanked the dagger free of the grass tie on my shin as another figure stepped into my refuge.

Not a guard, but Fione. Hooded, with a long, stiletto dagger in one hand, the sea witch sneered down at me. “I thought I heard clumsy feet. Our escaped *queen*. You’ve been sorely missed.”

Dammit. I scooted away. Fione didn’t pursue, merely watched my movements with a bemused grin.

“You are rather pathetic.” Fione wrinkled her smooth features in mock pity. “The Ever is no place for free earth fae.”

Branches snapped in the darkness of the trees. A horn rattled the solace of the wood, and humphs and grunts of commands drifted closer. Elven were coming for me. Whatever search had been made to find me—they’d succeeded.

“I am not returning with you, Fione.” Heat gathered in my palms. The trees shuddered at our backs. For a moment, I was captivated by the motion. Then, a silky sort of darkness took up space in my chest. Like a cloak of night shielding the tender, kinder parts of my heart from what it planned to do.

Fione took a slow step forward. “Be good, now, and return to your room, or I will keep you locked and shackled in the cold cells of this palace. And next time, I won’t stop Larsson when he tries to have his way with you.”

“You know what he tried to do, you know what he is like, yet you stand by him.”

I cried out in stun when Fione lunged. She caught me by the hair, drawing my face close.

The sea witch lightly dragged the point of a crooked knife down the side of my face. “What did I tell you, earth fae? When you are a woman in the Ever, it is better to know your place.”

“It was changing,” I snapped. “Erik made me his queen. Will Larsson do the same, or will you only be a body in his bed to burst with his heirs?”

For a moment, Fione’s confident snarl faltered. “Better to be a body in the bed of a king than nothing at all.”

I was not dying here, not without setting eyes on Erik, on my family, my friends, at least once more. The ground shuddered with life, vibrant and vicious. Vines emerged from the ferns, creeping onto the shore like dark, thorned serpents.

Within my chest, something tightened. Something cruel, something savage. I held out a palm, and the trees quaked.

Fione staggered back, stunned. Hesitation lasted a mere moment before the sea witch flicked her knife so the blade pointed at the sky. I had no time to think on it before she threw the blade at my heart.

CHAPTER TWENTY

THE SERPENT

TONIGHT. I would have my queen in my arms tonight.

After the dream, I woke with an aching cock, the taste of her skin on my tongue, and her sweet smile in my mind. I wouldn't accept less.

The obsession for Livia Ferus had never faded, but now a fire had ignited in my chest. I would not wake to see the dawn, as if the absence of her were the greatest poison, if I did not feel her hair entwined in my fingers, her breath on my skin, and her body pressed to mine.

Sulfur burned in the air. We were on the edges of the House of Blades.

When I woke from the sleeping draught, I shouted endless threats about dousing the king again, which were fiercely ignored, and we spent the early chimes of the morning planning.

Jonas and Sander were rather frightening in their ability to scheme, even in a realm not their own. It was as though a simple sketch of the House of Blades, a primary description, had ignited a dozen detailed strategies in their brains of how we'd get in, destroy, and leave with our way to Livia.

There was a heady gratitude and loyalty taking shape inside—no one hesitated to fight for her. It was no wonder why she loved her folk.

I could admit to myself alone that I was relieved earth fae were aboard the Ever Ship.

Confidence bled through the laths, but there was more. Something feral, something vicious, permeated the air. No matter how short a time Livia had been on this ship or in the Ever, she'd claimed us all. The crew was loyal to me, but part of me wondered if they'd be at the ready to fight simply to avenge the wrongs against my songbird.

Like she'd become part of the crew as much as its king.

Princess Mira painted the faces of her fellow royals. Every earth fae lined their eyes in dark kohl, runes drawn down their throats. Next, Mira dipped her fingers in a wooden bowl filled with silverfish blood and dragged her fingertips over their noses and cheeks.

Celine gawked at Alek when he shoved through the crowd, blood on his nose and lips. "You look like a feral merman, Bloodsummoner."

Alek ruffled, seeming pleased, until the twin princes stepped forward and Celine let out a squeak of horror.

Blood dripped onto Jonas's white teeth when he smirked. "Exactly the reaction I wanted."

"What is wrong with your eyes?" Celine said, nose wrinkled. "They're damn wretched."

The whites of their eyes were swallowed in glossy black, like endless night lived in their gazes.

"Sods," Alek grumbled when Celine went to gawk at the princes and listen to their explanation of their nightmare magic.

"Bloodsinger."

Valen and Stieg approached, blades sheathed, faces coated in their wild earth fae markings.

I cursed the shock of unease in my blood, a boyish fear rising again from a battle long ago when I watched Valen Ferus defend his lands with a brutality of beasts. He looked much the same now.

Through the whole of the scheming, Valen had observed, as though testing my word, my power aboard my own ship. As

though he wanted to prove I had no authority ... or wanted to prove that I did.

The earth bender unsettled me in many ways, but in these waters, on this ship, I thrived.

Valen leaned onto his elbows on the rail. "You say this noble house will have many warriors?"

I faced the shock of red across the horizon. "Yes. All skilled with the blade."

Valen rubbed his chin. "Any thoughts about this permanent mark?"

"No, but I plan to give Hesh no option but to tell us. He revels in bloodshed. I will do the same."

"If he is such a wretch, why not oust him?"

Irritation boiled under my skin. "I took the throne at four turns, Earth Bender, left to submit to a wicked uncle who allowed such men to rule in noble houses. Then, once more, I was left alone to fight for the respect of an entire kingdom in the aftermath of a war at age fourteen. In a world of the power-mad, it has taken a great deal of intricacy to crack through the Ever of Thorvald and every damn king before him."

I leaned forward, voice low. "Tell me, when you fought for change in your courts, how swiftly did it come?"

Valen's eyes burned to the color of scorched coals. He said nothing when he faced the sea, jaw so tight I could make out every tendon, every pulsing muscle.

"You keep seeking out my shortcomings as king to make me out as a cruel bastard, undeserving of your daughter. I will never disagree that I am undeserving, nor will I disagree that I am cruel. I am not a good man, Earth Bender. But I am no threat to her."

"You are the greatest threat to her, Erik."

It was the first time he'd addressed me by my given name. I turned my focus onto curling white waves against the hull. "If you think I consider anything above her, my kingdom

included, you are wrong. I care for nothing but getting her back.”

“That is why you are a threat,” Valen said, less venom in his tone than before. “You have her heart, and that is a priceless treasure I vowed to protect from her first breaths. Now, I am forced to trust that the same man who stole my girl from me will care for her in a way that is worthy of her.”

Perhaps, I did not understand the love of a father to his child, but I had enough sense to recognize the violence in Valen Ferus’s eyes to speak with care. “I will never give you a reason not to trust me with her heart.”

“If that is true”—the earth bender pierced me with a dark glare—“then hear me clearly, Ever King: break it, no matter what the reason, and I will not hesitate as I did at the fort to scatter your bones.”

“I break her heart, then I will offer you my blade.”

Valen’s cheek twitched. “So long as we understand each other.”

Sewell emerged from the hatch. He’d coated his body in black, top to boots, and it looked as though one of the earth fae had gotten to his thick hair—a braid ridged down the center of his skull.

He paused, grinning at Valen. “Sire to sire, Wolf. Little eel lights in his heart with our fox. I would place me Thunderfish in his hands if tides were turned.”

Valen likely did not grasp what Sewell was proclaiming, yet there was a horrid thickening in the back of my throat. A swell of something wretched like whimpering affection for the man who’d been at my side for the whole of my memories.

“You mean that?” Valen said, a smirk on his battle-painted face. “If it were your daughter, you would be at ease after what he did?”

“You knew what he was saying?” I asked before I could think better of interrupting.

Valen eyed me for a breath. “I’ve had many conversations with Sewell since setting sail. I’ll ask again—if he took your girl, you’d be at ease? Is that what you’re telling me?”

“Aye. If I saw what be seen, I’d rest easy.” Sewell barked a laugh. “Not telling that a little eel would not eat a bit of me knuckles on his tongue.”

Valen smiled, a sincere smile that reminded me of his daughter too fiercely. Sewell laughed again, clapped Valen on the shoulder, and gave me a wink before they left my side— together.

“Believe it or not, Valen stands by you because he already trusts you with her heart, Erik,” Stieg whispered.

“He will always despise me, Warrior,” I said. “And I cannot even blame him.”

“What you see as hatred is a father terrified he will not see his girl again. Get her back, let him hear her tale from her mouth, and you will have the fiercest ally in the Night Folk king.”

“I have survived long enough without anyone to call a father. I do not need the support of one now. If we can come to an understanding that he and I both love her, that is enough.”

“You will get more,” Stieg said with a knowing grin. “I’ve known Valen Ferus since the days before he was a king. Never have I met a man who fights for his family so fiercely. Like it or not, boy, you are now part of his house.”

Like the others, Stieg abandoned my side.

I doubted Valen would care for me, but I trusted he would fight to the brutal end until we found Livia, and that was all I truly wanted.

“The House of Blades!” Scar called from the crow’s nest.

Mists firm enough to slice into pieces, rolled over the deck of the ship like ghostly fingers trying to take hold of our ankles. When the bow carved through, the light of a warm dawn brightened the distant, fiery peaks of the House of Blades.

My fingernails dug into the wood of the rail.

“Divide the spear crews,” I shouted, limping up the stairs toward the helm. “At the ready with the cinder stones.”

An echo of my command filtered across the deck. Men split into their pairs and manned their spear. The crew moved around their posts like a brutal waltz, every man at the ready near the sails, the rigging, the ember spears. Every blade at the ready to draw blood.

Near the helm, I snatched the spyglass from Stormbringer’s hands. The main township in the House of Blades was made of simple cottages with moss rooftops, with stone and driftwood walls. They slept on grass mats and had some of the most fertile crops that grew from the dark, fiery soil at the base of their steaming mountains.

With less land than other houses, Hesh made the townships more fortress than village. Boys were gifted their first weapon at two turns, and girls were trained to sharpen them by three.

Along the shoreline of the isle, sea walls were erected and placed atop were towering trebuchets with black iron pots of oil. Blade guards stood at the ready with torches and a pigskin-wrapped stone ready to roll onto the sling.

“They’re readying to meet the wind,” Stormbringer grumbled.

Expected.

To the western side of the isle, Hesh’s smaller wartime ships were stocked, sails at the ready, crewmen stalking up and down gangplanks, all aiming for the Chasm. But the *Fire Storm* was anchored in the tides, its black sails at full cover, the banner of his crossed swords raised.

“They’re making their move for the earth realms.” I leaned over the rail of the quarterdeck, observing the men below. The bustle ceased when most caught sight of me and faced the helm. “We face a traitor of the Ever today. What do we do with traitors?”

“Brand their bones!”

“Feed them to the seas!”

“Paint the sands with blood!”

Endless jeers and hissing taunts spewed over the deck with a new kind of vitriol. Betrayal, treason, mutiny, the whole of it was a sin of the worst kind to a crew, blood bonded to their captain, their land.

“Pillage where you please, kill what you wish, but leave the women, littles, and the lord of blades.” I scanned the fierce gazes below. “Hesh is mine.”

Tait stood at the helm but mutely stepped aside when I took hold of a handle. “Stormbringer. Get us in the wind.”

Arms open, Stormbringer propped one foot on the rail and sang, a tenebrific sound—soft but powerful, cold but fearsome. Near the bow, Celine’s coo of a voice matched with Stormbringer’s—honey against fire. Alone they were formidable, together they created something unstoppable.

Rigging snapped and whipped against the force. The ship lurched.

We sliced through the currents rapidly. In our wake, the storm followed. Twenty paces in any direction grew violent. Booms of thunder, sharp bolts of lightning, splatters of heavy rain, followed much the same overhead.

When the shore was not more than a length away, I abandoned the helm to Skulleater, then limped to the rail.

Tait, Jonas, Sander, Gavyn, and half a dozen of my crew gathered around me. The earth bender made his way toward the hatch with Sewell, Mira, Aleksi, Stieg, and another half dozen of my crew. Over Tait’s shoulder, I caught Valen’s gaze.

For a moment, before he disappeared belowdecks, we seemed to harbor the same thought—we would get her back, no matter the cost.

With haste, I took hold of a dagger, sheathing it across the small of my back. I clamped a covered knife between my teeth and saw to it my cutlass was properly secured.

Tait shouted a little maniacally. “Let them rue the day they turned against the Ever Ship!”

I slipped one leg over the rail, then fell to the dark water below.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

THE SERPENT

WHORLS OF BUBBLES popped around me as, one by one, those following the *Ever King* sank into the tides. I swam for the dark hull of the *Fire Storm*, dead ahead.

Soon, if Celine and Stormbringer did their duty, they'd pull back the storm, just enough to reveal the crimson sails, enough to set the pulses of the House of Blades racing.

I dug and kicked through the current, at ease, at home. Tait pulled ahead and touched a palm to the hull first. Jonas, Sander, the warriors in our wake, were a breath behind. To see underwater was hardly a feat for sea fae. Perhaps vision was a bit distorted, but it never ached, never burned. Tait gave a nod, his signal he'd keep on my flank.

Arms out, palms open, I hummed, calling the sea to lift us up. The roll of the currents answered their king, and the water line gently rose, up and up, until I surfaced and could hook an arm over the rail.

Under the cloak of night, we crept onto the deck with predatory precision.

Damp pieces of hair slid from my headscarf, cascading water over my curled lips, the knife between my teeth. Hesh's crew shuffled about. Tunes of the sea flowed over the deck. Blades were stacked, some sharpened, others unpolished and tarnished in old blood.

I ducked behind a barrel, seated back-to-back with Tait, and took the knife from my mouth, the cutlass from its sheath.

The twins slunk around coils of rigging. Like a dark wave, the others spilled over the rail.

Tension crackled in the air. No signal, no word, I abandoned the barrel and stepped into the cracked skeins of moonlight. In a fluid motion the edge of my knife swiped over a burly sod nursing a flacon of sour rum. The man crumbled with a wet grunt and drowned in his own blood.

One by one, our blades met flesh of the unsuspecting, a phantom dance of gore. Sander covered a mouth, Jonas slit the liver. Tait kept low, gutting men with his violent way of twisting his daggers. I preferred slicing once, muting their cries, then watching their eyes go wide with recognition of their king before I filled their necks with my steel.

Our steps carved in the blood across the deck. From the shoreline, a glimmer of rolling mist drifted nearer to the township. The princess, illusionist that she was, seemed to be proving quite useful indeed.

“Dammit.” Gavyn hissed when he rammed his knife in the chest of a sleeping man with a dark, patchy beard, only to realize the lump of cloaks next to his corpse shifted.

A brute, thick as stone, woke. With a wash of horror on his face he took in his bloodied companion.

It was enough time for the man to send out a whistle, shrill and deafening, before he slumped over, a knife rammed through his ear in a desperate strike.

But the warning had been given, and Hesh’s crew took to the fight.

Steel glided free of leather. Shouts for our heads rattled the laths. Somewhere near the bow, a burst of fire sparked in the night, a flare, a warning to the fort on the House of Blades.

On cue, bells rang across Hesh’s stone walls, shouts of his guards rolled over the beach.

Do your part, Earth Bender.

I slammed my sword into the soft belly of a man who rushed me, his cutlass foolishly raised overhead, allowing me

a perfect place to strike. Another blade found me. I parried, kicked his knee. He was dead by the time I moved on to the next sod.

Jonas and Sander kept close to each other. Eyes black, the twin princes danced around a cluster of sobbing men, pleading for the horrors to cease.

Whatever they'd implanted in their heads was rotting them from the inside. With direct strikes, both princes put them out of their misery, then moved on to the next.

Tait was surrounded by five men, but a grin split over his face. Before the first could strike, Gavyn appeared from the damp on the deck. He stabbed his dagger into the side of a throat, then faded into the water again. Tait stepped in, killing one stunned fool, only to have Gavyn appear again and slaughter the next.

A man swung a wooden club at me. I twisted under his arm, the rod whistling close to my face. When I righted again, I swiped my cutlass against his middle, watching him fall at my back. Within the moment of respite, I unsheathed my knife, and gripped the blade, squeezing blood between my curled fingers.

Two men challenged me. Knife tossed, hand bloodied, I met their strikes. When blades crossed, I covered my opponent's mouth with my wet palm.

One after the other, they dropped, coughing, spluttering, black veins coating their necks.

My limp grew more pronounced. I didn't stop.

Five paces ahead was the captain's chamber. Three men stood guard, but there was a glint of fear in their eyes. The center guard, he would break first.

The bastard raised a trembling hand, voice rough as he said, "M-My King, we did—"

I never learned what they did. I cut him down before he could utter another sound. To the man at the right, I covered his mouth and nose with my palm, pinning him to the door of Hesh's chambers as his body succumbed to my poison.

To the man on the left, I snarled. “Open this door, or you meet the gods, followed by your mate, your mistress, and any of your little bastards. I will not stop until your blood is wiped from the Ever.”

He blinked, took a breath to scan the chaos on deck, the bodies heaped over rails and ropes. His fingers shuddered as he jabbed a brass key through the hole.

I kicked the door open, ignoring the white-hot shock that rolled up my thigh. “Hello, Hesh. Were you not expecting me?”

Lord Hesh rose off his cot, half-naked. A woman tucked her bare breasts beneath the quilts, whimpering.

“Bloodsinger.” Hesh spoke as though simply irritated I’d interrupted.

“Ah, am I no longer your king?”

He scoffed, taking up his cutlass from the table in the center of the room. “Boy, you know the answer to that, or you would not be here. Alas, you have wasted your time.”

“Killing you will never be a waste of time.”

“Kill me, and you will never find her. Leave me alive, and I will never guide you to her. It is better for you to forfeit your crown, spare us all a bit of bloodshed and embarrassment.”

Gods, the way I would make him scream. I could practically taste his cries on my tongue. “I think it would be in our best interest, at least for your house, if you revealed this key you have to the isle where he is keeping her.”

Hesh’s brow arched. “So, you’ve learned a few things.”

“More than you know.” I spun my blade in my grip, stepping to the left when Hesh mimicked my motion. We circled each other, two beasts looking for the weakest place to strike.

Despise me as he did, my uncle had insisted I learn the blade with more skill than I knew to walk. I yanked the dagger strapped to my lower back free of its sheath and threw it across the chamber.

Hesh roared, one hand on the hilt protruding from his hip. Strategic. I did not want the bastard dead. Not yet. He made a desperate swipe of his blade. I blocked with the edge of my cutlass and twisted his grip free of his sword.

“You were the best choice my father had for the blade lord?” I let out a derisive sigh. “What a disappointment.”

The woman in his bed screamed when I fisted a handful of Hesh’s thick, sun-lightened hair and dragged his bleeding ass onto the deck.

“Drop your blades,” I shouted over the din. “Or you watch your lord meet the hells, then you next.”

Bound by blood, what was left of the *Fire Storm* crew hesitated. Blades dropped in heavy thuds. The men tortured by Jonas and Sander sobbed as the two princes lightened their eyes to moss green. Tait ignored my halt, slit the throat of the man he’d pinned, then returned a smug sort of grin in my direction.

Gavyn crouched in front of Lord Hesh, teeth bared. “I know everything you have done, traitor. I’ve found her. Freed her from that room.”

Hesh’s eyes went wide. “Not possible.”

“Perhaps you should not have tossed your lot in with an imposter king.” Gavyn patted Hesh’s cheek with condescension, then rose.

“You say you found her, yet you are here without her.” Hesh chortled but winced when the blade still lodged in his hip shifted. “Discovered there is no escaping that place for the little earth fae, did you?”

I slammed the hilt of my dagger against his head. “Speaking of earth fae, they heard rumor that you had some grand delusion you would claim their realms. I think you’ll find they have no plans to let you.”

Before he could shirk me away, I ripped the dagger from his hip and pinned his back to the deck. One knee on the blade lord’s chest, I forced his arm to stretch out, then rammed the

point of my blade through his wrist until the tip dug through bone and flesh into the deck of the ship.

Hesh cried out his anguish.

I propped one boot on the hilt of the dagger. Hesh squirmed and hissed his pain. “Better for you to admit your defeat and spare everyone a bit of blood and embarrassment.”

“Go to the hells, Bloodsinger.”

I shrugged and pulled the dagger out of his wrist. “I wonder what the people of your house will think knowing you brought this upon their heads.”

Tait and Celine helped hoist Hesh up against the rail of his ship, facing him toward his own shores.

Behind me, one of my men whooped into the night. It didn't take long, mere moments, before an ember spear boomed, blasting a cinder stone at the shoreline of the House of Blades.

“Hardly frightening, I know,” I muttered close to Hesh's ear in a low snarl. “Don't worry. That was only the signal.”

Along the shoreline, the night shimmered. It faded like sea mist and revealed the truth hidden behind Mira's illusion. The Ever Crew battled the guards at the gates and forced frightened folk in their night clothes to the shoreline.

“Watch that man.” I pointed to the place where a figure knelt on the ground.

On the ship, I could not feel the force of what was happening, but the screams were a sweet clue. Walls shuddered. Soil fractured. Great pots of molten stone the House of Blades drew from their fiery pools in their cliffs spilled over the gates, swallowing some of Hesh's patrols in a blaze.

I watched, dark delight alive in my chest, as the ground quaked and groaned. My gaze drifted to the peak directly behind Hesh's fortress. Smoke billowed from the vent at the top. A fire mountain. The longer the earth bender commanded

the soil of the Ever to give, the more that mountain spluttered out bursts of ash and cinders.

Flames caught hold of sod roofs. Folk ran, their littles smashed to their bodies, desperate to escape the rainstorm of fire from their own hills.

I did not revel in the screams of children, but my crew was there to shuffle the innocent toward our skiffs in the surf. Sewell led the gathering, Aleksi at his side, shouting for littles and women.

Valen's fury unleashed the fire beneath the soil of the House of Blades. If Hesh remained a stubborn ass, he'd watch his small part of the kingdom fall to the sea. The blade lord gaped at the chaos in a bit of horror.

"By now, I'm certain you realize," I whispered, gripping the back of his throat. "The earth bender king did not take too kindly to your threats against his people."

"My King, please!" The woman from Hesh's chamber, wrapped in a quilt, sprinted across the deck. "Please, stop this. I beg of you."

She fell to her knees, gripping my legs, tears in her eyes.

"Not me you ought to beg, lady. Your lord would watch it all burn to keep his secrets."

Her glassy eyes drifted to Hesh. A flush burned through her cheeks, and her tears dried. "My King, please, my wee one remains on land. I-I-I've no one to reach her. She's alone, she's innocent."

Godsdammit, Hesh. "And my queen is lost to me. Seems we both have trials, lady."

The woman's jaw set with such force it was as though her bones were trying to reposition teeth that had gotten loose. "His lordship speaks a great deal when he beds a woman, likes to spout off his feats and such. Tis the only way he gets off, talking about himself, I'm afraid."

Laughter rippled across the deck from those who'd come with us.

“Shut your mouth or lose your tongue, Evanlee,” Hesh gritted.

“Oh.” I struck his head again with my fist. “Who will be taking it? You? I doubt that. What do you know, woman?”

She blew out a breath and slowly rose to her feet. “He said only he could find the hidden place where a new king is building his forces. A place on the edges of the Dark Isles.”

The fragile, stony exterior keeping me from sinking the whole of the house into the sea was cracking. “The Dark Isles. He’s been in the Dark Isles all this time.”

Mere lengths from the royal city. Mere lengths from the Tower. I’d sailed around my songbird without even knowing.

“If it be true, dark curses live in this hidden land,” Evanlee whispered. “No one else leaves without losing their way back, he tells me. Only he knows the way. ‘Tis marked within him. It calls to the curse of that gods-wretched soil.”

“Within him?”

“On his bones, My Lord.” She nodded frantically, ignoring Hesh’s curses and threats. “‘Tis over his heart. Told me himself, showed me the burn of the spell.”

You’ll find me in the heart.

I pinched the woman’s chin. “Thank you, lady. You and your child will find refuge in the royal city.”

Her breath quivered. She pressed a kiss to my fingers for a mere moment before I tossed Hesh backward. There was no telling how delicate this spell might be. I would not risk a wrong move. Not when we were this close.

I cupped the back of Gavyn’s neck. “I need you to go to the shore.”

“For what?”

“Bring me Fleshripper.”

“Erik, no.”

“Do it, Gavyn. Or do your own fears outweigh her life?”

Unfair of me, no mistake, and Gavyn would likely resent me for putting such an impossible choice atop his shoulders. I cared little.

He said nothing before dropping over the rail, part of the tides.



THE HOUSE OF BLADES burned in the distance. A few sloops and row boats were skittering across the sea toward the House of Kings with the displaced, Evanlee and her daughter included. The rest would be left on their scorched lands to await their king's return with a new lord of their house.

They would be waiting for some time.

Hesh still breathed, but he would not the moment his usefulness was spent.

We'd returned to the Ever Ship after sending the *Fire Storm* to the deepest ravines in the sea.

A few paces away, Valen drank an herb tea brewed by Skulleater to aid in replenishing the fury in his blood. The way he'd broken the earth enough to spout fire from their cliffs had brought a great deal of fatigue to Livia's father. Still, he eyed Hesh over the tip of his mug with a bloodlust that bordered on madness.

Gavyn and Celine stood near Sewell like twin shields, both flinched when I approached. Celine pleaded under her breath. I ignored them.

"Sewell. Gavyn told you I have need of Fleshripper."

Sewell shifted on his feet. "That was his whisper."

I gripped his shoulder, voice low. "I know what I ask is a risk."

The soft, kindhearted expression shifted to the man I'd known as a small boy—the bold lord who'd defended his kingdom, who'd sailed the most vicious of seas. "For our fox, little eel?"

I clapped his shoulder. “For our fox.”

Sewell approached Lord Hesh. Spoken words muddled on his tongue at times, but Harald’s torture had never dampened Sewell’s sea voice.

“Erik, if this gets him killed ...” Gavyn didn’t finish his threat. He didn’t need to. This would expose Sewell. No one had the voice of the former bone lord, and for his sacrifice, I would spend the rest of my living days ensuring he was unharmed.

Folk who’d believed as Thorvald, those who would still see Sewell as a traitor, were dying off, either through war or assassination by a young lord. But it was time to let Sewell Fleshripper, at last, be free. He’d committed no sin in my eyes for loving his mate, nor had his children.

Sewell crouched in front of Hesh, grinning. “See me?”

Hesh squinted, searching Sewell’s face he kept hidden under brims and a wild beard and new scars.

After a moment, Hesh paled. “You’re alive.”

With a deep laugh, Sewell shoved Hesh flat onto the deck and straddled his hips. Injured and weakened, Hesh still tried to scramble away until an axe with a black blade sliced into his shin. The blade lord shrieked in agony.

“You took my girl.” Valen stared down at Hesh.

“No ... I did not, earth king. Bonekeeper—”

“Yes, I’ve heard that name a great deal. Seems you aided the son of a bitch. Might as well have grabbed her yourself.” Valen backed away, trembling, and rolled his second axe in his grip. “If you do not want the other, you’ll stay put.”

Sewell flatted his palm over Hesh’s chest and hummed, soft and haunting. Much like a thin piece of parchment catching flame, Hesh’s bloodied skin over his heart burned and ebbed into ash until bone remained.

The blade lord’s eyes rolled back into his head. Murmurs lifted amongst the crew as they watched Sewell work.

Fleshripper, a great value once to King Thorvald, was a man who could peel flesh from the bones while a soul still lived.

Harald always bemoaned what a pity it was to kill Fleshripper since he'd admired Sewell's exquisite knack of torturing to get answers, to threaten, to keep folk trembling beneath the feet of the nobles of the Ever.

Layers of skin peeled away over Hesh's body, but under Sewell's touch, the edges scorched and cauterized, burning back the blood.

Gavyn told me King Thorvald had used Sewell many a time to leave gaping wounds on enemies—decidedly painful, yet they never bled out, simply lived for weeks, months, with monstrous, weeping holes in their bodies.

A few retching sounds came from the back of the ship. Jonas lowered to his knees, followed by Alek, as though the two princes were wholly fascinated.

Sewell's voice cut off once Hesh's chest was flayed, open and exposed. His bloody breastbone revealed. There, burned into the bone, was a symbol surrounded by small script written in a language I did not know.

I'd drag out any damn scholar, any witch, any sea fae who understood old words before the night's end. I would find her tonight.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

THE SONGBIRD

FIONE'S KNIFE STOPPED MIDAIR, the point a finger width from my nose.

The witch's eyes went wide. "How ..."

Roots and vines coiled in front of me like a wooded guard bursting forward to take the strike in my stead. Boughs and tree limbs had shot forward and cocooned her knife, halting it at a safe distance from my face.

I rolled my palm, so the trees aimed the steel at the ground. My fist clenched, and so too, did the branches tighten their grip around the knife until the blade snapped under the pressure.

I dropped my arm to my side, and the trees released the jagged pieces of the knife in a heap on the sand.

From my handcrafted grass sheath, I took hold of Gavyn's dagger in my grip, with a distinctive hilt—the amethyst stone and etched runes. Fione's gaze widened. A rose flush filled her cheeks.

"Are you realizing, perhaps, I have not been so alone?" I smirked. A mask, a ruse, to conceal the fear growing taut in my chest.

Fione's coldness grew ever colder. She cupped sand and gritty pebbles in her palms and shouted to any guards concealed nearby that I'd been found. Then, she tossed the pebbles into the air. She moved swift and furious like a violent sea. I hardly realized what she was doing before her sweet hum struck my ears.

When next the pebbles landed, instead of dark smooth stones and flakes of black sand, they sprouted into cruel posts and beams, encircling me. Trapping me.

I shrieked and slammed my fists against the stones, rattling a new cage. Voices, grunts, they grew closer. Through the trees, a dozen men and their swords stepped onto the beach.

Fione flashed a quick grin. “I think I’ll request you are bound to the bed from now on. Limbs spread. Simpler to gouge the flesh, if ever I require blood for a cast. I wonder how long you’ll live before you’re drained?”

I dropped to my knees, palms splayed over the rocky beach, fury hot in my veins.

Today. I was leaving today.

This moment proved my place as queen, this moment brought me closer to my king, or sent me to the Otherworld, a light in his darkness until he found me in the hall of the gods.

Sorrow lived in this soil. The deeper I dug with my own magic, the greater the memories of Natthaven consumed me.

A cruel hand throttled my throat like a vice, digging in and holding me in place. In my mind, steel clanged and vibrated. Smoke and scorched flesh burned my nose. Tears of loss. Wars had battled over these shores. But there’d been joy too. Comfort, smooth as silk, bloomed in my chest. A trill of laughter echoed through my ears. Revels. Dancing. Music.

Natthaven devoured my fury, revealing its pain and glee with each pulse I leveled into the shore. I didn’t know what I was seeking from the earth. All I could conjure in my thoughts was *today*.

I was leaving today.

“Take her,” Fione snapped, but her tone shifted. “What is this? No, take her!”

Muscles in my arms trembled. I slowly stood, still surrounded by Fione’s bewitched stone bars. But sand and pebbles shuddered underfoot. Fione reached for the pouch, digging for a new spell, a new attack.

The shore split.

From the sea, stalks of slimy, wet leaves burst like sprouting blooms. Serpents of green and black coiled and writhed around the pebble stone posts of my cage. Elven guards halted. Some gathered light in their palms from lanterns, the way Arion burned with candlelight against Skadi.

They never had a chance to strike. Forest roots and growing limbs stampeded from the wood in an opposing assault from the vines of the land and weeds of the sea. Knobbed roots toppled elven guards. Thin branches shackled wrists. Men cried out in stun, batted at the foliage attack, then drew blades. Swords met bark and bramble.

I screamed, fatigue burned through my forearms.

Today! I was leaving.

Sea plants began their retreat to the water, but as they went, the grip around the stone pillars holding me captive tightened. The scrape of stone cracking mingled with the shouts of the guards.

Over and over, the sea plants tugged and battled with Fione's cursed bars until they shattered.

Dust, debris, and salt lined my lungs. I covered my head against the rain of pebbles and broken rock.

When it settled, I took up Gavyn's dagger, arms only as sturdy as damp grass, but I readied to fight. Should the Otherworld claim me, I would plead with the gods to burn me bright in the skies of the Ever. Let Erik see me night after night, until he, at last, found me again. My Nightfire.

But I stumbled back.

Fione's cage had crumbled. Tracks of pulp from sea leaves scarred the shore, but from wood to water's edge had grown a twisted, ever-moving wall of roots, vines, and tree limbs.

Elven sliced at the barrier. Where one limb would splinter, another slithered into its place. Alive. The wall was alive, a barrier of snakes made of wood and thorns. Through the wall, Fione hissed, making every attempt to break through the

spreading wall. Elven shouted commands through a touch of disbelief. Tower bells rang out.

On my side of the new wall, nothing but forest and night were at my back.

Breathe. Focus.

A flash brightened the horizon, then faded into the night. I squinted, searching the sea, until the sound of splintering wood shook me back to the present. My writhing fury wall was weakening. Guards hacked at the twigs, and now, there was none to replace them.

The wood was retreating.

“Take her! Now!”

Larsson. Through one of the gaps in my barrier, his face contorted in rage. I spun on my heel and staggered for the wood. Trees bowed away from me, as though the forest, yet again, beckoned me into its sanctuary. Dagger limp at my side, I ducked beneath the leaves and bowers, jaw set.

This was not over, but it would be. Whether by sea or by death, I was leaving this isle.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

THE SERPENT

THICK ROPES WRAPPED Hesh's corpse to the center mast. His chest was open, the breastbone missing, and a dagger nestled deep into his silent heart. He'd been stripped of his fine clothes, his eyes plucked out, his tongue pinned to his forehead, and the wound from Valen's axe was left to weep onto the deck.

Tavish and his ship kept to the stern of the Ever Ship, awaiting any signal, any fleck of a spell. In the moonlight, I could make out the silhouette of Tavish sprawled out on the bowsprit, humming, drawing out any unknown spells on the Ever Sea.

Sander sat in front of the blade lord's corpse, unbothered by the gore as he traced the markings on the symbols burned into the washed breastbone. The prince would scan the symbols, then flip through thick parchment pages of writings he'd smuggled from the earth fae fort.

The prince's curiosity suited us quite well, and already he'd found old symbols that spoke of a fire on the moon. Stormbringer insisted it meant there would be a flash—some celestial signal—when we came close.

“How is it you know?” Sander asked.

“Home,” Stormbringer said. “My village took a great deal of stock in old languages and lore. Me mam raised me up reading symbols and runes and the ancient poems and sagas until she went to me pap in the Otherworld. I know symbols and translations.”

After several on the crew shouted and cursed Stormbringer for never letting on he had much of a brain, he settled by Sander, translating the breastbone.

“Do you have more?” I asked.

The Dark Isles were in our sights, the moon was high, and I was not missing an opportunity to catch sight of this damn warded isle.

Sander brushed a thumb over the bit of bone. “Stormbringer went to fetch some old sea witch lore from his supplies; he has an old book left to him from his grandmother.”

By the hells, I didn’t even know the man could read.

“There’s an incantation burned into the bone,” Sander went on, “and we’re missing one piece of it, we think.”

Strained voices rose over the deck near the hatch. Stormbringer, the man I needed at my side, halted at the top of the steps, his arms stacked with withered leather protecting old slips of parchment.

Pallid, damn near frightened, he stepped onto the deck like the laths might crack under his weight, eyeing the source of his disquiet. Sewell leaned against the foremast, arms folded over his chest, a scowl on his features. He looked nowhere but at Stormbringer.

“What is it?” I demanded.

Stormbringer took cautious steps in my direction. “Nothing, My King. It be nothing.”

“Lies on the tongue,” Sewell grumbled.

“Stormbringer,” I shouted. “Do you take issue with Lord Sewell, now that he has revealed his voice? I assure you, no matter your history on this ship, I have greater history with him. He will win out.”

“No.” Stormbringer licked the salty air off his lips. “No issue, My King.”

Celine stepped beside her father. “What’s gotten into you?”

Without a word, Sewell tugged Celine against his side—his first show of true affection to his daughter in front of the crew—and kept his glare trained on Stormbringer. “Eyes be misplaced, boy.”

“Gods, Sewell, I mean, Lord.” Stormbringer took another step for Sander. “I wasn’t lookin’, and I didn’t know. I would never ... if I would’ve known, I’d not be talkin’ of such things.”

Now, Gavyn, a fresh horn of ale in hand, joined. “What’s all this? Is it time?”

“No, but if a damn disagreement takes from the moment, I will string you all up.” I was in no mood for more strife on deck. “Away with your bickering. Stormbringer, if you’ve done something to offend Sewell, be done with it.”

“I never meant no disrespect,” Stormbringer said. “I didn’t know she was yours ...”

Gavyn perked at once. “Pray tell, did you unknowingly speak of my sister in front of my father?”

“Had a want for his own,” said Sewell.

“Wait.” Celine pushed away from Sewell’s hold. “You spoke to Stormbringer about me?”

“Weeks ago,” Stormbringer said, his voice cracking.

Sewell’s lip curled. “Thought he could take a taste of you ___”

“I *did not* say that.”

Gavyn waved him off. “Means you spoke like you thought of her as something more than a crewmate. Like you *wanted* her.”

He wagged his brows at Celine, laughing when her skin deepened to a dark flush with embarrassment.

“That true, Finn?” Celine asked, voice soft.

At that, even I paused. No one used Stormbringer’s given name. He detested it, said it made him sound like he belonged with the merfolk.

Stormbringer looked down at the deck. “I meant no disrespect, Tidecaller. It’s just ... we’ve ... we’ve got our connection with the storms and all, but I says to Sewell it could be more. Least it seemed so. I thought I was speaking to our cook, not your damn pap.”

Celine glared at her father. “Oh, and what did Sewell have to say?”

“Nothin’,” Stormbringer said. “Told me to keep to my tides, and I took that as I ought not to be fraternizing with the lone lady aboard and left it at that.”

“Not the proper heart for my Thunderfish,” Sewell grumbled.

Gavyn gripped Sewell’s shoulders, giving them a slight shake. “Is anyone going to be worthy of your precious Thunderfish?”

I readied to snap again, shout, curse, demand they cease talking, until Valen’s deep chuckle brought me to my own unease.

“Sewell,” said the earth bender. “Father to father, if my daughter found such an upstanding man as ... Stormbringer, is it?”

“Aye, Earth King.” Stormbringer grew paler, smaller as he slouched.

Valen propped an elbow on the rail, grinning. “Well, I’d take no issue—”

“Quiet the tongue, Wolf,” Sewell grumbled.

“Not so pleasant when it’s turned on you, is it?” Valen struck Sewell’s chest with the back of his hand.

Celine seemed ready to dissolve between the laths, Aleks and Mira laughed as Gavyn kept trying to nudge Stormbringer nearer, and Sewell hissed at the man before stalking toward the hatch, leaving us with all the arrogance of a house lord.

“I didn’t know,” Stormbringer muttered. “How would I know he’s *the* Fleshripper? How would I know Tidecaller is his blood?”

“Be done with it,” I snapped. “Keep your eyes on the stars, you sods.”

Stormbringer cast a wary look at Celine, who’d already raced away, pretending to be preoccupied with a bit of rope, then he, at last, sat beside Prince Sander.

“Found this, Earth Prince.” He unfolded a large sheet of old parchment. “An old runic spell to reveal lost things, well its direct translation is *hidden desires*. Still, figured we desire to find what’s hidden, and it’s damn close to that symbol there.”

Stormbringer pointed to a long, angled rune at the edge of the breastbone.

“Agreed.” Sander nodded and faced the sea. “We’re matched with the sky. I think these—” His fingertip edged the opposite side of the bone. “Are stars. We’re aligned, right?”

Stormbringer took the bone, squinting, as he held it against the sky. “Aye. Nothing there be part of any incantation or lore. It’s a position—beneath the star king and his twelve ladies, King Erik.”

The star king, another constellation with the tale of a rather spoiled king who lived in a constant dance with twelve potential mates, swirling around. I glanced at the sky. The brilliance of the center star flickered, and the softer light of the dozen stars looped around him glimmered, like they called to us.

“Aye. It aligns.” Gods, this had to be it.

“All right.” Sander crouched to one knee. “If I’m understanding correctly, we need to begin the incantation, and it should begin to reveal any hidden things. That’s how I understand it, at least.”

The earth bender had joined us, stone faced, but disquiet revealed itself in the way he cracked one knuckle, then another, over and over again. Jonas, Aleksi, and Mira hung near the rails, watching, a bit of desperation in the tension on their faces.

I knew the feeling too damn well.

“Then do it.” My voice was rough and strained.

Sander nodded. “It’ll move quickly once we begin. Give us a moment to ensure we have the dialect correct, but be ready, Bloodsinger.”

I’d been ready. Since the instant I knew Livia had been taken, I’d been bleeding ready to hold her again.

Wind bit at my face—harsh and cold. I refocused on the horizon.

“Is this your first dealing with facing a traitor?”

I looked up, annoyed to be interrupted again, but it faded at the sight of Valen. The earth bender was replenished from tonics and, in truth, I thought he took a bit of delight at the sight of Hesh, like his suffering invigorated him.

“Of this depth? Yes. No one in all our histories has ever tried to usurp an Ever King. I am the first to bear such an honor.”

“You think it makes you less of a king?”

“I am not beloved, earth bender. I am seen as quite weak.”

Valen paused for a few breaths, then after a moment sighed with a touch of irritation. “Look, Bloodsinger. You are not the first king to be betrayed, nor will you be the last. It was a traitor’s actions that finally brought me to accept my own crown because he nearly got Livia’s mother killed. Then later, another traitor tried to *sell* Elise to our enemies. I never would’ve suspected him, and I thought myself quite weak for not seeing it.”

Was he ... *reassuring* me?

“And—” I paused, adjusting the cutlass on my belt that had no need to be adjusted. “What did you do?”

“Slit the first’s throat.” Valen’s eyes darkened. “And the other, I tore out his lungs through his spine. No less than what you have done.”

Somewhere in my chest, a baffling sort of longing gripped me. It was a craving that wove its way through my skull down

to my heart; a need to ask advice from a king who'd fought for his queen. A king who did not look at me and only measure me against the scars on my skin.

I wanted to ask a dozen things: how did he earn the respect of his people? How did he trust any of them? How did he *speak* to his people?

Stay, Erik Bloodsinger.

It felt like, for a moment, I could see what Valen Ferus meant when he'd told me to stay. When he insisted they did not want my crown, merely wanted to stand at the side of a boy king as he rose to the impossible challenge of ruling a kingdom after the destruction of war.

"You might find this shocking," Valen said, a new calm to his tone. "But I am pleased with the blood on your hands today. I slaughtered men in the most painful ways I could think of for betraying my queen. Much like you have done ... for yours. I know how much I love my wife, Erik." Valen turned away, staring out at the sea, and shrugged. "Take that as you will."

I was damn well going to take it as the earth bender's admission he knew I'd overturn worlds for his bleeding daughter.

"Erik! It's beginning. Look. Gods, it's there!" Sander's voice shattered the night.

The prince held up the bone, and like a bit of starlight burst overhead, a fleeting, vibrant blue flickered.

"*Skriva till a natt,*" Stormbringer muttered. His voice, normally rough and dry, was smooth as a gentle tide. Clear, focused.

My fingers dug into the rough bone of one of the spikes protruding from the hull. I kept one leg propped on the rail, scanning the empty seas.

Nothing.

Another breath and the currents roughened, the ship swayed, a new air warmed my flesh rather than chilled the

skin.

The ship rocked violently. I had to grip the rigging to avoid spilling over the edge. Overhead, the banner of our colors whipped and snapped, then pointed in the opposite direction.

“Wind’s changed,” Stormbringer whispered.

“Three hells.” Valen leaned over the rail. “Look.”

Straight ahead, a new curve of land broke the horizon. Land unknown, prominent cliffsides, torchlight, lanterns, all of it lighting a beach made of dark crystal stones, not the soft sands of the Ever.

In the distance, the sound of a bell rang out over the tides.

Shouts, beastly and wretched, rose from the crew. Blades raised with their voices, and a single ember spear fired in a blast of crimson and ash into the night.

Songbird! I shouted through my heart, desperate for her to hear me. *Turn your eye to the sea, love. We found you!*

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

THE SONGBIRD

A TUMULT of wind ransacked the wood. I trudged forward, bowing my head, and making my way for my bower until I could find a way to Skadi.

If I could find a way to the princess, she might be able to free us of these wards. She could free herself of whatever arrangement Arion had forced upon her head. There'd been a change in Skadi after she'd used her darkness, but she was the last hope I had left. She was the only one with enough power, it seemed, to shatter mystical barriers.

I didn't know how to find her in the palace, then escape. Again.

The deep bong of the bells from the palace tower rattled through the soil. Above the frenzy came shouts, commands, pounding footsteps.

There was a tug around my middle, a distinct nudge to turn back to the sea.

No. I needed to aim for the palace. But warmth, bright and almost familiar, burned in my chest, urging me back toward the water.

He is coming. I shuddered at the thought. Not quite my voice, more ice-edged that burrowed into my blood. A chilling sound—a scrape of claws on my skull—but it didn't bring fear. It was as though something like my fury took hold of me, anxious to guide my steps.

I lifted the tattered hem of the shift, biting through the pain of sharp twigs and briars on the battered soles of my feet.

Branches cracked at my back. It sounded as though an entire army were surrounding me. The elven were formidable, no doubt. They knew their land. I'd no desire to meet them.

"Get me away from them," I called out to the last embers of fury tingling down the tips of my fingers. I brushed my palm across a twisted elm.

Brambles on the narrow path in the wood thickened, forcing me to turn on a bend, deeper into the shadows of the trees. Hair lifted on my arms, the unsettling notion that unseen eyes were locked on me rattled up my spine in great shudders.

He is coming.

Be it the voice of Natthaven, my fury, or a spectral, I no longer cared. The voice in my mind throttled me in panic.

Larsson was coming.

I hastened my pace until I broke free of the trees. A tang of blood burned in my throat, and my chest felt as though I'd swallowed flames. No, gods, no. I was back in the open. Open to arrows, open to Larsson's gaze.

A boom shook the glassy pebbles underfoot.

Thick night burst into a fiery sphere. Short-lived, but enough for gold light of a cinder stone to brighten towering squares of crimson sails. Enough to reveal the sheen of a pitch hull carving through the tides.

I stumbled. "Erik."

For a breath, the tumult in the wood ceased, as if the whole of the isle were stunned into silence at the sight of the Ever Ship.

He was here. Hells, the nudge, the voice, had been leading me to my king, to my serpent, all this time.

Fierce wind snapped and whipped the skirt of the shift around my legs. Then, the crimson sails turned, aiming at the wrong side of the damn isle.

"No! Erik!" I screamed his name, knowing the tides, the wind, the crack of sails on the Ever Ship would swallow the

sound of my voice before reaching him. I struggled against the call to succumb to the tether tying me to this land. “Erik!”

I held my breath. A light in the darkness—Nightfire. Erik was my Nightfire searching the seas and skies for his lost love.

I needed to draw him closer with light. Gods, I wished my uncle Tor, a pyre fae, were here. He could spark a flame with the flick of his hand.

Frantic, I looked about. Around the bend of the isle, I could just make out the tip of my failing wooded wall. Most of it still held, though it would not be long before it fell.

Some elven guards had forgone patience and were half walking, half swimming in the tides to get around the edges of the wall. One held a lantern over the surf.

I needed those flames.

Energy was spent, but I knelt on the soil and scooped it into my palms. A little more. Once more. “Light his way to me.”

For a moment, there was nothing. Then a cry of stun broke the night. The elven holding the lantern was ripped from the water. Far enough, I could only make out the smallest shape, but his cries rippled across the beach, distant but there.

Something moved around him. Roots? More branches? I didn’t know, but in the next breath, the flicker of his lantern skirted across the beach, out of the grip of the guard, and hurtled into the wood.

Shouts of confusion followed. Elven sprinted toward the trees, chasing after the stolen flame, likely expecting to find me there.

I spun around, looking to the trees, waiting. My fingers curled, then stretched and splayed, over and again until my pulse grew so frantic it hurt.

Up the slope, near where the wood had stolen the lantern, a spark leapt across the treetops. Golden flames licked up a towering oak in the center of the hill. Then, another leapt to a

slender spruce. Another onto an aspen. One by one, flames leapt and danced across branches, leaves, and shrubs.

A slow blaze built. But it was more. The trees were not still. They shifted and bent. Shrubs leaned into a distinct shape. My blood burned, but not what it ought to have been for a feat as this. I'd expected to collapse, to overspend my fury magic until I lost consciousness. I remained standing, fatigued, but ready to move when needed.

I was the Ever Queen. It was as though my fury accepted it, as though it were proving it to the sea and land. As though my fury were fighting as desperately as me to find the Ever King.

I backed away, watching in a bit of awe, as fire licked through the trees, coiling and spiraling into the darkness. A grin split over my face when fearful shouts from my hunters faded beneath the roar of wildfire.

Light in the darkness, leading two lost hearts home.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

THE SERPENT

THE BELL WAS A WARNING. Something had gone awry.

“Full cover, you bastards,” I roared. “Light those damn spears.”

Another boom, another cinder stone, peeled toward the dark isle. True to the word of those we’d met along the way, this land was not of the Ever. A dark cloak of mist hovered along the edges, and it seemed to be locked in a violent storm.

It seemed to be fighting against revealing itself, like it was pulling away.

The ashen sails of Tavish’s vessel reeled ahead. Shouts of his crew rippled over the Ever Ship as the House of Mists came about, the hull aligned with the shoreline of the isle. Pressure, like a warm wind before the violence of a storm, billowed the sails.

From here, I could make out Tavish’s form. He stood on the rails, one hand on the rigging, the other outstretched.

“He’s breaking the wards!” I shouted. “Keep aiming at the shore. When those wards shatter, I want no man left alive on that damn isle.”

“King Erik!” A man reeled back off the rail. “The sea witches are sayin’ these wards be trying. No telling if they’ll break entirely.”

Dammit. “Keep firing!”

Repeated calls for more spears echoed down the deck. The Ever Ship jolted before it reached the shallows, forced to go

still.

“I’m going.” I hurried to the port side of the ship.

“It won’t allow it,” Gavyn shouted. “This is what happened. I could remain in the sea but could not breach the shore.”

“Not without the bone.” Sander flailed Hesh’s breastbone. “It is the key, remember what the woman said, he was able to step through the wards while his crew was not. The bone and runes are both locator and key to step onto the shore.”

Without a word, I snatched the bone from the prince and leveraged both feet onto the rail. I clung to the rigging, desperately scanning the shoreline.

Gavyn had made it to the water. Livia was no fool. She would’ve hidden. The bells raging over the shore were sounding before we found the isle, and I had a sinking in my gut—they’d found her.

Another cinder stone cracked through night, but fell into the sea, twenty paces from the shore.

Songbird.

Celine handed me her knives, strapping them on my belt, turning over her own cutlass, as though she feared the same—there was a chance I would be depending on blades to fight until I found Livia.

I would. I would not stop until I laid eyes on my queen.

“Bloodsinger.” Valen took hold of the rope next to me. “You get one true chance. You cannot fight this alone.”

“No choice, Earth Bender. Only one goes ashore unless Tavish breaks through.”

“Then, I’ll go,” he said. “I’ll shatter this damn island.”

I could trust her own father to find her, no mistake, but there was no telling if he would have power over this isle. There was no telling if I would have power over the edges of that sea. There was a hum of strange magic here.

At a cove, mottled in trees and wood, a flicker of golden light rose against the shadows. Crimson flames spread in a distinct pattern, winding up the hillside, blazing through shadows like a beast devouring the land.

Air abandoned my lungs when the fire came to an end, burning in a writhing shape across the treetops. The fire spread in the deliberate shape of a writhing sea serpent.

“There! Livia’s there.”

Valen leaned farther over the rail. “How do you know?”

I didn’t respond, didn’t think, before I tightened my grip on the bone key and dove into the sea.

“Godsdammit, Bloodsinger.” Valen’s anger struck my back when I surfaced.

I dove again, demanding the pull of the current to pull me forward. The moment my knees struck ground, I stood and hurried to the shore. My leg protested. I dug a fist into the point of pain and forced the bones to move, forced my legs to quicken my step.

Billows of thick smoke towered over the isle. Lost in the frenzy of fire and ash, clear shouts of men revealed the truth of it—Larsson had a damn force in his command.

“Livia!” I blinked through the sting of smoke, vision blurring. The pathway through the burning trees sloped up for a short distance, then curved back down toward the shore. “Livia, answer me!”

I followed the blaze down the backside of the slope, coughing and retching against the burning air.

My foot slipped on a stone, landing me on flat, pebbled shore. Breaths were a struggle. I hooked my arm around my nose and mouth and limped through the thick smoke.

“*Livia.*” My voice croaked.

I hurried around a bend on the shoreline, only to meet another slope, and my heart stopped.

There, clinging to the spindly trunk of a small tree, my songbird, dirt-soaked, wild and fierce, halted her descent down the rocky ledge. Eyes like the deepest sea locked with mine for an endless breath.

Pain in my leg forgotten, I sprinted across the shore.

“Erik!” Her cry split me to the marrow of my damn bones. A broken cry, a cry of relief.

Livia used notches in the soil to climb down to the shore, not bothering to wait for her feet to meet pebble before leaping off the edge. She stumbled but caught her stride. Twenty paces, ten. Distance was spent, and I crushed her in my arms. Her body fit against mine, like our flesh and bones yearned to meld together as one.

“Gods,” I said in a frantic gasp, brushing her hair out of her face—a new compulsion.

Livia’s hands padded over my shoulders, my back, my chest, almost as though she weren’t certain if all this were some wretchedly wonderful dream. I pulled away, just enough to press my forehead to hers, enough to breathe her in.

My palms trapped her face. Tears bled onto her cheeks. My own eyes burned; her face blurred.

“Hello, love.” My voice broke, dry and jagged. I pressed my lips to the side of her head, and whispered, “I promised I’d come for you.”

“Erik.” My name slid over her lips like a fleeting hope, one if uttered too fiercely might dry up and whisk away on the wind.

With my thumb, I traced the perfect curve of her bottom lip. I wanted to taste her, wanted my mouth to leave a dozen marks so no land, no kingdom, no eyes would doubt whose heart she claimed.

The clap of an ember spear pulled me back to the sea. The Ever Ship fired bursts of flashing light, one right after the other, all aimed at our cove. A roar of unbridled rage collided with the boom of the Ever Ship. Shouts and commands were

swallowed in the chaos, but there were warriors here. Enemies and blades.

I unsheathed my cutlass and reached for a dagger on my thigh.

Livia tapped my arm. "I have one."

She yanked a sleek dagger from a braid of grass wrapped around her thigh. A grin played over my mouth when we made our way for the curve of the shore. My feral queen. I would devour her the moment she was off this damn land.

I strangled her fingers with my grip. If my hold ached, Livia made no complaints and kept close to my side. Another blast struck the shoreline. The fiery cinder stone arched in the darkness, then seemed to crack against an unseen wall, falling into the shallow tides.

Closer. Wards were falling.

"Is Fione still building the wards?" I asked. To kill the witch would weaken her lingering spells, it would benefit Tavish and quicken his own ability.

"I don't know. I trapped her."

"Where?"

"Fury blocked her behind that wall." Livia pointed to the bend in the shore.

Distant, but I could make out a dark barrier of mangled roots, tree boughs, and vines.

I cupped the back of Livia's neck, drawing her mouth close to mine. "You, Songbird, are the most vicious of foes."

The ground shuddered. Livia drew in a sharp breath, lips parted when she looked to the sea as if she knew. If Valen's fury magic was bending the soil of this isle, Tavish was shattering the wards.

"Time to go, love." I threaded our fingers together.

"She cannot leave."

I wheeled around, one hand on Livia's waist, and shoved her behind me. Gull-fledged arrows aimed at our hearts. Archers looked nowhere but me. In the center was a woman, dressed in a sullen ebony gown. Her eyes were dull, like a dying star. Lost, empty.

"Skadi," Livia's whisper was warm against my neck. "Skadi, what was done to you?"

I leveled the point of my blade at the woman. "It'll take more than a few arrows to stop us."

"Arrows will not stop you." The woman laced her fingers, staring through me like she could see into my soul. "I've already shown her—the isle will not release her."

Livia's eyes were wet. "I can't leave. I-I've tried." Her breaths came in sharp, frantic gasps.

"Songbird, listen to me." When I shifted, the bowstrings stretched and groaned as archers readied to fire. I paid them no mind and trapped Livia's face in my palms. "We'll find a way."

"Go." Livia pushed against my chest. "You must go, Erik. They'll kill you."

My lip curled. I tangled my hand in her hair, holding her in place against my body. "I am not leaving you. *Never* ask me again."

"I will not see Natthaven attacked." The woman took note of the blasts of the ship. "We'll fall into the mists."

"Skadi!" Livia cried. "Please. Help us, and I swear I will help you."

The woman hardly seemed like she needed help. Hard eyes drank us in. Her head cocked to one side when she locked her gaze on Livia. "I have no time to spend helping you when I must help my lands instead."

"No," Livia said, shaking her head. "This isn't you. This isn't what you wanted! Gods, Skadi, wake up. What did they do to you?"

There wasn't a response from the other woman. Only strange iridescent ribbons of darkness around her hands.

Wind, unnatural and furious, whipped through the trees, forcing every branch, every trunk to yield to its rage. I steeled against the torrent, cradling Livia's head against my body. Pebbles underfoot skidded and clacked against larger stones, rolling inward. Rolling toward the trees. Sea spray pricked at my face, a thousand needles against my skin.

"No!" Livia screamed. "The isle, it can fade if threatened."

"Then we go now."

She pulled back on my wrist. "I feel it, already, it's keeping me here."

"Bloodsinger!" Behind the empty-eyed woman, Larsson shoved forward, battling the force of the isle.

A familiar rage ripped its way to the surface, like an old friend I'd always carried with me, dormant and docile, locked away in the scorched edges of my soul. Larsson stumbled. His dark hair flung around his face, a face I saw so differently now. I could almost see hints of my father, of me, in him.

It made me want to snap his head free of his neck.

"Take her, then you kill your lover," Larsson roared. "Stay, and I will make your death swift."

We were surrounded by archers and blazing arrows. Flames lit the tears on Livia's cheeks, the gleam of my sword. I knew nothing about fading isles, knew nothing of how to break a bond that kept my queen a prisoner. All I knew was the gods could not tear me from her side.

"If I die," I shouted. "You die with me."

More ember spears rained shots against the isle. One stone lanced through a guard's chest, splattering bits of bone and flesh along the rocks beneath his boots. Panicked shouts filtered through the guards. Another stone shattered a knee and shoulder. Even Larsson crouched.

"How are the damn wards breaking? Pull us into the mist," he snapped at the woman.

A man with gold-flecked crimson hair cursed. “You keep pulling her deeper, and she will never resurface.”

Larsson ignored him and commanded the woman to tear them away again. Stony indifference lined her features, a mask over what might’ve been lovely.

“Erik, it’s taking me,” Livia cried. “Skadi! Let me go. This is not you.”

Already, countless trees were blotted out in a furious cyclone of dark mist, fading into the night. Only the outer ring of the isle seemed to remain. It was drawing Livia in, and I would not lose her. With Larsson knowing we could find him, there was no telling how long he’d hole away before he struck again.

Two forces fought the other—a magic of the isle drew Livia toward the land, and vicious magic cracked the shore, desperate to pull us back to the sea.

“Sea king.” The strange woman merely stood amidst the colliding magics, hair wild in the wind, fingers laced in front of her body. “White iron is an interesting blade.”

From the darkness around the woman’s hands, a dagger fell, all silver and pearl, like it was nothing but bone. The blade landed at my feet. Perhaps she’d fashioned it from her darkness, summoned it from some pit of the hells, it mattered little. After one look at the woman, after one curse from Larsson when he saw the dagger, I snatched it up.

The moment my fist curled around the ivory hilt, a jolt tugged around my middle, and the shore cracked and split. As though touching the blade broke some sort of chain keeping us grounded on the soil.

Bursts of dirt and bedrock shot from the deep fracture, aiming at the stars. The shore broke away from the isle and plunged me and Livia into the sea.

Before the tides swallowed us whole, the mist of the isle devoured the strange woman and Larsson’s face into nothingness.

I kicked us to the surface, Livia in my arms.

Where peaks and lanterns and forests had been, now empty seas stretched for lengths. Where furious tides and winds had been, now haunting silence remained.

Livia shuddered.

Horror, cold and sharp, flooded my chest. Her eyes spun wildly in her skull. Blood seeped from her nose, her ears, her damn mouth. The remaining wards tore her apart.

“Shit, *shit!* Livia! Livia, look at me.” I tilted her head in my hands. Her lashes fluttered. In another breath, I demanded—begged—the tides to get us back, to lift us, *help* us. My mind was spinning, I hardly felt the thud of the hard deck of the ship when the sea tossed us aboard.

Hands shaking, I laid Livia on the deck. Gods, every one of her limbs were soaked in blood; new gashes kept splitting open.

“Livia!” Valen’s voice, frantic and fearful, came from across the deck.

In one tug, I stripped my shirt and took my own dagger to my middle. A long swipe, deep and swift.

“Erik!” Tait shouted. “Godsdammit, too much.”

There would never be a line, never be a limit, to what I would do to keep Livia Ferus breathing. Did he not know that?

Blood stained my stomach, my thighs. I wrapped my body around Livia’s, aligning her numerous open wounds with mine, and sang. Desperate, broken, the sound of my song was one I did not recognize.

Her body convulsed in my grip. I closed my eyes and focused, blocking all shouts, all voices.

A haze gathered in my mind, a sort of peace, and through it, a vision of Livia smiled.

I deepened my song, tightened my hold on her calm body. She wasn’t trembling anymore. In my mind, her smile widened. She waved for me to follow.

“Erik!” Someone called for me from a great distance, like their voice carried on the wind. I ignored them and reached out for Livia’s outstretched hand.

Some force pulled me away from her. I shook it off and tried to reach her again.

“Bloodsinger.” The voice was rough, deep. Familiar. A voice I’d heard since childhood. The earth bender’s voice. Another tug, and I lost my grip on Livia’s hand. I tried to fight my way back to her, tried to reach for her again.

Hands were on my skin. Too large to be my songbird’s. “Enough, boy. That was enough.”

The image of Livia’s face faded from my mind. Hovered over me was Valen Ferus. His hands were soaked in my blood. I understood, and in truth, I didn’t blame him for taking the strike he’d vowed to take as my payment for stealing her away.

At least Livia was free now.

I let my eyes close, resigned to my end, and my mind went dark.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

THE SONGBIRD

HAZE BLURRED MY VISION, but I recognized the glass panes of the king's window in his chamber on the Ever Ship. I was bleeding atop the soft blue quilt on the king's cot. My eyes cracked enough to see strong hands on my blood-soaked skin, tenderly washing it away with a thin linen.

I knew those hands. They'd loved me since my earliest memories.

I tried to call to him, wanted to see the laughter I knew so well in those dark eyes, but words dried to ash in my throat, and I fell away into heady black.



WHEN I WOKE AGAIN, I knew nothing of how long I'd been sleeping, only that it must've been a great while. My lips were cracked and dry, my throat parched and desperate for water.

I squinted and peered out the bubbled glass. Sea—beautiful, cerulean Ever Sea surrounded me at all sides. Ghostly mist hovered over the white tips of waves, but a sliver of golden sunlight was chasing away the bleary night.

A soft groan slid out when I rolled onto my shoulder. Beside the bed was a clay basin and ewer. With wild hands, I snatched the ewer and tipped it against my mouth, drinking and drinking, until my tongue no longer stuck to my inner cheeks.

When I returned the ewer to its place, I startled.

There, seated in a wooden chair, his dark stubbled chin propped on the claw of his hand, was the first man I ever loved.

My father's sleeping face was fatigued, but strong as always. Youthful, yet ancient with worry. Blood stained his hands, mine or his, I didn't know. His breaths were steady as he slumbered, but his body was clenched in unease, as though he might step into battle at the slightest sound.

I sat up, the creak of the bed fluttering his eyes. My father dropped his arm, peered around the room for a breath, until his eyes locked with mine.

One heartbeat, and his face pinched. Two heartbeats, he shot off his chair. Three, and his arms, safe and strong, were holding me, the way they'd always done.

I clung to his neck, desperate to keep in the wet rattle of a sob in my chest.

"Livie," he whispered against my hair. "Gods, I've missed you."

My ambition to keep my wits cracked. Shattered, more like it.

I clung to my father's tunic and sobbed. Tears fell for the ache of missing him and my family, the ache they must've felt. I cried knowing he'd come after me, for the truth that I would tell him, and how it would break his heart all over again. That I loved them all so fiercely, but the Ever was my home.

All the while, Valen Ferus said nothing, merely let me cry.

I wiped at my eyes. "Daj, you're here."

He cupped my face in his palms, a wet smile on his face. "Always."

"How ... how am I even alive?" Only hints of fleshy scrapes lined my arms when it had felt as though every bone in my body had shattered.

My father hesitated for a breath. "Seems there is powerful healing blood aboard this ship."

Erik. To heal so much, it would've been dangerous for him. I opened my mouth to press about my king, I needed my eyes, my hands, on him soon, but voices beyond the door cut me off.

“Hello? We've waited long enough.”

I pressed a hand to my chest. I knew that glib tone.

A few clicks, a few moments, and the door swung open. A frenzy of bodies stumbled through, all speaking at once, but one boomed over the rest.

“Livia, I will have it known I have fought the hardest to get back to you, first damaging your lover, in your honor, of course. Then pleasuring a lovely Rave to free him—do not tell my mother, Valen—and I expect the fiercest thanks.”

“Jo—” I couldn't finish his name before Jonas Eriksson descended upon me like a wild storm. He held me, squeezed against his broad chest, and I thought there was a soft shudder in the way he let out a breath.

“Missed you, Liv,” he whispered.

My mouth hung open, stupid and stunned, when Sander took me next, muttering about all he'd been studying of the Ever, thoughts on the fading isle, and where he'd like to research next before Mira shoved through.

She crushed my windpipe against her shoulder. “We are never going to be allowed at a ball again,” she said, snickering through her tears. “Unless you hold one, of course. *Queen.*”

Gods, they knew it all.

“You ... all came for me?”

Jonas rolled his eyes. “She says that like she actually thinks we wouldn't.”

“I'll likely be named a traitor, or at the very least lose my standing in the Rave, but it was worth it.” In the doorway, Aleksii smiled, leaning one shoulder against the frame.

My father helped me to my feet. Every joint ached, every muscle protested, but greedy pain burned fiercest in my chest,

one I could not sate if I did not find *him* soon.

“I love you all.” I hesitated. “But I need to—”

“Out there.” Mira pointed toward the main deck. “I want to know *everything*.”

I spared a glance at my father; he seemed torn on letting me out of his sight. Perhaps it was selfish of me to desire to be anywhere else, but when he shook his head and waved me away, my feet could not turn me around swiftly enough.

The crew busied about their duties. At the sight of me, they would dip their chins, smile, greet me with a soft, “Welcome back, lovey.”

I did my best to respond, but my pulse was frantic. I scanned bodies, looked to the helm, desperate to find ...

Crimson eyes lifted over the shoulder of a man I did not know. Hunger lived in those eyes, beautiful, consuming, *mine*. Erik’s top was unlaced over his chest, revealing his scars and the dark ink of waves on his chest.

“I’m trying to set the spell. Hold still.” The tall man in front of the Ever King barked orders. Erik paid him no mind and shoved past with the strength of a dozen men.

I did not meet my king gently. My arms, legs, all of me wrapped around him, forcing his back to strike the rail.

Erik swallowed me up in his arms, his face burrowed against the slope of my neck. His body slid to the deck, my legs straddled over his hips, his back against the side, arms around my waist. He breathed deeply. His fingers curled into my flesh. I dug one hand into his hair before I pulled back, studying his face.

Sharp lines, that scar through his top lip, the points of his two elongated teeth visible in his parted lips.

His thumb brushed over my cheek, once, twice, then his mouth crashed to mine. There wasn’t anything sweet or gentle about the kiss. It screamed of greed, of a restored addiction after being deprived for too long.

Erik's mouth claimed every bit of mine. One kiss slid to the next.

"Songbird," he uttered against my neck, low, almost a growl.

My fingers glided under the neckline of his top, tracing scars along his shoulders, his back, reveling in the heat of his skin after so long of being without, wondering if I might ever feel him again. Erik shuddered and pulled me more tightly against his body, deepening the kiss.

His tongue swiped against mine—gods—his taste. Salt and fire, all of it collided in my mouth, and I let out a groan. I could not get enough.

Until a throat cleared.

We pulled apart, his brow on mine, our harsh breaths a song between us. Erik didn't look away but smiled at me. A true smile, the most beautiful sight.

"I want to say I will murder whoever has stopped us," he whispered, "but I can hardly draw up a drop of anger, not with you here." His palms stroked my hair, my neck, my shoulders, like he was proving his words true.

I kissed the hinge of his jaw. "I never wish to be anywhere else."

"Good hells. They're awful." Jonas groaned behind us, drawing a few laughs.

It was then I realized my father was an unwitting spectator to my moment of passion. As was—all gods—Stieg was here. My face heated. I cleared my throat and unraveled myself from the Ever King's lap.

"Erik Bloodsinger!" I pawed his ribs. Fresh blood soaked his tunic. "What were you thinking?"

The tall man hissed a curse. "This is the last time I'm going to set this damn wrap. If your horrid blood kills me, I'll have you know my mate will come for you for robbing my children of their father. Catriona is rather skilled at hexes, and she will not hold back for royalty."

“If you’re going to keep whimpering, have one of us crewmen do it,” shouted Skulleater. “Longs as we’re on our ship, we be safe.”

“No. Now, it’s simply become a challenge I must conquer, you sod,” the man retorted and dug back into Erik’s wound.

Perhaps it was the blood loss, maybe Erik was delirious with relief much the same as me, but instead of scowling, he murmured under his breath, “Do your littles look at all like me, Tavish?”

The man’s hands halted over the herb-soaked bandage. “Such questions should not be asked without a hefty ewer of strong mead, King. But I wonder if you’ll ever dare ask my father the question you long to ask.”

“Doubtful.” Erik waved him away, keeping his heated gaze on me. “Tavish is aggravated with me, Songbird. Seems when you are on the brink of death, I lose my mind and slaughter myself.”

This damn man. I gave him a withering look that could only hold for a moment before it dissolved into something stronger, more lascivious.

“I’m still trying to puzzle out what sort of spell caused all that damage,” Tavish murmured, focusing on the bandages.

“I was told blood spells kept me on the isle so long as Fione remained,” I said, voice soft. “Only death of the caster or a forced removal would break them entirely.”

“Your father broke the soil and tore us away,” Erik said through a wince. “It forced you to leave.”

I nodded. “But the blood ... I was told, removal from the isle was fatal.”

The man wrapping Erik’s waist paused for a tense moment. “Then it is a remarkable blessing the king was there to heal you. Dark blood spells as that—I’ve never heard of anyone surviving. The good news is there is truth to a forceful severance of blood bonds. The wards they created no longer exist. We can set foot on those shores again without the marked bone.”

Marked bone? It must've been what Skadi mentioned about Hesh and Larsson being the ones who could cross the wards without trouble.

While Tavish dressed the wound, I stepped aside, finding Celine beside Gavyn and Sewell.

“Don't do that again,” Celine whispered, locking her hands around my shoulders when I embraced her. “We stick together, remember? Can't be doing that if you get yourself snatched.”

“I plan to never leave a room without a dozen guards, lest another liar tries to steal me away.”

Celine's eyes glittered. “Trust me, the king will never let you out of his sight again.”

I wasn't certain I'd mind.

“Glad you found your way off the isle, My Queen,” Gavyn said, his elbows propped like the smug lord I'd seen from afar before our world toppled. “If I'd known I could force you away by merely peeling all the flesh off your bones, I certainly would've done so and avoided a lot of nasty threats from the king.”

“I'm rather glad you didn't.”

Gavyn blew out his lips. “It would've been a grand adventure.”

“Little fox,” Sewell shoved Gavyn—*his son*—aside and pressed a kiss to my head. “Strong as the sea.”

“It is good to see you, *Lord Sewell*,” I whispered against his chest.

Sewell lifted a finger to his lips and slunk back between his children.

“The royal city!” Tait, alive and stern, shouted down from the helm. For a breath, his gaze stayed with me, but as quickly as he looked, he turned back to the sea. Tension knotted over my heart. I needed to speak to him, but what to say, how to thank him, left my tongue wanting.

I leaned into Erik, holding his freshly bandaged waist. Spires of gold, cliffs and coves, the glitter of the pale shores of the royal city gleamed in the rising sun.

Erik pressed a lingering kiss to my forehead. We did not need to have a bond that spoke through our hearts—I knew what he was thinking, for I thought much the same.

We were home.



MERFOLK GUIDED the Ever Ship into port. Their orb eyes surfaced every few moments, scanning the laths for a peek at the king and his crew. Frightening and lovely, the merfolk captured the awe of my fellow royals.

Mira gasped when a woman with moss green hair and skin like a storm cloud beamed at her from the currents, flashing her jagged teeth and wailing her sorrowful voice.

Even my father seemed fascinated by their iridescent fins and cunning voices, urging the earth fae to join them for a swim.

“Don’t even think about it, Jonas,” Sander said, gripping his brother’s arm.

“She’s a bit pretty.” Jonas pointed down at a slender mermaid.

“They’ve no interest in your life once you’re beneath the tides,” Gavyn insisted, swinging a heavy canvas sack over the rails into some of the smaller skiffs taking supplies into the city. “They’re enamored by other folk but lose interest soon enough.”

“I’d see to it she wouldn’t lose interest.”

Gavyn chuckled. Strange, watching a bit of camaraderie between my lifelong friends and family, and my new people.

But for two.

Daj kept close to me, always a few paces away, but a clear distance was built between Erik and my father. They would

give occasional nods to each other but didn't speak.

I wanted to know everything—Erik's journey to my homeland, how they returned, how they discovered the isle. I wanted to know my father's thoughts about the few times I was certain he'd heard me addressed as queen.

More than anything, I wanted to slip away with my serpent. I wanted to touch him, hold him, tangle arms and legs with him, and for a moment, forget we'd ever been parted. There were conversations to be had. Larsson, Arion, and Fione still had some wretched power over Skadi and her people.

Larsson had been bruised, nothing more, but he would not stop his pursuits for the crown.

Now, we simply didn't know how he would strike.

Another horn was followed by cheers from the crowds packed along the winding stone road. From the windows of red gabled rooftops, children waved banners of the Ever Ship, and women flailed their white linens, waving their men home.

“So,” Daj said, voice low. “This is the Ever.”

Erik took a step to one side, mutely offering us a moment alone, and pretended to busy himself with the unloading of packs and crates and crew.

Webs of cobbled roads wove around cottages and taverns. Mighty stone archways marked each curve of the roads, and powerful waterfalls spilled over the rocky ledges. The verdant hill which embraced the tiered levels of the palace brightened under the beams of sunlight, like the royal city was celebrating the return of its king.

“This is the royal city,” I said, slipping my arm through the bend of my father's elbow. I let my head fall to his shoulder. “It's ... it's home, Daj.”

He dropped his chin, eyes closed, for a breath. Then took hold of my hand on his arm and lifted my knuckles to his lips. “I know.”

“It does not mean I have not missed you all horribly,” I whispered, mortified by the fearful tremble in my voice. “It

does not—nor could it—lessen how much I love—”

“Livia.” My father pulled me into his arms, holding me against his chest. “I know.”

A thousand unspoken words lived in such a simple statement—he knew what it was like to take on the burden of a kingdom. He knew what it was like to give your heart and soul to another.

He knew I was no longer *only* his daughter.

“Coaches are waiting, love.” Erik’s low timbre took me from my father’s arms.

With a touch of hesitation, the Ever King eyed the Night Folk king, then held out a hand for me.

On the outside, the moment was simple. To me, it was pivotal. A moment where I released my grip on my father, my people, and took hold of the man who’d come to own every facet of my soul.

Erik understood it and squeezed my palm in reassurance as we made our way to the plank.

Daj understood it and kept several paces behind me, joining Stieg and the others, like he’d accepted a new place where he could keep a wary eye on his girl, while letting her step into her own power.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

THE SONGBIRD

THERE WERE differences between this arrival and the time I'd stepped into the main palace hall for the first time. It wasn't that I now clung to Erik Bloodsinger with ease instead of fear, it wasn't that the coaches had driven both sea fae and earth fae into the gates, it was a feeling in the palace.

Somber and joyful, tenuous and bright. As though courtiers and villagers were pleased with the arrival of the royal ship, but they knew what it meant—more battles were coming.

Alistair awaited us in the wide hallway, pompous as ever, ill-fitted in his blue silken doublet and trousers, but there was a twitch to his thin lips when Erik barged through the doors. The old steward bowed at the waist.

“Welcome home, My King.” Alistair's dull eyes landed on our entangled hands. “And to you, My Queen.”

My heart fluttered when more than one courtier loitering in the hall bent at the knees or waist. A few witches and sirens studied Jonas, Sander, and Aleks. When he'd arrived, Alek had been a source of curiosity and attraction to many of the folk in the royal court. Now, there were more earth princes to ogle.

When Jonas gave up his cunning half grin, the courtiers snickered and bunched together with their hushed delight, hiding their plump lips behind their satin gloves.

Folk hushed at the sight of Stieg and my father.

A few murmurs of *earth bender* rumbled over the stones of the hall.

I'd hardly thought long on the truth that Valen Ferus was a killer of an Ever king, nor how the people of the royal city would react to his presence.

Erik was unbothered, ignoring most who greeted us, and spoke quickly to Alistair. "We have guests, visiting royalty. See to it they're fitted into suitable chambers."

The old steward blustered. "Perhaps, My King, and this is merely an idea, a suggestion, one might send a note to announce vast royalty would be in attendance."

"Alistair," Erik said, voice smug. "Did you not chatter my ear off before all this wretchedness began about how the palace would be ready to accommodate earth fae?"

"That does not sound like me."

Erik leaned closer. "See to it, or shall I have someone else oversee the task?"

"Threats are useless, Highness. Banish me all you please, I'll not comply. By the by, before you all retire, and—gods, I beg of you—go wash, I thought our Lady of the Ever might wish to see something."

Lady of the Ever. I swallowed through the knot in my throat.

"Don't ask me, old man." Erik's hand fell to the small of my back. "Ask your lady. Her voice bears the same weight as mine."

Truth be told, I wanted to slip away to our chambers and not emerge for no less than a month. Still, I nodded at Alistair. "I'd like to see."

The steward sniffed, turning before I could fully catch the satisfaction on his face, and led us toward the throne room. Blood had been scrubbed off the floor from the wickedly beautiful night when Erik made me his queen. The polished tiles swirled in a coil from the edges of the room to the center,

like a whirlpool on the sea. Sconces were alight and brightened the pale stone walls.

On the dais beside Erik's dark mahogany throne, was a second seat, complete and stunning. Vines of ivy ran along the armrests. Sunbeams, thorns, and rose buds shaped the high back, and on every edge, were small foxes racing along the wood.

"Are you pleased?" Alistair asked with anticipation.

"It's beautiful," I choked out.

Erik pressed a tender kiss to my palm. Mira and Celine made swift remarks on the craftsmanship, and how well-suited the throne looked amidst all the horridly gawdy tapestries and furnishings from Ever Kings of old.

My father was stoic, lost in thoughts I didn't want to disturb. Not until we'd had time to let this new life settle. Rest, food, a wash, as Alistair suggested. Then, we could speak.

Satisfied by my praise, Alistair clapped his hands, ushering a swell of palace servants to tend to the new arrivals.

"Daj is an enemy here," I whispered to Erik. "He killed a king, and everyone knows it."

Erik's eyes flashed. "He is also the father of our queen. I think I have made it clear—in this very room—what becomes of anyone who harms my queen, Songbird. Should he be hurt, you would be hurt."

A throat cleared. Alistair, nose in the air, stepped beside us. "Mind the intrusion, but I shall tend to the earth king personally. I assure you, I would stand little chance should I attack the man. Then, there is a feast to be had for this new unity, naturally. Ire has a way of dimming with a good meal, a spritely tune, and the king's wine."

He strode off before we could argue. I'd long since learned Alistair served the palace, but it would be rather pointless to stand in the man's way should he have a plan.

"He'll tend to Daj and Stieg because everyone else looks terrified of them," I whispered.

Once my friends and family were paired with an attendant, Erik led us to the study with a polished wood desk, a widespread window overlooking the sea, and one of the king's tricky hidden passages in the walls.

My insides heated until the burn ached between my thighs by the time Erik pushed through the wall and into the outer chamber of the king's wing.

Someone had lit the strange blue fire in the inglenook. Sweet wine and dark rum were set out on a wooden tray on the table, and steam spilled from the washroom.

A dozen memories of this room already reeled through my mind. The arguments, the shift between captor and captive to lovers, the joy and passion. All of it spun in my head until we stopped in front of the washroom door.

Erik fumbled with the handle. "We can wash, then—"

He didn't finish before I shoved his back to the wall. I kissed him. Fiercely. My teeth scraped over his lip. Erik thrust his fingers into the tangles of my hair, tugging my head back all to give him the angle he demanded. I arched my hips into his, groaning against the hardness of his body.

"Wash all you like," I said between breaths. "So long as I am there with my hands on your skin."

"Gods, woman," he cursed and tugged at the dirty shift, rusted over in old blood.

We were worn, cut and slashed, but there was little thought to any of it as I peeled his belt away, as Erik sloughed off his boots. Frantic fingers worked laces on my bodice, and buckles on his trousers.

"You have open wounds," I whispered between kisses, stealing a glance at the bandage over his ribs. "Don't allow your blood to poison me until I get a little more of you, Serpent."

His grin brushed over my mouth. "Tavish has tricks not even a boneweaver knows—the wraps clot the blood with a spell, love. Don't pick at it, and it should hold through plenty of movement."

Patience lost, Erik gripped the edges of the bodice and split it at the seams until it fell away. The cool air against my skin pebbled my nipples. He let out a hiss of desire before nudging my back to the doorframe and covering the peak with his lips.

Sharp, needy gasps spilled over my tongue. I held the back of his head, drawing him closer. Erik sucked and lapped at my skin. His teeth scraped over the point as he bit down on the tip, flicking his tongue.

My core throbbed. I bucked into his hips, already desperate for release. His touch was a beautiful curse, one taste, and I could never get enough.

I hooked my thumbs into the waist of his trousers and shoved them over his hips. His cock sprang out. Erik groaned into my breast when I curled my hand around the velvet skin and stroked.

“Songbird.” He lifted his head, eyes like gold fire.

The king straightened and placed his palms on either side of my head. He studied my hand around his shaft, rocked his hips, lips parted, and watched, drunk on desire, as my thumb ran over the narrow slit until his arousal beaded over the head.

“My hand,” I whispered by his ear, “or my mouth?”

Erik let out a moan; his forehead dropped to my shoulder. “If you think I’m going to come before you after all this, you’re mistaken.”

I let out a shriek when Erik scooped me up beneath my thighs, hooking my legs around his waist, and carried me into the washroom. A bath had been drawn in the deep stone basin. Doubtless Alistair and all his preparations would be the one to thank.

Erik placed me on the edge of the basin and made quick work of sliding the damp rag of the torn shift over my head.

On his knees, trousers still seductively low on his thighs, the king sat back on his heels, taking me in. Once, being exposed and bared in such a way, I might’ve felt a flush of embarrassment. It had never been so with Erik Bloodsinger.

His gaze, his touch, his passion, all of it unlocked a need to meet him with much the same.

The inky black of his pupils dilated when I slid my palms down my thighs, spreading my legs on the edge of the stone tub, baring myself.

Erik cursed and drove a hand between my thighs. His rough fingertips teased me with every flick, every touch. I let my head fall back when he dragged his tongue over my chest again, kissing his way down my belly. His fingers curled inside me, and I was undone.

“Erik.” My chest ached from the rough breaths. I cared little and hooked one leg over his shoulder. “Why are you still clothed?”

Erik paused, gently eased my leg to the side, and rid himself of his bloody top. I sucked in a breath. There, down his chest, I could now see plainly the still-healing gash over his heart. He hugged an arm around my waist, pulling me closer, and gently slid his palm over the same scar between the cleft of my breasts.

“Listen to me, love,” Erik whispered against my lips. “Whatever that bastard thinks he took from us, he failed. I belong to you, every wretched piece of me. I’ve no need for spells or bonds to prove it. I choose you, Livia Ferus. For much longer than my last breath.”

Tears lined my cheeks. “Your words help, Serpent.”

I kissed him, deep and sweet. With less frenzy, Erik eased me into the water, only pulling back to finish kicking off his trousers, then covered me with his body, steam coiling around our faces.

For a moment, his fiery eyes drank me in, gleaming with the vicious kind of need I’d always loved, those moments when he planned to stake a possessive claim over me. The tips of his fingers traced the planes of my face, the curves of my breasts, my belly, until his fingertips teased the folds of my entrance.

My head fell back against the edge of the basin. I let my knees fall open. Gods, I'd been starved of his touch too long. Anticipation for the musk of his earthy taste made my mouth drip with want. I reached for him again, but he shifted, avoiding my touch.

Erik nipped my jaw. "What did I say? You first."

"Bastard," I groaned when he added a second finger and set a vicious pace.

An intoxicating sort of numb spread over my body, no thought, no worry, no fear, only him. The calluses of his hands, the tension on my skin, the ebb and flow of his touch.

Beyond my control, my hips bucked with every glide of his hand. Water splashed over the rim of the basin onto the floor. Erik pressed the tip of his thumb against the sensitive apex of my core, and a grin split over his mouth when I whimpered, taut and ready to break.

"Prove my words true," Erik growled, a dark ferocity written on his features. "You're mine." He circled his thumb with more focus, thrust his fingers deeper, and lowered his voice to a dangerous tone. "Make certain every damn soul in this palace knows it."

I shattered.

Water thrashed around us, my body trembled, and his name tore from my throat. With haste, the king swallowed the sound with a bruising kiss. He worked his fingers in and out until my body went lax.

I pressed a palm to my brow, gasping. "Satisfied? You won."

Erik grinned with a touch of villainy and kissed the slope of my neck. "Not even close, love."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

THE SERPENT

POISONOUS BLOOD, with numerous gashes and wounds, was hardly convenient when all I wanted was my songbird naked and pressed against me.

My hands worked quickly but carefully, wiping away the grime from our bodies. Convinced I'd tended to my wounds without spilling any blood over her skin, I still kept a low hum in the back of my throat, when bits of crimson scrubbed off on linens, when drops fell in the water.

I was not risking a moment.

Livia frowned once more at the bandages over my middle, ready to protest my choice to slit my own body; I stole away any remarks by kissing her until she softened in my arms again.

"Erik," Livia breathed out. "More."

"You want more?" I kissed her jaw, her slender neck. "You want to taste me, Songbird? Want to choke on me? Want me to devour you?"

Livia let out a soft sob and nodded. Her neck arched back, as though she were offering herself to my desires.

"Get up." I took hold of her arm, losing myself in the way fragrant water sluiced over her curves.

Without hesitation, Livia complied and gripped my waist as I backed us into our bedchamber. She drew in a sharp breath when her legs hit the moss filled mattress of the enormous bed. New crimson coverlets shielded the linens, threads of

gold carved through the center in a design of ivy and waves of the sea.

I'd thank Alistair for commissioning furnishings that united both our worlds later. The old fool did it all in our absence, as though he knew there would be no reality in which I did not return with my songbird.

Livia's fingernails scraped over my hips. Good. I hoped she left her mark. Too damn long had my skin been free of my mate's touch.

I spun us around so my back was to the bed and cupped her face. "Trust me?"

"Always."

Slowly, I leveraged over the bed until my head reached the satin pillows. "Come here."

Livia, cheeks flushed, crept over the bed, straddling my hips. The corner of my mouth tugged up. "Wrong place, Songbird."

Her brow furrowed. "What do you—"

Words cut off when I cupped the globes of her ass and pulled her up my chest. Her knees settled beside my shoulders.

"Erik, what are you doing?"

"Almost there, love." I gripped her hips again until I had her knees next to my ears. "Hands on the posts, hips down."

"I can't ... Erik, I can't *sit* on you."

"You can." I dragged my nose through her heat, drawing in a breath of her scent. "You will."

With trembling fingers, Livia took hold of the posts making up the head of the bed. She sucked in a sharp gasp of air when my tongue swiped over her core, back to front. Gods, to taste her again . . .

"Erik." Her voice was hardly there, a rough whisper, almost an instinct, exactly where my damn name belonged.

Little by little, Livia's body rocked and arched the deeper I dragged my tongue, the more I used my fingers. The points of my teeth dragged over her sensitive flesh, to her inner thighs.

"So perfect," I rasped. From my angle, her body was in full view—flushed, glistening with water and sweat. I nudged her thighs. "Open more for me."

She let out a strangled gasp when I swirled my tongue around her sensitive core. Livia moaned, then bent a bit at the waist, her brow falling to the post of the bed as she sank lower over my mouth.

A queen on her knees, moaning from my kiss, my cock throbbed with the need for release from the sight of it all. Mangled sobs and curses bounced off the walls of our room. After a moment, it was hard to tell who made which sound.

Livia's head snapped back when I sucked harder and dug my fingers into her skin, holding her in place. Another breath, another taste, and her body went rigid.

I refused to let the moment fade away, and rolled her beneath me, fitting my hips between her thighs. She still writhed, seeking out pressure through her release.

"Please." She hooked her ankles around my legs, urging me closer.

In one thrust, I slid inside. The pleasure of it was a bright shock to my brain, my heart. Livia moaned at the intrusion, then buried her face against my neck, nipping at my pulse point.

I tilted her hips, only enough to sink deeper. For a breath, I went still. The sensation of her body wrapped around me again was almost too much. I drew back, then thrust back inside. She let out a soft gasp. The beautiful curves and soft edges of her body collided with my chest.

"Gods, all gods," she whispered, clawing at my back.

I picked up the rhythm. A give and take between us. My blood tingled. I reached between us and pinched her nipple until it was hard in my fingers. My lips covered hers. Livia

sucked on my tongue and devoured my mouth like she would never have me again.

My body trembled when the coil of tension gathered low in my gut. I lost control and bucked wildly. Livia met the new frenzy, grinding against me, until she whispered my name over and over, her body shuddering as a new release built.

“I love you.” My voice was soft. Even still, it cracked.

Her brow furrowed, and she kissed me harder. The slap of our skin, the heat of our breath, the rock of the bed against the wall. It was a moment so perfect, I wanted to battle for it to never end.

Livia’s neck strained when her core pulsed. In the next breath, tension snapped, and my cock twitched. I froze for a few breaths when my release spilled into her in long, heated rushes. I bit down on her shoulder, rotating my hips to draw out the pleasure.

One arm around her waist, I held her against me, breathing heavily. I kissed her pulse point, then slowly pulled out.

We collapsed on the bed, eyes on the rafters. After a moment, Livia rolled into me, one leg draped over mine. She kissed me, slow and sweet, eyes wet with tears.

“I love you, too, Erik Bloodsinger. I’ll never be able to express how wondrous it is to be in your arms again.”

I traced the curve of her bottom lip with my thumb, kissed her brow, then curled my body behind hers. My arm draped possessively over her waist until we drifted to sleep—safe, at long last.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

THE SONGBIRD

I WOKE ALONE.

Panic, so sharp it was almost painful, carved through my chest. My palm swatted over Erik's side of the bed. Still warm, but quickly cooling.

"Erik?" I snapped upright, blood rushing to my head until it pounded between my ears. Dark, satin shades were drawn over the windows, dimming the room, but through the cracks, a glare of sunlight sliced through, deeper than the dawn.

The washroom door connected the sitting chamber to our bedroom, but it was empty save for our discarded clothes that still littered the floor. I pressed the heel of my hand over my heart, the skin still sore from the lost heartbond.

"Erik."

Gods, I felt much like a fool, crumbling in such a way. I was neither warrior nor queenlike. Cruel, unrelenting thoughts that tricked my mind slithered between my rationale, desperate to convince me it had all been a beautiful illusion, some game, and in truth my serpent was still lost to me.

The tips of my fingers traced the marks on my throat, marks left behind by Erik Bloodsinger's wicked mouth.

Breathe. Focus. I blinked; tears fell off my lashes. I swiped them away, on the brink of spilling over the ledge of sobs, of panic.

The door leading to the sitting chamber opened. Erik, naked from the waist up, carried a tray of steaming herb drinks

and a few spongy cakes with pink sugared glaze. He kept his eyes homed on the delicate balance of the tray, unaware I'd become as a weeping stone in the center of our bed.

Gods, he was beautiful—strong and built to glide through the sea. His dark hair still tousled from my fingers.

His crimson gaze lifted, followed by a natural smile. "I'd planned to wake you my way, but ..." Erik's voice fell to the wayside. A furrow dug over his brow as he briskly set the tray on a chest of drawers against the wall. "Songbird? What is it?"

Mortification heated my cheeks, unrelenting. I forced a smile, shaking my head. "Nothing."

Erik crept over the bed, a gentle hand pressed over my heart, nudging me backward onto the mattress. With his body, he made a cage over me. "Is this the moment we begin lying to each other? I thought we determined long ago there was little point in such things."

"It's foolish," I whispered.

"Then I'm even more intrigued, for I've yet to hear a foolish thing from your mouth."

I rubbed one side of his arm, tracing a cluster of scars near his wrist. "Just rogue thoughts trying to run away again."

Erik settled behind me, his arm possessive around my waist, lips brushing my ear. "You are Livia Ferus."

I hugged his arm tightly, like he'd become part of the messy quilts around my body, reveling in the low grit of his voice.

"Daughter of warriors," he went on, pressing kisses behind my ear. "Defeater of traitors, biter of the Ever King—"

"I did not bite you."

Erik cocked his head to one side, revealing bruises in the shape of teeth all along the ridge of his shoulder.

Lips pinched, I turned away. "I heard no complaints."

Slow strokes of his fingers traced the tapered tip of my ear. "Never keep your fears from me, Songbird."

“Just a moment of worry when you weren’t here that it had all been a dream. I knew it wasn’t plausible but fell into the storm of spiraling thoughts all the same.”

“I’m disappointed,” he said, gripping my chin, urging me to look at him again. “I’ve still heard nothing foolish from your mouth.”

“You coddle me too much, Erik Bloodsinger.” I pinched his hip bone.

“I do not even know how to coddle.” Erik tugged on my waist until I rolled onto my shoulder to face him. “What did I tell you, love? Fear is powerful. Every mind sees it differently, but it is my honor to walk with you through yours. No matter how illogical you think them to be. Would you not do the same?”

I sighed. “Of course, I would. You, Ever King, could do with a few more stumbles, so I *can* pick you up a bit more. You’re rather unbending. It makes others”—I pointed at myself— “quite surly when we cannot be so stalwart.”

He pecked my lips. “You know more than anyone, love, it is only a mask I wear.”

I stroked the stubbled edge of his jaw. “No masks with me, Serpent.”

“Aye.” He kissed me again, slower, more tender. “So long as you do the same.”

“Fine.” I let out an exaggerated sigh. “By the gods, you’re demanding.”

Erik settled his body over mine, grinning with the same viciousness I’d loved since those nights peering into his prison cell.

“I have ways to make more demands you might enjoy.” He kissed both swells of my breasts, then rolled off the bed. “Unfortunately, it will need to be later. Our faces are required in the hall.” He gathered the food tray and laid it on the bed. Erik splayed on his side beside it, propped on one elbow. “I’ve tried to threaten death to Alistair to leave us be, even vowed to

rid him of his damn doublets, but I'm afraid he's the king here.”

I snickered and popped a small cake on my tongue. A groan of pleasure curled my toes. Milky glaze coated my throat in a burst of sweet, followed by the plush little cake.

Erik watched, his own sweet halfway to his mouth. “Say the word, love, and I will have you making more sounds like that. It would need to be swift, but I can't stomach that again without being inside you.”

I tossed a small currant seed at his forehead. “It's been days without good food. Larsson was not accommodating to his pet.”

I lifted a cup to my lips, pausing when Erik's face shadowed.

“Don't call yourself that.” His jaw pulsed. “Gavyn told us things he did to you.”

Bile churned in the back of my throat. I rested a hand on his arm. “I am still yours, Erik.”

“Gods, Livia.” He sat up and dropped his feet to the floor, leaning onto his knees. “Did you think you wouldn't be? Did you think I would see you as something less?”

“No. I didn't mean it like that.”

Erik hesitated, then, “For every moment he had you, I'd already planned to make him suffer. But to know he had his hands on you, that he drew blood from you, there is not a realm—from the gods to your people—who will not hear his screams. They will become myths, the haunts of the seas.” Erik turned his head, offering me the side of his face, but he didn't lift his gaze. “I am not a man most consider heartfelt, but you can always speak with me, love. If ever you wish to—or need to—talk about what was done to you—”

“To both of us,” I interjected. “This was done to the both of us.”

With care, I crept over the bed and slid my arms around his waist from behind. My cheek pressed to the warmth of his

spine, and I kissed the spot between the wings of his shoulders.

Erik covered my hands on his stomach with one of his. “I may not be skilled at gentility, but I don’t want the violence I feel to keep you from speaking to me about anything. I will always hear you first, then rage later.”

What Erik was truly saying burned a new vein of affection for the Ever King in my heart. Painful as it was to hear, Erik was offering his shoulder, his arms. He was offering his safety should it be needed.

I traced one of his scars over his upper back. “What I feared most was never seeing you again. When ... when Larsson saw to it the heartbond was taken, I thought I might never breathe again. In my darkest thoughts, I considered you might believe me to be dead, and cease the search.”

Slowly, Erik adjusted on the edge of the mattress, one leg bent on the bed, the other foot still flat on the floor. He cupped a palm over my cheek. “I would storm the gates of the Otherworld to find you, Songbird. When the emptiness came, I never considered ending the search. Never allowed the belief that you were gone to enter. To me, it did not matter. I would never stop.”

A new tear burned down my cheek. Erik swiped it away with his thumb. “That night when he touched me ... I still feel his hands—” My voice cracked, and Erik pulled me against his chest, holding me like he was frozen around my body. Breath came in sharp gasps over his skin. “His touch was cruel and ugly and ... I felt I would never rid my skin of the remnants of it.”

Gentle kisses pressed to the side of my head. “If my hands are ever too much—”

“No.” I wrapped my arms around his waist. “Your touch is what I crave.” My eyes clenched shut. “Here, beside you, is where I am at peace, Erik. Never cease touching me.”

The Ever King was silent, but tightened his hold on my body, as if mutely assuring me those arms would never release

me.

“My upbringing was always controlled,” he said, slow and hesitant. “After the war, I was still controlled by the expectations of the nobles and the people of the Ever. I’ve grown accustomed to controlling the Ever Ship. Be it a raid or simply sailing to meets with the houses, we kept a measure of order. Since he took you, I’ve felt nothing but chaos. I do not know what it is like for a mortal to drown, but I hear it feels like their lungs are bursting. That was every moment you were gone, love. Only when you were in my arms again did I breathe.”

I kissed his lips, soft, slow. “I felt much the same.”

“Never, in all my bitter life, have I craved such violence,” Erik went on. “Not with my uncle, not to avenge my father. Only for you. I suspect that makes me a wretch, hardly suitable for a heart as good as yours, but that is the ugliness of my truth, love.”

For a long moment, the only sound in the room was that of our breaths.

“Serpent?”

“Songbird.”

“I would follow your darkness, every ugly truth, across the skies and seas.”



I HELD Erik’s arm tightly outside the double doors of the throne room. We’d dressed quickly, Erik in his glossy black, me in a new jade gown filigreed in sun-kissed threads, like beams of light over the glades of the palace gardens.

Maids had come to the room to braid my hair, but I’d pleaded for them to tend to Mira or Celine (who would likely curse me for it) all to spend a moment more, alone and peaceful, with the Ever King.

Loose waves hung down my back, and even Erik had rid his shoulders and waist of the thick leather belts and numerous

blades he kept close.

We were not here to be magnanimous. Those beyond the doors would hardly care if we arrived in night clothes.

The doors opened to boisterous chatter, but the moment we crossed the threshold, all talk stilled. Seated at the far end of the long sea oak table were my father and Stieg. Daj wore ominous clothing, much like Erik. His dark hair was braided off his face, his chin smoother than before. He'd shed a dozen turns since stepping off the Ever Ship.

Stieg had wiped dried blood from his face, split his beard in two braids with silver beads adorning the ends, and a thick plait ridged down the center of his skull. All Rave, always.

Jonas and Sander wore tunics that favored the Ever, unlaced over their chests, with dark trousers. Were they spares of Erik's? Perhaps they borrowed from Tait. In truth, there was a chance the twins robbed some poor steward on their way to whatever chamber in which they'd been placed.

Mira sat beside Celine. The moment she cast her eyes to me, she stood, ruffling the skirt of her gown, blue as the lagoons near the shore, notably pleased with the thinner fabrics and higher slits in sea fae dresses.

Aleksi had one leg draped over the arm of his chair, slouched as he dragged a whetstone against the curved blade of a knife. On the other side of my cousin sat Sewell, Gavyn, and Tait, awaiting their king.

Erik did not lead us to the smaller chairs. Instead, he guided me to the wooden throne that had been arranged at the head of the table.

"This is your place, Songbird," he whispered.

I blinked, chest tight, then slowly sat in the new throne. My fingers traced the foxes, the vines. I bunched a bit of the gold satin draped over the back, testing it, memorizing the feel of it between my fingers.

Erik ignored his throne and stood beside me, a hand on my back, as though he couldn't withdraw his touch just yet.

Down the table, I met midnight eyes. Daj drummed his fingers over the edge of the table, teeth grinding like he was mulling words around in his mouth.

Finally, he stilled his hand. “They call you queen, Livie.”

“Yes, Daj.”

His gaze bounced from me to Erik, then back again. “Did you take vows?”

“Well ... no.”

“Then, I don’t understand.”

“The king’s word made it so,” Tait explained. “He gave her the title of queen in front of the court.”

“And that’s that?”

“To sit in the throne of the Ever King makes one an equal of the king,” Erik said. “She was placed on the throne. I bowed the knee. The title has never been known in the Ever. We do not have a custom for it.”

“Made one up as you went, Bloodsinger.” Jonas lifted a tin filled with the king’s mead, grinning. “I respect that sort of brazen initiative.”

“It was quite a spectacle,” Alek said, tapping a knife back and forth on the tabletop.

“Most accepted my word,” Erik went on, “but clearly there are folk who resist every word I speak.”

My father frowned, but it seemed the disquiet rose more from being tossed into a new culture than disappointment. After a pause, he slapped his palm on the table. “Well, if this is my daughter’s kingdom, then we are here to fight for it. I take it you have no plans to let this bastard simply disappear into the sea, Bloodsinger.”

Erik’s fist tightened by his leg. “Not until he’s nothing more than bone.”

“Then, we need to know how to lure him back out and finish this.” My father turned to me. “We need to know

everything about this isle, Liv. No matter how troubling you think it will be for us to hear, tell us.”

Us. I knew Valen Ferus well enough to know he did not mean the room. He spoke of himself and the man at my side. Affection, warm and heady, swelled in my chest. In a small way, it was my father’s way of accepting House Ferus had grown by one more.

And he was right. There was no time to speak gently to spare emotions. Larsson and Fione had too much potential for power on Natthaven, and it needed to be quashed. I began from the moment I awoke in that chamber. Talk of Skadi drew out a great deal of intrigue (particularly from Sander), and Erik sent for Alistair to bring any writings on elven folk he could find within the palace walls.

By the time I finished my description of Larsson’s confessions about his lineage, the darkening being a mark of their bloodthirsty spells, then onto his attack, my father was pacing, and Erik’s eyes had grown dark with hate.

“I must stop you,” Gavyn said, holding up a hand. “You left out my favorite detail—she bit off his damn ear.”

Celine’s expression shifted from one of fear and pity to jubilation. “Of course, she did. She’s of the Ever!”

“Sharp bites, deep strikes, little fox,” Sewell said with a wink.

I regaled the escape; Gavyn added his own input on the guards, the weapons, and the layout of the palace at Natthaven.

“Fury kept me safe.” I slipped my fingers through Erik’s. “Until I saw you. Larsson and Fione took the heartbond to shatter whatever keeps him from the blood crown—spells I don’t understand—but something called to me. Something brought me to the shore. It was like my fury, or that isle, knew you were mine.”

The burn of red flashed in Erik’s eyes. “I told you, they took nothing, Songbird. I will simply need to say all the sultry things I’ve told you privately, not so privately now.”

“I would rather you didn’t,” Aleksí grumbled.

“My palace, Bloodsummoner.”

Strange, but my father’s face did not contort in rage or grimace in disdain to have a man speak such things about me. He even chuckled when Stieg leaned over and murmured under his breath.

“What, Daj?”

“Nothing, little love.”

Stieg’s eyes brightened. “I was reminding the king of the many times he and your mother cleared us from the room during such talks as these, all to be alone. I said I’m waiting for you to do the same and toss us out.”

My face boiled in a shock of embarrassment that matched the flush of my father’s face. It was only made worse when Erik said, “Gladly.”

I elbowed the king in the ribs. “Now that I’ve learned more about my mother and father than I would like to know, where do we go from here?”

The room sobered.

Erik reached beneath his throne, removing a sheath wrapped around a blade that looked like white gold. “I don’t know if you recall, but the woman, right before the shore broke away, she dropped this. Seemed to appear out of nothing.”

The escape from Natthaven had been a blurred moment in time, I’d not noticed Skadi gave up a weapon, but my chest tightened with affection for a woman I hardly had a chance to know. Lost to whatever spell had taken her, she still offered aid, still fought.

Sleek, strange runes were etched along the edges with a hilt made of pale crystal.

“She called it white iron,” Erik said.

My heart stuttered. “White iron? An elven blade. Erik, she told me there are dark spells that protect Fione. She said as long as the sea witch lives, Larsson lives.”

“That is truly dark,” Tavish said, voice low. “To manipulate death draws out the cruelest bits of the soul.”

I inspected the blade. “Fione cannot be killed by a normal blade, according to Skadi. She’s too corrupted. Elven made, she told me, white iron has the power to burn the heart through any spell.”

“She dropped this with intention. Is that what you think?”

“Why else?”

Erik paused for a drawn breath. “Then she left it for you. Keep it, love. I’ll see to it you get the chance to use it.” He looked to the table. “Larsson has claim on the blood crown by blood, and now, it would seem by touch. Should he take it, should he sit atop the throne, the same reasoning I used to make Livia queen could be used to make him king.”

“It is never enough when a king only desires power,” my father said. “We’ve fought our fair share of arrogant sods as this, Ever King. Make his greed his undoing.”

Erik held my father’s scrutiny for a long pause. “Larsson has this isle that is unknown to us, he has his witch, and the help of this fire elven.”

“Arion,” I said. “An elven prince who is doing this to claim his own throne in their culture. Still, he is a threat, and he wants Skadi. She has power he needs, and I feel as though I’m missing a great deal. There are secrets aplenty on that isle.”

“Like Bonekeeper’s damn voice. How’d we not know he had a sea voice?” Celine massaged her head over her brows.

“He’s been well shielded thanks to Fione.”

“Stealing magic.” Gavyn scrubbed his eyes, blinking rapidly a few times. “That is a risk. Think he could drink your blood and live, Erik?”

“We could always dose him and find out,” Sander said, and in truth, I thought it was less about a jest and more sincere. Like he wanted to see the outcome for the sake of curiosity.

“Thorvald couldn’t stomach my blood,” Erik said.

“You know, it’s interesting,” Celine said. “But the earth bender was swimming in your blood when he pulled you back and nothing happened.”

My father slumped in his chair, arms folded over his chest. “It’s not some great feat or anything. I knew not to put it in my damn mouth. I’ve seen what his blood can do, remember? A whole war was fought across from the young Ever King.”

“You risked it, though,” I whispered. “You were the one who stopped his song before it harmed him, Daj.”

My father swallowed. “He was fading. You were healed. No sense having him bleed out.”

Erik took a deep interest in the grain of the table, and others had gone quiet. It was more than my father made it to be. Feign indifference all he liked, but Valen Ferus had stopped the Ever King from losing too much blood because the earth bender cared about Erik and his ability to keep breathing.

For me or for the king himself, it didn’t matter. My father was no threat to Erik Bloodsinger. Not anymore.

Erik finally took his place in his throne, ropes of tension taut in his neck. “Bruised as he is, Larsson will be on high guard to protect what he has left. Still, I know him. He won’t want to be seen as defeated by the loss of Hesh and Livia.”

“Then we better ready the gates,” Tait said, voice low. He looked to Gavyn. “Every house. Larsson will come against Erik. He won’t give us much time to paint him as the lesser choice between two kings.”

Erik hesitated. “This does not need to impact the earth realms. Hesh has been stopped. Narza remains to protect your borders—”

“Wait, what?” I looked at him.

“I’ll explain later, love.” Erik turned to Stieg, then my father. “You came to aid in Livia’s rescue and have done so.”

Jonas groaned with vigor, interrupting the king. “Gods, don’t tell me this will be a speech about how we don’t need to

risk our necks any longer and can return home to our comfortable little lives.”

Erik glared at the prince. Jonas glared back, shading his eyes to the inky pitch of the darkness he hid beneath his levity.

“What, Bloodsinger? You heard the Night Folk king. This is now the kingdom of one of our royals—Liv is family. You get us whether you bleeding want us or not. I’ll expect my own private chambers in your palace, mind you, once I become a decorated hero of the Ever.”

I squeezed Erik’s forearm. “Serpent.”

“Songbird?”

“You don’t need to hate alone,” I whispered. “Not anymore. We will hate him with you, at your side.”

Erik kissed the back of my hand. “Then, we ought to begin planning how to kill my brother.”

“First,” my father said. A pale shell was pinched between his fingers. “There is someone who has been waiting to speak to Livia for a great while now.”

“What is this?” I asked once my daj came to my side and dropped the shell in my palm.

“Hold it to your ear.”

One brow arched, I lifted the shell to my ear and drew in a sharp breath.

“Hello? Daj? I don’t hear you. Hey, sea witch, s’not working.”

“Rorik.” I covered my mouth with one palm. My wild, vibrant brother’s voice rolled through the shell, distant, quiet, a little muffled like Rorik spoke through one of his downy pillows, but there all the same.

“Livie?” Rorik sniffled, then released a torrent of frenzied words. “I’m sorry I didn’t rescue you, but you should know I *did* save Bloodsinger. I snuck into that room like a damn—I mean, like a Rave—and let him go. Jo and Alek said he was the only way to get you back, so I guess, I kinda rescued you.

Livie, what's it like in the Ever? Is it under the water all the time and are there big old fish with sharp teeth? What are merfolk like—”

“Ror.” I laughed, interrupting his trembling rambles. Tears stung my eyes. “You are the bravest Rave I know.”

My brother paused, his voice softer, like he might be speaking to someone in the distance. “Hey, Livie, the sea witch—” He softened his voice to a raspy whisper. “I keep forgettin’ her name. She is askin’ me where you are in the Ever.”

“We’re at the palace in the royal city.”

Rorik paused. “She says go to a lady named Oline’s cove. I don’t know what that means, but she says all of you should go and have Bloodsinger drop some blood in the water. I bet she’s gonna do a spell. Livie, she does wild spells. Turned Alva’s face blue for a whole clock toll when she stole my bleeding boots!”

I lowered the shell. “Ror says we should go to Oline’s cove. Where is that?”

Erik stiffened. “My mother’s refuge.” He lowered his voice. “*Our* cove, Songbird.”

My heart sped against my ribs. Our cove—the secluded spot where I’d told the Ever King he was mine. The night we’d split open our hearts to each other. The night Larsson’s assassins tried to rip us apart.

“Ror,” I said, voice soft. “Tell her we’ll be there soon.”

CHAPTER THIRTY

THE SERPENT

THE VERDANT WATER WAS UNDISTURBED—A sheet of emeralds over white sand. The stillness and shade of the cove had been what my mother loved most. Sometimes when I stepped onto the narrow beach, I could hear her voice, distant memories of a small boy's mind.

Can you imagine it, my love? This water is like looking into a new world, a place filled with marvelous adventures. That is what I like to imagine here—you and me, on a grand journey in a distant sea.

I'd spent many a night here, dreaming of those adventures after the war, alone and angry. These shores had always been a horrid reminder of what had been lost at my hands. Truth be told, I thought I might've come here to torture my own sanity, like a penance for being the cause of my mother's death.

Then, a persistent, beautiful songbird had peeled back the final layers over a scorched heart, and turned this cove—from the wind-weathered stone walls to the alabaster sand—into a sanctuary. A new place of memories I'd hold close until my final breaths.

I held out a hand, guiding Livia over a lip on the old moss-soaked stairs that opened to the beach. Valen was nearest Celine and held out a hand on instinct.

Celine ogled the earth bender's palm for half a breath before a smile cut over her lips. She lifted her chin like a damn lady of a noble house and accepted. "Many thanks, Earth Bender."

Tait stood in front of Princess Mira. She narrowed her eyes, gathered her skirt, and stepped onto the shore on her own. “Don’t trouble yourself, Hearttalker. I can manage.”

“I had no intention of troubling myself,” Tait grumbled. “And it’s *Heartwalker*.”

I waded out into the water to my knees and dragged my thumb along the point of my tooth. Spells of witches often required blood. No doubt, Narza had a trick planned, so I did not waste time questioning and let a splatter of my blood drop into the glassy water.

A ring of foam shaped around the drops, frothing and building. I backed away. Livia took hold of my arm and peered over my shoulder, eyes wide. Water spun and bubbled, like a school of netted fish were drawing close to the surface. Soon, the water smoothed again but kept a faint glow within the ring.

Livia tightened her hold on my arm. “Are those ... voices?”

From the water, voices echoed. Fingers laced, I urged Livia into the water and peered into the foam ring on the surface. A short, breathy cough broke from Livia, a sound caught between a sob and a laugh.

“Maj!”

There, in the ripples, was the fractured face of Queen Elise. The queen was positioned in a way that it looked like she were peering into a looking glass on the floor.

I gawked, taken back; I’d never seen such a spell. There were many ways to speak through the tides, through voice or a witch’s tricks, but to behold a face? The more I learned of my grandmother, the more I realized how little I knew of her.

No wonder why my father had a bit of fear of Lady Narza.

“Livia!” Elise’s voice was an echo on the wind—a sound in a dream. Still, it was clear enough. The queen reached her fingers. Her touch rippled the surface, breaking the image for a moment. When it steadied, the queen was beaming, eyes tight, and if the water were not so blurred, I was certain there would be tears on her cheeks. “My girl. You’re really there.”

Elise sobbed, and reached for Livia again, desperate to touch her. She halted before breaking the watery image again.

Livia knelt in the shallows, voice soft. “I’ve missed you.”

Elise sniffed. “I have missed you every moment of every day. Tell me you’re unharmed. Tell me you’re safe.”

“I’m safe.” Livia peered up at me, grinning. “I’m as safe as I can possibly be, Maj.”

Elise grunted when Rorik shoved in front of her.

“Livie,” the boy said, breathless. “Bleeding hells—I mean, wow—I can *see* you. Is Bloodsinger there? I want to show him how I can throw the knife he left with me. Oh, and Daj. I wanna see Daj too.”

Elise mussed her son’s hair and asked, too, for Valen. A little aghast, the earth bender and Stieg joined Livia at the rim of the spectral.

Elise let out a wet laugh at the sight of her husband, but a fierce battle ensued between Prince Rorik and his mother on who earned the privilege to speak first. In the end, Valen settled to watch his son throw a knife, never letting on that he couldn’t actually see where the blade landed outside the spell cast on the water.

“You won’t be returning this moment as I wish, will you?” Elise asked, softer than before.

“Not yet, my love. There are a few battles left to fight here.” Valen’s face, whenever he spoke to his queen, was hardly the enemy I’d always imagined from my memories. He looked upon his wife the way I hoped I looked at his daughter—soft, almost in awe of her with every glance.

Valen and Stieg briefly explained Larsson’s plans, his threat against the Ever, against Livia. He was not short on the risks; the earth bender did not shield his wife from the dreary, he treated her as his equal on a battlefield. A warrior queen.

“You’ve not killed the Ever King yet?” A hidden laugh lived in Elise’s tone.

“Maj,” Livia complained and took my hand.

Valen cast me a glance over his shoulder. “I haven’t. Strange, but the sea king almost grows on you.”

I looked away, rather inclined to storm back into the palace to avoid another half-compliment. Alas, I was compelled to stay when Livia began tearfully speaking with her mother and brother again.

Somewhere in their chatter, both of Aleksis’s fathers stepped into the ring. The prince spent the first few breaths filled with apologies, then like Livia, it turned to affectionate affirmations, grand promises he would return in one piece, and laughter about the earth fae ladies who’d already approached his fathers to praise their son about his bravery and boldness facing the horrid sea fae.

Jonas had watched the interactions with his familiar bravado, but the prince’s face blanched when a deep growl of a voice called his name, then Sander’s.

Jonas shook out his hands and smacked his brother’s chest. “All right, you speak to Daj first. Soften him up. I’ll handle Maj.”

In the end, they faced their parents and people as one. Their father, though I did not see his face, spoke in a dark rasp, threatening his sons for their stupidity, all while demanding they return their asses back home so he could berate them a bit more to their faces.

Mira was drawn to the water next. Her folk were more frantic, more chaotic. They’d shout, curse, then laugh together, only to begin again in the next breath.

The spell cast over the water began to fade, and the royals gathered around, shouting hurried farewells.

“Strange, isn’t it?” Celine whispered, stepping to my side while Livia bid her mother a tearful goodbye. “Not so long ago, we’d wanted the lot of these sods dead and gone. Now, it’s like they were ... always here.”

“Don’t get sentimental, Tidecaller.”

“Fine.” Celine tossed her hands in the air. “I won’t finish what I’d planned to say. I’ll keep my thoughts in about how I

think it's a little wonderful to see these changes in the kingdom. I'll bite my tongue before I dare tell you I know you're the king the Ever needs."

I didn't meet her gaze, didn't look away from the sea. I merely dipped my chin and murmured, "Wise choice. Best to keep such thoughts to yourself."

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

THE SONGBIRD

“So, where does Bloodsinger sneak off to when he’s not consumed with staring at you?” Mira removed one of Erik’s daggers off two pegs next to the inglenook in our chambers.

“He’s with Gavyn and a surveyor. I’m sure they’re returning now.” I adjusted a bead in the plait over my shoulder. “The surveyor can breathe in spells of the sea and has been scouting for the isle. Tait is with them as well.”

“Not sure why you mentioned Heartwalker,” Mira said, a click of metal on wood gave up that she’d returned the blade to its place.

“Because that’s what you be truly asking, earth fae,” Celine said, chuckling as she stepped from the washroom. “You’ve no interest in the king’s whereabouts, speak true.”

Mira’s eyes flashed. “I absolutely was not. Frankly, Celine, I don’t know how you stomach sailing with such a man as the king’s cousin. He’s terribly surly.”

Celine snorted and snatched one of Erik’s smaller knives off a table and stuffed it into her boot. “You’ll not meet a more loyal sod than Heartwalker. But I must say, earth fae, you like to point out his moods more than, well, anyone.”

A splotch of pink rose over the ridge of Mira’s sun-kissed cheeks. She gave Celine a dark look, like a challenge, then turned. “Livie, did you know a rather handsome, rugged brute on the Ever Crew fancies Celine?”

“What?” I spun around. “Celine Tidecaller, what haven’t you told me?”

“Gods, nothing.” Celine’s fingers shot to the spike through her lone ear. “Never knew all you damn earth fae were so chatty. Let us dress and be off. Fewer words, I beg of you both.”

I looped my arm through Celine’s, staring at her profile, taking a bit of pleasure in the way she strategically avoided my gaze.

“Celine.” I drew out her name. “What happened in my absence? You must tell me.”

“I must do nothing.”

“I’ve been kidnapped twice now, starved, beaten, and threatened by an enemy, so it would be a kindness to tell me something glad.”

She huffed. “You are becoming far too manipulative. I think the king’s wretchedness is rubbing off on you.”

“Oh, I think more than that is rubbing off on her,” Mira said, shrieking when I pinched the back of her arm. “Come now, Livie, your daj isn’t here, nor is your lover, and I’ve been *ravenous* to know every bawdy detail since I saw you spin away with a masked man.”

“I thought you wanted to kill my king after that night,” Celine said, grinning.

“Oh, only for a few weeks.” Mira waved her away, then propped her chin on my shoulder, fluttering her lashes. “Now I just want to gossip, perhaps get a tad envious you’re being pleased and I am not.”

“I’ll tell you what I told Alek, Erik is my *hjärta*, the song of my heart, and I will leave it at that.”

Mira wrinkled her nose. “Hardly satisfactory. At least soothe my worries and tell me he knows his proper way around a woman’s body.”

A rush of sordid heat spread through my belly, down between my legs where only this morning the king had masterfully tormented with his fingers and body until I’d been unable to draw in a deep breath.

“There is nothing proper about what he does,” I murmured, laughing when Mira offered a lazy applause and a wicked grin. “But I thought we were on about Celine and a crewman.”

Celine coughed, face red as a bloody blade. “We were not.”

“Who is it?”

“I must be off, My Queen.” Celine took a long step toward the door.

I hurriedly adjusted the bone necklace around my throat. A dark sort of grin tugged at the corners of my mouth when the gold-etched runes settled over my heart, a vicious reminder of what befell the enemies of the Ever King and his queen.

“Wait, Celine.” I spun toward the door before she slipped into the corridor. “We’re all going to the study, so don’t think I don’t realize there is plenty of time to tell me a name.”

“I’ll do it,” Mira said, snatching a few tattered scrolls we’d been studying about elven lore for nearly two days. “Stormdrawer, Stormcaller—”

“*Stormbringer?*” My lips parted.

“It means nothing,” Celine protested. “It’s not like the Ever Crew has many options while out to sea, they’ll take what they can get.”

“Don’t downplay the spell you have on the man,” Mira said. “Liv, he looks at her like she lights the sky.”

Celine cursed. “Life was peaceful before the Ever was overrun with princesses.”

I took hold of Celine’s elbow, and Mira took the other as though it were something we’d always done, as though Celine Tidecaller had always made us a trio, not a duo.

I leaned in to whisper, “Stormbringer would be a fool not to hang the stars for the likes of you, and it’s not simply because you’re the only woman on the crew.”

Celine dragged her palms down her face, groaning, but when she quickened her step, the slightest hint of a grin tugged

at her lips.

When we descended the staircase to the upper levels, the lot of us collided with Sewell and Tait as they made their way for the study. My heart tightened. Tait met my gaze for a slight glance, then stepped back. By my sides, my fingers danced in disquiet.

“Sewell, would you be kind enough to take my place and take your girl and Mira inside?”

Sewell, beaming with a touch of mischief, offered an arm for both women, leaving me with the back of Tait’s head.

He was making a clear dive for the study. Damn idiot wanted to avoid me as much as I’d struggled being in his presence.

“Heartwalker.”

Tait came to a halt but tilted his face to the crisscrossing rafters. “Nothing needs to be said.”

“You’re as infuriating as your cousin. Perhaps worse.”

Tait spun around. The red in his eyes was not as prominent as Erik’s, more gold and with dark streaks of brown like wet sand. Still, there were slices of crimson, like blood carved through the dark. “We are needed inside.”

“We will get there.”

I clasped my hands in front of my body and stepped a pace away. Chest to chest, eye to eye. For a moment, I said nothing, merely studied him. Tait was a brute on the outside, but beneath it all, every action he’d taken, every risk he’d faced, was laden in deadly loyalty.

The man risked it all to protect the House of Kings—aiding Erik when he’d been stabbed, no fear of his cousin’s blood. Taking a blade for me, no thought for his own life.

“I thought you died.”

He shoved a hand into the pocket of his trousers and removed a paper smoke, rolling it between his fingers. If I had to guess, it was more a nervous habit than a need.

He didn't look at me. "It wasn't a deep blow."

"I saw it. It should've been fatal."

Tait let out a rough sigh. "What do you want me to say? Should I have done nothing?"

A smile crept over my lips. "You don't care for me much, I know, but I merely wanted to thank you." I hesitated, then rested a hand on his upper arm. "I will never forget what you did, and I'm glad you're alive."

With that at an end, I turned for the study.

"Earth fae." Tait cleared his throat. "*Livia*."

I peered over my shoulder.

"You're ... you're wrong." At long last, Tait met my gaze.

"About what?"

He shuffled the paper roll between his teeth, unlit, and put his hands in his trouser pockets. "I care what happens to you. I know at times it does not seem that way. I ... I am unaccustomed to showing—" Tait waved his hands around, searching for the words.

"Your heart, Heartwalker?" The corner of my mouth tilted up.

He frowned. "Erik was my brother when we were small, before my father became a brutal wretch. Some bonds never fade, no matter how others try to kill them. We were told to despise each other, but he killed Harald to save me, I know he did. He protected the Ever despite his critics, those who only saw him as a failure."

I held my breath when Tait paused. This was, perhaps, the longest I'd ever heard the man speak.

"I did not want you here," he admitted. "For I saw the way he looked at you, the changes that came damn near immediately. Even when I felt your affection toward him, I didn't trust you. I thought you would use him, leave him, and eventually send your folk against him."

Tears blurred my vision. I fought to keep my voice steady.
“And now?”

“Now? I will take a thousand blades in your place.” A strange flush heated the ridges of Tait’s high cheekbones. “Because you bring *my brother* peace. You are the support, the family he always deserved but was never afforded due to a cruel father and cruel uncle. Let us leave it at that, shall we? No thanks, no guilt. I will do it again if need be.”

Without another word, Tait held out his arm for me to take.

I wiped a stray tear and hooked my hand around his elbow, smiling softly. “We’ll leave it at that then, Heartwalker.”

He tilted his head in a mute response.

“But,” I said, voice low, “I still think you’re a terribly surly bastard.”

For the first time since meeting the man, I witnessed a true, unburdened smile on his face.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

THE SONGBIRD

THE STUDY WINDOW overlooked the royal city. Red rooftops, winding cobbled paths, and stone arcades around the marketplace bustled with life now that the Ever Crew had returned. Families were reunited, and life simply went on.

The blood crown rested on the mantle in the study, following us wherever Alistair knew us to be during the day. Violent waves thrashed, shaping the points of the crown. I narrowed my eyes, despising Erik's father a little more. Thorvald had known there was another boy with his blood, he'd never said a word, never prepared his son or kingdom.

Then again, Thorvald had ordered his tiny child to kill his own mother. Foolish to think the man was capable of any affection.

"I'm assuming these were not done by Bloodsinger's hand." My father materialized at my side. He traced the corners of the windows where glossy, painted vines coated the corners of the glass.

"Alistair was—still is—a rather harsh critic. I was determined to paint the whole of the palace to earn a bit of praise from the man."

Daj let his hand fall away. For a moment, he studied the vines, a furrow to his brow, like he might be trying to decipher a hidden meaning beneath the leaves. "You will never know what a relief it is to learn my fears of what you were enduring were not true."

“Daj, I know we have not had much time to speak, but you must know the attack at the fort, it was not the first time I’d spoken with Erik. It wasn’t exactly random, him taking me. After the war ended and he was captured—”

“You would go to his cell.”

My words stuttered. “Did he tell you?”

“No. I already knew.” My father sat on the windowsill, dark eyes alive with a touch of mischief. “When I went to speak to the boy king after the war, to try to convince him we were not enemies, I noticed a bit of parchment he tried to hide. There were swirls on some of the lettering.”

“Gods, I thought I’d been so clever, slipping a note through the bars. I wanted to introduce myself before I spoke to him for the first time.”

“Your mother and I watched one night and caught you.”

I tilted my head. “Why did you not say anything?”

“Why do you think I urged Bloodsinger to stay?” My father rose and placed his hands on my shoulders. “I knew that young king would break my heart, even then.”

“I don’t understand.”

“It has been my desire to see my children experience a love like I have with your mother. But it does not mean I wanted the day to ever come. I knew my heart would break when another man took yours. I felt that ache when I looked at the boy my daughter had been befriending.”

I blinked, a little stunned. All this time, both my mother and father had known I’d read tales to Erik, that we had an unexpected connection.

“Feeling that, did you not worry he would return?”

My father sighed. “As time went on, I didn’t. I believed the barriers against the sea fae would hold. Reckless of me, since I’ve dealt with my fair share of fate. I should’ve known better.” He took my hand, squeezing my fingers like he’d done since I was a small girl. “I knew how to recognize when the

games of the Norns were at play, and both your mother and I sensed *something* about the Ever King and our girl.”

“You truly asked Erik to stay because of me?”

“I would do anything for your happiness. In truth, Liv, there was a common feeling amongst all of us that Bloodsinger had stepped into our world for a greater purpose. Stieg was close to the boy, then he saved your Uncle Tor.” My father paused, a bit of reluctance written on his face. “I think I was merely being too obstinate to admit it was for you.”

I gave him a half smile. “I could pretend that Erik regrets what he did, but we both know that isn’t true. Still, Daj, I hope you know I was never harmed by him. It’s strange, perhaps some might see it as mad, to fall in love with a man who lied and took you from your life—”

“Not so strange.” My father studied his rough palms. “You know of curses that plagued me once, but I’m not certain I’ve ever told you the schemes I leveled against your mother to break them.”

“You met because you were negotiating her vows to a mortal, I thought. You fell in love instead.”

“And what, Liv? You think that was allowed? Your mother’s uncle was a tyrannical king who despised fae folk and anyone stepping outside his plans.”

That startled a laugh out of me. “Daj, did you take Maj away to vow with her against the order of a king?”

“Vow with her? You think too highly of me, daughter.” His expression grew almost wistful. “I took her to *use* her, or so I thought. It wasn’t exactly the same as Bloodsinger, but I tricked your mother, made her trust me, only to reveal she’d put her faith in an enemy who wanted to destroy her world. I should’ve known after I first met her that she would, instead, unravel mine.”

It was strange, hearing secrets of a love I’d admired from my earliest memories. I knew there’d been tensions between mortal and fae long before I was born, but nothing of my

father tricking and lying to my mother. Nothing about him despising her folk.

The door to the study cracked against the wall. My heart swelled as Erik, lost in conversation with Sander, strode in with Gavyn and Aleksí in their wake.

“All I’m saying is I might understand how we got here more than you think.” My father winked—bleeding winked—and turned away. “It looks like we’re gathering.”

Satin sofas, the edge of the polished desk, and a few narrow-legged chairs were occupied. Tavish and his father, a man Erik called Maelstrom, were in attendance. Erik’s suspicions about their relationship with Lady Narza was curious. Like my father’s confession, when this was all at an end, when Larsson’s blood stained the sands of the Ever, I had a great many questions to unravel.

Erik lifted his gaze, a sullen smirk played with the scar on his lip, and while Sander was still speaking, the king abruptly quit his side and came to mine.

The point of his first finger traced the edges of the bones around my neck. “Wear only this tonight. Nothing else.”

“Serpent, may I remind you that my father is in this room.”

“Songbird,” Erik whispered in my ear. “Do you think he has not put it together that we share a bed?”

He grunted when my elbow jammed into his ribs. “You are a fiend, Erik Bloodsinger.”

“I’m offended you’ve only just noticed, love.”

We took a place on the sofa while Sander flipped the pages of a what seemed to be a storybook of fables for littles.

“What is that for?” I asked.

“There are a few myths that involve elven folk.”

Faded drawings of a mystical battle of golden clouds and dark shadows. Warriors with blades as long as their bodies were painted on opposing sides of a field.

“My mother read me this one as a boy.” Gavyn pointed to a page with a collision of night and daylight. “A tale of a princess of the sun who fled with an enemy of the night, so they could be together. Battles ensued, but eventually her people agreed to the match. It’s one of the few happy endings in the lore.”

“All sagas and myths are shaped from some truth. This fable, I think, is a tale of how the elven clans were formed. Light and shadow. It fits.”

Celine frowned. “Larsson’s a light elf?”

I shrugged. “That’s what he said.”

“He wants the Ever’s crown.” My daj leaned over his knees, taking in the room. “But Liv said his elven kin want battle against us much the same.”

“I think it’s a custom,” I said. “Arion, the elven prince, he hinted that victory in a battle is needed to earn his birthright.”

“Why so protective of the shadow woman then?” Sander asked. “Right? You said she seemed to be trapped as well.”

“The secrets surrounding Skadi are vast,” I admitted. “Larsson had less interest in her but had a bit of power over her through his elven cousin.” My pulse grew to a frantic rhythm. “There is something about that isle that keeps Skadi compliant *and* Arion invested in Larsson’s victory. Before she was commanded to aid in the removal of the heartbond, she told Arion he broke some kind of agreement.”

“You don’t have a guess as to what it could be?” Erik asked.

I rubbed the bridge of my nose. “No. But Skadi was furious with him and Larsson. She protested the removal, tried to get them to stop when she saw how he ... carved into me.”

Erik took hold of my hand, but I could not help but notice how his other palm rubbed his chest.

I squeezed my eyes, a phantom ache in my heart. “Skadi was frightened about stealing the bond through pain.”

“She must be powerful if she can take a bond from the blood,” Sander said, his voice hurried with excitement.

“I think it is more that she can take matter. That’s how she put it, at least. She said magic, mystical as it is, still has a physicality to it. A remnant she can find and take.”

“Interesting. You said she was somewhat kind to you?”

“She was kind, but something changed. It was like she was lost inside herself, colder, aloof. I didn’t learn much more since Gavyn found me after that.”

I shot to my feet, pacing.

“Liv,” Mira reached an arm out, a gentle smile on her face. “What has you uneasy?”

“Skadi is important to both Larsson and Arion. Perhaps she is not a vital piece in this battle for the Ever, but they have need of her magic. It’s dark, almost like your daj.” I looked to Jonas and Sander. Their father was made of shadows when he stepped deeply into his power.

Melancholy quiet descended over the room. I sat back beside the king. Erik gripped my hand, and every few moments he’d trace his thumb over my knuckles and back again, as though the motion soothed his own discontent.

“We need to understand what Larsson has at his disposal, whether it is with this woman, the elven prince, or even the sea witch,” Aleksi said.

Tavish had been silent for most of the conversation, but he cleared his throat. His fingers tapped against his thighs. “What if you could parlay with the bastard?”

Erik narrowed his eyes. “I don’t know what the hells you’re talking about, Tavish. I will not speak peacefully with Bonekeeper. The next time we meet, it will be with my blade down his throat.”

“Might help to get a glimpse at his plans. Ruffle him a bit, bite at his pride, so he comes against you, and we finish this damn fight.”

“Larsson wants Erik dead,” I snapped. “He won’t meet peacefully.”

“Ah, but there are ways to connect two minds, My Queen. He would meet him without the ability to be harmed.”

“By the gods.” Gavyn’s eyes widened. “You’re talking about Mindtaker.”

“Shit.” Erik cursed and rose to his feet. “Avaline.”

“What is it?” I tugged on his wrist. “Who is Avaline?”

Erik’s eyes burned—embers against gold. “Joron’s daughter.”

“And why are we needing this child, girl, woman?” Jonas asked.

“Woman.” Erik scrubbed his hands down his face. “She has a rare sea voice.”

“She’s a damn frightening sea witch,” Tavish said bitterly. “Joron always takes pride in the voices of his house being tide workers, not witches. Yet he refuses to allow her to grow in the House of Mists. He keeps her for himself and rarely lets her see the daylight.”

“Mindtaker.” I mulled the word over my tongue. “So, does she have an ability like Tait where he reads the heart?”

“Almost,” Tavish said. “Her spells allow one to overtake another’s mind. Rather frightening when you think of it.”

“I’ve no doubt if Joron has used his girl to slip through a mind or two,” Erik said. “He is notorious for believing everyone wishes to assassinate him.”

“He’s kept his girl trapped in her own household,” Tavish said. “But she could connect Erik and Bonekeeper. They share blood; the connection would be much simpler with shared blood. Otherwise, we’d need a bit of hair, some skin, an eyeball, something from the one we wanted to overtake.”

Bleeding gods.

“It comes at a price,” Erik said. “Her voice can connect two minds, but it isn’t always simple to pull them back.”

“No.” I held up a hand. “No, we’re not risking you getting stuck in Larsson’s mind.”

“We’ll need an anchor,” Tavish said. “But I’m confident we could do it.”

I spun on Erik when he went quiet, his fingers running over his chin. “You can’t honestly be willing to risk this.”

“If we want to know what we’re facing with Larsson, yes.”

“I just got you back,” I whispered.

“And you won’t lose me again,” he said.

Battle was always a risk. I despised it, wanted to thrash and shout and refuse. I closed my eyes and pressed my brow to Erik’s. “I’ll kill you if you don’t keep that promise, Serpent.”

“Understood, love.” He kissed the top of my knuckles.

“Well, there’s still the problem regarding Joron never allowing us to get close to Avaline,” Tait muttered.

“Agreed,” Erik said, voice harsh. “So, I think it is long overdue for Lord Joron to accept a visit from his king.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

THE SONGBIRD

ONCE AGAIN, the king's side of the bed had gone cold. The absence of the heartbond ached more when I could not reach out to Erik, when I could not sense him, nor find him. I tossed a diaphanous cloak over my chemise and slipped through the passage in the wall.

He'd grown stoic the longer we'd marked our plans earlier.

We'd strategized, altered plans, argued, but before we drifted away to find a few moments of sleep, it felt like we'd settled on a surer plan to approach Joron, to utilize his daughter, and find a way to learn more than one of Larsson's secrets.

The study was empty, only remnants of the meet earlier left behind. Scrolls and books, ewers and cups.

Corridors were empty but for a few guards watching the entrances. A bit of worry gathered in my belly, a slow burn I fought to taper. If something wretched had befallen Erik, I would know. Heartbond or not, there was something fierce that burned between me and my serpent. A sort of heartbeat that raced when he was near or in pain, then slowed when he was at peace or still.

Flickers of light bled from the cracks of the heavy doors guarding the throne room. Two guards stood watch. I cleared my throat, and with only a moment of hesitation, they stepped aside.

Old, damp hinges protested the movement. Empty walls caught the echo and spread it around like the gossip of ghosts

across the room.

My heart quickened, bruising my ribs, when Erik's lithe form was slumped in his throne, shirtless, injured leg outstretched. The king was lost in thought as he spun his blood crown in his hands.

"No one enters until we give the word," I whispered to the guards.

Again, they hesitated. I could not blame them. For a few short weeks, they'd known the Ever King had crowned a queen. I'd never exuded any sort of authority before I was snatched away.

Still, after a few breaths, they nodded and tightened their arrangement in front of the door.

So lost in his own mind, Erik did not glance behind when the doors moaned back into place, and he did not peek when my feet brushed over the stone tiles. The king didn't move until my fingertips slid over the scars on his chest. His breath caught, short and rough, then his head fell against the back of his throne, tilted as my lips and teeth explored his throat.

"Songbird," he said in a rasp. "You ought to be sleeping, love."

"I thought you'd learned by now, Serpent," I said between kisses. "I do not sleep well without you. I've grown rather accustomed to your overheated skin."

"I am not overheated. You are merely made of ice."

I came around the throne and stood between his knees. My fingertips tapped the points of the waves on his crown. "Troubling thoughts?"

"Nothing of great note." He kissed the center of my palm.

The man owned my soul, as surely as I owned his. But he was not accustomed to baring his heart, his troubles, what he'd been taught to think of as weaknesses.

I traced the lines of his jaw, drawing his gaze to mine. "As it happens, Bloodsinger, I want to take note, no matter how small, of all the things burdening your mind."

Erik's eyes darkened in the flicker of candlelight. He placed the crown in the seat of my new throne, and slumped against his, more defeated than before. "I'm not certain this is worth it, the Ever, this fight, this plan."

I lowered to my knees in front of him. "What are you saying?"

Our eyes locked—fire and water—and there behind the fight and ferocity of the Ever King was the worry of a man. "I want to give it up, hand the crown to Larsson, and take you away from here. But if I did, what a pathetic reward to you after all the pain you've endured."

A touch of frustration scorched through my veins. "Reward? You think all that matters is that I am given a title as some sort of reparation for how we were brought together again?"

"I put you at risk by bringing you here, Songbird. The smallest consolation I keep trying to reconcile is that you are a queen. But I still want to take you away, live as mere peasants if we must. I want to get you so far from Larsson, so far from danger, it is maddening."

I cupped one side of his face. "You brought me here, but my consolation does not come from the title you gave me, Bloodsinger. It comes from knowing I have this." Slowly, I dragged my palm from his cheek, to his throat, down his chest until it halted over his heart. "Don't you dare start bemoaning how you have only added burdens to my life."

"Even if it's true?" He arched a brow. "You would be with your family, safe. You would not have been harmed by *him* if not for me."

This man. Beautiful and vicious. A man who'd fought since childhood for his people, loved so fiercely he'd give it up for my sake, and he was yet to realize what a remarkable force the darkness, the passion, of his heart could create.

"I would still be searching for something I could feel but could not find." I rested my palms on his thighs. "Not until I caught the eye of a masked stranger across the ballroom."

Something awoke within me in that moment, and no matter the fear, the pain, no matter the risk, it has been worth it all.”

Erik studied me but said nothing, as though he did not fully believe my words. I stood, released the clasp on the cloak on my shoulders, then lifted the hem of my chemise over my head. A deep, throaty sort of growl rumbled from Erik’s throat.

“What plans are you making, love?”

Naked, bared for my king, I tapped the bone necklace around my throat. “I thought you requested nothing but this tonight?”

Erik’s tongue swiped out, licking his lips. He curled two of his fingers, gesturing me closer. I leveraged my body over his lap, straddling him in his throne. Erik’s lips quirked at the corners; he palmed my waist, drawing me closer.

I dragged my knuckles down his face. “King or not, Erik Bloodsinger, I would follow your darkness across the skies and seas. You are mine, a beautiful monster, a passionate lover, a loyal friend, a vicious king. All mine. And that is all I will ever want.”

Erik kissed me before I finished speaking. Not a sweet kiss, it was a kiss of hunger, almost brutal. Our teeth clacked, our tongues battled. This was a kiss edged in promises of desire, of unbendable devotion.

This kiss dug deeper than the heart—Erik was mine to the soul.

Something snapped Erik from his melancholy. He tangled my hair around his hand, tilting my head back. With a glance, dark with desire and no longer than a breath, the Ever King claimed the slope of my neck with his mouth.

A strangled sort of sob rattled over the empty throne room when the sharp points of his teeth broke my flesh. Erik bit my skin, his tongue following the sharp ache, pooling heat and want in the pit of my belly.

My body responded to every brush of his fingertips, every press of his lips. I rocked over his lap, desperate for more.

“Dammit,” Erik breathed out, his brow pressed to my shoulder, his palm gliding up the divots of my spine.

“Don’t want this?” Gods, I felt I might peel out of my skin if he stopped.

Erik’s eyes flashed in a dark frenzy. “Yes, Songbird, I want this. You’re rocking against my damn cock, and I fear I’m going to spill all over myself like a *bleeding boy*.”

My cheeks heated. I widened my knees and lowered my core over the strained bulge in his trousers, rolling my hips until Erik coughed. His fingers pierced the flesh of my hips.

Gods, I hoped there’d be marks in the morning.

Head back, Erik’s eyes shuttered closed. On pure instinct, on nothing but the *sensation* of me, he guided my hips over his shaft.

“I need to be inside you,” he whispered, voice slurred with desire.

“Agreed, Serpent.”

One palm slid down his chest, the flat planes of his stomach, to the laces of his trousers. Erik moaned and tightened his mouth, almost as if his body burned in pain, not pleasure.

I unthreaded the top lace and kissed the beat of his pulse. “You think you added more danger to my life. You’re wrong. The moment I laid eyes on you—the real you—every dark, beautiful piece brought more light to my heart than I’d ever known. In that moment, all the fear, the panic, the risks, faded.”

Erik cracked his eyes and studied me through his lashes as I hooked my thumbs in the waist of his trousers. He lifted his hips enough for me to slide them down his legs. He covered my hand when I gripped the smooth skin of his cock and stroked himself with me.

The Ever King watched in silence, almost awe, as I guided the tip of his shaft to my soaked entrance. His grip on my body froze, tight and possessive, when I sank onto him, tip to root.

For a moment, we didn't move, we simply looked at each other, sharing breath.

Erik gently tugged on my bottom lip with his thumb. "You are my light in the sky, love."

He soothed my heart when fears kept me in a rotten grip, but in this moment, the unbending Ever King offered his confession like a man surrendering to a lifelong battle. Taught to be as stone, cold and unfeeling, Erik Bloodsinger drew me close and told me with his words and hands, that he wanted to bend, wanted to fall, so long as it was me who caught him again.

Erik kissed me again. He bucked his hips, teasing me, testing me.

I nipped at his ear and whispered, "If you think I am looking for gentle, Serpent, you're mistaken."

"Woman," he hissed and speared deeper into me with a rough thrust. "Be ready to stand by your words."

I clung to his neck, gasping over his shoulder. Our bodies, feverish, rocked on the king's throne, taking and giving. Frantic and controlled.

Erik gripped my jaw, drawing my face in his line of sight, to watch my features. He grinned like a challenge was won the moment my brow gathered as pleasure built. My fingers coiled in his hair, tugging at the roots, desperate for purchase when he lifted my hips, only to slam my body back over his length, again and again.

He answered my demands for fervor, not gentility, and ground our bodies together until there was no space between us.

My neck bared, I lost control, moaning and sighing the king's name, unbothered that guards were paces away, standing watch. Erik bucked his hips hard enough the throne scraped over the stones. Pleasure numbed my mind. All I could do was sink into a fluster of instinct to draw out more raw grunts from his chest, more rasps when his own arousal pinched over his face.

“Livia,” Erik gasped my name like a final plea when I angled my body differently, drawing him in deeper.

I closed my eyes when the heat between my legs boiled over. My fingers dug in his shoulders, my body went taut, twitching as I called Erik’s name over and over. A haze clouded my mind as Erik thrust harder until the rush of his own release spilled into me.

We sagged against each other, trading weak kisses, chuckling when we took note of how out of line Erik’s throne had drifted compared to mine. With care, Erik helped me back into my chemise, then readjusted his own trousers before curling me onto his lap and burying his face into my neck.

Perhaps the Ever King was not a man who knew how to speak his heart, but he was mesmerizing how he conveyed it with his touch. In these moments, when Erik Bloodsinger held me, still and calm, I could understand every damn word.

For my heart screamed the same—this world, this kingdom, all of it mattered only if he was part of it.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

THE SERPENT

THE HOUSE OF TIDES had a deeper chill to the sea breeze than other houses in the Ever. Moonlight painted the inky waves in silver as the Ever Ship bow carved through the surface. The air was heavy with brine and woodsmoke. Flames shattered the night. Joron's shores were surrounded in sturdy stone towers with great basins of blue and gold flames lighting ships into his ports.

The shoreline was empty of imposing peaks like the House of Blades or the royal city, but stone cottages covered the rockier beaches in clusters all surrounding the village square.

Like a phantom on the water, the ship silently wove through the narrow islets leading to the main shores. A tang coated the salt in the air from rows of fire plum orchards, a pome with spiked, orange skin that could be used by boneweavers for pain relief, while the meat was traded as a delicacy amongst noble houses.

Once we carved through a weathered sea gate, cheerful bells rang out over the shores, announcing our arrival.

Flames burning in great iron basins at the top of the walls shifted to a poisonous green shade, and the thick, wooden gates cracked open. Small vessels awaited in the tides, there to ferry folk to the shores without crowding the ports and docks with large ships. Joron was a man of order and reveled in having a bit of control over those who stepped onto his shores, be it king or commoner.

I offered no greeting to those sent to collect us, merely held out a hand for Livia.

Gods, the woman was a sight. I'd nearly dragged her back into our bedchamber when she'd emerged with her hair tight in traditional plaits with bone beads of her folk, but over her head was one my black scarves, keeping hair free of her eyes. A tight corset accented her curves, and a thick skirt covered her legs, sturdy enough to withstand the sea winds.

A perfect collision of two worlds.

After we took our places in the sloop, the earth fae, Celine, and Tait followed. Stieg and Sewell remained at the shore, and Gavyn and Tavish would keep watch on the vessels in the tides.

Docks cut into the shallows, and waiting for us was a black coach painted in the seal on Joron's banner—a skull locked in a violent wave.

“Erik.” Livia shook my arm and gestured to the villagers meandering through the market square of Joron's main hub. Thin shawls over heads, hacking coughs by more, and a great many of the townspeople were threadbare and thin as a post.

Few even made an attempt to look our way.

Hair lifted on my arms. I gripped Livia's hand firmer. “Stay close.”

“My King.” A footman dipped his chin, holding the door to a glossy coach pulled by four braying horthane.

I paused, one foot on the step, and faced the man. “And?”

He lifted his eyes, hesitant. “Beg pardon?”

“My King *and*,” I snarled, scooping my arm around Livia's waist. “Does it look like I am the only royal here?”

The man's eyes widened, he seemed uncertain but bowed at the waist. “Forgive me, My Lady—”

“Queen, you bastard. She is not only the *lady* of the palace, she is the Ever Queen.”

Livia drew in a sharp breath through her nose but did not shrink against me. If our bond remained, doubtless I would sense her heightened pulse, the pull she often felt to disappear when she grew uneasy. She fought it, no mistake, she stood straighter, claimed her position.

“Of course,” he said and offered a fresh bow, facing Livia. “Highness. Welcome.”

“Don’t make me remind you again,” I snarled and ushered Livia inside ahead of me.

The footman hurried out a greeting to the others, merely naming them as, “Honored guests.”

“So this is your House of Tides.” Jonas laughed. “Wonderful way to earn a bit of fealty, My King. Snap and bite at every soul you see.”

I huffed and looked out the window, slipping my fingers through Livia’s. Haggard folk lined the roads, empty, almost despondent. What the hells? Joron had always built his ego upon the shoulders of his *fine lands*, his *proud folk*, his *glorious trade*.

The people we passed seemed as though they were weakening with each step.

Valen followed the folk out the other window. “It was the right move.”

“What was?” Jonas asked.

“If the perception of her authority is to change, he must not allow disrespect for his queen. Not in the slightest.” Valen spoke so plainly, so in favor of my outburst, I wasn’t certain I’d heard him correctly.

“Speaking from experience, Daj?” Livia pinched her lips.

“Yes.”

“Gods.” Livia shook her head. “Why have you and Maj not told us all these sordid details about your history?”

Valen grinned. “And allow you to see me as less than perfectly in control of my temper? I think not, little love.”

“I never thought I’d say it, Serpent,” Livia whispered, “but you have a great deal more in common with my father than I thought.”

True enough. The more I learned of my father’s killer, the more I understood his moves, his brutality, like I was seeing myself reflected through a pane of glass. Every step, even the death of the Ever King, had been to defend his queen, his family, his people.

It was a short distance to Joron’s manor, a wood and wattle structure made of three levels and simple blue banners waving in the breeze from every window, meant to mimic the flow of the sea.

“King Erik, what an *honored* surprise.” From atop a stone stoop, Joron watched us emerge one by one, sneering, his tone so pretentious I thought he might cough from the effort of speaking through his nose.

A woman with silver hair—like a flash of starlight—stood two paces at his back. Her chin was lifted in defiance, her dark eyes like an underwater abyss.

I ignored Joron, looking to the woman instead. “Lady Avaline. I have not seen you in court.”

Avaline Mindtaker was a mere turn younger than Livia. She ought to have been to the royal city as a courtier long ago, but Joron never parted with his precious gift.

She dipped her chin. “Highness. My father feels I am better suited here.”

Of course, he did. “Joron. Like I told your footman, I will have you address the queen properly. It aggravates me when she is ignored.”

Joron sneered, beastly and with unmasked derision, and tipped his head. “Welcome to the House of Tides, Queen.”

Only queen. Not *his* queen. I wanted to forgo our plans and split Joron’s sneer across his face permanently.

“I was pleased to hear the king was arriving,” Joron said, swirling his flute of wine more than sipping. “Although, I am

unfamiliar with your guests.”

“Then you’ve proven yet again how little fighting you did during the war.” I opened my arm to the earth fae. “Allow me to introduce the royal lines of the earth realms, and the earth bender, king of the Night Folk fae.”

Joron’s eyes bulged. “You ... stand with the Ever King’s killer?”

“The Ever King is not dead.” I patted my chest. “If you speak of the former king, then yes. I stand with those who stand with my queen. Her father seems to do that well enough.”

The bastard smoothed down his garish doublet and sniffed. “Of course. Naturally. Well, to what do I owe the honor of your visit?”

“Surely you’ve heard, Joron. We’re a kingdom divided.”

Joron sipped slowly, pale eyes unblinking. “There’s been talk. I take it you’ve come to petition me for my support against ... *another* heir of Thorvald, am I understanding correctly?”

“Actually, I care little about your support.” I pointed to his daughter. “We seek an audience with Lady Avaline.”

A flush filled her pale cheeks, taken off guard. But the slightest flicker of a grin painted her lips, as though the notion of speaking to another soul that was not Joron brought her a true thrill.

A scowl crept over Joron’s slanted features, a storm rolling over the sea, slow to build and vicious. “I’m afraid I cannot permit it, My King. My daughter does not take well to other people. Certainly not such strangers as earth fae.”

“She seems to be handling it just fine,” Sander said.

Joron frowned. “Surely you’ve heard of her fits, King Erik.”

Avaline hung her head and took a small step backward.

“I’ve heard,” I said. “Though, strangely, have never witnessed one.”

“Only because I have kept her within our walls.”

“I need to speak to your daughter.” Time for patience was at an end.

“And, again, I am afraid for the wellbeing of my daughter, I must refuse.” Joron dipped his chin with derision. “Respectfully.”

Respectfully, I’d cut off his balls and shove them down his damn throat if he sneered at me once more.

“What do you say, Avaline?”

She jolted, lifting her gaze. Avaline shot a look to Joron’s twisted face. He glared at her, puckering his features like drawstrings cinched his brow and lips.

In her silence, I’d not noticed Livia had peered around the corner of his home until another hacking cough drew out her panicked tone.

“Erik!” Livia was on her knees. “Gods, look.”

“I beg your pardon.” Joron rushed for the edge of his manor. “There is nothing of interest to the House of Kings, and I do not permit unprovoked rummaging.”

On Joron’s first step toward Livia, he was met with the curved edge of a battle axe propped beneath his chin. Valen’s eyes were black as slate.

Avaline let out a shriek of surprise and covered her mouth, but she did not cower, merely watched as each step Valen took nudged Joron back toward the entrance of his manor. “Don’t go near her,” was all the earth bender said.

“King Erik?” Joron looked horrified, mouth parted, eyes bewildered.

“What would you like me to do? I think he should bury you within your own lands until we’re finished.”

Mira trailed her fingers over Joron’s shoulder, a chilling kind of darkness written in her bright eyes. “I wonder how

long you could live buried in the earth before madness set in?”

Tait’s brow flicked, but he turned his gaze to his pocket watch and cursed. “There is danger here.”

“What is so important about that damn clock?” Mira said in a hiss under her breath.

“Reveals danger,” Tait snapped back.

One brow arched, the princess tilted her head. “Then why haven’t you been staring at that thing the whole time?”

“Danger for the Ever, meaning the crown.” Tait returned the golden watch to his trousers. “A spell from the House of Mists to aid me in finding anyone who means harm to the king ... and now queen. The one thing Harald did right by commissioning this.”

“It only works around Bloodsinger?”

Tait didn’t respond, merely offered the princess an exasperated look, like he’d already explained it all in great depth.

I did not need a mystical watch to tell me, the prickle on my flesh and weight in my gut was enough to know there was something amiss in the House of Tides.

Livia stroked the hair of a child. A girl, her matted braids were tangled around her flushed face, and the sickly creature could hardly catch a breath between her coughing spells. The girl trembled, flushed in fever, and toppled at her side was a basket of ...

“What the hells is this?” I lifted a pome, soaked in blackened skin. “The darkening?”

Livia clung to the child, but a new sort of villainy burned in the deep blue of her eyes. “They’re eating it. This isle is infected.”

It was then I looked to the fields behind the manor. Deadened meadows, crops, and riverbanks. Land that looked as though a wildfire had devoured the lot of it soaked the House of Tides.

“Three hells.” Valen took in the land. “This is what you’ve been healing?”

“This is what has been devouring us,” I retorted, voice rough and more hiss than words. I reeled around the corner, darkened pome in hand, and gripped Joron by the throat. “Why did you never send word? The state of your lands, hells Joron, they’ve been infected for months.”

The tide lord shook me off. “We tend to ourselves in the House of Tides. Our gifts were given for a reason, if we cannot save ourselves, then we do not deserve to be saved.”

“You don’t make those choices for *my* people.” I slammed a hand against his chest, shoving him against the wall. “Your folk are dying.”

“Have you been feeding them infected crops?” Livia, furious and harried, came to my side, shaking another blackened fruit in her hand. “You’ve been starving them, haven’t you? They have no choice but to take from the darkening fields.”

Joron’s eyes flashed in hatred. “I never permitted my folk to take from the fields. If they would consecrate and ration, they would not be in this state.”

I let out a growl of building rage and slammed his back against the wall again. “Did you think we wouldn’t notice when we arrived here? Why have you let this go on?” In Joron’s silence, I understood. The laugh from my throat was bitter, empty. “Ah. You were awaiting a new king. The creator of the darkening. You want him to rule, to clear your lands, is that it? So, you sit here like a coward and what? Wait me out? Wait for my death?”

“It isn’t like that,” Joron murmured. “It’s logical. We’ve heard by now who is responsible for the curse. He ... he will be able to clear it.”

“As can your queen,” I snapped.

“Yes, but it will be swifter if a curse maker breaks their own spell.” Joron glared at me. “If you would not be so proud and simply give up the blood crown—”

My fist crunched over Joron's jaw. Unsatisfied, I struck him again, then once more until he doubled over. Joron coughed and kicked, desperate to break free when the ground shuddered beneath Valen's fury magic, a threat of what could come.

Avaline backed away, horrified. Mira went to the woman, squaring to her, voice soft. "You know something is wrong here, don't you? You don't want this. Look at your people, they grow ill."

Avaline let her hand slide off her mouth. She looked to me, then Livia who slammed the rotted fruit onto the stones at our feet.

"Father ... believes it is a sign of the fates, that a new blood heir is destined to rise." Avaline winced. "After so many turns with the blight unable to be healed, it was thought this new king might have answers."

"But you disagree?" Mira pressed gently.

Avaline didn't respond.

Celine was the next to move in. "Look at me." Tidecaller waited until the woman lifted her gaze. "Bonekeeper began the darkening. Why would we want him to be on the throne?"

"Father says—"

"Shut up, girl," Joron seethed.

I struck his lip again, his blood on my knuckles. "Speak, Avaline."

She let out a rough breath. "Father says we do not have a choice. Yes, we heard the darkening was his doing, but he ... well, he wants to restore the Ever to what it was, not what—forgive me, My King—not what you are creating."

"I see." Livia stepped forward, her gaze focused nowhere but on Joron. "So it all leads back to a queen."

"Songbird," I warned when she knelt, but I pulled my hand away. Instinct to shield her, to keep her from more harm burned like lamplight in my chest. Yet, she was queen. She was a voice of the Ever.

Livia leveled with Joron, sneering into his bloodied face. “You hate that Erik placed me on the throne, don’t you? You would rather crown the bastard who is killing your lands, your people, all so a queen does not sit above you.”

“It is deeper than that.”

“Perhaps,” she said. “But that is a great part of it. You think he is your answer? Hmm, I wonder why he had to take me, then? Let me tell you something.” Livia leaned closer, lip curled. “It will not be a traitor who saves your lands. It will be your queen.”

She said nothing else and took hold of the splattered bits of fruit at her feet. Cupped in her palms, she closed her eyes. Even without touching her as we’d done, a hum of fury burned in the stone tiles. It spread through the courtyard. I went to her side, touching her shoulder, and nearly buckled from the burst of heat radiating off her skin.

Gasps, even cries of praise, rolled from the far side of Joron’s manor.

“Good hells, Liv.” Jonas stood around the corner. “Keep going. Valen, look.”

The earth bender followed. He did not wear a look of stun. He grinned with a searing pride. “It’s pulling back from those fields.”

“She’s not even touching it this time,” Tait whispered.

“No.” I held tightly to Livia’s shoulder, convinced bond or not, there was a power that flowed through us, an unmistakable strength. “But do not underestimate the rage of the Ever Queen. Hold him, will you?”

Mira and Sander went without pause to Joron’s side. Mira wrapped the tide lord in a dazed illusion of darkness. His whimpers were sweet as the dawn after a wretched night.

“Come.” I helped Livia to her feet. “These people will not doubt who you are by the time we end this.”

Since reuniting, we’d had little time to seek out the blight and poison across the Ever. The risk of facing Larsson

unprepared was too fierce, and in truth, I wasn't certain if Livia was ready.

She proved me wrong.

Without a pause, Livia hurried to the back fields. The thrum of magic, hot and palpable, burned between us. Fate joined us as children, and it was felt now with every step through Joron's fields.

Crops, stalks of grass, of wildflowers, of mangled fruit trees, they returned, lush and full and ripe. Livia was unrelenting. Tension pulsed in her jaw, but if she was fatiguing, she never let it show, merely urged us to continue across the flatlands.

I studied her, holding her palm, while she worked on a scorched, deadened wild oak.

You are the queen, love. She would not hear me, but her gaze caught mine, as though something in her heart stirred. With a wicked smirk, she nodded toward the deeper fields and pressed on.



TWO FIELDS. Three meadows. An entire orchard of fire plums that would feed most of the township for a month. Livia pulled back the poisoned earth with more strength than I anticipated. Truth be told, she did so with more strength than me. By the time she slumped into my chest, spent, I was damn close to pleading we return.

We were able to stumble back to the side of Joron's manor where a small army of people awaited, slack-jawed, in awe.

"Bleeding hells." Celine knelt in front of us, a ladle and bucket of fresh water in her hands. She forced the spoon against our lips, wetting our mouths. "Did you see how far you went?"

"No, Tidecaller." I laid back on the grass, cradling Livia's head to my heart. "We must've missed it, but please, do tell us how far?"

Celine clicked her tongue. “You won’t be able to stand for days.”

I didn’t disagree.

Movement by our heads forced me to crack my eyes. The earth bender stood over us, head cocked.

“Daj?” Livia said weakly. “What’s ... what’s with the look? You’ve seen me bloom soil before.”

His face was tugged into something else, not confusion over her abilities, it was more he studied us. “Why did you touch her while she pulled it away?”

I closed my eyes, too fatigued to keep them open. “We found it helps. I thought it wouldn’t without the heartbond, but ___”

“It did.” Livia patted my belly, like she might be dozing off. “Your words ... well, *you* help, Serpent.”

Valen rubbed a hand down his face. “Your touch strengthened her?”

“I suppose.” Did he not realize I wanted to sleep for no less than two days?

“Dammit,” he grumbled, and as he walked away, it sounded a great deal like he said, “like Elise.”

Of course, it could’ve been made up in the haze of my mind.

“Erik.” Tait kicked the bottom of my boot. “You’ll sleep soon, but we need to deal with Joron.”

Damn bastard. Reluctantly, I unraveled from Livia’s body, and together we stood.

Joron was coated in sweat but released from whatever illusion Mira had used to keep him compliant. He blinked his gaze to us.

“On your knees,” I said, voice low. “Bow to your queen. Thank her for her mercy, and perhaps I’ll let you keep your eyes. I’ve not decided on your tongue yet.”

Joron shuffled forward. He bent low, pressed his brow to the stones, and placed his palms out in front of Livia. “My Queen.”

Livia leaned against me, seeking my strength the way I sought hers. She looked to the curious people around us and lifted her voice as well as she could. “I am Livia Ferus, and I have sat on the throne of the Ever King. I am his queen. Stand with us, and you will not suffer the way your lord has made you suffer. You will not be forced to choose a tyrant who steals a crown, who poisons your land, your home.”

I kept a possessive hand on her back but said nothing. Not when a few gazes fell to me, as though they did not know what to do, not when Joron spat his distaste for our abuse of his title.

“I will choose an Ever Queen.” Avaline, meek and uncertain, stepped forward. Murmurs followed from her house. “I will choose you both to lead us through ... well, just to lead us. I don’t exactly know what all is going on out there.”

“The earth realms stand with Erik Bloodsinger and Livia Ferus.” Aleksi pounded a fist to his chest.

More murmurs rose up when a few folk went to their knees. Some uttered prayers to the gods. Most seemed too stunned to move, too uncertain on who to follow—their king, a new queen, or the lord of their house.

“My King.” Avaline approached, giving her father a wide step as she came. “You ... you said you came to speak to me.”

“Aye. We did.”

She clasped her hands in front of her body. “I would like to hear what you wanted to say.”

It took little convincing of Avaline to accompany us to the royal city. I wasn’t certain if she wanted to join to aid us with her voice, or merely to see a bit more of the Ever.

At the docks, Gavyn aided the weakest folk onto his ship.

“You’ll have access to clean food, boneweavers, and fresh beds,” I shouted, leaning over the rail of the Ever Ship to hide

how desperately I wanted to slide to the deck. “You are of the House of Tides, but you are of the Ever first and foremost. We do not allow our folk to suffer the way you have been forced.”

Some joined us aboard the Ever Ship, others remained on land, able to work, and now, find unblighted food. Men from the House of Bones and the Ever Ship offered to remain behind and keep Joron in their sights, a sort of imprisonment in his own manor, until this ended.

Should I die, Larsson could free him or kill him. It mattered little to me.

Avaline closed her eyes against the sea spray. “My voice is dangerous, My King. I hope you know.”

“I know some,” I admitted. “But there is a connection I must make.”

Avaline scoffed, bewildered. “You do not fit the old ways of the Ever, King Erik.”

“I’m not of the Ever.” I looked to Livia. “I’m of her. Your voice will help me find those who took her, harmed her, who began the darkening, and who seek to return the Ever Kingdom into the land of brutes like King Thorvald.”

Avaline gave me a gentle nod. “Then, I agree. I think it will be worth the risk.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

THE SONGBIRD

LAUGHTER ROSE from the corner of the great hall of the palace. Jonas and Aleksi kept taking turns relaying the theft of the House of Tides into the shell. Given the amount of time the earth princes were able to speak, Rorik must've been utterly enraptured in the tale, and more than once a bit of exaggeration slipped through.

Soon, my younger brother would be believing we practically fought a war on the shores of Joron's isle.

I'd enjoyed every bleeding moment of the tide lord's spluttering. A dark need to cut the man down bloomed through my heart, much like it had when I'd fought through the guards with Gavyn, much like it had when I bit into Larsson's flesh. Suffering—I wanted suffering.

Erik did not shy from blood, but I was unaccustomed to the thirst for pain to throttle me from behind, like a crook, robbing me of the last pieces of gentility. Love could draw out the most brutal pieces of the heart. Hadn't I told Erik that once? Each step to draw Larsson out proved them even more.

"All right." Jonas shook the ensorcelled shell. "The sea witch is ready to guide you, Bloodsinger."

Erik palmed the shell, the scar over his lip turned white when he pinched his mouth into a line. "What do we need to do?"

He lifted the shell to his ear, pausing as Narza responded. He rubbed the side of his leg, almost habitual now, and nodded. "Seems simple enough."

Another pause.

“I’m not diminishing the risk. Yes, Tavish will remain and see it through.” Erik groaned. “Narza, let us return to hostility, this new fretting you keep doing is unsettling and unwelcome.”

I caught Celine’s gaze over the king’s shoulder. Together, we muffled grins. Erik Bloodsinger had lived a life apart, convinced there were few folk through the realms who cared whether he lived or died. Faces dotted the great hall of the palace, and each cared.

Even his father’s killer.

Daj would always say he stood here for my benefit and mine alone, but the trouble was I knew my father well. If my heart claimed Erik, Valen Ferus would always defend the pieces of my heart.

A few more moments, and Erik returned the shell to my father. “The connection is lost.”

“You understand the process?” Tavish shoved off a back wall, clutching a stone mortar.

“Yes. Murdock will need to draw my blood.”

A chaise was drawn into the hall, tables were placed, a dagger between them. Boneweaver Murdock rolled up the king’s tunic sleeve, revealing the nicks and puckered scars along Erik’s wrists and forearms.

Avaline, dressed in a thin robe, silver hair loose over her shoulders, entered the hall. “Gets rather heated, mind taking,” she explained. “Best not to have irritations like tight clothes and such.”

Her spine was straight, her body tense, but there was more color to her pale features after having been fussed over by a few lady’s maids once we’d arrived at the royal city.

Erik slipped off his tunic altogether, and his bare skin was painted in a rosy flush. No doubt, from unease and vitriol at being seen by so many eyes. I went to his side and took hold

of his hand. Sweat beaded over my brow, and my breaths were rapid.

I held his stare, and a bit of worry flickered in the red. Had the heartbond still fluttered between us, he would know my insides had rotted and soured with disquiet. He'd know my skin was feverish with all that might go wrong. He would be whispering his salacious words through my heart to draw out a grin by the time Avaline lifted the dagger.

“Here is how it works.” Avaline spoke like a lullaby, gentle and light. “We fill each mortar with blood. Normally I would need a piece of both, but since you share the blood of Thorvald, it should connect us to the only other with the same blood.”

“Doesn't Tait have the same?” Jonas muttered.

Avaline frowned and tilted her head. “A blood cousin on the side of a sire? I could likely connect the king, but his mind would not shine as vibrant. A brother's blood is a closer match. It will draw us in swifter.”

“Stay out of my head.” Tait pinched one of his paper smokes between his teeth and inspected the tiny clock in his hand. “Time's on our side. For now.”

Erik pulsed a few tight squeezes against my palm and laid back on the chaise. “Then let's get to it. There are words to be had with my brother.”

“You'll need to step aside,” Avaline whispered to me.

“I can't be near him?” No. I couldn't watch Erik slip into some endless dream, locked in Larsson's mind. I needed to know he lived, breathed, and was still warm. Heat prickled along my scalp. I was mortified when my chin trembled, and sharp, thorny emotion tightened in the back of my throat.

Until Avaline patted my shoulder, awkward and more like a slap, as though the woman hardly knew how to comfort another soul. Being locked away most of her life, I doubted she did.

“Only for the bleeding.” She pointed to a place a mere three paces away. “Stand there. When the connection is made,

I think out of anyone here, you will prove the most powerful anchor.” With a nervous look about the room, she added. “Not that the king does not care for all of you. I’m certain he does.”

“I think I would make a much greater anchor than Livie,” Aleksi insisted. “Bloodsinger and I are inseparable.”

Erik glared at my cousin, but this close, I could see the flicker of a smile on his lips. “Put your hands on me, and I will separate us swiftly.”

“Oh, it should be Valen,” Mira said, beaming a little wickedly. “It’ll frighten you right back, Ever King.”

I knew what they were doing. Happened when one had grown with others since infancy. They would know the tension mounting in my blood, the burn in my lungs. They’d know the endless flow of horrid outcomes rampaging through my mind.

They were unthreading some of the woven pressure in the room with smiles and jests, and I loved them for it. In truth, I thought Erik was more relaxed.

Avaline called for Murdock to handle the blood once Erik’s skin opened. I hugged my middle, silent and unmoving, as Joron’s daughter sliced Erik’s arm open on one side, then the other. Murdock pressed on the king’s flesh, draining the blood in big bursts until the bottom of each mortar was coated.

Tavish joined Avaline in front of one mortar. Together, the witches added herbs, and with a wave of their palms, both bowls of blood flashed in a black spark, filling the room in the harsh scent of iron and salt.

With a nod of thanks to Tavish, Avaline dipped her fingers into the mortars, coating both hands. “Rest, King Erik. Think of the one you wish to see.”

One lingering glance at me, then Erik closed his eyes, and Avaline began to sing.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

THE SERPENT

ENDLESS WATER DRAGGED ME DEEPER, deeper, until I was lost to a bottomless sea. Then, my feet struck solid ground, buckling my weak leg.

Floorboards met my cheek, bruising my shoulder and hip. I groaned and rolled onto my back. Overhead, dim light split through droplets of muggy sea air, catching bits of dust over the dark wood laths.

Minimalism blanketed the room. Small, dim, and when the floor swayed it was clear—I was on a ship.

A chest of cherry-stained wood was topped with tin mugs and goblets of old wine and a rich, amber mead. Dried herbs added rustic potency to the room, and scattered in disarray amidst the ale were bones. Slivers and full pieces, teeth, and fingers.

Another moan, not from my chest, tilted my attention to the narrow bed pushed against one wall.

When his eyes blinked open, when he caught my gaze, Larsson scrambled for a discarded blade on the floor.

I rolled out of reach when the edge slammed into the wood, splintering a few boards from the gash. He swiped again. Hands lifted, I dodged and struggled to my knees. Too slow, too disoriented, the point of his cutlass sliced through my chest.

A sharp breath, then ... nothing.

Not pain, not blood, nothing but an eerie mist of cold.

“What is this?”

A cruel grin split over my mouth. With his blade still impaled deep through my heart, I stood. Larsson stumbled backward, dropping the sword. It spilled through my body like I was nothing but a projection of his nightmares.

“Hello, *brother*.” The word was poison on the tongue, sharp and painful.

The sight of his gnarled ear brought a flush of pride and numbing rage in the same breath. Larsson, dark hair scattered over his brow, twisted his features into one of disdain. A face I’d trusted, on my ship, in my palace, with Livia.

I no longer recognized this face.

With buried resentment, I strode past him and sat on the bed. It neither gave under my weight nor felt like much of anything. Still, I frowned. “Rather uncomfortable for a royal, don’t you think? What ship are we on?”

“What is this?”

“You keep saying that. Afraid, Bonekeeper?”

“You are nothing more than a spectral. Having a bit of fun with the sea witches, Bloodsinger?” Larsson peered over his shoulder as though he might find Narza hiding in the shadows.

“Likely as much as you.”

Larsson spread his arms over his chest and glared at me. “What do you want?”

“A meet,” I said. “Is that not what enemies are meant to do? Parlay to make their demands.”

“Ah, but we’re not enemies.” His teeth flashed in the morning light. “We’re brothers.”

Anything glib faded from my smile. “We could’ve been. You knew how I detested the crown.”

“I knew how much you wanted to please our dead father. Don’t pretend you would ever have given up your title.”

He knew so little. “I see Thorvald has done the same with you.”

Venom poisoned Larsson’s grin. “I care nothing about Thorvald. The only thing I needed from him was the power he left behind in the earth realms. It was the only way to break through the wards he leveled against me.”

My brow arched.

“Didn’t know that, did you, brother?” Larsson selected a piece of bone off the chest and inspected it. “Ever wonder why he did not favor a half-elven son? Rather unique bloodline, after all. My mother was even the niece of an elven king.” He curled his fingers around the bone shard, eyes like a moonless night. “But Thorvald feared me.”

Questions battered my skull, but I kept quiet.

“You want me to tell you everything.” He scoffed. “Want to know all my secrets? I assure you, knowing how I came to be here will not aid you in this fight, Erik. You cannot stop it. I have too much on my side.”

“Then where is the risk? I cannot touch you. I’m not even certain I’ll remember what you say. I detest you. I want your blood to spill. But I don’t understand how you could destroy the kingdom you plan to take. How do you ever expect the people to follow you after what you have done?”

“They will. I am the firstborn, and we both know what sort of power that wields in the Ever.”

I feigned boredom and disbelief. Sewell had agreed with the earth bender to prey on Larsson’s arrogance, his certainty he would win this battle. To make light of it, to make him feel less than. Larsson was the sort of man who would spew everything to prove me wrong.

“You think too highly of yourself.” I picked at my fingertips, as though wholly indifferent. “You’ve nothing to entice the people of the Ever. You’re a bastard who was abandoned and left behind, unwanted. Hardly impressive.”

“Impressive?” Larsson’s face hardened. “You have no idea what power I hold, Bloodsinger.” Once the bone shard was

returned to the chest, Larsson faced me again. “As I said, I was not unwanted, I was feared. After the boneweavers inspected me, the Ever King found my voice to be too great a risk.”

“You were inspected by boneweavers?” I cursed myself for letting the question slip. Indifference, smugness—those would infuriate Larsson more than feckless intrigue.

A grin of satisfaction proved me right. “Of course. For a time I even slept in your little princely bed. When our father realized I was a voice thief, he washed his hands of me. Thorvald knew once I was strong enough, I could take his blood, grow stronger than him, and overrule his legacy.”

I folded my arms over my chest as if bored. “If it is all true, why does no one recall the elven? You say they are your folk, yet they are spoken of like they are myths.”

“You ought to ask Lady Narza.”

My heart stuttered. No. Narza didn’t know, she couldn’t have known.

Larsson leaned forward. “When Thorvald came to her with his dreary mistake, she placed wards against elven folk and the Ever, long before you existed, Bloodsinger. Her abilities were impressive enough. I imagine the Ever King found merit in joining with her house. I am told that is when he began his new crusade to manipulate Narza’s daughter. In hopes he might create a powerful—yet, controllable—heir.”

Damn the hells. My folk, everyone who’d known of my father’s regrets, had only offered lies and deception to me.

“If this is so, how did you return?”

“Through death,” Larsson said. “Once the Ever King faded, old wards keeping me from the borders of the kingdom began to weaken. The final piece before I could cross into the Ever Sea was my mother.” He shook his head and touched a slender piece of bone. “Took me some time to realize he’d warded her blood. Fair, I suppose. You had to kill your mother too.”

Bastard. His grin was chilling, like ice flowed in my veins. Proud, almost maniacal, as he described ending his own

mother's life to break the final threads of barriers from the elven and the Ever.

“How many turns have you been plotting?”

“From the beginning, Erik.”

My jaw pulsed. None of his loyalty, none of the simple nights aboard the Ever Ship, none of it was sincere.

Larsson shook his head. “It takes time to overthrow spells and blood crowns.”

I clicked my tongue. “Rather pitiful that you nearly destroyed the Ever with the darkening.”

“Dark spells leave remnants. Of course, I didn't realize it would spread and poison.”

“Why now? Why take her?”

“Your lover?” Larsson clicked his tongue. “She is the power of the Ever.”

“Narza said she is not the mantle of Thorvald.”

“Ah, but she absorbed the mantle. Even if it now belongs to you, it was once Thorvald's. The last remnant of his voice was what I needed.”

“So, you took the heartbond.” I was speaking more to myself than him. All of it had tangled in my mind, overwhelming and infuriating.

“I took it. And Fione has already broken the wards against that crown. It will sit atop my head the moment it is in my hands.” Larsson crossed the room, tilting his head, practically snarling down at me. “Enjoy your earth fae, brother. I'll be taking her again, and without the wards against me, you won't be able to stop me. Not with the power I have.”

“You've no purpose for her any longer. You got what you wanted.”

“I did.” His voice lowered, low and cruel. “But I would so enjoy watching your face when I claim her myself before I kill you.”

“Careful, Bonekeeper,” I said. “She might bite off your nose should you try it again.”

Larsson’s eyes narrowed to dark slits. “As long as I have her, the earth fae will remain tamed.”

Erik ... A voice, gentle, warm, rose in the distance. Time ... return.

I peered over my shoulder but saw nothing. An urgency took root in my chest, like I’d been racing down a corridor for too long. Like there was a place I needed to be.

I rose from the bed, brushing off a bit of dust from my fall into the room. “So disappointing. You boast your power while knowing nothing of mine.”

He laughed. “What do you have? I hold the House of Blades—”

“I believe Hesh’s corpse will soon be fashioned into my queen’s crown.”

“I have his crew, you bastard.” Larsson’s face hardened. “I have elven ships. And I have elven with the affinity capable of keeping folk docile, including your little earth fae, well enough. I assure you, brother, you’ve no idea what she—what they can do.”

A slip. That was all I needed. *She*, not they. It had to be the woman Livia knew. What magic she held, I doubted Larsson would confess to it. Still, he’d given enough to know she was part of his plans for overtaking both the Ever and even leeching his influence against Livia’s folk.

Erik. Come back to me.

The voice, soft as a gentle current, tugged at the center of my chest, like strings in my heart. Like a bond I could not shake. I rubbed a hand over the bloom of warmth. The room seemed smaller, the air colder.

“You have your weapons,” I said. “But it’s not enough. Listen well, Bonekeeper, I have the power of the earth fae. They stand with the true king.”

“Lies.”

“You think so?” I leaned my face close enough I could almost touch his brow with mine. “How do you think we sank into the damn sea to get away from you?”

For the first time, Larsson paled, uncertain.

“I have the House of Mists—”

“As do I.” He slammed his fist over his chest. “Fione rivals Narza.”

“I doubt that.” I lowered my voice to a dark purr. “More importantly, I wear the blood crown and have no need to steal it. The Ever answers to me. She will never answer to you, a bastard who had no home, no birthright despite claiming to be from two royal lines.”

Larsson’s chest heaved. His body trembled like his skin might split beneath his fury in the next breath. “We shall see soon, *brother*.”

“I’m terrified.” I waved him away like he was nothing. “Here I am, standing in front of you, and you can do nothing. You will always be nothing.”

“Nothing?” Larsson spat. “We shall see who is nothing. Look to the seas, Bloodsinger. I will come for you with armies of land and sea, greater than the ones you think you possess. You will never see us coming until it is too late.”

Erik Bloodsinger. Come back to me now.

Songbird.

Livia. She was there. I felt her, deep to my bones, as much as I’d felt her before the heartbond was stolen from us.

Gods, I even felt the stun from my response. Had she heard me? I wanted to hold her, touch her, see her eyes gleam in the sunlight a great deal more than I wanted to stare at Larsson’s face.

The room dulled, grew somber and gray.

“Consider our parlay at an end.” An echo soaked my voice. “You will never bear the weight of the crown, Bonekeeper.” I paused, sneering one last time. “It would crush

you. Best to leave it to the true king and keep cowering in your shadows.”

Larsson lunged forward, but the room drowned into the endless sea.

I was tossed back, clawing my way through thrashing tides, until light burned behind my eyes. I snapped upright, gasping. In the next breath, arms wrapped around my throat, holding me like I would never be free again.

No mistake, that was the sort of freedom I would never want.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

THE SERPENT

I PACED in front of the cove, waiting for the boil of water to appear. My skin still drenched in sweat, my bones aching. I'd hardly oriented myself with the surroundings of the great hall before demanding a meet with a sea witch.

Livia stood close, eyeing me like I might tumble over and fade into the mind walk spell again.

"I'm fine, love," I said, sharp and biting. With a deep breath through my nose, I paused, faced her, and used a knuckle to tilt her chin. "I'm all right. You pulled me back exactly as Avaline said you would."

The fading sun added a touch of gold against her blue eyes, like the skies were freeing the fire she kept inside.

"I heard you." Livia guided my palm to her heart. "Here."

"Same. It's how you brought me back."

"What happened, Erik?" She worried her bottom lip between her teeth. "It was horrid."

She'd clung to me the instant I woke, trembling, drawing her palms over my face, my arms. Celine told me with less tact that I'd thrashed like a dying eel and moaned like a mournful haunt on the wind.

"I'll tell you everything, but first I need to speak to the Lady of witches. Maelstrom, where the hells is she?"

Maelstrom stood in the cove, water up to his knees, and stopped waving his palm over the sea's surface. "Takes time to summon the connection, King Erik."

“You know,” Tavish said, back against a thin spindle of a tree, “if this sod told you something about Lady Narza, I’d take it with a hefty dose of mistrust.”

I curled my lip, ignoring the others watching me with trepidation. The earth fae kept a distance, uncertain what had me in tangles, Celine, Gavyn, and Tait had seen enough of my anger to naturally stand aside until it faded.

A glow on the surface of the water pulled me to the edge. Like before, light rippled through the tides, warping Narza’s features, but she was there.

I wasted no time. “You knew Thorvald had another son.”

“Erik?” Narza leaned forward. “What’s happened?”

“Allow me to speak slower. You knew. Thorvald. Had. A bastard.”

“Erik,” Maelstrom warned.

I ignored him and peered over the glassy surface. “Tell me the truth, Narza. Did you aid my father in shielding Bonekeeper, his folk, and his mother from ever breaching the Ever?”

For a dozen heartbeats, she was silent. Almost frozen. Her voice was hollow when she spoke. “I don’t know.”

More than one gasp wisped at my back. Even Tavish wore a bit of distress on his features.

My chest cinched. “All this time, you could’ve told me. You’re just like him, keeping secrets, lies, like you wanted me to fail.”

“You don’t understand,” Narza snapped. “I-I say I don’t know because I *cannot* recall, only that I know there was something I did to aid the last Ever King. Many, many turns ago. Something was done to protect the Ever, but ... it has been washed of my memories.”

“Washed of your memories.” I wanted to lash out, draw blood, anything before the rage building took over. “How convenient.”

“No, it is not,” Narza insisted. “Whatever I did brought consequences. No doubt, an agreement between myself and Thorvald was made that would rid me of memories of what I had done. But a sea witch voice always leaves remnants behind. To my bones, I always knew something was there that involved the Ever King; I simply could not recall it.”

“Erik,” Maelstrom whispered. “In binding agreements where blood is signed, much like the bond she made with the earth fae, it could’ve been a stipulation that Narza would need to ward her own memories against the spell.”

I narrowed my eyes at the cove. We didn’t have much time before the connection would fade. “You would agree to literally forgetting a spell?”

She hesitated. “To agree to such a thing, I would’ve needed to believe there was great risk involved should anyone but the king know.”

He feared me. Perhaps Larsson had been correct in assuming Thorvald would’ve done everything to keep his blood thieving out of the Ever.

“It has been like a memory I cannot draw from the shadows,” Narza said. “But the unknown, the feeling, is why I never trusted Thorvald fully. It is why I demanded the heartbond for Oline.”

“Explain.”

“I thought it would protect Oline from whatever secrets he kept in his past, whatever secrets I had aided in hiding. I never —” Narza released a rough breath. “I never imagined he would use her boy to break the bond for him. The heartbond was crafted to shield her, to shield you both, and he still found a way to destroy it.”

“You must cease blaming yourself,” Maelstrom said, soft and tender.

Through the ripples, Narza straightened. “Tell me what has brought this on. I am not lying to you, perhaps I should’ve told you there was something in my past I could not recall, but I

swear to you, I did not think it would be connected to this. In truth, I have not thought of it since Thorvald died.”

A gentle hand curled around my arm. Livia stood beside me in the water. She said nothing; she didn’t need to, so long as she was there.

I hurried through Larsson’s confession, his belief Thorvald shunned his firstborn out of fear of his dark blood magic. I pressed about the strength of such wards, the crown, the edges of the kingdom, the elven mystery to sea folk, I pressed it all.

Narza held a hand over her mouth. “It’s ... it’s possible, Erik. But a warding spell of such magnitude would cause a great strain.”

“You fevered near the Otherworld for months,” Maelstrom whispered. “Two turns before the Ever King came for Oline, remember?”

“It is so disorienting. I hardly recall even those months. It ... it could be related.” Narza rubbed her brow but lifted weary eyes. “I am a fool, Grandson. I never wanted to bring you harm, but I have played so many roles in your suffering.”

“Then help us now,” I said, harsh as the sharpest wind. “By taking our bond and slaughtering his own mother, he insists all those blood wards are gone.”

“There are certain spells that unravel others, like a rope fraying,” Tavish said. “But to keep such wards frayed, it calls for death, blood, and sacrifice. I mean, it constantly calls for it. I’ve no doubt they were killing for turns, Erik, all to keep the blood wards from closing again.”

“It was the darkening,” I said. “An imprint of dark magic left behind as they slaughtered their way through the Ever.”

“How did it unravel?” Livia asked.

“Thorvald’s death.” I let out a sigh. “That was the first bend. Then after he killed his mother, the wards keeping him from the Ever broke. No one here knew of him, he could start anew, begin his schemes.”

“He would’ve told the truth to Fione.” Tait frowned. “She would be as bitter as Bonekeeper. Remember what you did as soon as we returned from the battle?”

I nodded. “Broke the mating agreement.”

“Larsson showed his face not long after, Erik. I’d give my damn voice and say that was when they stumbled upon each other.”

Dammit. It was like all I’d known, every breath I’d taken, was built from one deadly lie.

“He murdered his own mother.” Livia closed her eyes but raised a finger to me. “Don’t you dare.”

My lips were already half-parted. “What?”

“Don’t you dare insist you did the same. It is *not* the same.”

“Bonekeeper’s a lunatic,” Celine insisted. “Damn unfeeling wretch.”

“But to don the blood crown he needed one final thread to split from the protection against him.” I brushed a knuckle down Livia’s cheek. “The last piece of Thorvald’s power of the Ever, our heartbond. That was why it took so long for him to truly strike. He needed the Chasm to open as fiercely as me.”

“But it was our bond, not your father’s.”

“It originated with Thorvald,” Narza said glumly. “It was the same power that cast the wards against the crown. He would need it.”

Livia hugged her middle. “After I came to the Ever, I’m certain that’s when Larsson reached out to his elven kin. Skadi ... she said Arion refused to act until a battle was certain, until Larsson was prepared to claim his throne. Once the elven were on his side—”

“He took you,” I said, tongue a lash.

Larsson, for all his scheming, all his plotting, would die for that act alone.

The mirror spell faded with Narza's hurried assurances the House of Mists would always stand at my side, but a new unease built on the shore. As though no one truly knew what to think, what to say.

I strode out of the cove. "He'll come for the crown soon. He believes his power with the elven will outmatch ours. We don't have much time to build our plans."

"Erik," Livia whispered. "Not everyone who is there stands with him."

"What we know is Larsson has dark magic, and the lot of it rests with his kin." I pressed a palm to her cheek, stroking her warm skin with my thumb. "I'm not a hero, love. I'm not here to save them. I'm here to keep you breathing, damn the rest. There is no point in trying to get me to waste time thinking of possible ways for elven to live—I will only see you and your life. These are the darker pieces I warned you about."

"I'm not afraid of your darkness, Serpent. I'm already consumed by it." Livia kissed my fingertips. "But some will deserve a chance, if it is possible."

Gods, the things I wanted to do to her. The way she looked at me, unbothered by the lengths I would go to keep her at my side.

A chance. I was not completely heartless. I'd offer a chance to see the woman who'd tried to fight for Livia safe, but if it meant harming my songbird in the process, I'd tell the earth bender to sink the lot of them into the abyss of the Ever Sea.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

THE SERPENT

LIVIA FOUND me beneath Nightfire and his lover. Half the moon was buried in murky clouds, and added a brighter glow to the edges of the lost star.

“Wanting to be alone?” She strolled through the gentle laps of sea on the sand, feet bare and a wisp of a dress over her body. Thin linen, shoulders bare, a few laces keeping her breasts covered.

I’d never seen a more beautiful creature in my life.

“No.” I scooted to one side and smoothed out the sand near me. I rested my forearms over the tops of my knees and kept my eyes locked on the symbols in front of me as she nestled close.

“What is this—bleeding gods.”

“I often have the same reaction when I come out here,” I said, venom laced my words. “My father’s burial marker often stirs all types of emotions and exclamations.”

“I didn’t know it was here.” Livia hesitantly traced the pearl stone, the symbols of Thorvald’s title.

His body was long gone in the seas, but Harald erected his marker the moment we’d returned to the Ever. Untended since my uncle’s death, now thick sea moss coated the backside, and grass and briars climbed the edges like knobby fingers desperate to drag it to the hells below.

“What brings you here?” Livia rubbed a thumb between my brows, smoothing out the tension.

I shrugged, uncertain how to gather the words.

Livia tilted her head to my shoulder. “Nightfire is closer than ever to his lost love.”

“Seems that way.”

“I wonder what he will tell her once he finds her?” Livia slid her hand around my arm, holding me closer. “I’m sure she will want to hear everything he keeps inside.”

This damn woman. I kissed the top of her head. “Sly, Songbird. I’ve got you figured out, though.”

“You carry me through fears, Erik. I’d like to lift you through burdens, that’s all.”

I let my cheek fall to the top of her brow. “I came here to ... curse my father, I suppose. Perhaps try to ask him why he did all this. I hate him, but there is still this *weak* part of me that still wishes I had a drop of approval.”

Livia rubbed her hand up my arm, tracing the scars beneath my tunic. “It isn’t weak, Erik. He was your father.”

“He knew he had abandoned a child, one with a fearsome voice. Did he truly think, was he so arrogant, that he believed the boy would simply accept losing his birthright? Gods, the least he could do was even admit I was not the firstborn so I could be on my watch.”

Thorvald was a coward in my eyes. A wretched father to not one, but two sons. I felt little sympathy for Larsson, but I understood what it was like to live in the shadow of Thorvald’s resentment and regret. “I keep thinking if he’d not been such a weak-spined creature, he would’ve raised Larsson, taught him not to use his voice for viciousness. He would’ve left my mother alone, and she’d be alive.”

“Erik.” Livia tilted my chin, urging me to look at her. “But you would not be here, and so many other lives would not be full. There are times when you see yourself through the short-sighted vision of King Thorvald. He saw you for your birthright, and what a shame, for he missed knowing his extraordinary son.”

“Are you coddling me, Songbird?”

“Let me, just this once.” She stroked the hair on the back of my neck. “I wish you could see yourself through the eyes of others. Like mine.”

I scoffed. “And what do you see?”

“I see a cunning man.” She kissed my shoulder. “A rather ruthless swordsman.” Another kiss to my jaw. “I see a strong king who fights for those who do not always fight for him.” Livia kissed the corner of my mouth. “I see a beautiful black heart that has swallowed me whole.”

She pulled my mouth to hers. Her tongue slid through my lips, brushing mine. I clasped the sides of her face, drawing her body over mine on the sand.

I tucked her hair out of her eyes. “I am going to stop this, love. I am going to claim my peace with you. That is what I want, not the blood crown, not the title, not the palace—a life with you, uninterrupted.”

“That, My King, is a thing worth fighting for.”

Our hands were hurried, fumbling with each other’s clothes until there was nothing between us. Livia flattened a palm on the sand. Snaps and creaks of brambles and vines coated Thorvald’s grave marker entirely. She crashed her mouth to mine, mumbling between kisses, “This is not for him to see.”

Sprawled over our clothes, we rolled, caged in each other’s arms and legs. Livia pinned my shoulders to the ground, her hips straddling mine. I kissed her breasts, her throat, whispering the words I wanted to shout across the seas—mine, eternal, stunning, wicked—she was all of it.

Livia ran her hands across my chest, the deep scars from beatings and torture. Her lips followed. Halfway down my stomach, she rolled her eyes to meet mine. “You’re the most beautiful sight, Serpent.”

Prepared to argue, words choked off when her plump lips surrounded my cock, drawing me in deep. My fingers wove into her midnight hair, throat bared. Livia tortured with her

wicked mouth, licking and devouring, until pressure gathered, low and deep. Until my thoughts turned to fog.

Until every memory, every instance of swift passion in the past faded, replaced only with Livia. Her scent, roses and sea mist. Her hands, gentle and loving. Her skin, soft and warm.

“Love ...” I rocked my hips. “I’m going to—”

There wasn’t time to pull back before I was spent on her tongue.

Her name tore through our solitude as I came apart. My head fell back, my arms collapsed at my sides. When I stopped panting, Livia kissed me. I tasted the musk of my release, and curled her in my arms, holding her close.

Somewhere in the lazy strokes of our hands, in the tangle of our legs, words flowed without burden. We drifted to the past, to those nights after the war. She told me how she’d sliced her fingertips countless times trying to shape my songbird charm.

I told her of the instant Tait and I were found, huddled in the trees, after the war ended, how we were led through the great hall of the earth fae fort. I told her something drew me to look at the little royals seated at the table, and my eyes focused on a girl with sea blue eyes.

Livia went on about lazy summers on the lakes and ponds behind the Night Folk castle, making me vow that we, too, would sail out in the coves and do the fishing for our own meals from time to time.

I told her more about my mother, the way her hair shone in the sunlight. The way she’d always kissed my nose and tapped it every damn night before sending me off to sleep.

Livia told me how most nights, horrid dreams sent her racing to the bed of her parents, where the earth bender and his queen would move aside, snuggling her deep in the center between them.

Words faded by the time dawn broke along the horizon.

“Your turn, love,” I whispered, rolling her body under mine, and pressing my palm over her chest.

I kissed her then. Kissed her until her body trembled in my hands, until her pants matched the same sounds she’d drawn out of my throat. We faced a battle, danger was not gone, but for a few moments, I lost myself in the peace for which we were fighting.

Days as these, wrapped around Livia Ferus, these were the days I wanted. I’d kill for them, torture, raid. There was no cost too high for more days like these.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

THE SONGBIRD

BELLS in the city rang out, gleeful and bright, while inside the palace was somber. I pressed my palm to the window, observing the sea, wishing we could sail away, even for a moment, and pretend like the risks we were facing were gone.

Now, they were made worse with a new, horrid scheme brought up by Jonas Eriksson. The damn fool. And the trouble was, everyone else seemed to agree with his foolish plans.

I wanted to scream.

“It’s all right to express troubles, Princess.” Stieg strode to my side, matching my gaze over the sea.

“Not when it will do no good. You all have agreed with Jonas, and I hate that I also see the merit.”

“Ah.” Stieg perched on the windowsill. “I’ve known Jonas Eriksson as long as you—the day he took his first breath—so do not think we aren’t equally unsettled. It’s bold and brazen. He is his father’s son. But it might be needed.”

I wrung my hands together. “I know. That is the trouble. This entire plan is laden in risk, and I will not always be with Erik, or you, or ... I feel like I might break, Stieg. I feel like I am about to bend from the weight of it. How did you face war so many times?”

Stieg was rough around the edges. A fae that could draw out land storms as fiercely as Stormbringer could raise torrents on the sea. Scars dotted his toughened face, a bone pierced the center of his nose, but his eyes were never anything but deep, thoughtful, and kind.

A most trusted warrior since the earliest days of my parents' rise to their thrones.

I could tell him anything and there would never be judgment or harsh words.

“Much like you are doing now.” He patted my cheek gently. “I have stepped onto battlefields across our realms. Been a prisoner more than once, and come to care for too many damn people. But it has become those same people that keep me pressing forward and fighting whatever threatens them.”

“It's changing me, Stieg. Larsson, like so many others, underestimates Erik, and I want him to—I want him to fall at Erik Bloodsinger's feet, so he might see the true Ever King take his place at long last. I think such vile things, brutal and bloody. Whenever we return, I'm not sure our folk will know me.”

“Unless this is the Livia Ferus you were always meant to be.”

When I remained silent too long, Stieg squared to me, plopping his large palms on my shoulders.

“Our choices, our actions, they chip away at us, shaping us, whittling out our potential. It is what we do with that potential that makes us who we are. Sometimes our choices are brutal, even wicked,” Stieg went on. “But each one will carve a piece of us.”

“And if I choose Erik's life over countless others? Erik always says he is not a hero because there are no lines he will not cross to keep me safe. I admit, I feel much the same for him, for my family. Does that make us any better than Larsson?”

Stieg popped one shoulder. “If I must choose between two bloodthirsty men, I would rather stand by a fiend who fights for his love than a fiend who fights for himself.”

I hugged Stieg's arm. “You've always stood by him, from his youngest turns. He respects you, I hope you know.”

“Erik would’ve come with me if Harald had not taken him after Thorvald’s death. Did you know that?”

“What do you mean?”

“It is a shame Thorvald never saw his son for what he was. The whole time we were imprisoned, this tiny sea fae boy never faltered. He was brave as any warrior.” Stieg chuckled almost wistful. “I’d formed a connection to him, of course, and if his father had no care for him, or never returned, I told our folk I wanted him.”

My lips parted. “You would’ve ... *raised* Erik?”

Stieg cleared his throat. “That was the plan.”

The warrior would not admit it, but I could see—it had been more than a plan. It had been a hope.

“When you say it is hard to face battle, I assure you, I understand.” Stieg dropped his chin. “During the great war it was such a challenge to ever see Erik as an enemy. I always saw him a little bit as mine, I suppose. You know I have no littles, but I thought I almost had one once.”

“That true, Warrior?”

My heart jumped to the back of my throat. Erik filled the doorway of the small room. Dressed in black, blades strapped over his body, he was a beautiful villain, ready for a damn war. He looked nowhere but at Stieg.

“Does it surprise you, Erik?” Stieg asked, voice low. “I told you as much when you were small.”

Erik looked to me for half a breath, then schooled his gaze onto the floorboards. “To soothe me, when I couldn’t sleep.”

“Afraid I don’t have the talent of lying to young ones. All those future adventures, all those talks of the place I’d make for you in my house, I meant them.” Stieg crossed the room. Erik was stiff, his fists clenched at his sides when Stieg gripped his shoulder. “I did not want to say farewell the day your father was killed; I wanted you to stay. But I can’t help but wonder if fate always had a plan for you, and if it has worked out exactly as it should’ve.”

Stieg gave me a tender look before slapping Erik's shoulder once more and fading into the corridor, leaving us alone.

Erik blinked, unsteady, a little lost. Gently, I eased my arms around his waist, until the glow of his crimson eyes locked with mine.

“Serpent.”

He cleared his throat. “Songbird.”

“You've always been mine,” I whispered. “But I think you've always been all of ours, even if you didn't know it. You're not alone, Erik Bloodsinger. You never really were.”

Erik kissed me. From sweet to frenzied in a breath, as though the words he could not find regarding the confession spilled out in his touch, his tongue, his body pressed to mine.

My back struck the wall. His hands roved up my ribs, palmed one breast. I moaned into his kiss.

Breathless, I nudged him away enough to speak unhindered. “We're not set to meet just yet, right?”

Erik's teeth flashed in the sunlight. “Not for at least a chime, Songbird.”

“Good.” Perhaps it was the looming battle, perhaps it was the unknowns of each tomorrow, but there was a desperation in every moment I could steal away with the Ever King.

No mistake, soon solitude would be impossible once our moves were set to stand against Larsson. I would not waste an opportunity. Hands clasped, Erik led me from the palace to the private sea caves just below the gardens.

Erik spun me around, pressing my back to the soft stone. Before he could make another move, I ghosted my fingers over his straining cock.

Erik let out a rough gasp and gripped my chin, drawing our mouths close. “You, Songbird, are more maddening than a siren's song. Do what you will with me, so long as this—” His palm covered the place over my heart. “Is always mine.”

“Into the Otherworld, Serpent.”

My body rocked against his, arms choking around his neck. Erik hooked one of my legs around his waist, rubbing the bulge of his hard length against my core.

My stomach clenched in anticipation when I guided his hand up my inner thigh. He hummed his approval when his fingers slid across the wet heat of my entrance.

Only balanced on one leg, when Erik thrust two fingers to the second knuckles inside me, I stumbled onto my toes, nearly toppling. His arm circled my waist, his breath heated my lips when he spoke. “So slick for me, love. Gods, you love to drive me mad, don’t you?”

Breathless whimpers rolled over my lips. I rocked up and down the two fingers speared into me, and I writhed as they curled and flicked and teased. One hand flattened on the rock wall of a sea cave, the other dug deep into Erik’s tousled hair, gripping at the roots, and slamming his mouth to mine.

Our teeth clacked, and Erik’s tongue narrowly missed my bite. Soon enough, if we did not watch ourselves, blood would be drawn, and this moment would be ruined if Erik had to sing me back to the living world. Still, the thought of marking his skin, of him marking mine, such a primal thought sent a rush of heat to my center. Doubtless, Erik’s fingers were soaked.

To prove my words, he let out a moan and added his thumb to the sensitive apex between my legs. “Livia, you’re perfect for me. So ready.” He pressed a frantic kiss to my throat, his body rutting into mine.

Breath escaped my lungs in half a gasp, half a sob. I pushed my hips into his, the thick strain of his length rubbed between us, the bulge catching against my entrance.

“Shit, love. Do that again.” Silver ribbons of light spread over Erik’s sharp features. His face twisted in pleasure, head back.

I unbuckled his belt and hooked my fingers in the waist, freeing his cock just enough to see the tip. With one hand, I

lifted my skirt higher, and still with his fingers inside me, I glided my slit against the head of his length.

Erik choked on his own breath, then lifted his gaze, a fierce gleam in his eyes. He pulled back his hand and used it to hold onto his trousers as he dragged us deeper into the cave.

Sconces were nailed to the rock, leaving a haunting golden skein over our half-dressed bodies. Pools of warm, crystal water licked at our ankles. Misty air dampened our brows, and in moments we both looked as though we'd already spent many clock tolls wrapped in each other.

Back to the rocks, Erik unlaced my gown, letting it glide off my body in a heap around my ankles.

My head fell into the gentle trickle of water on the stones, and Erik licked droplets of water off my bared throat, down the ridges of my collar, between the cleft of my breasts. He pinched one nipple between his thumb and forefinger, and for the other, he took it between his teeth.

I panted, holding the back of his head, yearning for him to swallow the whole of me. With a wicked sort of smirk, the Ever King rolled the peak of my breast between his front teeth, adjusting his mouth until the sharp point of his elongated tooth sliced at the tip.

I cried out from the shock of vibrant pain, the bleed of heated pleasure that followed.

Erik flattened his tongue, lapping away the bead of blood off my skin, then kissed and sucked, soothing the ache. With a look, eyes no longer ember red but black as coals, Erik traded attention, biting and kissing and sucking the other breast, while palming the already ravished one in his rough palm.

“I need my name echoed in every cavern in this cave. I need to be inside you soon.”

“Don't wait, Erik.”

He kissed me again. It was more than a kiss—it was stunning, attentive dominance. Without pulling back, he kicked off his trousers, then slammed my wrists over my head, pressing his naked hips against my aching core.

His mouth slid over my throat, the curve of my neck. Thoughts turned to sensation. I closed my eyes and gave in, allowing my body to move, to rock, to grind against my serpent until the prickle of heat pooled in my lower belly.

Erik's lips parted, and his breaths were harsh, ragged. "So perfect, Songbird."

"I need you," I pleaded, mind lost in a haze.

A low rumble built from Erik's throat, deeper than a snarl, more a dark growl. I'd anticipated he'd hike my leg around his waist again, perhaps lie me down on the stones, maybe using my gown as the only buffer between rock and flesh.

Instead, Erik spun me around, my cheek, my breasts, flattened against the rocks.

"Gods." He dragged his mouth and nose down my spine, breathing me in. "Look at you. Hips back, love," he crooned, guiding my lower half into the angle he wanted. "Keep your hands on the wall. Don't move them, Songbird. Not once."

All gods, his voice—rough as dry sand—heated my blood from crown to toe. A collision of cool from the rocky wall and warmth from the air, and my serpent's body sent my head spinning, my toes curling.

With his knee, Erik spread my legs. I moaned when the tip of his length slid to my center. On first instinct, I wanted to bow back; I wanted to grapple for his waist or hold the back of his head. I closed my eyes and braced my palms against the wall as he'd demanded until the tips went white from the pressure.

Erik chuckled, dark honey from his throat, smooth and thick. "Good, Songbird. That's it."

One of his hands covered one of mine on the wall. He interlocked our fingers, while guiding my body to tilt and sit back against him. I gasped when it felt as though his length might bulge through the skin of my stomach he'd gone so deep.

For a torturous breath, Erik held us there, unmoving, locked as one. Then, he pulled his hips back until his cock

nearly slid out and drove back inside. I dug my fingernails into the rock wall, sobbing at the shock of the invasion. The way he stretched me, whole and perfect, clawed through me like an insatiable desire.

Erik pounded into me again. He kissed the top of my spine. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't move. Not one piece of me wanted to, afraid it would shatter the delirium of my king's body commanding me, claiming me, loving me with every rough thrust.

Erik's hand abandoned my hip, sliding up my ribs, and curled around the underside of one breast. He tugged on my nipple in tandem with every thrust. I panted his name.

"Echoes ... Songbird," he gritted out. "I want ... my name to fill ... this damn ... cavern."

He pinched and rolled the peak between his thumb and finger. His hips slapped against mine. I widened my legs, wanting him deeper.

"Erik!" I cried his name, over and over again. A prickle of pleasure tightened in my lower belly, dripping down to my core.

Erik's thrusts grew more frantic. "Together. Come with me."

As if his words unraveled a hidden part of me that could do nothing but comply, an overwhelming wave rolled from my belly to my head, and I shattered with his name echoing in tandem with mine from his mouth.

Erik fell over the ledge after me in a frenzy. He rolled his hips, grinding into my backside, drawing out our shared euphoria as his hot release spilled into me. I shuddered, grinning when the excess spilled down my thighs.

We remained there, Erik bent over me, my body boneless in his gentle embrace. He sprinkled kisses up the divots of my spine, my neck, then hugged my back to his chest as he softened and we broke apart.

Gently, Erik turned me around and held me close. I threaded my fingers through his hair, kissing his jaw, his lips.

“Do you think they’ve noticed our absence has gone on for some time?” More specifically, a Night Folk king. Gods, without fail I would lose myself in the Ever King and somehow pretend that my father would not notice certain things about his daughter and Erik Bloodsinger.

At the very least, Valen Ferus was a wise enough man to never mention them.

Even still, heat flooded my cheeks.

Erik kissed each side of my face. “I doubt anyone has noticed our absence at all. If anything, they’ll think we were tired and went to bed.”

“Oh, yes, I’m certain we have them all fooled.”

He kissed me sweetly. “Well, if you’d rather not return and face them, we *could* go to bed. In fact, I’m in favor of this new plan. I rescind the option to even return. To bed it is.”

I laughed and pinched his ribs, losing myself once again when Erik kissed me, soft and gentle, then with the passion and need I had only felt for this man.

CHAPTER FORTY

THE SERPENT

NEW FACES DECORATED the edges of the table in the great hall. Sea witches, some men from the House of Tides, and Tavish with Maelstrom waited near a back door.

Alistair fussed and bustled about, seeing to it those we'd brought into our schemes were fed, boarded in fine rooms, and tended to like they were helpless littles.

Livia sat beside me, and the high back of her seat made her look every bit a queen. Her hand was steady on my knee beneath the table. At least one of us was regal.

I lifted a drinking horn to hide the swift glance to where Stieg sat with Valen and Aleksi. They laughed at something Sewell said across the table.

Stieg's confession brought a haze to my mind, one I didn't understand. The warrior had wanted me to stay, not merely as a sea fae brought into his world out of pity, but ... as a damn son. A member of his house. *His* legacy. *His* boy.

My insides were wrapped in coiled barbs, sharp and painful. What might life have been if Thorvald had never returned for me? No doubt I would've been a Rave, like Aleksi. I would've grown with Livia, deep in her world.

Would I have still had her taste on my tongue? Her body wrapped around mine?

The way Valen treated Stieg, despite the differences of their titles, it certainly wouldn't have been impossible for a warrior to love a royal, not with earth fae.

But Tait, he would've been alone. My cousin was somber, but the occasional smile twitched on his face down the table whenever Gavyn tried to get Princess Mira to perform an illusion against a sea witch without being noticed.

Celine. My gaze drifted to her place where she sat between the twin princes, mocking something Jonas was attempting with a few spell herbs Tavish had offered up. She would be dead, the same as Sewell.

I could've had a life without war and hate. I could've had my songbird every day, but I would've been without the others.

The doors near Tavish and Maelstrom swung open. Livia jolted in her chair, jaw clenched. She fought to bury her unease.

I leaned over and pressed a kiss to her neck. "We do not need to do this."

Blue glass found my gaze. "We need her through this, and even if she does not recall it, we now know she has placed wards against elven magic before."

"The exchange must be done," Jonas insisted from his place across the table.

"Yes, she might be able to stand against the elven, but it doesn't mean any of you must make the sacrifice," I argued. "We have the support of many."

"If you are to finally be accepted as the king here, you need your people to be seen standing with you." Jonas narrowed his eyes. "You need us all to stand with you. This allows your sea witch of a grandmother to be where she belongs. You're stronger with her, and that's the end of it."

I did not know what to say. The offer to sacrifice for an enemy was foreign to me. Jonas Eriksson, a prince of the earth realms, was willingly taking the exchange of the *neach-dai* spell bond.

To make the proper exchange so Narza was free to return to her life in the Ever, the spell required an opposing bond. Where a powerful sea fae offered to defend the earth fae, now

a powerful prince of the earth realms would vow devotion and protection to the Ever.

Across the hall, Narza, hair loose, clad in a simple gown, strode in with all the grace of a queen. Her eyes flickered to Maelstrom for a moment, then returned to the table. Another woman, tall and voluptuous, with hair like a dark storm followed, accompanied by three littles.

Squeals of delight shattered the melancholy when the tiniest girl toddled for Tavish, who'd crouched low, arms wide. Soon he was overthrown by squirming, squealing children.

The woman at Narza's side beamed, kissing Tavish's mouth through the swarm.

"Narza." I stood from my seat once my grandmother made her way to the table. "Lady Catriona."

"King Erik. Queen Livia." Tavish's mate bowed her head, but raised her golden eyes, bright as a sunrise. "Earth fae are terrifying, My Lady."

"At times. I'm sure many of the royals did not appreciate being denied access through the Chasm again."

"Not at all." Catriona straightened. "Who claims the queen with red hair?"

Sander and Jonas lifted their hands with pride.

"Can she truly make folk forget how to breathe?"

Sander laughed. "She can. She has. Ask her to share those memories. I think it was a little manipulative of her as we were growing, honestly. She'd just *happen* to show us what she could do if we were misbehaving."

"Manipulative or brilliant," said Jonas. "Got us in line rather quickly."

The blood hair queen who'd carried me out of my torture as a boy. Livia had told me a great deal about her ability to steal memories in vicious ways.

"We kept this situation vague, as promised. They aren't aware of the longevity of this decision," Catriona whispered,

and a tremble was there, like she'd not wanted to do it at all.

Jonas picked at a thread on the table runner. "Thank you."

Valen closed his eyes. "Can we not simply break the one that was done?"

"I told you, Earth Bender," said Narza. "What's done is always done. Death or an exchange."

"I don't want any more chatter about it," Jonas said. "We're not children anymore. We face a life and death moment. The sea witch can face the elven, which we must do to end this. Is that not true?"

I closed my eyes. There were powers on that isle we needed to shatter. Our schemes depended on unraveling spells cast amongst the elven folk, or we would not defeat Larsson.

When no one spoke, Jonas went on, "I will not shy away from this opportunity if I can help. Let's move on."

Catriona looked to me. "Before we do, I have something for the Ever King. I was asked by a young prince to deliver this on his behalf. With the hope of defending you in your fight."

The sea witch passed over a wooden slab. Rough edges were rounded, still a little jagged. Leather straps were messily nailed on the opposing side, a place to slip the arm that would never fit the size of mine.

On the front was the symbol of the Rave warriors from the earth realms.

"Rorik made you a shield." Livia pressed a hand to her chest, then her mouth tightened, and she pinched my shoulder.

"Gods, what?"

"How is it my brother made you a shield and not me, not *our father*? I have been gone, and already he cares more for you."

"Bloodsinger told Ror he was good with a blade," Aleks said.

Livia snorted. "Ah, that explains it."

Grit gathered in my throat when I looked down at the childish shield. No, it would never hold in battle, but ... it meant something. It meant a great many things.

I rested the shield by the leg of the table and faced the room. “Many thanks, Catriona, for bringing Narza to the Ever.”

“We don’t have long,” Narza said, wincing. “It must be now, or I must return.”

Jonas rose from his chair, all levity washed of his face.

“Jo,” Sander whispered.

“Don’t.” Jonas shook his head. “What did I say? No more. I am the best choice for this. Alek and Stieg are Rave. I won’t take that from them. Valen is a king. Livie is already here as the queen. Mira is a sole heir.”

“But it could be me. You do this since there are two of us.”

Jonas stared at his brother. “I’m the eldest.”

“By moments.”

“Still.” He turned to Narza. “I’ll be the one taking the exchange. I’m much better with a blade than him. I assure you, I’m the best choice.”

Sander glared at his brother, cursed him, but when Mira took hold of his arm, she urged him back to his chair.

“This is Liv we’re talking about. They won’t trap him,” she whispered in a bit of reassurance.

“We need the king and the queen.” Catriona opened her arms, beckoning us forward to the center of the room.

Alistair and Tavish had already arranged seashell ewers filled with clear water and a bowl of tilled, soft soil inside a circle of painted runes.

With Livia’s hand in mine, we stepped inside, kneeling in the center at Catriona’s instruction. Narza took one side of the circle beside the ewers. Jonas knelt beside the soil.

“You remember how it is done?” Narza whispered to Catriona. “It’s slightly different than the first, since it is an exchange.”

“Yes. You showed me well.” The other sea witch rested a hand on the lady of the witches.

From inside a pouch made of gleaming scales and fishbone, Catriona removed emerald silk woven in dry threads of sea plants. Next, she removed a thread of slender roots, fine as weaving threads, and crossed them in front of Livia and me.

“One drop of blood from the bonded.” Catriona pricked Narza’s middle finger. “Added upon the heart of the willing.”

Jonas blinked, startled when Catriona paused in front of him. Fingers hurried, he unlaced the threads across his tunic, exposing the skin of his chest.

Catriona hummed. Jonas swallowed a grimace on his face that he buried with a laugh. “It’s getting warmer.”

“It’s growing colder,” Narza whispered.

Catriona paid them little mind and set about lifting one of the ewers and pouring water into the dark soil. “Sea and land, once at odds, now stand as one.”

The sea witch used her fingers to saturate the soil with the seawater until it was a gritty paste. Another gentle hum and a flash of crystalline flames rolled around the rim of the bowl, fading once it was complete.

“It is ready to set,” Catriona told us. “Once the parameters are given, the bond will fasten to the earth prince, releasing Lady Narza.”

I faced the prince. “I simply tell him what we want?”

“Yes.” Catriona nodded. “The bond offers the prince protection of the Ever since his vow will place him in the service of our people by creating a compulsion to defend us. Any other desires or needs are to be spoken by you that will add to his bond. The compulsion to protect is the common thread in every bond made. The rest is rather up to you.”

“Don’t make me sleep at the foot of your bed with my blade or something, Bloodsinger.” Jonas chuckled. “Make it impressive.”

Livia squeezed my hand and smiled. “I only ask that you protect my folk, the Ever King, and the land that comes with him, as fiercely as I will defend you and yours.”

Jonas smiled at her. “Always, Livie.”

“Protect the Ever Queen,” I said. “Above me. If ever we are in a position where it is a choice, always choose her.”

A shadow crossed his features. Jonas held my gaze, blood against moss. After a thick swallow, he dipped his chin. “As you say, Bloodsinger.”

To Catriona, I said, “The earth prince is free to leave the Ever, free to live wherever he may choose. I don’t want him bound in any other way.”

“No need to even speak it. If all you ask is his willingness to protect you the way you would protect him, then that is the bond that will hold fast.”

Again, Catriona sang over the gritty mud, and flames burned in the opposite direction around the edge of the bowl.

Jonas let out a rough breath, hand to his heart. “Strange. Felt like something pushed water through my veins.”

“It’s settled.” Catriona sat back on her knees but looked to the Lady of Witches. “Is the pressure gone?”

Narza inspected her palms, then looked to the nightmare prince. “Thank you.”

“Just be sure to make it worth it,” Jonas said. “I want to see you bring Jormungandr up from the depths or something equally incredible.”

I couldn’t recall the last time—if ever—I’d heard such a freeing, sincere laugh from my grandmother.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

THE SERPENT

BY WEEK'S END, laughter had slowly died in the palace. By week's end, blades were never far from belts and sheaths.

Valen scraped a whetstone across the curve of his axe in the front hall, eyeing the setting sun the same as me. I'd stood unmoving, watching as fire bled across the sky, and night came. Days, mere days, and we'd face Larsson. I despised the silence of the seas. Not a whisper of Bonekeeper, but like a hum in my blood, I knew it would be soon.

"How do you face it?" At long last, I revealed a touch of fear in the shadow of my father's killer.

Valen stopped sharpening his blade. "What do you mean?"

"You fought many battles where your queen could've died. She's mortal—"

"Bloodsinger," Valen interrupted, a restrained grin on his lips. "I will give you some advice, for I've no doubt you will stand in front of my wife again someday. Comment that her mortal blood is somehow a weakness for her, and she will make quick work of proving you wrong." He leaned in. "Elise has a love of slicing at fingers."

He was taunting me, and I was on edge. Like my mind, my instincts, were simply waiting for his disdain to fall into place again and one of his axes to peel through my heart when he recalled he was meant to hate me.

Instead of bloodshed, Valen sighed and placed his axe onto the table, looking at me. "It never was simple to watch my

wife step onto the battlefield. Some of those earlier wars, I wasn't always certain we would make it out alive."

"Did you ever try to keep her back?"

"I value my life too much," he said. "I stopped believing my fear of losing her and began trusting in her strength. By the time we stood against your folk, I felt as if I could not face a battle without her. Even here, we speak every day through that shell. When Rorik allows it."

"I thought you were merely passing information."

"I am, but if you all think any input I've given is strictly from me, you're wrong." He scoffed. "Most of what I say comes from Elise. She is not here, but I cannot do this without her." Valen paused, then went on, voice low. "However, I also share your feelings. But I am Liv's father. It is my instinct to lock her away until danger is over."

"You should," I said. "Then she cannot blame me."

Valen smirked. "If you want to truly be—gods, I hate you for this—if you want to be my girl's *lover*, you cannot rob her of the opportunity to be the queen and warrior she can be, eventually it will dim her light and weaken your trust in each other."

Reluctant as it was, the moment brought another hint of acceptance from the earth bender. An admission without truly saying it, that he knew where Livia went, I followed. Instead of fighting it, Valen seemed more intent to shape me into the man he wanted for his daughter.

That night, I'd fallen asleep with less pressure crushing my lungs.

Until my skin grew too chilled, my arms too empty.

I rubbed the fatigue from my eyes, propped on one elbow, all to find a horridly empty place beside me. Moonlight sliced into the room through the windowpane, painting Livia's smooth, sun-kissed skin in cold ribbons of blue.

She gnawed on her thumbnail, lost in thought.

Careful not to ruffle the quilts too much, I slipped out of the bed, tugged on my discarded trousers from when we'd practically toppled into bed earlier, and curled my arms around her waist from behind.

Livia jolted at first, then sank into me with a sigh.

I pressed a kiss to the nape of her neck. "I thought we agreed to share fears."

She gripped my forearms wrapped around her middle, tilting her neck to let my lips claim the curves. "I'm not *not* sharing, but I've never seen you look so much like a corpse. You were finally sleeping deeply, and I didn't want to wake you."

I growled against her skin. "Weak excuses, Songbird. Wake me. Always wake me."

"Larsson needs you dead, Erik," she whispered. "I keep seeing it when I close my eyes. The more days pass, the more I see it. I try, by the hells, I'm trying to keep my mind from spinning." Her voice croaked. "But I can't find peace, not when we wake—for we are instantly drawn into plans and strategy and waiting. Now, not even when we sleep, for the Mares haunt my dreams with a life empty of *you*."

She spun around, clinging to my waist like it kept her breathing. Her shoulders trembled when a gentle tear dropped down my bare chest. I dug my fingers through her hair, cradling her head to my heart.

"This won't do, love." I kissed her brow. "There's no need to shed a tear for a short life."

Livia tilted her face, using the heel of one hand to wipe her cheeks.

"I have no plans of spending less than a thousand turns with you at my side. Until I'm hunched and my skin is sagging off my bones." Livia offered a wet chuckle and ducked her head under my chin. I stroked my palms down her spine. "It's true. And, to add to your fate, my leg aches more each turn. By the time the Otherworld calls, you'll be hauling my ass around

on your back, love. Might as well ready your fears for those days.”

I felt her smile against my chest. Her hold around my waist tightened. “I will carry you everywhere, Serpent, so long as I get those thousand turns.”

I unraveled from her hold and gripped her palm, tugging her toward the door to the gardens. “Come with me.”

Livia kept close as I led us down the steps to the terraces and gardens. Since we’d been reunited, there’d been little time for her to visit, to shape them as she’d done before.

“You are drowning in there,” I told her. “Every corner of that palace, every face in those walls, is a reminder our fight is not over. I need you to breathe.” I pressed against her, hooking my arm around her body and drew my lips against her ear. “I need you to remember you are Livia Ferus, daughter of warriors, seducer of the Ever King, and ... you are my heartbond. I need no magic, no spell, to tell me that you are written into every thread of my future days.”

Livia’s thumb traced my jaw. “Serpent.”

“Songbird.”

“I am in love with every dark, wonderous piece of you.”

I kissed her, slow and sweet. When I pulled away, I took her to an untamed shrub with round, green berries dangling from the limbs. “Tell me what to do.”

“What?”

I waved my palms over the garden. “You found peace here once. Your fury thrives here, and I think you ought to be reminded that you can order a king about. Tell me what to do.”

Half of Livia’s mouth curved into a smile. “You want to help me tend the gardens? You’ve never done that before.”

“Do you enjoy it?”

“Yes. You know I do.”

“Then, this is what we’re doing tonight.”

“I’m barely dressed.”

“All the better.” I made a deliberate scan over the diaphanous slip covering her breasts and curves.

Livia rolled her eyes but knelt in front of the shrub. I maneuvered with less grace into sitting, my leg unable to tolerate kneeling tonight. With a smile, she placed her palms on the soil. Heat from her magic flowed beneath us.

Almost in an instant, as though the wild foliage were pleading for something to tend to them, the leaves glistened, lush and healthy. Branches shifted, and berries plumped until juice burst from the tops.

Livia instructed me on the manual tasks—pulling pebbles from the soil, stripping withered leaves, bracing heavier limbs that took more of her energy.

Halfway through a rather prickly fern, she glanced at me. “We’re doing this because I enjoy it. You swim when you need to breathe, but we’ve never really talked about what else you enjoy, Erik.”

“Your body.”

“Naturally.” Livia winked. “What else? Try to think outside your bed, Serpent.”

What did I enjoy? “There was never much room for fun under the command of my uncle. Then, after the war, it was rebuilding, trying to prove my place. I did not enjoy much, at least until you.”

“Even if you weren’t allowed, wasn’t there something you yearned to do?”

“Sometimes Gavyn and Celine would force me to festivals, hidden of course,” I said, thinking of the frosts where sweets were always added to market carts, or during harvest months when tales of haunts and horrid sea creatures frightened the hearts of littles across the kingdoms.

“Did you enjoy it?”

I scooped more soil, but a grin played over my mouth. “I tried not to, I tried not to even *like* Celine and Gavyn, but I

often ended those nights with an ache in my gut from too many sweet things, and feeling like I was failing.”

Livia sat back on her knees. “Failing? Why?”

“I tried to be what Thorvald wanted, but even after everything, a war, torture, death, I could not stop caring whether certain people lived or died.”

“They are your family, you know.” Livia touched the soil, eyes closed, calling to her fury magic. She let out a soft breath when a new, verdant sprout burst through the soil. “Celine cares for you like she cares for Gavyn, and he does much the same too. Did you ever spend time with Tait after the war?”

“Rarely,” I said, a drop of something harsh laced my tone. “Sometimes Gavyn would bring him without telling me.” I lifted my gaze to Livia. “I was raised to not have a heart, love, but I always wanted my cousin to live.”

“Is that why you killed Harald?” Her voice was soft, like a whisper through a dream.

There wasn’t fear in her voice. No mistake, she already knew, merely wanted to hear the tale from the source. I told her. Every moment. I described how Harald had slipped into a cruel belief after the death of my father, how he’d craved the destruction of the earth realms. He never let me live a day without reciting my forced hatred of Valen Ferus.

I told her of the beatings Tait suffered. How, when my cousin had been sleeping, half in the Otherworld, Gavyn would help me break into his tower chambers. I’d heal him just enough he’d survive, but not enough that a drunken Harald would suspect my intervention.

Tait never knew. Or if he did, never said a word.

“He nearly broke Tait’s neck during the war,” I said, unable to stop once the truth began. “Harald had taken his rage for the lives lost during the battle out on Tait. I wasn’t there.”

“Where were you?”

I paused. “Healing your uncle.” I gave her a swift smile. “And threatening your father for good measure, of course.”

“Of course.” Livia rolled her eyes.

“A member of the crew intervened for Tait, insisting he was protected by blood bonds of the ship. It saved Tait’s life. When I returned to the camp and learned what had happened, something finally snapped within me. When everyone was asleep, I poisoned Harald, then slit his throat, so no one would know it was me.”

Livia had witnessed me slaughter men. She’d seen me torture. I knew she wasn’t stunned to hear the details of Harald’s death, but I hadn’t anticipated a tearful gaze, as though I’d confessed to saving hundreds of helpless littles from a blaze.

“You are a beautiful monster, Erik Bloodsinger.” Her soil-coated fingers covered mine. “All right, what else besides murder brings you peace?”

I moved on to new soil beside a wilder shrub “The sea. I know it sounds obvious, but I am alive on the ship.”

“I saw that, even the first night you brought me aboard. Your countenance changed.”

“When I brought you aboard? What a gentle way to say it, Songbird.” I chuckled. “Is that what we’ll tell the littles someday, that I merely whisked you away for a pleasant voyage.”

Livia sat back on her knees, a tentative grin on her face. “Littles?”

Well, damn. I’d not even realized it had slipped out.

I kept patting the soil. “At your word, of course.”

“Your word doesn’t matter?”

“I would never demand such things of you.” Heat prickled up my neck. “But I won’t deny these gods-awful realms would be better with more of you.”

Livia hesitated, smiling as she tapped a spiked leaf. “Future days. I like speaking of future days with you. It gives us more to hold to during all this.”

“You’ve always given me that, a new sunrise to look forward to.” I lifted my gaze. “When you’d come read to me, I’d wait all day for you to appear. Even when I was banished with my anger, I kept a keen eye on the Chasm, looking forward to future days.”

“Violent days.”

“I thought so,” I admitted, “but now I’m not so sure it wasn’t always you. The moment I saw you, my decade-long plan dissolved, Livia. When I took you for our simple pleasure voyage and not after stealing you away—” I laughed and dodged a twig she tossed at me. “You consumed my thoughts like you did when you’d read to me. You gave me reason to see the better parts of the days, to imagine something different.”

Livia crept across the soil until her lips hovered over mine. “Imagine many things, Erik Bloodsinger. We still have a thousand turns to fill.”

Palms coated in soil, I grabbed her face and kissed her. Livia moaned and parted her lips, her tongue swiping over mine. Never, not once in the thousand turns ahead of us, would I tire of this woman’s kiss.

Livia nudged me back. I hissed when my leg caught. Without a pause, almost as though it’d become her own instinct, her palm rubbed over my upper thigh, soothing the ache. She kept her mouth on mine, as I laid back and maneuvered her thighs on either side of me.

Her hands went to the waist of my trousers, tugging on the laces. I slid my palms up her creamy skin, beneath her slip.

The garden door leading back into the bedchamber crashed open.

“Erik, sails on the horizon!” Celine’s voice shattered our solitude.

We fumbled off each other. Livia tripped over her night slip. I caught her under the arm and tugged her to her feet. Celine took the steps into the garden two at a time, sprinting for us.

She drew in a long breath through her nose, pointing to the inky pitch of the fading night. “Black sails ... Bonekeeper ... he’s here.”

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

THE SONGBIRD

ERIK SECURED the scarf over his head, a cutlass on his belt. I hugged the post of our bed, watching. My hair was tied off my face, braided on the sides and down the center of my skull, and I'd slipped into tight, black trousers, with a dark tunic. One dagger made of dark steel, the other the elven blade abandoned by Skadi.

My stomach ached. Bile burned my throat. *Breathe. Focus.*

It was then I took note of the slight tremble in Erik's fingers when he tied the knot behind his head. Bold, fearsome, bloodthirsty—those were all the things that made up the Ever King, but rarely did anyone speak of his unease, his unspoken affection for his people, his family.

There was no mistaking I was terrified. Dozens of horrid ways this all might go wrong rattled in my head, but I told Erik once no one lifted him when he stumbled. That needed to change.

I slipped my arms around his waist, pressing my cheek between his shoulders, and spoke softly. "You are Erik Bloodsinger, son of a brave sea witch, challenger of the earth bender, master of the Ever Queen's body—"

Erik snorted a laugh and turned to face me. He cupped one side of my face. "Your words help, Songbird."

I rose onto my toes and kissed him. Slow, tender, a lasting kiss I wanted to taste through the rest of what would come.

In the corridor, the others waited for us. Mira went down the line of earth fae, dipping her fingers in fish blood, and

dragged the tips over their faces. My father and Stieg had runes on their throats, their palms.

Jonas and Sander had kohl darkened around their eyes, much like Aleksi. When Mira stood in front of me, she smiled through the blood and dark runes down the center of her lips and forehead. “Queen.”

I closed my eyes while she painted hot, sticky tracks of blood down my lashes and cheeks.

“What’s it for? I mean, it’s fearsome, but why?” Celine whispered to Aleksi.

“We bless it, the blood,” he said. “A sacrifice to the gods for protection.”

“Hmm.” Celine shrugged. “Then I want some.”

My heart warmed, seeing a few of the sea fae, some from the Ever Crew, take traditions and prayers of the earth fae. For a moment, we truly were like one united people.

Bells of warning rolled over the outer walls. Erik took my hand and kissed my palm. “A thousand turns, Songbird.”

“Longer.” I held him close, clinging to the rapid beat of his heart for a dozen breaths.

Erik brushed his thumb over my cheek, and a dozen unspoken things gleamed in his eyes. Then he took the lead and barreled down the corridor.

Staff at the palace ran about, frenzied. When the din of the bells worsened, one clang after the other. Avaline, surrounded by a gaggle of courtiers, darted into the hall, eyes wide in a bit of horrified curiosity. The king demanded they take to the royal chambers and barricade themselves behind the doors.

For a moment, Joron’s daughter seemed to battle with joining the fight—if only to experience something new—and taking to safety. Only after the urging of a siren with dark braids to her waist did Avaline take to the staircase to the upper floors.

Erik paused at a window. “The isle, it’s here as we thought.”

Off the shores of the royal city, dark mists billowed from peaks and forests. In the early morning light, water flowed off the isle's shores, glistening like starlight crystals as the land rose from the sea. It would be beautiful were it not for the rows of shields, the burning tipped arrows that spread over the parapets and shorelines.

Larsson had his army.

"We expected this." I spun to a palace guard. "Send word to Tavish of the House of Mists, tell him the lands have risen. Those words precisely. Tell him to set to breaking any new spell casts they may have placed. Now. Go!"

The guard dipped his chin and abandoned the palace, racing for the sea.

"Think we'll get on without some nasty spell business like the day you were pulled off?" Jonas whispered.

"My removal broke those wards, and Arion needs his battle," I said. "They'll want blades, but it would be foolish to anticipate there would be no spell work against us. Fione will be cowering on those shores."

My lip curled. With how deep her role had gone, I looked forward a great deal to meeting the sea witch again.

From the edges of the isle, black sails rose against the sunrise like a blight in the dawn. The ship was unlike any I'd seen in the Ever. A sleek hull, like it might be half formed into the longships back home and the larger decks of sea fae ships. There were open decks where folk could walk near the rails but drop belowdecks to take cover.

Long, powerful, the laths seemed made of iron, but the nearer it came it was the same black oak wood I'd seen across the fading isle.

A ship of shadows that cut through the sea in a frenzy, as though the wind mattered little. Gods, doubtless they would have power aboard, weapons, magic. I flexed my fingers, swallowing against the sour burn creeping up from my insides.

Larsson did not have the Ever Ship, but this was no weak foe. Even now, there was a torrent around the keel that looked

much like the royal ship as it claimed the sea. Like the Ever's waters sensed its royal blood.

It would truly be a battle of which son was chosen to win the games of the tricky Norns today.

The king shouted for his household to take cover, to seal up their chambers, to guard the doors. He gripped a palace guard's shoulder. "Call out the palace ships. Take to the wind. Go, go, you bastard."

The guard crashed through a door, disappearing down a spiral staircase.

His crimson eyes blazed when he faced me. "You are my queen, my equal, but this fight is mine, love. The choice to stay—"

"Gods, I hope you are not telling me to stay behind, Erik Bloodsinger." I trapped his face between my palms. "And do what? Watch from the window as you risk your damn life? By your side, that is where I stand. Your battles belong to me, like mine belong to you."

Erik let out a rough breath; his brow pressed to mine. "Then make ready to sail, Queen."

Ferocious cries, wild and strange, rose beyond the palace. It was a sight—the sea fae taking to the water.

White tides thrashed from merfolk launching out beyond the gates, protecting their land from beneath the tides. Palace guards dressed in silver and blue, marked towers and every lower level of the city. They lined the cobbled roads, they took to the towers of the palace. With great heaves they arranged long iron shields, half a head shorter than their own bodies, adding another barrier against Larsson's attack.

A strong hand took hold of my shoulder. My father gave me a small grin. "Face it without mercy, little love. Win your kingdom."

My brow furrowed when I embraced him, taking a bit of comfort from the arms that'd always been there, that still were.

“We take to the sea,” Erik shouted. He held out a hand for me without a glance, as though he knew I would be close, and stepped through the wide doors.

The bells rattled through the city. A warning, dire and urgent. Crewmen abandoned their homes and families, sprinting toward the palace gates. Men on the watchtowers along the shore spun heavy cranks. Gates with spiked tips slowly rose from the depths of the sea like an underwater army, and sea plants draped over the brutal pikes like bits of flesh as they tore toward the sky.

“King Erik!” Gavyn drifted toward the edge of the walls. The bone lord offered a lazy sort of salute off his brow. “Meet you on the waters.”

Gavyn was gone in the next breath.

At the gates, Alistair, chin lifted, hands clasped at his back, stood stalwart.

“My King.” The old steward faced us and dipped his chin. “My Queen.”

“Alistair.” Erik paused. “Defend this house.”

The man was in a constant state of propriety, but when he bowed at the waist, I was certain his chin trembled, his voice grew smaller. “‘Tis my honor.”

Crimson sails caught the morning light—blood in the water. The black gloss of the bone and wood hull awaited its king. The crew bustled, strapped in knives and blades, humming their eerie song ... *we work, we rot* ...

Deep grunts of *ho, heave*, rippled across the deck with each tug of the thick ropes, leveling the ember spears with the notches in the hull.

“King’s aboard!” Skulleater roared from the helm. Erik held my hand, and upon the sight of me, words changed to, “Make way for the queen!”

The Ever Crew scuttled back, leaving a clear path for Erik to rush to the helm. I clasped tightly to rigging, one foot propped on the rail, peering at the approaching ships. More

than the phantom ship, smaller sloops and skiffs much like the royal city had embarked across the water.

Steel glided over leather. Down the rail, my friends, my family, unsheathed blades. Jonas and Sander had darkened their eyes, readying to plant endless nightmares in the minds of others. Mira kept close to Alek, both leaning over, watching the funnels of the spears lock into place.

My father and Stieg followed Erik, flanking him, almost protectively, at the helm.

“Ready on the spears!” Tait barked, marching up and down the deck, cursing at the crew to heave the cinder stones into the mouths of the spears.

Sewell took the opposite rope at my side, fearsome and brutish in a way I’d never seen of the man. He’d trimmed his dark beard, shaving turns off his face and lifting a hidden scar down his cheek I’d not noticed before.

Tied over his glossy hair was a blue scarf with the emblem of the House of Bones printed on the crown. Strapped across his chest were two daggers. I held his stare. No words were needed, a silent plea to keep breathing was leveled between us.

“Stormbringer!” Erik’s voice lifted. “Tidecaller! Warrior! Bring the storms.”

“We’ve never used three magics!” Celine rattled back, gaze drifting toward Stieg. “We don’t know what it’ll cause.”

Erik’s eyes took on a bit of wild madness. “Meet your post or get off the deck.”

Celine hissed at the king, teeth bared, but rushed to her familiar place. Instead of only Stormbringer summoning a torrent in the waves, Stieg stood beside them, drawing down the fury of the skies.

“Full cover!” Erik shouted over the helm.

The crew heaved the lines until every crimson sail fell into place.

Erik’s shoulders tensed and pulsed as he yanked the helm, hand over hand, until the ship groaned, and aimed the bow

toward open sea.

“Take her into the winds, Me King!” A knobby man clinging to the main mast cackled into a mounting storm.

With a flick of his palms, from bow to stern, sails whipped and snapped, expanding like breath in the lungs.

Horns bellowed in our wake, signaling the smaller ships of the royal city followed the lead of the Ever Ship. Sails and keels churned the water, thrashing in the wind toward the approaching ships.

Fins in the water were the only sign merfolk guided us, they darted forward through the currents, hissing and shrieking their wild voices whenever they broke the surface before diving beneath again.

Grim clouds spiraled overhead. Heavy drops of rain splattered over the deck like pebbles. Celine kept her post between Stormbringer and Stieg. Silent at first, but soon enough, Tidecaller took command, cursing and shouting at the two men to prove their rage in the wind.

Hate, hot and sharp, needled through my chest when I leaned over the rail, gaze on the dark sails ahead. Larsson Bonekeeper. The ways I wanted him to suffer, thoughts boiled over my brain in violence and gore.

I wanted to watch him break under the blades of the king.

Erik aimed the hull of the Ever Ship at the phantom vessel. The royal ships in our wake spread across the water, creating a wall of sails and masts.

For a moment, the world went still, quiet, as though the storm had swallowed us into the heart and would not release us to the awaiting fury.

“Fire at will!” Erik bellowed against the wind, shattering the lull.

“Fire!” Tait echoed down the line.

I did the same. Like a natural voice took hold and ripped the words from my chest.

The first round of spears launched. Blasts heard to the highest peak of the palace. Flashes of red. A whistle of wind. Sparks of fire burst through the black clouds.

Jonas roared in vengeful delight when the first crack of splintered wood shattered the bowsprit. Again, and again, cinder stones collided with the mast, the hull, the rails. A direct hit to the center sail punctured a gaping wound through the angled canvas.

Aleksi whooped and hooked an arm around Mira's neck as they cheered until what looked like black tides misted around the sails, the masts, the hull.

My heart stilled when Larsson's vessel simply faded like the spray of the sea.

Then came Erik's voice, calm, dark, urgent. "Down! Take cover."

I faltered back a step. With a riotous roll of waves, the phantom ship split through a wall of water. Hulls slammed against hulls. Wood and bone groaned and protested. Screams of crewmen clinging to the rails, tumbling into the sea, burned in my skull.

"Make ready to board!" Tait, Erik, maybe it was Aleksi who'd called the command.

Board. This was the moment I'd feared and craved since Larsson Bonekeeper stole me from my king.

Dread and anger burst from my chest in a cry against the rain. Decks of the enemy ship were so close, I could see the silver buttons along the gambesons and cloaks of the elven folk. Black sails crashed with crimson. Rigging tangled with masts and sails. Both ships rocked and swayed, finding their bearings in such close range.

Chaos wrapped around the deck.

I needed to stand by Erik, needed to ready our blades. Burly arms surrounded me, covering my head, before I had a chance to reach for my king.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

THE SERPENT

VALEN ABANDONED the helm when Larsson's ship crashed against ours. He'd covered Livia; I breathed again.

"Reload!" I shouted in a snarl so ragged it scraped like slivers along my throat. My arms yanked on the helm, drawing the bow about—an attempt to break free of the hold from Larsson's hull. "Keep the wind in those sails, you bastards!"

A brilliant flash of lightning speared through the heady billows of swirling clouds. Drenched from Stormbringer's rain, my men covered the ember spear touch holes, desperate to keep the flame alive to fire.

"A little more, Finn!" Celine cried, then to Stieg. "Prove what earth fae can do, Warrior."

Both Stormbringer and Stieg had hooked one arm around rope near the rails, then lifted their palms. Gusts of frosted wind swept across the deck, snapped at crimson sails. Groans and shouts of surprise lifted to the skies when dips and lulls of the sea rocked the ship. Stormbringer gritted his teeth, tense and on the verge of giving out.

Celine sprinted over the rails like a wraith in the night and held tightly to his waist, embracing him. Mouth half opened to curse and spit my rage, I swallowed it back.

Stormbringer let his shoulders drop, and the sea rolled violently.

His song was growing. Enough that the bow of the Ever Ship tilted and slid away, giving a bit of space between the two decks.

Some crewmen from the deck had tumbled into the thrashing waves. Others aboard the elven vessel had been swallowed into a pit of needle teeth and siren songs. Merfolk lunged from the waves for men on the rigging and rails of the phantom ship.

Peaceful looking most days, fearsome and beastly when they fought. Retractable claws extended like curved branches on their long limbs.

My fingers ached around the handles when I recognized Nixie, a loyal maid, who spent too much time attempting to get my crew to take a swim. She hissed and snapped her sharp teeth, hooking her barbed fingers into the belly of an elven man dangling by a rope over the edge of the ship.

I needed to get to Larsson. My voice was rough as chipped glass when I bellowed, “Make ready!”

Spears on starboard, make ready!

Steady on, me boys!

Aim for the head or them cocks!

Commands and warnings flowed up the deck. The din fierce and deafening, I could hardly take note upon which ship the orders were leveled. We had our ember spears, but—

“Dark tides, little eel!” Sewell cupped his hands around his mouth, hollering and pointing at the elven ship.

Dark tides—danger on the water.

Beneath the cover of mist and storm, flames, untouched by the sheets of rain, blazed overhead. Fire arrows.

I leaned over the helm, wood digging into my gut. “Load those spears faster, or we meet the gods of the seas!”

Boom, boom, boom. Spears fired in quick secession. Stones set aflame hurtled across the gap between ships. Cracking wood and shredding canvas was the only hint we’d succeeded before Tait followed with a fierce, “Cover!”

The whistle of the falling arrows burned in my skull. “Songbird! Against the rail!”

I dove over the deck, pressing my spine and my hips against the rail. Frantic, I found Livia—Valen still served as his daughter's shield, and together they'd pressed as close as possible to the rail of the ship.

Arrows thudded over the deck. Flames licked up the masts and rope. I wasted no time and heaved my body half over the side of the ship, drawing a curling wave to spill over the main deck, snuffing out the fire.

When I lifted my gaze, across the tempestuous gap between us, Larsson stood on the quarterdeck. His palms pressed to the sleek wood rail, gaze trained on me, nowhere else. His hair was tied off his neck, a scarf over his head, the same as when he'd sailed under the banner of the Ever Ship.

For a moment, a mere breath, the battle went still, the storm quieted. His face was hard, but unreadable. A remnant of the man I thought I knew. In this moment, he was something else. A dark creature that needed to be peeled from the Ever Kingdom.

I righted over the rail, slid one of the daggers from a sheath on my leg, and tilted my head, so one eye skimmed down the edge of the pointed blade. The point aimed at Larsson's heart. "I'm coming for you, brother."

Impossible to hear me over the booms of ember spears and thunder. Still, Larsson's teeth flashed in a twisted kind of grin as if to say, *I welcome you to try.*

"Bloodsinger!" Aleksi shouted, keeping his balance on the rocking deck by clinging to a rope. "Witches called. Shores are free. Our time is now!"

Over the black sails of Larsson's vessel the isle came into view. The smaller ships had left the shores, aiming to overpower us. My gaze locked with Livia's. She clung to the rail, eyes like deep sea lagoons, fierce and vibrant.

The only hint of her disquiet lived in the gentle wrinkle of her brow, the pinch of her lips.

I love you, Songbird.

Even without the heartbond, I took a bit of pleasure imagining she heard all the same. She covered her heart with one palm, a silent response that said it all.

“Hold a little more,” I returned to Alek. Already the fae royals were taking to their marks. Tait stood between them but faced me. I lifted a palm and watched my cousin relay the order to hold.

A little longer. I scanned the rough tides with a new desperation. Where the hells are you?

“Hold,” I shouted again, chest tight.

“*Bloodsinger.*”

I ignored the prince. *Where are you, godsdammit?*

Another ember spear fired. Two dozen arrows arched over the sea. Celine and Stieg focused their winds against them, knocking the flame off course.

Then, the sea seemed to sink and swirl, as though piling in on itself, dragging our ships down with it. A mermaid, painted in moss, holding a skull in her palms broke through the surface. Skulls with bloody eye sockets whipped on a black banner. Ivory laths from the birch groves on the House of Bones aimed for the sky. Gavyn’s ship broke through on the opposing side of Larsson’s ship.

Cheers erupted on deck. My crew punched fists into the rain, chanting for the bone lord.

Larsson whirled around. I could not hear over the cries of the wind, but I imagined he cursed, imagined he felt the sinking of his gut when Gavyn’s crew bellowed their battle cries into the darkness.

The *Siren’s Vengeance*, aptly renamed when Celine’s voice was cut out, dropped her thick, cerulean sails. The bow skidded over the surface of the water, aimed at the hull of Larsson’s ship. Elven sloops adjusted, focused on the onslaught from both sides, turning their attention from the isle.

“Took long enough, you bastard,” I muttered under my breath and limped away from the rail. “All hands! Grappling

hooks at the ready, you sods. Make ready to board.”

Skulleater took the helm. I snaked a rope around my wrist before stepping beside Sewell on the rail.

“Serpent.”

I drew in a breath. One look, one pause, and I said the words I should’ve said at the end of the war when the first glimmer of hope to a deadened heart came from a smile through the bars of a prison cell. “You are my light in the darkness!”

With a nudge from Valen, Livia was urged belowdecks, but before her face slipped from view, she called to me. “A thousand turns, Erik Bloodsinger.”

I closed my eyes and faced the sea. *A thousand turns, Songbird.*

Iron hooks flung over the gap between ships. Gavyn’s crew was already doing the same.

Larsson snapped his orders on the deck, cursing and hissing for his men to kick the barbs free. Once the hooks were lodged against their rails, crewmen in the center of the deck flung the slack of the ropes over their shoulders and heaved in the opposite direction. We drew ever closer.

The *Siren’s Vengeance* and the Ever Ship caught Larsson between our hulls, a fish in its net.

“On the rails,” I called out. “Keep your blades ready, take as you please, but Bonekeeper lives for me!”

This ended now. I planned to start those thousand turns with my queen with new blood on my hands. In another breath, I kicked off the rail and swung out over the sea.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

THE SONGBIRD

THE EVER SHIP ROCKED MERCILESSLY. Belowdecks, at the gaping mouth of the hull door, Jonas grabbed my elbow, steadying me when we lurched forward.

“Gods, get me back on land,” he murmured.

Sea water rushed into the hull, swallowing our ankles, our knees.

We had marks to meet, roles to play. Apart, yet Erik and I fought together to protect our kingdom. Sander was the one who’d puzzled through the scheme of where we would all be most useful. Despise it as I did, he wasn’t wrong. Earth fae and Alver folk like him were strongest on the soil.

Larsson’s threats—forces on land and sea—offered up that Natthaven and its armies would match the lands of the royal city. Larsson’s fight was with the sea, but Arion would bring victory on elven lands.

“Jonas,” I said, voice half-formed, no more than a gasp. “I know the *neach-dai* brings out a need to defend me, but do not do anything that will take you from us.”

He shook his head, grinning. “I am going to tell you something gods-awful heartfelt. I’ve always had the compulsion to keep the lot of you fools safe. I wouldn’t know what to do without any of you. Nothing has changed, I’m merely protecting your kingdom, and in turn, still protecting you.”

Jonas was playful, a bit of a rake, but what he’d done, what he’d offered to win this battle, I wasn’t convinced Erik even

knew what to think of it. The Ever King had been rather somber around my friend since, studying him, like Erik could simply not figure the nightmare prince's motivations in the least.

Once the tides gathered round our waists, we—my father, Tait, and fellow royals—dove into the currents. My lungs burned, my muscles ached. I kicked fiercely, swimming away from the Ever Ship.

The will to remain, to take up a role at Erik's side, was nauseating. The thought of him boarding Larsson's vessel, the truth of what he would face, churned my heart until it was nothing but a bloody pulp against my ribs.

I closed my eyes and dug my palms into the water, catapulting me farther from the ship.

Red flashes of the spears firing flickered above us, but when the tumult lessened, I arched for the surface. Only my brow and half my nose breached the tides. Straight ahead loomed the fading isle.

Mira's head bobbed beside me, half hidden in the currents. She flicked her kohl-wrapped eyes to me and gave me a quick nod, then sank back beneath the water.

Slowly, a bit of sea mist, a touch of fog, some thicker trees formed along the shore to allow us space to slip onto the beach unseen. I'd never tire of Mira's illusions. Mira could manipulate entire landscapes like a painting to reveal something new, subtle enough it went unnoticed.

One by one, we stepped from the river bank, crouched low in a forest made of half-truths. Illusions of peeling bark on aspen trees, and dewy leaves shrouding our faces, were so real, I could breathe in the clean rain scent as we strode past.

Alek kept a steady hand on the small of Mira's back, guiding her forward. Her eyes were closed, and her palms were opened at her sides. Focused. Deliberate. No mistake, if we went undisturbed, she'd be able to hold the illusion most of the way.

Palms out, I took on a bit of the burden. Fury heated the tips of my fingers, drawing an unseen tether to the isle, the soil, the dew on blossoms, until I could sense the pulse of life from root to bloom. True branches on real trees thickened, as though creating a canopy overhead. Grass lengthened, shrouding us to our knees.

As we crept forward, I hurried to explain the wooden paths that led to palace steps, where to avoid stepping too deeply into inner swamplands, and where, those who needed to, would find their way into the fortress.

My father crouched, drawing a finger in the soil, casting the occasional look around, as he mapped our location. We each repeated our marks and signals.

“Let’s get this over with.” Aleksi shook out his hands and drew his Rave short blade. He cut a glance to the swirls of clouds wrapped around the ships. Booms and flashes of light carved through the darkness every few breaths. “Bloodsinger will need us all.”

“Daj,” I said, eyes only on the palace ahead. “Time to draw them out.”

My father was a formidable force, he always had been in my eyes. I’d watched him spar with the Rave, knew he’d toppled tyrannical kingdoms, knew he’d lived with insatiable bloodlust. To stand beside him now was an honor. I’d harbored secret insecurities as a Ferus, as though our world would always keep me shadowed in the legacy of my parents.

To see my father, a king, the lone earth bender in a thousand turns, bend the knee at my command was humbling. It was empowering. To know he trusted my abilities and my word bolstered my strength, even numbed a few fears threatening to bend my spine beneath their weight.

My father splayed his palm over the soil. He closed his eyes.

I took hold of a tree limb when bursts of rock and soil flung into the air. The ground rolled and shook. It bent like nothing more than a jagged stick carving a line in the sand.

Daj split the soil, crumbling more than one wall around the palace.

The same harrowing bells from the night I'd escaped rang out from the belltowers. Guards, readied with blades and arrows, emerged from behind doors, walls, and trees.

"Mira," Sander shouted. "Light the sky."

My friend hesitated, still holding the illusions that kept us hidden.

I placed a hand on her shoulder. "Mir, it's time."

Her amber eyes were glassy as she took in each of our faces. "Any of you bleeding fools die, I will never sit with you in the hall of the gods, hear me? And I will be the life of the revel in the Otherworld, so stay alive. Gods, even you, Hearttalker."

"I'm not dying tonight, Princess," Tait grumbled without correcting his name. He looked to his clock. "Send the signal. Danger is rising. We're out of time."

Mira closed her eyes and flung her hands upward. Shadows and mists abandoned us, but flashes of silver and blue shattered the dark sky overhead. An illusion of stars spiraling down from the heavens, beautiful, yet unbelievable, like thousands of gleaming blades slicing through the billows of dark storm clouds.

Without the added shields of Mira's illusions, it took no time at all for the elven guards to spot us on the open shore.

"Go!" I shoved Mira into Jonas and Sander. Both twins had blackened the whites of their eyes.

Jonas hesitated, rubbing his chest. "I need you to say it plainly, Liv. It's keeping me close to you."

"Jonas, if you do not hit your mark, we have no way in. This is how you protect the Ever Kingdom."

A muscle throbbed in his cheek, but slowly, Jonas drifted away from me. Faster and faster still, until he sprinted after his brother and Mira.

“Livia,” my father shouted, unsheathing one axe. “Be fierce, little love.”

I clenched my jaw so tight it seized. There, in the trees, rounded shields of blue were aligned, shoulder to shoulder. Points of swords aimed over the tops. Rows of guards stomped onto the shore. From the parapets and scattered treetops, archers pulled bowstrings taut.

They surrounded us, their four remaining enemies—an earth bender, a sea fae, a warrior prince, and a queen—and, no mistake, thought this fight over before it truly began.

Upon a shrill whistle, the rows of shields parted. Arion shoved through. Wretchedly handsome, he appeared even more powerful than last I’d seen the man. Black straps kept his golden blades on his powerful chest and legs. His fiery hair was tied off his neck, and the gold caps over his pointed ears had been replaced with silver.

“We take to battle for all elven folk!” He spoke to bolster his warriors, but his snide, wretched glee at the sight of battle couldn’t be contained. He risked their blood, all to win himself a throne.

This was not for his people, this was for him.

Over his shoulder, Fione’s pointed features came into view. It was the first I’d seen the sea witch out of flowing silken gowns. She wore tight hosen, boots to her thighs, and stiletto knives encircled her waist. Pinned to her belt was a whale skin pouch, doubtless holding her spells and potions.

“This is the army of the Ever King?” Arion scoffed, a shadow in his eyes. “I’m insulted.”

“He is an earth bender,” Fione sneered. “I didn’t believe the rumor to be true. Bloodsinger managed to convince his father’s killer to keep him breathing.”

“Ah. I have plans for your fae realms. I find them bothersome and mismanaged,” Arion said. “I think I shall take them for myself. Why not? We’re taking the sea, simple enough to take yours.”

“Why not?” My father remained unruffled, almost bored. How? I didn’t know. My heart felt as though it had taken up in the back of my throat.

Arion flicked a palm at the split stones surrounding the palace. “If this is the best you can do, I rather like my odds.”

My daj didn’t even smirk. He rolled his axe once in his grip. “Why don’t we find out.”

With a derisive scoff, Arion turned his back on us. “Kill them and make it swift. I’d like to end this little skirmish before sunset and get on with well-overdue vows.”

Arrows realigned and adjusted. Fione’s lip curled as she turned after Arion, returning to the palace. The elven prince was meant to rise as the victor in battle, but he would do it on the backs of his people. He’d sit atop a seat, sipping his wine, and claim a throne while men died for his sake.

Tait clicked the cover over his watch, a curve in the corner of his mouth, like he fought a grin.

The moment Arion turned his back on us, he jolted when a spear rammed through the chest of the guard one pace from him. The elven prince wheeled around, eyes wide.

Water split in a spray of angry waves as the ashen sails of the *Shadow Wing* carved through the surface. Narza’s ship was made of three levels, and thick sails that looked more like the clouds overhead than canvas.

From the shallows, faces emerged. Witches, sirens, sea singers with their mutilated features, rose from the tides, spears and swords raised.

But Maelstrom, standing like a bit of carved stone, lowered his arm, grinning as the impaled guard fell forward.

Lines and lines of sea folk stormed the shore of the isle, dropping their herbs and vials in bursts of smoke and rancid scents.

“Fione!” A trio of sea witches screeched and raged at the sight of their house traitor.

One tossed a pouch. Fione hissed and held up her palms. A wash of sea water swallowed the pouch in the same moment it flashed in flames, doused in the swell of tides.

The witches bared their teeth and readied more blades and spells.

Another guard twitched and stumbled forward when blood dripped from his pores. He stumbled toward my cousin. Alek's eyes were dark as a raven's wing. He held out one hand, then another, summoning two more guards.

Locked in Alek's blood summoning glamour, it took Tait no time to ram his cutlass into the ribs and spines of the guards until they toppled in a heap at my cousin's feet.

"You said the witches did not stand with him," Arion snarled at Fione.

Her chest heaved. She blinked, unease carved into her porcelain face. "They ... they don't. They didn't."

"Shield us," Arion snarled.

Fione scrambled for the pouch on her waist, desperate and frantic, but she fumbled when a clap of thunder shook the whole of the isle. Cyclones burst from the sea, great torrents of water and wind beat against the army.

Maelstrom stood in the shallows, hands stretched over his head, calling out the rage of the sea. On the deck of the *Shadow Wing*, Narza had her palms down, pulling up water to meet his fury.

Bleeding hells, they were fearsome together.

Sand whipped against us, sharp pricks against cheeks and eyes. I blinked, grinning at the sight of the elven struggling to hold their arrows, their swords. They used their shields to guard up against the winds.

"Kill them!" Arion roared, but he, too, blinked rapidly, unable to keep his eyes open against the sand.

Narza and Maelstrom released their spell as one and launched a fierce wave over the shore. I fell to my knees, palms flat, and urged something, anything to help earth folk

hold steady. Aleksi cried out in a bit of shock when slimy coils of underwater weeds broke through the damp sand. They curled around my cousin's ankles, my father's thighs, and my waist.

When the rogue wave hit, we were bolstered in place.

Not so for the elven. Shields were lost, men tossed back, and some ran for higher ground. Arion grappled for a stone, holding him steady against the burst of water. Fione faded into the frenzy.

Narza's crew spilled over the rails of their ship, invading the isle without end. My heart swelled to hear Narza's dark satin voice ordering her house to take up arms for their king, their queen, their home.

When Jonas had devised the exchange for her vow to remain and defend the earth realms, I'd half expected her to return to the Ever and watch, once again, as her grandson faced a war. Cynical of me, perhaps, but to see her, fierce as ever, I let out a cry of my own rage at the line of what remained of the elven guard.

Arion stumbled again as soil underfoot cracked between their feet. The elven prince lunged to the side, desperate to avoid slipping into the ravine.

My father rolled an axe in his grip, head cocked. "Well, shall we find out how this will go?"

Arion drew his blade. He held my father's hateful stare. Then, as the water from the wave retreated, he and his men sprinted onto the beach.

An elven guard with a crooked nose and a gilded longsword rushed for me. I blocked his strike and twisted in a way to avoid a slice to the back from his quick-footed shift.

His blade cut a path toward my chest. I leaned back, narrowly missing the point. My dagger cut his ribs; my boot smashed against the side of his knee. He seethed at me as if he didn't feel a thing.

The guard slammed his thick fist into my mouth, tossing me backward.

“Livia!” Deep like the thunder overhead, my father called for me, then threw his axe.

The curved edge sliced into the spine of the guard. He grunted and slumped to his knees. I coughed blood and wasted no time before slamming my dagger through the back of his neck.

With only one axe, Valen Ferus turned to fury. Arion tripped over curses when my father chased the prince with jagged barbs of rock that burst through the beach.

Fire aimed at our folk from the elven magic was extinguished by the screams of witches. Sirens hummed melodic, heart-wrenching songs. Tait roared at Aleks and my father to fill their ears. They swung blades, stuffing sand and sea weeds to battle their own draw to the sirens. Elven, caught in their silken voices, stumbled, entranced, toward the sea.

Over the din of screams and clotting storm clouds, I caught sight of a pale face in the mists. Fione. The sea witch took in the battle with horror, then rushed into the trees.

I smiled, adjusted my grip on my blade, and sprinted for the wood.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

THE SERPENT

ONE HAND CLUNG to the thick rope. The other held my cutlass out to my side, the curved edge aimed at Larsson's ship. The sight of the grappling hooks spurred his crew into action. Ropes wrapped around wrists, and his men leapt off their rails much the same as us.

My swing had me aimed at a bastard with hair to his damn waist and a thick leather jerkin over his chest.

The fool wasn't a man of the sea. Both his hands clung to the rope, and his eyes went wide and hopeless when he took note of the blade in my grip. One swift swipe, and his innards spilled over the Ever Sea.

My boots struck the rail of Larsson's ship, leg protesting. Blades awaited. Blood called. To board a ship meant preparing to strike before you took a bleeding step on deck.

A gilded sword swiped at my neck. I met it with my blade and kicked the sod's knee in the same motion. When the man fell, my blade met his heart.

Purpose burned in my chest, a balance between bloodlust and passion, rage and hope.

I had two objectives in this battle: kill Larsson Bonekeeper and find my queen.

Bodies collided on the deck, and blades clashed in a frenzy. I strained to peer over heads, searching for Larsson. A wild swing from a knife nearly landed in the crook of my neck. I dodged and sliced through the man's belly.

Across the deck, Gavyn boarded, eyes black with the same wild heat pounding through my veins. Before one of the elven could strike, Gavyn impaled the bastard through the underside of his chin.

He disappeared into the rainfall on deck, only to take shape behind the brute at the helm. Gavyn winked through the helmsman's cry of fright, then trapped his face in his palms, snapping his neck in a single twist.

Celine and Stormbringer whooped when the elven folk backpedaled toward the center masts. Stormbringer closed his eyes, almost peaceful, and hummed his song. In the same moment, Celine and her false wooden teeth drove into the neck of one of the elven.

At her back, a man approached, blade at the ready. Before he had an opportunity to strike, he was thrown back by a rogue burst of wind that snapped one of the sails free from the rigging.

Celine lifted her gaze, blood dribbling down her chin, and beamed at Stormbringer. "Finn!"

"Woman," he shouted back, slicing through the chest of another guard. "Where you go, there I go."

A blade hissed through the air at my back. I spun around with just enough time to lift my cutlass.

A burly man with shocking pale eyes sliced a second blade close to my middle. I spun away, cutting at his knees. He dodged. I lunged. The damn guard earned a hit to my shoulder, but at the sight of my blood, he took a step back.

I dipped my fingers into the wound on my shoulder. "Ah, you've heard."

Before he could flee, I cupped a hand around the back of his head and slammed my bloodied palm over his mouth until black veins skirted up his throat and his body shook violently.

I let him drop and took hold of the cutlass that had slipped from my hand.

Overhead, the darkened sky burst in flashes of silver stars.

Elven not crossing blades shouted their stun, even a little despair, when the sky ignited over their isle.

A smile bloomed over my face. *Well done, love.*

The first signal was placed, now it would be time for Lady Narza to prove her words and stand with the Ever King at long last. Bells of warning clanged from the isle. Ash and smoke sails broke the surface in the distance, and a storm collided with the shores.

Triumph, bright and heady, burned under my ribs.

A grunt and splatter of blood landed a dead man at my feet. Through the rain, Stieg shot me a dark smile. The warrior turned and leveled another man with his sword, and when a second attack came from the side, he managed to cover the sod's face with his big palm and slam his face against the center mast.

I rolled my shoulders. All was going to plan.

“Bonekeeper!” My voice, like the swell of the sea, rocked along the deck with every sway in the storm.

“Erik, the helm!” Celine had a blade raised like she might throw it, but her mouth was slack with worry. “The helm!”

Tidecaller rushed on her own, frantic, dodging strikes made by rogue blades. I spun over my shoulder, and a sharp burn filled my middle. Sewell, bent over the rail, held his sword against Larsson. Blood already stained Bonekeeper's chin. How many men had he shredded for their voice?

None of it mattered. My cook, my crewmate, the closest man I'd ever had to a father, was faltering.

Then I was running.

Fire crackled up my leg, into my spine. I hastened my pace.

An elven guard, one sleeve of his starlight tunic set aflame, stumbled into me. I hissed, braced my back on the mast, and stuffed his belly with my boot. There was no time to wait to watch him flail as he tumbled over the edge of the ship into the sea.

The pierce of a scream cut deeper than a blade. Celine shouted for her father, her brother, and she stumbled. Larsson finagled Sewell's sword from his grip, and the moment the former bone lord opened his mouth to use his sea voice, Larsson tore his teeth into Sewell's neck.

"No!" Gavyn noticed. He was water in the next breath.

Shit, shit, shit!

I crashed into Larsson, tearing him away from Sewell. Gavyn's form appeared in front of his father, catching Sewell under the arms before he fell to the deck, blood a fountain from his neck.

Larsson's head smacked onto the quarterdeck, my body over his, but his fist struck my ribs without pause. We rolled away from the helm, lashing like starved hounds. Larsson straddled me and reached for my throat. My knuckles cracked over his jaw. I bucked my hips, tossing him off balance overhead, and scrambled to my feet.

Blades out, Larsson sliced a dagger through the air. I bent back, but not swift enough. Larsson slammed his leather-wrapped hilt against the weak point of my leg. It buckled. With the back of his hand, he struck my face. I tilted onto one elbow, bracing, and shielded a downward blow with the edge of my cutlass.

Teeth bared, Larsson leaned into me over our swords and lifted his boot again, kicking and kicking at the crooked bones in my leg.

Black clouded the corners of my eyes from the pain.

"Untouchable, Bloodsinger," Larsson spat. Blood from his attacks—from Sewell—fell onto my face. Another kick. "Poison blood can't help you against snapping bones."

Somewhere, my name was called. Pleaded, more like it. My leg bent under another kick. It cracked.

One more, and the whole of my limb would shatter. I groaned and embraced a hysterical instinct to survive. Larsson leaned over our blades again, and the edge trembled close to

my throat. I took him by the neck and dug my fingernails deep into his flesh until it broke and split.

Larsson reared back, leaving bits of his skin under my nails. With the quarterdeck rail, I heaved upright, bracing on my strong leg.

Cold eyes darkened. “You never give up, do you?”

“Must be a family trait.”

Larsson used his sleeve to wipe away some of the blood. “Perhaps. You know, *brother*, I don’t think you’ve ever heard my voice.”

He hummed a tune, soft, almost lively.

My body stiffened, muscles locking. Pain tore into my chest. Needles of ice pierced my skin until it burned. Rain slicked my shirt to my skin, giving clear sight to charcoal black flesh peeling away from my bones. *Fleshripper*. Strange, how fascinated my mind became, watching my own chest shred and burn.

Blood spilled down my middle. My feet stumbled. I fell.

Slow, almost somber steps approached. Dazed, distant, I stared up at Larsson’s face. If I narrowed my gaze, I could almost see *her*. Blue eyes like the Ever sea, the sweet worry line over her brow.

I should’ve told her I loved her one final time.

Larsson ended his song, leaving my skin opened, bleeding, burning.

“In another life,” he said, voice low. “We might’ve had a chance to be brothers. I might’ve even liked it.”

I despised him but wanted to agree, wanted to admit not much in this life had ever been truly fair for the heirs of Thorvald.

Blade raised over the ripped wound in my chest, Larsson studied me a final time, as if to bid a silent farewell, as if to prove he’d won the crown. Voices still cried out for me. It mattered, that even some on my crew might mourn me. I

ached for Livia. I'd crave her until I met her in the Otherworld; gods, I'd wanted those thousand turns.

The ship lurched without control. Sails tipped toward the water violently.

Larsson was thrown back, his brow struck the rail. Disoriented, he pressed his palm to his forehead. Agony pinched my face when I sat upright, hooking my elbow over the rail once more. I cried out when flesh and sinews split and tugged until I could peer into the storm.

A smile crept across my face. "Earth Bender."

From the swirl of the sea, jagged cliffs rose. The peaks split through ropes connecting the Ever Ship and Gavyn's vessel to Larsson's, like a cage isolating our singular enemy.

With a horrified sort of awe, Larsson gaped at the rising seafloor that trapped his ship.

Across the distance from ships to shore, cyclones rose from the shallows of the fading isle, violent and perilous. Narza was there, aiding in Livia's land battle. The Ever Queen claimed the soil. Now it was time to claim the sea.

I stood, biting down on the tip of my tongue when my leg raged. Larsson grappled to find his footing, still lost in the sprouting cliffs. Hate met hate.

"It's over, Erik," Larsson said, long, slow drips of blood covered his bottom lip. "You won't last against me. Die with dignity."

I bent and lifted my cutlass off the deck. "When have I ever been dignified? If I fall to the Otherworld, I will take you with me. In pieces, I hope."

No pause, Larsson rushed at me.

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

THE SONGBIRD

I SLIPPED BETWEEN TWO EVERGREENS. A thorn snapped off into my upper arm. A curse hissed over my tongue, but I kept on, tightening my hold on the white iron dagger. Salt and blossoms spun like bursts of wind around me.

Close.

A shudder rolled through the soil. My father was clever with his fury. Startling and terrorizing in waves before he revealed the depth of what he had planned. Each burst was a nudge to keep going, to meet my fight head on. The others would do the same.

With care, I leveraged over a fallen log, keeping my steps cautious when the path took a severe slant. Light flickered in the trees, and my steps softened. With care not to snap a single twig, I tugged a branch out of sight.

Fione knelt in a natural clearing, fumbling with the cork of a vial she'd yanked from her pouch. Whatever spell cast she had planned, it ended before it began.

Heat gathered in my palms. The trees shuddered at our backs. Fione reeled around, a knife held straight out from her chest. "Keep back, earth fae. I'll drop it and choke the air from your lungs in your next breath."

Dark spells, cruel magic, it was all that made Fione.

"I don't think so." One swipe of my hand, and the draw of my fury had branches, limbs, and vines curled around Fione's wrist, snatching the vial from her fingers.

Her eyes widened.

“Why the look of stun?” I tilted my head. “You always address me as earth fae.” My fingers pressed to my lip. “By the gods, did you not think us at all skilled? You are so confident in your twisted spells, Fione. Did you not think I would be the same with the fury of the earth?”

Fione yanked her wrist away, snapping the branch, and scrambled on her backside to the edge of the clearing. “You won’t win this.”

“Is that right?” I stepped into the clearing. “It seems like I am doing just that.”

Fione lunged toward me. Her fingers curled around the blade of my dagger. Blood soaked between her knuckles. She shrieked, holding my weapon while slicing hers.

Something tightened in my chest. Something cruel and savage. I reeled back, gliding my dagger out of Fione’s palms like it had been a fleshy sheath around the blade. The sea witch, at last, took note of her reckless grip and shrieked her pain when the blade sliced open her palm.

“I told you once, I come from a place where women do not tear each other down for power,” I said, aiming the point of my blade down. “They stand shoulder to shoulder; they carry one another. But I think for you, Fione, I will make an exception.”

“Bold words, earth fae. Prove them.”

Roots sprung from the forest floor in the same moment Fione summoned a strange spell. Murky water bubbled from the soil and hardened into ice sharp as blades. Fione flicked her fingers, and the icy bolts flung toward my chest.

I raised my arm in front of my face. Gnarled wooded fingers sprang from the soil, barbs and brambles, and swung over Fione’s ice like a bulbous club, shattering them to pieces.

Fione’s currant red lips pinched. Glass shattered, and one of her vials burst in ashen smoke over a fallen branch. She lifted the tree limb, peeled back large flakes of bark, and revealed a fine short blade fashioned by her spell.

Etched in grains like the tree limb, the cursed blade was narrow and lithe, handcrafted for Fione's slender palms.

"This won't end in your favor, Fione." Dammit. The tremble was clear in my voice. I adjusted the white iron dagger in my grip.

"You almost sound like you believe that, earth fae." Fione gripped her ensorcelled blade, eyes flashing with hatred, then lunged forward.

No hesitation, no second thoughts. The rest of the shore fell away. Swords, cries, the sound of steel slicing through leathers and flesh. I could not pause to fret over my father or Alek. Mira, Jonas, Sander, I could not wonder if they'd found Skadi or flattened Arion's forces.

Breathe. Focus. Those words had never settled clearer in my mind. This was my fight. This was my moment to secure peace for me and Erik. Others had their roles, their moments. Nothing would peel me away from mine.

With a strangled cry, I landed a blow against the edge of Fione's sword. A quick strike, one that tossed us apart nearly as fast. We circled each other. The vibration of the steel from her heavier, larger weapon prickled up my arms. Fione's eyes flashed like a storm over the sea.

We said nothing. No pleas. No jests. There was nothing to say. The sea witch and the Ever Queen were here to kill each other.

I rushed at her again. She met my strike with a ferocity I didn't anticipate. In the short time I'd come to know the sea witch, Fione seemed like a lady who balked at sword play, who reveled in fine teas and lush gowns.

When her sword landed a cut to my arm, I swore and reeled backward.

"Stop this, earth fae," she said. "Look around. You fight against old magics and old revenge. It will end in blood for your people."

Through the trees, still on the shore, were the sounds of battle cries, of slicing blades. Sea witches, sirens, my people,

battled the blades and elven pyre of Larsson's kin. Perhaps it hadn't been enough. Perhaps this fight was futile.

Or perhaps not.

My shoulders rose in sharp breaths. "I am Livia Ferus!"

I swung my dagger, catching Fione off guard, and landing a sharp strike to the edge of her sword. The sea witch backedpedaled.

"Daughter of warriors!" Another downward blow. Fione cursed me and made a wild strike for my middle. "Heir of the Night Folk fae!"

"Enough." Fione made a quick jab at my leg. I kicked at her knee.

Back and forth we pushed. Sloppy strokes, desperate blows, we fought with a finality, a knowledge that this moment would change the course of this land forever.

"Heartbond of the Ever King!"

Fione slammed her sword against my blade and promptly drew a fist against my jaw. I fumbled forward. The tang of blood grew hot on my tongue.

Do not fall. Breathe. Focus.

Erik's face flashed through my mind. So far, so near. I could taste the air, taste his flavor—woodsmoke, leather, heat.

I wiped a sleeve over my lips. Blood soaked the fabric. Five paces away, Fione gasped, hunched over her knees, a bit of horrid stun in her pale eyes. Erik would want blood. He'd demand bones to drape over my body as a shrine to what became of our enemies, but not this one.

This fight was mine to finish.

"I am Livia Ferus," I said, voice rough as a blade over stone. "I am the Ever Queen. And you, Fione, are no longer welcome in my kingdom."

I lifted the elven dagger. Never had I desired death, blood, pain, so fiercely. In the next breath, Fione lunged. Our blades

met. The sea witch screamed as she tried to hack at my neck. I parried and shoved her back.

Another blow came to my lower spine. I dodged. She met my strike over her head. Each clash, each blow lost power but gained hatred.

Fione made a sloppy cut at my heart, but weak steps fumbled over the uneven soil.

Now. A voice, be it from the sand or sea or wood, I didn't know, but it bloomed through my mind.

I dropped to my knees, palms splayed over the earth, and cried as fury burst through my pores. The ground heaved as vines, branches, as weeds from the sea, coiled like chains around Fione's ankles, trapping her in place.

The sea witch screamed in fright. She spluttered a few incantations, drawing out sparks that tried to ignite the limbs tethering her in place. I clambered over a thick root, racing over the surface, blade gripped tightly.

Fione writhed, desperate to break out. She hissed more spells, blackened more roots and vines. A scorch of hot air burrowed in my lungs. I let out a wretched cry and leveled the tip of my dagger against her, carving out the base of her throat.

It was horrifying, witnessing the edge of the elven dagger slice through skin, yet not draw blood. Golden scars veined over her flesh, flowing down her throat, her collar, into her chest.

She cried out, clawing at her breasts and skin until Fione's pale eyes flickered in stun, remorse, hatred. Until light faded. Neck split open. Fione's features froze, ever furrowed in a wince as if she might shed a tear, but nothing came from a lifeless gaze locked on the dark sky.

She was gone, rotted from the heart out.

Weak steps took me away from the unmoving form of the sea witch.

Respite lasted for a few moments. Wind bellowed through the trees, slamming against the elven palace. Boards and slats

peeled away against the tumult. I spun around when cries of stun rose from the shore down the slope.

By the gods—elven guards doubled over. It looked as though they were retching.

I clung to my bloodied dagger. Panic, harsh and sharp, stacked in my belly. I needed to find my family. As if he'd absorbed my thoughts, Aleksí peeled through the trees.

“Livia!” Blood dripped down his nose, but his arms curled around me. “Gods, I lost sight of you.”

“What’s happening?”

He pulled away and faced the shore. “I don’t know. Their folk started spewing blood. Something shifted here, changed —” Aleksí’s gaze landed on a dead Fione. “Recent kill?”

“Only just.”

“Coincidence her death brought about spewing elven?” We locked eyes and shook our heads, speaking as one, “Doubtful.”

“She’s dead,” I said, a curl to my lip. “Now, at long last, Larsson can fall to the hells.”

Natthaven needed to be taken, Fione needed to die, or the wretched magic protecting Larsson Bonekeeper would never allow him to fall under Erik’s blade.

“Where’s my daj?” I asked.

“Sending his message that the killer of Thorvald stands with Erik Bloodsinger.” Alek’s grin was cruel, almost vicious. He pointed through a gap in the trees.

The sea was chaos. Tides thrashed and spun around sails of crimson, black, and blue, but from the water grew formidable peaks of dark sea floor. Teeth of rock dug between the ships, caging the elven vessel, trapping Larsson.

Now was the time Valen Ferus revealed how he became the king of the Night Folk fae.

Tears burned behind my eyes. *Erik, we’re coming.*

Gods, I prayed he had Larsson's head, prayed Sewell, Celine, Stieg, the lot of them were cheering at the sight of those cliffs. He would die there. I'd take nothing less.

"Come on," Alek urged me forward. "Mira sent up a signal. They need us!"

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

THE SONGBIRD

IN THE CORRIDORS of the palace, guards trembled, blades fallen beside them. Blood stained the chins of some, others were coated in sweat, trembling.

What happened here?

To race through the halls of my captivity unhindered was disquieting, but I kept close to Alek. Occasionally, we'd both stumble, bracing against a wall, or clinging to a tapestry, when the earth shifted. After the feat of caging the ships with the seafloor, my father would fatigue soon.

By then, I wanted to be far from this isle.

Aleksi rounded the corner, shouldering through an arched door. My heart bottomed out. Mira crouched in front of Sander, her palms pressed against his middle. Blood. So much blood.

“Sander!” I dropped to his side.

He winced and shifted. There was a gilded knife rammed through his middle.

“Fine,” he said through his teeth.

“You’re not fine.” I brushed a palm over his feverish brow, brushing his dark waves from his eyes.

“Help Jo ...” Sander squeezed his eyes, blowing a painful breath through his nose.

“Where is Jonas?” Aleksi snapped.

“There. He’s in there.” Mira waved frantically at an archway covered in black satin drapes.

Aleksi held a palm against Sander’s sweaty cheek, a silent plea to stay alive, then ran through the curtains.

Mira blinked through tears. Her fingers were coated in blood from holding the blade steady in Sander’s flesh. To remove it, we’d face him bleeding out, to keep it there much longer ... time was running out.

“It worked,” Mira said, hurried. “The attack at the shore drew most blades to the sea. We found the door you told us about and slipped in without more than two guards in the way. I still had enough strength to cover us. Shadows. Simple, you know? Wouldn’t be seen.” Mira dragged a breath, shuddering down the length of her throat. “She ... she moved so quickly. Like a wraith, and ... and our blades, they were gone. Like they were made of nothing but mist.”

“She?” I looked to the draped doorway. Skadi. My fingers curled around the hilt of my dagger, anger, a touch of betrayal, in my veins. I rose without realizing.

“Livie.” Mira reached for me. “Don’t—”

She didn’t have time to finish her plea before the door in which Alek and I had come burst open. Tait sprinted in, at his back was Tavish, a wild sort of look in his eyes. A few sea fae and sea witches, but the black eyes in the midst of them were the ones I held.

My father, kohl smeared across his face, strode to me in five paces. He squeezed my arm in a bit of reassurance before dropping beside Sander.

“Come on, boy,” he whispered, a grin of a dozen things on his face—worry, pain, desperation.

Sander’s grin followed, weak with blood on his teeth. “Just tell ... tell my maj I died saving ... saving Jo from doing ... something stupid.”

My daj hugged Sander’s head to his chest and pressed a kiss to his hair. “You’re not going anywhere. Your own father

has been stabbed a time or two. House Eriksson doesn't go from stab wounds."

Sander's smile faltered. He closed his eyes and with one hand clung to my father's arm. Tears burned at the sight. No, Sander wasn't my blood brother, but he'd grown up, played, slept, and spent winters and summers, in my realms as much as I'd done in his.

My *daj* was his in this moment.

Sea witches knelt beside Sander, humming sweet, lyrical melodies as they sprinkled the wound with herbs.

"We're not boneweavers," one witch whispered, pressing a palm to his heart. "But we might help."

"Stay with him," I said.

"*Livia*," my father warned.

I was already through the curtains.

A round room filled with iron sconces and tallow candles added a smoky smell, and underneath was a burst of incense—sage and clove—so savory my insides twisted, repulsed. A fine bed with satin coverlets as delicate as a silk weaver web was tucked near one curved wall. A man slept, silver hair over his shoulders, broad chest rising peacefully.

But battle waged at the foot of his bed.

"Skadi!" I screamed her name as the woman spun on her heel, aiming a knife at Jonas's middle.

Blackened eyes, flushed skin, Jonas was locked in a delirious sort of rage. He cut his sword at Skadi. She held a palm over her head. The spray of dark mist surrounded Jonas's blade. It was stolen from his hands, only to land five paces to the side in a clatter across the room.

Skadi fumbled. The flicker of starlight in her eyes darkened. She was breathless. Jonas lunged for his blade, reeling back against her, cursing her, cursing for his fallen brother. He thought Sander was gone, and the pain was carved into every line of his face.

Aleksi had dropped his sword and kept stepping toward Skadi, hands out, doubtless to summon her to him.

She hissed, and every time he came too near, she waved a hand, and Aleksi would fade into darkness. My cousin emerged, much like Jonas's sword, mere paces away, gasping and groaning from the blow.

The princess panted, but lifted her knife, letting the blade hang weakly at her side. She looked to Jonas, whose fatigue was settling swiftly.

“Skadi, stop!”

Her eyes, empty, lost, found mine. “They can't have him.”

“Who?” I looked to the sleeping man. “Who is he?”

“All that's left.”

Tait rushed into the room, flustered, his watch in his palm. “Something's coming. We must get to the ship.”

“Not without this one,” Jonas seethed, taking a step for Skadi. “She needs to pay.”

“Livia,” Tait said, eyes wide. “I think it's Erik.”

My heart bottomed out.

Another glance at his watch, and Tait's eyes burned as bright as fiery embers. Panicked, he looked over my shoulder and ran for me. Only then did I notice the heat at my back, the new glow in the room.

Arion stepped from a fiery sheen, damp and bloodied from the shore, the bright red of his hair stuck to mud and sweat on his brow. He took in the room. In truth, he appeared taken aback at the sight of us in the chamber.

“You can't touch him!” This time, Skadi screamed at Arion. A first burst of any sort of emotion, aimed at her fellow elven.

Arion's lip curled. “I am finished with games. Natthaven is mine, and you will comply and give me what I want.”

He didn't make a move for Aleksi. Not me, not Tait. Arion sprinted for the bed and the sleeping man. Skadi, face like stone, spun away from Jonas's approaching blade. She cried out when she fell onto the bed, her palms flattened. Mists wrapped around the man, ready to pull it away with her tricky magic, but Arion leveled a sword over the man's throat.

He would slaughter the unknown elven before Skadi could muster the strength of her mist.

A voice, smooth as the finest cream, came from behind. Sweet as the tune was, it brought violence, not peace. Floorboards snapped and splintered under Arion's boots. He cursed when he sunk to his knees, jagged wood slicing his shins and thighs.

From the walls, tapestries split at the seams, the threads coiling like woven snakes. The writhing threads curled around Arion's throat, choking his breath as he struggled to break free.

I whirled around. Narza, eyes fiery as a sunrise after a storm, filled the chamber. Her hair was down and wild. Each movement drew out a strange wind, like an underwater attack. Power bled from her skin. Anger, hurt, fear, all of it emerged through her spells attacking Arion.

Skin on his face burned to a sickly sort of blue as the threads tightened. Arion's eyes spun wildly. He cast a frantic, hateful look at Skadi who was on the brink of collapse. A simple, spitting word fell over his lips. "Mine."

Before the serpentine tapestries finished him, Arion gathered his fiery light.

Alexi cried out, wanting blood as much as the sea witch, but not even the Bloodsummoner was swift enough before Arion faded into the brilliance of his magic and was gone.

Skadi whimpered in exhaustion. She reached for her knife on the edge of the bed, but Jonas swatted it away. His palms trapped her skull from behind, and Skadi screamed. Jonas lowered to the ground with her as she wailed and fought against the waking nightmares he pulsed into her head.

Narza hurried to his side, one hand on his shoulder, and waved her palm over the elven's face until Skadi went limp and silent.

"Jonas." I braced his back when he sat back, breathless. "Sander, he's still here. He's with Daj. Go to him. He needs you."

Jonas blinked once, twice, and the glossy black of his eyes returned to the brilliant green. He struggled to his feet but forced them to carry him back into the first chamber. Narza gently placed Skadi's head on the floorboards and looked to me. "There is darkness here. Power we do not understand."

"What happened to the guards, all the blood?" I asked frantically.

"Blood bonds," Narza replied, breathless, wiping sweat off her brow. "Deep and festering, the kind that rob a soul of their agency. They were bound to serve the witch's commands."

Fione's death freed them. My heart leapt. Skadi's folk, they fought us without a choice. I looked to the sleeping woman. There was more to her reasons, her emptiness.

"I need to get to Erik." I gestured at the bed, and Skadi's unmoving form. "We'll take them away where Larsson and Arion cannot reach them. But I must get to Erik."

Narza nodded. "Maelstrom awaits you. Go. We've claimed the isle. Go, and tell him he has made the Ever proud."

Emotion knotted in my throat, but I swallowed it down. I ran from the chamber.

"Livia!" My father called out to me. Sander was in the hands of the sea witches, sleeping, breathing, still with the blade in his flesh. Jonas cradled his brother's head, mocking his features and insisting he was being rather dramatic, through a glimmer of tears.

He was alive.

We were alive.

For now.

“I’m going to find my king, Daj,” I shouted.

“Wait.” My father gripped my arm.

I pulled back. “I’m not leaving Erik.”

“Livia.” He tried again. “I know. I want you to wait, for I’m coming with you.”

A slow smile crept over my face. I said nothing, merely nodded and raced from the palace, my father close behind me.

As promised, Maelstrom and Tavish had the *Shadow Wing* ready to sail. Sirens, witches, and sea fae still dotted the shore of Natthaven, tending to the elven guards. Some seemed ill, still choking on blood and spittle. Others were bound and rendered helpless to the mercy of the Ever folk.

“To the king,” I shouted at Maelstrom.

“Aye.” He winked, taking hold of the helm, and diving the sharp bow beneath the tides.

I closed my eyes, bracing for the chill of the sea. The distance was not far, and with the speed of Ever ships, wind thrashed around my face soon enough as the *Shadow Wing* broke through the tides, resurfacing beside the Ever Ship.

Ropes and grappling hooks were falling into the thrashing water. Gavyn’s ship rocked as it broke free from Larsson’s. Booms and flashes of the ember spears punctured new holes into the sails and decks of the black laths on Larsson’s vessel.

From here, I could make out clashing blades, bodies lunging at bodies. Men falling over rails into the torrent.

Erik, where are you?

“Liv.” My father pointed over my shoulder, blinking against the spray of rain and sea. “There.”

Sea floor split the surface of the Ever Sea like fingers of a lover tangled in dark tresses. They formed a sort of violent cage around Larsson’s ship, rocking the vessel side to side. On one dip, the black sails shifted enough to catch sight of the quarterdeck.

“Erik.” His name fell over my lips like a gasp.

Jabs, strikes, swings, back and forth, I watched Erik and Larsson. The Ever King stumbled against the rail, and Larsson sliced his sword. Erik rolled out of the way. I shouted for Maelstrom to take us in.

Pulse a frenzy, I curled my fingers around the rigging, skin pulled so taut it went white, and swung across the waves until my feet struck the new deck of the elven vessel.

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

THE SERPENT

THERE WAS power in the water. Salt and rain and the sweetness of the Ever, all of it seeped into my blood.

My battered leg went numb, almost deadened weight, but at least the pain no longer stole my breath. In my grip, the cutlass was heavy, my shoulders ached with fatigue. Larsson hacked his sword against my middle. There was a slicing sound and a bite over my chest. The point managed to nick the torn flesh over my heart.

Pain, white and hot sliced through my body. Another lull in the waves, and the ship slammed against one of the freshly raised seafloor peaks. Larsson fell face down. My spine struck the back rail and knocked my cutlass from my grip.

Blade lost, I opened my arms, and the deep, poignant hum rumbled from my chest. Turbulent water shot upward, like a tower seeking to touch the stars. When Larsson raised his head, he cursed and shielded his skull as I dropped the crushing tide over the top of him.

The force was harsh enough rails cracked, and half the quarterdeck and back chambers shattered into the Ever.

A whistle sliced through the storm. The burst of the main mast shattered after a burning cinder stone pummeled through the center. Cyclones and whirlpools, ships and blades, from all sides the power of the Ever converged on this moment, this ship.

They were fighting for our world, and somewhere in there was the truth—they were fighting for me. For the first Ever

Queen.

I dropped my call to the tides and retrieved my cutlass, refusing to fail them.

Energy seeped from my blood. Fighting eased on the main deck, more eyes turned to us, a final stand. Larsson's rogue crew gathered on one edge of the quarterdeck. Some looked like they'd joined after the fall of Hesh, and some had the deep eyes of the elven. Movement behind me hinted my own men could be coming to stand at my side.

Larsson found his feet. "Is this how we end, Erik? Fight until no one is fit for the blood crown? This is my birthright. Give it to me, and I will let you live, let you stay as brother to the king."

"If you had told me that not even a turn ago, I would've heartily agreed."

"You would've never given up the crown."

"I hated the crown. You knew it was my prison!" I used the back of my sleeve to wipe brine off my lashes, bracing as a wave knocked us back against Valen's cliffs, grounding the ship for good.

"So let it go, Bloodsinger."

Steady again, I turned, teeth flashing. "Never. Not after what you did to *her*."

"Are you so proud you'd destroy the Ever through our blood?" Larsson hunched over, exhausted, bitter, fading.

"We die, and the Ever will not fall."

Her face cut through the crew on the deck, and my body *felt*. Warmth, peace—my beacon, my home. Livia was worn, a little bloody, but there was a wildness in those eyes, like the fiercest sea, like she was the true power here.

"It won't fall," I repeated, holding her gaze when she was stopped by a thick arm of a crewman at the steps. "For it has its queen."

Livia shook her head. She struggled against the arm holding her back, crying out my name.

I turned back to Larsson, shoulders heaving. “Its queen is why I will not stop. She is why I will never let you live.”

“Pathetic,” Larsson said with enough disdain he meant it. “Your life for a bitch without a true crown.”

I blocked a swift strike from Larsson’s sword. He’d drawn a dagger from his boot and cut across my middle. I slammed my hilt against the side of his head, forcing him to back away, to give me enough time to stand straighter.

Larsson had enough wounds, and my skin held plenty of my blood, that I could kill him with should I wrap my arms around him. But to survive the endless strikes he’d level against me before the poison took hold?

Not even Murdock would be fast enough to stop me from bleeding out.

Perhaps this was always meant to be my fate. To die fighting for a new Ever. An amends for the hatred I’d leveled against her folk all these turns, for the destruction sea fae caused when we brought war.

The gift of the sea to a queen, to her people, who would tend to it with honor and mercy.

Livia’s cries turned to pleas, hardly audible under the crash of thunder. I took up my blades in a firmer grip, resigned to end this here.

A final stand.

My song was low, lost under my breath, but the sea tossed another wave at Larsson’s back. He swung around, trying to call it off. Whatever voice he’d stolen was not strong enough, or he was not swift enough. The crash of the wave knocked him backward. He landed with his shoulders and head hanging off the shattered edge of the deck.

Ten paces, that was all that remained between us. My movements were stiff and haggard, but I closed the distance and rammed the point of my blade through Larsson’s leg.

He roared his pain, managing to toss his fists at my ribs when I straddled his waist. A wave of violent delight rushed through my veins when the splintered edges of the ship sliced his shoulders and neck, the more I pressed him down.

Larsson groaned and tried to buck me off, the blade shredding his leg.

I scraped my palm over my teeth, placing it against gashes across his chest. He let out a throaty whimper when the poison took hold. Murky veins slithered up the sides of his neck. Blood-tinged foam clotted in his mouth.

I leaned closer, my face hovered over his. “I would tell you that your bones will adorn her neck.”

Slowly, I began to sing, pulling back the poison. A swift death, that wouldn’t do. Larsson shuddered, gasping when the poison leeches from his blood.

“But,” I went on, my voice like the threat of the storm above, “I think you’ll be better suited as her crown. As you said, she’s not been given a proper one yet.”

Blood stained the deck beneath us. Larsson shoved against my face, trying to throw me aside. I bent his body over the ledge, taking note of what was slowly rising beneath us from the sea floor.

His eyes were glassy, hateful, yet there was a heaviness in them, a glimmer of the man I thought was loyal, the one I dared consider a friend even in my loneliest turns.

“You failed,” I said, voice harsh. “Today you’ll die alone, unloved, and despised. I will send your flesh to the Otherworld, cursed and marred, so the gods know what a wretch you are. They will never welcome you into their seas.”

“Blood ... Bloodsinger,” he grunted hoarsely, pleading.

Another drop of blood burned his veins with poison. I let it flow farther, watching as the sharp point of a cliff slowly grew and grew from the sea, drawing closer and closer.

The shudder was so faint, I doubted anyone could feel Valen moving the earth. It was such a slow ascent, offering

time to say the words, the promises, the threats, I needed Larsson Bonekeeper to hear. As though Valen Ferus had been in this place himself and knew these moments were mine to claim.

When the whites of Larsson's eyes were smoky gray from the poison, I sang it back. He slumped, weak, fading.

"Tell our father," I whispered, "I will proudly continue to disappoint him."

I took hold of Larsson's face between my palms, aiming over the point of the rising shard of rock. I waited until his eyes fluttered open, until he held my gaze. I wanted to be the last face he saw.

"Go to the hells, you bastard."

With a fierce shove, I smashed the back of his skull over the tip of the rocky point. Like gliding through the surface of the sea, the stone sliced through his scalp, the bone, and pierced out the front of his brow.

Each breath burned as if torn from my lungs. I couldn't pull my hands away. Larsson's lifeless eyes were coated in blood, his mouth parted in stun, his skull mutilated and unrecognizable, and I was frozen.

Only once gentle hands curled around my waist did I lean back.

"Serpent." Livia wrapped her arms around my shoulders, pressing my back to her chest.

"Songbird. My ... my blood." I swallowed, trembling. My body was soaked in poison.

"I promise not to eat your blood but let me ... let me just touch you."

One of my palms curled around her wrists, clinging to her—*gods*—feeling that she was real, alive, that she was warm and with me.

Her lips met the side of my head. She held them there, soft sobs against my skin. "It's over, Erik. It's over."

I swallowed, blinking through blood and rain.

Over.

The Ever was won.

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

THE SONGBIRD

ERIK WAS ONLY LOCKED in his stun near Larsson's body for a few moments before he snapped up. "Sewell."

I draped his arm over my shoulders and helped him limp to where Gavyn, Celine, and a few of the Ever Crew must've shielded Sewell. In my rush to reach Erik, I'd hardly caught a glimpse of the injured.

Sick turned in my belly at the sight of my Sewell's bloodied neck. Gavyn held a press to his father's skin. Celine held tightly to Sewell's palm, and only shallow breaths gave way that any life still lived in the man's heart.

Erik was soaked head to foot in gore but fumbled to Sewell's side. Gavyn, eyes rimmed in red, moved down wordlessly, giving the king space. Energy was spent in the Ever King. How much would be needed to save Sewell?

Erik's bloodied hand curled around Sewell's throat. Upon the first note of his song, he fell over Sewell's chest, drained and weary. Still, he kept his hand steady, eyes closed, with the slow whisper of a song.

No one made a sound. My father rose from where he'd crouched to call a final bit of earth for Erik's killing blow. Pallid, heavy with his own exhaustion, yet he curled me against his side, always the protector, always my shield.

"Touch him, little love," he whispered. "He needs your touch."

"When we heal the darkening, but—"

“Your mother has the same impact on me,” he admitted. “It is a gift of *hjärtas*. Trust me. Touch him.”

I dropped beside Erik. One hand touched the back of his head, the other, on his shoulder. Erik shuddered, never breaking his breathy tune, but little by little a flush filled his cheeks. More vigor soaked his song.

Sewell’s chest heaved with new breath.

“Gods.” Gavyn fumbled to his knees.

With help from Stormbringer, my father, and the bone lord, Erik was eased off Sewell’s chest. I held him against my body, a bolster for him to use for strength.

Sewell’s eyes opened.

“Daj.” Celine covered his body, shoulders shaking.

Her father wrapped her up in his arms. “No rain, Thunderfish.”

She only buried her face against his chest a little more. Gavyn, somber and torn, stepped aside. He was the bone lord, an orphan who played the role of a brutal son trying to make amends for a traitorous father. Doubtless most of his crew believed the lies. Doubtless there were still risks from vigilantes who might lash out and finish the commands of Harald.

Erik coughed. “Gavyn. Our world changes today.”

Gavyn blinked, mouth tight. After a pause, he nodded and knelt beside Sewell. Celine shifted for her brother, but never released her father’s neck.

Sewell, over her shoulder, looked to his son.

Gavyn smiled and clasped forearms with his father. “I’ve always been proud to be your son, and I want our folk to know it.”

A few murmurs followed the confession but faded quickly.

Sewell cleared his throat. “Same words, boy. Same words.”

Erik's breaths rattled. For the first time, I looked over his wounds. Skin burnt and shredded across his chest. Blood down his nose, ears, belly. I watched how he'd moved, leg dragging behind. I'd guess the bones were fractured again.

"Erik, you need a boneweaver," I said against his head.

He hesitated. "I can't walk on my own."

There was a bit of shame in his words. I hugged him closer and drew my lips to his ear. "Then it is a good thing you never have to."



BY THE NEXT MORNING, Blister Poppy had joined Murdock (who was rather petulant about her arrival) at the palace to tend to the wounded.

Sea witches offered healing herbs, but the two boneweavers healed bones and skulls, replenished blood, and staved off infection. Murdock, naturally, was with the king who, out of the scattered bodies across the great hall, was the most horrid when it came to dispositions of the sick.

Erik swatted at Murdock when the man, once again, offered a black polished walking cane. "I'm not using that."

Murdock lifted his pointed chin. "You, my wretched king, cannot put pressure on the leg for at least a week. Not until the bones reset, or you will have a fiercer limp than before and be in constant pain."

"Serpent." I tilted my head to the side. "Could you try to be pleasant, just this once?"

Eyes narrowed, he snatched the cane from Murdock's hand and pointed the end at me. "Traitor."

"Yes." I slid my palms over his chest. "The worst kind. The kind that frets over your well-being enough to demand you care for yourself."

A smirk teased the corner of his lips. He kissed me sweetly, pulling back just enough to speak. "Despicable."

A throat cleared. Tait stood in the doorway, bandaged from his own wounds. “He’s awake now.”

My heart skipped. With a groan and a few more protests, Erik conceded to using the cane and went with me to a chamber down the hall from the royal rooms.

A decent size of a chamber, yet it was packed with folk—sea and earth fae alike. When we stepped inside, Stieg placed a chair in the open, gesturing for Erik to sit.

“Look, love,” Erik said, glaring at the man. “The warrior has provided you with a seat.”

“Still being an ass?” Stieg asked me.

I sighed, and let my head drop to Erik’s shoulder. “Yes, I’m afraid.”

I released Erik’s arm, leaving him to bluster his protests and threats at Stieg and nudged my way toward the bed. Sander, bleary-eyed but awake, sat against half a dozen satin pillows. Chest bare, his ribs were wrapped, and a bit of pink was returned to his skin.

Jonas refused to move aside, not that anyone would ask him, but it left me to squeeze beside Sander’s shoulder. “You gave us quite a scare, you know.”

Sander winced as he held his ribs. “I know. Touch and go there for a bit.”

“A bit?” Jonas huffed. “Try all night, you bastard.”

“Go to sleep, brother. You’re getting sour.”

Jonas used his center knuckle to strike Sander in the thigh, sneering when his twin winced and clutched his ribs again.

“Have you spoken with your mother and father?” I asked.

Sander shook his head. “No. And I think we ought to not say a word about it.”

“Your mother can literally steal memories,” Aleksi said. “Tell me how you keep it a secret.”

“You won’t.” My daj spoke up from where he stood at the foot of the bed. “I’ve already told them.”

“*Valen.*” Sander groaned and dragged his palms over his face. “Why?”

“Well, when your fellow kings and queens have saved your own ass more than once, you don’t keep mountainous secrets from them, like their son almost died.”

“Where’s Bloodsinger?” Sander strained to look over Jonas’s head. “I’m taking one of those vows but make it so I must remain in the Ever.”

Erik scoffed. “I can’t take more earth fae.”

“Not a fae,” Sander grumbled, but closed his eyes, settling against the pillows. When he opened his eyes again, his expression turned sullen. “It was worth it, right?”

Jonas gripped Sander’s arm. “Yes. It was worth it. Battles were won.”

“And the elven woman?”

“Alive.” Jonas clicked his tongue. “Unfortunately.”

“Jonas.” I flicked his ear.

“What? She stabbed Sander.”

“I’ve been thinking about it,” Sander said, the familiar, bemused furrow dug into his brow. “I think she was fighting to protect the chamber with the sleeping man. Don’t you recall?”

“No,” said Jonas. “I don’t recall much of what she said. Only that she could literally steal the blades from our hands with her damn dark magic.”

Mira snorted. “It’s not like you have the loveliest of gifts, Jo.”

“She kept telling us to leave him be,” Sander said. “She kept shouting that she would fight against us if we came closer. Like a warning first.”

Erik limped forward. “We have her, the guards, and the sleeping elven under our watch. Lady Narza is working to

wake the man. He was placed in a strange sleep, not one made by Fione, but Narza believes she can still work through it.”

“I hope he wakes soon,” I said. “Skadi is refusing to talk to us.”

“What about that fiery bastard?” Aleksi muttered.

Erik shook his head. “Gone.”

“He is a problem,” I said.

“Aye.” Erik nodded. “And we’ll find a way to deal with him, but our answers will likely need to come from the sleeping elven if he wakes.”

The elven guards had been drained of what Narza called *dark bindings*, a sort of dark spell cast that left them mindless, only obedient to those with command over their lives.

Once Fione was gone, the tethers faded.

“What do we do until then?” Sander asked, voice heavy with exhaustion. He looked to Erik.

My skin heated when Erik slid his fingers through mine. He smiled faintly. “We rebuild the Ever Kingdom.”

CHAPTER FIFTY

THE SERPENT

FOUR DAYS AFTER BATTLES ENDED, my leg was healed enough I no longer needed Murdock's damn cane. Still, I looked horrible. Healing wounds, new scars, bruises across my jaw and face from Larsson's boots.

In truth, my leg had turned a sickly, pulpy color, like rotted pomes, and hardly fit inside my trousers it remained so swollen.

Naturally, I blamed Murdock, told him if he couldn't even manage to make me kingly, what was the point of a boneweaver in the palace?

Livia took great care in seeing to it pastes and ointments were rubbed across my bare skin. Great care.

I glanced over to where she sat in her throne at my side, recalling just this morning the sort of care she took now that our bodies did not ache and protest with every movement made. Her cheeks flushed, as though she sensed my thoughts and knew why I studied her.

Palace staff rummaged around the back of the hall, draping satin banners and fragrant blossoms across rafters and sconces. By week's end, the palace would be bursting in a revel for all houses to honor the victory and to truly step into a new Ever.

No part of me wanted to participate in a revel. What I wanted to do was hole away in our chambers and memorize every new scar on each other's bodies until we could not breathe, before our lives were tossed into chaos and interruptions.

But Livia was to be coronated soon, and we had new orders for more than one house that would be made public.

By the fortnight, we would set sail through the Chasm.

Rejection wasn't a horrid fear, not with the earth bender still in my court, fresh from battle. Still, there were likely a great many emotions and thoughts about what was done to bring us here.

I was not certain how many of the earth fae would truly welcome the sea.

But it was unavoidable. Not only did Livia desperately miss those left behind, but already the protests from the earth fae were felt from their shores through the Chasm. Kings and Queens were at the point of demanding they rest eyes on their missing heirs, lest a new war began.

Queen Elise was the most frightening. The last time Narza arranged for us to speak through the water, the queen had left me with a scathing look that spoke a hundred threats if I did not return her daughter and husband soon.

"They're here, Highnesses," Alistair announced with a derisive sniff.

"Let them in then." I shook my head. "Really, old man, why do you think we are here?"

Alistair grumbled under his breath, words about *authority* and *propriety* and the *queen's sweeter voice*. If only the old steward could see the way his sweet queen was biting down on her lip to keep from grinning.

Stormbringer and Tait were the first to step inside. Two elven followed, surrounded by palace guards, blocking any chance of escape.

Wrapped around the necks of the elven were dainty leaves. Unassuming as they were, dark lamna vines were potent, used for sea fae imprisoned for petty crimes across the Ever. An herb used to dull magic in the veins.

The woman, Skadi, was seated on a velvet chair, clad in a pale rose gown, her hair wrapped around her head, with curls

down the back of her neck. No boots, not even satin slippers adorned her feet.

The man claimed a matching seat at her side, dressed in what looked like battle leathers and black trousers.

Narza took two nights unraveling the spell cast keeping the man in sleep. He was an elder, grooves in his skin and long silver hair the hint to his age. Elder or not, he was warrior strong, imposing, and carried himself with a touch of arrogance.

I took hold of Livia's hand and slumped back in my throne. "So, you wish us to believe you are a king?"

The man straightened his shoulders. "Eldirard Joraff Naganeen, King of the Dokkalfar, or as you know from my granddaughter—shadow elven."

"And you are kin to my dead brother?"

Eldirard sniffed. "Distantly. The traitor's mother was of the Ljosalfar clan, the light elven, and was niece to my grandnephew, the king. As I said, distantly. I will never claim such a name in my kin—not after discovering what he did to his own blood."

"You mean the murder of his mother?"

"Yes, sea king." Eldirard frowned. "Elven folk find power in kinship bonds, to spill the blood of your folk, of the one who gave you life, it stains the soul. It stains the line, and I will never claim such a stain."

Curious. I tapped the arm of the chair. "What of the other? This prince?"

"Prince Arion felt much more kinship to your traitor than I. Spoiled boy."

"We have not found him since the battle ended."

"I would imagine he has returned to his father's court." The elven's nose wrinkled like he'd tasted something fetid. "Shamed, most likely. To lose the battle is a disgrace for a rising king. When I inform King Gerard of his son's antics, it will be some time before Arion claims any throne."

There was still too much I did not understand about elven culture and customs to feel entirely settled about Arion's departure.

"The Lady of Witches tells us you were placed in a sort of stasis sleep. A dark spell. How is it you fell under it?"

"Arion," said Eldirard. "He feels rather entitled to Natthaven."

"Why would he feel entitled to your land?" Livia asked.

"Well, unfortunately, he is." Eldirard shifted. "Though, I hope Gerard has sense to rethink certain entitlements."

Livia shook her head. "I don't understand."

"I have no blood heirs for Natthaven." Eldirard faced Skadi, a gentle, apologetic kind of smile on his face. "Arion is the closest blood kin and will inherit both clans. One ruler for both clans has not been done for nearly seven hundred turns. He's quite proud of it and clearly impatient for me to die."

"He attacked you?"

"Deceived is more like it. I am an old fool who did not even suspect it." Eldirard sighed. "Like kinship bonds, our affinities crave arrangements, deals, alliances. It is how the elven folk have lived so long. Arion sent word to me not even two months ago, stating he desired to understand the Dokkalfar. If he was to one day be their king, he wished only to join us on our shores and build strong alliances."

"It was deception," Skadi said, unbothered and disinterested. "No need to blame yourself."

Eldirard gave her a look of pity but patted the top of her hand. "Being the proud fool I am, I agreed, impressed he would take such initiative, and I was a little pleased to boast about my lands. He remained in my hospitality for days, playing the decent prince, befriending our guards. Little did I know, he was placing witch's spell casts and potent blood bindings around my own men."

The king clenched his fist over his knee, glaring at the tiles for a time before I cleared my throat. "Go on."

“We were to make agreements, terms of his inheritance, if you will. It is a common request, and no small thing being that it has been centuries since an agreement has been done that unified the clans under one rule. As the one leaving the inheritance, I gave the terms. Once it is written, it is binding.

“My first term, was for Arion to always guard and defend my people as he would his own. Oh, the ways he twisted that. The second was to allow Skadinia a voice in my house. I should’ve also included that he was to abide her counsel.” The old man shook his head. “By the time I prepared to write a third term was when I realize the ink coating my quill was a wicked elixir.”

“Damn the hells.” From the back of the room, Mira covered her mouth, embarrassed she’d blurted her words out. “It’s just, apologies for the interruption, it’s just so conniving. He put on such a face for days, all with the intention to get you around that damn ink.”

Eldirard huffed with a touch of unresolved rage. “Yes. Conniving is one word. As my heir, and with me, the current king, unable to rule, he became the voice of Natthaven.”

“Why didn’t he kill you?” My question was brisk and a little callous, but it was what most enemies would do.

“Kinship.” Eldirard said like I should’ve realized. “Kinship bonds provide a level of protection. We are distant blood but blood all the same. Arion would not risk what your traitor risked, a cruel stain on the soul. It dulls affinities and creates a sort of madness over time. I’ve few doubts he would’ve been content to keep me in the sleep for centuries.”

“You were protecting him,” Livia whispered, looking to Skadi. “That was what you feared, if you did not stand with Arion he would harm your grandfather.”

The elven woman blinked. “Blood would not spill by Arion’s hand. But he was not above using your traitor or the sea witch to make good on threats of ending his life. They were willing to kill my grandfather without hesitation.”

Eldirard kissed her knuckles. “I am ashamed I did not place my third term at the first. I should’ve protected you more.”

“What was your third term?” I asked.

“That Arion would never use Skadinia’s affinity for greed, pain, or hatred.”

The mist. I leaned forward. “Explain more about her. She will not speak to us.”

“My words will change nothing that has happened,” the woman said. “Why would I speak to you?”

“Skadinia,” Eldirard grumbled a warning. “My granddaughter has a beautiful affinity. It is clever, helpful, it is a true power that protects Natthaven. But it is not without consequence. Should she take to her darkness for pain, or suffering, or brutality, it takes from her more than anything.”

“Skadi,” Livia tried again to speak to the woman. “I saw the change when they forced you to take my bond.”

The faintest hint of a flush filled the elven’s cheeks, but she said nothing.

“Why is she so cold?” I snapped.

Eldirard sighed. “That is what I’m explaining. Using her affinity for such things hardens Skadinia’s heart and soul. It leaves her with nothing but indifference.”

Bleeding gods. “For good?”

“It can. After so long, cruel uses will leave her practically heartless.” He gave her an affectionate look. “But I’m confident this one will fade. I hear she was rather emotional when she thought the attackers would kill me.”

“Emotional?” Jonas said, voice dark and low. “She nearly killed my brother.”

The woman tilted her head, facing the prince. “You were trespassing.”

“That’s all you have to say?”

“Jonas.” Sander hushed him. “I’m not sure she can help it right now.”

“She cannot,” Eldirard said. “The darkness she used to move Natthaven for the battle of a greedy prince pulled her back a great deal. Not to mention how she was forced to destroy a bond of love.”

“It destroyed nothing,” I said through my teeth, taking Livia’s hand in mine with more vigor.

“Arion didn’t want her to fade, not too much at least,” Livia said. “I heard him telling Larsson not to push too fiercely.”

“Selfish reasons.” Eldirard sniffed. “She must be clearheaded in her acceptance to take vows with him.”

“I don’t understand why Skadi is not set to inherit your lands,” Livia said. “Tell me you are not afraid of queens like sea fae once were.”

I kissed her knuckles.

“No, My Lady,” said Eldirard. “Queens have filled our histories since ice and fire first collided in the Ginnungagap void.”

They spoke of old lore regarding the creations of the realms of folk. Elven culture was strange, yet familiar.

“Then why is your granddaughter not the heir?” Mira was the one to ask.

“She is not my blood,” Eldirard said. He placed a loving hand on the woman’s shoulder. “Skadinia was orphaned as a wee girl. I found her rummaging the market streets, took to her spirit, and brought her to the palace where she has lived as a royal ever since.” The old man dropped his chin. “More than Natthaven, Arion seeks my granddaughter.”

“You don’t inherit granddaughters,” I said.

“Skadinia belongs to Natthaven. She will belong to Arion.”

“That’s barbaric,” Livia insisted. “Skadi, it’s true?”

The woman lifted her eyes, blue pools of ... cold. “The king of the light clan arranged betrothal agreements the first turn I was brought to the palace. I’ve grown knowing one day my life would be bound to the Ljosalfar.”

“As I said, he needs her clearheaded. If Skadinia has no heart, she would not care to agree to the vows he wishes to make—her, as his wife,” the old man explained. “Another binding agreement I made with his father. The boy inherits my clan, but he does not simply get Skadinia as his wife unless she agrees.”

“He cares that much about making her his wife?” I shook my head, there was more to it.

“Yes.” The old man sneered. “He wants to control her affinity. With enough strength, Skadinia can devour lands, steal them away. Arion wishes to conquer, expand his kingdom, and he cannot do it without her.”

The woman was a damn weapon.

I narrowed my eyes. “How can you be so certain he won’t return for her?”

“I hope his father will hold him to account, at least for a time. But there is only one guarantee that my granddaughter’s affinity will never belong to Arion.”

“Explain,” I snapped.

There was little trust to be had between these elven and my house. Livia, her goodness, wanted a chance for these folk. If it were up to me, they would be holed away beneath the palace and forgotten.

Heartless by choice or not, I was not a forgiving man. The woman had nearly killed Sander, and all I could think was if the prince had died, it would’ve shattered Livia’s heart.

Eldirard cleared his throat, one hand still protectively on Skadi’s shoulder. “As I said, our abilities are loyal to our kin. To take vows would make her his kin, and her affinity would never fight against him. In fact, it might even bow to his demands.”

That drew my attention. “Yet you said there was a way to prevent this.”

The elven woman let out a sigh and turned away.

Her grandfather did not share her despondency and nodded. “If she takes on different kin before he has the chance.” The old elven crossed one leg over his knee, fingers drumming along the handles of his chair. “Not a simple solution, since the betrothal bond was already written. It would need to be a marital vow of equal title. A royal vow.”

“I don’t care for how you’re looking at me, old man.”

“I am looking at the king. A royal,” Eldirard said.

Livia sat straighter, dropped one hand to my leg, squeezing possessively. “The Ever King has a *queen*.”

Gods, the dark, silky threat in her voice. Never would I tire of being the desire of Livia Ferus. To know, after so many turns of being unwanted, she would go to bleeding war to keep me? I leaned over and pressed my mouth to the side of her neck. A promise, a threat, a need, that spoke of how I would devour her later.

I rose from my throne and approached the two elven. “I have no answer for your dilemma. But, despite the woman nearly killing one of our own, she also protected my queen, so here is what I can offer her—refuge until that frosty heart starts beating again. Refuge from this bastard of a prince. You, King, of course, will also sign a treaty of peace that your clan will never rise against the Ever.”

“Refuge?” Eldirard looked uneasy. “You mean for her to remain here?”

“If you mean what you say, I doubt this prince will accept defeat for long. We can offer refuge. I don’t trust her, so she’ll be ordered to wear the herbs and dull her affinity until we find we do trust her. *If we find we trust her.*”

The king stood, half a head shorter than me, but formidable all the same. “She is a lady of Natthaven, a princess, and you would have me leave her here like a caged hound?”

“No one said anything about cages, but if you wish to, I certainly will.” I curled my lip. “Let us not forget what I said—she nearly killed one of our own. If it were up to me, I’d cage her. Good thing for you, my queen is more forgiving.”

Skadi stood, hands clasped in front of her body. “If you allow my grandfather to return to our folk, I will stay.”

“Skadinia.”

“It is fair, Grandfather.” Her voice did not shift, did not strain. “I am regretful for harming a prince, but I did so to protect my own, like you protected yours.” She turned her gaze to the old man. “What does it matter? I feel nothing about the agreement, either way.”

Eldirard growled in the back of his throat. “You’ve been in the dark too long, girl.”

“Yes.” She looked back to me. “I will accept your refuge.”

She was frigid, almost a walking corpse.

“If that is all,” she went on, “I would like to begin my solitude, and my grandfather will need to be returning to Natthaven soon. Our people have need of their king.”

Without waiting for a dismissal, Skadi turned away, chin lifted, until two guards met her at the door. Upon my slow nod, they led her out of the hall.

“I will sign your treaties.” Eldirard sighed but dipped his chin in a subtle genuflect. “Your fairness is appreciated. I will not forget it.”

I rubbed my chin and returned to my throne. The earth bender, too, watched the old man follow the woman out of the hall with a dark glower. There was more to the elven. They were a powerful people, no mistake, and might continue to be a risk.

“You’re going to have Gavyn follow them for all time, aren’t you?” Livia whispered.

I smirked. “Among others.”

Livia traced the peaks and valleys of my knuckles for a moment, hesitating. “Do you believe them when they speak of kin magic? It seemed true. Arion didn’t truly harm Eldirard. Not until those last desperate moments.”

I rested my cheek on the claw of my hand, glaring at the door where they’d left. “I’m certain Sander will not rest until he knows every detail, but if that is so, then I won’t trust them. I have no vow to offer to make her kin.”

My hand curled around her fingers, and I drew them to my lips.

Livia sighed. “There is more to Skadi. I just don’t know what.”

True enough. There was a gnawing in my belly, a twist of a dull blade, as though somewhere inside believed a blade was exactly what the elven woman might become one day.

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

THE SONGBIRD

THE HALL WAS TRULY A SIGHT.

A raised dais had been positioned at the far end. Blossoms and vines of berries draped the edges. To honor the earth fae queen, Alistair told me. Silver, ash, and blue banners draped over rafters and across windows of the hall. At the slightest breeze, they would billow and ripple, creating an illusion like the waves on the sea.

Lyres and pipes burst from the corners. Sea singers were skilled in their tunes, and under threat of death from the Ever King should they try to lure any of us with their songs.

I smoothed the front of my gown, rich red, like blood, and peered out the window.

The Ever Ship was on display in the harbor. From the sail rods, bodies of enemies were draped by limbs, throats, waists. An unspoken threat of what it meant to rise against the Ever King and Queen.

Gruesome, perhaps, but by now I was convinced half my heart had scabbed and hardened toward anyone who would dare level a threat against those I kept in the softer, gentler side.

Hesh had been stripped of his flesh by Sewell's voice once his skin began to rot. Now his bones dangled from the main mast like totems. Larsson was not placed on the Ever Ship. In truth, I didn't know what Erik had ordered with the fallen traitor.

Arms slid around my waist. I sighed and leaned into him.

“I miss your thoughts,” Erik whispered, his lips dusting over my throat.

Gods, how I missed our bond. I chose him, I would always choose him, heartbond or not. It was simply a comfort to have him burrowed into my heart, a constant presence.

“I was wondering what became of Larsson.”

Erik flinched, but promptly hid it beneath a sneer. “I saw to it he served a purpose and would not be welcomed in the Otherworld.”

There was a burden in my serpent, one that did not require a heartbond to sense. I turned into him and trapped his face in my palms. “We’ve not had a chance to truly speak about it, not in depth. I ... I know what he did damned him, but he was your blood.”

“He was nothing.”

“Erik.” I kissed the corner of his mouth. “I see you, sometimes, like you are lost in thought whenever his name is mentioned.” Slowly, I encircled his waist, a grin on my face. “I don’t mind if you stumble, Ever King, so long as you let me be there to catch you.”

The red in Erik’s eyes darkened, but I recognized the moment he gave in. “I’ve no remorse for ridding the Ever of Larsson Bonekeeper.” Erik ground his teeth, hesitating. “But I hate that there are moments when my thoughts wander. When I start to hate him a little more because he never gave us a chance to be brothers. I hate that it even bothers me at all. I hate that because of my ignorance, you were harmed.”

I covered his cheek with my palm and pressed a kiss to his lips. “Scars heal, Erik. These scars I earned from cruel hands *will* heal. But I would not change our tale, Serpent. What Larsson did only proved there is no line, no sea, no sky I would not cross for you. There is nowhere I belong as much as by your side.”

Erik’s mouth turned up into a sly kind of grin. “So, no regrets, Songbird?”

“Never, Serpent.”

“Pardon, Highnesses.” Alistair approached, nose in the air. “But it is time to dress for the ceremony.”

Erik ghosted a kiss over the center of my palm and stepped back. “See you shortly, love.”

One of my brows arched, and the king laughed as he left.

“He’s planning something, isn’t he, Alistair?”

“I would not know, My Queen.”

“Liar.”

The old steward ruffled, but I’d since learned he blustered and fumbled to conceal his smirks and smiles. “Whether or not the king has a plan in his frightening head is of no matter. What is of a matter to me is insisting my queen dress. Now, let’s be off with you.”



“I DON’T BLEEDING understand why I, once again, am forced into one of these gods-awful things.” Celine tugged at the satin neckline of the pale green bodice hugging her curves. It complimented her brown skin and bright eyes and looked rather regal with her silver woven hair draped in long waves over her shoulders.

Mira finished placing a beaded band in Celine’s hair, then stepped back to admire. “I think you are going to stop the entire bleeding room, Tidecaller.”

Celine swallowed, frowning, but like Alistair, I knew enough about Celine to know she did not easily give up her discontent.

“What’s troubling you?”

Celine caught my gaze in the standing mirror as I adjusted my bone necklace. She curled a lock of her hair around her finger. “Everyone knows about Daj. What if folk turn against him?”

“Celine.” I took hold of her hand. “What crime is Sewell truly guilty of committing?”

“Disobeying the Ever King.” She ticked them off her fingers. “Refusing an order from Lord Harald. Falsifying my death, his own. What if they oust Gavyn? Gods, what if they find out about Gavyn’s voice?”

Mira stroked Celine’s arm in reassurance, but spared me a glance, uncertain what to say. How could we understand? The threats against her family were foreign to us and nonsensical.

“Here is what I know,” I told her, placing both hands on her shoulders. “I know that if your father is convicted of crimes, then so is the sitting Ever King. Do not forget, Celine, Erik was complicit in all this. He stands with you, the way you have always stood with him. So do I.”

“Oh, and the lot of us earth fae do,” Mira said, waving a hand like it should’ve been obvious. “I’d gladly toss a few more knives at anyone who’s stupid enough to attack you all because your daj didn’t kill his bleeding mate. I mean, really. Do these archaic sods of the Ever realize that without their women, there is no Ever? Who, I wonder, do they think births the next generation?”

“It is hard after living in shadows for so long to think I can enter a room and actually speak to them. Actually call them brother and father.” Celine took in her reflection, arching her back, spinning the skirt. “Still, I don’t know why I have to wear this horrid thing.”

A knock announced our escorts.

“Daj.” I took his rough hands. “You look like a warrior. Maj will be seething that she missed all this.”

My father opened his arms, pulling me close. Dressed in black, absent of his axes, and his dark hair braided off his face, he looked like the powerful king of my childhood.

With a soft kiss to my forehead, my father cupped my face in his rough palms. “I am at a loss of what to say, Livie, but I want you to know that you are my light, and I am so proud of you.”

“Earth Bender.” Celine groaned. “You’re going to make her eyes run.”

I blinked, dabbing at the corner of my eyes. “I’m fine. Ready?”

Sander came for Mira, Aleksi for Celine. Jonas kept a step behind us, hair damp and styled, a dark tunic with runes stitched along the hem, and a bit somber. Daj suspected he was anxious to return home. Despite his *neach-dai* bond to the Ever, Jonas, like the rest of us, missed our homeland, our other people.

Still, it was odd to see Sander as the boisterous twin and Jonas lost in thought.

Already, nightfall was upon us, and the palace was glittering in golden light and savory scents from banquet tables lining the edges of the great hall. Window panes were cracked, letting in the night air, thick with sea spray and honey blooms from the gardens.

My hair was tied in an intricate plait, and my gown swished around my ankles, a skirt of liquid silver. The doors groaned upon our arrival. Alistair smacked a wooden stick along the stone floor, announcing, “The Ever Queen.”

A cinch in my chest stilled my heart. Folk from every noble house spun to the doorway. Sirens with their dark eyes, Ever Crew with their newly trimmed beards and waist sashes, fae from far seas and near. Murmurs slowed, then as gentle as a calm wave, heads bowed, knees bent, and I wanted to flee.

Until sunset eyes caught mine from the dais.

Erik stood in front of our thrones. His black shirt as deep as the night, his hair free and wild around his face, and a subtle, devious grin painted over his lips. The grin I knew, if he could enter my private thoughts, he would be forcing out a flush from the most salacious of words.

He was my king. He was my safety. He was my home.

My father handed Erik my palm. For a moment the two former enemies held the gaze of the other. Then, my daj clasped forearms with the Ever King, a tilt to his head, a gleam to his dark eyes that spoke of acceptance, and the warning of a father to care for his daughter.

“Folk of the Ever,” Alistair called. “Rise for your king and queen.”

Seats in the hall skidded as folk rose. Mira remained close to Celine and took a place near Gavyn and Sewell. Steig stood beside my father and the three earth fae princes.

Tait kept close to the king. Heartwalker would likely always remain surly, but there was a new lightness in his stance. For turns he’d been aloof and estranged from his cousin. It was as though our battles, our victory had, at long last, allowed the cousins permission to be the brothers they once were.

I’d even caught Tait laughing outside our chamber doors as he spoke to Erik in the corridor.

Avaline was there, dressed in a gown as gold as the sunrise. Color stained her cheeks, and her eyes took in the palace walls with a bit of awe.

Joron had appeared in court, doubtless rather reluctantly, but he’d been promised to reunite with his daughter and so he did. To find her less than enthusiastic to return to her rooms in the House of Tides was not our trouble. Already, Erik demanded should the Lady Avaline wish to remain at court for a time, the palace gates would welcome her.

Narza and the House of Mists were grouped near the back in their deep shades of doublets and gowns and sea foam hair. The Lady of Witches kept close to Maelstrom. Tavish a step behind, Catriona and their three children gathered around them.

Alistair took his place in front of the crowd. “Folk of the Ever, never have we held a title of queen. Such a thing might once have been considered a great weakness, but Livia of House Ferus, of the folk in the earth realms, has proven how it is nothing short of a fierce strength.”

Erik squeezed my palm, studying the faces in the crowd as Alistair went on.

“When our folk should have been enemies, you healed our lands. You continue to heal them.”

I swallowed and dipped my chin. The darkening was far from healed. But already we'd met with leaders and high voices of the isles throughout the kingdom, determining which corners of the kingdom were in the fiercest need.

“But above it all, you have shown us how a queen will fight as valiantly as the king for our people.” Alistair puffed out his chest, gesturing toward a guard to step forward. A wooden box, edged in gold, was held out. “As the first Ever Queen, accept your crown from our king, your mate.”

Erik abandoned his throne and lifted the top of the box. There was no rule to this ceremony, but the confidence in his stride, the lift of his shoulders, Erik Bloodsinger made it seem as though crowning a queen was a thing that had always been done.

A few gasps fluttered through the hall when Erik carefully took to one knee at my feet. No doubt it would take a bit of time for folk of the Ever to grow accustomed to their king's devotion to another.

I smiled, pleading with my damn tears to keep steady when Erik held out the box for me to see.

“I took the liberty of fashioning your crown, love,” he said, voice soft and secret, only meant for me.

“I knew you had a plan. Alistair lied for you.”

A huff came from the steward, but nothing more.

On a cushion of satin, a thin circlet was lined in filigree meant to look like wisps of ivy and leaves. Within the gold, much like the blood crown, a dash of crimson flowed as though alive.

“Erik,” I said, breathless. “It's beautiful.”

“A true banner for your beauty, your strength, and your resilience. I want folk throughout the ages, I want every future Ever Queen, to always remember the first. You are my heart and my blood.”

I arched a brow. “Your blood makes the crown?”

Erik nodded, grinning, and stood. With tenderness he placed the crown atop my head.

“Folk of the Ever!” The steward’s voice was a bellow. Strange to hear from his soft condescension. “Do you accept Livia of House Ferus to stand with us as Livia ...” Alistair let his words fade, a wicked kind of smirk on his face. “Earthmender, Queen of the Ever Kingdom.”

For a breath, a tenuous heartbeat, I was convinced no one would utter a sound. Then, the walls shook with applause and cries of, “Long life to the queen of kings.”

Earthmender. My lips parted when I shot my gaze to Erik. His mouth was set in a smirk, arrogant and wholly pleased with himself. Livia Earthmender. The name settled like scattered summer heat through my veins. I could not keep the smile from carving over my mouth.

Knees scraped over tiles, gowns rustled through netting and satin. Sea fae bent the knee, and one by one, my people joined. Stieg pounded a fist over his chest with a wink. Jonas and Sander elbowed each other as they raced to kneel first, and Mira clapped, rather un-regally, and let out a shriek of excitement before she adjusted her skirt to kneel next to Celine.

Tait took the place in front of us. He placed a hand over his heart and whispered, “To my queen.” And he knelt.

My father and Aleksí were the last to lower. Daj mouthed that he loved me. Aleksí rolled his eyes but fisted one hand over his chest. A prince, but always a Rave.

Erik returned my smile and drew his lips close to my ear. “I wear the blood crown, you wear the bones, love.”

My fingertips traced the edges of my crown, eyes startling wide. “Erik Bloodsinger, what did you do?”

The familiar darkness, the side I’d first seen of the boy trapped in that cell all those turns ago, shone through the glint of his eyes.

“I made a vow, in this very room, should anyone bring you harm, you wear them as a promise of what becomes of those

who dare touch the Ever Queen. Peel back the gold, and you will have answers to what became of traitors.”

The bone crown. My fingertips stilled on the circlet atop my head. “Larsson?”

“And others. A sea witch I will never speak of again and a bit of a dead lord.” Erik’s face was stern, his jaw taut with passion. “Too far, love?”

I studied Erik, drank him in, the light and the shadows. I kissed him until I could draw in a breath again.

“No, Serpent,” I whispered against his lips. “To me, you will always be the most beautiful of monsters.”



WINE FLOWED, dancing couples paraded across the hall, and the moon was brighter than I’d seen before. There was peace here. I’d taken my turn with Alek, my father, and of course, Sewell. Even Gavyn had shoved through, insistent to dance with the queen.

Sander danced with Celine, then Avaline. He’d since grown rather engrossed in conversation with a few witches from the House of Mists, comparing their spell casts to the potions and elixirs used by folk from his realms.

Jonas, for the first time since the man could grow a single whisker on his chin, was not dancing or tangled in the arms of some woman. He was standing near my father and Stieg, but his gaze was wholly trained on the somber features of Skadi.

Palace guards had escorted Skadi to the coronation. If she was to live as a refugee in the Ever, I felt it right that she be doused in the society of sea folk.

She’d remained by the guards, nibbled at a bit of silverfish, and spoken to no one.

Jonas seemed ready to pounce should she take one misstep. Gods, I hoped the bond was not destroying his levity and the fire in his soul.

Time. Changes, shifts, new beginnings: it would all take time.

I leaned against the wall, snickering into a horn of plum wine as Erik was dragged into a dance by Mira. She'd insisted something about undying friendship, to which the Ever King had a great many protests.

"You've had cakes aplenty." A familiar voice drew me to the far end of the table. Tavish lifted a young fae girl into his arms, snatching a glazed cake from her sticky hands.

"Tavish," I said. "You would deny her such a sweet thing?"

"Not at all, My Queen," he said, speckling kisses along the girl's cheeks until she giggled. "If you are willing to run the corridors with her at all the chimes tonight."

Tavish placed his girl on the ground, ushering her to go play with her siblings who ran amok with a few other littles from the township.

"May I pose a question, Tavish?" I didn't look at him.

"Of course."

My pulse thudded in my skull. I took another drink. "Why did you and your parents never take Erik in when he was such a small boy?"

Tavish stared straight ahead, but I knew where he looked. Narza stood cautiously near Maelstrom, but their occasional touches, their close whispers, only made it clearer to me they were mates.

"So," Tavish said, "he accepted the truth?"

"Erik has said nothing," I admitted. "But he knows. He will ask or not ask as he pleases. It is me asking."

Tavish squared to me. Buried in his slender, sharp features, I could almost see a resemblance to Erik.

"You ask because you resent us for it."

"Shall I lie?"

“I’d rather you didn’t.”

“I don’t understand it,” I admitted. “It is what I told your mother. I do not understand how his blood could abandon him to the cruelty of Harald.”

“We had no choice,” Tavish said, voice low. “The moment a male heir was born, Thorvald showed who he truly was. Threats were made against my sister and the boy. The Ever King would allow only my mother into Erik’s life, but no males who might influence his heir.”

“And no one tried to stop it.”

“I am told the work was done before we *knew* it was done.”

“You’re told?”

“I was a boy of twelve when this happened, My Queen.” Tavish rubbed the back of his neck. “Not even Oline knew what Thorvald had done against her father and brother until it was too late.”

“You or Narza could not break these wards?”

“My voice had not matured, and my mother and father could not without risking treason. And likely risking me or my sister.” Tavish shook his head. “Thorvald imprisoned Oline, Livia. She was the mate but had no freedom once the king got what he wanted in an heir.”

“So, Erik never knew you existed?”

“It was as though my father and I were forgotten in the House of Kings. Across the Ever, really. Only the most inner folk in the House of Mists know my bloodline. To others, I am a noble, a powerful spell caster. Once Oline was gone, Thorvald and Harald used other witches and warded us away. I could not step foot in the royal city until now.”

“What changed?”

“The king had to welcome us. My mother is the Lady of Witches, so she was required at council. Her invitation was much swifter. But me, my father? With the bitterness Erik had been taught, the hatred he’d come to feel toward the House of

Mists, why would he ever welcome us?" Tavish smiled, almost with a bit of surprise. "Until you."

My throat tightened. "Now what will you do?"

"What I have always done. Stand by my sister's son." Tavish plucked a crystal flute of wine from the table. "Even if I was not welcome here, I have always stood by the young Ever King. I fought in the fae war. He might not have known, but I was there. Even waited in the tides until your folk released him, all to be certain he returned."

"He thought it was only Tait who remained."

"I know." Tavish's face curled in a bit of regret. "I did not know how to even approach the boy king, only that I made a promise when my sister died, that I would do all I could to keep him alive. I admit, I thought he would grow to be more like his father. But the king I see before me, I assure you, he is all his mother. And she was a gift to this kingdom, as are you."

Tavish lifted my hand and pressed a kiss to the top.

"Does knowing all that help with the bitterness?"

"A little," I said. "I hope you will be present in the royal city much more often. He is worth knowing, Tavish."

"Aye, Queen Livia. I agree." He took a step back. "Now, if you'll excuse me, my mate is casting rather dangerous eyes in my direction. I must go help chain our offspring to the floor."

I snorted and watched him go. When I faced the hall again, heated crimson eyes locked with mine.

"Mira released you," I said, slipping my fingers through Erik's once he was at my side.

"I fled, like a coward."

I kissed the top of his shoulder. "It is not cowardly. She is a force that no man can truly tame."

Erik took a sip from my horn. "What was all that about with Tavish?"

"Merely your queen being rather protective of her king."

Erik tugged me against his chest, lips close. “Is that so?”

I sighed when he dipped his face, nose dragging along my throat. “Yes.” Hells, my voice was hardly more than a gasp.

“Songbird?”

“Serpent.”

“I’ve grown tired of this revel.”

My stomach backflipped. “Same.”

With a touch of fire in his eyes, the Ever King took my hand and led me from the hall, not pausing until his arms and legs were tangled around mine, and the new peace we’d claimed truly felt within reach.

CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

THE SERPENT

ON THE MORROW we would sail, once again, through the Chasm, but there were final alterations to make in the threads that once kept the Ever a dreary, vicious land.

A week after the coronation, the courtyard in front of the palace was packed with folk from the township, curious, no doubt, why the king and queen summoned the noble houses and the crew of the Ever.

One mention of my plans to Livia after we'd abandoned her own celebration and were breathless and tangled in our bed, she'd practically split through her skin with anticipation. There was no turning back, and in midnight conversations with my songbird, we'd added more to our upheaval.

I would never let on, but a strange disquiet prickled through my insides. I'd crowned a queen, fought a war, gave refuge to a stoic elven princess—but these changes would impact each house. Every isle, every edge of the Ever Sea.

As if she sensed the unease, Livia leaned in and whispered, "You are making the right moves, Erik. I think your father would be wholly enraged."

A grin, sincere and wide, broke over my mouth. "Your words help, Songbird."

The crowds hushed when I rose at the head of the courtyard. "At sunrise we return our new allies to the earth realms with gratitude and an alliance that ought never have been broken."

Applause and grunts of approval rippled through the crowd.

“Before we bid farewell, we have boons to grant and titles to bestow. First, the crew of the Ever Ship.”

Men, gruff and stern, wove through the crowd until more than three dozen men were aligned below me. I didn’t know how my words would be received.

“I have thought a great deal about the notion of loyalty in these trying weeks. In my life, I have witnessed a king demand the death of a noble family to prove loyalty. I have witnessed forced bonds to demand it.” I hesitated. No one moved. No one seemed to breathe. “I am honored to sail amongst such a crew as you, but blood bonds have secured the crew thus far. I offer to end those bonds.”

A few murmurs rose at that. Some of the crew shifted about, uncomfortable.

“It would be my honor to sail with you, not from a bond, but from loyalty from us all.” I swallowed. “I do not want to be a king like Thorvald.”

A few startled looks were expected. I didn’t stop.

“You each have a place on the Ever Ship, but of your own will. I would be honored to have your fealty on those decks, but I will not force it any longer.”

Silence, thick as a hot wind, crossed the courtyard.

Until Hans Skulleater cleared his throat to the point it was more like a wet hacking cough. “Can’t be speakin’ for these sods, but as for I, well, I’ll be keepin’ me bond, King Erik, if you please.”

Scar uttered the same, even chastising me for considering removing his blood bond. One by one the Ever Crew chanted the tune of the ship, low, eerie, powerful.

A man he’s not, we work, we rot . . .

“We’re stayin’ aboard,” Skulleater repeated. “We’re stayin’ with our king and our lovey of the ship.”

The brute winked at Livia. I tripped over words, so I said nothing. With a nod, I mutely bid them to return to their places.

“Next—” My voice was a rough scratch. “Sewell Fleshripper.”

“Little eel.” His hands were clasped behind his back. Sewell was trimmed and stood straighter. Without his overgrown beard and tousled hair, I could see Celine and Gavyn in his features.

“You were unjustly punished for a crime that was never there. I return to you the title of Lord, the same title your son still holds. You are to be given the respect, the dignity, and the honor you’ve always deserved. As such, you are free to live within your lands of the House of Bones unscathed. There is no quarrel with the crown and Sewell Fleshripper. Your mate will be honored and remembered in the royal city and across the Ever, never forgotten.”

Celine covered her mouth and leaned into Gavyn, whose face was unmoving. Sewell, on the other hand, beamed. “Sweet words, little eel.”

“Overdue words,” I said, facing the crowd. “Should anyone try to enact former punishments, they will fall beneath a blade instead.”

I called forth Lord Joron and Avaline. Joron gawked a bit at Sewell as he strode past. It was no small thing to unravel a vicious order from Thorvald and Harald, but the mood of the crowd was light, even hopeful.

“Lord Joron. You fulfilled your end of a command, though it does not escape me that you would not have done so if not for threats against you.”

“I would argue, My King,” Joron said, “that there is no way to know such things.”

“You have little respect for the title of queen,” I said through my teeth. “You disgraced your own people in your house by allowing them to suffer so fiercely. But there is

another within the House of Tides who willingly risked for the benefit of our people. Lady Avaline.”

Joron’s daughter’s eyes went wide, pale as a morning sun. Her hands shot to her gown, clasping the woolen skirt tightly, like she might want to toss it over her head and disappear.

“The nobles who preside over the houses of the Ever Seas are called with honor, required to protect and value their people.” I paused for good measure, and perhaps to see Joron sweat a bit. “You have proven you are the right choice to lead the House of Tides.”

“My King,” Joron hissed.

“Silence.” I curled my lip, flashing the points of my teeth. “I wasn’t finished. I strip your father of his title and give it to you. Lady of the House of Tides. Your word will be trusted at council, and within your isles.”

“You cannot demote me from my gods-given seat,” Joron seethed.

“There is no demotion,” I said calmly. “Your blood remains the ruler of the House of Tides. Your daughter is merely the mouthpiece. If she accepts, that is.”

Avaline offered a tentative look at her father. Joron’s pointed nose wrinkled, and his thin lips curled. A silent threat, but now would be when we saw what Avaline could do when given the shove.

After a drawn pause she blinked up to me. “I accept, My King. Gratefully.”

“And should a hair atop her head be harmed,” Livia said, glaring at Joron. “Know that our suspicions will fall to you.”

“A final title is due,” I went on, holding out an arm for Livia to join me at my side. “One that was heartily agreed upon by both king and queen. Celine Tidecaller.”

Celine jolted, a look of confusion on her features, but she peeled away from Gavyn, stepping into the sunlight.

“Celine,” Livia said, voice soft. “You have been a true ally, a friend when I thought I had none in the Ever. You have been

loyal to the crew, to your family, and the king all your life.”

“Like your father, you did not deserve to be punished in such a way, Tidecaller,” I offered. “I would trust you with my life, and I have, more than once. It will be difficult to part with you from the crew.”

Celine gasped and looked wary. “Erik, I-I don’t want, please, I don’t want to be off the crew.”

“I’m afraid it must be,” I went on.

“No.” Celine cast her gaze to Livia. “Why?”

I let out a heavy breath. “You’ll be too occupied with your own.”

“My own crew?” Celine tilted her head.

“Lord Hesh,” I said, voice lifted over the crowd. “Was a traitor to the Ever. He died a traitor’s death but has left the House of Blades without a lord.” I used my chin to gesture at Celine. “Or, like the House of Tides and Mists, another lady. If you agree.”

It looked as though I’d rammed a fist through Celine’s middle. She curled forward, eyes wide, lips parted. When she came about, she hurried to straighten and lift her gaze to mine. “You wish me to be ...”

“The Lady of Blades,” Livia finished. “Yes. There is no one who fights fiercer for the Ever, Celine Tidecaller. There is no one so clever and formidable and *kind* as you. All attributes that would suit a new High Farer of the Ever Seas.”

“Bleeding gods.” Celine dragged her fingers through her long waves. “Are you damn certain? You know what this means?”

I scoffed. “You have a title. A house.”

“It means I’m not wearing any more damn dresses to your revels. I’ll wear whatever I please.” Celine let out a loud, piercing laugh. “It means I get to tell you when you’re being a mighty stupid king.”

“You do that anyway.”

“Ah, but now I can shout it across the council table. Same for you.” Celine pointed a finger at Gavyn.

Her brother frowned but turned away before it could shift to a grin.

“I’m assuming you accept?”

“Aye, My King.” Celine’s chin quivered. She bowed. “Thank you.”

“King Erik!” From the back line of the Ever Crew, Stormbringer shoved his way to the front.

I groaned, unwilling to stop bloodshed should Sewell attack.

“What are you doing?” Celine said, a bite to her tone.

Stormbringer ignored her, looking to me and Livia. “If it be all the same to you, King, and you, Queen, I’d like to take you up on that offer of riddin’ me of a blood bond to the royal ship.”

Unexpected. Truth be told, it wrenched a little. “You wish to remain aboard, but unbonded?”

“I been sailing the fine Ever Ship nigh twenty turns, but I’m now hoping I might sail beneath different colors, a new banner.” Stormbringer looked to Celine. “If the Lady of Blades would have a wretch as me aboard, that is.”

“Well,” Livia whispered, a smug sort of smile on her face. “I like this turn about.”

Celine’s skin flushed. She attempted to stand unmoving, as any lord or lady of a house would, but her hands gave her up—flicking and twitching at her sides.

“I’ll release you of your bond, Stormbringer,” I said. “But as for the rest, that’ll be up to the Lady of Blades.”

For half a breath, Celine studied Stormbringer’s searching eyes. Gingerly, she took his hand. “Be honored to have you aboard, Finn Stormbringer.”

They stepped back, settling beside a discomfited Sewell.

I called for the earth fae. “The Ever will always be open to you and your folk. No door will be closed, no table will not welcome you whenever you enter our seas. Mine most of all. And it is my honor to thank House Eriksson of the Alver clans —”

“Finally got it right,” Jonas muttered.

“To accept a bond as you did to defend our kingdom,” I said, throat all at once rather tight. “I hope you know it will be reciprocated. Always.”

“You should know as well.” Jonas offered a quick grin. “You’re not so bad, Bloodsinger.”

CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

THE SERPENT

LONGSHIPS GREETED us on the opposing side of the Chasm. Sleek and narrow, filled with Rave and cheers once the hull of the Ever Ship, the blue sails of Gavyn's ship, and the ashen canvas of Narza's vessel broke through the earth fae seas.

Until the new vessel of the House of Blades was fashioned, Celine took to the Ever Ship as always.

With Sewell, Celine took charge of keeping watch on Skadi. I did not yet trust the woman to remain alone in the Ever. Eldirard had alliance treaties with his name and his granddaughter at our mercy. He was not a threat, but the woman—I did not understand her, and until I did, she was a threat.

Skadi had been rather indifferent about sailing through the Chasm. Then again, she was indifferent on most things. She slid the woolen hood from her cloak off her silver hair and took in the shoreline, not a flinch to her face.

When the scaled, crimson sails of the Ever Ship broke the surface, horns sounded and folk sprinted to the docks and beaches and into the shallows.

Since he'd stepped foot on my ship, I'd never seen the earth bender so alight with anticipation. I wouldn't have been stunned if Valen Ferus tossed himself over the rails to swim ashore.

When he took to a rowboat, that was precisely what he did the instant pale hair came into sight.

Livia drew in a sharp breath, still on deck, watching as her mother gathered the skirt of her blue gown in one hand and flung herself into Valen's arms before he fully emerged from the tides. He fell backward, holding his queen, devouring her, unbothered by the ever flow of waves splashing over their heads.

Livia swiped a tear off her cheek.

"Songbird?" I touched the small of her back.

"I once thought I'd never see them again." A flash of guilt tightened in my chest, but faded when Livia hugged my waist. "No regrets, Bloodsinger. I am in my homelands, but my *home* is beneath the sea."

I pressed a kiss to the side of her head, stomach tight when Tait called for us to join the boats ashore.

We'd intentionally stayed back, not wishing to intrude on reunions. There had been battles fought side by side, but tensions could still be felt, still be tasted, like soured pomes.

"Livia!" Elise Ferus screamed in the shallows once we were halfway to the shore.

Valen had Prince Rorik tossed over his shoulder, leaving his wife to claw through the tides. Like her father, Livia readied to leap over the rail. I held out a palm, calling back the currents, giving more solid ground for them to run.

Livia sobbed, calling out for her mother. Elise was slightly shorter, but she cradled Livia's head to hers, trembling. Over and over again, the Night Folk queen would pull back, stroke her daughter's tears, laughing through her own, then strangle her in another embrace.

"Ready for this?" Tait whispered.

"Not at all."

I landed ankle deep in the tides. Tait was at my shoulder. Eventually, Celine stood at the other with Stormbringer, her father, and the elven princess. Behind us, sirens and singers, merfolk and witches, Narza, even Tavish, awaited an invitation to join the earth fae ashore.

Aleksi was caught between two men. I looked away at the sight of the man I'd once saved during the war. That was an interaction I'd make good effort to avoid. It wasn't much better when I turned only to observe the twins greeting their folk.

Jonas and Sander were carved from their father, broad and tall, but I knew the blood-haired queen between them. A woman who'd carried a broken boy from his torture.

I'd avoid her too.

"Why is that one looking at me?" Tait mumbled.

True enough, as Mira's mother held her daughter, a man, inked with a raven tattoo on the side of his neck, glared at my cousin. I could not tell if it was a look of bewilderment or disdain.

"Bloodsinger!" A pack of young fae, led by Prince Rorik, barreled at the line of sea fae.

Gods. Littles.

The prince, his dark eyes narrowed in determination, shoved a girl at his side. Her long, cinnamon braids flung about her cheeks before she stumbled face first into the water. Rorik snickered a little wickedly until he, too, tripped in front of me. I caught him under the arm.

"Prince."

"Bloodsinger." He spluttered, wiping saltwater out of his eyes. "Can I ... can I steer the ship? Don't let Alva, but can I?"

"I asked first!" The spindly girl had recovered, storming toward the prince, with more young fae at her back.

"Shut it, Alva!" Rorik snapped. "I'm gonna steer it first. Bloodsinger said."

"Rorik." Livia gripped her brother by the tunic, pulling him back, and took hold of my hand. "Leave the king alone."

The boy groaned. "I just wanna steer the ship."

My songbird looked to me, a glister on her lashes. "You look uneasy, Serpent. Where is the aura of the masked man

who stole me away?”

“I’m afraid he had a run in with your father’s axes and your mother’s threats.”

Livia tugged on my hand. “Come.”

Tait shook out his hands, saw to his pocket watch, then nodded. “No threat.”

“What did you think you’d see, Heartwalker?” Livia shook her head and led us toward the shore. “There is no danger here. Not anymore.”

My free arm was pulled back. Rorik, a cunning look written on his face, yanked hard enough I bent at the waist.

“The ship?” he whispered. “You’re gonna let me, right?”

“We will sail. When we do, be ready to meet the wind.”

The boy’s lip curled, then he sped away, chasing the other littles in a race back to the shore. A shore lined in warriors, kings and queens, and few smiles.

Strange how much had changed when the earth bender stepped forward and I felt a bit of relief crack the pressure on my chest. Valen looked to me, then swept an arm toward the knolls that rolled in front of the fort.

“Sea fae, I am told we have a feast awaiting. You’re welcome at our table.”

Raised to be a brutal king, then left to my own devices at such a young age, it was not much of a shock that kingly behavior was not my instinct.

Neither was it Celine’s.

She shoved through the lines, nudging the Night Folk king as she went. “About time. My boots are soaked, and I’m rather starved, Earth Bender.”

Livia clung to my arm and led us after the new Lady of Blades.



THE GREAT HALL was filled much the same as it had been when we'd stowed away, but with less venom and blades.

Cheers boomed, rattling the iron chandelier over the tables, and horns lifted when Valen and Elise first entered. The Night Folk king was promptly surrounded by his people. Hands clapped on forearms, backs, and shoulders.

I clung to Livia's hand, feeling like a damn sod, afraid to release her until we were told to find seats at the tables scattered across the hall. I could've kissed her, deep and feral in front of all her folk, when Livia settled us beside the royals of her realms, but also next to Sewell, Tait, and the other sea fae nobles.

I did not want a line to divide us, but even still, I was grateful to be evenly matched.

Halfway through the meal of spiced roots, a gamey beast, and pickled herring, Mira's father, the raven tattooed king, clapped the edge of the table and pointed at Tait. "That's it. I remember why I know this fae. Banishment."

By his side, Mira's mother chuckled. "You're just now recognizing him, Ari?"

The queen had hair long and thick like her daughter's, only darker, and bore a few scars like mine that peeked from the neckline of her gown.

"Bleeding gods." Tait blew out a long breath, flexing his fingers until several knuckles cracked.

Princess Mira seemed satisfied with Tait's sudden loss of color to his face but looked at the raven king. "Daj, you know *the cousin* of the Ever King? I never heard you crossed paths before."

"We've met." The raven king drummed his fingers. "He's the boy I *personally* banished back to the sea. Got much thicker in the arms. Boy was nothing but bones and a bit of flesh when last we met."

"Wait, King Ari banished you, Heartwalker?" Aleksi's eyes widened. "Ari, you've never said that, and you love a good boast."

“That I do, Alek. Afraid it was a rather frantic time, and memory of my grandeur slipped my mind.” The king sneered and made a point to remove a serrated dagger made of bone and gold. “Isn’t that right, *Harald’s son*.”

“My name is Heartwalker,” Tait grumbled.

“Ari,” Mira’s mother said, a sigh in her voice. “No threatening.”

“Threatening? I am intimidating, which I will do to my heart’s content, especially when we have a damn lovely girl and there are princess snatchers about.”

“Daj.” Mira’s voice trembled, not from unease but from a muffled laugh. “They brought us back.”

“*Bloodsinger* returned his snatched princess. How do I know Harald’s son would do the same?”

Tait blanched. “I’m not here to snatch anyone.”

“Why?” The raven king’s golden eyes narrowed as he leaned closer. “Something wrong with my girl, Harald’s son?”

“What? No.” Tait’s face burned in a wash of red. “I didn’t say that.”

“So, you *would* snatch her?”

“No,” Tait shifted on his seat, eyes wide. “*Gods*.”

In a bout of decent timing, the earth bender banged a horn against the table, drawing eyes down the table as he stood.

“It has been rather trying these last months. I cannot express my gratitude to you all for standing beside us in the search for Liv.” He smiled at his daughter, then studied his horn of ale. “If anyone would have said we’d be seated here with sea fae—the Ever King—without bloodshed, I might’ve thought you mad. But I’ve had the honor of fighting beside folk I thought were enemies, only to be shown their devotion, their bonds to their people. The same bonds that run through us. I am proud to sit with you all.”

Horns clacked on the tables across the hall, loud enough I could not hear anything else.

Later, while Livia was passed around the royals, I was cornered by the Night Folk queen.

“Bloodsinger.”

“Queen.” I dipped my chin.

Elise Ferus’s head reached my chin, but when she squared to me, I wanted to take a step back. Until her face softened. “You brought them back to me.”

“I vowed I would.”

“Valen told me everything. He is not easily impressed in battle, but he has admitted more than once that he does not know how you steadied blades on a rocking ship.”

I fought to remain insouciant but failed when a grin spread. “He aided in the killing blow.”

Elise seemed pleased to hear how her people fought. Not only Livia, but the other heirs. To the Night Folk queen, they were as much her children as Livia and Rorik. She asked of the battle but pressed more on the changes in the Ever Kingdom.

Her eyes glazed in a bit of longing. “I wish I could see it someday.”

The Chasm would always be a divide for Livia. She spoke of the Ever like her home, yet her mother would never witness her atop her throne, would never see her daughter seated as a queen in her own court over sea fae.

Elise, surprising me, rested a hand on my arm and squeezed. “I am glad you returned to us, too, Ever King. There are those here who are much better for it.”

The words Valen had spoken to me that day I’d been tossed into the sea rattled in my skull. Turns, war, hate, all of it had happened to bring us to this moment, to make the words truth. I nodded, silent as the queen returned to the crowd.

“That current divides your worlds?”

I startled. Skadi, shadowed by Tait, materialized from a doorway. She was dressed simply. Half her hair was pulled

behind her head with a leather strip, and she wore an ashen gray dress that fit her terribly, two sizes too large. She was meant to be a princess, yet did not play the role.

“The elven speaks.” I turned away from her, content to watch my queen smile and laugh until her head fell back, exposing her throat I planned on licking and biting the moment we were alone.

“I speak when there are interesting enough words to say.” Skadi stepped beside me. “I overheard the mortal—”

“She is a queen, elven.”

“And I was going to call her the mortal queen.” For a moment, there was the slightest flicker of annoyance on the woman’s face.

Ah, she could feel.

“This current is too strong, yes? It keeps your queen’s mother out of your world.”

“Yes.” I thrummed in irritation, as though my old resentments toward the earth fae needed someone new to burden.

Trust was a fickle thing, and I’d not given it freely to her yet. Until then, she’d likely receive the sharper edges.

“I could take it away.”

I froze. “What did you say?”

“I could take the current away, leave a calm barrier between your kingdoms.”

“How can you take the Chasm?”

“Much the same as I took your bond.”

“I would not speak so flippantly about the bond you stole.”

The elven shrugged. “All I am saying is the act is the same without the pain. The boundary between realms will remain, but the violence that fractures your two worlds is powered by something Otherworldly. It was obvious when we sailed through.”

What fueled the crushing waters of the Chasm had never been taught to me, simply known to exist. Trade between sea and earth fae had been done before, but it was rare and used spells and summons to see it done.

Sea fae always went to the earth fae. Never—that I knew—had earth fae sailed to the Ever since the Chasm was shaped.

“A sea witch likely created the barrier,” I determined, more to myself than Skadi. If sea folk cast the violence, it would make a bit more sense why earth folk never came to us.

“Perhaps,” she said. “It matters little, but there is a power teeming within, and that is what I can take.”

“The boundary would remain,” I repeated.

“But the violence would be finished.”

No Chasm? A wall between worlds that had been in place for centuries.

“Explain your magic, elven.”

“Affinity,” she corrected. “Like Arion used flame or light to reach for and take objects, I do the same with darkness.”

“He walked through his.”

“A talent I do not possess.” Skadi tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. “Arion can walk through light, within reason. He cannot step long distances, nor can he go somewhere he has never been before. He must see it in his mind’s eye.”

Gods, I wished that bastard was dead. “Livia said you conjure things from these mists.”

“Not conjure. I take.” Skadi studied the rafters overhead. “When I summon my affinity, I could pull that drinking horn, for example”—she gestured to a far table—“into the mist until it reached my hand.”

That was how she’d robbed Sander of his blade.

“You can’t simply take a current like the Chasm and place it somewhere else.”

“No, the power within it would fade into the mist, die in a way. I can draw matter to me, or I can leave it within the darkness. It is the drearier side, or in your case—helpful.”

“Leave them where?”

“I don’t know exactly. Some say it is in the void of creation. I think the matter merely turns to dust. It is like closing a door. I can leave it open until whatever I summon steps through to me, or I can lock it away, out of sight.” Skadi tilted her head, an eerily vacant look on her face. “This is why my affinity is better off feared by you. Why it should never belong to a man like Arion.”

“Doesn’t seem any different than what Eldirard said.”

“He didn’t elaborate.” Skadi gave me an empty smile. “If I wanted, I can steal a life, the physical beat of a heart, the draw of breath in the lungs. I take it, then close it away behind the darkness, and there it goes to die. That is what I will do with whatever power lives in that Chasm of yours.”

Shit. “You kill with this mist?”

“I can. Just as you, simply in a different way.” Skadi shielded a yawn with the back of her hand. “I tire of this revelry. Would you permit your crew to lead me back to the ship to sleep?”

I wasn’t certain I even nodded before she turned away.

“Think on what I said, sea king. I can kill this Chasm, and you will give your queen her folk while keeping you.”

It wasn’t until Sander, Narza, and an Alver from the twins’ home realm confirmed there was merit to Skadi’s claims that it was determined on the morrow, we would kill the final wall between our people.

CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

THE SONGBIRD

THIS SEEMED A BIT MAD. Clearing the Chasm, surely it was impossible.

“Improbable.” Narza had told us before the dawn. “There *is* a power in that barrier. Magic leaves remnants, as you know. It is matter unseen. If the elven has an affinity to absorb physical matter, then it is possible whatever ancient power fuels the Chasm can be removed.”

My thumbnail was lodged between my teeth. My mother’s arm was around my waist, and together we watched Erik, my father, Sander, and Narza stand beside Skadi waist deep in the sea.

Skadi was dressed in a thin chemise, her hair wild around her shoulders and face. She looked like a spirit of the tides. Still strung around her neck were the herbs holding her affinity in her blood.

Jonas was crouched by the water line, Aleksi beside him. They were muttering in harsh tones. Jonas was uneasy, doubtless from the *neach-dai* bond. Our folk hardly knew what to make of the new intensity of the rakish prince, and his unbidden devotion to the sea fae.

I suspected having Skadi so near to so many nobles and the king of the Ever, added some discomfort to Jonas and his new vow to protect. Much like Erik, I was certain my friend held little trust for Skadi. Then again, he’d only seen her in battle, attempting to slaughter us. He’d not known her before her magic had hardened her.

Despite his melancholy, a gaggle of courtiers from across the realms kept close, a hope that Jonas and Alek might turn to the comfort of their arms. Freydis, clothed in her finest gown, stared with a sort of dreamy look at Jonas when he stretched the muscles of his neck side to side.

I wasn't the only one who noticed.

Fire red hair braided around a black circlet blocked the gazes of the ladies straining to get a glimpse at the princes. Malin, Jonas's mother, looked my way, winked, and billowed out her fur-lined cloak to make her slender figure take up more of the line of sight to her son.

"I am not the only one who desires a certain kind of lover for their child," my mother whispered, grinning at her fellow queen who utterly ignored the straining heads of the courtiers, trying to steal a glance over her shoulders.

"Malin thinks she's protecting him, but Jonas is the one who will gladly resist love to his dying breath."

My mother wrapped her arm around my waist. "You know, if this does not take, nothing will change, Livie. I will be here every other week when you come to visit me."

I snorted. "Oh, is that the timeframe you've set?"

"No, I would prefer you take up here, but unfortunately, your father reminded me that your *hjärta* is a king with responsibilities and such nonsense. What is that look?"

"You called Erik my *hjärta*. Daj did once too." A perfect harmony of my heart. An old, romantic belief of our folk.

"I would hope you'd accept nothing less." My mother looked to the sea a little wistfully. "We sensed the connection, or at least the intrigue, between you and the Ever King at the end of the war. When I learned you'd been taken ... I was broken, Livie. Never had I felt such pain."

"But?"

"But there was a moment when my heart knew this was bound to happen. Like it had been a truth I'd chosen to forget. Don't mistake me, I could do without the kidnapping, of

course. But perhaps Erik needed to learn something from you too; that fire overpowered the sea king and burned his hatred.”

My mother snickered and squeezed my waist a little tighter.

“I have a confession,” I whispered.

“Oh, I love secret confessions.”

“When I saw Erik at the masquerade, there was an indescribable pull toward him. I was terrified when he took me, but I couldn’t shake that before he removed that mask, the draw to him was something else, something folk always searched for, yet few found. It, well, I think it chased away the fear; I think it helped me trust him much more swiftly than I would’ve otherwise.”

My mother considered the confession for a few moments. “Do you think the draw was the heartbond?”

“Even if it was,” I said, “the love never left. It is only stronger.”

“It is what I’ve always wanted for you,” she said, voice soft. “That you would find your fire and a love that will fan your flames, not douse them.”

A commotion in the tides drew us back to the sea. Narza urged Erik and the others to return to the shore. Discontent tugged at Erik’s brows when he came to my side.

“What’s happening?” I hooked my hand around his arm.

“The sea witches and your witch folk—”

“Elixists,” my mother corrected, grinning. “They would not appreciate being called a witch.”

“Whatever their title, the lot of them are warding the shore between us and the elven should she choose to attack instead of living in peace.”

I doubted Skadi would turn on an entire shore of magics. She hid beneath a stony exterior, but she cared for Eldirard. She wouldn’t risk his life, nor Natthaven, by attacking those who’d offered refuge.

“Do you think she’ll succeed?” My voice was heavy with a burden. I almost wished I hadn’t been told there was a possibility. Disappointment should it fail would be a dreary weight. “I told you, she tried to pull away her grandfather and wasn’t able to without fatiguing.”

Erik nodded. “But hadn’t she been battling before? And Arion was there. Wasn’t he fighting against her?”

True enough. Skadi had been weary.

“Tavish is aiding her,” Erik told me, pointing to the far side of the shore. Tavish was crouched at the end of a long dock, one palm hovered over the sea. “He’s been unthreading bits of the spell cast.”

“He believes it was cast by a sea witch?”

Erik nodded. “An intricate spell, but if it is unraveled, the hope is the remnants will be simpler for the elven to hide away in her damn mist abyss.”

The sound of a deep groan—like a horn blared through a ravine—echoed over the water. Ripples bloomed away from the dark skein that wove over the surface of the water. Below was the wall of thrashing tides.

Some folk backed away from the shoreline when another boom shocked new ripples and gentle waves across the streak of the barrier.

Skadi held out her arms. Like black petals blooming, skeins of misty ink peeled away from her body. It was unlike a shadow, more diaphanous and damp, like a true mist. Water bubbled around her waist. Darkness grew, thickening like sea spray during a monsoon and plunged into the sea.

On the dock, Tavish flattened onto his belly, cursing and holding his palms over the water. I dug my fingers into Erik’s arm, unable to look away, unable to move the longer Skadi’s magic dug at the Chasm walls.

Then, Tavish shouted, rising to his knees. “That was the final thread. It’s free, woman. Pull it back. Now! Before it resettles!”

Skadi closed her eyes. Another pulse of her iridescent darkness skittered over the surface of the water, diving through the shadowed surface line of the Chasm. Her arms trembled. She doubled over. A soft cry followed.

“It’s too much for her,” I said.

“A little more,” Erik replied, low and like he was in his own thoughts.

Skadi stumbled. The coils of mists gathered around her, thrashing and spinning. She cried out again, slowly bringing her palms to the center of her heart, as though she were encapsulating her darkness.

Another guttural echo moaned across the sea. Then, the misty billows shot out from her middle, a sunburst of darkness. In the next breath, they were gone. As was Skadi. She’d fallen back into the water. Jonas and Aleksí rushed to her, dragging her out of the surf. She slumped against Jonas’s shoulder, hardly able to walk to the shore.

My pulse had gone still, my blood cold. I still clung to Erik’s arm, like it was the only solid thing.

“Well? Did it work?” Thank the gods for Celine. She was not one to wait long in heady silence.

Erik did not give the command before Gavyn took the liberty to look. The bone lord faded into the sea. Gentle circles coated the top of my hand from Erik’s thumb. Much like me, the Ever King seemed unwilling to blink, to even breathe, while we waited.

Deep in the water, beyond the sandbars and rocky edges, Gavyn’s face broke the surface. He faced the shore, simply staring.

Then, “The Chasm is gone!”

CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE

THE SERPENT

EARTH FAE TOOK any reason to celebrate and feast. Again, we were gathered in the great hall, drinking, eating, and dancing to their strange rawhide drums and odd lutes. Most nights, I would choose to hole away with Livia, alone, far from other souls, but tonight even I found a bit of lightness in the room.

A stark line carved through the seas. Dark waters marking the barrier between the Ever and the earth realms. It remained, but as the elven said—the violence was gone.

Gavyn, Tait, and Aleksı offered to test the new barrier. Gavyn’s ship had been gone half the morning, and when they returned, there’d been a bit of awe written on their faces.

To the sea fae, the Chasm was not horridly uncomfortable, more like a fierce sea storm. But Alek returned to say it was like drifting from the frosts to summer waters. Dark and cold, until they reached the Ever Sea where light and warmth fed into the currents.

“Almost peaceful,” he said, speaking to everyone, but his eyes had been on his aunt. “Nothing more than diving into the sea.”

There was the matter of breathing. Elise would live the length of the fae through spells and magic, but she still had mortal lungs.

One of the earth witches—or Elixists—waved the worry away. “A simple charm you keep with you, Elise. That’s all it’ll take. I’ll have one within days.”

“Days?” Tavish crossed his ankle over his knee. “I’ll have one by sunset tomorrow.”

“Is that a challenge, spell caster?”

Tavish smirked. “That it is, Elixir.”

I’d few doubts the Night Folk queen, and any mortal in the earth realms, would have half a dozen ways to breathe through the journey by week’s end.

Livia leaned into me, smiling at the levity. Women, men, littles; they danced around each other. The earth bender laughed with Elise in the center of the room when Mira’s father and mother muttered something to them.

But beside them, Sander bowed at the waist to a sea witch, taking the woman’s hand in the dance. Gavyn had become the intrigue of more than one earth fae courtier and had danced with no less than four women thus far.

“Hearttalker.” Mira approached Tait two seats from us. “Time for you to dance. Perhaps smile a bit.”

“I would rather dry out on the land before dancing.”

“Gods, you’re the sourest man,” the princess said, striding away with more than one insult murmured over her shoulder.

“She’s not wrong, cousin,” I said through a drink of the honey-thick ale the earth fae drank. I’d never admit it to Alistair, but I almost preferred it to our sweet wines.

Tait huffed but didn’t disagree. My cousin was surly, but there were reasons and they were his to tell. His secrets to reveal.

“What is the matter with Jonas?” I whispered against Livia’s ear.

Her eyes kicked to the prince who sat amongst a few Rave who’d placed themselves around the elven. Her feat with the Chasm, though miraculous, seemed to add a bit more trepidation about the extent of her power.

It was subtle, but the elven was being watched. Closely. No mistake, she always would be.

Jonas did not look to the revelry but studied his drinking horn, lost in his own mind.

Worry grooved over Livia's brow. "I don't know. He simply says he has a great deal on his mind with all this."

"Want Tait to read his heart?"

"No." Livia sighed. "Jonas deserves his private thoughts. War upset him as a boy. It seems this one has done the same."

"We can find a way to exchange the bond," I offered. "It does not mean he's a prisoner of the Ever—"

"I actually think he's rather proud of it," Livia hurried to say. "Alek said he's been explaining it to the Rave and anyone who'll listen, really. I think it is nearly losing Sander, nearly losing all of us, that's troubling him. Give him time to work through what has happened."

I kissed the tender place behind her ear, nodding. The prince could take his time, but much longer, and I'd forgo morality and have Tait dig through his heart, taking the lot of his secrets.

"Have you grown tired of this revel, love?"

Livia shuddered when my breath ghosted over her neck. "I think I have, Serpent."

I rose, holding out my hand, and took us toward the back doors of the hall before anyone could pull us back.

Alas, Aleks, irritating prince that he was, had other plans.

"Bloodsinger, you cannot avoid us any longer."

Heat skittered over my skin. I closed my eyes and slowly turned. Gods, I'd known if Livia and I returned to her people, if they'd accepted me as her king, her lover, her chosen, I would undoubtedly face the man again.

We'd never spoken. Not really. The only time I'd been so close to Alek's other father had been while he bled out, unconscious and stepping into the Otherworld.

Now, the bastard of a prince beamed at me like he knew exactly the disquiet he'd caused, while gesturing at the man at

his side.

“Oh,” Livia let out a breath. “Uncle Tor. You’ve ... have you ever spoken to the king?”

“No,” he said, never looking away from me. “The last time we were this close, I was bleeding out on the forest floor. Never had the chance.”

He was broader than his lover, with similarly dark hair, but darker eyes and a stronger chin. But buried in his eyes was the same spark of something like gratitude and affection when he looked at Aleksi.

“Don’t worry, Erik,” Aleksi said, “Daj likes to make idle chat about as much as you do.”

With a nudge to his father’s arm, the prince stepped back. I hissed when my songbird, my queen, abandoned me, a watery smile on her face. I wanted to sink into the damn soil.

“You saved my son,” Tor said. “And me.”

Without another word, he held out his arm. I hesitated, then clasped his forearm, unsteady and suspicious. Always suspicious. Some habits would die a slow death.

Torsten tipped his chin, then released my forearm. “Thank you. I think you’re an ass for taking my niece, but I will always stand with you for what you have done for my family.”

Silence built for a few breaths, then I bowed my own head in a bit of respect. “And I will always stand with them much the same.”

“Then welcome into House Ferus. Once you are in, they will never let you go.” He glanced to where his consort, the earth bender’s brother, spoke with Stieg and one of the queens, a wild sort of woman with golden braids, holding a bundled infant in her arms.

As promised, Livia’s uncle left it at that and strode away. With a tug to my hand, Livia grinned, pulling us out of the hall. She didn’t stop until we were at the edge of a dock.

“Swim with me, Serpent?”

Gods. Livia's fingers unlaced the front of her bodice. She wriggled free of her gown and skirts until moonlight kissed the gentle slopes of her breasts, her curves.

No need to reply, I rid myself of my clothes and lifted the water to pull us into the tides. Colder than the Ever Sea, but nothing would ever match this peace—this woman in my arms, the sea, the beat of her heart against mine.

I kissed her, deep and thorough. Livia tugged at the roots of my hair, wrapping her smooth thighs around my waist. I groaned. The feel of her heat was a delirious sort of intoxication. It robbed me of thought, of breath. It overpowered my mind until I could see nothing but her.

Livia pulled away, stroking her fingertips down my cheek. "My uncle spoke true."

"About what?" I licked water off the curve of her neck.

"You are of House Ferus as much as I am now of the Ever." She trapped my face in her palms, tilting her head, and drawing her lips maddeningly close. "And I will never let you go. You are my heartbond. Far longer than a thousand turns."

I grinned against her mouth. "They played, that serpent and songbird, from sunup to sundown."

Livia beamed, tears on her lashes, as she finished the story, the tale she'd invented so long ago. "And lived happily ever after."

I kissed her for that tale. I kissed her for this moment.

I kissed her for the thousand turns I planned to spend in her arms. I kissed her for all the moments that would come long after those turns were spent.

EPILOGUE

THE SERPENT

LIPS PARTED, my mouth hovered over Livia's, and her pants and sighs became my own. On either side of her head, my palms flattened, bracing my weight so I could lift my chest, giving us space to see where our bodies were joined.

Livia's knees fell open even more, spreading for the slow, deep thrusts of my hips.

What began as gentle kisses traded in the dawn's light, slowly shifted into stolen touches, sweat, and groans. Tender and without the fear of something soon snatching her away from me, I lavished her body. My tongue swirled over her breast, slowly licking and nipping at the puckered tip.

A breathy squeak was her reply when I scraped my tooth along the side. Her fingers dug into my hair, tangling the waves, holding my face to her skin. My hips snapped, deeper than before.

Livia jolted, a soft plea of my name on her tongue.

"So close," she mumbled, her head falling to one side, a look of bliss and flushed pleasure on her cheeks. "Erik, don't stop."

There wasn't a damn thing that could get me to stop. I bracketed onto one elbow, sliding my hand between us to tease the swollen bud at the apex of her core. Livia whimpered and bucked to meet my thrusts.

Familiar heat rolled in my gut, lower and lower, until my head was lost in a delirious, intoxicating haze.

Our door slammed against the wall in a frenzy of rattled wood “Bloodsinger, merfolk! They’re swimming and Heartwalker said there’s a damn whale, and *ahhh!*”

“Rorik!” Livia scrambled for the quilts.

Her knees shot up, catching between my legs.

“*Shit.*” My teeth dug into my lip, fierce enough I risked blood, and lost my balance so close to the edge of the bed.

Before I could stop it, in a flurry of linens, legs, and curses, I tumbled onto the floor. Naked, half covered by the top fur. A shamed king with a painfully hard cock and his queen shrieking at a snickering boy.

“Erik, gods, sorry. Rorik, get out of here.” Livia wrapped the quilts around her breasts, seething at her younger brother, tossing pillows across the room. “How did you get in here?”

“The steward.”

I would relieve Alistair of his centuries’ long service as soon as I could feel my damn cock again.

“Rorik, would you leave them alone until ... oh bleeding hells.” Elise Ferus, mother to the woman I’d been consuming, naked and breathless moments before, had now entered the room.

Where was the earth bender? Stieg? Perhaps Aleksi and his fathers would care to join in our mortification.

Rorik snorted. “Bloodsinger fell off the bed and flashed his ass—”

“Rorik!” Elise blustered. “Hush. Now!”

Flat on my back, I groaned and covered my face with my hands.

“Maj!” Livia shrieked. “Close the door! Gods, I beg of you.”

Elise, still scolding her son, paused to say, “There is a latch that locks, my girl. For *a reason.*”

“These are the royal chambers!” Livia insisted. “They are private.”

Elise huffed. “Erik. Good morning.”

“Queen,” I mumbled behind my hands.

“Forgive me, but I was told the king and queen had arranged for a morning ceremony. This may be your palace, but I expect the both of you by the next toll, or chime, or whatever they call it here. *Fully clothed.*” In the next breath, the door slammed shut again, and silence coated the room.

It couldn’t be helped, I laughed. A sound from deep in my chest vibrated through my ribs until it broke free and could not be reined back.

Livia poked her beautifully heated face over the edge of the bed. “It is not funny, Bloodsinger.”

That only made me laugh again.

Livia fell back onto the pillows, a palm on her forehead. “I’m never going to leave this room again.”

I crept back onto our bed. “Best plan you’ve had.” I kissed one of her breasts. “In fact, I’ll make it a proclamation this very morning.”

She laughed when I kissed the other swell. Lazy strokes of her fingers smoothed across the scars on my back. “Are you ready for this?”

“Ready?” My face nuzzled into her throat. “Yes. No question.”

Livia sighed. “Then, I have terrible news.”

“What is that?”

“We need to leave our bed.”



MY MOTHER’S gardens were in full bloom, filled with sea folk and the whole of House Ferus. Only a week had gone by since

we'd sailed through the sea barrier (I could not very well call it the Chasm) and returned to the Ever.

Four days since missives across the Ever gave up that over half the isles and noble houses were, at long last, free of the darkening. Even the Daire from Skondell returned with her folk to their sanctuaries and culture on the small isle.

Even with all the people around us, it was strange not to see any of the other royals besides Aleksi. Mira had been reluctant to remain in the earth realms, but one glance at her mother's face had her reconsidering.

They would be back soon. Or it would be us who went to them.

It wasn't difficult to sail to the Ever for earth fae, not now. We'd ferried one of their longships behind us on our journey home. Their oars, their sails, nothing snapped. Tait and Gavyn offered to sail on their odd serpent-like ships when Livia's family returned, to ensure it was safe for any vessel to cross into new seas.

The trouble was the dive beneath the surface. Avaline had already arranged some of her more curious people from the House of Tides to take up posts on the earth fae side of the barrier. They would summon the tides to open for trade and council in turns to come.

Joron had a proclivity to shelter his people, cutting them off from the vastness of the world. It was now more of a challenge to keep people from the House of Tides to remain in the Ever. So many wished to explore and learn and see a land they did not know.

In truth, we already knew Mira and Sander would return for no other purpose than the royals insisted. Different kingdoms, yet we were more like a fifth land of the earth realms, simply with more seas.

Jonas was another matter.

Alistair delivered a missive from the prince only a day before, stating Jonas knew what had been troubling him, and

he had his solution. He would not tell us yet, merely stated we'd know soon.

Ominous, and the worry he'd lined on Livia's face promptly reminded me I'd never gotten the prince back for all his battering when we first met.

"Ah, you chose to join us finally." Aleksi pinched Livia's ear as we stepped through a vine-wrapped archway. "Rorik is getting rather impatient."

When wasn't the boy impatient? Livia's brother had taken to the ships of the Ever. Every waking moment he would plead with me, with Tait, Celine, anyone, to let him step aboard and take to the seas.

Sewell was the only one who'd yet to tell the boy no and spent endless chimes each day sailing on sloops in the coves with Rorik at the helm in an oversized tricorn.

Narza stood near a wooden table lined in herbs and dried blossoms. Clay bowls were arranged near a circle of candles.

On one side, Tavish and his family stood by with Maelstrom and Tait. They were to stand for the blood of the king. But I could not, in good conscience, exclude the others. Celine, Gavyn, Sewell, and a freshly groomed Stormbringer joined.

Blood-related or not, they were the ones who'd raised me.

"Step forward."

Once Narza was confident this was possible, we'd planned this privately, thinking it would be small and intimate. Livia's family, as it turned out, was rather expansive when all placed together. They took up a great deal of room.

Aleksi stood between his fathers. The earth bender's sister, her consort, and their four children, all grown and the eldest of the cousins, had joined. Their son kept a hand around his wife's shoulders; the scar on her cheek was where all this truly began.

She'd been the one King Thorvald attacked when Valen filled my father's chest with his axe.

Strange, to have them here. For this reason.

Beside Valen and Elise were Livia's grandparents, one mortal, one fae, much like her parents. Rorik kept drifting to the side of the sea fae until Stieg promised him a Rave dagger if he would keep still.

The warrior was blood to none of us, but like Celine and her folk, Stieg deserved a place here.

The only one who did not truly belong, at least not to me, was the pensive watch of the elven from one of the upper windows. The woman had willingly returned her herb bands to her neck, agreeing not to use her affinity against us. She'd calmed the dangers of the Chasm, but I did not know what to do with her.

Small grins, a few flickers of feeling, had ignited over her face as of late, but Livia informed me she remained unlike the woman she first met. My songbird was hopeful, but I wasn't convinced that woman would return.

I shook thoughts of the elven away, turning my focus to the table.

Narza lit the candles. "Bonds are no small thing. Complicated spells, but powerful. Bonds of the heart come from willing blood of two separate lines. These, when valued, when loved, and when cherished, are the heart of the Ever. They are what brings the royal line its full potential."

Livia slipped her fingers into mine, beaming at me; I could not help but smile back.

Narza reached for Livia's hand. "Blood is offered, willingly, ardently, and with desire. Is this true of you?"

"Yes." Livia watched in fascination as drops of her blood spilled into one of the bowls.

My grandmother looked to me. "The heartbond of the House of Kings was destroyed, but we have found nothing that says a new bond cannot be formed with another. Do you willingly claim House Ferus as yours, ardently, and with desire?"

I swallowed, my throat all at once tight. Some, like Joron, would see this as a betrayal of the House of Kings. They would say the Ever King sold himself to the earth fae. I hardly cared. My loyalty was to the woman at my side, thrones and crowns be damned.

It meant something to know every soul of House Ferus came to prove they, too, accepted it.

I nodded and held out my hand for my grandmother. “Careful.”

Narza grinned softly. “I have bandaged more than one scrape on your knees, Grandson. Whether you recall it or not. I’m not afraid of your blood.”

My blood landed in the opposite bowl. One by one, those of our blood families were added. Tavish winked before he added his. We’d never admitted to each other the truth, nor had I said anything to Maelstrom.

It was simply known by the way they’d begun to share stories about my mother, whether through a look I gave, and Maelstrom would say, “Gods, that is how Oline used to frown.” Or if something reminded them of my mother—how she hated the scales of fish or how she’d once determined to be the first Lady of Blades, and that she would’ve been proud to know her son made such a thing possible.

Thorvald would be disappointed, and it made the new bonds all the better.

Narza heated the blood with herbs and incense, then carefully ladled both into one mortar, two bloodlines united. “Join hands.”

Livia and I held our clasped palms over the bowl. Narza began to sing, gentle and sweet.

Skin prickled; our palms heated. The longer Narza sang, the warmer our skin became.

Livia winced. I nearly did when the bite to my forearm dug to the bone. Not like a blade, more a weak burn that spread through meat of the body to the marrow, then the veins, until

my chest bloomed in warmth. A soothing heat, like a gulp of hot tea, felt all the way down to the belly.

Narza's song slowly tapered off. She wiped a tear from the corner of one eye and gestured to our hands. "May you always honor the bond between you."

Breath went quiet in my lungs. I dropped my gaze to the bare skin on my arms and let out a rough gasp.

Livia laughed, wiping tears away. Branded on our flesh, in the same place that once bore the bind rune of the House of Kings, was a new one tangled in what looked like ivy vines.

"House Ferus," Elise whispered, grinning. "That is the seal."

I kept rubbing the place over my heart, reveling in the familiar fullness. Gods, I'd missed it.

Livia rose up on her toes and kissed me, her tears wetting my face. When she pulled back, our families applauded. I looked only at her as her delicate fingers traced the bottom line of my lip.

A thousand turns would not be enough with her, but it would be a start.

While our people cheered and awkwardly came together, houses joined and all, I brushed Livia's hair from her eyes and smiled.

Without words, only using what was felt, I whispered. *Hello, love.*

Livia's eyes burned in a new heat. *Hello, Serpent.*



The Nightmare Prince

IT'D BEEN ages since I'd walked the halls of my own damn palace. Most often, I had a great deal of fun whenever we returned from the Crimson Festival. Hells, I'd even planned to irritate Sander by flaunting our heroics once we'd determined to break out the Ever King and fight beside sea fae.

This return, nothing about it was as I imagined.

Doubtless, nothing about life would *be* as I imagined after tonight.

I hesitated at the door leading into the wide chamber where an expansive inglenook heated the lower levels. Our main city of Klockglas was often cloudy and cold, as were the walls of the palace. Fitting for us royals, since the king manipulated the fears of others and his sons created nightmares.

Still—and I gave credit to my mother entirely—the palace was warm with laughter and loyalty.

I clung to the hope that it would remain after I admitted to my mother and father what I had done.

I'd sent word to the Ever already, so they wouldn't be surprised when I returned. Once details were confessed, Erik would think I'd lost my mind, but he wasn't a man of many words. In truth, he'd see the merit before Livia.

Livie would be like my mother—I could feel it in my gut—but she had no damn room to protest. She'd bleeding fallen in love and in bed with the man who kidnapped her and planned to murder her father.

Not one bit of room to protest.

I blew out a breath and entered without a sound. As a son of thieves, I'd long ago learned how to move like shadows. I was glad for it, not being noticed, for it gave me pause to take in what I loved most about the palace.

Sander, well into being healed, picked at a few dried currants while he read something new about sea fae sent from the witches. He was the one I worried about most. Perhaps he'd see this as a betrayal.

Then again, my twin was the more forgiving one of us.

I watched my parents for a heartbeat or two. I'd always thought my mother was the most beautiful woman. Fiery hair she kept a little wild, a smile that was equal parts devious and loving. She was laughing, the way she always did when my father whispered in her ear—head back, eyes squeezed shut.

Even Daj smiled. Kase Eriksson was who I aspired to be, different as we were.

Where I loved to attend the masques and have plenty of company, my father would be content to never leave this palace or see another soul beyond his family ever again. A possible exaggeration; he'd nearly torn the Kunglig palace apart—or so I was told—when Livia was taken, then once more when he learned his sons had disappeared.

He was close to every royal house in our realms. He simply enjoyed grumbling about them.

With one arm draped around my mother's shoulders, he pulled her close, all so he could press a kiss to her temple, again and again, like he could not get enough of her. It was a bond I'd never really thought about having.

Until now, when I knew I certainly would *never* have it.

I cleared my throat.

“Jonas. Come sit with us.” My mother patted the place beside her. “I've missed you too much.”

“Not as much as Daj, I'm sure.” I shoved my father's shoulder as I strode past.

“Frankly, I don't know why you're still here,” my father said, a sly grin on his face. “I thought I made it clear that I enjoyed the empty halls and alone time with your mother.”

“Please, contain yourself.” I sat on a bench across from them and wove my fingers together, gaze locked on the threads of the woven rug beneath my boots.

“Jonas?” My mother tilted her head to one side. “Are you all right?”

“I have something I must tell you. All of you.”

Sander slapped the pages of his book closed and perched on the arm of the sofa, concern on his face.

My father said nothing, but his eyes turned to black ink, blotting out until they were empty of any light.

“Daj, please.”

“You’re afraid to tell us. Why?”

Gods, it was damn aggravating when your family could literally know your fears. I let my shoulders slump. “Because you will not like to hear it.”

“Son,” my mother said softly. “Whatever it is, you can always tell us.”

“This bond with the Ever, you know it compels me to keep them safe.”

My father frowned. He’d been furious—no, enraged—at the notion of me taking a lifelong bond. But the man did not care for anything that took away a bit of will. Trapped by dark mesmer magic for a great many turns as a boy had left him furious about the whole notion.

Only after a dozen explanations that it was not a forced bond and merely a need to do what I could to stand with the sea fae, did he find any solace.

“The missing elven prince, he’s left me unsettled. His ambitions, the way he spoke of not only the sea but also our realms, won’t leave me.”

“Jonas,” Sander said. “You know as well as me King Eldirard said he’ll be kept at bay by his father for some time.”

“The risk remains. If it did not, I don’t think the bond would be ... feeling this way.” My stomach bottomed out. “But I’ve figured out how I can defend them. This is already done, I’ve sent missives, and I am choosing to do this. For all of us. Not only Livie and Bloodsinger, but our people and realms.”

“Jonas, gods, you’re starting to frighten me.” My mother leaned forward. “What is it?”

I held my breath until I reached the count of five.

“To be the kin of elven means their magic will not be a threat. After his failed battle, the betrothal arrangement with the prince can be challenged by a title of equal status.”

“Jonas—”

My mother cut off her own words when I shook my head, silently pleading for them to let me finish.

“I petitioned the king of the shadow elven for permission to take marital vows with his granddaughter. To make her our kin.” I hesitated. “And he agreed.”



IT LOOKS like there is an arranged marriage on the horizon. Click below to read how Prince Jonas handles his newest title of—husband. The journey continues in next standalone in the Ever Seas, [THE MIST THIEF](#)



NOT READY TO SAY GOODBYE to the serpent and songbird? Enjoy a glimpse into Erik’s and Livia’s happily ever after with a bonus scene [HERE](#)



WHILE YOU WAIT for the Mist Thief, you can read all about the parents of the young royals, starting with a Viking princess who falls in love with a cursed villain. Valen and Elise begin in the bestselling book, [CURSE OF SHADOWS AND THORNS](#)



CHARACTER GLOSSARY

The Ever Kingdom

House of Kings:

The Ever King—Erik Bloodsinger

Tait Heartwalker

Celine Tidecaller

Sewell Fleshripper—galley cook, former bone lord.

Finn Stormbringer—crewman on the Ever Ship

The Ever Crew

House of Mists:

House Lady: Narza—grandmother to Ever King

Fione—sea witch

Tavish Spellbreaker—uncle to the Ever King

Maelstrom—grandfather to the Ever King

House of Bones:

House Lord: Gavyn Bonerotter (Seeker)

House of Tides:

House Lord: Joron Seemaker

Avaline Mindtaker

House of Blades:

House Lord: Hesh, High Farer

Earth Fae Kingdoms**Night Folk Clans (Northern Realms)**

King Valen Ferus

Queen Elise Ferus

Livia Ferus

Rorik Ferus

Aleksi Bror-Ferus

Sol Ferus

Torsten Bror

Stieg Jakobson: Rave warrior

Alver Clans (Eastern Realms):

Prince Jonas Eriksson

Prince Sander Eriksson

(Fae Clans) Southern Realms:

Princess Krasmira (Mira) Sekundär

GLOSSARY

Neach-dai (neech-die): A peaceful bond made between different clans to prove unity and peace.

Night Folk: A type of earth fae whose magic is called fury and focuses on powers of the earth.

Alver: a magical clan in the earth fae realms who uses magic called mesmer that focuses on the mind and body.

Glamour: a fae clan magic from the Southern realms that can cast illusions, summon and compel, or aid in shapeshifters.

The darkening: a plague caused by dark spells in the Ever Kingdom.

Hjärta (hyar-tah): an earth fae term used for a love so fierce the couple is a perfect harmony of hearts and souls.

Dokkalfar: the shadow elven clan

Ljosalfar: the light elven clan

Natthaven (naht-hayven): The isle that is home to shadow elven, or Dokkalfar.

Chridhe: An elven term of endearment, like ‘my love.’ Of Scottish Gaelic origins.

Blood Crown: The crown of the Ever Kingdom. If worn by anyone other than the blood heir, it will burn and fester on the skin.

The Chasm: a violent, vertical current that separates the earth fae realms from the Ever Kingdom.

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LJ

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